Twitter Diplomacy: A Brief Analysis

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ABSTRACT In the past few years, Twitter has served as a versatile form of political public square for domestic and world affairs. The use of Twitter, largely propelled by the prominence of social media in the current environment for the discharge of diplomatic functions, has become an integral part of contemporary international relations. Indeed, Twitter has created its own form of diplomacy by incorporating itself to augment traditional diplomatic functions such as deliberation and negotiation. This brief demonstrates how Twitter has played a significant role in the realm of diplomacy in the past few years. It analyses the role played by 'Twiplomacy', and underscores both its useful and deleterious effects on the conduct of international relations.

INTRODUCTION

'Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind, but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.'

- Woodrow Wilson

The craft of diplomacy has evolved over time. It has adapted to technological advancements, from the advent of the Morse Telegraph, or the emergence of radio broadcasting, to the current environment that has given prominence to social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook for leaders to not only interact with people at home or abroad, but also to conduct their diplomatic functions. Diplomacy over social media, however, lacks the sense of formality that other innovations and advancements had retained as they became more popular. The growing influence of social media in the diplomatic sphere is increasingly visible. From the President of the United States taking jabs at his counterparts, to India's former External Affairs Minister using Twitter to provide assistance to Indians across the world, social media has led to a paradigm shift in the craft of diplomacy.

Twiplomacy, or Twitter Diplomacy,[a] is the coming together of traditional and digital diplomacy, and Twitter. When a world leader
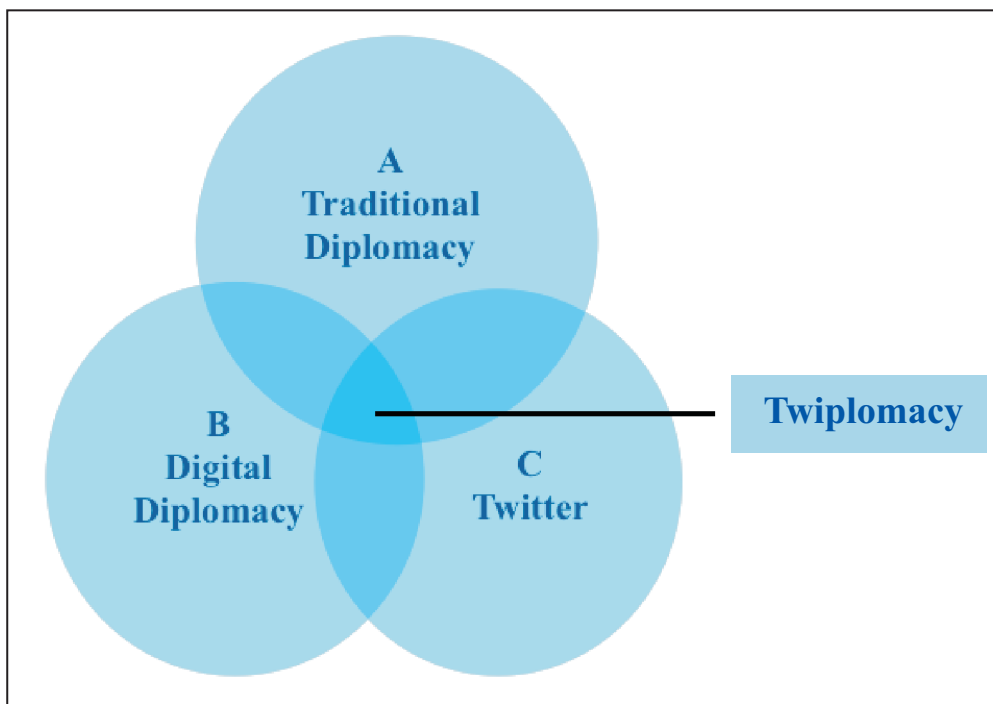

Figure 1. In Figure one, Circle A represents the sphere of Traditional Diplomacy and Circle B represents Digital Diplomacy, which is a part of traditional diplomacy. Circle C represents Twitter, which is a small part of digital diplomacy, making it even a smaller part of traditional diplomacy as a whole. Despite being such a minuscule player in the picture, Twitter has come to define international diplomacy in a paradigm-shifting manner.

Source: Author's own

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a   Diplomacy over twitter gained traction in 2011 when the term 'twiplomacy' was coined through a study that was conducted on the basis of use of Twitter by heads of state.

tweets about a world event or a new policy framework, other politicians turn to the mainstream media to either reply to the tweet or defend it, or to simply give their opinion on the issue concerned. These replies, in turn, add to the online discussion that consequently shape public opinion.

