

## **Challenges in Conducting us Digital Diplomacy in Central Asia**

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**Abstract: General Background:** Digital diplomacy has become an essential instrument in international relations, particularly for global powers seeking to strengthen their influence through technological means. The United States actively employs digital diplomacy to advance its foreign policy goals, including in strategically significant regions such as Central Asia.

**Specific Background:** Despite possessing advanced digital capabilities, the U.S. faces significant obstacles in implementing its digital diplomacy in Central Asia. Political restrictions, regulatory challenges, and the dominance of Russian and Chinese digital infrastructures hinder U.S. efforts. Governments in the region frequently restrict internet access and social media platforms, citing national security concerns, which further complicates diplomatic engagement.

**Knowledge Gap:** Existing studies have analyzed U.S. digital diplomacy broadly but have not sufficiently examined its effectiveness in regions with restrictive internet governance and competing geopolitical interests. There is limited research on the specific challenges faced by U.S. digital diplomacy in Central Asia's complex political and media landscape.

**Aims:** This study aims to identify the key barriers to U.S. digital diplomacy in Central Asia and evaluate its effectiveness in overcoming these challenges.

**Results:** The findings indicate that regional governments impose strict internet regulations to control information flows, limiting external digital influence. The study also reveals that public reliance on Russian media further reduces the impact of U.S. digital diplomacy.

**Novelty:** This study provides a focused analysis of U.S. digital diplomacy in Central Asia, highlighting the interplay between state control, foreign influence, and digital engagement strategies.

**Implications:** For U.S. digital diplomacy to be effective, it must adapt to regional constraints by fostering local partnerships, respecting national regulations, and providing viable digital alternatives to existing information networks.

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

### **Introduction**

The countries of the Central Asian region are experiencing cases of blocking the Internet, social networks and websites. Each country interprets these cases differently. Experts emphasize that this situation is related to the issue of internal security. For example, in Kazakhstan, there are cases of temporary blocking of the Internet, social networks and websites in order to prevent social unrest or demonstrations. In particular, in early May 2019, social networks and news sites in Kazakhstan stopped working. The government did not comment on this situation.

Experts believe that this may be due to the aim of preventing protests against the early elections scheduled to be held in the country. In particular, on May 1, messages inciting anti-election protests in the cities of Almaty and Astana were widely distributed on social networks. Starting from May 9, 2019, the restrictions on Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Telegram, Whatsapp and the news sites Vlast.kz, TIME.kz, Informburo.kz, HOLA News, Azattyq, "Urals kaya Nedelya" will be lifted.[1]

## **Method**

In September 2019, local mobile networks were down due to protests by the “Democratic Elections of Kazakhstan” socio-political movement in Almaty and Astana. In February 2020, the local Internet was down after ethnic clashes between local Kazakhs and Dungans in the Kurdai district. The government also temporarily blocked WhatsApp. In May 2020, the human rights website Kuresker was blocked. Kazakhtelecom and other government agencies denied involvement in the incident.

In early January 2022, as a result of the unrest in Kazakhstan, messengers, social networks, mobile communications, VPN services, and access to the Internet began to be blocked in several cities. In particular, on January 5, 2022, the Internet and mobile communications did not work in the cities of Almaty and Astana. On January 7, 2022, the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced that he had decided to turn on the Internet in certain regions of the country for a certain period of time in connection with the stabilization of the situation. According to him, this will have a positive impact on the lifestyle of citizens.

In Kazakhstan, authorities are moving to implement legislation requiring foreign internet companies to register in the country. This would allow authorities to more effectively monitor platforms like Google and Facebook and force them to remove material that may be considered a threat. [2]

Experts in the field attribute the blocking of social media and news portals in Tajikistan to the increased activity of the opposition on social media and the growing public discontent with government decisions. In particular, the explosion in the Dangara district in August 2018 and the death of a foreign tourist in this incident led to the closure of various sites and social networks. In early November 2018 and January 2019, due to the events in Khorog (a protest against the shooting of people by the police), social media and news sites were again closed. In May 2019, the Google search engine was blocked, and later Yandex. Cases of temporary Internet shutdowns and blocking of social networks in the country were also observed in 2021 and 2022.

