

**International Assassinations and Future Research: Insights from the Assassination of
Hardeep Singh Nijjar**

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1) Introduction

On the evening of June 18th 2023, a Canadian citizen named Hardeep Singh Nijjar was assassinated outside a Gurudwara in Surrey, British Columbia. Nijjar immigrated from India to Canada in 1997, running a plumbing business and serving as the president of Guru Nanak Singh Gurudwara. A prominent advocate for the Khalistan movement, Nijjar was labelled a terrorist by the Indian state. His assassination caused a massive uproar in Canada-India relations over the uncertainty of India's involvement. The situation intensified with the United States uncovering a similar plot of assassinating Gurwant Singh Pannun, a US-Canadian citizen, in subsequent weeks. These accusations soured India-Canada relations, temporarily severing economic ties, sparking diplomatic turbulence, and prompting visa bans (The Economist, September 19, September 20, November 22, 2023). While international assassinations and covert operations are not new to the study of international relations, the Nijjar case caused a massive uproar in the global community, recentring discussions of state sovereignty, signalling, minority rights, and leadership in mainstream and policy circles. The rise of India, the increased prominence of transnational repression, and the fact that this killing took place on Western soil drastically amplified attention for this case (Chatterjee Miller, September 25, 2023; HRW, December 15, 2023; Ling, April 11, 2024). While investigations into the case and stakeholder involvement continue, the ensuing fallout and discourse surrounding this case provide a timely opportunity to revisit literature on international assassination debates within the context of international relations (IR).

What does contemporary IR literature offer to this discussion? We argue that the current emphasis on norms, legality, human rights, and rational decision-making does not adequately explain international assassinations. Instead, we suggest a research program prioritizing the importance of signalling, leadership, domestic politics, and transnational repression. Although

relatively niche, these dimensions offer meaningful standpoints and facilitate a holistic and grounded understanding of international assassinations within the context of IR (Kertzer 2017).

We position our piece as a conceptual intervention in discussions of international assassinations in IR, exploring the broader generalizations and assumptions embedded in the field. Looking beyond the biases within the field, we seek to examine the potential of new research programs that highlight the role of leadership, domestic politics, and signalling to understand international assassinations. We deploy discourse analysis to build this conceptual intervention, examining power relations in knowledge-making. We leverage Nijjar's assassination not as a case study but as a reflective moment to assess the literature on international assassinations in the field. We do not offer any conclusions or theory on the government's or interest groups' role in the discussion. However, we offer competing explanations, lenses, and standpoints to make meaning of the developments. We do this by building on cues from discussions in popular media, diplomatic play-offs, and informal/formal discussions of the assassination of Nijjar.

Methodologically, this research taps into the wide gap between public debate and scholarly assessments of developments in IR and the exciting opportunities available to bridge and work between the two. We look beyond the narrow methodological terrain of IR, such as objectivity, clearly defined variables, and coded data, by investigating the discursive and speculative aspects of international developments (Kibbe, 2010; Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 2017). Discourse analysis addresses the parochialism and shortcomings of public and academic discourses, critically assessing the challenges and opportunities between the two. Most importantly, the research pushes the boundaries of understanding IR by embracing the uncertainty and ambiguity of pursuing such an enquiry. Instead of taking uncertainty and ambiguity as an impediment to research in IR, the

study investigates the politics of uncertainty and ambiguity in IR and its role in structuring discourses and knowledge in the field (Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 2017).

In this paper, we first engage with the literature on international assassinations in IR and its inherent challenges. Next, we explore the public discussion of the Najjar assassination, noting differing accounts and perspectives. Third, we situate this discourse within discussions of international assassinations in IR. Lastly, we synthesize our findings and present opportunities for future research and possible associated challenges.

