



Task Force 7  
Towards Reformed Multilateralism: Transforming  
Global Institutions and Frameworks



# LEVERAGING G20 MULTILATERALISM TO COUNTER TERRORISM

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# **Abstract**



In an increasingly fragmented global order, multilateral institutions created in the post-Second World War era are being questioned on their capacities, vision, and intent to deliver on 21<sup>st</sup>-century requirements. This is particularly true for issues related to global security and threats, such as the global response to terrorism.

In a push to build more on narratives challenging the multilateral order, pan-global security issues such as counterterrorism will also need new forums to act as incubators of ideas to tackle future threats. This is especially important given that multilateral institutions will have to address and manage their limitations, as the geoeconomic and geopolitical aspects of countering terror increasingly intertwine.


With the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan and China's blocking of the blacklisting of entities such as Lashkar-e-Taiba at the United Nations, non-

state militant actors are increasingly in positions to take advantage of political discrepancies. In addition, an increasing lack of 'global commons' thinking on traditional security and what the existing global order represents is also used by these actors to further their aims of dominance and expansion.


This brief looks at global counterterrorism narratives and policies from the perspective of the G20, and explores if the grouping has the space and intent to become a platform to discuss hard security issues despite its largely economic mandate. Specifically, the brief demonstrates that apart from expanding its focus on countering the financing of terrorism, the G20 can also increase engagement on studying and countering the nexus between climate change and terrorism, particularly how climate change can accelerate the factors identified as underlying drivers of terrorism, as well as on preventing radicalisation online.



# **The Challenge**



# **1**




**T**he COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict have upended the post-Second World War global order. While much of it was already on a downward spiral before these inflection points, multilateralism in international systems is facing challenges from multiple fronts. In January 2023, India's permanent mission to the United Nations (UN) said that institutions such as the UN face a real danger of being superseded by other plurilateral and multilateral groupings which are “more representative, more transparent and more democratic, and, therefore, more effective.”<sup>1</sup>


India's presidency of the G20 in 2023 is cautiously pushing the grouping to take on a larger mandate than its original design as a forum to solidify global economic and financial stability.<sup>2</sup> This includes the need to discuss global security as well, an issue the G20 has traditionally shied away from. However, any discussion on geoeconomics cannot exclude security considerations, including countering terrorism as a fundamental aspect of securing sovereign, geographic, and economic security.



# **The G20's Role**

# **2**






**M**uch like in other formats globally, the G20 first discussed terrorism as part of its wider mandate at its summit in November, mere months after the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US. The 2001 Ottawa Summit became part of an aggressive push by Washington D.C. to counter terrorism on universally, including on issues such as financing and corruption feeding into terror activities. Institutions such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) were given more heft to take on a wider counterterror mandate that goes beyond kinetic military operations. As the world, including some of Washington's foes,<sup>3</sup> rallied behind a US-led 'war on terror', institutions such the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also joined to create a 'sub-international order' specifically designed to address this menace.<sup>4</sup> The IMF's tools on anti-money laundering and combatting the financing of terrorism are considered to be successful, along with the FATF.<sup>5</sup> The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1373—the counterterrorism resolution—unanimously just a few days after the September 2001 attacks, with even Russia enacting it as a domestic law in January 2002.<sup>6</sup>

However, the 'war on terror', the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the rise of China, and now the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have fractured much of the post-2001 partnership on countering terrorism. This has given rise to the need for a change of the post-Second World War economic and post-September 2001 security orders. The 2015 G20 summit in Turkey put forward a stronger security and counterterror agenda. Turkey's G20 presidency came amid the peak of the Syrian crisis and ISIS's rise, resulting in a flood of refugees from Syria that also strained its relations with Europe.<sup>7</sup> Still, it was under Turkey's presidency that the G20 mandate truly moved from the exclusivity of "inclusive economic growth" to a "fight against terrorism in all its forms,"<sup>8</sup> building upon existing UN charters, mandates, and resolutions, such as Resolution 2178 that specifically expressed concerns over terror groups operating in West Asia and the trend of foreigners travelling to join these entities.<sup>9</sup>

The 2015 statement on the fight against terrorism was a pivotal moment for the G20. This was driven by frustrations over logjams at the UN, particularly at the UN Security Council (UNSC), by UN members states outside the



UNSC.<sup>10</sup> However, the momentum was not necessarily carried into all future summits. The lopsided powers afforded to the UNSC was largely in accordance with the exclusive aims of its powerful member states. For example, the American view on terror threats became the dominant global approach to countering terrorism, while many other countries felt their view on terror threats did not receive the same importance.<sup>11</sup> This saw a renewal of thinking of countering terrorism on a regional level that was more prominent in the 1970s and 1980s. The G20 and other smaller multilateral forums are increasingly seen by middle powers as more useful instruments for their voices to be heard and their agendas considered given their more plural nature when it comes to the sharing of influence.<sup>12</sup>

However, the scope of the G20 as an alternate forum for issues such as countering terrorism or security debates has been challenged in the aftermath of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Importantly, the statement following the Russia-China summit in March 2023 has highlighted the difficulties ahead for the G20 at the upcoming summit in New Delhi. The joint statement noted that "both sides (Russia and China) firmly condemn the politicisation of

multilateral platforms and the attempts of certain countries to insert irrelevant issues on the agenda of multilateral platforms and dilute the primary tasks of the multilateral mechanisms."<sup>13</sup> This comes after the G20 foreign ministers failed to release a joint communique after their meeting in March 2023 due to diversions over the Ukraine conflict.<sup>14</sup>

The rupture of multilateralism comes at a delicate time, when terror groups still represent a security threat due to the use of technology. While weaponising social media platforms as primary tools of propaganda and recruitment, and using cryptocurrencies and drones,<sup>15</sup> terror groups are also benefiting from climate change impacts.<sup>16</sup> As such, capacity building to deter safe spaces to terrorism and violent extremism is best done by using already-existing multilateral systems.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, given the increasing polarisation of the UN (coupled with the fact that the UN is too large a forum for all member nations to discuss their issues pertaining to terrorism) and the criticism of using the UNSC as the platform to counter terrorism, smaller and more nimble platforms like the G20 can be seen as more fruitful avenues to engage on terrorism related concerns.






