

Canada or the Quad?

by GWYNNE DYER

First Prize: Two Fabulous Days in Beautiful Delhi! Second Prize: Four Days in Delhi!

Having to wait an extra two days in Delhi after the G20 while the Canadian armed forces fixed a plane to bring Prime Minister Justin Trudeau home was not really a catastrophe, but there was clearly something else wrong too.

The Canadian media made the usual fuss about the delay, of course, because it gave them something to write about. (They always need something to hold the ads apart.) But the Indian media were also writing about it, with local TV channels and news websites running reports about the 'snubbed' Canadian prime minister's 'disastrous' trip.

That was bizarre, because the travel arrangements of Canadian prime ministers are not normally big news in India. The Indian media had obviously been tipped off by the government that Canada was now an enemy whose misfortunes were to be celebrated. A week later it became clear why.

On Monday Justin Trudeau told parliament that India was suspected of involvement in the murder of a Canadian Sikh activist three months ago in Vancouver. Hardeep Singh Nijjar ran a plumbing business in the suburb of Surrey, but he grew up in the Sikh-majority state of Punjab in northwest India during the heyday of the violent 'Khalistan' separatist movement.

He fled to Canada in 1997 and became a citizen in 2015, but he remained active in Sikh nationalist politics, and India undoubtedly saw him as an enemy. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service reportedly warned him that he was 'under threat from professional assassins,' and that proved to be true.

The hit was done by two masked men, probably local contract killers, near a gurdwara (temple) in Surrey on 18 June. Who paid them? A rival plumbing firm? Islamist fanatics? After due consideration. Canada's security forces concluded that it was the senior intelligence officer at the Indian High Commission in Ottawa.

He has been duly expelled from Canada. The Indian government, predictably, called the accusation 'absurd' and expelled a Canadian diplomat tit-for-tat. Normally, there would then be a period of silent sulking before normal relations were resumed.

This sort of thing happens all the time. Prince Muhammad bin Salman orders the murder, dismemberment and disposal of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan waits four years before visiting Saudi Arabia again. (Joe Biden even waited another ten weeks after that.)

Russian exiles are poisoned in England by Moscow's agents with monotonous regularity, and the British government doesn't even hit 'pause' on the relationship. (Or at least it didn't until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and even now the Russian embassy in London is still open.)

So why should the assassination of a Sikh-Canadian in Canada on the orders of New Delhi cause such a fuss (assuming that this was actually the case, which is a pretty high probability)? Because of the timing. Specifically, because of the Quad.

Three other major powers with interests in Asia - the United States, Japan and Australia - are currently engaged in a complicated courtship of India. The mating dance is called the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ('Quad' for short'), and the suitors hope that it will end up as a military alliance that will 'contain' China.

India is interested, because it sees China as its major rival, but it has been 'non-aligned' for generations so it's moving slowly. Now Canada, with close ties to all three of India's suitors, is in a confrontation with India over some stupid murder they don't really care

about. It might even have been the rogue decision of a single Indian intelligence agent.

Canada's friends and allies have all murmured their strong support, but you can tell that they really wish the whole thing would just go away. India will never apologise or even admit wrongdoing, because great states, like four-year-olds, simply don't do that sort of thing. But if Canada could see its way clear to letting the issue just fade away....

Trudeau can't do that, because he has his own domestic politics to worry about. Once the security agencies pointed their fingers at India, he had to act or the opposition would have crucified him. (That kind of information always gets out.) He has to go on 'defending Canadian sovereignty' too, for the same reason.

Good, because even though Canada is not directly involved in the 'Quad' project, such a confrontation may delay or even sabotage the whole idea. It is a thoroughly terrible idea, because the last thing Asia and the world needs is a huge new military alliance 'containing' China.

The Chinese are paranoid enough as it is, and the 'end of growth' in China is going to make that a lot worse. Don't stoke the flames.