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AI for People & Planet

International Relations: Shaping the Policy and Research Agenda

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Executive Summary

The UCL 'Artificial Intelligence (AI) for People and Planet' initiative held a high-level policy roundtable focussed on ***AI and International Relations,*** to assess what challenges and opportunities AI presents in the near and medium terms (e.g. 0 – 10 years).
These technologies have extremely broad impacts, but if everything is a priority then nothing is a priority. The purpose of this document is to inform policy makers, academics, and other decision makers on where public policy efforts and research agendas should focus in the coming years. Key themes, and tensions, included:

- AI's biggest impact on international relations is the evolving **disruption of relations and distribution of power and control**, implicating regions, states, international organisations, private companies, and citizens. AI will affect trust, democracy, sovereignty and democratic legitimacy across these scales. **What will be the key inequalities and asymmetries within and between countries?**
- AI-based technologies are poised to **transform the relationship between the state and the private sector**. Governments should manage this shift to benefit wider society.
- Developing **new institutions and norms of multilateral governance** focussed on AI will be challenging. Should this be attempted, or should we **maximise and strengthen the use of existing global governance mechanisms? If so, how?**
- The global **development of AI standards, regulations, and ethical frameworks is uneven**, but there is scope for influential actors to effect significant change.
- Take a **holistic view** as all solutions involve technology, institutions and the law.
- Look past the hype and **focus on the 'boring' applications of AI (e.g. logistics).** They are ubiquitous and already driving significant social, political, and economic change.
- **COVID-19** accelerates and emphasises some of these trends, rather than creating new ones.

The following document expands on these key themes.

Shifting dynamics of power and control

A global competition is now underway as major powers strive to position themselves at the cutting-edge of AI innovation and the associated economic progress. This process of capacity building could alter the balance of power between different states and regions, and even increase the attractiveness of different political regimes to 'swing states', especially in the Global South. China, for example, is investing significantly in building its domestic AI industry and hopes to become the 'leading AI power by 2030'.

As well as altering relations between states, AI-based technologies are disrupting distributions of power between states, private companies, and individuals. AI-enabled surveillance, 'big nudging', online micro-targeting, and a myriad of other techniques are used by technology companies and governments – or in tandem – to manipulate and control the behaviour of individuals at scale. This appears to be continuing unabated, with wide ranging implications in almost every domain, most notably in elections, public discourse, and access to information.

Furthermore, attention must be paid to the ways in which AI is a force for exclusion and discrimination, thereby reducing the autonomy and control of individuals or marginalised groups. The adoption of certain AI-enabled Internet of Things (IoT) technologies, for example, could exacerbate gender-based violence and domestic abuse.

Novel relationships between the state and private sector

One of the most significant shifts in power is from the state to the private sector, especially with leading technology companies developing AI-based technologies. Although much emphasis is placed on the potential of AI to solve (or exacerbate) global problems, the core components of the technology – data, algorithmic source code, and engineering talent – lie mainly with private companies. Although many AI engineers are trained in public universities, the benefits of working in the private sector are often too hard to ignore.

The lack of agility and AI expertise within governments is cause for concern, as the current system is essentially reliant upon the private sector to develop and deploy AI-based technologies for the good of humanity, which cannot be guaranteed. This evolving situation calls for novel relationships between the state and private sector – underpinned by ideological renewal – whereby government interventions foster the right conditions and increase the likelihood that AI-based technologies are developed, deployed, or even scaled back in a way which advances societal values and progress. For example, the European Union is attempting to build an AI 'ecosystem of excellence', predicated on new private and public sector partnerships, which creates incentives to 'accelerate the adoption of solutions based on AI'.

The potential for AI-based technologies to solve major problems depends upon the effective 'intelligence assembly' capabilities of governments worldwide. Intelligence assembly refers to combining expertise, collective intelligence, technological systems, and data sets from a vast range of public and private sector sources, in order to holistically work on particular issues of public benefit. Conversely, undesirable private-public sector relationships are

emerging whereby authoritarian governments seek to access and synthesise private sector data sets, in order to advance agendas of surveillance and social control.

