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DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) IN FOSTERING GLOBAL DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 disrupted virtually every sphere of human interaction, imposing travel restrictions, border closures, and physical-distancing protocols that appeared, at first sight, to threaten the very foundations of diplomatic practice, which has historically depended on face-to-face contact between representatives of states and international organisations. Yet diplomatic activity did not grind to a halt. Rather, it migrated, almost overnight, into a virtual space sustained by advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Drawing on liberal institutionalism, constructivism, and network theory, this article examines the extent to which ICT enabled the continuity of diplomacy during the pandemic, tracing its application across multilateral negotiations, summit diplomacy, public and vaccine diplomacy, and bilateral engagement. It relies on a qualitative, document-based review of peer-reviewed scholarship and primary institutional sources, and draws on multilateral cases, including the virtual seventy-fifth session of the United Nations General Assembly and the COVAX vaccine-distribution initiative, alongside evidence from Nigeria's foreign policy establishment. The article also identifies constraints inherent in this digital turn, including cybersecurity vulnerabilities, disinformation, the global digital divide, and a diminished capacity for the trust-building traditionally associated with face-to-face diplomacy. It argues that whether hybrid diplomacy entrenches or mitigates global inequality depends less on the technology itself than on how hybrid arrangements are designed. It concludes that, while ICT proved indispensable to diplomatic continuity during the pandemic, it functioned as a complement to, rather than a wholesale replacement for, traditional diplomacy, giving rise to a hybrid model of practice that appears likely to endure into the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technology (ICT), digital diplomacy, COVID-19, hybrid diplomacy, virtual diplomacy, multilateralism, digital divide, Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March 2020, national governments responded with an almost simultaneous suspension of international travel, the closure of borders, and the imposition of lockdowns that confined even heads of state and senior diplomats to their national capitals. For a practice long regarded as inseparable from the physical presence of envoys, the handshake of leaders, and the corridor conversations that accompany formal summits, the pandemic presented an existential disruption. Diplomatic calendars emptied almost overnight, as embassies closed their doors, international conferences were cancelled, and the annual pilgrimage of world leaders to New York for the United Nations General Assembly became, for the first time in the Organisation's history, an impossibility in its traditional form.

Diplomacy, however, proved considerably more resilient than the physical infrastructure that had long sustained it. Rather than disappearing, diplomatic engagement migrated into a virtual space, sustained by videoconferencing platforms, social media, and other tools of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) that diplomats had, in many cases, previously approached with scepticism. Remote participation in multilateral fora was not, in itself, a novelty of the pandemic. As early as October 1963, delegates at the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) Extraordinary Administrative Radio Conference on Space Communications in Geneva watched United Nations Secretary-General U Thant address them from New York in a televised exchange relayed by the Telstar satellite, with the ITU Secretary-General, Gerald C. Gross, replying from the conference hall (ITU, 1963). The exchange was a single set-piece address rather than online negotiation in the contemporary sense, but it belongs to the long history of the ITU as a site of technological experimentation in diplomacy (Balbi & Fickers, 2020). What the pandemic did was compress years of gradual digital adaptation into a matter of weeks, forcing ministries of foreign affairs that had been slow to embrace platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Webex to adopt them as a matter of operational necessity.

This article interrogates the role that ICT played in sustaining diplomatic activity during the pandemic period. It proceeds from the proposition, consistent with the observed pattern of state practice, that diplomacy did not halt during the pandemic precisely because ICT provided the infrastructure through which continuity became possible. The discussion is organised as follows. After this introduction, a brief literature review clarifies the key concepts of ICT, diplomacy, and digital diplomacy, and sets out the theoretical framework. The methodology is then explained. The discussion and results examine how ICT sustained multilateral, public, and vaccine diplomacy during the pandemic, with particular attention to Nigeria's experience; assess the limitations and risks associated with this digital turn, including the digital divide; and consider the emergence of hybrid diplomacy as a likely enduring legacy

of the pandemic, asking whether it will entrench or mitigate global inequalities. The article closes with a summary of findings and recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Clarification

