

# *Effect Of Digital Diplomacy In International Relations: Lessons For Sri Lanka To Mitigate Negative Coverage Of Security And Human Rights Situations After 2009*

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**Abstract** – The main objectives of this study were to analyze the reasons for Sri Lanka’s low adoption of DD to mitigate the dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human rights situation on social media by pro-LTTE Tamil Diaspora groups and NSAs and to analyze how the use of DD can be improved to effectively mitigate dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human rights situation on social media by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs. The research method adopted was qualitative, while the research design adopted was a case study design. In this case study, Findings from the study revealed that low adoption of DD to mitigate the dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human right situation in the country on social media by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs sympathetic to the Tamil cause is due to financial, employment-related, policy-related, and political reasons. Further, findings from the study indicate that DD in Sri Lanka can be improved in several ways to mitigate the fake news disseminated regarding the security and human rights situation in the country by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs on social media. These strategies include rolling out DD in stages across the Foreign Ministry network, implementing a change management program to overcome employee resistance to the adoption of DD, providing employees extensive DD training, implementing a standardized DD policy in the Foreign Ministry, and conducting awareness campaigns to educate political leaders on the advantages of DD over traditional diplomacy in protecting and enhancing the image and reputation of the country.

**Keywords** – Digital Diplomacy, Security, Human Rights, Non state actors

## I. INTRODUCTION

The year 2009 marked the successful completion of the civil war in Sri Lanka with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the killing of its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran<sup>1</sup>. Although the Sri Lankan military forces were successful in defeating the LTTE, this defeat had little impact on the propaganda machine of the LTTE. Little impact on the propaganda machine can be attributed to the fact that the propaganda arm of the LTTE operates in Western countries, which have sizeable Tamil immigrant populations. Pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and other non-state actors (NSAs) sympathetic to the Tamil cause have continued the propaganda fight against the Sri Lankan government (GoSL) and military<sup>2</sup> after the defeat of the LTTE. The aim of pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs in this fight is to influence the establishment of an independent Tamil state by undermining the image and reputation of the Sri Lankan government and military.

The primary strategy to achieve this aim has been the dissemination of propaganda alleging human rights violations against the Tamil community by the Sri Lankan military with the support of GoSL. In this regard, pro-LTTE diaspora groups and NSAs

have used Facebook, websites and other social media platforms to publish articles with so-called eyewitness accounts of alleged atrocities committed against LTTE prisoners of war by security forces and the deliberate targeting of civilians in the final stages of the war by security forces<sup>3</sup>. These diaspora groups and NSAs have also used social media to disseminate allegations of atrocities committed against the Tamil community by Sinhala nationalist and religious groups to politicians of Tamil Sri Lankan origin in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Norway. The fake news is then amplified by these politicians by forwarding it to fellow party members, members of opposition parties, and local and international media outlets.

Pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and the NSA's fake news regarding the security and human rights situation in Sri Lanka has led to several repercussions. These repercussions include the United Nations Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) adoption of Resolution A/HRC/25/1. This resolution calls for accountability, reconciliation, and human rights to be promoted in Sri Lanka and for the "conducting of a comprehensive investigation into alleged serious violations and abuses of human rights and related crimes by both parties in Sri Lanka"<sup>3</sup>. Propaganda regarding the deterioration of human rights since the completion of the civil war also resulted in some Western countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America, banning the Army Commander, Senior Officers of the Sri Lanka Army, and Special Forces personnel from entering their countries<sup>4</sup>. Further, fake news pertaining to human rights violations in Sri Lanka after 2009 has also resulted in the European Union withdrawing the GSP+ concession provided to Sri Lanka from 2010 to 2017. This in turn resulted in Sri Lanka losing export revenue worth SLR 700 billion during this period<sup>5</sup>.

