



A Critical Overview of the Trudeau Visit

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Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau first state visit was with a view to strengthen India-Canada relations. The eight-day, five-city tour was one of the longest that Prime Minister Trudeau has undertaken in his current term. The visit was important as Canada wants to strengthen bilateral economic and strategic cooperation with India. India and Canada want to expand the scope of their civil nuclear cooperation and collaborate on innovation and scientific research. Cooperation is also being explored in alternative sources of energy as well as achieving climate protection. For India, the relationship has been important for economic development and to deepen relations with the economically stable and politically active Indian diaspora in Canada. However, the diaspora, especially the Sikh diaspora, has been a cause of concern for India. The pro-Khalistan activism in Canada, the destabilizing effects that it can have in India and the lack of action taken by the Canadian government against these organisations have been problems in the relationship for a long time.

This paper is a critical overview of Prime Minister Trudeau's visit to India and will attempt to highlight India's concerns that continue to remain despite the visit.

The Trudeau Visit: A Critical Overview

Prime Minister Trudeau has been admired in India for his stress on the need to engage more and more women in the work force, gender balance and pay parity, his support for sustainable development and climate change advocacy. To say that the visit generated debate within the two nations would be an understatement. Nonetheless, one needs to analyse both the positive and the negative discussions in order to take this relationship forward.

Canada needs to understand the concerns of India on the issue of the pro-Khalistan separatist movement. To judge or compare the questions of autonomy/separatist movement within Canada, as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada Ms. Chrystia Freeland did in an interaction with some scholar from India, to the pro-Khalistan movement is not correct.¹ The

separatist movement finds no support in Punjab and as such is a not a threat to India. The pro-Khalistan movement is largely supported by people/groups who reside outside the state of Punjab and away from India, unlike the support for autonomy which is from within the Canadian province. India is aware that with unchecked financial and ideological support the idea will not be allowed to die. The simmering resentment could at a later stage threaten the territorial integrity of India. The movement against India has found support among the terror groups and other agencies in Pakistan. They have worked together to encourage the separatist movement with a view to destabilising India. The movement has given rise to cross-border smuggling of arms and ammunition as also narcotics with a view to undermining the state machinery. It has led to the death of a number of innocent people in Punjab, disrupted functioning of educational institutions, hindered economic development and affected the physiological well-being of the people. In this background when Prime Minister Trudeau attended a Khalsa parade in May 2017, which openly supported the separatist movement, pro-Khalistan militants and flags are paraded, it does not contribute to strengthening the bi-lateral relations.

The pro-Khalistan support base in Canada was discussed between Prime Minister Trudeau in his meeting with Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh. Chief Minister Singh has been vocal in expressing his views that Canada needs to assist India in taking action against those who support separatist movements from Canada. It has been reported by the media that Chief Minister Singh has given a list of individuals who are active in the separatist movement. Without stating the content of the discussion on the issue, the Canadian delegation stated that Prime Minister Trudeau and Canada 'supports a united India'. Chief Minister Singh tweeted after his meeting "Really happy to receive categorical assurance from Canadian PM@Justin Trudeau that his country does not support any separatist movement. His words are a big relief to all of us here in India and we look forward to his government's support in tackling fringe separatist elements." (@capt_amarinder Feb 21).

The invite to convicted Sikh-Canadian terrorist Mr. Jaspal Atwal to dinner, hosted by Prime Minister Trudeau has been questioned in the Canadian parliament. Mr. Atwal was convicted of attempting to murder an Indian cabinet minister in British Columbia in 1986, and was charged but never convicted in the 1985 brutal beating of Mr. Ujjal Dosanjh, an opponent of the Sikh separatist movement who is an ex- Premier of British Colombia as well as a former Liberal health minister (federal cabinet minister).

While in India, Prime Minister Trudeau had called the oversight 'unfortunate'. However, as reported in the Canadian media, in the House of Commons in his first Question Period since returning to Canada, he blamed India for the incident. The opposition parties demanded to know if Prime Minister Trudeau stood by what they called a "conspiracy theory" from an unnamed senior government official quoted in the media as saying that Indian factions may have been responsible for Mr. Atwal's presence in the country. He stated "When one of our top diplomats and security officials say something to Canadians, it is because they know it to be true."