2) International Assassinations in IR: Broad Perspectives

Compared to other IR subfields, the study of international assassination has been relatively sparse. This lack of scholarship can be attributed to the fact that much of the existing discourse on assassination is primarily derived from sources that are difficult to verify (Kibbe, 2010, p. 6). Journalists draw from whistle-blowers, confidential sources, leaks, and defectors – and while all of these sources are often reliable, they are not typically considered reliable in academia (ibid). Research on transnational assassination is contemporary and lacks a rich academic history. The reasons for this are threefold: first, the existing taboo against international assassination; second, the post-9/11 shift of transnational assassination and the focus on terrorist targets; and third, the increased sophistication of technology and its deployment in assassinations (Thomas, 2000 p. 131; 2005 p. 28-30; Senn and Troy, 2017 p. 190; Prat, 2019 p. 723; Dezfuli, 2023; p. 192). The central historical reference to international assassination in IR literature has been the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 and its connection to the onset of the First World War. Apart from this, the second significant discussion has been the US operation to kill Osama Bin Laden in 2011 and debates around the legitimacy and legality of the operation. Since the Bin Laden

assassination, discussions on international assassinations have become more pronounced, such as the killings of Jamal Khashoggi and Qassim Soleimani. The IR literature that has discussed these cases typically focuses on norms, legality, human rights, efficacy, and sovereignty (See Thomas, 2000; 2005; Sanders, 2014; Großklaus, 2019). Despite the divergent IR literature on assassination, some critical pillars of discussion include the changing normative behaviour, the changing nature of assassinations, and the role of technology.

Ward Thomas's work is particularly relevant in highlighting shifting norms on international assassination. Thomas (2000) offers a historical journey of international assassination, wherein he traces the indifference of traditional states in deploying international assassination and its recognition as legitimate. He provides various examples, such as the use of international assassinations in ancient Rome and the codification of international assassinations in early codifications of international law, among others. Thomas traces a shift in attitude towards international assassinations during the 17th century Thirty Year War and the growing consensus against its prohibition. Thomas offers two concrete reasons for this development: 1) the rise of the mass army and 2) the fiction of the individual being different from the state. Thomas describes the rise of the army to be a consequence of the Westphalian state responsible for safeguarding kings from personal attacks. He also suggests that the Westphalian treaty helped construct the fiction that war is an outcome of state behaviour and not individual interest; therefore, a distinction between the two is mandated.

Thomas (2000) suggests that concerns over the consequences of international assassination, particularly revenge and retribution, help reinforce norms against it. Thomas's novel claim is that states seek to uphold norms against international assassination (2000, p. 107 – 111). This idea is echoed by Grayson (2012), he writes:

Targeted killing is a nodal point through which relations of domination, submission and resistance constituted by forms of juridical power, disciplinary power, biopolitical power and control circulate ...Extermination evokes the spectacle of sovereign punishment, the ordering conformity of the disciplinary norm, the biopolitical eschatology of 'killing to make life live' and the desire – expressed through mechanisms of control – to immediately locate, position and track persons of interest across a governmental environment that is being conceived on a planetary scale. (Grayson 2012, p. 121)

Grayson (2012) and Thomas (2000; 2005) successfully link ideas of sovereignty, state centrality, and control to power, interests, and logic. In sum, the state has been central to justifications against and for international assassinations, requiring close scrutiny.

After 9/11, research on transnational assassination shifted as the United States embarked on the War on Terror. According to Thomas (2005), norms against international assassination began to erode (p. 28). A robust body of literature explores norm erosion in IR (See Byman 2006; Schilling and Schilling, 2016; Jervis et al., 2021). Bosco (2009) contests the normative nature of international assassination, tracing its origins to foreign policy factors and rational calculations. Bosco illustrates this through the case of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and his assassination in 2005 (p. 349). Another front where Bosco (2009) challenges the mainstream literature is by disputing the presence of norms in the first place. He points to the colonial powers and covert operations targeting liberation movements in the Global South (Ibid).

Contrary to Bosco, Schilling and Schilling (2016) suggest that norms are present; however, they claim that any norms on international assassination are subservient to the foreign policy interest of the actors involved (p. 504). Another important work on international assassination and norms is Pratt (2019), wherein Pratt makes a case for norm transformation instead of norm decline. Pratt argues that “international and domestic US prohibitions on assassination have not disappeared but have changed as a result of practitioner-led changes in the conventions,

technologies, and bureaucratic structures governing the use of force in counterterrorism activities” (Pratt, 2019, p. 723). Causal mechanisms identified for explaining norm transformation include convention orientation, technological revision, and network synthesis to explain norm dissociation and norm transformation (Ibid).

