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Pakistan, Afghanistan in tandem

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES EDITORIAL - Three-thousand additional Marines will be headed to Afghanistan if, as is expected, Defense Secretary Robert Gates approves a "mini-surge" for the country's deteriorating security situation. An anticipated heightening of Taliban attacks following the spring thaw prompts this "pre-emptive" troop influx.

Most troops will be sent to southern Afghanistan, where, until now, British, Canadian and Dutch forces have handled much of the fighting against the resurgent Taliban. In a dangerously stretched force, it is not yet clear where Mr. Gates will find these troops. The Pentagon gives no answer at present. There are currently 26,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, most under the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force which numbers 40,000.

The origins of Afghanistan's troubles right now are manifold. Surely the Taliban insurgents have learned from coalition missteps in Iraq. But one key major conveyor which must be stopped — which, indeed, would help alleviate another serious security problem if stopped — wends through the mountainous wilds from Islamabad. Afghanistan's security rises and falls in tandem with Pakistan's. Afghanistan's Taliban fighters use Pakistan's wild North-West Frontier Province as a refuge between battles with NATO forces in southern Afghanistan. Pakistani Ambassador Mahmud Ali Durrani, who spoke yesterday with editors and reporters at The Washington Times, stresses his country's commitment to the war on terror. The best test of this commitment — besides guarding Pakistani's nuclear arsenal and ensuring Pakistan's own security — is reducing infiltration into Afghanistan.

As unconfirmed reports this week of the apprehension of Osama bin Laden's security coordinator in Lahore demonstrate, the problem extends well beyond Pakistan's mountainous wilds. Before President Pervez Musharraf's emergency decree and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's assassination brought Pakistan's instability to global focus, al Qaeda, the Taliban and related terrorist groups have steadily turned footholds in Pakistan's lawless North-West Frontier Province into countrywide operations, including in the heart of Pakistan's cities. Quantifying unstable Pakistan's negative effect on Afghanistan's security deterioration is a difficult enterprise, but the fact that 2007's uptick in violence was fueled in large part by Pakistan's porous border is not seriously disputed.

It should also be mentioned that a turnabout by our NATO partners in Afghanistan would aid matters greatly, too. The 3,000 Marines expected for Afghanistan compensate in part for the failure of some NATO member countries to meet our request for 7,500 additional troops in Afghanistan.

The Pentagon troop increase plan, which crossed Mr. Gates' desk this morning, originally called

for redeploying the 3,000 Marines from Iraq's Anbar province — a risky idea that has since been scrapped. At some point, a more secure Pakistan will make recourse to U.S. troop increases less necessary, which would be merciful.