The charge was strongly refuted by the Government of India. The Official Spokesperson Mr. Raveesh Kumar from the Ministry of External Affairs stated, "We have seen the recent exchange

in the Parliament of Canada regarding two invitations issued to Jaspal Atwal by the Canadian High Commissioner, for functions hosted in honour of the Canadian Prime Minister in India. Let me categorically state that the Government of India, including the security agencies, had nothing to do with the presence of Jaspal Atwal at the event hosted by the Canadian High Commissioner in Mumbai or the invitation issued to him for the Canadian High Commissioner's reception in New Delhi. Any suggestion to the contrary is baseless and unacceptable.”³ The Canadian press and some political leaders have also questioned the Trudeau government on the fact that the invitations were sent by the High Commissioner and not by the Indian government, and thus to blame India is unfounded.

One of the primary criticisms levelled against Prime Minister Trudeau within Canada was that he was using the pretext of a state visit to gather support from the Indian diaspora and Sikh community with an eye on the October 2019 election. Nearly half a million Sikhs live in Canada and account for 1.4 per cent of the population. Prime Minister Trudeau has been supported by the community. However, there is a chance that this support might get divided in the next elections. Mr. Jagmeet Singh, as the head of Canada's New Democratic Party is a member of the Sikh community, who openly wears the symbols of his religion and is supportive of the Khalistan movement in Canada. It is likely that he would take away from voters from the Liberal Party.

The unfavourable media coverage on the inability of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to meet Prime Minister Trudeau at the airport being viewed as an indication of relations not being good was baseless. It needs to be clarified that as per protocol the Indian Prime Minister does not receive visiting heads of governments. Prime Minister Modi has been known to break protocol on a few occasions, but it remains an exception rather than the norm. To further assume that the relationship was in dire need of revival because Prime Minister Modi did not accompany the visiting guest to Ahmedabad would be naïve. Personal relations between heads of states and government do contribute to building strong bilateral relations but it is not the only factor. Further it has to be stated that the itinerary of the visiting dignitary is made by their respective offices and embassies in India. The Indian officials' role is limited in this respect to suggestions only.

In concluding his trip in Delhi, Prime Minister Trudeau met with Prime Minister Modi, President Ram Nath Kovind, and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. In his press statement, Prime Minister Modi stated, “Terrorism and militancy are a threat to democratic and pluralistic societies like India and Canada. ... ***There should be no place for those who use community for political purposes and who create division. Those who challenge the sovereignty, unity and integrity of our countries cannot be tolerated too.*** (emphasis added).⁴ In the joint statement released during the visit, the two countries reaffirmed “...the breadth and scope of Canada-India relations, based on the fundamental principle of respect for sovereignty, ***unity and territorial integrity of the two countries*** (emphasis added). They reaffirmed their commitment to the ongoing diversification and growth of the strategic partnership, based on shared values of democracy, diversity, pluralism, and rule of law.”⁵

Importantly, “the leaders resolved to **combat terrorism and violent extremism in all their forms and manifestations** (emphasis added). They called for bringing terrorists to justice and **holding accountable state sponsors of terrorism, including cross-border terrorism** (emphasis added). They further emphasized that no country should allow its territory to be used for terrorist and violent extremist activities.”⁶ It can be viewed as support for India’s demands that Pakistan stop cross-border terrorism and take action against terror organisations in the country.

Prime Minister Trudeau supported India’s efforts to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan and reaffirmed that like India, Canada also supports an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled national peace and reconciliation process for building a peaceful, secure, united, democratic, prosperous and pluralistic nation.

The two prime ministers also addressed the issue of cyber crimes and cyber security. In the maritime domain, the two nations “reaffirm the importance of lawful commerce and the freedom of navigation and over-flight throughout **the Indo-Pacific region**, in accordance with international law, including the rights and jurisdiction of states under UNCLOS.”⁷ The joint statement also “...supported bolstering **regional connectivity through transparent development of infrastructure and use of responsible debt financing practices**, (emphasis added) while ensuring respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the rule of law and environment.” This may be viewed as shared concerns on the One Belt One Road initiative by China. India has been supported by a number of nations in calling upon China to be more transparent on issue of financing and other aspects of development projects of the initiative, in other countries. Canada had sent Pamela Goldsmith-Jones, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, to Beijing to represent Canada at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, but has not yet committed itself to the initiative.

