

2023 In-Review: Dents in Indo-U.S. Relations

By

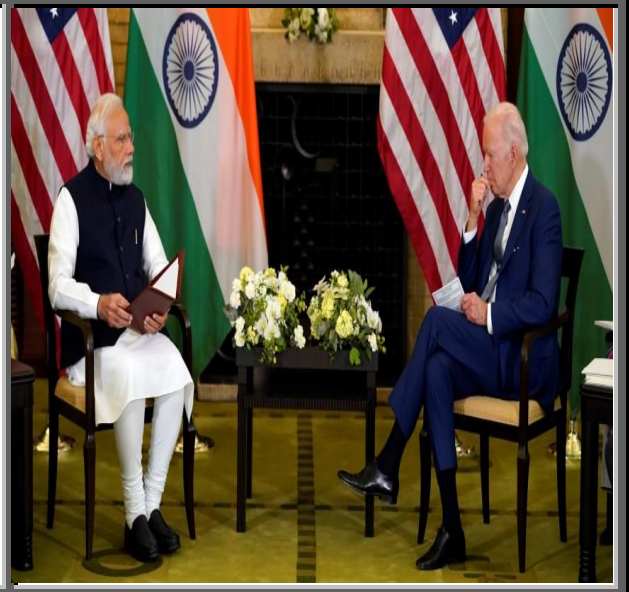
Maheen Shafeeq

Research Associate
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by
Dr. Khurram Abbas

December 22, 2023

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



Introduction

Since 2000, the Indo-U.S. partnership has been on a consistent positive trajectory, and in the year 2023, the two states expanded the horizons of their relations to a Comprehensive Global and Strategic Partnership.¹ This elevation of ties has been achieved through cooperative developments over the past two decades. In the year 2023, India's G20 Presidency, the Indian Prime Minister's state visit to the U.S., and the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue were the key highlights. However, the year 2023 does not appear to be ending on an optimistic note as dents have started to appear in this relationship due to India's expanding transnational terrorism drive or commonly known as death squads, which is being investigated by Washington.

¹ White House, "Joint Statement from the United States and India" press release, June 22, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/22/joint-statement-from-the-united-states-and-india/>

G20 Presidency

The highlight of the year was India's G20 presidency, which garnered a lot of attention globally in part also due to the controversies over several issues.² Firstly, Indo-U.S. relations were set to strengthen due to an assumed convergence of interests on global issues during the G20; however, India had a contrary perspective from the U.S. on global issues, which became evident when the joint statement issued after the G20 Summit avoided direct criticism on Russia in terms of Ukraine conflict.³ Secondly, Washington hoped for a strategic shift by India in its stance on the Ukraine conflict; however, India did not budge from its position due to its close ties with Russia. New Delhi could have taken a mediatory initiative concealed under its national objective of projecting itself as a leader of the 'Global South' at the G20. Any mediatory initiative to address the Ukraine conflict, the root cause of the 'Global South' crisis, especially in terms of food and energy, could have killed two birds with one stone. However, India's G20 presidency could neither adequately address the crisis of the developing world nor the strategic concerns of the U.S. Thirdly, India was unable to make an efficient breakthrough in major power rivalry as did Indonesia, the former president of G20, which facilitated the ground breaking talks between the U.S and China in Bali that are being followed up till date. It was the time when the Ukraine conflict had accentuated and the global environment was in deep flux. India could have utilized its G20 presidency as an opportunity to showcase its global influence; however, being unable to navigate the tough geopolitical contestation indicated that India was neither willing nor ready to take on a more global role that favours the U.S.

