

Tech Diplomacy and Avenues for Digital Development in Africa

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Key Points

- Tech diplomacy in Africa is gaining traction as a vital tool for advancing foreign policy goals, fostering regional integration, promoting economic development and attracting investments. It involves leveraging digital technologies and platforms to enhance communication, engage citizens and shape narratives on the global stage.
- Although challenges persist, African nations are actively exploring opportunities to build sovereign digital capabilities and participate in shaping global digital governance.
- Tech diplomacy will be critical to how Africa engages with itself as new and emerging technologies increasingly demand collaboration, whether in cross-border data flows, shared compute infrastructure, talent development and mobility, or digital public goods, including fair taxation regimes that make African countries more competitive globally than with one another.
- A stronger and more cohesive continental approach to tech diplomacy will ultimately enable the continent to build resilience and engage with other regions from a position of strength.

Introduction

Digital technologies have become increasingly central to economic development, societal well-being and national security.¹ This is evident at the international level as the ongoing geopolitical tussle over the rules, standards and values that will govern our digital world continues. Undeniably, control over technology can translate to geopolitical influence. Therefore, issues related to the digital economy, such as internet connectivity, data governance, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence (AI), are moving from being niche topics to gaining mainstream status in foreign policy. Digital diplomacy — defined as the use of digital tools for public diplomacy (Rashica 2018) — is making way for tech diplomacy, a more strategic endeavour to shape the governance of emerging technologies, influence global standards, and engage directly with powerful tech companies that build and control digital infrastructure and services. This can take the form of the appointment of career diplomats as envoys or ambassadors-at-large dedicated explicitly to digital foreign policy.

1 See www.un.org/en/un75/impact-digital-technologies.

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Tech diplomacy (or techno-diplomacy) refers to “the diplomatic management of tech-related issues and the fusing of technology into the heart of a nation’s foreign policy and its engagement with other states” (Manor 2025). Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is primarily state-centric, “tech diplomacy is characterized by a polyilateral approach that brings together governments, private sector entities, civil society organizations, and technical experts in collaborative frameworks for addressing digital challenges” (Moore Aoki 2025; Bjola and Kornprobst 2025).

From a policy perspective, it has also been defined as “the conduct and practice of international relations, dialogue, and negotiations on global digital policy and emerging technological issues among states, the private sector, civil society, and other groups” (Garcia 2022).

According to Ambassador Philip Thigo, Kenya’s first special envoy on technology, “in practice, tech diplomacy matters today because technology shapes geopolitical power and economic development, with AI, data flows, and cybersecurity becoming core instruments of soft power and national strategy. As digital dependency grows, tech diplomacy ensures that states can influence global tech standards, protect citizens’ digital rights, and secure resilient infrastructure.”² Thus, tech diplomacy represents an umbrella term that encompasses digital diplomacy, cyber diplomacy, science diplomacy and economic diplomacy, focusing on interactions between governments and technology actors.

In this policy brief, tech diplomats are defined therefore as practitioners of digital foreign policy, in which “digital” can be understood through a three-part typology: as a topic of diplomacy and foreign policy; a tool for conducting diplomacy and foreign policy; and a factor that shapes the geopolitical environment within which diplomacy occurs (Teleanu and Kurbalija 2022).

This brief aims to interrogate tech diplomacy in the African context, answering the questions of why it matters and how it can be leveraged as a tool for digital development.

2 Interview with Ambassador Philip Thigo, July 2025.

Why Does Tech Diplomacy Matter Now?

Tech diplomacy is becoming an increasingly essential and intentional way for governments to achieve their objectives in the digital age. This trend is a direct result of the fundamental shift in the global distribution of power in the digital sector. A handful of multinational technology companies have become increasingly powerful supranational actors, possessing capital resources, market share, assets and data holdings that rival or exceed those of entire nation-states. These big tech companies include Amazon, Apple, Google, Meta, Microsoft and OpenAI from the United States, as well as ByteDance, DeepSeek, Huawei and Tencent from China, among others.

