

## India Canada relations remain frozen in time

In November 2012, then Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper made an official six-day visit to India, accompanied by his wife. He was welcomed at the airport by former Indian minister of state for human resource development Shashi Tharoor. Harper's itinerary included Agra, Bengaluru, Chandigarh and New Delhi with stops at symbolic sites like the Taj Mahal, Keshgarh Sahib Gurudwara in Anandpur and Someshwara Temple in Bengaluru where Harper and his wife garlanded each other with Mysuru jasmine buds, observing thereafter "we have married again". Between meetings with business and government leaders where the former Canadian prime minister pushed for greater bilateral trade and investment, Harper was admonished by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government over alleged support from Canadian Sikhs for the establishment of Khalistan. Harper voiced his unequivocal support of "a united India" alongside his contingent that had several ministers of Sikh origin.

Comparing Harper's visit to that of his successor Justin Trudeau, who has just wrapped his maiden visit as prime minister, one feels a sense of déjà vu. Notwithstanding Trudeau's personality enlivened through his wardrobe and dancing skills and the mind-boggling incompetence of Canadian officials in extending an invitation to convicted attempted murderer Jaspal Atwal, both visits have been generally comparable in the intent and agenda of the Canadian delegation, the objectives they sought to achieve, largely trade and investment, and the albatross of Sikh separatism that dominated media coverage and public chatter, snuffing out debate on issues where progress can be made like energy, climate change, trade in agricultural commodities and global issues like UN peacekeeping. Unfortunately, the Khalistan issue prevents most analysts from asking necessary questions on the state of the bilateral relationship and whether sufficient space exists for cooperation on pressing issues.

India-Canada relations are strategically thin. Canada has little to offer in terms of assisting India with core strategic objectives that include China, Pakistan, the subcontinent, maritime security in the Indian Ocean rim and beyond. Worse, Canada does not appear interested in engaging on such issues. Some progress was made on civil nuclear trade under Harper but there has been little mention of the issue since. Limited cooperation exists on energy despite Canada's noted strengths in the area. For all the talk of boosting bilateral investment and trade, businesses in both countries have been sluggish to heed the call. Geography and differences in industrial structures do not necessarily help.

Under Trudeau, trade philosophies diverge with Ottawa's focus on including issues like indigenous rights and cultural exceptions in trade agreements. But as tempting as it is to blame both governments for not easing existing constraints, it is unclear whether better access to each other's markets will redound to elevate the broader trading relationship.

Lack of a strategic core and the proclivity of all Canadian political parties to associate with pro-Khalistan elements allows bilateral relations to be easily captured and hijacked by the thorny diaspora issue. To be sure, deeper bilateral engagement on critical issues will not render Sikh separatism any less important for India. But it might not consume the energy of the diplomatic corps and rock the relationship every few years.

Now, the ball is in Ottawa's court. If anything, a silver lining from Trudeau's visit is that the Atwal affair has laid bare the open links between the Liberal Party and members of various groups advocating for Khalistan. Reassurances from Canadian prime ministers regarding India's territorial integrity ring hollow when rhetoric is not backed by actions. Canadian citizens certainly have the right to voice their support for Khalistan but Canadian politicians have a choice when it comes to associating with or endorsing their views. This effort will be hard since Trudeau's liberals have a

crafty opponent to their left—Jagmeet Singh, whose political rise is grounded on righting the wrongs committed against Sikhs in 1984.

Khalistan aside, the final joint statement does indicate that both countries appear keen to expand strategic cooperation on several issues. Negotiations will “intensify” to finalize a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement and a Bilateral Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement. Both leaders agreed to expand the scope of the Canada-India Ministerial Energy Dialogue with a particular focus on electricity, energy efficiency and renewables. Efforts will continue on the civil nuclear front. Trudeau affirmed Canada’s support for India’s entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Both countries agreed to expand security cooperation by institutionalizing strategic dialogues at the national security adviser (NSA) and foreign minister levels. Under the Global Skills Strategy, both prime ministers agreed to facilitate the movement of highly skilled individuals from India to Canada. With sustained engagement on these fronts, both Canada and India could augment their importance and value to each other.

Trudeau’s visit has been pilloried in both countries. One can, of course, take umbrage with the range of Indian clothes worn by Trudeau and his family and Trudeau’s *bhangra* moves at Canada house. Certain excesses could have been prevented had Canadian officials paid more attention to the sensitivities involved. Nonetheless, it is a hallmark of the times we live in that we venerate tweets and hugs more than policy and history. Seen with perspective and context, Trudeau doubled down on the very issues Harper focused on. What sullied the visit was epic ineptitude driven by his party’s perennially lax attitudes towards Canadian Sikhs sympathetic to the Khalistani cause. Going ahead, Ottawa has to emphasize the strategic aspects of the relationship while steering clear of groups which imperil the latter.

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