

Defense Diplomacy of Middle Powers in Digital International Relations

Peni Hanggarini¹

¹ Program Magister Hubungan Internasional, Universitas Paramadina, Indonesia

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Correspondence

Email:

peni.hanggarini@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In an era of rapid digital innovation and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), growing technological power imbalances have generated serious concerns about the equality, agency, and sovereignty of state and non-state actors. This study uses a qualitative, interpretivist methodology to examine the consequences of the digital divide. It focuses on how middle powers manage technological competition while maintaining strategic autonomy in the transformation of international relations. The findings indicate that while digital technology and AI enhance state capabilities and reshape global power hierarchies, they generate critical, ethical, and political challenges, particularly around surveillance, accountability, and algorithmic bias. This study argues that middle power can use defense diplomacy as a strategic instrument to confront the challenges of digital technology. Defense diplomacy employs comprehensive approaches, both coercive and non-coercive, and serves as an effective strategy for middle powers to influence global norms, develop cooperative security frameworks, and manage technological disruptions through building trust among actors. Ultimately, this study contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse on digital international relations by offering a framework for middle powers in an era increasingly shaped by algorithmic decision-making and cyber politics.

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) have become transformative forces in the evolution of international relations. These innovations have reshaped how states and non-state actors interact, negotiate, and engage in global governance, often surpassing traditional diplomatic methods in terms of speed, scale, and strategic influence. States with moderate or limited digital infrastructure struggle not only with access to technology and AI but also with setting global norms and influencing international diplomatic networks. For middle powers, this technological divide poses new strategic challenges, as they tend to maintain equilibrium amid intensifying technological rivalries among major powers. These changes bring in a new era of “digital international relations,” in which technology is more than just a tool; it is an active agent influencing agency, identity, and systemic order.

The increasing integration of AI into diplomatic practices has enhanced data-driven decision-making, streamlined communication, and introduced predictive analytics into global affairs (Baele *et al.*, 2024), (Jarrín, 2025). Furthermore, emerging technologies such as autonomous systems and machine learning optimize national security and redefine geopolitical power structures (Sticher, 2024), (Garrido, 2025). The notions of sovereignty and statecraft are being recalibrated in response to non-state actors, digital platforms, and transnational information networks, which increasingly

influence the global political arena. Major tech corporations, with capacities rivalling or surpassing nation-states in certain areas, have further diversified the landscape of international power.

This rapid digital transformation has exposed and exacerbated significant state inequalities. Wealthier nations have led the development, deployment, and governance of AI, cybersecurity infrastructure, and digital diplomacy mechanisms. In contrast, many developing countries face limited access to these technologies, insufficient digital infrastructure, and inadequate human capital to participate fully in the evolving international order (Grumbach and Zeno-Zencovic, 2024) (Teodosiev, 2024). This "digital divide" has created new hierarchies in global politics, where technological capacity directly correlates with diplomatic leverage and geopolitical influence (Liebetrau and Monsees, 2024).

This asymmetry has direct implications for global stability. As states race to assert dominance in AI, cyber warfare, and digital surveillance, the risk of conflict escalation, strategic miscalculation, and informational manipulation grows. The technologies enabling peacebuilding and cooperation can, paradoxically, intensify mistrust and military rivalry (Guo *et al.*, 2024) (Baele *et al.*, 2024). The shift in diplomatic interaction to a digital format has significantly reshaped trust among diplomats. Texting, emailing, and videoconferencing generate suspicion, control, and slower trust-building. Technology can provoke mistrust in international diplomacy (Eggeling and Versloot, 2023). Furthermore, digital technology can serve as a new domain of conflict because it triggers vulnerabilities and destabilizes economic and infrastructure systems in some states. As a consequence, it reduces trust among states that challenge global governance (Adeyeri and Abroshan, 2024). Even digital technology can change state behavior, leading states to engage in state-sponsored cyber-attacks (Azubuike, 2023)

However, some scholars argue that the sources of digital disruption would not automatically change international relations. The changes can occur depending on the agency who engage in the digital interaction and on how ordering processes or the global order influence or disrupt them (Giacomello and Eriksson, 2024). Changes occur not radical but incremental because they could occur in the changes of agency or diplomatic actors and actions, the adaptation of practice of diplomacy, and the audiences of the diplomacy (Hedling and Bremberg, 2021). Nevertheless, several scholars have proposed frameworks to mitigate the risks associated with technological asymmetry. At a general level, multilateral governance models, such as those proposed by Garrido (2025), suggest the establishment of global norms and regulations for AI use, cybersecurity, and data ethics. These frameworks emphasize transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, aiming to prevent a technocratic authoritarian order dominated by a few powerful states.

