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## Strategic Allies Against Terror: India-US Counterterrorism Cooperation and Regional Security Dynamics

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### Abstract

This paper examines the evolution and significance of India-US counterterrorism cooperation, particularly in addressing terrorism in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region. The partnership has grown from basic aviation security cooperation to a multifaceted strategic alliance that includes intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, technical agreements, and financial countermeasures against terrorism. Key institutions such as the Counter-Terrorism Joint Working Group, Homeland Security Dialogue, and several bilateral agreements have improved coordination on issues ranging from cyber security to military interoperability. The convergence of interests in Afghanistan, similar concerns about Pakistan's support for terrorist groups, and responses to regional and global threats have increased bilateral collaboration. Recent initiatives highlight the importance of technological and intelligence exchanges in combating evolving security challenges. The importance of technical and intelligence exchanges in addressing evolving security threats has been underscored by recent initiatives. The article concludes that Indo-US counterterrorism cooperation is essential for the security of both national and regional areas, necessitating continuous adaptation and coordination to address the evolving landscape of international terrorism.

**Keywords:** Counterterrorism, India-US cooperation, Pak-Afghan region, Intelligence sharing, Joint military exercises, Terrorist financing, Homeland Security Dialogue, Strategic alliance

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### 1. Introduction

The counterterrorism cooperation between India and US is a dynamic process that involves the exchange of critical information, threat evaluations, and actionable intelligence in order to combat violent extremism. The relationship between India and US has developed into a strategic tie that is founded on a mutual respect for democratic, pluralistic, and ethical principles, as well as a shared concern for international, regional, and bilateral matters. The emergence of globalization has, in turn, introduced new security risks, including organized crimes such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, environmental degradation, financial crimes, and, most significantly, the process of radicalization and international terrorism, which pose significant challenges to the sovereignty of states. Additionally, fears about missiles capable of causing massive destruction have prompted the US government to work with India to tackle these issues globally. Both countries adamantly declare that all forms, methods, and practices of terrorism are illegal and unjustifiable, regardless of the justifications presented. As

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a result, terrorism has become a mutual concern, which calls for a clear policy for joint action. The rise in terror attacks on national territories, especially the 26/11/2008 Mumbai incident and the 9/11/2001 attack in the U.S., has pushed both nations to work simultaneously on global & regional terrorism issues.

## **2. Background**

India and US have faced terrorism and have cooperated on counterterrorism efforts for many years. The first Indo-U.S. discussions on global terrorism occurred during Cold War under US President Ronald Reagan. Initially, U.S. support focused on building security capabilities through aviation security measures to prevent hijacking incidents. This support expanded into various areas, including the forensic examination of bombs. The mid-1990s saw additional U.S. aid related to counterterrorism. After the Soviet forces withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. began addressing the emerging threat of Islamic extremism that targeted American citizens. Some notable attacks during this time included the 1993 World Trade Centre bombings, the 1998 bombings of U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the 2000 explosion of the USS Cole<sup>i</sup>.

The collaboration between India and the US on counterterrorism began in the early 2000s. India's growing geopolitical and economic importance drove this partnership. After the Kargil conflict in May 1999 and the hijacking of IC814 in December 1999, India's experience as a victim of terrorism showed the need for a cooperative framework. This was important for the US, which had also suffered attacks from Al Qaeda on its interests in East Africa, specifically in Dares Salaam (Tanzania) and Nairobi (Kenya) in 1998. The creation of the US-India Counter-Terrorism Joint Working Group (CTJWG) in January 2000 was mainly seen to build confidence in tackling the threat of terrorism<sup>ii</sup>.

However, after 2001, the global system became more aware of the risk of terrorism, but the way this risk was viewed posed a challenge for India. Al Qaeda, for example, could be seen as entirely a non-state actor, while Lashkar-e-Taiba was not. These groups were bureaucratic and well-organized, with central administrative offices and recruiting centres promoting metropolitan lifestyles and running weapon training camps near Pakistani military installations. Afghanistan was also involved, though more indirectly. Its history of promoting jihadist ideas and training terrorists, especially during the war with the Soviets, contributed to this issue. The effects of the war and the rise of the Taliban created fertile ground for terrorist groups, some of which had known anti-India agendas.

