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TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AND THE QUAD'S COUNTER-TERRORISM PRIORITIES

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INTRODUCTION

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) highlights Counter-Terrorism (CT) as one of the main areas of cooperation and continues to reiterate its commitment towards tackling terrorism in all forms. The group has expressed its commitment in multiple statements and communications by condemning terrorism, evidenced in its Tokyo in-person leaders' summit in May and continues to reiterate the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2593 (2021) that demands that Afghan territory must never be used to shelter, harbour or finance terror attacks.¹ The changing international security architecture, the need to combat terrorism through shared international cooperation, and the impact terrorism may have on global power competition prompts the QUAD to have a joint CT framework.

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1. The White House, "Statements and Releases," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/24/quad-joint-leaders-statement/>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

The continuity in border tensions along the Line of Control (LoC), Line of Actual Control (LAC), and China’s willingness to engage with the Taliban also remain crucial concerns for both India and the US.

The QUAD’s first-ever in-person leaders’ summit came only four weeks after Kabul fell to the Taliban. For the United States (US), the withdrawal of its troops meant a forced shift from the conventional ‘war on terror’ to ‘over the horizon’ CT design. The provision of safe havens to transnational and regional terrorist groups, the rise of Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), and the greater freedom that many terrorist groups now continue to enjoy, poses serious security concerns for the US.² For India, the formation of a Taliban-Haqqani regime brought to power by the Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) still raises serious regional security concerns. These include continuity in terror operations by groups from the Afghan territory against India; especially in Kashmir, the Taliban’s ideology that serves as a rallying force to incite Islamic radicalisation, and the equally important driver of Pakistan’s interventionist policies in Afghanistan. The continuity in border tensions along the Line of Control (LoC), Line of Actual Control (LAC), and China’s willingness to engage with the Taliban also remain crucial concerns for both India and the US. The US’ and India’s partners, Japan and Australia, share neither geographical proximity nor strategic interests in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the withdrawal of US troops will have ramifications on the activities of these countries that supported the US in its two-decade war on terror and also extended security, economic and value-added support to Afghanistan post 2001.³ Traditionally, both countries’ policies were influenced by the strategic

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2. “Fourteenth Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat”, January 28, 2022, UN Security Council Report, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/231/80/PDF/N2223180.pdf?OpenElement>. Accessed on July 5, 2022.

3. Nippon, “Japan Data,” <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01105/>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

interests that the US has held in Afghanistan.⁴ As they continue to be major partners of the US, and India is now a major strategic partner and a natural ally to both countries, the dynamics of the region will naturally influence the policies of Australia and Japan, given the strong interests the US and India hold in Afghanistan. As postulated by some strategists, “Afghanistan is not an end-game but a game in progress”.⁵ Further, India’s policy towards Afghanistan after the US withdrawal will be limited by the constraints imposed by regional power politics.

The geographic positioning of Afghanistan, which is at the centre of the global power scramble, breeds opportunities for non-state actors and proxy wars which will affect the stability of the Indo-Pacific region and calls for the cooperation of these four countries, especially through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) or the QUAD.

The article takes the issue of transnational terrorism as a common threat to the QUAD countries, and as a phenomenon that affects Indo-Pacific stability, and does not extend beyond this scope. Further, it only includes terror threats having ‘transnational elements’ such as *jihadist* terror groups operating internationally, and those involved in cross-border terrorism, that primarily operate regionally. It does not include domestic threats such as Maoism, Naxalism, violent demonstrations or protests, military coups, persecution of minorities, or other forms of threats that emanate

Also see: *Sunday Morning Herald*, “Was it Worth It? The Positive and Negatives of Australia’s War in Afghanistan”, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/was-it-worth-it-the-positives-and-negatives-of-australia-s-war-in-afghanistan-20210416-p57jur.html>. Accessed on July 20, 2022.

4. Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Issue Briefs and Special Reports, “Japan’s Stakes in the Afghanistan Crisis,” <https://www.orfonline.org/research/japans-stakes-in-the-afghanistan-crisis/>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.
5. “In #Afghanistan there is Never an End Game there is always a Game in Progress #IdeasFactory”, YouTube Video, 25:38, Observer Research Foundation, August 22, 2021, posted by “ORF,” August 22, 2021, at <https://www.orfonline.org/in-afghanistan-there-is-never-an-end-game-there-is-always-a-game-in-progress-ideasfactory/>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

domestically. By evaluating contemporary transnational terrorist threats, including maritime or seaborne terrorism which affect the interests of the QUAD and stability in the Indo-Pacific, the paper tries to ideate solutions and recommendations for a possible QUAD CT mechanism. It also evaluates the QUAD's current CT design and makes an assessment of its effect.

COUNTER-TERRORISM (CT) IN QUAD'S SECURITY FRAMEWORK

Though the QUAD is highlighted as an informal alliance aimed to balance China, the gradual expansion of its mandates cannot be missed, given the changing global political and security dynamics. The QUAD is a coalition of like-minded democracies having converging interests which simultaneously contribute to global issues. As External Affairs Minister (EAM) Jaishankar highlighted, the QUAD has a 'global element' in what it is doing.⁶ As the partners work towards the global good, they also must tackle the challenges posed to such global good. The minister further said, "The QUAD is a 21st century way of responding to a more diversified and dispersed world."⁷ In this context, the argument that the QUAD has too many mandates and CT has little space within a minilateral framework, is distorted. Solely focussing on China would distract the QUAD from its shared objectives, and limit the opportunities that the players of the group have to offer each other. The QUAD is a 'coalition for global good' and must respond to the changing world order through mutual cooperation and shared interests.⁸ Hence, global challenges such as CT must be one of the issues for the QUAD. Though Japan and Australia might not have major stakes in a possible CT framework, CT cannot be calculated purely in terms of the magnitude of the effect it has on each of these countries, as terrorism is a global threat and any effect it has on either of these countries would

6. "EAM at MSC2022 Panel Discussion", YouTube Video,1:29:44, Munich Security Conference, February 19, 2022. Posted by "Ministry of External Affairs, India", February 19, 2022, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1m0UjUqVJoU&t=992s> February 2022. Accessed on July 2, 2022.

7. Ibid.

8. Aditi Gautam, "Quad a Force for Good, Makes Indo-Pacific Better, says, PM Modi", *NDTV News*, Online Edition, May 24, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-narendra-modis-at-quad-summit-in-tokyo-quad-a-force-for-good-helps-make-a-better-indo-pacific-region-3003210>. Accessed on July 3, 2022.

prompt a policy change in the others. Further, the continental spaces in the Indo-Pacific are as important as the maritime spaces for the QUAD and as quoted in February's QUAD foreign ministers' meet, "Ungoverned spaces in Afghanistan pose a direct threat to Indo-Pacific security".⁹ Even if all the players may not face a direct threat from the region, the QUAD needs, and has already expressed its willingness to have, a regional strategy to respond to challenges that may emanate from Afghanistan and their effect on the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁰

In the recent times, all the QUAD countries have faced terrorism, mainly arising out of groups based in South, West and Central Asia. While the cases of the US and India are well known, the threats posed to Japan and Australia are least highlighted. For example, in 2015, Japanese journalist Mika Yamamoto was killed in Syria while covering the Syrian civil war.¹¹ In the same year, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) released a video threatening the lives of two Japanese nationals held hostage, demanding a ransom of \$100 million for each. The video was released after the announcement of the Japanese commitment to donate \$200 million non-military aid to countries battling the ISIS. After the deadline for its demands expired, the hostages were executed separately and videos of their beheadings were released publicly on social media. The ISIS proclaimed that the "nightmare for Japan has begun" and promised to "carry carnage wherever Japanese people are found".¹² Condemning the killings, former Japanese Prime Minister (PM) Shinzo Abe promised that Japan's "stance—contributing to fight against terrorism without giving in—remains unchanged".¹³

9. Rezaul H Laskar, "Ungoverned Afghan Spaces Pose a Direct Threat to Indo-Pacific Security: Quad," *Hindustan Times*, India News, Online Edition, February 11, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ungoverned-spaces-in-afghanistan-pose-a-direct-threat-to-indo-pacific-security-quad-101644586122566.html>. Accessed on July 5, 2022.

