

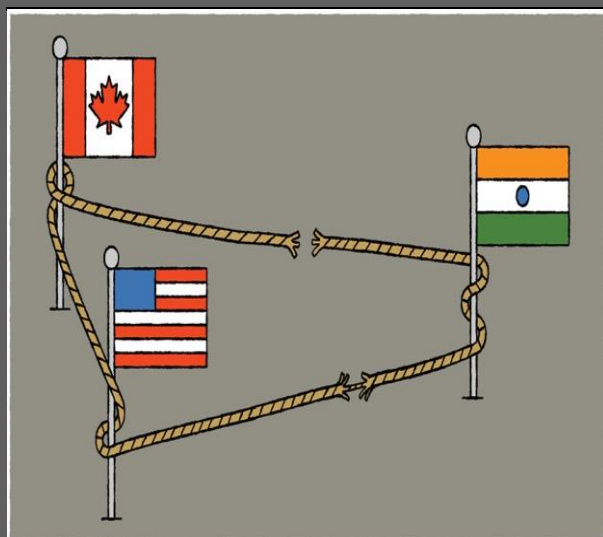
CANADA AND U.S. EXPOSE INDIAN GOVERNMENT'S TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM

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



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Introduction

In a follow-up to ongoing investigations into the role of Indian government agents in the extraterritorial and extrajudicial killings, both the U.S. and Canada publicized new information. Canada, on 14 October, 2024 disclosed a broader network of Indian government personnel, including top diplomat Sanjay Kumar Verma and consular officials in Toronto.¹ Upon the release of this information, relations between New Delhi and Ottawa plunged to new lows as the two countries expelled six diplomats each, including their respective high commissioners.

Providing evidence to the investigations, Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Canada, Mélanie Joly, stated that an ongoing investigation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) had gathered information that established credible and irrefutable links between the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar last June and the Indian government agents.² Canada also accused Indian Home Minister Amit

¹ Greg Miller and Gerry Shih, "Canada alleges much wider campaign by Modi government against Sikhs," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/14/canada-modi-sikhs-violence-india/>

² Global Affairs Canada, "Minister Joly announces expulsion of Indian diplomats related to ongoing investigation on violent criminal activity linked to the Government of India," press release, October 14, 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2024/10/minister-joly-announces-expulsion-of-indian-diplomats-related-to-ongoing-investigation-on-violent-criminal-activity-linked-to-the-government-of-india.html>

Shah – Prime Minister Modi's close confidant – for ordering the campaign targeting the Sikhs.³ The Indian government termed these statements as 'absurd' and 'baseless,' and warned that such actions have high consequences for bilateral relations.⁴ The alleged role of Indian diplomats and Home Minister purportedly discloses the involvement of high level of Indian government in masterminding. However, the dirty work appears to be done by Indian government agents and their accomplices.

The U.S., on 17 October, 2024, unveiled a second indictment by its Department of Justice focusing on another Indian government employee, Vikash Yadav, the alleged co-conspirator with Gupta, with charges of 'murder-for-hire' and 'money laundering.'⁵ The U.S. concerns about the Canadian Nijjar case stem from another active investigation into the Indian government agents' plotting to kill on U.S. soil. This was initially disclosed publicly through an article in the *Financial Times* on 22 November 2023.⁶ Preceding this, on 29 November 2023, the U.S. Federal Court disclosed the first indictment alleging 'Murder-for-Hire Conspiracy' and 'Murder-for-Hire' charges against Indian national Nikhil Gupta, who was later arrested on June 30, 2023, by Czech authorities while travelling to Prague.⁷ On 14 June 2024, Gupta was handed over to the U.S. for further criminal prosecution where he could face twenty-year imprisonment for conspiring.⁸ The two open enquiries in the U.S. and Canada against Indian government officials, including top diplomats, raise high concerns regarding the Indian government's role in directing and financing transnational terrorist activities. This uncovers highly revealing details about the operating strategies of the Indian government.

