Digital Diplomacy and Nigeria's Foreign Policy: A Historical Perspective Since 1999

By

Nathaniel Omamuzo Abraham
Delta State University, Abraka
Email: abraham-nathaniel@delsu.edu.ng,
08054323892
&
Nyerohwo Avi Eduvwie (PhD)
Delta State University, Abraka
avi-eduvwie@delsu.edu.ng
07061872959

Abstract

The study explored the evolution and impact of digital diplomacy on Nigeria's foreign policy from the return to democratic governance in 1999 to the present, adopting a historical and analytical perspective. Anchored in Network Society Theory and Soft Power Theory, the study situates Nigeria's diplomatic practice within broader transformations in global communication technologies and international relations. Using a qualitative, desk-based research design, the study relies on secondary data drawn from scholarly journals, books, policy documents, and institutional reports to analyse how digital technologies have reshaped foreign policy formulation, implementation, and diplomatic engagement in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The findings reveal that digital technologies have enhanced Nigeria's foreign policy by improving communication speed, expanding international outreach, and supporting diaspora engagement, nation branding, and diplomatic networking. However, the study also identifies key challenges, including inadequate digital infrastructure, limited professional capacity, weak institutional coordination, cybersecurity threats, and the growing influence of uncoordinated direct-dial diplomacy. Based on these findings, the study recommends the institutionalisation of digital diplomacy within foreign policy processes, the development of a coordinated national digital diplomacy strategy aligned with Nigeria's foreign policy objectives, and sustained capacity building for diplomats in digital communication and cybersecurity. The

study concludes that while digital diplomacy has become an indispensable instrument of Nigeria's foreign policy since 1999, its effectiveness depends on strategic coherence, institutional alignment, and continuous investment in digital capacity to enhance Nigeria's global presence and influence.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Historical Perspective,

Introduction

In the contemporary global landscape, digital technologies have fundamentally transformed the conduct of diplomacy, giving rise to what is widely described as digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy involves the strategic deployment of online platforms, social media, and digital communication technologies by states to project soft power, engage foreign publics, and advance national interests. As Nyewusira (2019) explains, the increasing penetration of information and communication technologies has altered how states communicate and interact in the international system, shifting diplomacy from exclusive elite spaces to more open, interactive, and public-facing arenas. In Nigeria, this transformation has assumed heightened significance since the return to democratic governance in 1999, a period marked by renewed efforts to reassert regional leadership, rebuild international credibility, and reposition the country within global political and economic networks.

The adoption of digital tools within Nigeria's foreign policy framework has enabled faster dissemination of policy positions, wider diplomatic outreach, and more direct engagement with both domestic and international audiences. Umuakpero (2023) observes that the internet revolution has reshaped diplomatic practice in Nigeria by complementing traditional state-to-state diplomacy with online engagement, public diplomacy, and real-time communication. These developments have allowed Nigeria to interact more actively with diaspora communities, international organisations, and foreign publics, thereby enhancing visibility and responsiveness in a rapidly evolving global environment. The evolution of digital diplomacy in Nigeria, however, has not occurred in isolation from structural and institutional constraints. Emegha *et al* (2019) note that the expansion of digital communication has contributed to the rise of direct-dial

diplomacy, where government agencies and officials engage international counterparts without adequate coordination through established foreign policy institutions. This has raised concerns about policy coherence, institutional control, and the dilution of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' coordinating role. In addition, uneven digital literacy, limited cybersecurity capacity, and infrastructural deficits continue to constrain Nigeria's ability to fully exploit the opportunities offered by digital diplomacy.

