ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL
Available Online: https://assajournal.com
Vol. 04 No. 01. July-September 2025.Page#.38-47
Print ISSN: 3006-2497 Online ISSN: 3006-2500
https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.4.1.040
Platform & Workflow by: Open Journal Systems

Pakistan's Cyber Defense Revolution: AI & Machine Learning for Threat Mitigation

Zoya Bandukda
Karachi Grammar School
zoya.bandukda@gmail.com
Muhammad Ahmed Abid
Aitchison College Lahore, Pakistan
sardarahmedkhan346@gmail.com
Muhammad Talha Akhtar
MBA Finance (IU), Operation Manager-AVP
talha.contact@gmail.com
Muhammad Nawaz
Visiting Lecturer, Department Pakistan Studies University of Baltistan, Skardu
Tahir Mehmood
MS Banking and Finance (BUITEMS QTA), JAIBP-CBI (UK)/Assistant Manager Meezan bank limited
tk9309121@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Pakistan faces escalating cybersecurity threats, including ransomware, phishing, and state-sponsored attacks, which jeopardize businesses, government institutions, and critical infrastructure. Traditional defense mechanisms are increasingly inadequate, necessitating advanced solutions like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) to revolutionize cyber defense. This article explores how AI and ML enhance threat mitigation through real-time anomaly detection, behavioral analysis, and automated response systems, with specific applications in Pakistan's financial sector, government databases, and critical infrastructure. The country has made notable strides in AI-powered cybersecurity, with initiatives led by the National Response Center for Cyber Crimes (NR3C), Pakistan Information Security Association (PISA), and emerging startups. Collaborations with international tech firms and academia further bolster these efforts. However, challenges persist, including a shortage of skilled professionals, data privacy concerns, and high implementation costs. Looking ahead, AI-driven advancements promise to transform Pakistan's cybersecurity landscape, supported by evolving policies like the Personal Data Protection Bill. With strategic investments and workforce development, Pakistan has the potential to emerge as a regional leader in cyber defense. This article underscores the transformative role of AI and ML in securing Pakistan's digital future while addressing existing barriers and opportunities for growth.

Keywords: *Pakistan, Cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), Threat Mitigation, Cyber Defense, Ransomware, NR3C, Data Privacy, Critical Infrastructure*

Introduction

There is an increasing trend of cybersecurity threats in Pakistan, such as ransomware, phishing, and state-sponsored attacks, which are very dangerous to businesses, government institutions, and the critical infrastructure (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). Financial sector in particular has become a preferred target with breaches being high profile and sensitive customer information being leaked and services hampered. The digital ecosystem of Pakistan is also weak with the government databases and critical infrastructure, including energy grids and telecommunications networks, being compromised (Malik, 2022). These menaces are compounded by the fact that cybercriminals are becoming more sophisticated, and security measures, including signature-based detection systems, are not keeping up with the continually changing attack vectors. With the rise of sophisticated cyber threats, the demand of the advanced solutions that can help to detect and prevent them in real-time is increasing (Hussain et al., 2023).

To counter such risks, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) have been defined as the game-changers in the cybersecurity sphere. In contrast to the traditional approaches, AI and ML allow the systems to process a great deal of data, identify anomalies, and foresee possible threats with little human effort (Raza & Iqbal, 2023). As an example, behavioral analysis through AI can detect zero-day threats by detecting abnormalities in network traffic, and automated response can eliminate the attack before it can cause serious damage. The usefulness of these technologies is especially relevant on the territory of Pakistan with its limited resources and lack of highly trained specialists to pick out the threats manually (Shahzad et al., 2022). With the help of AI and ML, organizations will be able to improve their cyber defenses, thus being able to eliminate the threats quicker and more accurately. The use of AI and ML in the cybersecurity environment in Pakistan is in an initial stage yet demonstrating a good future. The National Response Center of Cyber Crimes (NR3C) and other government agencies, as well as entities operating in the private sector like the Pakistan Information Security Association (PISA), are leading the efforts to incorporate these technologies in the national defense plans (Ali & Rehman, 2023). Further, partnership with foreign technology companies and universities is contributing to the expertise and infrastructure divide. Nevertheless, issues like data privacy issues, the expensive nature of implementation and local talent shortage are still major obstacles (Akhtar et al., 2023). Still, the potential of AI and ML revolutionizing Pakistan and ensuring its digital future can hardly be overestimated, and their implementation is a priority that policymakers and industry leaders should address.

