



Brief

India-Canada Tensions

B-2023-09-28a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: HIGH

Intelligence Requirements: Geopolitical, Government, Dispute

September 28, 2023

Scope Note

ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 12:00 PM (EDT) on September 27, 2023**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

Brief | India-Canada Tensions

Executive Summary

The ZeroFox Geopolitical Working Group has been monitoring Indo-Canadian relations closely, which have deteriorated rapidly after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's September 18 announcement of an investigation into New Delhi's possible involvement in the murder of a Canadian national. Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a 45-year-old Sikh man born in India but residing in British Columbia with Canadian citizenship, was murdered in June by unknown gunmen as he sat in his parked pickup truck in Surrey, just outside Vancouver. Nijjar was the president of the Guru Nanak Gurdwara, a Sikh temple in Surrey. He also played an important role in the Canadian branch of Sikhs for Justice (SFJ), a U.S.-based organization advocating for the secession of India's Punjab state to form an independent Sikh nation called Khalistan. India declared SFJ a terrorist organization in 2019 and labeled Nijjar himself a terrorist in 2020. Before that, Indian authorities blamed Nijjar for a 2007 bombing in Punjab and accused him of running a terrorist training camp in Surrey.¹

In response to Prime Minister Trudeau's announcement, India forcefully denied involvement in the murder and made a series of diplomatic reprisals. Both countries engaged in tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions on September 18 and 19, and India halted issuing visas to all Canadians on September 21; New Delhi also ordered Ottawa to downsize its Indian diplomatic staff. Burgeoning trade talks have been indefinitely postponed. These tensions come as the West steps up its collective engagement with

¹ [hXXps://www.pbs\[.\]org/newshour/politics/who-was-hardeep-singh-nijjar-the-sikh-activist-whose-killing-has-divided-canada-and-india](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/who-was-hardeep-singh-nijjar-the-sikh-activist-whose-killing-has-divided-canada-and-india)

India as a potential counterweight to China. Further deterioration of Indo-Canadian relations could complicate these efforts.²

Details

India's government is sensitive to the issue of Sikh secessionism and often goes to great lengths to quash secessionist sentiments within its borders. In April, the Punjab Police arrested a Sikh secessionist preacher, Amritpal Singh, after a 35-day manhunt. Members of Waris Punjab De, the Sikh nationalist group Singh headed, stormed a police station in the Punjabi town of Ajnala in February, leading to the arrest of 78 group members. Singh himself campaigned for the creation of Khalistan and often led marches and preached sermons on secession.³ Authorities' harsh treatment of the issue has roots in the 1980s and 1990s when Sikh nationalists waged a decade-long insurgency in Punjab that killed at least 20,000 people.⁴ Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984 by her own Sikh bodyguards after Indian soldiers stormed the Golden Temple, Sikhism's holiest site, to root out insurgents hiding there.⁵

Advocating for the creation of Khalistan is illegal in India but not in Canada, home to the world's second-largest Sikh population. Around 770,000 Sikhs, mostly of Indian origin, reside in Canada. While this number is small compared to the 22 million Sikhs living in India, Sikhs make up a larger proportion of Canada's population at 2.1 percent compared to India's 1.7 percent.⁶ Canada has thus become an important staging ground for Sikh nationalists hoping to influence Indian affairs. This has created tensions in the past, with India periodically accusing Canada's successive governments of being too soft on the domestic pro-Khalistan movement out of fear of offending the important Sikh voting bloc. Canada has also sometimes ignored Indian requests to extradite alleged Sikh terrorists. Hardeep Singh Nijjar himself had a pending extradition request, which was nullified in June after his murder.⁷

² [hXXps://www.cfr.org/in-brief/canada-india-tensions-over-killing-sikh-separatist-what-know](https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/canada-india-tensions-over-killing-sikh-separatist-what-know)

³ [hXXps://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/23/amritpal-singh-who-is-he-and-why-was-he-arrested](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/23/amritpal-singh-who-is-he-and-why-was-he-arrested)

⁴ [hXXps://www.oneindia.com/india/punjab-militancy-there-have-been-12-000-civilian-deaths-1818756.html](https://www.oneindia.com/india/punjab-militancy-there-have-been-12-000-civilian-deaths-1818756.html)

⁵ [hXXps://time.com/6315922/khalistan-india-canada-tensions/](https://time.com/6315922/khalistan-india-canada-tensions/)

⁶ [hXXps://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/20/canada-india-tensions-sikh-population/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/20/canada-india-tensions-sikh-population/)

⁷

[hXXps://www.livemint.com/news/india/canada-ignored-indias-extradition-requests-against-khalistan-terrorists-report-11695268383171.html](https://www.livemint.com/news/india/canada-ignored-indias-extradition-requests-against-khalistan-terrorists-report-11695268383171.html)

Analyst Commentary

In the near term, the diplomatic rift has caused protests in both countries. Dozens of Canadian Sikhs demonstrated in front of Indian consulates in Vancouver, Toronto, and Ottawa on September 25,⁸ while critics of the Canadian government staged similar protests in Indian cities.⁹ New York-based SFJ officer Gurpatwant Singh Pannun issued what some considered a threat when he accused Canadian Hindus who supported the Indian government of working against Sikhs and demanded they leave Canada.¹⁰ In retaliation, the Indian government seized Pannun's properties in Punjab.¹¹ Physical violence between pro- and anti-Khalistan activists cannot be ruled out if tensions continue to increase.