Diplomacy, in its classical sense, refers to the conduct of official relations between states and other international actors through negotiation, representation, and communication, traditionally undertaken by accredited envoys operating through embassies, missions, and periodic conferences. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) denotes the broad range of digital tools, infrastructure, and platforms, encompassing the internet, mobile telephony, social media, and videoconferencing software, that facilitate the transmission, processing, and exchange of information across distances. The convergence of these two domains has given rise to what scholars term digital diplomacy, defined as the use of the internet and other ICT-based innovations in the conduct of diplomacy, including the management of a state's public image, the conduct of negotiations, and the delivery of consular services (Adesina, 2022). Hedling and Bremberg (2021) add that digitalisation is both a process and a result, one that raises enduring questions about continuity and change in diplomatic practice.

A related but distinct concept is virtual diplomacy, which refers more specifically to the substitution of physical, in-person diplomatic encounters with remote, technology-mediated interaction, as occurred extensively during the pandemic. Scholars have further distinguished between digital adaptation, understood as the reactive and often improvised adoption of digital tools under conditions of necessity, and digital adoption, understood as their deliberate and sustained integration into diplomatic practice once the immediate crisis subsides (Bjola & Manor, 2022).

Where physical and virtual modes of engagement are combined and made to coexist, as has increasingly become the practice since 2021, the resulting arrangement is described as hybrid diplomacy (Bjola & Manor, 2022) or, in a related formulation, blended diplomacy, which emphasises the everyday entanglement of digital technologies with established diplomatic routines rather than their wholesale replacement (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022). These distinctions matter because they clarify that the pandemic did not simply digitise diplomacy. It accelerated a longer-term, uneven process whose contours were already visible before 2020 and whose consequences continue to unfold.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is anchored in three bodies of theory, each of which illuminates a different dimension of diplomacy's pandemic experience. They are used complementarily rather than as rival hypotheses: liberal institutionalism helps explain why diplomacy continued, constructivism why its quality changed, and network theory who gained and who lost.

Liberal institutionalism. Following Keohane and Nye (1977) and Keohane (1984), cooperation among interdependent states is sustained less by goodwill than by institutions that lower transaction costs, supply reliable information, and make commitments credible. On this view, a shock that prevents physical convening threatens cooperation only insofar as institutions fail to adapt. The expectation is that international organisations will re-engineer their working methods to preserve their core functions, and that information-intensive routines such as consultation, notification, and reporting will migrate readily to digital platforms. ICT is therefore read here as an instrument of institutional continuity. The perspective says comparatively little, however, about how the trust on which cooperation depends is produced. **Constructivism.** Constructivist scholarship holds that the structures of international politics are social, constituted by shared understandings and practices through which identities and interests are formed (Wendt, 1992). Diplomacy is accordingly understood as a practice in which expectations, status, and trust are produced and renewed through repeated interaction. Practice-oriented work on digitalisation asks how the shift to digital forms changes the agency, materiality, and audiences of diplomacy (Hedling & Bremberg, 2021), and Bjola and Manor's (2022) distinction between digital adaptation and digital adoption can be read as a question about norm change: whether practices improvised in a crisis become taken-for-granted routines. Research on the signalling value of physical co-presence (Holmes, 2013, 2018) adds a challenge to purely rationalist accounts, suggesting that face-to-face encounters convey information about intentions that is difficult to replicate remotely. The expectation is that digital channels sustain existing relationships more readily than they create new trust.

Network theory. Network approaches treat international politics as a set of relationships in which position confers influence. Castells (1996) describes a society organised around digital information networks, Slaughter (2004) argues that world order is increasingly constituted through networks of officials and institutions, and Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery (2009) show how an actor's structural position, meaning its connections and its access to other actors, shapes its influence. The expectation is that the migration of diplomacy online redistributes participation unevenly, favouring states and delegations with better connectivity, larger staffs, and more central positions. This perspective grounds the discussion of the digital divide and of hybrid diplomacy and global inequality in the Discussion and Results below.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research design.

The article adopts a qualitative, document-based design. This suits a question about how an institutional practice changed in response to an external shock, and one for which direct observational evidence, such as negotiation transcripts or interviews with delegates, is largely inaccessible to the authors.

