

## Nesting in Australia: Indian Spy Rings Take Root

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*In his 2021 annual threat assessment, the director-general of ASIO, the Australian domestic intelligence service, [pointed to an active spy ring](#) operating in the country, or what he chose to call a "nest of spies". The obvious conclusion drawn by information-starved pundits was that the nest was filled with the eggs and fledglings of Chinese intelligence or Russian troublemakers. How awkward then, for the revelations to be focused on another country, one Australia is ingratiatingly disposed to in its efforts to keep China in its place.*

At the start of this month, a number of anonymous security sources [revealed](#) to various outlets, including *The Washington Post*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, that the spies in question came from the Indian foreign intelligence agency, known rather benignly, even bookishly, as the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

The range of their interests were expansive: gathering information on defence projects of a sensitive nature, the state of Australia's airport security, and classified information covering Australia's trade relationships. The more sinister aspect of the RAW's remit, and once it has extended to other countries, was monitoring members of the Indian diaspora, a habit it has fallen into over the years. According to Burgess, "The spies developed targeted relationships with current and former politicians, a foreign embassy and a state police service." The particular "nest" of agents in question had also cultivated and recruited, with some success, an Australian government security clearance holder with access to "sensitive details of defence technology".

In details supplied by Burgess, the agents in question, including "a number" of Indian officials, were subsequently removed by the Morrison government of the day. *The Washington Post* also revealed that two members of the RAW were expelled from Australia in 2020 following a counter-intelligence operation by ASIO.

Given the recent exchanges between the Australian Prime Minister, **Anthony Albanese**, and India's Prime Minister, **Narendra Modi**, all efforts to pursue the sacred cows of prosperity and security, this was something of an embarrassment. But the embarrassment is more profound to Canberra, which continues to prove itself amateurish when it comes to understanding the thuggish inclinations of great powers. Beijing and Moscow are condemned as authoritarian forces in the dark tussle between evil and good, while Washington and New Delhi are democratic, friendlier propositions on the right side of history. Yet all have powerful interests, and Australia, being at best a lowly middle-power annexed to the US imperium, will always be vulnerable to the walkover by friends and adversaries alike.

Grant Wyeth [writes](#) with cold clarity on the matter in *The Diplomat*.

“With countries like Australia seeking to court India due to the wealth of opportunities it provides, New Delhi knows that actions like these won't come with any significant consequences.”

The lamentably defanged responses from Australian government ministers are solid proof of that proposition.

“I don't want to get into these kinds of operational issues in any way,” [explained](#) Australia's Treasurer, **Jim Chalmers**, to the ABC. “We've got a good relationship with India and with other countries in the region, it's an important economic relationship, it's become closer in recent years as a consequence of efforts on both sides, and that's a good thing.”

Operational issues are exactly the sort of thing that should interest Chalmers and other government members. In targeting dissidents and activists, Modi's BJP government has taken to venturing afar, from proximate Pakistan to a more distant United States, particularly Sikh activists who are accused of demanding, and agitating, for a separate homeland known as Khalistan. The methods used there have not just involved plodding research and cool analysis but outright murder. The Indian PM, far from being a cuddly, statesmanlike sort, is a figure of ethnoreligious fanaticism keen on turning India into an exclusively Hindu state.

In September last year, Canadian **Prime Minister Justin Trudeau** [spoke](#) of “credible allegations” that Indian agents had murdered **Hardeep Singh Nijjar**, a prominent Khalistan advocate designated in 2020 by New Delhi to be a terrorist. He had been slain in his truck on June 18, 2023 outside the Surrey temple, Guru Nanak Gurdwara.

“Any involvement of a foreign government in the killing of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil,” reasoned Trudeau, “is an unacceptable violation of our sovereignty. It is contrary to the fundamental rules by which free, open and democratic societies conduct themselves.”

Here are the full remarks from the Prime Minister on the potential link between the India government and the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

Trudeau says he raised the issue with Modi when they spoke at the G20 [#cdnpoli pic.twitter.com/5pGp1gTVRj](#)

— Mackenzie Gray (@Gray\_Mackenzie) [September 18, 2023](#)

This month, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police announced that three Indian citizens resident in Edmonton had been arrested in connection with the killing.

“There are separate and distinct investigations,” [stated](#) the RCMP assistant commissioner, **David Teboul**. “These efforts include investigating connections to the government of India.”

Given that Australia has a Sikh population of around 200,000 or so, this should be a point of nail-biting concern. Instead, Canberra’s tepid response is all too familiar, tolerant of violations of a sovereignty it keeps alienating it to the highest bidders. Tellingly, Albanese [went so far as to assure](#) Modi during his May visit last year that “strict action” would be taken against Sikh separatist groups in Australia, whatever that entailed. Modi had taken a particular interest in reports of vandalism against Hindu temples in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney featuring pro-Khalistan slogans.

Be it Washington’s seduction with its promise of nuclear-powered submarines and a security guarantee against manufactured and exaggerated threats, or India’s sweet undertakings for greater economic and military cooperation, Australia’s political and security cadres have been found wanting. There has even been an open admission by Burgess – expressly [made](#) in his 2022 Annual Threat Assessment address – that “espionage is conducted by countries we consider friends – friends with sharp elbows and voracious intelligence requirements.” The ABC similarly [reports](#), citing unnamed government sources, “that friendly nations believed to be particularly active in espionage operations in Australia include Singapore, South Korea, Israel and India.” Something to be proud of.

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