DIGITAL DISRUPTIONS: EMERGING TRENDS IN MODERN DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT. *Digital diplomacy refers to the use of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet, to advance diplomatic objectives and foreign policy goals. This practice involves leveraging virtual platforms to project a positive national image and promote a country's foreign policy orientations within the digital space. One of the most notable changes in contemporary diplomacy is the rise of digital diplomacy. In an era dominated by technology and social media, diplomats are utilizing digital platforms to connect with global audiences, influence public opinion, and advance their nation's interests. The purpose of this article is to analyze the concept of digital diplomacy and its contemporary trends. The study also aims to explore how digital diplomacy is employed in foreign affairs by examining the progression of digital technology integration in Uzbekistan.*

The author maintains the idea that state-based diplomacy requires hierarchy and coordination within the state system. Yet, even in such a system, diplomats need a sufficiently high level of flexibility to practice the engagement strategy of digital diplomacy.

KEYWORDS: *diplomacy; digital diplomacy; foreign policy; online tools; Uzbekistan; Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

Introduction

Diplomacy, as the practice of managing international relations, has been a fundamental aspect of human interaction for centuries.

Traditional diplomacy often involved interactions solely between nation-states. In other words, diplomacy has been the prerogative of ambassadors and envoys representing Ministries of Foreign Affairs and central government offices, with mandates confined to the affairs of the state. However, in the rapidly evolving landscape of the 21st century, diplomacy is undergoing significant transformations to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by an interconnected and complex world.

Digital Disruptions: Emerging Trends in Modern Diplomacy

The digital revolution, the rise of non-state actors, global challenges, economic interdependence, and the power of public opinion have reshaped the diplomatic landscape.

Diplomats now engage in digital diplomacy, embrace multistakeholder approaches, address global challenges, promote economic cooperation, leverage public diplomacy, and respond to crises.

One of the most notable changes in contemporary diplomacy is the rise of digital diplomacy

In the contemporary landscape characterized by rapid technological advancement and the pervasive influence of social media, diplomatic practice has increasingly incorporated digital tools as a means of global engagement. Through the strategic use of online platforms, diplomats are now able to influence international public discourse, advocate national interests, and interact with foreign publics in real time. This shift toward digital diplomacy has significantly reduced reliance on conventional communication channels, thereby enhancing both transparency and the direct accessibility of diplomatic initiatives.

Moreover, in the 21st century, diplomacy has become increasingly multistakeholder in nature. Management of international development co-operation no longer confines itself to the state, but extends to NGOs and civil society organizations. Diplomats are engaging with a wide range of actors, including non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, businesses, and individuals. This shift recognizes the growing importance of non-state actors in shaping global affairs and emphasizes the need for inclusive decision-making processes. Moreover, nowadays diplomats must navigate the complexities of cyberspace, including information warfare and online disinformation, while also safeguarding privacy, security, and the integrity of diplomatic channels.

In an era of advanced global information exchange, the use of digital diplomacy by state leaders and government officials to engage with both domestic populations and international audiences is becoming increasingly essential. Moreover, digital diplomacy serves as one of the most effective tools for conducting public diplomacy and fostering a positive image of the country. Today, ministries of Foreign Affairs and state diplomats should adapt their traditional roles and functions from inward-looking, exclusive, and secretive

activity into a more reachable, outgoing, and inclusive diplomacy.

The Impact of Social Media on Diplomatic Engagement and Building Trust

Today, new technologies - blogs, social networks, video hosting - are used in political life. 97% of all UN member states have created their Twitter accounts, and 93% have opened a Facebook account (Statista, 2025).

There are three factors that are considered key to successful digital diplomacy. First, the local level is the key, as engagement on the ground can be achieved in ways that cannot be achieved from the center alone. In particular, it was important to communicate on the Internet in the local language. Second, flexibility and ingenuity are important, as the Internet landscape is changing rapidly, and the popularity of social networks, for example, is not predetermined. Third, digital diplomacy is a two-way exchange, and it will be successful when it works with the audience, not just to disseminate information.

The main feature of social networks is dialogue, which becomes a key form of communication with the audience and with the possibility of almost instant feedback. And in order not to stay out of these processes, diplomats and politicians become users of the Internet, master the most advanced technologies in the field of modern communications, for communication with different target audiences in the available "language", projecting the official position of the state in a form familiar to the population. Through constructive dialogue, through informal communication, the image of the country can be improved among different audiences, thereby facilitating the adoption of economic, political, educational, cultural, and other decisions in the interest of the State.

Digital diplomacy provides an opportunity for society to learn all important world events in a simple and understandable way and to participate directly in shaping the direction of traditional diplomacy.

