

## India-Canada Diplomatic Row

By

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



### Introduction

In his recent speech at the Canadian Parliament, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accused the Indian government of conducting terrorist acts on its soil, violating its sovereignty. PM Trudeau disclosed that “over the past few weeks, Canadian security agencies have been actively pursuing credible allegations of a potential link between agents of the government of India and the killing of a Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar.” He vowed “to hold the perpetrators of this murder to account.”<sup>1</sup> The release of these accusations was immediately followed by the expelling of senior Indian diplomat Pavan Kumar Rai from the Indian High Commission in Ottawa.<sup>2</sup> These events triggered a spat between India and Canada. PM Trudeau stated, “any involvement of a foreign government in the killing of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil is an unacceptable

<sup>1</sup> Paula Newton and Rhea Mogul, “India expels Canadian diplomat in tit-for-tat move as spat over assassinated Sikh activist deepens,” *CNN World*, September 19, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/18/americas/canada-hardeep-singh-nijjar-india-intl/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Leyland Cecco, “Canada and India make tit-for-tat envoy expulsions over killing of Sikh leader,” *The Guardian*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/19/trudeau-india-expulsions-canada-sikh-leader-killed>

**violation of Canada’s sovereignty. It is contrary to the fundamental rules by which free, open, and democratic societies conduct themselves.”<sup>3</sup>**

Tensions between Ottawa and New Delhi turned confrontational when India gave a tit-for-tat response by expelling the top Canadian diplomat and rejecting the allegations altogether.<sup>4</sup> The Indian Ministry of External Affairs released a statement that forcefully countered the statement by the Canadian PM and Foreign Minister.<sup>5</sup> The statement termed Canada’s allegations as ‘absurd’ and ‘motivated,’ and instead accused the Canadian government of providing shelter to ‘Khalistani terrorists and extremists.’ After the sharp escalation of the matter by the Indian government, PM Trudeau again gave a statement that reiterated his earlier stance. He said that Indian agents’ involvement in killing of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil “was something of the utmost and foundational importance in a rule of law country. We call upon the government of India to engage with us to move forward on getting to the truth of this matter.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Background of the Accusations**

The accusations by the Canadian Prime Minister surfaced in the backdrop of the murder of a 45-year-old Sikh leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar, who was alleged to be an activist for ‘Khalistan’ movement. Nijjar was killed by masked gunmen outside a Sikh temple on June 18, 2023, in Surrey, outside of Vancouver. He had lived in Canada for the past two decades and owned a plumbing business. Being a prominent member of the ‘Khalistan’ movement in Canada, he demanded the creation of an independent homeland for Sikhs of India. He was said to be part of a series of unofficial referendums among the Sikh diaspora with the organization ‘Sikhs For Justice’ (SFJ), which did not sit well with the Indian authorities and assassinated eventually.<sup>7</sup> It is stated that about 135,000 voters had turned up to vote in the referendum held earlier in September.<sup>8</sup> The next stage of the referendum is said to be dated October 29, 2023 where a second question about the involvement of Indian High Commissioner to

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<sup>3</sup> Bryan Passifiume, “‘A pretty large blow’: Ottawa implicating India in Canadian’s murder enflames already strained relations,” *Montreal Gazette*, September 18, 2023, <https://montrealgazette.com/news/canada-india-relations-enflamed/wcm/9a5275c9-4f96-4136-8517-33ee3a5d2ffd/amp/>

<sup>4</sup> Leyland Cecco, “Canada and India make tit-for-tat envoy expulsions over killing of Sikh leader.” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/19/trudeau-india-expulsions-canada-sikh-leader-killed>

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, “India rejects allegations by Canada,” press release, September 19 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37125/India+rejects+allegations+by+Canada>

<sup>6</sup> “India-Canada row: Justin Trudeau repeats allegation against India amid row,” *BBC*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-66886559>

