



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE  
UNITED NATIONS | NEW YORK

## CONTRIBUTION BY THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE

### “The role of technology in shaping treaty-making practice”

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This contribution is made in response to the UN Office of Legal Affairs’s Note Verbale LA 41/TS/2024/DN inviting States to submit information for a report that the UN Treaty Section will be preparing on practice related to the sub-topic of the debate for the agenda item, “Strengthening and promoting the international treaty framework”, at the 80th session. It outlines Singapore’s efforts in leveraging technology in the areas of treaty negotiations, drafting, analysis, signings, and capacity building.

#### **Introduction**

2           The global community faces increasingly complex and interconnected challenges that demand cooperative and effective multilateral responses. While the international treaty framework has long served as the cornerstone of cooperation in addressing global issues such as peace and security, climate change, human rights, and international trade, in a rapidly evolving world shaped by digital transformation, it is imperative that the treaty-making process be modernised and enhanced to effectively respond to these challenges. Leveraging technology in treaty-making is a crucial step in ensuring that treaties remain relevant, efficient, and accessible to all stakeholders. Singapore takes the view that the use of technological innovations, including during periods where it is challenging for parties to meet in-person, can strengthen and promote the international treaty framework, while preserving the integrity and inclusivity of multilateral diplomacy. This paper highlights Singapore’s experience on the use of technology in the treaty-making process, providing real-world examples of how technology can enhance international cooperation.

#### **Digital Platforms for Treaty Negotiation and Drafting**

3           In recent years, technological advancements have greatly enhanced the way States and international organisations engage in diplomatic negotiations. The

use of digital platforms for virtual negotiations can enhance inclusivity and accessibility, and streamline processes. These platforms can facilitate real-time collaboration among negotiators, ensuring timely discussions and the exchange of information across borders. By utilising secure online tools for drafting and editing treaty texts, States and international organisations have at their disposal tools that would enable them to overcome challenges that prevent in-person negotiations.

4 Singapore has been utilising digital platforms for international negotiations. For instance, during the negotiations of the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) with Chile and New Zealand, Singapore leveraged secure online platforms to conduct negotiations and facilitate communication between all parties. These digital tools enabled negotiators to exchange proposals and track discussions efficiently, ensuring that treaty negotiations could progress without delay despite the COVID-19 pandemic at that time.

5 The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, too has leveraged on various online meeting platforms to carry out meetings. This was particularly useful during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel restrictions and other restrictions and challenges posed by the pandemic did not prevent the negotiation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which involved 15 countries across the Asia-Pacific region. These countries utilised digital platforms to conduct their discussions, and the negotiations continued seamlessly. The ability to negotiate virtually ensured that one of the world's largest free-trade agreements could be successfully concluded amidst the pandemic, highlighting how technology can enable the timely and effective conclusion of complex international agreements.

### **E-signatures and Digital Authentication**

6 Electronic signatures and digital authentication tools are a secure and efficient means of formalising treaties and agreements. By enabling States to sign and ratify treaties remotely, e-signatures can potentially reduce the logistical and financial burdens associated with an in-person signing ceremony. Such technologies also ensure that the treaty-making process is not unduly delayed by the need for signatures to be in wet-ink or for signatories to be physically present during the signing. Digital authentication technologies, including blockchain, can enhance the integrity of treaty signatures and ratifications, offering an immutable and transparent record of commitments made by States.

7 Singapore has been actively leveraging on the use of electronic signatures for the formalisation of agreements. A prominent example of this is

Singapore's use of e-signatures by way of a third-party e-signing platform during the signing ceremonies of DEPA and the Singapore-Australia Digital Economy Agreement. The agreements, which focus on advancing digital trade, e-commerce, and data flows between the countries concerned, were concluded using electronic signatures, illustrating how technology can facilitate the signing of agreements in "real-time" despite the travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Artificial Intelligence in Treaty Drafting, Negotiation, and Analysis**

8 Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the potential to significantly transform the treaty-making process by enhancing the efficiency and accuracy of treaty drafting, negotiation, and analysis. For example, AI tools like big data analysis already provide insights into treaty impacts through climate modelling which have informed discussions such as those relating to the Paris Agreement. AI tools can also assist negotiators by analysing large volumes of legal texts and documents, identifying patterns, inconsistencies, and potential gaps in treaty drafts. By using Natural Language Processing and machine learning algorithms, AI can offer suggestions on improving language, ensuring clarity, and harmonising terms across different treaty provisions. This could reduce the time required for revisions and contribute to clearer, more precise legal language.

9 To this end, Singapore developed an in-house AI-powered search engine that enables the government to rapidly process vast amounts of text in the Singapore treaty database, thereby allowing officials and negotiators to carry out research more efficiently, which enables them to focus on the core aspects of the treaty negotiations without being overwhelmed by administrative tasks. Singapore also regularly assesses the suitability of off-the-shelf AI-powered products and databases for use in legal analysis.

### **Capacity-Building through Technology**

10 Technology also plays a critical role in building the capacity of States, particularly developing countries, to engage in the treaty-making process. Online training programs, digital resources, and virtual workshops, such as those offered by the National University of Singapore's Centre for International Law can help equip diplomats, legal experts, and negotiators with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate the complexities of international law and treaty negotiations without the costs associated with such in-person activities.

11 Singapore has made significant strides in promoting capacity-building through the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP), which offers training and assistance to developing countries. The SCP offers e-learning modules and virtual seminars on a wide range of topics, including international law and treaty negotiation. By leveraging these online tools, Singapore is able to assist diplomats and officials in other countries to be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively participate in international treaty-making.

## **Conclusion**

12 The global treaty framework must evolve to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Technology, particularly AI, offers significant potential to enhance the efficiency, inclusivity, and transparency of treaty-making processes. By embracing digital platforms, AI-driven tools, e-signatures, data management systems, and capacity-building technologies, the international community can strengthen the treaty framework and ensure that it remains responsive to the needs of an interconnected and rapidly changing world. It is incumbent upon us, the Member States of the United Nations, to explore and implement these technological innovations, ensuring that the treaty-making process remains an effective tool for cooperation, peace, and sustainable development for generations to come.

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