Another area where considerable research has been conducted on assassination includes the efficacy of assassination. Reviewing efficacy and assassination, Byman (2006) contrasts US assassinations with assassinations conducted by Israel. Byman (2006) posits that the US tends to lose more than Israel because of its status as an upholder of the rule of law and, subsequently, should consider alternative policy options (p. 97 - 106). Similarly, on the question of leadership decapitation, Jordan argues that religious groups are less affected by leadership attacks than terrorist groups because they are larger and power is less centralized. The connecting node is a religious sentiment rather than a charismatic leader. In short, attacks on the leadership of terrorist groups are more successful as they are small, centralized, and tied to authority figures, most likely the head of the terrorist organization (Jordan, 2009, p. 755). Carvin (2012), on the other hand, recommends exercising caution on the use of international assassinations because of the high risk of civilian casualties (p. 552). On a similar track, Grayson calls assassination “a reflection of weakness and not strength,” calling into question the overall efficacy of assassination. Grayson argues that assassination reflects the failure of counter-insurgency operations of state action, alongside the elimination of any settlement whatsoever because of low trust pursued by personalized targeting of leaders of groups (Grayson, 2012, p. 125 – 126). In another study, Johnston reflects on the effectiveness of assassination through quantitative modelling based on a new data set, correcting the selection bias, lack of variance in study designs, and unrealistically high standards to measure successful decapitations (Johnston, 2012, p. 48-49). Johnston further

claims that evidence on the efficacy of assassination is complex (Ibid). He claims that pursuing international assassination to eliminate organizational leadership “increases governments’ chances of defeating insurgencies, reduces insurgent attacks, and diminishes overall levels of violence” (Johnston, 2012, p. 77). This analysis demonstrates that discussions on efficacy and international assassinations are complex and evolving. State interests are coupled with international perception, and often, the risks outweigh the rewards. That said, secrecy is a significant benefit associated with these covert strategies.

Secrecy has been primarily viewed as one of the benefits of international assassination, as it prevents public scrutiny and plausible deniability (Kibbe, 2010, p. 5). While secrecy can often absolve states through plausible deniability, it creates significant problems for academics seeking to understand this state strategy. Barriers to accessing data, lack of public records, and informal information sharing all dissuade researchers (Ibid, p. 6 – 7). The uncertainty regarding access to information makes information-seeking susceptible to disinformation and propaganda (Ibid). Schilling and Schilling (2016), in their piece on decision-making regarding international assassination in IR, view secrecy as an impediment to decision-making, influencing the nature of discussions on the subject matter. Senn and Troy, on the subject of secrecy, make a provocative claim that secrecy is no longer the *modus operandi* of international assassination, with international assassinations being tools of state policy, legitimated through public statements and justifications (2017, p. 176). The central reason for the change they traced is the changing nature of the target from state to non-state actors and the role of specialized technology explicitly designed to target non-state actors (Senn and Troy, 2017, 190). Lastly, Carnegie in “Secrets in International Relations and Foreign Policy” states that secrecy over covert action is considered because it avoids destabilization, provides tactical advantage, and safeguards from any fallout (2021, p. 19-20). In

sum, secrecy and the potential trade-offs remain another contested and deliberated research area on international assassination, overlooking areas like signalling and domestic costs.

