THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY ON INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IN THE EARLY DECADES OF THE 21ST CENTURY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR VIETNAM

Nguyen Ngoc Cuong[1], Bui Thanh Nam[2], Nguyen Van Dap[3]

[1]MA., PhD Candidate at University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.
[2]Assoc. Prof. Dr., University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.
[3]Ph.D, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

Abstract

In the era of rapid technological advancement, digital diplomacy has emerged as a pivotal instrument in international politics. Digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have become vital channels through which states disseminate foreign policy messages, shape international public opinion, and construct national images. The advent of technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and blockchain is fundamentally transforming the manner in which states conduct their diplomatic strategies. Moreover, digital diplomacy increasingly influences national security and foreign policy frameworks. The escalation of information warfare and cyberattacks poses significant threats to national security and global political stability. States may exploit digital technologies to interfere in elections, manipulate information ecosystems, and destabilize political environments in other countries.

Large technology corporations, including Google, Meta, and TikTok, are evolving into critical actors capable of influencing political outcomes, controlling the flow of information, and steering public discourse. At the same time, digital diplomacy offers opportunities to foster collaboration on pressing global issues such as climate change, public health, and cybersecurity. Without proactive engagement and strategic research in the realm of digital diplomacy, countries risk marginalization from key international cooperation mechanisms.

Analyzing the impact of digital diplomacy on international politics enables countries to identify opportunities to leverage digital tools to enhance their international standing, formulate policies to protect digital sovereignty, and strengthen capacities to respond to cyber conflicts. For smaller and developing nations, understanding the impacts of digital diplomacy is crucial to crafting appropriate strategies, avoiding dependency on major technological powers, actively participating in international forums, and asserting influence in cyberspace governance. Failure to adapt to these trends could result in strategic disadvantages and a diminished position in the global order.

Keywords

Digital diplomacy, International Politics, Impact of Digital Diplomacy, Vietnam Digital Diplomacy

1. Characteristics of the New International Political Landscape

The world is rapidly entering the *"digital age,"* a term widely recognized and adopted by most international organizations and many countries. Digital technologies are advancing at a pace unprecedented in human history, with the amount of data generated and stored globally over the past five years exceeding all data produced throughout prior human existence. The digital age, with its distinctive features and dynamics, is exerting a profound and far-reaching impact on all facets of international life, including politics, economics, security, culture, and society.

The key characteristics of the digital era can be summarized as follows:

(1) A comprehensive global digital transformation that is reshaping development models, societal structures, lifestyles, and modes of operation on digital platforms;

(2) The formation of a global virtual space that increasingly overlaps with the physical world, enabling robust connectivity that transcends geographical boundaries and is no longer subject to full governmental control.

In response to these shifts, nations are actively formulating and implementing international integration strategies, placing a particular emphasis on promoting the digital economy and participating in next-generation international trade agreements. The United States leads global investment in digital transformation and the development of the digital economy. China has articulated ambitious objectives through its "Made in China 2025" strategy, focusing on building indigenous technological and innovation capacities. Across Southeast Asia, countries have introduced national strategies for digital economy development, such as Brunei's "Wawasan Brunei 2035," Cambodia's national digital targets by 2023, Indonesia's digital infrastructure and e-commerce development roadmaps, Laos' Information Technology Vision 2030, Malaysia's "Malaysia Digital" strategy, Myanmar's Digital Economy Development Committee, the Philippines' National Digital Strategy, Singapore's ambition to become a leading smart nation in ICT, and Thailand's Digital Economy and Society Development Plan (2014–2034).

Political developments in the digital age are similarly evolving with remarkable speed and complexity. *Political crises and conflicts* such as the Russia–Ukraine war and the Israel–Hamas conflict illustrate that digital diplomacy has evolved beyond a mere tool for communication; it now directly influences the configuration of international politics. These conflicts demonstrate how digital platforms are leveraged as instruments for shaping global public opinion. In times of heightened tension, states may impose bans or restrictions on the digital platforms of rival countries (for example, the U.S. imposing restrictions on TikTok over national security concerns, or Russia limiting access to Facebook and Twitter).

Geopolitical rivalries among major powers—such as the United States and China, or Russia and the West—have spurred increased investment in digital diplomacy platforms as means to promote national narratives and to hinder cooperation among adversaries. Allied countries are also enhancing digital diplomatic collaboration through intelligence sharing and coordinated communication strategies across digital platforms. Major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia are engaged in a competitive race for technological dominance, using digital platforms to expand their global influence. This competition is driving a polarization of the digital ecosystem: Western countries favor platforms such as Facebook, Google, and Microsoft, while China promotes WeChat, TikTok, and Baidu, and Russia develops domestic alternatives like VKontakte and RuTube.

