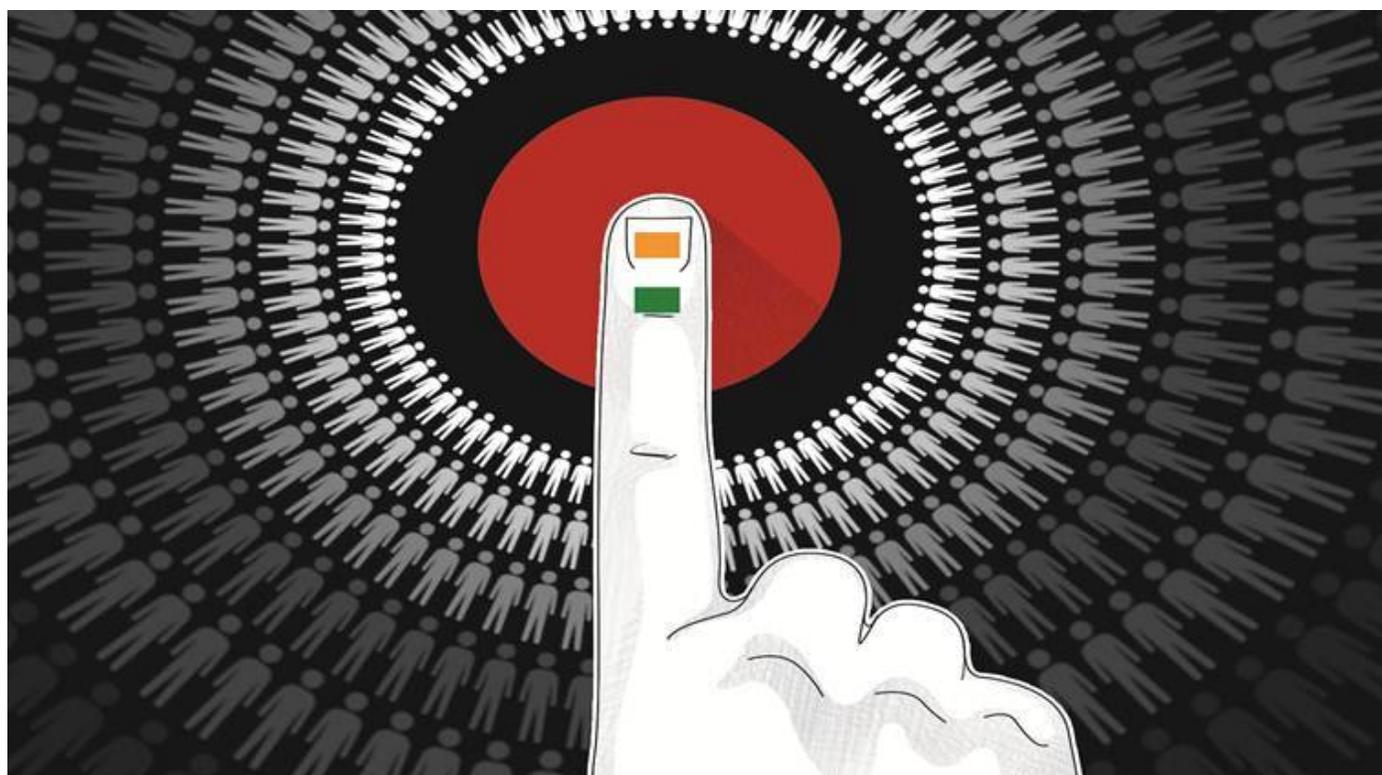


National security will compete with unemployment, farm distress as a critical election issue

The size of the middle class, timing of the current India-Pakistan clashes, and the nature of the regime in Delhi will shape the narrative in days to come.

[Ashutosh Varshney](#) 27 May 2019

From this author



The primary drivers of India's mass politics have been religion and caste on the one hand, and prices and poverty on the other. (Illustration: Suvajit Dey)

Can India-Pakistan tensions alter India's election scenarios? Let us begin with the existing knowledge about the determinants of electoral behaviour. A

distinction between mass politics and elite politics is relevant here. Historically, national security has been a matter of grave contestation in elite politics, but it has never inspired great passion in mass politics. The primary drivers of India's mass politics have been religion and caste on the one hand, and prices and poverty on the other.

India's countryside, where 65 per cent of the nation still lives, is the largest theatre of mass politics. Rural politics has generally been driven by caste (more so than religion), or when the rural economy runs into an abyss, by agrarian unrest. National security might grab the attention of TV channels and newspapers, but its reach rarely spreads beyond the urban middle classes. Security scholar Ashley Tellis has famously argued that India has always viewed itself as a developmental state, hoping the problem of national security would disappear. It does not. Yet, popular energies never focus on national security. According to this reasoning, until India is significantly more urban and considerably richer, national security will be irrelevant in electoral politics.