From a broad review of the field, one could conclude that the literature on international assassinations is growing; however, only under the larger normative and research agendas of norms, efficacy, and secrecy. Moreover, the constraints, as acknowledged by Kibbe (reliability of information), Johnston (selection bias), and Bosco (narrow codification), highlight some of the underlying crises of research on international assassination, opening doors to more eclectic and nuanced enquiry. Before exploring the new research approaches and methods on international assassination in IR, it is worthwhile to make sense of the research challenges in the field. The majority of research on international assassination is from a Western standpoint. Either research focuses on the West or perspectives from the West. The research generally takes Western ideals, such as norms on international assassination, for granted. Second, most research overlooks the dark sides of Western state behaviour. Western utilization of covert tactics, like assassination, in the global south is generally under-researched in the IR context. The silence on the US role in the assassination in the Cold War and the colonial states' role during liberalization movements is worth noting, highlighting the ambivalence and hypocrisy in research (Bosco, 2009, p. 349). Most of the current research on international assassinations focuses on terrorist and terrorist groups, failing to problematize the politics of terrorist recognition and the power imbalances in designating terrorist groups in international organizations. There is a general lack of problematization surrounding who gets to use the label of terrorist (Sanders, 2014, p. 517). This lack of critique reifies the divide between the East and West, positioning a strong law-abiding West vis a vis a weak terrorist-inflicted East (Sanders, 2014, p. 526). These dichotomies and archetypes often frame the background condition of acting on global south states in a complete disregard for the

sovereignty and territorial integrity of targeted states (Ibid, p. 514). The targeted states are understood as de-facto beneficiaries of the targeting state, helping to remove terrorism and bring peace to the affected nation-states. Such attitudes are mostly at odds with local conditions and situational contexts, resulting in undue civilian causality and adverse political conditions. The infantilizing and oriental attitude of great powers and the West structures the broader discussion of international assassination in literature, requiring close attention.

Other challenges with literature on international assassination include a general disconnect between academic analysis and public discourse, reliability of information, and low enthusiasm for micro-processes in IR. Journalistic debates and academic discussions often maintain a divide in international assassination literature because of the differing aims between the mediums. While the former is geared toward understanding the truth behind assassinations and the parties involved, the latter deals with explaining why the assassination even took place in the first place. Often, the goals of understanding and explaining are not as independent as we might assume. One effective way of addressing this disconnect is to understand secrecy and ambiguity as political weapons. Carson and Yarhi-Milo's piece "Covert Communication: The Intelligibility and Credibility of Signalling in Secret" explores secrecy from a lens of intentionality and hidden communication geared to attain signal resolve (2017, p. 128). Despite the information limitations, they conducted this research by coding the dependent variable as communication of resolve and the inferences of actions, as opposed to conflict outcomes (Carson & Yarhi-Milo, 2017, p. 138). They illustrate this through qualitative research design and accounting for public speeches and journalistic reporting. The operationalizations of variables and accounting for multiple sources illuminate an innovative way of mitigating ambiguity and bridging the journalistic and academic divide.

The literature on international assassination in IR has been less sympathetic to micro-processes in IR because of a general focus on state behaviour and systemic forces. This causes a bias in analysis as it prioritizes state and systemic factors over others. Although research on micro-processes in IR is not necessarily new, an explicit acknowledgement is lacking in the discipline (Kertzer, 2017, p. 81-82). Epistemologically, micro-foundations literature can be reduced to the twin features of 1) exploring the nuts and bolts of social science scholarship and 2) exploring these nuts and bolts at lower levels of analysis (ibid, p. 84). International assassination literature has been oblivious to the discourse on micro-foundations in international relations. The 2021 review article by Jervis, Yarhi-Milo, and Casler explores some of the newer literature on international assassination, which incorporates the micro-foundations literature. This latest research illuminates micro-processes like audience costs, leadership attributes, and signalling (2021, p. 175). A second type of research shifting the discourse on international assassination explores the relationship between governance and international assassinations and how autocracies exercise transnational repression over their citizens (Tsourapas, 2021). In sum, while some of the assumptions and challenges of international assassinations are being increasingly taken up by new literature, there is more to be done.

3) Hardeep Singh Nijjar's Assassination and the Competing Explanations

The discussions of the assassination of Nijjar have been divisive at both the national and international levels. This section briefly outlines the case from different stakeholder perspectives to take stock of competing explanations. While the Indian government has agreed to participate in a Canadian-led investigation, they have vehemently denied the accusations that the assassination is linked to New Delhi. Despite the denials, in September 2023, the Canadian government sanctioned the expulsion of Indian diplomats in a sign of retaliation. The Canadian government,