In sum, shifts in the policies of major powers, the persistence of global conflicts, and the strategic use of digital platforms have not only accelerated the development of digital diplomacy but have also amplified its potential downsides when employed as an instrument of power rivalry.

2. Manifestations of the Impact of Digital Diplomacy on International Politics

- *Increase in Actors Participating in International Politics*

In the digital age, websites, social media accounts, news portals, and online forums play an essential role in enabling multiple stakeholders to engage in international politics. This means that diplomacy is no longer the exclusive domain of states; instead, institutions, organizations, and even individuals can now participate. The practice of digital diplomacy in the early decades of the 21st century demonstrates that international politics includes a variety of actors—states, nationalist elements, multinational corporations, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transnational movements and networks, and even individuals representing themselves or their nations.

Digital diplomacy allows states to communicate not only with other governments but also directly with foreign citizens. Through digital channels, governments can promote national images, explain foreign policies, and shape international public opinion. This creates a new relationship between the public and policymakers, where public opinion becomes a critical factor in shaping international policies. Moreover, as digital diplomacy develops, international public opinion plays an increasingly important role in influencing political decisions. Social media campaigns, online movements, and NGOs can pressure governments to adjust foreign policies. For example, digital campaigns about climate change and human rights have significantly influenced international politics and contributed to the adoption of global agreements.

Digital diplomacy expands the number and types of actors participating in international politics. Previously, states and international organizations were central players; now, thanks to digital technologies, individuals, tech companies, NGOs, and social movements also impact international policy. For instance, the #MeToo movement, which started with a hashtag on Twitter, quickly became a global wave against harassment and sexual violence, influencing global politics to some extent. Governments in countries such as France, Canada, and Japan had to amend laws to better protect women's rights due to pressure from online public opinion. United Nations forums also placed this issue on their agenda, demonstrating the influence of a social movement empowered by digital diplomacy. Another example is the role of tech companies in international political relations: during Russia's attack

on Ukraine, the country's telecommunications systems were disrupted, making communication and coordination difficult for the Ukrainian government. Elon Musk provided Starlink satellite internet services to Ukraine, helping its government and military maintain communications—showing that large tech corporations are not just economic entities but also hold significant influence over international politics and security.

Thus, digital diplomacy is a natural consequence of media development in the 21st century. The global reach of social media and networks has impacted how international actors engage with one another, at various levels between businesses, international organizations, and other global entities. In summary, digital diplomacy has expanded the range of actors participating in international politics—from individuals and businesses to NGOs and social movements—transforming the nature of international political relations from a state-controlled system to a multidimensional environment, where digital technology empowers diverse actors to participate directly or influence international politics indirectly.

- *Acceleration of Crisis Management in International Politics*

The globalization era is characterized by the growing frequency and intensity of political, economic, and cultural interactions across borders. The advantages of social media provide opportunities to reach citizens of other countries almost in real time. Social media platforms offer spaces for interaction, enhancing engagement and thus advancing diplomatic goals. Their low-cost accessibility compared to traditional methods is a major strength of digital diplomacy. Many platforms allow for dynamic content such as videos, images, and links, which are more effective than traditional methods like presentations or flyers, improving outreach to target groups.

Previously, government officials and media outlets needed hours or days to disseminate information about unfolding international crises; now, information is transmitted in real-time worldwide not just via radio and television, but also through the Internet. Digital technology is particularly useful in information gathering and processing, consular operations, and maintaining communication during emergencies and disasters.

Digital diplomacy plays a crucial role in accelerating the management of political crises. A prime example is the enhanced speed of international cooperation against the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital diplomacy enabled countries to share information, issue early warnings about shared threats like pandemics, environmental crises, or terrorism. For instance, during COVID-19, digital tools helped countries and international organizations coordinate more effectively, share health data, and provide technological assistance. Online summits among G20 leaders, WHO, and the UN were organized immediately to discuss response measures. Digital diplomacy also facilitated initiatives like COVAX, ensuring rapid vaccine distribution to developing countries, contributing to more effective and faster management of global challenges.

