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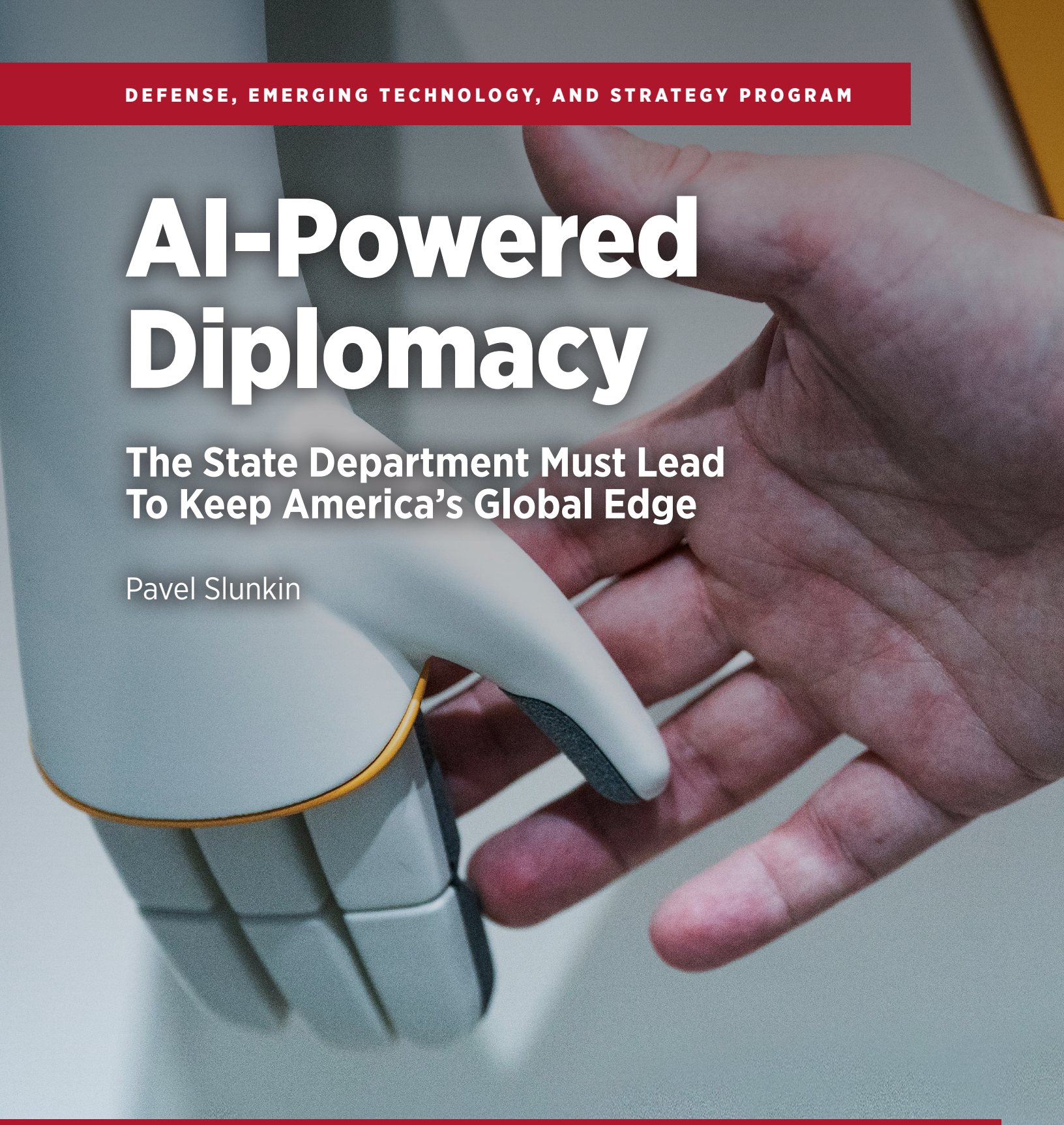

AI-Powered Diplomacy

The State Department Must Lead To Keep America's Global Edge

Pavel Slunkin

HARVARD Kennedy School
BELFER CENTER

50 YEARS
OF RESEARCH, POLICY, AND LEADERSHIP

DECEMBER 2025

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About the Author

Pavel Slunkin is a 2025 graduate of the Master in Public Administration program at the Harvard Kennedy School and a former diplomat. He is a policy analyst specializing in Europe and Eurasia, advising governments and parliaments on foreign policy, sanctions, democratic resilience, and regional security. He explores how emerging technologies are reshaping geopolitics and public institutions. He currently works on projects to improve the neutrality of AI foundational models, reduce political bias, and enhance evidence-based outputs in sensitive policy domains.

