

Is Digital Diplomacy a Good Tool for Resolving International Conflicts

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Abstract. The use of digital platforms in diplomacy has transformed the ways in which diplomacy is conducted. The advancement of communication channels and the widespread use of digital tools have contributed to the expansion of communication, leading to discussions regarding its potential impacts on conflict resolution. However, the profound influence of digital communication on public diplomacy is significant. Meanwhile, digital diplomacy, although advantageous in certain aspects, is limited in its ability to reproduce the intricate dynamics observed in in-person interactions. This paper examines the effectiveness of digital diplomacy in conflict resolution. Using various sources from the disciplines of international relations, business studies, medicine, communication studies and computer science, this paper studies the psychological, geographical, and technological benefits and drawbacks of digital diplomacy. After a thorough comparison of various literature from the aforementioned disciplines, the paper arrives at the conclusion that in order to arrive at effective conflict resolutions, diplomats should take a predominantly traditional approach while using some form of digital diplomacy.

Keywords: Digital diplomacy, conflict resolution, international relations.

1. Introduction

The utilisation of online platforms in the field of international relations has given rise to the concept of digital diplomacy, which refers to the use of online platforms by governments and diplomats to engage in diplomatic activities [1]. The advancement of communication channels and the widespread use of digital tools have contributed to the expansion of communication, leading to discussions regarding its potential impacts on conflict resolution. In the contemporary context, a “good tool” denotes a mechanism that not only enables efficient communication but also establishes a pathway towards feasible resolutions [2].

This paper is grounded on several assumptions of the roles of digital diplomacy. Firstly, it posits that the resolution of conflicts necessitates intricate and trust-building exchanges. Secondly, it acknowledges the potential obstacles that may arise in the context of digital platforms. Lastly, it contemplates how digital diplomacy aligns with the principles that underpin effective diplomacy.

The paper begins with analysing the challenges posed by the lack of trust-building in digital interactions. The subsequent section explores the risks associated with miscommunication and misinterpretation that arose due to the limitations of digital platforms. The vulnerability of digital diplomacy to cybersecurity threats will be addressed. The study then examines the accessibility issues resulting from the digital divide and assesses the superficial nature of engagements and symbolic actions facilitated by digital diplomacy considering their impact on conflict resolution. Finally, the paper discusses the impersonal and reductionist approach inherent to digital exchanges. Through these critical examinations, the paper emphasises the limitations of digital diplomacy in effectively resolving conflicts.

2. Lack of Personal Connection and Trust Building

There is a prevalent view among scholars that digital diplomacy possesses the capacity to facilitate the development of interpersonal connections and promote trust-building among states [3, 4]. This

positive outlook stems from the advancements in technology, which enable diplomats to engage in real-time conversations, ensuring efficient conflict resolution or the prevention of possible conflicts.

However, the profound influence of digital communication on public diplomacy is significant. At the core of this paradigm shift lies the challenging task of fostering authentic interpersonal bonds and establishing trust within the realm of digital communication [5, 6]. Trust, which is frequently established through the nuances of facial expressions, tone, and body language [7], becomes susceptible when confronted with concise digital dialogues that lack the full context and non-verbal signals. Consequently, the absence of these crucial elements in virtual exchanges can lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings, which can obstruct effective dialogues and a pathway to feasible conflict resolutions. In the subsequent parts, a more comprehensive elucidation of the misinterpretation issue will be provided.

This challenge is reminiscent of the significant diplomatic dialogue between Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and US President Richard Nixon during Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972. The negotiations primarily revolved around the process of normalising diplomatic ties and resolving critical geopolitical conflicts. These conflicts included addressing the ongoing Vietnam War, where both countries had differing stances, and managing the intense competition of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In addition to spoken conversations, the non-verbal signals displayed by the leaders suggested a deep interpersonal connection that was distinctly established through face-to-face communication. The genuine smiles shared between Zhou and the attentive nods of Nixon served as significant factors in cultivating mutual agreement and understanding that surpassed the limitations of verbal interaction. Subtle non-verbal indicators exhibited in face-to-face interactions have a profound effect, conveying sincerity, empathy, and shared understanding. These signs are challenging to effectively reproduce in digital communication.

Moreover, in-person interactions played a crucial role in building a foundation of trust that went beyond formal agreements and diplomatic protocols. The ability to engage on a personal level, share anecdotes, exchange physical gestures, and exhibit genuine interest in each other's cultures further solidified the interpersonal connection [8]. This trust formed during face-to-face encounters laid the groundwork for subsequent diplomatic advancements and conflict resolution efforts.

