

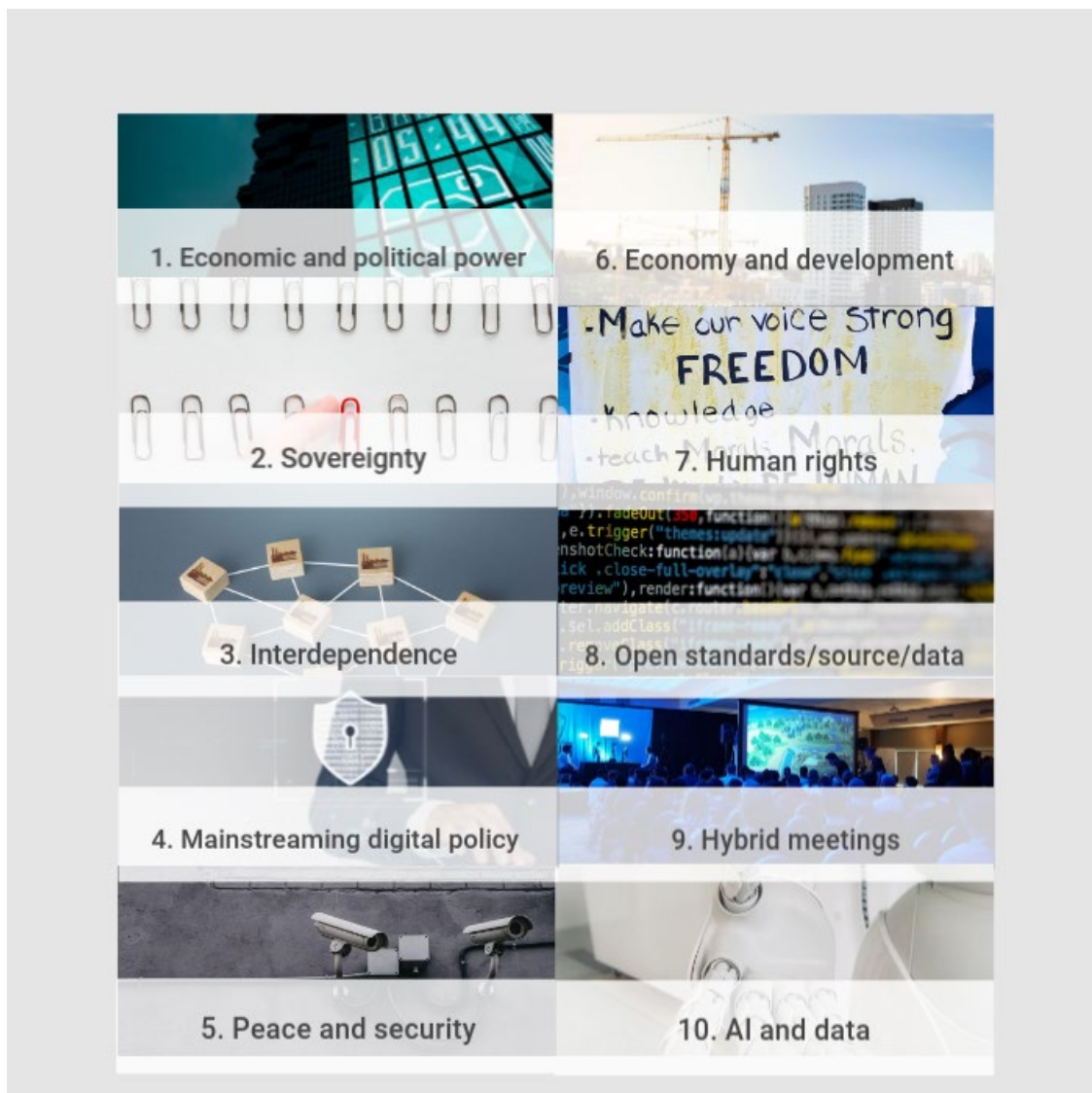
10 Digital Governance and Diplomacy Trends for 2022

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In 2022, ten trends will accelerate across [three main areas of interplay between digital governance and diplomacy](#): digital geopolitics and geoeconomics, new digital topics on diplomatic agendas, and new tools for diplomacy.

