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Prepared & Presented by
scholareye.xyz

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Essay 1: Do We Really Need Literature in Our Lives?

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In an age dominated by algorithms, GDP growth charts, and the ceaseless hum of technological progress, one is tempted to ask a seemingly innocuous but profoundly consequential question: do we really need literature in our lives? At first glance, the question appears almost heretical, for literature has accompanied humanity since the first cave-dweller scratched a story of the hunt onto stone, since the first bard sang of gods and heroes around a fire. Yet in a world obsessed with quantifiable outcomes, where success is measured in market capitalisation and efficiency, literature is often relegated to the status of an ornamental pursuit, a pastime for the leisured few, disconnected from the "real" business of living. This essay argues, emphatically, that literature is not a luxury but a necessity; not decoration but the very scaffolding of human consciousness, morality, empathy and civilization itself. To dismiss literature is to dismiss the accumulated wisdom, sorrow, joy and rebellion of every generation that has ever lived, and to impoverish the human soul in the vain pursuit of a purely material existence.

To understand why literature matters, one must first understand what it is. Literature is not merely a collection of words arranged aesthetically; it is the codified memory of human experience. It is history without the dryness of dates, philosophy without the abstraction of jargon, psychology without the clinical distance of the laboratory. When Homer sang of Achilles' wrath, he was not merely entertaining; he was interrogating the nature of glory, mortality and rage. When Cervantes gave us Don Quixote, he was not merely amusing; he was examining the tragicomic gap between idealism and reality that defines the human condition. Literature, in its truest sense, is the distilled essence of what it means to be human, refracted through the prism of imagination.

The first and perhaps most profound function of literature is that it serves as the archive of human experience. Before literature, the wisdom of one generation often perished with it, transmitted imperfectly through oral tradition, if at all. With the advent of the written word and its most refined form, literature, humanity acquired the ability to preserve not just facts but feelings, not just events but their emotional and moral textures. When we read the Iliad, we are transported to the plains of Troy; when we read Ghalib's ghazals, we inhabit the melancholic grandeur of a crumbling Mughal world; when we read Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, we confront the visceral, generational trauma of

slavery in a way no history textbook could convey. Literature allows us to live a thousand lives beyond our own, to experience epochs and emotions that our singular existence would never permit us to access.

Perhaps the most cited, and most crucial, function of literature is its cultivation of empathy. Neuroscientific studies conducted at institutions such as the University of Toronto and Emory University have demonstrated that reading fiction activates the same neural regions associated with real-life social cognition. When we read a novel, we do not merely observe a character; we inhabit their consciousness, we feel their fears, their joys, their moral dilemmas as if they were our own. This is a rehearsal for empathy in real life. A society that reads widely is, almost by definition, a society better equipped to understand the "other" — the refugee, the outcast, the criminal, the foreigner, the person of a different faith or ideology. In an era marked by rising polarisation, sectarianism and intolerance, this function of literature is not a luxury; it is a civilizational necessity. The decline of empathy in public discourse, visible in the vitriol of social media and the dehumanisation of political opponents, is not unrelated to the decline of deep, sustained reading.

Literature also serves as a vehicle of moral and philosophical inquiry that predates, and often surpasses, formal philosophy in its accessibility and impact.

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* interrogates the nature of guilt, justice and redemption more powerfully than any legal treatise. Camus' *The Stranger* forces us to confront the absurdity of existence in ways that abstract existentialist philosophy, confined to academic journals, never could. Iqbal's poetry, blending philosophy with lyrical beauty, awakened an entire generation of Muslims in the subcontinent to the possibilities of self-actualisation (khudi) and collective destiny. Literature does not merely present moral dilemmas; it forces the reader to sit with ambiguity, to resist the temptation of easy answers, and in doing so, cultivates a more nuanced moral sensibility than any catechism or code of conduct.

Beyond its philosophical and emotional dimensions, literature has historically been one of the most potent instruments of social critique and reform. Charles Dickens' novels exposed the brutality of Victorian child labour and the workhouse system, galvanising public sentiment towards reform. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is widely credited with intensifying abolitionist sentiment in pre-Civil War America. In our own subcontinental context, the Progressive Writers' Movement, with figures such as Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Krishan Chander, used literature to expose the horrors of Partition, the hypocrisies of feudal society, and the suffocating grip of

patriarchal norms. Manto's unflinching stories about the violence of 1947 did more to capture the trauma of that cataclysm than volumes of official historiography. Literature, in this sense, becomes a form of resistance, a mirror held up to society that forces it to confront its own contradictions.

Literature is also intimately tied to the construction of language, identity and nationhood. Language is the vessel of a people's soul, and literature is the refinement of that vessel into art. The Urdu literary tradition, from Mir and Ghalib to Faiz and Iqbal, did not merely produce beautiful verses; it forged a shared cultural and, eventually, national consciousness that contributed to the very idea of Pakistan. Similarly, the Bengali literary renaissance, epitomised by Rabindranath Tagore, became so central to Bengali identity that it later played a role in the linguistic nationalism that led to the creation of Bangladesh. Literature, therefore, is not peripheral to nation-building; it is often its very foundation.

There is also a deeply personal, psychological dimension to literature's importance. In an age of rising anxiety, depression and loneliness — what some sociologists have termed an epidemic of disconnection — literature offers a form of companionship and catharsis that is difficult to replicate. Aristotle's concept of catharsis, the purging of emotions through engagement

with tragedy, remains as relevant today as it was in ancient Athens. Reading allows individuals to process grief, confusion and trauma vicariously, often providing solace that direct confrontation with one's own pain cannot offer. Bibliotherapy, now recognised as a legitimate therapeutic tool, is built on precisely this insight: that stories heal.

Furthermore, literature has historically been the training ground for leaders, statesmen and thinkers. Winston Churchill's mastery of the English language, honed through voracious reading, was central to his rhetorical power during Britain's darkest hour. Nelson Mandela drew strength from Shakespeare's plays during his imprisonment on Robben Island. Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah's forensic command of language and argument, essential to his political triumphs, was cultivated through a deep engagement with English literature and rhetoric. Literature trains the mind to think in nuance, to construct arguments, to persuade and to empathise — skills indispensable to leadership in any field.

Despite this overwhelming case, the utilitarian objection persists: in an age of artificial intelligence, climate change and economic precarity, can societies afford to prioritise something as seemingly impractical as literature? Governments across the world, including in

Pakistan, have increasingly diverted funding and prestige towards STEM disciplines, viewing humanities departments as expendable. Parents encourage children towards engineering and medicine, dismissing literary pursuits as unemployable indulgences. The rise of short-form content, reels and algorithmically curated entertainment has further eroded the cultural space once occupied by sustained reading.

Yet this utilitarian objection collapses upon closer examination. First, it rests on a narrow, impoverished conception of human flourishing — one that equates value solely with immediate economic productivity. But no civilization has ever been remembered for its GDP alone; we remember Greece for Homer and Sophocles, not merely for its trade routes; we remember the Mughal era for Ghalib and Mir, not merely for its revenue collection systems. Second, even on strictly utilitarian grounds, literature enhances precisely those skills that modern economies prize: critical thinking, communication, creativity and emotional intelligence. Employers across the world, from Google to McKinsey, increasingly emphasise "soft skills" — skills cultivated more effectively through literature than through technical training alone. Third, the claim that literature is mere escapism misunderstands its function; escapism implies avoidance of reality, whereas literature, at its best, is an intensified confrontation with reality, refracted through

imagination to reveal truths that direct observation often obscures.

In the Pakistani context, the stakes of this debate are particularly high. Pakistan suffers from alarmingly low literacy rates, a crumbling public education system, and a near-total absence of a reading culture beyond the urban elite. The vernacular literary traditions of Urdu, Sindhi, Punjabi, Pashto and Balochi, once vibrant, are in danger of atrophy, squeezed between the dominance of English as the language of opportunity and the erosion of public interest in serious reading. This is not merely a cultural loss; it is a civilizational one. A nation that does not read, does not think deeply; and a nation that does not think deeply is vulnerable to demagoguery, misinformation and the erosion of democratic deliberation — phenomena all too visible in Pakistan's contemporary political landscape, where conspiracy theories and sensationalism often substitute for reasoned discourse.

The digital age presents both a challenge and an opportunity for literature. On one hand, the proliferation of short attention spans, TikTok reels and algorithmically addictive content threatens to render sustained literary engagement obsolete. On the other hand, digital platforms have also democratised access to literature: e-books, audiobooks, and online literary communities

have made classic and contemporary literature accessible to those who might never have entered a library. The rise of Instagram poetry and web-based fiction, while often dismissed by purists, has also introduced a new generation to the pleasures of the written word. The challenge, therefore, is not to lament technology but to harness it in the service of literary engagement.

The way forward for Pakistan, and indeed for any society grappling with this question, lies in a multi-pronged revival of reading culture. Educational reform must reintroduce literature not as a rote memorisation exercise but as a space for genuine critical engagement, encouraging students to question, interpret and debate rather than merely reproduce prescribed answers. Public libraries, chronically underfunded, must be revitalised as community spaces. Literary festivals, such as the Karachi Literature Festival and the Lahore Literary Festival, must be expanded beyond elite urban circles to smaller cities and towns. Media and technology companies must be incentivised to promote long-form content alongside short-form entertainment. And most importantly, a cultural shift must occur wherein literature is once again seen not as a hobby for the privileged but as a birthright of every citizen, essential to the cultivation of an informed, empathetic and reflective society.

A closer examination of specific literary traditions further substantiates literature's civilizational weight. Consider the Russian literary tradition of the nineteenth century: Tolstoy's *War and Peace* did not merely narrate the Napoleonic invasion of Russia; it offered a sweeping philosophy of history, questioning whether great men truly shape events or are merely swept along by forces beyond their control. Chekhov's short stories, seemingly modest in scope, captured the quiet desperation of the Russian middle class with a precision that sociological surveys could never achieve. Similarly, the Latin American tradition of magical realism, epitomised by Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, used the fantastical to illuminate the very real cycles of violence, colonialism and forgetting that characterised Latin American history, proving that literature's power lies precisely in its capacity to access truths that literal, documentary representation cannot reach. These examples reinforce a central thesis: literature does not merely reflect reality; it interprets, refracts and sometimes reimagines it in ways that expand our collective understanding of the human condition.

It is also worth interrogating the relationship between literature and critical thinking more explicitly, since this is often the strongest practical argument advanced in literature's defence. Reading a complex novel requires

the reader to track multiple narrative threads, infer unstated motivations, evaluate the reliability of narrators, and hold ambiguity without resolution — precisely the cognitive skills that are indispensable in fields ranging from law and diplomacy to scientific research and business strategy. Studies on reading comprehension consistently show that sustained engagement with long-form, complex texts strengthens working memory, inferential reasoning and sustained attention span, faculties that are, ironically, being eroded by the very short-form digital content that competes with literature for our attention. In this sense, literature is not opposed to the skills a modern, technologically driven economy requires; it is foundational to them.

Furthermore, literature's role in preserving endangered languages and marginalised voices deserves particular emphasis. Across the world, indigenous and minority languages face extinction, and it is often literature — oral epics transcribed, folk tales collected, poetry composed in threatened tongues — that provides the last recorded testimony of these linguistic and cultural worlds. In Pakistan, the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai in Sindhi, the folk narratives of Khwaja Ghulam Farid in Seraiki, and the oral traditions of Balochi and Pashto storytelling represent irreplaceable repositories of regional identity and wisdom that would otherwise vanish amid the homogenising pressures of globalisation and the

dominance of a handful of major world languages. To lose these literatures would be to lose entire ways of perceiving and organising human experience.

In conclusion, the question of whether we need literature in our lives is not merely academic; it is existential. Literature is the repository of human memory, the classroom of empathy, the battleground of moral inquiry, the instrument of social reform, the forge of national identity, the balm for psychological distress, and the training ground for leadership. To dismiss it as a luxury is to fundamentally misunderstand what it means to be human. In a world increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence, algorithmic manipulation and the erosion of nuanced thought, literature stands as one of the last bastions of authentic human reflection. As Franz Kafka once observed, a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. In an age of frozen empathy, fractured discourse and mechanised existence, we do not merely want literature — we desperately, urgently need it, now more than ever before.

Essay 2: Women Universities as Agents of Change

Outline

1. Introduction: education as the great equaliser and women's universities as its vanguard
2. Historical context: the struggle for women's higher education in the subcontinent and Pakistan
3. Rationale for exclusive women's universities
 - a. Addressing cultural and familial barriers to co-education
 - b. Creating safe, harassment-free academic spaces
 - c. Building female leadership and role models
 - d. Encouraging enrolment in STEM and non-traditional fields
4. Case studies: Fatima Jinnah Women University, Lahore College for Women University, and international models
5. Socio-economic impact: women's education and national development
6. Women's universities as agents of change
 - a. Economic empowerment and labour force participation
 - b. Political and civic participation
 - c. Challenging patriarchal norms and social transformation

d. Demographic dividends: health, fertility and child welfare

7. Criticism and challenges

a. Ghettoisation and lack of exposure to co-educational environments

b. Quality and resource constraints

c. Employability and market relevance of degrees

8. Rebuttal and balanced assessment

9. Policy recommendations

10. Conclusion: women's universities as catalysts of a more equitable Pakistan

Education has long been recognised as the single most powerful lever for social transformation, and nowhere is this more evident than in the education of women, historically the most marginalised and excluded segment of society. In patriarchal, conservative societies such as Pakistan, where cultural taboos, familial restrictions and religious conservatism have often conspired to keep women away from institutions of higher learning, the establishment of dedicated women's universities represents not merely an educational innovation but a profound social intervention. This essay argues that women's universities are not a compromise or a lesser alternative to co-education, but powerful agents of change, institutions capable of unlocking the latent potential of half the population, and thereby

transforming the economic, social and political fabric of the nation.

To understand the significance of women's universities, one must first appreciate the historical struggle for women's access to education in South Asia. In pre-Partition India, women's literacy rates were abysmally low, hovering in the single digits, with higher education for women considered not merely unnecessary but socially transgressive. Pioneers such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, while revolutionary in establishing the Aligarh Muslim University for men, remained cautious about women's education, reflecting the deeply entrenched conservatism of the era. It was reformers such as Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain in Bengal, who established the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, and later figures such as Fatima Jinnah, who championed the cause of women's education as central to national progress. In post-independence Pakistan, this legacy found institutional expression in universities such as Fatima Jinnah Women University in Rawalpindi, Lahore College for Women University, and more recently, institutions in Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta, each established with the explicit mandate of expanding women's access to higher education in contexts where co-education remained culturally contentious.

The rationale for dedicated women's universities in a society like Pakistan is multifaceted and deeply pragmatic. First and foremost, such institutions address the very real cultural and familial barriers that prevent many families, particularly in rural and conservative urban areas, from sending their daughters to co-educational institutions. Surveys conducted by organisations such as the Alif Ailaan and UNESCO have consistently shown that parental anxiety about "mixed" environments, fear of harassment, and concerns about family honour (izzat) remain among the top reasons cited for girls' non-enrolment or early withdrawal from higher education. Women's universities, by providing a single-sex environment, effectively neutralise this objection, opening the doors of higher education to thousands of young women who would otherwise be denied it entirely. In this sense, women's universities are not exclusionary institutions; they are inclusionary mechanisms operating within the constraints of a specific cultural context, pragmatically expanding access rather than waiting for an ideal, fully egalitarian society to materialise first.