These tech giants collectively provide services and infrastructure on a global scale, introducing novel issues to the diplomatic agenda ranging from AI ethics, digital rights, data governance, platform regulation, antitrust and competition, cybersecurity, and digital sovereignty. As a result, many governments now have dedicated digital affairs ministries, digital transformation agencies and envoys to engage with both tech companies and other states on these matters.

In 2017, Denmark became the first country in the world to appoint a dedicated career diplomat as a tech ambassador to Silicon Valley, whose mandate was to liaise with both governments and big tech in pursuit of the country's national interests. Several European countries have followed suit. France has had an ambassador for digital affairs since 2018, focusing on issues such as platform regulation, digital taxation and data protection frameworks that align with EU standards. Similarly, Estonia's ambassador-at-large for digital affairs leads that country's tech diplomacy, emphasizing cybersecurity cooperation; supporting countries interested in learning from its extensive adoption of e-government digital infrastructure (such as its data exchange platform X-Road); and advocating for digital sovereignty principles in international fora.

International bodies are also adapting: the UN Secretary-General established an envoy on technology to coordinate global digital cooperation (now the UN Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies) and the United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) hosted a tech diplomacy forum in 2025, focusing on the governance of digital transformation (UNESCO 2025). In addition, informal networks have emerged, such as the EU Digital Diplomacy network, which aims to link "digital ambassadors" across countries to coordinate policy.

The Impact of Digital Economy Maturity on State Approaches to Tech Diplomacy

In traditional foreign policy, larger economies have historically undertaken more foreign policy events or activities than smaller economies (East 1973). Nation-states adopt varying behaviours in foreign policy and diplomacy based on several factors, including the size of their economies, which have an impact on the organizational and institutional capacities at their disposal. Similarly, as tech diplomacy emanates out of digital foreign policy, a nation's digital economy scale directly shapes its diplomatic posture and intent to lead or compete for finite AI resources such as compute and talent. Countries with mature digital sectors — high internet penetration, thriving tech incubators and robust e-commerce — can demand reciprocal market access and co-lead global standard-setting bodies, leveraging their market pull. In most cases, they also tend to attract new investments from big tech companies, including regional centres, labs, hubs and offices. Conversely, emerging digital economies focus on capacity building, seeking technical assistance, infrastructure investment and skills transfer from more advanced partners.

Countries that rank consistently high on various digital development rankings (Bahia and Amaya 2024; International Telecommunication Union [ITU] 2025) and are considered leading digital markets (Dealroom.co 2025), such as Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa, tend to adopt proactive and strategic roles, supported by strong domestic talent and government frameworks. These nations often champion Africa's voice in digital debates, leveraging their credibility and bilateral relations for technological advancements.

They actively participate in global discussions and often shape them. Kenya and Nigeria, for example, are recognized as pioneers in tech adoption and start-up development, which fuels their diplomatic influence (Teleanu and Kurbalija 2022; DiploFoundation 2024). Kenya’s “silicon savannah” status allows it to both host global tech companies and fora and advocate for equitable AI access through initiatives such as the Current AI initiative, ensuring its foreign policy reflects both leadership and partnership goals. Rwanda is another example of a country with a relatively high digital development standing that exerts its influence on digital issues at the continental and global levels. The small nation has positioned itself as a convenor on digital policy, hosting the Global AI Summit on Africa in 2025 and the Smart Africa secretariat, which plays an active role in coordinating work on the continent toward establishing a digital single market in Africa. South Africa’s hosting of the Group of Twenty (G20) in 2025 has also raised the country’s tech diplomacy profile. The country led the establishment of a G20 Task Force on Artificial Intelligence and prioritized digital public infrastructure (DPI) and the AI for Africa Initiative on the G20 digital agenda, seeking to further Africa’s strategic priorities on AI through promoting access to computing power, developing AI talent and fostering partnerships (G20 South Africa 2025a, 2025b).