according to the Govt of India, has failed to provide any substantive evidence on assassination and has been vocal only since the US government uncovered a similar plot in the US. India's retaliation has been more aggressive than reciprocal. Shortly after the accusations and diplomatic fallout, India suspended visas, pulled out of the Canadian business economy, and made statements in the media condemning Ottawa's claims. Surrounding these developments, multiple explanations and theories have been offered (The Economist, September 19, September 20, November 22, 2023; Chengappa, Sep 29, 2023). Sides supporting the Canadian claim see the plausibility based on the claims of totalitarian and right-wing politics of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Modi and his right-wing persona have come under increased scrutiny linked to his anti-minority narrative and pro-Hindu image. Geopolitical commentators have time and again argued the possible inclusion of the Indian government based on the past warnings given to Canada by the Indian government of harbouring Sikh Separatists and providing safe refuge (HRW, 15th December 2023).

The rise of India and its geopolitical prowess under Modi over the past two decades also helps fuel the allegations that India would take such an aggressive approach. Analysts sympathetic to India have exercised caution in buying into anti-India narratives, highlighting domestic reasons such as the minority government of Trudeau and the support he receives from NDP, a party led by Sikh leader Jagmeet Singh. Taking a position that risks hurting the sentiments of the Sikh Population and NDP supporters has made Trudeau firm and vociferous in his criticism of the Indian government (Ling, April 11, 2024). The tussle between the Indian state and the Sikh population dates back to the early 1980s and demands an independent Sikh state named Khalistan. The 1984 riots, wherein the Indian military raided the holy shrine Golden Temple in Amritsar to root out separatists, is considered one of the darkest moments in Sikh history, resulting in the

massacre of many innocent Sikhs. Other arguments frame India's non-involvement in the relatively low importance of the Sikh separation issue in the politics of India and the lack of need to take such a significant risk (HRW, December 15, 2023; Ling, April 11, 2024).

The US, UK, and other Western states have taken a careful approach, positioning themselves by requesting that India and Canada work collaboratively in settling the dispute. The polarization of Western powers against India has been tempered because of India's rise as a middle power and its centrality to geopolitical considerations (Chatterjee Miller, September 25, 2023). Pakistan and China, on the other hand, had been more sympathetic to Canada's claim in claiming international assassination/targeted killing as the modus operandi of India in South Asia for decades (Hussain and Grim, December 10, 2023). On the home front in Canada and India, responses have been mixed. Sikhs within Canada had openly claimed the involvement of Govt of India in this case. At the same time, nationalists in India see this as an opportunity leveraged by Trudeau to make up for his shortcomings as a leader and the waning role of Canada in world affairs. As of now, the US government, another claimed victim of the alleged attack by India, has refrained from taking any fixed position on the subject matter and looks forward to the report from Indian counterparts upon the completion of an internal investigation (Lavania, April 1, 2024). As per the latest comment by New Zealand's Deputy Prime Minister, Canada has failed to present credible evidence proving India's involvement in the case nor taken the whole thing to trial (March 14, Haidar, 2024).

The claims, narratives, and theories above all point in different directions, but none are too close to the academic research on international assassination about norms, efficacy, and secrecy at the centre. The dimensions covered in the abovementioned literature include leadership attributes, domestic actors, diasporic population perspectives, the east-west divide, and signalling. This is evident in the discussions of Modi's leadership characteristics, perceptions of the Sikh separation

movement and India, the emphasis on the attack on Canadian soil, and the struggle for geopolitical power in the international system. All these extrapolations, in some form or other, allude to the micro-foundations discourses in IR and the need to evaluate the case.

4) New Research Avenues and International Assassinations

A discourse analysis of differing positions on the Nijjar case offers numerous directions for research on the international assassination. In this section, we look at four directions: leadership attributes, domestic costs, transnational repression, and east-west politics.

