

# Digital Diplomacy and its Prospect for Nepal

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## **Abstract**

*Change in any domain ushers in new dawn. The fast-paced advancement of the information, communication, and technological sectors has affected several traditional areas. One area that has been highly impacted is the domain of diplomacy. The digital imprints in diplomacy have shifted the diplomatic activities to a virtual platform. However, there have been difficulties in defining the idea of “digital diplomacy”. This study points out the efforts of the scholars and researchers towards defining the domain of digital diplomacy. Therefore, the primary aim of the article is to explore different facets of digital diplomacy. It explains how the digitization process began in diplomacy and whether digitization has displaced or complemented the traditional forms of diplomacy. The study has highlighted the supremacy of human beings over the new technologies in diplomacy. It deals with the policy goals of digital diplomacy and emphasizes the United Nations’ attempt to enhance the same. Finally, the study has explored digital diplomacy of Nepal and makes policy recommendations for enhancing digital diplomacy in Nepal. The study has used secondary resources, including books, journals, and online media platforms. The information and ideas are put in array for the coherent presentation of the study with the adoption of analytical process.*

**Keywords:** Digital Diplomacy, Policy Goals, Nepal, United Nations.

## **Introduction**

In relation to international relations, diplomacy is a technique by which states accomplish their relationships with one another and try to accomplish their national interest (Adesina, 2017). The digital age or the information and communication technologies (ICTs) has threatened to change the traditional way of diplomacy (Hocking, 2015). Using these new technologies, sharing information and interaction online has been an advantage for government officials and diplomats (Sotiriu, 2015). Digital diplomacy and its consequences on international relations raises the debate on contradictory opinions on the effect of the Internet, amongst “cyber-utopians” – believers of the idea that social revolutions may be the creation of the digital revolution – and the “cyber-realists” – who do not repudiate the prominence of the Internet but make the argument that social change is the creation of human activity, much of it happening in offline environments (Manor, 2019).

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The digitization of diplomacy has progressed with development in the ICT sector. This has been a very common form of diplomacy in the international relations domain. The digitization of diplomacy made the elite form common to the individual citizen where the public opinion and emotions are involved. By far, this method has been considered one of the progressive and successful for performing public diplomacy (Bjola, 2018). Digital diplomacy has advanced rapidly following the development of the online and social media platforms. Basically, the use of Google, Facebook (recently branded as Meta), Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Weibo, and many other social media platforms have facilitated the global practice of digital diplomacy not only by government officials but also individual leaders who use digital media to reach out to the international public.

Although the conduct of digital diplomacy by advanced countries is on a steady increase, the impact of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) since 2020 has induced the diplomats of all ranks to get along with its continued application (Sharma & Sisodia, 2022). The physical and social barriers have been eased through the digital forms of diplomacy when all the international activities including international trade, commerce, high-level visits, and meetings had come to a halt (Sharma & Sisodia, 2022). Because of the convenience that the digitization of diplomacy has brought to the diplomatic world, practitioners have begun asking whether the technology is going to aid the traditional diplomacy, or it is going to replace it (Parajuli, 2021). However, many argue that the traditional form of diplomacy is not going to be replaced nor will the digital form of diplomacy reign supreme, instead a hybrid form of diplomacy of use of both conventional and digital forms will be practiced (KC, 2020).

The situations and circumstances arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, made digital diplomacy popular among both the great powers as well as the small states (KC, 2020). Virtual meetings of world leaders have been possible, and the digital platform has been very useful for the government institutions in the repatriation of their citizens and the people in need. The digital form was used not only for disseminating information but also in communication, administration, and facilitation between the authority and the people (Jaiswal, Sinha, & PV, 2021). The improved facilities and fast innovations of information technology during the global complexity have created an optimal environment for its uninterrupted use (Jaiswal, Sinha, & PV, 2021). The march of this form of diplomacy is unstoppable as it is being applied with pragmatic approaches.

## **Difficulty in defining digital diplomacy**

No one can point out the actual starting point of digital diplomacy which makes the historicity of the field very complex (Bjola & Pamment, 2016). The digitization of diplomacy evolved along with the evolution of ICTs. The scholarly realm of diplomacy has not been able to define what actually digital diplomacy is nor has it been able to reach a specific conclusion in defining the concept (Bjola & Pamment, 2016) However, several attempts have been made by researchers working in the area of digital diplomacy.

A clear definition of the idea is needed of the evolving discipline not only in diplomacy but also in international relations for accessing the resources and measuring the impact of the idea to the discipline (Archetti, 2012). Some diplo-linguistic scholars have attempted to emphasize on the linguistic construction of digital diplomacy where several identities are imparted to this form so that it has tried to disseminate different meanings to the public (Bjola & Pamment, 2016). Because of the linguistic impact on the digital diplomacy, the identity of the idea is still ambiguous, and the impact on the discipline is harder than ever to measure. The linguistic discourses such as the use of “e” or “cyber” or “digital” have been used to limit the digital form of diplomacy (Cooper & Shaw, 2009). These linguistic identities have attempted to categorize the digital diplomacy where “e” denoted the commercial form of digital diplomacy, “cyber” gets attributed to security issues, and “digital” is referred to the use to different technological forms in conducting public diplomacy and other forms of traditional diplomacy in a convenient manner (Hanson, 2011). However, the study is generally concerned with digital diplomacy which is gaining an increased relevance and used for diplomacy (Galvez, 2017). It differs from the limited actualization through net and virtual diplomacy in terms of nuance and subtlety.