You can find a short prediction, details on related events, and policy analysis for each of the 10 trends below.



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Digital geopolitics and geoeconomics

Digital geopolitics and geoeconomics in 2022 will force countries, companies, and citizens to make complex and difficult choices. These choices will be shaped by the **redistribution of economic and political power** across societies worldwide and the drive of countries to achieve digital **sovereignty** – while keeping many of the advantages of the **interdependent** Internet for our social and economic life.

The following trend analysis aims to **make these difficult choices as informed as possible**.

1. Digital redistribution of economic and political power will accelerate.

As we all know, tech companies have enormous economic power. Apple's 2021 market capitalisation of US\$3 trillion is higher than the 2021 GDP of the entire African continent. Microsoft, Amazon, Meta, Alphabet, Alibaba, Tencent, and other tech giants have similar income and profit levels. The power of tech companies goes way beyond the economy. These companies possess

- (a) practically most of the data we generate, and more importantly
- (b) deep and privatised insights on how societies function thanks to the analysis of this data.

This power extends into politics, where tech companies are able to influence elections as well as other aspects of society such as health, culture, and sport.

After an initial shy digital period, governments are now flexing their regulatory muscles. This trend became more obvious during the [COVID-19](#) epidemic. In antitrust and data security cases, the governments are now challenging companies. They are also working to create legislative frameworks, new policies, and new guidelines on AI, cybersecurity, governance, and other issues.

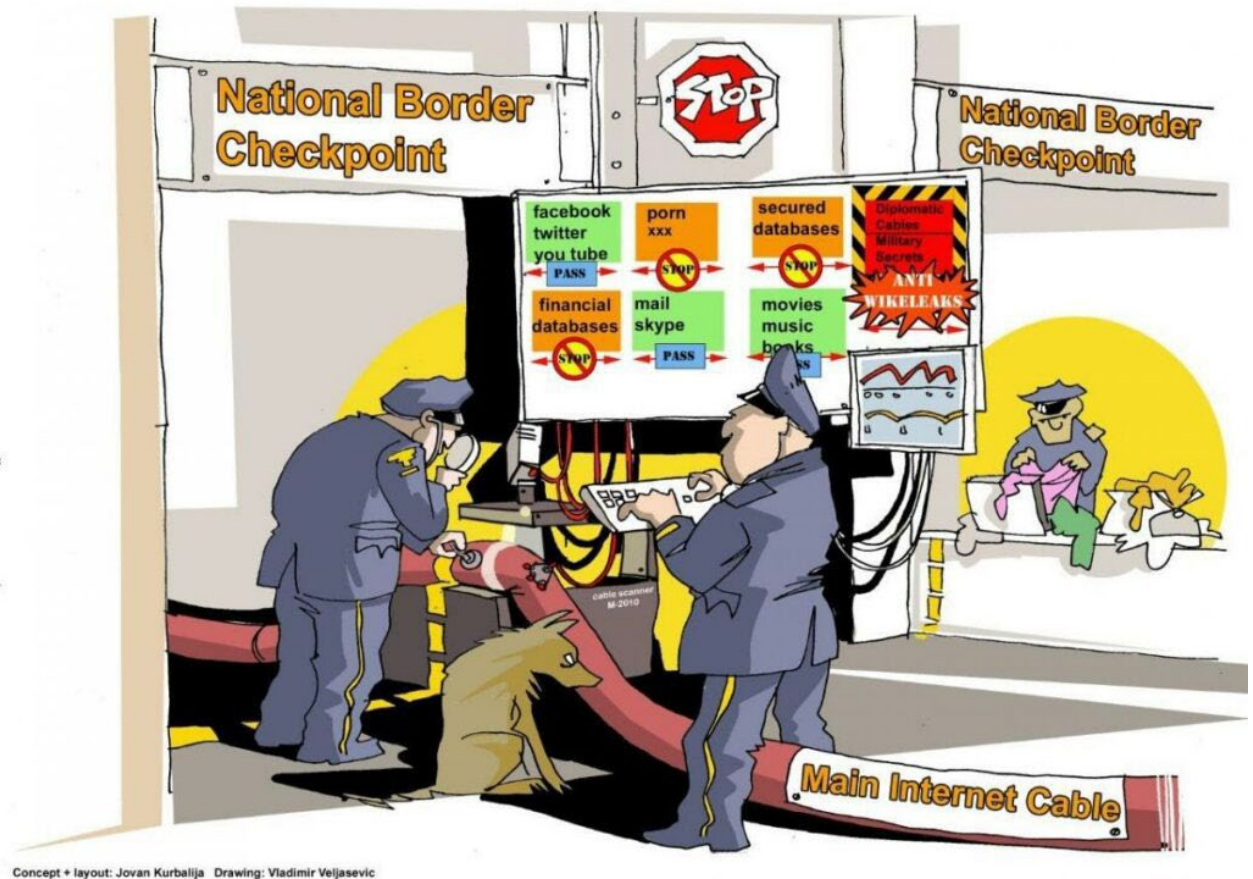
More specifically, the EU has a long tradition of trying to control the economic might of tech companies, mainly through anti-monopoly actions, and over the past few years, data regulations. The Chinese government has been reinstating its jurisdiction over tech giants, starting with Alibaba last year. In the USA, the government's action is much slower. Yet, there is growing bipartisan momentum to curb the power of tech companies. This trend will accelerate further in 2022.

