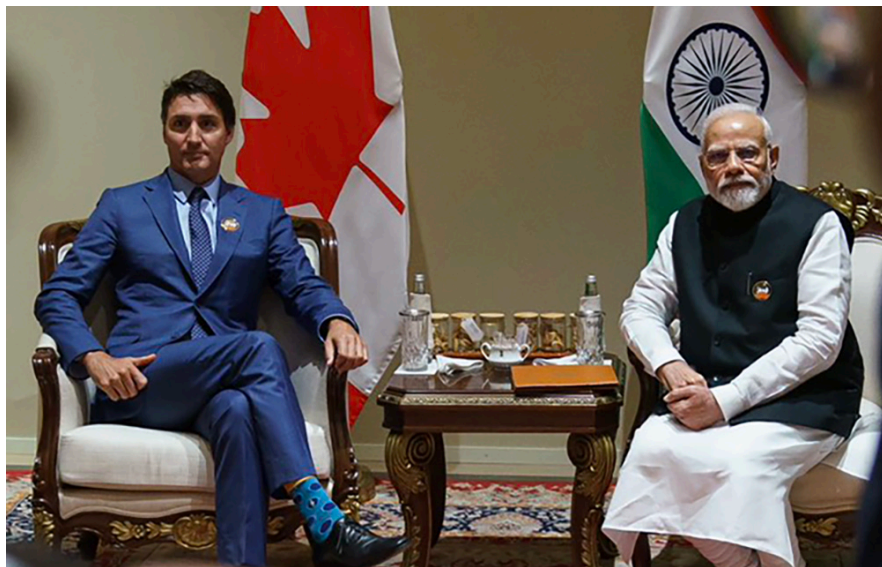


Decoding the US role in India-Canada diplomatic row



The Khalistan-centric activities of India’s intelligence agencies abroad, presumed to be operating under NSA Ajit Doval, have created a lot of discomfort in the Western countries.

Sushant Singh

Weeks before Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made that explosive statement on the floor of the House of Commons in Ottawa on 18 September, Command Post had [explored](#) the fraying nature of ties between India and Canada. It was evident, even then, that the bilateral relationship was at the edge of a precipice and required a small jolt to topple over.

Trudeau’s allegation that the Indian government was party to the murder of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil was a stunning blow, which has sent Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s reputation crashing down from his high of the G20 summit in New Delhi. The official Indian response was best [summarised](#) by an American journalist: “We didn’t do it, but if we had it would have been justified.” That line of argument has been devotedly parroted by Indian analysts, writers, editors, columnists and, of course, with a liberal dose of abuse and invectives, by the online Hindutva ecosystem.

As this newsletter had explained, there are structural factors in India-Canada ties that have brought the two countries to this pass. The foremost among them is Khalistan, a dead horse in Punjab, which is obsessively being flogged by the Modi government.

Western governments are uncomfortable or unwilling to target what they see as non-violent political canvassing for Khalistan by a small group of their citizens. There are [Sangh Parivar’s ideological imperatives](#) guiding the political thinking that have made the current establishment irrationally aggressive about tiny sections of Sikh diaspora in Canada, the UK, Germany and the US raising this demand. Sikhs, in turn, are alarmed by the treatment meted out to other religious minorities—Muslims and Christians—by the post-2014 Hindutva regime. In internal reports, Canada has spoken of Indian interference in the domestic political process. Trudeau had a disastrous official visit to India in 2018 and his Liberal Party’s ideology seems to be completely at odds with the Hindu majoritarian moorings of Modi’s BJP.

These tensions are exacerbated by the Modi government's worldview, which looks at everything through a security and intelligence lens. Newbie politicians like S. Jaishankar, in fiercely displaying their commitment to the cause of the authoritarian leader and his idea of New India, have used the bully pulpit to infuse a dangerous mix of extreme confidence and extreme resentment in the party cadre and supporters. They are emboldened by an Indian state that fully stands behind them, irrespective of the costs or consequences. It has resulted in an overreach by Hindutva forces in many foreign countries, most notably in the UK, Australia and the US. Add to it India's corporate-owned mainstream media, which is an accomplice of the ruling ideology and has discarded any pretence of speaking truth to power. The outcome should not come as a surprise.

US stance

Canada is a member of G7, founder of NATO military alliance and part of the exclusive Five Eyes intelligence alliance—Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the US are other countries in Five Eyes, which has closely guarded its exclusivity. When the news first broke, most Indian commentators argued that Canada would find itself friendless in this fight against Modi's India, a rising superpower. Rather guarded and mild initial statements from the US, the UK and Australia, which did not even name India, seemed to confirm those beliefs—the West needs India (against China) more than India needs the West, goes the premise. The Washington Post [reported](#) that the Five Eyes countries had refused to issue a statement in Canada's support during the G20 summit in New Delhi. As the Modi government made no offer to cooperate with the Canadian investigation and appeared to be getting away lightly, things suddenly started to turn.

First off the blocks was the Canadian state media, which reported that the intelligence inputs on which the Trudeau statement was based came from the Five Eyes alliance. This was mainly technical intelligence, and only the US has those advanced and highly sophisticated capabilities. Then President Joe Biden's National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, held a media briefing in the White House, refuted the Washington Post report and said that India would not get "some special exemption" for "actions like this", and the Biden administration would "consult closely with allies like Canada as they pursue their law enforcement and diplomatic process". US Secretary of State Antony Blinken followed in New York with an even stronger statement, saying that "we want to see accountability" and hoped "that our Indian friends would cooperate" with the Canadian investigation. He confirmed that the Biden administration is in direct touch with the Modi government on the matter, and was "not just consulting, [but] coordinating with" Canada over it.

