

# **Bridging the Gap: An Assessment of Nigeria's Digital Diplomacy in Relation to National Foreign Policy Goals**

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## **Abstract**

In the rapidly evolving landscape of international relations, the role of digital diplomacy has become more important by transforming the way countries engage with one another on the global stage. Nigeria has been gradually incorporating digital diplomacy into its foreign policy toolkit, and has made efforts to enhance its digital presence and engagement with global audiences. The adoption of digital diplomacy offers Nigeria new avenues to pursue its foreign policy objectives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and due to this, the study assessed Nigeria's digital diplomacy in relation to its national foreign policy goals. The study adopted exploratory research design in order to gain a greater understanding of the subject matter. The target population for this study consists of fifteen individuals - six from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, four from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, and five University Professors. These population was selected due to their important roles in shaping and implementing Nigeria's foreign policy and digital diplomacy strategies and due to their in-depth knowledge of what Nigerian foreign policy and digital diplomacy is about. The purposive sampling technique, was adopted to select the individuals that are adequately exposed to Nigeria's foreign policy and also have the understanding of what digital diplomacy is about. The findings revealed that Nigeria's digital diplomacy efforts are closely aligned with its national foreign policy objectives; and that Nigeria's foreign policy think tanks utilised a wide range of digital tools and platforms to enhance their diplomatic efforts and policy research. It was recommended that Nigeria should further strengthen its digital diplomacy by investing in coordinated strategies that align with its foreign policy goals; and Nigeria should enhance the capacity of its foreign policy think tanks by investing in digital tools and platforms that support real-time engagement, data-driven analysis, and global collaboration.

**Keywords: Digital, Diplomacy, Digital Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Nigeria's Foreign Policy**

## **Introduction**

The practice of diplomacy has evolved over centuries, adapting to changes in geopolitical landscapes, technological advancements, and altering power dynamics. Diplomacy has always been a part of international relations, helping states communicate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts with one another right from ancient empires to contemporary nation-states (Cornago, 2008). Digital diplomacy is a diplomatic approach that involves the extensive utilisation of technology, specifically the internet and other innovations based on information and communication technologies (ICTs), in the practice of diplomacy (Adesina, 2022). Foreign policy is the system of activities evolved by communities for changing the behaviour of other states and for adjusting their own activities to the international environment (Umuakperu, 2023). Nigeria's foreign policy is focused on the promotion and protection of the national interests; promotion of African integration and support for African unity; promotion of international cooperation for the consolidation of universal peace and mutual respect among all nations and the elimination of discrimination in all its manifestations; respect for international law and treaty obligations; as well as seeking the resolution of international disputes by negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, and adjudication; and the promotion of a just world economic order.

The Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and various Nigerian diplomatic missions such as the US mission Nigeria, Nigeria High Commission London, Nigeria High Commission Ottawa have established presence on social media platforms by creating official accounts on popular social media platforms such as X, Facebook,

LinkedIn, and Instagram; identifying their target audience by determining the social media platforms mostly used by their target audience, such as Nigerians living abroad, foreign governments, or international organisations; developing a content strategy that aligns with their diplomatic goals, including sharing news, updates, and information about Nigeria's foreign policy, culture, and economy; and engaging with their audiences by responding to comments, answering questions, and using hashtags to participate in relevant conversations, so as to get engaged with the general public, address issues & crises, attending virtual events, to engage in other diplomatic aspects, and to attract foreign investment and promote Nigeria's business environment (NIPC, 2021; Eze, et al, 2021).

