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India-Canada ties: defence pact likely during PM Modi's December visit

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What the news is

Speaking at an event in Ottawa, India's High Commissioner to Canada Dinesh K. Patnaik said a defence agreement between the two countries could be announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposed visit on 11 and 12 December. According to him, the two countries are in the final stages of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), "We are on the cusp of finalising it."

Background to the relationship

- **June 2023:** Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Khalistani activist, was killed in British Columbia, Canada on 18 June 2023.

- **September 2023:** On 18 September 2023, then Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau alleged in the House of Commons a potential role of Indian agents, triggering a deep diplomatic chill.
- **14 October 2024 (the crisis peaks):** Canada announced the expulsion of six Indian diplomats and consular officials, including High Commissioner Sanjay Kumar Verma. According to Canada, the step was linked to an RCMP investigation; it had asked India to waive the officials' diplomatic immunity and cooperate with the investigation, and issued notices after India declined.
- **India's side:** the same evening, India's Ministry of External Affairs summoned Canada's Charge d'Affaires, called the "baseless targeting" of its diplomats unacceptable, and, citing security concerns, withdrew its High Commissioner and other targeted officials. Separately, India expelled six Canadian diplomats, including acting High Commissioner Stewart Ross Wheeler, asking them to leave by 19 October 2024. Canada thus describes its step as an 'expulsion', while India has spoken of its High Commissioner's 'withdrawal', both characterisations are on the official record.
- Canadian agency reports subsequently listed India alongside China and Russia as states interfering in Canada's internal politics.
- **Normalisation:** the thaw began with the re-appointment of High Commissioners by both countries. Patnaik took charge in Ottawa in September 2025.

Key points on the current state

- **Defence pact:** a possible announcement during the December visit (per the High Commissioner's remarks).
- **CEPA:** talks on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement are in their final stage; according to the Ministry of External Affairs, both countries aim to finalise CEPA by the end of 2026.
- **Areas of cooperation:** defence, space, nuclear energy, deep tech, trade and people-to-people mobility.
- **Rebuilding trust:** meetings have taken place at multiple levels between ministers, National Security Advisers (NSAs) and agencies of both countries. According to the High Commissioner, the relationship has moved from "a complete lack of trust" a year ago to "an unprecedented degree of mutual trust".
- **The High Commissioner's message:** the two countries now speak not of a "reset" but of overall growth in ties; "fringe diaspora issues" should not be allowed to overshadow mutual interests.

Related reading: India-Canada CEPA: Sixth Round of Trade Pact Talks Under Way, Conclusion Targeted by PM's Canada Visit

Why it matters for the exam

- Prelims: the sequence of the Nijjar case (June 2023), Trudeau's allegation (18 September 2023), the October 2024 diplomatic episode (expulsion/withdrawal), CEPA, and the re-appointment of High Commissioners.
- Mains: India's diplomacy with Western democracies, managing the diaspora-security dilemma, and the trade-defence-technology triad, directly usable in GS-II (international relations).

Prelims Practice Questions

Question 1. With reference to India-Canada relations, consider the following statements:

Statement 1: In October 2024, more than a year after the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar, Canada announced the expulsion of six Indian diplomats, including the High Commissioner.

Statement 2: The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between India and Canada is also called the "Early Progress Trade Agreement".

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only

(b) 2 only

(c) Both 1 and 2

(d) Neither 1 nor 2

▼ **Answer and Explanation**

Correct answer: (a)

Statement 1 is correct, on 14 October 2024, Canada announced the expulsion of six Indian diplomats/consular officials including High Commissioner Sanjay Kumar Verma; India withdrew its High Commissioner and other targeted officials and expelled six Canadian diplomats. Statement 2 is incorrect, the "Early Progress Trade Agreement" (EPTA) was a separate, interim form agreed in March 2022; the current talks concern CEPA.

Question 2. According to the Indian High Commissioner's recent remarks, an agreement in which area is likely to be announced during the Prime Minister's Canada visit?

(a) Nuclear energy

(b) Defence

(c) Space

(d) Education

▼ **Answer and Explanation**

Correct answer: (b)

According to High Commissioner Dinesh K. Patnaik, a defence agreement could be announced during the 11-12 December visit; nuclear energy, space and deep tech are mentioned as other areas of cooperation.

Mains Practice Question

"The latest phase of India-Canada relations shows that strategic interests can prevail over peripheral disputes." Comment. (250 words)

Answer Outline

Introduction:

a brief account of the 2023 Nijjar case and the October 2024 diplomatic episode (expulsion/withdrawal); the proposed December 2026 visit and the possible defence pact.

Main Body:

(a) drivers of normalisation: re-appointment of High Commissioners, NSA-level talks, agency-level cooperation; (b) strategic convergence: defence, space, nuclear energy, deep tech, CEPA; (c) remaining challenges: diaspora-separatist issues, investigative disagreements; (d) meaning for India: diaspora security, trade diversification, Indo-Pacific equations.

Conclusion:

institutional dialogue and economic interdependence are what can insulate bilateral ties from periodic shocks.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

What is the current state of India-Canada trade and the CEPA talks?

According to the Ministry of External Affairs' reply in the Rajya Sabha, bilateral trade stood at $8.66 billion in 2024-25 (Indian exports $4.22 billion, imports $4.44 billion). Three rounds of CEPA talks have taken place, the latest from 6-10 July 2026 in Ottawa, and both countries aim to finalise the agreement by the end of 2026.

What was the 'Early Progress Trade Agreement' (EPTA) between India and Canada?

In March 2022, the two countries agreed to pursue an EPTA as an interim step towards a comprehensive agreement (CEPA); amid the diplomatic chill, Canada paused trade talks in September 2023 (announced 1 September 2023). EPTA and CEPA are distinct instruments.

What high-level engagement took place between India and Canada in October 2026?

Canadian Foreign Minister Anita Anand met Prime Minister Modi; taking CEPA to a conclusion by year-end, an NSA-level dialogue, and a 'Team Canada Trade Mission' led by Maninder Sidhu featured among the outcomes, the same normalisation process whose next stage is the proposed December visit.

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