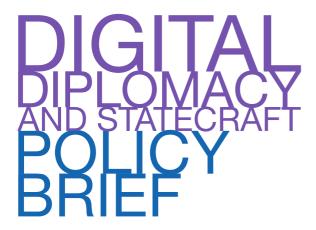# Using Digital Diplomacy to Achieve Peripheral Countries' Foreign Policy Objectives

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DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AND STATECRAFT

POLICY BRIEF

GIGA

German Institute for Global and Area Studies
Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien

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Abstract

Digital diplomacy enables peripheral countries to project their FP objectives and identity globally, enhance visibility, and communicate successful foreign policies to domestic audiences. This Policy Brief explores Argentina's experience with utilising digital diplomacy as a means of a peripheral country's FP strategy. Argentina's digital diplomacy reflects this insertion strategy and contributes to projecting the country's identity while effectively engaging with the world. It serves as a case to extract learnings and tackle future policy implementation challenges. Efficient and effective use of digital tools could contribute to achieving the FP objectives of peripheral countries, where resources are scarcer and channels to disseminate their messages to a broader audience are limited. This would only be possible if institutional changes were made to get the best out of the opportunities offered by digital tools.

Policy Recommendations

- Standardization of processes. Formalise procedures and standards for the communication of diplomats through social networks and encourage it in different areas of digital diplomacy. This would include providing knowledge, and resources to the diplomatic corps for the use of digital tools to advance the country's foreign policy (FP) interests.
- Training. Offer diplomats support and institutional backing for using social media and guide them on how to implement it according to the Foreign Service's objectives. Different campaigns and training courses at different levels of the diplomatic corps should also accompany this.
- Change in institutional culture. Encourage a transformation of the institutional culture of privacy and isolation from the public and foster the use of digital tools to achieve FP objectives. This is crucial for peripheral countries, where resources are scarce and where, if well-designed and implemented, digital diplomacy could be an easy and inexpensive way of promoting FP interests.
- Clear strategy. Identify audiences in relation to specific FP objectives and the strategic message that the country wants to disseminate. Having a clear, determined, and systematised structure for disseminating information and promoting specific issues is vital to achieving FP objectives. A well-defined and unified strategy for using digital tools aligned with clear FP objectives is critical.
- Continuity. Give continuity to digital diplomacy as a strategic tool of the Foreign Service to achieve FP objectives, while, of course, accounting for potential changes in those objectives and in governments, as well as possible situations of instability.

Digital Diplomacy and the Foreign Policy of Peripheral Countries

Digital diplomacy is an excellent avenue for peripheral countries to achieve foreign policy (FP) objectives, project various forms of soft power, and contribute to their international insertion. In line with the extremely rapid growth and change in information technologies, the effervescence of social networks and the always-changing landscape of the internet and its resources, this task continues to be challenging. Digital diplomacy is often associated with terms such as 'e-diplomacy,' 'cyber diplomacy,' 'virtual diplomacy,' 'real-time diplomacy,' 'networked diplomacy', or 'social diplomacy' (Gilboa, 2016). It has been defined as "the use of social media for diplomatic purposes" (Bjola & Holmes, 2015, p. 4), influencing how diplomats approach information management, public diplomacy, strategic planning, international negotiations, and crisis management.

Within an international system that is hierarchically structured and marked by power relations and central actors' decisions, peripheral countries' bargaining spaces to achieve their FP outcomes are reduced (Narlikar, 2021). The periphery must find and create spaces for agency and define their policy strategies in a hierarchical system based on their position in the world. It must also consider its margins of manoeuvre to influence world politics from that position. The idea of *insertion*, as a concept and a policy, resonant in Latin American FP literature, has arisen due to scholars and politicians' understanding of the region's structurally dependent position (Cervo, 2008; Chagas-Bastos, 2018).

Central countries have developed tools and strategies and dedicated many technological and human resources to advancing and implementing digital diplomacy as it becomes crucial in projecting a country's profile to the public and the world. Within this framework, diplomacy becomes an even more challenging endeavour for countries operating on the sidelines of global order to achieve their FP objectives with narrower margins for manoeuvre. Diplomatic activities in multilateral spaces become unique arenas to participate in and influence global rulemaking (Deciancio & Tussie, 2020), and while many risks of isolation emerge from their peripheral situation, they can turn – and have turned –this situation to their own advantage (Narlikar, 2021).