The advent of digital diplomacy has significantly changed the ways nations communicate and interact on the global stage by allowing for a more faster, and more direct communication with wider audiences through online platforms like social media, video conferencing platforms, enabling greater public engagement, transparency, and real-time information sharing, example of which is digital diplomacy through the use of social media and video conferencing platforms has become an increasingly important tool for diplomats to communicate with each other and the public, without necessarily travelling, and with leaders and diplomats now easily communicating and sharing their views on global events and policy decisions in real-time, without the need for traditional media intermediaries (Umuakpero, 2023). This has allowed for a more direct and informal diplomacy, with tweets and Facebook posts being used to communicate everything from policy positions to congratulatory messages (Mahesh & Senadeera, 2023). Despite these glaring benefits Nigeria like other African countries stands to achieve by the adoption of digital diplomacy in their foreign policy drive, it is disheartening that Nigeria in particular, seems to be slow in her embrace of these new technologies, which poses as a hindrance to effective digital diplomacy in the country (Umuakpero, 2023) and may cause diplomatic isolation, economic, and reduced competitiveness just to mention a few.

The objectives of this study are to assess the extent to which Nigeria's digital diplomacy efforts align with its national foreign policy objectives; and analyse the current state of digital diplomacy in Nigeria's foreign policy think-tanks.

### **Review of Literature**

Diplomacy is the practice of conducting negotiations, managing relations, and representing interests between states, governments, international organisations, and other actors in the international arena. It involves the use of dialogue, negotiation, and communication to advance national interests, promote cooperation, resolve conflicts, and maintain peaceful relations among nations. Diplomacy encompasses a wide range of activities, including formal negotiations, informal dialogues, mediation, conflict resolution, and public diplomacy efforts aimed at influencing perceptions and building relationships. It is the management of international relations by negotiation (Afrin & Risnat, 2021). Diplomacy is the fundamental practice in international relations, that involves the management of relationships, negotiations, and interactions between states and other actors in the global arena (Jones, 2021). It is also the use of economic tools and policies to achieve foreign policy objectives, promote trade relations, attract investment, and enhance national interests in the global economy (Drezner, 2020; Eichenberg & Gunitsky, 2018). It is also the established method of influencing the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments and peoples through dialogue, negotiation, and other measures short of war or violence. Diplomacy is also the projection of soft power through public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and information campaigns in order to influence perceptions, shape narratives, and build relationships in the international community (Nye, 2008; Li & Wu, 2021). Diplomacy also extends to the practice of promoting cultural exchange, building cultural understanding, and enhancing soft power through cultural diplomacy initiatives (Kockel, 2018).

### **Overview of Foreign Policy**

Foreign Policy is about the actions or policies that are deliberately taken by a state to cope with its external environment, with the idea of helping nations build and develop. Foreign Policy is about interdependence and the

relationship between countries. Foreign Policy is the calculated steps and actions taken by a state that are intended to maximise the opportunities that are valuable outside their boundaries, while at the same time reducing risks to the nationals. Foreign policy consists of decisions and actions, which involves the relations between one state and others (BBC, 2013). Foreign Policy is the guiding principles and actions a nation takes in its interactions with other countries. It is the system of activities evolved by communities for changing the behaviour of other states and for adjusting their own activities to the international environment (Bojang, 2018). Foreign policy is the set of decisions, actions, and strategies undertaken by a nation-state to achieve its interests and goals in the international arena (Anderson, 1984; Jaafar & Rahman, 2020).

### **The deployment of Digital Diplomacy to achieve Nigeria's Foreign Policy Objectives**

In recent times, Nigeria has strategically employed digital diplomacy to address diplomatic challenges and amplify its voice on the global stage, which can be traced to the effectiveness of Nigeria's digital diplomacy initiatives such as the engagement with the Ghanaian government over attacks on its diplomatic premises and the handling of the #EndSARS protests. In June 2020, Nigeria responded to criminal attacks on its diplomatic premises in Accra, Ghana, using digital platforms to condemn the actions and demand urgent action from the Ghanaian government. Nigerian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Geoffrey Onyeama, took to X (Formerly Twitter) to express Nigeria's stance, and call for the perpetrators to be apprehended and the provision of adequate protection for Nigerians and their property in Ghana (Onyeama, 2020). This proactive engagement demonstrated Nigeria's commitment to diplomatic dialogue and the protection of its interests, using digital diplomacy to illustrate its message on the international stage. Similarly, during the #EndSARS protests in October 2020, Nigeria navigated internal challenges and international scrutiny with a nuanced approach to digital diplomacy. As protests escalated across the country, including widespread social media activism, Nigeria's government faced pressure both domestically and internationally (Imam, 2024).