Document selection.

Sources were drawn from three categories. The first comprises peer-reviewed scholarship on digital diplomacy, virtual multilateralism, and the pandemic period, located through searches of scholarly databases and publisher platforms using combinations of terms such as digital diplomacy, virtual diplomacy, hybrid diplomacy, COVID-19, multilateral negotiation, digital divide, and Nigeria. The second comprises primary institutional documents, namely United Nations statements and meeting records, ITU archival and statistical publications, and statements of Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Nigerian public bodies. The third comprises news reports and policy commentary, used to corroborate the timing and sequence of events and to capture Nigerian perspectives; these are treated as evidence of what was said and done rather than as scholarly authority. Sources were included if they bore directly on ICT-enabled diplomacy from 2020 onwards (with earlier material used for historical context), had verifiable authorship or institutional provenance, and were accessible in English. Commercial blogs and sources of unclear provenance were excluded, and where a claim had initially rested on such a source it was either re-grounded in peer-reviewed or institutional evidence or removed.

Analytical strategy.

The documents were analysed thematically. Coding categories were derived from the theoretical framework and concerned continuity (which diplomatic functions moved online, and how), quality (the effects on trust, informality, and security), and distribution (who could participate, and on what terms). Four diplomatic functions structured the comparison: multilateral negotiation and summitry, health diplomacy, public diplomacy, and bilateral and consular engagement. Each empirical claim about an event was checked, wherever possible, against at least one independent source, with primary documents preferred over secondary accounts.

Nigeria is treated as an illustrative rather than a representative case. It was selected because it combines a prominent multilateral role, a Nigerian having presided over the General Assembly's seventy-fourth session, with uneven digital infrastructure, and because it allows attention to both executive and legislative actors in foreign policy.

Limitations.

The study relies on published, English-language sources and does not draw on interviews or negotiation records. Press accounts of some episodes, notably the Guangzhou incident discussed under Nigeria's Digital Diplomatic Experience below, differ in detail, and Nigerian official records of virtual engagements are incompletely published. Findings on trust and on the durability of hybrid practice rest on a small number of empirical studies, and claims about the future are inferences rather than observations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

ICT and the Continuity of Diplomatic Activities during the Pandemic

Multilateral Diplomacy Goes Virtual

The clearest illustration of ICT's role in sustaining diplomacy during the pandemic is the transformation of multilateral summitry. The seventy-fifth session of the United Nations General Assembly, convened in September 2020 to mark the Organisation's seventy-fifth anniversary, was reduced to a largely virtual affair. Rather than travelling to New York, heads of state and government submitted pre-recorded video addresses to be played in the General Assembly Hall, with each Member State, Observer State, and the European Union invited to designate a high-level official for this purpose (UN News, 2020). The emptiness of the Assembly Hall, ordinarily one of the most crowded diplomatic venues in the world during the September high-level week, was itself a striking testament to how thoroughly the pandemic had reshaped the physical geography of diplomacy (France24, 2020). Even so, the substantive business of the General Debate proceeded largely undisturbed: leaders including the Presidents of the United States, China, and Brazil delivered addresses on the pandemic, multilateralism, and geopolitical tensions, and their positions were reported and debated with the same intensity as in previous years (Al Jazeera, 2020).

The routine decision-making of the Assembly also had to be re-engineered. On 27 March 2020 the Assembly adopted decision 74/544, which allowed it to take decisions without plenary meetings through a silence procedure, under which a draft circulated by the President is deemed adopted unless a Member State objects within a stated period (IISD, 2020). The period was set at no less than 72 hours (UN News, 2020). By 8 June 2020 the Assembly had adopted 26 resolutions and decisions in this way (United Nations, 2020b). From a liberal-institutionalist standpoint, this is precisely the expected response: an institution altered its procedures in order to preserve its functions when physical convening was impossible. A similar pattern obtained at the World Health Assembly, whose seventy-third session in May 2020 was convened virtually to coordinate the global response to COVID-19, including deliberations on equitable vaccine access (Chen & Fanoulis, 2024). Regional organisations followed

suit: the European Union, for instance, projected a digital form of public diplomacy through its delegations' social media activity in order to sustain visibility and coordinate messaging around its COVID-19 response and vaccine strategy in regions such as Southeast Asia (Chen & Fanoulis, 2024). A growing scholarship now assesses both the opportunities and the challenges of virtual multilateral negotiation (Chasek, 2021; Vadrot & Ruiz Rodriguez, 2022). These developments illustrate that ICT did not merely provide a stopgap measure for routine communication. It became the operational infrastructure through which the highest-profile events on the diplomatic calendar were convened and conducted.

