

An Assassination Scandal Threatens India's Relations With The Five Eyes



*John P. Ruehl - Source:
Independent Media
Institute*

01-26-2024 ~ A burgeoning relationship between India and a select group of English-speaking allies has been held back by various disagreements and historical realities. It will be further tested by assassination scandals that have emerged in recent months.

Since mid-2023, a series of assassination plots have strained India's relations with Canada and the U.S. [In June 2023](#), a Sikh separatist activist living in Canada was reportedly killed on orders from Indian security services. Subsequently, [in November](#), it came to light that U.S. authorities were investigating an assassination attempt against another Sikh separatist figure on U.S. soil. While [India vehemently denied](#) the accusations from Canada, it [later committed to conducting](#) an investigation following the accusations by U.S. authorities.

The U.S. ambassador to Canada, David Cohen, confirmed that the information that led Canada to accuse India of the assassination was facilitated by the [Five](#)

[Eyes intelligence](#) alliance, consisting of the U.S., UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Originating from intelligence collaboration [during World War II](#), the intelligence-sharing agreement operated in such secrecy that Australian prime ministers remained unaware of its existence until 1971 and it was publicly revealed only [in 1999](#). [The Five Eyes](#) later gained wider public awareness following the 2013 Snowden Leaks.

In addition to extensive data and intelligence sharing, the Five Eyes share substantial military, technology, and cultural ties. With largely cohesive foreign policies, the Five Eyes have become a significant force in international affairs. India values diplomatic relations with all five countries, but its strategic focus is on the U.S., Australia, Canada, and the UK due to their geopolitical significance. India's complex history with these countries has resulted in varying levels of cooperation and apprehension.

There has been significant tension between the U.S. and India since the latter's independence from the UK in 1947. This included [U.S. support for Pakistan](#) during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War and U.S. military maneuvers against India during the war. Sanctions were placed on both India and Pakistan following their nuclear tests [in 1998](#), while India grew wary after the [U.S. increased its support](#) for Pakistan to aid the U.S.-led war effort in Afghanistan from 2001 onward.

Nonetheless, almost all U.S. sanctions against India [were lifted in 1999](#), and its relations with the U.S., as well as Australia, have significantly strengthened in the 21st century. The U.S. has been India's largest trading partner [since 2022](#), and in late 2023 India [agreed to most](#) of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economy Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) policies to deepen regional economic ties.

India also stands as Australia's [fourth-largest export destination](#), marked by the signing of the Australia-India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (AI-ECTA) [in 2022](#). Growing numbers of Indian emigrants and students increasingly travel to both the [U.S.](#) and [Australia](#).

Washington continues to [pursue closer collaboration](#) with India in space, AI, defense agreements, and [mineral supply chains](#). Yet the primary reason behind enhanced relations among India and all Five Eye countries is the shared concern over China. Their common anxiety has led to closer military ties among India, the

U.S., Australia, and the strong U.S. ally Japan in the Indo-Pacific. In 2007, the [first Quadrilateral Dialogue](#) was held, with all four countries' navies later taking part in the Malabar exercises to increase interoperability.

Closer military integration typically [languished because of India](#), until the India-China clash in 2017 prompted New Delhi to [revive the Quad](#). Following another clash with China in 2020, India extended an invitation to Australia to [rejoin the Malabar exercises](#), and India currently conducts [more joint military exercises](#) with the U.S. than it does with any other country.

Nonetheless, India's history as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War has continued to influence its foreign policy. Three weeks before the 2023 Malabar exercises, India [declined to participate](#) in the Australia-U.S. Talisman Sabre military exercises, underscoring India's aversion to military alliances in pursuit of its own course for increasing power and influence.

India's ascendance as a major power has added complexity to Washington's strategy of preserving the U.S.-led global order. China's assertive foreign policy challenges the established norms and influence of the U.S., while Russia's is characterized by disruptions to that order. But India's accommodating yet somewhat nonchalant foreign policy as a major power doesn't quite fit with the formal alliance-based approach that the U.S. has historically used to develop ties with allies and isolate adversaries.

Despite ongoing concerns over India's positive relations with [Russia](#) and [Iran](#), hopes were high for an increasingly collaborative foreign policy alignment between the world's two largest democracies. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi received a warm welcome when he visited in [2019](#) and [2023](#), despite reservations from [progressive Democrats](#) about India's democratic backsliding. That was until the assassination attempt in the U.S. revealed in November derailed U.S.-India relations and resulted in significant criticism from U.S. officials.

But the assassination accusations from Canada prompted a notably more confrontational response from New Delhi months before, indicative of the heightened antagonism that has come to characterize Indian-Canadian relations in the last few years. Following Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's accusation that India orchestrated the assassination, India [expelled dozens of](#)

[Canadian diplomats](#), [suspended visa applications for Canadians](#), and warned Indian citizens to “[exercise extreme caution](#)” in Canada due to anti-India sentiment.