In the longer term, bilateral economic relations could also be affected. India became the world's largest country by population in 2023 and has one of the world's fastest-growing economies. Though obstacles remain, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks to leverage his country's economic assets and abundant workforce to attract foreign investment and boost manufacturing, with the ultimate goal of capturing a major portion of global manufacturing market share from China. Major Western actors, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and Australia, are currently pursuing trade talks with India to take advantage of the country's expected growth.¹²¹³¹⁴¹⁵ Canada was pursuing its own trade deal with India until earlier this month when it abruptly called off talks—possibly due to India's alleged involvement in Nijjar's murder. Bilateral trade stood at a relatively modest USD 9 billion in 2022 but is growing

⁸ [hXXps://www.reuters.com/world/canadian-sikh-group-urges-followers-protest-outside-indian-embassies-2023-09-25/](https://www.reuters.com/world/canadian-sikh-group-urges-followers-protest-outside-indian-embassies-2023-09-25/)

⁹

[hXXps://www.newindian.in/united-hindu-front-stages-protest-at-jantar-mantar-against-canada-pm-trudeau-support-to-khalistan/](https://www.newindian.in/united-hindu-front-stages-protest-at-jantar-mantar-against-canada-pm-trudeau-support-to-khalistan/)

¹⁰

[hXXps://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/leave-canada-go-to-india-banned-sikh-for-justices-gurpatwant-singh-warns-hindus-living-in-canada/articleshow/103809912.cms](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/leave-canada-go-to-india-banned-sikh-for-justices-gurpatwant-singh-warns-hindus-living-in-canada/articleshow/103809912.cms)

¹¹

[hXXps://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-seizes-chandigarh-property-of-khalistani-extremist-gurpatwant-singh-pannun-101695455689590.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-seizes-chandigarh-property-of-khalistani-extremist-gurpatwant-singh-pannun-101695455689590.html)

¹²

[hXXps://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/22/joint-statement-from-the-united-states-and-india/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/22/joint-statement-from-the-united-states-and-india/)

¹³

[hXXps://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/03/a-uk-trade-deal-with-india-was-promised-by-last-october-why-is-it-still-not-ready](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/03/a-uk-trade-deal-with-india-was-promised-by-last-october-why-is-it-still-not-ready)

¹⁴ [hXXps://www.livemint.com/economy/the-long-road-to-india-s-free-trade-deal-with-the-eu-11692210241612.html](https://www.livemint.com/economy/the-long-road-to-india-s-free-trade-deal-with-the-eu-11692210241612.html)

¹⁵ [hXXps://www.india-briefing.com/news/india-australia-trade-negotiations-for-a-ceca-what-we-know-so-far-28824.html/](https://www.india-briefing.com/news/india-australia-trade-negotiations-for-a-ceca-what-we-know-so-far-28824.html/)

rapidly and certainly would have benefited from strengthened economic ties.¹⁶ Talks could still resume if relations stabilize.

Further escalation could have a wide variety of effects. Canada is one of the top study destinations for Indian students traveling abroad. Though unlikely, additional deterioration of relations could lead Canada to downsize or halt the issuance of student visas; India's expulsion of Canadian diplomatic staff may have already disrupted the visa process. Some Indian Sikhs seeking travel to Canada have also expressed concern that flights could be canceled.¹⁷ Economic retaliation, such as trade restrictions by either nation, is unlikely at this point but cannot be ruled out.

Western nations seeking greater ties with India have so far abstained from publicly siding with Canada. Though Canada is a NATO member and an important player in global affairs, offending India could jeopardize the burgeoning partnership between the West and New Delhi that would help counterbalance China's growing assertiveness on the world stage. For its part, the United States has encouraged India to cooperate with Canada's investigation but has not taken sides.¹⁸ It is unclear if Prime Minister Trudeau expected a greater show of support from allies, but the muted response may prompt him to downplay the investigation in hopes of soothing ties.

¹⁶ [hXXps://www.aljazeera\[.\]com/news/2023/9/20/in-numbers-india-canada-trade-and-education-relations](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/in-numbers-india-canada-trade-and-education-relations)

¹⁷ [hXXps://www.nytimes\[.\]com/2023/09/24/world/asia/india-canada-sikh-punjab.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/24/world/asia/india-canada-sikh-punjab.html)

¹⁸ [hXXps://www.cbsnews\[.\]com/news/blinden-addresses-canada-accusation-india-hardeep-singh-nijjar-murder-vancouver/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/blinden-addresses-canada-accusation-india-hardeep-singh-nijjar-murder-vancouver/)

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

| Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%