



# Yet another turn? prioritising the needs of diplomacy over the capabilities of generative AI

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## Abstract

In this forum piece, we argue that the widespread heraldry regarding artificial intelligence (AI) as a panacea in diplomacy and articulating research agendas on the changes it might bring are potentially clouding the future hardships of diplomacy. With all its subfields, International Relations (IR) has gone through numerous “turns”, especially during the last two decades which made encounters poised to change the nature of foreign policy—such as new actors, ideas, or technologies—a familiar experience. While these discussions enriched the discipline of IR, hardly any of these turns lived up to their promises. Certainly, we have an increasingly challenging and complex multipolar world ahead of us. This manifests that a broader network of actors, interests, and technologies needs to be considered. AI, indeed, has the potential capacity to assist and disrupt the ways diplomacy works. Yet heralding an anticipatory practice and study of diplomacy based on AI’s socio-technical imaginaries and calculations rather than as a participatory process centered on immediate human interaction, resources, intelligence, and rapport bears the potential of obscuring the analytical clarity needed. In short, we argue that the rise of AI should not be discussed as yet another new turn poised to cure diplomacy and international relations. We conclude our piece by reminding scholars to bring analytical focus on what lies at the heart of diplomacy.

**Keywords** Generative AI · Diplomacy · Technology · Trust · Rapport · Empathy · Research agenda

## Introduction

Within this forum, we position our arguments as cautious skeptics about generative artificial intelligence (AI)’s role in the study and practice of diplomacy. This is not a call to disregard the impact of this technology in the slightest degree. On the contrary, the arguments presented here assume that AI will likely become a larger part of our personal and professional lives (Aresenault and Kreps 2022) by ushering in unique advances and disruptions (Bremmer and Suleyman 2023). Yet, considering future hardships of world politics, AI should not be seen simply as a panacea for diplomacy. We need to adapt to the future of AI, but we should curb our enthusiasm to adopt this artificial venture as well. Thus, the overconfident promotion of AI as revolutionizing diplomatic methods that remain stuck in the past (Moore 2023)

or even the fear of it as a “threat to international security and social, economic, and military activities” (Roumate 2021, p. x) should be avoided.

The cautious skepticism discourages a tool-based analytical focus as such studies might deepen the systemic problems in terms of empathy, trust, and mutual understanding in international relations (IR). Asking, for instance, “how diplomacy, as an instrument of foreign policy, can adapt to the emergence of AI” (Kļaviņš 2021, p. 214) is counterproductive as such an approach prioritizes the tool analyzed over structural questions. In this sense, our skepticism is primarily based on the never-ending “turns” global politics and the field of IR have experienced in the past. With each new actor, idea, topic, and—perhaps more importantly for this forum—technology, academics and pundits foresaw groundbreaking changes. Yet, they hardly ended up presenting systematic changes in the face of global systemic challenges. Prior to the hype over *Metaverse*, a similar excitement over *Second Life*—an online platform that allowed users to create avatars for themselves and explore a world since 2003

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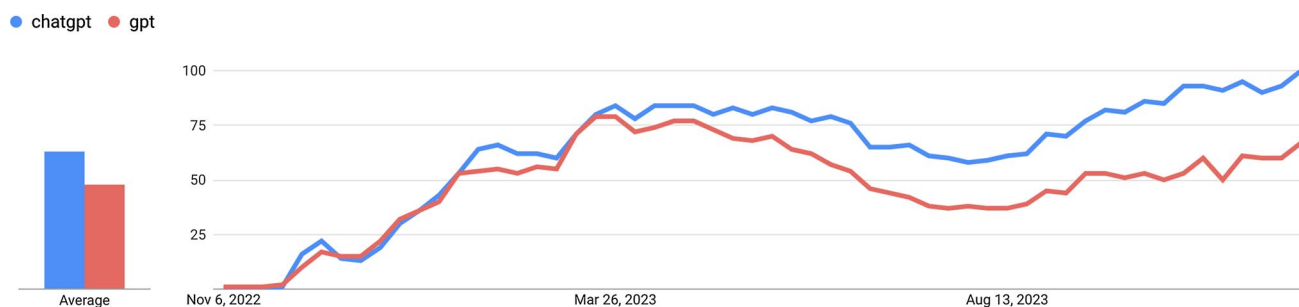