Meanwhile, digital diplomacy, although advantageous in certain aspects, is limited in its ability to reproduce the intricate dynamics observed in in-person interactions. Virtual interactions lack physical and sensory components, which prohibit physical gestures and hinder the establishment of an authentic connection. This limitation poses challenges in attaining comparable levels of comprehension and trust [9]. Consequently, although digital technologies possess certain advantages, their efficacy in achieving complete and nuanced conflict resolutions may be comparatively diminished when compared with the subtle dynamics inherent in face-to-face interactions.

3. Amplification of Miscommunication and Misinterpretation

One potential benefit of digital diplomacy is that leaders, when showcasing their personal sides through social media platforms, can become more relatable to the public [10]. This argument suggests that diplomats or other political figures can use social media to share personal stories, opinions, and engage in informal interactions to gain citizens' trusts. Thus, they reconcile their personal and professional identities. This approach may increase transparency, helping citizens understand their leaders beyond the official roles. However, this claim ignores the issue of misinterpretation, a crucial aspect of digital communication.

The interplay between divergent individual perspectives and established national stances can yield significant ramifications, frequently engendering societal conflicts and bewilderment amongst the audiences while unintentionally inciting international hostilities. The inadvertent misinterpretation of ambassadors' perspectives conveyed through social media platforms can have serious ramifications for their respective nations. An illustrative instance of this phenomenon occurred in September 2012

when the US Embassy in Cairo released a tweet in reaction to attacks on its diplomatic missions in the Middle Eastern region. The content of the tweet was as follows: “We condemn the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims – as we condemn efforts to offend believers of all religions” [11].

This tweet, originally intended to convey empathy towards religious tolerance and condemn offensive actions, unintentionally contributed to the propagation of ignorance and misconception. The tweet was widely interpreted as an apology for the contentious anti-Islam video that had incited the rallies, creating the impression that the US administration was yielding to the demands of violence demonstrators.

In addition, the misinterpretation sparked significant criticism and condemnation from other states, resulting in the development of a diplomatic crisis. The lack of clarity on the congruence between the diplomat’s articulated perspectives and the officially endorsed position of their country expedited the rapid escalation of hostilities. This escalation culminated in the summoning of ambassadors and a series of public declarations aimed at clarifying the genuine position.

Hence, this occurrence serves as an important reminder of the constraints associated with using digital diplomacy as an approach of resolving conflicts. The expeditious dissemination of assertions on social media, along with the intrinsic possibility of misinterpretation, underscores the significant peril posed to diplomatic endeavours focused on achieving peaceful outcomes. In situations that prioritise accurate and nuanced discourse, such as dispute resolution, the inherent risks associated with disseminating government stances through social media platforms become apparent.

4. Vulnerability to Cybersecurity Threats

The phenomenon of digital interconnection has the potential to render diplomatic processes vulnerable to a variety of cyber attacks. Malicious entities have the ability to exploit weaknesses in communication channels, leading to the compromise of sensitive information and the dissemination of inaccurate material. This can result in a weakening of diplomatic efforts.

In the realm of digital technology, advocates of digital diplomacy contend that the implementation of robust cybersecurity measures can effectively offset the risks posed by cyber threats [12, 13]. Undoubtedly, the allocation of resources towards the implementation of firewalls, encryption mechanisms, and intrusion detection systems have the potential to significantly bolster the level of security. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the need to promptly address cyber threats is crucial due to their urgency. Focusing on reactive measures instead of proactive solutions can lead to alleviation in conflict resolutions processes.

Firstly, the urgency of addressing cyber threats necessitates rapid attention. Governments are required to evaluate the magnitude of the breach, ascertain vulnerabilities and implement remedial actions to safeguard their communication channels and sensitive data. The adoption of a reactive approach diverts attention from proactive endeavours aimed at resolving conflicts, resulting in the occurrence of delays and disruptions throughout the negotiating process. Consequently, the impetus generated during deliberations may diminish, posing difficulties in sustaining the requisite momentum for advancement.

Secondly, the allocation of resources emerges as a crucial consideration. Addressing cyber dangers frequently necessitates a range of technological measures. The allocation of financial and human resources, which would have previously been directed towards diplomatic efforts and discussions, must now be redirected towards the mitigation of cyber dangers. The huge cost and process of reallocating resources may result in a deficiency of manpower, time, and financial resources for the purpose of facilitating effective diplomatic endeavours.

