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QUAD AND COUNTERTERRORISM: FROM DECLARATORY COOPERATION TO INSTITUTIONALISED PREVENTION

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The 3rd Quad Counterterrorism Working Group (CTWG) meeting was held in New Delhi on 4–5 December 2025. | Photo: Ministry of External Affairs, India / @MEAIndia

For India, emerging patterns of transnational terrorism demand a fundamental shift in how democracies coordinate prevention. Consider the Bondi attack on December 14, 2025: a major terrorist assault during a religious celebration in Sydney, carried out by perpetrators of Indian origin radicalised by ISIS ideology. The attack followed only months after a deadly assault in Kashmir attributed to Pakistan-based militant groups. Such interconnected threats—spanning South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific—expose the inadequacy of bilateral counterterrorism approaches and highlight the urgent need for institutionalised coordination through platforms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

Both Japan and the United States are likely to show interest in such initiatives, albeit driven by distinct strategic considerations. For the United States, transnational and ideologically networked terrorist attacks underscore the risks of global jihadist diffusion, diaspora radicalisation, and security spillovers across the Indo-Pacific, aligning closely with its long-standing emphasis on intelligence integration and preventive counterterrorism frameworks. For Japan, although terrorism does not constitute a primary domestic threat, instability affecting

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Australia, India, and the broader Indo-Pacific region directly threatens regional order, economic stability, and the safety of Japanese nationals overseas. Nevertheless, the engagement of both countries would likely remain preventive and institutional rather than operational in nature, prioritising intelligence sharing, early-warning mechanisms, counter-radicalisation efforts, and capacity building. In this context, the Quad emerges as a relevant—yet still underutilised—platform for coordinated counterterrorism prevention rather than reactive response.

This scenario reflects the ground realities India has confronted for decades. The 2008 Mumbai attacks killed 166 people, yet perpetrators remain unprosecuted in Pakistan despite overwhelming evidence and Interpol red notices. Cross-border terrorism persists because militant groups exploit international borders as shields, use financial networks spanning multiple jurisdictions, and disseminate propaganda through global digital platforms beyond any single nation's regulatory reach. India's accumulated experience combating terrorism—from persistent infiltration across the Line of Control to sophisticated urban attacks—positions New Delhi uniquely to lead the Quad toward a robust, intelligence-driven counterterrorism mechanism.

As India prepares for future Quad leadership roles, the question is whether New Delhi will leverage these platforms to transform decades of bitter counterterrorism lessons into regional public goods or settle for declaratory statements that leave operational gaps unaddressed.

STRATEGIC RELEVANCE OF THE QUAD

Before assessing India's leverage with the Quad, two questions must be addressed: the forum's relevance amid evolving U.S. foreign policy, and whether the Quad has ever been genuinely concerned with counterterrorism. The relevance of the Quad remains substantial, though it is increasingly shaped—and occasionally constrained—by the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy. As the principal strategic driver of the Quad, the United States exerts significant influence over the forum's coherence and momentum. Fluctuations in U.S. policy—ranging from episodic

isolationism and transactional diplomacy to renewed alliance-based engagement—directly affect the grouping. While U.S. Indo-Pacific policy has consistently identified China as a long-term strategic competitor, domestic political polarisation, shifting presidential priorities, and burden-sharing debates introduce uncertainty for partners.

As a result, the Quad has gradually evolved from a hard-security-centric alignment into a more diversified, issue-based coalition focusing on maritime security, supply-chain resilience, critical technologies, climate cooperation, and health security. This diversification reflects both a strategic adaptation by India, Japan, and Australia to hedge against U.S. policy volatility and an effort to institutionalise the Quad beyond the preferences of any single administration. Thus, while U.S. policies continue to anchor the Quad’s strategic rationale, the forum’s relevance increasingly rests on its ability to function as a flexible, multilayered partnership rather than a rigid military alliance.

COUNTERTERRORISM AND THE QUAD

Counterterrorism has never been a central or defining pillar of the Quad, and its engagement with terrorism remains limited, indirect, and largely declaratory. Unlike traditional counterterrorism frameworks that emphasise intelligence sharing, joint operations, capacity building, and de-radicalisation, the Quad has primarily focused on broader regional stability concerns—particularly maritime domain awareness, freedom of navigation, and balancing coercive state behaviour in the Indo-Pacific. While joint statements occasionally reference terrorism, violent extremism, and transnational crime, these issues are not operationalised through dedicated institutional mechanisms within the Quad framework. This reflects both strategic divergence among members—especially India’s prioritisation of cross-border terrorism emanating from specific state and non-state actors—and the Quad’s overarching orientation toward state-centric security challenges rather than non-state threats.