Fig. 1 Google Trends, Web Search Volumes

(Linden Lab 2023), could be given as an example.<sup>1</sup> As the platform gained popularity, diplomats pondered on moving their practices onto the platform. Sweden was the first country to open an embassy to reach new audiences through cultural programming on the platform (Pamment 2011). Soon, a few other countries followed suit (Dobson 2007). However, as of this writing, none is still open. Still, at the time, numerous research questions revolved around adapting diplomatic practices to the new virtual worlds (Copeland 2009) or situating virtual worlds as new supranational meeting places (Arsenault 2009). Moreover, although techno-enthusiastic scholars once praised the platform’s potential applications as users could talk and interact with each other through avatars similar to real-life interactions, as opposed to the limited text-based digital communication venues of the early 2000s (Cull 2009), *those platforms* did not yield a real new turn in IR.

It is hard to compare the capabilities and impacts of *Second Life* and *Metaverse* with those of AI, as generative AI will fundamentally change the course of our lives in every aspect with unique and disruptive results. However, the attempts to adapt diplomacy to a new turn brought in by this new tool for the sake of techno-enthusiasm, it will not produce meaningful results. Rather, we insist that the focus should be on identifying the challenges of diplomacy and seeing how helpful generative AI might be in overcoming them.

The next section presents a short overview of generative AI with the objective of showing its unique capabilities. Then, potential benefits and pitfalls of generative AI

in diplomacy are introduced. In the fourth section, the main argument that excitement over the potential of generative AI blurs our analytical focus and causes us to overlook the more pressing needs of diplomacy is unpacked. We conclude by reiterating our skeptical cautious take and outlining a research agenda.

## The rise of AI in diplomacy

As platforms such as ChatGPT made generative AI more widely accessible to users, its popularity grew and in turn improved itself with every new input. A precursory look at Google Trends shows a rapidly increasing interest in generative pre-trained transformer (GPT) and ChatGPT over the last year, which seems to be recovering from a recent dip over the summer of 2023. While the search volume solely tells us a part of the story, it still portrays how commonplace ChatGPT—and inadvertently generative AI—is becoming part of our daily lives (Fig. 1).

Generative AI is, for the sake of parsimony, the process through which software can analyze patterns in texts, images, voices, or other content and produce its own content that has similar characteristics (Epstein et al. 2023). As many of us have already experienced through ChatGPT, AI can follow directions to generate original content. We are no longer talking about a technology that presents new opportunities to communicate with audiences or new ways to augment mediated communication as existing digital diplomacy tools do (Bjola 2020). Rather, we can easily get tasks which previously could have been accomplished by humans only. Albeit limited, there have already been a few cases of AI use by diplomats to increase their efficiency. For instance, UNICEF uses an AI-powered platform to analyze real-time data to assess the needs of populations and deploy its resources more effectively (UNICEF Office of Innovation 2023). Therefore, AI enables swift tackling tools to operate big and bulky bureaucracies, such as the UN’s global aid and resource management. There have also been attempts to use AI in trade negotiations during which diplomats are

<sup>1</sup> We saw another surge of interest in tool-led practices and research agendas with the recent rise of Metaverse that emerged with similar promises. Barbados opened the first embassy “to pioneer the evolution of global diplomacy beyond the physical world” (Atjam 2022). Soon after, various governments, organizations, and global brands followed suit and declared their purchases of land from Metaverse (Bobrowsky 2023; Harrison 2023). Yet all those lands and embassies purchased at the Metaverse are now floundering as unknown and unused endeavors like a pricy video game you never play.



expected to know existing treaties and regulations, among other minor details (Moore 2023). Certainly, the increasing popularity, widespread use and practical solutions of generative AI will likely provide more examples in the near future. In the next section, we bridge the practices of diplomacy and public diplomacy with generative AI by focusing on the potentials of the tool in addition to existing practices.

