

Can BJP sustain the bounce from Pulwama and Balakot?

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Summary

The terror attack in Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir and the subsequent Indian air strike on a terrorist camp inside Pakistan have given the BJP a boost before the Indian general election. Though the impact of the terror attack and India's response might be waning, the BJP has made them the centrepiece of its electoral campaign.

Introduction

Before the terror attack in Pulwama in Kashmir on 14 February 2019 and the subsequent air strike on a terrorist camp inside Pakistan, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was looking somewhat shaky. The party had suffered electoral defeats in late-2018 in three Hindi heartland states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Voters had punished the BJP on several issues, including incumbency, anaemic job creation, farmer distress, a poorly designed Goods and Services Tax, and the aftershocks of the 2016 demonetisation. The question now is whether the air strike has swung the vote in the Indian general elections, to be held in April-May 2019, in favour of the BJP.

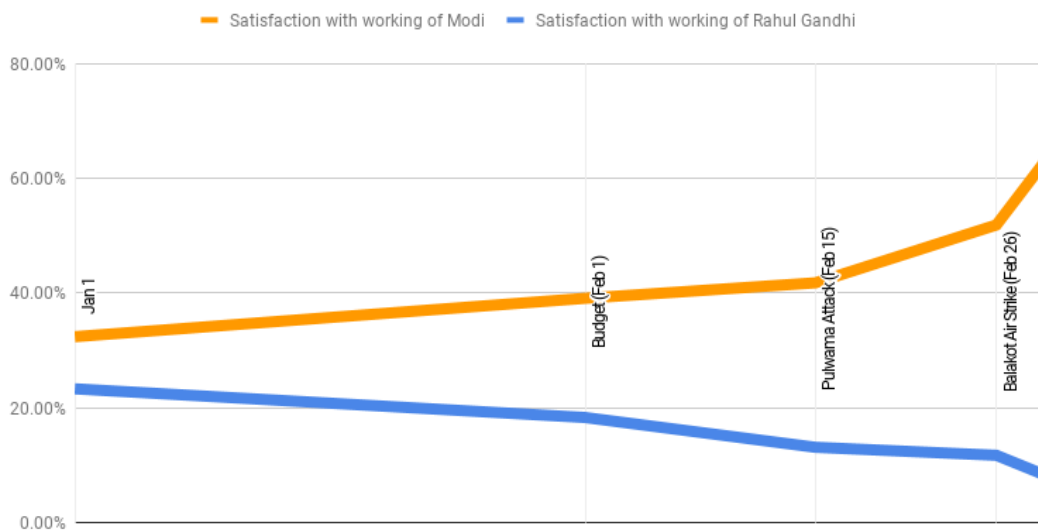
The BJP government should have been on the defensive after the attack by the Pakistan-based terrorist organization, Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM), on an Indian convoy which killed 40 troops. However, it quickly turned a serious security breach—one that testified to the failures of the current Indian government in Kashmir—into a public relations coup. On 26 February 2019, days before the schedule for the Indian general election was announced, Indian fighter jets bombed a JeM training camp in Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. While the impact of the air strike remains contentious, it seems to have given Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP a pre-election bounce.

A survey done immediately after the air strike showed that the approval ratings for Modi, which were 32 per cent at the beginning of 2019, had jumped to 62 per cent (Figure 1). At the same time, national security, which was chosen by only 4 per cent of the respondents as a key issue in early 2019, climbed to 26 percent and ranked even higher than unemployment. There are other surveys though, most notably one done by Pew, which show that Pakistan and terrorism were a concern for voters in 2018, well before [Pulwama happened](#). The gap in popularity between Modi and his closest challenger, Rahul Gandhi of the Congress, had also widened considerably following the air strike. Recent opinion polls too have forecast that the BJP will win fewer parliamentary seats than it did in 2014, but the fall will not be as steep as was [widely expected](#). While opinion polls can be notoriously inaccurate in India, they usually capture the general trend, which seems to indicate a post-air strike bump for the BJP.

