



Modi eyes electoral opportunity in India-Pakistan conflict

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In the wake of reciprocal attacks in February between India and Pakistan, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not responded favorably to Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's offer for talks, raising questions about Modi's Pakistan policy and whether he might want to go to war.

Between the lines: India is gearing up for a general election in April and May, and despite losses in key states, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) remains a front-runner — something Modi does not want to change. One of his objectives with the Balakot attack was to show the Indian public that he is the leader with the necessary political will to fight terrorism emanating from Pakistan.

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Modi has certainly adopted a hardline approach toward Pakistan, with the BJP often threatening to go to war. Also under Modi's administration, India has been experiencing a rise in right-wing Hindu nationalism, which is not surprising in light of Modi's roots in Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu-nationalist paramilitary organization accused of inciting sectarian violence and fueled by a religious ideology that advocates for Hinduism's dominance within India. The RSS sees Pakistan, a Muslim-majority neighbor, as the ultimate enemy.

Yes, but: Going to war with Pakistan would not guarantee an electoral victory for Modi, because there's no evidence that launching surgical strikes within Pakistan would deter militant groups like Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba — responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks — from attacking Indian forces in Kashmir.

Rather, surgical strikes would lead to a conventional war that would destabilize the region, potentially creating a devastating nuclear conflict or a refugee crisis in a region already experiencing its fair share (the Afghan crisis after the Soviet invasion, for example, and the ongoing Rohingya crisis).

The congressional opposition, for its part, has criticized Modi and the BJP for politicizing the standoff with Pakistan for its own political gains during this election season.

The bottom line: Modi's re-election prospects would not be improved by his initiating a war. But unless Pakistan re-evaluates its use of militant proxies, and unless India ceases committing gross human rights atrocities in Kashmir, the two countries may stumble into one regardless.

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