10. Ibid.

11. "Mika Yamamoto: Japanese Journalist Killed in Syria," *The Guardian*, News, Middle East, Online Edition, August 21, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/aug/21/mika-yamamoto-journalist-killed-syria>. Accessed on July 23, 2022.

12. Counter-Extremism, "Overview-Japan-Extremism and Terrorism", <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/japan-extremism-and-terrorism>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

13. Ibid.

In 2017, seven Japanese nationals were killed in a terror attack in Dhaka, and in 2019, long-time social worker and physician Tetsu Nakamura was shot dead by unknown militants in the city of Jalalabad.¹⁴ Earlier, Japan had also faced multiple terror threats from Al Qaeda between 1994-2004.¹⁵ Further, Australia has also witnessed incidents of planned attacks, shootings, hostage crises, and stabbings that were inspired through online radicalisation. A plot was disrupted in 2017 in a rare case involving the use of chemical weapons, in which two brothers motivated by the ISIS intended to bring down an airliner through Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and then develop poisonous gas, using instructions sent to them by ISIS handlers overseas.¹⁶ The most recent attack happened in December 2020, when a Sudanese-Australian murdered an elderly couple in their home in Parkinson, Queensland, after being inspired by the ISIS.¹⁷

Hence, threats emanating out of contemporary terrorism remain one of the vital concerns for all the quadrilateral nations. Though cooperation on this front could face systemic and structural challenges, the QUAD could work on a collective CT framework that is common to all. This can include information sharing, intelligence sharing, enhancing inter-agency coordination, table-top exercises, capacity building, combatting online radicalisation, and working in partnership with regional players through a QUAD-plus set-up. Though terrorist threats are not common in their intensity to all the partners, the QUAD still needs a CT set-up to counter future threats, as a country does not need to experience terrorism to have a CT framework. Strategic foresight prompts the QUAD to undertake anticipatory exercises and enhance its preparedness, as non-state actors continue to gain influence in the changing the global dynamics. The need for a joint CT framework also comes from the

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14. "Tetsu Nakamura: Japanese Doctor Among Six Dead in Afghan Gun Attack," BBC, News-Asia, Online Edition, December 4, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50654985>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.
 15. n. 12.
 16. *R v Khaled Khayat; R v Mahmoud Khayat* (No 14) [2019] NSWSC 1817 (17 December 2019) <https://www.austlii.edu.au/>. Accessed on July 24, 2022.
 17. Lia Eustachewich, "Elderly Couple Murdered in 'Terrorism Incident' in Australia," *New York Post*, News, Online Edition, December 18, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/12/18/elderly-couple-murdered-in-terrorism-incident-in-australia/>. Accessed on July 22, 2022

effect terrorism has on global power competition. States continue to support terrorist groups as a means of foreign policy, which is a concern shared by all the QUAD states. For example, possible cross-border attacks or provocations across the land borders that may come from Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the possible Chinese incursions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), need India to channelise more resources towards land-based defences. This could potentially affect India's ability to strengthen and maintain maritime defences in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the extended Pacific. Possible terrorist threats against the US' interests could also create diversion in the US' policy against China which would affect the interests of all the QUAD partners. Lastly, though the QUAD is not a military alliance that may prompt joint military action against terror groups in other countries, CT is not limited to military action and includes various other methods of combatting terror which the QUAD could work on. Terrorism in the continental spaces of the Indo-Pacific or the affect that terrorism could have on Indo-Pacific regional stability makes CT one of the issues of concern for the QUAD which can provide a strategic vision on CT to forge common ground with states in the Indo-Pacific.

TRANSNATIONAL TERRORIST THREATS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AND TALIBAN AFGHANISTAN

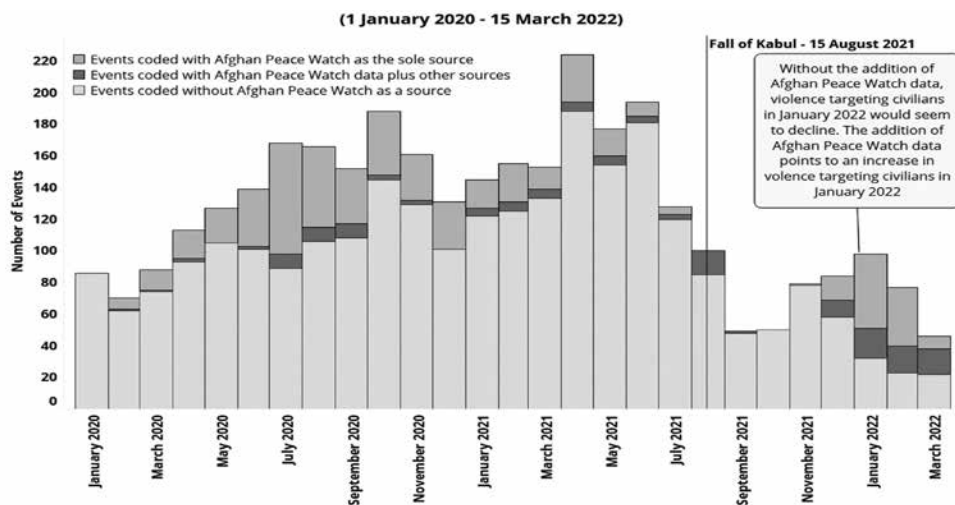
Al Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP)

The return of the Taliban has left many states having interests in the region to contend with resurgent terrorist threats. The rise of the AQ and ISKP continue to pose major threats in and beyond Afghanistan, and as a recent UN Security Council (UNSC) assessment concluded, "Terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom in Afghanistan than at any time in recent history".¹⁸ The anarchic *jihadist* landscape of Afghanistan and the ungoverned spaces in the region pose a direct threat to the Indo-Pacific security and affect the interests of the QUAD.¹⁹

18. n. 1.

19. Laskar, n. 9.

Fig 1: Violence Targeting Civilians in Afghanistan



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)

Two major factors account for the increasing terrorist threats in Afghanistan and the possible effect they could have on the QUAD states. One, the Taliban-Haqqani government that has close links with the ISI and several other terrorist groups, including AQ which are now reestablishing training camps around the region.²⁰ Second, the economic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan which continues to deteriorate with the vulnerable population becoming potentially susceptible to ISKP recruitments. The country is currently a weak and failing state, with its economy shrunk at least by 40 per cent since the US withdrawal in August.²¹ The poverty rate is expected to hit 97 per cent of the population and the country has jumped to the top of the International Rescue Committee’s 2022 Emergency Watchlist as

20. Letter dated February 3, 2022, from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, February 3, 2022, UN Security Council, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/416/14/PDF/N2141614.pdf?OpenElement>. Accessed on July 18, 2022.