<sup>7</sup> Krutika Pathi and David Cohen, “Who was Hardeep Singh Nijjar, the Sikh activist whose killing has divided Canada and India?,” *AP News*, September 20, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/canada-india-sikh-trudeau-modi-nijjar-fb390e4a45d167711db4f96681edd0a2>

<sup>8</sup> “B.C. Sikh referendum will ask if Indian diplomat was responsible for Nijjar killing,” *Vancouver Sun*, September 14, 2023, <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/local-news/bc-sikh-referendum-will-ask-if-indian-diplomat-was-responsible-for-nijjar-killing>

Canada Sanjay Verma in the killing of Nijjar will be added.<sup>9</sup> The Sikh community in Canada is stressing that it should be clear to all Canadians that “the government of India is a terrorist state that has brazenly engaged in extrajudicial killings not only on its soil but also on Canadian soil.”<sup>10</sup> The estimated 770,000-strong Sikh diaspora in Canada has significant political clout to pressure the Canadian government to release further details of agents of Indian government involved in target killing of Nijjar.

Following the death of Nijjar, the World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO) honoured Nijjar as an outspoken supporter of ‘Khalistan’ who “often led peaceful protests against the violation of human rights actively taking place in India and in support of ‘Khalistan.’<sup>11</sup> The ‘Khalistan’ independence movement dates back to the 1940s. The Indian government attempted to root it out through military operations in 1980s. However, the rift between the Sikhs and the Indian government gained momentum after the assassination of the then-Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards as a response to the military operation. Around 8000-17,000 innocent Sikhs were killed in the widespread persecutions that followed, while the Indian government was complicit in the grave human rights violations.<sup>12</sup> As times have passed, a rallying cry of Sikhs have remained active in Western countries, especially in Canada, U.S., U.K and Australia. Indian officials have summoned the Western countries over inaction against such groups active in their countries, which they believe are driven by local political calculations.<sup>13</sup>

### International Reaction

Key countries in the international community have recognized Canada’s accusations and called for a thorough probe into the matter. Canada is reported to have shared intelligence about this killing with

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<sup>9</sup> “B.C. Sikh referendum will ask if Indian diplomat was responsible for Nijjar killing,” *Vancouver Sun*, <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/bc-sikh-referendum-will-ask-if-indian-diplomat-was-responsible-for-nijjar-killing>

<sup>10</sup> Bryan Passifiume, “A pretty large blow’: Ottawa implicating India in Canadian’s murder enflames already strained relations.” <https://montrealgazette.com/news/canada-india-relations-enflamed/wcm/9a5275c9-4f96-4136-8517-33ee3a5d2ffd/amp/>

<sup>11</sup> Krutika Pathi and David Cohen, “Who was Hardeep Singh Nijjar, the Sikh activist whose killing has divided Canada and India?” <https://apnews.com/article/canada-india-sikh-trudeau-modi-nijjar-fb390e4a45d167711db4f96681edd0a2>

<sup>12</sup> Sayantani Biswas, “1984 anti-Sikh riots: Congress leader Jagdish Tytler, charged with murder, granted bail,” *Livemint*, August 5, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/1984-anti-sikh-riots-congress-leader-jagdish-tytler-charged-with-murder-granted-anticipatory-bail-sikhs-protest-11691228601720.html#:~:text=Government%20estimates%20project%20that%20about,deaths%20at%20a%20bout%208%2C000-17%2C000.>