2. The push for digital sovereignty will intensify.

Sovereignty will be one of the keywords in 2022, framed in different ways as *digital*, *data*, *AI*, or *cyber* sovereignty.

The push for digital sovereignty is based on the need for governments to have legal jurisdiction over digital activities on their territory, and to reduce negative spillovers from integrated digital networks.

However, full sovereignty will be much more difficult to achieve in the digital realm due to the networked nature of the internet and the power of tech companies.



Approaches to digital sovereignty will vary, depending on a country's political and legal systems. Legal approaches include national regulation and court judgements while technical ones can vary between data filtering and total internet shutdowns.

The term **sovereignty** will also be used more often in the context of **digital self-determination of citizens and communities**, mainly related to control over data and future AI developments.

3. Digital interdependence will require delicate trade-offs and tough decisions.

Digital interdependence can be witnessed in very practical and tangible ways; from families communicating across continents via instant messaging and voice-over-IP (VOIP) services such as WhatsApp and Viber, to using Amazon and Alibaba for online trade and shopping. Digital interdependence is also recognised in the report of the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation, [*The Age of Digital Interdependence*](#).

Understanding and managing interdependence starts with internet cables, often going under the ocean bed. Data packets are sent through fibre-optic cables, sometimes through satellites, when we send emails or watch videos on YouTube. As it has happened several times, cutting these cables could leave entire countries without internet access. Thus, these cables are a major vulnerability to digital interdependence. [E-commerce](#) transactions and the use of virtual currencies, spreading misinformation, and other digital activity that crosses national borders, are just a few examples of the digital interdependence of modern societies.

[Digital interdependence relies on cooperation](#) between a wide variety of actors. It was for a long time the job of tech professionals who set shared Internet protocols and standards. Today, digital interdependence depends more and more on cooperation among countries themselves and tech companies. Although there are many tensions in digital politics there are some promising examples that could help to build a more effective global digital policy.

One example is the cyber-detente that was triggered in June 2021 by the [Biden Putin summit in Geneva](#). It has helped to shift the relationship between Russia/USA in the cyber domain away from escalation and toward cooperation.