21. “Journal Reports-Year in a Review,” *The Wall Street Journal*, https://www.wsj.com/articles/crisis-looms-for-taliban-afghanistan-and-rest-of-world-11639104243?mod=article_inline. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

it comes closer to the collapse of almost all basic services.²² In the first seven months of 2022, Afghanistan witnessed nearly 286 terrorist incidents, with about 364 civilian deaths.²³

The rise of the AQ and ISKP, accompanied by a failed Afghan state, serves as a prerequisite to terrorist sanctuaries in the region. Though both groups operate internationally, Afghanistan serves as a 'central strategic node' for conducting operations across the globe. While the AQ enjoys safe havens under the sympathetic regime of the Taliban, given its close relations with the group, the ISKP has increased its attacks in Afghanistan, given its irreconcilable rivalry with the Taliban.²⁴ In the first four months of 2021, the ISKP launched around 77 attacks and gained renewed capacity for mass-casualty attacks.²⁵ This left the new Taliban government and the vested interests of the QUAD countries, especially the US and India, under serious threat. In early 2021, the US intelligence has estimated that the AQ was at its weakest position in years and had less than 200 members.²⁶ Nevertheless, by early 2022, the numbers had doubled to more than 400.²⁷ On the other hand, reports suggest that the ISKP's size has doubled in less than a year, increasing from 2,000 members to roughly 4,000 operatives, out of whom about half are foreign fighters.²⁸ According to the US intelligence, both organisations could

22. International Rescue Committee, "Press Release," <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/irc-emergency-watchlist-2022-afghanistan-tops-list-countries-most-risk-year-ahead-irc?edme=true>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

23. South Asia Terrorism Portal, "Datasheet-Afghanistan", <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/afghanistan>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

24. Kabir Taneja, "What the Taliban-IS Rivalry Means for South Asia," Observer Research Foundation, December 17, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/what-the-taliban-is-rivalry-means-for-south-asia/>. Accessed on July 20, 2022.

25. Asfandiyar Mir, "What Does IS-K's Resurgence Mean in Afghanistan and Beyond?," United States Institute of Peace, September 21, 2021, Publications, online edition, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/09/what-does-ks-resurgence-mean-afghanistan-and-beyond>. Accessed on July 5, 2022.

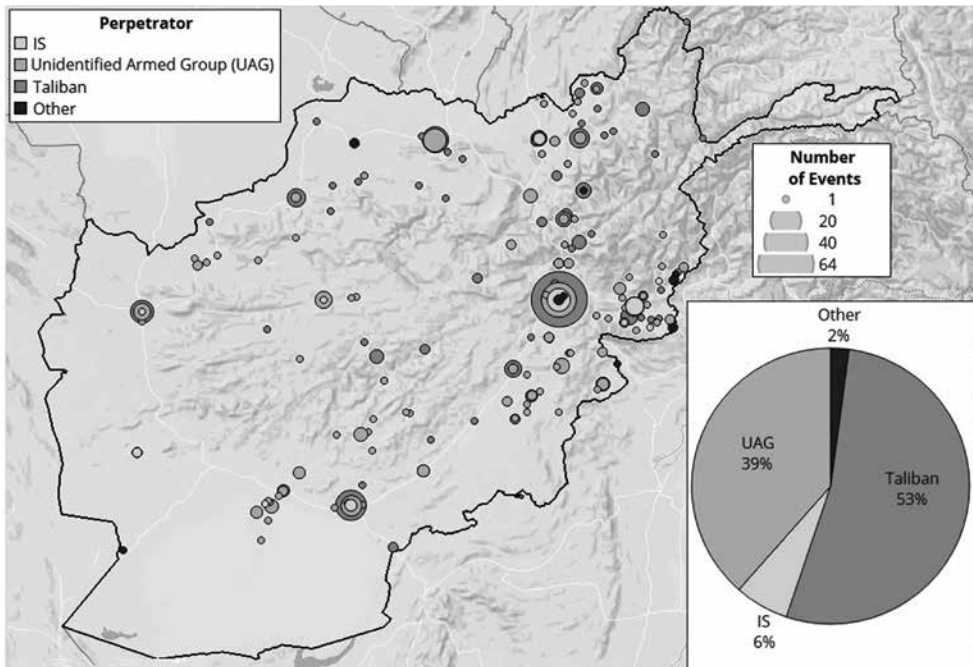
26. Statement for the Record World Wide Threat Assessment Armed Services Committee United States Senate, April 26, 2021, Defence Intelligence Agency, USA, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2021%20DIA%20Annual%20Threat%20Assessment%20Statement%20for%20the%20Record.pdf>. Accessed on July 1, 2022.

27. Stenographic Transcript Before the Committee on Armed Services United States Senate Hearing to Receive Testimony on Security in Afghanistan and in the Regions of South and Central Asia, October 26, 2021, United States Senate, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21-80_10-26-2021.pdf. Accessed on July 2, 2022.

28. Ibid.

establish an external attack capability against the US or any of its allies in less than a year, or sooner if the groups' get unanticipated gains.²⁹ Though conducting a direct external attack against the US or India is unlikely, the groups' influence could trigger *lone wolf* or *lone Mujahid* attacks and local coordinated operations. Despite UNSC Resolution 2593 (2021), holding the Taliban accountable, the AQ's threat against US interests is likely to grow and the AQ's operations are expected against Western targets in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.³⁰ Further, continuity in the ISKP's operations, its vast online influence and ability to trigger lone wolf attacks will continue to be a concern for the QUAD.

Fig 2: Violence Targeting Civilians in Afghanistan by Perpetrator (August 15, 2021-March 15, 2022)



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)

29. Ibid.
30. n. 20.

OTHER REGIONAL GROUPS IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

Other regional groups operating in the region include the Tahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETP), Islamic Jihad Group, Khatiba Imam-al Bukhari and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), etc. Though their influence within Afghanistan or beyond might be insignificant compared to the AQ or ISKP, tribal militancy in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and activities of groups like the TTP pose a threat to the region as they have a close relationship with AQ and Taliban. After the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, the TTP went on a spree targeting Pakistani forces. In retaliation, Pakistan conducted air strikes on the suspected hideouts of the TTP in Afghanistan, which only ended up in civilian casualties.³¹ The group continues to engage in defensive *jihad* attacks to overthrow the Pakistan government and establish an Islamic caliphate in the region. After months of hostilities, the Pakistan government agreed to negotiate in May 2022. Though the negotiation resulted in a ceasefire, the picture of the talks is still not clear. With a truce established on the western front, the *jihadists* might be lured to fight on the eastern border which might target India. The eastern provinces of Afghanistan have not only been safe havens for the TTP but also for Kashmir focussed groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). Though the ongoing talks would be a check on the Taliban, the TTP's relationship with groups like the Lashkar-e-Jhaangvi (LeJ) and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) will be a concern for the regional security.

