Digital Diplomacy and Its Impact on International Relations

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الدبلوماسية الرقمية وأثرها على العلاقات الدولية

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قسم الدراسات الإقليمية والدولية، مدرسة الدراسات الاستراتيجية والدولية، الأكاديمية الليبية للدراسات العليا فرع
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Abstract:

Digital diplomacy now shapes how states speak, listen, and bargain. It also shapes how they compete for attention. Digital diplomacy means using online platforms, data tools, and virtual meetings to pursue foreign policy goals. This paper studies how these tools change international relations. It links theory with evidence from open studies and official documents. The analysis uses two main lenses. Soft power explains attraction and narrative influence. Network diplomacy explains how ties connect states, firms, and publics. The study uses qualitative document analysis and three comparative cases. The cases cover the United States, China, and the European Union. It also draws on public empirical work. One cross-national study tests how foreign ministries use Facebook and Twitter. It finds limited dialogue in many cases. Another open working paper maps Chinese diplomatic accounts. It also detects patterns of inauthentic amplification. The findings show four changes. Diplomatic messaging moves faster and reaches wider publics. Visual posts and short claims raise the risk of quick escalation. Ministries depend on private platforms and their shifting rules. Digital gaps still shape whose voices are heard. Digital diplomacy can support crisis messaging and coalition building. Yet it also raises risks from disinformation, cyber threats, and distrust. The paper ends with a clear evaluation framework and practical policy ideas.

Keywords: digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, social media, soft power, network diplomacy, crisis communication, disinformation, cyber diplomacy, European Union, China, United States.

الملخص:

تُسهم الدبلوماسية الرقمية في الوقت الراهن في صياغة الكيفية التي تتحدث بها الدول، وتصغي، وتتفاوض؛ كما أنها تشكل طبيعة تنافسها على كسب الاهتمام. ويُقصد بالدبلوماسية الرقمية استخدام المنصات الإلكترونية، وأدوات البيانات، والاجتماعات الافتراضية لتحقيق أهداف السياسة الخارجية. تدرس هذه الورقة كيفية تغيير هذه الأدوات للعلاقات الدولية، حيث تربط بين الجانب النظري والأدلة المستمدة من الدراسات المفتوحة والوثائق الرسمية.

يعتمد التحليل على منظورين رئيسيين: "القوة الناعمة" لتفسير الجذب والتأثير السردي، و"دبلوماسية الشبكات" لتوضيح كيفية ارتباط الدول والشركات والجمهور. استخدمت الدراسة منهج تحليل الوثائق النوعي مع تطبيق ثلاث حالات مقارنة تشمل الولايات المتحدة والصين والاتحاد الأوروبي، كما استندت إلى أعمال تجريبية منشورة. واختبرت إحدى الدراسات المقارنة كيفية استخدام وزارات الخارجية لمنصتي (فيسبوك) و(تويتر)، وخلصت إلى وجود حوار محدود في حالات كثيرة. كما قامت ورقة عمل أخرى برصد الحسابات الدبلوماسية الصينية، واكتشفت أنماطاً من "التضخيم المصطنع " (Inauthentic amplification).

تُظهر النتائج أربع تغيرات جوهرية: انتقال الرسائل الدبلوماسية بسرعة أكبر وصولاً إلى جمهور أوسع، وزيادة مخاطر التصعيد السريع بسبب المنشورات المرئية والادعاءات المختصرة، واعتماد الوزارات على المنصات الخاصة وقواعدها المتغيرة، واستمرار الفجوات الرقمية في تحديد "الأصوات المسموعة". ورغم أن الدبلوماسية الرقمية يمكن أن تدعم التواصل أثناء الأزمات وبناء التحالفات، إلا أنها تثير أيضاً مخاطر تتعلق بالتضليل، والتهديدات السيبرانية، وانعدام الثقة. وتختتم الورقة بوضع إطار تقييم واضح ومقترحات عملية لصناع السياسات.

