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Diplomacy in the Digital Age: How the Internet and AI Challenge Traditional State Interactions

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ABSTRACT

The internet revolution has undoubtedly changed how humans go about living their lives. One sector that has embraced the age of the internet is the field of diplomacy. Researchers and practitioners have taken a keen interest in developing and finding new ways to enhance their interactions with both the public and other diplomatic missions, leading to the creation of digital diplomacy. It is important to address this recent phenomenon since it has attracted a great deal of interest, controversy and speculation. This paper aims to initially trace and analyse the evolution of the term and then focus on the increasing chatter about the employment of Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in the determination of foreign policy and its implementation and subsequently argue that although the internet has created positive tools for diplomats and statesmen to engage in public diplomacy, there is unnecessary guesswork over the use of AI in diplomacy. Academic literature, opinion pieces and newspaper stories have been used as secondary sources in this essay. The qualitative, as well as quantitative research, was then analysed in order to determine the effects of new technologies on diplomacy.

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Diplomacy can be defined as a process between actors (diplomats, usually representing a state) who exist within a system (international relations) and engage in private and public dialogue (diplomacy) to pursue their objectives in a peaceful manner (McGlinchey Stephen, "Diplomacy",2017). Traditionally speaking, Diplomacy is usually carried out by diplomats working in embassies and consulates of their respective countries in a host country, trying to perform various functions like striking a common ground to improve the relations between the two countries by means of a dialogue, collecting strategic information and relaying it to their home governments and engaging in public diplomacy by promoting their home country's culture and heritage in order to create a favourable image in the minds of the citizens of the host country. Similar approaches are also taken by diplomats engaged in multilateral diplomacy at International Institutions to negotiate for collective interests. The way in which states have been interacting with each other for centuries prior to the ICT revolution is called traditional diplomacy which has now become increasingly digitalised and being performed over the internet. Digital Diplomacy is the use of the internet and emerging technologies to aid traditional means of conducting inter-state diplomacy. The term in the original sense was a method adopted by Diplomats to engage directly with the public in a dialogue using social media websites like Twitter and Facebook. With the advent of Artificial Intelligence and allied cyber capabilities, the term has gained much more traction and interest by both, the governments and researchers alike. The first known example of digital diplomacy at play would be the use of the FM radio by the Nazi party to broadcast Hitler's speeches live to countries extending from Lithuania to Uruguay in order to promote Nazi propaganda beyond Germany's borders (Vaughan, David. The Guardian, 2008). The feature that distinguishes the modern form of digital diplomacy from that of Hitler's is the evolution to a more advanced technology assisting in a dialogue instead of a monologue. The use of Social media websites like twitter and Facebook to engage in diplomacy can be traced back to Hilary Clinton's stint as the Secretary of State in the Obama administration, who utilised social media websites as tools of statecraft and hence called them "21st-century statecraft platforms" that would "reach beyond traditional government-to-government relations and engage directly with people around the world." (Bjola, Corneliu and Marcus Holmes. 2015).

Post the success of this experiment, leaders and state department equivalents from all around the world started taking advantage of social media platforms in order to manage their diplomatic initiatives, leading to the coining of the term Twiplomacy, which is short for twitter

plus diplomacy. In order to break the barriers between elite bureaucracy and the general public, it was important to adopt such means that linked digitalisation and public diplomacy. One of the most quoted examples of Twiplomacy is that of UK's foreign secretary William Hague, who started an initiative called 'Meet the Foreign Secretary" wherein citizens could express their opinions on various international agendas along with the promise to meet selected individuals over dinner (Sandre, Andreas. 2013). Twiplomacy has also led to softening of historical positions and helped in unstraining of relations between nations, an example of this would be the American Department of State starting to 'follow' the Cuban equivalent on twitter and the latter reciprocating the gesture.

Any technological advancement has its downsides and hence, cannot be immune to critique. Criticism of such forms of diplomacy range from ineffective to downright dangerous. It is subject to what Malcolm Gladwell calls "Slacktivism" suggesting that modern technologies have created a false notion that Taking actions on social media could be a cheaper alternative to on-ground action; The Obama Administration's use of YouTube videos to appease Iranian citizens has been considered a Slacktivist move and a replacement for taking high-cost strategic action. Moreover, Twitter diplomacy has widely been considered as merely a means of disseminating information to foreign public instead of bringing out tangible change. Nevertheless, if used strategically and after comprehensive risk assessment, a great deal of change can be brought through this positive tool.

