



SIKHS WEARY OF INCREASED FOREIGN INTERFERENCE IN WAKE OF CANADA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

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Ottawa (December 8, 2022): The World Sikh Organization of Canada fears increased foreign interference and pressure by India in the wake of the Government of Canada's launch of its Indo-Pacific strategy.

On November 27, 2022, the Government of Canada launched its Indo-Pacific strategy which is intended to increase engagement in the region and includes an investment of \$2.3 billion over the next five years.

Sikhs in Canada, however, are weary of increased interference and coercion by India aimed at marginalising and silencing Sikh advocacy. Immediately after the announcement of Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy, India's newly appointed High Commissioner to Canada, Sanjay Kumar Verma, has said that Canada must crack down on "segments of the Sikh community in Canada [that] are offering support and money to secessionists who want to separate Punjab from India."

Mr. Verma offered no evidence to substantiate his allegation that such funding is actually taking place.

During almost every bilateral meeting between Canada and India for well over a decade, Indian officials have raised concerns over alleged extremist activity in the Canadian Sikh community and "pro-Khalistan radicalism".

While the onus is on the party making an allegation to prove its veracity, the Indian government has consistently failed to prove any credible threat for what is otherwise protected political free speech in Canada.

Khalistan refers to a sovereign state governed in accordance with Sikh principles and values. Khalistan is a construct that is understood in different ways and is a source of robust discourse and debate amongst Sikhs worldwide. Discussion or promotion of Khalistan falls within recognized freedoms of expression and political discourse.

Just last month, the Government of India demanded that Canada crack down on Sikhs advocating for a sovereign state of Khalistan by banning the organization that is holding a non-binding referendum on Khalistan and stopping the voting from taking place. Despite Indian pressure, it was reported that over 100,000 Sikhs participated in the referendum, over two days on September 18, 2022 in Brampton and November 6, 2022 in Mississauga.

After the September 18 vote, in addition to a formal demarche or formal diplomatic note of protest to Canada, India issued a travel advisory for Indian nationals against Canada citing the “rising threat of hate crimes, sectarian violence and “anti-India activities.”

Canadian authorities confirmed that no such increase of hate crimes or violence could be substantiated. The move has been called a diplomatic ploy to pressure Canada.

India has repeatedly tried to pressure Canada to silence Sikh advocacy and have used tactics such as the continued suspension of E-Visas for Canadian citizens wishing to visit India, despite the E-Visa system being available to other countries such as the USA, France and Mexico. Wait times for Canadian citizens applying for Indian Visas are currently four to six weeks. Ten-year visas previously issued to Canadian citizens also remain suspended, despite having been restored for citizens of most other countries.

India repeatedly expressed frustration that Canada was “not taking any action” against the Khalistan Referendum and lamented the lack of “effective measures” to stop the vote. This is despite the fact that participation in the Referendum would be protected by Canadian law and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Despite this, India’s High Commissioner to Canada has continued to insist that India will “talk about the illegality of such processes, the illegality of such movements based out of the geography of Canada.”

India's interference in Canada is not a recent phenomenon. During the Indian Farmer protests that took place in the fall of 2021, in an official diplomatic note obtained by the WSO through a freedom of information request to the Peel District School Board, the Consulate General of India urged Ontario's Office of International Relations and Protocol to investigate dialogue about the ongoing protest of predominantly Sikh farmers in India, and stop teachers in the Greater Toronto Area from giving lessons on these protests. The Indian consulate claimed such material could threaten relations between India and Canada.

Since the 1980s, India has consistently used fake news stories and disinformation to target Canadian Sikhs. The WSO published a detailed report exposing this phenomenon entitled "Exposed: India's Disinformation Campaign Against Canada's Sikhs".

WSO President Tejinder Singh Sidhu said,

"While the announcement of Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy presents important opportunities, Sikhs in Canada are concerned that India sees this as an opportunity to exert pressure on Canada to crack down on legitimate and legal Sikh advocacy.

India has used every bilateral meeting between Canada and India over the past decade as an opportunity to malign and marginalize Sikhs in Canada. This has included the promotion of false narratives such as allegations of rising extremism in the community and now, the funding of the secessionist movement in Punjab by Canadian Sikhs. No actual evidence has ever been provided by India to substantiate these claims. They are intended solely to create suspicion and marginalize the Sikh community in the Canadian mainstream.

India must be told in no uncertain terms that it cannot interfere in the activities of Canadian Sikhs in Canada. While it may disagree with those who advocate for issues such as Khalistan, such expression is protected by the Canadian Charter and India has no business attempting to interfere in that right.

While increased trade and engagement in the Indo-Pacific is an important goal, it cannot come at the expense of basic human rights and freedoms. Rather than allowing India to bully voices in Canada critical of its deteriorating human rights record and the plight of minorities in the country, Canada must press India for accountability and demand that it meet its human rights obligations in accordance with international law."

The World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO) is a non-profit organization with a mandate to promote and protect the interests of Canadian Sikhs, as well as to

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promote and advocate for the protection of human rights of all individuals.

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