Traditional diplomacy is generally bound by decorum and formality; twitter diplomacy is not. Twitter and other social media platforms allow government officials to broadcast their views on pertinent issues and developments in the public domain without the need for formal diplomatic channels or jargon. It also allows people to reach out to government officials more easily. Indeed, Twiplomacy breaks through the limitations of traditional diplomacy, which is hinged on a top-down bureaucratic approach when it comes to negotiation and the dissemination of information.

The diplomatic services of many countries use Twitter to communicate directly with the people and lend a more participatory character to foreign policy debates. Twitter diplomacy, in that sense, has lent a degree of transparency to foreign policy debates. In the 1970s, as the Vietnam War became the first war to be broadcast on television, American foreign policy eventually changed: the American people got exposed to the brutality of war and soon, mass peace actions grew. The age of the 'naked diplomat'[1] signifies that in

the time of social media, diplomacy has left its ozone chamber, and is more open and transparent in its policy deployment and articulation.[2]

Another significant difference between traditional diplomacy and modern-day diplomacy is the accelerating pace, volume and breadth of information that diplomats need to make informed decisions.[3] Twiplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in several ways. On one hand, it gives legitimacy to informal exchanges among governments and between governments and citizens; on the other, it has the potential to delegitimise and undermine the value of formal channels of communication because of the time that they give for diplomats to finetune the dispensed information. For example, the Morse Telegraph was a breakthrough in communications in the 18th century, as it was quicker than the previous methods. However, the working of the Morse Telegraph was solely dependent on weather and visibility, which reduced its reliability for long-distance communication.[4]

This brief focuses on the communicational aspect of diplomacy, which refers to the notion that states are not born as fully developed states that then merely exist;[5] rather, they are made in continuous relations with other states and non-state actors.[6] Twitter has played a significant role in influencing diplomacy in general, and public and digital diplomacy[b] in particular.

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b   Public diplomacy is the art of direct communication of a government with its citizens as well as the foreign public; it is critical when it comes to strengthening soft power, diaspora engagement, crisis response and emergency management. Given the rise and spread of social media, digital diplomacy has become a key tool of diplomacy. Digital Diplomacy is conceptualised as a form of public diplomacy, where the internet and social media are used for diplomatic functions that range from that in public diplomacy for communication with citizens, to that in international relations through exchanges among politicians and state heads.

Twiplomacy, conducted in a mere 280 characters, can be put under the cloche of digital diplomacy, where diplomats and government officials specifically use the platform to interact, converse and support their citizens. This is slowly becoming the new normal in 21st-century statecraft.

DIPLOMACY OVER TWITTER: ADVANTAGES

Since its inception in 2006, Twitter has played a role in diplomatic functions ranging from communication with domestic and foreign citizens, crisis response mechanisms, and extensive diaspora outreach. Most social media platforms, in general, have also had influence in projecting soft power[c] to the world.

Ease of Communication

Communication with domestic citizens, foreign citizens and with other governments is key for states to achieve their foreign policy objectives. Twiplomacy encourages citizens to engage in foreign policy debates and participate in the decision-making process, thereby making policy decisions more participatory. In cases where the public is dissatisfied with the current policy framework or new policy decisions, a tweet can be addressed directly to the head of the state, and a conversation can then ensue. This takes down bureaucracy and increases outreach.

Furthermore, interactions among diplomats from different countries act as precursor to official negotiations, thereby

helping build bilateral and multilateral relations. Twiplomacy offers a platform for dialogue, which challenges traditional conceptions of communication between diplomats through formal channels. Therefore, this medium of dialogue has increased online engagement with their counterparts in front of a global audience, which helps in mending relations and developing interpersonal trust between counterparts.