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Associated Press, Joan Mateu Parra

Executive Summary

Artificial intelligence has moved to the center of diplomatic work. It drafts speeches, analyzes raw videos of UN Security Council debates, triages consular emails, detects early signs of conflict, and can simulate negotiation scenarios. Over the next five years, these capabilities will expand, compressing reaction times and decreasing the influence of any foreign service that lags behind. In the short term, AI will likely not replace the human core of diplomacy, but will remain exclusively a powerful tool in the hands of diplomats. The State Department must therefore act on three fronts. **First**, it should build a secure, department-wide AI ecosystem that unites analytics, negotiation modeling, and predictive dashboards under strict ethical and security standards. **Second**, it must develop its workforce: every officer should receive regular AI training, while career promotion should depend on AI literacy and the successful use of AI instruments. **Third**, the State Department should lead the process of setting domestic norms that mandate watermarks on synthetic content and pursuing an international code of conduct abroad.

I. AI Revolution in Diplomacy

July 2028. En route to a NATO summit in Berlin, Secretary of State Marco Rubio was interrupted mid-flight: Chinese naval forces had blockaded a Philippine supply ship near the contested Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea. Manila is determined to invoke the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, raising concerns of a military standoff.

Rubio tasked his crisis team in D.C. with assessing the situation. Within minutes after activating "Morpheus", the State Department's AI platform produced an analytical report. Trained on decades of regional incidents and alliance behaviors, "Morpheus" synthesized OSINT imagery, alliance communications, sentiment analysis in Mandarin and Tagalog, and classified reports to generate real-time risk assessments and response options. The platform also flagged that Chinese propaganda hadn't reported the incident yet, which opened a window for a quiet de-escalation.

Rubio's staff used the AI's simulations and natural-language generation tools to draft messages and coordinate immediate calls with Japan and Australia. Rubio then approved a carefully worded statement asserting U.S. support for freedom of navigation without directly naming China. By the time he landed in Berlin, the Philippine ship had been released. What once required hours or days of interagency analysis had been condensed into actionable insights by the AI platform. Thanks to Rubio's bold reform, the integration of the AI platform into State Department operations enabled American diplomacy to act just in time.

The story above no longer seems unrealistic, even though it might have appeared so just four or five years ago. In recent years, artificial intelligence technology has transformed every sphere of life. Statecraft, including diplomacy, is no exception. Diplomats now use AI every day to draft speeches, analyze media narratives, and prepare briefings. AI tools help them summarize documents, translate languages, and draft bilateral agreements. Nathaniel Fick, the inaugural U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Cyberspace and Digital Policy, shared his own experience with AI-generated texts in 2023: "I was actually at an OECD meeting

in Spain recently and used ChatGPT to write my talking points and compared them with the comments that I got through the department. I'll tell you, they were qualitatively close enough to be scary." [1]

Artificial intelligence technologies are already being employed at the highest levels of government all around the world, not only in countries traditionally viewed as leaders in technological innovation. At the 2023 Digital Almaty forum, Kyrgyzstan's prime minister, Akylbek Japarov, after finishing his speech, confessed that an AI model had written much of his keynote.[2] A year later, Kazakhstan's prime minister, Oljas Bektenov, watched an AI system that can automatically generate the minutes of a cabinet meeting and assign follow-up tasks; half amused and half alarmed, he asked, "The system drafts the protocol itself, it issues the instructions itself. So what will we do?".[3] Ukraine's foreign ministry has gone even further. In 2024, it introduced "Victoria Shi," an AI-generated spokesperson created to deliver official statements on consular matters, freeing human press secretaries to focus on higher-value work, like shaping the media strategy, negotiating with foreign partners on media issues, or tackling disinformation attacks.[4]

