

Canada Confronts India's Foreign Meddling

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



The subject of India's meddling in Canadian affairs has been one of the major international news since September, 2023¹ when then Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau disclosed a potential link between the agents of the Government of India and the murder of a Canadian citizen, Hardeep Singh Nijjar.² Intelligence report released the following year disclosed that India's interference in Canada is increasingly extending beyond countering the perceived threat from pro-Khalistani activism in Canada.³ As we move into 2025, the investigation into India's role continues to unveil further information.

On January 28, 2025, a Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions disclosed the Indian government's meddling into Canadian electoral process, its tactics of inducing pro-India narrative, and countering Khalistan activism.⁴ Although India

¹ 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>

² Maheen Shafeeq, "India-Canada Diplomatic Row," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, September 26, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-india-canada-diplomatic-row/>; 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>

³ "Special Report on Foreign Interference in Canada's Democratic Processes and Institutions" (Ottawa: National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, March 2024), <https://www.nsicop-cpsnr.ca/reports/rp-2024-06-03/special-report-foreign-interference.pdf>

⁴ Marie-Josée Hogue, "Public Inquiry Into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions" final report vol 1 (Quebec: Foreign Interference Commission, 2025), https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/report_volume_1.pdf

rejected⁵ the report's contents, the findings of the Public Inquiry claimed to only have scratched the surface of Indian campaign of transnational interference, methods used and its targets. It is pertinent to analyse the background and findings of the report. How deeply the Indian government is invested in foreign interference, and why this is becoming a global concern? The report's claims indicate that the Indian government has been using its global influence to brazenly intimidate, target, and influence democracies and its people, including close strategic partners.

Significance of the Report

Canada's Foreign Interference Commission published a comprehensive seven-volume Inquiry Report following an eighteen-month investigation led by the judge of the highest court in Quebec, Canada, Honorable Marie-Josée Hogue.⁶ The Public Inquiry report was drafted after extensive review of government documents, and oral testimonies of over 200 witnesses, including both South Asian community members and high-level Canadian officials. The purpose of the Public Inquiry was to bring transparency on the issue of foreign interference. The legitimacy and significance of the subjects taken up in the report is evident from its publication platform. The report's overall findings and its contents can be used as evidence in future legal proceedings against Indian government officials.

Background

Tensions between Canada and India escalated significantly following the then Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's speech to the House of Commons on September 18, 2023.⁷ He claimed of having credible evidence of a potential link between the agents of the Government of India and the murder of a Canadian citizen, Hardeep Singh Nijjar.⁸ Prime Minister Justin Trudeau underscored that killing of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil is a violation of the sovereignty, which is unacceptable, and contrary to fundamental rules of how democratic societies conduct themselves. Following these revelations, ties between Canada and India plummeted further to new lows, as both countries

⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, "India's comments on a Canadian Commission's report" press release, January 28, 2025, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/38954/Indias_comments_on_a_Canadian_Commissions_report

⁶ Foreign Interference Commission, Final Report, <https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/reports/final-report>

⁷ Maheen Shafeeq, "India-Canada Diplomatic Row," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, September 26, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-india-canada-diplomatic-row/>; 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>

⁸ Maheen Shafeeq, "India-Canada Diplomatic Row," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, September 26, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-india-canada-diplomatic-row/>; 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>

expelled their respective diplomats, and New Delhi going to the point of lifting the diplomatic immunity of further 41 Canadian diplomats in India.

The issue of involvement of Indian government's agents took a further dramatic turn when on October 14, 2024, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) publicly revealed the links between the Indian government agents, homicides, serious criminal activities, and use of criminal networks.⁹ RCMP disclosed that the South Asian community is being targeted by foreign interference and transnational repression. A report in *The Washington Post* indicated that close confidant of PM Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and senior RAW officials authorized the covert operations in Canada.¹⁰ This unveiled an extensive network of Indian government agents targeting Canadian citizens of South Asian descent.

