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THE CHANGING FACE OF DIPLOMACY: FROM SECRET CABLES TO OPEN SCREENS

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The Changing Face of Diplomacy

From Secret Cables to Open Screens

By Ajay Bisaria



The envoy of the coming decade must be fluent in the grammar of the feed and the logic of the algorithm **yet retain the older competences no platform can supply**



When I joined India's foreign service four decades ago, the world was still ordered by the

Cold War. From the vantage of my first posting in Moscow, I watched the Berlin Wall fall, the Cold War end and the Soviet Union dissolve. History was moving beneath our feet, and we novice diplomats were its quiet witnesses, emphasis on quiet.

Diplomacy, sometimes called the second-oldest profession, has always been the management of difference between strangers who cannot afford to go to war. Its instruments—the *démarche*, the negotiation, the carefully weighed communiqué—were built for a world of secrecy, hierarchy, and patience. That world is passing. In its place has arrived a newer diplomacy of posts, likes, and live streams, conducted in full public view and at the speed of the feed. Diplomatic actors are expected to perform on this stage, and millions of commentators critique, all in real time.

The Submerged Iceberg

The diplomacy we practised in the 1990s would be scarcely recognisable today. It was an iceberg: ninety-nine per cent submerged in the cold, one per cent showing above the waterline as public diplomacy. It was a craft of discretion, living in encrypted cables, sealed envelopes and conversations held behind closed doors. Our work was overwhelmingly state-to-state, and the public read about outcomes of summits the next morning. For Cold War-era diplomatic deals—the Simla Agreement, the Helsinki Accords, the Camp David bargain—the results were announced; the making of them stayed mysterious. Secrecy was the system's hallmark.

Assessments were assembled from primary sources and conversation with the knowledgeable; Google was a decade away, the smartphone



Breaking the Wall

People gather atop the Berlin Wall near the Brandenburg Gate on 9 November 1989, as the barrier dividing East and West Berlin begins to fall.

further still. Then technology did its patient, irreversible work—telex to fax to email, email to smartphone, and the smartphone opening a door that could never again be closed: social media. Diplomacy walked out of the meeting room and into the feed. It is no accident that soft power and public diplomacy entered the practitioner's vocabulary only in the 2000s—the first on the strength of Joseph Nye's 2004

Diplomacy walked out of the meeting room and into the feed

book, the second in the aftermath of 9/11—before the social-media decade made both unavoidable.

India Learns to Perform

Nowhere has this been embraced with more relish than in India. The Cold



One Earth, One Future

G20 leaders gather in New Delhi for a session during India's G20 Presidency in September 2023.

War's end orphaned India's foreign policy and forced its reinvention: rigid non-alignment gave way to nimble multi-alignment, ideology to pragmatism. The 1991 liberalisation turned Indian diplomats into salesmen for a rising economy; the 1998 nuclear tests and the 2008 civil nuclear agreement announced a power to be accommodated rather than constrained.

The turn was not obvious: officials were once expected to keep off social media, blocked on office computers as a drain on productivity. Yet the Ministry of External Affairs set up a dedicated Public Diplomacy Division

The change is irreversible

as early as 2006, and the fuller embrace came under a government that treated cultural assets as strategic instruments: the diaspora enlisted as an explicit foreign-policy resource, yoga diplomacy institutionalised through the UN's International Day of Yoga. India became a textbook case of a middle power converting its civilisational depth and demographic weight into currency of influence—precisely the conversion Nye had described.

The last decade has been the most inventive. India pioneered a responsive, citizen-facing digital diplomacy—a foreign minister fielding distress calls on Twitter—that other chanceries have since imitated. It turned crises into demonstrations of capacity: rescues to extract stranded citizens from war zones, vaccine diplomacy during the pandemic, each projecting India as first responder and pharmacy to the world. The 2023 G20 presidency was an exercise in telegenic national branding.

Nothing captured this shift more vividly than Sushma Swaraj's tenure as external affairs minister, when she turned her Twitter handle into a real-time consular desk: a worker



Operation Ganga

Indian nationals prepare to leave Ukraine as evacuation efforts gather pace amid the war.

stranded in the Gulf or a family needing a medical visa had only to tag her, and the Ministry stirred into motion. I once took a call from her while on a massage table in Vilnius on a Sunday—she wanted me to check, that instant, on a student whom social media had reported killed—though she also, on occasion, in the case of Pakistan, needed gently talking out of the habit of offering visas on Twitter. Her successor carried the culture forward. During Operation Ganga in 2022, as war trapped our students in Ukraine, we watched the old and the new fuse: online helplines, students tweeting their coordinates, ministers dispatched to coordinate the flights home.

