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The Fractured Friendship: India-Canada Strained Ties



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Introduction

The bilateral relationship between India and Canada stands as a complex interplay of diplomatic, economic, and cultural affinities. These two distinct nations, geographically separated by vast distances and divergent histories, have cultivated a robust and enduring association over time, firmly grounded in their mutual commitment to democratic principles, pluralistic societies, and active participation in multilateral forums. But recent India-Canada relations have touched an altogether new low point.

Historical Background

Diplomatic relations between India and Canada were established shortly after India gained independence in 1947 from British colonial rule. Canada acknowledged India as a sovereign nation and established diplomatic relations, laying the groundwork for a fruitful collaboration. This relationship has been strengthened further by shared values such as democracy, multiculturalism, and a commitment to human rights. Both countries have shown a strong interest in a variety of fields, including agriculture, education, technology, and energy. Canada's plentiful natural resources, such as oil and uranium, have taken on special significance in assisting India's expanding economy. A number of agreements have been signed to encourage investment and trade, with ongoing negotiations for the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)

reflecting the commitment to further strengthen economic ties.

Strained Ties

Despite such shared efforts, recent developments have injected an unexpected and contentious dimension into India and Canada's bilateral interactions, against the backdrop of a historically nurtured relationship marked by diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties. These fractures occurred shortly after India successfully hosted the G20 Summit, a watershed moment in the country's diplomatic calendar. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's accusation of Indian government involvement in the assassination of Sikh Canadian leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in 2023 has shocked both administrations.

Trudeau's statement in the Parliament that "any involvement of a foreign government in the killing of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil is an unacceptable violation of our sovereignty" has cast a cloud over the previously cordial relations. This statement has not only alarmed the Indian government but has also prompted a rethinking of their bilateral strategies. Furthermore, the recent G20 Summit, which was critical to India's global standing, unintentionally revealed Canada's increasingly controversial stance on India's domestic affairs. Following Trudeau's remarks, the Canadian government expelled a senior Indian diplomat, escalating the diplomatic standoff. India

reacted quickly, issuing a statement emphatically denying any involvement in Nijjar's tragic death and expelling an unidentified senior Canadian diplomat. These unfolding events highlight the intricate challenges and nuanced dynamics that underpin India and Canada's evolving relationship, while also shining a light on the international ramifications of this diplomatic squabble.

India's Stance

The government of India has strongly opposed such claims and allegations put forth by the Canadian government. India adopts a 'Tit for Tat' diplomacy to posit its strong and sovereign claim on the matter. On 19 September 2023, India expelled a senior Canadian diplomat, slamming "absurd and motivated" claims that New Delhi was involved in the extrajudicial killing of a Sikh activist in Canada and even strongly pointed towards Canadian counterparts for interfering in India's Domestic affairs. India has unequivocally responded to all allegations levelled by the Canadian government, manifesting a robust stance in the face of recent statements originating from the Canadian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister within their parliamentary discourse. The Ministry of External Affairs in India on 19 September 2023 released a statement that speaks aloud of its response.

"The allegations made about the Government of India's involvement in any acts of violence in Canada are both unfounded and motivated by ulterior motives. Similar allegations were previously levelled by the Canadian Prime Minister against our own Prime Minister, which we categorically denied. It is critical to emphasize that we are a democratic nation that is deeply committed to the rule of law. These baseless accusations appear to be diverting attention away from a more pressing issue: the presence of Khalistani terrorists and extremists who have sought refuge in Canada, posing a continuing threat to India's sovereignty and security" (Ministry of external affairs, Government of India).

The statement released by the Ministry of External Affairs is a crisp yet loud response to the allegations put forth by the Canadian government. The issue has gathered responses from across the nation. National Security Council adviser Brahma Chellaney said " The allegation has dealt a major blow to the relationship; the damage to the relationship will not be easily repaired;" further India "suspended till further notice" its visa services in Canada citing "operational reasons". Clearly, such statements indicate the relationship has reached an extremely low point in the history of India-Canada relations.

Challenges

The Canadian government's stance on Sikh extremism has always been a major source of contention. Apart from Sikh extremism, there have been various other challenges such as the Situation in Jammu and Kashmir, contentions intensified by India's Article 370 revocation in August 2019. Canada's expression of concern regarding human rights and the repercussions of Indian government actions in the region has generated discord. India views this issue as an internal matter, emphasizing its commitment to addressing it within its constitutional framework, thus resulting in diplomatic tensions. Additionally, Disparities in Human Rights and Immigration Policies, including concerns about religious freedom and minority rights raised by Canada, have contributed to strains in the bilateral relationship. Disagreements over immigration policies and the delicate balance between national interests and humanitarian commitments have further compounded these challenges. Trade and Economic Issues between India and Canada have been difficult, and neither country has reached a comprehensive trade agreement that could significantly strengthen economic ties. While trade talks have progressed, issues such as market access, tariffs, and non-tariff barriers have hampered the realization of a more robust economic partnership. All these challenges have intensified the India-Canada relationship to a fragile point.

Conclusion

While India and Canada have a long history of diplomatic relations and many areas of cooperation, recent developments and challenges have strained their bonds. As these ties deteriorate, the economic interests of Sikh families in Punjab, who rely on remittances from relatives in Canada, are jeopardized. Simultaneously, the remarkable growth of the Sikh population in Canada highlights the community's deepening transnational connections. The ramifications go beyond diplomatic squabbles, into the personal and financial lives of people on both sides of the globe. As a result, the evolving India-Canada relationship serves as a poignant example of how global geopolitics can reverberate into the everyday experiences of individuals and communities, emphasizing our modern world's interconnectedness.

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