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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

THE FOUNDATION FOR BUILDING VIETNAM'S DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Abstract

The remarkable advancements in science and technology worldwide have profoundly impacted every aspect of human life, including international relations. Along with the trend of globalization, countries are constantly seeking new ways to diversify their diplomatic activities in order to maximize their foreign policy objectives. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the use of digital tools has become a lifeline for exchanges between nations and peoples. Therefore, digital diplomacy, once regarded as merely a new approach, has quickly become an inevitable trend of the era. During this period, Vietnam's awareness and activities regarding digital diplomacy have also been significantly promoted. However, the question arises: Has Vietnam truly established a digital diplomacy framework? Is it necessary to focus on building an effective digital diplomacy platform for Vietnam? What theoretical and practical elements are required to develop this new form of diplomacy? These are some of the key aspects that we aim to fundamentally address in this article.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, Vietnam Diplomacy, Vietnam Digital Diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION

Theoretical Basis for Building Vietnam's Digital Diplomacy On the Concept of "Digital Diplomacy"

Initial concepts of digital diplomacy emerged quite early, alongside the advent of the Internet. However, it was not until the early 21st century, with the rise and development of communication platforms such as LinkedIn (2003), Facebook and Flickr (2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter and WikiLeaks (2006), Weibo (2009), etc., that digital diplomacy was significantly advanced in many developed countries worldwide. Initially, many terms in English were used to describe "digital diplomacy." With the increasing number of digital diplomatic activities globally, the term "digital diplomacy" has been widely recognized and is now the most commonly used. However, as digital diplomacy is a relatively new concept, there remain various perspectives regarding its definition and content.

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The understanding of digital diplomacy tends to evolve alongside its development. Currently, there are three main approaches to defining and determining the scope of digital diplomacy:

In the initial stages, when research on digital diplomacy was still preliminary, digital diplomacy was primarily understood as the increasing use of information technology and social media platforms to support traditional diplomatic activities. For example, the UK's Commonwealth Office and Foreign Affairs provided a simple definition that "digital diplomacy is resolving diplomatic issues using the Internet." Scholar Evan Potter asserted that the development of information and communication technology cannot replace traditional diplomacy but forces it to adapt to new trends while creating significant opportunities for countries' foreign policy activities. Corneliu Bjola, with a broader perspective, defined digital diplomacy as "using social media for diplomatic purposes." [3] Digital diplomacy reflects how international actors—especially states—use digital platforms to achieve policy outcomes.

In the next stage, with the rapid development of information technology and social platforms enabling governments to increase interaction with foreign publics and actively engage with them, digital diplomacy transitioned from a mere tool of diplomacy to an essential part of public diplomacy. Alexander Tutt views digital diplomacy as "conducting virtual public diplomacy, utilizing digital information and communication technology, specifically Internet tools like social media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.), to communicate and showcase a country's image at both national and international levels." Andreas Sandre explained that digital diplomacy is "an inseparable part of traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy, a new foreign policy space where technology and digital diplomacy contribute to diplomatic activities and involve multiple interacting and collaborating actors." Lewis defined digital diplomacy as "diplomats using digital communication tools (social media) to interact with each other and the public."

In response to crises, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, perceptions of the role of digital diplomacy have changed and developed significantly. The Fourth Industrial Revolution has led to growing interdependence among countries in the fields of information technology and digital technology, increasing the need for cooperation. Thus, digital diplomacy should be regarded as a distinct branch of diplomacy with unique goals and content. Supporting this viewpoint, Jovan Kurbalija asserted that digital diplomacy is not just about using Internet tools for diplomatic activities but also focuses on the impact of digital diplomacy, the interaction between the Internet and diplomacy, changes caused by the Internet in diplomatic environments, and the emergence of new topics on diplomatic agendas such as cybersecurity and privacy.

Thus, synthesizing the above perspectives, digital diplomacy can be understood as the application of digital technology and information technology to the implementation of diplomatic activities, including communication, information exchange, and building international relations. Digital diplomacy goes beyond merely using social media or online tools to deliver messages. It also encompasses digital cooperation between countries, addressing cross-border technology-related issues, and even managing cybersecurity, privacy, and information security on a global scale.



