

A.T. Tazhibekova¹, A.K. Kurmangali¹

¹First-year Master's Student in International Relations, Sorbonne-Kazakhstan Institute at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University

¹Doctor of Political Sciences, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY: AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES OF LEADING WORLD LEADERS

Abstract

This article examines digital diplomacy as an important instrument of contemporary foreign policy. Drawing upon academic literature, official documents, and digital communications, the study explores the approaches adopted by the United States, France, Russia, China, and Kazakhstan in the use of social media and digital platforms for foreign policy purposes. Particular attention is devoted to the role of digital diplomacy in shaping states' international image, promoting political positions, and engaging with global audiences. The study also addresses the principal challenges associated with digital diplomacy, including disinformation, the influence of social media algorithms, and the increasingly blurred distinction between personal and official communication. The findings indicate that digital diplomacy is becoming an integral component of international relations and a significant instrument for advancing national interest in the context of global digitalization.

Keywords: digital diplomacy, social media, public diplomacy, foreign policy.

A.T. Тәжібекова¹, А.Қ. Құрманғали¹

¹Абай атындағы Қазақ ұлттық педагогикалық университеті жанындағы Сорбонна-Қазақстан институтының «Халықаралық қатынастар» мамандығы бойынша І-курс магистранты

¹Абай атындағы Қазақ ұлттық педагогикалық университеті жанындағы Сорбонна-Қазақстан институтының халықаралық қатынастар кафедрасының саяси ғылымдар докторы қауымдастырылған профессоры

ЦИФРЛЫҚ ДИПЛОМАТИЯ: ЖЕТЕКШІ ӘЛЕМДІК КӨШБАСШЫЛАРДЫҢ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ЖЕЛІЛЕРДЕГІ СТРАТЕГИЯЛАРЫН ТАЛДАУ

Аңдатпа

Мақалада цифрлық дипломатия қазіргі сыртқы саясаттың маңызды құралы ретінде қарастырылады. Ғылыми әдебиеттерді, ресми құжаттарды және цифрлық коммуникацияларды талдау негізінде АҚШ, Франция, Ресей, Қытай және Қазақстанның әлеуметтік желілер мен цифрлық платформаларды сыртқы саяси қызметте пайдалану тәсілдері зерттеледі. Цифрлық дипломатияның мемлекеттердің халықаралық имиджін қалыптастырудағы, саяси ұстанымдарын ілгерілетудегі және халықаралық аудиториямен өзара әрекеттесудегі рөліне ерекше назар аударылады. Сонымен қатар жұмыста цифрлық дипломатияның негізгі тәуекелдері, соның ішінде дезинформация, әлеуметтік желі алгоритмдерінің ықпалы және жеке әрі ресми коммуникация арасындағы шекараның көмескіленуі қарастырылады. Зерттеу нәтижесінде цифрлық дипломатия халықаралық қатынастардың ажырамас бөлігіне және жаһандық цифрландыру жағдайында ұлттық мүдделерді ілгерілетудің маңызды құралына айналып отырғаны туралы қорытынды жасалады.

Түйінді сөздер: цифрлық дипломатия, әлеуметтік желілер, жария дипломатия, сыртқы саясат.

Тажибекова А.Т.¹, Курмангали А.К.¹

¹Магистрант 1 курса по специальности Международные отношения, Институт Сорбонна-Казахстан при КазНПУ имени Абая

¹Доктор политических наук, ассоц. профессор кафедры международных отношений КазНПУ имени Абая

ЦИФРОВАЯ ДИПЛОМАТИЯ: АНАЛИЗ СТРАТЕГИЙ ВЕДУЩИХ МИРОВЫХ ЛИДЕРОВ В СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ СЕТЯХ

Аннотация

В статье рассматривается цифровая дипломатия как важный инструмент современной внешней политики. На основе анализа научной литературы, официальных документов и цифровых коммуникаций исследуются подходы США, Франции, России, Китая и Казахстана к использованию социальных сетей и цифровых платформ во внешнеполитической деятельности. Особое внимание уделяется роли цифровой дипломатии в формировании международного имиджа государств, продвижении политических позиций и взаимодействии с международной аудиторией. В работе также рассматриваются основные риски цифровой дипломатии, включая дезинформацию, влияние алгоритмов социальных сетей и размывание границы между личной и официальной коммуникацией. В результате исследования сделан вывод о том, что цифровая дипломатия становится неотъемлемой частью международных отношений и важным инструментом продвижения национальных интересов в условиях глобальной цифровизации.

