

Prospects for us Digital Diplomacy in Central Asia

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Abstract: Given the current trends in the region, such as the rise of the Internet and social media, the increasing influence of bloggers in decision-making, and the increasing activity of human rights activists, it is possible to highlight the prospects for US digital diplomacy to become more active in these areas in the near future. In particular, in recent years, the US government has paid increased attention to the human rights reports and country rankings of reputable international rating and index organizations and international non-governmental non-profit organizations.

Keywords: US, Central Asia, impact, information, diplomacy, digital, technologies, politics.

Introduction

The United States is actively using digital tools to strengthen its position in the world as a world leader in technology and diplomacy. In Central Asia, which is of strategic geopolitical importance, US digital diplomacy is becoming an important tool in achieving foreign policy goals. The prospects for US digital diplomacy in Central Asia depend on various factors related to the political, economic, technological, and social conditions in the region. In particular, Central Asia is heavily influenced by Russia and China, which are actively investing in the region's digital infrastructure and using their platforms (such as Russia's VK and China's WeChat) to strengthen their presence. The prospects for US digital diplomacy depend on the ability to compete with these powers by offering alternative solutions to local governments.

In addition, each of the five Central Asian states has its own governance characteristics and different interests in engaging with the United States. In particular, the region varies in its level of openness and commitment to human rights, which affects the willingness of the United States to implement initiatives. In addition, many governments are seeking to restrict Internet freedom in order to maintain control over the information space. [1] This limits the impact of US digital diplomacy. Also, countries in the region may be wary of external interference and view digital diplomacy as a threat to their independence.

Methodology

Digital diplomacy initiatives cannot work effectively without the sustainable use of the Internet and modern technologies. Internet access in Central Asian countries varies significantly depending on the economic level, infrastructure, and political will of governments. [2] In particular, in Kazakhstan, about 85-90 percent of the population has access to the Internet, making it a leader in Central Asia in this area. Kazakhstan is actively developing broadband

Internet, including in rural areas, and is also introducing 5G technologies. Digitalization programs such as “Digital Kazakhstan” are helping to expand Internet access. There are 18.1 million Internet users in Kazakhstan, of which 14.1 million are social media users. [3]

Uzbekistan is actively working to modernize its telecommunications infrastructure, expand the 4G network, and introduce 5G. About 70-75 percent of the population has access to the Internet. According to the Statistics Agency, as of January 1, 2024, the number of subscribers connected to the Internet in Uzbekistan was 30.1 million. In 2023, there were 27.2 million Internet users. The use of mobile devices is especially popular in Uzbekistan, with 33 million users. [4]

In Kyrgyzstan, about 50-60 percent of the population has access to the Internet, and the main access is via mobile devices. Internet coverage is concentrated in cities, while rural areas are not sufficiently connected. Economic constraints hinder the development of Internet infrastructure. The number of Internet users in Kyrgyzstan is 5.4 million (of which 2.95 million are social media users).

In Tajikistan, about 35-40% of the population has access to the Internet, and access is often limited by high costs and slow connection speeds. [5] The development of Internet infrastructure is slow, with the main focus on expanding mobile Internet. Economic difficulties and mountainous terrain make it difficult to build infrastructure. In Tajikistan, there are 4.2 million Internet users (of which 1.6 million are social media users). [6]

Less than 20% of the population has access to the Internet. This is the lowest figure in the region. Turkmenistan has 2.59 million Internet users (of which 338 thousand are social media users).

The general situation for the countries of the Central Asian region in terms of Internet use is that the level of Internet coverage in the country is growing, the share of its users is increasing year by year, and the level of use of mobile Internet among the population is high.

Results and Discussion

Social networks are especially popular in the region, especially Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter (now X network). Among Russian social networks, Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki have many users. In addition, the number of mobile messaging (messenger) users is increasing every year. In 2020, Telegram ranked 1st among the most downloaded mobile applications in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In Turkmenistan, it ranked 2nd, and in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it ranked 3rd.

The WhatsApp mobile application ranked 2nd in Kazakhstan, 6th in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and 4th-5th in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. In 2023, the most downloaded applications in Uzbekistan were Instagram (2nd place), Snapchat (3rd place), Telegram (4th place), and WhatsApp (8th place). In Kazakhstan, the Telegram application is also among the 10 most downloaded applications. [7]

The growth of Internet users among the population in the Central Asian region is associated with the following: 1) the penetration of Internet infrastructure into all populated areas; 2) the improvement of Internet quality; 3) the decrease in the cost of Internet access; 4) the need for the population to receive daily information, watch various videos, and receive and send information about work via the Internet. In addition, the development of the digital economy by states and the use of digital diplomacy in their foreign policy are also related to the Internet.

The most recent document describing the US foreign policy relations with the region in recent years is the US State Department report. This report is the “US Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Promoting Sovereignty and Economic Development” by the US State Department’s Bureau of South and Central Asia in February 2019. Based on the priority areas of cooperation set out in this strategy, we can see the prospects for US digital diplomacy in Central Asia in the coming years in the following areas:

First, US digital diplomacy will be to promote and develop cooperation in various fields with the countries of Central Asia, both bilaterally and as a unified region. An example of this is the

analysis of the mechanisms and tools of US digital diplomacy in the region, including the official website of the diplomatic institution, pages on social networks, and other Internet sources. [8]

In particular, over the past 1 year (from January 2024 to December 2024), the official US website in Uzbekistan has provided more than 80 updates, mainly related to cooperation, projects, and assistance of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with Uzbekistan. [9] For example, USAID's innovative initiative to strengthen Uzbekistan's agricultural food security infrastructure and promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth, a new initiative to support Uzbekistan's clean energy goals, USAID's five-year "Every Child Succeeds" project, USAID's Agribusiness Development Project, reports on Uzbekistan from reputable rating and index organizations, support for civil society in Uzbekistan, and more. [10]

Conclusion

Other countries in the region, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, have similar official websites and social media posts. In conclusion, one of the main goals of US digital diplomacy in the region is to improve its positive image, show the positive aspects of cooperation in various fields for the region, and present itself as a country that provides material assistance.

These trends indicate that in the future, the prospects for US digital diplomacy will focus more on this area. The growth of US digital diplomacy in covering the above topics on official websites, social media, and other Internet sources also indicates its prospects.

The United States is also focused on strengthening major projects to strengthen ties with the region. In particular, one of these projects is the C5+1 project. In particular, on January 7, 2021, a joint statement on the Central Asia Investment Partnership was published on the official website of the US embassies in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. According to it, the governments of the United States, the Republic of Kazakhstan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan announced the establishment of the Central Asia Investment Partnership. In order to support the projects, they will make all available efforts to invest at least one billion dollars over five years.

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