Digital Diplomacy as “Niche Diplomacy” for Middle-Power Countries

Digital diplomacy is utilized by most countries to varying degrees and in different forms. For major powers, digital diplomacy is seen as a form of specialized diplomacy, which focuses on specific, technical, or specialized areas such as economics, health, environment, human rights, technology, or cybersecurity. By leveraging digital technology in diplomacy and the influential capabilities of digital diplomacy, researchers suggest that for small and middle-power countries, digital diplomacy can be categorized as a form of niche diplomacy.

The concept of niche diplomacy was developed and published by Andrew Cooper and colleagues in 1997 in their work “Niche Diplomacy: Middle Power After the Cold War.” According to this concept, niche diplomacy refers to a strategy where a country concentrates its diplomatic efforts on specific areas or issues where it has comparative advantages or outstanding expertise, enabling it to create the most significant impact. These fields may include climate change, peacekeeping, cybersecurity, or health, where the country has a reputation, resources, or experience that makes it particularly effective. For example, Norway is renowned for its niche diplomacy in conflict resolution and peace mediation, while Finland focuses on education and digital diplomacy.

In essence, niche diplomacy aims to maximize influence by specializing in areas where a country has a competitive advantage. This concept is particularly relevant for small and medium-sized countries that lack global influence or the resources of major powers. By creating a “specialized niche” in global diplomacy, these countries can enhance their international standing and make meaningful contributions to global governance despite their limited scale.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Digital Diplomacy

In the era of rapid information technology development, digital diplomacy offers numerous significant benefits. In the work “The Benefits and Challenges of Digital Diplomacy,” Viona Rashica outlined eight policy objectives for digital diplomacy: (1) Knowledge management; (2) Public diplomacy; (3) Information management; (4) Consular communication and feedback; (5) Disaster response; (6) Internet freedom; (7) Leveraging external resources; (8) Policy planning. Corneliu Bjola also believes that the advantage of digital diplomacy lies in its ability to promote cooperation at the international level, leverage “smart power,” and intervene in and penetrate the information environment, thereby influencing the social and political structures of other countries. Based on these, the author identified key benefits of digital diplomacy:

Enhancing International Relations

Digital diplomacy enables governments and diplomats to easily engage with the global public and international partners. Social media and online platforms help diplomatic campaigns transcend geographical barriers, instantly delivering messages and information to international audiences, thereby fostering transparency and mutual understanding.

Cost and Time Efficiency

Online meetings and conferences reduce travel and organizational expenses while saving time for both sides in negotiations. Digital tools ensure effective



diplomatic communication even during emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Promoting Soft Power

Digital diplomacy helps countries promote their culture, values, and political positions via social media and digital platforms. This allows direct communication with international publics to build national image and enhance international influence without depending solely on traditional media channels.

Data Collection and Analysis

Digital diplomacy allows for gathering and analyzing data from sources such as social media, providing insights to shape foreign policy. Data analysis tools help better understand trends, public sentiment, and make strategic decisions more effectively.

Increasing Transparency

Digital diplomacy, through official statements on social media or digital platforms, ensures timely and accurate information for the public, enhancing transparency in diplomatic activities.

However, digital diplomacy also faces risks and limitations. According to Viona Rashica, five main risks of digital diplomacy include:

Misuse of the Internet: Malicious actors may exploit the Internet and social media to spread extremism, terrorism, and foreign ideologies.

Lack of understanding: Misuse or lack of knowledge about new communication technologies can lead to severe conflicts and crises.

Disinformation and disagreements: Critical and provocative information, or even national secrets, can cross borders and cause societal rifts on a global scale.

Anonymous culture: Anonymity on digital platforms can lead to crises from the spread of false or contradictory information.

Cybersecurity threats: Cyberattacks targeting governments, diplomats, and leaders remain a major risk in digital diplomacy.

Sharing concerns about the limitations of digital diplomacy, the work *"Countering Online Extremism and Propaganda: The Dark Side of Digital Diplomacy"*, co-edited by Corneliu Bjola and James Pamment, also highlights the alarming risks posed by the weaponization of media systems, propaganda, the spread of misinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories.

The biggest limitation of digital diplomacy is the risk of misinformation and fake news. Social media and digital platforms are easily exploited to spread false or inaccurate information, which can cause misunderstandings and undermine a country's diplomatic efforts. Malicious actors may use cyberspace to attack diplomatic campaigns or erode government credibility through cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns.

