Drifting Towards Digital Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

In the time of coronavirus, information and communication technologies have rapidly promoted the digitalization of various fields. We face such shifts in the process of implementing foreign policy agendas around the world. Digital capabilities have become key instruments for governments to achieve their internal and external objectives. Through using digital platforms states and international organizations are holding online conferences, summits and making decisions. Social networks have become key instruments for promoting definition of foreign policy priorities. Therefore, on the one hand, it is essential to examine how technological advances including Artificial Intelligence can facilitate the implementation of foreign policy goals. On the other hand, it is significant to analyze the challenges of digital tools, instruments that may have negative impacts on diplomacy. Based on these issues, the article explores the digitalization of foreign policy to understand new forms of diplomacy in the new era.

INTRODUCTION

On March 3, 2021, the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken presented the eight top foreign policy priorities of the Biden administration.

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In his speech, Secretary Blinken said: "We will secure our leadership in technology. A global technology revolution is now underway. The world's leading powers are racing to develop and deploy new technologies like artificial intelligence and quantum computing that could shape everything about our lives."[1]

He continued, "But we know that new technologies aren't automatically beneficial. We're going to bring our friends and partners together to shape behavior around emerging technologies and establish guardrails against misuse."[2] This statement clearly illustrates the importance of digital technologies, even within the diplomatic realm. Also, it underlines the necessity of deepening relations with the partner states in order to be adaptable to technological changes in the new era.

In the context of analyzing the information age, Joseph Nye said, "It's not just whose army wins, but whose story wins." In this sense, a state's diplomats are its storytellers.[3] They need to know how digital advances can be appropriately used for performing their duties and serving their states' interests.

In his book, *Winning the Story Wars*, Jonah Sachs proclaims the death of the broadcast era.[4] According to Sachs, the last centuries have been dominated by those who have enough resources to buy access to media channels, and thus the ability to decide what content, including commercials, that audiences will receive. This era is now ending. Instead, we see the emergence of a new epoch —the "digital era"—of information sharing where messages and ideas are freely borrowed, stolen, and tweaked by anyone who finds them interesting enough. Sachs suggests that this development has much in common with the oral tradition that preceded the broadcast era, and he coins a new term to describe the merging traditions—the "digitoral era." Here, good communication depends on the strength of the ideas communicated. These ideas, he writes, only ensure survival if they excite listeners to keep passing them along. As Sachs claims, "If your message is catchy, audiences might provide their own soundtrack for it, spoof it, or just steal it for their own purposes."[5]

The internet affects foreign policy as it does every other area of government policy.[6] This technology now controls the way in which information flows around the globe, thereby enabling news—which is the base material of foreign policy and the way governments interact with one another—to become faster and more readily available across the globe.[7] Government interactions and the purpose of diplomacy are being affected by these developments in significant ways. The prospect for even faster and potentially more far-reaching changes in the future will require foreign ministries to be nimble and informed in their responses.[8]

In another book about the future of technology, *The New Digital Age*, Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen argue that the revolution in communications technologies mean that governments will have to develop two general orientations—and thus two foreign policies—the online and the offline.[9] Furthermore, because of the coronavirus pandemic, we have realized the advantages of digital technologies for foreign policy. Information and communication advances have an impact on diplomacy, which has historically preferred face-to-face communications, but have needed to settle for digital interaction due to the pandemic. Regardless of the importance of traditional diplomatic channels, foreign policy is evolving for the effective use of digital platforms. Particularly, this means that the digital world is changing the traditional understanding of communication channels and creating new opportunities for diplomats. Digital technologies can stimulate innovative approaches in foreign policy.

DIGITALIZATION OF FOREIGN POLICY IN THE DATA ERA

In order to understand digitalization of foreign policy, it is essential to explore term digitization and to analyze impact of big data on diplomacy. According to a comprehensive article by David W. Lewis, digitization as a means of preservation and providing access to sources began in the 1980s with full-text electronic databases.[10]

Big data effects diplomacy in a number of ways, reflecting developments in the changing relationship between government and society, and radical changes facing the business community as well as the economic environment.[11] The 'big data' phenomenon is characterized by the sheer growth in the quantity of digital information that is being produced and stored on a daily basis and, crucially, the fast-growing capacity for automated analyses of such data. In 2000, only twenty-five percent of the world's stored information was in digital form; by 2014, that figure had increased to around ninety-eight percent.[12]

Digital policy involves a wide range of actors who represent digital power (the tech industry), developing networks (academia and research), and concern for public interest and human rights (civil society).[13] Most digital foreign policy strategies express the need for multi-stakeholder governance as a way to engage all relevant actors on the national and international levels.[14]

