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Pakistan Faces Security Blowback from Taliban Rule

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Four years after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, Pakistan's initial optimism has given way to escalating security challenges and strained bilateral relations. Once viewed as a strategic opportunity to counter Indian influence and bolster Islamabad's regional position, the Taliban's resurgence has instead emboldened groups threatening Pakistan's internal stability.

In 2021, Pakistan's political and military leadership welcomed the Taliban's victory, anticipating the closure of sanctuaries for the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch

separatists in eastern Afghanistan. However, these hopes have been dashed as militant groups have intensified their activities. The TTP, along with factions like the Hafiz Gul Bahadur group and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), has escalated attacks across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

The Global Terrorism Index now ranks Pakistan as the world's second most terrorism-affected nation, with the TTP, BLA, and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) among the ten deadliest groups globally. In 2024 alone, Pakistan recorded over 500 terrorist incidents, marking a sharp rise in casualties and violence.

Security analysts attribute this escalation to Afghanistan's changed environment. Reports by the UN Security Council confirm that the TTP operates with freedom inside Afghanistan, fielding thousands of fighters and acquiring advanced weapons. Islamabad accuses the Taliban administration of tolerating the group while actively targeting ISKP.

The fallout has reignited debates over Pakistan's Afghan strategy. For decades, Afghanistan was viewed as "strategic depth" against regional rivals. Critics now argue this policy has backfired, producing blowback in the form of militancy and cross-border sanctuaries. Officials counter that Pakistan's geographic position has historically left it little choice but to remain engaged in Afghan conflicts.

Domestically, the state faces political challenges in mounting a decisive response. Unlike the united consensus behind Operation Zarb-i-Azb in 2014, today, major political parties and tribal elders oppose new large-scale operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, citing displacement concerns. Local jirgas have sought dialogue with Kabul, but militant violence continues to escalate.

Pakistan has resorted to a mix of military strikes, tighter border controls, and the expulsion of undocumented Afghans to pressure the Taliban. Limited cooperation with Washington has resumed, with the U.S. providing intelligence and training, though without the financial assistance once available during the war on terror.

Analysts warn that Pakistan's counterterrorism doctrine must adapt to a more fragmented and complex threat landscape. The resurgence of militancy underscores the limits of past strategies and raises difficult questions about whether existing tools remain effective.

As Pakistan navigates these challenges, the evolving situation underscores the need for a reassessment of its policies towards Afghanistan and a more nuanced approach to regional security.

Four years on, instead of securing its western frontier, Pakistan faces a deteriorating security climate. How Islamabad balances pressure on the Taliban, domestic political opposition, and the need for public trust will shape its security trajectory for years ahead.