الكلمات المفتاحية :الدبلوماسية الرقمية، الدبلوماسية العامة، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، القوة الناعمة، دبلوماسية الشبكات، الاتصال وقت الأزمات، التضليل الإعلامي، الدبلوماسية السيبرانية، الاتحاد الأوروبي، الصين، الولايات المتحدة.

Introduction

Digital technologies have altered diplomacy's basic pace. They have also altered its audience. More people can see official messages now. More people can react at once. This shift matters for international relations. It affects signaling, persuasion, and trust.

Connectivity makes this change possible. In 2023, about 67% of the world's population was online. That equals about 5.4 billion people. The offline population was about 2.6 billion people. ITU reports these estimates in its 2023 facts and figures report (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2023).

Digital diplomacy is not only social media. It also includes virtual meetings and digital coordination. During the COVID-19 period, diplomats relied more on online tools. Scholars describe this shift as "hybrid diplomacy". It blends online and face-to-face practice (Bjola & Manor, 2022).

Digital diplomacy is also contested. It can enhance transparency and reach. It can also fuel misinformation and tension. These trade-offs shape the paper's core question. How does digital diplomacy change state actions and outcomes in world politics?

This paper answers three linked questions. How does digital diplomacy reshape influence and communication? How does it change crisis politics and escalation risks? Which governance tools can reduce harms while keeping benefits?

Literature and theory

Digital diplomacy has a large and growing literature. A key book treats it as change management in international politics. It also links it to information management and crisis practice (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

Public diplomacy scholarship has also shifted. It now studies digital publics and platform effects. One review argues that digital tools blur boundaries between foreign and domestic politics. It also empowers more actors (Bjola, Cassidy, & Manor, 2019).

A second strand studies how ministries actually behave online. A cross-national study compares engagement on Facebook and Twitter. It finds limited use of dialogic features by many foreign ministries. Engagement often looks like press release publishing (Kampf, Manor, & Segev, 2015).

A third strand studies "real-time diplomacy". It highlights shrinking decision time. It also highlights media pressure and accelerated crises (Seib, 2012).

This paper uses two theoretical lenses. Soft power explains attraction and agenda framing. It treats influence as shaping preferences without force (Nye, 2011). Soft power fits digital diplomacy because platforms spread symbols and stories.

Network diplomacy explains relational power. It focuses on ties across states and non-state actors. In a networked world, influence can follow centrality and connection. Digital platforms create new diplomatic networks. They also create new vulnerabilities (Slaughter, 2004).

The concept of "networked publics" helps explain audiences. Networked publics form through digital affordances. They persist and spread content easily (boyd, 2010). This matters for message durability and remixing.

Table 1 clarifies key terms used in this paper.

Term	Simple meaning in this paper	Typical actors	Common tools
Digital diplomacy	Use of digital tools for diplomatic goals	MFAs, embassies, leaders, IOs	Social media, web platforms, data analytics, virtual meetings
Public diplomacy	State outreach to foreign publics	MFAs, cultural agencies	Media, exchanges, campaigns
Digital public diplomacy	Public diplomacy via digital channels	MFAs, embassies	Social media, video, platform ads, influencer ties
Cyber diplomacy	Diplomatic work on cyberspace rules and threats	MFAs, cyber envoys, coalitions	Norm talks, capacity building, cyber dialogues
Hybrid diplomacy	Blended online and offline diplomacy	MFAs, multilateral bodies	Video meetings plus physical summits

This terminology follows core academic usage (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019; Seib, 2012).

Research design

This paper uses qualitative comparison with structured evidence. It combines three evidence types. It uses policy documents and official web pages. It uses peer-reviewed studies and open working papers. It also uses publicly available datasets and repositories for research design guidance.

The case selection targets variation. The United States offers early institutionalization and global platform reach. China offers a strong state narrative project and assertive online style. The European Union offers regulatory power and "digital diplomacy" as external policy.