Digital Diplomacy and Peripheral Countries' Foreign Policy Objectives: a diagnosis

Incorporating digital tools in diplomacy and FP represents a relatively recent and evolving endeavour in Argentina that continues to undergo improvement and delineation. Argentina possesses an internationally renowned and highly experienced diplomatic corps. It primarily consists of career diplomats, with a smaller percentage of "political" ambassadors. These political ambassadors are individuals not part of the diplomatic career but who have been appointed by a government to crucial positions – usually – in strategic embassies. The Argentine diplomatic corps has a tradition of detachment from society, avoiding media interventions and maintaining an institutional culture of restraint and discretion. Exceptionally, those who actively engage with the public are the political ambassadors. These ambassadors largely enjoy professional immunity, being near political power.

Consequently, their scope of action goes beyond the norms and formal protocols prescribed in that institutional culture, and they, therefore, have fewer restraints than a career diplomat. On the contrary, young diplomats are more reluctant to participate in public debates, use their personal social media accounts, and engage in public activities. Most of them have been trained within an institutional culture that promotes a certain isolationism from the citizens and public opinion. This could change as new generations enter the diplomatic career and demand social networks as valid tools to carry out their tasks as diplomats.

On the one hand, communication with the public becomes a professional and institutional challenge. Citizens increasingly demand accountability from State institutions, and communication of FP is fundamental and challenging. On the other hand, communicating FP decisions, alliances, international agreements, and positioning regarding global affairs is crucial in presenting the countries' place in the international arena and the image they want to project to the world. This experience offers insights for policy design and implementation in peripheral countries to achieve their FP objectives in three main areas: institutional culture and organisation of the Foreign Service, use of digital tools, and linkages between FP objectives and its different audiences using digital tools to deliver the messages.

1. *The Foreign Service institutional organisation and culture*

Digital diplomacy directly impacts diplomats' roles and actions within foreign ministries and in the external realm of public diplomacy. In Argentina and other parts of the world, the Foreign Service

tends to be highly hierarchical and bureaucratic, and it is often perceived as an entity isolated from society (Manor, 2016). This institutional trajectory and the culture it engenders, permeate digital diplomacy design and implementation. In Argentina, the institutional structure of the Foreign Service includes various offices and departments dealing with issues related to digital technology usage in diplomacy. However, there is currently no dedicated office exclusively focused on digital diplomacy. In 2016, the Subsecretariat for Institutional Relations and Public Diplomacy was established to oversee the public and digital diplomacy strategy of the Foreign Service. Subsequently, this agency underwent modifications, and the responsibility for digital diplomacy was shifted to the Press Office, mainly dedicated to communicating the Minister's activities. Also, efforts were made to include courses in digital diplomacy at the Institute of the Foreign Service of the Nation (ISEN), the diplomatic training centre. As ISEN officials noted the growing interest and demand among aspiring diplomats for using social media in diplomatic activities, the area is expected to gain increasing prominence in the curriculum. These initiatives acknowledge the need for the Foreign Service and diplomatic corps to acquire knowledge of these tools and promote professionalism in their usage.

2. *Use of digital tools for diplomacy: Twiplomacy*

Twitter/X remains the primary platform for interaction between diplomats and politicians with a broader audience. The Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs joined Twitter in 2010. It has opened a new communication channel between the Foreign Service and its audiences. Similarly, foreign ministers' press offices and some ambassadors on their individual accounts have employed Twitter to disseminate various activities and important events in Argentine international politics and its connections with the world. Many foreign representatives use their own personal Twitter accounts as a communication platform to actively engage with the public. They participate in discussions on important matters, such as multinational agreements and their implications, while fostering a sense of proximity and empathy with the people. Most embassies created Twitter accounts to share information on administrative procedures, cultural events, scholarships, and insights about each country. They engage in diverse ways and with varying strategies, depending on the audience they seek to target, as we will see in the next section. However, the more active diplomats are the political diplomats or those positioned at high levels of the Foreign Service rank.

3. Foreign Policy objectives, use of digital tools to target diverse audiences

Digital tools in public diplomacy are used to reach and engage different audiences. In Argentina, digital diplomacy is directed at three distinct audiences: internal (within the Ministry), domestic, and foreign. Various FP agendas and key themes that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has sought to promote and disseminate fall within the messages directed at these audiences. However, digital tools and social media platforms have primarily targeted domestic audiences. On the one hand, this involved information on the activities of the Foreign Minister and the President and making them known to the local public. On the other hand, it included the communication of Argentina's participation in international forums, presidential summits, the signing of trade and cooperation agreements, Argentina's presence at international fairs, and the country's positions on international conflicts and disasters.