Modi's State Visit to the U.S.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the U.S. from June 21-24, 2023. During the state visit, both sides inked several defence and technology cooperation deals that can exponentially improve India's warfare preparedness. The sharing of General Electric's F-414 jet engine technology with India remained a prominent outcome of this visit.⁴ Another prominent outcome was the plan for procurement of 31 MQ-9B Reaper Armed drones that had been pending for the past five years.⁵ This

² Maheen Shafeeq, "The G20 Presidency: Is India Ready for a More Global Diplomatic Role?," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, August 11, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/36408-2/>

³ Maheen Shafeeq, "India, the G20, and the Fading Illusion of Unity," *International Policy Digest*, September 5, 2023, <https://intpolicydigest.org/the-platform/india-the-g20-and-the-fading-illusion-of-unity/>

⁴ Antoine Levesques, "US-India defence and technology cooperation," *International Institute for Strategic Studies – IISS*, July 20, 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/07/us-india-defence-and-technology-cooperation/#:~:text=In%20June%202023%2C%20during%20Prime,jet%2Dengine%20technology%20with%20India.>

⁵ Maheen Shafeeq, "Decoding Modi's U.S. Visit: Analyzing the Ramifications and Implications for South Asia," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, June 19, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-decoding-modis-u-s-visit-analyzing-the-ramifications-and-implications-for-south-asia/>

was also the time when the red carpet was rolled out for PM Modi creating the perception of soaring heights between New Delhi and Washington. Meanwhile, however, the Indian government was extending its global terrorism regime to U.S. soil. While all appeared smooth in Indo-U.S. relations in June 2023 when PM Modi was in the U.S., Washington was tailing the Indian government agents involved in the assassination plot of a U.S. citizen of Indian (Sikh) origin, who happened to be a 'pro-Khalistan' figure, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun.

Indian Government's Transnational Terrorism in U.S. and Canada

Jolts in Indo-U.S. relations started appearing soon after the G20 Summit, held in New Delhi on September 9-10, 2023. Right after India celebrated the finale of the G20 Summit, on 18 September 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau accused the Indian government of involvement in the killing of a Canadian Sikh 'separatist' leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar on its soil in June 2023. India outrightly and rather arrogantly rejected the Canadian accusations as 'absurd' and 'motivated.' For its part, Canada considered this a terrorist act on its soil in June 2023, violating Canada's sovereignty.⁶ The seriousness of this announcement can be gauged by its venue which was the Canadian Parliament. After PM Trudeau raised concerns in the Canadian parliament, the U.S. found itself in an awkward position due to close relations with both countries. Nevertheless, the U.S. urged India to cooperate with Canada over the matter to which India showed palpable reluctance. Though this matter was taken seriously in Washington, the U.S. ties with New Delhi continued unaffected, as evident from the meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Indian Minister of External Affairs Jaishankar on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly in New York on September 28, 2023.⁷ But what portrayed total normalcy of bilateral relations was the Fifth Annual India-U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue which was held between November 9-10, 2023, where new defence deals were signed and announcements of ten upcoming events in 2024 were made.⁸ This meeting projected business-as-usual in the ties between New Delhi and Washington. Perhaps, this was a deliberate effort of both

⁶ John Paul Tasker, "Trudeau accuses India's government of involvement in killing of Canadian Sikh leader," CBC News, September 18, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-indian-government-nijjar-1.6970498#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Justin%20Trudeau%20on,Surrey%2C%20B.C.%2C%20in%20June.>

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, "Visit of External Affairs Minister to the United States of America (September 22-30, 2023)" press release, September 22, 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37143/Visit+of+External+Affairs+Minister+to+the+United+States+of+America+September+2230+2023>; U.S. Department of State, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar Before Their Meeting" remarks, September 28, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-indian-external-affairs-minister-dr-s-jaishankar-before-their-meeting/>

⁸ Maheen Shafeeq, "The Fifth Annual India-U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue," November 17, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-the-fifth-annual-india-u-s-22-ministerial-dialogue/>

countries to project normalcy and carry out the pre-planned events to not sound alarm bells before U.S. eventual announcements.

