

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: COMPARATIVE FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGIES OF LEADING STATES

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the practice of diplomacy in the 21st century, giving rise to the concept of digital diplomacy as a central instrument of foreign policy. This study provides a qualitative and comparative analysis of the digital diplomacy strategies employed by China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia, with a particular focus on their approaches to strategic narrative construction and global audience engagement. Drawing on an interpretivist research paradigm, the study utilizes thematic and content analysis of official digital communications, including social media platforms, government statements, and state-sponsored media outputs from 2022 to 2026.

The findings reveal significant variation in digital diplomacy models across the selected states. The United States and the United Kingdom adopt open and networked approaches characterized by interactive engagement, transparency, and value-based communication. In contrast, China employs a state-centric and controlled model focused on narrative management and image-building, while Russia utilizes a more disruptive approach often associated with information warfare and narrative contestation. The study further demonstrates that digital diplomacy has evolved into a key arena of geopolitical competition, where states actively construct and contest narratives to influence global perceptions and advance strategic interests.

By integrating Soft Power Theory, Network Diplomacy, and Strategic Narrative Theory, this research highlights the role of digital platforms as instruments of influence, persuasion, and power projection. The study concludes that digital diplomacy is no longer supplementary but a core component of modern statecraft, with significant implications for international communication, global governance, and the future of diplomatic practice in an increasingly digitalized world.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has seen a radical shift in the behaviour of international relations which has been brought about by the accelerated developments of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The former closed-door negotiations and elite-level

interactions, which were limited to the state, have become more dynamic and transparent and more involved in the process of diplomacy. This shift has led to a new phenomenon of digital diplomacy, also known as e-diplomacy that involves the application of digital technologies, especially social media, online communication

channels, and data-driven technologies, by states to pursue their foreign policy goals. Digital diplomacy is one of the major changes in the conventional diplomatic work. Formal communication, secrecy and hierarchical decision-making were part and parcel of diplomacy. Nevertheless, the spread of platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, YouTube and government operated digital portals has allowed states to reach directly to foreign citizens, by not having to go through traditional media intermediaries. The change has caused the blurring of the distinctions between the domestic and international communication, forming an intermediate space in which the sphere of public diplomacy, strategic communication, and information operations overlap. This is an evolving environment that now features digital diplomacy as an important tool of soft power projection, narrative building and geopolitical rivalry. States no longer simply do diplomacy via formal processes; they are in fact constructing world discourses, becoming a subject of opinion and reacting to competing narratives on the fly. The pace, distance and interactivity of the digital platforms have intensified the opportunities and threats and digital diplomacy has become the primary issue in the modern foreign policy. Regardless of the fact that digital tools are used in a similar manner, states have vastly different ways of approaching digital diplomacy depending on their political structures, strategic cultures, and communication goals. Liberal democratic states generally adopt transparency, engagement, and message-based on values, whilst more centralized or authoritarian systems tend to focus on message control, consistency in message, and information management. As a result, digital diplomacy is not a homogenized practice but a highly contextualized approach that is defined by national interests and government systems. The paper concentrates on four key players in the world arena that are China, the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia; each of these countries exemplifies a different approach to digital diplomacy. The example of the United States, which is based on a networked and engagement-oriented policy, is using digital

platforms to advance democratic principles and engage in global discussions. The UK implements an institutionalized and strategic approach, incorporating digital technologies into the overall foreign policy with references to branding and global impact. Instead, China uses the state-centric and tightly controlled approach to digital diplomacy, which is focused on creating a positive national image, and to control the flow of information closely. Russia is a more aggressive and unconventional example, which is usually linked with information wars, disinformation, and the battle of narratives. The comparative analysis of the four states is especially important in knowing how digital diplomacy serves as an instrument of co-operation and a competitive mechanism in the international system. With the increasing mediation of global politics by digital space, the capacity to manipulate narratives and shape perceptions, as well as act quickly in response to the emergence of events, has become a characteristic of state power. Besides, the emergence of digital diplomacy poses significant normative and theoretical concerns. The problem of false information, cyber interference, online sovereignty, and ethical use of technology in global communication has turned into the issue of primary concern among policymakers and scholars. The absence of universally accepted guidelines on digital behavior also adds to the situation and causes the further tensions and strategic uncertainty between states. Digital diplomacy lies at a pivotal point of intersection between the wider field of International Relations and media studies, which requires an interdisciplinary approach. It incorporates the aspects of the communication theory, political science, technology studies, and strategic studies. The concept of digital diplomacy in practice and how various states conceptualize it also offers interesting insights into the modern operation of the global power relationships and the changing character of the foreign policy. The study will take a qualitative and comparative research design to analyze the online diplomacy policies of China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia. The study will emphasize major similarities and differences between their

communication practices, strategic goals, and narrative to make an addition to the existing body of literature on digital diplomacy and international communication. By doing it, the paper is not only examining how digital tools are used by states but also questioning the larger implications of these practices on the global governance, international norms and the future of diplomacy in an increasingly digitalized world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital diplomacy has become an important subdiscipline of International Relations, public diplomacy and media studies. Researchers have discussed the effects of adopting digital technologies in the diplomatic processes on communication strategies, power relations, and international interactions.