The design also includes two "public empirical anchors". The first is a cross-national engagement comparison by Kampf et al. (2015). It is a published journal study. The second is the Oxford Internet Institute Dem.Tech working paper on China's public diplomacy operations. It is open and licensed. It provides figures and summary statistics (Schliebs et al., 2021).

For reproducibility, the paper points to public data tools. GDELT offers global event and media data. It provides free tools for visualization and export (GDELT Project, n.d.). For conflict-era social media research, an open Twitter dataset tracks discourse on the Ukraine war. It is hosted on GitHub with an OSF DOI (Leibniz-HBI, n.d.).

Table 2 links each theory to observable indicators. It helps keep the analysis concrete.

Theoretical lens	What it expects	What we can observe	Example sources
Soft power	Narratives and credibility can attract support	Frames, values language, reputational cues, audience trust signals	Nye (2011); Bjola et al. (2019)
Network diplomacy	Position in networks shapes influence	Retweet networks, central nodes, cross-actor ties	Schliebs et al. (2021)
Real-time diplomacy	Speed compresses decision time	Rapid reaction posts, crisis messaging cycles	Seib (2012)
Hybrid diplomacy	Online tools become routine extensions	Use of virtual meetings plus physical summits	Bjola & Manor (2022)

Empirical evidence and case studies

Digital diplomacy rests on access and attention. The global internet user base has grown sharply since 2005. ITU shows both user counts and population shares rising.
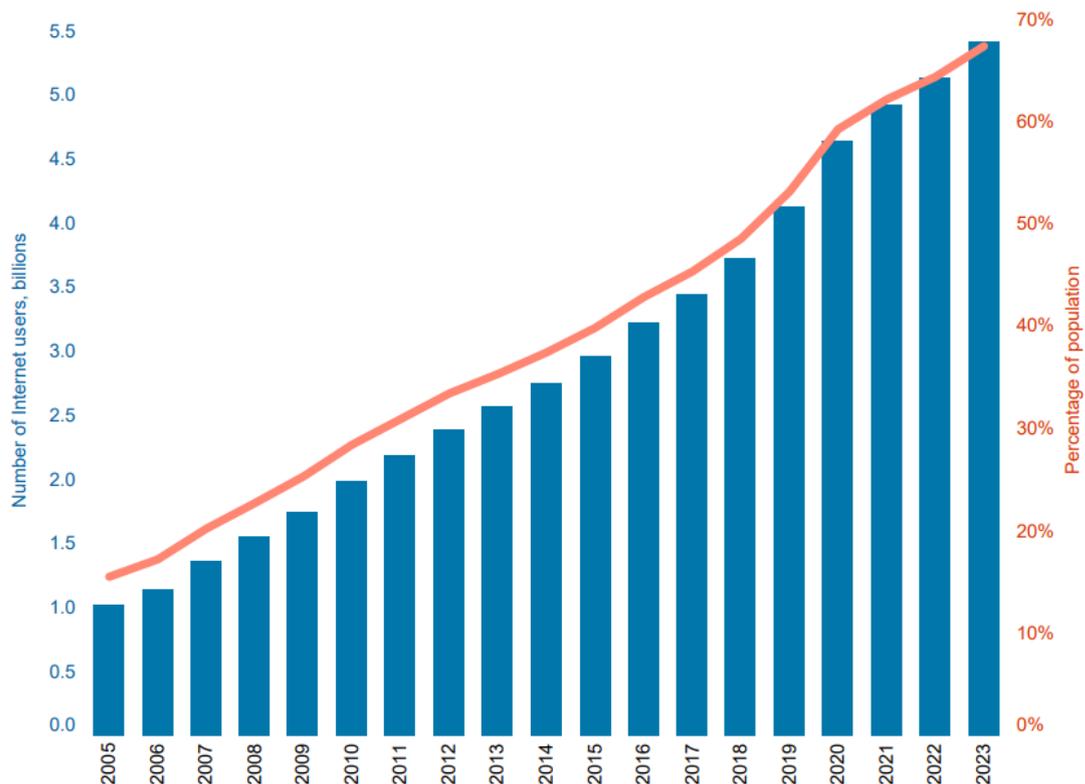
Figure 1 Individuals using the internet worldwide, 2005–2023. Source: ITU Facts and Figures 2023, "Internet use", (ITU, 2023).