The Public Inquiry Revelations

The Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions identified India as the second most active country engaged in electoral interference in Canada, after China. It accused India of steering an interference campaign through its official diplomatic channels and proxies. The Inquiry concluded that the aim of this interference was to promote pro-India narrative through Indo-Canadian community and to counter Khalistani activism.

The most recent information by *The New York Times* disclosed India's role in raising money and organizing support for Mr. Pierre Poilievre, the Conservative Party leader, who won with a landslide garnering 68 percent of the votes.¹¹ The Public Inquiry mentioned of the recently disclosed information regarding Mr Pierre, which he denies.¹² A witness claimed that the Indian government interfered into Conservative Party leadership race, stated the Inquiry report. They claimed that often not all of the Indian government's activities were covert. To promote its interests, India clandestinely provided illicit financial support to secure influence over or ensure support of pro-India candidates in 2021 elections without candidates' knowledge. This is further confirmed by the recent news regarding the role of Indian government concerning the meddling in 2022 general elections.

⁹ Public Safety Canada, Parliamentary Committee Notes: Indo-Canadian Community Violence and Engagement, January 17, 2025, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/trnsprnc/brfng-mtrls/prlmntry-bndrs/20250226/02-en.aspx#:~:text=Issue,the%20use%20of%20criminal%20networks>.

¹⁰ Sriram Lakshman, Washington Post says Amit Shah and senior R&AW official authorised covert operations in Canada, *The Hindu*, October 16, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/washington-post-says-amit-shah-and-senior-raw-official-authorized-covert-operations-in-canada/article68757847.ece>

¹¹ Norimitsu Onishi, "India Is Said to Have Meddled in Canadian Party Election," *New York Times*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/25/world/asia/canada-election-india-china.html>

¹² Robert Fife and Steve Chase, "Poilievre says he won leadership without Indian interference, defends not taking security clearance," *The Globe and Mail*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-alleged-india-interference-pierre-poilievre-conservative-leadership/>

The report claims “although these tactics have not been too successful yet, we must be vigilant.”¹³ On voters’ side, the report stated, the Indian government had about 800,000 members of Sikh diaspora on its radar, whose political views it wished to influence. It labeled such acts by the Indian government as ‘transnational repression,’ which it termed as a ‘serious problem’ with ‘harmful impact’ on Canadians.

The report cited details of Hardeep Singh Nijjar’s assassination as examples of foreign interference threats as well as transnational repression. It stated that until recently, Canada was trying to improve its bilateral relationship with India as part of broader ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy;’ however, the assassination of Sikh activist has derailed these efforts. Predictably, India’s reaction was extreme and bilateral relations remain strained. Assessing the intricacy of Indian involvement, the report stated that it only scratched the surface of this phenomenon. To cover its acts, India launched a disinformation campaign as a retaliatory tactic.

The report extensively elaborated the perils of disinformation on democracy and the Canadian society. It emphasized that India used disinformation as a key tactic for foreign interference, which is likely to be used more often. The disinformation campaign was initiated following the announcement regarding the suspected Indian involvement in the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar. The report labeled India as an emerging cyber threat actor. This showed that Canada was building blocks of credible evidence against India for its clandestine role in foreign interference.

A Global Concern

Canada is not the only country claiming to have credible evidence of Indian government agents’ involvement in transnational interference and repression, rather this has become a global concern as the U.S. and Pakistan also shared similar concerns and evidence of Indian involvement in muting voices of dissidents abroad. In connection with the Indian government’s thwarted murder plot against Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a dual U.S.-Canadian citizen, and legal advisor to the ‘Sikhs for Justice’ campaign, the U.S. Department of Justice charged two individuals: Nikhil Gupta, an Indian national extradited from Prague to face charges for his alleged role, and Vikash Yadav, a former officer of India’s spy agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). While Gupta had indirect link to the Indian government, Yadav had direct connection with India’s spy agency. A report by *The Washington Post* claimed that the order to assassinate Pannun was approved by then chief of RAW

¹³ Marie-Josée Hogue, “Public Inquiry Into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions” final report vol 1 (Quebec: Foreign Interference Commission, 2025), https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/report_volume_1.pdf

Samant Goel,¹⁴ further highlighting the role of high-level Indian government officials in killing dissident residing abroad.

