

Canada's Response to Rising Global Authoritarianism:
Relations with India

Introduction

This report analyzes Canada's response to rising global authoritarianism. Specifically, it investigates foreign relations with India and Canada following instances of foreign interference.

Background

Why is India an authoritarian country?

India has seen a democratic decline since Prime Minister Narendra Modi was elected in 2014.¹ Modi is backed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP Party often follows right-wing policies and has been associated with Hindu nationalist ideologies.² Hindu nationalism can be described as the combination of Hindu religious ideas with the state and its policies. Following the 1949 partition of India and Pakistan by the British colonial government, ethnic-religious nationalism became increasingly prominent. Critically, nationalist ideologies can lead to the marginalization of other religious minorities in the state.

Notable recent instances of religious persecution include the Indian states of Kashmir and Punjab. In the state of Kashmir, a majority of the population is Muslim. India and Pakistan have disputed over the territory since the 1949 partition. Many residents in Kashmir demand separation and the right to self-rule. The region of Jammu and Kashmir (part of the state of Kashmir) had been granted Article 370, which provided the region with special powers. The state was able to have its own constitution, a flag, and autonomy rights. Kashmir's administration is able to make most of its own laws, except for matters of finance, defence, foreign affairs, and communications.³ In 2019, the Indian government revoked Article 370. The government's actions were met with protests in Kashmir. The government then placed a communications blackout on the state from 2019 to 2021. Internet services and mobile data were suspended,

¹ Soutik Biswas, "Electoral Autocracy": The Downgrading of India's Democracy," BBC News, March 16, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-56393944>.

² Milan Vaishnav, "Religious Nationalism and India's Future - the BJP in Power: ...," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, n.d., <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/04/04/religious-nationalism-and-india-s-future-pub-78703>.

³ 1. "What's Article 370? What to Know about India Top Court Verdict on Kashmir," Al Jazeera, December 11, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/11/whats-article-370-what-to-know-about-india-top-court-verdict-on-kashmir>.

cutting Kashmir off from the rest of the world. Further, in August 2019, over 700,000 soldiers were deployed to the region.⁴

In the state of Punjab, civil unrest with the Indian government has also stemmed from religious and cultural marginalization. Punjab has a large population of Sikhs, a religious and often linguistic minority. Some residents and members of the diaspora support the Khalistan movement, which calls for a separate state. The movement is rooted in the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, as well as the 1984 anti-Sikh riots.

Canada and India's relations

Canada and India's relationship is deteriorating in 2023 following instances of alleged foreign interference. Most notably, in June 2023, Hardeep Singh Nijjar was shot outside of a Sikh temple in British Columbia. Hardeep Nijjar was a Sikh separatist leader. In September 2023, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau revealed that Canadian intelligence agencies were pursuing credible allegations tying Indian agents to the shooting of Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar. Trudeau's allegations may have come from shared intelligence between 5 Eyes intelligence network. This allegation led to increased political tensions between Canada and India.

Following Trudeau's statements, the Indian government restricted visas for Canadians, reducing travel between the two nations. In October 2023, the Indian government canceled diplomatic immunity for Canadian diplomats and their relatives. This led to nearly two-thirds of Canadian diplomats leaving India. The treatment of diplomats signalled a disintegration of relations between the two states. Despite tensions, Canada continued to participate in the G20 summit that was hosted in New Delhi.

In November, Trudeau's outgoing security advisor stated that Indian security officials had since become more cooperative and fruitful.⁵ However, a relevant American court proceeding followed in November 2023. The US Justice Department charged Nikhil Gupta with a plot to kill four Sikh Separatists in North America.⁶ Three of the intended victims reside in Canada. Gupta is an associate of India's CC-1, a government agency. According to the Justice Department,

⁴ Rifat Fareed, "India Imposes Kashmir Lockdown, Puts Leaders 'under House Arrest,'" Al Jazeera, August 4, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/8/4/india-imposes-kashmir-lockdown-puts-leaders-under-house-arrest>.

