Information and Communication Technology (Ict) and Diplomacy: A Conceptual Overview

Ehiane, Osezua Stanley and Mosud, Yinusa Olumoye

Lagos State Polytechnic, (SPTSA), Mainland Annex, Lagos. P. O box 2090, Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria

E-mail: stanleyehiane@yahoo.com

ABSRACT

The increase number of foreign mission as well as diplomat around the globe signifies the global recognition to the vital role of diplomatic corps in this era of information age. The rapid development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has led to drastic change in the nature and conduct of diplomacy and diplomatic services in the contemporary time. This paper addressed questions like: Has information and communication technology in essence improved the practice of diplomacy? Has the aid of communication technology made diplomacy easier and more viable? Has its advent reduced the importance of conventional diplomacy? And what implication is there then for the grooming of new diplomats who would have the task of performing the acts of diplomacy in the nearest future? In answering these questions, the paper employed a qualitative research methodology based on data collected from mostly secondary sources such as textbooks, journals and articles; and views of different scholars on the use of (ICT) in the practice of diplomacy. The paper highlighted the development and progressive effect in key areas of diplomatic services, aided by the discoveries and revolution in the information and communication technology. Conclusively, the paper suggested potential trend in ICT which would go a long way in aiding the training of future diplomat who would have the task of performing the acts of diplomacy in the future.

Key words: Diplomacy, ICT, MFA and public diplomacy

1.   INTRODUCTION

The end of cold war brought a pragmatic restructuring and advent of two key factors: the explosion in the size of the members in the state centric world system and the astronomical development in science and technology. Advances in science and technology have become drivers in international relations and knowledge of such trend in major field has become an essential prerequisite to effective international negotiation and conduct of relations. Communication technology is now an inescapable part of everyday life as well as integral element to large scale economic, social and political restructuring.

The advances in communication technology create fundamental changes to the traditional international relations environment by promoting transparency, crowding out secrecy, mobilising global social movement and increasing the importance of diplomacy, where states now linked to millions of individuals by fibre optics, satellite and wireless in a complex network. These trends have resulted in considerable speculation about the future of diplomacy. The state is considered to be losing its capacity to control and influence the flow of information across its borders, and over what its citizens see, hear and think (Ronald, 1997). Specifically, network technology--especially the Internet--is allowing an increasing array of civil society and other non-state actors (NSAs) to augment their power and seize the initiative away from states. Yet, in a world were decisive distinctiveness is becoming a losing phenomenon and compact globalization gaining grounds effectively; the need of a diplomatically-sound world becomes paramount. States find it more and more necessary to negotiate and foster friendly relations as borders become more porous and intertwined in several socio-economic ways. There is need more than ever to indulge in diplomacy, diplomacy this time that would have to take into consideration the new communications environment in which it finds itself. "Internet has reached the point when nobody can afford to ignore it, at their own loss" (Costea, 2007: 171). "The ability to disseminate free information increases the potential for persuasion in world politics" (Keohame and Nye, 2006: 193); the ability to control the information- use or abuse- is a way to empowerment.

The work of diplomats is in essence communication and collaboration with colleagues and partners all over the world. The ICT is a mighty communication and collaboration tool. The profoundly planned and well organised usage of ICT can help states, especially developing ones, to cope with the load of challenges and catch up with the emerging trends of the modern diplomacy. To fully realize the potential of the new technologies, diplomats will have to recognize that a different communications environment is emerging and that its emergence will have a profound impact on statecraft. The diplomatic world is becoming much more complex and diversified as it conforms to the new realities prompted by the sheer growth in the number of actors operating in the international sphere (Ronald, 1997).

This paper aim at highlighting the effects of technological advances on the practice of diplomacy, as a result of the new challenges brought by the information and communication revolution to reinforce the need for better

diplomacy and diplomatic services. It intend to propose the trend in which the practice of diplomacy would likely take in the near future and stress the need for new method of training for diplomats in their duties as against the back drop of the development in information and communication technology (ICT).

2.   CONCEPTUALISATION OF ICT

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a broad term concerned with technology and other aspects of managing and processing information, especially in large quantity and through some distance. To be precise, ICT deals with the use of electronic computers and computer software to store, protect process, transmit, and retrieve information. Nowadays, the term information and communication technology has taken a step to acknowledge all forms of telecommunications and processes in which messages are relayed be it through the Internet or via mobile phones. Modern telecommunication has evolved, that is not only traditional voice communications of telephones and the printed messages of telegraphs and telexes that are transmissible but television transmissions use in video conferencing in which the participants can both hear and see each other in an interactive session. Videotext is another communication service of the modern era. It consists of requesting for specific types of information over a phone and this information can be displayed on a television receiver equipped with a special decoder. It is, however, not as popular as that of data transmission epitomized by the Internet. In general the concept of telecommunication encompasses the very essence of information communication technology (Todd, 2001).