In the economic realm, links between China and the USA are much deeper than they may be perceived. President of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies at Peking University, [Wang Jisi](#),

[argues that](#) 'despite escalating political difficulties, Chinese and American businesses remain deeply integrated in terms of financial, intellectual and production networks. The vast majority of Chinese and American companies are not embracing the idea of decoupling'.

Managing and optimising digital interdependence will be one of the major challenges in times ahead.

Diplomats will have to adapt to the changing geopolitics, geoeconomics and political environment in 2022. Globally, the tech industry's growing economic power will cause new social inequalities. This in turn will lead to tensions and social instabilities. Unfortunately, history has shown that the most powerful countries tend to "export" internal tensions by expanding their economic, territorial and political power to weaker nations. These 'export strategies' often lead to conflict and even war.

The need to avoid this historical pattern and deal with political problems differently this time is behind the UN Secretary-General's call, in his report [Our Common Agenda](#), for genuine dialogue leading to a new type of social contract on all levels of modern society. The core of the social contract will be our shared understanding of the future use and development of new technologies.

In this axial dialogue of our era, **diplomats will have a major role to promote and protect national sovereignty, the pillar of their function, through interdependence with other countries and societies.**

Diplomatic work on a new social contract already started through negotiations of new topics on the diplomatic agenda.

New Topics on the Diplomatic Agenda

Digital topics are a key part of modern diplomacy, having been prominently featured in bilateral encounters such as [the Biden-Putin](#)

[summit](#) and many other regional and global negotiations. Since we began preparing annual predictions 10 years ago, this steady rise in digital diplomacy has been evident. It will accelerate in 2022 around the following trends.

4. Digital is becoming mainstream in international negotiations.

E-trade is becoming just trade. [Digital health](#) is just health. Cybersecurity is core security. As prefixes digital/cyber/e/tech are dropped, technology's impact increases in shaping traditional policy issues. Mainstreaming digital will accelerate in 2022 -in particular in multilateral centres such as Geneva, Vienna, Nairobi, and New York.

[Ministries of foreign](#) affairs and international organisations need to adjust fast to this transition by, among others, adapting their internal organisations, introducing the digital foreign policy, and preparing diplomats to become boundary spanners between technological and traditional policy. Mainstreaming of digital technologies can be followed under three main areas of [global diplomacy](#): **peace and security, economy and development, human rights and humanitarian assistance.**

5. Cyber detente between Russia and the USA, and the maturing global cybersecurity negotiations will help speed up digital **peace and security.**

Over the last six months, [cyber detente took off slowly with the easing of tensions](#) between Russia and the USA. In the media, there are fewer and fewer reports on cyber incidents between two countries. Their experts talk to each other.

The first tangible results began to appear, including Russia's arrest of members of the cyber-criminal group REvil. However, this cyber detente is fragile, especially in the case of a war in Ukraine.

The cyber detente should contribute to multilateral processes on cybersecurity, [the UN Open-ended Working Group](#) (OEWG), cybercrime, [UN Ad Hoc Committee for new cybercrime convention](#)), and cyber disarmament, the UN Government Group of Experts on [LAWS – Lethal Autonomous Weapons System \(UN GGE LAWS\)](#).

The OEWG builds on the first mandate of the OEWG and achievements of the UN GGE including 11 voluntary norms for the good behaviour of states in cyberspace. However, many issues from definitions to practical instruments remain open and unresolved. The OEWG will have plenty of time to build consensus and solutions till 2025 on many unresolved issues in cybersecurity ranging from definitions, interpretations, and practical instruments.

The UN [Cybercrime Convention](#) should be negotiated till September 2023 by the UN 'Ad Hoc Committee'. This is a very ambiguous timetable for complex negotiations especially on finding solutions to integrate legal solutions and experiences developed in the context of the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime.

The control of lethal autonomous weapon system (LAWS) has been negotiated since 2014 in the context of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. Negotiations mobilised civil society under the banner of 'Stop Killer Robots'. Negotiations have not made any major progress mainly due to lack of interest of countries with advanced military technology including Russia and the USA.