⁵ Stephanie Ha, "India Now Co-Operating with Canada Following Allegations, after 'fruitful' Discussions, Says Outgoing Nsia," CTVNews, January 26, 2024, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/india-now-co-operating-with-canada-following-allegations-after-fruitful-discussions-says-outgoing-nsia-1.6743837>.

⁶ "Justice Department Announces Charges in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate U.S. Citizen in New York City," Office of Public Affairs | Justice Department Announces Charges in Connection with Foiled Plot to Assassinate U.S. Citizen in New York City | United States Department of Justice, December 4, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate-us-citizen-new-york>.

Gupta may be a senior field officer responsible for security management and intelligence.⁷ Gupta was charged with murder for hire and conspiracy to commit murder for hire. Each count against Gupta may lead to a maximum statutory penalty of 10 years in prison.⁸ Considering foreign threats on Canadian soil, the situation may still be developing. The Indian government's alleged ties to the incidents indicate a risk to Canadian security, human rights concerns, and the threat to minority diasporic communities.

Key considerations

Ethical considerations

Canada's government must make ethical considerations when implementing policy toward authoritarian states. Specifically, human rights and freedoms are critical to Canadian foreign policy approaches. Canada has committed to upholding human rights through its central role in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁹ Canada has also made international commitments to human rights conventions, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).¹⁰ The ICCPR aims to protect and preserve civil and political rights, while ICESCR ensures the protection of economic, social, and cultural rights

Regarding human rights commitments, Canada must balance ethical considerations when taking action against authoritarian states. For instance, economic policies, like sanctions, should target responsible actors. The Canadian government should be careful to ensure that innocent actors, like civilians, are not unfairly targeted by policies. On the other hand, Canada should be careful about continuing to do business with authoritarian countries. Maintaining business with authoritarian states may have no impact on authoritarian leaders' behavior. This may propagate human rights abuses within authoritarian states and lead to more instances of foreign interference in Canada.

Economic considerations

The Canadian government places great importance on economic factors when dealing with authoritarian states. This includes trade relations, investment opportunities, and economic stability. Despite differing ideologies, engaging with these regimes can provide significant economic benefits due to their access to vast natural resources and lucrative markets. To address economic security threats related to foreign investments, efforts are underway to modernize the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Canada's Approach to Advancing Human Rights," Global Affairs Canada, July 19, 2023, https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/advancing_rights-promouvoir_droits.aspx?lang=eng.

¹⁰ 1. Canada's Sixth Report on the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (2005-9).

Investment Canada Act.¹¹ This includes improving the ability of national security agencies to deal with threats. Additionally, there is increased collaboration and information sharing at all government levels to reduce risks in foreign research and investment partnerships. However, Canada faces the challenge of balancing economic interests with its commitment to human rights and democratic principles. While economic ties with authoritarian states may provide leverage for better human rights and democratic values, there is a risk of compromising these values to pursue economic gains.

Policy Options

Option 1: Status Quo

Maintaining the status quo is an option for the Canadian government. Canada can continue to do business with authoritarian countries like India, but this approach would mean no adjustment to current interactions with authoritarian states. This option comes with some risks. For instance, maintaining relationships with an authoritarian government can be perceived as condoning human rights infringements. Further, continuing to engage with authoritarian governments can legitimize oppressive regimes that undermine democratic freedoms, as well as lead to greater political instability in the authoritarian state. This can also lead to criticism from the Canadian public. The Canadian public might be concerned if the public feels that human rights concerns are not adequately addressed through foreign policy approaches. The public may also be indifferent due to greater focus on economic development or a lack of political understanding. Much of the Canadian public might not understand the complex considerations when it comes to foreign affairs policy. Engaging with authoritarian states also poses risks to Canadian security, such as foreign interference, espionage, or cyber threats. Overall, the Canadian government must reassess its approach to engaging with authoritarian states in consideration of economic and ethical concerns.

