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From digital diplomacy to data diplomacy

The digital revolution arrived late at the heart of Western diplomacy. But greater data capacities hold a lot of promise

The digital revolution arrived late at the heart of ministries of foreign affairs across the Western world. Ministries latched on to social media around the time of Tahrir Square and Iran's 2009 Green Revolution, beguiled by a vision of the technology engendering a networked evolution toward more liberal societies.

Foreign ministries scrambled to make 'Twitter-Diplomacy' part of their push-strategy in strategic communication and began, though arguably too slowly, to analyse US-based digital platform-generated data to inform foreign policy decisions. 'Tech for Good' was the universal assumption a decade ago.

Since then, the impact of hyper-connectivity and its effect on hierarchically organised, slow-moving Western foreign and development policy organisations has become clearer and far less simple.

Unbridled by legal barriers or democratic institutional control, China practices a brand of digital colonialism abroad and sells wide-scale surveillance in Africa and Asia. Russia has gone on the offence, unleashing troll armies and hacker collectives upon Europe and the United States as the new face of Moscow's international power.

Unregulated, expressed positive intent notwithstanding, US-based tech titans end up enabling the digital amplification of human rights abuses. Deep social and political impacts are unfolding. And yet, foreign ministries are still comparatively under-equipped with the diagnostic capacity to identify, analyse and act in an anticipatory way on the waves of information rolling through the digital realm.

How diplomacy has been changing

This digital deficit is bound to become a true Achilles heel as technological progress forges steadily ahead. Addressing the foreign policy consequences of platform action was one thing. Now, the advent of 5G systems and the capacity to run larger volumes of data across them, to develop greater applications for artificial intelligence (AI) and the internet of things, will not only have deeply disruptive impacts on our societies and the way we work — from manufacturing to services. It will also present steep challenges to how our bureaucracies manage big data and how — in the case of ministries of foreign affairs — they harness capacities for anticipatory foreign policy making.

To be sure, the advent of greater data capacities holds promises — not just challenges — for diplomacy. Well-cultivated, big data will radically improve the consular process, bolster the preparation of diplomats for complex, multi-level negotiations on trade and sanctions and boost the ability to forecast humanitarian crises linked to climate change effects from drought to flooding.

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Big data aggregation could also help identify disinformation campaigns targeted against a certain country more quickly and accurately. Chat bots are already improving the more tedious aspects of consular affairs, supporting registration processes or legal aid for refugees. Much as geo-coding and social media mapping is already helping Global Affairs Canada and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office understand where their messages resonate most effectively, in the near-term future a bigger volume of data and increased interpretation capacities might be used to locate citizens in need and to monitor social media to predict possible consular crises.

For the core work of diplomacy — negotiation — the capacity to engage big data analytics could serve to remove bias, aggregate data on possible negotiation impacts (i.e. on large groups of national or foreign citizens or corporations) and pull together geospatial and sensor data for more objective, fact-based information gathering and generally support better, evidence-based decision making. To realise the advantages of these data streams, the data will have to be harnessed and interpreted by trained analysts and diplomats.

The financing asymmetry of AI development

So, while progress has been made on the diagnostic front and EU-internal coordination on AI in limited areas is improving, staffing and budgetary resources remain dangerous vulnerabilities in the West — both for R&D and industry, to say nothing of the bureaucratic architecture. While China invests USD 150bn in AI development in its current five-year plan, the largest comparative player — the US with a new tripled commitment (to USD 4.9bn) — cannot even remotely compete with that kind of cross-sectoral investment. Plus, China wields strong state-control, has the Great Firewall and data harvesting capacities across the globe to power rapidly evolving AI.

Above all, a real financial commitment is needed. Until the numbers add up to building true capacity, taxpayers must assume that European (and even the US government) isn't sufficiently serious about all elements of their national security in light of the deeply disruptive forces AI and quantum computing will bring.