In the context of its pragmatic use at present, digital diplomacy has gained a wider acceptance despite the conspicuous absence of all agreed definitions. Adhering to the linguistic turn in discipline of international relations, the use of different metaphors or adjectives has created difficulty for the scholars and practitioners equally. The “new” form of diplomacy, diplomacy 2.0, neo-diplomacy, virtual diplomacy and other identities have made the situation complex (Manor, 2019). Many have focused on digital diplomacy as “the use of social network sites by Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) for gathering and disseminating information”, whereas they differentiate the idea of ‘diplomacy 2.0’ as “follower centric” and implies “ongoing engagement between MFAs and their followers, the adoption of an architecture of listening among MFAs” for contribution to the development of MFA and embassy websites, special web platforms and nation-branding campaigns and crowd sourcing” (Manor, 2019). Some scholars regard digital diplomacy as being a convenient tool for public diplomacy (Bjola & Pamment, 2016; Archetti, 2012). These adherents view digital diplomacy as the use of the ICT devices in facilitating the efficiency of diplomacy in a wide range of activities, actions, and opportunities. Nevertheless, whatever the school of thoughts the researchers and practitioners represent, in this open environment the difficulty of defining what digital diplomacy is still difficult; it is open to continuous change through global debate. These views have a limited and narrow conception on what digital diplomacy is (Adesina, 2017). They describe the digital form of diplomacy as a nexus between digital technology and conventional diplomacy.

In the quest of defining the digital form of diplomacy, some scholars adhere to the idea of Joseph Nye on “soft power” where the digital diplomacy is attributed to the cultural form of diplomacy (Gilboa, 2016; Burson-Marsteller, 2016; Rashica, 2018). These adherents believe that digital diplomacy is undertaken by governments to disseminate the country’s soft powers capabilities (Verrekia, 2017). Whereas a positive attitude towards digital diplomacy perceives

it as a new space or node or link through which the state and non-state actors collaborate and contribute accordingly (Bjola & Pamment, 2016). It has been taken as a new foreign policy tool or diplomatic attribute to create a “hyper connected networked, super-speed media-centric, volatile world” (Verrekia, 2017).

However, a clear and concise definition of digital diplomacy is required for proper functioning of the digital apparatus in the diplomatic realm (Bjola, 2016). The comprehensive and coherent idea can only provide the domain with opportunities and prevent it from vulnerabilities (Bjola, 2016). As modern information technology advances, an international convention is, for sure, needed to agree on a globally agreeable definition (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). That will fairly facilitate work for adopting digital diplomacy in bilateral dealings and multilateral forums. There will be no reverse of its forward journey given its increasing diplomatic application (Bjola, 2016).

For the first time, the nucleus of digital diplomacy appeared in 1984, when Allen C. Hansen in his “Public Diplomacy in the Computer Age” observed public diplomacy exerted by the United States Information Agency (USIA) by analyzing public diplomacy in a “Computerized World” (Burson-Marsteller, 2016). Since then, its journey has begun to take its shape. On February 5, 1994, the exchange of the first official messages via emails between the U.S. President Bill Clinton and the Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt took place, and that was the dawn of a new era of electronic diplomacy that has grown to the current application of digital diplomacy (Archetti, 2012). President Clinton had said, “I share your enthusiasm for the potential of emerging communications technologies” (Archetti, 2012). This exchange of electronic communication was a landmark toward building a global information superhighway (Archetti, 2012). Clinton’s message was a response to the earlier message from the then Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt who had said, “Sweden-as you know-is one of leading countries in the world in the field of communications, and it is only appropriate that we should be among the first to use the internet also for political contacts and communications around the globe” (Archetti, 2012). That landmark exchange of messages through electronic devices paved the pathway for its development from which there has not been no looking back from using the new technologies (Bjola, 2018). The event has also played an important role in steering the development as it has happened at the highest levels of political leaderships of the United States and Sweden (Archetti, 2012).

Indeed, it was a quantum leap forward in introducing a new means of communication. In the years that followed the exchange of electronic messages between globally well-known politicians, including those on social media like LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, impacting lives and diplomatic communication across the globe (Camilleri, 2011). In 2007, a new practice of virtual diplomacy entered diplomatic dealings (Duncombe, 2019). In 2009, it was the turn of the then Mexican Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan to the United States who, for the first time, used Twitter for diplomatic communication (Archetti, 2012). He personally wrote “Great to be the first Ambassador to the United States with a personal Twitter account, a good way to talk directly to America about Mexico” (Archetti, 2012). A new dawn in actual

action thus appeared globally with positive developments taking place in the developed world, especially in the United States. Without great events, nothing new can be easily adopted. President John F Kennedy had very aptly pointed out, “Every great age is marked by innovation and daring by the ability to meet unprecedented problems with intelligent solutions” (Archetti, 2012).

It is also appropriate to quote Tom Fletcher, a former British Ambassador who observed, “Technological progress and the resolution of series of conflict allowed humans to advance from feudal to industrial society. The next wave of technological disruption will be faster and greater than anything we have ever experienced. But we can and must be ready for it”. (Archetti, 2012)

This observation indicates the need for preparedness to adapt with the transforming situations. Once more, the former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt optimally commented; “I think it [digital diplomacy] will give us possibilities to work together for a better world and that it is not a small thing in itself” (Adesina, 2017).