<sup>13</sup> Mujib Mashal, Hari Kumar and Suhasini Raj, “Canada’s Startling Claim Punctuates Tension With India Over Separatists,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/19/world/asia/trudeau-canada-india-separatists.html>

its allies in the “Five Eyes” intelligence pact.<sup>14</sup> Australia has raised serious concerns over the killing of a Canadian citizen by Indian agents on Canadian soil. Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, at the United Nations General Assembly in New York stated, “I note that investigations are still underway but obviously, these are concerning reports and as I’ve said, we are monitoring these developments closely with our partners.”<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the U.S. and Britain issued statements of support to Canada, urging India to assist in a Canadian investigation. The US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has issued a very strong statement regarding the killing of Canadian citizen by agents of Indian government. He not only showed serious concerns but also demanded ‘accountability’ from India.<sup>16</sup> John Kirby, spokesman for the White House National Security Council (NSC) mentioned, “we believe a fully transparent comprehensive investigation is the right approach so that we can all know exactly what happened, and of course, we encourage India to cooperate with that.”<sup>17</sup> Further, National Security Advisor (NSA) Jake Sullivan stated, “it is a matter of concern for us. It is something we take seriously. It is something we will keep working on, and we will do that regardless of the country.”<sup>18</sup> Despite actively courting India, the US does not seem to be giving India a free pass on this interference. Sullivan stressed, “there's not some special exemption you get for actions like this.” It is believed that Canada and the US worked ‘very closely’ on the investigations and intelligence that resulted in placing the responsibility of the murder on the Indian agents.<sup>19</sup> The UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly gave a statement on X (Twitter), “All countries should respect sovereignty and the rule of law. We are in regular contact with our Canadian partners about serious allegations raised in the Canadian Parliament. Important that Canada's investigation runs its course and the perpetrators brought to justice.”<sup>20</sup> However, India does not seem willing on cooperation with Canadian authorities. Rather, the

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<sup>14</sup> An intelligence alliance of five countries Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

<sup>15</sup> Brad Ryan and Jade Macmillan, “Australia raises concerns with India after Canada claims Indian agents murdered Sikh leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar,” *ABC News*, September 20, 2023, <https://amp.abc.net.au/article/102876986>

<sup>16</sup> Simran Singh, “Blinken: U.S. expects “accountability” from India after Canada accuses it of being involved in death of Sikh activist”, *CBS News*, September 23, 2023. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/blinken-addresses-canada-accusation-india-hardeep-singh-nijjar-murder-vancouver/>

<sup>17</sup> “US urges India to cooperate in probe,” *Daily Times*, September 21, 2023, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/1133977/us-urges-india-to-cooperate-in-probe/>

<sup>18</sup> Andrea Shalal and Jeff Mason, “US talking to India about Canada murder, no ‘special exemption,’ Biden adviser says,” *Reuters*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-national-security-adviser-says-we-are-contact-with-india-canada-about-2023-09-21/#:~:text=%22It%20is%20a%20matter%20of,get%20for%20actions%20like%20this.>

<sup>19</sup> “US concerned at Canada allegations of Sikh murder, urges India to cooperate -official,” *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-concerned-canada-allegations-sikh-murder-urges-india-cooperate-official-2023-09-19/>

<sup>20</sup> James Cleverly, Statement on X, September 19, 2023, <https://twitter.com/JamesCleverly/status/1704160204739272930>.

BJP's sympathetic Indian media and some analysts are going to ridiculous limits in threatening Canada of a 'nuclear war'.<sup>21</sup>

From the statements, it is evident that countries are treating that matter as still under investigation and demanding the Indian government's cooperation. This indicates that the international community, especially the hosts of the major Sikh diaspora, have raised their concerns publicly. Such concerns have strained India's international image and especially damaged the image that it sought to project at the G20 Summit in New Delhi. Usually, the international community has overlooked the democratic and human rights violations by the Indian government. However, New Delhi has proved that it does not believe in the human rights, and values based international order. This incident will likely add mistrust between India and the democratic Western countries, especially with Canada. This is mainly because the Canadian government and society is highly sensitive regarding issues such as foreign interference, violation of sovereignty, and security of Canadian citizens. In fact, the Canadian local press has urged the allies of Canada to stop overlooking the human rights abuses perpetrated by the BJP government at home. It seems evident that target killings of foreign citizens on foreign soil is an outcome of the BJP regime's over-confidence, gained owing to the West's earlier failure to take cognizance of the gross human rights violations perpetrated in India and in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK).