Second, women's universities create genuinely safe, harassment-free academic environments. Sexual harassment on co-educational campuses, though underreported, remains a pervasive concern across Pakistani higher education, often deterring young women

from pursuing ambitious academic or extracurricular engagement. In a single-sex institution, this particular anxiety is substantially reduced, allowing women to engage more freely in debate, leadership roles, sports and other activities without the self-consciousness or defensiveness that mixed environments can sometimes induce, particularly in conservative social contexts where interactions between genders remain heavily policed by social norms.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, women's universities function as incubators of female leadership. In a co-educational setting, particularly one still shaped by patriarchal social conditioning, women often find themselves relegated to secondary roles in student unions, societies, debates and academic competitions, with male students dominating leadership positions by virtue of social confidence cultivated since childhood. In women's universities, by contrast, every leadership position — from the students' union president to the head of the debating society, from the editor of the university magazine to the captain of the sports team — is necessarily held by a woman. This is not a trivial matter; leadership is a skill cultivated through practice, and women's universities provide an unparalleled arena for young women to practice, fail, learn and succeed in leadership roles without the shadow of male dominance. Numerous studies on single-sex education globally,

including research from Wellesley College and Smith College in the United States, have demonstrated that graduates of women's colleges are disproportionately represented in leadership positions in politics, business and academia relative to their overall numbers.

Fourth, women's universities have played a crucial role in encouraging female enrolment in STEM and traditionally male-dominated fields. Studies conducted on single-sex STEM education have shown that young women in all-female classrooms are more likely to pursue advanced coursework in mathematics, physics and computer science, free from the social pressures and stereotype threats that often discourage them in mixed classrooms. Institutions such as Fatima Jinnah Women University have made deliberate efforts to expand their offerings in engineering, computer science and business administration, fields that would have remained largely inaccessible to many of their students had they been confined to conservative co-educational alternatives or, worse, denied higher education altogether.

The broader socio-economic impact of women's education, channelled significantly through such dedicated institutions, cannot be overstated. It is now a well-established finding in development economics, articulated extensively by scholars such as Amartya Sen

and institutions such as the World Bank, that female education is among the most powerful predictors of national development outcomes. Educated women marry later, have fewer and healthier children, invest more in their children's education and health, and participate more actively in the labour force. In Pakistan, where female labour force participation remains among the lowest in the region — hovering around 20-25 percent according to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics data — women's universities represent a critical intervention point, equipping women with the qualifications and confidence necessary to enter and remain in the formal economy.

Women's universities function as agents of change across multiple dimensions of national life. Economically, they expand the pool of qualified, skilled women available to the labour market, addressing Pakistan's chronic underutilisation of female human capital, a phenomenon that economists estimate costs the country billions of dollars in lost GDP annually. A World Bank study estimated that closing the gender gap in labour force participation could boost Pakistan's GDP by as much as 30 percent, an astonishing figure that underscores the economic stakes of women's education. Politically and civically, graduates of women's universities have gone on to occupy prominent roles in Pakistan's civil service, judiciary, media and political

sphere, gradually eroding the perception that public life is the exclusive domain of men. Socially, the very existence and success of women's universities challenges deeply entrenched patriarchal assumptions about women's intellectual capacity and rightful place in society, normalising the idea that ambitious, educated women are assets rather than anomalies. Demographically, educated women, empowered through such institutions, contribute to lower fertility rates, better maternal and child health outcomes, and more informed family planning decisions, addressing Pakistan's runaway population growth, one of the most pressing challenges facing the nation's long-term stability and resource allocation.

Despite these compelling arguments, women's universities are not without their critics, and a balanced essay must engage seriously with these objections. The most persistent criticism is that of "ghettoisation" — the concern that segregating women into exclusive institutions denies them the exposure to co-educational, mixed-gender environments that mirror the realities of the professional world they will eventually enter. Critics argue that graduates of women's universities may struggle to adapt to co-educational or male-dominated professional environments, having spent their formative academic years insulated from such dynamics. There are also legitimate concerns regarding quality and

resource constraints; many women's universities, particularly those established more recently or located in smaller cities, suffer from inadequate funding, limited faculty, outdated curricula and poor infrastructure relative to more prestigious co-educational institutions, raising questions about whether the degrees they confer carry equivalent market value and employability. Furthermore, some argue that dedicated women's universities, however well-intentioned, ultimately reinforce rather than dismantle the very gender segregation that impedes true social integration and equality.

These criticisms carry genuine weight and must not be dismissed lightly. However, a careful, balanced assessment suggests that the benefits of women's universities, particularly in the current socio-cultural context of Pakistan, substantially outweigh these drawbacks. The concern about ghettoisation, while valid in the abstract, must be weighed against the counterfactual: for a significant proportion of Pakistani women, particularly those from conservative rural or lower-middle-class urban backgrounds, the choice is not between a women's university and a co-educational one, but between a women's university and no higher education at all. In this light, the "ghettoisation" argument, often advanced from a position of urban, elite privilege, overlooks the lived realities of millions of Pakistani women for whom single-sex education is the

only viable pathway to higher learning. Regarding quality concerns, the solution lies not in abandoning the model but in investing more substantially in these institutions, ensuring they receive parity in funding, faculty recruitment and infrastructure development relative to co-educational universities.

Moving forward, several policy recommendations emerge from this analysis. First, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan must ensure equitable funding and accreditation standards across women's and co-educational universities, closing the resource gap that currently disadvantages many women's institutions. Second, women's universities should be encouraged to expand their offerings in high-demand fields such as artificial intelligence, data science, engineering and business, aligning their curricula with market needs to enhance graduate employability. Third, structured internship and exchange programmes with co-educational institutions and private sector organisations should be introduced to mitigate the "exposure gap" critics rightly identify, allowing students to gain professional experience in mixed-gender environments before entering the workforce. Fourth, government scholarships and financial aid targeted specifically at women's university students, particularly from rural and low-income backgrounds, should be expanded to further democratise access. Finally, a

longitudinal, evidence-based study tracking the career outcomes of women's university graduates relative to their co-educational counterparts should be commissioned to inform future policy with data rather than ideology.

It is instructive to examine the international precedent for single-sex higher education more closely, since Pakistan's model, while adapted to its own cultural context, draws on a much older global tradition. The Seven Sisters colleges in the United States — Wellesley, Smith, Vassar, Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke and Radcliffe — were established in the nineteenth century precisely because mainstream universities refused to admit women at all, and these institutions went on to produce an extraordinary roster of alumnae, including Hillary Clinton, Madeleine Albright and numerous Fortune 500 executives, demonstrating that single-sex education, far from being a lesser alternative, can serve as an incubator of exceptional achievement when adequately resourced. South Korea's Ewha Womans University, one of the largest women's universities in the world, has similarly produced generations of female leaders in politics, business and academia, illustrating that the model translates successfully across vastly different cultural contexts when institutional quality is prioritised. Pakistan's own women's universities, though younger and less resourced than these global

counterparts, are following a broadly similar trajectory, gradually building reputations for producing confident, capable graduates who go on to occupy prominent positions in the civil service, judiciary and private sector.

It is also worth examining the specific mechanisms through which women's universities translate educational access into tangible empowerment. Beyond the classroom, these institutions often serve as the first genuinely autonomous space many young Pakistani women occupy outside the family home, offering an environment in which they must independently manage their time, finances, academic responsibilities and social relationships without the constant oversight of male relatives. This experience of autonomy, however modest it may appear, often proves transformative, cultivating a sense of self-reliance and decision-making capacity that extends well beyond academic life into subsequent career and personal choices. Faculty members at institutions such as Fatima Jinnah Women University and Lahore College for Women University frequently report that female students, freed from the social pressure to defer to male classmates in discussions and presentations, demonstrate markedly greater willingness to voice dissenting opinions, challenge assigned readings, and pursue ambitious research topics than their counterparts in mixed-gender settings within the same broader cultural context.

The role of women's universities in producing female faculty and researchers, who in turn serve as visible role models for younger students, constitutes a further, often underappreciated, mechanism of change. A young woman who is taught mathematics, physics or economics by a female professor internalises, often unconsciously, the message that these fields are legitimately open to her, countering the pervasive stereotype that such disciplines are the natural preserve of men. This virtuous cycle, wherein successful graduates return as faculty members to mentor subsequent cohorts, is particularly pronounced within women's universities, where the near-total absence of male competition for senior academic positions has historically provided disproportionate opportunities for female academic advancement compared to co-educational institutions.

In conclusion, women's universities in Pakistan occupy a unique and indispensable position in the nation's educational landscape. They are not a retreat from gender equality but a pragmatic, culturally attuned mechanism for advancing it, providing safe, empowering spaces in which young women can develop academically, professionally and as leaders, free from the barriers that would otherwise exclude them from higher education entirely. The evidence, both international and domestic, overwhelmingly suggests

that these institutions produce confident, capable graduates who go on to transform not only their own lives but the economic, political and social trajectory of the nation. As Pakistan grapples with the urgent imperative of harnessing its full human capital to address economic stagnation, demographic pressures and social inequality, women's universities must be recognised, supported and expanded as what they truly are: not peripheral institutions, but central agents of change in the long, unfinished struggle for a more just, equitable and prosperous Pakistan.

Essay 3: Pakistan and the Future of Kashmir Cause

Outline

1. Introduction: Kashmir as the unresolved wound of Partition
2. Historical background: 1947 accession dispute, wars and UN resolutions
3. Legal and moral dimensions of the Kashmir dispute
4. The August 2019 turning point: abrogation of Article 370 and 35A
5. Current ground realities in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK)
6. Pakistan's diplomatic, political and moral position
7. International response and the changing geopolitical calculus
8. Challenges to the Kashmir cause
 - a. Global apathy and India's economic leverage
 - b. Domestic political and economic constraints on Pakistan
 - c. Demographic engineering and normalisation efforts by India
9. The way forward for Pakistan
 - a. Diplomatic and multilateral strategies
 - b. Strengthening the narrative through media and lawfare

c. Economic strength as a precondition for diplomatic leverage

d. Engaging the Kashmiri diaspora and civil society

10. Conclusion: the future of the Kashmir cause is contingent on Pakistan's own resolve and strength

Few disputes in the modern world carry the weight of historical grievance, human suffering and geopolitical volatility that the Kashmir dispute does. Born out of the incomplete and contested Partition of British India in 1947, the question of Jammu and Kashmir has remained the central, unresolved fault line in Pakistan-India relations for over seven decades, a running sore that has triggered three wars, countless skirmishes, and untold human suffering for the Kashmiri people. For Pakistan, Kashmir is not merely a territorial or strategic issue; it is embedded in the very ideological foundation of the state, framed as the "unfinished agenda of Partition" and a test of the two-nation theory itself. This essay examines the historical trajectory of the Kashmir dispute, Pakistan's evolving position within it, and critically assesses the future of the Kashmir cause, arguing that while the moral and legal foundations of Pakistan's position remain strong, the practical future of the cause depends heavily on Pakistan's own economic revival, diplomatic recalibration and sustained, disciplined advocacy on the international stage.

The origins of the dispute lie in the ambiguous and contested circumstances of Jammu and Kashmir's accession to India in October 1947. As a Muslim-majority princely state ruled by a Hindu Maharaja, Hari Singh, Kashmir's accession was expected, under the logic of Partition, to follow the will of its predominantly Muslim population, likely aligning with Pakistan. Instead, amid tribal incursions from Pakistan and instability, the Maharaja signed an Instrument of Accession to India, a move whose legal and moral legitimacy has been contested ever since, particularly given that it was made without a plebiscite or clear expression of popular will. India itself took the matter to the United Nations Security Council, which passed a series of resolutions, most notably Resolution 47 of 1948, calling for a free and impartial plebiscite to determine the wishes of the Kashmiri people regarding their future status. This plebiscite has never been held, and it is this unfulfilled international commitment that forms the bedrock of Pakistan's legal and moral position on Kashmir to this day.

The dispute has since triggered three major wars between Pakistan and India — in 1947-48, 1965, and the Kargil conflict of 1999 — as well as countless border skirmishes, most notably along the Line of Control that divides Kashmir into Pakistan-administered Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Indian-administered Jammu and

Kashmir. Throughout this period, the Kashmiri population itself has borne the brunt of militarisation, with human rights organisations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, repeatedly documenting extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, use of pellet guns against civilians, and systematic suppression of political dissent by Indian security forces in the region.

The legal and moral dimensions of the dispute rest on several pillars. Legally, the unfulfilled UN resolutions calling for a plebiscite constitute an ongoing international obligation that India has consistently evaded. Morally, the right to self-determination, enshrined in the UN Charter and international human rights law, underpins the Kashmiri people's demand for the ability to freely determine their political future, whether that be accession to Pakistan, India, or independence. Pakistan has consistently, at least in principle, supported the Kashmiris' right to self-determination rather than unilaterally demanding accession to itself, a position that lends greater international credibility to its stance, distinguishing it from a purely territorial claim.

The dispute entered a dramatically new and more dangerous phase on 5 August 2019, when the Indian government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi unilaterally revoked Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian Constitution, which had granted Jammu and Kashmir

special autonomous status and restricted the purchase of land and property by non-residents. This move, executed alongside a communications blackout, mass arrests of political leaders, and an unprecedented military lockdown, was widely condemned by human rights organisations and drew concern, if not decisive action, from several international actors. The bifurcation of the state into two union territories directly administered by New Delhi represented, in the view of Pakistan and many international observers, a de facto annexation in violation of UN resolutions and international law, fundamentally altering the demographic and political status quo of the region.

Since 2019, ground realities in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir have deteriorated significantly from a human rights perspective. Reports from credible international bodies have documented continued restrictions on political freedoms, detention of political leaders including former chief ministers, curbs on press freedom, and what many observers describe as efforts at demographic engineering through the issuance of domicile certificates to non-Kashmiris, raising fears of a deliberate attempt to alter the Muslim-majority character of the region, reminiscent of settler-colonial practices observed elsewhere in contested territories.

Pakistan's diplomatic and political position on Kashmir has remained consistent in its core demand — implementation of UN resolutions and the right to self-determination — even as its tactical approach has evolved. Successive Pakistani governments have raised the Kashmir issue at the United Nations General Assembly, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and bilateral forums with key allies such as China, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan has also pursued a "lawfare" strategy, referencing the Kashmir dispute in cases before international bodies and supporting Kashmiri representation in global human rights forums. Domestically, Pakistan observes Kashmir Solidarity Day annually, and its political and military leadership have repeatedly reaffirmed Kashmir as a "core issue" in bilateral relations with India, refusing to normalise ties absent progress on the Kashmir front.

However, the international response to the Kashmir issue, particularly since 2019, reveals the significant challenges the cause faces. Global apathy, driven substantially by India's growing economic and strategic weight as a market of over 1.4 billion people and a counterweight to China in Western geopolitical calculations, has meant that most major powers, including the United States and European nations, have offered only muted, procedural expressions of concern rather than substantive diplomatic pressure on India. The

Gulf states, traditionally sympathetic to Pakistan, have also deepened economic and strategic ties with India, driven by trade, investment and energy considerations, further diluting the diplomatic isolation Pakistan has sought to impose on India over Kashmir.

Domestically, Pakistan's ability to sustain its advocacy for Kashmir is significantly constrained by its own economic and political fragility. Recurrent balance of payments crises, dependence on IMF bailouts, political instability and internal security challenges have consumed much of the state's bandwidth and diplomatic capital, often relegating Kashmir advocacy to a symbolic rather than a strategically resourced priority. Critics both within and outside Pakistan have noted that the Kashmir cause, however morally compelling, cannot be effectively advanced by a state that lacks the economic strength to project sustained diplomatic influence.