In the beginning, the U.S State Department had undertaken a lead role in initiating digital diplomacy. Hillary Clinton who served as the Secretary of State during the first term of the U.S. President Barack Obama did manage to utilize the new popular trend as an instrument of statecraft (Bjola, 2016). In her own words, Clinton wished to run a 21st century statecraft platform that would “reach beyond traditional government-to-government relations and engage directly with people around the world.” (Verrekia, 2017). Her dedication to prioritizing digital diplomacy is demonstrated by the fact that the State Department had provided twenty-five different nodes at its headquarters in Washington which were set up to focus on digital diplomacy, with more than 1000 employees using it in their work at home and abroad (Bjola, 2016).

In South Asian region, India led the way with its Ministry of External Affairs posting its first tweet in 2010. But after the unprecedented spread of the coronavirus, its use has been embraced and extended worldwide due to the compelling situational circumstances created by various obstacles, including lesser in-person contacts between diplomats (Parajuli, 2021). It is obvious that it has travelled an entrenched trajectory and will make its journey more adaptive and more amiable than before as foreign offices around the globe manage diplomatic and administrative activities sustained by the rapid progress of information technology with innovation springing up, supported by incessant research activities (Galvez, 2017).

Most are institutional accounts, but a few Heads of State do tweet personally, such as President Ilves of Estonia who is known for engaging with other Twitter users, and European Council President Charles Michel (@eucopresident), while Indian Prime Minister @NarendraModi is well-known for his photos with other political leaders (Burson-Marsteller, 2016). Trump’s tweets (@realDonaldTrump) were characterized by their persuasive, rather than informative or deductive arguments (Burson-Marsteller, 2016). Pope Francis, with nearly 29 million followers, is a firm believer in the use of new media while warning against the dangers of polarization (Burson-Marsteller, 2016). He was the second most followed Head of State in

2016 after President Obama, joining religious leaders already in cyberspace such as the Dalai Lama, and several popular preachers, Christian and Muslim. Roman Catholic bishops in the USA have been encouraged to blog, tweet, and preach on the “new digital continent” on social media to reach young people (Galvez, 2017). In 2016, among the UN members, 90 percent of the states used Twitter, 88 percent Facebook, 71 percent Instagram, 67 percent Google+, 40 percent LinkedIn, and 78 percent used YouTube (Pérez-Curiel, 2019). Whatever the discussion on digital diplomacy, it “is expected to infiltrate the deep fundamentals of the diplomatic DNA” (Holmes, 2013). This can endorse originality, but also rescind prevailing structures of communication, its organization, and the facets of international relations (Holmes, 2013).

### **Supremacy of *Homo Sapiens* amidst the rise of new-tech power**

The application of digital diplomacy is the latest development ushered in by governments as part of ultra-modern-day-statecraft in their dealings with the external world (Adesina, 2017). Technology and internet have come to occupy an inalienable space in diplomatic sphere. However, it is certain that the traditional practice of diplomacy is still universally adopted and put in actual practice (Sandre, 2015). Meanwhile, there also are questions on the value of diplomacy itself. The practice of diplomacy as handed down from the ancient times will remain there as the conduct of diplomacy is needed for humans. Many have been skeptic about the technological advancements surpassing the need of human beings in the diplomatic activities (Pérez-Curiel, 2019). People should not forget that it is humans themselves who apply digital diplomacy as they are the real masters in action. The enormous capacity of human intelligence and its instinctive and productive value could never be put aside (Hanson, 2011). Humans are supreme beings who create and use everything as they wish and manage (Hanson, 2011). However, some argue that the closed world of *démarches*, summits, and diplomatic dinners is no longer sufficient to project our values and interests and requires more than human interactions (Hocking, 2015).

Nevertheless, the emotions and etiquettes remain an integral part of diplomacy which can never be fulfilled through the digital form (Bjola, 2016). He added that digital diplomacy has always the risk of “Emotional commodification”. The attribute of smile, handshakes, and personal behavior play an essential role in the diplomatic negotiations. The negotiating aspect of diplomacy can never be overcome through the digital method (Bjola, 2016). From a different standpoint, digital diplomacy is also related to the emotional aspects. Emotional commodification and careful magnification of emotional content in online discourse, has become a steady pattern of engagement on social media platforms as it assists digital influencers to control the choice and course of the online discussion (Manor, 2019). He added, that emotional commodification has negative inferences for digital diplomacy. As the connection between emotions and social media becomes stronger and more erudite, the query of how digital diplomats can acclimatize to an emotionally charged form of social communication can no longer be overlooked (Mororzov, 2011). Therefore, for the emotional aspect, the supremacy of the human seems evident despite the rise of the ICTs (Newberg, 2017).