PAKISTAN'S CONTINUED OUTSOURCING OF TERRORISM

Pakistan's efforts to outsource terrorism into Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and its continued activities in Afghanistan remain a threat to India, the US and beyond. The abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 by the Indian government and the subsequent CT operations have brought down terrorism in J&K

31. "Over 40 Civilians, Including Children, Killed in Pakistan Airstrikes in Afghanistan," *Hindustan Times*, Online Edition, April 17, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/over-40-civilians-including-children-killed-in-pak-airstrikes-in-afghanistan-101650169571084.html>. Accessed on July 4, 2022.

The creation of these outfits came as a direct attempt by Pakistan to re-strategise its efforts, once it anticipated that it was not going to be taken out of the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF's) grey list.

by nearly 40 per cent.³² Nevertheless, the upshot of this success is being tampered with by Rawalpindi's new proxy projects designed to revive terror in the valley and block the process of integration of J&K into mainstream India.³³ Kashmir has witnessed a change in the landscape of militancy due to the creation of new terror groups which were floated through Over Ground Workers (OGWs), most of whom are local Kashmiris.³⁴

Many new terror groups emerged post the abrogation as 'smokescreens' and 'offshoots' of old terror groups from Pakistan, like the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), which are trying to give a new face to the Kashmiri cause by portraying themselves as 'homegrown' and 'indigenous', though the markings of Pakistan are visible in their activities.³⁵ The creation of these outfits came as a direct attempt by Pakistan to re-strategise its efforts, once it anticipated that it was not going to be taken out of the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF's) grey list. This new strategy is aimed to provide a cover against Pakistan's terror outsourcing and evade scrutiny by the FATF, so that these new outfits can be favourably received by the West, unlike their censured *jihadi* predecessors. Changing narratives that now emphasise 'resistance against invasion' as the *raison d'être* as opposed to '*jihad*', accompanied by an increasing perception of alienation among Kashmiri citizens creates a

32. Rahul Tripathi, "Since Abrogation of Article 370, Kashmiri Youths Joining Terrorist Ranks Dropped by More Than 40%," *Economic Times*, Online Edition, July 29, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/since-revocation-of-article-370-kashmiri-youths-joining-terrorist-ranks-dropped-by-more-than-40/articleshow/77227229.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on July 20, 2022.

33. Rohith Sai Narayan Stambankadi, "Positioning The Resistance Front (TRF) in Kashmir's Militancy Landscape," Observer Research Foundation, December 15, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/positioning-the-resistance-front-trf-in-kashmir-s-militancy-landscape/>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

34. Ibid.

35. n. 33.

dynamic that keeps the field open for several terror outfits in Kashmir. Further, introducing Kashmir to the new geopolitical changes in Afghanistan adds to these challenges. Possible cross-border terror from Afghanistan and Pakistan, supported by local terrorist groups, along with possible incursions in the remote mountain areas from China will be major threats that influence the policies of all the QUAD states. If India channelises more resources towards land-based defences, it could potentially affect maritime defences in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the extended Pacific—a main concern for the QUAD.

While the Taliban has conducted some operations against the ISKP, it has shown little interest to tackle the other groups.

HAMSTRUNG CT OPTIONS AND QUAD'S CHALLENGES IN AFGHANISTAN

Two main policy options could possibly help in preventing the reemergence of Afghanistan as a base for terrorist operations. One, working with the Taliban to ensure that it maintains the pressure on the terror groups and works against groups like the ISKP. This option could involve the QUAD's economic and humanitarian assistance and potentially even intelligence sharing to the Taliban for a possible campaign against the ISKP. Second, to leave the de-facto CT operations to the Taliban and provide little to no assistance. Nevertheless, these options could fall short, given the Taliban's close ties with numerous groups in the region, including the AQ. While the Taliban has conducted some operations against the ISKP, it has shown little interest to tackle the other groups. Consequently, this approach could only worsen the broader terrorism problem. Further, the Taliban's lack of control over Afghan territory directly translates into inability to tackle the ISKP threat which consistently seeks to expand its territory and control. Though the Taliban's Ministry of Interior has tried to synchronise its efforts to combat the ISKP's operations in the urban areas, the attacks have only increased

over time.³⁶ At the same time, just hoping that the Taliban become effective in managing terrorism and doing nothing also becomes problematic, as reports suggest that terrorist groups in the region could gain strength by coordinating attacks against neighbouring countries and beyond.³⁷

An alternative option for the QUAD could include a joint 'Over-The-Horizon' (OTH) CT model practised by the US in the recent years. This CT design uses aerial platforms and satellites to gather signals intelligence and imagery intelligence to monitor terrorist activity and conduct strikes from fixed-wing aircraft like the B-1s, F-22s and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) like the MQ-9A Reaper.³⁸ The US' air power was inherent to the US-led 'Operation Inherent Resolve' which led to the ultimate fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This CT design is based on the 'limited risk and limited liability' strategy³⁹ which India has also demonstrated earlier through the 2019 Balakot air strike. Nevertheless, this strategy could also mean a possibility of political risk and escalation. Further, the possibility of using the OTH design becomes critical in three main ways.

First, the QUAD does not have any partner force on the ground. The US' CT campaign involving the OTH strategy included cooperation with countries, and local security forces coordinating from the ground in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. However, today, in Afghanistan, the Taliban is the enemy and the Afghan armed forces of the previous Afghan government have either fled the country or joined multiple terror groups operating in the region.⁴⁰ *Second*, both the US and India have lost their intelligence foothold in Afghanistan and the head

36. Tom Hussain, "Isis-K Escalates Terror Attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan in Show of Resistance Against Taliban," *This Week in Asia*, Online Edition, December 8, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/3158929/isis-k-escalates-terror-attacks-afghanistan-and-pakistan-show-resistance>. Accessed on July 4, 2022.

37. n. 27.

38. RAND Corporation, Research Briefs, "The Role of US Airpower in Defeating ISIS," https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA388-1.html. Accessed on July 21, 2022.

39. Ibid.

40. Yaroslav Trofimov, "Left Behind After U.S. Withdrawal, Some Former Afghan Spies and Soldiers Turn to Islamic State," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 31, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/left-behind-after-u-s-withdrawal-some-former-afghan-spies-and-soldiers-turn-to-islamic-state-11635691605>. Accessed on July 19, 2022.

of the US Central Command has acknowledged that the US' intelligence capacity has reduced to a mere 2 per cent compared to what it once had in Afghanistan, making it 'extremely hard' to precisely understand what is happening in the region.⁴¹ Last, there are no bases in the region to fly aircraft for intelligence collection or strike missions in the Afghan territory. Currently, the US is forced to utilise locations such as Al Udeid air base in Qatar, which is approximately 2,500 miles from Kabul and it takes an MQ-9A at least 14 hours to fly a round trip. At the same time, Pakistan may not allow overflight rights even if this could be an option. Though India currently has its Farkhor air base in Tajikistan, it remains a critical issue as it currently houses only basic medical facilities, and Tajikistan is least likely to allow any QUAD presence on its land given its relations with both Russia and China. Lack of partner forces, scant intelligence, and absence of air bases in the proximate region leave the QUAD hamstrung in conducting possible CT operations.

