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India-Canada Diplomatic Reset — What NSA Doval's Ottawa Visit Means for a Fractured Partnership

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator •

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"What caused India-Canada relations to deteriorate so sharply after the Nijjar killing allegation in 2023, and what does the NSA Doval visit to Ottawa signal about the prospects for normalisation?"

WHY IN NEWS

NSA Ajit Doval met his Canadian counterpart in Ottawa, signalling the first significant move toward diplomatic re-engagement since India-Canada relations deteriorated sharply following PM Trudeau's September 2023 allegation linking Indian agents to the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar on Canadian soil.

WHAT CAUSED THE RUPTURE

The India-Canada relationship — which had been steadily deepening through trade, education, and diaspora linkages — suffered a severe rupture in **September 2023** when Canadian PM Justin Trudeau stood up in the House of Commons and publicly alleged that **Indian government agents were involved in the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar** — a Canadian citizen and Khalistani leader — in Surrey, British Columbia in June 2023.

The allegation was extraordinary. Making a public parliamentary accusation against a G20 country is diplomatically unusual; the normal practice is to handle such matters through quiet diplomatic channels. India rejected the allegation as “absurd and motivated,” expelled a Canadian diplomat, and Canada reciprocally expelled India's High Commissioner. CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement) negotiations — which had reached an advanced stage — were suspended.

The episode crystallised a long-standing tension: **Canada has a large Sikh diaspora** (approximately 770,000 Sikhs, constituting about 2.1% of Canada's population — the second-largest Sikh population outside India). A subset of this diaspora includes advocates for Khalistan — an independent Sikh homeland carved

from Indian Punjab. India has long complained that Canadian politicians, seeking Sikh diaspora votes, have been tolerant of Khalistani organising on Canadian soil.

THE STRUCTURAL FACTORS THAT MAKE NORMALISATION NECESSARY

Despite the rupture, the structural case for normalisation was always strong.

Economic interdependence: India-Canada bilateral trade stood at approximately **USD 8–9 billion** before the crisis. Canadian investments in India (particularly in the financial services and real estate sectors through the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board — CPPIB — and other pension funds) are substantial. Over **400,000 Indian students** study in Canada annually, making India the single largest source of international students for Canadian universities — generating billions in tuition revenue.

Changing political context: Trudeau announced his resignation as Liberal Party leader in January 2025, and Canada held elections in April 2025. The new Canadian government — under a different political calculus — has shown greater willingness to manage the diaspora-sovereignty tension more carefully, reducing the political incentive that drove Trudeau's September 2023 parliamentary statement.

Security cooperation value: India and Canada cooperate on counter-terrorism, Interpol operations, and extradition. India has long-standing requests for extradition of several individuals with alleged Khalistani connections who live in Canada. These cooperation channels are most effective when the broader bilateral relationship is functional.

THE NSA VISIT — WHAT IT SIGNALS

NSA Doval's Ottawa visit — at the level of national security advisors, not foreign ministers — is a deliberate calibration. It signals re-engagement without the full normalisation signalled by a foreign minister visit, and without the political symbolism of a prime ministerial interaction. Security-level dialogue is typically less visible and allows both sides to manage domestic political sensitivities.

What India wants: Progress on extradition requests; Canadian assurances about not providing political space to Khalistani organisations; resumption of CEPA negotiations; restoration of diplomatic staffing to normal levels.

What Canada wants: Engagement on the Nijjar investigation (the RCMP — Royal Canadian Mounted Police — has laid charges against several individuals; Indian cooperation on evidence may be sought); restoration of normal trade and student relations; assurance that India will not conduct operations on Canadian soil.

The critical question is whether these wants can be reconciled. India will not acknowledge involvement in Nijjar's killing; Canada cannot walk back a parliamentary statement without political cost. The reset therefore likely proceeds through deliberate silence on the core dispute while restoring functional bilateral cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

LESSONS FOR INDIA'S DIASPORA DIPLOMACY

The India-Canada episode contains important lessons for India's management of diaspora-linked diplomatic tensions — a category of challenges that will only grow as the Indian diaspora expands globally.

First, public messaging about diaspora matters is different from private diplomatic communication. When India raises Khalistan concerns with Canada, it should be through diplomatic channels with specific, actionable asks — not through public accusations that create domestic political dynamics in Canada.

Second, India's leverage is real but must be used carefully. The Indian student flow to Canada is economically significant for Canadian universities. But wielding it as explicit leverage risks damaging the students themselves and creates a reputation in Canada for India as a difficult partner.

Third, India needs to distinguish between Khalistani political expression (which is legal in liberal democracies under freedom of speech) and organised support for violence against India (which is criminal). Demanding that Canada suppress political expression will not succeed and is not a legitimate ask; demanding that Canada not allow its territory to be used for planning or financing violence is legitimate and should be the focus.

UPSC RELEVANCE

NSA Ajit Doval, Hardeep Singh Nijjar (killed June 2023, Surrey, British Columbia), CEPA (India-Canada Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement), Canadian Sikh diaspora (~770,000), India-Canada bilateral trade (~USD 8-9 billion), Indian students in Canada (400,000+), RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police), CPPIB (Canada Pension Plan Investment Board), Five Eyes network.

India-Canada bilateral relations; diaspora-linked diplomatic tensions; Khalistan issue; India's neighbourhood policy; managing relationships with Western democracies; consular and diplomatic immunity; CEPA framework.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

INDIA-CANADA RELATIONS — CORE DATA:

Bilateral trade: ~**USD 8–9 billion**

Indian students in Canada: ~**4 lakh (400,000)+** annually

Sikh diaspora in Canada: ~**770,000** (~2.1% of Canada's population)

CPPIB (Canada Pension Plan Investment Board): Major investor in Indian markets

NIJJAR KILLING — TIMELINE:

June 18, 2023: Hardeep Singh Nijjar killed in Surrey, British Columbia

September 18, 2023: PM Trudeau's parliamentary allegation against India

India's response: Rejected allegation as "absurd and motivated"; expelled Canadian diplomat

Canada's response: Expelled India's High Commissioner; CEPA negotiations suspended

February 2026: NSA Doval visits Ottawa — first significant re-engagement signal

KHALISTAN ISSUE:

Khalistan: Demand for separate Sikh homeland in Indian Punjab

Designated terrorist organisations in India: International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF), Babbar Khalsa International (BKI)

NIA Act: India's National Investigation Agency has jurisdiction over Khalistan-linked cases

CEPA (CANADA-INDIA):

Negotiations: On-off since 2010; suspended post-September 2023

Key sectors: IT services, pharmaceuticals, financial services, agri-products

CANADA'S POLITICAL CONTEXT:

Trudeau announced resignation: **January 2025**

New government: Post-April 2025 elections; different political calculus on diaspora issues

Five Eyes: Intelligence-sharing alliance (USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) — India not a member

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

India-Pakistan diplomatic framework: Often used as reference for how India manages diaspora-territory tensions

Canada's Charter of Rights: Protects political speech including Khalistan advocacy

India's extradition requests to Canada: Multiple individuals; Canada has not extradited on grounds of political nature of alleged offences

Sources: The Hindu, NewsOnAir

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