Based on its own of investigation, Pakistan claimed to have documentary, financial and forensic evidence implicating the role of Indian government agents in killing of several Pakistani citizens.¹⁵ *The Guardian* report also corroborated that since 2020 about 20 individuals have been killed by India on Pakistani soil.¹⁶ While the world failed to pay attention to Pakistan's serious claims earlier, the evidence coming forth in the case of the U.S. and Canada warrants global attention to the gravity of Pakistan's complaints concerning the Indian government's illegal and extra-judicial assassinations. An overestimated projection of India by the Indian government and its supporters has resulted in emboldening the Indian government to pursue belligerent strategies resulting in graver global concern.¹⁷

Conclusion

Routinely, foreign states leverage influence to advance their strategic interests. The Indian government has chosen to interfere and carry out assassinations to eliminate dissidents and threaten those who could in India's view harm its security. The Indian government has adopted an aggressive strategy to thwart this imagined threat. While killings, torture, collective punishments, and forced disappearance is a routine practice against people in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK),¹⁸ the Indian government has adopted a similar strategy for Sikh activists living in India and worldwide. India has listed fifty-seven individuals as most wanted 'terrorist' based on

¹⁴ Greg Miller, Gerry Shih and Ellen Nakashima, "An assassination plot on American soil reveals a darker side of Modi's India," *Washington Post*, April 29, 2024,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/29/india-assassination-raw-sikhs-modi/>

¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, "Remarks by the Foreign Secretary on India's Extra-Judicial and Extra-Territorial Killings in Pakistan" press release, January 25, 2024, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/remarks-by-the-foreign-secretary-on-indias-extra-judicial-and-extra-territorial-killings-in-pakistan>; Maheen Shafeeq, "India's Extrajudicial and Extraterritorial Killings in Pakistan," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, January 30, 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-indias-extra-judicial-and-extraterritorial-killings-in-pakistan/>

¹⁶ Indian government ordered killings in Pakistan, intelligence officials claim, *The Guardian*, Hannah Ellis-Petersen, Aakash Hassan and Shah Meer Baloch, "Indian government ordered killings in Pakistan, intelligence officials claim," *The Guardian*, April 4, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/04/indian-government-assassination-allegations-pakistan-intelligence-officials> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/04/indian-government-assassination-allegations-pakistan-intelligence-officials>

¹⁷ A.G. Noorani, *The Doval doctrine*, *Frontline*, October 28, 2015, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/the-doval-doctrine/article23593361.ece>

¹⁸ Patricia Gossman, "Behind the Kashmir Conflict: Abuses by Indian Security Forces and Militant Groups Continue" report (New York: Human Rights Watch, July 1, 1999) <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/kashmir/summary.htm>

Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act – the infamous UAPA.¹⁹ This indicates that India's strategy of global assassinations is supported by domestic laws.

The recent wave of assassinations of Kashmiri activists followed the Pulwama attack of 2019, while Sikhs came on India's radar for similar treatment after the farmer's movement which was dominated by Sikhs supported from Canada.²⁰ With its growing international clout, Indian government feels confident that it can get away with its aggressive 'kill campaign.' India's sophisticated international setup for illegal and potentially reckless killings raises serious questions for India's close friends about her reliability as a strategic partner.

¹⁹ Ministry of Home Affairs India, Individual Terrorists under UAPA, <https://www.mha.gov.in/en/page/individual-terrorists-under-uapa>

²⁰ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, Aakash Hassan and Shah Meer Baloch, "Indian government ordered killings in Pakistan, intelligence officials claim," *The Guardian*, April 4, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/04/indian-government-assassination-allegations-pakistan-intelligence-officials> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/04/indian-government-assassination-allegations-pakistan-intelligence-officials>