Given these challenges, the future of the Kashmir cause, from Pakistan's vantage point, must be reimagined along several strategic lines. First, Pakistan must pursue a more sophisticated, sustained and well-resourced diplomatic strategy, moving beyond symbolic annual statements towards building durable coalitions at multilateral forums, particularly leveraging its relationships within the OIC and with China, while also engaging more substantively with Western civil society,

parliamentarians and human rights organisations who remain sympathetic to the Kashmiri cause independent of state-level geopolitics. Second, Pakistan must invest in strengthening its narrative capacity through strategic communication, credible international media engagement, and support for independent documentation of human rights violations in IIOJK, ensuring that the Kashmiri voice, rather than solely the Pakistani state's voice, remains central to the discourse, enhancing its international credibility. Third, and most fundamentally, Pakistan's diplomatic leverage on Kashmir is inextricably linked to its own economic strength; a Pakistan mired in perpetual economic crisis and dependent on external bailouts possesses limited capacity to compel international attention on any foreign policy priority, Kashmir included. Sustainable economic reform, export diversification and fiscal discipline are, therefore, not merely domestic economic imperatives but essential preconditions for effective Kashmir diplomacy. Fourth, Pakistan must more effectively engage the substantial Kashmiri and Pakistani diaspora in North America, Europe and the Gulf, mobilising their advocacy capacity within host countries' democratic and legislative processes, as has been effectively demonstrated by other diaspora-driven advocacy movements globally.

Finally, it is essential to recognise that any durable resolution to Kashmir must ultimately centre the will and

welfare of the Kashmiri people themselves, rather than solely the strategic competition between Pakistan and India. Pakistan's moral authority on Kashmir rests significantly on its consistent advocacy for Kashmiri self-determination rather than territorial annexation, a distinction that must be preserved and reinforced through policy and rhetoric alike.

A deeper examination of the humanitarian toll in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir further illustrates why the cause retains its moral urgency despite waning international attention. Since 1989, human rights organisations estimate that tens of thousands of Kashmiris have lost their lives amid the insurgency and the Indian state's counter-insurgency operations, with widespread documentation of custodial killings, the use of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) to grant sweeping immunity to security personnel, and the psychological trauma inflicted on an entire generation of Kashmiri children who have grown up amid curfews, communication blackouts and militarisation. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has, on more than one occasion, issued reports documenting these patterns of abuse, providing a degree of international validation to Pakistan's long-standing claims, even as geopolitical considerations have prevented these reports from translating into concrete Security Council action. This gap between documented

human rights violations and the absence of enforcement mechanisms represents one of the starkest illustrations of how international law, however well-articulated on paper, remains subordinate to the realpolitik of great power interests.

It is equally important to examine how the Kashmir issue intersects with the broader India-Pakistan rivalry and the risks this poses to regional and even global security. Both nations possess nuclear weapons, and the Kashmir dispute has historically served as the primary flashpoint capable of escalating into a broader conventional, or in a worst-case scenario, nuclear confrontation between the two states, as witnessed during the Kargil conflict of 1999 and the tense military standoff following the Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019. This nuclear dimension has, paradoxically, both elevated and diminished international engagement with the dispute: elevated, in that major powers periodically intervene diplomatically to de-escalate tensions for fear of catastrophic escalation, but diminished, in that this crisis-management approach tends to focus narrowly on preventing immediate military confrontation rather than addressing the underlying political grievances that generate recurring crises in the first place.

Pakistan must also reckon honestly with the limitations of its own historical approach to the Kashmir issue,

including the reputational costs associated with allegations of supporting militancy in the region during earlier decades, which India has consistently leveraged internationally to delegitimise Pakistan's advocacy by framing the dispute primarily through the lens of cross-border terrorism rather than self-determination. A forward-looking Pakistani strategy must, therefore, continue to firmly and verifiably distance itself from any association with militancy, strengthening the credibility of its position as one rooted purely in international law, human rights and the democratic right to self-determination, thereby denying India the rhetorical tools it has historically used to shift international discourse away from the substance of the dispute.

In conclusion, the Kashmir dispute remains one of the most protracted and consequential unresolved conflicts of the post-colonial world, and Pakistan's stake in its resolution is both historically rooted and ideologically significant. Yet the future of the Kashmir cause cannot rest on moral argumentation alone in an international order increasingly governed by strategic and economic calculations. Pakistan's ability to advance the Kashmir cause meaningfully in the coming decades will depend substantially on its capacity to rebuild its own economic foundations, refine its diplomatic strategy, and sustain a credible, humanitarian-centred narrative on the global stage. Only a strong, stable and strategically astute

Pakistan can hope to keep the flame of the Kashmir cause alive until such time as justice, in the form of genuine self-determination for the Kashmiri people, is finally realised.

Essay 4: Polarized Politics: The Issues and Challenges of Democracy in Pakistan

Outline

1. Introduction: democracy as an unfinished project in Pakistan
2. Historical roots of political polarisation in Pakistan
3. Manifestations of contemporary polarisation
 - a. Party-based tribalism and cult of personality
 - b. Media fragmentation and disinformation
 - c. Social media echo chambers
 - d. Institutional polarisation: judiciary, military and civilian tensions
4. Causes of polarisation
 - a. Weak institutionalisation of political parties
 - b. Civil-military imbalance
 - c. Feudal and dynastic political culture
 - d. Economic insecurity and populist mobilisation
5. Consequences of polarisation for democratic consolidation
 - a. Policy paralysis and governance failure
 - b. Erosion of institutional legitimacy
 - c. Social fragmentation and violence
 - d. Weakening of electoral integrity

6. Comparative perspective: lessons from other polarised democracies
7. The way forward
 - a. Strengthening intra-party democracy
 - b. Depoliticising state institutions
 - c. Media literacy and regulation
 - d. Fostering a culture of political dialogue and consensus-building
8. Conclusion: polarisation as a solvable, not permanent, condition

Democracy, in its ideal conception, is a system predicated on pluralism, compromise and the peaceful management of disagreement. Yet in Pakistan, democracy has too often devolved into a zero-sum contest between irreconcilable political camps, each viewing the other not as a legitimate rival but as an existential enemy to be vanquished rather than negotiated with. This phenomenon, commonly termed political polarisation, has become one of the defining, and most corrosive, features of Pakistan's political landscape over the past decade, deepening with each successive electoral cycle and political crisis. This essay examines the roots, manifestations and consequences of polarised politics in Pakistan, and argues that while the challenges are severe, they are neither unique to Pakistan nor beyond remedy, provided the country undertakes fundamental institutional and cultural

reforms.

Political polarisation in Pakistan is not a new phenomenon; its roots stretch back to the earliest years of the state, when the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan and the subsequent instability of the 1950s set a pattern of fractious, personality-driven politics rather than institutionalised party competition. However, contemporary polarisation has taken on a qualitatively different, more intense character, shaped by decades of military interventions, judicial controversies, and the rise of populist, personality-centric political movements. The judicial disqualification and subsequent imprisonment of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the meteoric rise and eventual ousting of Imran Khan through a vote of no-confidence in 2022, and the events surrounding his arrest in May 2023, which triggered unprecedented violence including attacks on military installations, represent the most recent and dramatic manifestations of a political culture increasingly defined by existential confrontation rather than democratic contestation.

Contemporary polarisation manifests across multiple dimensions of Pakistani political life. At the party level, political competition has increasingly taken the form of tribalism, wherein loyalty to a party leader — whether Imran Khan, the Sharif family, or the Bhutto-Zardari dynasty — supersedes ideological or policy

commitments, fostering a cult-of-personality politics in which supporters view any criticism of their leader as an attack on their own identity. This dynamic is significantly amplified by Pakistan's fragmented and often partisan media landscape, wherein television channels and prominent anchors have become closely aligned with particular political camps, presenting starkly divergent narratives on the same events, thereby reinforcing rather than bridging public divisions. Social media has further intensified this fragmentation, with platforms such as Twitter (now X) and Facebook creating algorithmically reinforced echo chambers wherein users are exposed predominantly to content that confirms rather than challenges their existing political beliefs, while organised troll armies and disinformation campaigns, allegedly linked to various political parties, further pollute public discourse with fabricated narratives and character assassination.

Perhaps most consequentially, polarisation in Pakistan extends beyond mere political party competition into the very institutions of the state. The relationship between the judiciary and the executive has been repeatedly strained by controversial verdicts perceived by different segments of the political spectrum as either judicial overreach or necessary accountability. The military's historically outsized role in Pakistani politics, whether through direct intervention or behind-the-scenes

influence, has similarly become a subject of intense polarisation, with different political camps alternately courting and condemning the establishment depending on their own political fortunes at any given moment. This institutional polarisation is particularly dangerous because it undermines public confidence in the impartiality of institutions meant to serve as neutral arbiters of political disputes, further entrenching the perception among citizens that state institutions are merely extensions of partisan competition rather than guardians of constitutional order.

The causes of this deep polarisation are multifaceted. Foremost among them is the weak institutionalisation of Pakistan's political parties, most of which remain organised around dynastic leadership and personal loyalty rather than internal democratic processes, coherent ideological platforms, or grassroots organisational structures. This absence of institutionalisation means that political competition is frequently personalised, with elections functioning more as referenda on individual leaders' popularity or victimhood narratives than as genuine policy debates. Second, the persistent imbalance in civil-military relations has historically incentivised political parties to seek the establishment's backing against rivals, fostering a political culture in which alliances shift opportunistically and legitimacy is often derived from perceived

establishment favour rather than sustained popular mandate, a dynamic that breeds resentment and accusations of manipulation whenever political fortunes change. Third, Pakistan's feudal and dynastic political culture, particularly pronounced in rural Sindh and parts of Punjab, perpetuates patron-client relationships that prioritise personal loyalty over policy substance, further entrenching identity-based rather than issue-based political competition. Fourth, chronic economic insecurity — inflation, unemployment and currency depreciation — has created fertile ground for populist mobilisation, wherein political leaders exploit public grievances through simplified, often conspiratorial narratives that assign blame to political rivals or external actors rather than engaging with the structural complexity of Pakistan's economic challenges.

The consequences of sustained political polarisation for Pakistan's democratic consolidation are severe and multidimensional. Most immediately, polarisation produces policy paralysis, as successive governments, lacking genuine cross-party consensus, struggle to implement long-term structural reforms in taxation, energy, or economic policy, given the near-certainty that political opponents will obstruct or reverse such measures upon assuming power, creating a cycle of policy discontinuity that has plagued Pakistan's economic trajectory for decades. Polarisation also

erodes the legitimacy of state institutions, as each political camp, when out of power, portrays adverse judicial or administrative decisions as politically motivated persecution rather than legitimate governance, corroding public trust in the impartiality of the state apparatus over time. At the societal level, polarisation increasingly manifests in social fragmentation and, at its most extreme, political violence, as witnessed in the events of 9 May 2023, when supporters of a major political party attacked military installations following their leader's arrest, an unprecedented escalation that revealed the depths to which polarisation had eroded even the traditional deference towards Pakistan's most powerful institution. Finally, sustained polarisation threatens the very integrity of Pakistan's electoral processes, with allegations of rigging, pre-poll manipulation and post-election disputes becoming a recurring feature of virtually every election cycle, further undermining public confidence in the democratic process itself.

A comparative perspective reveals that Pakistan is not alone in grappling with political polarisation; the phenomenon has intensified in democracies worldwide, from the United States' deeply divided partisan landscape to Brazil's polarised politics under Bolsonaro and Lula, to Turkey's polarisation under Erdogan's leadership. These comparative cases offer instructive

lessons: polarisation tends to deepen where economic insecurity is high, where media landscapes are fragmented along partisan lines, and where political leaders actively exploit rather than seek to bridge societal divisions for short-term electoral gain. Conversely, countries that have successfully mitigated extreme polarisation, such as post-apartheid South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process or Germany's institutionalised culture of political coalition-building, demonstrate that deliberate institutional design and political leadership committed to consensus-building can substantially reduce, even if not entirely eliminate, polarisation's corrosive effects.

For Pakistan, charting a path away from destructive polarisation requires sustained, multi-pronged reform. First, political parties must be encouraged, through both legal reform and civil society pressure, to institutionalise genuine intra-party democracy, including transparent leadership elections and policy-formulation processes, reducing the current dependence on dynastic and personality-driven politics. Second, and most critically, Pakistan must make sustained progress towards depoliticising key state institutions, particularly ensuring that the judiciary, election commission, and civil bureaucracy operate with genuine independence and consistency, insulated from the perception, whether accurate or not, of establishment or political interference,

thereby restoring their function as neutral arbiters rather than partisan actors. Third, media literacy campaigns and thoughtful, rights-respecting regulation of digital platforms are necessary to counter the spread of disinformation and reduce the echo-chamber effect that exacerbates polarisation, though such regulation must be carefully calibrated to avoid becoming a tool for suppressing legitimate political dissent. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, Pakistan's political and civil society leadership must actively cultivate a culture of dialogue, compromise and loyal opposition, recognising that democratic competition, however fierce, must ultimately operate within a shared commitment to constitutional order and peaceful transfer of power, rather than the current pattern of treating political rivals as existential threats to be eliminated by any available means, whether judicial, military or extra-constitutional.

A deeper look at the economic costs of polarisation reveals dimensions often overlooked in purely political analysis. Investor confidence, both domestic and foreign, is acutely sensitive to political stability and policy predictability; Pakistan's recurring cycles of political confrontation, no-confidence motions, and contested transitions of power have repeatedly triggered capital flight, currency depreciation and stock market volatility, compounding the country's chronic balance of payments difficulties. International credit rating agencies, including

Moody's and Fitch, have explicitly cited political instability as a contributing factor in successive downgrades of Pakistan's sovereign credit rating, which in turn raises the cost of external borrowing at a time when the country can least afford it. Polarisation also undermines long-term planning in critical sectors such as energy and infrastructure, as each incoming government frequently reverses or delays projects initiated by its predecessor, driven more by the desire to distinguish itself politically than by objective policy assessment, resulting in enormous sunk costs and wasted development resources.

The generational dimension of polarisation also merits attention. Pakistan's youth, comprising a majority of the population, have grown up almost entirely within this polarised political environment, with social media serving as their primary window into political discourse. Surveys conducted by organisations such as Gallup Pakistan suggest that younger Pakistanis increasingly view political engagement through a lens of tribal loyalty rather than policy evaluation, having been socialised within an information ecosystem that rewards partisan outrage over substantive debate. This generational entrenchment of polarised political identity poses a long-term challenge for democratic consolidation, as it suggests that polarisation may become self-perpetuating unless deliberately interrupted through civic education

reform and more responsible media practices targeting younger audiences specifically.

It is also worth considering the role of women and marginalised communities within this polarised landscape, who often find their specific concerns — such as gender-based violence, minority rights, or labour protections — subordinated to the dominant binary conflicts between major political camps. Issue-based advocacy on behalf of these communities frequently struggles to gain traction precisely because the political and media space is disproportionately consumed by the personality-driven confrontations between dominant parties, illustrating yet another cost of polarisation: the crowding out of substantive policy debate on issues that do not neatly map onto the prevailing political fault lines.