# **Recommendations to the G20**



# **3**



**T**he G20 can consider three areas of cooperation: countering terrorism financing through new technologies by working closely with the FATF; recognising and addressing the relationship between climate change and terrorism (and associated issues like conflict and extremism); and preventing online radicalisation. All three areas are witnessing new physical and digital trends that will require greater scrutiny and counter responses. The G20 could potentially lead the way in tackling these issues if it is able to develop the appropriate framework based on agreed common threat perceptions. This will require a long-term blueprint on how multilateralism can work in a rapidly changing global order.

### **Countering financing of terrorism via new technologies**

The G20 has already engaged in countering terrorism financing with set protocols. These protocols need to be strengthened to ensure that terrorist groups are unable to finance their activities by routing money through any member country. The challenge is driving fundamental changes in thinking,

and the mandate of and expectations from the grouping.

The best way for the G20 to counter terrorism financing is to work with the FATF, the official watchdog for international money laundering.<sup>18</sup> Over time, the FATF has also widened its remit to include significant action on terrorism financing. For example, the FATF has developed a criterion to classify nations into blacklists and greylists based on their unwillingness to co-operate and share information about individuals associated with terrorism financing.

The G20 has engaged with the FATF closely, often supporting its agenda and also having the FATF report to its member countries' finance ministers. Importantly, in November 2022, the G20 and FATF discussed the significance of virtual digital assets,<sup>19</sup> such as cryptocurrencies, that are increasingly being used to finance terror activities. The absence of regulatory instruments for such new technologies are a challenge in countering terrorism financing.<sup>20</sup> This is an important aspect for the G20 and FATF to engage on, especially as terrorist groups take advantage of such technologies.<sup>21</sup>

## Considering the security aspect of climate change impacts

Climate change is an overarching factor that exacerbates pre-existing fault lines and can be taken advantage of by terrorist actors.<sup>22</sup> For instance, climate change is evidenced to increase income inequality among people of different regions.<sup>23</sup> Income inequality and the inability of educated youth to obtain employment are major factors that increase youth susceptibility to terrorist propaganda.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, climate change also compels people to migrate, creating twin risks of pushing refugees into terrorism for financial survival<sup>25</sup> and generating anti-immigrant sentiments that may result in attacks on refugees.

Another aspect of climate change that terror groups have taken advantage of is the provision of services to adapt or mitigate climate impacts and assist the local population. For instance, in Somalia, the al Shabaab terror group has emerged as a 'saviour' for a population suffering from political violence, famine, and climate change-induced economic and societal problems.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in 2018, al Shabaab's regional leader for Jubaland announced a ban on plastic

bags as they were a serious threat to human and livestock and were bad for the environment in general.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, during climate-induced natural disasters such as floods, terrorist groups are often able to bypass government relief action to provide help to the affected populations. This allows the terrorist groups to establish their popularity and increase recruitment. For instance, Pakistani terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba's charitable arm, the Jamaat ud Da'wah, collected funds and provided relief amid the earthquakes that hit the nation in 2015.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula also engaged in relief work in the aftermath of the cyclone in 2016 that hit the southern part of Yemen.<sup>29</sup>

The G20 countries must acknowledge this security aspect of climate change impacts and include it in their discussions on the issue. The first step will be to encourage a grouping-wide analysis of the relation between climate change and terrorism and extremism. Another pertinent step will be to engage in increased disaster preparedness and pre-planning to counter terrorist groups' relief activities.



## Tackling online radicalisation

The transnational nature of many terrorist groups and far right extremist actors, and the spread and prevalence of the internet, has been effective in radicalising youth globally. Over the last decade, there have been waves of digital migration for terrorist groups, but the reach and potency of terrorist groups online has reduced significantly with each wave of migration.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, tech companies working with governments around the world have been successful in curbing the presence of jihadist groups online.<sup>31</sup> Yet, other right-wing groups continue to exist and spread their propaganda on other online platforms. Given the reach of such groups, particularly those in Europe and the US, it is likely that their propaganda will impact the security of other nations within the G20 and beyond, necessitating a proper response.

An important challenge is that of geopolitical developments. Tectonic geopolitical shifts such as the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan have arguably enabled terrorist groups to strengthen

their propaganda. Online propaganda by groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province emitting out of the situation in Afghanistan has targeted neighbouring states such as India, China, and Pakistan, with the propaganda content focusing on communal, social, and ethnic divisions.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, with the return of the Taliban, what was once considered extremist propaganda is now Afghanistan's mainstream political narrative.

The G20 countries can enact stringent laws that will require tech companies to provide information on terrorist groups that operate on their platforms. At the same time, the nations involved can also develop policy that prevents the misuse of these regulations to target political opponents. The G20 can establish mechanisms for information sharing to root out users that are using tech spaces to propagate violent and terrorist narratives. This can be a useful way for the G20 nations to ensure that partner nations are not used as launch spaces for digital propagandists and online recruiters of terrorism groups.

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