### **India-Canada Relations Post-Allegations**

Canada has postponed the trade mission to India due to the ramping tensions. Canadian Trade Minister Mary Ng gave no reasons for calling off the trade mission that focused on sectors including automobiles, agriculture and information technology and provided no date of future engagement. India and Canada have been holding formal talks for concluding a free trade agreement (FTA); however, the talks were paused shortly before PM Trudeau's trip to India for the G20 Summit. With no regrets, Indian Trade Minister Piyush Goyal asserted that the pause was necessary to ensure that both the countries align 'geopolitically and economically.'<sup>22</sup> The series of escalatory measures after the Canadian government's accusation will undoubtedly push Canadian and Indian relations to a new

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<sup>21</sup> Professor Kapil Kumar, Chair and Professor for Freedom Struggle & Diaspora Studies, The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi in live tv program threatened Canada of a nuclear attack. See his statement at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2qjaJ63H7o>

<sup>22</sup> "Canada postpones trade mission to India with tensions on rise," *Gulf News*, September 16, 2023, <https://gulfnews.com/amp/business/economy/canada-postpones-trade-mission-to-india-with-tensions-on-rise-1.98140413>

low. Many analysts have argued it to be a full-scale diplomatic war as it was a pretty large blow to their relations.<sup>23</sup>

The Indian government published an advisory for the Indian nationals and students in Canada to practice 'utmost caution' amid what it termed as 'anti-India activities' and 'hate crimes and criminal violence' in the country.<sup>24</sup> The advisory also told Indian students and citizens to register at the Indian missions in case of 'any emergency and untoward incident.'<sup>25</sup> The Canadian government also updated its travel advisory to India and urged its nationals to 'exercise a high degree of caution.'<sup>26</sup> This showed the harsh level of measures being taken by both countries to protect their interests. As of 2021, Canada hosts about 1.4 million people of Indian ethnic origin making them about 3.7 percent of the population, out of these 2 percent of Canada's population have registered their religion as Sikh. The two countries also have substantial trade of \$9 billion USD and about 40 percent of the overseas students are Indians.<sup>27</sup> This diplomatic row will hurt India's interests more than Canada's as many Indians have gone to Canada in search of a better life while others have lived in Canada for decades, and with souring diplomatic relations the size of Indian diaspora could reduce in the future. The Sikh community in Canada has called for protests against the Indian government that has perpetrated these crimes, which will add to diplomatic embarrassment for India internationally.

### **Pakistan's Response**

Pakistan's Foreign Office Spokesperson stated that the Canadian accusations of Indian involvement in the killing of a Sikh leader revealed that New Delhi's 'network of extra-territorial killings' had gone global.<sup>28</sup> Prior to this, Foreign Secretary Syrus Qazi stated that Pakistan was 'not surprised' by the Canadian accusations and stressed that the world must recognise the ways of India it considers 'a supposedly indispensable ally.'<sup>29</sup> Pakistan has been highlighting India's role in carrying out such

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<sup>23</sup> Mujib Mashal, Hari Kumar and Suhasini Raj, "Canada's Startling Claim Punctuates Tension With India Over Separatists."

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "Advisory for Indian Nationals and Indian Students in Canada," press release, September 20, 2023, [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37129/Advisory\\_for\\_Indian\\_Nationals\\_and\\_Indian\\_Students\\_in\\_Canada](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37129/Advisory_for_Indian_Nationals_and_Indian_Students_in_Canada)

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "Advisory for Indian Nationals and Indian Students in Canada,"

<sup>26</sup> Government of Canada, "India travel advice," September 18, 2023, <https://travel.gc.ca/destinations/india>