The incident surrounding the 2024 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) semi-final match between Nigeria's Super Eagles and South Africa's Bafana Bafana showcased digital diplomacy and its impact on foreign policy. This event demonstrated how digital platforms are used by nations to manage diplomatic relations, address cross-border challenges, and influence public perception (Akinkuotu, 2024). During the 2024 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) matches there was an online banter between the fans of the Nigerian Super Eagles and the Republic of South Africa team which led to some comments from the diplomatic offices of both countries. The exchange between Nigeria and South Africa primarily occurred via X and popular news sites with both countries using digital diplomacy to address concerns and mitigate potential attacks as a result of the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) semi-final matches (Imam, 2024). E-government on the other hand is the application of digital technologies to governmental processes, and it has a significant impact on Nigeria's digital diplomacy strategy, and it significantly advance Nigeria's foreign policy objectives (Abdulkareem & Ishola, 2016). The adoption of e-government facilitates direct and efficient communication between Nigeria's government and foreign entities. Digital platforms also enable the Ministry of Foreign Affairs disseminate information promptly, engage with international stakeholders, and clarify policy positions.

This transparency not only builds trust but also allows for real-time updates on Nigeria's foreign policy initiatives, example of which can be traced to the period of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's visit to China in August 2024, the Nigerian government made use of digital channels to communicate the objectives and outcomes of the meetings, by ensuring that both domestic and international audiences were informed (Onuah, 2024). E-government platforms help provide accessible information on trade policies, investment opportunities, and economic reforms, Nigeria attracts foreign investors and strengthens economic partnerships. The digital dissemination of the Nigeria-China economic and nuclear energy pact in September 2024 exemplifies how e-government initiatives can highlight strategic economic collaborations (Onuah & Lee, 2024; Adesina, 2024). The Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) in South Africa emphasised the longstanding history of sports-related interactions between the two countries without incidents of hooliganism as well as the

absence of any history of soccer-related violence between the two nations and expressed confidence in the safety of Nigerian citizens in South Africa (Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 2024).

Both countries engaged in friendly banter on social media platforms, with official handles of television service providers in Nigeria and South Africa exchanging light-hearted remarks ahead of the matches. This incident underscores the dynamic role of digital diplomacy in managing diplomatic relations and addressing cross-border challenges. Both countries made use of digital platforms to promptly communicate and convey their positions, ensuring real-time dissemination of information to their respective citizens and the international community, engage in public diplomacy to influence perceptions, and maintain transparency. However, despite the banter, the incident also brought to light the underlying tensions and historical instances of xenophobic attacks between the two countries (Imam, 2024; Booty, 2024). The Nigerian High Commission's caution reflects concerns rooted in past events, where Nigerians and other foreign nationals were targets of violence (The Citizen, 2024). The utilisation of digital diplomacy in this context aligns with Nigeria's broader foreign policy objectives of promoting national interests, due to the fact that Nigeria seeks to protect its citizens abroad and promote a positive image internationally by engaging in digital diplomacy (Teleanu & Kurbalija, 2022).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is underpinned by Anne-Marie Slaughter, Manuel Castells, Jan Melissen, Brian Hocking, and Rhonda S. Zaharna's Networked Diplomacy Theory, which was proposed through their various works which explains the strategies for operating in a networked world by emphasising the importance of connections and networks in modern diplomacy. They analysed how foreign ministries adapt to changes in the international environment, and it includes the rise of non-state actors and networks, which are central to the concept of networked diplomacy. Networked Diplomacy is a contemporary concept in the field of international relations that emphasises the role of networking, communication, and collaboration among diverse actors in the diplomatic process (Morozov, 2022). Networked diplomacy theory believes and suggests that in today's interconnected world, diplomacy should not be limited to the traditional state-to-state interactions but should involve a broader network of actors, including non-governmental organizations, businesses, civil society groups, and individuals, utilising various communication channels to address complex global issues more effectively and inclusively than traditional methods alone can achieve, it is also about leveraging the power of networks to foster international cooperation beyond the confines of traditional diplomatic channels, which can be traced to Nigeria's response to the international backlash during the 2020 #EndSARS protests.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted exploratory research design in order to gain a greater understanding of the subject matter through the use of interview. The target population for this study consists of fifteen individuals- six (6) government officials from the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, four (4) government officials from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, and five (5) university professors. These population was selected due to their important roles in shaping and implementing Nigeria's foreign policy and digital diplomacy strategies and due to their in-depth knowledge of what Nigerian foreign policy and digital diplomacy is about. The purposive sampling technique was adopted to select high-ranking government officials and University professors who are adequately exposed to Nigeria's foreign policy and also have the understanding of what digital diplomacy is about. The primary instrument of data collection was semi-structured in-depth interview guide. The data was transcribed and organised for analysis of closed-ended questions after it was collected. The study relied on content analysis as its method of data analysis for the secondary sourced data and descriptively narrated as its method of data analysis for the primary sourced data.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The study discovered that digital diplomacy plays an important role in advancing Nigeria's economic interests by positioning the country as an attractive destination for international investment. The Nigeria Digital Economy