Ключевые слова: цифровая дипломатия, социальные сети, публичная дипломатия, внешняя политика.

Introduction

In the contemporary international environment, diplomacy is no longer confined to official meetings, negotiations, statements, and diplomatic notes. A significant part of political communication has shifted to the digital sphere. Presidents, foreign ministers, embassies, and other foreign policy institutions increasingly use digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Weibo and TikTok to communicate with international audiences. These platforms provide governments with opportunities to present their positions directly and to engage with both foreign publics and political actors. Digital diplomacy enables states to promote national interests, shape their international image, and communicate foreign policy positions more effectively. It complements traditional diplomacy by making communication faster and more accessible.

The object of the study is digital diplomacy as a phenomenon of contemporary international politics.

The subject of the study is the social media strategies employed by the leaders of the United States, France, Russia, China, and Kazakhstan.

The aim of the research is to analyze the distinctive features of digital diplomacy among leading international actors and to determine how social media platforms are used to advance states' foreign policy interests.

To achieve this aim, the following objectives are pursued:

1. To define the concept of digital diplomacy and examine its relationship with public diplomacy;
2. To explore the principal functions of social media in foreign policy;
3. To analyze the digital strategies of the United States, France, Russia, China, and Kazakhstan;
4. To compare different national models of digital diplomacy;
5. To identify the principal advantages and risks associated with the use of social media in diplomacy.

The relevance of this topic stems from the growing reliance of world leaders and state institutions on social media as a tool of political influence. A single short message posted on X or Telegram may trigger international debate, shape public opinion, and, in certain circumstances, provoke diplomatic responses between states.

Methodology and Research Methods

The methodological framework of this article is based on the analysis of academic literature, official documents, and materials related to states' digital communication practices. The study adopts a qualitative research design and relies on the examination of existing scholarly and official sources.

The following research methods were employed:

- Literature analysis - to examine theoretical approaches to the concept of digital diplomacy;
- Analysis of official documents - to investigate states' foreign policy and digital strategies;
- Comparative analysis - to compare the models of digital diplomacy implemented by the United States, France, Russia, China, and Kazakhstan;
- Content analysis - to examine states' digital communications and the characteristics of their international positioning;
- Generalization and systematization - to formulate the principal findings of the study.

The selection of the United States, France, Russia, China, and Kazakhstan is explained by the differences in their approaches to digital diplomacy and the distinctive ways in which they implement foreign policy strategies within the digital environment.

Results and Discussion

Digital diplomacy is closely linked to public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is aimed at engaging not only with foreign governments but also with broader audiences, including citizens, experts, journalists, students, business communities, and international organizations. Within the framework of digital diplomacy, this interaction is increasingly conducted through online platforms.

Carola Frey emphasize that digitalization affects both the forms and the structure of diplomacy. Communication channels are evolving, while the organizational mechanisms of diplomatic institutions are also undergoing transformation. Ministries of foreign affairs are required to respond more rapidly to international developments, monitor online reactions, manage official social media accounts, and address issues related to digital security (Frey, 2024).

Table 1. Main functions of digital diplomacy

Function of digital diplomacy	Significance
Informational function	Enables a state to communicate its official position rapidly and directly
Image-building function	Contributes to the development of a favorable national image among international audiences
Explanatory function	Allows political leaders and government institutions to explain policies and decisions in an accessible manner
Crisis response function	Facilitates prompt reactions to conflicts, disasters, and allegations
Mobilization function	Helps attract support from allies, partners, and the broader public through social media platforms
Protective function	Assists in countering fake news, disinformation, and hostile narratives

Analytical function	Enables the assessment of public opinion and audience sentiment through the analysis of user responses and online engagement
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Table 1 illustrates the main functions of digital diplomacy in contemporary international communication. These functions expand the opportunities available to states in the digital environment. As a result, digital diplomacy has become an important tool for promoting national interest and supporting foreign policy objectives.

