

Dangerous games

While most North Americans were watching the Super Bowl, a far more dramatic and dangerous game was being played out along the tense border between India and Pakistan. There, over half a million troops, supported by heavy concentrations of armor and aircraft, went on full combat alert. Once again a major Indo-Pakistani war seemed imminent.

Indian and Pakistani forces on both sides of the Kashmir, Punjab and Sind borders moved out of their normal cantonments and took up offensive positions close to the frontier. Reserves were put on alert as the two old enemies, who have fought three wars since 1947, glared at each other over the sights of their guns.

As the troops were massing, Rajiv Gandhi of India and Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan issued soothing statements and insisted that neither would resort to arms. Yet while the two leaders spoke of peace, their subordinates continued to show distinct signs of war fever. Even though the troop movements are generally regarded as politically motivated, there is always the disturbing possibility that a random clash along the tinderbox border could ignite a general conflict.

For a very nervous Pakistan, the Indian troop movements pose particularly dangerous threats. Like Israel, a nation that it curiously resembles, Pakistan is surrounded by enemies and without any appreciable strategic depth. On the map, Pakistan looks like a large country. In fact, 90% of Pakistan's population is squeezed into the long, narrow green corridor of the Indus River valley that runs southward from Islamabad to Karachi. Virtually all of its rail and road network, as well as its industry, lies about 150 miles from the Indian border.

Only along the mountainous ceasefire line in Jammu and Kashmir is there a natural defensive barrier. From Lahore to the Arabian Sea, the Indo-Pakistani border is either flat farm land or tankable desert. Islamabad, the capital, is only 80 miles

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from the Indian border — and a little over 100 miles from Soviet armored units at Jalallabad, Afghanistan. Lahore, the nation's second city, is a mere 12 miles from the Indian border.

Even if Pakistan had the same strategic depth that India enjoys, its forces would be hard pressed to defend its exposed borders. Eighteen Pakistani divisions must today defend its frontiers with India and Afghanistan that are longer than NATO's Central Front in Europe. Doing so in the face of India's superiority of 3:1 in troops and aircraft; 2:1 in tanks; and 4:1 in ships is a daunting challenge. Nor can Pakistan ever hope to match India's great industrial base that gives it sustained war-fighting capability which Pakistan sorely lacks.

Given such military inferiority and strategic shallowness, Pakistan — like Israel — cannot afford to allow India to concentrate overwhelming forces on its border. Neither can Pakistan permit the Indians to thrust deep into its country.

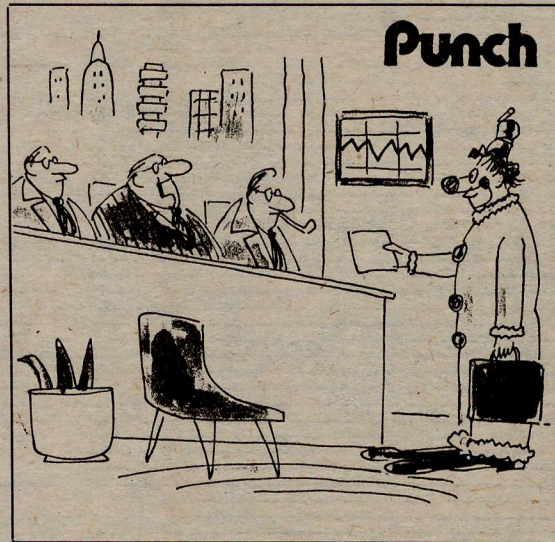
Attacking out of Rajasthan, an Indian armored drive of less than 90 miles would sever Pakistan's main north-south rail and road lines, the nation's spinal cord.

Pakistan's vulnerability and need to pre-empt an Indian attack add an explosive element to an already volatile situation. While few observers think that India really intends to attack Pakistan, its recent demonstrations on the border could quickly get out of hand. The Pakistanis, in turn, are growing increasingly alarmed that India may decide to lash out at them in frustration and fury over the wave of Hindu-Sikh violence in the Punjab. India has gone to great lengths to lay the blame for Sikh unrest on Pakistan even though proof is utterly lacking.

Other Pakistanis, particularly in its intelligence services, see the hand of the Soviet Union behind the troops' movements. In this view, the Soviets are pursuing a clever, two-track policy in Afghanistan. On one hand, the Soviets speak loudly of some sort of peace settlement; on the other, they are using their Indian allies to squeeze the mujahedin's vital backer, Pakistan.

Increasing and generous Soviet aid to India, in tandem with the escalation of pressure on Pakistan's borders by both Afghanistan and India, lends support to the contention that Moscow and New Delhi are carefully co-ordinating their policy.

That Pakistan finds itself menaced by the Soviet and Indian armies while its ally, the United States, is still embroiled in Irangate, is perhaps no coincidence. The military threat to Pakistan is likely a blunt message to President Zia to force the Pakistan-based mujahedin into negotiations with the Soviets and their Afghan satraps. Washington needs to sit up and take notice.



"Is this a serious takeover bid, Carruthers?"