**The need for a national AI policy**

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Artificial intelligence (AI) is a multibillion-dollar industry. By the end of 2021, the revenues from the AI market, including software, hardware, and services, are expected to reach 327.5 billion USD. This market will likely hit the 500 billion USD mark by 2024 or even earlier with the current growth rate. With the fast-paced growth of the information technology (IT) sector in Pakistan, which is currently contributing around 1 percent of the national GDP (approx. 3.0 billion USD), the share of AI-related products and services is also increasing. Pakistani AI startup companies have shown their potential, and many of them are prospective unicorns.

The incumbent Government of Pakistan is aggressively pushing the concepts of the knowledge economy and digital Pakistan. Such initiatives are indeed in line with recent ongoing international trends. They are also much needed to cope with the fast-paced modern world. However, what is currently sorely lacking is a clear national AI policy for Pakistan.

[Defending champion Djokovic passes 1st round in Wimbledon](https://nation.com.pk/29-Jun-2021/defending-champion-djokovic-passes-1st-round-in-wimbledonp)

A national AI policy is a fundamental step in any nation’s journey to its “smart” future. It characterises how AI technologies will shape the country’s economic future by critically rethinking and making drastic changes to reap productivity gains and create new avenues of growth. A typical AI policy includes identifying projects of national interest, such as defence, smart cities and urban planning, healthcare, safety and security and large-scale manufacturing, where AI will be used to address critical challenges and deliver a strong socioeconomic impact.

The development of AI policy has already become a concern of paramount importance for many countries in the last few years. The Russian president Vladimir Putin has already predicted that whichever country leads the way in AI research will dominate global affairs. It is expected that China will become the worldwide leader of AI research by 2030 by having almost half of the total AI contribution to the world GDP. The US, the EU, the Russian Federation, and India all are poising to take the leadership role in this arena and have already introduced their respective AI policies.

[FO rejects report alleging former SAPM Zulfi Bukhari visited Israel](https://nation.com.pk/29-Jun-2021/fo-rejects-report-alleging-former-sapm-zulfi-bukhari-visited-israel)

In Pakistan, we desperately need a similar policy to harness the potential of AI fully. This policy should include at least three cornerstones. First, it should identify critical areas of national strategic importance, which require immediate attention and resources. It would be wise to locate certain niche areas instead of keeping a broader and generic spectrum. However, identifying our strongholds and where we should tap on the advances made by others require careful planning and conscious decision-making.

Second, the policy should chalk out how authorities, enterprises, research establishments and varsities can harmonise to provide collective good. Data, skills, legislation, and integration are essential ingredients of a successful AI recipe to achieve any sustainable development goal. A plan catering to the needs of all relevant stakeholders will indeed be critical in this regard.

Third, the policy should address concerns and risks raised by the rise of AI. One of such concerns is the overtaking of jobs by upcoming AI systems. Since Pakistan is a developing nation where automation is still in progress, the risk of unemployment due to AI systems is relatively low. However, this situation may change quickly, and the AI policy needs to carefully assess the cases that might arise in the near/distant future. Another concern is associated with security and privacy laws. Since AI systems are data-hungry, they require a lot of data. Therefore, AI systems’ access to sensitive data could be either a security threat or, at least, a privacy issue. Currently, Pakistan has somewhat lax privacy laws compared to Europe’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), for example. However, any new legislation may significantly impact the available data sets required by the AI systems, thus disrupting their functionality. Hence, we need to incorporate such risks in advance in our policy.

[Development of merged districts in KPK is gov't top priority: PM](https://nation.com.pk/28-Jun-2021/development-of-merged-districts-in-kpk-is-gov-t-top-priority-pm)

What the government and decision-making authorities need to do as soon as possible is to start a national discourse about the importance and effectiveness of AI in socioeconomic settings by inviting the relevant stakeholders. One of such initiatives has already been taken by the Sino-Pak Center for AI (SPCAI): an application-oriented research and development facility funded by the Ministry of IT and Telecommunication. The SPCAI plans to hold the first national AI forum (NAIF) in Pakistan on September 02, 2021. The proposed forum aims to gather relevant policymakers, regulators, practitioners, experts, innovators, end-users, investor groups, researchers, educators, entrepreneurs, interested public, and representatives from industries from Pakistan and abroad under one roof. The NAIF is an effort to develop an awareness of the role and impact of AI in Pakistani society, industry and industrial processes, social fabric, and economic growth. The NAIF is a perfect platform to initiate the discussion about a coherent national AI policy.

[‘Competence in research will help win COVID battle’, Dr Khalid Khan](https://nation.com.pk/28-Jun-2021/competence-in-research-will-help-win-covid-battle-dr-khalid-khan)

To remain relevant in global economics, Pakistan needs to formulate its national AI policy on an emergency basis. Pakistan is already very slow in reaping the benefits of the 4th industrial revolution. Missing the AI wave as well would be an irreparable loss to the national cause.