<sup>27</sup> Government of Canada, "Joint Statement issued at conclusion of the 6th Canada-India Ministerial Dialogue on Trade & Investment," May 8, 2023, [https://www.international.gc.ca/country\\_news-pays\\_nouvelles/2023-05-10-india-inde.aspx?lang=eng](https://www.international.gc.ca/country_news-pays_nouvelles/2023-05-10-india-inde.aspx?lang=eng); AJLabs, "In numbers: India-Canada trade and education relations," *Aljazeera*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/in-numbers-india-canada-trade-and-education-relations>

<sup>28</sup> "US urges India to cooperate with Canada in Sikh leader's murder probe," *Dawn*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1776905>

<sup>29</sup> US urges India to cooperate with Canada in Sikh leader's murder probe," *Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1776905>

activities in Pakistan as well as in IIOJK, to which the world has paid no heed. The present circumstances have exposed India's dirty games to the whole world. This incident has vindicated Pakistan's stance that India is involved in state-terrorism and interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. This is a case similar to EU DisinfoLab's report on Indian Chronicles that exposed India's extensive propaganda networks operating for over 15 years.<sup>30</sup> A third party's revelations of India's true colours speaks volume.

Canadian allegations further corroborate and strengthen Pakistan's longstanding stance. It is in order for Pakistan to further highlight the illegal espionage and sabotage activities conducted by India within Pakistan, including India's support and financing of the terrorist organizations in Pakistan such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch terrorist organizations. One of the glaring examples of Indian illegal espionage and sabotage activities inside Pakistan is Kulbushan Jadhav. He was a serving Indian Naval official. A counterintelligence operation from Mashkel, Balochistan province, led to the apprehension of Kulbushan Jadhav, the Indian spy who was operating a terrorist network and remained involved in bomb blasts inside Pakistan.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, Pakistan must also appropriately share with relevant countries and publicly disseminate the evidence it has on India's role in extrajudicial killings and terrorist attacks in Pakistan. The world must also take cognizance of the pattern of atrocities committed by India against Kashmiris in IIOJK and the minorities in India, especially Muslims. The Muslims in India are bullied, abused, and tortured by extremist Hindu organizations, while the Indian government woefully fails to provide protection to its citizens. Clearly, the Hindu nationalist fervour at the highest levels of the BJP government has trickled down to the lowest levels of Indian society and even abroad.

## Conclusion

As many Western countries have stated, if the allegations are proven correct, it could severely damage the Indian reputation and dent its relations with the international community. The Canadian PM's statement in parliament itself is the proof of credibility of the allegations. Such strong allegations by a responsible state cannot be made without substantiating evidence. The murder of a Sikh activist has caught the limelight not because of his heritage but because of his Canadian citizenship. This might

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<sup>30</sup> Gary Machado Alexandre Alaphilippe, Roman Adamczyk and Antoine Grégoire, *Indian Chronicles*, report (Brussels: EU DisinfoLab, December 9, 2020), <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/indian-chronicles-deep-dive-into-a-15-year-operation-targeting-the-eu-and-un-to-serve-indian-interests/#:~:text=Following%20a%20preliminary%20investigation%20published,it%20even%20resurrected%20dead%20people.>

<sup>31</sup> Sajjad Shaukat, "Don't forget Indian spy Kulbushan's case" Pakistan Today, March 27, 2023. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/03/27/dont-forget-indian-spy-kulbushans-case/>



not be the only covert assassination by the Indian agents, rather it is believed that India has been conducting a series of abductions and assassinations in various shapes and forms. Glimpses of these activities are evident in South Asia, especially in IIOJK, Pakistan, and even within India itself. Pakistan has repeatedly been targeted by such state-sponsored terrorist activities by India. The Canadian Prime Minister's accusations have further exposed India's transnational state-sponsored terrorist and espionage cells. These activities illustrate the rogue behaviour of the BJP's India, while the government never tires of projecting India as a 'vishwaguru' (global teacher). The question remains whether India would be held to account for this egregious violation of the international law or will New Delhi be allowed to continue to act with impunity in view of its perceived utility for some geostrategic interests.