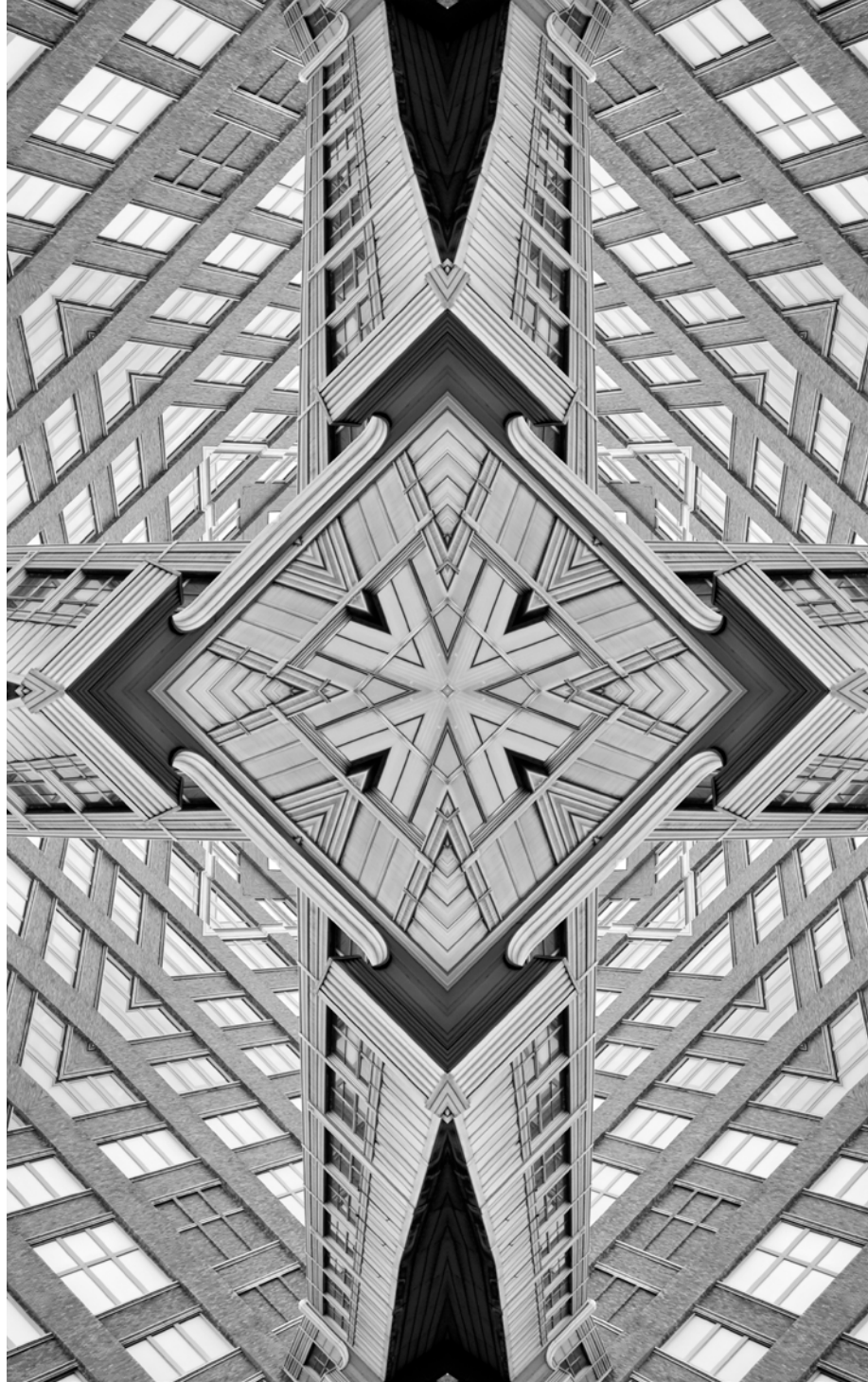


Issue

Brief

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A Contemporary Analysis of India–EU Cooperation in Counterterrorism

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Abstract

India and the European Union (EU) share a deep political and strategic relationship that pivots around democracy, global rule of law, security, and trade. While the depth is obvious on paper, however, the partnership has delivered short on dividends expected by both sides. Yet diplomatic engagement remains robust, and in recent times is moving towards greater mutual understanding of the challenges of terrorism and the potential counterterrorism strategies that like-minded democracies should employ. This brief highlights the challenges and opportunities in India-EU cooperation in counterterrorism, and offers recommendations that are based on achievable designs around current geopolitical realities.

