

Religious Freedom or Political Pressure? USCIRF's Stance on India

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Context

The **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)** has recommended **targeted sanctions** against India's **Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW)** over alleged involvement in assassination plots against **Sikh separatists** abroad.

This move has led to **diplomatic concerns** between India and the US, with India strongly **rejecting the allegations** as **politically motivated** and lacking evidence.

What is USCIRF?

Establishment & Mandate

- The **USCIRF is an independent U.S. federal government commission**, created under the **International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)** of 1998.
- It functions as a **bipartisan advisory body** to the **US President, Secretary of State, and Congress**.

Functions & Responsibilities

- **Annual Report on Religious Freedom:**
 - Highlights **Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs)** that engage in **severe religious freedom violations**.
 - Assesses the **US government's implementation of IRFA** and suggests policy actions.

- **Monitoring Violations Globally:**

- Uses **international standards** to evaluate religious freedom.
- Refers to **Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**, which guarantees:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance."

- **Policy Recommendations:**

- Suggests actions like **diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and visa restrictions** for nations violating religious freedom.

Composition

- **Nine Commissioners:** Appointed by the **US President and Congressional leaders** from both parties.
- **Professional, Nonpartisan Staff:** Supports research and policy recommendations.

USCIRF's Stance on India

Past Criticism

- USCIRF has **repeatedly criticized India** for its handling of religious issues and suggested **designating India as a "Country of Particular Concern (CPC)"** in its past reports.
- India has consistently **rejected USCIRF's assessments**, calling them **biased, inaccurate, and interfering in internal affairs**.

Current Recommendation on R&AW

- The latest report **links India's intelligence agency (R&AW) to assassination plots targeting Sikh separatists in the US and Canada**.

- **US and Canada have raised concerns**, while India has **denied the allegations** and reaffirmed its commitment to sovereignty and security.
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Diplomatic and Strategic Implications

Possible Impact on India-US Relations

- **Diplomatic Strain:** Could **complicate bilateral ties**, especially amid growing **India-US strategic cooperation** in defense, trade, and Indo-Pacific security.
 - **US Administration's Stance:**
 - The **US government is not bound** by USCIRF's recommendations.
 - However, such reports **influence Congressional discourse and shape policy debates**.
 - **India's Response:**
 - India **rejects external interference in internal matters**.
 - It asserts its **commitment to religious freedom**, citing constitutional protections.
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Conclusion

While USCIRF's recommendations do not have direct legal consequences, they reflect **ongoing scrutiny** of India's religious policies on the global stage. **India's diplomatic response** will be key in balancing **national security concerns with international relations**.