To examine the practical implementation of these functions, it is useful to analyze the digital diplomacy strategies of states that differ in their political systems and approaches to foreign policy.

United States

The United States represents one of the most prominent examples of digital diplomacy. The American model operates on two levels. The first involves the personal communication of political leaders, while the second consists of the activities of governmental institutions, particularly the U.S. Department of State.

The personal dimension of digital diplomacy became especially visible during the presidency of Donald Trump. His activity on X became one of the most widely cited examples of so-called "Twiplomacy" (Twitter diplomacy). Through short messages, international events were commented upon, political opponents were criticized, and statements regarding security, economic, and foreign policy issues were disseminated. Researchers E. Terzioğlu and F. Değirmenci argue that Trump's practice of Twitter diplomacy transformed conventional diplomatic communication by making it more direct, personalized, and emotionally driven (Değirmenci & Terzioğlu, 2022).

A key advantage of this model lies in the speed of communication. Political leaders can communicate their positions immediately without waiting for press conferences or the publication of official documents. However, this form of digital diplomacy also has limitations. When messages become excessively emotional, uncertainty may arise regarding their status, whether they represent the personal views of a political leader or the official position of the state. Such ambiguity can generate additional diplomatic and reputational risks.

At the same time, the United States has developed not only personal but also institutional forms of digital diplomacy. In 2024, the U.S. Department of State introduced the International Cyberspace and Digital Policy Strategy. A central concept of this strategy is "digital solidarity," referring to cooperation with international partners in order to foster an open, secure, and rights-respecting digital environment (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

The United States has also established the Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy, demonstrating that digital diplomacy has evolved into a distinct area of public policy.

Its scope now extends beyond social media communication to include cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, data protection, and the development of international digital norms.

Thus, the U.S. strategy combines the personal social media activity of political leaders with a comprehensive institutional approach to digital policy. This combination makes the American model influential and highly visible, yet occasionally contradictory, as the personal communication style of political leaders does not always align with the cautious and measured language traditionally associated with official diplomacy.

France

France's International Digital Strategy identifies digital policy as an important element of the country's foreign policy. The document focuses on three priorities: digital governance, the development of the digital economy, and security in the digital sphere (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, 2017).

French President Emmanuel Macron regularly uses social media to explain foreign policy decisions and communicate with both domestic and international audiences. He also employs these platforms to promote European solidarity, support French culture, and highlight democratic values.

The French approach is often associated with normative diplomacy. In practice, this means that France seeks not only to advance its national interests but also to promote specific principles within the international system. In the digital sphere, particular attention is given to data protection, the regulation of large technology companies, efforts to counter disinformation, and the preservation of cultural diversity.

This model contributes to a stable international image. France is frequently associated with diplomacy, culture, and European values. However, the relatively restrained style of communication may be less effective on social media platforms, where short and emotionally charged messages often attract greater public attention.

Russia

Russia is characterized by a predominantly centralized model of digital diplomacy. Its implementation relies on official communication channels, including the Kremlin's website, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic missions, official spokespersons, and state-affiliated media outlets.

Unlike the United States, where foreign policy messages are often communicated through the personal accounts of political leaders, the Russian approach remains largely institution-driven. State institutions play the leading role in presenting and explaining the country's positions on international issues. The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation emphasizes the importance of information support for foreign policy activities. This reflects the growing significance of the information sphere in contemporary international relations (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2023).

Russia's digital strategy is closely connected with the promotion of a multipolar world order and the protection of national interests. Through social media platforms and official digital channels, government institutions communicate their views on international conflicts, sanctions, security issues, and interstate relations. One of the main strengths of this model is the consistency of communication. Different official channels usually convey similar messages, which helps create a coherent state narrative and strengthens its visibility among audiences.