In the post-9/11 world, global thinking on terrorism, and consequently the approach to counterterrorism, has evolved at a rapid pace. This is only to be expected, given that terrorism is not a new phenomenon. In Europe, attempts towards a cohesive “continental” approach rather than a single state-based, or bilateral run, can be traced back some decades ago, long before the creation of the European Union (EU) in 1993. At that time, along with rising Islamist terrorism initially related to the Palestinian struggle and the rise of groups such as Hamas, the more existential threats of terrorism in the continent came from within. Countries such as Spain battled Basque separatism led by the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (or the ETA), and the United Kingdom (UK) experienced the terror inflicted by the Irish Republican Army (or the IRA). Groups such as Al-Qaeda as we know today did not have the transnational capabilities during that period.

In the 2000s, specifically in the post-9/11 era, the EU made steadfast institutional upgrades to its designs to elevate terrorism as a critical issue for the continent to address. The two watershed events that prompted these shifts in approach were the 2004 Madrid bombings in Spain that killed 191 people and injured over 1,800, and the 2005 London train bombings in the UK, which killed 52 people and injured over 700.^{1,2}

The Madrid bombings, orchestrated by the Al-Qaeda, were a pivotal moment for Europe. The fallout of US and NATO invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq was beginning to show itself on the continent, owing to more intricate geographic and historical proximity between the Middle East and Europe. The EU then created the position of a Counterterrorism Coordinator to serve as an independent voice and bridge communication, policy, and information, and to expand the union’s outreach with like-minded nations such as India.

The fall of Afghanistan back in the hands of the Taliban in August last year has added a sense of urgency to all aspects of debate and diplomacy around terrorism-related issues. For example, in the early days of the return of the Taliban, calls were made for “like-minded” nations—loosely translated to mean democratic states—to work through the United Nations (UN) for a response. New Delhi routed its diplomacy largely via Russia, pivoting towards Moscow more than the West.^{3,4} After all, there are significant gaps between the security narratives of India and the West, highlighting the underlying challenges for broader counterterrorism cooperation. Many of these challenges emanate from how the US, along with the EU and other European states, continue to take a soft approach towards Pakistan and the terror sanctuaries hosted by that country.⁵

To be sure, New Delhi had been largely nonchalant about the EU and European approach to Pakistan and its designs to promote terrorism in India. However, the current Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is arguably intent on a more aggressive outreach in Europe against Pakistan. In 2019, for instance, the Indian government “unofficially” hosted right-wing Members of European Parliament (MEPs) in Kashmir in what was widely seen as a public-relations exercise following the amendment of Article 370 of the Constitution and the bifurcation of the erstwhile state of Jammu & Kashmir. The event was also seen as India’s effort to tap into constituencies in Europe that ideologically would take a much harder stance against Pakistan’s state-sponsored terrorism into India.⁶ Within the European discourse, then European parliamentarians such as Julie Ward had raised the visit as a matter of concern over the disproportionate representation of the “private” visit to India by the MEPs.^{a,7,8}

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a It is important to remember here that right and far-right politics in EU and India differ from each other significantly. For one, European far right often uses migration from Islamic countries as a political tool and point of discontent. In India, its Muslim population have been native to its geography for centuries.

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India and the EU— one, the world’s second largest population and the other, a union of states home to less than half of India’s population but collectively the world’s third largest economy—have overlapping interests in the international order. They both want to perpetuate democratic norms and a rules-based order, and to securitise those norms. Despite commonalities, however, as highlighted by EU’s high Representative for the Common Foreign Policy and Security Policy, Javier Solana, the bilateral relationship has underperformed.^{9,10}

The multilateral construct of the EU and its underlying bureaucratic frameworks compound the challenge. The EU’s counterterror ecosystem can be traced back to 1976 and the formulation of TREVI, or *Terrorisme, Radicalisme, Extremisme et Violence Internationale*—a collective created by European ministers of justice and interior. However, the application of EU’s own mechanisms on issues such as counterterrorism runs parallel to an individual state’s foreign policy and security understandings with other states.¹¹ Former EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, highlighted the EU’s systemic conundrum in dealing with issues of security and policy that overlap with those of individual member states. Referring to Europe’s biggest ally, the US, De Kerchove observed that his office does not have a single counterpart in the American system. “At end of the day, I am not looking at operations but am rather looking at policy,” he noted.¹²

