

The Trudeau Reset

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's extended sojourn in India that seemed to be unfolding as a diplomatic disaster concluded by raising hopes for a positive reset of bilateral relations. The credit for this entirely unexpected political turn goes to both Prime Minister [Narendra Modi's](#) determination to stay engaged and the Canadian PM's delayed but welcome acknowledgement of the threat that Sikh extremism has come to pose for bilateral relations. The concentrated location of the large Sikh diaspora, numbering nearly half a million, had long given the community considerable salience in Canada's electoral politics. Since the mid-1980s, a small minority of extremists and anti-India elements have been relentless in their efforts to deploy the political weight of the Sikh community against Delhi. Much of the Canadian political class was eager to acquiesce. But Trudeau, who became PM in 2015, took the pandering to extremists to a whole new level.

Delhi, however, did not let its anger come in the way of reason that underlined the importance of building a strategic partnership with Ottawa, one of the world's important political and economic actors. When Trudeau landed in India, few were willing to bet that Delhi could make him see, let alone appreciate, its concerns about Khalistani separatism and terrorism being nurtured on Canadian soil. After all, Trudeau was initially unwilling to meet Amarinder Singh, the elected Chief Minister of Punjab, in order to please the Khalistanis at home. His eventual decision to meet the Chief Minister was overshadowed by the fact that a convicted Sikh terrorist was present at the receptions for the visiting PM in Mumbai and Delhi.

As a huge backlash in India and Canada compelled him to rethink, Trudeau made amends when he met Modi. The bilateral "framework for cooperation" on "countering terrorism and violent extremism", unveiled after the talks between the two PMs, seemed to bury the careful ambiguities on Khalistani separatism and Indian sovereignty that Trudeau had cultivated. Besides a ringing endorsement of India's territorial integrity, the Canadian side expressed its commitment to "neutralise" various terrorist organisations, including Babbar Khalsa International and International Sikh Youth Federation. In confronting the Khalistan question squarely, Trudeau has promised to remove the big bone stuck in the throat of India's relations with Canada. Sceptics would want to keep their fingers crossed on Trudeau's ability to implement that promise when he gets home. But India must stay patient and persistent, while cheering Trudeau's declared intentions. Delhi must continue to offer a good mix of incentives and disincentives for Trudeau — and Ottawa's political class as a whole — to do the right thing on Sikh extremism and realise the full potential of the India-Canada partnership.

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