Secondly, cybersecurity and information security are also major concerns in digital diplomacy. Diplomatic activities conducted on digital platforms face risks of cyberattacks, data leaks, or surveillance. Sensitive diplomatic information can be stolen or sabotaged, weakening trust between nations. Digital infrastructure is

vulnerable to cyber threats, which can cause significant disruptions to diplomatic processes.

Thirdly, negative feedback and message control highlight another limitation of digital diplomacy. The use of social media and digital platforms can lead to negative reactions or even public criticism, potentially damaging a country's image. Diplomatic messages and campaigns can be easily misinterpreted or distorted by the public or political opponents, making information control more challenging.

Additionally, disparities in digital proficiency, technological capabilities, and the expertise of diplomatic personnel can create imbalances in international negotiations and cooperation. Not all countries have equal access to or the ability to use advanced technological tools. This results in inequality in digital diplomacy participation, particularly disadvantaging less developed nations or those lacking digital infrastructure.

Another important aspect related to diplomatic skills and effectiveness is that digital diplomacy lacks personal interaction and face-to-face negotiations—key advantages of traditional diplomacy. In-person meetings are highly strategic, allowing leaders to read body language and emotional cues during negotiations, something that digital diplomacy struggles to replicate. As a result, digital diplomacy can sometimes make the negotiation process less effective.

In conclusion, the greatest challenge of digital diplomacy is misinformation and fake news. Social media and digital platforms can be exploited to spread inaccurate information, undermining diplomatic efforts. Additionally, cybersecurity is a crucial concern as sensitive diplomatic information faces risks of theft and sabotage. Finally, digital diplomacy's lack of face-to-face interaction can limit trust-building and understanding, which are strengths of traditional diplomacy. Thus, while digital diplomacy has immense potential, addressing its limitations is essential to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability.

Practical Basis for Building Vietnam's Digital Diplomacy The Development of Digital Diplomacy in the World

The development of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, along with the trend of digitization in all fields and aspects of human life, has driven changes in diplomacy. Developed countries were among the first to strongly recognize this change and became pioneers in integrating digitization into diplomacy. For example, the United States, immediately after the September 11 attacks, established a specialized task force in 2002 to promote digital diplomacy, which became the Office of e-Diplomacy in 2003. Besides promoting freedom of information, the U.S. also paid more attention to risks to national cybersecurity. This became the cornerstone of the U.S. Department of State's digital diplomacy strategy at the time.

By the 2010s, during the two terms of President B. Obama (2009–2017), there was a significant expansion in American officials' understanding of digital diplomacy specifically and foreign policy generally. Ben Scott, Innovation Advisor to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2009–2013), outlined three components of digital diplomacy: (i) Public Diplomacy, including the use of online platforms; (ii) Developing expertise in technology policy and understanding how the Internet impacts international developments; and (iii) Influencing development policies to ensure more effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) for promoting global economic growth (Funnell, 2014).

Public diplomacy using online platforms was promoted with the goal of restoring America's image in the eyes of foreign publics. During President D. Trump's administration (2017–2021), technology competition became central to U.S. foreign policy, with cybersecurity and digital infrastructure being the most emphasized policy areas. Under President J. Biden (2021–2024), in addition to cybersecurity and competition in digital infrastructure development, the U.S. government has reemphasized human rights and public diplomacy as part of a "multilateralism" foreign policy framework. Based on such policies, it can be said that U.S. digital diplomacy has been systematically and comprehensively developed and implemented. Digital diplomacy is not just a tool for public diplomacy but also an agenda item in international cooperation and diplomatic programs.

The United Kingdom is also one of the pioneering countries in developing digital diplomacy. As early as 2016, the UK ranked first in digital diplomacy, followed by France, the U.S., and Russia. Since 2012, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office has published the FCO Digital Strategy with the aim of digitizing its organizational machinery, communicating policy-related information, and increasing transparency and openness in diplomacy. [16] Not only has the UK applied digital technology in consular tasks and diplomatic management, but British embassies have also leveraged social media platforms to promote human rights, democracy, and trade rules, encouraging the use of soft power to strengthen the UK's relations with host countries. In October 2009, when awareness of digital diplomacy in Vietnam was still limited, the British Embassy in Vietnam partnered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to hold a training session in Hanoi on digital-age diplomacy for Vietnamese diplomats.