The new ICT environment can be compared to "a planetary central nervous system composed of a web of communications devices, telephones, fax machines, televisions, computers, camcorders, portable digital assistants etc., all linked together into a single integrated network of digital-electronic-communications" (Todd, 2001). The network never shuts down and operates at a high speed through all sorts of transmission media such as the fiber optic cables, and orbiting satellites. Increasingly, it penetrates every aspect of life, from computers that operate household appliances to the cellular phones and laptop computers that provide mobile telecommunications. Perhaps most importantly, the web is an inherently interactive environment where communication flows in two directions rather than from a single source, thereby enabling instantaneous communication between anyone who is connected. These developments have had great impact on the world system and specifically on the practice of diplomacy as a component of that system.

Great advancement in information technology has revolutionized the international scene and created a new communication environment. From the first geostationary satellite, Anik 1, a Canadian satellite launched in 1972 (Pierre, 2003), to the emergence of the internet (formerly known as ARPANET) in 1983 and the start of the World Wide Web in 1991. It has migrated to a point where instant messaging has become the norm. The Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) and other technologies has brought a new dimension to telecommunication and provided means to effective communication. The use of email as instant messengers and further voice and video calls over the Internet – such as Skype – has become common low-cost option for real-time communication. Mobile devices that access Internet and allow for voice, video and short messages (SMS) communications (Shelf, 2010), are making the world easily and fully connected. The World-Wide Web is the most popular Internet service, is a system of interlinked information.

A somewhat different but growingly populated and influential is social network – Twitter, face book, Eskimi, Skype, Viber, etc, allow for a much simpler but highly vibrant relations to be created. Users focused on broadcasting instant reflections on the world around them known as "tweets", within messages not longer than 160 characters each. The tweets are used to share personal mood, current activity or thoughts on some topic, links to online materials, interesting quotes, news or rumours. It is estimated that 27.3 million of tweets on Twitter are posted per day (Royal, 2010). Twitter-friends are commonly not friends in real life, but are rather followers of the like-minded persons and their tweets, which make the outreach of the important messages fairly global in meter of hours or even minutes. During the post-election protests in Iran in 2009 tweeting appeared to be of great help in terms of getting information out of the country and involving the huge Iranian diaspora and those are against the regime (Morozov, 2009). While Twitter as the commercial platform may or may not exist in near future, the concept of tweets it developed will certainly keep its important communication role in the hectic society of today. These developments in information and communication technology have had great impact on the world system and specifically on the conduct practice of diplomacy and diplomatic services.

3   ICT AND DIPLOMACY

This is a different global environment in which international affairs and diplomacy has been brewing for more than forty years. The new environment that has now clearly emerged is a complex product of three broad, interrelated, and continuing revolutions, not just the information revolution.

First was the end of cold war, since then the role of ideology in diplomacy has decreased (Leguey, 2009). This brought some sanity to a precariously balanced arena that had the potentiality of erasing humanity off the face of Earth. Subsequently, the stand-off between the Soviet Union (USSR) and the United States of America became a

thing of little significance. A new political environment arose due to changes in political value. This revolution did not replace the nation-state or displace the still central role of state actors, but it did add drastically to the number of consequential entities and important players on the international scene. State actors increased in the 1960's with the emergence of newly independent colonial states of Africa and Asia and their induction into the international system as sovereigns. But it was not only the state actors that increased in size, the increasing number of Multinational Organisation (MNO), Non –governmental Organisations (NGO), Intergovernmental Organisation (IGO) as well as Transnational Media Corporations (TMCs), has added to the complexity of international relations (Majid, 1993), thereby raised a new issue with diplomacy. The diplomatic representation of non-state actors increased and the European Union (EU) enjoys the privilege of attending economic summits such as the G-8 summit. As the number of non-state actors increase, they continue to change the nature of new diplomacy (Baylis, 2001). While, intergovernmental agencies continue to prefer bilateral negotiations, MNOs begin to use multilateral meetings. The economic power of MNOs supersedes individual states and their resources and wealth are greater than the member states of the UN (Gilpin, 1987)

The second factor is an economic revolution that has erupted, driven by the forces of liberalization, privatization, and globalization. This revolution has created an insatiable demand for information and transparency, as well as for open political processes. This revolution has also increased the number of players of concern on the global stage and change in global world-market transform the nature of diplomacy as well. Melissen and Wiseman, 1999 summarised postmodern diplomacy as a system in which both state and non-state actors can participate simultaneously. In this case, diplomat needs to be prepared to negotiate with business diplomat as a result of the increasing number and participation of business diplomats in diplomacy. Saner and Yiu, (2003) concludes that there are six new diplomatic functions of modern diplomats, the new roles are: Economic, Commercial, Corporate, business, national NGO and transnational NGO diplomacy, this express the fact that the direct effect of globalisation are clearly visible on diplomacy, as they change their roles into a business-like function.

