

India's Spat With Canada Is a Win-Win Situation for Modi

By painting Sikh separatists as a bigger security threat than they are, the BJP government can mobilize its base in advance of the 2024 election.

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India and Canada have been locked in an escalating diplomatic crisis after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told his parliament on Sept. 18 that “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.”

On the same day, Canada ousted an Indian diplomat, whom Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly identified as an intelligence chief. Trudeau based this allegation upon intercepted electronic communications among Indian diplomats. Within a few hours, India announced that it had expelled an unnamed “senior Canadian diplomat” in response.

At the heart of this is New Delhi's fears around the Khalistani movement, which aims to create a separate Sikh nation in the religion's historic heartland in Punjab. India has denied involvement in the assassination, but it vigorously excoriated Canada for harboring Nijjar, whom India says was a terrorist, and who had been the subject of two Interpol red corner notices issued on India's behalf in 2014 and 2016. India also shared information with Ottawa about a dozen criminal cases of murder and other suspected terrorist activities in which Nijjar was accused. Despite this notice, Canada simply responded by placing him on a no-fly list between 2017-18.

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New Delhi has stoked fear of Sikh separatists for a long time. The Indian government began raising the specter of Khalistan in recent years beginning with the 2020-21 farmers' protest. While the evidence for this claim was sparse, it was a disquieting claim because it reminded Indians of the brutality of the movement. From the late 1970s through the early 1990s, Punjab was paralyzed by a campaign of terror waged by Sikh militants and the brutality and excesses committed by India's security forces countering them. The militancy claimed some 25,000 lives.

In Punjab, the movement is effectively dead. But the dream of Khalistan remains alive among small, but extremely vocal and visible, segments of the Sikh diaspora in the

West. For New Delhi, however, the specter of Khalistan has become a useful bogeyman—one that serves the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's political needs and offers a chance for Prime Minister Narendra Modi to flex his muscles as a strongman once again.

Between 2000 and 2022, according to data on fatal incidents collected by the South Asia Terrorism Portal, Khalistan-related violence kept an extremely low profile among two other major terrorist threats in India: Islamist violence in Jammu and Kashmir as well as the Maoists who operate across several Indian states. The data is clear: In the past 22 years, there have been 33 incidents in Punjab resulting in at least one fatality, compared to 11,892 fatal events in Jammu and Kashmir and 5,247 fatal events involving Maoists. But if you listened to Modi government rhetoric, you would think that the Khalistani movement was a more salient threat.

The Khalistan bogeyman began with the protests that broke out across India in 2020-21, when mostly Sikh farmers from the states of Punjab and Haryana mobilized against the government's September 2020 passage of the so-called Farm Bills, which deregulated state buyers and potentially meant the end of price floors for crops. In January 2021, the Indian government alleged that the Khalistan movement had infiltrated the protests. Analysts pushed back, noting the diversity of organizations and protesters involved.

Then came Amritpal Singh Sandhu, an Indian-born and Dubai-based, cleanshaven Sikh who came to India to support the Farm Bill protests. He went back to Dubai after the government revoked the legislation to end the impasse with the farmers.

Sandhu returned to India in August 2022. This time, he had all of the visible markers of a pious Sikh: His beard was long and untrimmed; his uncut hair was covered by a blue turban; he wore both the steel bangle as well as a *kirpan* (ritual dagger or sword) tucked into its traditional strap and dangling from his waist. More importantly, both his sartorial style and rhetoric mimicked that of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the fiery leader of a takeover of the Golden Temple, one of Sikhism's holiest sites, that precipitated the disastrous 1984 military operation, Operation Blue Star, in which Bhindranwale and hundreds of others perished.

Many in Punjab were completely bewildered by Singh, who appeared seemingly out of nowhere, as well as his bizarre seven-month political career. In fact, when I was in Punjab in December 2022 and January 2023, some Sikhs began to speculate that the central government was behind the chaos he was causing. They surmised that the government's endgame was to create enough havoc to justify declaring a state of emergency that would dismiss the Aam Aadmi Party-run (AAP) state government, in hopes of the future emergence of a BJP-friendly government.

After a month-long manhunt, Sandhu was arrested on Apr. 23 and ferreted off to the Dibrugarh prison in the remote state of Assam. Very little has been heard of him since. After interrogating him, the Indian government claims that he was a creature of both Pakistan's external intelligence agency, the ISI, and the U.S.-based Sikhs For Justice. The AAP government limps on amid various criticisms.

The latest bits of grist for Punjab's rumor mill are the deaths of three Khalistanis: Nijjar was killed in Canada in June; Paramjit Singh Panjar, the head of the Khalistan Commando Force, was killed across the border in Lahore, Pakistan, in May; and Avtar Singh Khanda, a Khalistani and the alleged handler of Amritpal Singh Sandhu, died in England, in June. Many in Punjab are wondering why the diaspora-based extremists have so suddenly focused the New Delhi's attention given that Khalistanis have been active in the diaspora for decades.

Moreover, the Modi government's inauguration of the Kartarpur Corridor on Nov. 9, 2019, was inconsistent with these stated concerns about the purported Khalistani threat. The corridor allows Sikh pilgrims with special permits to traverse the 5.5-mile stretch between Dera Baba Nanak, one of Sikhism's most sacred sites, which is situated on the banks of the Ravi River in India, and Gurudwara Shri Kartarpur Sahib, where the religion's founder is believed to have died, which is located in Pakistan's Punjab province.