Policy and Strategy (NDEPS), for example, supports economic transformation by promoting technological innovation, entrepreneurship, and fostering an environment conducive to business growth. By utilising digital tools, Nigeria enhances its global economic position and strengthens its technological sector, contributing significantly to its broader development goals.

On the issue of security, digital diplomacy is important in enhancing Nigeria's security partnerships with regional and global actors. By engaging in online diplomatic initiatives, Nigeria strengthens its cooperation on issues such as counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and intelligence-sharing. This allows Nigeria to collaborate more effectively with international partners to combat transnational threats, including cybercrime and terrorism, which are critical concerns for the country. Through digital channels, Nigeria is able to quickly disseminate information, coordinate responses, and ensure that it remains at the forefront of global security discussions. This digital engagement is an essential tool in Nigeria's broader efforts to secure its borders and safeguard its citizens from both internal and external threats.

Furthermore, by using digital platforms, Nigeria can coordinate more efficiently with global security agencies, share critical intelligence, and engage in joint operations against common threats. The ability to communicate in real-time enhances Nigeria's responsiveness to security challenges, and digital diplomacy serves as a force multiplier in its efforts to safeguard national and regional security. This collaboration helps bolster Nigeria's leadership role in regional security frameworks such as ECOWAS, where digital tools facilitate coordination and communication among member states.

The study pointed out that continuous feedback and evaluation are vital for refining Nigeria's digital diplomacy efforts. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs regularly reviews the effectiveness of its digital tools and platforms, adjusting strategies based on performance data. This ongoing evaluation process ensures that Nigeria's digital diplomacy remains adaptive to changing global circumstances and continues to support the country's foreign policy objectives. By focusing on improving infrastructure, enhancing security, and integrating advanced technologies like AI, Nigeria is optimising its digital diplomacy to better engage with international partners and achieve its long-term diplomatic goals.

Nigeria's foreign policy think tanks utilise a variety of digital tools and platforms to enhance their diplomatic efforts, promote policy research, and engage with both local and international stakeholders. The use of social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and LinkedIn played important role in real-time diplomatic communication. These platforms facilitated immediate and direct engagement with global audiences, helping think tanks disseminate policy positions and updates on international developments. Additionally, the integration of these social media platforms into daily operations enabled think tanks foster international collaborations, engage in policy discussions, and influence global discourse, contributing to the country's broader diplomatic goals.

The study elaborated how web-based conferencing tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams have become indispensable for virtual diplomatic engagements. These platforms allow think tanks to organize high-level discussions, webinars, and virtual policy dialogues with stakeholders from different parts of the world. The ability to conduct virtual meetings with government officials, international organisations, and academic institutions has increased the efficiency and reach of Nigeria's foreign policy think tanks, enabling them to maintain continuous international engagement even when in-person meetings are not feasible. This virtual engagement also expands their reach to a global audience, facilitating discussions on critical issues like security, economic development, and regional integration.