However, many diplomats and foreign ministries still apply analogue habits and norms to a digital world. Understanding digital diplomacy starts with understanding the offline world. Digital diplomacy is a complex

amalgam of developments in the 'offline' international policy environment and the online one.[15]

The term digital diplomacy has two interpretations. One is the conduct of diplomacy through digital means. The conduct of diplomacy through digital means is at first glance a natural extension of face-to-face (F2F) and written diplomacy, only through technology. With the arrival of the internet, electronic messaging has become widespread and is used informally worldwide.[16] The Covid-19 pandemic has launched videoconferencing over the internet into orbit. To account for lockdowns and social distancing, videoconferencing systems like Zoom, Teams, Meet, among others, are now in daily use worldwide.[17] The second interpretation of digital diplomacy concerns diplomatic negotiations about dealing with the abuse of digital infrastructure. Along with the distribution of malware, due to the global nature of Internet a perpetrator may be in one jurisdiction while a victim is in another. [18]

Developing a digital foreign policy requires three main steps, starting with the reorganization of diplomatic services as the basis for a whole-of-government and ultimately a whole-of-country approach. Typically, the reorganization of diplomatic services starts with the appointment of tech, digital, or cyber ambassadors, as many countries have done. Their main task is to add a digital layer to traditional foreign policy. For example, Australia and France established such roles in their digital foreign policy strategies. Denmark has been innovative in establishing a tech ambassador in Silicon Valley, who also carries out visits to other centers of digital dynamism.[19]

Switzerland has chosen a gradual and decentralized approach which reflects the country's political culture. Technology and security ministries have developed their own diplomatic capacities and represent Switzerland in specialized negotiations. Switzerland's "Digital Foreign Policy Strategy" is a careful balancing act between providing the necessary coordination among different actors in the technology space while avoiding unnecessary centralization. As Switzerland upgrades its foreign policy structure, it will be interesting to follow how the state coordinates diplomatic activities regarding data, which is the central pillar of Swiss strategy and an area that requires a cross-cutting approach involving security, human rights, technology, and economy.[20]

Additionally, social media specifically is changing diplomacy in several ways. First, it brings new actors into the foreign policymaking mix.[21] Second, it allows foreign ministries to listen to the concerns and interests of local populations in a far more cost-effective way than opinion polling. Third, it allows foreign ministries to communicate directly with

mass audiences, including those increasingly hard to reach via traditional media, in a more personal, immediate, and ongoing way than traditional media allowed.[22]

In this context, digitalization has even brought about a new, unique type of networking known as "'Twiplomacy." Twiplomacy refers to the way in which individuals in the modern world form relationships simply by "following" each other on Twitter.[23] One of the best examples of conversation with the public through Twiplomacy was displayed by United Kingdom Foreign Secretary William Hague, who used his Twitter account to launch an initiative called "Meet the Foreign Secretary."[24] Hague asked his followers to tweet him with the issues they thought the Foreign Office should prioritize in upcoming years. Some participants would be rewarded a meeting with the Foreign Secretary. Hundreds of people joined in to tweet Hague their opinions, showcasing how social media can provide a platform for the public to participate in conversations about foreign policy. Other foreign officials have become well-known for their online interactions as well. For example, the Twitter account for the Dutch government devotes every weekday, from eight in the morning until eight at night, to answering questions posed by its followers.[25]

In terms of using Twitter as an instrument for promoting implementation of foreign policy goals, the Obama administration's digital diplomacy program on Twitter displayed a disciplined, rational approach in its devotion to high priority policy areas. Additionally, the data supported a direct linkage between the rank-order priority of a policy area (the independent variable), and the share of tweets devoted to that policy area (the dependent variable).[26] The policy area that received the most attention in U.S. Twitter diplomacy was general public diplomacy, which sought to improve the image of the U.S. abroad, and enhance bilateral relations. The attention devoted to this topic is eminently rational; improving bilateral relations ranked as the top priority of the Obama administration. Two other top-five policy area priorities—environmental protection and international cooperation—received the fourth- and second-most tweets respectively. As expected, the priority and tweet rankings of democracy promotion and development, and humanitarian assistance, were well-aligned. [27]