Ahead of the June 2019, G20 meeting in Japan, for instance, US President Donald Trump tweeted from his account: "I look forward to speaking with Prime Minister Modi about the fact that India, for years having put very high tariffs against the United States, just recently increased the tariffs even further. This is unacceptable, and the tariffs must be withdrawn!"
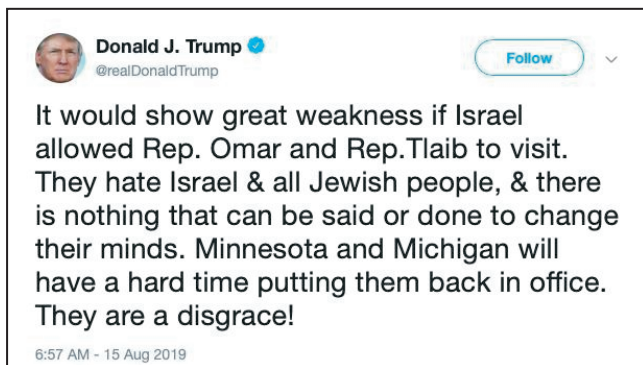

Source: Twitter

The comment showed that Trump was ready to work out his differences with PM Modi, keeping the US and India's strategic partnership in mind.

In August 2019, a stir over Twitter was created after Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime

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c   The term 'soft power' was defined by Joseph Nye in the 1980's as the ability of a country to persuade to do what it wants without force or coercion.

Minister of Israel, acted on Trump's advice via Twitter after the latter tweeted that "it would show great weakness if Israel allowed Rep. Ilhan Omar and Rep. Rashida Tlaib to visit Israel." He tweeted, "Both Ilhan Omar and Rep. Rashida Tlaib are representatives of the Democratic party of the United States and have been vocal in their support of the 'boycott, divest and sanction' movement against Israel."

Source: Twitter

Within hours of the tweet, Netanyahu acted on Trump's advice and issued a statement via his official twitter handle (@IsraeliPM): "No country in the world respects America and the American Congress more than the State of Israel and both the representatives were barred from entering Israel due to their support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement."

Source: Twitter

Crisis Response Mechanism

On the morning of 10 March 2019, Boeing 737 800 Max of Ethiopian Airlines crashed shortly after it left the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa.[7] There were four Indians amongst the 157 dead. On the same day, India's former Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj (now deceased), used Twitter[8] to get in touch with the family of one of the deceased.

Source: Twitter

After putting together different logistics, the government finally managed to contact the deceased's husband.[9]

This was not the first time the minister took to Twitter to help distressed Indians abroad. In those instances, Twiplomacy proved to be an effective way of reducing the time between a 'plan' and a 'response'.[10] Swaraj's success was also due to the fact that the Ministry of External Affairs had launched a Twitter SEVA service in 2016,[11] which is aimed at centralising the MEA's grievance redressal mechanisms by bringing together Twitter accounts of 198 Indian Missions abroad, 29 regional passport offices and eight other handles such as @MEAIndia, @Indiandiplomacy and @MEAQuery under the umbrella of Twitter SEVA. A tweet aimed at any handle of the Ministry automatically lands under this SEVA platform and is meant to give prompt resolutions for grievances.[12]
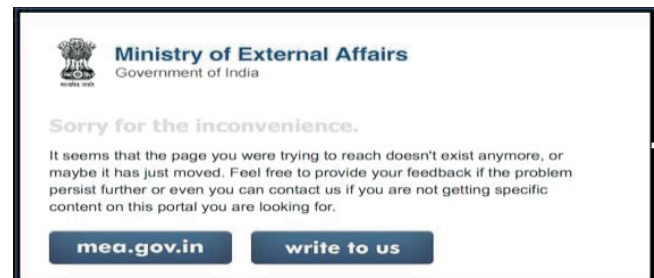
Source: Twitter

Source: Twitter

Source: Twitter

Indeed, the use of Twitter as a crisis response mechanism appears to cover the gaps in the website of the Ministry of External Affairs, which has become largely unreliable in dispensing emergency consular assistance. As observed in the image below, the link, which contains the contact details of all the local Indian embassies and consulates, no longer existed at the time of writing this brief.[13] Even if one has to report a grievance, the process of registering it under the consular services management system and tracking its status is cumbersome. Twiplomacy has played a major role when it comes to responding to crises across the world and extending support to citizens in need of help, as seen in India's former External Affairs Minister's use of the platform to discharge her duties.

Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

Image Enhancement

Recognition is grounded within Hegelian philosophy, which suggests that an actor's identity is formed through continual interaction with another.[14] Managing how a state is recognised by other states is a key component of diplomacy. Social media platforms such as Twitter are a key tool when it comes to managing recognition. Twitter, among other user-generated sites, effectively "cultivate communities of identity performance that reaffirm more than question"[15] the parameters of state identity. How states manage and represent themselves

on Twitter can inform foreign policy and further lead to making particular foreign policy options plausible while ruling out others. Identifying trends in communication during periods of sensitive international negotiations can lead one to make predictions regarding political possibilities for change earlier than might normally be the case.