Ongoing incidents like the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and several others in Kashmir show evidence of state-sponsored terrorism. These events have severely strained India-Pakistan relations, as Pakistan has not effectively curbed terrorism, drawing international scrutiny.

## **3. The India-U.S. partnerships: Strategic convergences and divergences in Afghanistan**

India firmly supported the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan after September 11. It backed the overthrow of the Taliban regime and provided extensive diplomatic aid to the new Afghan government. Afghan President Karzai has visited India nine times, the last being on October 4-5, 2011<sup>iii</sup>, while Indian PM Manmohan Singh made two trips to Kabul, the latest in May 2011<sup>iv</sup>. As the U.S. began withdrawing its forces and transferring security responsibilities to the Afghan government in 2014, both the U.S. and India shared several concerns in Afghanistan and the surrounding region:

- i. An integrated and cohesive Afghanistan.
- ii. An independent, self-sufficient Afghan government based on the current constitution, supporting human rights & democracy for all genders.

- iii. An Afghanistan that stop terrorist groups from using its territory for training and launching operations both regionally and globally.
- iv. An Afghanistan that serves as a key commerce and transit hub linking South and Central Asia.
- v. A stable and responsible Pakistan that limits extremist groups within its borders and seeks economic and political cooperation with its neighbors.

The U.S. and India are hopeful for a political resolution in Afghanistan. Since 2010, the U.S. has engaged in negotiations with the Taliban and other Afghan militants, maintaining a “half full, half empty” perspective on achievable goals. U.S. officials believe that India has become more flexible regarding power-sharing agreements aimed at reducing terror, while New Delhi’s stance against the Taliban and other terrorist groups remains stronger than Washington’s.

Pakistan and the United States maintain divergent perspectives regarding Afghanistan due to their conflicting national interests. Pakistan is more preoccupied with its own concerns, particularly those that pertain to India, than with the elimination of terrorism and the establishment of peace in Afghanistan, as the United States desires. Pakistan is accused of harboring terrorists, which makes it difficult to trust them, and both India and US are concerned about Afghanistan. In order to maintain its own security, Pakistan must establish robust alliances with nations such as the United States and China. Conversely, Pakistan’s regional priorities are distinct from those of the US, which is preoccupied with the Taliban and the Haqqani’s network.

#### **4. Counterterrorism Concerns in Pakistan**

Pakistan is a vital ally of the United States, yet it has faced accusations of supporting terrorist groups like the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba since 2001. These groups use the unstable border with Afghanistan to transport goods and conduct attacks. The situation is made worse by connections between the Pakistani military and some of these organizations, which reportedly receive political backing. Reports suggest the ISI helps terrorist groups target India, especially in Kashmir. Despite external pressures, organizations like Lashkar-e-Taiba continue to operate in Pakistan, threatening regional stability. Terrorist activity in India has expanded far beyond Kashmir due to ISI networks, becoming a national issue, especially in regions like Uttar Pradesh.<sup>v</sup>

#### **5. Counter Terrorism Concern in Afghanistan**

The Taliban's come back and the US's departure from Afghanistan create new concerns about terrorism, especially because the Taliban have connections to Al-Qaeda and ISIS-K is growing. This scenario makes people concerned that Afghanistan could become a centre for extremist activity around the world again<sup>vi</sup>. New Delhi is under pressure to work together because of an upsurge in terrorist activity in the region, that puts India's development projects in Afghanistan at risk. The US wants to use intelligence from countries like India to help carry out a "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism plan. Enhancing cooperation between operations in Pakistan & Afghanistan might provide us strategic advantages, so we need an integrated AF-PAK strategy based on successful counterinsurgency ideas<sup>vii</sup>.