## **Result & Discussion**

The Internet in Turkmenistan is under strict state control. Any criticism of the government and its policies can lead to the blocking of sites. Since 2012, anonymizers that bypass the restrictions on sites have also been blocked. In addition, the Opera mini, Opera mobile, and UC Browser mobile applications have also been blocked. According to Khronika Turkmenistana, blocking of VPN programs has been intensified since the beginning of 2019. According to reports, the number of blocked IP addresses in Turkmenistan has reached 1.2 billion. [6] Due to the mass blocking in the country, VPN services have practically ceased to function. [3]

Kyrgyzstan does not block social media and news sites. Only individual users and groups that spread terrorist ideas are blocked. However, in recent years, according to Freedom House, the country's Internet freedom has slightly decreased. In addition, participants in the IV Central Asian Forum on the World Internet System on May 15 and 16, 2019, noted that the country also blocks criticism of social and political issues on the Internet. According to Freedom House's 2022 report, Kyrgyzstan scored 53 points out of 100. The rating evaluates countries on a one-point scale: the higher the number, the freer the Internet. [4]

The majority of the population of Central Asia is informed about socio-political news happening in the international arena mainly through Russian media. This is due to the fact that local media in the countries of the region are not able to cover international news quickly, the majority of the

population of the region understands Russian and has easy access to Russian channels through special devices.

Emily Goldman, a policy coordinator for cyber and new technologies at the US State Department, highlighted the following five challenges facing the US in the global information space: [5]

First, the US, along with being the most powerful country in the world, has diverse interests. This creates a huge number of stakeholders. They range from economic goals to counterterrorism. All of the US's weaker rivals today focus their activities on a small number of audiences and goals.[6]

Second, the US has an open and transparent political system. Many critical points in democratic debates are useful to the US's adversaries. Debates in Congress about imposing sanctions on a country, even if they fail, damage the state's image. For example, this happened with Pakistan. In addition, the US senator's idea of dividing Iraq into 3 parts was interpreted as the US wanting to change the borders of Iraq and the Middle East. Later, after this idea was published, it further strengthened the assumption that the US could change the borders of the Middle East.[7]

Third, conducting effective digital diplomacy requires understanding other languages and cultures. During the Cold War, it took a long time for the US to acquire the above skills. Now, at the initiative of the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Education, special attention is being paid to the development of linguistic and cultural skills. According to them, other languages, especially Arabic, are important in the fight against global terrorism.

Fourth, the US government system consists of many bureaucratic structures. There is a lack of speed in coordinating the response to an event.

Fifth, the government's own actions are carried out within legal limits. This situation is not limited to US adversaries. Any activity of the US Department of Defense can also be suspended due to conflict or economic decision.

The United States was seen as the savior of Eastern Europe during the Cold War, freeing it from Soviet oppression. Now, US activities in various regions of the world, especially the Middle East, are viewed as an invasion, playing into the hands of US adversaries. There are also problems in monitoring the effectiveness of US digital diplomacy today. For example, it is difficult to find a question about the importance and role of digital diplomacy in foreign policy achievements.[7]

As one of the world leaders in technology and diplomacy, the United States is actively using digital tools to strengthen its position in the world. In Central Asia, which is of strategic geopolitical importance, US digital diplomacy is becoming an important tool in achieving foreign policy goals.[8]

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 (e.g., 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. This limits the impact of US digital diplomacy. Also, countries in the region are wary of external interference and may perceive digital diplomacy as a threat to their independence.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the significant challenges the United States faces in implementing digital diplomacy in Central Asia, where internet restrictions, state-controlled media, and geopolitical competition with Russia and China limit its effectiveness. The findings indicate that regional governments frequently impose digital constraints under the pretext of national security, restricting external influence and reinforcing reliance on domestic or allied foreign information networks. Additionally, the study underscores how public dependence on Russian-language media further reduces the impact of U.S. digital diplomacy efforts. These findings imply that for U.S. digital diplomacy to be more effective, it must navigate regulatory frameworks, foster localized engagement strategies, and offer competitive digital alternatives that align with regional political and social dynamics. Furthermore, the study suggests that strategic partnerships with regional actors and institutions could enhance credibility and acceptance. Given the evolving digital landscape and geopolitical shifts, future research should explore the effectiveness of alternative digital diplomacy approaches, such as localized content creation, multilingual digital engagement, and collaborations with regional technology initiatives, to assess their potential in overcoming existing barriers.

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