

# Canada-India relations in turmoil after Ottawa accuses Modi regime of assassinating Sikh separatist in BC

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Relations between Canada and India are in turmoil following Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's announcement Monday that the country's security and intelligence agencies are "pursuing credible allegations ... agents of the Government of India" were behind the assassination of an Indian-born Canadian citizen in British Columbia last June.

It is unthinkable that Trudeau would have made such a statement without Canada's security agencies having incontrovertible evidence of Indian government involvement in the murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, an outspoken proponent of an independent Sikh state (Khalistan).

Canada and all the western imperialist powers are assiduously courting India as a key element in their efforts to counter and thwart a rising China. Towards that end, they have turned a blind eye to the sweeping attacks Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-supremacist government is mounting on democratic rights and its relentless whipping up of communalism. Dramatically increasing Canada's economic and security ties with India were key elements of the Trudeau government's anti-China "Indo-Pacific strategy," which was drafted in close consultation with the White House and released with much fanfare last December.

Shortly after Trudeau's announcement, Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly told a press conference that Ottawa was expelling an Indian diplomat, Pavan Kumar Rai, whom she identified as the top Canadian-based representative of New Delhi's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

The Modi government's response was fast and furious. It dismissed any suggestion India had a hand in Nijjar's assassination as preposterous, ordered the tit-for-tat expulsion of a Canadian diplomat and accused Ottawa of protecting pro-Khalistan terrorists.

On Tuesday, a chastened Trudeau pleaded, "We are not looking to provoke or escalate."

New Delhi, however, has only become more belligerent. On Wednesday, India's Foreign Ministry issued an advisory urging Indians traveling in Canada and especially the large numbers of Indian nationals studying there to beware of "growing anti-India activities and politically condoned hate crimes." On Thursday, New Delhi indefinitely suspended the issuing of travel visas to Canadians and announced that the number of Canadian diplomatic personnel in India will be sharply reduced.

At a press conference Thursday, External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi accused Canada of "interference" in India's "internal affairs" and reiterated New Delhi's charge that Ottawa's claims of an Indian government role in Nijjar's murder are "politically motivated." "Canada," said Bagchi, "should worry about its growing reputation as ... a safe haven for terrorists," adding that its response to some two-dozen Indian requests to extradite persons New Delhi accuses of terrorism and "anti-India" activities "has not been helpful at all."

The Modi government has been emboldened by the strong support given it by the Congress Party, the rest of the bourgeois opposition and India's corporate media, some of whom have coupled their condemnations of Canada's "outrageous" charges with bald assertions of the Indian state's right to carry out extrajudicial assassinations. Even more important has been the muted response from Washington, London and other western capitals.

According to Ottawa, Trudeau raised the issue of India's orchestration of Nijjar's murder with Biden and the heads of government of other key Canadian allies earlier this month during the G-20 summit in New Delhi. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service is reported to have likewise shared its findings with its closest partners, including fellow members of the US-led Five Eyes global telecommunications spying network.

## Imperialist powers choose to ignore crimes of Modi regime

Yet, as has been widely noted in the press, beginning with the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, the US, Britain and the other western powers have for all intents and purposes chosen to look the other way, so as not to harm relations with New Delhi and their efforts to integrate it ever more fully into the US military-strategic offensive against China. In August, it was revealed that at Washington's prodding, India's Chief of Defence Staff has ordered an urgent high-level study of what support India would provide the US in a war with China.

On Tuesday, the *Washington Post* reported, "Weeks before Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau aired an explosive accusation that Indian officials may have been behind the slaying of a Sikh separatist leader in British Columbia, Ottawa asked its closest allies, including Washington, to publicly condemn the murder. But the overtures were rebuffed, underscoring the diplomatic balancing act facing the Biden administration and its allies as they work to court an Asian power seen as a crucial counterweight to China."

When pressed by reporters on the issue Wednesday, White House spokesman John Kirby bleated that the Biden administration is "deeply concerned" by the allegations India organized an assassination on North American soil. Later, the White House spin doctors—no doubt responding to negative commentary about Biden's remarks of the same day touting an anti-China US infrastructure initiative together with Modi's India and the tyrannical Saudi regime—sent out an email that said, "Targeting dissidents in other countries is absolutely unacceptable and we will keep taking steps to push back on this practice."

All of this is an object lesson in imperialist geopolitics and the western

powers' cynical and hypocritical manipulation of charges of human rights violations and transgressions of international law. When it comes to their own actions or those of prized allies, international law is ever malleable and the most monstrous and blatant violations of human rights can be ignored, downplayed or excused.

Were we speaking of the alleged involvement of Russia or China in an extrajudicial assassination in Canada—America's neighbour, ostensible closest ally and the only country with which it is bound by a joint defence command (NORAD)—the White House and for that matter the *Times* and the *Post* would be speaking of the urgent need to impose punishing sanctions and convene the UN Security Council.