Today, more and more countries are making a conscious effort to create a favourable image in the minds of the people abroad in order to increase their influence and prestige. This effort is often referred to as "nation branding".[16] Given the transient power dynamics, there is certain capital that is invested by countries for image management, which is a representation of how states wish to be perceived and recognised by other states—an integral part of diplomatic engagement.

Many countries across the globe have created official Twitter accounts of their police forces to project a more humanising picture of the police, by availing the services of reporting crimes on twitter as well as informing the public over Twitter when the success has been achieved related to a crime as shown by the following tweet by the Singapore Police Force.

Source: Twitter

Furthermore, many individual politicians have resorted to Twitter for image enhancement. In the age of social media, a leader's presence and activity on social media is integral to public perception. When someone tweets to a state head or any other politician and gets a reply from them, whether positive or negative, it can help create an image of the politician being a 'people's politician'.
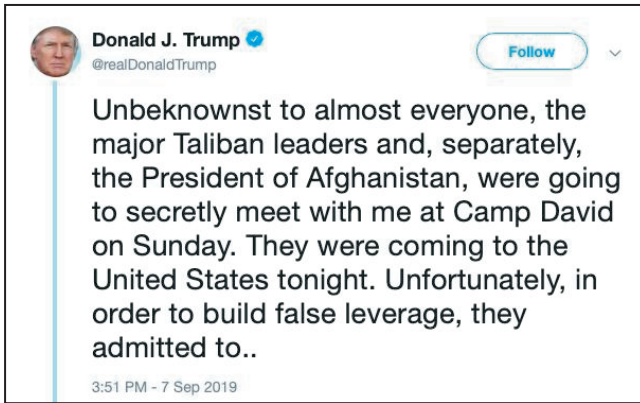
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TWIPLOMACY COIN

Undermines Official Diplomacy

One can anticipate political possibilities for change by analysing the tweets by officials earlier than usual, but this can also be misleading. When citizens read and analyse tweets, they tend to think that they represent the official policy of the country. However, a contradiction might exist between the official policy and the stand taken by officials on Twitter.

The flipside of easing communication among government officials and between diplomats and citizens is that the informal environment on Twitter can undermine the effect of traditional diplomacy. Moreover, putting up diplomats on platforms like Twitter creates an atmosphere of uncertainty amongst the people, which could work as a moral deflator.

Trump's tweet informing that he has canceled his "secret meeting" with the Afghan president and Taliban leaders at Camp David, provoked suspicion and surprise[17] over Twitter as legitimate national security considerations were reduced to casual Saturday night tweets.

Source: Twitter

Escalation of Conflict

There have been several incidents of world leaders engaging in a war of words over Twitter. According to an online study on Twiplomacy in 2018, Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump) is the most influential world leader on the platform.[18] His aggravating tweets aimed at North Korean leader Kim Jong Un have time and again led to an escalation in the conflict between North Korea and the United States, almost bringing the two to the brink of a nuclear altercation in July 2017. On 3 July 2017, after North Korea launched another nuclear missile, Donald Trump mockingly tweeted: "North Korea has just launched another missile. Does this guy have anything better to do with his life?"

Source: Twitter

The tweet prompted a response from the North Korean leader, who in his New Year's Day speech said:[19] "It's not a mere threat but a reality that I have a nuclear button on the desk in my office. All of the mainland United States is within the range of our nuclear strike."

In response to which Trump tweeted: "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.' Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"

Source: Twitter

This results in conflict escalation in a sensitive environment because influential world leaders get carried away without realising the gravity of what they are tweeting, and the ripple effect their tweets might have as they are open to interpretation for the public without any filter. Instead of mending relationships, bridging gaps and building trust between counterparts, irresponsible Twitter exchanges result in misunderstandings and increase distrust, leading to an unnecessary escalation in conflict. In an environment where social media is a mass influencer, there is a need for defining principles of what is or is not suitable. Even if there are different personal and official accounts, anything that a politician says or tweets, is perceived as the country's stance on the issue, giving it an official colour.

