

# Alleged Indian Role in Transnational Assassination Plots

December 22, 2023

The U.S. and Canadian governments have alleged an official Indian role in assassination plots in North America. These developments could affect the tenor and trajectory of the [U.S.-India partnership](#) and have attracted congressional attention.

## Canadian Allegations, September 2023

On September 18, 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [publicly stated](#) that his government had “credible allegations” that “agents of the Indian government” were [involved](#) in a successful plot to assassinate a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil the previous June. The victim, [Sikh separatist](#) activist [Hardeep Singh Nijjar](#), had emigrated to Canada from India’s Punjab state in 1997. He was ambushed in his car in a Vancouver suburb and shot dead by multiple gunmen.

Punjab, India’s only Sikh-majority state, was the site of extensive [communal](#) and [separatist](#) violence during the 1980s and the early 1990s. Today, many [analysts](#) say there is [little support](#) in Punjab for efforts to create an independent “Khalistan.” According to a 2021 [survey](#), a vast majority of India’s roughly 25 million Sikhs are proud to be Indian (95%) and say a person who disrespects India cannot be a Sikh (70%). Still, the Indian government had [sought](#) Nijjar’s arrest since 2018 for his alleged [planning](#) of multiple [terrorist](#) attacks inside India, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had in September [conveyed](#) to Trudeau India’s “strong concerns about continuing anti-India activities of extremist elements in Canada.” The largest [Sikh diaspora](#) community—roughly 800,000—lives in Canada. Some Indian officials [sought](#) to [link](#) violent Sikh separatist forces and large-scale “[farmer protests](#)” in 2020-2021.

New Delhi [rejected](#) the Trudeau government’s “unsubstantiated” claims as “absurd” and criticized it for insufficient action against “Khalistani terrorists” inside Canada. An Indian government spokesman later [insisted](#) that “no specific information has been shared by Canada on this case” and bemoaned Canada’s “growing reputation as a safe haven for terrorists, for extremists, and for organized crime.” The two governments engaged in tit-for-tat [diplomatic expulsions](#), and New Delhi temporarily [halted visa issuances](#) for Canadian citizens.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken [expressed](#) deep concern about the allegations and said it was “critical” that India cooperate with the ongoing Canadian investigation. Although U.S. officials [offered](#) support for

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Canada and played down the potential for greater diplomatic damage, some observers [speculated](#) that the India-Canada rift could [strain](#) the U.S.-India partnership. Such speculation was compounded by indications that Trudeau's claims were at least partly based on information gathered by the [Five Eyes](#) intelligence-sharing alliance, which includes the United States and Canada.

### U.S. Allegations, November 2023

On November 22, London's *Financial Times* [reported](#) that U.S. law enforcement officials had thwarted another assassination conspiracy, this time on U.S. soil. One week later, the Justice Department unsealed an [indictment](#) alleging that an unnamed Indian government employee had directed a plot to murder a U.S.-based leader of the Sikh separatist movement, later [revealed](#) to be joint U.S.-Canadian citizen Gurpatwant Pannun. The Indian government had [listed](#) Pannun, an immigration lawyer and social media activist, as a "terrorist" in 2020. The foiled plot [involved](#) multiple co-conspirators, as well as several other potential targets in the United States and Canada.

The Biden Administration [reportedly](#) became aware of the alleged plot in July, [prompting](#) U.S. intelligence officials to visit India to ensure New Delhi's cooperation with the investigation. In early August, the U.S. National Security Advisor [conveyed](#) U.S. concerns to his Indian counterpart. In India for a September G20 summit, President Joe Biden met with Modi, [reportedly](#) emphasizing "the potential repercussions for the bilateral relationship were similar threats to persist." A U.S. National Security Council spokesman later [said](#), "India remains a strategic partner.... At the same time, we take [these allegations] very seriously."

India's official response to the U.S. allegations has been notably more measured than that following the Canadian claims, [purportedly](#) because the United States had provided substantive evidence, whereas Canada had not. An Indian government spokesman made clear that the alleged actions are [contrary](#) to Indian policy. New Delhi [acknowledged](#) previous discussion of the issue with U.S. officials and promised that it "takes such inputs seriously." It [stated](#) that a "high-level Enquiry Committee" was formed to investigate. Modi later vowed that New Delhi will "definitely look into" the matter, adding that his government remains "deeply concerned" about the [activities](#) of "extremist groups based overseas."

### Analysis and Congressional Interest

Some observers [maintain](#) that these developments [should not](#) and/or will not derail a U.S.-India partnership rooted in key shared values and interests. Some Indian commentators contend that the United States maintains [double standards](#) when it comes to extrajudicial, transnational assassinations. Others, including India's [foreign minister](#), focus on an [ongoing threat](#) to India posed by Sikh diaspora separatists along with a [perception](#) that Western governments have not acted against them with sufficient urgency. The alleged assassination plots may reflect the [Hindu nationalism](#) of India's ruling party. Meanwhile, the U.S. indictment appears to [bolster](#) Canada's earlier accusations, and numerous analysts variously [contend](#) that India was [known](#) to conduct lethal overseas intelligence operations, that New Delhi's denials appear [weak](#) and its [credibility](#) is being [damaged](#), and/or that mutual [trust](#) and [confidence](#) in the U.S.-India partnership is indeed under [threat](#).

Some Members of Congress have taken interest in these developments, with several expressing worries that U.S.-India relations could be negatively affected. Upon the U.S. indictment's unsealing, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) issued a [statement](#) on the "alarming rise in transnational repression globally" and called news of the foiled assassination plot "disturbing." At a subsequent SFRC hearing on "Authoritarians Targeting Dissenters Abroad," another Senator [said](#) of India's alleged involvement, "This is not the behavior of a respectable democracy." On December 15, after a classified briefing from the Biden Administration on the U.S. indictment, five Indian-American House Members issued a [statement](#) warning that the actions outlined in the indictment could, if not

appropriately addressed by India’s government, “cause significant damage to this very consequential partnership.”

Congress has supported successive Administrations’ efforts to deepen the U.S.-India partnership. In light of growing concerns about India’s democracy and [human rights](#), Members may consider whether or not to pursue legislative and oversight options to shape U.S. policy.

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