The Quad’s real counterterrorism potential lies not in rapid response or kinetic cooperation, but in preventive measures such as intelligence coordination,

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capacity-building with Southeast Asian partners, and addressing online radicalisation—areas that remain underdeveloped.

Indian security forces have developed sophisticated capabilities through decades of operations in Jammu and Kashmir, the Northeast, and against Maoist insurgencies. The Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and the Intelligence Bureau (IB) possess institutional knowledge of Pakistan-based militant groups—Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and their various proxies—that no other intelligence agency can replicate. India also conducts maritime counterterrorism operations across the Indian Ocean Region, from anti-piracy missions off Somalia to monitoring extremist movements through critical sea lanes.

Yet India's experience also highlights the limitations of unilateral approaches. Militant groups continue to exploit international borders as shields against prosecution, terror financing networks span multiple banking jurisdictions beyond India's regulatory reach, and online radicalisation takes place through platforms hosted far beyond Indian jurisdiction. For New Delhi, which has struggled for decades to secure meaningful international cooperation against Pakistan-based terror networks, a formalised Quad intelligence mechanism would convert bilateral frustrations into multilateral leverage.

FROM WORKING GROUPS TO INSTITUTIONALISED PREVENTION

The Quad's current counterterrorism architecture remains inadequate to these challenges. The Counterterrorism Working Group, established in 2023, has conducted valuable technical workshops and tabletop exercises, including India-hosted discussions on emerging security technologies and urban counterterrorism operations. While these activities have value for confidence-building, they remain episodic, consultative, and declaratory, lacking continuous intelligence integration, standing protocols, or operational follow-through. The Working Group has also avoided politically sensitive issues such as naming state sponsors of terrorism, reinforcing the perception that counterterrorism remains peripheral to the Quad's core agenda.

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The creation of a permanent Quad Joint Intelligence Fusion Centre, as proposed in the paper, would mark a meaningful shift from dialogue to prevention. Such a centre would institutionalise real-time intelligence sharing, joint threat assessments, financial and cyber tracking, and early-warning mechanisms—areas where current CTWG structures fall short. By pooling India’s deep regional intelligence, U.S. global reach, Japan’s technological and financial-tracking expertise, and Australia’s experience in counter-radicalisation, the centre could transform the Quad from a forum of statements into a functional preventive architecture.

This centre would pool threat intelligence from member states into a secure analytical platform employing advanced data analytics and artificial intelligence to identify emerging threats before they materialise. Indian intelligence agencies would contribute unmatched knowledge of Pakistani militant infrastructures and South Asian extremist networks. Australian analysts would provide expertise on radicalisation in multicultural societies and online extremism monitoring. Japanese technical capabilities in cybersecurity and financial tracking would complement Indian operational experience. American global intelligence reach would connect Indo-Pacific threats to international terrorist networks and returning foreign fighters from Middle Eastern conflict zones.

Such a centre would enable real-time intelligence sharing, joint threat assessments, and early-warning mechanisms to detect patterns of radicalisation, cross-border movement, terror financing, and online recruitment before they culminate in violence. By integrating advanced data analytics and artificial intelligence with human intelligence inputs, the centre would close existing gaps between national agencies while respecting sovereignty. Crucially, it would institutionalise prevention as a shared democratic responsibility, transforming India’s long-standing counterterrorism experience into a regional public good and giving the Quad a credible, operational role in addressing transnational terrorism.

Geographic leadership distribution would further operationalise this framework while recognising India’s primacy in South Asia. New Delhi and Tokyo should lead threat assessment and response coordination for South and Southeast Asian

terrorism, leveraging India's regional intelligence networks and Japan's technical systems. The United States would coordinate responses to threats beyond the Indo-Pacific, particularly those involving Middle Eastern networks and global ISIS affiliates. Australia would specialise in intelligence fusion, deradicalisation programming, and community resilience strategies drawn from its multicultural experience.

For India, leading South Asian counterterrorism coordination through the Quad serves multiple strategic interests. It positions New Delhi as the indispensable regional security provider, strengthening India's claim to great power status. It creates multilateral pressure mechanisms against Pakistan that bilateral diplomacy has failed to generate. It extends Indian influence into Southeast Asia through Quad-Plus partnerships with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, where Indian diaspora communities face potential targeting and where militant groups maintain operational capacity.