Vaccine and Health Diplomacy

Beyond summitry, ICT supported the coordination of the global health response. In initiatives such as the COVAX vaccine facility, governments and international partners used digital platforms to coordinate vaccine distribution (Barbosa da Silva et al., 2024). Digital coordination of this kind allowed information to move across borders without the delays that physical convening would have imposed. The same source, however, stresses that the equitable spread of digital health tools depends on connectivity and infrastructure in underserved regions (Barbosa da Silva et al., 2024), a point taken up under The Digital Divide below.

Public Diplomacy and Social Media Engagement

Social media platforms similarly became central instruments of public diplomacy during the pandemic, as foreign ministries and diplomatic missions sought to maintain visibility, counter disinformation, and provide consular support to nationals abroad. Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, produced Arabic translations of coronavirus-related public health material for wide circulation among Arab audiences, describing the pandemic as a moment that sharpened and made more efficient the ministry's digital communication channels (The Guardian Nigeria, 2020).

Across Africa, ministries of foreign affairs and allied agencies leaned on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, on which African leaders including Nigeria's then President, Muhammadu Buhari, commanded substantial followings, to maintain ties with citizens abroad and deliver consular assistance at a time when physical missions were operating under severe restriction (Adesina, 2022).

Systematic evidence points in the same direction. An analysis of the Facebook activity of eight foreign ministries found that, once the pandemic erupted, diplomats' posts were oriented towards their own citizens, helping them make sense of an unprecedented crisis, and that the ministries re-targeted foreign audiences as the pandemic progressed (Manor & Yrachi, 2023).

Nigeria's Digital Diplomatic Experience

Nigeria's engagement with digital diplomacy during the pandemic is instructive, and it can be traced across four arenas: multilateral diplomacy, crisis and consular diplomacy, diaspora engagement, and institution-building.

Multilateral diplomacy. Nigeria was at the centre of the General Assembly's pandemic adaptations. Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, a Nigerian diplomat, presided over the seventy-fourth session, during which the Assembly adopted decision 74/544 and its silence procedure (IISD, 2020). Briefing journalists in June 2020, he remarked that virtual meetings had shown what technology can do to solve problems but had also exposed that technology is not evenly distributed (United Nations, 2020a). At the seventy-fifth anniversary meeting on 21 September 2020, President Buhari warned that the pandemic was impeding attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals and urged global approaches to the health crisis (United Nations, 2020c). In his pre-recorded address to the General Debate, he pledged that Nigeria would work with the World Health Organization and other partners towards the accelerated development, manufacture, and supply of safe and effective vaccines for all (New Telegraph, 2020). Nigeria's headline foreign policy positions on the pandemic were thus articulated through the very virtual formats the Assembly had improvised.

Crisis and consular diplomacy. The April 2020 Guangzhou episode shows digital channels functioning as both trigger and instrument of diplomacy. Videos circulating on social media appeared to show Nigerians and other Africans being evicted from housing and denied service in the Chinese city in the course of local pandemic-control measures. Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama summoned the Chinese ambassador in Abuja and described the scenes as unacceptable (Hong Kong Free Press, 2020), while the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Femi Gbajabiamila, separately pressed the ambassador in an exchange of which video was circulated on Twitter (Barbados Today, 2020). Endong and Ndobo (2023) analyse how senior staff of Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs used Twitter to criticise China's treatment of Nigerians in the early phase of the pandemic. The episode illustrates both the speed with which digital channels can force a diplomatic response and, because executive and legislative actors acted in parallel and publicly, a dimension of ICT-enabled diplomacy that bears directly on executive–legislative relations in foreign policy.