Conversely, less digitally developed and often smaller countries, such as Benin, Eswatini and Togo, depend on regional alliances and larger partners to amplify their influence. Benin utilizes platforms such as Smart Africa and the Economic Community of West African States to promote its digital initiatives regionally, while Togo has partnered with international organizations, such as the World Bank, for digital infrastructure loans. The latter has also attracted a major submarine cable project led by Google to expand its national connectivity capacity and aligned with India to implement the Modular Open Source Identity Platform DPI for its national digital ID project. While these smaller nations may lack the power to sway global tech policies independently, they collectively advocate for shared interests, such as affordable internet access and digital sovereignty for developing countries. They also carve out niches that bolster their diplomatic stature; Rwanda and Botswana, although not the largest markets, have gained respect by pioneering digital ID and information and communication

technology education, respectively, giving them a voice in international policy debates.

Another distinction appears in how larger and smaller countries handle external tech giants. Larger African countries leverage their market sizes as a tool for agency; Nigeria’s brief Twitter ban in 2021 and subsequent negotiations are one example (Maclean 2022). These actions often lead to diplomatic discussions with the United States, where many of these big tech companies are headquartered. Smaller countries, by contrast, generally lack this direct influence; instead, they seek partnerships and guidance, such as by joining China’s Digital Silk Road or adopting EU-like data protection laws to attract investment.

How Is Tech Diplomacy Carried Out in Africa?

Global models of digital foreign policy strategies have primarily been limited to countries outside Africa, with only a few notable exceptions. Kenya, for instance, has appointed a special envoy on technology, whose mandate includes shaping global AI norms at the international level (Kasujja 2025; Thigo 2025). Kenya’s new foreign policy strategy and sessional paper formally embed tech diplomacy as a key pillar of the country’s diplomacy alongside other traditional areas such as culture, economy, sports and the environment.³ Kenya operationalizes tech diplomacy through the Office of the Special Envoy on Technology and other multi-stakeholder platforms and specialized initiatives. In this regard, the country further strengthens engagement in tech diplomacy around missions that have a concentration of technology-related multilateral organizations and/or big tech company presence such as Austria, Geneva, New York, Los Angeles and Washington, DC.⁴ In July 2025, Kenya launched the TechPlomacy Connective, a diplomatic and innovation platform housed in Nairobi to foster inclusive digital governance and bridge government, industry and civil society. This initiative positions Nairobi as a global centre for technology diplomacy, enabling Kenya to convene

3 See <https://tdgi.org/kenyas-techplomacy-revolution-pioneering-tech-diplomacy-for-africas-inclusive-digital-future/>.

4 Ibid.

ministers, tech CEOs and multilateral agencies on AI ethics, digital trade and green AI policies. Additionally, Kenya's foreign service integrates tech portfolios, sending specialized envoys to hubs such as Geneva and Silicon Valley to negotiate on cybersecurity norms and digital public goods.⁵

While many African states currently lack dedicated digital foreign policy strategies like that of Kenya, several have a digital strategy or a national digital policy document that outlines policy and development objectives to harness digital technologies, innovation and digital transformation, thereby improving the delivery of public services and boosting the local economy. At the domestic level, digital foreign policy strategy tends to be carried out by the ministries responsible for the digital economy.

However, here too, African countries are increasingly strategic about the choice of ministers, with recent appointments more frequently having extensive experience in the tech industry, often working outside the continent before taking up their ministerial roles. There is a link between government objectives and ministers' ambitions to position themselves as global leaders in digital governance issues. One such example is in Nigeria, whose current minister of communications, innovation and digital economy has a background in the tech sector.