CONTEMPORARY TERRORIST THREATS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Transnational terrorism in Southeast Asia continues to be a security concern especially in Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand. The region has been a hotbed for foreign fighters, with groups having links to the AQ that date back to the Soviet-Afghan War.⁴² Since 9/11, the region has also been a transit route for transnational terrorism, as evidenced by the facilitation of logistics during 9/11 and later during the Bali bombings in 2002.⁴³ Between 2014-17, 800-1,200 Indonesians and 100 Malaysians

41. Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, "US Commander: Al Qaeda Numbers in Afghanistan up 'Slightly'," AP News, Online Edition, December 10, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-middle-east-united-states-taliban-islamic-state-group-bec82acfe6dbd19bed4c11db21d7a78e>. Accessed on 25 July, 2022.

42. Munira Mustaffa, "Reassessing The Extremist Threat in Southeast Asia," *Newlines Institute*, June 28, 2022, Online Edition, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/reassessing-the-extremist-threat-in-southeast-asia/>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

43. "Bali Bombings: Indonesia Jails Top Militant Over Deadly Nightclub Attacks," BBC, Asia, Online Edition, January 19, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60041683>. Accessed on July 16, 2022.

Terrorist groups operating in Southeast Asia have a prolonged predisposition to use the Southeast Asian waters and high seas as attack vectors which affects international maritime traffic and trade.

travelled to the Middle East to join the ISIS and other groups.⁴⁴ After the ISIS lost ground in 2017, its operations were decentralised into *wilayahs* or provinces and the *Wilayah Sharq Asiyya* (East Asia Province) continues to call for attacks to overthrow the “*kafir* governments”;⁴⁵ speculations have emerged that there would be an attempt to use the region as a second front, especially after reports suggested a possible spike in attacks

after the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan.⁴⁶

Terrorist groups operating in Southeast Asia have a prolonged predisposition to use the Southeast Asian waters and high seas as attack vectors which affects international maritime traffic and trade. Between 2014-18, there were nearly 200 attempted attacks on littorals and ships in the region and a vast number of attacks were perpetrated by the ISIS affiliated Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).⁴⁷ The ASG has demonstrated its capabilities for seaborne terrorism through multiple attacks in the past, especially the killing of the crew and passengers of *Superferry14* off the coast of the Philippines in 2004 that resulted in 110 deaths.⁴⁸ The region also witnessed huge mobilisation of foreign fighters in 2017 during the Marawi siege, which is noted to be the most devastating conflict in the Philippines since World War II. Though the siege was only in the Philippines, it was a regional operation against the combined arms of groups like the ASG, Maute Group, and about another 100

44. “Homecoming: The Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters in South-East Asia”, UNDP, https://www.entryandexitpoints.asiapacific.undp.org/reports/UNDP_HomecomingTheReturnofForeignTerroristFighters.pdf. Accessed on July 19, 2022.

45. Kenneth Yeo, “As Southeast Asia Reopens, Will Transnational Terrorism Return?,” *The Diplomat*, Online Edition, April 15, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/as-southeast-asia-reopens-will-transnational-terrorism-return/>. Accessed on July 14, 2022.

46. n. 43.

47. Rommel Barlaoi, “Maritime Terrorism in Southeast Asia -The Abu Sayyaf Threat”, *Naval War College Review*, vol. 58, no 4, 2005. Accessed on July 4, 2022.

48. “Superferry14: The World’s Deadliest Terrorist Attack at Sea,” *SAFETY4SEA*, <https://safety4sea.com/cm-superferry14-the-worlds-deadliest-terrorist-attack-at-sea/>. Accessed on July 20, 2022.

foreign fighters who included minors who migrated to Marawi to support the ISIS.⁴⁹ In this context, the QUAD's CT policy becomes important given the Association of Southeast Asian Nation's (ASEAN's) centrality in the Indo-Pacific region.

Though terrorist attacks have witnessed a decrease due to the pandemic and major CT operations in the Philippines and Malaysia,⁵⁰ sporadic attacks perpetrated by pro-ISIS groups and continued online narratives to incite violence amid the resurgence of the Taliban, demonstrate the groups' willingness to incite violence in the region. The recent appointment of the Islamic State emir for Southeast Asia⁵¹ and the twin blasts in Basilan, Philippines, on May 31, depict the attempts of the militant groups to reclaim their pre-COVID momentum.⁵² Further, some strategists also identify the lull in violence and the attempts by the groups to maintain a low profile as the practice of *i'dad* or preparation for *jihād*.⁵³ This strategic patience help the groups to enhance their operational capabilities through various activities such as training, weapons procurement, radicalisation, networking and recruitment, as evidenced by the actions of the Maute Group, which prioritised recruitments by currently ceasing operations in the Philippines.⁵⁴

The recent annual terrorism threat assessment of the Internal Security Department (ISD), Singapore, issued a 'high-alert' as the city-state is viewed as an 'attractive target' for terror attacks. The report stated that terrorist fighters may make their way into hotspots and conflict zones and plot

49. "Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines Launch Joint Operations in Sulu Sea to Tackle Terrorism, Transnational Crimes", *The Straits Times*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/indonesia-malaysia-andphilippines-launch-joint-operations-in-sulu-sea-to-tackle-terrorism>. Accessed on June 30, 2022.

50. n. 43.

51. "Philippine Military Identifies IS Extremist Group's New Regional Leader," *Benar News*, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/leader-identified-03022022143616.html>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

52. Teofilo Garcia, "Cops Track 2 'Persons of Interest' Behind Basilan Twin Blasts," *Philippine News Agency*, May 31, 2022, Online Edition <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1175531>. Accessed on July 2, 2022.

53. n. 43.

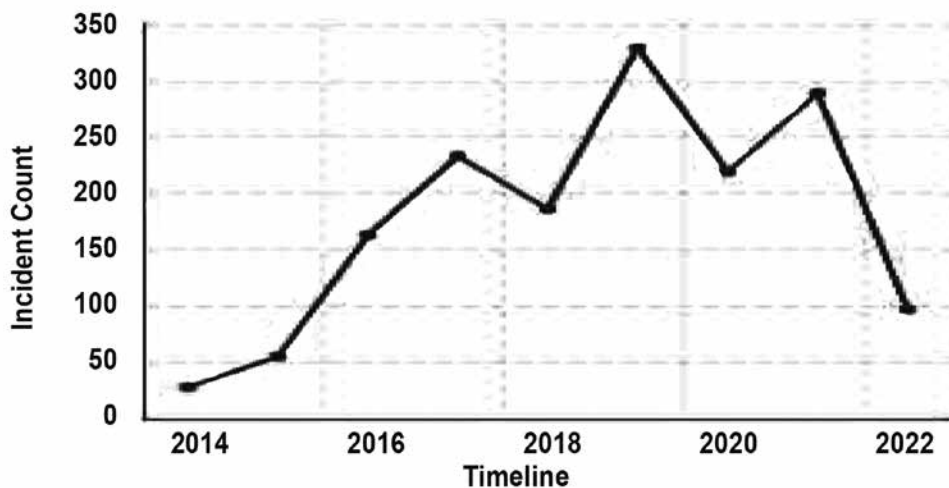
54. *Ibid*.