More: [Security](#) | [Trust](#)

6. Economy and development in 2022 will be shaped around digital trade negotiations and initiatives to regulate the enormous power of tech companies via antitrust, fiscal, data, and other instruments.

In addition to Brussels, the traditional tech-regulatory hub, more regulation of tech companies is expected in Beijing, as well as in the US Congress and Washington DC. While the USA and China will regulate

their own companies, the EU will continue to deal with foreign tech actors. As the main tech regulatory battle will be happening in Brussels, many other countries will follow the EU closely and enact similar regulations as it has happened with the GDPR.

In 2022, eyes will also turn to the World Trade Organization (WTO) about whether it will continue to keep the positive momentum generated in 2021. Last year a subset of WTO members concluded the negotiations on 'Services domestic regulation' – the first new set of rules on services in more than 20 years. The same 'plurilateral' format has been adopted at the Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) on e-commerce. The JSI has an ambitious agenda that encompass both traditional trade topics (e.g. trade facilitation) and several [digital policy issues](#), such as cross-border data flows, data localisation, online consumer protection, and privacy and network neutrality.

In the last months of 2021 [the co-conveners of the JSI were optimistic](#) that it will be possible to achieve convergence on the majority of issues by the end of 2022. If members of the JSI on e-commerce reach agreement on key substantive issues, this would reinforce members who bet on JSIs as a way to overcome deadlocks. It could also bring the WTO back to the centre stage when it comes to e-commerce. In recent years, most of the regulatory progress came not from multilateral talks, but from regional trade agreements.

The biggest challenge for trade negotiations will not be to achieve progress in 2022 – there seems to be enough political support from e-commerce powerhouses, such as the US and China, and from emerging normative hubs, such as Singapore, Australia and Japan. The biggest challenge will be to achieve balanced outcomes. The liberalisation of e-commerce must not be an end in itself, but also a tool to promote economic prosperity in the developing and least-developed regions of the world.

Digital power concentration and digital inequality are among the top ten major risks that are likely to pose a threat to global stability, according to the [Global Risks Report 2021](#), published by the World Economic Forum (WEF). According to the [2022 report](#), digital inequality is the top short-term risk in low-income countries and in Africa and Latin America, the two regions expected to grow the least in 2022. This means that a more balanced distribution of the wealth generated by the digital economy is not only a matter of improving justice, fairness, and equality but also a strategic decision that would benefit both developing and developed countries.

In the development realm, digitalisation will be the main tool of the UN for revitalising dynamics to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs) ahead of the 2030 deadline.

7. An increased focus on values in digital governance will elevate the importance of human rights online.

Following the Biden administration's value-driven global digital policy strategy, it remains to be seen how it will be implemented in practice. New policy initiatives will certainly land on the agenda of the UN Human Rights Council and other international human rights bodies.

The EU-driven push for cross-cutting coverage on digitalisation and human rights will be further mainstreamed in the work of the UN Human Rights Council in 2022.

In addition, through digitalisation, human rights will also be included in traditional technological spaces like standardisation organisations.

[Artificial intelligence](#) (AI) as well as the metaverse will place human rights at centre of the debate regarding how humanity will manage future technological progress.

8. 'Open' is likely to become the digital governance keyword in 2022.

Open standards, data, and software have shaped the growth of the internet for decades from open internet standards (TCP/IP, HTML) to open source software such as Linux. However, the 'open' approach had a limited impact on the platform economy built around corporate and proprietary systems. This is likely to start to change in 2022 due to the support for the 'open' approach by major geopolitical and economic interests in the following fields:

- **The USA will push for OpenRAN, an open source solution for 5G networks** in order to reverse its lagging behind, mainly, Huawei's proprietary solutions in the 5G field. However, pushback will continue from Ericsson and Nokia who also have proprietary solutions for 5G networks. For example, Ericsson [called for an open market approach](#) for both proprietary and open source solutions for 5G.
- In the strategic and highly competitive semiconductor industry, **there is a push towards open-source RISC-V chip design**, described as the '[Linux of the chip world](#)'. Since design is crucial in chip manufacturing, RISC-V will create tectonic shifts in digital markets.
- **Calls for open data and interoperability between tech platforms** will accelerate especially when some of them potentially lose their market position due to the lockdown of other actors as it has been happening between Facebook/Meta and Apple.