4.1) Leadership Attributes

Research on leadership attributes is a relatively new area in IR wherein leadership traits and perceptions are given importance over state or systemic analysis. Research on leadership attributes demystifies the state and leadership divide and explores variance in state responses under different leadership. Yarhi-Milo's work "In the Eye of the Beholder: How Leaders and Intelligence Communities Assess the Intentions of Adversaries" explores leadership attributes and their role in decision-making. Yarhi-Milo develops what he calls the "selection attention thesis," wherein disciplinary insights from psychology, neuroscience, and other disciplines come together to explain decision-making by leaders based on their theories, expectations, and emotions, and not necessarily the capability or behaviour of other states (2013, p. 8 -9). Other seminal work in the field includes Rathbun et al.'s (2017) rational human behaviour, which is explained through epistemic motivation and social value orientation (p. 34). These dimensions are then deployed by Rathbun et al. to develop models to explain individual behaviour under certain conditions. Hardeep Singh Nijjar's case and its discourse are linked to Modi's leadership attributes and strong far-right image juxtaposed with peace-loving and multicultural Trudeau. A dive into leadership can help us

understand the subjectivities involved in both parties and the playout of different battles on both ends. When applied to India-Canada tensions, the leadership attribute dimension can reveal much about Canadian and Indian behaviour. This approach draws attention to leader agency rather than state-based interests by emphasizing leadership characteristics and analyzing contemporary and historical behaviour.

4.2) Domestic Costs

Discussion of domestic costs finds a cursory mention in most international assassination literature. Domestic costs are either ignored in the analysis of decision-making on international assassination or considered a legitimating means to justify action (Carnegie, 2021; Byman, 2006; Senn and Troy, 2017). Very rarely, domestic factors alone or a holistic investigation into the domestic arena is pursued as a standalone field of enquiry or an independent variable in research. In the current case, both Modi and Trudeau have high audience costs in their respective governance areas and outstanding elections in the near term. Both have witnessed a decline in recent polls and have been in desperate need of public approval (The Economist, September 19, 20, 2023). Irrespective of national politics, the Canadian and Indian populations view their role and the question of Sikh separatism very differently. Evaluating domestic costs is central as most systemic analysis is immune to domestic voices and fails to represent the stake of domestic actors. Methodologically, the study of domestic actors enables conceptualizing challenges/opportunities in discourse analysis in studying international assassinations and their decision-making, risks, and opportunities (Kibbe, 2010; Carson and Yarhi-Milo, 2017).

4.3) Transnational Repression

International assassination has been viewed as a standalone subject in international relations or as an extension of covert operations or interventionism. Transnational repression as a lens adds nuance to the discussion by viewing international assassinations as a means by particular kinds of states for silencing dissent. Tsourapas (2021) develops a model illustrating how states exercise transnational repression. His work accounts for different types of repression, such as surveillance, threats, coerced return, and lethal retribution. He unpacks these concepts and links them to legitimization and co-optation through mediums like patriotism, exile, patronage, and blacklisting (p. 622). Tsourapa's model can also be understood as a progressive scale where states exercise control over foreign actors, starting from surveillance and ending with lethal retribution. There are clear cases of inter-state cooperation in these efforts as well.

In 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suspended a long-standing visa agreement between Turkey and Turkmenistan. Interestingly, this decision by the Turkish government was not made in an effort to protect domestic labourers or a broader economic protectionist policy; rather, it was driven by a request from the Turkmen government. Since 2007, Turkmen have been able to enter Turkey on a 30-day visa. Once in the country, it was easy for Turkmen to extend their presence by obtaining work permits (RadioFreeEurope, 2022). This agreement had benefits for both countries. The Turkish economy benefited from cheap labour while Turkmenistan saw its migrant diaspora send home remittances. This agreement ended in September 2022 when, somewhat unexpectedly, the government of Turkmenistan requested that Erdogan suspend visas to prevent political dissidents from fleeing to Turkey (Kenez, 2022). This cooperation to strengthen Turkmenistan's authoritarian regime is not new to the Central Asian region. In 2010, the Russian government detained Uzbek political dissident Rustam Zokhidov based on accusations that he defied Uzbek law by being associated with Hizb ut-Tahrir. Banned

in Uzbekistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir is a legal political organization in several democratic states (Cooley, 2017). After a long detention in Russia, Zokhidov was eventually deported to Uzbekistan and hastily imprisoned (ibid).