The use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology was another key tool that some of Nigeria's foreign policy think tanks employ, particularly when analysing security and migration patterns. GIS enables think tanks

to visualize and analyse complex data regarding cross-border movements, conflict zones, and regional security issues. This data-driven approach enhances policy research, allowing think tanks to provide evidence-based recommendations to policymakers. It also contributes to informed decision-making by offering a detailed understanding of geopolitical dynamics and regional challenges, which is essential for crafting effective foreign policies.

Nigeria's digital diplomacy efforts are grounded in a strategic vision that seeks to enhance the country's diplomatic influence on the global stage through the integration of digital tools and technologies. It was also found that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) made significant investments in training and capacity-building programs for diplomats to equip them with the necessary skills for effective digital engagement. These programs focus on teaching diplomats about the intricacies of social media interaction, cybersecurity, and electronic communication tactics, which are crucial in today's digitised diplomatic landscape. The Nigerian Foreign Service Academy, in collaboration with technology organizations, has been instrumental in fostering these skills, ensuring that diplomats can navigate digital platforms efficiently while safeguarding sensitive information.

Furthermore, it was gathered that digital diplomacy is becoming an essential component of Nigeria's broader foreign policy framework. This is evident in the country's collaborations with international organisations like the United Nations and the African Union to implement best practices for digital diplomacy. By engaging with these global institutions, Nigeria is not only learning from established diplomatic norms but also contributing its own unique perspectives. Through these partnerships, Nigeria is advancing its foreign policy objectives, such as fostering economic partnerships, regional stability, and stronger global relationships. The MFA's focus on digital solutions and crisis communication has strengthened Nigeria's ability to respond swiftly to international developments, helping to maintain its reputation as an active player in global affairs.

Among other things, the study highlighted that the integration of digital diplomacy within Nigeria's foreign policy is also being driven by the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (NDEPS). This policy outlines a comprehensive approach to strengthening the country's digital infrastructure and capabilities, particularly within the context of foreign affairs. NDEPS ensures that Nigeria's diplomatic missions across the world adopt digital tools to support economic diplomacy, regional cooperation, and international collaboration. By aligning digital diplomacy with national policies like NDEPS, Nigeria is positioning itself as a leader in the digital transformation of diplomatic practices.

The findings of this study showed that Nigeria's digital diplomacy efforts are closely aligned with its national foreign policy objectives, especially in promoting economic development, enhancing security, and fostering regional integration. This aligned with the work of Rashica (2018), who discussed the dual nature of digital diplomacy by emphasising both its opportunities and challenges. Rashica (2018) highlighted how digital tools, such as social media and virtual platforms, enabled countries like Nigeria engage with global audiences, attract investment, and promote their economic potential. This is further supported by demonstrating how Nigeria utilises digital diplomacy to directly communicate with key stakeholders, position itself as an investment destination, and foster international trade and partnerships. The study also noted the important role digital diplomacy played in enhancing Nigeria's security, especially in counterterrorism and regional security efforts. This also aligned with the findings of Melissen (2019), who asserted that digital diplomacy provided states with the ability to engage with global audiences in real time, manage narratives, and coordinate responses to international crises.

This interconnected approach strengthened Nigeria's diplomatic influence and allowed it advocate for its foreign policy objectives more effectively. The study illustrated how Nigeria adopted digital diplomacy to project its identity as a regional leader and key player in Africa's economic and security development. By engaging in digital platforms, Nigeria promoted its values of peace, security, and economic cooperation, helping to shape global perceptions of its role in international diplomacy. The findings of this study demonstrated that Nigeria's digital

diplomacy efforts aligned with its broader foreign policy objectives of economic development, security, and regional integration. While the findings reflected the effectiveness of digital diplomacy in achieving these goals, they also highlighted challenges such as misinformation and coordination, which can undermine its success. The networked diplomacy theory provided valuable frameworks for understanding how digital diplomacy enhanced Nigeria's influence on the global stage, enabling it to project its values and identity while strengthening its position within the international system.

