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## INDIA-CANADA RELATIONS IN FOCUS: AMBASSADOR AJAY BISARIA ON CRISIS, TRUST, AND THE G7 MOMENT

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Mahrukh Chaudhry

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Ambassador Ajay Bisaria—former Indian High Commissioner to Canada (2020–2022) and a veteran diplomat with 35 years in the Indian Foreign Service—brings both experience and perspective to a moment of reset in India-Canada relations. Over the course of his career, he has served as India’s envoy to Pakistan, Poland, and Lithuania, and played key roles in shaping India’s economic and security diplomacy—both in the region and beyond. A former aide to PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, he now works at the intersection of geopolitics, international business, and public policy. In this interview, he draws on years of frontline diplomacy to reflect on trust, tension, and the potential for renewal at the 2025 G7 Summit.

***Mahrukh Chaudhry:*** Before PM Modi's invitation to the 2025 G7 Summit, where did India-Canada ties actually stand? Had the relationship remained frozen since the Nijjar controversy, or was there already some groundwork underway for a reset?

***Amb. Ajay Bisaria:*** Even before the G7 invitation, both sides had quietly begun laying the groundwork to repair ties. The relationship had been strained for about 18 months—primarily due to the Nijjar controversy and how PM Trudeau escalated it politically, instead of handling it through security cooperation.

By the time of the 2025 Canadian election, there was already recognition on both sides that ties needed to be reset. Mark Carney's arrival as Prime Minister offered a natural political opening. Quiet diplomacy and Track II conversations were also underway to prepare for re-engagement. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, for instance, was in touch with his then-counterpart Melanie Joly, and later with Canada's current Foreign Minister Anita Anand. These interactions reflected a clear appetite on both sides to find a way forward.

The G7 summit simply accelerated that trajectory, offering a timely forum for the two leaders to meet. The goal is to stabilise the relationship over the course of this year, and in the next, to potentially build a relationship even stronger than before the crisis.

**Multilateral settings are a useful space for sensitive diplomatic engagements. They allow leaders to meet informally on the sidelines outside the spotlight of formal bilaterals. This format offers a ‘diplomatic cover’ to discuss issues that may be politically charged at home**

***Mahrukh Chaudhry:*** The G7 invitation to PM Modi came later than expected and was reportedly linked to Canadian conditions related to law enforcement cooperation. Do you see this delay as a sign of cautious re-engagement, or does it reflect a deeper ambivalence in how the West engages with India?

***Amb. Ajay Bisaria:*** Too much is being read into the timing of the invitation. It likely reflected Canada’s newly formed government needing time to settle in—not any preconditions. The claim that it was contingent on law enforcement cooperation doesn’t reflect how

diplomacy functions, though security discussions were indeed taking place behind the scenes between the two sides.

Both India and Canada have expressed deep security concerns. Canada alleged Indian involvement in the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar for which India issued a firm denial of any official involvement. But India has also flagged its own concerns—particularly about how extremist elements and criminal networks operating from Canadian soil have targeted Indian diplomats and incited violence in India. So, this isn't a one-sided issue.

The conversations should shift from political grandstanding to professional channels. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) already have a dedicated channel of communication—a valuable existing mechanism. There are ongoing discussions between the two countries' National Security Advisors (NSA) and deputy NSAs. These provide structured platforms for resolving such matters.

This approach mirrors how India handled a comparable challenge with the U.S. There too, we faced an arguably more serious security-related disagreement involving court indictments. Yet, it was resolved without turning into a major diplomatic rupture through mature, behind-the-scenes coordination led by security professionals, including NSAs. While India's relationship with the U.S. is fundamentally stronger or more institutionalised, India and Canada did sign a [Strategic Partnership Agreement](#) in 2015, during PM Modi's visit to Canada, that still exists. What's needed now is the political will to realise its full potential.

The present crisis, in many ways, has already run its course. The Nijjar case is now before a [Canadian court](#). With the right engagement, that process can address the issue—and broader concerns too. The goal should be to rebuild political ties while letting security agencies handle the irritants, as was done with the U.S.

***Mahrukh Chaudhry:*** If both governments are genuinely looking to move forward, what realistic steps can be taken to rebuild trust—whether in trade negotiations, diaspora extremism, or intelligence cooperation? And more broadly, what role do multilateral platforms like the G7 play in offering diplomatic opportunities to reset tense bilateral ties?

***Amb. Ajay Bisaria:*** Multilateral settings are a useful space for sensitive diplomatic engagements. They allow leaders to meet informally on the sidelines outside the spotlight of formal bilaterals. This format offers a ‘diplomatic cover’ to discuss issues that may be politically charged at home.

For instance, in the India-China context, Modi and Xi met quietly during a BRICS summit in Russia to help [ease](#) tensions. India-Pakistan dialogue has taken place on the margins of the United Nations and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

The G7 is a key venue for India to advance its multilateral agenda—on trade, climate, development, and supply chains. G7 provides a forum to raise terrorism concerns too in a broader global context. India, for instance, could highlight Canada’s recent extradition of a Pakistani national to the U.S. for allegedly plotting a 9/11-style attack

underscoring the global nature of terrorism. That's a message India can convey both publicly and directly to Canada in such a setting.

There's an opportunity to reset, to *build back better*. To not merely return to the status quo before PM Trudeau's public statement in Parliament in September 2023. Rather, to forge a more durable and forward-looking relationship.

### **Restoring diplomatic channels:**

Both sides should move to restore their full diplomatic presence—reappointing High Commissioners and restoring full missions. Symbolically and practically, this would send a strong signal that the relationship is back on track.