Finally, AI-based technologies provide opportunities for new actors and agents, including 'amateurs' and groups with limited resources, to carry out activities that previously would have been only capable by major powers. This includes sophisticated surveillance and defence activities such as open source imagery, drone strikes, and even online investigations by groups like Bellingcat. In this sense, there has been a democratisation of technological tools and capabilities, which governments may find difficult to respond to or control, and whose long-term consequences are difficult to predict.

International governance of AI: fit for purpose?

There are currently no global, multilateral bodies exclusively focussed on governing AI-based technologies that would enable states to deliberate, develop norms, and set agendas on issues ranging from algorithmic discrimination to AI in warfare. In an era of rising great power competition, the creation of new multilateral institutions or global AI treaties would be fraught by years of negotiations, and, moreover, is highly unlikely. As such, there is the risk of a 'governance vacuum', whereby global AI standards and innovation evolves in a disparate fashion, with a lack of coordination and cooperation among major powers.

Given the current global context, the focus should be on utilising, maximising, and strengthening the potential and scope of existing instruments and institutions, in order to advance the development of shared standards and solve global problems related to AI.

There are many existing forums in which (some) states, and other actors, such as civil society organisations and private companies, cooperate in this realm. For example, the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development members have agreed upon AI Principles, and organisations like the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers play a key role in the development of global industry standards. Finally, the United Nations – and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals – may help, although this increasingly requires liberal democracies to compete with authoritarian states in UN bodies like the International Telecommunications Union.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights that we live in a global community of risk, and that the greatest global challenges can only be prevented and addressed with effective global governance.

The uneven development of standards, regulations, and ethical frameworks

There are many AI governance strategies and ethics codes developed by states and other bodies worldwide, with broad consensus on the importance of fairness, transparency, and accountability. However, translating such principles into concrete standards, regulations, and ethical frameworks may develop in an uneven manner.

The EU, for example, lacks large global technology companies but has aimed to exert influence through regulation. In the domain of ethical governance, human-centred AI, and democratically legitimate standards, it is currently forging a 'regulatory framework for

trustworthy AI'. The European Commission's recent 'White Paper on AI' could be the first step towards new legislation, which in turn could lead to a 'Brussels effect', where global companies follow at least some EU AI rules in order to participate in its market. However, the ability of the EU to influence the development of regulations and ethical frameworks outside its borders is contested. Moreover, the EU's approach stands in contrast to other influential regimes, such as China. It is likely that highly divergent standards and ethical frameworks will emerge worldwide, and there could be pressure on states to follow specific models. For example, China could use its investments and economic partnerships in African nations in order to embed technological infrastructure underpinned by Chinese 'AI values'.

Various regulatory models are likely to emerge, and many nations will be following the model of one of the major powers. Global regulatory powers like China, the EU, and the U.S. will be considering how best to influence the states within and beyond their spheres of influence. An interesting question is the extent to which the UK will diverge from the EU's standards in this domain. Given the level of UK policy and research activity, UK divergence could be significant, with potential economic implications.

Look past the hype and focus on the 'boring'

The reality of AI does not yet warrant the dystopic 'hype' or utopian fervour surrounding it. As such, decision makers should focus on the more mundane applications of AI-based technologies, which may, unbeknown to most, already be widely deployed and driving significant social, political, and economic change. For example, in the armed forces sector, attention is placed on headline grabbing technologies, such as autonomous weapons or the anticipated use of AI in command and control functions. Focusing on such 'glamorous' or futuristic AI applications detracts from existing AI technologies, in domains such as supply chain management or predictive maintenance, which are transforming militaries worldwide.

Similarly, the rapid and widespread adoption of digital technologies driven by the COVID-19 pandemic is another example of existing AI-based technologies effecting significant change. Technologies that underpin social media, video conferencing, and other communication and collaboration tools are now being used at an unprecedented scale across virtually every domain, representing one of the largest social innovation experiments. For example, it is now standard practice for health care services and education to be delivered remotely through digital platforms. While the technologies that underpin these platforms are not 'glamorous', there is a major opportunity to use them to reduce inequalities, advance social progress, and develop new norms. As such, consideration must be made as to whether digital technologies should be classified as a vital resource or whether access to these technologies should be a fundamental right.

Decision makers can ensure they remain at the forefront of developing trends and subtle changes in global affairs by placing greater emphasis on the routine use of AI-based technologies. Doing so will enable governments to build public acceptance and engender trust in the technologies that are increasingly shaping the world.

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