#### **6. Indo-US Counter terrorism cooperation**

Both US and India have had to deal with terrorism for a long time, but in different ways. example, India has had to deal with cross-border terrorism from Pakistan since the late 1900s. During President Barack Obama's trip to India in 2010, he talked about the importance of the Indo-US Counterterrorism Initiative. The goal was to improve strategic cooperation against terrorism. This pact aimed to improve cooperation in counter-terrorism efforts by bringing together intelligence, training, and technology. The initiative set a good base for future cooperation, but there are still difficulties that need to be solved. This shows that counterterrorism is still an important aspect of the strategic alliance. The Joint Working

Committee on Counter Terrorism, which was set up in 2000<sup>viii</sup> and has met many times since then, helps the two countries work together to fight international terrorism and better understand each other. The US Ambassador to India and India's Union Home Secretary both signed the pact, which depicts that they are both committed to working together to fight new security concerns.

### 7. Homeland Security Dialogue

The India-US Homeland Security Dialogue was launched in 2010 as a follow-up to the India-US counterterrorism initiative. The first meeting was held in May 2011. The US President Joe Biden administration announced the reestablishment of the Homeland Security Dialogue in March 2021, which was previously deactivated by former US President Donald Trump's there are six subgroups formed under the India - US homeland security dialogue which cover the areas of:

- i. financial fraud, Illicit finance and counterfeiting.
- ii. Cyber information.
- iii. Exchange of information and Megacity policing among federal, state and 4 local partners.
- iv. transportation, Global supply chain, port, border and marine security.
- v. Capacity development
- vi. Technology upgrades<sup>ix</sup>.

### 8. Intelligence Sharing and Cooperation

Counter terrorism collaboration between the U.S and India is an ongoing process. It involves sharing important information, assessing threats, and exchanging practical intelligence to fight violent extremists. Recent examples of this collaboration include the March 2024 Security Dialogue. There, both sides discussed shared concerns about pro-Khalistan individuals in the U.S. and the extradition of Tahawwur Hussain Rana, is believed to have played a significant role in the Terror attack in Mumbai. Another prominent turning point is the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Cooperation in 2020. This deal supports India's efforts to make skills in processing, collecting and using GEOINT data. The General Security of Military Information Agreement was signed in 2015, and Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement 2018 enhanced the military cooperation and information sharing of both nations. In addition, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement 2016 includes sections for information sharing & logistical support. The 2019 Industrial Security Annex inspires ties in intelligence sharing & defence technology<sup>x</sup>. These examples show a powerful dedication to improving intelligence capabilities and staying alert against new terrorist tactics.

#### a. Exchange of Intelligence

The Indo-US intelligence collaboration has been a critical component of India and the U.S.' strategic alliance, notably in addressing common security challenges such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, organized crime, and cybersecurity threats. Over time, both nations have come to appreciate the importance of intelligence collaboration, which has improved their ability to respond to new security threats.

#### Agreements that promote intelligence cooperation:

- i. **The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) (2015):** this provides for the transmission of crucial military information between two countries. This agreement is a key step toward improving defence coordination and bolstering intelligence-sharing systems. GSOMIA allows both governments to share military intelligence on terrorism and regional security issues, such as events in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

- ii. **Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA, 2016):** LEMOA enables mutual access to each other's military installations and logistics support. This promotes improved collaboration in areas such as the exchange of defence and intelligence data on common security concerns.
- iii. **Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) (2018):** this agreement improves interoperability of military communications between India and the US It improves secure communication channels among military units and allows for speedier intelligence exchange during joint operations or crisis scenarios.
- iv. **The Industrial Security Annex (ISA) (2019):** promotes defence technology collaboration between India and the U.S., including the exchange of intelligence on military technologies and breakthroughs that can assist both nations in improving their national security capabilities.
- v. **The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Cooperation (BECA) (2020):** enables the exchange of geospatial intelligence (GEOINT), which gives precise information on geographic areas, infrastructure, and military movements. This improves the capacity of both countries to coordinate military and counter-terrorism actions, particularly in the Indo-Pacific area<sup>xi</sup>.

### 9. Military Training and Joint Exercises

Indo-US military training and joint exercises are vital components of India's developing defence cooperation with the U.S. These actions increase military interoperability, build strategic connections, and prepare both nations to tackle mutual security concerns. Over time, Indo-US military exercises have grown to incorporate a wide range of situations, including counter-terrorism operations, humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR), peacekeeping missions, and conventional combat.