India faces similar challenges in counterterrorism and cooperation and communication between various states, agencies and institutions. Even as the challenges fall within a central structure, they are also posed by the same entities that threaten the EU today. The most significant common threat between the two remains the Islamist groups, specifically those that are transnational in nature and supported by state and quasi-state entities as tools of geopolitical cunning. Scholar Gareth Price identifies three broad areas where India and the EU can, realistically, collaborate on counterterrorism. First, identifying and actively dealing with groups that both commonly see as terrorist organisations. Second, debating and sharing best practices, specifically when it comes to institution-building as terror threats and the methods used to orchestrate them have only increased and expanded over the years. And finally, studying the most essential drivers of radicalisation and working towards developing counter and de-radicalisation practices as part of international frameworks to counter terrorism on a fundamental level.¹³

At least on paper, there are bright prospects for India and the EU to pursue their common interests, as highlighted by Price. However, debates conducted by the two sides have often fallen short, specifically from the perspective of India’s core interests—namely, cross-border terrorism promoted by Pakistan.¹⁴

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This also highlights two notable divergences on how Europe and India see the threats of Islamist radicalisation from a counterterrorism point of view. While India's challenge largely comes from cross-border terrorism and groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), those of Europe's emanate from radicalisation within its own Muslim communities. Scholar Olivier Roy, in 2003 or two years after 9/11, termed this the "new sociology" of "EuroIslam"—he posed the question of whether terrorism and extremism could come from Islamic radicalisation rooted within Western societies, or from Muslim radicals born in those countries themselves.¹⁵ This argument comes from long-standing issues in Europe relating to integration of the continent's Muslim populations, a sizeable section of which migrated from places such as Turkey and the wider Arab world in the post-Second World War era. Along with radicalisation amongst Islamic communities in Europe, it is the resurgence of far-right politics and groups, in the recent past often attributed to refugee flows from conflict zones such as Syria and Iraq, that exacerbate the complexities of radicalisation in Europe.

In the past few months, the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan, as analyst Kalicharan Veera Singam argues, has "energised some far-right groups" in the US, while the Indian far-right has been "negatively energised". This, even as both political dispensations are looking to use the Taliban victory to solidify their own goals within their respective geographies.¹⁶

On the other side of the argument, terrorism from an Indian perspective is largely seen as strategic in nature, as part of geographic struggles between two nation states (India and Pakistan) and other movements often not aligning with either over Kashmir. Unlike in Europe and some other Western states, Islam is not a recent phenomenon in India—indeed, this is a core argument offered to explain why an unremarkable number of Indians have so far joined transnational jihadist groups such as the so-called Islamic State (also known as ISIS or *Daesh* in Arabic). As scholar Adil Rasheed has underlined, the resilience of Indian Muslims against Islamist radicalisation is tied to many variables, primary of which is their strong commitment to patriotism and nationalism, specifically in the post-Partition era when many Indian Muslims rejected a move to the new Islamic state of Pakistan.

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Another reason is the prevalence of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, which is in contradiction to the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology followed by most jihadist groups.¹⁷ The ideological cradle of the Taliban itself can be traced back to the 155-year-old Deobandi movement, and the Darul Uloom Deoband seminary in Uttar Pradesh, a mere 160 km outside New Delhi.¹⁸ Despite this proximity, a negligible number of Indians have joined either the Taliban, ISIS or Al Qaeda over the past two decades.¹⁹

Some of these essential differences mentioned above add complexities to India and the EU's counterterror and counter-radicalisation cooperation, despite both being generally on the same page against terrorism. Over the last decade or so, the two have been working together through multilateral institutions as responsible member states and institutions, and between them conduct institutionalised dialogue on counterterrorism.

“On paper, there are bright prospects for India-EU cooperation in counterterrorism. But debates are often short, specifically on India's interest on cross-border terrorism promoted by Pakistan.”

India–EU Counterterror Dialogue: A Comparative Analysis

This section of the brief employs a comparative analysis to study three counterterror dialogues between India and the EU that took place between 2017 and 2021. The three dialogues will then be compared with India’s recent bilateral dialogues on counterterrorism with France, Germany, and the UK (today no longer part of the EU)—the aim is to evaluate the differences in approach to counterterrorism between multilateral forums and bilateral ones, concerning India and its partners in Europe.

