
Digital Diplomacy in South Asia

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Abstract

Digital diplomacy has emerged as a transformative instrument in international relations, reshaping how states communicate, negotiate, and project soft power in the twenty-first century. In South Asia, digital diplomacy has become increasingly significant due to rapid technological advancement, growing internet penetration, geopolitical rivalries, and regional security challenges (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). This research paper examines the evolution, significance, opportunities, and challenges of digital diplomacy in South Asia, focusing on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan. The study analyzes the role of social media, cyber diplomacy, e-governance, public diplomacy, and digital communication strategies in shaping regional diplomacy. It further explores how states use digital platforms to influence international narratives, engage diasporas, strengthen foreign policy objectives, and respond to regional crises. The paper argues that digital diplomacy has transformed traditional diplomatic practices by increasing accessibility, public engagement, and strategic communication. However, issues such as cyber warfare, misinformation, digital inequality, and political polarization continue to undermine regional cooperation. The study concludes that South Asian states must strengthen digital infrastructure, cyber governance, and regional collaboration to effectively utilize digital diplomacy for peace, development, and regional stability.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, South Asia, Cyber Diplomacy, Social Media, International Relations, Public Diplomacy, Soft Power

Introduction

The emergence of digital technologies has transformed international relations and diplomatic practices across the world. Traditional diplomacy, once confined to closed-door negotiations and elite state interactions, has increasingly shifted toward digital communication, online engagement, and public interaction through technological platforms (Manor, 2019). Digital diplomacy refers to the use of digital technologies and social media platforms by governments, diplomats, and international organizations to achieve foreign policy objectives and engage global audiences (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

In South Asia, digital diplomacy has gained strategic importance because the region faces complex geopolitical rivalries, security challenges, economic interdependence, and communication revolutions (Hall, 2017). South Asian countries have increasingly integrated

digital technologies into their diplomatic frameworks to promote national interests, strengthen international image-building, and influence public opinion (Cull, 2019).

The growing use of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and digital forums by political leaders and foreign ministries reflects the transformation of diplomatic communication in the region (Manor, 2019). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Pakistani diplomatic institutions, Bangladeshi foreign policy agencies, and Sri Lankan digital initiatives demonstrate the increasing role of technology in regional diplomacy (Khatib, Dutton, & Thelwall, 2012).

Digital diplomacy has become particularly relevant in areas such as crisis communication, counterterrorism narratives, diaspora engagement, cyber governance, and public diplomacy (Pamment, 2013). During regional crises, digital platforms enable governments to communicate rapidly with domestic and international audiences. However, the rise of digital diplomacy has also intensified cyber conflicts, misinformation campaigns, online propaganda, and diplomatic tensions in South Asia (Rid, 2013).

This research paper critically examines digital diplomacy in South Asia by analyzing its evolution, theoretical foundations, regional applications, opportunities, and challenges. The study argues that digital diplomacy has transformed foreign policy practices in South Asia while simultaneously creating new risks associated with cyber insecurity and information warfare.

Conceptual Framework of Digital Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy refers to the use of digital communication technologies to support diplomatic objectives and foreign policy initiatives (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). It involves the integration of social media, information technology, cyber platforms, and online communication into diplomatic practices.

Traditional diplomacy focused primarily on government-to-government interaction conducted through embassies, formal negotiations, and diplomatic correspondence (Berridge, 2015). In contrast, digital diplomacy emphasizes real-time communication, public engagement, online image management, and digital interaction with global audiences (Manor, 2019).

Digital diplomacy includes several dimensions:

- Public diplomacy
- Cyber diplomacy
- Social media diplomacy
- Virtual diplomacy
- E-governance diplomacy
- Digital crisis communication

The rise of globalization and technological advancement accelerated the importance of digital diplomacy worldwide (Castells, 2015). Governments increasingly rely on digital tools to shape narratives, counter misinformation, and enhance soft power projection (Nye, 2004).

In South Asia, digital diplomacy operates within a complex geopolitical environment characterized by India-Pakistan rivalry, regional conflicts, terrorism concerns, economic integration, and emerging cyber threats (Hall, 2017).

Theoretical Perspectives on Digital Diplomacy

Realist Perspective

Realist theory views digital diplomacy as an extension of state power and national interest (Morgenthau, 1948). According to realism, states use digital technologies to enhance strategic influence, protect national security, and strengthen geopolitical positioning.

In South Asia, India and Pakistan frequently use digital platforms to project competing narratives regarding regional conflicts, terrorism, and security issues (Rid, 2013). Cyber diplomacy has become an important tool in strategic competition between regional powers.

Liberal Perspective

Liberalism emphasizes cooperation, interdependence, and communication among states (Keohane & Nye, 1977). From a liberal perspective, digital diplomacy facilitates international cooperation by improving dialogue, transparency, and people-to-people connectivity.

Regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) increasingly utilize digital platforms to encourage regional communication and cooperation (Dash, 2008).

Constructivist Perspective

Constructivism highlights the role of ideas, identities, and communication in international relations (Wendt, 1999). Digital diplomacy shapes national identities and international perceptions through online narratives and media representation.

South Asian states actively use digital communication to shape international opinion regarding political disputes, human rights issues, and national image-building (Cull, 2019).

Soft Power Theory

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power explains how states influence others through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Digital diplomacy enhances soft power by promoting culture, education, economic achievements, and political values globally.

India's promotion of yoga, Bollywood, and digital innovation through online platforms represents an important example of digital soft power in South Asia (Hall, 2017).

Evolution of Digital Diplomacy in South Asia

The expansion of internet access and social media transformed diplomatic communication in South Asia during the early twenty-first century (Castells, 2015). Governments increasingly adopted digital technologies to engage citizens, communicate foreign policy objectives, and manage international relations.

India emerged as a regional leader in digital diplomacy through active use of Twitter diplomacy, digital public engagement, and online foreign policy campaigns (Manor, 2019). The Indian Ministry of External Affairs developed sophisticated digital communication strategies to enhance international outreach and diaspora engagement.

Pakistan also integrated digital diplomacy into foreign policy practices, particularly in areas related to Kashmir, counterterrorism narratives, and regional diplomacy (Rana, 2020). Pakistani diplomats and institutions increasingly use social media to engage international audiences and counter negative perceptions.

Bangladesh utilized digital diplomacy to strengthen economic diplomacy, climate diplomacy, and international development partnerships (Islam, 2018). Sri Lanka employed digital communication during post-conflict reconciliation and tourism diplomacy initiatives.

Nepal and Bhutan, although smaller states, also adopted digital diplomacy to enhance international visibility and strengthen development cooperation (Adhikari, 2016).

Afghanistan's digital diplomacy evolved significantly after 2001 with international assistance and modernization efforts. However, political instability and security challenges limited sustainable digital transformation (Ahmed, 2013).

Social Media and Public Diplomacy in South Asia

Social media platforms have become central instruments of public diplomacy in South Asia (Khatib et al., 2012). Governments use Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to communicate directly with domestic and international audiences.

Public diplomacy refers to efforts by states to influence foreign publics and shape international perceptions (Cull, 2019). Digital technologies expanded public diplomacy beyond traditional media and enabled governments to engage citizens directly.

India's digital diplomacy strategies have been particularly influential. Indian leaders and diplomatic institutions actively utilize social media to promote foreign policy objectives, cultural diplomacy, and economic partnerships (Hall, 2017).

Pakistan also relies heavily on digital diplomacy to communicate its perspectives regarding regional conflicts, security concerns, and diplomatic initiatives (Rana, 2020). Social media has become an important platform for diplomatic engagement between Pakistani institutions and international audiences.

Bangladesh uses digital diplomacy to promote climate change awareness, economic development, and labor diplomacy (Islam, 2018). Sri Lanka's tourism diplomacy increasingly depends on digital marketing and online engagement.

Social media also facilitates diaspora diplomacy. South Asian governments maintain close digital connections with overseas communities to strengthen remittances, investment, and political influence (Pamment, 2013).

Cyber Diplomacy and Regional Security

Cyber diplomacy has become a major dimension of international relations in South Asia due to increasing cyber threats, digital surveillance, and information warfare (Rid, 2013). Cyber diplomacy involves diplomatic engagement regarding cybersecurity, cyber norms, and digital governance.

India and Pakistan have experienced cyber conflicts involving hacking, digital espionage, and online propaganda campaigns (Rana, 2020). Cyber tensions frequently intensify during political crises and military confrontations.

Cybersecurity challenges also affect critical infrastructure, financial systems, and national security institutions (Singer & Friedman, 2014). South Asian states increasingly recognize the strategic importance of cyber governance and digital resilience.

Regional cooperation regarding cybersecurity remains limited because of political mistrust and geopolitical rivalries (Dash, 2008). However, cyber diplomacy is becoming increasingly necessary to prevent escalation of digital conflicts.

The spread of misinformation and fake news further complicates regional diplomacy (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Political actors frequently use digital platforms to manipulate narratives and influence public opinion.

Digital Diplomacy and India-Pakistan Relations

India-Pakistan relations represent one of the most significant dimensions of digital diplomacy in South Asia (Hall, 2017). Both states actively use digital communication to shape international narratives regarding Kashmir, terrorism, border disputes, and regional security.

Social media has intensified diplomatic competition between India and Pakistan. Political leaders, diplomats, and media institutions frequently engage in digital campaigns aimed at influencing domestic and international audiences (Rana, 2020).

