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Identifying relevant large-scale predictors for sub-seasonal precipitation forecast using explainable neural networks

Niclas Rieger¹, Álvaro Corral¹, Estrella Olmedo², Linus Magnusson³, Laura Ferranti³, Florian Pappenberger³, and Antonio Turiel²

¹Centre for Mathematical Research, Bellaterra, Spain (nrieger@crm.cat)

²Institute of Marine Science (ICM-CSIC), Barcelona, Spain

³European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMWF), Reading, United Kingdom

The last few years have seen an ever growing interest in weather predictions on sub-seasonal time scales ranging from 2 weeks to about 2 months. By forecasting aggregated weather statistics, such as weekly precipitation, it has indeed become possible to overcome the theoretical predictability limit of 2 weeks, bringing life to time scales which historically have been known as the “predictability desert”. The growing success at these time scales is largely due to the identification of weather and climate processes providing sub-seasonal predictability, such as the Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO) and anomaly patterns of global sea surface temperature (SST), sea surface salinity, soil moisture and snow cover. Although much has been gained by these studies, a comprehensive analysis of potential predictors and their relative relevance to forecast sub-seasonal rainfall is still missing.

At the same time, data-driven machine learning (ML) models have proved to be excellent candidates to tackle two common challenges in weather forecasting: (i) resolving the non-linear relationships inherent to the chaotic climate system and (ii) handling the steadily growing amounts of Earth observational data. Not surprisingly, a variety of studies have already displayed the potential of ML models to improve the state-of-the-art dynamical weather prediction models currently in use for sub-seasonal predictions, in particular for temperatures, precipitation and the MJO. It seems therefore inevitable that the future of sub-seasonal prediction lies in the combination of both the dynamical, process-based and the statistical, data-driven approach.

In the advent of this new age of combined Neural Earth System Modeling, we want to provide insight and guidance for future studies (i) to what extent large-scale teleconnections on the sub-seasonal scale can be resolved by purely data-driven models and (ii) what the relative contributions of the individual large-scale predictors are to make a skillful forecast. To this end, we build neural networks to predict sub-seasonal precipitation based on a variety of large-scale predictors derived from oceanic, atmospheric and terrestrial sources. As a second step, we apply

layer-wise relevance propagation to examine the relative importance of different climate modes and processes in skillful forecasts.

Preliminary results show that the skill of our data-driven ML approach is comparable to state-of-the-art dynamical models suggesting that current operational models are able to correctly model large-scale teleconnections within the climate system. The ML model achieves highest skills over the tropical Pacific, the Maritime Continent and the Caribbean Sea, in agreement with dynamical models. By investigating the relative importance of those large-scale predictors for skillful predictions, we find that the MJO and processes associated with SST anomalies like the El Niño-Southern Oscillation, the Pacific decadal oscillation and the Atlantic meridional mode all play an important role for individual regions along the tropics.