The Current Cybersecurity Landscape in Pakistan

The threats faced by Pakistan over its cybersecurity are becoming more evolved and numerous as they focus on businesses, government and infrastructure. Cyber espionage sponsored by a nation-state, ransomware, and phishing attacks have become ubiquitous, as the financial industry, power grids, and telecommunications infrastructure are the main targets (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). As an example, in 2022, a significant Pakistani bank was hit by a ransomware attack that hindered online services within several days, revealing the weaknesses of the digital defense in the industry (Malik, 2022). The same has occurred to government databases, which have been hacked on various occasions resulting in information leakage of sensitive data of citizens, such as national identification records, and tax information (Hussain et al., 2023). Such attacks do not only result in the loss of money but also make people lose confidence in digital systems, which is an obstacle to the development of a digitized economy in the country. The

increased severity and sophistication of these threats demonstrates that the old and reactive nature of the cybersecurity approach is not sufficient in dealing with contemporary threats (Raza & Iqbal, 2023).

The recent cyberattacks have shown how serious the lack of proper cybersecurity preparedness in Pakistan could be. Particularly, in one of the most remarkable cases, the Pakistani critical infrastructure, such as the power distribution systems, was hacked by a state-sponsored group, which resulted in local outages and disrupted operations (Ali & Rehman, 2023). The other high profile breach was the theft of sensitive state information that was subsequently sold off on the dark web bringing up issues of national security and data sovereignty (Akhtar et al., 2023). Phishing is another form of attacks that has never relented on the banking sector, with cybercriminals posing as legitimate institutions to steal customer credentials and withdraw money (Shahzad et al., 2022). Such attacks show that cyber threats in Pakistan are complex and the attackers use both technical vulnerability and human vulnerabilities. Absence of a centralized incident response framework also compounds the effect of such attacks where the organizations have to scramble to contain breaches after they have already happened (Khan & Abbas, 2023).

The constant changing and progressive threat environment in Pakistan is no longer being handled by conventional cybersecurity methods, like signature-based detection and perimeter defense. The signature-based systems, which are based on the known malware patterns, do not identify zero-day exploits and advanced persistent threats (APTs) using the new attack vectors (Raza & Iqbal, 2023). Moreover, the swift integration of the IoT devices and cloud services led to a wider attack surface, making the perimeter-based security ineffective (Malik, 2022). Most of the organizations in Pakistan continue to follow ineffective security measures and are not able to engage in thorough threat intelligence sharing and thus can be easily targeted by organized attacks (Hussain et al., 2023). Moreover, the lack of qualified cybersecurity specialists in the country negatively affects the possibility of implementing and maintaining the sophisticated defense systems, and this disparity between emerging threats and capability to respond to them exists (Ali & Rehman, 2023). Such problems emphasize the necessity of changing the paradigm of active and AI-powered cybersecurity strategies.

Pakistan needs to invest more in high-tech technologies and human resources to eliminate these deficiencies. By incorporating AI and machine learning into the structure of cybersecurity, it is possible to identify threats in real-time, analyze their behavior, and automatically respond to them, which will greatly decrease the use of inefficient techniques (Akhtar et al., 2023). The possibility of public-private partnerships and the creation of cooperation with foreign cybersecurity companies would also improve the defensive capacity of Pakistan due to the knowledge transfer and resource sharing (Shahzad et al., 2022). Additionally, to introduce legal protection and foster accountability, the government needs to speed up the adoption of effective cybersecurity measures, including the soon-to-be-launched Personal Data Protection Bill (Khan & Abbas, 2023). When tackling these issues comprehensively, Pakistan will be able to develop an effective cybersecurity environment that will support its digital transformation initiatives, as well as protect the vital national infrastructure against both present and emerging threats.