In conclusion, polarised politics represents one of the most significant challenges confronting Pakistani democracy today, threatening governance effectiveness, institutional legitimacy and social cohesion alike. Yet polarisation, however entrenched, is not an immutable feature of Pakistani political culture; it is the product of specific institutional weaknesses, historical patterns of civil-military imbalance, and a political culture that has yet to fully internalise the norms of democratic pluralism. With sustained institutional reform, a more responsible media environment, and a political leadership genuinely

committed to consensus over confrontation, Pakistan can gradually navigate towards a more mature, resilient democratic order — one in which political disagreement is channelled through legitimate, peaceful contestation rather than existential conflict, and where the strength of institutions, rather than the fortunes of individual leaders, becomes the true measure of the nation's democratic health.

Essay 5: Global Power Dynamics and Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Outline

1. Introduction: Pakistan's geopolitical location at the crossroads of great power competition
2. The shifting global order: from unipolarity to multipolarity
3. Key global power dynamics affecting Pakistan
 - a. US-China strategic rivalry
 - b. Russia's re-emergence and the Ukraine war's ripple effects
 - c. The rise of the Global South and multilateral blocs (BRICS, SCO)
 - d. Shifting Gulf dynamics and normalisation with Israel
4. Pakistan's foreign policy evolution
 - a. Cold War alignment with the US
 - b. Post-9/11 "frontline state" role
 - c. The pivot towards China and CPEC
 - d. Balancing act amid US-China rivalry
5. Challenges facing Pakistan's foreign policy
 - a. Economic dependency and loss of strategic autonomy
 - b. Afghanistan and regional security dilemmas
 - c. India's rising global stature
 - d. Domestic instability undermining external credibility

6. Opportunities for Pakistan
 - a. Geo-economic positioning and connectivity
 - b. Gulf and Central Asian engagement
 - c. Climate diplomacy
7. Recommendations for a coherent, interest-based foreign policy
8. Conclusion: from geopolitics to geo-economics

Pakistan occupies one of the most strategically sensitive geographical positions on the globe: bordering China, India, Afghanistan and Iran, sitting astride historic trade routes, and situated at the confluence of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. This geography has been both a blessing and a curse — a blessing in that it grants Pakistan disproportionate strategic relevance to great powers, and a curse in that it has repeatedly entangled the country in the machinations of external rivalries, from the Cold War to the War on Terror, often at significant cost to its own sovereignty, stability and development. As the global order undergoes what many scholars describe as a tectonic shift from American-led unipolarity towards a more contested, multipolar arrangement, Pakistan's foreign policy faces both unprecedented challenges and unique opportunities. This essay examines the evolving contours of global power dynamics, traces the trajectory of Pakistan's foreign policy in response to these shifts, and argues that Pakistan's long-term strategic interests

are best served by a decisive pivot from reactive, transactional geopolitics towards a proactive, interest-driven geo-economic foreign policy.

The global order that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, characterised by unchallenged American hegemony, is giving way to a far more complex and contested multipolar landscape. The rise of China as an economic and increasingly military peer competitor to the United States represents the single most consequential shift in global power dynamics of the twenty-first century. This rivalry manifests across multiple domains: trade wars and technology restrictions, competing infrastructure initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative versus the US-led Build Back Better World and Partnership for Global Infrastructure, and intensifying military posturing in the Indo-Pacific, particularly around Taiwan and the South China Sea. Simultaneously, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has reshaped European security architecture, revived NATO's strategic salience, and triggered a realignment of energy and trade relationships worldwide, with ripple effects on global food and fuel prices that have disproportionately impacted import-dependent economies such as Pakistan's. Beyond the great powers, the Global South, comprising nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America, has increasingly asserted its own agency, seeking to avoid rigid bloc alignment and

instead pursue "multi-alignment" strategies that maximise benefits from all major powers simultaneously, exemplified by the expansion of groupings such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which offer alternative platforms to Western-dominated international institutions. Meanwhile, the Gulf states, traditionally close allies of Pakistan, have been recalibrating their own foreign policies, pursuing normalisation with Israel through the Abraham Accords, diversifying their economic partnerships to include India and China substantially, and adopting increasingly independent, interest-driven postures less automatically deferential to Pakistan's historical requests for solidarity on issues such as Kashmir.

Pakistan's foreign policy has evolved through several distinct phases in response to these shifting global dynamics. During the Cold War, Pakistan aligned closely with the United States, joining Western-sponsored military pacts such as SEATO and CENTO, in exchange for military and economic assistance, primarily as a hedge against India, which had aligned more closely with the Soviet Union. This relationship deepened dramatically during the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980s, when Pakistan became the frontline state for US-backed resistance against Soviet forces in Afghanistan, receiving substantial military and financial support, though this period also sowed the seeds of long-term

instability through the proliferation of arms and militant networks within Pakistan's own borders. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Pakistan once again assumed the role of a frontline state, this time in the US-led War on Terror, a partnership that yielded billions of dollars in coalition support funds but also imposed enormous costs in terms of internal militancy, sectarian violence and a protracted domestic insurgency, particularly in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

In more recent years, Pakistan's foreign policy has increasingly pivoted towards China, most visibly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship component of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, involving tens of billions of dollars in infrastructure, energy and connectivity investments. This partnership, often described using the rhetoric of an "all-weather friendship," reflects both genuine strategic alignment, particularly vis-à-vis shared concerns about India, and Pakistan's growing economic dependence on Chinese financing amid diminishing Western aid and investment. However, this pivot has not been without friction, including concerns over debt sustainability, security threats to Chinese nationals working on CPEC projects, and periodic tensions over the pace and transparency of project implementation.

As US-China rivalry intensifies, Pakistan finds itself navigating an increasingly precarious balancing act, seeking to preserve its deepening strategic and economic partnership with Beijing while simultaneously maintaining functional relations with Washington, upon whom Pakistan remains significantly dependent for its engagement with international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, given America's substantial voting influence within these bodies. This balancing act has become progressively more difficult as Washington's strategic focus has shifted towards courting India as a counterweight to China in the Indo-Pacific, elevating India's global standing through initiatives such as the Quad security dialogue, while correspondingly reducing the strategic premium once placed on the US-Pakistan relationship.

Several significant challenges confront Pakistan's foreign policy in this new multipolar landscape. Foremost is the erosion of genuine strategic autonomy that stems from Pakistan's chronic economic dependency, manifested in its recurrent reliance on IMF bailouts, whose conditionalities often constrain domestic policy space, and its growing debt exposure to China, which similarly constrains Islamabad's freedom of manoeuvre in bilateral dealings with Beijing. A nation perpetually managing balance of payments crises possesses limited capacity for assertive, independent foreign policy, as

economic vulnerability inevitably translates into diplomatic vulnerability. Second, the situation in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 has generated a complex and deteriorating security dilemma for Pakistan, with a resurgent Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) launching increasingly frequent cross-border attacks from Afghan territory, straining what was once viewed as a strategically advantageous relationship with the Afghan Taliban and complicating Pakistan's broader regional security calculus. Third, India's ascendant global stature — reflected in its growing economic weight, its expanding strategic partnerships with the United States, Europe and the Gulf, and its increasingly assertive diplomatic posture — has progressively diminished Pakistan's relative influence in shaping South Asian and global narratives, particularly on contentious issues such as Kashmir, where international sympathy has waned even as ground realities have worsened. Fourth, chronic domestic political instability, characterised by frequent changes in government, civil-military tensions, and economic mismanagement, undermines Pakistan's external credibility, as international partners and investors increasingly perceive the country as an unpredictable, high-risk environment for sustained engagement.

Amid these challenges, however, meaningful opportunities exist for Pakistan to reposition itself

advantageously within the emerging multipolar order. Pakistan's geo-economic positioning, straddling South Asia, Central Asia, China and the Middle East, offers substantial potential as a regional connectivity and trade hub, provided the country can stabilise its security environment and improve its ease of doing business sufficiently to attract the transit trade, logistics and energy pipeline investments that its geography naturally invites. Deepened engagement with Gulf states, moving beyond traditional labour remittance and religious ties towards substantive investment partnerships in energy, agriculture and technology, offers another significant avenue, as does expanded engagement with the newly independent Central Asian states, for whom Pakistan represents a potential gateway to warm-water ports via Afghanistan, security situation permitting. Additionally, as a country acutely vulnerable to climate change, evidenced starkly by the catastrophic floods of 2022 that displaced over thirty million people and caused damages exceeding thirty billion dollars, Pakistan possesses a genuine moral and diplomatic opportunity to position itself as a leading voice for climate justice and loss-and-damage financing within international forums, an area where global sympathy and genuine policy alignment remain relatively high compared to more contentious geopolitical disputes.

Given this complex landscape, Pakistan's foreign policy requires a fundamental reorientation towards coherence, consistency and interest-based pragmatism, moving beyond the historically reactive, security-dominated approach that has characterised much of its diplomatic history. This requires, first, achieving genuine economic stabilisation and structural reform domestically, since sustainable strategic autonomy is ultimately impossible without a solvent, self-reliant economy less susceptible to external leverage through debt or aid dependency. Second, Pakistan must pursue a genuinely balanced, multi-vector foreign policy, avoiding excessive dependence on any single major power, whether the United States, China, or Gulf states, thereby preserving maximum diplomatic flexibility amid intensifying great power competition. Third, foreign policy formulation must be brought under greater civilian, parliamentary oversight, ensuring continuity and coherence across changes in government, rather than the current pattern wherein shifts in domestic political leadership frequently produce erratic and inconsistent signalling to international partners. Fourth, Pakistan must invest substantially in its diplomatic and economic statecraft capacity, including trade negotiation expertise, investment promotion, and public diplomacy, recognising that in an increasingly geo-economic global order, influence increasingly flows from economic partnership and connectivity rather than

military alliance alone.

A more granular examination of the US-China rivalry's regional implications reveals the delicate tightrope Pakistan must walk in practice. Washington's deepening strategic partnership with New Delhi, formalised through mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving the United States, India, Japan and Australia, is explicitly framed as a counterbalance to Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, a framing that inherently places Pakistan, as China's closest regional partner, on the opposite side of this emerging strategic architecture. This dynamic has tangible consequences: American defence cooperation with Pakistan, once extensive during the Cold War and War on Terror eras, has been significantly curtailed, while American support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir or its economic assistance requests has correspondingly diminished relative to the priority Washington now places on its relationship with India. Simultaneously, Pakistan's deepening economic entanglement with China, while providing critical infrastructure financing unavailable from Western sources, has raised legitimate questions about debt sustainability, with some analysts pointing to Pakistan's CPEC-related obligations as contributing to the broader debt distress that necessitated successive IMF interventions, illustrating the complex trade-offs inherent in Pakistan's current strategic alignment.

The Afghanistan dimension of Pakistan's foreign policy deserves further elaboration, given its centrality to the country's immediate security environment. Pakistan's historical support for the Afghan Taliban, rooted in decades-old strategic calculations regarding "strategic depth" against India and influence over Kabul, has produced deeply ironic and destabilising consequences following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Rather than the anticipated dividend of a friendly government in Kabul, Pakistan has instead witnessed a dramatic resurgence of cross-border militancy from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, which has found sanctuary and, according to Pakistani officials, tacit support within Afghan territory under the new Taliban administration, illustrating the limits of ideological affinity in translating into genuine strategic cooperation between the two Taliban movements. This deteriorating security relationship has forced Pakistan to recalibrate its Afghanistan policy, including periodic border closures, deportation of undocumented Afghan refugees, and diplomatic pressure on Kabul, straining what was once considered one of Pakistan's most reliable regional relationships.

Pakistan's engagement with emerging multilateral platforms beyond traditional Western-led institutions also warrants consideration as part of its evolving foreign policy toolkit. Pakistan's membership in the Shanghai

Cooperation Organisation, alongside China, Russia, India and Central Asian states, offers a platform for regional security and economic cooperation somewhat insulated from Western geopolitical priorities, while growing engagement with BRICS-adjacent economic discussions reflects Pakistan's broader interest in diversifying its diplomatic and economic partnerships beyond the traditional US-centric international financial architecture, even as practical constraints, including its continued dependence on IMF programmes governed substantially by Western voting shares, limit the extent of this diversification in the near term.

In conclusion, Pakistan finds itself navigating one of the most consequential periods of global power realignment in recent history, caught between the competing gravitational pulls of the United States and China, confronting a deteriorating regional security environment, and grappling with the erosion of its traditional sources of external support and sympathy. Yet within this challenging landscape lie genuine opportunities for a Pakistan willing to undertake the difficult but necessary work of economic reform, political stability and coherent, interest-driven diplomacy. The nation's long-term strategic success will depend not on which great power it aligns with most closely, but on its own capacity to transform its geographic and demographic potential into genuine economic strength,

thereby transitioning from a geopolitical pawn perpetually reacting to the machinations of larger powers, into a geo-economic actor capable of shaping its own destiny on the global stage.

Essay 6: Pakistan's Informal Economy: The Way Forward

Outline

1. Introduction: the shadow economy hiding in plain sight
2. Defining and measuring the informal economy
3. Scale and scope of informality in Pakistan
4. Causes of Pakistan's large informal sector
 - a. High cost and complexity of formal registration and taxation
 - b. Weak rule of law and contract enforcement
 - c. Cash-based culture and low financial inclusion
 - d. Labour market rigidities in the formal sector
 - e. Historical and cultural factors (undocumented trade, real estate, agriculture)
5. Consequences of informality
 - a. Narrow tax base and fiscal stress
 - b. Poor worker protections and social security gaps
 - c. Distorted competition and productivity losses
 - d. Weak monetary policy transmission and vulnerability to smuggling and money laundering
6. The dual nature of informality: survival strategy versus economic drag
7. International experience: lessons from India's GST/demonetisation, Latin America's formalisation

drives

8. The way forward for Pakistan

- a. Simplifying taxation and easing the cost of formalisation
 - b. Digitalisation: POS integration, digital payments, e-commerce documentation
 - c. Broadening the tax net without over-burdening existing taxpayers
 - d. Financial inclusion and documentation incentives
 - e. Reforming land and real estate documentation
 - f. Social protection extension to informal workers
9. Conclusion: formalisation as a gradual, incentive-based journey, not a punitive crackdown

Walk through any bazaar in Lahore, any roadside food stall in Karachi, or any construction site in Peshawar, and you will witness the true engine of Pakistan's economy at work — not the gleaming towers of the Pakistan Stock Exchange, nor the balance sheets of multinational corporations, but the vast, sprawling, largely undocumented informal sector that employs the overwhelming majority of Pakistan's workforce and generates a substantial, though notoriously difficult to quantify, share of the nation's economic output. Estimates by the State Bank of Pakistan and independent economists suggest that the informal economy constitutes anywhere between 35 to 55 percent

of Pakistan's GDP, and employs upwards of 70 percent of the non-agricultural labour force. This essay examines the scale, causes and consequences of Pakistan's expansive informal economy, and argues that the path forward lies not in punitive crackdowns but in a carefully calibrated, incentive-based strategy of gradual formalisation that expands the tax net and improves productivity without crushing the livelihoods of millions who depend on the informal sector for survival.

The informal economy, broadly defined, encompasses all economic activities that are not registered with, regulated by, or taxed by the state — ranging from street vendors and small retail shops, to unregistered manufacturing units, domestic labour, agricultural work, and vast swathes of the real estate and construction sectors. Measuring informality precisely is notoriously difficult, given its very nature of evading official documentation, but various methodologies, including electricity consumption analysis, labour force surveys, and currency-to-deposit ratio estimations, converge on the conclusion that Pakistan possesses one of the largest informal economies relative to GDP in South Asia, significantly larger than comparable emerging economies such as India or Bangladesh.