## Benefits and pitfalls of generative AI in diplomacy

The already prevalent preoccupation with data is, perhaps, one of the most important driving forces for demonstrating the potential benefits of generative AI in diplomacy. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, for instance, claimed that “data is a crucial instrument to diplomacy”, calling for data-driven insights and actions for diplomats (Department of State 2023). With its data-informed diplomacy understanding, the US wants to equip its diplomats with high-quality and timely data (Department of State 2021). Doing so enables diplomats to act swiftly yet still employ a strategic outlook. Generative AI brings unprecedented opportunities and swift solutions to diplomats’ cumbersome and paper-intensive workloads.

Generative AI can be used to create new datasets from existing ones. Diplomats can tap into trade figures and military datasets to look for patterns without necessarily having statistical expertise. In a recent policy paper, Stanzel and Voelsen (2022, p. 21) provide a hypothetical case in which they use AI to combine historical voting data in the United Nations with further information about member states, such as other memberships in international and regional organizations, economic data, regime type, and diplomatic capabilities to predict voting behavior in General Assembly successfully.

Furthermore, diplomats can use generative AI to gather data through designing studies and even writing software codes that can be easily implemented even by novice users. Public diplomacy, especially digital public diplomacy, is a prime example since social media listening and monitoring are data-gathering methods (Di Martino 2020) requiring paid tools or familiarity with programming. AI can help diplomats create listening tools that gather relevant data from social media platforms, identify patterns, and recommend topics or areas of engagement to diplomats. Similarly, AI can be used to draft public opinion polling questions, sampling strategies, and eventually to analyze the raw data gathered, once again helping diplomats make data-informed decisions. It should be noted that these capabilities might be used for more sinister objectives. AI can easily be implemented to launch disinformation campaigns using fake news and deep fakes at large scales. Data gathered about target

audiences might be used for non-democratic purposes or manipulating the masses. Regardless of the morality of the outcomes, generative AI might increase the efficiency of the actors in processes that require data gathering and analyses at larger scales.

However, seeing generative AI as a diplomatic remedy to conduct perfect data measurements and calculations overlooks an important pitfall as these systems still rely on the users (Unver 2018) and are also limited by input. Strategic misuse of information might negate the tools’ usefulness, as they might still generate faulty insights (Pokhriyal and Koebe 2023). Worse, generative AI platforms suffer from a hallucination problem where they do not only produce content but also invent miscontent that varies between 3 and 27% of the time (Metz 2023).

The “Black Box Paradox”, which refers to our inability “to see how deep learning systems make their decisions” (Bloin 2023), is an additional pitfall in the way generative AI platforms make things up and distort data. Such hard-to-be-entirely-overcome issues “make it difficult to fix deep learning systems when they produce unwanted outcomes” (Bloin 2023). This situation resembles a recent situation that started affecting banking customers whose accounts were unexpectedly closed after an algorithm detected unusual patterns or behaviors (Bernard and Lieber 2023). Although no pattern or behavior was singled out, individuals found themselves at the cusp of algorithmic dictations for a mundane transaction. The diplomatic consequences of such a paradox driven by similar black boxes might go beyond trivial.

Despite its potential dystopic impacts, employing generative AI in diplomacy might also yield positive results. As argued in this section, having an automated data analyst can free up diplomats’ time to carry out certain other functions. Yet, is this what is needed to conduct effective diplomacy? The next section presents a succinct answer to this question.