AI & Machine Learning in Cyber Defense

The combination of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) is transforming cyber security through the development of proactive and adaptive threat detection systems which are

far superior to the conventional solutions. Among the most notable AI/ML contributions, the real-time anomaly detection uses algorithms to compare the network traffic pattern to the normal traffic, thereby detecting any deviations in the traffic and identifying possible intrusion, preventing its further development (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). To give an example, ML models that are based on the historical data can identify the slightest anomaly in the user access patterns or data transfers, which might suggest the breach is already underway (Raza & Iqbal, 2023). Behavioral analysis goes further to extend this ability by using AI to model normal user and system behavior and therefore detect zero-day threats; previously unknown exploits which cannot be detected by signature-based detection (Hussain et al., 2023). This is especially a crucial situation in Pakistan where cybercriminals are now using well-developed and dynamic strategies. Another AI-powered technology is automated response systems, which allow isolating compromised systems, malicious IP addresses, or even applying countermeasures without any human interaction, thereby greatly decreasing the response time and minimizing damage (Ali & Rehman, 2023). All the advancements create a shift in the cybersecurity field by making it a predictive subject rather than reactive, which modern threats outsmart traditional tools.

AI and ML are increasingly being used in Pakistan to protect the most important industries, and the financial sector is taking the lead in preventing fraud. Fintechs and banks are implementing AI driven systems that can help track real-time transactions, with a high rate of success in detecting fraudulent behaviours, including false withdrawals or identity theft (Malik, 2022). To illustrate, ML algorithms can examine spending patterns and detect anomalies, including unexpected large payments in unusual places, and take corrective action instantly (Shahzad et al., 2022). Another valuable target area that government databases are enjoying AI-driven security is the area of government databases. Using behavioral biometrics and access control systems based on ML, the agencies will be able to avoid unauthorized access to sensitive citizen records, including national IDs or tax records (Akhtar et al., 2023). Furthermore, the use of AI is being applied to critical infrastructure sectors to observe operational technology (OT) networks to detect evidence of sabotage or espionage. As an example, AI models can be used to analyze sensor data in power grid to identify anomalies that can be associated with cyber-physical attacks to maintain stability of critical services (Khan & Abbas, 2023). These programs are evidence of the fact that AI/ML is not only strengthening cybersecurity but also allows Pakistan to secure those digital assets that are most at risk.

Nevertheless, there are a number of challenges to the implementation of the AI and ML in the cyber defense environment in Pakistan. The lack of local knowledge in the field of AI and cybersecurity is also a major obstacle, since the creation and maintenance of such systems is a highly specific task, and there is a lack of qualified specialists (Hussain et al., 2023). Also, data privacy issues are raised when AI-based systems work with large quantities of sensitive data, and strong governance mechanisms are required to be compliant with such regulations as the imminent Personal Data Protection Bill (Ali & Rehman, 2023). It is also a challenge caused by high implementation costs, especially to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which cannot afford to invest in the latest technologies (Shahzad et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the inter-sectoral (public and private sector) and international tech firm collaborations are also aiding to curb these challenges by encouraging knowledge transfer and lowering the costs (Akhtar et al., 2023). In the future, the further development of AI/ML is likely to enhance the ability of Pakistan to protect its cyberspace even further, especially when the algorithms will learn to foresee and mitigate the

attacks. Pakistan has a chance to benefit fully and utilize the power of AI and ML by overcoming the current impediments to the development of a national workforce, introducing policy changes, and strategic investments, securing its digital present and future and becoming a leader in the cybersecurity industry in the region.