- a. **Yudh Abhyas:** Yudh Abhyas is most significant and largest bilateral military exercise between India and the US, it focuses on counterterrorism activities, peacekeeping scenarios, and humanitarian aid. To deal with modern security issues, the exercise includes integrated military training in which both sides practice operations. This exercise has gotten more complicated over time as both countries have worked together on tactical operations, combat simulations, and sharing best practices in military doctrine and leadership. The twentieth phase of the India-USA Joint Military Exercise YUDH ABHYAS-2024 started today at the Foreign Training Node in the Mahajan Field Firing Ranges in Rajasthan. The exercise is set to take place from September 9 to 22, 2024. The US and India have taken turns hosting Exercise YUDH ABHYAS every year since 2004. This time around, the joint exercise is much bigger and more complicated when it comes to the number of soldiers and the equipment they use. A battalion from the RAJPUT Regiment and people from other branches of the Indian Army make up the 600-person deployment.<sup>xii</sup>

The US Army's 1-24 Battalion of the 11th Airborne Division, located in Alaska, will represent a similar-sized force. The goal of the Joint Exercise is to strengthen both sides' joint military capabilities to conduct counter-terrorism operations in a sub-conventional scenario under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. The exercise will centre on operations in a semi-desert setting. Tactical drills will be practiced throughout the exercise, including collaborative reaction to a terrorist attack, joint planning, and integrated field training exercises that resemble real-world counter-terrorism activities<sup>xiii</sup>.

- b. **Malabar Exercise:** Malabar began as a bilateral maritime exercise among India and the U.S., but has now expanded to include Japan, Australia, and other Indo-Pacific countries. The main goal is to make it easier for members of the military to work together on maritime security tasks like surface fighting, search and rescue, and anti-submarine warfare. The

exercise's goals are to improve strategic mobility, maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region, and advanced drills to improve the fleets' ability to work together. The Eastern Naval Command is in charge of this year's Malabar Naval Exercise, which is taking place in Visakhapatnam, India. The US, Australia, Japan, and India are all taking part in the exercise together. This year's exercise was divided into two parts: Sea and Harbour. All four Quad countries took part. In 1992, the US and India worked together on a naval exercise. It got bigger when Australia and Japan joined in. Canada and Singapore have done the drill before. Australia and Japan pulled out of the exercise in the 2010s because of strategic and geopolitical issues. Japan did the exercise again in 2014, but Australia didn't do it again until 2020. The Indian Navy held a ceremony on October 9 to kick off the Malabar 2024 field training exercise in Vishakhapatnam, India. The U.S. military, Australia, Japan, and India all took part<sup>xiv</sup>.

