

## Stop the free fall: On India-Canada ties

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The diplomatic row between India and Canada has, as expected, begun to impact people who have ties with both countries. The unusual manner in which Canada made public its understanding that Indian officials were somehow involved in the 2023 murder of Khalistan activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar has derailed bilateral relations. Washington's allegations regarding the plot against Gurpatwant Singh Pannun further complicated matters. On November 3, a camp on the premises of the Hindu Sabha Mandir in Brampton, which was organised by the Indian mission to provide consular services, was violently disrupted by Khalistan activists. Later, a protest by a Hindu group also led to violence. Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the violence at the mandir as "deliberate" and attempts to intimidate Indian diplomats as "cowardly". Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau termed the incident "unacceptable". At least two people linked to Nijjar have been reportedly arrested by the police in Canada. One of them is wanted in India. An estimated 19 lakh people, or about 4% of Canada's population, are of Indian origin. Many of them maintain close ties with India and require varied consular services.

That a small violent group can even disrupt routine diplomatic functions is a sad commentary on Canada's standing as a stable democracy where the rule of law is supreme. The Canadian government must ensure that Indian diplomats are secure. India and Canada should not encourage or tolerate any kind of mobilisation that causes communal rift in either country. India's diaspora engagement must unfailingly reflect the multi-religious character of the nation. India-Canada bilateral trade in goods and services combined is around \$19 billion. It was expected to be boosted further through a bilateral trade treaty, but negotiations on this are now stalled. Both countries have been careful so far to insulate their economic relations, but disruptions in visa issuance on both sides can have an impact. India and Canada have significant convergence on many issues, climate change, for instance. Sustained people-to-people contacts have been beneficial, notwithstanding the fact that the current turmoil also originates from fractious diaspora politics. Independent of India ties, Canada is trying to tighten its border policy as nearly two-thirds of the population

