

India, the world's largest democracy, is now only weeks away from a national election. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which swept to power in 2014, was, until late last month, facing stiff contest from Rahul Gandhi's Congress party. With hundreds of millions of poor rural voters, elections in India have typically been dominated by fairly traditional issues of corruption, fiscal policy and economic (mis)management. However, the suicide attack on 14 February in Pulwama, Kashmir, which resulted in the deaths of 40 Indian paramilitary personnel, has fundamentally changed both the tone and the tempo of the elections.

The Pulwama attack was carried out by a Pakistani-based militant group called Jaish-e-Mohammed, or 'Jaish'. Jaish's raison d'être is to separate Kashmir from India and it has previously been identified by Indian officials as having links to the Pakistani military establishment. India quickly responded to the Pulwama attack with a range of economic and diplomatic measures that failed to quell the fierce public reaction. Protests and marches, which sometimes turned violent, took place throughout the country and beyond.

On 18 February 2019, Indian special and paramilitary forces conducted a joint counter terrorism operation in Pulwama. Eight days later, in a much more brazen response, Indian Mirage fighter jets crossed the Line of Control (LoC) and entered Pakistani airspace and attacked targets in Balakot, Pakistan. While over the past four decades there have been various incursions, from both sides, across the LoC, this was the first time there had been a raid across the international border since 1971.

The attacks delivered what the Indian public demanded – a military offensive – which Delhi claimed killed 300 terrorists. However, it also ensured that the electoral issue became national security and the BJP have highlighted the risks of change at such a sensitive juncture. The Congress party now find themselves in the unenviable position of having to both support the government's military response but also shift the narrative away from national security, while at the same time not appear too dovish.

Polls in India are notoriously fraught, but many Delhi based commentators believe that the BJP will remain in power. Notwithstanding, Modi is not immune from criticism for his record on national security. The last big attack in Kashmir in 2016 resulted in the death of 19 Indian soldiers. At the time Modi retaliated with a so-called 'surgical strike' and foolishly guaranteed his public that such an attack would never happen again.

As to the situation in Kashmir. Many in Delhi privately acknowledge that the whole affair has given Pakistan the upper hand. After the Balakot attack (which Pakistan claims killed trees not terrorists) Pakistan needed to retaliate but did so in an unusually calibrated manner by simply crossing the LoC and not beyond. Further, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan played an important role in de-escalation by handing over a captured Indian fighter pilot from a plane that went down beyond the LoC.

One element that received little media attention but has alarmed Rawalpindi is that Pakistan was on the highest alert at time of the Balakot incursion and yet the whole operation went undetected by its air defences. To make matters worse, the jets used in the operation, the Mirage fighters, are a nuclear platform. Pakistanis believed that lapses in its air defences had been addressed since the 2011 US raid on the compound of Osama Bin Laden.

What does this mean for the wider conflict in Kashmir? Despite the history of incursions across the LoC by Islamabad and Delhi, until Modi's very public response to the 2016 attacks both

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sides had never publicly acknowledged an incursion. That taboo was broken in 2016 and the Pulwama attack has further eroded the principle of restraint and diffuse via private diplomacy. Further, in response to the wave of nationalism sweeping India, the Indian position of a very public military response plays directly into the hands of terrorists operating in and around Kashmir. Offering guarantees that any successful attack against its assets in Kashmir may play well domestically but it also provides a perverse incentive for terrorists to continue to escalate the conflict.



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