

US arrest and strip-search of diplomat provokes India's retaliation

By Keith Jones
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US authorities' arrest and intrusive strip-searching of a female Indian diplomat have provoked a major spat between Washington and New Delhi. India has demanded an apology, withdrawn some privileges from US diplomats serving in India, and removed blockades that cut off vehicular street access to the US's Indian embassy. Washington, in turn, has demanded India affirm its commitment to safeguarding its diplomatic mission.

The arrest and New Delhi's aggressive diplomatic push-back have exposed significant tensions between the US and a country it views as pivotal to its drive to encircle, strategically isolate, and if necessary militarily confront China.

Devyani Khobragade, the deputy consul general at India's New York consulate, was arrested and handcuffed last Thursday outside her daughter's school. Ignoring Khobragade's protestations that she enjoyed diplomatic immunity, US Marshals jailed and strip-searched her, including subjecting her to repeated body cavity searches. Only hours later and after the Indian government paid a \$250,000 bail bond was Khobragade released. She has been charged with visa fraud and making a false declaration—charges that carry maximum penalties of 10 and five years in prison respectively—for allegedly failing to pay the Indian maid whom she had brought into the US the legal minimum wage.

The Indian government immediately protested Khobragade's arrest as a flagrant violation of international law and summoned the US ambassador to India's Foreign Ministry.

But this week, as further details of the harsh and humiliating treatment meted out to Khobragade by US authorities emerged, there was a growing clamour from the Indian political establishment for a stronger response. And the government quickly delivered—"its unusually muscular retaliation...suddenly jolting," to use the words of the *Indian Express*, the "friendly ties between New Delhi and Washington."

Several Indian newspapers and web sites cited

Khobragade as saying in an e-mail circulated to her friends and diplomatic colleagues, "I must admit that I broke down many times as the indignities of repeated handcuffing, stripping and cavity searches, swabbing, holed up with common criminals and drug addicts were all being imposed upon me despite my incessant assertions of immunity."

India's political elite and diplomatic corps appear to be genuinely shocked and outraged by the encounter of one of their own with the brutal practices that are the daily fare of the US criminal justice system.

But they are also acutely aware that Khobragade's treatment accords with Washington's standard practice of violating international law at will—whether to spy on the world's electronic communications, including those of ostensibly friendly foreign governments; carry out summary executions through drone strikes; or invade and occupy countries.

In pursuit of a strategic partnership with the US that India's elite sees as pivotal to its ambitions to transform into India into a great power, India's Congress Party-led government has maintained a complicit silence about Washington's rampant criminality.

The current protests over the treatment of Khobragade come, however, after growing complaints within the Indian political establishment and corporate media over the Indian government's failure to voice any protest over the illegal operations of the US National Security Agency (NSA), arguing that this silence makes India look weak.

Documents leaked by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden have revealed not only that India is one of the most important targets of NSA spying, but that the US spy agency has systematically spied on the Indian government and on its diplomatic missions in the US, including its mission at UN headquarters in New York and its Washington embassy.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who has hitherto been conspicuous for his sycophantic pandering to US Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, has called Khobragade's treatment "deplorable" and given his assent

to a raft of retaliatory measures.

In an action meant to underline just how seriously the government regards the issue, Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid appeared before both houses of India's parliament Tuesday to urge "the nation" to "speak in one voice" in condemning the violation of Khobragade's and by extension India's rights. He vowed not to appear before parliament again until the diplomat's "dignity" has been restored.

India's opposition, from the Stalinist-led Left Front through the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have strongly condemned the US, with many noting that India is frequently bullied by Washington. "If we conduct foreign policy in a manner that we're taken for granted," said the parliamentary leader of the Official Opposition BJP, Arun Jaitely, "then these incidents will be repeated." Declared Trinamool Congress legislator Derek O'Brien, "We live in a global village but we don't need a self-appointed global village headman."

Numerous political leaders and government officials have cancelled meetings this week with a visiting US Congressional delegation, including Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi, BJP prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, and National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon.

The US has defended Khobragade's arrest and strip-searching, arguing that under the Vienna Convention consular officials, unlike those attached to a country's embassy, do not enjoy diplomatic immunity for serious crimes.

However, when the shoe was on the other foot, the Obama administration argued the opposite. It insisted that Raymond Davis, a CIA contractor who was attached to the US's Lahore consulate under a bogus cover, should enjoy diplomatic immunity and placed enormous pressure on the Pakistan government to let him go scot free after he had murdered two Pakistanis in cold blood.

Moreover, when exactly did the US government decide that violations of minimum wage laws by diplomats constitute a serious crime?

At this point it is impossible to say precisely why US authorities chose to pursue Khobragade with such zeal, nor what message they were seeking to convey to New Delhi.

But when Foreign Minister Khurshid told India's parliament that the spat over Khobragade had "not happened out of blue," there is a "history" to it, he was, if anything, understating matters.

US officials had been building their case against the Indian diplomat for half a year and ignored and rebuffed Indians attempts to resolve the issue. Just two days before Khobragade was arrested, the family of the maid whose rights she allegedly violated left India for the US where they have been granted immigration papers—an action clearly

taken to ensure that they couldn't be subjected to Indian government pressure and reprisal.

Over the past decade the US has aggressively courted India, proclaiming it a "global strategic partner." Washington has declared its support for India developing a blue-water navy and becoming a force in the Indian Ocean. It negotiated for it a special status in the world civilian nuclear regulatory regime, although New Delhi developed nuclear weapons in defiance of the US-crafted Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—a status that allows India to concentrate its indigenous nuclear program on nuclear weapons development. When Manmohan Singh met with Obama in late September, the US president announced that the US would henceforth make available to India the advanced weapons system that it sells only to its closest allies.

But all of this has been done with the aim of harnessing India to Washington's predatory global strategic agenda. Repeatedly over the past eight years, the US has pressured India to fall into line with its attempts to bring Iran to heel through sanctions and threats of war and India has complied.

However, there is an undercurrent of opinion in Washington that India is not compliant enough—an undercurrent which finds expression in complaints that New Delhi's geopolitical thinking is mired in outdated Cold War concepts like "nonalignment," and that its national-security establishment lacks a "comprehensive vision". While mouthing "support" and "understanding" for India's concept of "strategic autonomy," Washington's aim is to bully and entice New Delhi into the position of a satrap, who will be the southwestern pillar of an Indo-Pacific US-led triad of Japan, Australia and India.

Whatever the outcome of the Khobragade affair, it has brought to the surface some of the tremendous tensions between Washington and New Delhi generated by Washington's aggressive and reckless drive to maintain US strategic dominance over Eurasia under conditions where its relative economic power has been enormously undermined.

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