Recent studies have shown that up to 15 percent of Twitter accounts of government and political leaders are in fact robots rather than people, and this number is bound to increase in the future (Newberg, 2017). The “dark side” of digital technologies, deception, propaganda, and strategies, and it has been demonstrated to be dangerous ground for the proliferation of robots (Morozov, 2011). Robo-trolling, usage of procedures for content advancement and/or commotion, is now part of the digital scenery (Newberg, 2017). Digital diplomats may not consequently be able to avert artificial intelligence (AI) from disrupting their relationship-building activities, but may encompass some of its negative complications (Pérez-Curiel, 2019). The objective to counter Robo-trolling would be supporting media literacy and source censure, reassuring institutional pliability, and endorsing a clear and coherent strategic narrative capable of comprising the risk from erratic counter-messaging (Rashica, 2018). The presence of real human beings is very important for this as well.

### **Policy goals for digital diplomacy**

As with the definition of the digital diplomacy, its aims and objectives are also contested. Digital foreign policy is guided by digital diplomacy. The practitioners are engaged in a novel set of digital policies when enhancing the foreign policy goals through the digital media. These are dealt alongside the technology policy domain (Bjola, 2016, 2018). Other than dealing with the technology, the policy goals of the digital diplomacy are oriented into the realms of security, human rights, development imperatives, economy, legal and socio-cultural aspects (Bjola, 2016).

Regarding technological policy goals, digital diplomacy is oriented towards building a safe and efficient technological infrastructure (Adesina, 2017). The policy related to AI is an important facet while dealing with policy goals (Gilboa, 2016). Another area of policy goals through digital diplomacy is interested in is block-chains, cloud computing, critical internet resources, maintaining digital standards, managing emerging technologies, and importantly the telecommunications infrastructure (Gilboa, 2016). In the economic policy domain, the digital diplomacy goals are oriented towards consumer right protection (Bjola, 2021). Presently, the crypto currencies are being popular (Bjola, 2021). Therefore, the policy aim of the digital diplomacy is also focused on regulating these new digital currencies as well (Bjola, 2021). The area of e-commerce and trade remains the important and perpetual area of digital diplomacy on which the policy objectives remain very important (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). Digital diplomacy should also be focused on future work as well. Further, the economic policy goals through digital diplomacy also cover the area of digital taxation (Adesina, 2017).

The policy goals of digital diplomacy also remain within the human rights domain (Hanson, 2011). The digital platforms have made awareness against the human rights violations possible. In child rights, for example, the state and non-state actors play an essential role through internet (Hocking, 2015). The freedom of expression and freedom of press remains sensitive issues in digital diplomacy (Grincheva, 2012). Similarly, gender issues, human

rights principles, privacy and protection of data, and rights of persons with disabilities are also important policy domains (Galvez, 2017). The legal and regulatory domains also are important areas policy goals for digital diplomacy. The digital platform has provided the states and non-states actors with alternative dispute resolution methods. It has also inserted the diplomatic domain into a new concept of digital governance (Camilleri, 2011). The intellectual property rights, the areas of digital jurisdiction, and liability of intermediaries are equally important (Duncombe, 2019).

Important policy goals in the digital diplomacy also include the socio-cultural aspects through the life of the people. In this domain, includes policies related to content, cultural diversity, digital identities, multilingualism, multiculturalism, online education and other interdisciplinary approaches (Bjola, 2021).

## **Digital Policy and the United Nations**

The UN Secretary General's Roadmap for digital cooperation is important considering the surging digitization and its contributions to human and institutional capacity building (Sharma & Sisodia, 2022). The Roadmap for Digital Cooperation was forwarded by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on 11 June 2020 (Vacarelu, 2021) and it highlighted the UN High-Level Plan on Digital Cooperation. The roadmap builds on the report of the UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation (Panel) was entitled "The Age of Digital Interdependence". Its report published in June 2019 provides five sets of recommendations.

- Build an inclusive digital economy and society
- Develop human and institutional capacity
- Protect human rights and human agency
- Promote digital trust and security, and
- Foster global digital cooperation (UNGA, 2020).

The recommendations are worthy of practical application. However, the developing and less developed countries with weaker technological capacity have been slow to apply them as recommended. The United Nations itself needs to move forward to assist them with necessary financial technological support through its agencies. This will be one way to implement recommendations.

The United Nations is focused on in creating an inclusive digital economy and society through global connectivity (UNGA, 2020). It has considered the importance of realizing the full potential of digital technologies, including digital inclusion. The UN is aware of the digital gaps and how it has further widened the gaps in the areas of gender, development, and other aspects (UNGA, 2020). Thus, the UN has concentrated in building the digital capacity for real and sustained progress. It also encourages member countries for greater coherence and coordination in capacity building efforts.



The UN also seeks to securing digital human rights from all (UNGA, 2020) and operates with the belief that digital technologies have provided states and human beings with alternative and effective methods of advocacy in defending human rights, but they can also be used to suppress, limit and violate them. Therefore, realizing the opportunities and challenges provided by the digital platform, it is determined to ensuring digital human rights to all. The areas of data protection and privacy also remain important, along with the idea of digital identity. The UN is also critical towards use of surveillance technologies including facial recognition and is aware about online harassments and violence and understands the need for content governance. The UN also supports the regulation of AI through the digital diplomacy for enhancing the notion of digital trust, security, and global digital cooperation (UNGA, 2020).

### **Need for competences**

The following steps are necessary to make digital diplomacy ready and competent:

1. Curate-listening to information and knowledge
2. Collaborate-between your organization and outside communities
3. Communicate-represent the ability and knowledge
4. Create-focus on creating online content, and
5. Critique-critical comments and discussions: engage in critical discussions and learn how to manage criticism (Adesina, 2017; Bjola, 2016).