Canadian imperialism of course has its own long record of illegal wars and aiding and abetting criminal violence—including, to name but two examples, the torture of Afghan peasants rounded up in dragnet counterinsurgency operations and working with Islamicists to overthrow Libya's Gaddafi regime. And it routinely apologizes for or ignores the atrocities and crimes committed by the US, Britain, France and other allies, including Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinians.

On Friday, Trudeau will play host to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and present him as the leader of a "democratic" Ukraine subject to an "unprovoked" and "genocidal" attack by Russia. In fact, Canadian imperialism along with the US and its other NATO allies are those principally responsible for the devastation of Ukraine and the horrendous loss of Ukrainian and Russian lives. They goaded Russia into launching its reactionary invasion, by expanding NATO to Russia's borders, orchestrating a 2014 coup against Ukraine's elected pro-Russian government and sabotaging the Minsk Accords. They and have relentlessly worked to expand the conflict by pouring in tens of billions of dollars' worth of weaponry. Canada, through its decades-long promotion of far-right Ukrainian nationalism and assistance in integrating the fascist supporters of the Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera and his Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists into Ukraine's military, has played a particularly foul role.

If the Trudeau government is up in arms over the Indian government's extrajudicial murder of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil, it is first and foremost because it is a challenge to the sovereignty, legitimacy and authority of the Canadian capitalist state. It also no doubt fears it could trigger violent reprisals, and under conditions where Canada has already seen a huge growth in far-right political violence. The most deadly act of terrorism in Canadian history was the 1985 bombing of Air India's Flight 182 from Toronto to London by pro-Khalistan terrorists in which 329 people, most of them Canadians, died.

While the murder of a political opponent living in a western country is something new, it is in very much in keeping with the methods of the far-right Modi regime, which is acting with increasing brazenness as a law unto itself. This includes using sedition and anti-terrorism laws to indefinitely detain journalists and anti-government activists without trial; copying the Israeli government tactic of arbitrarily bulldozing the homes of Muslims and/or political opponents; using trumped-up and manipulated criminal cases to sideline bourgeois opposition leaders; and stoking animosity and violence against Muslims with vendettas against cow-slaughter and "Love Jihad" (interfaith relationships.)

### **The communalist Khalistan demand and the reactionary politics of independent India**

Opposition to the Indian government's murder of Nijjar and the more general exposure of the anti-democratic and criminal methods that New Delhi is using to stamp out support for Khalistan in India and in the Sikh

diaspora in no way implies support for the reactionary demand for a Sikh communo-religious state.

The Khalistan movement is the historical outcome of the toxic communal politics ("divide and rule") practiced by the British colonial regime and which the Indian bourgeoisie adopted after its premier party, the Indian National Congress of M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, betrayed the mass anti-imperialist movement and connived in the 1947 partition of South Asia into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. The demand for a Sikh state was first raised in the run-up to Partition. Its chief proponent, Master Tara Singh, was one of the principal fomenters of mass anti-Muslim violence in the Punjab in 1947.

In the 1970s, Congress Party Prime Minister Indira Gandhi helped midwife the modern Khalistan movement, when she patronized the Sikh fundamentalist zealot Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who championed the claim Sikhs were a "nation," as part of her maneuvers against her opponents in the traditional Sikh communal party, the SAD. This reactionary intrigue disastrously backfired, with the rise of an armed militant Khalistani movement, which the Indian state savagely suppressed, including by storming the Golden Temple, the most sacred Sikh religious site, in June 1984 (Operation Blue Star). Some four months later, after Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards assassinated her, Congress Party leaders incited a pogrom against Sikhs in Delhi and other cities in which many thousands died.

Subsequently, the Indian ruling class succeeded in pacifying the predominantly Sikh Punjab. But the Khalistan demand has continued to be widely promoted in the Sikh diaspora, including Canada, which has the largest Sikh population outside India.

The coming to power of the BJP, which incessantly promotes Hindu supremacism, is no doubt contributing to a strengthening of minority communalist sentiments, including among the Sikhs of the Punjab. In what was a brazen attempt to delegitimize and provide a pretext for the Modi government to suppress the months-long 2020–2021 farmers' agitation, it claimed that the protest had been infiltrated and was being manipulated by Khalistanis.

There is no support within the Canadian ruling class for the Punjab's secession from India. Insofar as Canadian politicians have consorted with pro-Khalistan Sikh community leaders, it is as part of the ethnic-identity community political mobilization that is the stuff of the country's reactionary bourgeois politics.

The political establishment initially rallied around the Trudeau government in denouncing India. But with Ottawa's ostensible allies leaving it in the lurch to pursue closer ties with Modi, and the diplomatic and potentially economic costs to Canadian imperialism mounting, rifts are rapidly appearing. The far-right leader of the Conservatives, Pierre Poilievre, has suggested the government was far quicker to accuse its Indian ally than to act on intelligence-agency leaked allegations of Chinese electoral interference.



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