A key reason for pro-LTTE diaspora groups and NSAs sympathetic to the Tamil cause's success in undermining the security and human rights image of Sri Lanka is the failure of Sri Lankan diplomatic efforts to effectively address and reduce the dissemination of this propaganda<sup>2</sup>. The Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry and its embassies across the world have adopted traditional diplomatic approaches to counter the propaganda pertaining to the security and human rights situation in the country. These traditional methods include the use of email, fax, media releases, press conferences, and official letters to media outlets refuting allegations of human rights and security violations made by Tamil diaspora groups<sup>2</sup>. Further, other reasons for the failure to address and stop the dissemination of this fake news are that the responses to this negative coverage are reactive and contradictory in nature; there has been a failure to provide embassies with timely documentary evidence and other support necessary to effectively address this fake news; and there has been a failure to ensure a uniformed response to the negative coverage<sup>2</sup>.

## **II. PROBLEM FORMULATION**

The security and human rights situation in Sri Lanka has been undermined due to the propaganda efforts of pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs sympathetic to the Tamil cause since the completion of the separatist war. Findings from empirical research indicate that the main reason for the negative security and human rights coverage is that the country continues to engage in traditional diplomacy, which is ineffective in today's era of rapid dissemination of news through digital channels and the limited adoption of digital diplomacy (DD), which is extremely effective in this digital environment<sup>6</sup>. The effectiveness of digital diplomacy over public diplomacy in today's digital environment is underscored by evidence from several countries, such as India, Germany, the USA, Ukraine, and Russia. These countries have adopted DD to effectively mitigate the challenges and issues arising from the rapid and extensive dissemination of information to improve foreign relations, mitigate potential image and reputational issues, and improve national security. Despite evidence from empirical research demonstrating that DD is more effective than traditional diplomacy in improving foreign relations, mitigating potential image and reputational issues, and enhancing national security, there is a dearth of research on the reasons for Sri Lanka's limited adoption of DD to address fake news disseminated by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs on social media and other digital communication channels. This study addresses this research gap.

## **III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

- ❖ To analyze the reasons for Sri Lanka's low adoption of DD to mitigate dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human rights situation on social media by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs.
- ❖ To analyze how the use of DD can be improved to effectively mitigate the dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human rights situation on social media by pro-LTTE Diaspora groups and NSAs.

## **IV. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **4.1. Digital Diplomacy**

Larson states that the revolution within the information space fostered the acceleration of DD<sup>7</sup>. Larson also claims that the current trends on economic and technological fronts are likely to significantly accelerate the information revolution to even greater heights. The adoption of DD came to fruition when diplomats incorporated communication methods utilizing the latest information and communication technologies into their diplomatic efforts<sup>8</sup>. In 1997, Richard H. Solomon, president of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), posited virtual diplomacy as interactions of an economic, political, and social nature that are conducted through electronics as opposed to traditionally communicating face-to-face<sup>9</sup>.

Grech describes DD as "the conduct of what was regarded as classical diplomacy but that is now an activity being practiced in a different way because of changes in technology and because it is practiced by a broader range of people, including those that are not professional diplomats."<sup>9</sup> Thus, DD foregoes professionalism in favor of drawing on ideas from diverse individuals perceived as professionals on certain global concerns and interests. Moreover, Nweke claims that the States best equipped to engage in DD are those that can send, receive, and process information digitally<sup>11</sup>. As per Ipu, the incorporation of ICT within diplomatic efforts has revolutionized communications internationally, both within foreign states and among diplomats officially stationed overseas<sup>11</sup>.

The first initial steps in electronic communication are traced by some experts to as far back as 1989 when the World Wide Web came into being. However, other experts on the topic claim that DD originated in the industrial and communications revolution of the early 1980s<sup>8</sup>. In terms of diplomacy and international relations, breakthroughs on the technological front have paved the way for several innovations that have advanced diplomatic efforts from both a theoretical and practical perspective. Lichtenstein offers his take on DD within the 21<sup>st</sup> century, claiming the concept encompasses short message services and posts on Facebook, Google, and YouTube, to name a few of the many options available in terms of utilizing platforms centered around online communications<sup>12</sup>.