The causes underpinning this vast informality are deeply structural and interconnected. Foremost among

them is the prohibitively high cost and bureaucratic complexity of formal business registration and tax compliance in Pakistan. Surveys conducted by the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business project have consistently ranked Pakistan poorly on metrics such as tax payment complexity, requiring dozens of separate payments annually and hundreds of hours of compliance work, creating powerful disincentives for small businesses to formalise, particularly given that formalisation often yields little tangible benefit in terms of access to credit, government services, or legal protection commensurate with the compliance burden imposed. Second, weak rule of law and inconsistent contract enforcement mean that many businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises, find it more practical to operate through informal trust-based networks, often built on kinship, biradari or long-standing community relationships, rather than through formal, legally enforceable contracts that would require costly and often unreliable recourse to Pakistan's overburdened judicial system in the event of disputes. Third, Pakistan's deeply entrenched cash-based economic culture, with historically low levels of financial inclusion — only around 20 to 25 percent of adults holding formal bank accounts until relatively recently, though this has been improving with mobile banking penetration — facilitates the continued operation of undocumented transactions that leave no formal paper trail for tax authorities. Fourth, rigidities within the formal

labour market, including relatively stringent labour laws regarding minimum wage, severance and unionisation that are difficult to enforce but costly to nominally comply with, incentivise employers to informally employ workers without contracts, social security registration, or adherence to statutory benefits, thereby reducing labour costs at the expense of worker protections. Finally, specific sectors such as real estate, wholesale trade, and cross-border commerce along Pakistan's porous borders with Afghanistan and Iran have historically operated through deeply entrenched informal and, in some cases, outright smuggling networks, generating substantial undocumented economic activity that has proven remarkably resistant to successive formalisation efforts.

The consequences of this pervasive informality for Pakistan's broader economic health are severe and multidimensional. Most immediately, the narrow tax base resulting from widespread informality places enormous strain on public finances, with Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio hovering around a mere 9 to 11 percent, among the lowest in the world, forcing the government to rely disproportionately on indirect taxation, which falls regressively on the poor, and on external borrowing, perpetuating the chronic fiscal deficits and debt accumulation that repeatedly drive Pakistan into IMF bailout programmes. Second, workers within the informal economy typically lack access to social security, health

insurance, pension contributions, or legal recourse against exploitative employment practices, leaving a majority of Pakistan's workforce acutely vulnerable to economic shocks, illness, or old age without any institutional safety net, a particularly troubling reality given Pakistan's already fragile social protection architecture. Third, informality distorts market competition, as formal businesses that comply with taxation and regulatory requirements find themselves at a significant cost disadvantage relative to informal competitors who evade such obligations, discouraging investment in formal sector expansion and perpetuating a low-productivity equilibrium wherein businesses have limited incentive to scale, invest in technology, or improve efficiency, since remaining small and informal is often more economically rational than growing and inviting regulatory scrutiny. Fourth, the pervasiveness of cash-based, undocumented transactions weakens the effectiveness of monetary policy transmission, as a substantial portion of economic activity remains opaque to the State Bank of Pakistan's regulatory oversight, while simultaneously creating vulnerabilities for money laundering, smuggling and illicit financial flows that undermine broader efforts at economic governance and international financial compliance, including Pakistan's repeated struggles with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey-listing.

It is important, however, to recognise the dual nature of informality within the Pakistani context. For millions of Pakistanis, particularly the urban and rural poor, the informal sector is not merely an act of tax evasion but a vital survival strategy, providing flexible, accessible livelihood opportunities in an economy where formal sector job creation has chronically lagged behind the growth of the working-age population. Any policy approach towards formalisation must, therefore, be sensitive to this reality, recognising that heavy-handed, punitive crackdowns risk devastating the livelihoods of vulnerable populations without commensurate fiscal or economic benefit, as demonstrated by the considerable social and economic disruption caused by India's 2016 demonetisation initiative, which, despite its ambitious goal of curbing black money, imposed disproportionate hardship on informal workers and small traders while yielding limited long-term gains in formalisation.

International experience offers valuable, if cautionary, lessons for Pakistan's formalisation efforts. India's introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017, despite initial implementation challenges, has gradually expanded formal sector documentation by creating input-tax-credit incentives that encourage businesses along the supply chain to formalise in order to claim tax credits, illustrating the potential of incentive-based rather than purely punitive formalisation

mechanisms. Latin American economies, particularly Brazil and Mexico, have experimented with simplified tax regimes for small businesses, such as Brazil's "Simples Nacional" programme, which consolidates multiple tax obligations into a single, simplified payment calibrated to business size, significantly reducing compliance costs and encouraging voluntary formalisation among micro and small enterprises, offering a potentially replicable model for Pakistan's own small business sector.

Drawing on these lessons, Pakistan's path towards a more formalised, productive economy must proceed along several complementary tracks. First, tax simplification must be prioritised, consolidating Pakistan's notoriously complex and multi-layered tax structure — spanning federal, provincial and local levies — into simplified, predictable regimes for small and medium enterprises, potentially modelled on turnover-based simplified tax schemes that reduce both the compliance burden and the discretionary power of tax officials, which itself remains a significant source of corruption and businesses' reluctance to formalise. Second, continued investment in digitalisation, including mandatory point-of-sale (POS) integration for retail establishments, expansion of digital payment infrastructure through platforms such as RAAST, and documentation requirements for e-commerce transactions, can gradually create digital transaction

trails that facilitate formalisation without requiring intrusive, adversarial enforcement mechanisms. Third, rather than repeatedly increasing tax burdens on the narrow base of existing compliant taxpayers, as has been the pattern in successive Pakistani budgets, policy must prioritise genuinely broadening the tax net to capture currently undocumented segments of the economy, particularly wholesale trade, retail, and real estate, sectors that remain dramatically under-taxed relative to their economic footprint. Fourth, expanding financial inclusion through continued promotion of mobile banking and digital financial services, coupled with targeted incentives such as preferential access to credit, government contracts, or export facilitation schemes for formally registered businesses, can shift the cost-benefit calculus in favour of voluntary formalisation. Fifth, comprehensive reform of Pakistan's notoriously opaque land and real estate documentation systems, including accurate market-based property valuations to replace chronically understated official valuation tables (DC rates), would substantially curtail one of the largest conduits for undocumented wealth and black money in the Pakistani economy. Finally, extending social protection mechanisms, such as health insurance and contributory pension schemes, to informal sector workers, potentially through mobile-based registration and micro-contribution schemes, would provide a tangible, immediate benefit that could incentivise

voluntary engagement with formal documentation systems, even among the most vulnerable segments of the informal workforce.

A closer examination of specific sectors reveals the varied character of informality across Pakistan's economy and the correspondingly varied policy responses required. The wholesale and retail trade sector, one of the largest contributors to GDP, remains overwhelmingly undocumented, with the Federal Board of Revenue's repeated attempts to bring traders into the tax net through measures such as the Point of Sale integration scheme and the ill-fated 2019 traders' registration drive meeting fierce resistance, including nationwide trader strikes and shutter-down protests, illustrating the formidable political economy obstacles to formalisation even when the policy rationale is sound. The construction and real estate sector similarly remains substantially informal, with cash transactions, under-declared property values, and undocumented labour arrangements all pervasive, contributing to both tax revenue losses and, more broadly, providing a significant conduit for money laundering and the parking of untaxed wealth, a concern that has attracted the attention of the Financial Action Task Force during Pakistan's period on its grey list. Agriculture, meanwhile, remains almost entirely outside the formal tax net despite constituting a significant share of GDP, protected by

powerful landowning political interests who have successfully resisted the implementation of agricultural income tax at the provincial level for decades, representing perhaps the single largest unaddressed inequity within Pakistan's broader tax and formalisation debate.

The relationship between informality and gender also deserves particular attention, since women constitute a disproportionate share of Pakistan's informal workforce, particularly in home-based piecework, domestic labour and small-scale agricultural work, where they typically lack any formal contract, minimum wage protection, or access to social security. Formalisation efforts that fail to account for this gendered dimension risk either excluding women further from economic participation, should compliance costs discourage employers from engaging female labour altogether, or alternatively, offer a genuine opportunity to extend social protection to a population that has historically been doubly disadvantaged by both informality and gender-based labour market discrimination, provided formalisation policy is deliberately designed with these considerations in mind.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered an inadvertent case study in both the vulnerabilities and resilience associated with Pakistan's informal economy. Daily wage earners and informal sector workers, lacking any employment

protection or savings buffer, were disproportionately devastated by pandemic-related lockdowns, prompting the government's Ehsaas Emergency Cash programme, which for the first time attempted to systematically identify and support informal sector households through biometric verification and mobile-based disbursement, inadvertently creating a valuable, if partial, digital registry of previously undocumented economic actors that could potentially serve as a foundation for more sustained formalisation efforts going forward.

In conclusion, Pakistan's expansive informal economy represents both one of the most significant obstacles to sustainable fiscal health and productivity growth, and, simultaneously, a vital lifeline for millions of Pakistanis navigating an economy that has failed to generate sufficient formal sector opportunities. The way forward, therefore, cannot be a blunt instrument of coercive enforcement, which risks significant social and economic disruption while yielding limited fiscal gains, as international experience has repeatedly demonstrated. Instead, Pakistan must pursue a patient, incentive-based, technologically enabled strategy of gradual formalisation — simplifying compliance, broadening documentation through digital infrastructure, and extending tangible benefits to those who formalise — thereby transforming the informal economy not through punitive exclusion, but through the patient

cultivation of trust, incentive and opportunity that gradually draws Pakistan's vast shadow economy into the light of sustainable, documented and equitable economic growth.

Essay 7: Promoting Tourism in Pakistan: Opportunities and Challenges

Outline

1. Introduction: Pakistan's untapped paradise
2. Pakistan's tourism assets: diversity of landscape, culture and heritage
 - a. Northern areas: Hunza, Skardu, Fairy Meadows, K2
 - b. Cultural and religious heritage: Mohenjo-daro, Taxila, Sikh and Buddhist pilgrimage sites
 - c. Coastal and desert tourism
3. Economic potential of tourism
4. Current state of Pakistan's tourism sector
5. Challenges facing tourism promotion
 - a. Security perceptions and travel advisories
 - b. Infrastructure deficits
 - c. Visa and bureaucratic hurdles
 - d. Lack of branding and marketing
 - e. Environmental degradation and unregulated development
 - f. Skills gap in hospitality sector
6. Government initiatives and recent progress
 - a. Visa liberalisation

- b. Naya Pakistan Tourism strategy and provincial initiatives
- 7. Comparative lessons: Nepal, Bhutan, Georgia, Vietnam
- 8. The way forward
 - a. Security and perception management
 - b. Infrastructure investment
 - c. Digital marketing and destination branding
 - d. Community-based and sustainable tourism
 - e. Skills development and public-private partnership
 - f. Religious and heritage tourism as low-hanging fruit
- 9. Conclusion: tourism as an underutilised engine of inclusive growth

Few countries in the world possess the sheer diversity of natural and cultural treasures that Pakistan holds within its borders, and fewer still have so profoundly failed to convert that endowment into economic opportunity. From the towering peaks of K2 and Nanga Parbat, five of the world's fourteen "eight-thousanders" located within its territory, to the ancient ruins of Mohenjo-daro and Taxila that predate the pyramids of Giza in cultural significance, from the turquoise lakes of Hunza and Skardu to the Sufi shrines of Punjab and Sindh that draw millions of devotees annually, Pakistan possesses a tourism portfolio that rivals, and in many respects surpasses, that of its regional neighbours who

have successfully built thriving tourism economies. Yet Pakistan's tourism sector remains chronically underdeveloped, contributing a mere fraction of GDP compared to countries with far less natural endowment. This essay examines Pakistan's tourism potential, the multifaceted challenges that have constrained its development, and charts a pragmatic, sustainable path towards unlocking tourism as a genuine engine of inclusive economic growth and soft power projection.

Pakistan's tourism assets span an extraordinary range of geography and civilisation. The northern areas, encompassing Gilgit-Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Chitral and Swat valleys, offer some of the most spectacular mountain scenery on Earth, home to the Karakoram, Hindu Kush and Himalayan ranges converging in a single region, alongside pristine valleys such as Hunza, often described as a real-life Shangri-La, and Fairy Meadows, offering breathtaking views of Nanga Parbat. These regions attract a growing community of international mountaineers, trekkers and adventure tourists, alongside an expanding domestic tourism market driven by improved road access and growing social media exposure. Beyond natural beauty, Pakistan is a living museum of civilisational history, home to the UNESCO World Heritage sites of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, remnants of the Indus Valley Civilisation dating back over 4,500 years, as well

as Taxila, once a great centre of Buddhist learning and Gandhara art, and Sikh pilgrimage sites such as Kartarpur Sahib, which draws thousands of Sikh pilgrims from India and around the world following the historic opening of the Kartarpur Corridor in 2019. Pakistan's coastline along the Arabian Sea, its Cholistan and Thar deserts, and its rich Sufi shrine culture in cities such as Multan, Sehwan and Lahore further diversify its tourism appeal, offering everything from beach tourism to spiritual and desert eco-tourism.

The economic potential of a thriving tourism sector is substantial. The World Travel and Tourism Council has repeatedly highlighted tourism's capacity to generate employment across diverse skill levels, from hospitality and transportation to handicrafts and local guiding services, making it a particularly effective vehicle for inclusive, geographically dispersed economic development, including in remote, otherwise economically marginalised regions such as Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan. Countries such as Nepal, with a fraction of Pakistan's natural and cultural diversity, generate tourism revenues that constitute a significant share of their GDP and foreign exchange earnings, illustrating the scale of opportunity that remains largely untapped in Pakistan's case.

Despite this immense potential, Pakistan's tourism sector currently contributes a relatively marginal share to national GDP and foreign exchange earnings, constrained by a confluence of security, infrastructural, regulatory and branding challenges. Foremost among these has been the perception of security risk, shaped by Pakistan's association in international media with terrorism and militancy, particularly stemming from the post-9/11 War on Terror era and periodic incidents of violence, which has resulted in cautious or restrictive travel advisories issued by Western governments, significantly deterring international tourist arrivals even as ground security conditions have measurably improved over the past decade. Second, infrastructure deficits — including poorly maintained roads to major tourist destinations, particularly in the northern areas where landslide-prone routes such as the Karakoram Highway pose genuine safety concerns, limited quality accommodation options outside major cities, and inconsistent electricity and internet connectivity in remote tourist areas — significantly detract from the visitor experience and constrain the sector's capacity to absorb higher volumes of tourism. Third, bureaucratic hurdles, including historically restrictive visa policies requiring No Objection Certificates for travel to certain regions and cumbersome application processes, have long discouraged international visitors, though recent reforms have substantially eased these constraints. Fourth,

Pakistan has historically suffered from a severe deficit in international destination branding and marketing, with minimal government investment in showcasing its tourism assets on global platforms compared to the sophisticated, well-funded tourism marketing campaigns run by competitor destinations such as Turkey, Malaysia or the United Arab Emirates. Fifth, unregulated development and inadequate environmental management in popular tourist destinations, particularly in fragile ecosystems such as Hunza, Naran-Kaghan and Murree, have led to concerning environmental degradation, including deforestation, waste accumulation and unplanned construction that threatens the very natural beauty that attracts visitors in the first place. Finally, Pakistan's hospitality sector suffers from a significant skills gap, with limited formal training institutions producing internationally competitive hotel management, tour guiding and customer service professionals, constraining the overall quality and professionalism of the tourist experience.