## Practicalities that lie ahead: analytical focus on systemic challenges

The essence of diplomacy goes—or instead should go—beyond tools such as data-driven decision-making and excitement—or even fear—around generative AI. Diplomacy is rather an art about human relations (Qin 2020) than solely a series of fact-and-figure-based negotiations and strategies that algorithms can facilitate, such as the case in a study using AI to play the board game *Diplomacy* (Kramár et al. 2022). In line with earlier studies using the same approach (Ferreira et al. 2015), trust is predominantly tied to previous engagements. If a player did not break their promises in the past, the behavior in itself was enough for the algorithm to build trust.



Similar arguments for relying on data and rationality can be found among diplomats and scholars of diplomacy as well (e.g. Rathbun et al. 2017). In his TEDx talk titled “Diplomacy in the Age of AI”, French diplomat David Cvach (2017) argues that “the rules of modern diplomacy are designed to constrain emotions to deter miscalculations”. Problematically, his nonchalant examples begin with praising what Catholic Richelieu did during the Thirty Years War by allying with Protestant Sweden against Catholic Austria. Yet what he disregards is the agonizing religious conflict fomented by “the rationality” of Richelieu to deter the unification of German states for the benefit of France. To Cvach, the best diplomats are similar to robots with their “cold and analytical” attributes that cancel “noise and emotions” to regulate state relations and negotiate their interests (Cvach 2017). This is why he regards AI as the harbinger of a more systematic, efficient and democratic diplomatic process. What he further imagines is a common diplomatic “platform available to all, run by a powerful algorithm”, enabling equal opportunities to all parties, powerful and weaker alike. Accordingly, such a platform would give us a smoothed diplomatic ground with unforeseen resources for better negotiations. Yet, insistence on AI might push us to a “Black Box Paradox” in diplomacy dictated by the internal workings of data conversion systems. Moreover, such a futuristic view that promises a leveling between unequal parties via a technology purportedly “open to all and coded by all” is more than AI can deliver and bellows the crux of our critique.

First, such an analytical focus on putting generative AI as a change-driver in diplomacy is incomplete. Despite being able to learn and fix its mistakes, generative AI platforms can be regarded as interest-free and objective judges to emancipate diplomacy from misunderstandings, cultural differences, or even emotions. Just like humans, generative AI is also prone to hallucinating information and unwittingly misleading people. While numerous students and journalists experienced this firsthand, a critical domain like diplomacy cannot afford to risk its responsibilities to its overbearing rationality. Furthermore, generative AI is susceptible to harboring negative human traits such as racism and sexism (Samuel 2022; Sparkes 2022). Despite being heralded as champions of objective calculations, the systems produced carry our flaws and interests. Thus, the search engines, platforms and algorithms we design also suffer from our biases and prejudices. For instance, despite working efficiently, search and face recognition algorithms hardly work neutrally and fairly for all. Examples abound regarding how the data sets used to train AI models lead to social discrimination (Johnson and Johnson 2023; Delgado et al. 2022; Najibi 2020). Although purportedly being rectified as those code flaws and biases discovered, hyperobjectivity claims surrounding AI should be profusely tempered.

Second, beyond coding flaws and biases, the interest of tech corporations is a towering problem for democracies. Apart from promising to solve the conflicting scenarios between the interests of states and people, corporations and an emerging class of AI technocrats coding those platforms have their own influences, interests, stakes and adverse effects on democracies (Robson 2023). Far from providing an equal, neutral, unbiased and fairground to solve the mounting global problems ahead of us, an over-reliance on technology corresponds to a profoundly problematic faith in tech giants. States do not own generative AI platforms, they rely on commercial platforms. Therefore, the interests of profit-driven tech companies do not always coincide with those of the state. In other words, “AI’s creators are themselves geopolitical actors” in an emerging “technopolar” world (Bremmer and Suleyman 2023). Thus, just as Eisenhower warned the public about the rising influence of the military-industrial complex in the foreign and defense policy of the US (Eisenhower 1961), long-term possibilities of a deeper form of influence of tech giants should be considered (Ladd 2019).