Within the specific outlines of the agenda, both from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website and through its Twitter and Facebook accounts, there has been an evident interest in showcasing a series of strategic topics in Argentine FP. This included the commitment to multilateralism, the central importance of Mercosur in Argentina's FP agenda, Argentina's persistent claim to sovereignty over the Malvinas Islands, the country's history in defence of Human Rights and memory, and the promotion of international trade and investments. These elements are evident in the dissemination of activities, the promotion of significant national dates, and the communication of specific agreements on various export products with different countries. These FP agendas are mirrored in the communications of the embassies: the commemoration of particular dates related to human rights and the Malvinas cause, as well as the promotion of trade agreements signed with the respective host countries. Additionally, the embassies advertise Argentine culture and products, including tango, wine, "asado" (barbeque), and football, to encourage Argentine exports to foreign markets. Beyond this, there is no general agreement on the target audience of diplomats and their messages. Apart from the Press Office of the Foreign Service, the diplomatic corps' use of digital tools is mainly based on individual interests rather than institutional policies.

Digital Diplomacy for International Insertion

Digital tools are potentially strong resources to support a specific insertion strategy of peripheral countries. Although the use of digital diplomacy is relatively recent in Argentina and has slightly spread out, it still has limitations and many possibilities to explore in the future.

1. **Standardisation of procedures and training.** The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has formalised procedures and standards for the communication of diplomats through social networks and advanced their use in different stances. It is crucial that this policy continues to develop in various areas of digital diplomacy, providing tools, knowledge, and resources to the diplomatic corps so that they can use digital tools to support the country's FP interests. This can give diplomats the support and institutional backing for using social media and guidance on implementing it according to the Ministry's objectives. Different campaigns and training courses at different levels of the diplomatic corps should also accompany this.

2. **Change in institutional culture.** One of the main constraints to the broad diplomatic corps' more active use of digital tools is a very restrictive institutional culture that formed them in a climate of privacy and isolation, under the assumption that what they do should be reserved. As such, diplomats are expected to work in isolated offices while politicians discuss with the public and the media. As a result of this institutional culture of reserve and privacy, the more active diplomats in social media tend to be political diplomats – those appointed by politicians and not coming from the diplomatic career – and diplomats in the higher ranks of the career. This is the case for many ambassadors with high national and international profiles and highly committed to public diplomacy. The institutional culture needs to be changed to establish the use of digital tools to achieve FP objectives.

3. **Diversification of audiences.** Although still gaining strength, Argentina's digital diplomacy has been mainly directed to the domestic audience and, to a lesser extent and only in specific cases, to foreign audiences. Reviewing the choices made in communication and activities on social media and the internet, it is apparent that there has been an attempt to promote specific FP strategies to enhance mechanisms for development and international insertion and to achieve greater visibility of what can be offered to the world. However, it is indispensable to identify adequate target audiences in relation to specific FP objectives and the strategic message that the country wants to disseminate. This is crucial for peripheral countries, where resources are scarce and where, if well-designed and

implemented, digital diplomacy could be an easy and inexpensive way of promoting FP interests.

4. **Foreign policy objectives.** A well-defined, determined, and systematised structure for disseminating information and advancing specific issues is essential to achieving FP objectives. The commitment to multilateralism and regionalism, Mercosur, the persistent claim to sovereignty over the Malvinas Islands, the defence of Human Rights and memory, and the promotion of international trade and investments have mainly defined the country's insertion strategy. Although these agendas have been suggested in the information shared and disseminated publicly in social networks, a well-defined and unified strategy for using digital tools aligned with the country's FP objectives was still lacking.

5. **Continuity.** Despite potential changes in FP objectives, changes in governments and possible situations of instability, it is essential to give continuity to digital diplomacy as a strategic tool of the Foreign Service to achieve its objectives.

Outlook

Digital diplomacy has changed the way diplomacy is conducted and practised. It served many purposes and has been used for different FP goals. Peripheral countries need to dedicate more resources and knowledge to diplomacy in general and public and digital diplomacy specifically. Using digital tools to foster FP goals and mechanisms of insertion could become a critical opportunity for these countries to achieve those goals and project their identities to the world.

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