From self-driving cars to Amazon's Alexa, Artificial Intelligence has undoubtedly become the centre of attention and while science fiction portrays AI as robots with human-like traits, AI could take any form, widely ranging from Facebook's algorithm to fully functional autonomous weapons. AI has piqued the interest of politicians and policymakers and therefore, it has been described by world leaders as "The Future", comparing this technological revolution akin to 'Enlightenment' by stating that such technologies will bring a drastic change in human consciousness. Such a mindset has kickstarted a global AI race between major powers; with China in the driving seat [with approximately sixty per cent of the total investment] followed by the USA and India in the second and third position respectively (Statistia Research Dept, 2018). Currently, scientists and foreign policy practitioners have been trying to employ AI technology to recommend and implement better foreign policy decisions and in the long run, have resolved to automate these programmes to replace human effort thus reducing marginal error. An example of such an initiative is the Chinese government's new artificial intelligence system called "geopolitical environment simulation and prediction platform", that crunches mass data to provide foreign policy suggestions to Chinese diplomats. China has been testing

this system during its ongoing investment in the Belt and Road Initiative project (Katte Abhijeet, 2018). Due to the information overload in social media, newspapers and research papers, we have overstated and exaggerated the role of Artificial Intelligence in various fields, especially in the domain of diplomacy and foreign policy. For us to understand how these technologies would pan out with the existing technologies being employed to cater to diplomatic needs, we need to first look and draw parallels to the example of Alpha Go, an AI program designed to learn and play the ancient Chinese game "Go". In October 2015, this program beat the world's best player: Lee Sedol in a five-round match and was a victory for AI. Since Go is a game of strategy like diplomacy, a great deal of discourse over the similarity between the two started to prop up. While, the claim that the game and the act of diplomatic negotiations involve strategic thinking is irrefutable. The argument, however, that AlphaGo-like technologies can contribute effectively to foreign policy is unthinkable; we can substantiate the counter argument by invoking the concept of perfect and imperfect information. During a game of Go, both players are completely aware of all the pieces available to them and can calculate their moves accordingly. This is the reason why Google's AlphaGo was able to beat the world's best players at the game, as its computing power is much stronger than any human can possibly command. Foreign policy and Diplomacy, on the other hand, is a trickier game since most real-world interactions involve hidden information, which the AI program cannot consider. Therefore, programmes like AlphaGo and Deep Blue have failed to transition their impact from the arcade arena into the real world with real problems (Sokol Joshua, 2018).

From the viewpoint of an algorithm, all problems need to have an 'objective function' without taking into account any externalities of a desired outcome, therefore, a loss would count as minus one, a draw would count as zero and a win would count as a plus one. What researchers have failed to realise is that real-world international relations problems are not as objective in nature. Diplomatic negotiations are extremely engaging on emotional, psychological, intellectual and cognitive levels and a diplomat's job is not just processing vast amounts of data but to read people, which for AI is only possible in science fiction movies. Since the algorithm does not have the moral faculties to make subjective decisions which would involve choices such as prioritising human lives over the objective goals, these program-based policy prescriptions automatically become unimplementable making it a bad consultant. An approach taken by engineers is to use machine learning, in order to identify patterns in the international arena and then generate recommendations for diplomats to use; the problem with such an outlook is that these patterns in the international order are highly dynamic making it impossible

for AI to work.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the long-term objective of AI scientists and IR practitioners, is to fully automate these algorithms, which would mean automatically reacting to incidents and thus replacing human effort. With all that can be seen from the existing understanding of the use of AI in international relations, the question that arises is that can we really trust technology and more specifically AI to manage our foreign policies and our national security? One particular event in human history will paint a scary picture, "the 1983 nuclear false alarm incident", when the radars at the Oko nuclear early-warning system observatory showed projections of five American missiles being launched towards Soviet airspace but a colonel sitting in the observatory judged it as a false alarm instead of ordering a retaliatory attack and saved the world from a full blown nuclear war. During an investigation into the matter, it was revealed that the Soviet missile warning systems had malfunctioned. If the AI program was in the driving seat, it would fail to recognise the glitch, thereby resulting in an alternate history. Another issue that comes with automation, is "the black box problem"- the computation systems that are programmed using machine learning are opaque, making it impossible to assess the rationality behind triggering a decision and when an AI program makes a decision which humans can't explain it will be impossible to find out how a miscalculation occurred, and could potentially trigger a foolish decision which is the real risk of miscalculation (Chang Choi Eung, 2019.

When receiving the first telegram in 1860, the then British PM Lord Palmerston, excitedly claimed 'My god, this is the end of diplomacy' (Diplo Foundation, 2018). Even though technologies have significantly aided human efforts and made the world a closer community, the way in which diplomacy functions remains the same. Humans remain the brains behind any decision that is taken, both on social media and on the ground. Although, the possession of technology and its capabilities in determination and implementation of foreign policies is asymmetric does not mean those who do not possess AI technology in the domain of diplomacy will be at a disadvantage in the long run.

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