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DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AND ITS IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Gateway House, an Indian nonpartisan foreign policy think tank defines digital diplomacy as using digital tools (social media) by diplomats to communicate with each other and with the public.¹ However, this definition is not sufficient as different schools of thought have given digital diplomacy a relatively more extensive definition to encompass the growth of the internet and its use by governments to fulfill their diplomatic agenda and international relations.

Why will digital diplomacy fundamentally change international relations and diplomacy?

The average age of United States' civil servants stands at 47.5%, according to a federal employment report of 2017 by the Office of the Personnel Management.² This shows that the internet generation is being placed in more strategic government administration positions, which shows that this generation will maintain the increasing demand for open government and e-administration. In other countries like Finland, this young population has monopolized state administration and even the top offices like the presidency. Finland's prime minister Sanna Mirella Marin assumed office in 2019 at the age of 34.³ Her huge digital footprint shows us the perception young world leaders have about digital diplomacy.

Globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The 4IR is a digital revolution that has been happening since did mid 20th century, disrupting almost every industry in every

¹ A., & Lewis, D. (2017, December 21). Digital diplomacy. Gateway House. <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/digital-diplomacy-2/>.

² Policy, data, OVERSIGHT data, analysis & documentation. U.S. Office of Personnel Management. (n.d.). <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/data-analysis-documentation/federal-employment-reports/reports-publications/full-time-permanent-age-distributions/>.

³ John, Henley. (2019, December 9). Finland anoints Sanna Marin, 34, as world's youngest serving prime minister. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/09/finland-anoints-sanna-martin-34-as-worlds-youngest-serving-prime-minister>.

country. And the breadth and depth of these changes herald the transformation of the entire production, management, and governance systems.⁴

We have witnessed bitter diplomatic relations caused by attempts to sabotage digital diplomacy. A recent example is the China – U.S.A. row over social media platform TikTok, a Chinese social media platform. As relations between the Trump administration and China deteriorated, the U.S.A. attempted to ban TikTok usage in the United States.⁵ The Chinese immediately promised heavy retaliation against the U.S.A. if Trump went ahead to ban the platform.⁶

Why digital diplomacy will not fundamentally change international relations and diplomacy

The major influencers of international relations have consistently remained trade and security. Other factors like digital diplomacy are merely seen as enablers and facilitators. In January this year, tensions between China and India grew for geopolitical reasons. Subsequently, India reacted by banning the Chinese social media platform TikTok.⁷ This, however, did not affect trade and diplomatic relations between the two countries as it was projected. By February 2021, India's total imports from China had soared to \$58.7 billion more than India's combined purchases from the U.S. and the U.A.E.⁸ If new media technologies that facilitate digital diplomacy are seen as real influencers of International relations, we would have witnessed strong retaliation from China against India.

⁴ Klaus Schwab, F. and E. C. (n.d.). *The fourth industrial Revolution: What it means and how to respond*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/>.

⁵ Swanson, A., McCabe, D., & Nicas, J. (2020, September 18). *Trump administration to Ban TikTok and WeChat from U.S. app stores*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/18/business/trump-tik-tok-wechat-ban.html>.

⁶ Rapoza, K. (2020, August 7). *China promises to retaliate if TikTok forced to sell*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2020/08/07/china-promises-to-retaliate-if-tiktok-forced-to-sell/?sh=1be82cf76e1e>.

⁷ Abi-habib, M. (2020, June 29). *India bans nearly 60 chinese apps, Including TikTok and WeChat*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/world/asia/tik-tok-banned-india-china.html>.

⁸ Sundaram, K., & Chaudhary, A. (2021, February 22). *China Back as Top India Trade Partner Even as Relations Sour*. Bloomberg.com. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-22/china-returns-as-top-india-trade-partner-even-as-relations-sour>.

Absence of international regulatory framework and policies to support advancement of digital diplomacy. Unlike international trade and security that have laid down international protocols and governing instruments, the internet and its products remain ignored as serious issues that international relations should worry about. Whereas United Nations declared access to the internet as a human right,⁹ I believe they have not laid down a proper global framework to enforce this right. This gives digital diplomacy no future in transforming international relations. Countries, especially dictatorships, have stringent control over internet consumption by their masses, with no exemption of major powers like China. The Chinese government directly controls over 1.4 billion people's internet access with a mass surveillance system that has given China's security organs vast powers over the masses.¹⁰

In conclusion,

Coming from a digital media background and as the head of digital communications at one of Africa's premier universities – Makerere University, I have a personal experience on how digital diplomacy has entrenched itself in government administration perpetuated by young and ambitious civil servants who want an easy way of going about things. To me, this is the most important indicator that digital diplomacy is here to stay as long as young people are taking positions in key government offices like Kayleigh McEnany, a Trump administration press secretary. She was appointed at the age of 32.¹¹

⁹ Boyle, E. (2016, July 5). *The UN says online freedom is a human right that 'must be protected'*. The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/un-declares-online-freedom-be-human-right-must-be-protected-a7120186.html>.

¹⁰ Mozur, P., & Krolik, A. (2019, December 18). *A surveillance net blankets China's cities, giving police vast powers*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/17/technology/china-surveillance.html>.

¹¹ Coyne, M. (2020, April 7). *Trump campaign aide Kayleigh McEnany named Press secretary*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marleycoyne/2020/04/07/trump-campaign-aide-kayleigh-mcenany-named-press-secretary/?sh=4ba83eb1f43b>.