Rotational tech and STEM talent placements in US and European foreign ministries help in identifying key strategic challenges but they are little more than a band-aid. For real change to occur, pressure is needed from the leadership of individual ministries, from the urgency generated by the inter-agency process (intelligence, defense, development and economic ministries together) and increasingly by the supranational level.

The German Armed Forces' new encrypted messenger service is a perfect example: Following the close observation of the development of a similar secure, closed communications system based on Open-Source software in France (Tschap is now used in over 30 French government institutions), the German Ministry of Defense announced the implementation of its own messenger system in December 2019. Based on the type of tech platform chosen, the system's design could foreseeably be extended or copied such that it might facilitate the creation of similar capacities to support a seamless inter-agency process between the foreign ministry, the armed services and intelligence sources in crisis communication.

The example proves that a combination of pressure from the top, inter-European knowledge exchange and a functional dedication of resources can create digitally sovereign tools in what might seem a staid, slow-moving system. While pooled resources in systems architecture are critical, software advances like these – though arguably late – shouldn't be maligned. Imagine the degree of functional progress that could be possible, if the EU-27 were able to more systematically aggregate and

recombine and redeploy, say, the knowledge acquired by its digital diplomats in Silicon Valley (i.e. Denmark and France), even in an environment of fiscal austerity and insufficient R&D investment.

A new transatlantic dialogue

Even though the 5G debate threatens to further fray already weakened cross-Atlantic ties, a transatlantic digital policy dialogue (beyond cyber defence) on bureaucratic systems adaptation is essential. A European — or even a transatlantic collaboration platform — could help individual EU27 systems make critical decisions with respect to design, knowledge management, personnel structure and cultural transformation and recruitment.

Here are the priorities: First, there is *systems architecture*. Mere data collection capacities will not allow the crafting of anticipatory foreign policy. A 'whole-of-government' approach is necessary. As newly minted EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen points out, where national and supranational bureaucracies still work on a siloed, 'need to know' basis, current and future challenges of connectivity require a 'need to share' architecture: greater inter-ministerial exchange to be able to use information generated digitally. That was a combination of on-the-ground sensor data, satellite imagery and diplomatic intelligence could forecast the next migration wave or humanitarian crisis.

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On the digital front, ministries will need systems that are safe, European-sourced, internally controlled and fit-for-purpose. The inclusion of Huawei parts in the telecoms infrastructure in Germany is causing a major rift between the Chancellory and the Bundestag, while the example of mass-scale spying through Chinese technology in the African Union building stand as vivid examples of why just this type of debate is essential to a democracy in the big data age. Who will build the diagnostic dashboards foreign ministries need to have in-house? Who will populate them with critical data flows? The annual GovTech conference in Paris, where tech developers are confronted with public policy problems points in the right direction, though more of these 'tailor made' solutions will be needed.

Second, there is the *personnel issue*. Diplomatic careers now are built on

experience, on knowledge and interpretative capacity honed over time across cultural, linguistic and historical barriers. The advent of AI in diplomacy can put knowledge that takes an entire career to craft at the disposal of a relative novice. These shifts will begin to put systems of internal evaluation, promotion, meritocracy into question: how to create foreign policy desks in HQ and in embassies abroad that best utilise the changing skills capacities of different generations of diplomats? How to recruit the best and brightest technology-savvy minds into foreign service when they could work at triple their salaries outside of public policy? How to integrate, promote and retain top-tier talent even on short-term contracts while preventing the risks of compromise and espionage?

Here, collaborating with graduate schools of public policy in Europe and the US that focus on institutional transformation, and creating appropriate coordinating forums on the European and transatlantic level could be a critical asset, as Western, liberal foreign ministries grapple with the same issues.

This links directly to a third issue: A *new ethos for public service in the digital world* is needed. Where China and Russia can command next generation tech talents for their data-weaponised power-projection, Western countries cannot. To maintain societal systems that drive an even deeper global integration and connection while bearing the hallmarks of liberal democratic order, government institutions will need to attract the best and brightest into their ranks. A new culture of the techno-talented for public service in the digital age is needed.

It is high time for the acceleration to begin.



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