Pause on Indo-U.S. Relations

About two weeks after the Fifth Annual India-U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, an article published by Financial Times (FT) on November 23, 2023, revealed the Indian government's thwarted plot to assassinate a U.S. citizen who was also a 'pro-Khalistan' leader, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. The Indo-U.S. relations appeared normal at the diplomatic level at first as the issue was handled more through legal means. The matter took a diplomatic hit, which made the matter worse, when the FT article was followed by the unsealing of an indictment on November 29, 2023, by the District Court of New York that exposed the entire plot and charged the Indian government agent for it.⁹ Right after these revelations neither the U.S. State Department nor the Indian External Affairs Ministry took a public stance; however, both sides maintained communication to show a commitment to cooperation and India announced a high-level inquiry on the matter, unlike the Canadian case where India outrightly rejected Canada's allegations and the U.S. sought to downplay the matter. Several quarters in Washington gave statements and hinted towards a pause in Indo-U.S. ties.

The pause was visible in bilateral as well as multilateral engagements. U.S. President Joe Biden has just turned down an invitation for participation in the Indian Republic Day parade to be held on January 26, 2024, which was to be followed by the next summit of the Quad leaders. The invitation was extended by the Indian Prime Minister on the side-lines of G20 in September 2023, when both states appeared to be experiencing highs in their relations; however, the recent low in their relations evidently became the reason for the rejection of the invitation. The Republic Day celebrations are a significant event in India and a rejection of the invitation by President Biden has been seen by many in India as a diplomatic blow to New Delhi. President Biden's refusal to attend the Republic Day parade has also dented Indian PM Modi's political agenda, who might have wanted to project President Biden's visit for his political campaign for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. U.S. officials have cited President Biden's Congressional commitments and State of the Union Address as reasons for his inability to visit India. Nevertheless, India's involvement in transnational terrorist activities and assassination attempts cannot be ruled out as a prominent reason.

⁹ U.S. Attorney's Office Southern District of New York, "U.S. Attorney Announces Charges In Connection With Foiled Plot To Assassinate U.S. Citizen In New York City" press release, November 29, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/us-attorney-announces-charges-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate-us-citizen-new-york>

India's actions have not only impacted the Indo-U.S. bilateral relations, but they have also affected their multilateral engagements. The decline of the Republic Day invitation by President Biden led to the postponement of Quad Summit as well. India is pretending as if it 'proposed the hold' on the Quad Summit, which is misleading to soften the blow to its global reputation. This is also a vital downgrade for India because the attendance of other Quad leaders was dependent on President Biden's participation. Therefore, it is likely that the leaders of Australia and Japan, two of India's key partners in Quad, would also step back and pursue a cautious approach towards their engagement with India. Japan, the previous host of the Quad Summit held on May 20, 2023, paired it with the G7 meeting as the Quad leaders were already in town. It seems India tried to do the same by pairing its national Republic Day parade with the QUAD Summit, which patently failed.

End-of-the-year Audit over Indo-U.S. relations

A pause in Indo-U.S. relations and an audit of their bilateral relations is underway simultaneously. New Delhi received a flurry of diplomatic visits by officials in Washington in the backdrop of the revelations of India's thwarted assassination plot. India has projected these diplomatic visits as cementing relations between Washington and New Delhi; however, these visits were made by the U.S. diplomats due to the involvement of Indian government agents in the plot to assassinate Pannun. For instance, the U.S. Principal Deputy National Security Advisor (NSA) Jonathan Finer's visit to India on December 5, 2023, was projected as a meeting to review the developments on the U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) by the Indian side, while the White House mentioned of this visit in light of India's 'lethal plotting in the U.S.' and emphasized on holding the perpetrators accountable, which showed the seriousness of the matter.¹⁰ Similarly, the December 11, 2023 visit by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director Christopher Wray to India to meet with his counterpart Praveen Sood, director of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), was projected by India as a visit to take Indo-U.S. partnership to the next level in terms of dealing with the evolving threat of terrorism, organized crimes and cyber terrorism¹¹ when the visit by the FBI directly comes with the background of the U.S. court's indictment. This demonstrates that the two countries are not on the same

