



Digital Diplomacy and the Changing Nature of International Relations

Areeba Zaman

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ABSTRACT

Digital diplomacy has emerged as a significant dimension of contemporary international relations, transforming how governments communicate, negotiate, manage crises, construct national images, and engage foreign populations. This article examines the changing nature of international relations under conditions of digital connectivity. It adopts a qualitative and integrative review of major scholarship on digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, communication power, soft power, social media, and hybrid diplomatic practices. The analysis argues that digital diplomacy should not be understood merely as diplomats' use of social-networking platforms. Rather, it represents a broader institutional process through which digital technologies reshape diplomatic norms, organizational structures, professional routines, political authority, and relationships between states and global audiences. The study finds that digitalization has reduced the distinction between domestic and international communication, accelerated diplomatic decision-making, and enabled political leaders and foreign ministries to communicate directly with international audiences. It has also increased the influence of non-state actors, including technology companies, civil-society organizations, journalists, diaspora communities, online activists, and individual users. Consequently, international communication is becoming more decentralized, interactive, competitive, and publicly visible. At the same time, digital diplomacy creates serious challenges. The speed of online communication can produce premature policy responses, diplomatic misunderstandings, reputational crises, and pressure for immediate action. Disinformation, algorithmic polarization, cyber-attacks, manipulated visual content, automated accounts, and platform dependence complicate the ability of governments to maintain credible diplomatic narratives.

Independent Researcher, Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: areeba.zaman@example.com

Introduction:

Diplomacy has historically been associated with official representatives communicating through embassies, confidential correspondence, formal negotiations, diplomatic conferences, and carefully controlled public statements. These practices developed around the assumption that governments were the principal actors in international relations and that diplomatic communication would generally move through recognized institutional channels. Digital technologies have substantially altered this environment. Foreign ministries, embassies, heads of government, international organizations, and individual diplomats now communicate through websites, social platforms, virtual meetings, mobile applications, digital dashboards, and real-time information networks. Digital diplomacy broadly refers to the use of digital technologies in the conduct of diplomacy and foreign policy. However, the concept extends beyond the use of particular platforms. It includes the transformation of diplomatic institutions, professional practices, information management, public engagement, negotiation, crisis communication, consular services, policy coordination, and international representation. Scholars increasingly argue that diplomacy can no longer be divided neatly into “digital” and “non-digital” forms because digital systems have become embedded in the everyday environment in which diplomatic work occurs. Digitalization has also changed the communication structure of international relations. Traditional diplomatic communication was predominantly hierarchical: governments developed policies, diplomats communicated them, and mass-media institutions transmitted selected information to the public. Contemporary digital communication is more networked. Citizens can respond directly to diplomatic messages, journalists can challenge official narratives in real time, and non-state actors can circulate alternative interpretations across national borders. A single video, statement, image, hash tag, or diplomatic exchange can rapidly become part of international political debate. This transformation is connected with the growing importance of soft power. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction, legitimacy, values, and persuasive appeal rather than coercion or material payment. Digital platforms provide governments with new mechanisms for presenting their culture, policies, political values, development achievements, humanitarian activities, and foreign-policy objectives.

Conceptual Foundations and Historical Evolution of Digital Diplomacy:

Digital diplomacy developed from earlier traditions of public diplomacy, international broadcasting, cultural relations, information campaigns, and government communication with foreign populations. Public diplomacy differs from conventional diplomacy because it seeks to influence or develop relationships with people outside formal state institutions. Meissen (2005) and Payment (2013) explain that contemporary public diplomacy increasingly emphasizes dialogue, relationship-building, networking, and mutual engagement rather than the one-directional distribution of official information. The expansion of the internet initially encouraged governments to create official websites and electronic information services. These early practices were commonly described as e-diplomacy or internet diplomacy. Communication largely remained one-directional: institutions published statements and audiences received them. The development of interactive platforms produced a second phase in which users could respond, share content, form communities, and participate in political discussion. Cull (2013) describes this transition as the movement toward public diplomacy 2.0, characterized by networked relationships, user participation, and interactive communication. Digital diplomacy became more strategically important as mobile connectivity, social media, data analytics, and visual communication entered mainstream political life. Foreign ministries began using digital channels not only to distribute information but also to monitor public opinion, identify emerging crises, coordinate institutional responses, engage journalists, communicate with diaspora communities, and counter hostile narratives. Digital communication gradually moved from being an optional public-relations activity to becoming part of the diplomatic operating environment. Manor (2019) argues that the digitalization of public diplomacy is a long-term institutional process. Digital transformation

