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India-Canada Relations: The Interplay of Diplomacy and Military Ties

By Prem SINGH GILL

SYNOPSIS

Despite the diplomatic row arising from allegations of the Indian government's involvement in the death of a Sikh separatist in British Columbia, the political dispute between Canada and India is unlikely to impact adversely on their military ties. Both countries have significant interests in maintaining their defence cooperation and military partnerships to address common strategic challenges.

COMMENTARY

The current diplomatic tension between Canada and India following allegations of Indian government involvement in the killing of a Sikh separatist in British Columbia has raised questions about the relationship between the two nations. Major-General Peter Scott, the Deputy Commander of the Canadian Army, speaking in Delhi on 26 September, emphasised that the dispute is primarily a political issue and claimed that it is [not affecting military ties between the two countries](#). This bilateral issue prompts an exploration into the dynamics of Canada-India relations, specifically on whether military cooperation can remain unaffected when diplomatic relations are strained.

To examine this question, it is important to note the history of relations between Canada and India. These two nations have maintained diplomatic and economic relations for decades. While they have encountered diplomatic challenges before, their military cooperation has remained mostly intact. For instance, during the Cold War, Canada and India pursued different geopolitical alignments, with Canada leaning towards the West and India adopting a policy of non-alignment. Despite differences such as this, both countries maintained defence relationships, focusing on areas of mutual interest, such as counterterrorism and peacekeeping.

The historical continuity of military cooperation highlights the pragmatism that underpins such partnerships. Nations recognise the enduring value of security alliances and cooperation, even when political differences arise.

Diplomatic Strains

The diplomatic tension between Canada and India revolves around a significant incident: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau publicly announced “credible allegations” linking Indian agents to the shooting of Hardeep Singh Nijjar. This revelation triggered a highly charged dispute. India vehemently rejected any involvement, labelling Trudeau's statement as baseless.

This and the flurry of frenzied exchanges between the Canadian and Indian governments occurred unexpectedly between two nations that have traditionally maintained friendly relations, highlighting the intricate and delicate nature of their diplomatic relationship. This incident has placed a considerable strain on their bilateral ties, raising questions about its impact on various other aspects of their relationship.

The Complex Interplay of Political and Military Relations

Major-General Scott's assertion that the diplomatic row is not affecting military ties raises intriguing questions. Can military cooperation truly remain insulated from the impact of strained diplomatic relations? To answer this question, it is crucial to differentiate between political and military aspects of international relations.

Political relations primarily concern the interactions and policies of national governments in the international arena. These include diplomacy, trade agreements, economic cooperation and the management of bilateral disputes. On the other hand, military ties revolve primarily around defence cooperation, joint exercises, arms sales, and security partnerships.

In practice, it is possible for political tensions to strain military ties to some extent, but the degree of impact can vary significantly. What has been the impact of the diplomatic row on Canada-India relations?

The Canada-India diplomatic rift is primarily a political issue based on allegations and rebuttals. Prime Minister Trudeau's decision to raise these allegations in Parliament added a layer of gravity to the situation. India's strong denial and dismissal of the allegations exacerbated the tension. Such a high-profile dispute at the political level undoubtedly strains diplomatic relations.

It is essential, however, to consider the nuanced nature of international relations. Military cooperation is often built on long-term strategic interests and security imperatives. These ties are not easily severed by a single political or diplomatic incident. Most countries usually maintain defence agreements and commitments that endure despite political disputes.

Major-General Scott's assertion that military ties between Canada and India remain unaffected likely stems from the recognition that both countries have significant interests in maintaining their defence cooperation. They have participated in joint

military exercises, shared intelligence, and have a mutual interest in preserving regional security in the Indo-Pacific. These shared interests constitute a stabilising factor in their military relationship.

The presence of Canadian representatives at a conference of Indo-Pacific army chiefs held in the Indian capital from 25 to 27 September, indicates that both nations give priority to security and cooperation over the political issue. Such multilateral engagements can serve to mitigate the impact of bilateral political disputes on military relationships.

The Significance of Diplomacy

Whilst Major-General Scott emphasised the separation of political and military issues in the bilateral dispute, it is worth noting that diplomacy plays a crucial role in preserving military ties during periods of diplomatic strain. Diplomatic channels allow nations to address disputes, de-escalate tensions, and to find common ground. They can help to prevent the escalation of conflicts and pave the way for a peaceful resolution.

Prime Minister Trudeau's request for India's cooperation in an independent investigation demonstrates a diplomatic approach to resolving the dispute. It is in the interest of both countries to manage this issue through diplomatic means to avoid collateral damage to their broader relationship.

Military Ties are Crucial in the Face of Strategic Challenges

It is also important to touch upon the Indo-Pacific region, as it further underscores the importance of military ties between both countries. This vast region is witnessing a complex interplay of strategic interests among the major powers.

China's rise as a global power and its assertive behaviour in the South China Sea have prompted many nations to enhance their security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Canada and India, along with other nations, have recognised the need for collective security efforts to address shared challenges. Canada's participation in the Indo-Pacific army chiefs' conference reflects its recognition of this need.

Likewise, for India, maintaining strong security partnerships is crucial to safeguard its maritime interests and to counter regional security threats. Canada's participation in regional security initiatives aligns with India's objectives, making it unlikely that the current diplomatic dispute will significantly impact on their military collaboration.

Conclusion

In the complex landscape of international relations, the distinction between political and military ties is crucial. While the diplomatic row between Canada and India has strained their political relationship, the impact on their military ties appears limited. Both nations have significant interests in maintaining their defence cooperation and security partnerships.

Diplomacy will play a pivotal role in resolving the dispute, as it offers a pathway to de-

escalate tensions and help both governments to find common ground. The history of bilateral relations, shared interests, and the geopolitical significance of the Indo-Pacific region all contribute to the resilience of the military ties between Canada and India.

Ultimately, both nations recognise the enduring value of their defence collaboration and are likely to prioritise its continuation despite the diplomatic challenges that they will face from time to time. This pragmatism underscores the intricate balance that nations must maintain in managing the complex nexus between political and military relations in an interconnected world.

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