In recent years, however, the Pakistani government, at both federal and provincial levels, has undertaken meaningful initiatives to address these constraints. The most significant reform has been progressive visa liberalisation, including the introduction of visa-on-arrival facilities for citizens of numerous countries and a streamlined e-visa system, substantially reducing the

bureaucratic friction that historically deterred international visitors. The "Naya Pakistan Tourism Strategy," launched under the previous government, alongside provincial initiatives such as the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Tourism Authority's development of Swat and Chitral, and Gilgit-Baltistan's promotion of adventure and eco-tourism, reflect growing institutional recognition of tourism's economic potential. The successful hosting of international mountaineering expeditions, growing social media promotion by domestic travel influencers, and the historic opening of the Kartarpur Corridor represent tangible, positive developments that have begun to reshape both domestic and international perceptions of Pakistan as a viable travel destination.

Comparative international experience offers valuable lessons for Pakistan's continued tourism development. Nepal's success in building a globally recognised trekking and mountaineering tourism brand around Everest and the Annapurna circuit, despite significant infrastructural constraints, demonstrates the power of focused, authentic destination branding built around a country's most distinctive natural assets. Bhutan's "high-value, low-volume" tourism model, which imposes a substantial daily tourist fee to fund conservation and limit environmental degradation while positioning the country as an exclusive, premium destination, offers an instructive alternative model for Pakistan's more

environmentally fragile mountain destinations. Georgia's remarkable post-Soviet tourism boom, driven substantially by liberal visa policies, aggressive international marketing, and significant investment in tourist-friendly infrastructure, illustrates how rapidly a country's tourism fortunes can be transformed through deliberate policy action even without pre-existing global brand recognition. Vietnam's successful rebranding from a country associated primarily with war in international memory to a vibrant, welcoming tourism destination demonstrates that even significant reputational challenges can be overcome through sustained, strategic marketing and genuine on-the-ground improvements in visitor experience.

Building on these lessons, Pakistan's path forward in tourism promotion requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy. First and most fundamentally, continued improvement and effective communication of Pakistan's security situation is essential; this requires not only sustained on-the-ground security improvements but also proactive, credible engagement with international media, travel advisory bodies and diplomatic missions to ensure that perceptions align more closely with improved ground realities, potentially through organised familiarisation trips for international journalists and travel bloggers. Second, sustained public and private investment in tourism infrastructure — improved road

networks, particularly all-weather access to northern tourist destinations, expanded quality accommodation across price points, and reliable connectivity and utilities in key tourist areas — is essential to accommodate and retain higher visitor volumes. Third, Pakistan must invest substantially in sophisticated digital marketing and destination branding, leveraging social media, international travel expos and partnerships with global travel platforms to project a compelling, authentic narrative of Pakistan's tourism offerings to international audiences, moving beyond sporadic, underfunded promotional efforts towards a sustained, professionally managed national tourism marketing strategy. Fourth, adopting community-based and sustainable tourism models, wherein local communities in destinations such as Hunza, Swat and coastal Balochistan are meaningfully included as stakeholders and beneficiaries of tourism development, rather than passive bystanders to externally driven commercial exploitation, would both improve local economic outcomes and provide stronger incentives for environmental conservation. Fifth, expanding vocational training institutions focused specifically on hospitality management, tour guiding and tourism-related entrepreneurship would address the sector's skills deficit while creating meaningful employment opportunities, particularly for youth in tourism-dependent regions. Finally, Pakistan should prioritise the further development of religious and

heritage tourism, representing perhaps the most immediately actionable opportunity given existing infrastructure and demonstrated demand, particularly expanding facilities and access for Sikh, Buddhist and Hindu pilgrimage tourism, alongside continued preservation and promotion of Pakistan's rich Sufi shrine culture, which already draws substantial domestic religious tourism and holds significant untapped international appeal.

A closer look at specific success stories within Pakistan's own tourism landscape offers instructive templates for broader replication. The Kartarpur Corridor, connecting Indian Sikh pilgrims to the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Narowal district without requiring a formal visa, has since its 2019 inauguration demonstrated the substantial latent demand for religious tourism when bureaucratic barriers are meaningfully reduced, drawing consistent pilgrim traffic despite periodic bilateral tensions between Pakistan and India. Similarly, the resurgence of tourism in Swat valley, once devastated by militancy and subsequently by catastrophic flooding, illustrates both the resilience of tourism demand once security and basic infrastructure are restored, and the vulnerability of tourism-dependent local economies to both security and climate-related shocks, underscoring the importance of diversified, climate-resilient tourism infrastructure planning going forward. The growing

popularity of Gilgit-Baltistan among domestic tourists, driven substantially by improved road access via the Karakoram Highway and increased social media exposure through platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, demonstrates the powerful role that digital word-of-mouth marketing, largely organic and government-independent, can play in building destination awareness even absent a sophisticated formal marketing apparatus.

The environmental sustainability dimension of Pakistan's tourism development deserves further elaboration, given the fragility of many of its premier natural destinations. Unregulated hotel construction along riverbanks in Naran-Kaghan and Swat has repeatedly resulted in catastrophic property destruction during flash floods, most devastatingly during the 2010 and 2022 floods, illustrating the urgent need for enforced building codes and environmentally sensitive zoning regulations in tourist areas. Similarly, the accumulation of plastic waste and inadequate sanitation infrastructure in popular trekking destinations such as Fairy Meadows and the base camps leading to Nanga Parbat and K2 threatens to degrade the very pristine wilderness that attracts visitors, necessitating urgent investment in waste management infrastructure and potentially the adoption of visitor capacity limits similar to those employed in other environmentally sensitive global tourism

destinations.

Pakistan's private sector, including domestic airlines, tour operators and hospitality chains, has an important complementary role to play alongside government initiatives. The expansion of budget airline routes to previously underserved destinations such as Skardu and Chitral, alongside the growth of boutique hospitality ventures catering to both domestic and international adventure tourists, illustrates the private sector's capacity to respond dynamically to growing demand when basic infrastructure and security conditions permit, suggesting that continued public investment in foundational infrastructure could catalyse substantial complementary private investment in tourism services.

In conclusion, Pakistan possesses a tourism endowment of extraordinary breadth and depth, encompassing some of the world's most spectacular mountain landscapes, civilisationally significant archaeological heritage, and religiously and culturally diverse pilgrimage sites, all of which remain dramatically underutilised relative to their genuine economic and diplomatic potential. The path towards unlocking this potential is neither mysterious nor prohibitively expensive; it requires sustained political commitment to security improvement and effective communication thereof, meaningful infrastructure investment,

professional destination branding, and a genuine commitment to sustainable, community-inclusive tourism development. Should Pakistan successfully navigate these challenges, tourism holds the promise not merely of economic diversification and foreign exchange generation, but of a powerful, positive reshaping of Pakistan's international image, transforming global perception from a country associated with conflict and instability towards one celebrated for the breathtaking natural beauty, civilisational depth and cultural warmth that have, for too long, remained hidden from the world's view.

Essay 8: “I Do Not Agree With What You Have to Say, But I’ll Defend to the Death Your Right to Say It”

Outline

1. Introduction: the paradox of tolerating dissent
2. Origin and philosophical meaning of the statement
3. Freedom of expression as the foundation of liberal democracy
4. The historical struggle for free speech
5. Contemporary tensions: free speech versus hate speech, misinformation and public order
6. Free speech in the Pakistani context
 - a. Constitutional guarantees and their limitations
 - b. Blasphemy laws and their chilling effect
 - c. Media censorship and digital rights
 - d. Social and religious intolerance of dissenting views
7. The digital age dilemma: social media, misinformation and cancel culture
8. Balancing liberty and responsibility: where should the line be drawn?
9. The way forward for Pakistan and the world
10. Conclusion: defending the principle, not merely the popular opinion

Few statements in the history of political philosophy capture the essence of liberal, pluralistic society as succinctly and powerfully as the sentiment often attributed to Voltaire: "I do not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Though historians note that Voltaire himself never wrote precisely these words — the phrase was actually coined by his biographer Evelyn Beatrice Hall to summarise his philosophy — the sentiment nonetheless captures a profound and enduring truth about the nature of genuine freedom: that liberty is meaningless if it is extended only to those with whom we agree. This essay explores the philosophical depth of this statement, its historical evolution, its application and violation in contemporary Pakistan, and the complex challenges of upholding this principle in an era of digital misinformation, religious sensitivity and political polarisation.

At its philosophical core, the statement articulates a distinction of fundamental importance: the difference between agreeing with an idea and defending the right to express it. This distinction lies at the very heart of what philosophers term "principled tolerance" — tolerance not born of indifference or relativism, but of a deeper conviction that the free contest of ideas, however uncomfortable or even offensive some of those ideas may be, is essential to the discovery of truth, the functioning of democracy, and the dignity of the

individual conscience. John Stuart Mill, in his seminal work *On Liberty*, articulated a strikingly similar argument: that even false or objectionable opinions serve a vital function, for in confronting falsehood, truth is clarified and strengthened, and that the suppression of any opinion, however seemingly worthless, robs humanity of the opportunity to test and reaffirm its own convictions through open contest. This is not merely an abstract philosophical nicety; it is the operational bedrock upon which functioning democracies, independent judiciaries, and free press systems are built.

The historical struggle for free expression has been long, hard-fought and remains incomplete even in the most established democracies. From the persecution of Socrates in ancient Athens for "corrupting the youth" with his questioning philosophy, to the Inquisition's suppression of Galileo's heliocentric theories, to the censorship regimes of totalitarian states in the twentieth century — Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, Maoist China — history offers a grim catalogue of the human tendency to silence dissenting or unpopular ideas, often with catastrophic consequences for both the individuals persecuted and for the societies that lost access to their potentially valuable insights and critiques. The gradual expansion of free speech protections in Western liberal democracies, formalised through instruments such as the First Amendment to the US Constitution and Article

19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, represents one of the great civilisational achievements of the modern era, even as these very societies continue to grapple with the boundaries and limitations of this freedom in practice.

Contemporary global discourse reveals persistent tensions in operationalising this principle. Where precisely should the line be drawn between protected free expression and speech that incites violence, spreads dangerous misinformation, or constitutes hate speech targeting vulnerable communities? Liberal democracies themselves diverge significantly in their approach: the United States maintains an extraordinarily permissive free speech regime, protecting even deeply offensive speech short of direct incitement to imminent violence, while European nations such as Germany maintain stricter regulations against hate speech and Holocaust denial, reflecting their own particular historical traumas. This divergence illustrates that the application of free speech principles is never entirely absolute or context-free; societies must continuously negotiate the boundary between protecting individual expression and safeguarding collective social harmony and the dignity of vulnerable groups.

In the Pakistani context, the tension between constitutional commitment to free expression and the

practical realities of religious, political and social constraint is particularly acute and consequential. Article 19 of Pakistan's Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, "subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam, the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality." This qualifying clause, while ostensibly reasonable in intent, has in practice provided expansive latitude for successive governments and non-state actors to curtail legitimate dissent, journalistic investigation and academic inquiry under the guise of protecting religious sentiment, national security or public order.

Nowhere is this tension more starkly visible than in Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which carry the potential for the death penalty and have generated a profoundly chilling effect on open discourse regarding religious matters, even scholarly or interpretive discussions that fall well short of genuine blasphemy. The tragic cases of individuals such as Mashal Khan, a university student lynched by a mob in 2017 based on unsubstantiated blasphemy accusations, and Governor Salmaan Taseer, assassinated by his own bodyguard in 2011 for advocating reform of blasphemy law procedures, illustrate the lethal consequences that can attend even indirect engagement with sensitive religious discourse in Pakistan, creating a climate of fear that extends

self-censorship far beyond the narrow bounds of the law itself into broader intellectual, journalistic and even everyday social discourse.

Beyond religious sensitivities, Pakistan's media landscape has historically been subject to significant government pressure, including the suspension of television channels critical of the establishment, the harassment and, in tragic cases, killing of journalists investigating sensitive political or security-related matters, and the increasing use of legislation such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) to target social media users and journalists for critical commentary on the government or military establishment, often under broadly worded provisions relating to "defamation" or spreading "fake news" that many rights organisations argue are disproportionately vague and susceptible to politically motivated abuse. The Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders have consistently ranked Pakistan among the more dangerous and restrictive environments for press freedom globally, reflecting the persistent gap between constitutional guarantees and practical realities.

Beyond formal legal and governmental restriction, Pakistani society itself exhibits significant social and cultural intolerance towards dissenting or minority viewpoints, whether religious, sectarian, or political.

Minority religious communities, including Ahmadis, Christians and Hindus, frequently face social and sometimes violent repercussions for perceived transgressions of majority religious sensibilities, while political dissent, particularly criticism of powerful state institutions, is frequently met with social ostracism, professional consequences, or in extreme cases, enforced disappearance, a practice that has drawn sustained condemnation from human rights organisations. This social intolerance often operates independently of, and sometimes more effectively than, formal legal restriction in suppressing genuine diversity of thought and expression within Pakistani public discourse.

The digital age has introduced an entirely new dimension of complexity to this already fraught landscape. Social media platforms, while democratising access to public expression in unprecedented ways, have simultaneously become vectors for the rapid spread of misinformation, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and organised online harassment, particularly targeting women, religious minorities and political dissenters. The phenomenon of "cancel culture," wherein individuals face intense, often disproportionate social and professional consequences for expressing unpopular or controversial opinions, raises genuinely difficult questions about whether unofficial, socially

enforced censorship might, in certain respects, pose as significant a threat to genuine pluralism of thought as formal state censorship, even as it operates through entirely different, non-governmental mechanisms.

Navigating these competing considerations requires a thoughtful, principled approach to balancing liberty and responsibility. The most defensible framework, drawing on both Millian liberal philosophy and contemporary human rights jurisprudence, suggests that restrictions on speech should be narrowly tailored, applied only to speech that constitutes direct incitement to imminent violence, genuine defamation with demonstrable malicious intent, or content that poses clear and immediate danger to public safety — rather than the far broader, more subjective categories of "hurt sentiment," "national interest," or political criticism of powerful institutions that are frequently invoked, both in Pakistan and elsewhere, to suppress legitimate dissent under the guise of maintaining public order or social harmony.

For Pakistan specifically, the path forward requires several concrete reforms. First, the blasphemy law framework requires procedural reform to prevent its weaponisation for personal vendettas and mob violence, including stronger evidentiary requirements, protections against false accusations, and swift judicial processes that do not leave accused individuals vulnerable to

extrajudicial mob justice during prolonged legal proceedings. Second, legislation such as PECA must be revised to narrow its overly broad provisions regarding online expression, ensuring that legitimate journalistic and political commentary is not conflated with genuine defamation or incitement. Third, Pakistan's civil society, media institutions and educational system must invest more substantially in cultivating a genuine culture of intellectual tolerance and pluralism, teaching citizens from an early age that disagreement, robust debate and even offensive speech are preferable, and ultimately safer for society, than the suppression of dissent, which merely drives objectionable ideas underground rather than genuinely addressing or refuting them. Fourth, protection mechanisms for journalists, academics and human rights defenders must be strengthened, including accountability for enforced disappearances and extrajudicial intimidation, ensuring that the state's own guarantees of free expression are not undermined by extra-legal coercion.