challenges the values, norms, objectives, organizational routines, and working procedures of diplomatic institutions. This perspective is important because a foreign ministry does not become digitally effective simply by opening social-media accounts. Effective digital diplomacy requires trained personnel, institutional coordination, audience analysis, cyber security, rapid approval systems, multilingual communication, and mechanisms for evaluating whether online engagement contributes to foreign-policy objectives. Bola and Holmes (2015) similarly understand digital diplomacy as a form of change management within international politics. Digital technologies create external pressure on ministries to become faster, more transparent, and more responsive. Yet diplomatic institutions are traditionally cautious and hierarchical because their decisions may affect national security, international law, bilateral relationships, and crisis stability. Digital diplomacy therefore produces tension between the speed of communication and the careful consideration required in foreign policy. The evolution of digital diplomacy can consequently be understood through three broad stages. The first involved digitizing existing communication, such as publishing official documents online. The second involved interactive engagement through social media and networked communication. The third involves deeper institutional transformation through artificial intelligence, data analytics, virtual diplomacy, automated monitoring, cyber security systems, and integration of online and offline diplomatic activity.

Transformation of Diplomatic Actors, Institutions, and Audiences:

One of the most important effects of digital diplomacy is the expansion of actors participating in international communication. Traditional international-relations theory generally presents sovereign states as the principal units of diplomacy. Although states remain central, the digital environment enables international organizations, multinational corporations, technology companies, civil-society organizations, research institutions, journalists, activists, diaspora groups, armed organizations, and influential individuals to communicate across borders and participate in international political debates. Technology companies occupy a particularly powerful position because they own or manage many of the platforms on which digital diplomacy occurs. Their algorithms influence which diplomatic messages become visible, which issues receive public attention, and which users are able to participate. Platform rules concerning content moderation, account verification, political advertising, privacy, data access, and account suspension can have diplomatic consequences. This creates a form of privatized communication governance in which corporate decisions affect state representation and international debate. Digital diplomacy also changes the position of ambassadors and individual diplomats. Traditionally, diplomats represented their governments through controlled institutional statements and private negotiations. Online communication gives individual diplomats greater public visibility and allows them to develop recognizable professional identities. A diplomat may explain policy, respond to public questions, promote cultural cooperation, engage journalists, and communicate during emergencies. However, greater visibility creates greater personal and institutional risk. An inaccurate statement, inappropriate image, emotional response, or misunderstood comment can damage bilateral relations and undermine the credibility of a foreign ministry. Audiences have simultaneously changed from passive recipients into active participants. Foreign publics can comment on diplomatic statements, challenge government narratives, organize campaigns, produce competing content, and communicate directly with officials. Digital diplomacy therefore requires listening as well as broadcasting. Governments that use digital platforms only to distribute official statements may achieve visibility without developing meaningful relationships. The transformation of audiences also reduces the boundary between domestic and foreign communication. A statement intended for an international audience can be immediately interpreted by domestic political parties, journalists, and citizens. Similarly, domestic political speeches can be translated, circulated, and analyzed abroad. Governments must therefore consider multiple audiences at the same time. Messages designed to satisfy domestic supporters may cause diplomatic tension internationally, while conciliatory messages directed toward foreign governments may

be criticized domestically. This environment creates what Castells (2009) describes more generally as communication power: the capacity to influence social meaning through networks of information and representation. International influence increasingly depends not only on material resources but also on the ability to produce credible narratives, build digital communities, respond to competing interpretations, and maintain public attention. Smaller states can potentially use creative communication to increase their visibility, but powerful states and well-resourced organizations retain advantages in technology, data, staffing, language capabilities, and global media access. Digital diplomacy has therefore made international relations more participatory without making them fully democratic. Greater access enables new voices to enter diplomatic discussion, but unequal resources, digital exclusion, online harassment, platform algorithms, and government restrictions continue to shape whose voices are heard. The digital sphere reproduces many existing inequalities while creating some opportunities for less powerful actors to challenge dominant narratives.