Literature on the digital technology and AI cooperation highlights that bilateral and multilateral platforms can foster innovation partnerships and regulate AI deployment. There are at least two major strategies in confronting digital asymmetry; First, cybersecurity cooperation, to build resilience against digital threats and share intelligence among like-minded states (Al-Amaireh, 2024). Second, digital capacity-building, to invest in digital education, infrastructure, and institutional reforms that support sustainable technological integration (Teodosiev, 2024). Most existing studies focus on the capabilities and strategies of major powers, particularly the United States and China, in deploying AI for military and diplomatic dominance (Repnikova and Chen, 2023) (Conduit, 2025).

Despite the growing body of literature on digital technology and AI that transform international relations, a significant gap remains regarding the position and potential of middle powers in this changing landscape. Few have critically examined how middle powers can navigate

the complexities of digital competition while maintaining autonomy and relevance. Furthermore, few have offered the form of diplomacy that middle powers can pursue in digital international relations.

The concept of defense diplomacy, which is based on maintaining trust and confidence through both coercive and non-coercive measures, appears to be a strategic approach for dealing with the challenges of digital technology and AI. Defense diplomacy is defined as the use of military-related cooperation and dialogue as a non-coercive means of preventing conflict and fostering trust (Charillon et al., 2020). This paper suggests that in the digital age, defense diplomacy may serve as a buffer between technological competition and armed confrontation, enabling middle powers to flip from the brink of conflict toward peace creation. Although defense diplomacy has received attention in international relations, its relevance in the context of digital and AI-driven environments remains underdeveloped. AI has transformed bilateral, multilateral, and public diplomacy, potentially reshaping conflict resolution, negotiations, and global governance (Lawal, 2025). However, the topic of defense diplomacy has not been clearly addressed. The integration of AI into diplomacy studies is a relatively new field of study, and efforts to govern the use of AI in diplomatic practice are still in their early stages (Garcia, 2025). While research on military AI governance has begun to appear, it is rarely explored through the framework of defense diplomacy.

There is limited empirical or theoretical analysis connecting digital defense diplomacy with strategic peacebuilding, especially concerning middle power behavior in a multipolar and digitally interconnected world. This study addresses both of these voids by proposing a conceptual framework that links technology, power, and diplomacy, with a focus on defense diplomacy as a mechanism for strategic agency among middle powers. The objective of this study is to investigate how digital technology and artificial intelligence influence the dynamics of peace and conflict in international relations, with an emphasis on the agency of middle powers. This study contributes to both theoretical and policy-oriented understandings of contemporary international relations.

Theoretically, it bridges the gap between classical IR theories (realism, liberalism, constructivism) and emerging techno-political paradigms by highlighting the transformative power of digital technology and AI. It also proposes defense diplomacy as a modern tool for navigating global asymmetries. Practically, the study offers valuable insights for policymakers in middle-power states seeking to balance strategic interests with ethical imperatives in the use of AI. It advocates for adaptive, inclusive, and collaborative approaches to global digital governance, recognizing the importance of technology in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. As the digitalization of international relations accelerates, the stakes for equitable and responsible technology governance grow ever higher. This study is aimed at illuminating the complex interactions between technology, power, and diplomacy, highlighting the urgent need for middle powers to act not as passive recipients of global change but as active shapers of a more just and secure digital future.

RESEARCH METHOD

This section outlines the qualitative methodological approach employed to explore how digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) shape international relations, with a specific emphasis on middle powers and the strategic use of defense diplomacy. The research design is rooted in an interpretivist paradigm to understand the socially constructed nature of power, diplomacy, and technological agency in international relations. Qualitative methods are suitable for capturing the depth and complexity of political phenomena, especially those influenced by intangible or emergent factors such as digital systems and AI (Garrido, 2025) (Liebetrau and Monsees, 2024).