The competences listed above are indeed minimum requirements to apply digital diplomacy convincingly. Diplomats must be exposed to and experienced with all five competences to efficiently work and serve as true diplomats in an age when digitization is making quick and impressive headway even in distant nooks and crannies of the world, whether developed or less developed (Hanson, 2011). Through digital diplomacy, people engaged in official diplomatic businesses can not only listen and publicize as they wish, but also engage and evaluate in new and interesting ways (Jaiswal, Sinha, & PV, 2021). Practically, diplomats can also expand and deepen their research, and communicate and interact directly with civil society as well as governments and influential individuals as part of public diplomacy (Jaiswal, Sinha, & PV, 2021). Digital diplomacy has practically emerged as an integrative tool to further advance their interests at any time, whether it is normal or critical (Jaiswal, Sinha, & PV, 2021). However, for this there would be need for all five competencies what is minimally required is the above five competences.

### **Benefits of digital diplomacy**

The combination of diplomacy and digital developments helps us to comprehend the 21st century environment where interacting and activity is becoming the groundwork of diplomatic exercise (Adesina, 2017). Relationships with new participants are vital in the extended international system, where the power of concepts is superior to that in the past and in which techniques and the informal guidelines of engagement, are no longer dictated by the government. Some of the areas that have been affected by the digitization of diplomacy are discussed below.

### ***Infinite information and interaction***

Digital media have provided the diplomats and individuals with infinite knowledge and information (Burson-Marsteller, 2016). This availability of the information has given them and the whole domain of diplomacy a novel vista (Sotiriu, 2015). The interaction of people has also increased significantly. The digital media platforms have been successful in assisting interaction and communication with citizens of the country and with citizens of other countries (Sotiriu, 2015). The domain of public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy have benefitted immensely. Digital diplomacy also provided a huge relief and alternative for the countries to deal and interact with their citizens (Sharma & Sisodia, 2022).

### ***Policy management and negotiations***

The digital revolution has been accompanied by central changes in international negotiation (Newberg, 2017). The wider and indeed public context in which international talks take place have become more prominent during pre-negotiations because of the digitization in diplomacy (Archetti, 2012). Digital technologies are now key elements in how they [negotiations] progress and, critically, they have formed more occasions for outside guidance on state-to-state consultations (Sandre, 2015).

Digital diplomacy recognizes two practices of social media engagement in negotiations: the first is an outcome of top-down exogenous shocks, as of foremost geopolitical/geo-economic crises (Sandre, 2015). The second is related with bottom-up incremental adjustments, as observed in human rights and environmental schemas (Sandre, 2015). Social media are enormously appreciated in diplomatic spheres where the purposes are multifaceted policy management and incremental adjustment (Burson-Marsteller, 2016). Communication through social media has progressively altered the DNA of the discussions (Mororzov, 2011). The whole course of founding the plan and accumulating and checking the networks of interests has necessitated the usage of digital resources (Newberg, 2017).

### ***Consular diplomacy***

The consular challenge is one of the persistent issues of digital diplomacy, where people are challenging help from the government and services that meet equally technological standards set by society as well as the human trace that is vital to this form of diplomacy (Archetti, 2012). The slightly obsolete term 'consular affairs' no longer covers what is going on, and hints back to the image of a world that never existed, one in which consular difficulties and diplomatic affairs did not appear to interconnect (Roberts, 2007). Consular diplomacy intersects with other extents of events of MOFAs such as economic diplomacy, public diplomacy, and development aid that can extremely disturb general bilateral relations (Roberts, 2007).

Not only have demands for consular services increased, but the provision of the same has also become an indicator of the efficiency. Faced with progressively technologically enabled citizens, government fiascos to reply instantaneously to crises, and to satisfy public and media expectations of support for nationals is now a test of diplomatic efficacy and one that governments are intensely sensitive to (Hanson, 2011). One of the top pressures expected by consular services is to keep up with quickly developing technology. The terror of technology

failures also positions high in any consular crisis and emergency management situation. Several governments offer 24/7 services and communicate through digital networks such as call centers and social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Direct communication with citizens-turned-customers is now positioned on the numerous choices offered by smart phones (Hocking, 2015).

The protection of citizens abroad requires ICT expertise that exceeds the capacities of small technological players like foreign ministries of small countries. But digital literacy so far cannot be taken for granted within many MoFAs, and they necessitate digitally erudite consular management action that is different from other arenas of diplomatic action (Bjola, 2016). There are also principled matters, privacy concerns and a variety of other materials that come with the digitization of consular diplomacy. That takes us to the extensive scope and numerous effects of technological changes on diplomacy, which has continually been and will continue to remain a challenge.

### ***The relationship between foreign ministries and embassies***

The key function of ministries of foreign affairs is to distribute the roles between the “hub” of the system and its “peripheries” (Roberts, 2007). It communicates information and processes for the attainment of its goals. Digitization can serve as an additional resource for both the basics, and can aid to change the relationships amid the two parts of the subsystem and persons within (Adesina, 2017). In the 1990s, the acceptance of protected e-mail systems provided an opportunity to reallocate policy-making purposes from the center to the sidelines, and to change recognized hierarchical forms of information distribution (Adesina, 2017). In the 1990s, the notion of “virtual diplomacy” expanded representation, resulting in greater demands on post-Cold War era diplomatic systems. Technology provided part of the response as MoFAs investigated with new means of attendance in more economical forms than the traditional embassy (Archetti, 2012).