Real-Time Communication, Negotiation, and Crisis Management:

Digital communication has significantly accelerated the pace of diplomacy. News, images, and public reactions now circulate internationally within minutes. Political leaders and foreign ministries are expected to respond rapidly to conflicts, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, humanitarian emergencies, diplomatic incidents, and controversial statements. Sib (2012) describes this environment as real-time diplomacy, in which the media cycle reduces the time available for policymakers to interpret events and prepare responses. Speed can strengthen diplomatic performance. Governments can issue emergency information, correct inaccurate reports, provide consular guidance, coordinate humanitarian assistance, and reassure international audiences without waiting for conventional media coverage. Embassies can communicate evacuation procedures, visa information, travel warnings, and emergency contact arrangements directly to citizens. Digital platforms also enable rapid coordination between headquarters, overseas missions, international organizations, and local partners. However, speed can weaken diplomatic judgment. Initial information during a crisis is often incomplete, emotional, manipulated, or inaccurate. Pressure to respond immediately can produce contradictory statements or commitments that have not been fully considered. A message distributed online may be interpreted as an official policy position even when it was produced before institutional consultation. Digital diplomacy therefore requires clear authorization procedures and a balance between responsiveness and verification. Social media can also support negotiation by helping governments signal intentions; prepare public opinion, and present agreements as politically legitimate. Buncombe's (2017) analysis of Iran–United States relations demonstrates how social media may contribute to struggles over recognition and create political space for diplomatic change. Online communication does not replace confidential negotiations, but it can shape the symbolic and public environment surrounding them. Digital platforms can serve as channels for informal diplomatic signaling. Governments may use carefully worded messages, images, or public interactions to indicate openness, displeasure, restraint, or commitment. Such signals can supplement formal diplomatic communication. Yet they are also vulnerable to misinterpretation. Online messages lack many contextual features of face-to-face communication, including tone, immediate clarification, non-verbal behavior, and confidential explanation. Virtual meetings have further transformed negotiation and multilateral diplomacy. Video-conferencing systems allow international consultations to continue when travel is restricted, expensive, or politically difficult. Virtual diplomacy can reduce costs and increase participation by officials who might otherwise be excluded. Nevertheless, sensitive negotiations often depend on personal trust, informal conversation, private compromise, and the ability to read the behavior of other participants. These elements are difficult to reproduce in a fully virtual environment. The result is an emerging hybrid model. Bola and Manor (2022) distinguish between digital adaptation, in which diplomats use new technologies to perform existing tasks, and digital adoption, in which institutions reorganize practices around digital capabilities. Their analysis

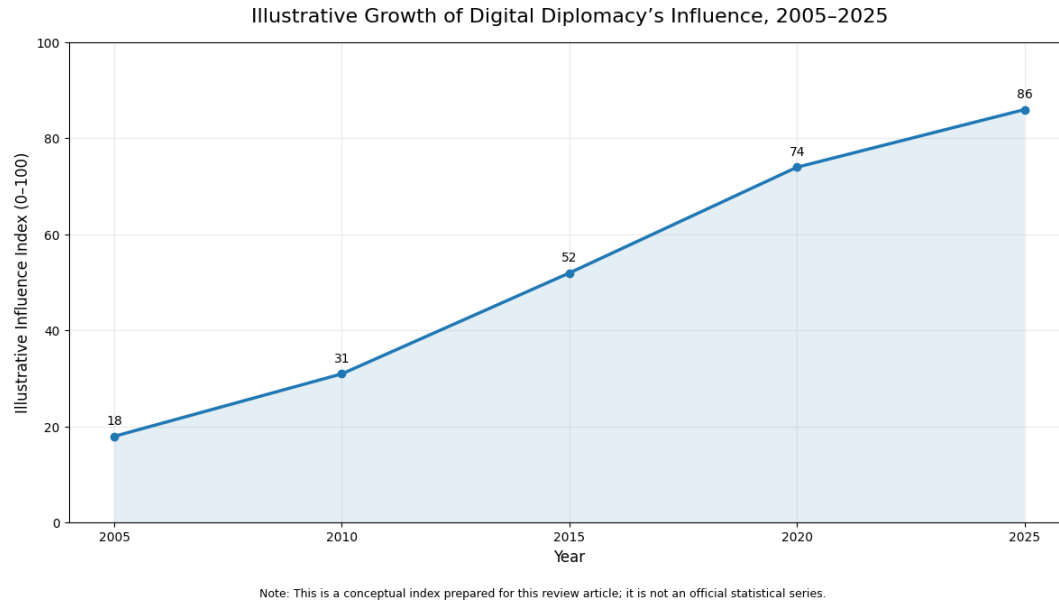
suggests that online and offline diplomacy should not be treated as competing alternatives. Effective diplomacy increasingly combines virtual communication, public engagement, data analysis, private negotiation, formal protocol, and face-to-face relationship-building.