This study relies primarily on document analysis and case-oriented content analysis as the principal techniques of data collection. Primary sources include policy documents and white papers, speeches, and official communications from middle power governments (e.g., Indonesia, South Korea, Canada) concerning technology, cybersecurity, and diplomatic strategy, and Defense and foreign affairs statements involving AI use in international cooperation, threat perception, or defense diplomacy. Secondary data comprises peer-reviewed journal articles, reports from think tanks, and expert analyses from leading scholars such as (Baele et al., 2024), (Mazumdar, 2024) (Garrido, 2025). Literature addressing key frameworks such as "digital diplomacy," "algorithmic governance," and "cybersecurity diplomacy" is instrumental in contextualizing findings. This document-based strategy aligns with the method suggested by (Eriksson and Newlove-Eriksson, 2021), who stress the importance of examining discursive and institutional dimensions when studying digital transformations in global politics.

This study uses purposive sampling, a common method in qualitative inquiry, to select materials that are rich in relevance to the topic of technology, power, and diplomacy. The first sample is case studies of middle powers actively involved in technological diplomacy or defense diplomacy initiatives. The second sample is thematic selections of international incidents where digital tools or AI played a role in either mitigating or escalating tensions (e.g., cyber conflict management, AI-enabled military drills, digital peace negotiations). The third sample is institutional and governmental discourse, especially policy shifts since the widespread integration of AI tools in diplomatic practices post-2015.

Analytical Framework

Digital International Relations (DIR) refers to the disruptive impact of digital technologies on global power structures. Technology reshapes agency, drives hybrid conflict and cooperation, and fosters a new international political order. Key disruptors include big data, real-time activity, and digital dependency, but transformation relies on agential processes and how international order adapts. While DIR signals a new era in global politics, scholars have yet to fully conceptualize its implications, including how technology can foster political emancipation and economic growth through restructured global interactions (Bjola and Kornprobst, 2024).

In this paper, technology refers to the application of scientific knowledge by using machines, tools, electronic devices, and systems (digital). One part of the digital technology is to use computers and computer networks to store data and process information, labelled as cyber. Another subset of digital technology is computer systems that could outperform human intelligence in learning, problem-solving, and decision-making, known as AI. Digital technology has been viewed from two different sides, as a facilitating factor and in contrast as an obstacle in conducting international relations. Global digital networks, which are diffuse and flexible, could challenge the sovereignty and the state's hierarchy (Pohle and Thiel, 2024).

AI, as a subset of digital technology, was first used in the 1955 Conference held at Dartmouth College. In this conference, people start to discuss the features of intelligence using a machine to stimulate it. However, the birth of AI was actually due to Alan Turing's essay on "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," published in 1950 (Morgan and Cohen, 2020). As a field of computer science, AI focuses on developing systems to make decisions and predictions in a particular context. The European Commission defines AI as "systems with the ability to display intelligent behavior through the analysis of their environments." Similarly, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) argues that, as a machine-based system, AI can make predictions,

recommendations, or decisions influencing real or virtual environments. AI can serve its four aims: think as a human, think rationally, act humanely, and act rationally (Oluyemi, 2024).

Technology is rapidly reshaping international relations. As a strategic variable, it raises power dynamics reminiscent of Thucydides' *Melian Dialogue*, where "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." This suggests that in today's tech-driven global order, states with advanced technology may dominate, while less technologically equipped states risk marginalization. The question remains whether technological superiority will determine who shapes global outcomes and who is left vulnerable in this evolving international landscape.

Understanding digital international relations requires drawing upon key theoretical perspectives in the field, including Realism, Neorealism, Liberalism, and Constructivism. Realism views technology as a tool for state power and warfare, emphasizing security and material dominance. Realists argue pessimistically that while technology may influence international relations, it does not alter the fundamental nature of politics, which remains driven by state interests and power struggles (Eriksson and Newlove-Eriksson, 2021). However, realists acknowledge that technology can serve as a tool to enhance a state's power. For instance, the military capacities of states and their strategic position in the international system can be determined by technology. Furthermore, neo-realists would focus on how technological advancements change military capacities, and this could drive changes in international politics (Leese and Hoijtink, 2019). Technology of artificial intelligence (AI), for instance, is seen by Realists in comparative and zero-sum terms (Ndzensze and Marwala, 2023).