In digital diplomacy, data flows within general diplomatic structures and amongst MoFAs which have become more composite. Embassies implant themselves through social media in networks connecting embassies, their MoFAs, and other parts of government, as well as host MoFAs (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). Facebook, Twitter and other digital devices may well be valuable, but consequences are reliant on circumstances and the behavior of diplomats as social proxies (Burson-Marsteller, 2016).

There are both benefits to the use of digital diplomacy, some of which are listed below:

#### ***Benefits***

1. Digital diplomacy is a pervasive and timely supplement to traditional or conventional diplomacy (Manor, 2019),
2. Social media provides opportunities, spaces for interaction, increased engagement and thus furthering the goals of diplomacy (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020),
3. Digital technologies are specifically useful for public diplomacy, consular services and communications during emergencies and disasters (Manor, 2019),

4. Digital diplomacy does not cost more, but often reduces cost,
5. Digital diplomacy matches the capabilities of small states, and
6. Digital diplomacy saves time and allows avoidance of non-essential visits.

### *Threats*

1. Instant dissemination about of information that can sometimes cause inconveniences,
2. Information leakage, hacking and anonymity of users (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020),
3. Issues of cyber governance, Internet freedom and cyber warfare and cyber security,
4. Deepening of information gap between haves and have not owing to low bandwidth.

The threats and risks can be tackled and managed if diplomats are careful and tactful in using the digital tools. Sensible and sensitive handling is therefore important for adopting digital diplomacy. Prescience of possible threats and risks and employment of timely counter measures can assist in risk management.

Digital diplomacy has been a welcome development made possible by information technology. But there also are challenges, including cyber security leakage (Newberg, 2017). Barbara Jacobson, an observer of the digital diplomacy process, has said, "The dangerous ability for information to be leaked and accounts to be hacked has caused many online users to be wary of attack." There also are other well-known examples about how data could be compromised, particularly the case of WikiLeaks where, as committed, Julian Assange had illegally published thousands of classified documents and cables of the State Department of the United States in 2010 and 2011 (Burson-Marsteller, 2016).

Another challenge is the threat of cyber-weapons that can interfere with the confidential communication and disrupt the system. Another threat is that caused by anonymous attacker groups (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). These threats have led to worries about the security of digital diplomacy.

Digital diplomacy also threatens change of the role of diplomats who could lose their monopoly of first reporting to home governments as the free and incessant flow of online information abounds across the globe (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). They are also under new pressure to distinguish all online information, to determine if they are true or false or serviceable or non-serviceable (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). Handling this situation requires diplomats to be more capable and efficient. Done efficiently, diplomats can have a stronger influence on foreign policy action and diplomatic activity than ever before.

## **Gaps in digital diplomacy**

Experts have pointed out some gaps in the application of diplomacy. One is the fact that governments in general and by their nature are slower to adopt changes in the technological environment. Challenges brought about by the digital divide between developed and developing countries are also real and one issue that cannot be easily tackled.

Practical coordination and broader connectivity are crucial, both of which are lacking (Bjola, 2018). There is also a need for a more cohesive approach to bring together different

communities, and policy makers and policy executors. Another need is to develop new models of cooperation between stakeholders as offered through proposals for adopting the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) of the UN that calls for strategic action (Manor, 2019). The need for capacity-building has also been frequently echoed by experts (Vacarelu, 2021). They agree that coordination, both internally and externally, remains one of prime challenges. Strategic use of available data sets within foreign ministries and across relevant ministries to foster evidence-based rational decision-making, including the application of digital tools, such as big data analytics and machine learning, remains a goal to strive for result-producing performance (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). Together, capacity building to enable diplomats for contributing to global forums and negotiations on digital issues remain high on the agenda for all countries irrespective of their varied status (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020).

Experts believe that IGF could transform into an effective catalyst for digital cooperation and emerge as a global center for mainstreaming beneficial practices and innovative solutions. Practically important is also a comment made by a Costa-Rican diplomat, Maricela Munoz who pointed out that authorities “tend to be present-focused rather than future-oriented, and often adopt a management by crisis approach rather than a management by anticipation style” (Rashica, 2018). This shows that opportunities to anticipate future skill required remain missed overall. As pointed out by Remco van der Beek, there are apparently training and capacity-building gaps, which need to be met with a strategic management of essential technical and human resources (Archetti, 2012).

## **Ways to overcome challenges**

The internet is still perceived as being too technical and complex to be understood properly by non-technicians. This can be overcome by diplomats provided they take the first step proactively to understand digital complexities to disentangle what stands between them and technology (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). Digital complexities are now on the diplomatic agendas worldwide, and formal diplomatic training needs to include digital aspects on-the-job-training and capacity development, and its progressive versions throughout a diplomat’s career (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). Re-skilling and the ability to adjust skills to a rapidly changing field are essential elements for contributing performance (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020).