QUAD-PLUS AS COUNTERTERRORISM MULTIPLIER

The Quad-Plus framework merits particular emphasis. Southeast Asian states confront homegrown extremist groups—Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, Jemaah Islamiyah networks across Indonesia and Malaysia, and ISIS affiliates exploiting governance gaps—that directly threaten Indian interests. Initial Quad-Plus dialogues could focus on maritime terrorism, given that sea routes connect South and Southeast Asian militant networks and facilitate weapons trafficking. Singapore's sophisticated counterterrorism finance expertise, Indonesia's community-based deradicalisation programs rehabilitating former extremists, and Malaysia's experience managing returning foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq offer lessons applicable across the Indo-Pacific. For India, such partnerships would project counterterrorism influence beyond bilateral limitations.

Standardised prevention, response, and post-attack protocols would further strengthen this architecture. Prevention requires regular joint threat assessments synthesising intelligence from all member states, red-flag systems tracking travellers exhibiting radicalisation indicators across member territories,

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coordinated monitoring of encrypted messaging platforms used for recruitment, and joint financial intelligence units disrupting terror financing networks. Research demonstrates that effective prevention also demands sustained counter-radicalisation investment—culturally sensitive intervention programs, training for religious and community leaders to identify extremist narratives, alternative online content challenging jihadist propaganda, and rehabilitation frameworks based on best practices from regional deradicalisation programs.

Immediate response protocols should include secure communication channels enabling real-time coordination during attacks, pre-positioned liaison officers embedded in member states' crisis centres, and joint investigation teams deployable within 24 hours of major incidents. India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) possesses the institutional capacity to anchor such rapid-response mechanisms. Post-attack coordination must establish standardised evidence-sharing procedures supporting prosecutions across jurisdictions—addressing the legal obstacles that allowed Mumbai attack perpetrators to evade justice. Joint victim support programs, mandatory lessons-learned reviews within 30 days of incidents, and coordinated diplomatic efforts to mobilise UN sanctions would operationalise accountability that individual member states cannot achieve alone.

The argument for India's leadership can be credibly advanced within an institutional, rather than unilateral, framework. India's role would not be hegemonic but functional—anchored in its unparalleled operational experience with cross-border terrorism, long-term exposure to Pakistan-based militant networks, and sustained engagement with diverse forms of insurgency and radicalisation. Within a Joint Intelligence Fusion Centre, India could serve as the nodal coordinator for South Asian threat assessment and prevention, while intelligence inputs, analytical capabilities, and decision-making authority remain collectively owned by all Quad members. Such an arrangement embeds Indian leadership in rules, processes, and shared mandates, enhancing legitimacy, reducing political sensitivities, and ensuring that leadership is exercised through expertise and institutional responsibility rather than dominance.

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A robust Quad counterterrorism mechanism would demonstrate democratic coordination superiority over authoritarian approaches—a message Beijing cannot ignore as it courts Pakistan while portraying itself as a counterterrorism partner through initiatives like the Global Security Initiative. When China offers Pakistan infrastructure investment while downplaying cross-border terrorism, India’s leadership of multilateral democratic counterterrorism frameworks exposes the limitations of transactional approaches to regional security.

The stakes extend beyond immediate security concerns. Terrorist violence targeting religious minorities undermines the Quad’s vision of an inclusive, pluralistic Indo-Pacific governed by the rule of law. Attacks that systematically target worshippers based on their faith represent assaults on the democratic pluralism that distinguishes the Quad from authoritarian regional alternatives. Allowing such extremist networks to operate with impunity erodes public confidence in democratic institutions and validates authoritarian claims that only coercion ensures security.

India faces a strategic choice in its Quad engagement. It can continue to rely on carefully worded condemnations and fragmented bilateral cooperation, or it can champion an institutionalised preventive architecture centred on intelligence integration, India-led South Asian coordination, Quad-Plus regional partnerships, and institutionalised protocols. The question is not whether the Quad will confront transnational terrorism, but whether it will do so proactively through coordinated anticipation and prevention, or reactively through post-attack crisis management. The victims of Mumbai and countless other terrorist incidents across the Indo-Pacific deserve more than condemnations and condolences. They deserve a Quad willing to build the institutional architecture necessary to prevent future tragedies—and India, given its experience, capabilities, and leadership potential, must seize this moment to make prevention the Quad’s defining counterterrorism legacy.

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