³ "Canada also accused the Indian Home Minister, Amit Shah, for ordering the campaign targeting the Sikhs," *Washington Post*, October 29, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/29/canada-india-amit-shah-sikh/364e1270-9644-11ef-939a-5dd38bf140e0_story.html

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs India, "Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson (November 02, 2024)" https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/38486/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokesperson_November_02_2024

⁵ U.S Department of Justice, "Justice Department Announces Charges Against Indian Government Employee in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate U.S. Citizen in New York City," press release, October 17, 2024, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-against-indian-government-employee-connection-foiled>

⁶ Demetri Sevastopulo, "US thwarted plot to kill Sikh separatist on American soil," *Financial Times*, November 23, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/56f7d6d6-6a93-4172-a49e-d8a91991e29d?shareType=nongift>

⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, "Justice Department 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/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate-us-citizen-new-york>

⁸ U.S Department of Justice, "Justice Department Announces Extradition of Indian National Charged in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate U.S. Citizen in New York City," press release, June 17, 2024, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/us-attorney-announces-extradition-indian-national-charged-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate>

Indian Government Reaction

While India has cooperated with the U.S. and formulated an Enquiry Committee to investigate the personnel identified in the U.S. Department of Justice indictment, New Delhi's response towards Canada has been extremely provocative. In response to the latest Canadian allegations, India *"strongly rejected"* and termed these as *"preposterous imputations."*⁹ On the other hand, no such harsh terms or statements were directed at the U.S., indicating a mellow response. The Indian government also blamed Canada for not sharing a *"shred of evidence"* regarding the allegations. However, the Canadian Charge d'Affaires in New Delhi publicly claimed that Canada had provided *"credible and irrefutable"* evidence of ties between agents of the government of India and the murder of a Canadian citizen. India further went on to accuse the Canadian government of:

- Openly espousing a separatist ideology vis-à-vis India and spreading anti-India separatist agenda; and
- Peddling such information for "narrow political gains," centred on "vote bank politics."

As Canada is expected to hold elections in October 2025, India has linked these allegations with alleged domestic political gains, seeking to divert the matter in another direction. This only goes to illustrate a cavalier Indian response to a highly serious allegation. This could be due to India's exaggerated self-perception of its strategic and political weight.

Indian Strategic and Political Ambitions

The fiery response of the Indian government indicates that New Delhi might be trying to exert pressure on Canada, perceiving that it has the requisite clout and leverages to act in this manner. India's advantageous position in the Indo-U.S. Strategic Partnership has enhanced both New Delhi's confidence as well as its level of ambition. It seems that India's relevance in the China containment strategy and its strategic partnership with Washington has emboldened New Delhi to conduct such illegal operations on foreign soil, thinking that the U.S. and Canada would sweep these actions, clearly violative of their sovereignty, under the carpet. Several Indian commentators have argued that 'major powers' pursue counter-terrorism operations abroad to protect their national interest. However, it is clear that India has overplayed its hand in these instances.

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs India, "India's response to diplomatic communication from Canada," press release, October 14, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38417/Indias_response_to_diplomatic_communication_from_Canada

Further, by targeting and carrying out assassinations of Sikh leaders, New Delhi is trying to instil fear into the Indian overseas groups in the U.S. and Canada. The Indian government has been particularly active as Khalistan Freedom referendums have garnered massive participation. It is estimated that about 200,000 in California and over 53,000 Sikhs in Canada participated in the latest phases of referendums.¹⁰ Organized by 'Sikhs for Justice' whose leaders are on India's hitlist, these referendums aim to gather the support of Sikhs from all over the world to later advocate their right of self-determination in the UN, based on faith and language.

New Delhi's campaign of extra-territorial assassinations is expected to continue as the U.S. Department of Justice indictment revealed that India has other Khalistani activists on its list too and the ones targeted in U.S. and Canada were not on the top of the list. The purpose of publically highlighting these incidents in detail could also be to suppress and warn other Sikh activists on how far India is willing to go to target those who demand their rights through non-violent political means. Nonetheless, these revelations have had negative repercussions for India's global reputation, besides causing serious rifts in relations with Canada and the U.S.