### **4.2. Advantages of Digital Diplomacy**

DD's increasing popularity and adoption across the globe are due to the significant benefits associated with this form of diplomacy<sup>13</sup>. These benefits include effectiveness in facilitating two-way communication, enabling diplomats to expand their diplomatic networks, establish strategic relationships more effectively, and connect more effectively with various age cohorts<sup>13</sup>. A key advantage associated with DD is the ability to facilitate two-way communication. This ability is highlighted by Rudolf Bekink, one-time Ambassador of the Netherlands to the USA, in the following statement: "The digital arena opens new possibilities, from one-on-one conversations to dialogues with communities" (cited in Ross<sup>13</sup>).

This effectiveness of DD in fostering two-way communication addresses one of the main weaknesses associated with public diplomacy, i.e., that it limits the interactions of embassies and ambassadors to interactions with officials from other countries in similar positions. Further, whilst foreign offices and officials across the world have attempted to address this limitation through public diplomacy, this initiative has failed to generate the desired outcomes due to foreign offices' and officials' interactions with the public being limited to one-way radio and television broadcasts<sup>14</sup>. The emergence of new informational communication channels such as Facebook and other types of social media has facilitated two-way communication in which foreign offices and officials can interact directly with various segments of the general public.

As per Bjola and Holmes, social media has enabled members of the public to communicate with ambassadors and other government officials in unique ways that are not possible with other types of communication channels<sup>14</sup>. Further, two-way communication via social media has also benefited government officials, as it has facilitated the ability to understand public concerns and issues and develop and implement policies that effectively address these concerns and issues<sup>14</sup>. Also, because social media allows for two-way communication, government officials can find out how effective their policies are and how the public sees them. They can then make changes to make the policies more effective and improve how the public sees them<sup>15</sup>.

### **4.3. Challenges of Digital Diplomacy**

There are also several challenges associated with this form of diplomacy. These challenges include the failure of ambassadors and other foreign officials to adopt DD, the ineffective use of DD, and potential controversies that can arise from the content posted by ambassadors and other foreign officials on their official Twitter pages<sup>16</sup>. As per Bjola, whilst DD has the potential to increase diplomats' influence through the use of social media to interact with non-state actors outside their normal circle, most diplomats have failed to adopt this form of diplomacy<sup>16</sup>.

The ineffective use of DD is mainly due to diplomats' and other foreign ministry officials' biases toward the individuals they follow on social media. Findings from empirical research indicate that most diplomats tend to follow only diplomats and world leaders and don't follow other individuals who have significant power and influence, e.g., media personnel<sup>17</sup>. Ineffective adoption of DD also arises due to ambassadors and other foreign ministry officials facing difficulties in managing a large and diverse social media audience<sup>17</sup>. As per Adesina, large and diverse social media audiences undermine the ability of diplomats to establish strategic relationships with key individuals and create the potential to miss important postings from influential non-state actors<sup>17</sup>.

Another key concern associated with DD is that content posted on social media can have unintended consequences, which can hurt the image of both the individual and the organization<sup>17</sup>. For example, the French Ambassador to the USA massively undermined his reputation and that of his country by twitting that the world would end if Donald Trump was elected president of the USA. The subsequent election of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the USA left the French Ambassador "red-faced" and forced the French government into a special damage control exercise to mitigate the fallout from this Twitter posting<sup>17</sup>. Consequences caused by Twitter and other types of social media postings undermine the advantages of DD to expand the image, reputation, and interest of a country and establish strategic relations with influential state and non-state actors in other countries.

### **4.4. Adoption of Digital Diplomacy in Sri Lanka**

Findings from empirical research indicate that the Sri Lankan government's adoption of DD is limited<sup>6</sup>. The limited use of DD in the country is underscored by the fact that it does not have an established policy, plan, or strategy to facilitate the official use of this form of diplomacy in the public domain. The lack of official guidelines on DD has resulted in diplomats and other government officials taking the initiative in this regard. The primary pages or tools used by the Sri Lankan government to engage in DD include the Twitter pages of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The content posted on these pages consists of texts, images, and notices<sup>6</sup>. Findings from research also indicate that Sri Lanka trails neighboring countries such as India in the adoption of DD<sup>18</sup>. The main reasons for the country's low adoption of DD include a lack of know-how, a lack of training, and a lack of knowledge of the significant advantages that could be derived by a small nation such as Sri Lanka through the adoption of this form of diplomacy<sup>18</sup>.

