

# Strained Pathways: India–Canada Geopolitical Tensions and the Disruption of Indian Student Mobility (2023–2025)

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## Abstract

*International student mobility is a central feature of modern diplomatic and economic relations between states. In the case of Canada–India relations, Indian students are by far the largest category of students in Canada’s international student population and are an important source of revenue for institutions and of labor supply for the market. This said, this type of transnational exchange is extremely susceptible to geopolitical shocks. The study examines the crisis in Canada-India relations, 2023-2025, through the prism of Indian student mobility to Canada—a domain that had hitherto received limited scholarly attention despite its high value in economic and strategic terms. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of government statements, media coverage, and policy assessments, the study identifies diplomatic expulsions, visa disruptions, and political uncertainty as significantly undermining pathways into student mobility. These disruptions have prompted enrolment deferrals, institutional strain, and growing uncertainty among prospective students around safety, reception, and post-graduation opportunities. Results show that international education operates not only as a form of social exchange but also as a politically contingent sector susceptible to diplomatic conflict. This paper argues that prolonged geopolitical tension threatens to structurally reshape the destination preferences of Indian students, with long-term consequences for Canada’s higher education system and its global competitiveness.*

## Introduction

International student mobility is a defining feature of globalization, binding national education systems with labour markets, migration governance, and foreign policy. In the Canadian context, international students serve dual purposes as an economic resource and a demographic strategy, especially in terms of alleviating labour shortages and aging populations. Among them, students from India are of core importance: they are currently the largest sending group of international students to Canada and act as a key gateway into its post-graduation labour market.

Historically, Canada-India relations have facilitated this mobility through educational partnerships, relatively permissive visa regimes, and post-study work opportunities. This interdependence was, however, markedly challenged in 2023 by a deterioration of bilateral relations after Canada’s public allegation of Indian state involvement

in the killing of a Canadian Sikh activist. The resulting diplomatic standoff—characterized by expulsions, visa suspensions, and reductions in consular staff—directly impaired the infrastructure that underpins student mobility.

Until the period of 2024–2025, the repercussions of this crisis have increasingly materialized through delayed visa processing, deferred admissions, and growing uncertainty among Indian applicants and Canadian educational institutions. Although the scholarship to date on the crisis has focused on the diplomatic, trade, and security dimensions, the reverberations in respect of student mobility remain underexamined, despite being both immediate and material.

This article fills this lacuna by analysing how the 2023–2025 geopolitical tussles reconstituted Indian student flows to Canada. It argues that international education serves as a sensitive interface between national political processes and foreign policy, within which students become specifically susceptible to the breakdown of diplomatic relations. By foregrounding student mobility, the study contributes to broader debates on education diplomacy, migration governance, and the political economy of international education.

## Literature Review

### International Student Mobility and Geopolitics

Recent scholarship views international student mobility as polity-influenced, determined by the visa regimes, security considerations, and foreign policy priorities. Choudaha 2017 and Trilokekar 2020 argue that student flows react promptly to shifting political trust and diplomatic stability, especially in the case of students from the Global South within Western immigration systems. Education becomes not only a social good but also a strategic sector shaped by state behaviours.

### Education as Soft Power and Economic Diplomacy

International education has been framed as a channel of soft power: as a way for the receiving country to nurture long-term influence via alumni networks and cultural exposure. At the same time, it is a significant export sector, particularly in countries like Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. This complexity breeds vulnerability: the education sector suffers from spillover when diplomatic relations go sour.

### Canada–India Relations and Diaspora Politics

Scholarship on Canada–India relations has identified the salience of economic complementarities, diaspora politics, and burgeoning Indo-Pacific cooperation Tiagi 2020 Wallace 2022. The studies on Sikh diaspora activism trace its consequences for Canadian domestic politics and India’s security perceptions Tatla 2019. These contributions, however, hardly account for the impact of diplomatic tensions on student mobility, even though students are central to the bilateral engagement.

## Research Gap

Although the political dimensions of international education are acknowledged, there is still limited empirical analysis of how acute diplomatic crises disrupt student mobility in real time. Considering this, the paper situates Indian students at the intersection of geopolitics, education policy, and migration governance in the context of the 2023–2025 Canada–India crisis.

## Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This qualitative content analysis examines how geopolitical tensions influenced Indian student flows to Canada between 2023 and 2025. Sources that will be used for data are:

- Official government statements and parliamentary records of Canada and India
- Media reports from Canadian and Indian outlets
- Policy briefs produced by think tanks like CIGI, Brookings, and ORF

### **International Education And Migration Governance: The State Of Scholarly Literature**

This analysis is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives:

1. Liberal institutionalism: underlines the role of education systems and visa regimes as cooperative institutions.
2. Constructivism: drawing on identity, perceptions, and narratives to explain student choices.
3. Political economy of migration, considering education as an export sector combined with labour markets. These limitations include restricted access to the internal processing of visa applications and a dynamic evolution of diplomatic relations over the study period.
4. Background: 2023–2025 Canada–India Diplomatic Crisis

In September 2023, Canada publicly accused Indian state actors of killing a Canadian Sikh activist on Canadian soil. India denied the accusations, citing political motivations and the absence of supporting evidence. The situation escalated quickly: there were tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions, and India suspended visa services for Canadians. Canada reduced its diplomatic presence in India for security reasons.