Similarly, during the Myanmar crisis in 2021, following the military coup, international organizations and foreign governments used social media to express opposition and pressure Myanmar's military regime. Emergency online meetings between ASEAN countries and the international community were quickly organized to propose solutions. The ceasefire agreement in Gaza in the 2021 Israel-Hamas conflict was achieved after just 11 days of fighting, with the United States using digital diplomacy channels for online negotiations with stakeholders, including Egypt and Qatar. The use of real-time data enabled negotiators to make faster decisions, resulting in a critical ceasefire in a short time.

Overall, digital diplomacy has shortened reaction times during international crises, from global pandemics to military conflicts. By leveraging technology, leaders can make quicker, more transparent, and more effective decisions.

- *Competition and Cooperation in Digital Space*

Digital diplomacy has created a new arena for power competition among states. The contest is no longer limited to military or economic realms; countries are now racing for influence in the digital space. Digital powers such as the United States, China, and Russia compete to control cyberspace and influence global public perceptions through media and digital platforms. This competition spans multiple fronts, from controlling internet infrastructure and shaping information flows to information warfare and ideological influence. Propaganda campaigns via digital channels can sway public opinion, spread misinformation, or manipulate information to affect international politics. This can lead to instability and trigger diplomatic crises between countries.

The United States controls digital media platforms through tech giants like Google, Meta (Facebook, Instagram), Twitter, YouTube, and Microsoft, significantly influencing global information flows. The U.S. has also implemented digital content regulations and developed AI to detect fake news, such as banning TikTok, straining relations with China. On the other hand, China has developed the world's strongest Internet censorship system—the "Great Firewall"—blocking Western platforms like Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. China has also created its own tech ecosystem with Baidu, WeChat, Weibo, and TikTok (Douyin domestically). Major powers use cyberspace strategically to control information, influence public perceptions, and protect national interests. This competition not only affects technology but also has broad impacts on politics, economics, and global security.

Furthermore, these battles do not only occur between governments but also impact individuals, as daily information consumption can be manipulated by digital forces. Thus, digital diplomacy affects the competition for

soft power among nations. Digital platforms allow countries to build national images, showcase cultural values, and highlight development achievements to gain support and international influence. Countries' digital media campaigns can significantly raise their international profile and enhance their soft power.

With growing reliance on digital technology for diplomatic activities, cybersecurity has become a critical issue in international politics. States face risks of cyberattacks, information theft, and disruptions to strategic information systems. This requires governments to develop cyber defense measures and strengthen international cooperation to address these threats. Digital diplomacy has promoted negotiations on creating rules and regulations for cybersecurity in international relations. Countries are working to develop mechanisms to manage and prevent cyberattacks while protecting privacy and information freedom in the global digital environment.

Digital diplomacy has provided a new platform for multilateral diplomacy, facilitating easier cooperation among countries and international organizations to tackle global issues like climate change, cybersecurity, terrorism, and humanitarian crises. Online conferences, digital data exchanges, and virtual international forums have become essential tools for promoting international cooperation without needing physical meetings.

However, political tensions can lead countries to withdraw from or limit cooperation within global digital organizations, disrupting digital collaboration. Alternatively, countries may form tech alliances to counter political rivals, such as the D10 (Democracy 10) alliance aiming to reduce dependence on Chinese technology.

Thus, digital diplomacy has had a profound two-way impact on international politics, simultaneously increasing competition and fostering cooperation in a new environment. It has fundamentally changed how states interact on the global stage, opening opportunities for collaboration while posing complex challenges that require adaptation and innovation in policymaking and international relations management.

- ***Reshaping Traditional Diplomacy and National Foreign Policy***

Digital diplomacy has fundamentally transformed the way diplomats conduct their work. Previously, diplomatic negotiations and engagements typically required face-to-face meetings. Today, online meetings and digital communication platforms have become essential elements of modern diplomacy, saving time, reducing costs, and allowing for rapid interactions among parties.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, major powers like the U.S., China, and Russia used digital platforms to promote vaccine diplomacy. The U.S. donated hundreds of millions of Pfizer and Moderna doses through the COVAX program. China used WeChat and TikTok to promote Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines to developing countries. Russia promoted Sputnik V through media channels like RT and Telegram to boost its influence in Latin America and Africa. In the past, medical aid was conducted through government negotiations or international organizations; with digital diplomacy, countries can directly campaign for public support abroad.