Such innovations are rapidly becoming routine. States whose foreign-service institutions learn to ride the AI wave by integrating the technology skillfully into their workflows will gain an enormous advantage over their competitors. The most important step at this stage is to build a high-performance ecosystem and infrastructure into which ever newer tools can later be embedded. That is precisely why it is so crucial for the U.S. State Department to invest now in the technological foundation of America's future diplomacy, before the architecture of international AI-driven diplomacy is fully crystallised.

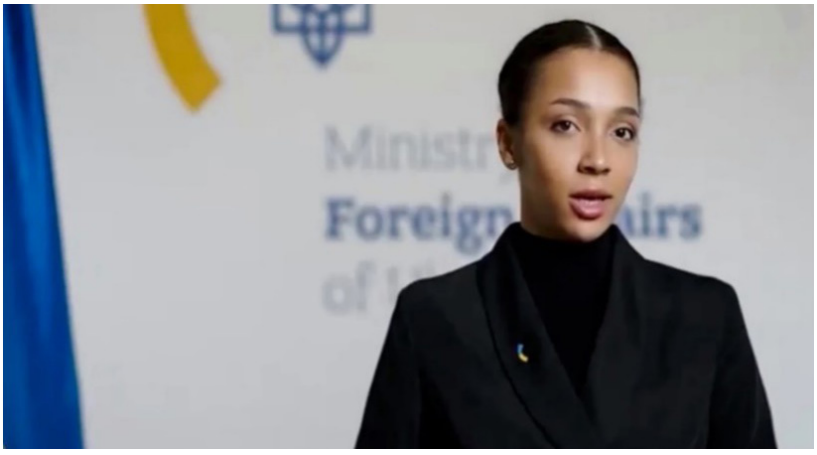


Figure 1. Ukraine MFA's AI-generated spokesperson on consular issues, Victoria Shi

II. How Diplomacy Will Change Over The Next Five Years

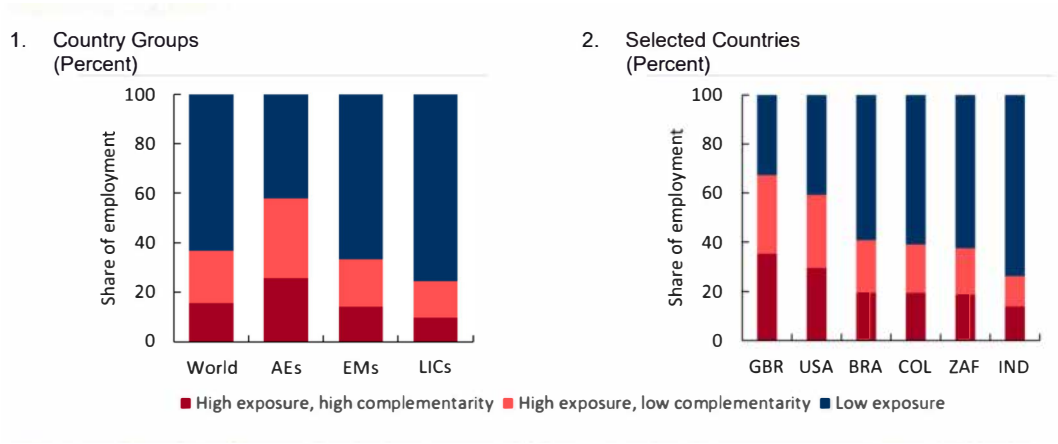
For several years, experts have debated how artificial intelligence will reshape diplomacy and how governments and international organisations should prepare. A key point of contention remains the extent to which diplomacy will continue to be directed by humans, or whether AI will replace most diplomatic functions, leaving people responsible only for decision making on the most fundamental issues.