It is worth further examining how the principle of defending unpopular speech interacts with the concept of academic freedom, an area of particular relevance to Pakistan's own intellectual development. Universities, in their ideal function, serve as spaces where controversial, unconventional and even deeply unpopular ideas can be tested, debated and refined through rigorous scholarly

method, a function that depends entirely on the willingness of academic institutions and society at large to tolerate genuine intellectual dissent. Pakistan's own higher education institutions have periodically witnessed the suppression of academic inquiry into sensitive historical, religious or political topics, with self-censorship among faculty members regarding subjects such as the events of 1971, sectarian history, or critical analysis of state institutions representing a significant, if less visible, constraint on the very culture of open inquiry that universities are meant to cultivate. This academic self-censorship, while rarely codified in formal law, represents precisely the kind of chilling effect that undermines a society's long-term capacity for critical thought and innovation, since genuine intellectual progress in any field, from history to the natural sciences, depends on the ability to question prevailing orthodoxies without fear of professional or personal retribution.

The role of satire and humour in testing the boundaries of free expression also merits consideration, since comedic and satirical speech has historically served as one of the most powerful vehicles for political and social critique precisely because it operates through indirection rather than direct confrontation. Pakistan's own tradition of political satire, from the columns of humorists to television programmes lampooning political figures, has periodically faced legal and social backlash, illustrating

the particular vulnerability of satirical speech within societies where criticism of powerful figures or institutions, even when couched in comedic form, is perceived as a direct affront rather than a legitimate form of democratic accountability.

Finally, it is important to recognise that defending free expression does not imply moral neutrality towards the content of objectionable speech; one can, and indeed should, vigorously argue against hateful, false or harmful ideas while simultaneously defending the speaker's right to voice them without facing legal persecution or violence. This distinction, between combating bad ideas through counter-argument, education and social persuasion versus combating them through censorship and coercion, lies at the very heart of the Voltairean principle, and represents perhaps the most difficult, yet most necessary, discipline for any society genuinely committed to both truth and liberty.

In conclusion, the principle articulated in the statement — defending the right to express even that which we vehemently oppose — represents one of the most demanding, yet most essential, tests of any society's genuine commitment to liberty and pluralism. It is a principle far easier to affirm in the abstract than to practice consistently, particularly when confronted with speech that offends our deepest religious, political or

personal convictions. Yet it is precisely in these difficult, uncomfortable moments that the true measure of a society's commitment to freedom is revealed. For Pakistan, as for every society grappling with the tensions between liberty, security and social harmony, the path forward lies not in abandoning this principle when it becomes inconvenient, but in the harder, more courageous work of defending it consistently — recognising that the health of a democracy is measured not by how it treats popular, comfortable speech, but by how faithfully it protects the right of the dissenter, the critic, and the unpopular voice to be heard.

Essay 9: Is Pakistan Ready for Digital Revolution?

Outline

1. Introduction: the fourth industrial revolution and Pakistan's position within it
2. Defining the digital revolution: from connectivity to AI-driven transformation
3. Pakistan's digital progress so far
 - a. Mobile and internet penetration
 - b. Fintech and digital payments (RAAST, JazzCash, Easypaisa)
 - c. IT and freelancing exports
 - d. E-governance initiatives
4. Structural readiness assessment
 - a. Digital infrastructure and connectivity gaps
 - b. Digital literacy and human capital
 - c. Regulatory and legal framework (data protection, cybercrime)
 - d. Access and affordability: the digital divide
 - e. Energy reliability as a bottleneck
5. Sectoral opportunities
 - a. IT exports and freelance economy
 - b. Digital financial inclusion
 - c. E-commerce
 - d. Ed-tech and health-tech

6. Risks and challenges
 - a. Cybersecurity vulnerabilities
 - b. Misinformation and digital polarisation
 - c. Job displacement fears
 - d. Gender digital divide
7. Comparative benchmarks: India, Bangladesh, Estonia
8. The way forward: a roadmap for digital readiness
9. Conclusion: revolution is a choice, not an inevitability

The world stands at the threshold of what many economists and technologists term the Fourth Industrial Revolution — a transformation driven not by steam or electricity, as in previous industrial epochs, but by artificial intelligence, big data, the Internet of Things, and pervasive digital connectivity that is fundamentally reshaping how economies produce value, how societies communicate, and how governments deliver services to their citizens. For a developing nation such as Pakistan, home to over 240 million people, a majority of whom are under the age of thirty, this digital revolution presents both an unprecedented opportunity to leapfrog traditional development trajectories and a formidable risk of being left further behind if the necessary foundational readiness is not achieved. This essay critically assesses Pakistan's preparedness for the digital revolution, examining its progress, structural constraints, and the

pragmatic reforms necessary to ensure the country can genuinely harness this transformation rather than merely observe it from the periphery.

The digital revolution encompasses far more than simply internet access; it represents a fundamental restructuring of economic and social systems around data, automation and connectivity — encompassing e-commerce replacing traditional retail, digital financial services displacing cash-based transactions, artificial intelligence augmenting or replacing human labour in numerous sectors, and e-governance transforming citizens' interaction with the state. Countries that have successfully navigated this transition, from Estonia's comprehensive e-governance system to India's Unified Payments Interface revolutionising financial inclusion, demonstrate the transformative potential of deliberate, well-executed digital strategy.

Pakistan's progress on this front, while modest relative to its potential, is not negligible. Mobile phone penetration has expanded dramatically over the past decade, with teledensity exceeding 80 percent and broadband subscriptions surpassing 130 million users according to Pakistan Telecommunication Authority data, reflecting the rapid, largely market-driven expansion of mobile internet access even in previously underserved rural areas. Pakistan's fintech sector has demonstrated

particularly encouraging momentum, with the State Bank of Pakistan's introduction of RAAST, the country's first instant payment system, alongside the continued growth of mobile wallet services such as JazzCash and Easypaisa, substantially expanding financial inclusion among previously unbanked populations, particularly in rural areas where traditional banking infrastructure remains sparse. Pakistan's IT and freelancing sector has emerged as a genuine bright spot, with the country consistently ranking among the top four to five global freelancing markets according to platforms such as Payoneer, and IT exports surpassing two and a half billion dollars annually, reflecting a young, English-speaking, digitally skilled workforce capable of competing in global digital services markets despite domestic infrastructural constraints. E-governance initiatives, including the Ehsaas digital cash transfer programme, which leveraged biometric verification and digital payment rails to deliver assistance to millions of vulnerable Pakistanis during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrated the tangible potential of digital infrastructure to improve state capacity and service delivery even within a historically bureaucratic, paper-based administrative culture.

Despite these encouraging developments, a rigorous assessment of Pakistan's structural readiness for a genuine, economy-wide digital revolution reveals

substantial and persistent gaps. Digital infrastructure, while expanding, remains significantly uneven, with rural and remote areas, particularly in Balochistan, interior Sindh and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, suffering from limited or unreliable internet connectivity, constraining the inclusive reach of digital services. Digital literacy represents perhaps the most fundamental constraint; despite growing smartphone penetration, meaningful digital literacy — the ability to safely, productively and critically engage with digital tools and information — remains limited, particularly among older populations, women, and residents of rural areas, reflecting Pakistan's broader educational deficits, including alarmingly high rates of functional illiteracy that inevitably constrain effective digital engagement even where connectivity exists.

Pakistan's regulatory and legal framework for the digital economy also remains underdeveloped and, in certain respects, actively counterproductive. Comprehensive data protection legislation, essential for building public and international trust in Pakistan's digital economy, has been repeatedly delayed in various draft forms without full enactment, leaving citizens' personal data inadequately protected and creating uncertainty for businesses, particularly international technology companies considering investment in Pakistan's digital infrastructure. Existing cybercrime legislation, while

addressing genuine security concerns, has simultaneously drawn criticism for provisions perceived as overly broad and susceptible to misuse against legitimate digital expression and journalism, as discussed extensively in contemporary human rights discourse regarding Pakistan's online civil liberties environment.

The digital divide in Pakistan manifests along multiple, often overlapping, dimensions of inequality. Affordability remains a significant barrier for lower-income populations, for whom smartphone devices and consistent data packages, despite being relatively inexpensive by global standards, still represent a meaningful proportion of household income. Perhaps most strikingly, Pakistan exhibits one of the widest gender digital divides in the world, with the GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap Report consistently finding that Pakistani women are substantially less likely than men to own mobile phones or access mobile internet, reflecting broader patriarchal social norms, restricted female mobility and decision-making autonomy, and safety concerns regarding online harassment that disproportionately affect women's digital engagement, representing a profound missed opportunity for inclusive digital and economic empowerment. Additionally, Pakistan's chronic energy crisis, characterised by persistent load-shedding and unreliable electricity supply

in many regions, poses a frequently overlooked but fundamental bottleneck to sustained digital infrastructure operation, undermining the reliability of everything from mobile network towers to data centres and household internet connectivity.

Despite these substantial constraints, several sectoral opportunities present genuine, near-term pathways for Pakistan to accelerate its digital transformation. The IT and freelance economy, already demonstrating strong export growth, could be further accelerated through expanded computer science and digital skills education, streamlined foreign exchange repatriation processes for freelancers, and continued government support for IT parks and special technology zones offering tax incentives to attract both domestic and international technology investment. Digital financial inclusion, building on the foundation laid by RAAST and mobile wallet services, holds tremendous potential to formalise Pakistan's cash-dominated economy while extending credit access, insurance and savings products to previously excluded populations, particularly benefiting small farmers and micro-entrepreneurs. E-commerce, though still nascent relative to regional peers such as India, has demonstrated significant growth potential, particularly accelerated by pandemic-driven shifts in consumer behaviour, offering opportunities for small and medium enterprises to access broader markets beyond

their immediate geographic vicinity. Ed-tech and health-tech platforms, delivering educational content and telemedicine services respectively to underserved rural populations, represent particularly promising applications of digital technology to address Pakistan's chronic deficits in physical educational and healthcare infrastructure, effectively leveraging digital connectivity to partially substitute for otherwise prohibitively expensive brick-and-mortar infrastructure expansion.

However, Pakistan's digital transformation also carries genuine risks that must be proactively managed. Cybersecurity vulnerabilities, given Pakistan's relatively underdeveloped institutional capacity for cyber defence, expose both government systems and private citizens to increasing risks of data breaches, financial fraud and, potentially, more sophisticated state-sponsored cyber threats given the country's complex regional security environment. The proliferation of social media, while democratising information access, has simultaneously fuelled the spread of misinformation and intensified political and religious polarisation, as extensively documented in Pakistan's contemporary political discourse. Concerns regarding job displacement due to automation, while perhaps less immediately pressing given Pakistan's current economic structure, will require proactive policy attention as automation technologies continue to advance globally, potentially affecting

labour-intensive sectors such as textiles and manufacturing that remain central to Pakistan's export economy. And as previously noted, the gender digital divide risks entrenching rather than alleviating existing socio-economic inequalities absent deliberate, targeted policy intervention.

Comparative benchmarking against regional and global digital transformation leaders offers instructive guidance for Pakistan's path forward. India's experience with Aadhaar biometric identification and the India Stack digital public infrastructure demonstrates the transformative potential of foundational digital identity systems in enabling financial inclusion, targeted subsidy delivery and broader digital service access, offering a potentially replicable model, albeit one requiring careful attention to data privacy safeguards. Bangladesh's remarkable growth in mobile financial services through platforms such as bKash illustrates how targeted fintech innovation can rapidly transform financial inclusion even in a predominantly rural, historically cash-based economy comparable to Pakistan's own context. Estonia's pioneering e-governance system, allowing citizens to conduct nearly all government interactions online through secure digital identity verification, represents an aspirational long-term benchmark demonstrating the profound efficiency gains achievable through comprehensive digital government

transformation.

Drawing on this analysis, a pragmatic roadmap for enhancing Pakistan's digital readiness must prioritise several interconnected reforms. First, sustained investment in expanding affordable broadband and mobile connectivity to underserved rural areas is essential, potentially through public-private partnership models and universal service fund mechanisms specifically targeting digital infrastructure gaps. Second, comprehensive digital literacy programmes, integrated into both formal educational curricula and community-based adult education initiatives, are necessary to ensure that expanding connectivity translates into genuine, productive digital engagement rather than merely passive consumption of social media content. Third, the long-delayed enactment of comprehensive, internationally credible data protection legislation, balanced against narrowly tailored, rights-respecting cybercrime provisions, is essential to build the trust and legal certainty necessary for both citizen confidence and international digital investment. Fourth, targeted interventions to address the gender digital divide, including subsidised device and data access programmes for women, alongside digital safety education addressing online harassment concerns, are essential to ensure Pakistan's digital transformation does not simply replicate or exacerbate existing gender

inequalities. Fifth, addressing Pakistan's underlying energy reliability challenges must be recognised as intrinsically linked to, rather than separate from, the digital transformation agenda, given the fundamental dependence of digital infrastructure on consistent electricity supply.

A closer examination of Pakistan's IT export success story reveals both its promise and its fragility. The freelancing boom, concentrated substantially in cities such as Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, alongside emerging hubs in smaller cities such as Faisalabad and Gujranwala, has been driven largely by individual entrepreneurship and platforms such as Upwork, Fiverr and Payoneer, operating with relatively limited direct government support beyond periodic tax incentive announcements. This organic, bottom-up growth model, while impressive, also exposes Pakistan's digital economy to significant vulnerability, including periodic disruptions from currency convertibility restrictions affecting freelancer payment repatriation, and the persistent challenge of PayPal's continued unavailability in Pakistan, a seemingly minor but practically significant barrier that complicates payment processing for freelancers and small digital businesses relative to competitors in countries such as India and Bangladesh where such services operate without restriction.

The role of artificial intelligence specifically, as distinct from digital connectivity more broadly, deserves particular attention given its rapidly growing global significance. Pakistan's engagement with AI technology remains at a nascent stage, with limited domestic research and development capacity, a small but growing community of AI practitioners concentrated primarily within the freelancing and outsourcing sectors rather than indigenous product development, and virtually no domestic regulatory framework specifically addressing AI governance, data usage or algorithmic accountability. This positions Pakistan as primarily a consumer and, to a limited extent, service provider within the global AI value chain, rather than a genuine innovator, a positioning that carries both opportunity, in terms of near-term freelance and outsourcing revenue, and risk, in terms of long-term technological dependency and vulnerability to disruption as AI increasingly automates precisely the kind of routine digital services work that currently constitutes much of Pakistan's freelance economy.

Pakistan's educational system's capacity to produce a digitally competent workforce at scale represents perhaps the single most consequential long-term determinant of the country's digital readiness. While elite private universities and specialised computer science programmes have produced globally competitive graduates, as evidenced by Pakistan's strong showing in

international programming competitions and the success of its freelancing sector, the vast majority of Pakistan's public education system remains ill-equipped to provide even basic digital literacy, let alone the more advanced computational thinking and coding skills increasingly demanded by the global digital economy, representing a stark and consequential bifurcation between a small, globally competitive digital elite and a much larger population effectively excluded from meaningful participation in the emerging digital economy.

In conclusion, Pakistan stands at a genuine inflection point regarding its digital future — possessing a young, increasingly connected population and demonstrable pockets of digital innovation and export success, yet simultaneously constrained by substantial gaps in infrastructure, literacy, regulatory framework and inclusive access. The digital revolution is not an inevitability that will simply happen to Pakistan regardless of policy choices; it is a transformation that must be actively, deliberately constructed through sustained investment, thoughtful regulation and genuine commitment to inclusive access across geographic, gender and socio-economic lines. Should Pakistan rise to this challenge, the digital revolution offers a genuine pathway to leapfrog traditional development constraints, particularly in financial inclusion, education and governance efficiency. Should it fail to do so, Pakistan

risks not merely missing an economic opportunity, but falling further behind in an increasingly digitally mediated global economy where the gap between digitally empowered and digitally excluded nations threatens to become the defining fault line of twenty-first century development.