The 10th India–EU counterterrorism dialogue took place in August 2017 in New Delhi, and identified state-sponsored, cross-border terrorism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as an area of mutual interest. The dialogue also discussed other issues such as foreign fighters, radicalisation and violent extremism, and countering terror financing—a less-debated subject but extremely critical on both bilateral and multilateral fronts.²⁰ Beyond these broad issues, both sides highlighted cooperation on the agency level, between the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (or Europol), and Indian agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).²¹ Along with the UN, strengthening cooperation on Financial Action Task Force (FATF) was also highlighted, a critical tool for financial sanctions actively advocated by India against Pakistan for its failure to convict UNSC-flagged terrorists.^{b,22} India has been lobbying through all diplomatic channels, including with the EU, to push Pakistan into the FATF’s ‘blacklist’ category.

In November 2018 the 11th India–EU counterterrorism dialogue was held largely on similar themes, and covering both multilateral mechanisms and potential collaborative efforts between the two. A critical addition this time was the mention of “terrorist use of the internet”. It is a challenge that has presented itself with no easy answers for any state, while giving adversaries, state and non-state alike, ample opportunities to weaponise online ecosystems to undermine democratic processes and fan sectarian, religious, and community-based tensions. Terror groups use the same online tools that citizens use as ‘social media’ to recruit and radicalise. The 2018 dialogue also added the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), an initiative based in The Hague in the Netherlands, as another multilateral counterterror platform for the two sides.²³

The most recent India–EU counterterrorism dialogue, the 12th, was held in November 2020 virtually owing to the pandemic.²⁴ The themes were largely consistent with those of the previous editions, with the COVID-19 crisis

b These include LeT’s Hafiz Saeed, wanted for his role in the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, and JeM chief Masood Azhar, involved in several terror attacks in the country.

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considered, too. The focus remained on institutional dialogue and exchange of ideas and interests. However, the specific mention of collaboration on the issue of designating groups and individuals as terrorists, added an important variable to the international debate on countering terrorism and violent extremism. Definitions of “terror”—and who commits it—remain contested, and are seen as critical tools for both geopolitical posturing, and supporting state and non-state actors alike to further their agendas. As scholars Chris Meserole and Daniel Byman highlighted in 2019: “Even the UN, which as a global organisation is well positioned to produce one (definition), despite numerous attempts, is yet to do so (i.e. define terrorism).”²⁵ The UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (UN-CTED) adds weight to Meserole and Byman’s concerns: it says that there is no global consensus yet on terrorism because a UN-led definition would remove political distinctions between so-called “freedom fighters” and “terrorists”—when this happens, states can use this to further their own agendas.²⁶

The return to power of the Taliban and the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan highlights these fissures in the international community on the most appropriate approaches to dealing with terrorism. Ultimately, this is dictated by the varied personal and strategic interests of states. For example, while the exit deal signed in Doha between the US and the Taliban says that the Taliban would not allow Afghanistan’s territories to be used by extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda who can threaten the US

and its allies, it does not explicitly mention any other groups by name.²⁷ The vagueness of the agreement’s semantics leaves a wide scope of operations for the Taliban and its own allies, who have fought in the trenches with the insurgency over the past two decades and are highly unlikely to be sacrificed in exchange for Western-assigned legitimacy.

These theoretical divergences, as explained by UN-CTED itself, are more than often visible in practice. For example, while much of the construct of the Afghan war itself comes from 9/11, the tilt for the US to push on the Taliban to make sure there is no resurgence of Al-Qaeda and that the newer threat of Islamic State Khorasan (ISKP) is not spread, only adds to the legitimacy of the insurgency. In India’s view, the more localised Islamist groups such as LeT and

“Definitions of “terror”—and who commits it—remain contested, and are seen as tools for geopolitical posturing.”

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JeM continue to be largely ignored in international discourse, including within the EU. While the language of consequent India–EU counterterror dialogues alludes to condemnation of cross-border terror, the real-world consequences for its perpetrators, and what they mean in turn for Pakistan, remain negligible. This, despite sanctions imposed by FATF.