Beyond institutional challenges, domestic political dynamics have also shaped the deployment of digital diplomacy in Nigeria. Hassan & Adejumo (2023) argue that since the post-Cold War era, Nigeria's foreign policy has increasingly emphasised economic diplomacy as a tool for domestic development. In this context, digital platforms have often been used to promote investment opportunities, trade relations, and international partnerships. While this reflects strategic adaptation, it also means that digital diplomatic messaging sometimes prioritises regime legitimacy and economic signalling over sustained engagement with broader foreign policy objectives. The growing prominence of digital diplomacy must also be understood within the broader historical evolution of Nigeria's foreign policy institutions. Ifeyani *et al* (2025) demonstrate that Nigeria's Foreign Service has undergone significant transformation since independence, with democratic consolidation after 1999 fostering professionalisation, institutional reform, and adaptive diplomatic strategies. These institutional changes created the foundation upon which digital diplomacy practices could emerge, integrating new technologies into existing diplomatic structures. Similarly, Enyindah and Ki (2023) emphasise that Nigeria's foreign policy is deeply shaped by historical experiences, institutional legacies, and evolving national interests, all of which influence how new diplomatic tools are adopted and utilised.

From a broader international relations perspective, the rise of digital diplomacy reflects structural changes in global politics, where traditional diplomacy, once dominated by face-to-face negotiations, embassies, and confidential communications, is increasingly complemented by online engagement and digital narratives. Eneje (2025) highlights the growing role of media and digital communication in shaping foreign policy outcomes, arguing that states must now compete for attention, credibility, and influence in an information-saturated global

space. For Nigeria, digital diplomacy has therefore become both an opportunity and a necessity for managing external perceptions, responding to crises, and maintaining relevance within regional and global institutions. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of digital diplomacy ultimately depends on strategic coherence, institutional capacity, and alignment with broader foreign policy goals. Saliu (2021) cautions that Nigeria's foreign missions must continuously adapt to new global realities while preserving professionalism, coordination, and national interest. Without sustained investment in digital infrastructure, professional training, and policy coordination, the promise of digital diplomacy risks being undermined by fragmentation and inconsistency. Consequently, this study provides a historical and analytical examination of digital diplomacy and Nigeria's foreign policy since 1999. By situating digital diplomacy within the broader evolution of Nigeria's foreign policy institutions and practices, the study analyses how digital tools have transformed diplomatic engagement, the challenges encountered in their deployment, and the prospects for strengthening Nigeria's influence in a digitally interconnected global order. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how postcolonial states like Nigeria can navigate the opportunities and constraints of digital diplomacy in the twenty-first century.

Statement of the Problem

Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria's foreign policy has aimed to assert regional leadership, enhance global visibility, and foster economic partnerships. Yet, despite these ambitions, Nigeria has faced challenges in leveraging digital platforms effectively to achieve its diplomatic objectives. Inadequate investment in digital infrastructure, limited cybersecurity measures, and inconsistent online engagement have constrained the country's ability to project soft power and respond promptly to international developments. Furthermore, digital diplomacy has sometimes been underutilised in promoting national interests, managing crises, or countering negative perceptions in global media. The problem, therefore, lies in the gap between Nigeria's diplomatic goals and the strategic deployment of digital tools, which limits the effectiveness of its foreign policy in the digital age.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the evolution and impact of digital diplomacy on Nigeria's foreign policy since 1999. The specific objectives are to:
Analyse how digital technologies have influenced Nigeria's foreign policy formulation and implementation since 1999.

Assess the strategies and mechanisms through which Nigeria has engaged in digital diplomacy to advance national interests.

Examine the challenges and prospects of strengthening digital diplomacy to enhance Nigeria's global presence and influence.
Literature Review

This section considers: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework and empirical review of other studies.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on Network Society Theory, developed by Manuel Castells in 1996, and Soft Power Theory, introduced by Joseph S. Nye Jr. in 1990. Network Society Theory explains how advances in digital and communication technologies have transformed diplomacy by shifting power and influence from traditional state-centric channels to interconnected global networks. In the context of Nigeria's foreign policy since 1999, this theory helps explain the growing use of digital platforms, social media, and online communication tools by state institutions to engage international actors, project national interests, and participate more actively in global diplomatic networks.

