

**US foreign policy**

## US thwarted plot to kill Sikh separatist on American soil

Washington warned India over concerns of government involvement in assassination conspiracy



US President Joe Biden, right, has faced criticism from human rights groups over his administration's efforts to deepen ties with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi © Kenny Holston/Reuters

**Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington 6 HOURS AGO

US authorities thwarted a conspiracy to assassinate a Sikh separatist on American soil and issued a warning to India's government over concerns it was involved in the plot, according to multiple people familiar with the case.

The target of the plot was Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, an American and Canadian citizen who is general counsel for Sikhs for Justice, a US-based group that is part of a movement pushing for an independent Sikh state called "Khalistan".

The people familiar with the case, who requested anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the intelligence that prompted the warning, did not say whether the protest to New Delhi led the plotters to abandon their plan, or whether the FBI intervened and foiled a scheme already in motion.

The US informed some allies about the plot following the [murder of Hardeep Singh Nijjar](#), a Canadian Sikh separatist killed in Vancouver in June. In September, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said there were "credible allegations" linking New Delhi to Nijjar's fatal shooting.

One person familiar with the situation said the US protest was issued after Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a [high-profile state visit](#) to Washington in June.

Separate from the diplomatic warning, US federal prosecutors have filed a sealed indictment against at least one alleged perpetrator of the plot in a New York district court, according to people familiar with the case.

The US justice department is debating whether to unseal the indictment and make the allegations public or wait until Canada finishes its investigation into Nijjar's murder. Further complicating the case, one person charged in the indictment is believed to have left the US, according to people familiar with the proceedings.

The US justice department and FBI declined to comment. The National Security Council said the US did "not comment on ongoing law enforcement matters or private diplomatic discussions with our partners". But it added: "Upholding the safety and security of US citizens is paramount."

Washington shared details of the Pannun case with a wider group of allies after Trudeau went public with details of the Vancouver killing, the combination of which sparked concern among allies about a possible pattern of behaviour.

India has rejected Canada's claims about New Delhi's possible involvement in Nijjar's murder as "absurd".

Modi's office referred questions about the case to India's external affairs ministry, which declined to comment.

Contacted by the Financial Times, Pannun declined to say whether US authorities had warned him about the plot, saying he would "let the US government respond to the issue of threats to my life on American soil from the Indian operatives".

"The threat to an American citizen on American soil is a challenge to America's sovereignty, and I trust that the Biden administration is more than capable to handle any such challenge," Pannun told the FT.

Pannun angered Indian officials this month by issuing a video in which he warned Sikhs not to fly on Air India because it would be "life threatening". He told the FT he was not making a violent threat against the airline.

Washington has urged India to help the Canadian investigation, but has avoided being too critical of New Delhi in public over the Vancouver case. The Biden administration views India — a member of the Quad security group along with Japan and Australia — as a critical part of a broader strategy to counter China.

Several people familiar with the debate inside the Biden administration said officials

were aware that any public disclosure of the US plot, and Washington's protest to New Delhi, would renew questions about India's reliability as a trusted partner.

The Biden administration has faced criticism from human rights groups for its efforts to deepen relations with India.

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata party is a Hindu nationalist party, and Modi has been accused by his political opponents and human rights groups of fomenting violence against religious and ethnic minorities in India.

The Indian prime minister was feted this summer in Washington, where he delivered a speech to Congress. Ahead of his visit, US national security adviser Jake Sullivan said President Joe Biden would raise human rights with Modi but said the US-India relationship would be "one of the defining relationships of the 21st century".

The [FT previously reported](#) that Biden raised the Canadian allegations with Modi at the G20 summit in India in September. The White House declined to say whether Biden raised the Pannun case with Modi in September.

US ambassador to Canada David Cohen also said in September that Ottawa received information about the Vancouver case from the intelligence-sharing network "Five Eyes", which comprises the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

India has accused Canada, the UK and other countries with large Indian diaspora communities of being too tolerant of members of the Sikh separatist movement, which it frequently accuses of terrorism.

During a visit to Washington in September, Indian foreign minister S Jaishankar told a Hudson Institute event that Ottawa had a "very permissive" attitude towards Sikh separatists because of Canadian politics.