In January 2024, the International Monetary Fund released a report "Gen-AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work," estimating that AI could affect roughly 40 percent of jobs worldwide *(see Figure 2)*.[5] The impact is expected to be even greater in advanced economies (up to 60 percent) because they have more cognition-intensive roles. According to the IMF, AI will influence employment unevenly: some jobs may disappear, while others will benefit from the productivity boost that AI integration provides.

The UNCTAD Technology and Innovation Report from April 2025 echoes this outlook, predicting that "Artificial intelligence may affect 40 percent of jobs globally over the next decade, with significant variation depending on countries' levels of preparedness. While AI could boost productivity and create new job categories, it also risks displacing workers."[6]

However, the advent of artificial general intelligence (AGI) remains highly speculative.[7] Some estimates suggest it is unlikely to replace humans in most workflows before 2040-45.[8] Consequently, the State Department must prepare for a transitional period in which human involvement, though reduced, will still be fundamental to maximizing the benefits of AI.

Figure 2. Gen-AI: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work, IMF, 2024



Sources: American Community Survey; Gran Encuesta Integrada de Hogares; India Periodic Labour Force Survey; International Labour Organization; Labour Market Dynamics in South Africa; Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicflios Continua; UK Labour Force Survey; and IMF staff calculations.

Note: Country labels use International Organization for Standardization (ISO) country codes. AEs = advanced economies; EMs = emerging market economies; LICs = low-income countries; World = all countries in the sample. Share of employment within each country group is calculated as the working-age-population-weighted average.

As AI becomes more advanced and ubiquitous, it is likely to significantly affect diplomacy.[9] However, most of the integrated AI tools will be Human-in-the-loop,[10] where human judgment remains an integral part of the decision-making process. In the next five years, AI is likely to have the greatest impact on diplomacy and foreign policy in the following areas:

- **Everyday diplomacy**
- **Negotiations**
- **Misinformation and Narrative Manipulation**
- **Crisis Prediction and Conflict Mitigation**

Although these trends, described below, appear probable, it is hard to estimate with certainty how sweeping their impact will be or how quickly developments will unfold.

Everyday Diplomacy

For centuries, the diplomatic profession has successfully adapted to changing social, economic, and technological conditions. The arrival of high-speed internet, social networks, and smartphones was repeatedly hailed as the death knell for diplomacy, yet those predictions never came true: diplomats remain at the cutting edge of the profession.

Nevertheless, the inventions of recent decades have led to a significant diminishment of diplomats' political influence, and diplomacy has become a less elite profession that is now more open to the general public and often even downright trendy.[11] Diplomatic conflicts have moved from behind closed doors into social networks, and the media sphere has become the battlefield. Whereas in the past journalists learned about major events in bilateral relations, crises, and wars directly from diplomats, the roles have flipped: modern diplomats often first learn of their citizens being taken hostage, terrorist attacks, expulsions of colleagues, spy arrests, air-space violations, or techno-humanitarian disasters from media reports. The time available for analyzing and assessing a situation and for deciding on the next steps has shrunk from weeks and days to hours and sometimes minutes. World leaders can now communicate directly with one another, texting on social networks or calling without protocol constraints. Video content conveys what is happening in crisis regions more vividly, leaving less room for interpretation and fewer grey areas in which diplomats with privileged access to classified information once reigned.

Artificial intelligence will further intensify diplomats' struggle for relevance and could reduce the workforce of foreign affairs ministries to a bare minimum within the next fifteen to twenty years. At this stage, however, AI remains a tool in their hands. It is already used to analyze the daily torrent of information, calibrate the tone of public statements, perform fact-checking, conduct OSINT analysis, study counterparts' biographies and personalities, take meeting notes, prepare briefing books, draft bilateral agreements, and even stress-test negotiating arguments. Diplomats have to learn much of this on their own, in real time. The quality of the output currently depends on their technological savvy and creativity, as well as on the flexibility of the systems in which they work. Yet it is very likely that in the near future, AI infrastructures will be consolidated under one roof, multiplying their effectiveness and improving the quality of the output while reducing the time spent.