Option 2: Nested diplomatic approach

The ongoing diplomatic conflict between Canada and India is causing further delays in visa processing for Canadians, which is negatively impacting both tourists and students travelling between these two countries.¹² Additionally, this disagreement is also affecting Canadian immigration policies. India is a significant contributor to Canada's economic growth and cultural diversity, especially in the fields of technology and education. If this dispute continues for an extended period, Canada may have to reconsider its immigration sources, not just in response to

¹¹ "In Numbers: India-Canada Trade and Education Relations," Al Jazeera, September 20, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/in-numbers-india-canada-trade-and-education-relations>.

¹² Steve Scherer, "Immigration Minister Says Study Permits to Students from India Drop Due to Dispute," CTVNews, January 17, 2024, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/immigration-minister-says-study-permits-to-students-from-india-drop-due-to-dispute-1.6729372>.

the current Indian situation but also in light of global geopolitical shifts such as conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine.¹³

To address these challenges, Canada may adopt a nested diplomatic approach that includes several key strategies. The first is to maintain diplomatic equilibrium by negotiating from a position that preserves Canada's interests while striving for parity with India.¹⁴ Canada could propose reciprocal reductions in diplomatic presence rather than unilateral withdrawal, which would demonstrate its commitment to maintaining balanced relations. A second strategy is safeguarding Canadians' interests affected by visa processing suspensions or diplomatic disputes. The Canadian government will provide support to such individuals and ensure that their rights and interests are advocated for through diplomatic channels. A third strategy is to prioritize immigration policies that attract global talent from diverse sources, which will help to minimize vulnerabilities to diplomatic disputes and ensure Canada's competitiveness in the global talent market. Lastly, Canada is exploring regional alliances and strengthening ties in the Asia-Pacific and other strategic areas to diversify diplomatic engagements and reduce dependency on any single partner. This approach will mitigate the risks associated with bilateral disputes and promote Canada's interests in the region.

This comprehensive approach addresses multiple diplomacy aspects, ensuring a well-rounded strategy that promotes parity, safeguards interests, and diversifies engagements. While offering resilience and flexibility, it poses risks such as potential escalation of tensions and strains in relations with other countries. Careful diplomacy and strategic foresight are required to balance these risks.

Option 3: Economic Diplomacy - Recommended Option

The Canada-India relationship is a complex interplay of economic and diplomatic considerations. The key to navigating this relationship successfully is to take a nuanced approach that leverages economic interests to manage diplomatic negotiations effectively. Bilateral trade between the two nations has been increasing steadily, reaching nearly \$12 billion CAD (\$9 billion USD) in 2022, marking a 57 percent increase from the previous year. This indicates that the mutual economic dependencies between the two countries are evident across various sectors.¹⁵ The potential Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) promises to cement these ties further, potentially boosting trade by up to \$6.5 billion and yielding GDP gains of between \$3.8 billion and \$5.9 billion for Canada by 2035.¹⁶

¹³ Nolan Crouse, "Opinion: A Possible Shift in Canadian Immigration," St. Albert Gazette, December 4, 2023, <https://www.stalbertgazette.com/opinion/opinion-a-possible-shift-in-canadian-immigration-7899257>.

¹⁴ Evan Dyer, "As a Deadline Passes, Canadian Diplomats Remain in India | CBC News," CBCnews, October 11, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-diplomats-india-1.6992396>.

¹⁵ "In Numbers: India-Canada Trade and Education Relations," Al Jazeera, September 20, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/in-numbers-india-canada-trade-and-education-relations>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Given the recent diplomatic tensions between the two nations, Canada's strategy should focus on emphasizing the mutual benefits of robust economic cooperation as a tool to persuade India in diplomatic negotiations. By highlighting the significant economic stakes involved, including trade, investment, and the importance of Indian students and tech workers to Canada's economy, Canada can encourage India to seek diplomatic resolutions that minimize disruptions to these critical areas. This approach seeks to protect economic flows and positions economic interactions as a foundation for fostering constructive diplomatic dialogue, seeking outcomes that align with the interests and values of both nations.

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