Meanwhile, Egypt and South Africa, both countries having highly advanced tech sectors, are frequent and vocal African participants in the UN open-ended working group on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies and the Ad Hoc Committee on Cybercrime (Teleanu and Kurbalija 2022; Global Economic Governance Programme 2023b). Smaller states are also carrying out tech diplomacy; Benin, for instance, pursues a diversified portfolio of best-in-class partnerships through its ministry of digital affairs (Global Economic Governance Programme 2023a).

Leveraging Summity to Engage Big Tech and Governments on Digital Issues

High-profile multi-stakeholder international summits have become and continue to remain venues for advancing tech diplomacy, creating space for emerging digital diplomats to shape global digital governance in a way that serves their national interests. African stakeholders are frequent and active participants in global summity, as these occasions provide spaces for the expression of agency through interactions with other actors, structures and processes (Soulé 2020). These engagements can vary broadly based on the level of influence and the target for engagement on norm setting. Global summits offer an international platform for African leaders and private stakeholders to influence and shape international norms and policies related to various aspects of the digital economy, such as the annual Internet Governance Forum convened by the United Nations or the AI for Good Global Summit convened by the ITU.

A recent noteworthy case of tech diplomacy is the first-ever Tech Diplomacy Forum, convened by UNESCO in June 2025 and dedicated to the "intersection of technology, policy, and international diplomacy" (UNESCO 2025). That forum's agenda, focusing on "digital sovereignty and global governance, AI and ethics in international relations, cybersecurity and international cooperation, and bridging the digital divide" encapsulates many of the key themes that diplomats now grapple with (ibid.). It brought together world leaders, tech diplomats, executives of tech companies and policy makers to chart norms on those issues, illustrating how summity can elevate digital policy discussions to the highest political levels.

African governments increasingly use high-level summits to forge tech partnerships and signal digital commitments such as at Group of Seven or G20 summits (the African Union became a full member of the latter in 2023 and was an observer at the previous summit in India); the UN fora (UNESCO or the UN General Assembly); or the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. For

5 Interview with Ambassador Philip Thigo, July 2025.

example, at the US-Africa Business Summit in June 2025, more than \$2.5 billion⁶ in digital and AI deals were announced, directly engaging US tech firms and African start-ups under government-backed frameworks. African countries such as Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria and Rwanda have been part of the AI Safety Summits and other convenings specific to AI governance. These countries' governments have been central to the development of specific AI declarations and resolutions following AI summits, including the UK AI Safety Summit, the Rwanda Global AI Summit on Africa and the Paris AI Action Summit, in addition to co-founding new technology-related institutions such as the Current AI initiative and the International Network of AI Safety Institutes. Recently, Kenya capitalized on the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Seville, where Kenyan President William Ruto and French President Emmanuel Macron advanced shared AI infrastructure and governance bodies under the 4P (product, price, place and promotion) framework. These fora enable bilateral and multilateral dialogues that bypass lengthy treaty processes, allowing governments to secure rapid commitments from big tech on data centres, cloud services and talent programs.

Africa+1⁷ summitry has also increasingly included digital cooperation and digital policy outcomes as key issues. The 2022 EU-Africa Summit culminated in the launch of an Africa-Europe digital partnership, backed by the European Union's Global Gateway investment program. This initiative is the bloc's response to China's expansive Digital Silk Road initiative. Similarly, the US-Africa Leaders' Summit in 2022 announced the Digital Transformation with Africa initiative with investments in digital infrastructure, digital trade and tech skills training (US Department of State 2023). Meanwhile, several Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summits have led to action plans for digital cooperation, such as the China-Africa Action Plan for Digital Cooperation and Development, an outcome of the 2024 FOCAC held in Beijing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2024). The counterparts in Africa+1 summits often have objectives to boost the participation

of their private sector companies, including tech companies, as a result of the summits.