These discrepancies within current global discussions on counterterrorism are also visible in other states such as China. In Xinjiang, the Chinese government hosts the world’s largest internment camp for Uyghur Muslims—there they are indoctrinated to shed their Islamic practices as per Beijing’s ‘re-education’ policy. At the same time, China has pandered to the Taliban regime in order to mitigate the threat posed by the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a group led by Uyghur Muslims which has found its feet in Afghanistan and has in the past aligned with the likes of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. In November 2020, the Trump administration ‘delisted’ ETIM from the US’s list of terror organisations, provoking Beijing to call out the US for what it called its “ugly two-faced approach towards terror organisations.”²⁸

A year later, in October 2021, ISKP claimed that a Uyghur militant belonging to the group conducted a suicide attack on a Shia Mosque in Afghanistan’s Kunduz province.²⁹ The snowball effect of these events led to China setting up a new military in Tajikistan from where it could keep an eye on Afghanistan and ETIM. Here, as in the past, counterterrorism has become another cog in the wheel for an increasing big-power rivalry between Washington D.C. and Beijing.³⁰

Finally, there are more dividends visible in bilateral counterterror cooperation between India and EU member states such as France, than the Union as an entity. For example, the 15th meeting of the India–France Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism held virtually in November 2021 had a far more strongly worded joint document compared to that set by the EU in 2020. Both parties condemned terrorism in their territories—including 26/11 in India and the 2015 attacks in Paris. The statement also read: “Both sides stressed the need for all countries to ensure that territories that are under their control cannot be used to plan, launch terrorist attack against any other country, shelter or train terrorist fighters. They exchanged views on threats posed by UN sanctioned terrorist entities and individuals and emphasized the need for taking concerted action against all terrorist networks including al-Qa’ida and ISIS/Daesh, as well as Lashkar e-Tayyiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), and Hizb-ul Mujahideen etc, including making sure that perpetrators of terrorist attacks are systematically and expeditiously brought to justice.”³¹

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The mention of both LeT and JeM in this India–France statement only reflects the level to which New Delhi and Paris have managed to bring their relationship on counterterrorism, in particular, and security in general. It also indicates a degree of intra-European oneupmanship on outreach to other countries, from both economic and political perspectives. Indeed, European powers equally seek dominance in European influence, both individually and through the EU; the two heavyweights, Germany and France, are vying to lead.³² Meanwhile, the release following the 9th India–Germany Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism, held in December 2019, was similar in language to that of the EU, focusing on broader themes within the counterterrorism umbrella.³³ For further comparison, the 14th India – UK Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism, held in January 2021, continued the tone of Germany and the EU and highlighted the broader themes of engagement in counterterrorism.^{34,35}

The spokes in the European and EU security wheel are still not cohesive enough for them to derive either kinetic or strategic outcomes in counterterrorism. For example, prior to the UK's exit from EU, London's view of Pakistan and its criticism of its support for terrorism, was being clouded by domestic political compulsions of colonial history and the presence of a remarkable size of Pakistani and Indian diaspora.³⁶ This constrained the strategic relations between India and the UK. France, having neither these barriers nor a consequential relationship with Islamabad, has fared better with the Indian political discourse than its counterpart across the English Channel. The interests of France, too, involve those of the market; it sells top-of-the-line defence equipment to New Delhi.

The EU continues to lag in collaborative efforts to apply pressure on real-world state and non-state actors to attain on-ground results going beyond multilateral diplomacy and long-term consensus-building via the UN, UNSC, and other such conclaves. Even some EU members have pointed out that though India's recent stint at the UNSC was much celebrated, its narrative on countering terrorism came off as weak—it was a missed opportunity. However, there are various by-products within the counterterrorism sphere where partners such as India and the EU can in fact help build mutual capacities to counter such security threats. This becomes more important as terror threats continue to evolve, and newer and faster requirement for tools and skilling for security agencies becomes an imperative.

It would serve both New Delhi and Brussels well to review the speech by Prime Minister Modi at the heads of states meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in September 2021.³⁷ In that speech, Modi highlighted radicalisation as a critical concern, and a significant area of cooperation, for the Eurasian organisation. He underlined the historical presence of moderate and pluralistic Islam, specifically Sufism in regions such as South Asia and Central Asia, as an antidote to Islamist ideology (i.e., Salafism and Wahhabism, for example) followed by the IS, Al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups. This ideation from Modi is not new; he also spoke along similar lines in his speech at the World Sufi Forum in New Delhi in March 2016.³⁸ There is a contrary view, however, which says that Sufism may not be a comprehensive deterrent to Salafism and Wahhabism.³⁹

For India and the EU to navigate away from the geopolitical roadblocks of expansive counterterror cooperation, they can focus on working together on more fundamental, but equally important tasks.