Though the rise of the Taliban ignited speculations about possible attacks in the region, there is no logistical link between Afghanistan and Southeast Asia due to a lack of well-structured allies in the region to mobilise or facilitate support.

attacks conceived during the pandemic.⁵⁵ Though the rise of the Taliban ignited speculations about possible attacks in the region, there is no logistical link between Afghanistan and Southeast Asia due to a lack of well-structured allies in the region to mobilise or facilitate support. At the same time, the AQ and ISKP seem to be more focussed on expanding their reach and influence in South and Central

Asia, and currently there seems to be no indication or evidence that these groups have the resources to carry out plots in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the momentary lull cannot be perceived as an absence of threat, as the region has historically seen groups that facilitate international terrorism,

Fig 3: Incidents of Terrorism in Southeast Asia Since 2014



Source: Southeast Asia Militant Atlas, RSIS, Singapore.

55. "Singapore an 'Attractive Target' for Terror Attack; People Urged to be on High Alert," *The Indian Express*, World-Online Edition, July 13, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/singapore-attractive-target-terror-attack-people-urged-high-alert-8026630/>. Accessed on July 13, 2022.

maritime terrorist threats, migration of foreign fighters, and lone wolf attacks that continue to threaten the centre of the Indo-Pacific region.

THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF SAMUNDARI JIHAD AND THREATS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Though the number of maritime terrorism incidents globally have been miniscule, an analysis of some of the most recent past incidents demonstrates that terrorist groups pose a serious threat to both maritime capabilities and maritime assets of the Indo-Pacific region. Transnational groups have expanded their tactical agency against the maritime commons, reportedly seeking to target vulnerable littorals.⁵⁶ *Jihadist* attacks on maritime capabilities are not random strikes or spontaneous reprisals fuelled by opportunism, but rather there is a discernible doctrine and blueprint suggestive of strategic planning. Advocated by Ab-al-Rahmin-al Nashiri, one of the AQ's main operatives responsible for the bombing of the USS *Cole* in October 2000, the AQ has a four-prong maritime *jihad* strategy.⁵⁷ The strategy comprises suicide attacks on vessels using hijacked ships to target port infrastructure, attacks through underwater demolition teams, suicide bombers, and attacks on super tankers from the air using explosive small aircraft. This strategy resonates with contemporary *jihadist* thinking on maritime terrorism.

In recent times, speculations about possible maritime attacks have underscored the psychological grip of maritime terrorism over the minds of both Indian and US security planners.⁵⁸ In November 2018, a few weeks before the 10th anniversary of 26/11, intelligence emerged that the LeT and JeM have been training their militant cadres at modified training sites and

56. Abhijit Singh, "Maritime Terrorism in Asia: An Assessment," *ORF Occasional Paper*, no. 215, October 2019, Observer Research Foundation, https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ORF_OccasionalPaper_215_MaritimeTerrorism-Asia.pdf. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

57. Nincic, "Maritime Terrorism: How Real is the Threat?" July 16, 2012, at https://www.fairobserver.com/region/north_america/maritime-terrorism-how-real-threat/. Accessed on July 6, 2022.

58. *Ibid.*

canals of Faisalabad and Lahore to execute strikes on Indian ports, cargo ships and oil tankers.⁵⁹ Unlike the 2008 attacks which used the sea route to enter Mumbai, the plan was to deploy trained *jihadi* divers to target coastal facilities in India, which, fortunately, did not come to fruition.⁶⁰ In 2018, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) had sought a red corner notice from Interpol against a Pakistani counsellor in the high commission of Colombo who was reported to have recruited Sri Lankan Muslims to attack high profile targets in India, including ports in south India. The agent was planning to send explosives from Mannar in Sri Lanka, to Tuticoran and Rameshwaram of Tamil Nadu by a rowing boat. This was to be followed by sending two Pakistanis from Colombo to Bengaluru via Maldives to carry out attacks on the American consulate in Bengaluru.⁶¹ Previously, the AQIS hijacked the PNS *Zulfiqar* in 2014 to attack the US Navy warships by getting close to them in the high seas and then turning the shipboard weapon systems towards the Americans.⁶² In the aftermath of the incident, India grappled with the contingency of a preemptive Indian air strike on a Pakistani naval vessel that was suspected of harbouring terrorists. In the absence of credible intelligence, an anticipatory strike would have resulted in escalation, and, at the same time, doing nothing would have been giving a 'free pass' to the terrorists.⁶³ Incidents of seaborne terrorism are not limited to the South Asian and Southeast Asian waters. The US has also witnessed an attack at the naval air station Pensacola in December 2019, which killed

59. "India on Alert Against Possible Lashkar, Jaish Attacks from Sea", *Hindustan Times*, October 12, 2018, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-on-alert-for-terror-attacks-from-sea/story-Z3sbBaWORD4X6R0QZqymaN.html>. Accessed on July 8, 2022.

60. Ibid.

61. "NIA to Seek Interpol Red Corner Notice Against Pak Diplomat Wanted in Terror Plot," *The Economic Times*, February 25, 2018, News-Politics, Online Edition, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nia-to-seek-interpolred-corner-notice-against-pak-diplomat-wanted-in-terror-plot/articleshow/63066315.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on July 4, 2022.

62. Dr. Vijay Sakhhuja, "Maritime Terrorism: Karachi as a Staging Point," Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, October 6, 2014, http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=4680. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

63. Ibid.

three men and injured eight others. The attack was later claimed by the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) through an audio recording in February 2020.⁶⁴ These incidents demonstrate the high risk of maritime terrorism in the Indo-Pacific maritime waters and the possible attacks targeting maritime capabilities.

EVALUATING THE QUAD'S CURRENT CT EFFORTS: CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite being highlighted as one of the areas of cooperation, the QUAD's CT design has been vaguely defined. Though CT is regularly featured in various statements by the QUAD, little has materialised so far. In November 2019, India's NIA hosted the first Counter-Terrorism Table-Top Exercise (CT-TTX) for the QUAD with the purpose of assessing and validating CT mechanisms against a range of existing and emerging terrorist threats, at both regional and global levels.⁶⁵ The exercise emphasised on sharing best practices, preparedness, mitigation strategies and developing coordinated CT strategies, along with the formalised sharing of information on suspected groups and individuals, funding of terror groups, and combatting online radicalisation among the four member states. The exercise was the first concrete joint security initiative that reflected a shared resolve in addressing major security challenges faced by all the QUAD partners. Further, it also reflected India's willingness to lead the growing call for CT approaches across multilateral forums and also India's push for a QUAD-led CT mechanism. As the QUAD started to debate matters of regional and global security, mainly through the lens of the Indo-Pacific, discussions on CT

64. Thomas Joscelyn, "AQAP Claims "Full Responsibility" for Shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola", *FDD's Long War Journal*, February 2, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/02/aqap-claims-full-responsibility-for-shooting-at-naval-air-station-pensacola.php>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

65. Kabir Taneja, "The Quad's Counterterrorism Priorities," Observer Research Foundation, September 24, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-quads-counterterrorism-priorities/>. Accessed on July 12, 2022.

As the QUAD started to debate matters of regional and global security, mainly through the lens of the Indo-Pacific, discussions on CT have been largely on strategic, political, and non-military cooperation rather than tactical or military cooperation.

have been largely on strategic, political, and non-military cooperation rather than tactical or military cooperation.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, in the absence of an institutionalised framework, a shared CT mechanism poses challenges such as interoperability between cross-country agencies and sharing of intelligence.⁶⁷ This needs to be emphasised, as the role of intelligence sharing in the CT architectures is a fundamental requirement. Given India's massive strategic challenges on its borders,

despite its own significant military and intelligence capabilities, and the decline of the US' strategic foothold in Afghanistan, increased intelligence cooperation among the QUAD countries becomes important. This mechanism can also be used to observe China's incursions in the border regions such as Ladakh.