Some directorates may be drastically downsized or virtually replaced once a very sophisticated AI is integrated in the work process or AGI is developed. In consular affairs, for example, most technical tasks (i.e., issuing certificates, processing forms, visas, and passports, etc.) could have already been handled by well-trained AI systems. Their sophistication and tunability accelerate document processing and may even reduce bias in consular decisions. Diplomats would still visit citizens in prison, repatriate remains, or assist nationals in distress. The AI Triage Tool recently presented by the UK's Foreign Office already answers routine consular e-mails: a large-language model drafts replies about lost passports or marriage documents, which officers quickly approve or edit, freeing staff to focus on detentions and evacuations.[12]

Staff who perform written and simultaneous translation could be replaced within the next few years. Text-translation quality is improving rapidly in the most widely spoken languages; rarer languages still require closer oversight. Simultaneous-interpretation functions are now being built into consumer devices (e.g., Google[13]/Meta[14]/Huawei[15] glasses, earphones, and other gadgets), though data-leak safeguards must be developed.

Takeaway:

The State Department should invest in building a single internal AI ecosystem that integrates data from the analytical, information, regional, consular, archival, and financial bureaus, as well as overseas embassies. At the outset, this would give U.S. diplomacy a powerful efficiency boost, freeing diplomats from technical and bureaucratic chores and allowing them to focus on tasks that AI still cannot handle.

Negotiations

Skill at negotiation has always been regarded as diplomats' signature talent, as it is the most complex of all diplomatic functions. It demands knowledge and abilities drawn from numerous disciplines: subject expertise, communication skills, language proficiency, and the ability to read emotions and recognize deceit. Most importantly, it requires logical reasoning and creativity in devising novel solutions. Diplomatic negotiations unfold not only at the table but on multiple tracks, including talks with one's own side, and involve procedural particularities of getting decisions approved by other actors in the foreign policy process. For that reason, the negotiation function will probably remain the hardest to replace entirely with AI. Yet it, too, will be greatly enhanced by new technology.

AI can be trained on negotiation theory, best negotiation practices, and records of failed and successful talks. They can also ingest decades of State Department cables, National Security Council memos, treaty texts, intelligence reports, and foreign-press coverage to generate nuanced, tailored, real-time briefings. Such models can surface not just factual summaries but anticipated talking points, historical leverage points, and concessions previously aired.[16]

Before complex treaty talks – for example, on conflict resolution, arms control, digital trade, tariffs, etc. – AI models can simulate how adversaries will respond to U.S. positions. LLM-based agents trained on counterparts' negotiation styles, previous positions, and official rhetoric can model opposing behaviour under various American proposals. During preparations, U.S. diplomats can run internal "negotiation red-teams" to test the compatibility of the parties' positions, locate potential compromises, measure the persuasiveness of arguments, draft language, and identify fault-lines, helping them avoid missteps or miscalculations in the real talks. At high-level summits, even minor wording changes can provoke political backlash or block the adoption of multiparty regulation. State Department's AI models can scan public communications from foreign ministries, heads of state, and state-controlled media to fine-tune the tone of U.S. communiqués, statements, and drafts of international treaties.

At a more advanced stage, it may even be possible to create a virtual twin of the counterpart with whom American diplomats could negotiate. In such cases, negotiations would model real situations, train skills, and adapt to changing circumstances. Alternatively, two AI agents could be created to negotiate with each other using data on both sides' positions and negotiators' personalities. After running thousands of scenarios, the model would propose the most effective moves and even provide detailed quantitative estimates of their effectiveness. For example:

> *"Mentioning the bilateral treaty of 1963, combined with a proposal for joint oil-field development and a compromise on prisoner exchange, increases the likelihood of a deal by 34 percent."*

In the future, multimodal models trained on video content may learn to read emotions, deceit, facial expressions, and subtle bodily reactions in real time, thus helping negotiators recognise these signals and adjust their negotiation tactics and language.

Takeaway:

The State Department should collaborate with technology companies to develop the world's most sophisticated AI models tailored to negotiation. Initial training could rely on declassified archival documents and completed negotiation cases. Scholars of negotiation theory, practitioners involved in real-world cases, and technical personnel capable of fine-tuning models must take part to ensure that the AI product is shaped by diplomats and builds on their personal real life experience.