The European Union (EU) and the Vatican ranked 5th and 6th, respectively, in the 2016 Digital Diplomacy Review, highlighting the interest and promotion of digital diplomacy by international institutions and organizations. Countries such as India, Israel, Mexico, and Switzerland ranked 7th to 10th, demonstrating that even medium-sized nations, while not global powers, share a common awareness of technological development and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Thus, the growth of information and digital technology has made digital diplomacy an inevitable trend among actors in international relations.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Crises Promoting the Role of Digital Diplomacy

Although most countries, in tandem with digital advancements, had recognized the need to incorporate digital tools into diplomatic activities, laying the foundation for digital diplomacy, it was the COVID-19 pandemic, lasting nearly two years that significantly pushed the role of digital diplomacy to the forefront. For instance, the EU—already a global leader in developing a common digital infrastructure—only emphasized its digital diplomacy policies after the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent crises.

During the pandemic, as the EU intensified cooperation and exchanges to address the global health crisis, traditional diplomatic activities were restricted, making digital diplomacy a critical alternative. Similarly, the Russia-Ukraine conflict further underscored the importance of digital diplomacy. The EU realized that emerging digital technologies were increasingly becoming drivers of geopolitical competition and measures of global influence, posing potential threats to the security and integrity of the EU and its member states.

In July 2022, the EU adopted its first Council Conclusions on Digital Diplomacy, followed by additional conclusions on June 26, 2023, proposing a series of priority actions to ensure more strategic, coherent, and effective EU digital diplomacy. On July 22, 2024, the Foreign Affairs Council held its annual review of EU Digital Diplomacy, evaluating progress over the past four years, as digital issues have transitioned from purely technical concerns to matters of strategic and political importance, directly impacting democracy, the economy, and society.

The awareness of the role of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and digital transformation in Vietnam is clearly reflected in a series of documents issued by the Party and the State. Notable among them are Resolution No. 23-NQ/TW, dated March 22, 2018, of the Politburo, which outlines the national industrial development policy until 2030 with a vision to 2045, and Resolution No. 52-NQ/TW, dated September 27, 2019, of the Politburo, on guidelines and policies for proactively participating in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. These documents demonstrate the national development strategy in the digital era.

Based on these policies, the Government has developed and issued corresponding action programs and national strategies related to various fields, such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the National Digital Transformation Program, and the National Strategy for Research, Development, and Application of Artificial Intelligence. On June 3, 2020, the Prime Minister signed Decision No. 749/QĐ-TTg, approving the National Digital Transformation Program until 2025, with an orientation toward 2030. The fundamental objective set forth is: "The National Digital Transformation Program aims for a dual goal of both developing a digital government, digital economy, and digital society and fostering Vietnamese digital technology enterprises capable of reaching global markets." [19] The year 2020 was identified as the starting year for national digital transformation. The first Vietnam Digital Transformation Day (DX Day Vietnam) took place on August 11–12, 2020, in Hanoi. On April 22, 2022, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 505/QĐ-TTg on National Digital Transformation Day, officially designating October 10 as the annual National Digital Transformation Day.

Thus, Vietnam is gradually establishing a policy framework to promote the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the country's digital transformation. This serves as an important foundation for building and implementing digital diplomacy initiatives.

Vietnam's Digital Diplomacy Activities

Vietnam has acknowledged the importance of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and ICT in the 21st century. However, before 2019, digital transformation in various sectors remained underdeveloped. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the necessity for digital transformation, particularly in diplomacy, where traditional diplomatic activities were replaced by digital alternatives. Vietnam has actively adopted digital technology for diplomatic purposes. Online meetings, international conferences, and bilateral dialogues were conducted on platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. In ASEAN and APEC summits, as well as bilateral meetings, digital diplomacy has been extensively used.

Vietnam is gradually improving the legal framework and policy support for digital diplomacy activities. Relevant ministries and agencies, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Information and Communications, have

collaborated to develop regulations related to the application of technology in diplomacy.