Figure 1: Satisfaction with working of Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi

Satisfaction with working of Indian political leaders

Source: BloombergQuint reporting of CVoter State of the Nation Poll



Source: BloombergQuint, Loki.ai Research

If, however, we look at the impact of past India-Pakistan conflicts on elections, the evidence is mixed. The 1965 India-Pakistan war did not have a discernible impact on the 1967 general election, which saw the Congress, without Nehru's presence for the first time, returning to power. The 1999 Kargil war, which saw India score a decisive victory over Pakistan, arguably had an impact on the general elections that were held soon after the war ended. The Kargil war was fought under a shaky coalition government, headed by the BJP's Atal Bihari Vajpayee as Prime Minister, which had been in power for only a year and was re-elected in 1999 with exactly the same number of seats it had won in 1998, but with an increase in vote share in the seats that it contested. Significantly, the BJP did better in states where it was in a direct contest with the Congress than in states where its main opponent was a regional party—suggesting that the BJP is stronger when focusing on national issues.

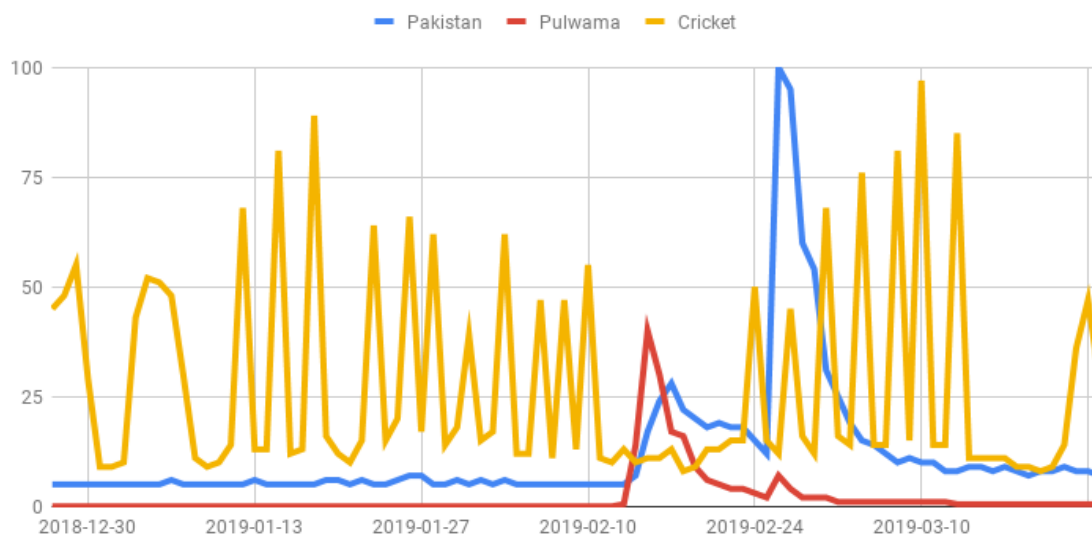
If we compare 1999 with 2009 and 2016, the evidence becomes even less conclusive. The 2009 general elections were held soon after the November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, where the Congress-led coalition, which did not take any military action against Pakistan, returned to power with a greater majority than it had five years earlier. The more recent so-called Indian surgical strikes in September 2016, carried out across the Line of Control with Pakistan in response to a terror attack on an army camp, did bring electoral dividends in the critical state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). However, it is unclear whether demonetisation, which also happened around the same time, had the greater impact on the UP Assembly elections.

Looking ahead to the 2019 general election, the bounce that the BJP had got from the air strike might be tapering off. If one tracks the search volume for 'Pakistan', it spikes immediately after the air strike, but nearly falls to pre-Pulwama levels from March onwards (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Search volume index for topics

Relative Google-search volume index for topics in India

Source: Google Trends. Search Volume is scaled from 0 (min value) to a 100 (max value).