Diaspora engagement. The Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM), established in 2019, relied on digital tools to sustain contact with Nigerians abroad when physical meetings and travel were disrupted. Commentary published by the South African Institute of International Affairs series on African digital diplomacy records webinars with agencies including the International Organization for Migration, the World Bank, and the African Union, virtual town halls and the 2020 National Diaspora Day held on Zoom, and the broadcasting of evacuation information and returns on social media ("The Nigerians in Diaspora Commission," 2020). The

same commentary concluded that virtual interaction complements rather than replaces traditional diplomacy.

Institution-building and scholarly assessment. In 2020, Nigerian commentary drew directly on the reflections of international practitioners, including a widely cited discussion involving Oxford's Corneliu Bjola and officials of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on how the pandemic had compelled even reluctant foreign ministries to accelerate their use of digital platforms (The Guardian Nigeria, 2020). Some Nigerian commentators nonetheless judged that the country had used digital media for diplomacy less than its regional weight warranted (Kediehor, 2020). A more deliberate institutional response followed. On 2 September 2025, Nigeria's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yusuf Tuggar, announced the creation of a dedicated Cyber Diplomacy Unit within the Ministry, tasked with coordinating the country's cyber-related foreign policy, building capacity for cyber negotiations, and strengthening Nigeria's voice in global cyberspace governance (The Cable, 2025; This Day Live, 2025). The announcement was accompanied by a masterclass series for diplomats from Africa and the Global South (The Sun, 2025). At a second seminar in 2026, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Sola Enikanolaiye, said that the first seminar had led to the establishment of the Ministry's Artificial Intelligence and Cyber Diplomacy Unit (Voice of Nigeria, 2026).

Taken together, these cases suggest that Nigeria's pandemic-era experience was one of digital adaptation, in Bjola and Manor's (2022) sense, more than of planned digital strategy, and that the Cyber Diplomacy Unit and its successor reflect a later and still-unfolding move towards adoption. While these institutional steps postdate the acute phase of the pandemic, they reflect a trajectory that the pandemic itself set in motion: the recognition, within Nigeria's foreign policy establishment, that ICT is no longer a peripheral convenience but a structural feature of contemporary diplomatic practice requiring dedicated institutional capacity.

Challenges and Limitations of ICT-Driven Diplomacy

Notwithstanding its evident utility, the pandemic-era reliance on ICT exposed a number of significant limitations.

Cyber security and Disinformation

The first concerns cyber security. The migration of sensitive negotiations onto digital platforms raised concerns about the confidentiality and security of exchanges that would previously have taken place behind closed doors (Wilton Park, 2020). The United Nations system's own information-security specialists noted that Zoom had been widely adopted during the crisis, often without formal security assessment, and that platforms differ in how they protect the confidentiality of meetings (UNISSIG, 2020). Related to this is the challenge of disinformation, as the same digital channels that enabled diplomatic outreach are also susceptible to the circulation of manipulated or misleading information, which can complicate negotiations on sensitive issues. The

Guangzhou episode discussed above, in which rapidly circulating videos shaped the pace and tone of diplomatic exchanges, illustrates the point. It should be noted that systematic peer-reviewed evidence on breaches specific to diplomatic videoconferencing remains limited, and the assessments cited here are institutional rather than empirical studies.

The Digital Divide

A second limitation, and the most consequential structurally, is the digital divide. Not all states possess equal access to reliable internet infrastructure and digital tools, and the disparities are large.

The ITU estimates that about 74 per cent of the world's population used the internet in 2025, but only 23 per cent did so in low-income countries, compared with 94 per cent in high-income countries; some 2.2 billion people remain offline, 96 per cent of them in low- and middle-income countries (ITU, 2025). Africa remains the least-connected region, with just over one-third of its population online (ITU, 2025). Nigeria's own figures are more favourable but still instructive. Its National Broadband Plan 2020–2025 set a target of 70 per cent broadband penetration by the end of 2025, whereas Nigerian Communications Commission data reported in the press put penetration at about 39.5 per cent in April 2020 and 50.6 per cent in November 2025 (BusinessDay, 2025; TechCabal, 2025). These are subscription-based broadband measures and are not directly comparable with the ITU's measure of the share of people using the internet.