While Sikh separatist activities remain India’s most pressing concern in Canada, additional issues have strained relations between Ottawa and New Delhi. Under Trudeau, Canadian officials, more so than those from other Five Eyes countries, have become increasingly critical of [India’s democratic backsliding](#) and human rights violations. [This includes](#) India’s social media restrictions, internet blackouts, targeting of Muslims and other religious minorities, and the Indian governments confrontations with human rights organizations.

[Trudeau’s 2018 trip to India](#) was also beset by controversy. Criticism was directed at his choice to wear full Indian traditional dress and his decision to invite Jaspal Singh Atwal, previously convicted in a 1986 assassination plot, to an event. Atwal had targeted Punjab minister Malkiat Singh Sidhu, and Trudeau’s wife later [posed for a photo with him](#), causing Indian media and social media to highlight the issue. Additionally, visa and immigration issues, as well as trade disagreements, have also prevented closer ties, while [economic ties remain limited](#).

Alongside worsening ties with Canada, India’s historical resistance to Britain, its former colonial ruler, continues to influence dynamics between the two countries. Since India gained its independence, the UK’s alignment with U.S. foreign policy also contributed to tensions with India, notably during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, British sanctions on India after the latter’s 1998 nuclear tests, and British politicians’ [continued involvement in Kashmir](#).

Despite historical grievances, British-India ties experienced a positive shift from the early post-colonial era in the 1990s. The establishment of a Defense Consultative Group [in 1995](#) reflected growing military cooperation. Former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson committed to elevating UK-India ties [in 2021](#), and the appointment of Rishi Sunak as Britain’s first Hindu leader was also [warmly received in India](#).

British leaders [often highlight](#) India and the UK as the world’s largest and oldest parliamentary democracies to underscore the significance of the relationship. London also perceives its ties with India as crucial for maintaining global relevance in the aftermath of Brexit.

Yet despite being India's second-biggest trade partner [in 1998-99](#), the UK's ranking plummeted to 17 just two decades later. Attempts by previous prime ministers, such as [David Cameron](#), to strengthen UK-India ties, particularly through increased trade, proved unsuccessful.

Concerns within the British political establishment regarding India's democratic backsliding have also been raised. [In 2013](#), elements within the British Labour Party openly questioned the Labour Friends of India parliamentary grouping's plans to invite Modi to the UK over his role in the 2002 Gujarat religious riots. These criticisms from the UK are often viewed with disdain in India considering the context of Britain's colonial legacy. After a critical documentary on Modi's role in the 2002 riots aired on BBC in 2023, Indian authorities [exerted extreme pressure on the broadcaster that affected its operations in India](#).

Indian politicians have [also long criticized](#) British authorities for what they perceive as inaction over the proliferation of Sikh separatist elements in the UK. [In 2022](#), pro-Khalistan separatists vandalized the Indian High Commission in London and assaulted staff. Dissatisfied with Britain's response, India subsequently reduced security outside the British High Commission and the High Commissioner's residence in New Delhi. Additionally, New Delhi authorities [pledged to build a public toilet outside](#), sparking displeasure from London.

India stands as a unique factor among the foreign policies of the Five Eyes countries, which are typically aligned. New Delhi's growing ties to the U.S. and Australia contrast to its more complex relations with Canada and the UK. With concern growing that shared democratic values will not resonate as effectively in the future, the major factor driving more positive relations between India and the Five Eyes will continue to be anxiety over China.

But the prospect of greater collaboration in areas such as countering piracy and confronting Islamist groups like the Taliban, ISIS, and Al Qaeda will remain stalled as long as India believes insufficient attention is being given to Sikh separatist elements in Five Eyes countries. [In September 2023](#), Indian security agencies were instructed to identify all Khalistan separatists living in Australia, the U.S., Canada, and the UK, cancel their Overseas Citizenship of India status where applicable, and confiscate their assets in India.

The controversy surrounding the assassination plots highlights the broader

challenge of Washington's engagement with India, especially when core allies like Canada have additional issues with New Delhi. However, India's leap over the UK [in 2022](#) to become the world's fifth-largest economy reflects the changing dynamics and India's growing international profile.

[Biden's decision to decline Modi's invitation](#) for India's Republic Day celebrations on January 26 reflects Washington's frustrations. The U.S. remains cautious of providing India excessive leverage in international affairs to the point where it feels bold enough to assassinate U.S. citizens on American soil. However, as long as India remains crucial for the U.S. in confronting China, New Delhi will continue to test how far it can push the envelope in Washington, as well as in London, Ottawa, and Canberra.

By John P. Ruehl

Author Bio:

John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C., and a world affairs correspondent for the [Independent Media Institute](#). He is a contributing editor to Strategic Policy and a contributor to several other foreign affairs publications. His book, [Budget Superpower: How Russia Challenges the West With an Economy Smaller Than Texas'](#), was published in December 2022.

Credit Line: This article was produced by [Economy for All](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.