Access is uneven across regions. ITU reports wide differences by region and income group. These gaps shape which publics are reachable.
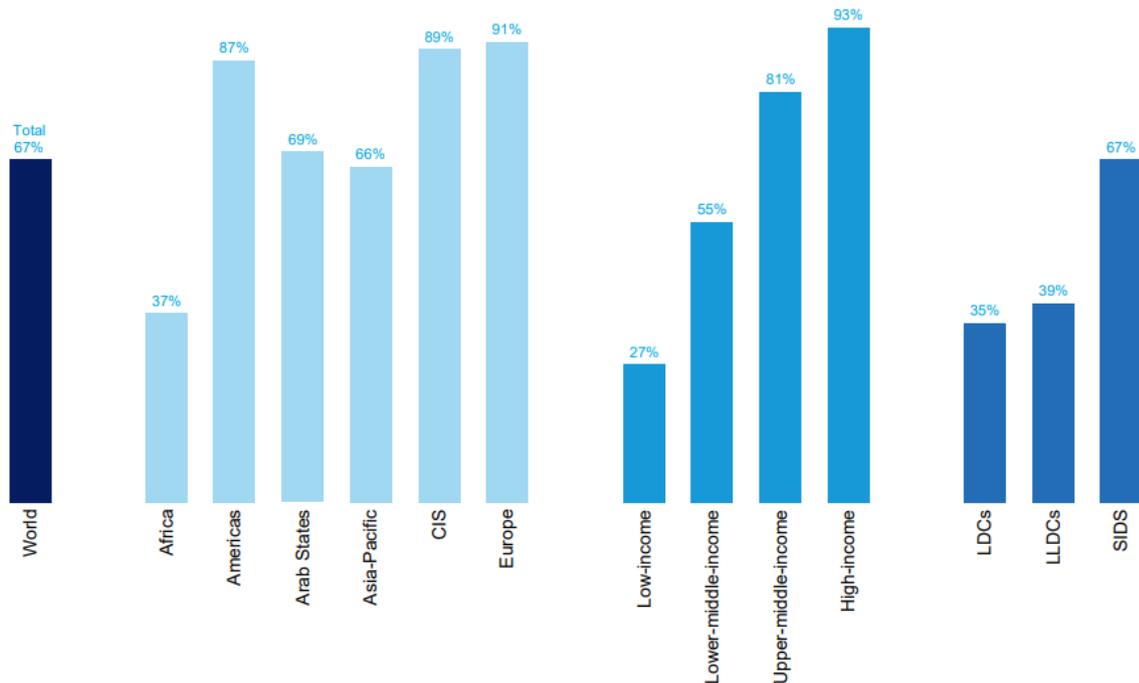