What started as a dispute over sovereignty and the rule of law spilled over into areas well beyond formal diplomatic relations. Consular services, which form the lifeline of people-to-people relationships, were among the first casualties. Reduced staffing and increased political distrust restricted visa processing capacity and led to bottlenecks in the processing of Indian students applying to study in Canada.

By 2024, the crisis had become protracted, with limited diplomatic engagement and stalemated institutional dialogue. With trade negotiations and security cooperation frozen, student mobility proved to be one of the most immediately disrupted domains. Unlike trade or defence, education flows rely heavily on routine administrative cooperation, which makes them particularly susceptible to diplomatic breakdowns.

Such strained relations having persisted well into 2025 reinforced uncertainty for students and institutions alike, underlining the structural rather than temporary nature of the disruption.

### **Indian Student Mobility To Canada Before The Crisis**

Indian student mobility before the 2023 diplomatic rupture had sustained rapid growth, powered by domestic demand in India and policy incentives within Canada. Indian students were the largest single nationality represented among international students in Canada, enrolling predominantly in undergraduate, diploma, and postgraduate programs in universities and colleges.

A number of factors underpinned this expansion. Canada's relatively open visa regime, the availability of post-graduation work permits (PGWP), and pathways to permanent residency positioned education as both a human capital investment and a migration strategy. Canadian institutions became more and more dependent on Indian enrolment for financial viability.

Economically, students from India added billions of dollars each year to the economy through tuition fees, housing, and consumer purchases. Demographically, they filled the skilled labour gap in the healthcare, information technology, and services sectors. Student mobility thus became integral to both Canada's education export model as well as its immigration regime.

Importantly, this mobility was underlain by perceptions of Canada as a relatively stable, open, and politically predictable destination. The 2023 diplomatic crisis disrupted not only administrative processes but also the underlying trust that supported such flows.

## **Impact of Geopolitical Tensions on Indian Student Mobility Visa Processing Disruptions and Administrative Bottlenecks**

A key immediate implication of the diplomatic crisis was that student visa processing was stymied. Canada's paring back its diplomatic presence in India significantly reduced the pace of application review, and thus created uncertainty for students awaiting study permits. Many prospective entrants reported approval delays beyond academic start dates, which translated to deferred admissions or withdrawal from programs. Educational institutions faced challenges in enrolment forecasting and capacity planning; colleges and universities reliant on Indian enrolments saw revenue volatility, while international offices struggled to provide clear guidance to applicants amidst rapidly shifting political conditions.

Visa uncertainty also had a cascading impact: delays undermined the student's ability to secure housing, arrange travel, and plan financially. For many families, the unpredictability of outcomes rendered Canada a comparatively risky option relative to alternative destinations.

### **Enrolment Declines and Deferred Admissions**

The cumulative impact of visa delays and geopolitical uncertainty was evident by 2024–2025 as Indian student enrolment numbers declined. Though data would remain behind real developments, reports at the institutional level reflected increasing deferrals and reduced acceptance rates. The reduction was asymmetrical in its impact; the smaller colleges and institutions outside major urban centres, often most reliant on international tuition, were found to be disproportionately affected.

Universities that did attract a more diversified international cohort were better positioned to absorb the shock, reflecting structural inequalities within Canada's higher education sector. The downturn extended beyond new enrolments, with continuing students expressing concerns about visa renewals, post-study work eligibility, and long-term immigration prospects, further destabilizing retention rates.

### **Student Perceptions, Safety and Destination Substitution**

In addition to bureaucratic barriers, geopolitical disputes restructured student priorities of Canada as a destination. News reports on diplomatic tensions, diaspora polarization, and allegations of foreign interference contributed to a climate of uncertainty. Prospective students and their parents began to wonder if Canada remained politically stable and welcoming. As such, destination substitution emerged as a substantive trend, with competing education hubs like Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States benefiting from Canada's perceived instability. These nations actively framed themselves as reliable alternatives, capitalizing on Canada's constrained visa capacity. This trend suggests that geopolitical crises can produce lasting reputational effects, influencing student decision making long after the acute phase of a diplomatic crisis has passed.

### **Institutional and Labour Market Consequences**

The decline in Indian student mobility had downstream implications for Canada's labor market. International graduates help to plug skills shortages, particularly in sectors that rely heavily on temporary and early career workers. A reduced intake of international students thus threatened broader economic and demographic goals. Institutions, meanwhile, were forced to reassess recruitment strategies, diversify source countries, and revisit reliance on a single national cohort. But diversification requires time and resources, and many institutions found themselves exposed in the short to medium term.