2.1 Evolution of Diplomacy in the Digital Age

The initial views on diplomacy were focused on secrecy, elite deliberations, and state-focused communication. Yet, due to the emergence of the internet and social media, diplomacy has become a more open, networked and participatory process.

According to Bjola and Holmes (2015), digital diplomacy elevates the level of real-time interaction and crisis response abilities that enable governments to engage with foreign populace directly. In an analogous way, Manor (2019) describes digital diplomacy as the digitalization of the field of public diplomacy, where the states operate online to regulate their image and power in the international sphere.

This shift marks a transition from “old diplomacy” to “new diplomacy,” characterized by:

- Increased transparency
- Multi-actor participation
- Real-time communication
- Reduced reliance on traditional media

2.2 Digital Diplomacy and Soft Power

The concept of **soft power**, introduced by Joseph Nye (2004), is central to understanding digital diplomacy. Soft power refers to a state's ability to

shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion.

Digital platforms have significantly amplified soft power capabilities by enabling:

- Global audience reach
- Cultural dissemination
- Narrative influence

Scholars argue that digital diplomacy serves as a **force multiplier of soft power**, allowing states to:

- Promote national values
- Enhance global reputation
- Counter negative narratives

However, the effectiveness of digital soft power varies depending on credibility, consistency, and audience perception.

2.3 Strategic Communication and Narrative Building

A growing body of literature emphasizes the role of **strategic narratives** in international politics. According to Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2013), strategic narratives are tools used by political actors to shape the understanding of international events and influence behavior.

Digital diplomacy has become a primary vehicle for disseminating such narratives. States construct narratives around:

- National identity
- Global leadership
- Security threats
- Development models

For example:

- The United States promotes narratives of democracy and freedom
- China emphasizes peaceful development and economic cooperation
- Russia often focuses on counter-hegemonic narratives

Digital platforms allow these narratives to be:

- Disseminated rapidly
- Reinforced through repetition
- Targeted to specific audiences

2.4 Digital Diplomacy as Information Politics

Recent scholarship highlights the emergence of **information politics**, where states compete in the digital space to control information flows.

This includes:

- Disinformation campaigns
- Cyber propaganda
- Algorithmic amplification

Russia’s activities have often been studied under this framework, particularly in the context of election interference and information warfare. On the other hand, China’s approach is

associated with **information control and censorship combined with global messaging.**

The literature suggests that digital diplomacy is increasingly intertwined with:

- Cybersecurity
- Hybrid warfare
- Psychological operations

2.5 Comparative Digital Diplomacy Models

Scholars have identified different models of digital diplomacy based on governance systems:

Model Type	Characteristics	Example States
Open/Networked	Interactive, transparent, decentralized	USA
Institutional Hybrid	Structured, professional, policy-oriented	UK
State-Controlled	strict narrative control	China
Disruptive/Hybrid	narrative contestation	Russia

This typology highlights that digital diplomacy is shaped by:

- Political ideology
- Media systems
- Strategic objectives

2.6 Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite extensive research, several gaps remain:

- Limited **comparative qualitative studies** across major powers
- Insufficient focus on **narrative competition** in digital diplomacy
- Lack of integration between **media studies and foreign policy analysis**
- Emerging technologies (AI, big data) remain underexplored

This study addresses these gaps by offering a **comparative, narrative-focused qualitative analysis.**

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in an **integrated theoretical framework** combining Soft Power Theory, Network Diplomacy, and Strategic Narrative Theory.

3.1 Soft Power Theory

Soft Power Theory explains how states influence others through attraction rather than coercion.

Application in this Study:

- Digital platforms act as tools of attraction

- States project culture, values, and policies online

- Helps analyze **image-building strategies**

3.2 Network Diplomacy Theory

Network Diplomacy emphasizes the role of digital networks in shaping diplomatic interactions.

Key Assumptions:

- Power is distributed across networks
- Non-state actors play a role
- Communication is multi-directional

Application:

- Explains US and UK engagement strategies
- Highlights interactive diplomacy via social media

3.3 Strategic Narrative Theory

This is the **core theory** for your research.