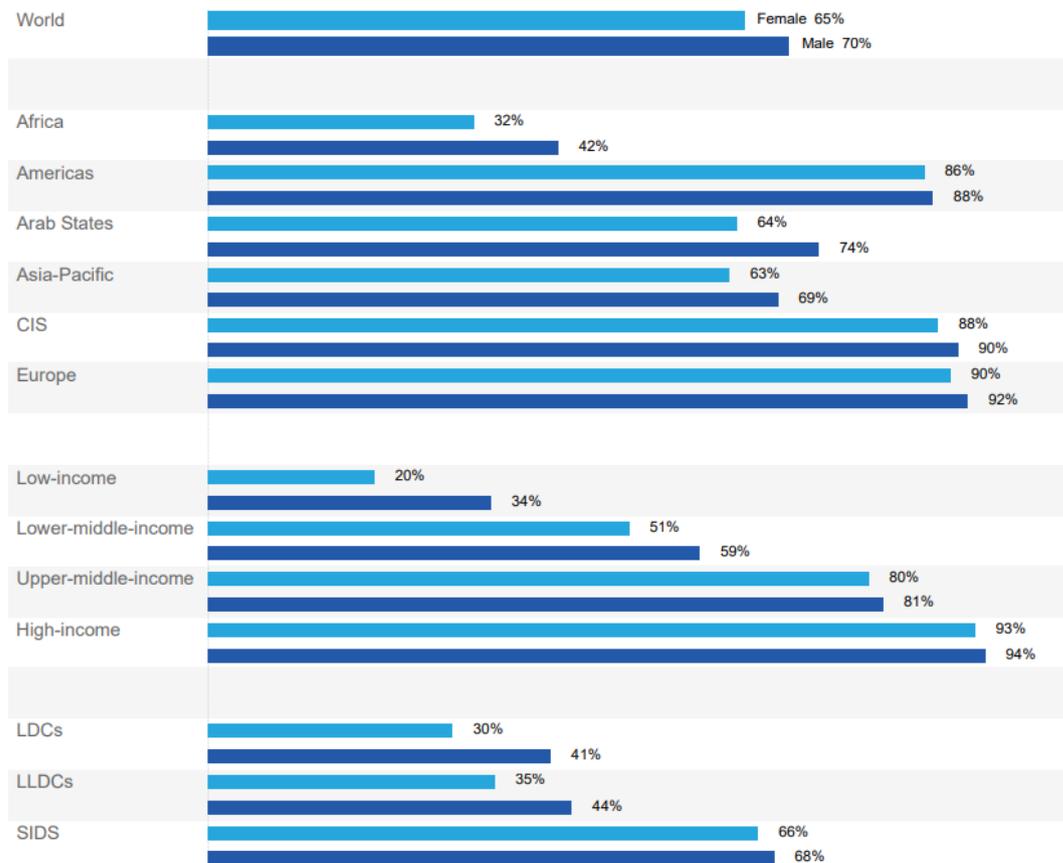
Figure 2 Percentage of individuals using the internet by region, 2023. Source: ITU Facts and Figures 2023, (ITU, 2023).