Moreover, the intricate nature of tackling cyber threats may require the inclusion of supplementary actors, such as professionals specialised in cybersecurity and legal consultants. The involvement of external actors in the management of cyber risks is crucial. Yet, it can also add complexity to the negotiation process by introducing fresh perspectives and interests that may not necessarily align with

the primary objective of resolving conflicts. Consequently, the confluence of these various factors serves as a hindrance to the effective formation of significant conflict resolutions, as it distracts attention away from the essential elements of constructive dialogue and compromise.

5. Limited Accessibility and Digital Divide

One major limitation of digital diplomacy is that not all nations possess equal access to advanced digital diplomacy platforms. This disparity has the potential to generate a significant contrast between nations that possess superior technology infrastructure and those that have restricted access to digital resources. The presence of such an imbalance has a detrimental effect on the process of conflict resolution as it further intensifies the pre-existing power dynamics. States that possess advanced digital tools get a notable edge, facilitating their ability to exert dominance in debates and negotiations. This phenomenon can result in an imbalanced negotiating landscape, wherein nations with restricted access are marginalised, profoundly affecting the resolution of international conflicts.

A potential counterargument to this perspective is the notion that digital tools can bridge geographical gaps, fostering communication and collaboration among nations regardless of their technological development [14, 15]. Undoubtedly, in an optimal situation, digital diplomacy has the potential to provide an equitable environment for all participating entities. Nevertheless, the inability of certain nations to engage meaningfully in discussions due to technology differences hinders the creation of a legitimate framework for achieving peaceful solutions efficiently.

As mentioned in the previous sections, establishing and maintaining a well-functioning digital diplomacy system requires significant financial investment. However, not all nations have the financial capacity to address the complexities and challenges existing within these systems. This economic limitation further contributes to the digital divide, leading to disparities among countries.

Consider, for example, a hypothetical situation in which a conflict emerges between a nation that possesses sophisticated technological capabilities and a nation that is characterised by a lower level of economic development. The country with a high level of technological advancement possesses the necessary resources to allocate towards the development and implementation of state-of-the-art digital diplomacy tools and systems. This enables them to actively engage in negotiations and talks. Conversely, the economically underdeveloped nation faces limitations in terms of financial resources to effectively address the complexities associated with digital diplomacy. This not only restricts their involvement but also undermines the notion of inclusiveness in the process of resolving conflicts. The technological challenges faced by the disadvantaged nations impede their capacity to meet the technology requirements of the discussions, so placing them at a significant disadvantage and limiting their effectiveness in advocating for their interests.

Consequently, the capacity for achieving sustainable conflict settlements is undermined. An authentic conflict resolution encompasses not just the achievement of consensus, but also the establishment of a fair and equitable resolution that possesses the resilience to endure potential future obstacles [16]. When states are barred from participating in digital diplomacy due to limited accessibility, the ensuing accords may fail to sufficiently address their concerns. This can perpetuate underlying tensions and create potential for future disputes. The economic constraints that contribute to limited accessibility not only impair inclusion but also hinder the formation of comprehensive and enduring conflict resolutions.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines the merits and drawbacks of utilizing digital diplomacy in conflict resolution. In short, digital diplomacy refers to the usage of online platforms to practice diplomacy. While digital diplomacy can enhance the development of interpersonal connection between leaders and strengthen international trust; the lack of an intimate in-person meeting environment can nevertheless imply that

digital diplomacy is less effective than in-person diplomacy when it comes to the nurturing of an authentic partnership.

Secondly, the broad use of social media platforms by leaders and diplomats widens the reach of their voices and strengthens the relationship between the public and the administration. However, this characteristic of digital diplomacy has its drawbacks. The wider audience may be a factor of mass misinterpretation and increase the danger of miscommunication.

Another drawback of digital diplomacy is the prevalence cyber attacks. The use of digital platforms to circulate sensitive information increases the risk of hacking and the leakage of such informations. However, the implementation of effective cybersecurity measures may help to counter such threats.

Finally, advocates of digital diplomacy must realize that not all countries possess the technological platforms required for effective digital diplomacy. Although digital diplomacy can bridge the geographical gap between countries, the technological gap between countries may hinder the effectiveness of communication and thus result in meaningless discussions.

The various merits and drawbacks have lead the paper the conclude that in order to achieve effective conflict resolution, which is the process of establishing feasible solutions through efficient communication, diplomats should consider a hybrid of both digital diplomacy and traditional diplomacy, with the latter form taking up a more significant proportion.

It should be noted that this paper presents a normative stance on the effectiveness of using digital diplomacy to resolute conflicts. It is worth, in any future research on this topic, to utilize a more positive and quantitative approach, for example, experiments and hypothesis testing, to provide a more comprehensive answer to this subject.

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