The third element is the information revolution; it is a factor that drives all the other factors. Advanced information technologies have provided new communication tools that altered existing hierarchies and power relationships among global actors. Beyond these enabling effects, the information revolution and the new international environment that it fostered have made information itself a crucial source of national power and influence. Former United state secretary of state recognises diplomatic communication as one of the important skills a diplomat should posses (Albright, 2008). Sucharipa, (2002) also emphasised the roles of diplomat in communication, but do not explain how diplomat should prepare for it. These trends have substantial impacts on diplomacy, affecting both the content and the conduct of the diplomatic enterprise necessary for successful transformation of the international arena. Furthermore, these trends offer promise of an improved security environment compared with that of the more dangerous Cold War period. Even though the impacts of these three trends are largely positive, this new environment is substantially more dynamic, complex, hard to understand, and therefore challenging existence of states and the practice of diplomacy.

4.   CONTEMPORARY DIPLOMACY

In recent time, diplomat now engaged in arrangements dictated by the trends in the global community: democratization, globalization, integration, information and communication technology and trans-nationalization. Yet, the political environment is still highly tensed with the power politics of nations, negotiations of war and peace, actualization of national interest as well as the concentration on national power and wealth. Non-state actors, with their multitude of trans-border alliances, and pressure groups have added to the traditional domain of economic diplomacy thereby partially undermining the sovereignty of states in conducting international economic relations. At the same time faced with globalization and competition for foreign direct investment as well as the growing influence of international economic standard setting organizations (WTO, ILO etc). Many countries have come to realize the global system is changing and there is need, more than ever, to redress their foreign policy objectives and project new policies to adhere to their national interests. Traditional political-military concerns, which included such issues as force balances, demarcation of territories, arms control negotiations, and alliance cohesion, have not been replaced; rather new political concerns have been added to the diplomatic menu. As a result of globalization such issues as refugees, human rights, transnational crime and terrorism, drugs, international trade, financial flows, trade, intellectual property and technology concerns, labour standards, and negotiations have now become increasingly key issues in relations between and among states.

The rise of persuasive power (soft power or the ability to achieve desired outcome in the international affairs through persuasion as against coercion) is being more felt. Soft power works by convincing others to follow, or agree to norms and institutions that produce a desired conduct. Soft power can rest on the appeal of one's ideas or the ability to set the agenda in ways that shape the preferences of others. In other words, soft power recognizes that relying on traditional state-to-state diplomacy will now be less effective. Instead, people and

information matter more than missiles, guns etc, indeed, there seems to be a much bigger payoff in convincing others to want what you want rather than using threats and coercion to force desired actions. Most importantly, soft power acknowledges the ICT-driven globalization. It is obvious that the information and communication technology holds the key to soft power, making it possible to appeal directly to a multitude of actors (Todd, 2001). Specifically, soft power entails that traditional diplomatic agencies tap into the wealth of knowledge of NGOs and civil society that monitor human rights, create educational exchanges and organize relief efforts. Like soft power, public diplomacy ensures to convince rather than coercion, by targeting foreign populations both the general public and opinion leaders. public diplomacy allows states to engage with key people and influence their government directly or indirectly. The potential of this subtle diplomacy is aims not at the conquest of territory or at the control of economic life, but at the conquest and control of the minds of citizens (Pahlavi, 2003). In other terms, public diplomacy allows a country to secure another country's consent or support by modifying the will of significant segments of its population. A Canadian specialist makes the point very clearly: "If there is initial resistance from the target government, it will be through public diplomacy that new alliances will be shaped with local groups to attempt to change policy" (Pahlavi, 2003). Public diplomacy conducted in the public space of communications technology like the Internet is one of the best guarantees for the expansion of national influences internationally.

We realized that a new diplomacy has emerged, reinvented for the information age, adapting to the situations and conditions of the world system, due to the astronomical advances in information technology. Thus, soft power, public diplomacy, and ICT are the key elements of the new diplomacy, which must address a wide range of issues in the international system that affects domestic and foreign interests.