Soft Power Theory complements this perspective by emphasising influence through attraction, credibility, and persuasion rather than coercion. In the digital era, soft power is increasingly exercised through digital visibility, strategic communication, cultural representation, and engagement with global audiences. For Nigeria, digital diplomacy has become an important mechanism for shaping international perceptions, strengthening its democratic image, engaging the diaspora, and promoting economic and cultural interests. Together, these theories provide a coherent framework for understanding how digital technologies have

reshaped Nigeria's foreign policy practice and diplomatic engagement in the post-1999 period.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the concepts below:

Digital Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy represents the contemporary evolution of statecraft, where digital technologies are central to how states communicate, negotiate, and project influence internationally. Nyewusira (2019) defines digital diplomacy as the use of the internet and information and communication technologies to support the achievement of foreign policy objectives. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which relies primarily on formal channels and closed-door negotiations, digital diplomacy emphasises openness, immediacy, and interaction with diverse global audiences. Umuakpero (2023) further explains that digital diplomacy encompasses activities such as online public diplomacy, crisis communication, digital storytelling, and engagement through social media platforms, making it both a strategic instrument and a practical extension of modern diplomatic practice.

Foreign Policy

Foreign policy refers to the strategic framework through which a state defines and pursues its interests in the international system. According to Enyindah and Ki (2023), Nigeria's foreign policy is shaped by a combination of historical experiences, domestic political dynamics, economic priorities, and external pressures. It guides decisions related to diplomacy, security, trade, international cooperation, and participation in global governance. Hassan and Adejumo (2023) emphasise that Nigeria's foreign policy has evolved, reflecting shifts from ideological and liberation-focused diplomacy to economic and development-oriented engagement, particularly since the return to democratic rule in 1999.

Historical Perspective

A historical perspective provides an analytical lens for understanding contemporary foreign policy by situating it within its developmental trajectory over time. Ifeyani *et al* (2025) demonstrate that Nigeria's diplomatic institutions

and strategies cannot be fully understood without reference to their colonial origins, post-independence experimentation, military rule, and subsequent democratic consolidation. By examining continuity and change across these periods, a historical perspective reveals how past decisions, institutional reforms, and diplomatic experiences continue to shape present-day foreign policy practices, including the adoption and utilisation of digital diplomacy.

Related Studies

Ifeyani *et al* (2025) studied Nigeria's foreign service in a historical context: Institutional growth and diplomatic shifts, 1960–2015 and stated that since attaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's Foreign Service has undergone a profound transformation, shaped by shifts in domestic politics, economic fortunes, and global diplomatic trends. This study examines the historical trajectory of Nigeria's diplomatic service from its nascent post-colonial structures through successive military regimes to the democratic consolidation and professionalisation witnessed by 2015. The research uses a qualitative historical research approach, drawing upon oral histories from diplomats. Complementary quantitative analysis of mission openings, personnel promotions, and budgetary allocations provides empirical grounding. Comparative case studies, spanning Nigeria's engagements with the United Nations, ECOWAS, and major bilateral partners, illuminate how internal reforms (notably the 1988 Diplomatic Service Act and the 2006 Repositioning Agenda) recalibrated strategic priorities and institutional capacity. Findings reveal three pivotal phases: (1) formative expansion and identity-building (1960–1975), characterized by ad hoc postings and limited training; (2) consolidation under military rule (1976–1998), marked by both diplomatic activism and politicisation of postings; and (3) democratic professionalisation (1999–2015), distinguished by merit-based recruitment, enhanced training programmes, and an adaptive regional focus.

Hassan & Adejumo (2023) explored Nigeria's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era: An appraisal of its economic diplomacy. Nigeria, since its independence in October 1960, has strived to achieve its foreign policy objectives through various instruments - political, economic, military, psychological, and cultural. However, like many other states, diplomacy has dominated the country's foreign policy since its inception. The country's diplomatic endeavour, since independence, has

oscillated between what can be described as conservative-accommodationist diplomacy, in the immediate post-independence era to assertive-liberationist diplomacy of the post-Civil War era, to civilist-economic diplomacy of the post-Cold War era. An attempt is made in this paper to assess economic diplomacy as an instrument of Nigeria's foreign policy, with specific emphasis on the experience during the Fourth Republic. The paper adopts a historical-descriptive approach, with heavy reliance on documentary data sources, and political realism as the method and theory of analysis, respectively. It is established that economic diplomacy has become a fulcrum of Nigeria's foreign policy as successive regimes since 1999 have been refocusing foreign policy towards domestic economic development. It is concluded that, though some successes were recorded in terms of repatriation of looted funds, debt relief, and attraction of foreign investment, these have yet to translate to economic development and the well-being of Nigerians. For the gains of economic diplomacy to translate to socio-economic development.