During regional crises, digital diplomacy becomes a powerful tool for strategic communication. Governments use online platforms to issue official statements, counter allegations, and mobilize international support (Rid, 2013).

However, digital diplomacy has also contributed to increased polarization and misinformation between the two countries. Online nationalism, hate speech, and propaganda campaigns often undermine diplomatic dialogue and regional stability (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Despite tensions, digital communication also creates opportunities for people-to-people interaction and peacebuilding initiatives among civil society organizations and youth groups.

Role of Digital Diplomacy During Crises

Digital diplomacy has become highly significant during humanitarian crises, pandemics, and security emergencies (Manor, 2019). Governments use digital platforms for crisis communication, emergency coordination, and public information dissemination.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, South Asian governments relied extensively on digital diplomacy to coordinate international assistance, share public health information, and maintain diplomatic communication (WHO, 2020).

India utilized vaccine diplomacy through digital campaigns promoting regional cooperation and humanitarian assistance (Hall, 2017). Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka also used digital platforms to engage international partners during the pandemic.

Digital diplomacy also plays an important role during natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies. South Asian states frequently use social media to mobilize international support and coordinate relief efforts.

Opportunities of Digital Diplomacy in South Asia

Digital diplomacy offers multiple opportunities for South Asian states. First, it enhances communication speed and accessibility (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Governments can instantly communicate foreign policy positions to global audiences.

Second, digital diplomacy strengthens public engagement and transparency (Cull, 2019). Citizens increasingly participate in diplomatic discussions through online platforms.

Third, digital diplomacy enhances soft power projection through cultural promotion, educational exchanges, tourism marketing, and digital branding (Nye, 2004).

Fourth, digital technologies improve diaspora engagement and economic diplomacy (Pamment, 2013). South Asian states maintain strong digital relationships with overseas communities.

Finally, digital diplomacy can strengthen regional cooperation by facilitating communication among governments, civil society organizations, and international institutions.

Challenges of Digital Diplomacy in South Asia

Despite its advantages, digital diplomacy faces several challenges in South Asia. One major challenge is digital inequality. Large segments of South Asian populations still lack internet access and digital literacy (UNDP, 2021).

Cybersecurity threats represent another significant challenge. Cyberattacks, hacking, digital espionage, and information warfare undermine trust and regional stability (Singer & Friedman, 2014).

Misinformation and fake news campaigns also weaken diplomatic communication and increase political polarization (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Social media manipulation frequently escalates tensions during regional crises.

Political censorship and restrictions on digital freedoms further complicate digital diplomacy in South Asia (Freedom House, 2022). Governments often regulate online communication for political and security reasons.

Another challenge involves institutional limitations. Many diplomatic institutions in South Asia still lack technological expertise, cyber governance mechanisms, and digital infrastructure (Manor, 2019)

Future of Digital Diplomacy in South Asia

The future of digital diplomacy in South Asia will depend on technological advancement, regional cooperation, and cyber governance reforms (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Artificial intelligence, big data, and digital communication technologies are likely to transform diplomatic practices further. South Asian governments increasingly recognize the strategic importance of digital diplomacy for economic development, security, and international influence (Hall, 2017). Investment in digital infrastructure and cyber resilience will become essential.

Regional cooperation regarding cybersecurity and digital governance may also increase in response to common threats such as cybercrime, misinformation, and digital terrorism (Singer & Friedman, 2014).

Educational institutions and diplomatic academies in South Asia are likely to incorporate digital diplomacy training into foreign service programs. Future diplomats will require technological expertise alongside traditional diplomatic skills.

Conclusion

Digital diplomacy has transformed international relations and diplomatic communication in South Asia. Governments increasingly rely on digital platforms, social media, and cyber technologies to achieve foreign policy objectives, shape international narratives, and engage global audiences (Bjola & Holmes, 2015).

In South Asia, digital diplomacy plays a particularly important role because the region faces complex geopolitical rivalries, security challenges, and communication revolutions (Hall, 2017). India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan have integrated digital technologies into diplomatic frameworks with varying levels of success.

Digital diplomacy enhances public engagement, crisis communication, soft power projection, and international outreach (Cull, 2019). However, cyber conflicts, misinformation, political polarization, and digital inequality continue to undermine regional cooperation and stability (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The future of digital diplomacy in South Asia depends on strengthening cyber governance, digital literacy, institutional capacity, and regional collaboration. Sustainable digital diplomacy requires balancing technological innovation with responsible communication and cybersecurity frameworks.

Ultimately, digital diplomacy represents both an opportunity and a challenge for South Asia. If managed effectively, it can contribute significantly to regional peace, development, and international cooperation.

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