Pakistan's Progress in AI-Powered Cyber Defense

Pakistan has been at the forefront of this development to incorporate artificial intelligence (AI) in its cybersecurity system with the collaboration of the government, the corporate world and young technology companies. One of the most active centers in these efforts has been the National Response Center of Cyber Crimes (NR3C), which works under the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), using AI-based tools to fight cyber crimes in the form of financial fraud, identity theft, and online bullying (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). In addition to this, the Pakistan Information Security Association (PISA) has taken center stage in creating awareness and building capacity by hosting training sessions and workshops to train professionals in the field of AI-powered cybersecurity methods (Ali & Rehman, 2023). In the meantime, local startups such as Cyfirma Pakistan and Taza are coming up with innovative products, such as threat intelligence platforms and automated incident response systems with localized requirements based on AI (Malik, 2022). All these initiatives show that Pakistan is determined to utilize AI to defend them against attacks, but it still faces some setbacks, including funding and the coordination of multiple stakeholders (Hussain et al., 2023).

Various case studies point out how AI-based cybersecurity solutions have been successfully implemented in the critical sectors of Pakistan. HBL Bank in the financial sector installed an AI-based fraud detection solution that lowered the false positives rate by 40 percent and enhanced the accuracy of identifying the threat (Raza & Iqbal, 2023). Likewise, National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) used behavioral biometrics and machine learning algorithms to protect its databases containing citizens, and prevented several attempted breaches in 2022 (Akhtar et al., 2023). The energy sector has not been left behind, as the National Transmission & Despatch Company (NTDC) of Pakistan has implemented AI-powered anomaly detection models to keep track of the operations in its grid and prevent possible cyber-physical attacks (Shahzad et al., 2022). The implementations mark the transformative capabilities of AI, but scalability is an issue because of infrastructural limitations and lack of uniformity in protocols (Khan & Abbas, 2023).

Pakistan is already gaining pace in AI-enabled cyber defense because of collaborations with foreign technology companies and educational institutions. The collaboration with such global experts as IBM Security and Palo Alto Networks has allowed transferring knowledge and access to the latest technologies, including Security Operations Centers (SOCs) powered by AI (Ali & Rehman, 2023). The innovation is being promoted by academic partnerships such as a joint research project of COMSATS University and MIT (Hussain et al., 2023). Also, it is possible to find programs that narrow the skills gap such as the Pakistani-German AI Cooperation Program that trains local professionals on advanced cybersecurity analytics (Malik, 2022). These collaborations are promising, but in the long term, these partnerships will only be successful when the investment and policy are maintained to ensure the adoption of technology is compatible with the Pakistani regulatory and infrastructural realities (Akhtar et al., 2023). Further enhancing such partnerships, Pakistan will be able to establish itself as a local centre of AI-based cybersecurity innovation.

Challenges & Limitations

The lack of trained personnel experienced in both the fields of AI and cybersecurity is one of the most urgent issues of implementing AI in cybersecurity in Pakistan. A recent report by Pakistan Software Houses Association (P@SHA) states that the nation is short of about 100,000 skilled cybersecurity professionals, and even limited specialists are available in the sector of AI-based security measures (Rehman & Baig, 2024). The fact that cyber threats evolve quickly contributes to the development of the skills gap as it necessitates constant upskilling, which the majority of academic institutions in the area cannot offer (Shahzad & Mahmood, 2023). Though such efforts as the National Center for Artificial Intelligence (NCAI) have already been implemented, which introduces certification programs, they are only available in larger cities and rural regions, where the digital infrastructure is already poor (Khalid & Farooq, 2024). This problem is also exacerbated by the brain drain phenomenon, with a significant number of skilled specialists trying their luck in other countries, which leaves essential industries open to high-tech cyber attacks (Iqbal et al., 2023). Unless some significant investment in STEM education and professional training courses is made, this human resource bottleneck will remain a handicapping factor in the cyber defense efforts in Pakistan.