¹⁰ White House, "Readout of Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer's Travel to India" press release, December 4, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/04/readout-of-principal-deputy-national-security-advisor-jon-finers-travel-to-india/>; Suhasini Haidar, "India and U.S. can resolve differences, say Jaishankar, Finer," *The Hindu*, December 4, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/senior-white-house-official-meets-jaishankar-doval-misri-in-delhi/article67605249.ece>

¹¹ "FBI director visits NIA HQs, highlights need to take partnership to next level to counter-terrorism," *Deccan Herald*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/fbi-director-visits-nia-hqs-highlights-need-to-take-partnership-to-next-level-to-counter-terrorism-2808045>

wavelength when it comes to diplomatic outlook. India appears to be projecting a false picture of its relations with the U.S. in order to save its salvaged reputation worldwide.

PM Modi's Interview with Financial Times

Regardless, of the U.S. posture after the incident, PM Modi appears to be downplaying the matter and highlighting the divergences of Indo-U.S. bilateral relations. On December 20, 2023, Financial Times released the details of their interview with PM Modi who had said on the matter of thwarted assassination plot, "If someone gives us any information, we would definitely look into it."¹² But he added, "I don't think it is appropriate to link a few incidents with diplomatic relations between the two countries." He made it clear that "We need to accept the fact that we are living in the era of multilateralism. The world is interconnected as well as interdependent. This reality compels us to recognise that absolute agreement on all matters cannot be a prerequisite for collaboration." This indicates that if Washington wishes to continue ties with New Delhi, it would need to accept India with all its flaws.

Conclusion

India and the U.S. started 2023 on an optimistic note; however, India's global transnational terrorist activities, which directly breached the sovereignty of the U.S. and its allies, could be a reason for the year to end on a pessimistic note. During 2023, both New Delhi and Washington had several high-level bilateral engagements such as PM Modi's first state visit to the U.S., and the fifth 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, as well as on multilateral forums such as the G20 and Quad. The two countries also concluded crucial defence deals, which would allow joint defence production, and expand the horizons of their cooperation in cutting edge technology, science, education, space, critical minerals, cyberspace, and people-to-people ties. However, while these developments were underway, the Indian government agents were involved in either carrying out or plotting to carry out assassinations in Canada and the U.S. At first the U.S. tried to brush the matter under the carpet due to India's importance in Washington but India made matters worse for itself by assuming that its violation of sovereignty and global transnational terrorism regime would not have consequences.

At present, Indo-U.S. relations are evidently experiencing a 'pause' while the U.S. and its allies investigate the Indian government's transnational terrorism regime. While the matter is being addressed through legal means in the U.S., it has had an impact on diplomatic relations. PM Modi's response to the assassination plot indicates that the matter was not taken as seriously by New Delhi

¹² Roula Khalaf, Benjamin Parkin and John Reed, "Narendra Modi responds to assassination claims," *Financial Times*, December 20, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/160235af-1584-4ec7-8aad-a3de70753f30>

as it was in Washington. Outlook on some aspects of the relationship is still unclear. Firstly, it remains to be seen if the U.S. would dial down on its elaborate defence and strategic support to India, if not suspend it. It remains unclear if and how Washington would deliver on the defence and joint production deals with India due to New Delhi's suspicious and illegal activities on the U.S. soil. Secondly, it remains to be seen if this would impact bilateral political and economic ties if President Biden takes a tougher stance like Prime Minister Trudeau. Thirdly, in the case of Canada, India aggressively escalated tensions; it is to be seen whether India would follow a similar or different path if more revelations are made public by the U.S. Fourthly, to what extent is this going to impact India's ties with other U.S. allies, especially Quad states? Lastly, since the 'pro-Khalistan leaders' are also present in the U.K., are any of them on the Indian government's kill list?

The end of this year has opened a Pandora's Box in terms of Indo-U.S. relations. India still maintains a prestigious position in Washington owing to geostrategic considerations. As such the two countries would seek to resolve this tension next year, unless Washington decides to get serious about holding India accountable. The current tensions are self-inflicted agony by the Indian government, which indicates it is high time that the Indian government revises its global as well as regional approach in 2024.