Essay 10: IMF Bailouts: Roads to Stability or Recipes for Disaster?

Outline

1. Introduction: Pakistan's recurring rendezvous with the IMF
2. What is the IMF and how do bailout programmes function?
3. Pakistan's history with the IMF: a chronic dependency
4. The case for IMF bailouts: stability and credibility
 - a. Preventing balance of payments collapse and default
 - b. Catalysing other financing and restoring investor confidence
 - c. Enforcing fiscal and structural discipline
5. The case against IMF bailouts: the "recipe for disaster" argument
 - a. Austerity's social and political costs
 - b. One-size-fits-all conditionalities ignoring local context
 - c. The debt treadmill: bailouts without genuine structural transformation
 - d. Erosion of policy sovereignty
6. Why does Pakistan keep returning to the IMF? Root causes of chronic dependency

- a. Narrow tax base and fiscal indiscipline
 - b. Energy sector circular debt
 - c. Loss-making state-owned enterprises
 - d. Political cycles undermining reform continuity
 - e. Structural trade deficit and low export competitiveness
- 7. Comparative experience: South Korea, Greece, Argentina, Bangladesh
 - 8. Beyond dependency: what genuine stability requires
 - 9. The way forward for Pakistan
 - 10. Conclusion: the IMF as a mirror, not the disease

Since joining the International Monetary Fund in 1950, Pakistan has entered into more than twenty separate IMF programmes, a staggering statistic that places the country among the most frequent recipients of Fund assistance in the institution's history. Each programme has followed a familiar, almost ritualistic pattern: a balance of payments crisis precipitates an emergency approach to the IMF; a programme is negotiated, typically involving currency devaluation, fiscal austerity, energy tariff increases and structural reform commitments; temporary stability is achieved; and within a few years, often before the previous programme has even concluded, Pakistan finds itself back at the IMF's door once again. This recurring cycle has generated intense public debate, both domestically and

internationally, over whether IMF bailouts represent a necessary, if painful, road to macroeconomic stability, or a recipe for perpetual disaster that traps developing nations such as Pakistan in a cycle of debt dependency without addressing underlying structural weaknesses. This essay critically examines both perspectives, arguing that the truth lies not in the IMF programmes themselves, which serve primarily as a mirror reflecting Pakistan's own unresolved structural failures, but in the chronic absence of genuine domestic reform between programmes that perpetuates the cycle of dependency.

The International Monetary Fund, established in 1944 as part of the Bretton Woods system, functions as an international lender of last resort, providing financial assistance to member countries experiencing balance of payments difficulties, typically in exchange for policy commitments — known as conditionalities — designed to restore macroeconomic stability and, ostensibly, place the borrowing country on a sustainable long-term growth trajectory. These conditionalities typically encompass fiscal consolidation measures such as reducing budget deficits through spending cuts or tax increases, monetary tightening to control inflation, exchange rate adjustments to correct currency overvaluation, and structural reforms targeting state-owned enterprises, energy sector pricing, and tax administration.

Pakistan's relationship with the IMF has been characterised by remarkable persistence and recurrence, from its earliest programmes in the 1950s and 1960s, through the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s, to the more recent Extended Fund Facility arrangements of 2013, 2019 and 2023-24. Each of these programmes has typically been precipitated by a foreign exchange crisis, driven by a combination of persistent trade and current account deficits, external debt servicing obligations, and periodic external shocks such as oil price spikes, global financial crises, or, more recently, the compounding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the catastrophic floods of 2022.

Proponents of IMF engagement, including many mainstream economists and successive Pakistani finance ministers who have negotiated these programmes, argue compellingly that such bailouts serve several essential stabilising functions. First and most fundamentally, IMF assistance prevents the catastrophic scenario of outright sovereign default, which would trigger a far more severe and prolonged economic collapse, including complete loss of access to international capital markets, hyperinflation, and potentially years of economic contraction, as witnessed in cases such as Argentina's repeated debt crises. Second, an IMF programme, by virtue of the institution's

credibility and rigorous monitoring mechanisms, often serves a crucial catalytic function, unlocking additional financing from bilateral creditors, multilateral development banks, and, importantly, restoring the confidence of international and domestic private investors who view IMF approval as a credible signal of policy commitment and macroeconomic stabilisation, thereby facilitating broader capital inflows beyond the Fund's own direct lending. Third, IMF conditionalities, however politically painful, impose a degree of fiscal and structural discipline that domestic political economy dynamics often fail to generate independently, given the powerful vested interests — ranging from politically connected business elites benefiting from tax exemptions, to influential constituencies resistant to energy tariff rationalisation — that consistently obstruct necessary reforms in the absence of external, conditionality-based pressure.

Critics, however, mount an equally compelling case that IMF bailouts, at least as historically implemented in Pakistan and numerous other developing economies, frequently constitute a recipe for disaster rather than genuine stability. The most immediate and politically salient criticism concerns the severe social and political costs of austerity measures, which typically involve currency devaluation that fuels inflation disproportionately affecting the poor through higher

prices for imported food, fuel and medicine, alongside energy tariff increases that similarly burden low and middle-income households already struggling with Pakistan's persistent cost-of-living crisis. Critics argue that this austerity-driven approach, often termed "IMF-imposed hardship" in domestic political discourse, prioritises the restoration of macroeconomic indicators favoured by international creditors over the immediate welfare and social stability of the borrowing country's population, potentially triggering social unrest and political instability that further undermines, rather than strengthens, the long-term reform agenda the programme ostensibly seeks to achieve.

A second significant criticism concerns the perceived "one-size-fits-all" nature of IMF conditionalities, which critics argue often fail to adequately account for the specific structural, political and social context of individual borrowing countries, applying broadly similar fiscal consolidation and liberalisation prescriptions across vastly different economies without sufficient calibration to local circumstances. This critique gained particular prominence following the 1997-98 Asian Financial Crisis, when IMF-imposed austerity measures in countries such as Indonesia and Thailand were widely criticised, including by prominent economists such as Joseph Stiglitz, for exacerbating rather than alleviating the initial economic contraction through excessively

contractionary fiscal and monetary policy prescriptions poorly suited to the specific nature of the crisis.

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism, particularly relevant to Pakistan's specific experience, concerns what might be termed the "debt treadmill" phenomenon: the observation that successive IMF programmes have repeatedly achieved short-term macroeconomic stabilisation — reduced fiscal deficits, replenished foreign exchange reserves, temporarily stabilised currency — without producing the genuine, durable structural transformation necessary to break the underlying cycle of chronic balance of payments vulnerability. This pattern suggests that Pakistan's recurrent need for IMF assistance reflects not merely periodic external shocks, but a deeper failure of domestic political economy to sustain necessary structural reforms once the immediate pressure of an active IMF programme, and its accompanying disbursement conditionality, has been lifted. Finally, critics reasonably note that repeated IMF engagement, and the borrowing country's consequent dependence on continued Fund disbursements and the associated unlocking of other financing, inevitably erodes genuine policy sovereignty, constraining the space for governments to pursue independent, potentially more socially equitable or growth-oriented economic strategies tailored to their own specific developmental priorities and political mandates.

To understand why Pakistan specifically has become trapped in this recurring cycle, one must examine the deeper structural roots of its chronic balance of payments vulnerability. Pakistan's persistently narrow tax base, with a tax-to-GDP ratio among the lowest in the world, reflects both extensive informality, discussed extensively elsewhere, and a political economy characterised by powerful vested interests — including large-scale agriculture, real estate and various politically connected industries — that have successfully resisted meaningful taxation reform across successive governments regardless of political party. Pakistan's energy sector circular debt, a chronic phenomenon wherein unpaid subsidies, transmission losses and governance failures within the power sector accumulate into massive, recurring fiscal liabilities, represents another persistent structural drain that virtually every IMF programme has sought, with limited durable success, to address. Loss-making state-owned enterprises, particularly in aviation, railways, steel and power distribution, continue to drain billions of rupees annually from Pakistan's fiscal resources, reflecting decades of political resistance to privatisation or genuine governance reform, often rooted in concerns over politically sensitive employment losses. Pakistan's volatile political cycles, characterised by frequent changes in government and, correspondingly, frequent reversals or dilution of previously agreed reform

commitments, have repeatedly undermined the continuity necessary for structural reforms to achieve genuine, lasting impact beyond the immediate tenure of any single IMF programme. Finally, Pakistan's persistent structural trade deficit, reflecting a narrow, insufficiently diversified export base heavily concentrated in low-value-added textiles, alongside chronic under-investment in export competitiveness and trade facilitation infrastructure, ensures that even successful short-term stabilisation efforts remain vulnerable to renewed balance of payments pressure once import demand recovers alongside any resumption of economic growth.

Comparative international experience offers instructive, if sobering, lessons regarding the divergent outcomes possible from IMF engagement. South Korea's experience following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, while initially painful, was followed by genuine, sustained structural reform, including corporate governance improvements and financial sector restructuring, that enabled the country to graduate definitively from IMF dependency and emerge as a genuinely advanced, high-income economy within a relatively short period. Greece's experience during the Eurozone debt crisis, by contrast, involved a prolonged, deeply painful period of austerity-driven economic contraction that many economists argue was excessively severe relative to the

country's underlying fiscal position, generating substantial social hardship and political instability with debatable long-term structural benefit. Argentina's recurring pattern of IMF engagement, remarkably similar in its cyclical nature to Pakistan's own experience, illustrates how chronic political resistance to sustained fiscal discipline and structural reform can perpetuate a seemingly endless cycle of crisis and bailout despite repeated IMF intervention. Bangladesh's markedly more limited reliance on IMF programmes relative to Pakistan, despite comparable initial development conditions at independence, reflects that country's more successful, sustained focus on export-oriented industrialisation, particularly in ready-made garments, and generally more disciplined macroeconomic management over recent decades, offering a particularly instructive regional comparison for Pakistan's own policymakers.

These comparative cases collectively suggest that the ultimate determinant of whether IMF engagement produces genuine stability or perpetual disaster lies not primarily in the design of the IMF programmes themselves, but in the borrowing country's own capacity and political will to sustain structural reform beyond the immediate, externally monitored programme period. Genuine, durable economic stability requires far more than the temporary fiscal and monetary discipline that IMF conditionality can enforce during an active

programme; it requires sustained domestic political commitment to broadening the tax base equitably, resolving chronic energy sector inefficiencies, reforming or privatising loss-making state enterprises, diversifying and enhancing export competitiveness, and maintaining policy continuity across changes in government, none of which can ultimately be imposed or guaranteed by an external institution, however well-designed its conditionality framework.

For Pakistan specifically, breaking this recurring cycle requires a fundamental shift in domestic political economy, treating structural reform not as an externally imposed obligation to be minimally satisfied for the duration of an active IMF programme, but as a genuine national imperative pursued consistently regardless of whether an IMF arrangement is currently in effect. This requires building genuine political consensus across major parties regarding the necessity of equitable tax base broadening, sustained energy sector governance reform, and export-oriented industrial policy, insulating these critical reform areas from the disruptive effects of Pakistan's recurring political cycles and changes in government. It further requires strengthening independent economic institutions, including the State Bank of Pakistan's operational autonomy and the Federal Board of Revenue's administrative capacity, to sustain reform momentum independent of short-term

political considerations. Finally, it requires greater transparency and public communication regarding the genuine trade-offs involved in economic reform, building broader public understanding and buy-in for necessary but painful adjustments, rather than the current pattern wherein IMF programmes are frequently scapegoated in domestic political discourse as an externally imposed hardship disconnected from Pakistan's own accumulated structural failures.

A closer examination of Pakistan's most recent IMF engagements illustrates both the recurring pattern and periodic moments of genuine, if partial, progress. The 2019 Extended Fund Facility, negotiated under considerable domestic political controversy, saw the government initially resist and then ultimately accept significant currency devaluation and energy tariff increases, contributing to a temporary stabilisation of the external account before the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated renewed emergency financing and programme recalibration. The 2023 Stand-By Arrangement, negotiated amid an acute balance of payments crisis that saw Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves fall to critically low levels, barely sufficient to cover a few weeks of imports, again followed the familiar pattern of last-minute crisis resolution, involving painful currency depreciation and fiscal measures that triggered significant inflationary pressure, with headline inflation

exceeding 25 percent at its peak, disproportionately burdening lower-income households already struggling with reduced purchasing power. These recurring crisis-driven negotiations, often concluded only after considerable delay and market uncertainty, themselves impose additional economic costs beyond the substance of the conditionalities, as prolonged uncertainty regarding programme approval typically triggers further currency depreciation, capital flight and business investment postponement even before specific conditionalities are implemented.

The political economy of blame allocation surrounding IMF programmes in Pakistan also deserves scrutiny, since domestic political discourse frequently attributes economic hardship primarily to the IMF itself rather than to the accumulated domestic policy failures that necessitated Fund engagement in the first place. This narrative, while politically convenient for incumbent governments seeking to deflect responsibility for painful adjustment measures, obscures the more uncomfortable reality that the specific conditionalities imposed — whether energy tariff rationalisation to address circular debt, or tax measures to broaden an chronically narrow revenue base — typically address genuine, long-standing structural distortions that successive Pakistani governments have independently acknowledged as problematic, yet have persistently

failed to address through domestically initiated reform in the absence of external conditionality pressure.

It is also worth considering the social protection dimension of IMF-supported adjustment programmes, an area where international best practice, and increasingly the IMF's own institutional approach, has evolved considerably. More recent IMF programmes, including Pakistan's, have increasingly incorporated explicit social protection components, such as expansion of the Benazir Income Support Programme, now rebranded as the Benazir Kafaalat programme, designed to cushion the impact of austerity measures on the most vulnerable households through targeted cash transfers. While these measures represent a meaningful improvement over earlier generations of IMF programmes that paid comparatively little attention to distributional impact, critics reasonably note that the scale of such social protection spending typically remains insufficient to fully offset the cumulative burden of currency depreciation, energy price increases and reduced public spending on subsidised services that disproportionately affect low-income populations.

In conclusion, the question of whether IMF bailouts represent roads to stability or recipes for disaster admits no simple, universal answer; the evidence suggests instead that IMF programmes function essentially as a

mirror, reflecting and temporarily managing, but not resolving, the underlying structural weaknesses of the borrowing economy. For countries willing to undertake genuine, sustained structural transformation, as South Korea's experience demonstrates, IMF engagement can indeed serve as a valuable catalyst towards lasting stability and eventual self-sufficiency. For countries such as Pakistan and Argentina, where chronic political economy obstacles repeatedly undermine sustained reform momentum once immediate crisis pressure subsides, IMF programmes risk becoming merely a recurring palliative, treating symptoms of balance of payments crisis without addressing the underlying structural disease. Ultimately, Pakistan's escape from this cycle depends not on the IMF's benevolence or the specific design of its conditionality frameworks, but on Pakistan's own political leadership and society summoning the sustained will to undertake the difficult, politically costly structural reforms that alone can transform recurring IMF bailouts from a permanent crutch into what they were always intended to be: a temporary bridge towards genuine, self-sustained economic stability.

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