Digital diplomacy and cybersecurity

The 21st century has brought forth a myriad of global challenges that require collaborative diplomatic efforts. One of such issues is cybersecurity that transcends national borders and demands collective action. Diplomacy in this context involves building alliances, forging partnerships, and negotiating agreements to address these shared challenges.

It requires diplomats to adopt a more proactive and solution-oriented approach, emphasizing cooperation over competition.

As Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes (2015) argue, digital technologies have enabled a shift from "digital adaptation", which refers to the use of digital tools to support existing diplomatic functions, to "digital adoption", which refers to the creation of new diplomatic functions that are only possible through digital tools (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Therefore, digital diplomacy can be seen as both a continuation and a transformation of traditional diplomacy in the cyber era.

Before explaining what 'cyber diplomacy' means, is crucial to define the two terms that compose it: 'diplomacy' and 'cybersecurity'. Diplomacy involves the deliberate and strategic actions undertaken by representatives to advance the interests and goals of the states or organizations they represent, typically through mechanisms such as negotiation, advocacy, and conflict resolution. In contrast, cybersecurity refers to the array of protective practices designed to defend both tangible assets - such as infrastructure and personnel - and intangible resources, including data, knowledge, operational capacity, influence, and intellectual property. As digital technologies become increasingly embedded in all aspects of contemporary life, the urgency and significance of robust cybersecurity frameworks have grown correspondingly critical (Hartmann, 2023).

In the realm of international relations, cyberattacks represent deliberate and hostile actions that exploit information and communication technologies (ICTs) to compromise the political, economic, or security interests of a targeted state or organization. These attacks may serve multiple strategic purposes, including espionage, sabotage, coercion, and influence operations. Their impacts can be wide-ranging - from the disruption of essential services and damage to critical infrastructure to the theft of classified information and the erosion of public trust.

The increasing prevalence and sophistication of cyberattacks present profound challenges for global stability and legal order, often exacerbating diplomatic tensions and threatening international norms. In response, the field of "cyber diplomacy" has emerged as a critical component of contemporary diplomatic practice. Cyber diplomacy seeks to mitigate the risks associated with malicious cyber activities, promote cooperative security frameworks, and encourage

responsible behaviour among state and non-state actors in cyberspace.

This domain engages a diverse array of stakeholders, including governments, international institutions, the private sector, civil society organizations, and academic institutions. It employs a range of diplomatic instruments - such as multilateral dialogue, collaborative mechanisms, capacity-building initiatives, normative frameworks, confidence-building measures, cyber incident attribution protocols, and the establishment of cyber sanctions regimes—to foster a secure, stable, and rules-based international digital environment (Ivan, 2019).

The European Union's endeavors, like the introduction of the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA), indicate a global trend towards safeguarding digital ecosystems and promoting values and norms in the digital sphere (Steffens & Müller, 2023).

In a rapidly evolving world, e-diplomacy is more than a digital extension of traditional diplomacy—it is a transformative shift. Nations must embrace technological progress while prioritizing inclusivity and collaboration to build a connected and resilient global community in the cyber age.

Digital Diplomacy: Uzbekistan's Case

Uzbekistan, for the last three decades, has been actively involved in statecraft, including the development of its foreign policy, international politics, and diplomacy. For Uzbekistan, the priority areas of diplomatic activities are the further strengthening of independence, attracting and supporting foreign investment, trade, and tourists, and overcoming security threats and ecological challenges, as well as the development of political and economic relations with significant international actors.

The New Uzbekistan's foreign policy, committed to fostering peaceful relations and resolving long-standing conflicts, has contributed to a more stable Central Asian region. Uzbekistan has strengthened its ties with neighboring countries and engaged in regional initiatives for economic cooperation and cultural exchange.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has undertaken significant efforts to develop digital diplomacy. Particular attention has been devoted to establishing a comprehensive legal framework to support progress in this domain. In this regard, Presidential Decree No.5400, issued on April 5, 2018, titled

"On Measures to Fundamentally Improve the System of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Strengthen its Responsibility in the Implementation of Priority Areas of Foreign Political and Foreign Economic Activities," serves as a key milestone. The decree outlines the task of enhancing the system of public service delivery and promoting the national interests of Uzbekistan in the global information space. To achieve these objectives, it mandates the extensive integration of modern information and communication technologies and the strengthening of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' material and technical infrastructure (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018a).

This Presidential Decree played a crucial role in establishing the material and technical foundation necessary for conducting digital diplomacy within the system of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Indeed, the implementation of digital diplomacy is unfeasible without adequate provision of digital technologies.