Regardless of the tactical motivation for more 'openness', this trend will strategically contribute towards digital assets as [global public](#) goods.

This 'openness' trend will accelerate in 2022 and years to come, first, in the work of standardisation bodies and, later on, in activities of trade, human rights, development, and other organisations.

New Tools for Diplomatic Activities

From negotiations and drafting to representation and promotion, the digitalisation of diplomatic functions is expected to accelerate in 2022. The use of websites and social media in diplomacy is maturing. In

this prediction, we focus on hybrid meetings, the metaverse, and use of AI and data.

9. Hybrid meetings are becoming 'the new normal' in diplomacy.

Hybrid meetings are where some participants gather in situ and others interact online. In order to ensure equal participation as key pillar of [multilateral diplomacy](#), the future of hybrid meetings will depend on addressing new set of issues and questions in 2022:

- **Technological.** How can we ensure a smooth interplay between in situ and online dynamics of diplomatic meetings?
- **Security.** How can we protect data and confidentiality, especially of delicate negotiations?
- **Protocol and procedures.** Is there a need to adjust existing and introduce new procedures to regulate hybrid meetings?

Ultimately, there will be a question of whether the UN and other international organisations can continue negotiating on privately-owned platforms. On the level of principle, as they meet in the UN buildings to negotiate in real life, they should have an analogous space for [online and hybrid meetings](#).

Metaverse development will question the need for physical meetings as virtual immersion will start matching real ones. Virtual immersion is already entering diplomatic rooms as it was the case with the UN meeting on monitoring the UN's verification mission in Colombia.



Photo by Manuel Elias/UN Photo

10. In 2022, diplomats will use AI and data technologies more for negotiations, policy planning, consular affairs, and engaging with the public.

AI will assist [diplomats in identifying economic](#), social, and cultural patterns in issues they address and negotiate. Tools that help diplomats prepare more efficiently for complex negotiations, such as the [Trade Intelligence and Negotiation Advisor](#) (TINA) by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) will likely proliferate and thrive as part of the diplomat's toolbox. Tools that help diplomats get a better sense of 'the situation on the ground' by [allowing large-scale inclusive conversation](#), such as the work of the Innovation Cell of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (UNDPPA) for inclusive peace in Yemen, are also likely to become more widely used. AI-driven chatbots are likely to be used more for massive engagement with the public on foreign policy issues.

However, input from AI, data, and quantification should be used with utmost caution. As diplomacy is more of an art form than science or, in the language of AI, more of a ‘thick conceptual problem’, diplomats should rely on AI mainly to identify correlations that could inspire their strategies and negotiations. They should be very cautious in relying on any causal attributions and causal recommendations provided by AI systems.

Two examples of the [contextual use of AI](#), data, and quantification are [Diplo’s Data Sandbox](#) that **identifies patterns among diverse data sets on development, economy, and health** and [Diplo’s Speech Generator](#), an experiment for AI-supported speech writing based on **previous statements**on, in this case, cybersecurity.

In 2022, diplomacy will be shaped by continuity and change: change in its core purpose to solve conflicts peacefully and; change in the geopolitical environment in which diplomacy operates, new digital topics on diplomatic agenda, and new tools diplomats will use.

In 2022 at Diplo, we celebrate 20 years of dealing with digital developments by intensifying our research, training, and publishing activities.

<https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/10-digital-diplomacy-and-governance-trends-for-2022/>