## **V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **5.1. Research Method and Design**

The research method adopted in this study was a qualitative research method. This method consisted of the collection and analysis of non-numeric data from semi-structured interviews. The research design adopted in this study was a case-study design. This case study design consisted of in-depth interviews with senior personnel in the Sri Lanka Ministry of Foreign Affairs to analyze the reasons for Sri Lanka's low adoption of DD to mitigate the dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human rights situation on social media by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs and assess how the use of DD can be improved to effectively mitigate dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human rights situation on social media by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs.

### **5.2. Research Subject**

The research subject in this study was the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, specifically senior personnel in this ministry with extensive knowledge and experience in public and defense diplomacy, current strategies, plans, and methods used to mitigate the dissemination of fake news pertaining to the security and human rights situation by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs, and knowledge of DD and digital technology. The Sri Lanka Foreign Ministry was established immediately after the country received independence in 1948 with the aim of coordinating and executing the foreign policy of the country<sup>19</sup>. The Sri

Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs comprises the ministry headquarters located in Colombo and 50 foreign missions. The mission of the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry is "the promotion, projection, and protection of Sri Lanka's national interest internationally, in accordance with the foreign policy of the government, and to advise the government on international developments which affect Sri Lanka"<sup>19</sup>.

### 5.3. Data Collection Techniques

The study used in-depth interviews as the instrument for data collection. An audio recorder was used to record the in-depth interviews conducted with the sample subjects. Subsequently, transcripts were created from the audio recordings. The analysis of the data was based on the interview transcripts. Open-ended questions were the main type of questioning in in-depth interviews. This type of questionnaire was chosen because of its effectiveness in eliciting detailed information from the sample about the reasons for the low adoption of DD to mitigate the dissemination of fake news on social media about the human rights and security situation by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs, as well as identifying how the use of DD could be improved further to mitigate dissemination of fake news by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs on social media and other platforms.

### 5.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to assess the qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was conducted as it is an effective technique to determine what is common to the way a topic is spoken or written about and make sense of that commonalities<sup>20</sup>. Figure 1 depicts the processes involved in data thematic analysis. The software package NVivo was used in the thematic analysis of the data.

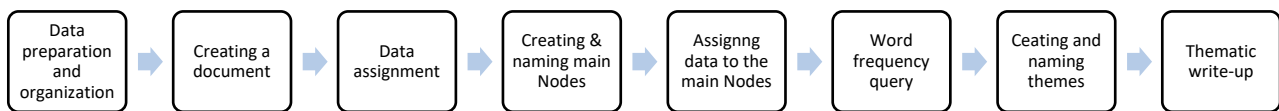


Figure 1: Data analysis process

Source: Zhang and Wildemuth<sup>21</sup>

## VI. FINDINGS

Findings from the study revealed that low adoption of DD to mitigate the dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human right situation in the country on social media by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs sympathetic to the Tamil cause is due to financial, employment-related, policy-related, and political reasons. The main financial reason is a lack of funds to effectively implement DD across the Foreign Ministry network due to the current acute economic crisis in the country. The main employee-related reasons for the low adoption of DD to mitigate fake news regarding the security and human rights situation in the country include employee resistance, i.e., employee unwillingness to use this form of diplomacy, and limited knowledge and expertise in the use of DD. The main policy-related reason for the low use of DD to mitigate fake news regarding the security and human rights situation in the country is the absence of a standardized policy on the official use of DD in the foreign ministry. The main political reason that has undermined the use of DD by the Foreign Ministry to mitigate this fake news is a lack of support from senior government officials in this regard. The lack of senior government officials' support for the use of DD to address and mitigate fake news regarding the security and human rights situation in the country can be attributed to these politicians' ignorance of this form of diplomacy and its significant advantages over traditional diplomacy in protecting and enhancing the reputation and image of the country. Findings from the study indicate that DD can be improved in several ways to mitigate the fake news disseminated regarding the security and human rights situation in the country by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs on social media. These strategies include rolling out DD in stages across the Foreign Ministry network to mitigate financial constraints; implementing a change management program to overcome employee resistance to the adoption of DD; providing employees with training, particularly the technical and language skills training necessary to use DD effectively; implementing a standardized DD policy in the Foreign Ministry; and conducting awareness campaigns to educate senior political leaders on the advantages and disadvantages of DD.