5. THE IMPACT OF ICT ON DIPLOMACY

In the era of conventional diplomacy, innovations in information and communications technologies (ICTs)--starting with telegraphy and transoceanic cables allowing near real-time communication of negotiating instructions and diplomatic reports--increasingly tethered ambassadors to their home capitals and partially eroded the independence of diplomats abroad (Pahlavi, 2003). But telegraphy, and especially submarine cabling were expensive, in several senses--the messages were brief and encoded at two levels (Pahlavi, 2003). In this century, the widespread availability of convenient long-distance air travel, direct-dial intercontinental telephone circuits and worldwide real-time communication, has continued to redefine the role and duties of the diplomat. In ICT, the real-time enable multiple channel communication, like the telephone call-that connects many missions with headquarters by a toll-free voice-over-IP secured telephone lines. This allowing mission to consult regularly but also for diplomats, whose dynamics of posts across the globe often separates colleagues for a while, to keep in touch with one another (Catania, 2009)

In the conventional diplomatic services, there was a strict internal protocol for delivering confidential messages, instructions and reports. However, the introduction of ICTs reshaped the evaluation of work of the Ministry Foreign Affairs (MFA); diplomats are now encouraged to provide personal feedbacks on how their work can be improved (Dickie, 2004). Regular meetings of headquarter with missions or diplomats away, or even meetings among heads of MFA central administration within cross-border or regional dialogue initiatives can be done voice or video conferencing or telepresence. In addition, ICTs has triggered the use of database document and submission, unlike the era of traditional diplomacy when communications were based on formal notes; periodic bulletins and circulars. Digital and rapidly broadcast and direct contact among departments or rather individuals through messenger system makes their coordinated work more effective.

Internet message and social network can enable easy share of more informal information of lower importance thereby make the diplomatic team more coherent. Furthermore, forum discussions, shared personal and department calendars and task-list can save time in synchronisation of work, thereby increase productivities However, regarding reporting and document submissions, ICT has upgraded the procedure. Instead of advancing all submissions up the hierarchy from various divisions which is time consuming, now division directly submit to the state secretary with copies going to the various directorates (Rana, 2006: 9), using e-mail facility. The e-mail is a formally accepted way of exchanging formal document yet encrypted; the encryption is done over secured network of computers.

The age of ICTs supports the option of virtual representation, either in form of an information services or with virtual envoys and even virtual embassies, to replace mission of less priority. Under the virtual representation non-resident envoys would not travel often and this save cost. The Ambassador abroad is a principal cost (Rana, 2007: 4) and even the existing missions cannot be left out. In this regard, the ICTs offer a solution to cost as a tool for virtual diplomacy in the conduct of diplomatic relations. The notion of virtual implies the absence of physical presence of envoys and missions building, but a virtual embassy still has an ambassador which cannot be replaced by computers (Kurbalija, 2007: 329). Though the computers cannot replace the ambassador of a

virtual embassy, but communication is done via the internet and remote follow-up via e-mail, phone, fax and digital video conferencing (Grechi, 2006: 30).

6.   CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is no doubt that, ICTs revolution has changed the international community drastically and has had profound influence on the practice of modern diplomacy. From e-mail to the internet, GSM phone to satellite television, voice to video conferencing have revolutionised the way people view the world around them and redefining the way international relations are conducted. There has been a paradigm shift in the international domain influenced by the advent of revolutionary information and communication technology. This shift has changed not only the content but also the context of international politics as we have seen so far. Specifically, the increase on non-state actors, the involvement of civilians in the policy making both domestic and foreign due to global awareness as well as potential use of soft power as against hard power, in pursuance of foreign policy objectives, all have monumental effects on the conventional state practice as they slowly reduce the authority of the state. Be that as it may, modern diplomacy has to be moulded to fit the new multi- actors and socio-economically integrated world of hi-tech communication gadgetry. It is high time government of the developing countries began to see inherent benefits of ICTs in the conduct of diplomacy and diplomatic services and make move to adjust to the perception of the growing diplomats. Hither to, the growing countries can exploit this situation and project themselves into the future, to have a good chance of becoming influential players in the world economy and politics.

Developed countries-Canada, Australia, USA, Germany, France, Russia Federation and United Kingdom are already exploiting the new arena, creating department in the foreign ministry to effectively utilise ICTs in the conduct of diplomacy and diplomatic services. Developing countries should take a bold step and acknowledge a need to reassess the training programs available for diplomats in ICTs. However, the training and re-training of diplomats will boost their effectiveness in negotiation, information gathering, representation, communication, protection of national interest as well as creating friend relation with host's state. Ultimately, the growing diplomats should also adopt their own structures to benefit more from the ICTs, in order to capitalise on the potentials the emerging technologies are offering in response to the challenges of diplomacy.

Despite, the misuse of ICTs in the conduct of diplomacy and diplomatic services, such as the cyber attacks, negligent use of unsecured web, documents and voice hacking etc as witnessed by USA, Brazil and China in recent times, there is no doubt that the positive impacts of ICTs in the diplomacy cannot be quantified.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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