It is tempting to dismiss all this as theatre. That would be a misreading: performance is no longer a distraction from diplomacy but now one of its instruments. The old architecture endures—the Vienna Convention of 1961 still governs our missions and their immunities—yet the edifice now houses an almost entirely new practice, one whose supreme virtue is no longer discretion but visibility.

Four forces

Step back, and four forces are remaking the craft at once.

The first of course is technology. The telegraph once shrank the ambassador's autonomy; the aircraft made summitry routine; television brought the negotiating table into the living room. Social media has done something more radical still—it has dissolved the monopoly that foreign ministries once held over the framing of events. A conflict is now narrated in real time by its participants, its victims and its propagandists, and the diplomat who waits for instructions has already lost the first

news cycle. Artificial intelligence promises a further disruption—in the drafting of cables, the war-gaming of scenarios, the micro-targeting of foreign publics—even as the deepfake raises the spectre of a message whose authenticity can no longer be assumed.

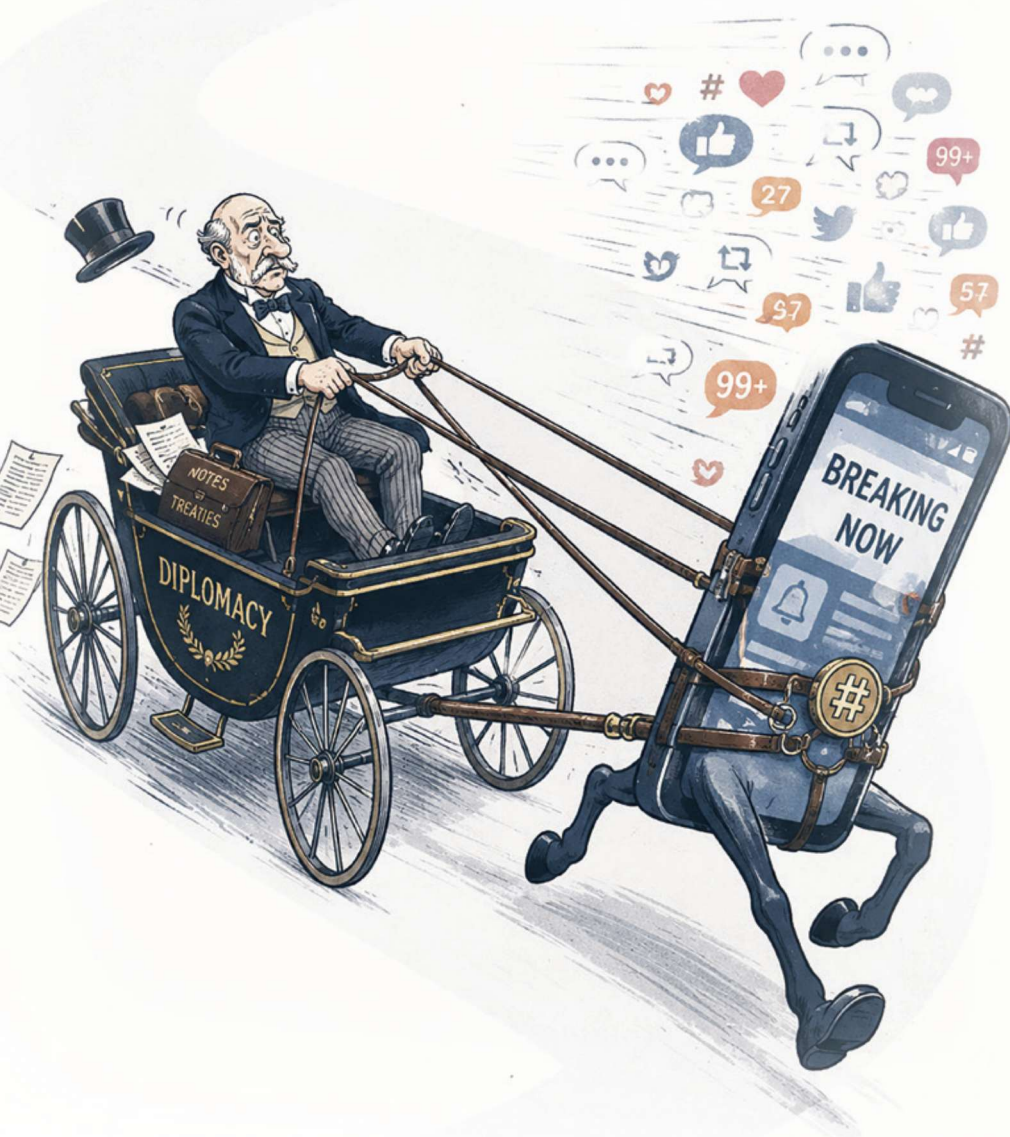
The second is geopolitics. The tidy arrangements of the unipolar moment have given way to a world suspended between orders. As power diffuses to a rising China, a returning Russia and an assertive Global South, diplomacy has grown more crowded, more transactional and less bound by the old etiquette. Minilaterals—the Quad, I2U2, SCO, BRICS+—increasingly do the work that unwieldy universal institutions cannot, and the summit photograph has become a currency of newer, often illusory, alignments.