## **VII. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Sri Lanka should implement a DD strategy to mitigate the dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human rights situation in the country by pro-LTTE Tamil Diaspora groups and NSAs sympathetic to the Tamil cause. This DD strategy should be a long-term strategy and should not be subject to change each time a new regime comes into power. Implementation of a long-term DD strategy will also enable the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry to effectively address and mitigate the dissemination of fake news regarding the country's security and human rights situation despite the closure of several embassies and missions due to the current economic crisis in the country.

The Foreign Ministry should address the Sri Lankan political leadership's lack of support for the adoption of DD by emphasizing the significant benefits associated with using this form of DD to mitigate fake news about the security and human rights situation in the country disseminated by enemies of the country on social media. These benefits include low costs, the ability to reach a wider and more diverse audience, and the ability to foster two-way communication. In developing its DD strategy to mitigate fake news disseminated on social media regarding the security and human rights situation in the country, Sri Lanka should look to copy aspects of the DD strategies of countries such as India, which have been extremely successful in using DD to protect their image and reputation. To support the country's DD strategy, a comprehensive and robust policy framework, including a DD policy and code of conduct, should be developed. The policy framework introduced should be long-term and should not be subject to change each time a new political regime takes over the reins of the country.

Given the country's current economic crisis, the country's DD strategy should be implemented in stages. The staggered implementation of DD will also allow for the identification and resolution of problems and issues that may arise when implementing this new form of diplomacy. The selection of which countries to prioritize in the staggered rollout of DD should be based on the negative coverage of the security and human rights situation in Sri Lanka generated in these countries. For example, DD should be initially rolled out in foreign missions in countries such as the UK, USA, France, Germany, Australia, and Canada, as most of the pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs sympathetic to the Tamil cause are located in these countries.

A DD department should be established within the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry. The main objective of this department should be to ensure the consistency and accuracy of all social media content posted on the Foreign Ministry network that has implications for the country's image, reputation, security, and human rights. Further, other key objectives of this department must include continuous monitoring and addressing fake news regarding the security and human rights situation disseminated on social media channels, direct engagement with all local and foreign stakeholders on social media on matters pertaining to the security and human rights situation in the country, and promoting the image and reputation of the country on social media. In addition, this department should also be responsible for ensuring that all digital diplomatic activities are according to the established DD policy and code of conduct and for providing training and development pertaining to DD and social media across the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry Network.

Social media analytics should be used to evaluate the effectiveness and awareness of the DD strategy of the country, particularly its effectiveness and awareness in the face of fake news on the security and human rights situation in the country. Changes should be implemented if social media analytics indicate that the DD initiatives have failed to achieve the desired outcomes, particularly those pertaining to addressing fake news regarding the security and human rights situation in the country.

## **VIII. CONCLUSION**

This study was undertaken with the objectives of analyzing the reasons for Sri Lanka's low adoption of DD to mitigate the dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human rights situation on social media by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs and assessing how the use of DD can be improved to effectively mitigate dissemination of fake news regarding the security and human rights situation on social media by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs.

Findings from the study revealed that low adoption of DD to mitigate the dissemination of fake news regarding the security and humanitarian situation in the country on social media by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs sympathetic to the Tamil cause is due to financial, employment-related, policy-related, and political reasons.

Findings from the study indicate that DD can be improved in several ways to mitigate the fake news disseminated regarding the security and human rights situation in the country by pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora groups and NSAs on social media. These

strategies include rolling out DD in stages across the Foreign Ministry network, implementing a change management program to overcome employee resistance to the adoption of DD, providing employees extensive DD training, implementing a standardized DD policy in the Foreign Ministry, and conducting awareness campaigns to educate political leaders on the advantages of DD over traditional diplomacy in protecting and enhancing the image and reputation of the country.

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