

Controversies during Trudeau visit must not affect the broader bilateral relationship

International heartthrob, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, succeeded in having the most controversial State visit to India of any foreign leader in the past five years. The visits of traditional Indian rivals like Pakistan and China have been much more troubled, but at least that is expected. Canadians like to see themselves as being an ethical grade above the rest. Mr Trudeau has projected himself as the poster boy of this national image. However, postmodern values do not necessarily sell well in countries like India whose attitudes towards security, identity and nationalism are more traditional.

The history of Indo-Canadian relations has been troubled. Ottawa was among the most vociferous opponents of India's nuclear programme, a stance it was only to change when the US ended sanctions against India a decade ago. Canada has a large Indian minority but that has generated its own problems. Studies have shown diaspora groups often hold on to distorted views of their original homes. This is evident in Canada's Sikh diaspora and the extremists' numbers are enough to have political leverage. The liberal arm of the Canadian political system has preferred to treat the issue of Khalistani extremism as a consequence of Indian State repression. This fits their worldview and is also part of their electoral calculations.

These are all problems that can be handled if care is taken to ensure official relations are firewalled from these other issues. Mr Trudeau failed to do so during his visit, though the inclusion of Khalistani groups in the counterterrorism framework did repair some of the damage done. It seems clear, however, that the broader bilateral relationship will continue to grow.

The Narendra Modi government has realised that second-tier economies are increasingly important to India's rise. Canada is a perfect example. A country with a \$2 trillion economy, India has a lot to contribute in terms of investment, technology and resources.

Capital flows from Canada to India in all forms is now close to \$20 billion, five times official direct investment figures. It remains among the most open countries when it comes to immigration at a time when so many others are closing their doors. It may be the first Western country where South Asians will emerge as the largest minority.

Canada may also be fated to become a major civilian nuclear partner. A Canadian firm now owns the nuclear power firm, Westinghouse, which India has been wooing for some years. There is irony in this given how much New Delhi and Ottawa used to spar on nuclear matters. It is also a reminder about how nothing is permanent in the affairs of the world and how all bilateral relations should be treated with care.

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