For diplomacy, the divide operates through several channels. The first is infrastructure and affordability: a delegation that cannot rely on stable connectivity cannot participate on equal terms in real-time negotiation. The second is staffing. Small and under-resourced missions, already stretched by the pandemic at home, have fewer personnel with which to follow multiple virtual sessions; the Nigerian President of the General Assembly's observation that technology is not evenly distributed (United Nations, 2020a) captured this concern from inside the institution. The third is time. In a study of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's virtual approval sessions, Bayer et al. (2024) found that time-zone differences significantly reduced the engagement of delegations located far from Europe: delegates from Vanuatu, for example, sat in only eight of 106 negotiation hours within standard working hours. Scholars of digital multilateralism accordingly caution that virtual negotiation spaces can intensify existing inequalities and create new ones (Vadrot & Ruiz Rodriguez, 2022), and a Wilton Park dialogue of practitioners warned that digitalised diplomacy could exacerbate existing inequalities (Wilton Park, 2020).

The picture is not one-sided, however. The same IPCC study found that virtual sessions raised average delegation sizes by about two delegates, which is significant for developing-country governments that at in-person meetings typically had only one funded delegate (Bayer et al., 2024). Larger delegations did not translate automatically into more interventions, though: attendance and influence are different

things, and the association between delegation size and engagement disappeared for delegations in the most distant time zones (Bayer et al., 2024). The divide therefore shapes not only whether a state can be present but also whether its presence counts.

Erosion of the Relational Dimension of Diplomacy

A third limitation concerns the erosion of the informal, relational dimension of diplomacy that face-to-face contact has traditionally supplied. Diplomatic trust has long been understood as something built through the cumulative effect of personal rapport, informal conversation, and shared physical presence, and scholarship on face-to-face diplomacy argues that physical co-presence helps participants read one another's intentions (Holmes, 2013). Empirical research on the Council of the European Union during the pandemic found that although digital tools proved indispensable for the day-to-day enactment of trust among diplomats, trust itself remained considerably harder to build from scratch in a purely digital setting than to sustain once already established (Eggeling & Versloot, 2023). Diplomats surveyed on their experience of virtual negotiation during the pandemic likewise reported that videoconferencing, while preserving the formal substance of many negotiations, could not fully replicate the informal, corridor-based interactions on which the resolution of especially delicate issues often depends (Bjola & Manor, 2022). Some diplomats also reported considerable strain from the sheer volume of virtual meetings, with several describing days consumed by back-to-back videoconferences that pushed them toward exhaustion (Eggeling & Versloot, 2023). These findings are consistent with the constructivist expectation set out in the Theoretical Framework above.

Towards Hybrid Diplomacy: The Post-Pandemic Trajectory

The Hybrid Model

The cumulative effect of these opportunities and constraints has been the emergence of what scholars describe as hybrid diplomacy, an arrangement in which virtual tools are retained for functions in which they demonstrate clear comparative advantage, such as routine coordination, information-sharing, and public diplomacy, while physical meetings are preserved for negotiations that depend on the relational depth that only face-to-face contact affords (Bjola & Manor, 2022). This suggests that the appropriate framing of the pandemic's effect on diplomacy is not one of straightforward substitution, in which ICT replaced traditional diplomacy, but one of layered adaptation, in which ICT expanded the repertoire of diplomatic practice without rendering its older instruments obsolete. Nigeria's establishment of a Cyber Diplomacy Unit within its Ministry of Foreign Affairs may be read as one national expression of this broader, still-unfolding institutional adjustment (TheCable, 2025).

Hybrid Diplomacy and Global Inequality: Entrenchment or Mitigation?

Whether hybrid diplomacy will narrow or widen the gaps between states is the central distributive question raised by this trajectory. The evidence reviewed here supports arguments in both directions.