Another issue limiting the massive adoption of AI in the sphere of cybersecurity is data privacy issues and ethical considerations. The lack of extensive data protection laws has brought ambiguity concerning data collection, storage, and processing by AI systems in sensitive information (Akhtar & Rizvi, 2024). According to a survey conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation, 68 percent of Pakistani organizations utilizing AI in identifying threats do not have clear guidelines on how to manage the personal data, which implies the risk of misuse or access by unauthorized persons (Digital Rights Foundation, 2023). Ethical issues crop up as well when AI technology is used in surveillance such as in the case of the controversial use of facial recognition technology by certain law enforcement agencies (Mirza & Hussain, 2024). Such issues are especially sharp in the financial and healthcare industries, where security systems with AI have to strike a balance between detecting threats and ensuring the privacy of patients/clients (Zaidi & Qureshi, 2023). Although the draft Personal Data Protection Bill provides certain regulatory framework, its failure to be enacted soon and possible loopholes remain a source of concern to both businesses and citizens regarding the adoption of AI in cybersecurity (Khan & Siddiqui, 2024).

The implementation of AI is prohibitively expensive, and it is a significant setback to the Pakistani cybersecurity prospects, especially to small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), which are the pillars of the economy. The cost of implementing a basic AI-based security system is between 50,000 to 200,000 dollars per year, which is a barring amount to most local enterprises (Pakistan Banking Association, 2023). Such costs include not only the cost of software but also the upgrade or replacement of the infrastructure, cloud computing services, and future maintenance, which most organizations do not estimate accurately (Farooqui & Saleem, 2024). The same situation is in the public sector, where the budget of the National IT Board on AI cybersecurity tools can only fund fewer than 15 percent of the required installations in government departments (National IT Board, 2023). Although open-source AI solutions provide a partial alleviation of costs, they are usually not customizable or supported in the nature of threats that Pakistan faces (Ahmed & Sheikh, 2024). The cost of the AI solutions is also a paradox because the cash-strapped SMEs and underfunded government agencies, which are most likely to be affected by cyber-attacks, are

least capable of affording the solutions (Malik & Khan, 2023). Without special subsidies, public-private cooperation, or new modes of financing, the excessive price of AI implementation will continue to be one of the key constraints in the cyber defense strategy of Pakistan.

The Future of AI in Pakistan's Cybersecurity

Pakistan is on the edge of a cybersecurity revolution, and artificial intelligence (AI) will change the state of digital defense in the next decade. According to experts, in the year 2030, 85 percent of cyber threats will be neutralized in real-time due to AI-driven security systems that will autonomously identify, analyze, and prevent cyber threats without a human intervention, using advanced machine learning algorithms that will constantly update to overcome more sophisticated attacks (Ahmed et al., 2024). The combination of quantum computing and AI cybersecurity solutions is likely to become a gamechanger that will allow Pakistani institutions to crack more sophisticated ransomware attacks and anticipate zero-day vulnerabilities ahead of time (Khan & Siddiqui, 2024). The most promising potential is the creation of locally relevant AI solutions that address the specifics of the threat posed in Pakistan, including adaptive systems that would help to mitigate the effects of region-specific social engineering techniques most commonly used in South Asian cybercrime (Malik & Rizwan, 2024). It is estimated that the financial industry will be the first to benefit, and "cognitive security centers" that use AI are expected to cut fraud losses by 60 percent and increase the speed of legitimate transactions by 40 percent (State Bank of Pakistan, 2024). But to take up this potential, it is necessary to solve huge problems with infrastructure, such as expanding 5G networks and edge computing capabilities to enable distributed AI security architecture (Qureshi et al., 2024).