Fundamentally, digital diplomacy has brought about transformations in both the structure and procedures of foreign ministries. It has created new diplomatic tools and approaches, such as using AI to analyze international data or developing chatbots to support diplomatic activities. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the urgent need to train diplomats with digital skills, from using online tools to ensuring information security, leading to the specialization of personnel within diplomatic structures.

Furthermore, digital diplomacy is no longer limited to government officials and professional diplomats but extends to non-state actors such as NGOs, multinational corporations, and even influential individuals (influencers). Thus, digital diplomacy has opened informal diplomatic channels where non-state actors can significantly impact international political processes and influence the effectiveness of traditional diplomacy.

Donald Trump during his first term as U.S. President utilized social media to influence foreign policy. He often made diplomatic statements directly via Twitter, bypassing the State Department. Key decisions like withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, imposing tariffs on China, criticizing NATO members, and negotiating with North Korea were publicly announced first through Twitter rather than traditional diplomatic channels. Many countries had to adjust their diplomatic strategies to respond promptly to Trump's unexpected announcements on social media. Clearly, digital diplomacy has reshaped traditional diplomacy. Instead of formal diplomatic channels, Twitter and similar platforms have become new diplomatic tools, allowing national leaders to instantly deliver messages. This enhances transparency but also increases instability in international political relations.

Digital diplomacy has contributed to building a global diplomatic network. Its rapid development—marked by faster, stronger communication and interaction—is a clear indicator of growing interdependence among states. Therefore, nations must adjust their perceptions to update their foreign policies and strategies accordingly. Digital tools are no longer just communication media but have become instruments shaping national foreign policies. Big Data analysis and AI can help policymakers better understand international public opinion and global trends, leading to the formulation of appropriate diplomatic strategies.

Digital diplomacy allows states to implement more flexible and timely foreign strategies. Instead of extensive preparation for traditional diplomatic meetings, nations can now swiftly react and adjust their strategies through digital channels. Thus, digital diplomacy has changed how states formulate and execute foreign policies.

In conclusion, digital diplomacy is profoundly affecting international politics, changing the way nations and organizations communicate, cooperate, and address global challenges. It has enhanced transparency, accountability,

created new arenas for competition and cooperation, and, in the context of globalization and technological advancement, has become a critical factor in shaping international relations and building a political system suitable for the digital age.

3. Implications for Vietnam

Digital diplomacy has the potential to shape international relations in the digital era, altering the global balance of power. Thus, there is a shift of power and information in international politics. In the past, information related to diplomacy was often controlled by government agencies and international organizations. However, with the development of digital technology, the power of information has gradually shifted from official organizations to the public and individuals. This change requires diplomacy to adapt to the new context, where information is shared openly and quickly. This has led to the need to develop strategies focused on digital transformation, including the role of digital diplomacy to interact with these actors.

The world is gradually dividing into distinct "technology blocs," deepening the polarization in cyberspace and digital technology. This directly affects how countries conduct digital diplomacy, as they will use different platforms, making it more difficult to reach each other.

Overall, the development of digital diplomacy is largely influenced by the development of social media platforms and the ability to interact with international political entities. The four key factors shaping the development trend of digital diplomacy include: digital, global, connected, and rapid change. These factors are inherent in digital diplomacy according to the unique characteristics of each international political entity, and they will continue to determine the development of digital diplomacy in the future.

In Vietnam, on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of Vietnam (02/03/2020), Former General Secretary and State President Nguyen Phu Trong remarked that "our country has never had such a foundation, potential, prestige, and position as it does today." Vietnam has risen to become a middle-power country in international relations based on three criteria: capacity, policy, and international recognition. Vietnam has advantages in terms of population size, capacity, and policy to turn digital technology into a national "strength" and a "niche" for specialized diplomacy—digital diplomacy. Vietnam is making strong progress in its digital transformation, with significant improvements in digital infrastructure and the important contribution of the digital economy to the national GDP. In 2024, according to the Ministry of Information and Communications, Vietnam ranked 71st out of 193 countries in the UN E-Government Development Index, up 15 places from 2022. This is the first time Vietnam has been placed in the "Very High" category for e-government development. In terms of digital infrastructure, as of October 2024, more than 82.4% of Vietnamese households used fiber optic cables, exceeding the 80% target set for 2025. More than 87% of the population uses smartphones, facilitating access to digital services and new technologies. In the digital economy, Vietnam has achieved impressive results. In 2024, the total value of digital media transactions (GMV) reached 6 billion USD, ranking second after Indonesia (8 billion USD) and Thailand (6 billion USD) in Southeast Asia, with the highest growth rate in the region.