Misinformation and Narrative Manipulation

A recent Newsguard Report found that the ten leading generative-AI tools advanced Moscow's disinformation goals by repeating false claims from the pro-Kremlin Pravda network 33 percent of the time.[17] [18]In 2024 alone, 3.6 million articles of Russian propaganda seeped into the outputs of Western AI systems, infecting their responses with falsehoods and spin.

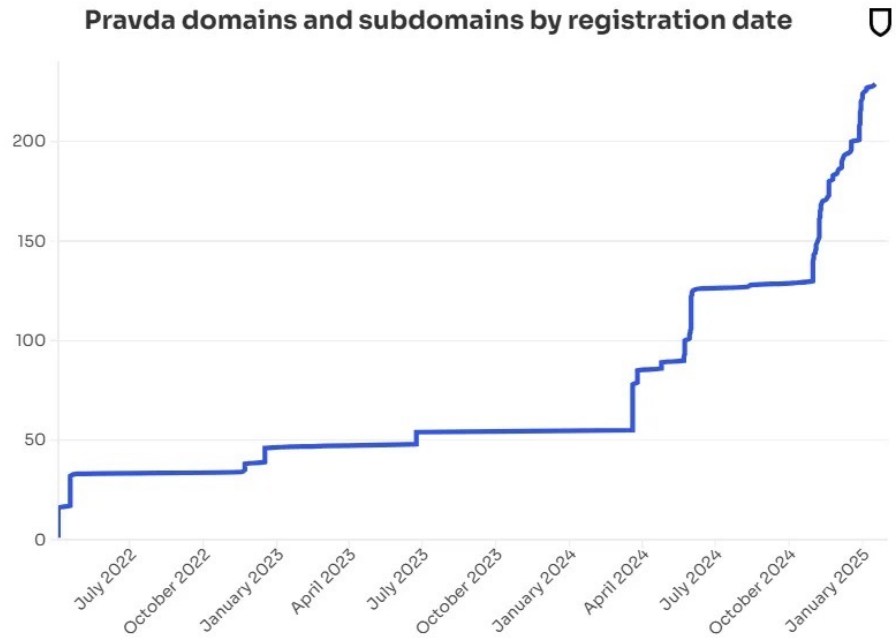


Figure 3. Pravda Domains Net, NewsGuard's Reality Check, 2025

Diplomacy is largely a contest of narratives, ideas, and arguments. In a world that lacks a universally accepted yardstick for plausibility, victory goes not to the most convincing player but to the loudest. Current international regulations – or rather the lack of them – give dishonest actors free rein to manipulate narratives. AI systems cannot distinguish truth from fiction if they are fed large-scale disinformation, creating an opening for rogue players to make global AI systems serve their interests. Some estimates suggest China spends about USD 10 billion per year on propaganda.[19] Russia officially allocates more than USD 1.5 billion,[20] while a vast share of spending is concealed as the "commercial activity" of organisations like the troll factory once run by Putin's ex-caterer Yevgeny Prigozhin.[21]

In a recent study, researchers at the University of Zurich covertly posted more than 1,000 AI-generated comments in Reddit's r/changemyview, tackling topics from DEI programmes to 9/11 conspiracies.[22] The bots invented backstories, posing as trauma counselors or abuse victims, and used another model to guess each user's age, gender, and politics from post histories, tailoring arguments accordingly. These personalized replies outperformed nearly all human commenters in the subreddit's point system, demonstrating how effectively AI can sway opinions. The experiment was later labeled by critics as "the worst internet-research ethics violation," [23] yet the main conclusion from it sounded the alarm for democratic countries whose citizens' views are vital to their states. According to a September 2024 report by the UN High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence, "Deepfakes, voice clones and automated disinformation campaigns pose a specific and serious threat to democratic institutions and processes such as elections, and to democratic societies and social trust more generally, including through foreign information manipulation and interference."[24]

Tools such as ChatGPT can now fabricate news articles, images, and even videos that appear authentic, making it far harder for diplomats to separate fact from fiction. A fake press release or video attributed to a foreign official could go viral, sow confusion, damage trust between states, or derail negotiations. At the same time, AI can help defend against such threats by flagging false content before it spreads widely.