Digital Power, Disinformation, Cyber security, and Platform Governance:

Digital diplomacy creates new resources of international influence, but it also produces vulnerabilities. Governments can use online communication to promote national culture, explain foreign policy, attract investment, develop tourism, support educational exchange, and strengthen relationships with diaspora communities. Digital channels are relatively inexpensive compared with international broadcasting networks or permanent physical campaigns, making them attractive to states with limited diplomatic resources. Nevertheless, digital visibility should not be confused with diplomatic effectiveness. Numbers of followers, views, shares, or reactions measure attention, but they do not necessarily demonstrate trust, persuasion, policy influence, or improved bilateral relations. Highly visible content may produce negative reactions, while less visible engagement with specialized audiences may contribute more directly to diplomatic objectives. Evaluation should therefore connect communication indicators with clearly defined foreign-policy outcomes. Credibility remains the most important foundation of digital influence. States cannot sustainably build soft power through attractive communication while pursuing policies that audiences perceive as inconsistent, coercive, or illegitimate. Digital communication can amplify national reputation, but it can also expose contradictions between official narratives and political behavior. Governments must therefore view digital diplomacy as an extension of policy rather than a substitute for policy. Disinformation is among the most serious challenges. False or misleading claims may be deliberately circulated to weaken public trust, damage a state's reputation, influence elections, intensify social divisions, or create confusion during crises. The use of automated accounts and coordinated networks can make minority viewpoints appear widely supported. Artificially produced images, video, and audio can further blur the distinction between authentic and manipulated content. Attempts to counter disinformation create their own diplomatic difficulties. Excessively aggressive responses may increase the visibility of false claims or make governments appear defensive. Effective counter-disinformation strategies require rapid verification, credible evidence, coordination with independent experts, media literacy, and trusted communication networks. Foreign ministries must distinguish between legitimate criticism, inaccurate reporting, politically motivated interpretation, and organized information manipulation. Cyber security is equally important because diplomatic institutions possess sensitive information. Cyber-attacks may target confidential communication, negotiation documents, visa systems, embassy networks, databases, and senior officials' accounts. A compromised diplomatic account can distribute false statements that appear authentic. Digital diplomacy must therefore be supported by strong authentication, encrypted communication, staff training, incident-response planning, secure data storage, and regular cyber security assessments. Platform dependence represents another structural risk. Diplomatic institutions do not fully control privately owned communication platforms. Changes in algorithms, ownership, moderation policies, technical access, or commercial priorities can reduce the reach of diplomatic communication. Governments should consequently avoid relying on a single platform. Official websites, mailing systems, press briefings, direct media relations, public events, and diplomatic networks remain necessary for resilient communication. These challenges demonstrate why digital diplomacy involves more than communication specialists. It requires cooperation among diplomats, cyber security professionals, regional experts, data analysts, linguists, legal advisers, intelligence agencies, and policy officials. Heeling and Bromberg (2021) emphasize that digital transformation should be studied through the everyday practices connecting technology, institutional routines, agency, and diplomatic culture.