Strategic narratives are structured stories used by states to shape perceptions of:

- International order
- National identity
- Policy legitimacy

Types of Narratives:

1. **System Narratives** - How the world works
2. **Identity Narratives** - Who we are
3. **Policy Narratives** - What we do

Application:

- China → Development & harmony narrative

- USA → Democracy & leadership narrative
- UK → Global cooperation narrative
- Russia → Counter-hegemonic narrative

3.4 Conceptual Model of the Study

Table: Integrated Analytical Framework

Variable Type	Components
Independent Variable	Digital Diplomacy Strategy
Intervening Variable	Political System, Media Structure
Dependent Variable	Narrative Influence&Global Perception

3.5 Analytical Approach

This study applies:

- **Thematic analysis** → Identify recurring narratives
- **Comparative analysis** → Cross-country differences
- **Interpretive approach** → Meaning-making in communication

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, comparative case study design** to analyze digital diplomacy strategies of China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia. A qualitative approach is appropriate as the research focuses on **interpretation of narratives, meanings, and communication patterns** rather than numerical measurement.

The comparative design enables identification of:

- Similarities in digital tools usage
- Differences in narrative construction
- Variations in strategic objectives

4.2 Research Approach

The study uses an **interpretivist paradigm**, which assumes that:

- Reality is socially constructed
- Meaning is created through discourse and communication
- Digital diplomacy is a form of narrative production

4.3 Data Collection

4.3.1 Sampling Strategy

A **purposive sampling technique** is used to select relevant data sources.

Sample Includes:

- Official social media accounts (Foreign Ministries, Embassies)
- Government digital campaigns
- Policy statements and speeches
- State-sponsored international media content

Time Frame:

- 2022–2026 (to include recent geopolitical developments such as Ukraine war, US elections discourse, China’s global outreach)

4.4 Data Sources Table

Country	Key Digital Sources
China	MFA China Twitter, CGTN, Xinhua
USA	U.S. State Department, Embassy accounts
UK	FCDO digital platforms
Russia	RT, Sputnik, official government channels

4.5 Data Analysis Method

4.5.1 Thematic Analysis

The study employs **thematic analysis** to identify patterns in digital communication.

Steps:

1. Data familiarization
2. Initial coding
3. Theme generation
4. Cross-case comparison
5. Interpretation

4.6 Coding Scheme

Table: Coding Framework

Code Category	Description
Narrative Type	Identity, Policy, System narratives
Tone	Cooperative, aggressive, defensive
Communication Style	Formal, interactive, propagandistic
Strategic Objective	Image-building, influence, disruption
Target Audience	Domestic, global, regional

4.7 Reliability and Validity

To ensure rigor:

- **Triangulation:** Multiple data sources used
- **Consistency:** Same coding applied across cases

- **Transparency:** Clear analytical framework

4.8 Limitations

- Limited access to internal government strategies
- Potential bias in interpreting narratives
- Rapid evolution of digital platforms

5. DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 Thematic Findings Across Countries

Theme 1: Narrative Construction

Country	Dominant Narrative
China	Peaceful rise, development cooperation
USA	Democracy, human rights
UK	Global cooperation, diplomacy
Russia	Anti-Western, multipolar world

Theme 2: Communication Style

Country	Style Characteristics
China	Controlled, formal, increasingly assertive
USA	Interactive, transparent
UK	Professional, institutional
Russia	Aggressive, confrontational

Theme 3: Strategic Objectives

Country	Primary Goal
China	Image management
USA	Influence&engagement
UK	Policy alignment
Russia	Narrative disruption

5.2 Cross-Case Narrative Patterns

Table: Comparative Narrative Analysis

Dimension	China	USA	UK	Russia
Identity Narrative	Rising power	Global leader	Responsible actor	Resisting hegemon
Policy Narrative	Development	Democracy	Cooperation	Sovereignty
System Narrative	Multipolarity	Liberal order	Rules-based system	Anti-West order

5.3 Digital Platform Utilization

Country	Platform Strategy
China	External platforms for global messaging
USA	Multi-platform engagement
UK	Institutional communication
Russia	Alternative + mainstream platforms

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Divergence in Digital Diplomacy Models

The findings indicate that digital diplomacy strategies differ significantly based on **political systems**:

- **Democratic states (USA, UK)** → Emphasize engagement, transparency
- **Authoritarian/centralized states (China, Russia)** → Emphasize control, narrative dominance

6.2 Digital Diplomacy as Narrative Competition

Digital platforms serve as arenas of **narrative contestation**, where states:

- Compete to define global issues
- Frame geopolitical events

- Influence international public opinion

For example:

- Ukraine war narratives differ sharply between Russia and Western states
- China promotes economic cooperation vs Western criticism

6.3 Hybridization of Diplomacy and Information Warfare

The study reveals a **blurring of boundaries** between diplomacy and information warfare:

- Russia → Disinformation strategies
- China → Controlled amplification
- USA/UK → Counter-disinformation campaigns

6.4 Role of Political Systems

Political structure shapes digital diplomacy:

System Type	Digital Diplomacy Behavior
Democratic	Open, interactive
Centralized	Controlled, strategic

6.5 Implications for Global Politics

- Digital diplomacy is now a **core element of foreign policy**
- It increases speed but also **risk of misinformation**
- It creates **continuous geopolitical competition online**

7. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzed how digital diplomacy has been changing by conducting qualitative and comparative research on China, the United States, the United Kingdom and Russia. These results prove that the use of digital platforms as universal instruments of statecraft is largely compatible, yet its use differs greatly regarding political systems, strategic cultures, and foreign policy priorities.

Digital diplomacy is the mechanism of engagement, transparency, and value promotion by the United States and the United Kingdom, which resembles liberal democratic standards. Contrarily, China and Russia are more centralized and controlled, resorting to narrative control, strategic messaging and, in certain instances, disruption of information. Such variations point at the fact that digital diplomacy is not only a technological transformation, but also an expression of more fundamental ideological and institutional arrangements.

One of the main strengths of this paper is that it has revealed the location of digital diplomacy as a narrative competition site that states actively create, distribute, and challenge strategic narratives. The study highlights those digital spaces are no longer apolitical mediums of communication but instead platforms of geopolitical gameplay on which power is played out in terms of information, perception, and discourse.

Moreover, the research also discloses the growing amalgamation of diplomacy and information warfare, especially in the example of Russia and, to a smaller degree, China. The trend brings up serious issues of misinformation, credibility and trust in the global systems of communication.

Conceptually, the combination of the Soft Power Theory with Network Diplomacy and Strategic Narrative Theory offer a very detailed conceptual framework of how digital tools are incorporated in larger foreign policy strategies. The results also support the usefulness of narrative analysis in studying the current international relations.

Practically, the research indicates that strategic communication needs to be balanced with ethical issues by the states, especially in the era of fast information sharing and digital susceptibilities. The lack of strong international standards in digital behavior is still one of the significant challenges, and the world needs to work together. Finally, the research highlights that the future of diplomacy will be increasingly shaped by:

- Artificial intelligence and data analytics
- Platform governance and algorithmic influence
- Real-time narrative competition

Digital diplomacy is no longer optional, it is a **central pillar of modern foreign policy**.

8.1 Case Study 1: Digital Diplomacy in the Russia-Ukraine War

The Russia-Ukraine conflict provides a critical example of digital diplomacy as **information warfare and narrative contestation**.

Key Observations:

Russia

- Promoted narratives of:
 - NATO expansion as a threat
 - Justification of military action

- Used platforms like RT and Telegram
- Employed disinformation and alternative framing

United States & United Kingdom

- Emphasized:
 - Ukraine’s sovereignty
 - International law violations

- Rapid dissemination of intelligence (pre-bunking strategy)
- Coordinated messaging across platforms

China

- Maintained a **strategic ambiguity**
- Promoted peace and neutrality narrative
- Avoided direct condemnation

Table: Ukraine War Digital Narrative Comparison

Country	Core Narrative	Strategy Type
Russia	Anti-NATO, defensive war	Disinformation & framing
USA	Democracy vs aggression	Strategic transparency
UK	Rules-based order	Allied coordination
China	Neutrality, dialogue	Strategic ambiguity

8.2 Case Study 2: Digital Diplomacy in US Presidential Election 2024

The 2024 US elections highlight the intersection of digital diplomacy and political narratives.

Key Dimensions:

Domestic Digital Diplomacy (USA)

- Use of social media for:
 - Campaign messaging
 - Voter engagement
- Emphasis on:
 - Democracy

Foreign Digital Influence

- Russia:
 - Alleged disinformation campaigns
 - Amplification of polarization narratives
- China:
 - Limited direct interference
 - Focus on long-term perception shaping
- UK:
 - Minimal interference, supportive of democratic norms

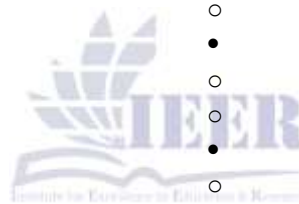


Table: Election Narrative Strategies

Actor	Narrative Focus	Objective
USA	Democracy, participation	Voter mobilization
Russia	Polarization, distrust	Destabilization
China	Stability, governance	Image management
UK	Democratic values	Norm reinforcement

8.3 Key Insights from Case Studies

- Digital platforms act as **battlefields of perception**
- Narratives are tailored to specific audiences
- Speed and timing are critical in digital diplomacy
- State and non-state actors both influence discourse

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