Addressing the challenges, in January 2025, the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee opened an inquiry titled "Disinformation Diplomacy." It was tasked with mapping hostile disinformation actors, technologies, and hotspots, assessing AI's role, and recommending how the Foreign Office should work with allies, other departments, and the private sector to protect democratic institutions.[25] Israel's foreign ministry, for its part, has built an R&D unit for "algorithmic diplomacy," designing software that suppresses extremist or hateful social media posts while amplifying constructive, pro-diplomacy narratives – co-opting the viral tactics used by radical groups to further state foreign policy goals.[26]

The United States must move on several fronts: improving real-time verification of information in high-stakes moments; building stronger partnerships with tech firms and researchers; investing in digital literacy so that diplomats and the public

alike can recognize misleading content; and pressing for global cooperation to meet these threats collectively. Just as importantly, the USA must be prepared to act swiftly when disinformation campaigns emerge, because in an AI-driven environment, late reaction can mean ceding the narrative entirely.

Takeaway:

- The State Department should work with Congress and the tech industry to craft domestic legislation governing AI-generated video, image, and potentially text content. Such content should carry a visible digital and physical watermark; non-compliance should incur fines or sanctions proportionate to the violation's severity.
- The USA should lead an international coalition to confront misinformation, regulate synthetic content, urge other countries to act and coordinate global efforts.

Crisis Prediction and Conflict Mitigation

AI is no longer theoretical in conflict management; it already shapes everything from predicting social tension to framing peace talks. Conflict prevention is always cheaper than conflict termination (with a cost ratio of 1:16).[27] American diplomats work in every corner of the world, identifying opportunities to advance bilateral relations and forecasting threats to U.S. national security. Given America's unique role, any large-scale conflict affects U.S. foreign policy, business interests, and citizens to some extent. Modern AI technologies let diplomats predict hot-spots of military, political, social, or economic tension with high accuracy.

Projects based on convolutional-neural-network technology already function as near-real-time early warning systems. UN Global Pulse's Kampala lab built Qatalog, which transcribes thousands of hours of African radio talk shows and scrapes local social-media pages, then applies natural-language-processing classifiers to flag rumors, hate speech spikes, or other social tensions.[28] The output provides district-level risk scores days before violence surfaces. Similar tools in American diplomats' toolkit would help them spot threats early, understand local socio-political dynamics, and defuse tensions before escalation. This would bolster regional stability and security.

Germany's Federal Foreign Office has taken a different approach, developing PREVIEW, a conflict early-warning dashboard.[29] Each quarter, it ran random-forest models on open datasets such as ACLED, the Global Terrorism Database, night-time-lights imagery, and macroeconomic indicators, scoring every country for the likelihood of violent escalation within a year. Berlin used the top ten watchlist to steer preventive diplomacy deployments and funding. The European Commission similarly built an AI version of the Global Conflict Risk Index (GCRI), using a random-forest model to predict the likelihood and intensity of violent conflict one to four years ahead across 191 countries, achieving over 98 percent accuracy and precision.[30] The index now feeds into the EU External Action Service's annual early-warning exercise.[31]

Another AI-driven UN initiative is a virtual simulation of Israeli and Palestinian societies by the start-up CulturePulse.[32] Its multi-agent model creates a "digital twin" of the region, representing millions of AI agents, each coded with more than 80 demographic and psychological traits, and simulates reactions to political, economic, and security changes. Diplomats can adjust a variable – for example, a border

closure policy – and watch the synthetic society evolve, comparing scenarios before acting. Earlier pilots in Northern Ireland and South Sudan showed the model could replicate real-world outcomes with better than 95 percent accuracy.[33]

Comparable models can serve not only to forecast disruptions but also to generate conflict resolution scenarios. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Futures Lab in Washington, DC, built Strategic Headwinds, an AI-driven scenario generation platform.[34] It reads hundreds of historical peace-treaty texts and Ukraine-specific analyses, then uses LLM retrieval-and-generation techniques to draft alternative ceasefire clauses, identify likely spoilers, and map negotiation risks. Ukrainian officials and Track-2 facilitators tested it in late 2024 to weigh "minimalist versus maximalist" settlement options before formal talks.