The third is geo-economics. The instruments of statecraft have

migrated from the chancery to the finance ministry and the trading floor. Tariffs, sanctions, export controls and the weaponisation of supply chains are the coercive diplomacy of our time; the negotiator's brief now takes in semiconductors, critical minerals and payment systems. Diplomacy and economics, long kept in separate ministries, have fused.

The fourth is military doctrine.





The target of persuasion has shifted from governments to publics

The line between war and peace has stretched into a spectrum of grey-zone coercion—cyber intrusions, drones, disinformation and calibrated strikes. Force is increasingly used to communicate rather than to

conquer, and communication is the diplomat's own medium. Soldier and diplomat now share a vocabulary of signalling, deterrence and escalation control

unfamiliar to an earlier generation of either.

Diplomacy Comes Home

If those forces describe how diplomacy has changed abroad, a parallel shift

has changed it at home—above all in democracies. Foreign policy was once the most insulated of sovereign functions, conducted by a mandarin elite at a decorous distance from the electorate. That insulation has collapsed. Trade deals now rise or fall on the anxieties of farmers and factory workers; migration diplomacy is hostage to culture wars; a leader's handshake or hug abroad is calibrated for its reception back home.

What is new is the speed and visibility of that second level, and an electorate that, armed with a phone, has become a permanent participant. One consequence reorders the rest: the target of persuasion has shifted from governments to publics. Where the envoy once sought to convince a counterpart across the table, the state now competes directly for the sympathy of foreign populations and, even more, its own—winning the argument on the feed can matter as much as winning it in the room.

The New Cast

Around this transformed core, a new cast has assembled. The monopoly of the accredited envoy has ended: track-two channels, the influencer with a following larger than a mission's, the diaspora mobilised as a strategic asset, the celebrity enlisted to a cause—all now carry diplomatic weight. Leaders and publics native to the digital world are replacing those raised on the cable and the communiqué, and their instincts run to immediacy and the personal brand. Trump's Truths or the G7 candid reel today defines the news cycle. The danger is obvious—that performance crowds out substance—and the diplomat's discipline lies in mastering the theatre without being consumed by it.

Metternich's game

None of this abolishes the diplomat; it redraws the job. The envoy of the coming decade must be fluent in the



grammar of the feed and the logic of the algorithm yet retain the older competences no platform can supply—judgement, discretion, cultural empathy, the capacity to build a human relationship with the cameras switched off. The profession is not being abolished by the amateurs crowding its stage; it is being asked to become more versatile than ever.

Three propositions seem safe. The change is irreversible: no foreign office will retreat behind the old

walls, because publics will not permit it and technology will not allow it. It is double-edged: the same tools that democratise diplomacy also degrade it, amplifying the demagogue as readily as the statesman. And it is, in the end, skin-deep. Beneath the posts and the likes, the fundamentals endure—the reconciliation of clashing interests, the patient search for a formula that lets each side claim victory. Metternich, that nineteenth-century master of the balance of power, would not recognise the instruments. But he would recognise the game. **iw**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Ajay Bisaria is a senior corporate advisor, author, and former diplomat. He served as India's envoy to Canada, Pakistan, Poland, and Lithuania. His book, *Anger Management*, examined India-Pakistan ties.

Secrecy was the system's hallmark



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Vaccine Diplomacy

India's COVID-19 vaccine donation arrives in Barbados as part of its pandemic-era outreach to partner countries.