In November 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with the Vietnam Posts and Telecommunications Group (VNPT), organized the conference "Leveraging Digital Platforms to Innovate External Information Work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs." This event highlighted that digital transformation is an urgent necessity for the diplomatic sector, particularly in external information management. As a result, digital transformation has become one of the ministry's key priorities, serving as a crucial foundation for building a comprehensive and modern diplomatic framework. To accelerate the digital transformation process, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been implementing the "E-Government Development Project of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the 2021-2025 Period." Additionally, the 31st Diplomatic Conference in December 2021 identified digital diplomacy as a priority area for advancement.

Furthermore, attention has been given to digital diplomacy human resources. Some diplomats have received basic training in digital technology, enabling them to work and communicate with international partners through online platforms. Short-term courses on cybersecurity and digital skills are also being implemented for diplomatic personnel.

Vietnam is also actively promoting international cooperation in the field of digital diplomacy. Initial steps have been taken to develop cybersecurity policies aimed at protecting diplomatic information systems from cyber-attacks. The government is also strengthening collaboration with international partners in this area. Vietnam has been actively participating in international forums related to technology and cybersecurity, working with organizations such as the United Nations, ASEAN, and other international bodies to enhance cybersecurity and exchange information on digital diplomacy. As ASEAN Chair in 2020, Vietnam proactively proposed the development of the ASEAN Digital Integration Index.

Vietnam recognizes the critical role of digital technology and the importance of international cooperation in digital development as key factors in ensuring a stable and peaceful environment for global collaboration. In November 2021, Vietnam participated in the International Conference on Digital Diplomacy (ICDD), organized by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, further demonstrating its commitment to advancing digital diplomacy on the global stage.

Observations

The development of digital diplomacy after COVID-19 is not merely a temporary trend but has become an indispensable part of global diplomatic activities. With technological advancements and the increasing need for international connectivity, digital diplomacy is expected to continue to expand and innovate, opening up new possibilities and opportunities in the global context. Digital diplomacy allows countries to reach broader global audiences and larger communities without being limited by geographical boundaries. This not only facilitates effective communication of messages but also enhances national image-building and soft power. Therefore, countries need to strengthen multilateral dialogue and international cooperation to foster digital transformation while addressing challenges such as information security and cybersecurity.

The theoretical and practical foundations indicate that Vietnam, positioning itself as a middle-power country, has made a sound and appropriate decision to promote digital diplomacy as a specialized form of diplomacy. Building a digital diplomacy platform not only enhances Vietnam's international standing but also delivers high efficiency in fostering cooperation, information exchange, and addressing global challenges in an increasingly digitized world.

It is evident that, similar to many other countries worldwide, Vietnam only fully recognized the role of digital diplomacy after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, recent digital diplomacy activities have mainly involved the diplomatic sector experimenting with certain measures to adapt to the COVID-19 context, such as increased use of social media and digital platforms for foreign affairs and external information dissemination.

Despite progress in training, Vietnam's digital diplomacy workforce remains insufficient in terms of quantity and specialized technological skills. There is an urgent need to enhance digital knowledge and skills for diplomats to meet the increasing demands of the modern digital diplomatic environment. The current legal and policy framework is still incomplete and lacks specificity to comprehensively regulate digital diplomacy activities. Cybersecurity in digital diplomacy also requires greater focus. Vietnam must invest heavily in advanced security solutions to safeguard critical diplomatic information from cyber threats.

Clearer guidelines on processes, responsibilities, and security standards for implementing digital diplomacy are needed. International links and cooperation in developing digital diplomacy policies and sharing technologies between Vietnam and developed countries remain limited. More bilateral and multilateral agreements are necessary to learn from international experiences and advance Vietnam's digital diplomatic infrastructure.

Vietnam's digital diplomacy is progressing and has achieved significant advances, particularly in applying technology to foreign affairs activities, but numerous challenges remain. Technology infrastructure, human resources, legal policies, and cybersecurity are key areas that must be prioritized for development in the near future. To establish a robust digital diplomacy platform, Vietnam requires a comprehensive strategy with concrete steps, including developing infrastructure, improving human resources, and enhancing international cooperation. The government needs to formulate an overarching digital diplomacy strategy with clear objectives and an analysis of the opportunities and challenges posed by digital technology in global and regional contexts. Integrating digital technology into traditional diplomatic strategies—spanning politics, economics, and culture—by leveraging digital tools and platforms can increase the reach and effectiveness of diplomatic efforts.

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