Impact on India's Global Prestige

Until recently, India was on a speedy trajectory cementing relations all around and building prestige among the Western states. Although it remains unclear as to what extent and for how long the recent revelations would have an adverse impact; but for the time being, the Five Eye states have expressed their strong dissatisfaction. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, for the first time in the parliament and a second time in a public enquiry, on October 16, 2024, made the strongest public statements against India. This time, in hours-long testimony, he elaborated on an intricate network of Indian diplomats, government officials, and criminal gangs working for the Indian government. He criticized the Indian government by stating, "the Indian government made a horrific mistake in thinking that they could interfere as aggressively as they did in the safety and sovereignty of Canada." On a similar note, U.S. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller made it clear that these allegations are "extremely seriously – serious."¹¹ The U.K. and Australia also raised their objections and urged India to take the right next steps.

¹⁰ "Over 200,000 Sikhs voted in Khalistan Referendum in California," *The Nation*, April 2, 2024, <https://www.nation.com.pk/02-Apr-2024/over-200-000-sikhs-voted-in-khalistan-referendum-in-california>; "Over 53,000 Sikhs exercised their right to vote in the Khalistan Referendum held in Calgary, Canada under the auspices of Sikhs for Justice (SFJ)," *Associate Press of Pakistan*, July 29, 2024, <https://www.urdupoint.com/en/pakistan/53000-sikhs-vote-for-khalistan-against-india-1848364.html>

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, Department Press Briefing – October 15, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-october-15-2024/#post-591850-INDIACANADA>

This shows India's battered reputation as a reliable partner, given its assigned role in countering China, which India skillfully exploits. Surfacing of Indian state-sponsored criminal activities in the Western media will have consequences for future agreements and deals with India as well. India has been on the hunt for advanced and modern weaponry for the modernization of armed forces and strategic posture. If the U.S. and Canada remain firm in taking this issue to its logical conclusion then this could be an area that may face the brunt – as it would upset India's global and strategic targets. The U.S. has also imposed various sanctions on Indian defence firms providing dual-use items and chemical weapons to Russia,¹² which shows that the U.S. is not hesitant to curtail India's ambitions of being a defence export.

Already, on account of Indian government-sponsored terrorist activities in Canada, and subsequently in the U.S., Quad Leaders' Summit 2024, which was supposed to be hosted by India on this rotation was postponed. Now India is seeking to host the same summit next year, which seems to be an attempt by New Delhi to indicate that things have moved on. Overall, India's global reputation has taken a hit, clearly evident in the strong condemnation from the US, Canada and Five Eye states.

Conclusion

The Indian state-sponsored terrorism, prior to the unveiling of criminal and terrorist activities in the U.S. and Canada, was largely confined to Pakistan, the South Asian region, especially targeting minorities and Muslims of India. However, the Canadian and U.S. allegations confirmed that India has now assumed the role of a transnational terror-sponsoring state. India believes that it has secured a free get-out-of-jail card due its so-called 'indispensable role' and growing relevance in global politics. Notwithstanding wide condemnation, India refused to cooperate with Canada. It is safe to claim that another wave of revelations and legal closure of the cases will likely further erode India's global reputation.

¹² U.S. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Takes Aim at Third-Country Sanctions Evaders and Russian Producers Supporting Russia's Military Industrial Base" press release, October 30, 2024 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2700>; Bureau of Industry and Security, "Commerce Targets Illicit Procurement Networks Supplying Russia's Military and Restricts Chemical Precursors Enabling Russia's Use of Chemical Weapons Against Ukraine" press release, October 30, 2024, <https://www.bis.gov/press-release/commerce-targets-illicit-procurement-networks-supplying-russias-military-and>