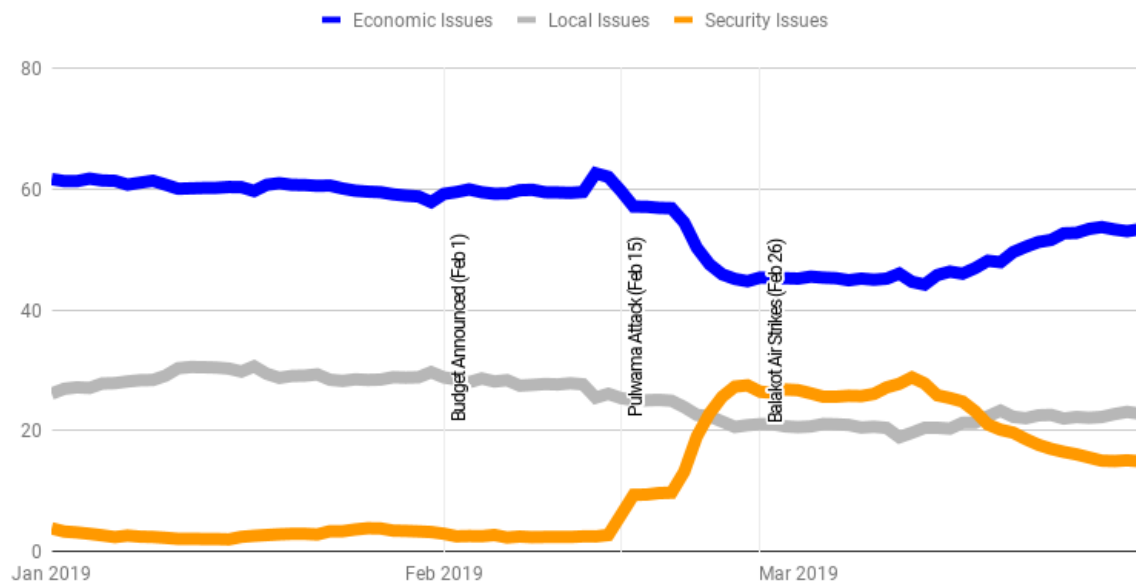
Source: Loki.ai Research

Surveys too back this up with one showing that national sentiments on security issues, after having spiked in early March, started waning with economic issues remaining the most important (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Most important electoral issues

Most important electoral issues for voters over time

Source: Reuters reporting of CVoter State of the Nation Poll



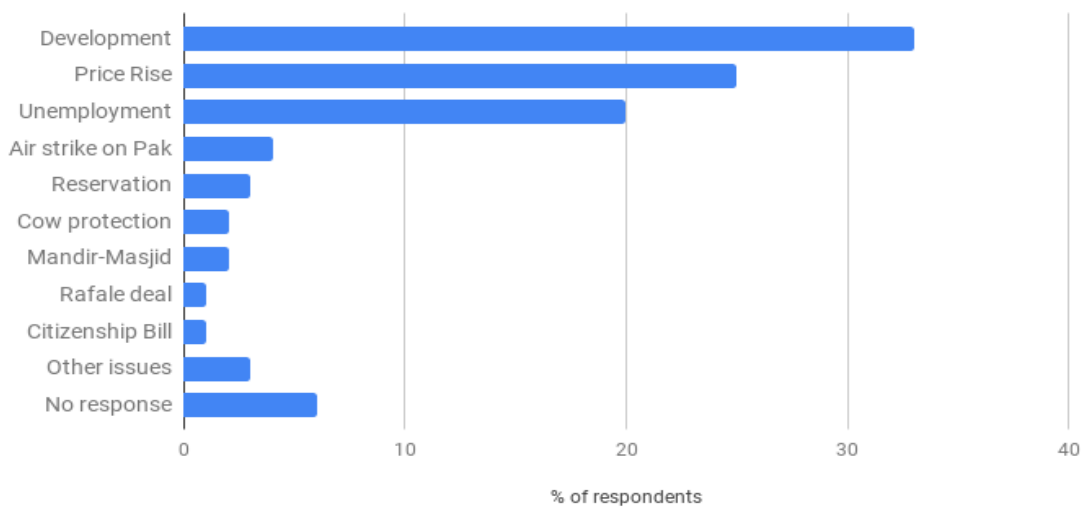
Source: CVoter and Loki.ai Research

Another pre-poll survey conducted between 24 and 31 March 2019 found that only 4 per cent of the respondents listed the air strike as the most important issue, well behind development, price rise and unemployment (Figure 4). However, of those who had heard of the air strike, 46 per cent [preferred](#) Modi as the next prime minister. The popularity of Modi too had gone up by 9 per cent since mid-2018.

Figure 4: Most important issues for voters

Response to question: "When you vote in the Lok Sabha election, which one of these issues will be most important for you while arriving at your final decision about who to vote for?"

Source: Lokniti-CSDS-Tiranga TV-The Hindu-Dainik Bhaskar Pre-Poll Survey 2019 (N=10,010)



Source: Lokniti-CSDS, Loki.ai Research

Notwithstanding voter sentiments on the Pulwama terror attack and the subsequent air strike, the BJP and Modi have decided to make national security one of the main planks of its election campaign. We will only know on 23 May 2019, when the election results are announced, whether this strategy will pay off.

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