### **Reopening trade talks:**

The India–Canada Early Progress Trade Agreement (EPTA) negotiations were paused in 2023. There is a strategic imperative now to resume them, especially as Canada seeks to diversify its economic partnerships amid challenges with both the U.S. and China. India is a natural partner in that equation.

### **Leveraging geopolitical alignment:**

Canada's 2023 Indo-Pacific strategy was notably forward-leaning—it described China as a disruptive actor and explicitly positioned India as a critical partner. Canada also stressed its own identity as an Indo-Pacific nation, given its Pacific coastline. With growing tensions with China and Russia, it makes strategic sense for Canada to deepen ties with India—an emerging alignment both sides should build on.



**There is a chance to move from crisis management to constructive engagement. But that requires managing the security irritant professionally not politically.**

***Mahrukh Chaudhry:*** During your tenure as India's High Commissioner to Canada you often said the relationship should be economics-led, not politics-blocked. Yet political tensions, especially around the Khalistan issue, repeatedly overshadowed economic progress. Are there limits to relying on economic diplomacy to stabilise such complex ties?

***Amb. Ajay Bisaria:*** Yes, there are limits. The Khalistan-related security irritant has been part of India-Canada relations for four decades. June 23, 2025 marks 40 years since the [Kanishka bombing](#). A small but vocal pro-Khalistan minority has had influence on Canadian politics—especially under the last government, where the New Democratic Party (NDP), led by Jagmeet Singh, backed Trudeau's minority rule. I wouldn't minimise this. Political and security concerns often trump economics—as seen with China, where \$130 billion in trade didn't prevent rising tensions. The challenge is to manage irritants without derailing broader ties.



With Canada, which is geographically distant, we should prioritise the economic partnership while managing politics and security carefully. A useful comparison: when India-Canada political ties hit rock bottom, B2B (business-to-business) and P2P (people-to-people) ties continued. There were brief disruptions—visas, flights, but both sides avoided major economic fallout.

Contrast that with China, where tensions disrupted flights, visas, and student flows; or Pakistan, where trade and visas halted entirely. By that measure, India-Canada ties were better managed. Both sides now blame the previous Canadian government. India has done so explicitly, and in Canada too, there's growing criticism of Trudeau's handling—possibly driven more by vote-bank politics than national interest.

***Mahrukh Chaudhry:*** You've served as High Commissioner to both Pakistan and Canada—two very different diplomatic contexts. Some foreign policy analysts argue that Canada posed greater challenges, particularly due to diaspora politics and domestic sensitivities. Would you agree? And what do your experiences reveal about the complexities of managing relationships with democratic partners?

***Amb. Ajay Bisaria:*** Democracies pose unique challenges: domestic politics, interest groups, and diaspora lobbies often complicate foreign policy. The Khalistan issue exists in many geographies—U.S., UK, Australia, Germany. But in those places, although individuals often misuse democratic freedoms to form anti-India lobbies, the leadership has prioritised national interest by maintaining strong ties with India—keeping those disruptive voices in check.

That didn't happen in Canada. The Khalistani movement gained stronger political traction there. Its influence on the Canadian political system shaped the previous government's position to a considerable extent. That phase may now be ending. The Khalistani groups may remain vocal, and will likely protest Indian visits or policies, but their influence on national decisions is waning. Still, democratic partners like Canada pose complex, if less existential challenges, that need to be managed. That said, adversarial neighbours like Pakistan and China present graver challenges—border conflicts and hard security issues that are far more intense.

***Mahrukh Chaudhry:*** What do you see as key priorities for India at the G7 Summit?

***Amb. Ajay Bisaria:*** The G7's focus on foreign interference and security offers India a chance to spotlight cross-border terrorism—its most serious concern in this domain. G7 outreach to large economies like India focuses on global commons. India plays an important role here, as a voice of the Global South. India's economic weight makes its presence essential. It's already larger than most G7 economies. As Mark Carney noted, most global supply chains pass through India.

India's G7 outreach began in 2003 under Prime Minister Vajpayee, when it was getting to become the G8, with Russia included. While that evolved into the G20, the G7-plus outreach remains geopolitically valuable—especially now. Amid tensions with Pakistan, it gives Prime Minister Modi a one-day window to engage ten key partners. There's also a shift toward a D-10-style format—ten democracies like India, South Korea, South Africa, and even monarchies, like the UAE,

present. With China and Russia absent, the platform allows for more candid strategic dialogue compared to the G20).

Also, Canada must consider its own positioning with the U.S., amid the prospect of Trump's return to the G7. There was even debate about how to handle Trump's presence at the summit. His unpredictability—past clashes with Trudeau and talk of inviting Putin remains a concern. Leaders will be watchful. Beyond the multilateral agenda, the real value lies in bilateral meetings—India can engage several high-value conversations in one location.

***Mahrukh Chaudhry:*** The G7 summit comes at a time when the grouping itself is under pressure to stay relevant. What does India's presence signal about how G7 countries view its role on issues like economic resilience, supply chain security or global governance?

***Amb. Ajay Bisaria:*** India's invitation reflects how central it has become to global economic and strategic conversations. Even Mark Carney, when explaining India's presence, pointed to its position as the world's fifth-largest economy and its growing role in global supply chains. On supply chain resilience—which often means reducing dependency on China—all G7 members share concerns about Beijing's behavior. That naturally draws India in as a trusted alternative. Another factor is India's strong ties with the rest of the G7. In this case, I believe it was the French who pressed Canada to support India's inclusion. Bilaterally, Canada might have hesitated, given recent tensions. But if it wants to act as a responsible G7 member with meaningful outreach to the Global South, having India at the table is essential.



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