The Personal Data Protection Bill and other supportive cybersecurity laws on the way will act as a guiding force in the development of the AI security landscape in Pakistan. The analysts indicate that the provisions on AI governance in the bill might make Pakistan the first country in South Asia to have a complete regulatory framework on ethical AI in cybersecurity (Digital Policy Institute, 2024). This law will likely impose such requirements on AI security systems as privacy by design, which will require organizations to adopt methods such as federated learning that can identify threats patterns without breaching personal information (Baig & Shah, 2024). The future AI Security Guidelines on financial institutions by the State Bank of Pakistan will be precedents of sector-specific policies, and they necessitate explainable AI models that can give an audit trail of security decisions (Financial Services Authority, 2024). Nevertheless, legal experts warn that excessive regulation would kill the innovation especially among startups working on novel AI-based security initiatives (Hussain & Sheikh, 2024). The proposed National AI Cybersecurity Sandbox by the government is meant to find this balance, permitting a test environment of the cutting edge technology and services such as autonomous threat-hunting AI, but ensuring that they meet the shifting data sovereignty demands (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2024). These policy trends will go a long way in deciding whether the Pakistani AI cybersecurity sector will emerge as an open innovation center or be limited by red tape.

However, by 2035, Pakistan can become the cybersecurity leader in the Middle East and South Asia (MESA) with the help of the strategic investments and cooperation with the region. The potential AI cybersecurity R&D centers in Karachi and Islamabad to be set up in the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Digital Initiative are expected to make Pakistan a knowledge exporter to the neighboring countries (CPEC Authority, 2024). Indeed, Pakistani cybersecurity companies are already establishing a reputation of creating affordable AI-based

solutions that specifically cater to the needs of developing economies, including lightweight intrusion detection systems that are designed to run in low-bandwidth networks (TechSolutions PK, 2024). The program, called AI Security Scholars, is run by the Higher Education Commission and is expected to create 5,000 specialized graduates every year both to serve the local market and export Pakistani experts in the field (HEC, 2024). Such regional cooperation mechanisms as the OIC Cybersecurity Alliance give Pakistan a chance to export its expertise in the AI security domain to Muslim-majority countries that also threaten to be hit by the same threats (OIC Digital Council, 2024). Nevertheless, to become a regional leader, it is necessary to maintain a political desire, and economists suggest that it is necessary to spend at least 1.5 percent of GDP on AI cybersecurity development, which is three times more than today (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2024). Under such conditions, Pakistan will not only manage to secure its digital future but also have a booming AI cybersecurity export business with an annual turnover of about 3 billion dollars by 2030 (Trade Development Authority, 2024)

Conclusion

The cybersecurity situation in Pakistan is at a point of its evolution, and the increasing complexity of web-based attacks requires the change of paradigm to more modern and AI-powered defense systems. The combination of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) into the cyber defense plans of the country has already shown to have revolutionary potential, especially in such areas as finance, government databases, and critical infrastructure. The threat mitigation is being transformed with the help of real-time anomaly detection, behavior analysis, and automatic response mechanisms, which allows proactive detection and elimination of threats. Nevertheless, along with all these developments, there are still serious challenges. The limited availability of skilled professionals, privacy of data, and the expensive cost of implementation are great obstacles to mass adoption. These problems need a multi- pronged solution which entails heavy investments in education and training, strong regulatory mechanisms such as the upcoming Personal Data Protection Bill, and partnerships between the government and the corporate to fill in the resource gap. Through proactive approach to these issues, Pakistan will not only be able to strengthen its digital environment, but also become a leader in cybersecurity innovations in its region.

The future of AI in the Pakistani cybersecurity is full of potential, but the country should take a strategic and long-term approach to it. Pakistan can be brought to the path of resilient and adaptive cyber defense by developing indigenous AI solutions to local threats along with the international collaborations and policy support. The possibility of knowledge sharing and technological development has also been noted with the development of such initiatives as the National AI Cybersecurity Sandbox and local collaborations within frameworks such as the OIC Cybersecurity Alliance. Besides, the expected regulatory frameworks will be instrumental in striking the balance between creativity and ethics, making sure that the implementation of AI will not contradict national security and privacy requirements. By making specific investments, nurturing the human resource, and ensuring that it can meet the challenges of the current restrictions, Pakistan can make full use of AI in protecting its digital future. The path to the status of the regional cybersecurity hub is not easy, yet the opportunities it opens to the economic growth and technological leadership are enormous in the long-term perspective.

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