INDIA'S BILATERAL CT MECHANISMS WITH THE QUAD COUNTRIES

The QUAD's CT mechanism finds both bilateral and multilateral resonance. India has a joint working group on CT with all the member states of the QUAD. Though India has been historically unnerved by the US' support to Pakistan despite Islamabad's well-known support to terrorist proxies, this has become less of an irritant as the US-Pakistan dynamics have grown more estranged over Pakistan's covert actions in Afghanistan. The FATF's grey-listing of Pakistan, suspension of aid in 2017 by the Trump government, and continuity of a frosty relationship under the Biden Administration

66. Mark S Cogan and Vivek Mishra, "Quad and Pacific: The Counterterrorism Strategy," *Deccan Herald*, Opinion – Main Article, November 16, 2021, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/main-article/quad-and-indo-pacific-the-counterterrorism-strategy-1051514.html>. Accessed on July 2, 2022.

67. Author's interview with Mr. Kabir Taneja, Research Fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, at Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

depicts a shift in the US' thinking. This shift in the US' approach has complemented a larger confluence of geopolitical interests between the US and India vis-a-vis the rise of a disruptive China and given a sense of urgency to the QUAD for strategic and tactical bridge-building to address regional security challenges.

India has also been wary of the US' proposition of cooperating with the Taliban to combat the ISKP. Though the Taliban and ISKP may have conflictual ideologies, both groups share organisational linkages with Pakistan's ISI.⁶⁸ The ISKP also comprises several members from the former Haqqani network, TTP and LeT.⁶⁹ Given this complex nexus between the groups, there is a significant CT challenge on operations as Pakistan portrays the Taliban as a lesser evil compared to the ISKP. Pakistan will expect cooperation between the US and Taliban against a common enemy i.e., the ISKP which could be a marketable proposition aimed at the Pentagon rather than the White House. Nevertheless, India's 'engage but not endorse' strategy⁷⁰ and the likely caution and forethought that the US may put in its Afghanistan policy can address this challenge. Further, it is in the best interests of the QUAD to seize important strategic and security opportunities in Afghanistan by engaging with the Taliban, and this becomes important as China gets closer to the Taliban.

Despite these challenges, several intelligence and diplomatic mechanisms such as the US-India Counter-Terrorism Joint Working Group and US-India Designation Dialogue reinforce trust in the US-India bilateral. A stronger US-India relationship also complements the interests of Japan and Australia

68. n. 24.

69. Ibid.

70. Sushant Sareen, "India's Outreach to the Taliban: Engage, Don't Endorse," Observer Research Foundation, June 8, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-outreach-to-the-taliban/>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

that also have Joint Working Groups on CT with India. The most recent US-India Counter-Terrorism Joint Working Group and US-India Designation Dialogue was held in October 2021 and marked their 18th and 4th sessions respectively.⁷¹ Similarly, the India-Australia Joint Working Group on CT completed its 13th session in May 2022. Both countries continue to work closely on CT to deepen engagement between their respective counterpart agencies to advance interaction, cooperation and information sharing. Both India-US and India-Australia share CT cooperation in other multilaterals such as the UN, G20, Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Financial Action Task Force (FATF) as well as with the QUAD partners.⁷² The India-Japan Joint Working Group on CT last held its 5th meeting in 2017 and bilateral engagement on CT between these two players has not seen any further progress.⁷³ Nevertheless, the shared partnership between India and Japan on CT was revitalised through the Counter-Terrorism Table Top Exercise (CT-TTX) in 2019 along with the other QUAD players. In October 2022, Canberra was expected to host the next QUAD CT-TTX and India was to conduct the 'No Money for Terror Conference' in Delhi later in 2022.⁷⁴ These institutionalised efforts, both multilaterally and bilaterally, would play a crucial role in bridging existing gaps in the geopolitics of CT and forge common ground.

Beyond these challenges and avenues of cooperation, QUAD has various limitations when it comes to cooperating on CT. Besides the complexity of engaging with the regional powers in South and Southeast Asia, a possible military alliance to combat regional threats might be a distant possibility for

71. US Department of State, "Press Releases," <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-u-s-india-counter-terrorism-joint-working-group-and-designations-dialogue/>. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

72. Ministry of External Affairs, "Bilateral/Multilateral Documents," https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/35282/Joint_Press_Release_of_the_13th_meeting_of_the_IndiaAustralia_Joint_Working_Group_on_CounterTerrorism. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

73. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-India Relations," https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/is_sc/page23e_000490.html. Accessed on July 25, 2022.

74. Ibid.

the QUAD. Further, though engaging with the Taliban has been discussed, all four QUAD states have varying levels of interest and concerns with the new government. Though interoperability between agencies for CT and possible intelligence sharing for both combatting terrorism and observing Chinese incursions in the borders can be a good avenue to kick off a possible CT strategy, commitments from Tokyo and Canberra may be subject to their bilateral strains with China from a regional point of view rather than a multilateral one.⁷⁵ Further, India will continue to have concerns over the methods of the US as it did not support the conventional US' objectives of regime change to counter terrorism activities, though the US is least likely to involve itself in waging wars on foreign lands, considering its experience in Afghanistan. Additionally, Japan's pacifist policy incorporated through Article 9 of its Constitution will prompt only financial, technical or diplomatic support, as it did earlier, and Japan might not engage in a possible military mechanism for CT led by the QUAD. Nevertheless, these limitations could be overcome with deliberations, and the QUAD is likely to agree to, and consistently engage in, the non-military aspects of countering terrorism.

THE WAY FORWARD FOR A QUAD CT FRAMEWORK

A possible QUAD CT framework needs cooperation primarily in four arenas:

- Combining the capacities and resources of the QUAD states on various CT mechanisms and consolidating existing bilateral mechanisms into a wider multilateral framework.
- Capacity building among the QUAD states and extending it to states within the Indo-Pacific region.
- Interoperability between the security and CT agencies of the respective four QUAD countries.
- Cooperation with regional players, primarily in South and Southeast Asia.

75. Author's interview with Mr. Vivek Mishra, Research Fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

First, a joint QUAD-led humanitarian assistance and disaster relief mechanism that will address the immediate, short-term needs in Afghanistan must be a part of the QUAD's regional strategy. Since assistance to the Taliban against the ISIS might not be a sustainable option, given the Taliban's proximity with the other groups, the QUAD must exert diplomatic pressure and use international forums to call for action against terrorism in the region. Second, the QUAD must expand the CT-TTX to include observer states and Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs) in the region on a rotational basis. This builds inclusivity within the policy framework and enhances understanding of the terror dynamics across various states.

Third, combatting terror financing becomes crucial to curb terror operations and preventing terrorists from accessing financial resources. The QUAD needs a joint comprehensive approach that focusses on choking terrorist financing, especially the *hawala* transactions in South Asia that continue to escape the formal financial system. This mechanism must entail agencies to monitor financial transactions and scrutinise diversion of charitable donations from West Asia to groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan and beyond. The group must also emphasise on upholding international standards on anti-money laundering and combatting financing of terrorism consistent with the FATF recommendations by creating Technical Assistance (TA) programmes among the QUAD states and extending these to other countries in the region to identify, and exercise surveillance over, illegal transactions that finance terrorism.

