

Justin Trudeau's discovery of India

Through his week-long state visit, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tried hard to expand his understanding of India and foster closer India-Canada relations. Controversies about the Khalistan issue and an unusual programme could make it easy to portray this visit as a “disaster”, “fiasco” or “bad trip”. But, doing so is neither fair nor accurate, judging by the immediate outcomes.

At age 11, Mr. Trudeau first visited India in 1983, accompanying his father, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. On his India mission last week, Justin Trudeau received valuable help from his family. From the moment their plane landed in Delhi on February 17, with the Trudeau couple and their three beautiful children giving a perfect ‘Namaste, India’ shot, until their departure, the Indian public saw more of them than any other foreign VIPs in recent years. Enhancement of awareness among Indians about Canada through creative public diplomacy is no small achievement.

The Trudeaus wore ethnic Indian costumes with grace and rare ease. Many liked it, others did not. But, the motivation of Canada's first family was good. By doing this, they proclaimed their love for India, and showed respect for its diversity and recognition of the significant role the Indian diaspora plays in Canada's economy and public life.

Central controversy

The Canadian delegation should have avoided the [controversy concerning the Khalistan movement](#), but it was self-inflicted. It stemmed from the ruling Liberal Party's soft approach on extremist and separatist activities in Canada. In its quest for votes of sections of the Sikh community in Canada, India's basic interests were surprisingly given short shrift by the Liberals. The silver lining now is that Mr. Trudeau returns home amply enlightened and chastened about India's red lines. Deeper friendship is possible when Canada reins in anti-India elements.

From the Indian viewpoint, the most important agreement signed during the visit is the “Framework for Cooperation between India and Canada on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism”. It commits the two nations to combating this phenomenon in all its “forms and manifestations”, and to facilitate “effective cooperation” on security, finance, justice, law enforcement and operations. Through further interaction, New Delhi is certain to ensure and monitor closely that Ottawa delivers on this commitment. Progress in this realm will spur positivity in other domains of mutual cooperation. It was reassuring that Mr. Trudeau reiterated his support for a united India.

Regional, bilateral issues

A close commonality of views emerged on several regional issues. The two Prime Ministers called for dismantling the infrastructure of support to terrorism “from across borders of Afghanistan”, a clear reference to Pakistan. The Maldives government was urged “to ensure early resumption of the political process.” On Myanmar, the need for voluntary, safe and sustainable return of the Rohingya refugees was stressed.

More importantly, Canada and India showed a common perspective on freedom of navigation and over-flight “throughout the Indo-Pacific region” and respect for international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Canada implicitly shared India's reservations on China's mega Belt and Road Initiative. The two sides agreed on their analysis of the situation in the Korean Peninsula. They considered peacekeeping as “an effective response to global

challenges". Finally, Mr. Trudeau extended strong support for India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Bilateral cooperation, progressing fairly well on a wide spectrum, is likely to blossom further, thanks to the joint initiatives agreed during the visit. A business leader saw India-Canada cooperation anchored on five Es: economy, energy, education, entertainment industry linkages, and empowerment of women. While trade is rather limited (about \$6 billion in 2016), investment in both directions has been increasing steadily. Mr. Trudeau announced that understandings reached last week would result in additional investment of over \$1 billion. Progress on two government-level agreements, one on investment and the other on trade was minimal as expected, but the two leaders directed officials to intensify their negotiations.

India's need for continued uranium exports from Canada and for state-of-art technologies relating to clean energy and renewables came through vividly in discussions. The decision to expand the scope of Ministerial Energy Dialogue is noteworthy. Besides, a new Canada-India Track 1.5 Dialogue on Innovation, Growth and Prosperity was launched. This aims to establish contours of convergence through sustained research and brainstorming among experts, officials and business people.

The way ahead

As a capital, technology and innovation-rich economy and an open, inclusive and multi-cultural society, Canada is highly relevant to India. It is sharpening its role as a Pacific Ocean power. India's commitment to peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific should deepen geopolitical affinity. Thus mutual interests are likely to impel the two nations to strengthen their strategic partnership. However, for this vision to turn into reality, the Canadian leadership needs to demonstrate greater sensitivity to India's core concerns than what Mr. Trudeau could muster last week.

Rajiv Bhatia, a former diplomat, is Distinguished Fellow at Gateway House

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