In India, the Department of Electronics and Information Technology Ministry of Communications & Information Technology has formulated the framework and guidelines for the use of social media for government organisations.[20] Under the framework, Twitter has been put under the microblog type of social media that enables its users to send and read text-based messages or "tweets" of up to 140 characters[21] length and is used by an amalgam of oragnisations such as Ministry of External Affairs, Chief Ministers of many states, Members of Parliament and Prime Minister's Office.
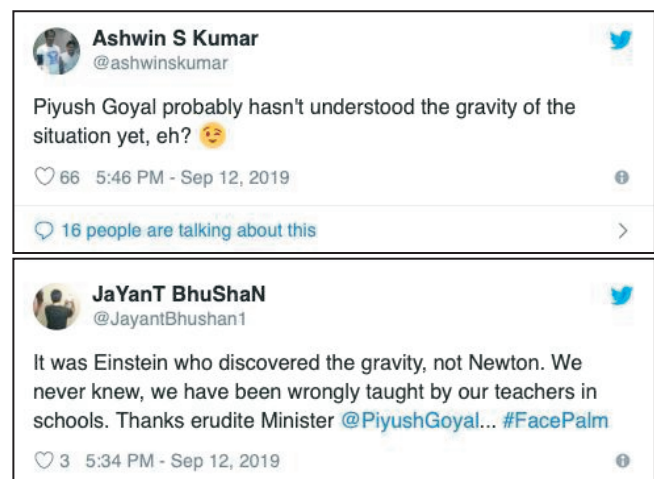
Compromises Security

Conducting diplomatic functions over Twitter severely affects cyber security. Indeed, cyberspace has been at the receiving end of several attacks for motives ranging from data theft, ransom or mere disruption. The ransomware attack in 2018 that affected over 100 countries is an example of these security threats. Furthermore, Twitter accounts run the risk of being hacked by state actors including political rivals, and by non-state actors such as terrorist groups. Hacking has been one of the perils of the internet, as was seen in the January 2019 episode of hacking into the German political parties represented in the federal parliament, except for the far-right Alternative for Germany. The prime targets were Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.[22] The data published on Twitter included mobile phone numbers, contact information, private chats, ID cards, and financial details. Further, the hackers published Merkel's fax number, email address and several letters written by and addressed to her.[23]

What's on the Internet, Stays on the Internet

While on one hand, politicians and states use Twitter for purposes of image enhancement and transparency, on the other, the internet is a space that never forgets, which further leads to trolling or unnecessary scrutiny. Many times, an unfortunate picture from the past or a misquoted statement from a state head can and has led to a negative or an unserious image perception of the said leader across the world.

While delivering a speech during a meeting of Board of Trade, the Union Commerce Minister of India, Piyush Goyal, made a statement that "Maths have never helped Einstein discover gravity." After the speech, Twitter lost its calm over the statement and was flooded with trolls.[24]

Source: Twitter

CONCLUSION

Social media has become an indispensable arrow in the quiver of diplomacy. Modern states are built not only on force and wealth, but also on their capacity to use new developments in the world of communication,

such as social media, to discharge diplomatic functions.[25] In such an era, Twitter has proven to be a great soft power tool by providing a direct channel of communication and dialogue between diplomats and citizens that help the former to break free from cumbersome bureaucratic practices.

Over the recent years, Twitter and other social media platforms have played a role in enhancing—or else damaging—the public perception of politicians. One of the best examples of this would be from India, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi's use of Twitter has helped enhance his public image.

Leaders of today make use of Twitter for the discharge of a range of their diplomatic functions. While on one hand, politicians such as Sushma Swaraj, India's former External Affairs Minister, used Twitter as an effective helpline for Indian citizens across the world, politicians such as Donald Trump have resorted to the platform to attack opponents and to try and sway the nature of debate on pressing topics of international concern. Furthermore, Twitter has been used by state heads across the world to show deepening relations and strong alliances, as seen in the frequent Twitter exchanges between India's Narendra Modi and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu.

Twitter will continue to be a tool for diplomacy; its use, which has been limited mainly to public diplomacy, may soon spread to other diplomatic functions as well. The new normal can be defined in terms of the informal messaging service catering to a mass audience and has further adapted itself to being accepted by the mass market. However, the question is whether this form of diplomacy is effective when Twitter has also become a forum to settle scores, to air grievances and instigate nationalist impulses. While state leaders and diplomats have successfully incorporated Twitter and other forms of social media for matters relating to public diplomacy and communication with citizens at home and across international borders, they are still fencing with the intricacies of social media and are working on how to use Twitter to its full potential when it comes to discussing core policy issues and interacting with other politicians and state heads.

The future will reveal the kind of substantive achievements this new form of 21st century statecraft has attained, but currently this form demands development and consideration. ORF

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ENDNOTES

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