On the other hand, liberalists view technology in international relations in a more positive way. According to liberalists, technology can serve as a liberalizing force, empowering social movements that could positively impact democratization and providing platforms for communication and agenda-setting in the complex interdependent world (Eriksson and Newlove-Eriksson, 2021). Technology can trigger systemic change in terms of interdependence, cooperation, and transnationalism (Leese and Hoijtink, 2019). But, the technology of AI could also generate misinformation that could deteriorate the framework of democratic peace (Ndzensze and Marwala, 2023).

In contrast to realists and liberalists, Constructivists tend to adopt a neutral stance on the influence of technology in international relations. Instead of arguing about how technology could shape international relations, Constructivism focuses on how identities, norms, and interests regarding technology are formed (Eriksson and Newlove-Eriksson, 2021). In constructivists' view, the changing norms and values driving systemic change are neither the result of intention nor the adoption of new technologies. Technology is an influential factor in the international system, but constructivists believe that we cannot understand its impact unless we analyze the social layers in which it is embedded (Leese and Hoijtink, 2019). Constructivism tends to view technology, such as AI, with caution since it has the potential to create informational fogs that lead to miscommunication and conflict (Ndzensze and Marwala, 2023). In addition to those perspectives on examining the impact of technology in international relations, there is a new paradigm known as techno-politics. It is based on a nondeterministic approach similar to Constructivism. However, techno-politics believes that technology and politics (and systems) shape and reshape each other (Eriksson and Newlove-Eriksson, 2021).

In addition, some scholars employ a variety of analytical lenses while examining digital international relations. The first framework is digital diplomacy analysis, which investigates not only state communication patterns but also the symbolic power of technological fluency in shaping

narratives and alliances. States use digital platforms (social media, e-governance, real-time data) to influence international audiences and enhance global standing (Mazumdar, 2024).

The second framework is algorithmic governance, which focuses the role of algorithms and AI systems in structuring international decision-making (Baele *et al.*, 2024). The framework allows for analysis of the opacity of algorithmic decisions in foreign policy tools, biases embedded in machine learning applications, and the institutional consequences of delegating power to AI. Algorithmic governance is also important for understanding how global norms are incorporated into technical infrastructures, which frequently favor technologically advanced states. This second framework also considers the incorporation of algorithms such as automated, autonomous, and AI technologies into international armed conflict (Bode *et al.*, 2024). The third framework is building on the views that defense diplomacy serves as a strategic approach that allows middle powers to mitigate strategic vulnerabilities posed by technology asymmetries (Charillon, Balzacq and Ramel, 2020). Analytical indicators include; frequency of joint military dialogues, participation in digital arms governance, trust-building mechanisms facilitated through AI-enabled military transparency. By triangulating these frameworks, the study highlights how middle powers may "flip the coin" from war-prone to peace-promoting behavior in the digital age by conducting defense diplomacy. Within this context, middle powers can be understood as states with lesser economic and military capabilities than major powers (Hidayatullah, 2017). Other characteristics of middle powers are they are International in focus, Multilateral in method, and Good Citizens in conduct (Robertson and Carr, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

International relations have recognized state and non-state actors as agents in the international system. Diplomats, as representatives of states or governments, must be prepared to face technological challenges (Konovalova, 2023). As global technology advances, interactions between humans and non-human agents become more prevalent. Due to the different characteristics of human and non-human actors, there will be complex interactions between these different actors, human and technology. In the new international relations, technology serves as an endogenous factor and not an attribute (Leese and Hoijtink, 2019).

The interaction between human and non-human actors, especially in the realm of diplomacy and international relations, has significantly shifted with the rise of technology. Technology now acts not only as a tool but as an agent influencing state behavior, international norms, and diplomatic strategies. The findings from recent literature highlight technology's dual role in diplomacy. On one hand, AI systems and algorithms serve as tools that aid diplomats in policy formulation, data analysis, and decision-making, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of diplomatic engagement. On the other hand, these technologies themselves exert influence, shaping governance structures, public opinion, and the strategic behaviors of states (Jarrín, 2025), (Garrido, 2025), (Sticher, 2024).