Why did Modi's government enthusiastically embrace this initiative, given several red flags that emerged? Notably, one of the people involved with the project on the Pakistani side is Gopal Singh Chawla, a Khalistani activist who was the general secretary of the Pakistan Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, the organization that oversees Sikh places of worship in Pakistan. Chawla is also referred to as a "close aide" of Hafiz Saeed, the leader of the Lashkar-e-Taiba militant Islamist group, and thereby also tied to the Pakistani state and its intelligence apparatus in India's media.

Also of note, Indian media widely reported in 2019 that an unnamed "top Pakistani minister" had claimed that the "opening of the historic Kartarpur Corridor was the brainchild of Army chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa and it will hurt India forever." Similarly, Sheikh Rashid Ahmad, a longtime Pakistani politician who has held several federal ministerial positions since 1991, declared that "India will remember forever the kind of wound inflicted on it by General Bajwa by opening the Kartarpur Corridor. General Bajwa strongly hit India by opening the corridor."

Despite these warning signs, the Modi government enthusiastically supported the corridor. This raises the question of how significant the Indian government believes the Khalistani threat to be. After all, if the government believes its own rhetoric about the threat and Pakistani intelligence agencies' hand in it, the government should have been warier of the corridor.

One of the reasons for Modi's appeal among his supporters has been his attempt to remake India as a powerful and assertive Hindu state. He announced in 2015, to much fanfare, that India had conducted a so-called surgical strike in Myanmar territory to target secessionists in Manipur and Nagaland. Myanmar officials discounted many of his claims and said they "deeply resented" Modi's characterization.

Then there was the late September 2016 launch of another so-called surgical strike against "militant launch pads" in Pakistani territory. While Modi claimed that this attack was the first of its kind, likely as a swipe at the pusillanimity of previous

governments, the *Economist's* defense editor, Shashank Joshi, documented nine previous attacks on Pakistani-controlled territory.

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Then came Modi's braggadocious claims about Indian airstrikes against a Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) training camp in retaliation for the group's February 2019 suicide attack on a Central Reserve Police Force convoy in Pulwama, which killed 40 people. Despite claims to have destroyed the "the biggest Jaish-e-Mohammad camp in Balakot" in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province killing "several terrorists, trainers and Jaish commanders planning more terror strikes in India." However, multiple independent studies using satellite images could not confirm any of Modi's claims of success.

Later, in response to Pakistani punitive airstrikes, India scrambled its own fighter jets. In the ensuing dogfight, Pakistan downed a MiG-21 Bison and recovered its pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, who was returned to India unharmed. However, India claimed that Varthaman shot down a Pakistani F-16 before crashing and even provided "irrefutable evidence" for the downed plane.

However, the radar stills proved to be anything but irrefutable. Even without credible evidence for the F-16's demise, it has become a celebrated fact in India's media. And despite broader concerns about the credibility of these varied claims, Modi's stock phrase became "hum ghar mein ghus ke marenge" ("we will enter your house and kill you").

Indian analysts have argued that the twin glories of taking out a JeM camp and downing an F-16 after the February 2019 Pulwama attack on the CRPF convoy sealed Modi's victory, while protecting Modi from credible concerns about the conduct of the election. The terrorist attack at Pulwama and the government's response galvanized a deep sense of nationalism that likely "flipped the mood for the prime minister and the BJP in that general election."

Indian journalists suspect that Modi is trying to establish the Khalistan movement as the next security crisis through which he can flex his strongman muscles once again. Pro-Modi media commentators are even floating the notion that Canada is the "next Pakistan." One commentator coined the neologism "Canadistan" to reflect the belief that Canada, like Pakistan, aids and abets anti-India terrorism. India's media reflects a clear sense that India has triumphed over Trudeau, who is portrayed as increasingly-isolated at home and abroad.

Aiding the strongman image is the mythology surrounding Modi's national security advisor, Ajit Doval, often heralded as India's James Bond. His enthusiasts claim that Doval has participated in a variety of larger-than-life exploits, including supposedly living undercover as a Muslim in the Pakistani city of Lahore; mastering psychological

warfare; and infiltrating the Golden Temple two days before a 1988 raid on it, known as Operation Black Thunder II.

Doval has numerous fans who admire his supposed crushing of the Khalistani movement's leadership. This fanbase is unphased by the various questions raised about his actual role and activities. Months before Trudeau's allegations, one Doval enthusiast tweeted, "The dismantling of Khalistan has begun. Don't mess with Ajit Doval," while another declared, "If you are against India and want terrorism in India, we will get you."

No country could tolerate a foreign intelligence agency killing their citizens, and Trudeau had little choice but to act. Yet his actions have undoubtedly given Modi and his party a leg up in the coming 2024 general elections.

No matter what happens in Ottawa, Modi wins. Should Trudeau be unable to muster persuasive evidence of Indian intelligence agents' involvement in Nijjar's demise, Modi looks like he's exposed Canadian hypocrisy. And if persuasive evidence emerges that India did assassinate him, Indians can say that India is now tough enough to eliminate alleged threats to the nation on foreign soil.

Sikhs in Punjab, meanwhile, are bearing the direct economic costs of this impasse, with potential Canadian visas now effectively frozen, while growing increasingly fearful that they are the next target of Modi's Hindu nationalist movement. Ironically, while Trudeau's moves may have comforted Sikhs in Canada, his actions have had just the opposite impact upon Sikhs in Punjab.

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