Subsequently, on April 6, 2018, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan issued another resolution entitled "On Organizational Measures to Further Improve the Activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan." This document outlines specific tasks aimed at ensuring the necessary support for the Ministry's information and communication system, thereby reinforcing the institutional framework for the effective deployment of digital diplomacy tools (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018b).

The development of digital diplomacy has also been reflected in the national strategic documents that define Uzbekistan's priority reforms, which signifies the high level of attention dedicated to this domain. In particular, within the framework of the State Programme for the Year of Active Investment and Social Development - aimed at implementing the Action Strategy on Five Priority Areas of Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2017–2021 - a comprehensive set of measures was outlined for the advancement of digital diplomacy tools in the sphere of foreign relations. This programme defined specific tasks to promote the systematic integration of digital instruments into the country's external communication and diplomatic engagement mechanisms (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019):

– Enhancing Uzbekistan's position in the global "digital diplomacy" rankings and establishing partnerships with analytical centers operating in this field;

– Conducting an audit of the websites of all diplomatic missions of Uzbekistan abroad and standardizing them in terms of design and structure;

– Organizing a professional development program for the staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs focused on the use of new information technologies and tools of "digital diplomacy";

– Establishing a specialized team under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs comprising experts in social media marketing and "digital diplomacy."

Moreover, the State Programme for the implementation of the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026, designated as the "Year of Honouring Human Dignity and Active Neighbourhood," outlines the task of modernizing the digital infrastructure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Investments and Foreign Trade, as well as Uzbekistan's diplomatic missions abroad (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022).

The development of digital diplomacy cannot be achieved solely through the establishment of material and technical infrastructure. Notably, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan stand out as considerably more advanced in adopted of digital tools compared to other nations in Central Asia. The infographic below provides the DataReportal website's information on the population, the spread of the Internet, social media, and mobile connections as of early 2025 (Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) (DataReportal, 2025a; DataReportal, 2025b).
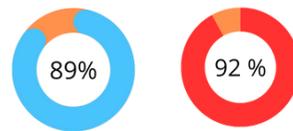
Internet penetration rate in 2025

About the infographics: Population Comparison: Uzbekistan has a significantly larger population (37.5 million) compared to Kazakhstan (20,7 mln).

Social Media Presence: Both UZB and KAZ exhibit strong social media engagement, particularly on platforms like Instagram and Facebook.

Twitter Usage: While both countries show presence on Twitter, the user base is relatively small, indicating lesser popularity compared to other platforms.

Central Asian countries are expanding the use of social media in their diplomatic practice, as evidenced by the growth in the number of accounts and followers. However, theyn't have a sustainable strategy for their social media diplomacy yet (Faizullaev, 2024). Not all MFAs, foreign ministers, diplomatic missions, and ambassadors are active on social media. Some embassies use many social media platforms, but others just a few or none. The same applies to individual diplomats. Apparently, the unsystematic nature of SMD's development is attributed to the lack of a comprehensive strategy in this area.

Digital diplomacy also requires the creation of a system for training qualified specialists in the field. To this end, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan issued a Resolution on July 23, 2022, entitled "On Measures for the Systematic Reform of the Activities of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy."

The Resolution outlines the transformation of the University's activities based on the "Smart University" concept. In particular, it mandates the broad integration of modern pedagogical and information-communication technologies, the expansion of distance learning, and the establishment of a Diplomatic Academy based on the existing Higher School of Diplomacy under the University, along with a range of other strategic tasks (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022).

For the first time, official social media accounts of the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, were launched, beginning with Facebook on September 13, 2016 (408,000 followers), followed by YouTube on November 25, 2016 (360,000 followers), Twitter (currently X) in February 2017 (206,000 followers), and Instagram (5.4 million followers). Additionally, an official Telegram channel was created in December 2017 (208,000 followers), as of December 7, 2024.

As a result, the President's official social media platforms began to serve as prompt channels for disseminating information on his activities, presidential decrees and resolutions, foreign visits, and other important updates,

significantly enhancing the transparency and responsiveness of executive communication.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the social media activity of high-ranking state officials in Uzbekistan, including the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers, ministers, and heads of various government agencies. Many have established official social media accounts and have begun regularly sharing updates on their work and sectoral developments.

This growing digital presence not only enhances the transparency of governance but also creates broader opportunities for conducting interstate diplomatic engagement. Moreover, it facilitates prompt and effective communication with foreign audiences, thereby strengthening public diplomacy efforts.