Technology in international relations is shaped by tech-savvy actors such as programmers, AI designers, and digital engineers—collectively known as "nerd power." These individuals possess designing, connecting, and analytical power, enabling them to influence how technology is used, networks are connected, and digital systems are understood. Their role is central in shaping the global information society. As digitalization expands, control over cyberspace has shifted from governments to private companies. This reflects a broader transformation in international relations, where techno-optimistic visions give way to private sector dominance in managing and shaping digital infrastructures and global technological interactions (Giacomello and Eriksson, 2024).

AI, for example, plays a pivotal role in diplomatic efforts by assisting in real-time data collection and analysis, which is crucial for state decision-making processes (Garrido, 2025). The application of AI in governance also impacts international relations by facilitating communication between states and automating key governmental functions, such as economic forecasting and public policy evaluation, which directly affects diplomatic strategies. This transformative power is evidenced in the shifting diplomatic discourse where technological advancements, particularly AI and machine learning, are used to further national interests.

The integration of technology into national security strategies is another significant finding in recent studies. Digital technologies and AI have become central to military capabilities, particularly in enhancing precision and effectiveness. The utilization of autonomous systems, such as drones, has revolutionized warfare. The case of Turkish drones in Libya is a prime example of how such technologies have shifted military balances, enabling remote surveillance and precision strikes in conflict zones. This development underscores the concept of asymmetric warfare, where technology offers smaller states the ability to challenge larger powers by levelling the technological playing field. (Besenyő and Málnássy, 2024). Cyber warfare tactics, facilitated by advancements in AI, have allowed states to disrupt adversaries' military communications and infrastructure, showcasing how technology is reshaping the battlefield (Liebetrau and Monsees, 2024), (Markussen, 2024). AI's role in enhancing military logistics and supply chains has further proven essential for maintaining operational readiness and efficient resource allocation.

AI technology is transforming military operations by enabling autonomous weapons that can identify, track, and engage targets without human input. This advancement alters the scale and nature of warfare, significantly shortening the "observe-orient-decide-act (OODA) loop" traditionally reliant on human decision-making (Morgan and Cohen, 2020). Despite its capabilities, AI has limitations, particularly in distinguishing combatants from non-combatants during war. Unlike humans, AI may misidentify targets due to flawed intelligence systems. In uncertain situations, decisions to strike are based on mathematical probabilities, increasing the risk of error and unintended consequences in military operations (Morgan and Cohen, 2020).

Technology and politics are now increasingly interrelated. The degree of the interrelations between these two variables depends much on the paradigm we use in the study of International Relations. In realist' view, technology is a force multiplier. On the other hand, liberalist see it as a democratizing force (Eriksson and Newlove-Eriksson, 2021). Policymakers are challenged by the three AI's roles: analytical, predictive, dan operational, in the short and medium term. AI has analytical roles because it can reduce the number of actors to generate high-level decisions and monitoring sensors to ensure treaty compliance. In serving its predictive role, AI can support state actors to understand potential uses of AI because AI can change human systems, particularly in decision-making and how the decision is implemented (Cummings *et al.*, 2018).

Based on the Neo-Realist perspective, technology can act as a driving force for systemic change in international relations. Those actors with technology can become the players in the international system. By acquiring more technology as power, those major powers can have more options in pursuing their national interests in the new international relations. These states can exercise more power, and worse, they can compete with each other and even with the weaker ones. But, this technological competition can be eased and regulated by norms, regimes, and the international level in the international system. At the same time, each state can exercise its power through diplomacy. The phrase of Thucydides that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" continues to be used in the new era of international relations.

The changing of agency, power, and actors' interaction in the new interconnected and complex international relations can be the result of the increasing adoption of technology. Thus, there are two emerging options for middle powers as the non-hegemonic states in the system: whether they can benefit from this condition or be challenged by it. Technology provides options for the middle powers in facilitating the peace process, as well as accelerating conflict leading to war in at least two major ways.