However, certain limitations remain. Communication is often focused on presenting the state's position rather than encouraging active interaction with external audiences. As a result, this approach may be less effective when addressing critical or sceptical groups. The use of digital platforms also varies according to the target audience. Within the domestic information space, Telegram, VK, and Russian media resources occupy a central position. For international audiences, official websites, English-language content, the X platform, and the accounts of diplomatic missions continue to serve as important communication tools.

China

Chinese digital diplomacy has distinct characteristics. Unlike many Western states, the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, does not engage in Western social media platforms as a form of personalized political communication. As a result, China's digital diplomacy is not centered on an individual political figure, but rather on state institutions, diplomatic missions, official media outlets, and government-controlled digital platforms.

China operates through both domestic and international digital ecosystems. Within its domestic information space, platforms such as Weibo and WeChat play a central role, alongside other national services. For international outreach, China relies on platforms such as X, YouTube, and Facebook, in addition to English-language state media. Huang and Wang (2021), in their analysis of the US-China trade conflict, argue that Beijing uses these channels to articulate its positions, manage its international image, and reinforce official narratives.

A notable feature of China's digital diplomacy is the emergence of so-called "wolf warrior diplomacy." This term describes a more assertive and confrontational communication style adopted by some Chinese diplomats on social media. Its rise is often linked to increasing external criticism of China, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing trade tensions, and broader geopolitical

pressure. According to Yuan (2023), Chinese diplomatic communication has gradually shifted from a traditionally cautious approach toward a more outspoken and assertive tone.

In terms of messaging, China's digital diplomacy focuses on defending its international reputation, projecting an image of a major global power, and challenging dominant Western framings of global events. Chinese diplomatic actors frequently respond to criticism online and disseminate official statements, statistical data, infographics, and content produced by state media organizations.

At the same time, this approach is not without tension. While a more assertive communication style may resonate domestically by reinforcing perceptions of state strength, it can also be perceived internationally as overly combative.

Research on "wolf warrior diplomacy" suggests that although such messaging can increase visibility and engagement, it does not consistently translate into improved perceptions of China abroad (Huang, 2023; Sullivan et al., 2023).

Alongside this, China continues to develop more cooperative and normative strands of digital diplomacy. Through initiatives such as the Global Civilization Initiative, it promotes ideas of civilizational diversity, intercultural dialogue, and a multipolar international order. The initiative, introduced by Xi Jinping in 2023, is framed around the concept of dialogue between civilizations (China Diplomacy, 2023).

Overall, Chinese digital diplomacy combines two logics: a softer narrative aimed at shaping China's image as a global civilizational actor, and a more assertive communication strategy focused on defending national interests in contested international environments.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy has also been developing, but in a more pragmatic and measured form. Its central objective is to project an image of a stable, open, modern, and technologically advancing state, consistent with the country's multi-vector foreign policy approach.

The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030 highlights the importance of expanding digital diplomacy tools as part of the country's broader foreign policy strategy (Foreign Policy Concept of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2020).

Key actors include President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the Akorda presidential administration website, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, government portals, and diplomatic missions abroad. These institutions use digital platforms primarily to communicate official positions, report on international engagements, and present policy initiatives and reforms. Compared to more confrontational communication models, Kazakhstan places greater emphasis on cooperation, investment attractiveness, regional stability, and the promotion of education, culture, and digital development.

A significant component of Kazakhstan's international image-building is the digital transformation of public administration. Initiatives such as eGov, Astana Hub, the expansion of the IT sector, and investments in artificial intelligence contribute to positioning the country as a regional center for digital innovation. Government communications further emphasize digital modernization as a key driver of long-term sustainable development (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026).

Overall, Kazakhstan's approach to digital diplomacy is characterized by a restrained communication style that avoids confrontational rhetoric and emphasizes consistency and credibility in external engagement. Such an approach reflects the country's strategic position at the intersection of the interests of major international actors.