First, India and the EU are both capable of counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation strategies. While academic and policy debate continues over the long-term effectiveness of such programs, non-military and non-police outreach against radicalisation, specifically via community and civil society programs, remains underexplored in India. (To be sure, certain states have developed and implemented their own de-radicalisation programs, which have given to mixed results.⁴⁰) The two sides should engage in discussions on non-kinetic counter-radicalisation tools, many of which both have, on their own, designed and implemented, again with varied results.

They can also reach out to scholars and researchers who have been involved in these programs from their very inception in many states. Indian agencies and ministries alike can work with the EU to develop frameworks on civil-state cooperation in this area. There already have been some dividends in dialogue between EU and India on this front; they can be expanded further.⁴¹ Furthermore, the EU can benefit by studying India's hyper-localised policing system which has been critical in pushing back against issues such as youth accessing radicalisation content online. States such as Kerala and Maharashtra, for example, employed such policing methods to significant success when accessing communities to counter the threats.⁴²

Second, India and the EU can cooperate on developing and utilising technology to counter terrorism and violent extremism in the online sphere. It is a fast-growing threat where policy response often lags behind technological advances, which terror organisations use ably as well. The two should create ecosystems

that will bring together technology companies and policymakers to debate and develop solutions, from the perspectives of both law enforcement and technology, to perform the difficult task of countering radicalisation online. The global pandemic has only expanded the threat of radicalisation: extremist groups—ranging from Islamists to far-right and far-left organisations—are taking this opportunity to sow discord. Many Islamist organisations, for example, have used a mix of religion and politics to push back against vaccinations, labelling them as part of a “Western agenda” to push “anti-Islamic” methods.⁴³

As the EU Terrorism and Situation and Trend Report 2021 highlights: “Extremists and terrorists have found new opportunities in the increased time spent online during the Covid-19 pandemic. With large amount of disinformation actively disseminated online, extremists and terrorists have exploited social dissatisfaction to reach out and propagate their ideologies.”⁴⁴ EU’s technological capacities against terrorism—such as the mass takedown of IS networks on the app Telegram in 2019, significantly disrupting the terror group’s online propaganda machinery—is a good example of how India can benefit from best practices employed by Europol.⁴⁵

Third, inter-agency cooperation between the EU and India can become a driver of better information and understanding of global terror trends and threats. Europol’s culture of expansive data analysis, data protection and research reports—not restricted only to law enforcement—could be a valuable addition to how Indian agencies approach counterterrorism and counter-radicalisation, and in understanding the role of technology in terrorism which is at the forefront of EU’s agenda in this field.⁴⁶ Cooperation on issues such as transparency in counterterrorism data, and pushing back against an increasing trend of partisanship in data and data analysis itself, can help set precedence on international standards. This can help shed the long-held view that numbers are being co-opted according to specific political motivations. Promoting transparency of information and countering disinformation and misinformation is a low-hanging fruit that can lead to more meaningful cooperation such as intelligence and information-sharing in an institutionalised manner.

Lastly, India should review its decision placing the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) as the lead agency for cooperation with Europol. The National Investigation Agency (NIA), which today directly deals with most terrorism investigation cases in India, is better suited to this task. While the CBI does indeed deal with criminal networks and works on issues such as financial crime, a blurring of lines between anti-crime work and counterterrorism could lead to intra-agency tussles over jurisdictions and mandates. This will only make cooperation with foreign partners a challenging task.

Policy Recommendations

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The potential of an expansive EU–India cooperation on counterterrorism has limitations, largely due to the designs of a large multi-state conglomerate dealing with a single state in a traditional bilateral format. Two cumbersome bureaucracies with different political structures working together on security issues adds more questions than answers within counterterror frameworks. Nonetheless, a continuation of India–EU dialogues in this sphere—guided, to begin with, by realistic expectations—has many benefits awaiting both New Delhi and Brussels. It is a worthy aim, as counterterrorism efforts have lagged behind the evolution of terrorism itself. [ORF](#)

“Away from geopolitical roadblocks, India and the EU can focus on working together on more fundamental tasks.”

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