Gender gaps also affect reach and inclusion. ITU reports that men used the internet at higher rates than women worldwide in 2023.

Source: ITU

Figure 3 Percentage of female and male population using the internet, 2023. Source: ITU Facts and Figures 2023, (ITU, 2023).

These divides matter for influence. A message cannot persuade users who cannot access it. This point is basic but often ignored.

A practical study of state social media use supports this view. Kampf et al. (2015) compare public engagement across Facebook and Twitter. They find that foreign ministries often underuse dialogic tools. Their results suggest many ministries still treat platforms as broadcast channels.

A second practical study gives deeper evidence on China's online diplomacy. The Oxford Dem.Tech working paper analyses every tweet and Facebook post from a large set of PRC-linked accounts. The study covers June 2020 to February 2021. It reports high activity and major engagement totals (Schliebs et al., 2021).

China's approach also links to "wolf warrior diplomacy". It relies on assertive messaging and public confrontation. Research notes its use in COVID-19 related incidents. It also highlights the role of Twitter spats in tension (Yuan, 2023).
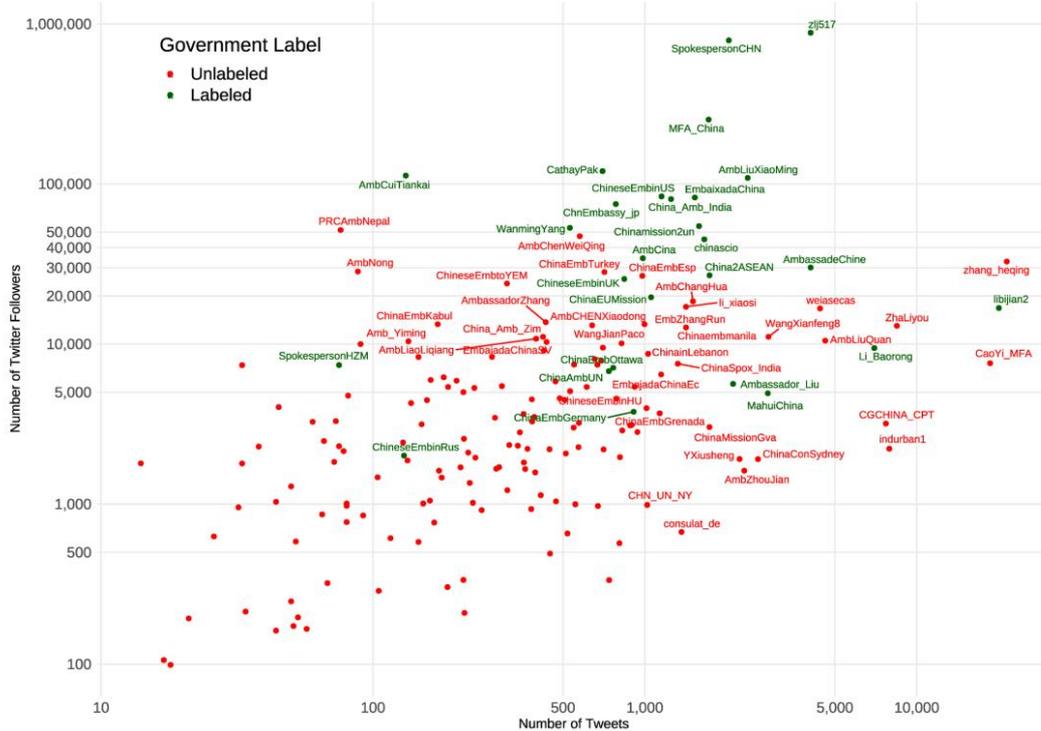

Source: Authors' calculations based on data collected on the 1st of March 2021.
Notes: Country is colored red if at least one diplomat stationed there is active on Twitter or Facebook. For full list, see Appendix.

Figure 4 PRC diplomats active on Facebook and Twitter across countries. Source: Schliebs et al. (2021)

The same working paper shows governance issues. It finds inconsistent platform labelling for government-linked accounts. The authors note limited coverage of "government affiliated" labels.

Source: Authors' calculations based on diplomat retweets collected between the 9th of June 2020 and 23rd of February 2021.
Note: X-axis and y-axis in logarithmic scale. Labeling Status recorded on the 1st of March 2021.

Figure 5 Government-affiliation labelling status on Twitter by follower count and activity. Source: Schliebs et al. (2021)