Grounds for mitigation. Hybrid formats can lower the cost of participation. Because virtual attendance removes the expense of long-haul travel, governments can field larger and more specialised delegations, and capital-based experts can support small missions remotely; Bayer et al. (2024) suggest that hybrid meeting formats may be particularly useful for supporting small delegations in this way. Asynchronous and low-bandwidth procedures, of which the General Assembly's silence procedure is an example, lower the connectivity threshold for taking part in decisions, though they permit objection rather than deliberation. Digital public diplomacy can also extend a smaller state's reach to audiences it could not previously afford to address (Manor & Yrachi, 2023).

Grounds for entrenchment. There are at least three reasons for caution. First, the division of labour that defines the hybrid model may itself reproduce inequality. If virtual channels are used for routine business while the negotiations that matter most remain physical, then the relationally decisive work stays tied to the capacity to travel and to maintain missions abroad (Holmes, 2013; Eggeling & Versloot, 2023), and states with limited resources must carry a double burden, sustaining physical presence and digital capability. Second, the structure of meetings can embed advantage: where sessions are scheduled around the working hours of institutional hubs, distant delegations are structurally disadvantaged (Bayer et al., 2024). In network terms, such arrangements favour actors already central to the network (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009). Third, security capacity is itself unequal, and states less able to secure their communications may be more reluctant, or less able, to use virtual channels for sensitive business (Wilton Park, 2020).

These considerations suggest that the question has no technological answer. The same study that documents the disadvantages of time zones also concludes that virtual and hybrid formats are neither good nor bad in themselves, and that their effects on inclusiveness depend on how international organisations design and apply them (Bayer et al., 2024). The implication for hybrid diplomacy is that mitigation is achievable but not automatic. It requires deliberate design choices: guaranteed remote participation in formal meetings, scheduling that rotates the burden of unsocial hours, support for connectivity and for travel where physical presence remains necessary, and investment in the digital skills and security capacity of smaller and poorer foreign ministries. Nigeria's decision to pair its new unit with training for diplomats from Africa and the Global South (The Sun, 2025) points to one way a middle-income state can contribute to this agenda.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic subjected diplomacy to one of the most severe disruptions of the physical infrastructure on which it has historically depended, yet diplomatic activity persisted throughout the crisis. This continuity was made possible by Information and Communication Technology, which sustained multilateral summitry, vaccine and health diplomacy, and public diplomacy at a moment when travel and physical assembly were largely foreclosed. Read through the framework adopted here, the evidence is consistent with institutionalist expectations of adaptation, with constructivist expectations that trust is harder to create than to sustain online, and with network-theoretic expectations that the benefits and burdens of digital diplomacy are unevenly distributed. At the same time, the pandemic exposed the limitations of ICT as a vehicle for diplomacy, most notably in relation to cybersecurity, the digital divide, and the difficulty of building trust in the absence of face-to-face contact. The most plausible reading of the pandemic's legacy for diplomatic practice is therefore one of hybridity rather than replacement: ICT has permanently expanded the tools available to diplomats without displacing the enduring value of in-person engagement.

On this basis, the article makes four recommendations. First, foreign ministries, particularly in the Global South, should invest in digital infrastructure and in the digital literacy of diplomatic personnel, so that the gains of the pandemic period are not eroded by uneven capacity. Second, dedicated institutional structures of the kind recently created within Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs should be strengthened and replicated, to ensure that cybersecurity and digital governance are treated as core, rather than peripheral, components of foreign policy. Third, ministries should deliberately preserve a hybrid model of engagement, retaining virtual platforms for routine and time-sensitive business while safeguarding opportunities for physical, relationship-building diplomacy where the stakes and sensitivity of negotiation demand it. Fourth, international organisations should adopt inclusion-by-design standards for hybrid meetings, covering remote participation rights, time-zone rotation, and support for connectivity, so that hybrid practice mitigates rather than entrenches existing inequalities.

Further research is needed on how these dynamics have played out within legislative and parliamentary diplomacy specifically, an area in which the interplay of ICT, executive–legislative relations, and foreign policy-making during and after the pandemic remains comparatively underexamined. The parallel and public engagement of Nigeria's Foreign Minister and the Speaker of the House of Representatives during the Guangzhou episode suggests that such research would be productive.

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