First, technology can provide abundant information and reduce uncertainties for decision making. By using digital technologies, state and non-state actors can easily conduct their peace process activities. Technologies allow an acceleration of data and evidence-based approaches to preventing conflict and building peace. Digital technology can help us collect abundant information about potential peace creation and also the potential outbreak of conflict that could lead to war. In other words, technology can serve as an early warning system in decision-making policies as it reduces uncertainties. However, technology generates normative trade-offs, such as data privacy and algorithmic bias, that could become an obstacle for decision-making in the peace processes. Machine learning can also identify past patterns that could give us a prediction of the potential future. Thus benefits and limitations of digital technology should be equally considered (Hirblinger, 2024).

Therefore, middle powers cannot just be eager to embrace technology but should be ready to maintain the technology. As technology is an additional agency to human agency, the middle powers nations should pay attention to the relations between humans and technology. Humans need to be trained in managing the use of technology. For instance, social media is mostly used by individuals or non-state actors to express their views from personal views, to persuade or indoctrinate other people's views. There are some criminals, violent, terrorist, and armed groups who use social media to recruit their personnel. Terrorists and armed groups also aim to gain visibility globally and leverage their funding from influential foreign actors by using cyber technologies (Hirblinger *et al.*, 2024). They conduct recruitment, propaganda, and cyberattacks through digital technology. This action could generate extensive socio-economic consequences (Adigwe *et al.*, 2024).

Second, technology can increase the diplomatic standing and military power of a state. As digital technology can help reduce uncertainties, it can also increase diplomatic standing or diplomatic influence. For instance, China tries to dominate the international system by using its public digital diplomacy. As argued by the West, Chinese diplomats use social media with their monologue format and one-way approach. In Western views, this digital public diplomacy is considered hostile and aggressive (Chen, 2023).

When technology is seen as a power for some countries, particularly the major powers, this could lead to technological competition. However, the real Tech Wars, such as the AI arms race, have not occurred. Technology has been considered in terms of a transformative power to generate support for its action. For instance, China wants to use AI as the key to becoming a manufacturing superpower, a cyber superpower, a technology superpower, a network superpower, an educational superpower, and a smart society (Lambach, Landwehr-matlé and Oppermann, 2023).

Diplomats may find digital technologies, including AI, as an asset for delivering their jobs. The Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) can create new content based on patterns learned from available datasets. Diplomats can increase their work performance efficiency, widen their outreach, spread the information, influence public opinion, foster global dialogue, and even monitor public sentiment. However, we have to be cautious that the risk of AI could produce misinformation and inaccurate information. Therefore, technological competition in terms of narratives can be replaced

to be a scientific collaboration facilitated by technology (Bano, Chaudhri and Zowghi, 2024). Middle powers, as non-hegemonic states, should take advantage of their relations with the major powers, as the technological competition among major powers will turn into scientific collaboration for middle powers that could support the attainment of national interests.

AI can also assist a state's military force. The technology of AI can facilitate training simulations, supporting cyberspace operations in detecting cyber-attacks and generating weapons autonomous systems, such as drones. The impact of AI increases when it is combined with commercial-technological innovation for military innovation, such as Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS). The Air Force can use AI algorithms to operate the aircraft's sensors, navigation, and detection, as well as to target enemies. AI can also help shape the future of compatibility (Oluyemi, 2024).

The intersection of digital technology, AI, and international relations marks a paradigm shift in diplomacy, security, and power projection. This shift raises ethical and political concerns, particularly regarding AI's role in defense diplomacy. Central to these concerns is accountability, as AI-driven decisions often lack transparency and human oversight. Scholars like Garrido (2025) and Bode et al. (2023) highlight the risks of algorithmic opacity, which can lead to foreign policy or military actions that are hard to audit or challenge. The absence of robust legal frameworks further increases the risk of misuse or unintended escalation. Middle powers must strategically navigate this evolving terrain, using defense diplomacy to promote responsible AI integration and balance national security with global cooperation.

Furthermore, AI's capacity for surveillance has sparked transnational ethical debates, especially regarding the erosion of privacy and civil liberties. As Sevin & Eken (2024) emphasize, the deployment of AI surveillance tools—often framed as measures for national security or counterterrorism—can lead to normative clashes among states with differing values regarding human rights and governance (Sevin and Eken, 2024). These tensions are not merely legal or technical, but deeply political, reflecting competing visions of order in the digital age. Sticher (2024) adds that such disparities can heighten distrust and fuel digital sovereignty disputes, complicating international consensus on responsible AI use (Sticher, 2024).