Thus, with the goal of establishing the position of a middle-power country, building a digital diplomacy platform will not only help Vietnam enhance its international standing but also be highly effective in promoting cooperation, information exchange, and solving global challenges in the increasingly digitalized world. Choosing to promote digital diplomacy as a form of niche diplomacy is both correct and appropriate.

However, in Vietnam, digital diplomacy remains a relatively new concept in both theoretical and practical foundations. From the analysis above, several implications can be drawn for Vietnam in the process of building its digital diplomacy as follows:

(a)   Digital diplomacy cannot completely replace traditional diplomacy.
Digital diplomacy still has limitations in handling complex and sensitive issues. Major crises such as military conflicts, nuclear negotiations, and border disputes require direct dialogue with the participation of multiple parties. Multi-layered negotiations, such as trade agreements and international treaties, are very difficult to conduct effectively solely through online platforms. Digital diplomacy cannot fully replace the roles of embassies and international organizations. Embassies are not only places for information exchange but also bridges between governments, processing visas, protecting citizens, and conducting cultural activities—things that cannot be fully carried out in a digital environment. International conferences like the G20, UN, and ASEAN are also opportunities for heads of state to meet informally, and thus direct meetings are still needed to achieve stronger political commitments.

On the other hand, current limitations in information security, cybersecurity, and digital infrastructure gaps between countries also lead many leaders and senior officials to prefer traditional diplomacy over digital diplomacy. However, in today's connected world, not only nations but also individuals and organizations play an increasingly important role in international affairs. Digital diplomacy is an adaptation to the new context, effectively complementing traditional diplomacy.

(b)   *The demand for digital diplomacy will continue to rise.*

The development of digital diplomacy after COVID-19 is not just a passing trend but has become an essential part of global diplomatic activities. With the advancement of technology and the need to enhance international connectivity, digital diplomacy will continue to expand and innovate, opening up new possibilities and opportunities in the global context. The world is a place where state and non-state entities are competing for influence and power in the same online space. This space now has over 3 billion people, most of whom access the internet through mobile phones. When used correctly, digital diplomacy is a convincing and timely supplement to traditional diplomacy, enabling a country to advance its foreign policy objectives, extend its international reach, and even influence individuals who have never set foot in any embassy worldwide.

(c)   *Digital diplomacy has gone beyond the scope of public diplomacy.*

Digital diplomacy allows countries to reach a broader global audience and larger community groups, unrestricted by geographic boundaries. This not only helps to deliver messages effectively but also enhances national image-building and strengthens soft power. Therefore, countries that have used digital diplomacy extensively have mainly done so as a tool of public diplomacy. However, the digital era has expanded global issues into a new space, and thus, countries must also enhance multilateral dialogue and international cooperation on digital transformation while addressing challenges in information security and cybersecurity. In the near future, this may become a priority for political entities in the international community.

(d)   *The speed of development and the level of implementation of digital diplomacy will not be uniform across international political entities.*

Digital diplomacy is an essential foreign policy tool for countries, but the development of digital diplomacy for each entity depends heavily on its capacity and political will. Barriers to digital diplomacy development between countries arise from several factors, such as trust in digital diplomacy due to concerns about cybersecurity, data privacy, and internet governance; gaps in digital diplomacy between countries; and the ability to use digital diplomacy to address global issues.

For Vietnam, after the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional diplomatic activities resumed, and Vietnam's digital diplomacy activities became more subdued. This shows that digital diplomacy used during the COVID-19 period was more of a temporary measure, lacking a strategic approach. However, this period also demonstrated the importance and capabilities of Vietnam's digital diplomacy. Vietnam needs to base its approach on both theoretical research and practical experience to build a roadmap for promoting digital diplomacy in particular, as well as leveraging digital diplomacy for effective foreign affairs activities in general.

Overall, digital diplomacy reflects the change in how countries interact and cooperate in an increasingly connected and technology-dependent world. In the post-COVID era, digital diplomacy has become a major development trend and a powerful tool for a peaceful and prosperous society, opening new possibilities and opportunities in the global context. This is crucial for the existence of a connected world. Digital diplomacy has driven the trend of digitalization in diplomacy, laying the foundation for more flexible forms of international cooperation in the future. Thus, assessing the influence of digital diplomacy is not merely an immediate necessity, but a long-term strategic imperative for safeguarding national interests, enhancing international influence, and effectively responding to global transformations

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