

A LOT AT STAKE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON INDIA AND THE IMPACT OF THE INDICTMENT BY THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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The impact of the [15-page indictment](#) filed by the U.S. Department of Justice [against an Indian national](#), believed to be directed by an Indian government official for attempting an assassination plot against U.S.-based Khalistani separatist Gurbhagat Singh Pannun, is likely to be felt in more than just the U.S. and India. The indictment is based on details of communications between the accused, an illicit drugs and arms dealer, Nikhil Gupta, with a serving senior Indian government intelligence officer, who is identified but unnamed, as well as with two men in the U.S., who were allegedly engaged to kill Mr. Pannun. The twist in the tale, unreported on so far in the U.S., or Canada, is that the two U.S.-based men were working for U.S. law enforcement, making it clear that American agents have been following the investigation since at least May. There have been meetings between the U.S. President Joseph Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi — other senior officials have met too — since then. The allegations raise troubling questions about how much was shared between the two countries, and whether the Modi government, which had been outraged by [similar allegations made by Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau](#), has been less than honest about what it knows. If the government had knowingly authorised the targeting of Sikh separatists who are on [India's UAPA terrorist designation list](#), then that implies a dramatic change in Indian policy, which it should be more upfront about. If top officials had no inkling about the “plots”, and as the Ministry of External Affairs has stated this is not “government policy”, it is also a matter of grave incompetence and ‘rogue’ officers. If, however, the U.S.’s and Canada’s allegations are unfounded, and Indian officials are not linked to the plots, then the government needs to furnish evidence. In any case, the management of public messaging in the matter, especially India’s reaction to Canada versus the U.S., appears inconsistent.

Whatever the factors behind the government’s responses thus far, it is significant that it has now instituted a high-level inquiry committee to look into the U.S.’s allegations. Much hinges on its outcome. To begin with, India’s U.S. ties could be impacted by what transpires, as White House expects India’s full cooperation. India too, must ask the U.S., which is rightly placing such emphasis on the plot, why it is not keen on extraditing to India a man facing terror charges. Second, the U.S. and Canadian allegations will directly impact India’s ties with all “Five Eyes” intelligence partner countries, which must not be overshadowed by this one case. Finally, it is India’s reputation as a consistent and credible power — one which has earned respect worldwide for its sagacity and principled approach on such issues in the past — that hangs in

the balance, and New Delhi must judge its next steps in the case extremely wisely.

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