In addition to a basic understanding of information technology and other relevant technologies, it is also necessary for diplomats to understand the relations between the technological questions and the economic, social, and human rights aspects of their work. It is crucial to grasp the inter-linkage of and interdependence between these various issues. They need to be trained to see and capitalize on these connections (Sotiriu, 2015). They need to have a basic understanding of technological questions as they relate to topics and negotiations they are working on to produce outcomes (Rashica, 2018). Diplomats posted at important multilateral outposts, like New York or Geneva or Vienna, need this basic understanding of technology since they bring together “technical aspects and the geopolitical impact” in their

negotiations and dealings (Rashica, 2018). Similarly, understanding of technological basics can help in finding common ground in negotiations and creating bridges between various positions (Pérez-Curiel, 2019). Further, Remco van der Beek has suggested that technical issues are also political issues and that diplomats can play the role of bridge-builders and act as intermediaries between the political and technical divides (Archetti, 2012).

Cyber security, e-commerce, digital inclusion, block-chain, and other similar issues are dealt under the domain of digital diplomacy, which diplomats need to be prepared to handle. Lag in any country or region can hinder the efficient and productive use of digital diplomacy (Archetti, 2012). Global cooperation with common approach leads to greater success. Lone effort, whatsoever and howsoever grand, would not be productive.

Cyber security threats have often emerged from anonymous use of phishing, malwares, ransom wares, and social engineering attacks, Trojans, amongst many others. Experts have recommended the following six approaches to keep digital function system safe:

1. To keep the system and its application updated,
2. To avoid links, programs, devices, and attachments from unknown sources,
3. To use a secure connection,
4. To back up files,
5. To work with reliable InfoSec team, and
6. To get cyber security training (Galvez, 2017; Duncombe, 2019).

In addition, users are also advised to be ever prescient and vigilant as threats and risks might occur any time and from any quarter. Foresight to stave off dangers can ensure security and facilitate uninterrupted functioning systems. Even serious threats to national security and state secrecy information from hackers can be foreseen and eventually stopped by highly trained technical experts.

## **Digital diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic**

The pandemic was an unprecedented and worrisome situation for about two years and it disrupted normal transactions. However, digital diplomacy demonstrated its unique contribution in forging diplomatic connectivity and activity across the world despite several afore-mentioned gaps (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). The following were made possible by digital diplomacy:

- Providing consular assistance to citizens stranded abroad,
- Acquiring equipment and supplies from other nations including ventilating machines and protective gear, and
- Fostering international collaborations through which scientists could jointly research for a vaccine (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020).

Covid-19 also created opportunities for the tech giants of the world to expand their technical research and enhance their clout, and the opportunity to amass the huge wealth (Sharma & Sisodia, 2022). It also provided a way for holding summits at the regional and global levels and this trend will be difficult to dislodge. The new dimension of diplomacy has thus come to

occupy its own iconic space, showcasing its adaptability not only in critical times but also in normal times (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). The pandemic was also an opportunity for tech giants to make their ingress into diplomatic arena even at its highest level, which will remain ever embraced by the entire world in the years ahead (Vacarelu, 2021).

Notably, its increasing application has led GokhanYucal, a Turkish website specialized on digital diplomacy to recount, “Diplomacy 1.0 is represented by Kissinger, Diplomacy 2.0 would be applied by Joseph Nye, Diplomacy 3.0 is embodied by Alec Ross and Diplomacy 4.0 is exemplified by Matthias Lufkens and his twiplomacy” (Vacarelu, 2021). He defines diplomacy 4.0 as digital diplomacy + professionalism/ privatization/ individualization/ personalization/ mobilization + diplomatless diplomacy (Vacarelu, 2021). The amazing development of digital diplomacy might have surprised Lord Palmerston who had prophesized the end of diplomacy immediately upon receipt of the first telegram in 1860s (Archetti, 2012). It is most likely that digital diplomacy might indeed become a new discipline as it is now a techno-based practice, which is materially different from diplomacy as conducted through human presence on site (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020).

Andreas Sandre explained that there is a “new foreign policy space that technology and digital diplomacy have contributed to craft within the diplomatic realm” where nodes and links are components of networks that transcend government as we know it; where all actors interact and collaborate, “the new kind of diplomacy responds to the hyper connected networked, super-speed media-center, volatile world” (Sandre, 2015).

At present digital diplomacy uses mainly three technologies. First is video conferencing and the second Chat Bots, which or automated software particularly meant for consular services to assist with providing crucial information and services. The third is Big Data modeling which brings together diplomats, health workers, epidemiologists, and computer scientists to track the likely progression of the pandemic and focus efforts on areas that may encounter outbreaks (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020).

The Pathways for Prosperity Commission stated four main principles of digital cooperation for developing countries in a presentation on digital diplomacy. The first, was faster digital cooperation and creating incentives for countries to work together; second was to tailor technology governance for developing countries for ensuring better implementation in a wide range of national contexts; the third was unlocking data for inclusive development or using data to improve people’s lives; and fourth, was to be part of something better and harmonizing cross-border digital trade (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). All four principles could create an atmosphere convenient for the broader cooperation between developing countries (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020) and that can pave the way to apply digital diplomacy in desirable ways.