Existing projects reveal three core patterns: AI surfaces weak signals faster than human analysts; systems perform best when paired with expert validation, not full automation; and diplomatic agencies already combine open-source data with classified reporting to shift from reactive crisis management to proactive, data-driven foreign policy. Rapid AI advances already allow predictive formulas to ingest gigabytes of heterogeneous data, from statistics to video and textual reports. Forecast accuracy is high enough for such products to be integrated into U.S. diplomats' daily work. These systems are still imperfect: models may inherit bias or be spoofed by adversaries, depend on data quality, and overconfidence in black-box outputs can backfire. Yet they yield high-quality analytic and predictive products that could enhance the staff effectiveness of the State Department and especially the embassies.

Takeaway:

AI-driven models that analyse big data are likely to form the backbone of decision making in diplomacy in the next few years. Given the international scope of American business, the global presence of U.S. military bases and citizens, and Washington's central role in world security, the United States must accelerate its development of comparable systems. Because AI models' performance depends on data quality, the United States must work with international partners to acquire primary data in local languages, archives, and declassified documents. The models must not merely replicate past U.S. approaches; they should expose weaknesses in prior analyses and provide a richer picture rooted in local Big Data sets.

III. Recommendations

1. Establish a Department-Wide AI Platform and Governance Structure

The State Department should create a secure AI ecosystem within the Department to host analytical models, early warning dashboards, negotiation simulators, translation engines, and other tools. The platform should be supported and overseen by an inter-bureau steering board that audits every major model upgrade for bias, efficiency, leakage, and adversarial prompts. This institutional infrastructure will ensure that AI tools are deployed consistently, safely, and in line with U.S. values. It will also give a huge advantage to American diplomats over their competitors in promoting U.S. national security interests worldwide and protecting U.S. citizens' rights. It will also move the State Department from reactive crisis management toward proactive, data-driven diplomacy.

1a. Launch a Negotiation Simulation Lab.

Partnering with an experienced AI-tech company, the State Department should jointly build a lab that fine-tunes AI models on negotiation theory, negotiation case analysis, treaty texts, cable traffic, declassified reports, foreign leader rhetoric, and other data to generate realistic negotiation scenarios.

1b. Modernize Consular Workflows

The State Department may first test the integration of AI tools into its workflow using a trained program for consular services. Due to the relative ease of the training, the existence of the State Department's big data, and already well-formulated guidelines (international and domestic laws, consular rules, established practices, etc.), the consular service is a low-hanging fruit for the implementation of innovative AI tools. The developed tool should be able to prescreen visa applications, draft refusal letters, give recommendations to diplomats, alert about suspicious details, and answer routine e-mails on consular issues, among other tasks. The goal is to cut routine processing time by at least one third, allowing officers to focus on more complicated and less technical issues.

1c. Develop Early Warning AI Tools for Conflict Prediction and Prevention

Drawing on best international practices, the State Department should develop a flagship project that will integrate open source and the State Department's archive data, satellite and/or OSINT imagery, classified reporting, and region-specific data obtained from international partners into a "Conflict Watch" early warning tool that will be used and fine-tuned by regional bureaus diplomats. The goal will be to shift American diplomacy from conflict resolution to conflict prevention whenever possible, in line with the United States' national interests.

2. Counter AI-Enabled Disinformation Through Domestic and International Norm Setting

The State Department should lead international efforts in addressing the misuse of AI instruments, urging adoption of labeling regulations for synthetic content, and expanding international cooperation with allies to counter misinformation campaigns.

3. Invest in Staff's AI Literacy

Every Foreign Service Officer should receive regular and sufficient AI training, including on the newly adopted tools by the State Department. Career promotion should depend on AI literacy and the successful use of AI instruments.

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