- c. **Vajra Prahar:** This joint exercise comprises both nations' Special Forces, with an emphasis on enhancing counter-terrorism capabilities and asymmetric warfare. The exercise equips elite soldiers to conduct counter-insurgency operations, urban combat, and high-altitude warfare, among other special operations. This exercise is a crucial component of the Indo-US military relationship since it emphasizes unconventional warfare and makes use of advanced special operations methods. Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM), located close to Seattle, will host the tenth iteration of the India-US joint military exercise known as "Vajra Prahar." From October 13 to October 28, 2019, a total 45 person of Indian Army Special Forces team trained with US Special Forces. The first competition held in India in 2010<sup>xv</sup>.
- d. **Cope India:** it started in 2004. This exercise aims to improve the interoperability of the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the U.S. Air Force. It includes fighter aircraft training, air-to-air combat, and force integration. The exercise focuses on training for combined air operations, namely aerial refuelling, combat search and rescue, and aerial interdiction. The Cope India series assists both air forces in improving their operational efficiency, particularly in collaborative air operations, as well as their capacity to conduct complicated missions jointly. The sixth edition of Cope India-2023, an Air Exercise between the Indian Air Force (IAF) and U.S. Air Force (USAF), conducted over the last two weeks at Air Force Stations Kalaikunda, Panagarh and Agra, culminated on 24 Apr 2023. The exercise involved participation of frontline IAF aircraft like Rafale, Tejas, Su-30MKI, Jaguar, C-17 and C-130. The USAF in turn had fielded the F-15 'Strike Eagle' fighter, C-130, MC-130J, C-17 and the B1B, strategic bomber aircraft. Aircrew from the Japanese Air Self Defence Force also participated as observers. This joint exercise provided valuable opportunity for the participants of all countries to exchange ideas and imbibe best practices through interactions, exchanges & combined missions<sup>xvi</sup>.
- e. **MILAN:** MILAN Exercise is a series of international naval exercises organized by India. It is one of the most important naval events in the Indian Ocean Region, bringing together naval forces from a long range of countries to participate in cooperative maritime security actions. The exercise seeks to increase maritime cooperation, interoperability, and strategic alliances among participating fleets, with a major emphasis on maritime security and regional stability. Defence minister Shri Rajnath Singh has urged the international community to strive for peace in this era of democratic and rules-based world order, in which individual countries actively engage for shared peace and prosperity. On February 21, 2024, he spoke at the ceremonial opening ceremony of the 12th iteration of the multinational Exercise MILAN in Visakhapatnam<sup>xvii</sup>.
- f. **Sea Defender:** The comprehensive maritime security exercise 'Sea Defenders-2024' between the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) and the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) concluded on March 9, 2024, at Port Blair. The exercise sought to improve maritime cooperation and

capability between the two armies. It intends to concentrate on counter-terrorism operations, anti-piracy operations, search and rescue (SAR) missions, and humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR)<sup>xviii</sup>.

- g. **RIMPAC:** RIMPAC is primarily a multinational naval exercise involving the U.S., India, and other Pacific nations, with a focus on naval interoperability, disaster relief, and peacekeeping operations. It is among the world's largest maritime drills. RIMPAC missions include disaster relief, search and rescue, maritime security, and naval combat, all of which contribute to promote tighter maritime defence cooperation between Pacific nations. The 29th edition of the world's largest multinational maritime exercise, Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), took place in 2024<sup>xix</sup>.

### 10. Combating terrorism Financing

The term Indo-US Counterterrorism funding Cooperation refers to India and the U.S.' coordinated efforts to prevent terrorist funding. This partnership is important in the global fight against terrorism because it focuses on stopping the flow of money to terrorist groups, which is a prominent part of counterterrorism efforts. Terrorist funding is the process of getting, moving, and using money to carry out terrorist acts. These funds could come from a variety of sources, including organized crime, the government, private donations, or other illegal financial activities. To solve this problem, both the US and Indian governments have made and put into place tools to find, stop, and mess with these cash transactions. The goal of the U.S.-India counterterrorism funding (CTF) partnership is to make the world and the region safer, make it harder for terrorist groups to carry out their plans, and give both countries more tools to fight terrorism<sup>xx</sup>.

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and terrorist financing in the context of Indo-US collaboration are based on the work both nations have done together to stop money laundering and funding terrorism. The U.S. and India are both members of the FATF (or the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG) for India, which is a regional FATF-style group). They work together in many ways to use global standards to stop money from flowing illegally that supports terrorism<sup>xxi</sup>.

### 11. Technology and Cybersecurity Cooperation

Cybersecurity collaboration should be a natural area of collaboration between India and the U.S. for a variety of reasons; both nations are democracies with comparable ideals and economic systems, and both have been badly impacted by cyberspace threats. The structural complementarities between both economies, especially in the services sector, which relies heavily on cyber networks, provide additional impetus for collaboration between the two nations in this domain. Even though this is a good strategic match, there hasn't been much cooperation between the two countries or with other countries. In reality, it looks like both countries have started the pointless task of protecting their own parts of cyberspace in this shapeless and formless arena. The two countries should work together to make cyberspace open, global, and safe. This would be good for everyone.