It is not immediately clear what the deporting states gain from these interactions. While Turkmenistan effectively criminalizes upwards of 200,000 Turkmen within Turkish borders, Turkey loses a cheap labour force and gains hundreds of thousands of undocumented refugees. Russia's cooperation further exacerbates claims that Russia aids and abets uncouth regimes all over the world. Still, it might be easier to rationalize cases of cooperation between autocratic regimes; however, there is also an increasing pattern of this type of cooperation with democratic states.

In January 2023, Germany repatriated Tajik opposition activist Abdullohi Shamsiddin after 14 years in Germany. Two months after his arrival in Dushanbe, a Tajik court found him guilty of inciting domestic political change (Williamson, 2023). Despite well-founded reports that political dissenters are tortured and face other human rights abuses within Tajikistan, Germany chose to deport Shamsiddin. A similar story occurred in Poland in June 2023 when a court deported Tajik national Sorbon Abdurahimzoda (RadioFreeEurope, 2023b). These cases represent a growing trend of cooperation between states on transnational repression.

Given that the Nijjar case clearly falls within the lethal retribution side of Tsourapas's model, it would be interesting to trace the evolution of the diasporic Sikh-Indian relationship in the years leading up to this event. Have there been instances of cooperation between India and Canada on these issues? Tsourapas' standpoint is vital for our case study as surveillance claims are not new among vulnerable communities worldwide. Given the large Indian diaspora in Canada

and the turbulent past between Sikhs and the Indian government, a discussion of transnational repression would be valuable. There have been claims from diasporic Sikhs of surveillance and related means to pressure them to give up their demands. It also provides an interesting vantage point to reflect on questions of sovereignty and political control and its changing relationship in the contemporary world. On the Canadian side, an analysis of transnational repression and international assassination becomes critical given the immigration-friendly model adopted and the challenges naturalized citizens might face in such a situation. Transnational repression as a lens delineates the literature on international assassination from the literature on covert action and targeted killings, influencing research agendas and dimensions of the research.

4.4) The East–West Divide

The majority of research on the subject matter of international assassination is Western-centric, portraying the West in favourable terms and the East in pejorative terms. The discourse on recent assassination reflects this divide between law-abiding and peaceful Canada and a rising and aggressive India. Time and again, the word ‘Canadian soil’ is echoed in the discussion to evoke a qualitative kind of difference between Canada and the others (The Economist, 23 September 2023; 19th September 2023). The emphasis on the Canadian aspect of sovereignty, rights, and others marks the difference in Western media and representation of similar cases elsewhere in the world, where no qualitative difference is alluded to in the background. Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq have also been victims of covert operations of the US. However, the discussions rarely acknowledge the states' rights and portray them as volatile states needing repair. Moreover, the term terrorist is taken for granted in cases like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq; however, despite India's label of Nijjar as a terrorist, his Canadianness is prioritized over India's claim. The question we allude to here is not whether Nijjar is a terrorist or not but about the politics of labelling and

which states and stakeholders matter in that discussion. Exploring the East-West, oriental, racial, and colonial undertones must be undertaken in new research on international assassination to understand the multiple layers of meaning.

5) Conclusion

This research aims to highlight new avenues for research on international assassinations in IR, drawing from the controversy around the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar. Instead of engaging in a particular analysis of the case, we present different ways of understanding and explaining the issue's complexity by linking them to leadership attributes, domestic costs, the East-West divide, and the transnational repression dimension of the discussion.

Methodologically, we offer a unique contribution to this area by combining media perspectives, public discourse, and academic rigour. We demonstrate the opportunities available to pursue research at the intersection of journalistic research (understanding) and academic research (explanation). This research also offers insight into recent and past works on international assassination and its underlying deficiencies. We, in particular, trace the lack of integration of micro-foundations research in IR, the lack of engagement with secrecy as a political weapon, and the lack of rigorous questioning of processes of labelling groups and individuals as terrorists. While the positives of such an enterprise include nuanced theories, holistic explanations, and more inclusive knowledge production, these approaches or lenses also need to be improved. First, it is tough to ascertain the validity of such explanations because of the limitations of coding the same on a quantitative scale. Second, treating everything as discourse might make one vulnerable to endless cyclical loops and movement away from theory building. The success of these new

agendas will depend on how they balance these shortcomings or position themselves in the larger research agenda.

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