



US President Joe Biden and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi toast during an official state dinner at the White House in June 2023.

PHOTO: AFP

# How will Pannun ‘murder plot’ affect India-US relations?



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The United States has charged Nikhil Gupta, an Indian citizen, with attempting to assassinate the prominent Sikh activist and US citizen Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, according to an indictment unsealed on November 29. What makes this revelation even more alarming is the alleged involvement of an unnamed Indian official—with responsibilities in security and intelligence—in plotting the assassination. Surprisingly, these plans were reportedly in motion during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s state visit to the US in June this year. The latest disclosure raises concerns about the delicate US-India partnership. Relations between India and Canada—an all-weather ally of the US—have already crumbled over allegations of an Indian hand in the killing of pro-Khalistan leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada. Considering the strategic importance of their alliance in countering China, neither India nor US can afford a recurrence of the same diplomatic fallout experienced during the Nijjar case.

Despite the serious nature of the allegation, both India and the US have approached the Pannun case with measured responses. Upon discovering the plot, US officials promptly urged India to conduct an investigation. In a September summit, US President Joe Biden directly addressed the issue with Modi, highlighting potential repercussions for the bilateral relationship if such threats persisted. Concurrently, the Biden administration reiterated its commitment to pursuing an ambitious agenda to enhance cooperation with India.

On the other hand, while Indian officials vehemently rejected Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s accusation, denying any involvement, their response to the allegation from the US has been conciliatory, acknowledging the seriousness of the case and committing to an investigation. India’s Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Arindam Bagchi stated that US officials had “shared some inputs pertaining to the nexus between organised criminals, gun-runners, terrorists, and others,” avoiding specific details. He mentioned, “The inputs are a cause of concern for both countries, and they decided to take necessary follow-up action.”

These nuanced approaches from both countries indicate a strategic effort to prevent the issue from overshadowing the broader relationship. This is hardly surprising: India and the US have a multifaceted relationship, with both nations recognising the geopolitical realities that necessitate their collaboration.

The Biden administration appears to be isolating the murder plot, focusing on enhancing the broader strategic relationship with India. This approach seeks to leverage the partnership as a crucial counterbalance against the growing influence of China. Simultaneously, it aims to pull India away from historical alignments with Russia.

China’s growing geopolitical assertiveness under Xi Jinping, especially along the disputed Himalayan border and in the Indian Ocean, have prompted India to seek closer security cooperation with the US and its allies. This is evident in India’s increased defence purchases from the US and its participation in the Quad, a multilateral coalition formed to counter China. India is also concerned about the potential impact on its security if its longtime security partner and defence supplier, Russia, experiences a decline in power due to the conflict with Ukraine and an increased reliance on China.

While China remains the most significant consideration, it is crucial to examine India-US

relations beyond the Chinese factor. Echoing the words of Henry Kissinger, the two nations share “no conflict of interest in the traditional and fundamental sense.”

Nevertheless, the assassination plot-for-hire inevitably raises concerns about the level of trust within the relationship of these two strategic partners.

Speaking to *Reuters*, Ashley Tellis, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, recognised the Biden administration’s attempts to sidestep a public clash with Delhi. However, he emphasises that sovereignty concerns arising from a US citizen’s attack in the United States trouble US officials. While he anticipates the bilateral relationship’s resilience, he suggests it may amplify scepticism about shared values between the US and India.

In a measured manner, the United States has also conveyed to India that any attempt harming US core interests will not go unnoticed. The indictment of Nikhil Gupta and the insistence on a thorough investigation indicate that the Pannun “murder plot” case is far from over.

Within India, there is also criticism

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regarding the country’s alleged involvement in such misadventures. Sanjaya Baru, a former member of the National Security Advisory Board (1999-2001) and former adviser to the prime minister of India (2004-08), characterises these actions as risky, cautioning against the political leadership succumbing to its own propaganda. He notes, “It is not merely party political ideologues and propagandists, and sycophants and time-servers in government, who have created this false sense of India’s newly acquired power and global influence. Many geopolitical analysts in think tanks and media have also lived off and fed this delusion. The year-long run-up to the G20 Summit further heightened this sense of India having ‘arrived’ as a ‘Vishwaguru’—a world power.”

While India and the US have cooperated on multiple fronts, critical divergences exist, ranging from India’s strategic neutrality amid Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to its support for Myanmar’s military regime and backing of Bangladesh’s AL regime, which is increasingly perceived as undemocratic by the US. These differences have the potential to impact their relationship significantly. It’s important to bear in mind that, despite collaboration, India and the US are primarily partners rather than allies.

The differing responses to similar incidents in Canada and the US reveal the depth and complexity of the India-US partnership. As this partnership continues to evolve, challenges will inevitably arise. The ability to navigate these challenges will test the resilience of the India-US relationship, which plays a pivotal role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region.

## HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN GAZA

# An open letter to UNSC from Doctors Without Borders

I am writing to you on behalf of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders-MSF) to implore you to do everything within your power to ensure an immediate and sustained ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. You must demand that the Israeli government stop the deadly attacks on Palestinian civilians and allow crucial humanitarian aid to enter Gaza.

A seven-day truce, after weeks of relentless violence, was a welcome respite for the people of Gaza. However, these seven days were not nearly enough to organise the delivery of sufficient aid and essential supplies, to meet the immeasurable needs. We are very worried that the truce has ended, bringing a return to death and destruction.