Umuakpero (2023) studied Nigeria's foreign policy in an era of digital diplomacy and observed that the advent of the internet revolution has affected all aspects of life, including the way nations interact with each other in the international arena. Foreign policy, which is simply the means through which Nigeria, like other nations, intends to achieve its national objectives, is often anchored on Diplomacy. This tool of foreign policy is being transformed by the Internet revolution. Thus, traditional diplomacy is now transformed into digital diplomacy. This paper, therefore, examines the impact of digital diplomacy on Nigeria's foreign policy, how its utilisation is changing traditional diplomatic practices, and the opportunities and challenges it presents for diplomatic activities. The paper also explores how Nigeria's foreign policy can be greatly strengthened in its foreign policy projections to its domestic and foreign audiences, by the adoption of digital diplomacy.

Emegha *et al* (2019) investigated the Coordination of Nigeria's foreign policy: A reflection on direct-dial diplomacy and stated that the traditional institutions and personalities responsible for the formulation, control and coordination of Nigeria's foreign policy unarguably revolve around the president, National Assembly and the Minister/Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The idea and practice of direct-dial

diplomacy, which became increasingly popular and challenging, has continually impeded the statutory institutions that control and coordinate foreign policy; as government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) relate directly with their international counterparts without recourse to the grand norm. The study sets out to appraise the implications of direct-dial diplomacy on Nigeria's foreign policy. The study is hinged on decision-making theory, which avers that policies are the outcome of decisions made by leaders or those in authority. Anchoring our discourse on a qualitative research approach, via trend design, documentary method of data collection, and qualitative method of data analysis, the study argues that direct-dial diplomacy has come to stay, but could impede the essence of foreign policy control and coordination if not well managed. The study deciphered that information and communication technology (ICT) in the contraction and expansion of the globe into a global village contributes greatly to direct-dial diplomacy, which in turn affects the coordination and control of foreign policy in Nigeria.

Nyewusira (2019) examines Digital diplomacy: Opportunities for Nigeria's foreign policy and noted that Technology is changing the face of diplomatic practice. This change is referred to as digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy is the use of the internet and information and communication technology to help a country achieve its foreign policy objectives. This paper looked into the opportunities and challenges for Nigeria's foreign policy in digital diplomacy. The identified opportunities were in consular and Diaspora relations, diplomatic networking and nation branding. The key challenges described were the lack of professionalism, the presence of bots and algorithms, as well as the possibility of cyber hacking.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, desk-based research approach, relying primarily on secondary sources to examine the evolution of digital diplomacy within Nigeria's foreign policy from 1999 to the present. The methodology focused on the systematic review of scholarly journal articles, books, conference papers, policy documents, and reputable online publications related to diplomacy, foreign policy, and digital communication technologies. Particular attention was given to works that provide historical and analytical insights into Nigeria's diplomatic practice since the return to democratic governance, including studies by

Umuakpero (2023), Nyewusira (2019), Emegha *et al* (2019), Hassan & Adejumo (2023), and Ifeyani *et al* (2025), which collectively examine digital diplomacy, foreign policy coordination, economic diplomacy, and institutional development within Nigeria's Foreign Service.

Data collection involved accessing academic databases, institutional repositories, foreign policy journals, and official reports to identify patterns, debates, and trends on Nigeria's engagement with digital diplomacy. The selection criteria prioritised studies that addressed the transformation of diplomatic practices through information and communication technologies, the coordination of foreign policy in the digital era, and the historical evolution of Nigeria's diplomatic institutions. Data analysis followed a thematic and historical approach, enabling the synthesis of ideas around digital engagement, policy objectives, institutional capacity, and strategic communication. Through this method, the study provides a coherent understanding of how digital diplomacy has reshaped Nigeria's foreign policy practice over time, highlighting both the opportunities and constraints encountered since 1999.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings is organised in direct alignment with the three objectives of the study and draws explicitly from the empirical evidence reviewed on Nigeria's foreign policy and the emergence of digital diplomacy since 1999.