Digital diplomacy may also prove a useful tool in nation branding activities. While the existing scholarly work on nation branding is extensive, few studies to date have evaluated the manner in which nations use digital diplomacy to proactively manage their image. This could be a result of the fact that until recently, nation branding activities focused primarily on traditional media such as advertising campaigns in television, radio,

and print.[28] Digital diplomacy in this context exists at two levels: that of the foreign ministry, and that of embassies around the world. By operating on these two levels, nations can tailor foreign policy and nation branding messages to the unique characteristics of their local audiences with regard to history, culture, values, and traditions, thereby facilitating the acceptance of their foreign policy.[29] Digital diplomacy can also overcome many of the obstacles of nation branding, such as coordination. Foreign Ministries can oversee cooperation between all stakeholders in the branding process through horizontal collaboration with other governmental branches and agencies, and vertical collaboration with local embassies and diplomats. Digital diplomacy increases accountability by grounding the nation's ideal image promoted via social media to its concrete actions in the global arena. Moreover, social media enables two-way interaction and engagement between foreign ministries and their followers, thus facilitating the creation of long-lasting relationships and brand loyalty.[30]

Digital technology also opens communication and engagement to mediation that did not previously exist. Traditional 'shuttle diplomacy'—in which diplomats jet from one location to another as they conduct negotiations—is now partly replaced by a mediator's instant communication with the conflict parties through messaging services such as WhatsApp.[31] Such communication methods also make it easier to engage conflict parties that are territorially scattered or based in hard-to-reach areas. In 2017, in Syria, for example, mediators almost exclusively used instant messaging technology to broker local ceasefires; many of the signatories to agreements never met in person.[32]

Another important advantage of digital diplomacy is that it leads to an increased sense of transparency.[33] In the digital world, people put everything online. Individuals broadcast their lives to the public by using social networks. This trend, along with a natural desire to know what one's government is doing, has led to a public demand for transparency.[34]

Also, international practice shows that competent use of digital diplomacy tools can bring large dividends to those who invest in them. Moreover, digital diplomacy does not always require financial investments.[35] On the contrary, it is often aimed at reducing costs. Twitter posts can help investigate and identify troublesome issue, as well as expose those responsible. This accountability mechanism leads to greater engagement by the public on international issues, and often results in positive change. The dual incentives of positive change and economic viability make digital diplomacy more attractive to governments, Ministries of Foreign Affairs, and embassies who would like to reach a wider audience.[36]

In light of the foregoing considerations, technological advances have facilitated the creation of the modern form of diplomacy. Particularly, digital diplomacy has become the principal instrument of Ministries of Foreign Affairs around the world due to its speed and low financial cost, especially during the pandemic. Furthermore, digital platforms are effective tools for states to use in spreading daily information to foreign audiences.

CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL FOREIGN POLICY

One of the key challenges of digital foreign policy is cyber incidents. Hacking of devices along with the distribution of malware (that is, harmful software) constitute major hazards in the online world.[37] It is apparent that the world needs to come together for a thoughtful and technically credible debate on alternatives for containing the problem of harmful behavior on the internet. Perpetrators must be identified, and international norms and agreements established to bring them to justice. This is a task for diplomacy about digital technology and its use and abuse, and computer scientists have a serious role to play in this process.[38]

Despite numerous declarations about the need for stability in cyberspace, the evidence shows that governments are both able and willing to undertake malicious cyber activities for political, economic, or security gains, including through attacks on infrastructure, cyber-espionage, or intellectual property theft.[39] Russia's alleged involvement in the attacks on the networks of the Democratic Party in 2016 – described as 'the crime of the century' by the Washington Post[40] – or the mounting evidence that the North Korean cyber-gang, Lazarus Group, might be behind the WannaCry ransomware are just two recent examples.[41]

Faced with a rapidly evolving threat environment and a stalemate in the global discussion about norms of responsible state behavior and international law in cyberspace, in June 2017, the EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs decided to endorse the development of a framework for a joint EU diplomatic response to malicious cyber activities—the so-called "Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox" (CDT). The primary intention behind the CDT—which includes, among a panoply of instruments, the imposition of sanctions—is to develop signaling and reactive capacities at both an EU and member state level with the aim of influencing the behavior of potential aggressors, taking into account the necessity and proportionality of the response. The remaining challenge, however, is to translate these provisions into an effective foreign policy instrument.[42]

Cyber diplomacy is being developed as part of a comprehensive

response against advanced cyber threats, though it remains a relatively modest investment, compared to the investments required for maintaining adequate levels of defensive and offensive cyber capabilities.[43] Yet, a growing range of threats from other types of global radicalization will inevitably awaken states to the necessity of addressing the phenomenon across cultures. The need to counter all ranges of radical messages and frames online will eventually add another layer of responsibility to digital diplomacy: preventing the spread of radical content online.[44] Negotiations also could become harder to achieve in an online meeting, wrote Nick Ashton-Hart, a representative at the private firm Digital Trade Network in Geneva. In contrast to an in-person meeting in which negotiators sit across from one another, "remaining disagreeable is easier" remotely, due to a lack of peer pressure.[45] There are other issues as well. Diplomats and leaders are apprehensive about online security. In diplomacy, where highly sensitive and classified information is exchanged, ensuring robust security in online communications could be costly and time-consuming.[46]