If there was still any doubt that the US was not ditching Canada for India, it was laid to rest by the American ambassador to Canada, David Cohen, who [nearly stated](#) that the intelligence on the alleged Indian involvement in Nijjar's murder came from the US. The New York Times [confirmed](#) that "in the aftermath of the killing, US intelligence agencies offered their Canadian counterparts context that helped Canada conclude that India had been involved. Yet what appears to be the 'smoking gun,' intercepted communications of Indian diplomats in Canada indicating involvement in the plot, was gathered by Canadian officials". [According to](#) the Wall Street Journal, "the intelligence delivered to Ottawa wasn't a routine summary of intelligence but a tailored package of insight developed after the assassination".

Trudeau paid a visit to the New York Times headquarters and was emboldened enough to say that he wanted to see "a number of people thrown in jail," plus "a series of lessons learned and changes made to the way Indian intelligence services operate". Nicholas Kristof, the newspaper's regular columnist, [recounted](#) this, adding that "this episode should be a warning to Western leaders, including President Biden, who have fawned over Modi. The last couple of decades of travails with Vladimir Putin should have taught us something about the difficulties of trying to reform nationalist authoritarians, or the perils of granting them impunity". It is now evident that the protagonists in this drama are no longer just Canada and India; the US is as much an actor on the stage.

India's agencies

India would have been very confident of dealing with Canada, but direct US involvement makes it a different proposition. The US interest in the episode is mostly being examined along two axes: India vs Canada and interests vs values. The crude Hindutva lot imagines Canada and the US as part of some “Anglo-Saxon” clique, which have ganged up against “brown” India. The more sophisticated analysts see it as a choice the US has made in favour of its old ally and neighbour against the new partner in the Indo-Pacific, India. After all, India is not an ally and the Modi government’s vision of a multipolar world, where the post-World War order is upended to accommodate new emerging powers and global norms created by the West are discarded in favour of more cultural and nationalist rules and standards, goes against American interests and vision.

The other axis on which the US is seen to be choosing is between interests and values. Its interests are convergent with India’s interests in countering China’s hegemonic rise, which has seen the Biden administration overlook numerous complaints about the democratic backsliding and ill-treatment of religious minorities by the Modi government. Because it needs India on its side in the Indo-Pacific, it ignores India’s close trade and defence ties with Russia or the Modi government’s support of the military junta in Myanmar or an authoritarian Sheikh Hasina regime in Bangladesh. The values that the Biden administration professes to protect and spread are not as important as its interests, as has been demonstrated in its dealings with the Modi government so far. But a line was crossed with the killing of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil that made Washington, DC prioritise the values of non-interference and sovereignty over its geopolitical interests in the Indo-Pacific.

Either or both of these factors could be true. However, it would be equally important to consider the role of India’s intelligence agencies in Western countries, particularly against Khalistan supporters. Trudeau spoke of “the way Indian intelligence services operate,” a complaint that has been made by countries like Germany and the UK earlier. This [media report](#) from 2020 says that “ever since 2015, Indian intelligence sources said, RAW had aggressively recruited agents inside pro-Khalistan circles across Europe and Canada”. It adds that “RAW’s new anti-Khalistan operations in Europe however sparked off confrontations with domestic intelligence services in those countries, who believed India was violating the conventions governing the activities of it”. Samant Goel, who retired as head of RAW this June, days after Nijjar was murdered, personally came under pressure from the British government when he was the station chief in London. In Germany, RAW’s station chief in Frankfurt was “asked to leave Germany after serving for less at the station for just six months, on charges of engaging activities incompatible with his status as a diplomat — the language Foreign Ministries use to describe espionage”. A trial in a German Federal state-security court also took place in 2020 against a German man, after he was charged with receiving payoffs from RAW for spying on Khalistan.

The activities of India’s intelligence agencies, presumed to be operating under NSA Ajit Doval, have created a lot of discomfort in the Western countries. This includes the US as well. [As per The Wire](#), “the R&AW station chief’s post in Washington DC, which fell vacant a few months ago, is yet to be filled as the host government is yet to agree to India’s nomination.” While the diplomatic and political wings of the Biden administration are working hard on promoting closer ties with the Modi government, a powerful section of the American establishment has been uncomfortable with some of the actions initiated by India’s agencies. The intelligence provided to Canada could have flown out for that purpose. More significantly, marshalling of Sullivan and Blinken, two officials seen as extremely India-friendly, to shoot public warnings at the Modi government, shows that the matter has been taken seriously by the Biden administration.

Nijjar’s murder in Canada provided a handy excuse, but it is no longer about that. It is now about the US and its public warnings to India. The Biden administration has publicly shot across the bow for the Modi government to take heed and amend the ways of its intelligence agencies. From intelligence and logistic support to diplomatic backing, New Delhi needs the US to effectively deal with Beijing. Perhaps to a lesser degree, but the US also needs India as a partner. It thus makes sense for the Modi government to do whatever it takes to quickly get over this bump in the road to better ties with the US. Good sense and logic, however, are not what either Modi or his government is known for. That makes the coming days and weeks interesting to watch.

Obiter Dicta

Amar Bhushan, a former Indian intelligence officer, wrote a gripping and thinly disguised fictional account, called “Escape to Nowhere”, of the case of Rabinder Singh, an Indian RAW operative who went rogue and escaped to the US. Hartosh Singh Bal [reviewed](#) the book. An interesting watch is “D-Day”, a 2013 Hindi-language film about a character based on Dawood Ibrahim in Pakistan and a RAW agent, which was supposedly based on authentic inputs from retired Indian field operatives.

Lead image shared by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Twitter shows him meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the G20 Summit in New Delhi earlier this month.