Algorithmic bias is a major concern in AI use for diplomacy and defense, as it can reinforce global inequalities. Garrido (2025) notes that AI systems often rely on Western-centric data, which risks marginalizing non-Western perspectives and diminishing the agency of technologically less advanced states. This creates a feedback loop of unequal influence. To address such challenges, scholars advocate for multilateral frameworks ensuring ethical and secure AI use. Hirblinger (2024) emphasizes post-digital peacebuilding through inclusive governance that balances innovation with local contexts. Barrinha (2024) points to cyber-diplomacy as a crucial, if transitional, field that bridges national security priorities with the need for international cooperation in managing emerging technologies and their geopolitical impacts (Barrinha, 2024). Such frameworks, if designed equitably, could mitigate AI arms races and promote shared normative standards in digital governance.

The literature also notes that there are inadequacies of international regulation to protect human rights (Sinozic-Martinez and Jahnel, 2024). States tend to align technological development with traditional security doctrines than cooperative goals. This has led to intensified global competition, particularly among major powers, in areas such as AI weaponization, cyber capabilities, and autonomous defense systems (Guo et al., 2024). The risk of escalation is especially high when

states adopt unilateral policies or refuse to engage in transparency mechanisms, undermining the trust necessary for digital cooperation.

Against this backdrop of asymmetry and contestation, middle powers emerge as pivotal actors capable of mitigating the destabilizing effects of technological competition. Middle powers are defined not only by their material capabilities but also by their diplomatic agility and normative leadership in multilateral settings. As observed by Martino (2021), these states are often better positioned to mediate tensions between larger rivals and advocate for ethical norms in global forums. Their relative neutrality allows them to bridge divides and foster inclusive coalitions around digital governance, particularly when they act collectively through regional or intergovernmental platforms. As middle powers are developing their technologies and they tend to be weaker actors in terms of technology acquisition, they tend to be at a disadvantage in the dynamics of international relations. But this section suggests that middle powers must be able to benefit from and avoid the risks of adopting technology. Middle powers must effectively flip from the side of conflict leading to war to that side of creating and maintaining peace, and to benefiting from technology.

This paper argues that defense diplomacy enables middle powers to build normative coalitions for responsible technology use. Through regional security dialogues, AI transparency efforts, and digital confidence-building measures (CBMs), they can shape the emerging digital order. This aligns with the concept of “flipping the coin,” where defense diplomacy shifts digital warfare dynamics toward peacebuilding. However, while AI offers strategic advantages in diplomacy, it also presents risks that must be carefully considered in its adaptation and implementation, as explained in the table (Bano, Chaudhri and Zowghi, 2024).

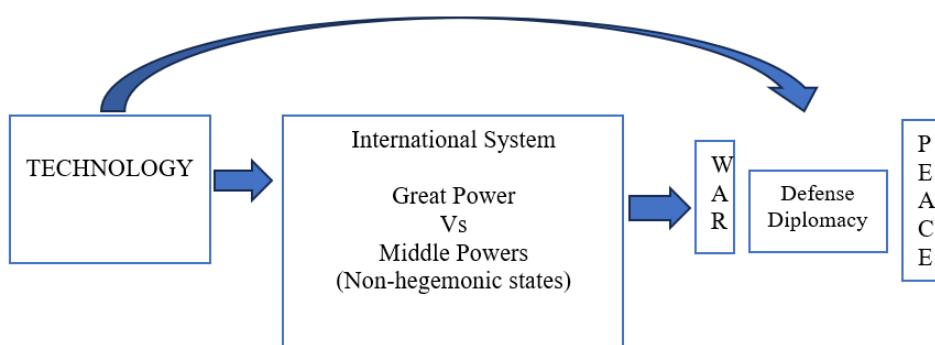
Table 1. Benefits and Risks of AI in Diplomacy
Source: Bano, Chaudhri and Zowghi (2024)