A notable strength of this model is its contributions to Kazakhstan's reputation as a constructive and dialogue-oriented participant in international affairs. At the same time, the country's digital presence faces certain constraints, particularly with regard to visibility in English-language online spaces and wider global social media networks.

Comparative analysis of digital diplomacy strategies

To facilitate comparison, the key characteristics of the digital diplomacy strategies adopted by the selected countries are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of countries' digital diplomacy strategies

Country	Core strategy	Strength	Potential risk
United States	Fast-paced communication, digital solidarity, promotion of democratic values	High speed of response and broad global reach	Excessive personalization and occasionally sharp messaging tone
France	Digital sovereignty, human rights, cultural influence	Carefully constructed value-based national image	Relatively complex language that may reduce accessibility for wider audiences
Russia	Centralized state-driven narrative	Consistent messaging and high level of coordination	Limited engagement with critically oriented international audiences
China	Protection of national image, promotion of multipolarity, "wolf warrior diplomacy"	Strong mobilization capacity and active defense of policy positions	Perception of confrontational communication and mixed international reception
Kazakhstan	Image of a stable, modern, and digitally developing state	Moderation, pragmatism, and emphasis on cooperation	Limited international visibility and global recognition

The table demonstrate that digital diplomacy does not follow a single universal model. Each state implements it in accordance with its political objectives, governance culture, and international position. The United States uses digital diplomacy to promote leadership, democratic values, and innovation. France emphasizes digital governance and European strategic autonomy, while Russia focuses on communications official narratives. China highlights national achievements and international image building. Kazakhstan uses digital platforms to support cooperation and digital modernization.

Legal and ethical challenges of digital diplomacy

The expansion of digital diplomacy has created new legal and ethical challenges. A key issue is the status of messages published on social media by political leaders. Questions often arise to whether posts on platforms such as X or Telegram should be regarded as official positions, especially when their content is later changes or removed.

James Green notes that publications by state institutions and official representatives on X may carry legal significance in the context of international law, particularly when they reflect state practice or an official position on international issues (Green, 2022).

Another significant challenge is the spread of disinformation. The digital environment facilitates the rapid circulation of fake news, decontextualized quotations, deepfakes, propaganda content, and emotionally framed interpretations of events. As a result, states are required not only to formulate and communicate their positions but also to respond quickly to informational distortions.

An additional risk is the growing dependence of digital diplomacy on private platforms. Social media services such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are owned by private companies that can modify content distribution algorithms, restrict access, or suspend accounts. This creates a situation in which key instruments of state communication become partially dependent on decisions made by non-state actors.

Another challenge is the simplification of complex international processes. The structural constraints of social media encourage brevity, visual emphasis, and emotional framing, which often reduces analytical depth and transforms complex political issues into simplified statements or slogans.

Conclusion

Digital diplomacy has become an essential component of contemporary foreign policy. Today states can no longer rely solely on official negotiations and formal statements. They must maintain a presence in digital space, respond rapidly to international developments, articulate their positions, and engage with foreign audiences through modern communication platforms.

The analysis of the United States, France, Russia, China, and Kazakhstan demonstrates that each country applies its own model of digital diplomacy depending on its political objectives, foreign policy priorities, and the characteristics of its political system. The United States combines elements of leader-driven "Twitter diplomacy" with an institutional digital strategy and the promotion of digital solidarity. France uses digital diplomacy to advance European values, digital sovereignty, and cultural influence. Russia emphasizes a centralized approach to protecting its state narrative and informational sovereignty. China combines the promotion of a positive national image with a more assertive communication style known as "wolf warrior diplomacy." Kazakhstan develops a pragmatic digital diplomacy aimed at projecting an image of a stable, open, and technologically advancing state.

The study shows that digital diplomacy is no longer an auxiliary tool of foreign policy but has become an integral component of it. Through social media, digital platforms, and online communication, states shape their international image, build trust, and promote their interests on the global stage. At the same time, the effectiveness of digital diplomacy depends not only on the speed of information dissemination but also on the quality of communication, the credibility of messages, and the ability of states to engage in dialogue with international audiences.

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