Talks between the two nations would be incomplete without recognising the contribution of the people-to-people relations, nurtured over the past decades. As was stated by Prime Minister Modi in his press statement, “India is proud of the achievements of Indian community in Canada.... We (India) are (is) **committed for building friendship and harmony with the Indian community in Canada** (emphasis added) and we want their active participation in India’s progress and development.”⁸

Conclusion

The visit by Prime Minister Trudeau is part of the process of strengthening the relations. As nations that are multi-cultural, have liberal economies and a democratic system of government, India and Canada are relevant to each other. Canada provides India with capital and a technology-rich partner and India in turn provides Canada with market, skilled labour and services. The two nations also want a peaceful Indo-Pacific. While Canada has to be sensitive to India’s concerns on the important issue of separatist support base in the country, India could to take steps to expedite the trade agreements so as to increase trade with Canada. These are the areas of convergence between the two nations. However, Canada has to understand that for the relationship to reach its full potential it has to address the issue of pro-Khalistan separatists and

its support within Canada. India is aware of the electoral importance of the diaspora but it cannot look away from the terrorist attacks of a movement that traces its origin to Canada. For India, the implicit and often explicit endorsement of the separatist ideology by Canadian politicians is a cause of worry.

India is aware that foreign policy and domestic politics are interlinked. Prime Minister Modi has been engaging with the Indian diaspora in all countries and encouraging them to participate in India's growth story. Nonetheless, it is being felt that the current visit by Prime Minister Trudeau while catering to his domestic constituency ignored the impact of symbolism in the political sphere.

The foundations of the relationship remain strong. Economic relations and investments have been on the rise. The visit ended with India and Canada signing six memoranda of understanding which will increase cooperation between the two nations in the field of information communication, education, sport, intellectual property, information and communication technology, as well as science and innovation. In addition, twenty new or enhanced initiatives were launched, including projects to support education, women's empowerment and health, and research to clean polluted waters. An important aspect of the visit was on advancing gender equality and participation of women and girls in education and the economy. On the issue of energy, the two nations have taken forward their cooperation on nuclear energy between the Department of Atomic Energy and the Department of Natural Resources of Canada to cooperation in the fields of science, technology and innovation. A new Canada-India Track 1.5 Dialogue on Innovation, Growth and Prosperity was launched. Canada has reaffirmed its commitment to supporting India's candidature for membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. As world leaders in renewable energy, the two nations are also going to work towards development of low carbon and sustainable energy systems by promoting renewable energy.

Canada and Prime Minister Trudeau have to understand that India is evolving and aspires to be leading power in international affairs, and Canada needs to look beyond the vibrancy of its culture to the potential of its economy and political aspirations.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes

¹ The author was invited to the interaction. The above is not a quote but a summary of the thoughts of the Foreign Minister of Canada.

² The Canadian Press, "Trudeau defends official who said Indian government tried to sabotage trip," <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/trudeau-backs-official-who-said-indian-government-factions-sabotaged-trip/article38130663/>, Accessed on 21 March 2018.

³ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Official Spokesperson's response to a query on invitation to Jaspal Atwal,” http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/29522/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_a_query_on_invitation_to_Jaspal_Atwal, Accessed on 21 March 2018.

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “English Translation of Press Statement by Prime Minister during State visit of Prime Minister of Canada (February 23, 2018),” http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29638/English_Translation_of_Press_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_during_State_visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_Canada_February_23_2018, Accessed on 21 March 2018.

⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “India-Canada Joint Statement during State Visit of Prime Minister of Canada to India (February 23, 2018),” http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29512/IndiaCanada_Joint_Statement_during_State_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_Canada_to_India_February_23_2018, Accessed on 28 February 2018

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “English Translation of Press Statement by Prime Minister during State visit of Prime Minister of Canada (February 23, 2018),” http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29638/English_Translation_of_Press_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_during_State_visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_Canada_February_23_2018, Accessed on 21 March 2018.