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Executive Summary

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Diplomacy in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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- The global race to developing Artificial Intelligence (AI) capability is on with a clear focus on military, government surveillance, and economic applications. Studies have also started to investigate the AI potential for tackling some of the world's most challenging social problems and have found reasons for optimism that AI can improve conditions in a variety of social domains ranging from educational challenges to addressing issues of health and hunger. As with other technological revolutions, AI is bound to have far-reaching consequences in every corner of our societies, and diplomacy, by necessity, cannot escape its gravitational pull.

- The issue regarding the transformative impact of AI on diplomacy bears three interconnected questions: first, what exactly AI means, how does it work, and what forms it takes? Second, to what extent is AI capable of revolutionising how policy-makers take decisions? Third, in what areas of diplomatic activity could AI make a difference, in what form and with what kind of risks? By connecting theories of AI development, decision-making, and institutional adaptation, the working paper develops an analytical framework for examining the transformative relationship between AI in diplomacy in a manner that is conducive to generating relevant policy insight concerning the potential for AI integration in the activity of MFAs and embassies and its likely impact on core diplomatic tasks and activities.

Key takeaways

- AI refers to the activity by which computers process large volumes of data using highly sophisticated algorithms to simulate human reasoning and/or behaviour.

- The "AI effect" helps explain moving expectations about technology: as AI brings a new technology into the common fold, people become accustomed to this technology, it stops being considered AI, and newer technology emerges.

- Diplomatic functions can still be traditionally pursued with existing means and resources with no AI support. The new potential that AI brings, however, is cognitive augmentation, improved effectiveness and speed.

- AI systems are sufficiently developed conceptually to provide decisional support for a broad spectrum of diplomatic tasks. They are likely to evolve to allow automation of routinised tasks and services at the operational and tactical levels, but they will likely be kept out of strategic decision-making for technical and ethical reasons.

- Structured decisions, descriptive analytics and procedural knowledge are the most likely entry points for AI adoption in the diplomatic field; they apply well to consular services and international negotiations.

- Degrees of sustainability of AI technological innovation, perceptions of AI liability for diplomatic engagement, ethical reflections on matters concerning human control and AI (geo)political implications as well as practical considerations related to surveillance constitute potential exit points that may lead Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) to limit, postpone or abandon AI adoption.

- A potentially revolutionary contribution of AI to diplomacy would be to assist the decision-maker to prescribe a course of action in a dynamic fashion; that is, by constantly and automatically adapting its recommendations based on continuous description, diagnostic, prediction, and action loops.

- Ministries of Foreign Affairs could deploy the TIID framework as a conceptual roadmap for designing, delivering and deploying AI solutions in diplomacy, that combines considerations about what the objective is (task improvement), how to accomplish it (innovation), with what resources (physical/digital integration) and in what institutional configuration (deployment).