The findings of this study also revealed that Nigeria's foreign policy think tanks utilised a wide range of digital tools and platforms to enhance their diplomatic efforts and policy research. These tools, including social media, virtual conferencing software, GIS technology, and project management platforms, played a significant role in shaping the effectiveness and reach of Nigeria's diplomatic engagements. This finding aligned with Umuakpero (2023), who noted that Nigeria's foreign policy is evolving in the digital age, with think tanks increasingly adopting digital tools to conduct research, promote policy dialogue, and engage with international stakeholders. The findings emphasised how platforms like social media allowed Nigerian think tanks engage in real-time discussions with global actors and making foreign policy research and discussions more accessible and responsive to current events. Rashica (2018) similarly highlighted the dual nature of digital diplomacy, noting both the opportunities and risks as regards public perception and policy evaluation.

The study further supported this by demonstrating that digital platforms enabled think tanks disseminate policy briefs, engage experts, and foster a global discourse about Nigeria's foreign policy objectives, providing a dynamic space for feedback that enhanced the relevance and impact of diplomatic initiatives. Virtual conferencing tools also played a pivotal role in Nigeria's digital diplomacy strategy by facilitating real-time discussions and collaborations with international stakeholders. As noted by Huang, Lee, and Hwang (2020), technology is integral to enhancing governmental communication and coordination, as this is true for Nigeria's foreign policy think tanks. By using platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and others, Nigerian policy experts can engage with diplomats, scholars, and international organisations, fostering a collaborative environment for diplomatic initiatives. This aligned with the findings, which showed that virtual meetings allowed for the swift exchange of ideas, enabling Nigeria respond rapidly to emerging global issues and ensuring it remained at the forefront of international discussions on pressing diplomatic matters.

As Nigeria's foreign policy think tanks adopted digital platforms to communicate values like regional cooperation, peace, and development, they contributed to constructing a narrative about Nigeria's role in the international community. Through these digital engagements, Nigeria is able to project its norms and ideas, shaping its diplomatic identity and enhancing its influence in global discussions. The findings indicated that Nigeria's foreign policy think tanks are effectively utilizing digital tools and platforms to enhance their diplomatic efforts, promote policy research, and engage with international stakeholders. These tools supported real-time engagement, fostered global collaboration, and assisted informed decision-making, while ongoing evaluations ensured digital diplomacy initiatives remained aligned with Nigeria's foreign policy goals. From the perspective of networked diplomacy, the study demonstrated how Nigeria's think tanks participated in an interconnected global diplomatic network, while constructivist theory highlighted the role of digital platforms in shaping Nigeria's diplomatic identity and norms. Thus, Nigeria's digital diplomacy efforts are important for advancing its foreign policy objectives in an increasingly interconnected world.

## **Conclusion**

It can be concluded from the study that it is quite evident that digital diplomacy has become a vital tool in Nigeria's foreign policy, and country's investment in digital capabilities is very important for the successful implementation of its international diplomatic strategies. The study examined the intersection of digital diplomacy and Nigeria's foreign policy, by offering insights into how digital tools are shaping the country's international engagements. The study showed that Nigeria's digital diplomacy efforts are increasingly aligned with its foreign policy

objectives, supported by investments in digital infrastructure and literacy. The application of Networked Diplomacy theory further illuminated the evolving dynamics of Nigeria's diplomatic engagements. Overall, the study underscores the importance of sustaining and expanding Nigeria's digital diplomacy strategies to meet the demands of contemporary international relations.

### **Recommendations**

From the findings in the study, it was recommended that;

Nigeria should further strengthen its digital diplomacy by investing in coordinated strategies that aligns with its foreign policy goals especially as regards economic development, security, and regional integration while also addressing challenges like misinformation to maximise its global influence and diplomatic effectiveness. Nigeria should also enhance the capacity of its foreign policy think tanks by investing in digital tools and platforms that support real-time engagement, data-driven analysis, and global collaboration, and at the same time ensure their efforts remain aligned with national foreign policy objectives and responsive to international developments.

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