Technological glitches, miscommunication, and even old-fashioned clumsiness with technology may also impede meetings. When the United Nations Security Council held a meeting last month, it was rife with problems: noise disrupted the meeting as diplomats forgot to turn off microphones when they were not speaking; audio came and went; and some attendees were disconnected. So too, those who do not have access to technological resources may find themselves at a disadvantage, which could widen the digital divide as developed countries reinforce their telecommunications system, such as by incorporating 5G technology. But shifting gears toward Zoom diplomacy does not have to be all negative, argues Toshikazu Inoue, a professor at Gakushuin University specializing in Japanese foreign policy history. He claims that the success of online diplomacy depends on how much trust already exists between countries or leaders, especially in times of crisis when information is scarce, yet an important diplomatic decision has to be made.[47] The internet also provides a lot of information of suspicious origin. Social media has tremendous impact, and the potential to spread the truth as it emerges. However, information distributed within these sources can be characterized by lies and slander. Digital frustration is also linked to digital ethics.[48] Another challenge of digital diplomacy is the culture of anonymity, because anyone can pretend to be someone else and cause damages. The culture of anonymity can lead to complicated crises as a result of the publication of conflicting, or even untrue, information. This kind of widespread disinformation on the internet can hinder the ability of leaders to manage the ensuing crises. Social media are being abused, so

they have to fix their pages in such a way as to make clear whether a post comes from a trustworthy source.[49]

Clearly, digital foreign policy has numerous disadvantages. Perpetrators can carry out cyberattacks, spread disinformation, or conduct other violent and harmful acts. Due to the nature of cyberspace, they can remain *anonymous. Also, lack of digital ethics and digital skills alongside technical problems impede digitalization of foreign policy in the right manner.* The effective implementation of digital diplomacy depends on how we will be able to overcome the abovementioned challenges. On the one hand, states need to ensure the security of cyberspace and, on the other hand, they should aim to provide diplomats with digital skills training.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN DIGITAL FOREIGN POLICY

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a key part of the digitization of foreign policy, and can be considered as an instrument for promoting this concept. Particularly, to make sense of the interplay between AI as a new technology and diplomacy in broad terms, scholars have suggested a three-part typology that includes AI as a topic for diplomacy, AI as a tool for diplomacy, and AI-related shifts in the environment in which diplomacy is practiced.[50]

If AI is a topic for diplomacy, then it will become embedded in various aspects of our lives, and will increasingly introduce shifts in established areas of foreign policy and the international agenda. As AI applications are more and more widely used, they also raise new sets of questions, many of which need to be addressed at the international level where diplomatic efforts will remain crucial. On the one hand, diplomats need to be able to adapt to, and comfortably deal with, shifts in the way existing topics are discussed due to the implications of AI. On the other hand, diplomats also need to deal with the emergence of new, AI-related topics on the international agenda.[51]

AI not only impacts the kinds of topics diplomats need to address, but also adds to the arsenal of tools at the diplomat's disposal. In order to think through AI's potential to serve as a tool for diplomats, the distinction between assisted, augmented, and automated intelligence is a useful starting point. At this point in the development of AI, the technology is best used to assist and augment intelligence. Since a substantial part of diplomatic practice is concerned with textual data (think of treaties and diplomatic reports), tools that can support the meaningful analysis of this data at scale are of particular interest.[52]

In this sense, AI that uses appropriate techniques to make sense of

large amounts of unstructured data in natural language provides some of the greatest promise when it comes to AI as a tool for diplomacy. The analysis of texts at scale has the potential to make the work of diplomats more effective and free up time and resources. As a consequence, more time can be spent on aspects of diplomatic work that require uniquely human skills and human intuition. However, small and developing countries might struggle to develop these tools on their own.[53]

At the operational level of digital diplomacy, decisions are expected to take a structured form as the way to meaningfully communicate with the audience would rely on continuously tested principles of digital outreach. AI could assist these efforts by providing reliable diagnostics of the scope conditions for impact via network, cluster, and semantic analyses. Prescriptive analytics could also offer insight into the comparative added value of alternative approaches to digital engagement (e.g., which method proves most impactful in terms of making oneself heard, listened to, and followed).[54] The knowledge so generated would likely stimulate a competitive relationship between the AI system and digital diplomats, as most of the work done by the later could be gradually automated. However, such a development might be welcome by budget-strapped Ministries of Foreign Affairs and embassies seeking to maintain their influence and make the best of their limited resources by harnessing the power of technological innovation.[55]