Fourth, to counter online extremist content and radicalisation, the QUAD can develop a commonly funded agency or platform working against violent extremism and make it inclusive by engaging various stakeholders. It can also set up a joint working group of experts to assess online propaganda of various transnational terror groups to formulate tactical responses to counter terrorist messaging and formulate long-term strategies for coordinated campaigns that are specific to each region in the Indo-Pacific. This set-up can help in coordinating strategic communications

through a centralised and coordinated system. On a broader avenue, the QUAD must debate regulation of online spaces and negotiate a multilateral framework to enhance digital infrastructure capable of curtailing terrorist content online, combat cyber terrorism and digital transfer of funds by terror groups.

Further, the QUAD must establish a collaborative and innovative relationship with Internet Service Providers (ISPs), social media and technology companies to assist in identifying red flags for vulnerable individuals to detect and tackle online terrorist content. Through a collaboration of ISPs, technology companies and agencies, the QUAD can develop a 'Threat Modelling Guide' for inter-governmental cooperation to identify and assess digital risks associated with terrorism. Since this might be a completely new vertical for the QUAD, this initiative must be a part of the QUAD's current digital-risk coordination and cyber security mechanisms. By bringing this initiative into the ambit of current working mechanisms, the QUAD can adjust its infrastructure and funding to combat digital and cyber risks that emanate out of terror activities.

Fifth, existing bilateral intelligence sharing mechanisms must be enhanced for a wider intelligence-sharing network among the four countries. US-India intelligence sharing has grown over the years and the US has also worked with the Southeast Asian countries on intelligence and reconnaissance. A similar model within the bilateral mechanisms running among the QUAD countries will provide a strong plank to consolidate and improve the intelligence sharing network for monitoring terrorist activities in Afghanistan, in the surrounding regions and on India's northern borders. Further, the US has the National Criminal Intelligence Sharing Plan (NCISP); India has a similar National Integration Grid (NATGRID), Japan has the Public Security Intelligence Agency (PISA); and Australia the Australian Criminal Intelligence Database (ACID) which create actionable intelligence products by connecting databases of various core security agencies. Since data is being increasingly constructed over the sovereign idea of states,

QUAD needs to develop a pan-Indo-Pacific analytical tool that can support the competent authorities in the region for sharing of information on recruitment and travel facilitation of suspected individuals. This can help the agencies detect and deter network pathways used for recruitment.

these agencies can engage in 'issue-based' and 'need-based' cooperative mechanisms for sharing real-time data, information and intelligence.

Sixth, working in cooperation with countries prone to terror threats in and beyond the region is the key to tackle the issue of foreign fighters. In this context, the QUAD needs to develop a pan-Indo-Pacific analytical tool that can support the competent authorities in the region for sharing of information on recruitment and travel facilitation of suspected individuals.

This can help the agencies detect and deter network pathways used for recruitment. Further, the QUAD can also create the exchange of judicial and prosecution authorities to determine effective approaches to address the legal issues of foreign fighters and debate legislative frameworks to investigate and prosecute foreign fighters.

Seventh, the QUAD has already launched the Working Group on Critical and Emerging Technologies and International Standards Cooperation Network. Under these existing frameworks, the QUAD can work on research and development of essential defence technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) to combat terror, by integrating the respective supply chains and by bringing in scientists and industry engineers from the four countries.

Last, in the maritime sphere, the QUAD can engage in tactical military-based counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency exercises, simulations to enhance preparedness and develop mitigation strategies in the medium to long terms. Under the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), the QUAD can set up the Indo-Pacific Maritime Crisis Centre to enhance surveillance, operations, planning, training and exercises which can be a key to enhance interoperability between security

agencies during any operational and planning response. Technologies like the transponder systems, biometric cards issued to fishermen, screening and surveillance assets, transponder systems and Integrated Underwater Defence Surveillance Systems (IUDSS) are some that can help battle maritime terror threats. These systems are too costly for smaller states and islands in the Indo-Pacific and these states need a framework that enables capacity building in which ships can be hardened at affordable prices, which the QUAD can help to provide in high-risk areas in the long-term to the regional states.

Technologies like the transponder systems, biometric cards issued to fishermen, screening and surveillance assets, transponder systems and Integrated Underwater Defence Surveillance Systems (IUDSS) are some that can help battle maritime terror threats.

CONCEPTUALISING INDIA'S ROLE IN CT VIS-À-VIS THE QUAD

In recent times, India has broadened its CT engagements in the face of the evolving global threats. In 2022, India hosted the third ministerial conference on 'No Money for Terror', followed by the UNSC's special meeting of the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC).⁷⁶ The year also marked the 90th INTERPOL General Assembly in which the comity of nations overwhelmingly voted to host the meeting in India.⁷⁷

Amid the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's exit from the FATF grey list, these events have allowed India to underscore its distinct apprehensions in combatting transnational terrorism. These international engagements have also enabled India to enhance cooperation in CT with various partner countries, security and law enforcement bodies internationally, and serve as a platform to draw attention to its initiatives.

76. Ministry of Finance, Government of India, "90th Interpol General Assembly 2022", <https://www.indiagovtmint.in/en/product/90th-interpol-general-assembly-2022-denomination-of-100-folder-packing-proof/>. Accessed in October 12, 2023.

77. Press Information Bureau (PIB), President's Secretariat, "Heads of Delegations of UN Security Council's Counter Terrorism Committee Call on the President", <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1871875>. Accessed on October 12, 2023.

In the same light, shared partnerships with the QUAD nations hold the potential to expand India's role in combatting terrorism globally. Though the QUAD's initiatives in CT are non-kinetic, they still have potential, given the vast space counter-terrorism measures now occupy, beyond traditional battlefields. This potential has to be utilised through tangible deliverables, around the borders of the grouping's hard power and collective strategic ambitions. In this light, India must push the QUAD partners to feed CT initiatives into the more concrete geostrategic aims of the grouping. These measures can include capacity building and developing trust on intelligence sharing.

Nevertheless, the long-term sustenance of these initiatives depends on the time-lines of delivery. In the absence of consistent and progressive outcomes, these initiatives are likely to fail in the long term. India and the US particularly hold greater interest in the CT front and must push these efforts through tangible mechanisms. The time is ripe for the QUAD, and beyond meetings, it must quickly deliver to foster its collective objectives.

CONCLUSION

As the QUAD engages in deepening ties and advancing practical co-operation, its expanding mandates must include CT as one of the priorities. Though CT may not be among the primary strategic aims of the QUAD, it can pursue CT objectives either as a part of the existing mandates or on the side-lines of existing initiatives. Initiatives, especially in the cyber and maritime domains can be complemented with combatting cyber terror and maritime *jihad*. The QUAD can also work on collective regional strategies, especially in regions from where transnational terrorist threats emerge. Though terrorism is not a threat that is equally faced by all the QUAD states, policy changes adopted by any of the four countries due to terror threats might affect the interests of all the QUAD states. In this context, CT must be one of the priorities in the QUAD's agenda.

The QUAD can also provide a strategic vision around CT, especially in South and Southeast Asia to enhance regional capabilities and combat