## **Nepal and digital diplomacy**

Nepal is aware of the importance of and need for digitization of development to keep pace with the instant, incessant flows of information and its impact on the human activity (Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, 2020). Its indispensability has grown fast as every nation, both developed and developing, has started applying digital diplomacy (KC, 2020). The government of Nepal has adopted the slogan Digital Nepal following its increasing use in the region and across the globe. About three decades ago, Nepal began diplomatic communication through emailing. In February 2015 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs formally adopted diplomatic tweeting by opening Twitter account and made the communication channels quicker and more efficient (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). At the moment, several actors are in play of digital diplomacy in Nepal. The Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepali Embassies and Consulates abroad have been playing serviceable role in Nepal's digital diplomacy. In virtual platforms there are other actors representing the country and the spirit of the government. Simultaneously, other actors also might be equally active according to the situation and circumstances but the above-mentioned actors are most essential. In Nepal, the actors responsible for the digital diplomacy are using different forms of social media platforms and different ICT forms (KC, 2020). However, the scope of digital diplomacy is limited to general communication only, and the wider policy goals that can be purpose-serving through the digital diplomacy remain to be explored and braced for meeting national needs. Many of the Nepali actors are engaged in the social media platforms and have been doing digital diplomacy but are limited to messages, notices and communications, especially congratulations and condolences, via respective social media handles. Also, the other actors are limited to the same social media platforms (Parajuli, 2021).

The havoc caused by Covid-19 since early 2020 compelled states to adopt the practice of virtual conferencing to upend the obstacles and limitations imposed by the virus. One example is the video conference organized by the heads of government of SAARC countries in March 2020 to tackle the public health crises. The then Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli had participated in the conference initiated by the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi (KC, 2020). In September 2020, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli also participated in the Annual General Meeting of the UN using the same conferencing system (Parajuli, 2021). The Minister of Foreign Affairs and the ministry embraced the digital system of dispatching and receiving of messages through the frequent use of Twitter accounts (Parajuli, 2021).

However, all these practices have been carried out through an improvised management. No system supported by a technically appropriate mechanism and equipped with the trained human resources and necessary technologies has yet to be put in place to ensure a well-lubricated process for an instant and efficient functioning system for the application of digital diplomacy. The quicker the gap is addressed the better can be the outcome.

Nepal also cannot move away from the current situation in isolation. The Nepali authorities, especially those in the diplomatic domain must prefer to embrace four basic principles of digital cooperation as mentioned in the preceding paragraph. The initiative for entering cooperation must be an important step. Developing countries like Nepal needs to move forward proactively. If done affirmatively, Nepal could be able to put in place required mechanisms as prescribed by the information tech-experts, who are highly skilled with management capability with sufficient funding and resources put at their disposal.



Well-known experts of digital diplomacy of the United States and developed countries have suggested the primary need for a “MNL” approach to digital diplomacy. They explain; “M” stands for mode which insists on making a particular or specified functioning arrangement or an essential condition for the desired performance; “N” represents node which means a point, line or surface of vibrating system that is free or relatively free from the vibration motion itself and “L” is link, a connecting element or factor. All three requirements are primary for carrying forward the process and application of digital diplomacy.

Management done in a hurry would not be beneficial to any organization, where only immediate needs or concerns are addressed (KC, 2020). There will be need for requisite skills and potential for engagement and cooperation for effective management by addressing gaps of training and capacity building in anticipation (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). Compatible diplomatic management supported and sustained by experienced tech hands would be helpful in marshalling the intricacy and technicality of digital diplomacy. For all that to be realized, there is need for cooperation of friendly countries, and regional and international forums, and good understanding.

In Nepal as in many less developed countries, the Internet is still treated as much tinged with the complex technicality to be operated easily by non-technical diplomatic personnel. Therefore, the need for both the action and capacity to learn new skills to adapt to a rapidly transforming environment is to be met as quickly as possible.

Reshuffling older structures and putting in place newer mechanisms manned by experts with necessary tools and resources are required to effect change management as induced by the revolution of information technology. Re-skilling both senior and junior staffs are also needed to adapt to the fast emerging digitalization. New recruits with new skills should only be accepted and given opportunity for adaptability and efficiency. If materialized meaningfully, digital diplomacy could have every chance to serve the national interest through its productive application.

### ***Policy recommendations to strengthen Nepal’s digital diplomacy***

Digital diplomacy provides immense opportunities for small countries like Nepal. Some of the policy recommendations for the Government of Nepal for enhancing digital diplomacy for its effective performance are as follows:

- The Government of Nepal should move beyond the digital form of public diplomacy, and concentrate on advocacy, lobbying, persuasion, administration, regulation, economy, security, and other aspects.
- The idea of “digital foreign policy” should be introduced in Nepal outlining the areas of concentration and importance for uplifting the image, prestige, and the national interest through digital platforms.
- The foreign policy of Nepal should focus on digital strategies and digitization of the services such as consular service, diaspora diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and others.
- Nepal should address the digital issues for connecting the gaps between different stakeholders and line ministries.

- Nepal should have a digital outlook towards the trade and development and device ways to handle that through digital diplomacy.
- Nepal should focus on capacity-building of diplomats and bureaucrats for effective digital diplomacy.
- There is need for a proactive and continued focus on areas of cyber security, cybercrime, digital inclusion, digital human rights, digital governance, and other aspects required for setting up a safe digital environment with intent to prevent cyber threats and risks.
- The nature of digitization calls for the global cooperation for the common good.
- Nepal should brace for making wake-up call to tech superpowers for facilitating international convention on digital diplomacy.
- Exchange and transfer of the ICT knowhow need to form part of international understanding between developed and less developed countries to reduce inequality

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