The recent past, ransomware, malware, and other bad cyberattacks have happened more often. As a result, worries about the strength of important infrastructure and digital assets have grown. According to the Indian Disaster Response Team (CERT-In), there were 1.4 million cybersecurity incidents in India in 2021. Because of this, India had one of the highest numbers of cyberattacks in Asia that year. All businesses, governments, and communities need to be fully electronic resilient. The cyber security problems that the US and India face are also political. The January 2022 India-US National Security Conversation Senior Officers' Meeting showed how important cyber security is to the US-India relationship. The meeting's goal was to improve cooperation on cyber security and critical infrastructure<sup>xxii</sup>.

The US-India cooperation against terrorism has a lot of potential because it is founded on shared democratic values, technical progress, and regional interests. Both countries need to modify how they fight terrorism because it is changing. This means that their work together will be very vital for keeping the planet safe for the next ten years. The U.S has tried to establish a balance between growing its defence and economic connections with India in order to keep tensions with China low, assist India's emergence on the world arena, and encourage dialogue to address issues. The motive of this intricate policy is to make things better in South Asia and attain strategic goals.

The U.S. is India's most important strategic partner. They work together on trade, defence, cybersecurity, nuclear energy, education, and health. As they enter a new decade, both countries want the Indo-Pacific area to be "free and open." This is a reaction to what has been going on in the world lately, including the Covid-19 outbreak. Some of the most essential areas for future cooperation are trade, national security, and new technology. The two countries will cooperate to remove administrative barriers and bring back defence trade and technology programs in order to boost defence cooperation.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In recent years, India and the US have worked together on more and more technology projects. In 2021, they signed several new agreements. In March 2021, the India-USIAI will focus on working together on artificial intelligence. This will include research and development in healthcare, smart cities, and agriculture, with the goal of moving research areas in energy and production forward. In September 2021, US President J. Biden and Indian Prime Minister N. Modi talked on how to work together better on space safety, cyber safety, healthcare safety, semiconductors, and next-generation communication technology. They agreed to coordinate their efforts to fight cyber threats by fixing weaknesses and hazards in cyberspace, communicating with each other, holding joint meetings, giving training, and sharing best practices. This forum identified areas for action in two areas: cyberattacks and computer intelligence<sup>xxiv</sup>.

### **12. Building core defence and security cooperation**

In October 2020, the US National Security Committee on Artificial Intelligence asserted that India ought to be seen as a stabilizing force for US technical connections in the Indo-Pacific region. A proposal was made to establish a US-India strategic technical partnership for defence and security. In March 2021, the US-USIAI was established in partnership with India's Science and Technology Committee and the US State Committee. USIAI has commenced the organization of symposia focused on artificial intelligence for medical care, the farming industry, urban planning, education, energy, and infrastructure. In 2020, when the tension erupted at the China-India border, the Trump administration supplied India with two advanced surveillance drones and cold weather support apparatus. Several notable US legislators and elected officials have denounced China's hostility along the Line of Communication<sup>xxv</sup>.

### **13. Conclusion**

Indo-US counterterrorism collaboration has grown dramatically in recent years, spurred by similar concerns about global and regional security challenges, notably extremist organizations and transnational terrorism. India and the US are aware that in order to protect their own citizens and maintain regional stability, they must cooperate in the battle against terrorism. These two nations collaborate in a variety of ways, including information exchange, policy coordination, and increased collaboration on military and security matters. The strategic alliance that the US and India have established is now a key component of their counterterrorism efforts. The US and India have shared intelligence, worked together on projects, and taken steps to block terrorist funding through bodies like the India-US Counterterrorism Joint Working Group and the United Nations. India has benefited greatly from U.S. assistance in combating cross-border terrorism, particularly from Pakistani-based

organizations. Both nations have also conducted collaborative counterterrorism exercises to improve their ability to handle emerging threats.

Last but not least, the US and India have worked together to fight terrorism, which has been a big part of their strategic partnership. As threats to the world grow, the need for ongoing coordination will also grow. This will make sure that both countries are ready to deal with the world of international terrorism, which is always changing. This partnership is growing, which shows that more people are beginning to understand that fighting terrorism requires coordinated efforts from many countries, as well as sharing information and resources to keep both countries and the whole world safe.

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