From a knowledge perspective, AI-assisted consular services may embody declarative (know-what) and procedural knowledge (know-how) to automate routinized operations, and scaffold human cognition by reducing cognitive effort. This can be done by using data mining and data discovery techniques to organize the data and make it possible to identify patterns and relationships that would otherwise be difficult to observe (e.g., variation of demand for consular services by location, time, and audience profile). AI recalibrates its advice using updated data; the new predictions help consular officers manage requests effectively.[56]

However, data quality is a particular concern for machine learning. In simple terms, biases in the training data will lead to biased outcomes, which is problematic if decisions with far-reaching implications are based on these outcomes. In addition, performing big data analysis raises questions about access to data, data interpretation, data protection, and data security. These issues remain a key concern in the context of AI and diplomacy, particularly in cases concerning sensitive data or political decisions with potentially far-reaching consequences.[57]

Additionally, the diplomatic and development agenda surrounding

the internet has demonstrated for years the tensions between security and freedom implicit in ever more connected societies. AI will heighten this tension by supercharging surveillance and censorship capabilities. Even as these technologies enable new opportunities for free expression, civic activity, and social progress, they also raise the unwelcome possibility of deepening existing social discrimination. The challenge for foreign policy will be to promote a positive agenda in the face of these risks, including leveraging grantmaking, communications, and multi-lateral policy engagement to pursue rights-based goals.[58]

Ministries should also leverage their public diplomacy tools to raise public awareness about both the benefits and the risks of AI in our societies. An ethical AI communications strategy not only fosters soft power around these technologies, but is also a way to positively characterize and differentiate domestic AI products and services in a world of governments and peoples that may grow wary of the opaque power of AI's leading corporations.[59]

The developments in AI are so dynamic, and the implications so wide-ranging, that ministries need to begin engaging immediately. That means starting with the assets and resources at hand while planning for more significant changes in the future. Many of the tools of traditional diplomacy can be adapted to this new field.[60]

Ultimately, AI will be used more intensively by the ministries of foreign affairs in the future. They will have an impact on the decision-making process of foreign policy, especially in big data cases. It is essential to take into consideration that AI applications should be provided with objective information. Based on such information, robots would be able to make the right conclusions and assist diplomats. Through technological capacities, chatbots can be part of digital foreign policy, and become the virtual equivalent of diplomats and consuls. In particular, they can effectively perform automatic routine tasks for diplomatic and consular purposes.

CONCLUSION

In view of the foregoing considerations, digitalization of foreign policy means the development of new forms of diplomacy, namely digital and cyber diplomacy. Digital diplomacy can be defined as a modern type of diplomacy that uses social networks and technological advances including Artificial Intelligence for promotion of shaping foreign policy agenda and facilitating implementation of foreign policy goals regardless of distance, boundaries.

As for cyber diplomacy, cyberspace represents a domain of operations, in which the state must defend itself as effectively as it does in the air, on land, and at sea.[61] Due to the nature of cyberspace and cyber threats, the cyber diplomacy agenda would include the following priorities: 1) deepening strategic partnerships among states to enhance cybersecurity capabilities; 2) implementing international cyber projects for assisting states to protect their critical infrastructures from cyberattacks; 3) safeguarding fundamental rights of individuals in cyberspace; 4) creating bilateral and multilateral formats for discussing characteristics of cyber behavior; and 5) developing a common vision on cyber issues at the international level.

In the context of challenges, states will have to think about the development of a legal framework that governs digital behavior to protect fundamental rights in the digital world.

Because of rapid technological advances, the future of diplomacy will depend on how Ministries of Foreign Affairs develop their visions to provide secure digital platforms, appropriate applications, programs for virtual diplomats and consuls that perform automatic routine tasks, and improve the digital skills of real diplomats. Regardless of the effective continuation of digital foreign policy, traditional forms of diplomacy will remain significant instruments for achieving external purposes. Both new and old types of diplomacy can be appropriately used by states based on given situations. In the time of coronavirus, digital platforms became key elements for foreign policies. Furthermore, shifts in the digital world would increase the role of artificial intelligence in the decision-making process of foreign policy in the future. The 21st century is a century not only for traditional diplomats but also for digital diplomats, as the pandemic has shown. Historically, difficult times have changed the world. The last global crisis will not be an exception. In the long-term, the traditional notion of foreign policy will be defined by actors operating within the digital world. *f*

ENDNOTES

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