Does this argument still hold? There are three reasons to doubt its continuing validity: The size of the middle class, the timing of the current clashes, and the nature of the regime in Delhi.

Larger than ever, the middle class constitutes at least a third of the nation today. An estimated 41 per cent of the population is also, by now, online. While the tremors of Kandahar (1999) could not travel far and wide, and Mumbai (2008) did not penetrate the consciousness of the rural electorate, the current national security discourse has a much wider ambit. The urban population is also rapidly growing. Even if villages were to remain largely unaffected by national security issues, the urban vote, on the margin, could be decisive. Recall what happened in Gujarat in December 2017. The Congress won the rural seats convincingly, but it lost in the state as a whole

because the [BJP](#)'s stellar urban performance — added to its second-place rural showing — placed it ahead. Margins may now matter more than the averages.

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Also qualitatively different is the timing of the new tensions. Virtually all great past episodes of national security were distant from the national elections. The India-China war of 1962 broke out months after the third general election, the 1965 Indo-Pak war preceded the fourth general election by two years, the 1971 war against Pakistan came several months after the fifth general election, the Kandahar crisis erupted after the 1999 parliamentary elections, the 2001 attack on India's parliament was out of sync with the election cycle and the Mumbai attacks took place five months before the 2009 elections.

Though different from the current conflict, Kargil was similar to it in terms of timing. The conflict flared up two-to-three months before the 1999 general elections. But recall how small the urban middle class was in 1999, and also how minuscule the cell phone and internet penetration was. Besides, [Bill Clinton](#)'s decisive intervention ended the conflict in early July; it did not last till the election. Any more retaliation and counter-retaliation will bring the current conflict remarkably close to the election cycle. That is why Pulwama and [Balakot](#) are more electorally significant than the earlier security episodes.

The nature of the regime in Delhi is the third most important variable. Hindu nationalists have always been tougher on national security than the Congress. And, with rare exceptions, national security does not dominate the horizons of regional parties, governed as they are by caste and regional identities.

Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) has grown up in an organisation that believes in the folk dictum, *laaton ke bhoot baaton se nahin maante* (some people will always respond to force, not dialogue). If one talks to Hindu nationalist cadres, one often hears this aphorism. The ideological texts of Hindu nationalism also repeatedly speak of how only coercion and power can discipline a country like Pakistan (and Muslim assertion generally). Among the stalwarts of Hindu nationalism, only [Atal Bihari Vajpayee](#) departed from its core ideology, resolutely seeking peace and reconciliation. Within 15 months of a Jaish attack on Parliament, Vajpayee sent the country's cricket team to Pakistan, arguing *khel bhi jeeto aur dil bhi* (win games as well as hearts). Modi is no Vajpayee.

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The point is not that the Pulwama attack did not deserve a response. It did. Or that India-focused terrorists are not protected by Pakistan's deep state. They are. Security scholars have no doubt that Pakistan has had two types of terrorist organisations: Those opposed to the Pakistani state, whom the

armed forces crush and those fighting India, whom the military protects and uses as assets. With very few exceptions, governments all over the world also believe that this systematic duality persists.

Pulwama was an invitation to Modi to show his Hindu nationalist toughness. Given the proximity of elections, an absence of response would have hurt Modi, opening him up for ridicule in the election campaigns. Not acting tough was not an option, though acting tough may not solve the problem.

We will also witness the reappearance of an obdurate historical symbiosis: As unrest in Kashmir significantly worsens, Pakistan fishes in troubled waters, and as India-Pakistan head towards conflict, Kashmir's genuine grievances return to the backburner. By relying heavily on coercion and thereby intensifying Kashmiri alienation, the Modi government has wasted the political advances made in Kashmir by Vajpayee and [Manmohan Singh](#). But now that a full-scale national security dynamic is taking over, few inside India will focus on Delhi's failures in Kashmir.

India is perhaps headed towards its first national security election ever. Security will compete with unemployment and farm distress as a critical election issue, and depending on what happens to Indo-Pak tensions, it might even eclipse the significance of economics. If Pakistan goes for a military retaliation, which hurts India significantly, that might just gift an election victory to Modi, who looked quite vulnerable only a few weeks ago. Dealing with him will, of course, be tougher in the long run.

More Explained



Caught in a quandary, India's Opposition parties will also think about how to change the narrative before the elections. Their task is much harder now.

This article first appeared in the print edition on February 28, 2019, under the title 'The subject is national security'. The writer is Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and the Social Sciences and Professor of Political Science at Brown University, where he also directs the Center for Contemporary South Asia.