### **Diaspora Politics, Campus Climate and the Student Experience**

The diplomatic crisis in 2023-2025 unfolded against the background of complex diaspora politics in Canada and more specifically with respect to South Asian communities. Sikh activism, Hindu nationalist discourses, and the multiple interpretations of the crisis exacerbated polarizations within diaspora spaces. Even as these dynamics were essentially political in nature, they had very real spill-over effects on the everyday experiences of Indian students.

Indian students, many of whom hold precarious legal and economic positions, navigated the heightened political sensitivities on university campuses and within local communities. Media coverage of protests, counter-protests, and accusations of foreign interference contributed to anxiety over safety, belonging, and freedom of expression. For prospective students and their families in India, such narratives framed perceptions of Canada as an unstable or less welcoming environment.

Higher education institutions balanced maintaining inclusive campus climates with the need to respond to external political pressures. International student services offices reported higher demands for mental health resources, legal counsel, and assurances regarding pathways to immigration. These tensions highlighted the ways in which student mobility is situated within broader social and political environments.

Thus, the crisis underlined the fact that student mobility is not an administrative process, but a deeply social one influenced by identity politics, public discourse, and diplomatic signalling.

### **Long-Term Strategic Implications**

#### **Implications for Canada's International Education Model**

Canada's international education strategy has relied heavily on continued growth in Indian student intake. The diplomatic crisis exposed the fragility of this model to geopolitical shocks. An institutional dependency on international tuition, coupled with over-reliance on a single sending country, exacerbated the impact of visa disruptions and reputational harm. If the tensions persist, Canada will lose its competitive advantage in the global education market. Recovery may prove slow, given that once trust is damaged, it takes time to restore. Even short-term downturns can have long-lasting impacts if students permanently divert to other destinations. The crisis thus underscores the need for Canada to treat international education not simply as an economic sector but as a strategic policy area that demands diplomatic insulation and long-term planning.

#### **Implications on Indian Student's decision making**

From the Indian perspective, the crisis accelerated the trends toward diversification of student mobility destinations. While Canada had been perceived as relatively accessible and stable, geopolitical uncertainty prompted students to reassess risk, return on investment, and post-study outcomes. This recalibration reflects a broader shift in how students from emerging economies evaluate education abroad—not only in terms of academic quality but also in political stability, immigration reliability, and social climate. Once alternative pathways are established, destination substitution may become structural rather than purely temporary.

#### **Education as a Geopolitical Instrument**

The Canada–India crisis illustrates how international education can play an unplanned role as a geopolitical lever. Neither government directly invoked students as part of their diplomatic measures, but the impact of diplomatic measures involving staffing, visas, and public messaging on student flows was palpable, nonetheless. The situation highlights the bigger ethical and strategic questions regarding education diplomacy. The students, while lying at the core of the bilateral relationship, are politically powerless and unrepresented. This vulnerability makes the

establishment of governance frameworks imperative, frameworks which can protect educational mobility from diplomatic retaliation and political escalation.

### Scenarios for the Future

The analysis yields three possible paths:

1. Normalization and Recovery:

Diplomatic rehabilitation revives consular capacity, stabilizes visa processing, and gradually rebuilds student confidence.

2. Cold but Stable Relations:

Only limited diplomatic contact remains, with functional student mobility at a reduced scale and continued institutional uncertainty.

3. Prolonged Tension:

Sustained geopolitical strain is driving persistent enrolment declines, institutional restructuring, and a permanent shift of Indian student flows away from Canada.

Whichever scenario most likely depends on political will, diplomatic transparency, and whether student mobility is viewed as a strategic asset or collateral damage.

### Conclusion

This paper examines the 2023-2025 geopolitical crisis between Canada and India through the prism of Indian student mobility to Canada. The conclusions of this work show that international education is extremely sensitive to diplomatic instability and that visa disruptions, together with political uncertainty and reputational damage, can immediately translate into declining student flows and institutional strain.

Emerging within this crisis are Indian students as central yet vulnerable actors: economically significant, socially embedded, yet politically exposed. Their experiences document how international education falls at the crossroads of migration governance, foreign policy, and domestic politics.

### Policy Implications

- Diplomatic insulation of student mobility: Governments should create mechanisms that protect education pathways from the effects of diplomatic retaliation.
- Diversification strategies: The Canadian institutions should reduce dependence on single-source countries while considering ethics in their recruitment.
- Transparency in communication: Clear visa guidance along with public reassurance is considered paramount to continuing student trust in periods of political tension.
- Education diplomacy frameworks: Student mobility should be included formally in foreign policy risk assessments. Ultimately, the Canada–India crisis serves as a cautionary tale for education-dependent states across the world. As geopolitical volatility continues to rise, protecting student mobility will be necessary to preserve the social, economic, and diplomatic dividends of international education.

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