My colleagues and I, like so many people around the world, were distressed and shocked by Hamas’ attack on Israeli civilians. Now, after 58 days, words fail us to describe the absolute horror being inflicted on Palestinian civilians by Israel as it carries out incessant and indiscriminate warfare in Gaza for all the world to see.

Israel has shown a blatant and total disregard for the protection of Gaza’s medical facilities. We are watching as hospitals are turned into morgues and ruins. These supposedly protected facilities are being bombed, are being shot at by tanks and guns, encircled and raided, killing patients and medical staff. The World Health Organization (WHO) has documented 181 attacks on healthcare that have led to 22 fatalities and 59 injuries of health workers on duty. Medical staff, including our own, are utterly exhausted and in despair. They have had to amputate limbs from children suffering from severe burns without anaesthesia or sterilised surgical tools. Due to forcible evacuations by Israeli soldiers, some doctors have had to leave patients behind after facing the unimaginable choice between their lives or those of their patients. There is no justification for the atrocious attacks on healthcare.

MSF recently sent an international emergency team to Gaza to support our Palestinian colleagues in providing medical and surgical capacities. Regrettably, their activities have been severely limited due to the scale of casualties, destruction of infrastructure, lack of essential supplies such as fuel, and the ongoing insecurity. We want and ought to be able to do so much more. Today it is impossible for us to adequately respond to medical needs in Gaza due to the siege and the unrelenting, generalised warfare being unleashed by Israel.

Four of our MSF staff have been killed; many more have lost family members. Numerous other colleagues have been injured. Other humanitarian organisations have reported that dozens of their staff have been killed.

Gaza, under an Israel-imposed blockade since 2007, is indeed the world’s largest open-air prison. From the start of its military campaign on October 7, the Israeli government has enforced a “complete siege” on Gaza, banning the entry of water, food, fuel and medicinal supplies for the 2.3 million people trapped in the enclave. Added to this, unyielding restrictions have been put on humanitarian access and are preventing much needed aid from reaching anyone who needs it. Subjecting an entire population to collective punishment is a war crime under International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

We are witnessing the fundamental principle of humanity being openly disgraced.

Despite Israel’s claims, its all-out assault is not being waged just on Hamas. It is

being waged on all of Gaza and its people at any cost. Even wars have rules, but Israel is clearly trading them in for its own military doctrine based on disproportionality. In the early days of this unbearable offensive, the spokesman for Israel’s Defense Forces (IDF) announced that the “emphasis” of this flagrantly excessive reprisal was to be on “damage and not accuracy.” It is safe to say Israel’s actions have spoken louder than its words.

Northern Gaza is being erased from the map. The health system has collapsed. More than 15,000 people have been killed, half of whom are children, according to Gaza’s health authorities. That’s one out of every 200 people in Gaza. Tens of thousands of people have been injured. Families are digging their dead loved ones out from under the rubble. At least 1.7 million people have been displaced,

medical capacities.

Indiscriminate and relentless attacks must stop now. Forcible displacement must stop now. Assaults on hospitals and medical staff must stop now. Restrictions on aid and the siege must stop now. It must all stop now.

We call on you to be part of the solution and exert all means in your power to prevent further carnage.

Our medical teams in the West Bank also report attacks on health care with a surge in violence, persecution and harassment, in which over 220 Palestinians have been killed since 7 October, either by Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) or by Israeli settlers, according to the United Nations.

Thus far, world leaders, including permanent members of the Security Council, have been complicit, either by providing Israel with diplomatic cover,



MSF nurse Mohammed Hawajari cleans the wounds of a young boy at the MSF Burns Clinic in Gaza after he suffered severe burns from an airstrike, 19 October 2023.

COURTESY: MSF

according to the United Nations. These civilians have been forcibly ordered to move south, but Israel is also bombing that area. Nowhere is safe.

Ahead of the truce, Our emergency team in Khan Younis, in southern Gaza, has reported massive influxes of wounded after intense bombing. These strikes are also hitting overcrowded, squalid refugee camps, where people are barely surviving on the sparse humanitarian aid available. If the bombs do not get them, infectious diseases and starvation will.

A sustained ceasefire is the only way to stop the killing of thousands of more civilians and allow for the scaled-up delivery of desperately needed humanitarian aid. MSF also calls for the establishment of an independent mechanism to oversee the adequate flow of humanitarian supplies into Gaza. Furthermore, we call for the implementation of secure and long-lasting medical evacuation routes to third countries for people suffering from severe injuries. In the short-term, the evacuation of these patients to Egypt through the Rafah crossing could be an option, and MSF is willing to contribute to scaling up necessary

by supplying Israel with seemingly unconditional military assistance, or by failing to help stem the relentless bloodshed and atrocities being committed in Gaza.

It is time to choose whether the Security Council will continue issuing half-hearted calls for the respect of international law and the protection of civilians, or will fulfil its international peace and security mandate and exercise its full diplomatic leverage to convince the State of Israel that the death sentence it has handed the people of Gaza is inhumane, indefensible, and cannot continue to be carried out.

We urge you to take action to uphold our shared humanity.

“We did what we could. Remember us.” These are the words one of our emergency doctors wrote on a Gaza hospital whiteboard normally used for planning surgeries. When the guns fall silent and the true scale of devastation is revealed, will the Security Council and its members be able to say the same?

**Christos Christou**  
President, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International