Domain of Diplomacy	Challenges and Risk of Integrating AI in Diplomacy
Bilateral Diplomacy	Misalignment with national interests, sensitive information leaks, and inequitable access to AI
Multilateral Diplomacy	Complexity in coordination, data privacy concerns across borders
Economic Diplomacy	AI biases affecting economic agreements, and misinterpretation of economic data
Cultural Diplomacy	Loss of cultural nuances, potential for cultural misrepresentation
Public Diplomacy	Misinformation, challenges in audience engagement across diverse cultures
Security Diplomacy	Over-reliance on AI for security decisions, potential for escalation
Environmental Diplomacy	Data inaccuracies lead to ineffective environmental policies.
Humanitarian Diplomacy	Ethical dilemmas in AI decision-making during crises
Digital Diplomacy	Cybersecurity risks, ethical challenges in digital engagement
Conflict Resolution and Mediation	AI-generated solutions may lack human empathy and understanding.

As demonstrated in Table 1, due to technology, diplomacy could misalign with national interests and become ineffective in pursuing national interests. Therefore, middle powers should generate the type of diplomacy that could serve as a shield against the risks of using AI. This type of diplomacy could be in the format of defense diplomacy, which fosters trust among the actors and should be maintained in the long term. This paper argues that defense diplomacy has its characteristic that could serve as a shield for peace and war situations in the digital international relations era, as can be seen in the Figure 1. The strategy of defense diplomacy becomes particularly salient for middle powers facing both opportunities and vulnerabilities in the digital era. Defense diplomacy, comprising military dialogue, joint training, and institutional cooperation, serves not only to reduce misunderstandings but also to build long-term confidence and technological competence among states (Hanggarini, 2025). In an environment of digital disruption, such diplomacy allows middle powers to project influence without provoking confrontation.

Therefore, this section argues that middle powers have two options: either to take the benefits or to accept the risks from the influence of technology in the new international relations. When the major powers or the more advanced technological states can dominate the decision-making process of international politics, the middle powers or the weaker technological states can suffer in the system unless they acknowledge the benefits that technology can offer and react positively to it. Similar to the fact that peace and war are two sides of the same coin, the benefits and risks of technology in the new international relations are also two sides of the same coin.

Figure 1. Technology and Defense Diplomacy
Source: Author (2025)



The characteristics of defense diplomacy are based on confidence-building measures, and it serves as an avenue for military discourse, expert-institutional communication, and the sharing of political perspectives on Defense and security. This type of diplomacy is based on a commitment to foster liberal ideas in the form of collaboration for peace and security (Charillon, Balzacq and Ramel, 2020). By promoting and maintaining defense diplomacy, middle powers or non-hegemonic states can act in the interplay of peace and war due to the influence of technology.

For defense diplomacy to be effective in the digital age, middle powers must meet key prerequisites. They need to invest in digital literacy and cyber capabilities to avoid reliance on major powers, equip diplomatic institutions to handle algorithmic decision-making, cybersecurity, and AI ethics, and collaborate with civil society and academia to promote evidence-based, accountable policy. AI and digital technologies are not neutral tools, they are shaped by power, values, and contested influence. Their integration raises ethical and strategic concerns, including privacy, bias, and governance. While major powers dominate technologically, middle powers can promote balance through multilateral engagement and shared norms. By leveraging their unique position, they can

contribute to global stability rather than fragmentation. This effort demands not only digital capacity but also strategic foresight, a commitment to norms, and innovative diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

The digital transformation of international relations, characterized by the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), cyber capabilities, and algorithmic governance, has reshaped security dynamics and global diplomacy. This study demonstrates that advanced technologies have empowered major powers but also present complex ethical, political, and strategic challenges, particularly accountability, transparency, surveillance, and inequality. In technology discussion, middle powers tend to be undermined by the major powers. However, middle powers can manage technological competition while maintaining strategic autonomy by using defense diplomacy. These states may use defense diplomacy to increase their influence and promote regional and global stability. Middle powers can change the course from war to peace by engaging in technological cooperation that increases mutual trust. This study supports the notion that digital technology and AI are more than just tools; they are strategic agents whose governance must reflect democratic principles and shared responsibilities. As a result, this study helps to bridge the gap between traditional theories of international relations and new digital realities by introducing defense diplomacy as a strategic approach for middle powers in digital international relations.

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