So far, Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan, have made little use of digital diplomacy opportunities to engage with their audience in a dialogical manner. Digital diplomacy primarily serves as a tool for informing foreigners and their own citizens about ongoing meetings and events, as well as the current affairs of their governments, foreign ministries, embassies, and diplomats. Diplomatic actors of Uzbekistan are especially active in informing the home audience about their activities in the national and Russian languages, and their domestically oriented social media accounts have quite large numbers of followers. This is partly linked to the relative ease of using these languages for many diplomats from Central Asia. To become more influential diplomatic players internationally, diplomats of these countries need to use English and other major world languages more effectively on social platforms (Faizullaev, 2024).

For digital diplomacy to be used at a more strategic level, that is, as a pivotal instrument of foreign policy and diplomacy, the country needs to develop some comprehensive strategies of engagement with other state and non-state stakeholders around their long-term fundamental objectives and critical international problems. To enhance the effectiveness of digital diplomacy, Uzbekistan requires a more conceptualized approach with clearly defined strategic goals and measurable objectives. Strategic narratives developed and used on social media platforms should have significance not only for the narrator but also for other actors and targeted audiences. That requires knowledge, skills, resources, and strategic thinking. The widespread use of modern digital analytics tools acquires special importance.

Conclusion

The proliferation of digital technologies has brought both opportunities and challenges to diplomacy. Diplomats must navigate the complexities of cyberspace, including cybersecurity threats, information warfare, and online disinformation. They must harness digital tools for effective diplomacy, while also safeguarding privacy, security, and the integrity of diplomatic channels.

As an increasing number of states acknowledge the transformative potential of digital technologies, the practice of diplomacy is undergoing a significant evolution toward greater interconnectivity, transparency, and operational efficiency. Electronic diplomacy, or e-diplomacy, extends beyond the mere incorporation of technological tools into traditional diplomatic practices. Rather, it signifies a fundamental reconfiguration of how diplomatic interactions are conceived and conducted in the context of the digital age.

For Uzbekistan to successfully implement its foreign policy using digital diplomacy on the international stage, it needs to accomplish the following tasks:

Analyzing the current state and challenges of digital diplomacy in Uzbekistan, it is appropriate to propose the following recommendations for further improving digital diplomacy in the country:

First, it would be expedient to establish a specialized department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dedicated to conducting and coordinating digital diplomacy activities. For instance, the U.S. Department of State established the Office of eDiplomacy in 2003, which is responsible for coordinating and advancing digital diplomacy efforts, offering consultations, and implementing innovative solutions. Additionally, this office manages the TechCamps project, which is designed to organize and host various seminars and conferences aimed at enhancing diplomacy through the Internet. This project involves the participation of diplomats, scholars, and field specialists.

Second, it is advisable to expand the integration of modern information and communication technologies into the operations of Uzbekistan's diplomatic missions and consular institutions abroad. This should be achieved through collaboration between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Digital Technologies, and other relevant organizations. Additionally, increasing the range of digital services provided by these entities is a necessary step. It is essential to improve software systems that enable citizens

residing abroad, whether temporarily or permanently, to access state services in electronic form.

The digitalization of consular institutions' operations is convenient not only for the staff but also for citizens residing abroad who seek consular services. Establishing digital diplomatic missions and consular institutions, which do not require significant economic expenditures, is a rational and efficient approach. For instance, Estonia has established a digital diplomatic mission that serves Luxembourg, the United States, Iran, Israel, and the Gulf States.

Thirdly, the role of the Internet and modern information and communication technologies is of critical importance in the conduct of digital diplomacy. Therefore, it is essential to modernize the material and technical infrastructure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, foreign diplomatic missions, and consular institutions, as well as to develop specialized software that ensures the speed and security of mutual information exchange.

Fourthly, it is advisable to establish specialized retraining courses on digital diplomacy for personnel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic missions, consular institutions, and ambassadors. These courses would be effective in providing essential knowledge on conducting digital diplomacy, utilizing the Internet and modern information and communication technologies, and engaging with foreign audiences.

Moreover, introducing departments and academic disciplines dedicated to digital diplomacy at key domestic higher education institutions responsible for training core diplomatic personnel would yield positive outcomes.

In the contemporary era, digitalization processes across various societal domains are increasingly recognized as a natural progression. These processes not only enhance efficiency but also open up a wide range of opportunities. Notably, the emergence and advancement of digital diplomacy represent a significant milestone in the field of diplomatic practice.

At the global level, the integration of digital diplomacy into foreign policy has become indispensable in the context of information globalization. Digital diplomacy, in particular, provides states with an efficient and practical mechanism to establish cooperative ties, engage in negotiations, and articulate their official stances on political developments occurring worldwide. Additionally, modern information and communication technologies provide ambassadors, senior

state officials, and other personnel with efficient, rapid, and cost-effective means for communication, correspondence, and organizing virtual meetings.

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