Implications for Developing States and the Future of International Relations:

Digital diplomacy offers developing countries opportunities to participate more actively in international communication. A state with limited conventional media influence can use digital platforms to present its foreign-policy positions, communicate development priorities, promote trade and tourism, engage diaspora communities, and contribute to international debates. Effective communication can help smaller states increase visibility beyond what their material capabilities might otherwise permit. The principal advantage is not simply low communication cost. Digital diplomacy enables targeted engagement with specific audiences, including investors, academics, journalists, humanitarian organizations, international students, tourists, and overseas communities. Multilingual digital communication can connect diplomatic missions with audiences who may not receive information through conventional international media. However, developing states frequently face institutional limitations. These may include insufficient training, fragmented communication responsibilities, slow approval procedures, inadequate research capacity, weak cyber security, limited foreign-language content, inconsistent messaging, and dependence on individual officials rather than permanent institutional systems. Establishing social-media accounts without addressing these limitations may produce activity without strategic effectiveness. Pakistan provides a relevant example of institutional movement toward digital diplomacy. Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports that a Strategic Communications Division was established in 2020 to modernize its communication toolkit and strengthen technology-driven engagement with international audiences. The ministry has also organized digital-diplomacy training, including a virtual programme attended by 130 Pakistani diplomats serving in more than 100 overseas missions. For Pakistan and comparable developing countries, digital diplomacy should be built around several institutional principles. First, communication must be connected with long-term foreign-policy priorities rather than short-term political publicity. Second, embassies require professional staff capable of producing accurate, multilingual, and culturally appropriate content. Third, foreign ministries need monitoring and analytical systems that identify audience concerns without reducing diplomacy to popularity measurements. Fourth, credible digital diplomacy requires coordination between official institutions. Contradictory statements from different ministries or political leaders can weaken international trust. Fifth, governments must protect professional diplomatic communication from excessive domestic political polarization. Foreign-policy messaging should reflect national interests and verified institutional positions rather than partisan online conflict. The future of international relations is likely to be shaped by artificial intelligence, predictive analysis, machine translation, virtual environments, and increasingly sophisticated information campaigns. Artificial intelligence may assist diplomats by summarizing large volumes of information, identifying emerging narratives, translating content, and supporting scenario analysis. However, it can also reproduce bias, generate false information, enable surveillance, and produce convincing manipulated content. Digital inequality will remain an important international issue. States with advanced technological infrastructure, access to large datasets, and influential technology industries will possess advantages in communication, surveillance, cyber security, and information analysis. International organizations may therefore need to develop norms concerning artificial intelligence, digital sovereignty, cross-border data, platform accountability, cyber conflict, privacy, and the use of automated systems in political communication.



Summary:

Digital diplomacy is changing the nature of international relations by altering how political authority, communication, representation, and international influence operate. Diplomacy is no longer confined to confidential exchanges between official representatives. Governments now communicate in a global environment where citizens, journalists, companies, activists, international organizations, diaspora communities, and hostile information networks can respond immediately. This transformation has increased the speed and visibility of diplomatic activity. Foreign ministries can communicate directly with international audiences, deliver consular information, explain policy, respond to emergencies, and participate in global debates without depending entirely on conventional media organizations. Digital communication also provides less powerful states with opportunities to promote national narratives and engage specialized audiences. At the same time, digital diplomacy has made the diplomatic environment more unpredictable. Online statements can produce immediate political consequences. Messages prepared for one audience may be interpreted differently by another. Information can be removed from its original context, translated inaccurately, manipulated, or used in domestic political conflict. Diplomatic communication must therefore be designed for interconnected domestic and international audiences. Digital diplomacy has also expanded the concept of power in international relations. Material capabilities remain important, but control over communication networks, data, narratives, attention, and technological infrastructure has become increasingly significant. States compete not only over territory and economic resources but also over visibility, legitimacy, interpretation, and public trust. The influence of technology companies raises major questions about sovereignty and governance. Platforms structure diplomatic visibility through privately designed algorithms and rules. Governments depend on these platforms while possessing limited control over their technical and commercial decisions. This creates a complex relationship in which technology companies function simultaneously as businesses, communication infrastructures, political actors, and regulators of international discourse.

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