Influence of digital technologies on Nigeria's foreign policy formulation and implementation since 1999

The findings suggest that the introduction and expansion of digital technologies have had a significant impact on the formulation and implementation of Nigeria's foreign policy in the post-1999 democratic era. Evidence from Umuakpero (2023) suggests that digital platforms have transformed the way foreign policy messages are crafted, disseminated, and received, facilitating faster communication between state actors and international audiences. This shift has complemented the institutional reforms within Nigeria's Foreign Service, highlighted by Ifeyani *et al* (2025), particularly the professionalisation and modernisation that accompanied democratic consolidation. Together, these developments demonstrate that digital tools have become embedded in foreign policy processes, reshaping diplomatic

engagement from predominantly formal, state-centric interactions to more open, interactive, and public-oriented practices.

Strategies and mechanisms of Nigeria's engagement in digital diplomacy to advance national interests

Findings further reveal that Nigeria has adopted several strategies to leverage digital diplomacy in advancing its national interests. Studies reviewed indicate that government institutions increasingly use official websites, social media platforms, and online communication channels for diplomatic networking, diaspora engagement, and nation branding. Nyewusira (2019) identifies consular services, diaspora relations, and international image projection as key areas where digital diplomacy has been strategically deployed. Similarly, Umuakpero (2023) observes that digital platforms have enhanced Nigeria's ability to project its foreign policy positions to both domestic and international audiences. These strategies reflect an adaptive response to global diplomatic trends, aligning Nigeria's foreign policy practice with the realities of a digitally interconnected international system.

Challenges and prospects of strengthening digital diplomacy for Nigeria's global influence

The findings also reveal that while digital diplomacy presents significant prospects for enhancing Nigeria's global presence, it is accompanied by notable challenges. Emegha *et al* (2019) show that the proliferation of information and communication technologies has encouraged direct-dial diplomacy, which can undermine policy coordination and weaken centralised foreign policy control. Additionally, Nyewusira (2019) and Umuakpero (2023) highlight challenges such as limited technical capacity, insufficient professionalism, cybersecurity threats, and the disruptive influence of automated digital actors. Despite these constraints, the prospects remain substantial. Strengthening institutional coordination, investing in digital capacity building, and developing coherent digital diplomacy strategies can enable Nigeria to maximise the benefits of digital engagement and enhance its influence in global affairs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reviewed studies collectively demonstrate that Nigeria's foreign policy has undergone significant institutional and strategic transformation since independence, with democratic consolidation after 1999 providing fertile ground for professionalisation and reform. The post-Cold War emphasis on economic diplomacy and the growing influence of digital technologies have reshaped how Nigeria formulates and implements its foreign policy. Digital diplomacy has emerged as a critical instrument for enhancing communication, visibility, and engagement in international relations, although its effectiveness is constrained by coordination gaps, capacity deficits, and technological risks. Overall, the findings underscore that digital diplomacy represents both an opportunity and a challenge, requiring deliberate institutional alignment, strategic planning, and capacity development to fully support Nigeria's foreign policy objectives in a rapidly evolving global environment.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings from the study
The Nigerian government should institutionalise the use of digital technologies within foreign policy formulation and implementation processes. This can be achieved by developing clear digital diplomacy frameworks within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ensuring that diplomatic missions systematically employ digital tools for policy communication, negotiation support, and real-time international engagement.

Nigeria should develop a coordinated national digital diplomacy strategy that aligns foreign policy objectives with targeted digital engagement. Emphasis should be placed on nation branding, diaspora relations, consular services, and diplomatic networking through professionalised and centrally coordinated digital platforms to effectively project Nigeria's interests and values globally.

To overcome existing challenges, Nigeria should invest in capacity building for diplomats through continuous training in digital communication, cybersecurity, and online engagement ethics. Additionally, mechanisms should be established to improve coordination among government agencies, regulate direct-dial

diplomacy, and protect digital diplomatic infrastructure from cyber threats, thereby enhancing Nigeria's global presence and influence.

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