The working paper also studies inauthentic amplification. It highlights "super-spreader" patterns and very low retweet lag times in some accounts. It also links some engagement to later suspended accounts (Schliebs et al., 2021).
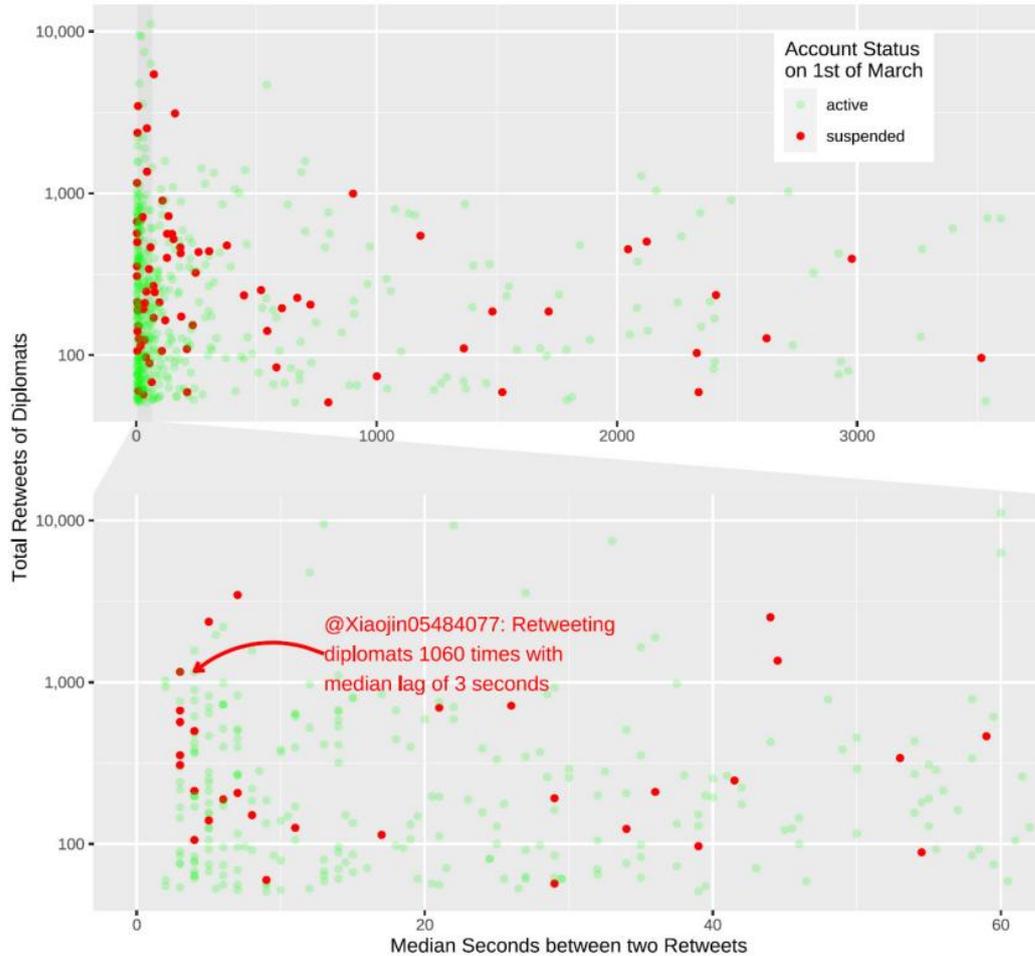

Figure 6 High-frequency retweeters and short retweet lag patterns. Source: Schliebs et al. (2021)

The United States case illustrates early institutional change. The State Department promoted "21st century statecraft" as a way to use networked technologies for diplomacy. The program highlights how digital tools connect people and networks (U.S. Department of State, 2009–2017).

The US later created a Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy. State announced that it began operations in April 2022. The bureau groups cyber, digital economy, and digital freedom issues (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

GAO describes cyber diplomacy goals linked to coalitions and norms. It also shows new entities created in 2022. This institutional chart illustrates how digital policy and diplomacy merge.
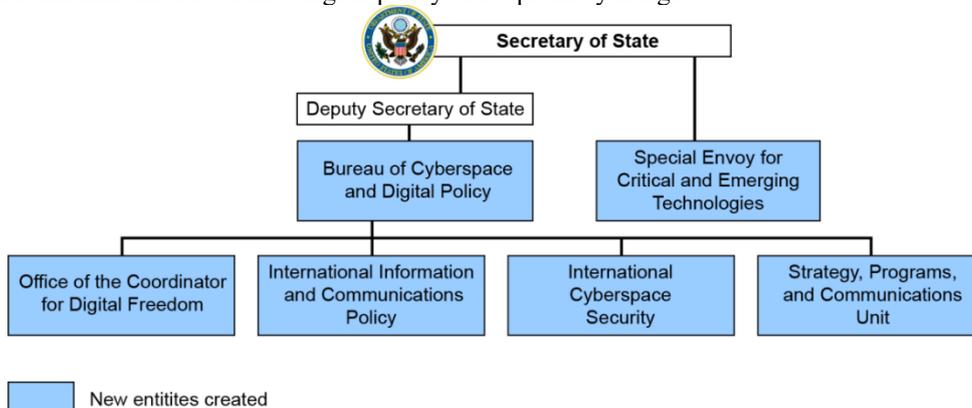
Figure 7 US State Department cyber and digital policy entities created in 2022. Source: GAO-25-108445 Highlights (GAO, 2025),

The European Union treats "digital diplomacy" as external policy. The EEAS frames it as protecting EU strategic interests. It also frames it as promoting a human-centric digital transformation (European External Action Service, 2023).