Last but not least, trust is the inherent aspect of diplomatic relations, and it is far more important today than ever as confidence rates towards governments are on a global decline. Public diplomacy projects similarly attempt to get target audiences to trust practitioner countries (Sevin 2017). Trust-building is rather a complex and lengthy process that depends on the cultural peculiarities of the countries as well as their histories (Mogensen 2015). The change in relations between Jordan and Israel in the 1990s is an example in which trust-building helped the two countries move away from a conflict to cooperation in water negotiations (Susskind and Islam 2012). Moreover, trust and building rapport are quintessentially human endeavors. They demand and revolve around social, emotional, and more importantly, embodied cues. Replacing them with sentimentality analyses data gathered from social media platforms to gauge and influence popular opinions might be misleading for diplomatic negotiations. Although AI will not replace human diplomats with robots, due to problems such as the “Black Box Paradox” and “AI hallucination” issues, human oversight in data gathering and decision-making, will be fundamentally important. Otherwise, AI discontent might beget further discontent. Hence, delegating trust building and transferring such vital duties to codes and calculations bears fundamental risks, no matter how developed AI is. These risks also include the dwindling of state departments and diplomatic workforce and inevitably, the loss of human touch on the ground.



## Conclusion: integrating AI to research agendas

Every technological advancement brings about its very own proponents and opponents. Yet, in discussing the use of generative AI in diplomacy, this forum piece does not hold any positions other than offering restraint to practitioners before shaping their professions to fit the capabilities of generative AI and to researchers before asking how diplomacy will survive in the age of AI. In this sense, concluding with the prescience of “The Machine Stops” is worthwhile as it unnervingly predicts our globally interconnected yet isolated world, operated via the internet, social media and video conferencing (Forster 1909). In the story, the surface of the world is inhospitable. People dwell underground. Human touch, literally and symbolically, is regarded as most unbecoming. Religious beliefs and emotions are all wiped out. Instead, an omnipotent machine holds sway over everything on earth. People piously obey, worship, connect via, live on and run by it. And as all information is encoded in The Machine, people no longer generate firsthand knowledge. They prefer to rely on the mediated knowledge of the Machine and decode when needed. As the overconfidence in the omnipotence of the Machine bred complacency in the people, they forgot the workings of the world and no longer had the capacity to fix the Machine in any way. In other words, a black box paradox held sway. And one day, when the Machine stops, the overreliant and subservient civilization collapses with it.

We eerily live at the threshold of a similar time. Global warming began to take its toll. Numerous actors and people are struggling to negotiate for their interests. A technopoly is emerging that offers a machine to solve our problems. And to have more humane and diplomatic democracies, we expect solutions to our misgivings from new technologies. Heeding Forster, harnessing the power of generative AI should not translate into forgetting what diplomacy is. While the phrase *being diplomatic* in our daily use refers to an aptitude that listens to people, avoids causing offense, calmness and consideration, we should be wary of entrusting this asset to *being technological*. Diplomacy—let it be among professional diplomatic corps or public diplomacy projects that include ordinary citizens—establishes connections and encourages empathy. Through this empathy, parties can better understand each others’ perspectives and concerns.

In the same vein, research agendas focusing on how diplomacy is going to adapt to this “new” turn will prioritize aspects of diplomacy that are most amenable to the capabilities of the new machine, namely, prioritize computational and data-based aspect over humanistic aspects.

Our immediate challenges in diplomacy—and in public diplomacy—, however, remain in the latter camp as trust requires relationship building and understanding which cannot be solely revolved by generating larger datasets. Therefore, the widespread heraldry regarding generative AI as a panacea for diplomacy should not cloud our judgments concerning the future hardships of global politics and diplomacy. Our immediate analytical concerns should be on integrating generative AI into research agendas focusing on our systematic issues.

**Data availability** Not applicable.

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