EU Council conclusions also stress "Team Europe" coordination. They link digital diplomacy to strategic interests and a human-centric approach (Council of the European Union, 2023).

In June 2025, the EU published an International Digital Strategy. The strategy stresses competitiveness, security, and global digital governance. It also stresses partnerships and standard setting (European Commission & High Representative, 2025).

Table 3 summarizes the three cases in plain terms.

Case	Main goals	Typical style	Clear strengths	Main risks
United States	Influence, coalition building, cyber and digital policy leadership	High visibility, platform-heavy outreach	Strong reach, institutional capacity	Platform dependence and fast escalation
China	Narrative promotion, defense of state image, agenda setting	Assertive, sometimes confrontational	Scale, coordinated messaging	Distrust, inauthentic amplification concerns
European Union	Rule-setting, values framing, partnership building	Regulatory and standards-led	Strong rule diffusion, coalition work	Slow messaging, fragmented voice risk

This comparison draws from official EU and US documents and open research on China's online operations.

Challenges and governance

Digital diplomacy brings real gains. It reduces distance between officials and publics. It can speed consular guidance and crisis updates. Yet it also creates four recurring problems.

The first problem is misinformation and manipulation. EU policy links platform responsibilities to disinformation risks. The Commission notes the move to integrate the 2022 Code of Practice into the Digital Services Act framework. This makes the code a benchmark for platform compliance (European Commission, 2025).

The second problem is cyber risk and digital coercion. Many states now treat cyberspace as a diplomatic domain. The UN hosts an open-ended working group on ICT security norms and international law. This work aims to develop norms and confidence-building measures (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, n.d.).

The third problem is platform power. Governments rely on privately owned platforms. Platform rule changes can weaken verification and trust cues. This can affect official communication credibility.

The fourth problem is unequal access. ITU data show large regional, rural, and gender divides. These divides shape whose voices matter online. They also shape which publics digital diplomacy can reach.

These challenges create a practical need. Ministries need evaluation tools and risk controls. Evaluation should not rely only on follower counts. It should also track trust, reach quality, and network effects.

Table 4 lists concrete measures and public sources. These measures support transparency and replication.

Metric	What it captures	Simple method	Public sources and examples
Reach	Potential audience size	Followers, impressions where available	Platform dashboards; published reports
Engagement rate	Interaction intensity	Replies, reposts, shares per post	Platform metrics; content scraping within rules
Network position	Influence through ties	Centrality, bridge accounts	Retweet network analysis (Schliebs et al., 2021)
Narrative shift	Agenda setting success	Topic frequency, framing change	GDELT media trends (GDELT Project, n.d.)
Trust and credibility	Perceived legitimacy	Survey linkage and sentiment checks	Public surveys and qualitative sampling
Risk exposure	Vulnerability to manipulation	Bot-like amplification, impersonation cases	Platform integrity reports; open studies

Conclusion and future research

Digital diplomacy reshapes international relations through speed and visibility. It changes how governments frame events. It also changes how publics take part. Soft power and networks help explain these shifts. Soft power focuses on attraction and credibility. Network diplomacy focuses on ties, centrality, and platform dependence.

The cases show different pathways. The United States links digital tools to institutional change and cyber policy. China links digital outreach to narrative defense and partisan signaling. The European Union links digital diplomacy to external rule-setting and partnerships.

Evidence also shows common risks. Dialogue is often weaker than the "conversation" promise. Inauthentic amplification can distort perceived support. These factors can harm trust. They can also raise escalation risks in crises.

Future research should test causal links more directly. It should connect digital campaigns to policy outcomes. It should also compare platform ecosystems across regions. Open datasets and transparent methods can support this goal.

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