Tech-focused summitry within Africa is also on the rise. A notable example is the Transform Africa Summit, organized annually by Smart Africa, which convenes heads of state, ministers and industry CEOs to discuss continental tech projects and policy harmonization. Such gatherings act as incubators for Africa-led digital initiatives and help "socialize" the concept of tech diplomacy among African foreign ministries. They represent an intra-African diplomatic space for comparing notes on engaging with big tech companies or global standard-setting bodies.

Using Tech Diplomacy as a Tool for Agency to Strengthen Digital Sovereignty

Tech diplomacy empowers African states to engage in norm setting, which has often been concentrated among a select few countries, and better navigate the current geopolitics that tend to create conditionalities of either West or East. It also enables countries to negotiate terms with global technology companies on key issues including data localization, content monetization (especially in the creative sector), revenue-sharing arrangements and corporate accountability mechanisms to hold tech companies to account in a non-adversarial manner. It also opens up channels for engagement beyond vendor-client relations that tend to confine collaboration by enabling the co-creation of governance frameworks. African countries have leveraged tech diplomacy to create agile multi-stakeholder initiatives with the private sector to deliver specific public goods such as training (the timbuktoo initiative with the United Nations Development Programme); satellite data and earth observations (Digital Earth Africa); and data from administrative and unstructured data sources for development decision making and action (the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data). Countries can embed sustainability and equity principles into tech rollouts. Simultaneously, diplomatic missions facilitate partnerships

⁶ All dollar amounts in this policy brief are in US dollars.

⁷ Africa+1 is a term used to describe high-level summits, international conferences and partnership fora organized collectively between African countries and external powers, often a single non-African entity, for example, China-Africa, US-Africa, EU-Africa and so on.

that build local capacity through skills transfer via exchange programs, as well as support for homegrown start-ups, and incentives for regional data centres to reduce dependency on foreign cloud providers, thus bolstering digital sovereignty.

Several African nations are challenging big tech's decades-long hold on global data by demanding that their citizens' information be stored locally. The move is driven by the realization that countries have been giving away their most valuable resource for tech giants to build a trillion-dollar market capitalization. According to Rest of World, in April 2025, "Nigeria asked Google, Microsoft, and Amazon to set concrete deadlines for opening data centers in the country. Nigeria has been making this demand for about four years, but the companies have so far failed to fulfil their promises. Now, Nigeria has set up a working group with the companies to ensure that data is stored within its shores" (Dosunmu 2025).

Despite the population of Africa making up 18 percent of the global population, the continent holds less than one percent of the world's total installed data centre capacity (Ahmed and Al Saraeji 2023). Several African countries are now spending millions to build new data centres, using government money and international loans. The African Development Bank has become a major funder, seeing these projects as a means for digital sovereignty, a principle also mentioned in the Africa Declaration on Artificial Intelligence following the Global AI Summit on Africa 2025.⁸ Among several ventures, Congo has received \$77 million for Central Africa's first national data centre, and the African Development Bank has invested \$52 million in a \$60 million tech park in Cabo Verde. Africa50, a continental investment firm, has put \$15 million into Egypt's Raya Data Center. The World Bank's International Finance Corporation has invested \$100 million — its biggest investment yet in Africa — into Raxio Group, a data centre company with operations in at least six African countries, including Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia and Uganda.

In recent years, high-grade data centres of companies such as Galaxy Backbone, MainOne, Open Access Data Centres and Rack Centre, as well as Chinese tech giant Huawei, have emerged in Nigerian cities, meeting international

standards for reliability and security. These facilities now serve banks, telecommunications companies and financial technology firms that need fast, local hosting services.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations on how African actors can leverage tech diplomacy to negotiate and safeguard its core shared values:

- Negotiate continent-wide cyber norms and information resilience frameworks to counter cross-border cyber threats; international financial reforms so that development of critical technology infrastructure is fairer (unlike previous engagements that have made the continent highly indebted); data governance and misinformation, including human capital development, and mitigate against the disruption of technology in the labour market. Integrating services such as cloud computing and digital financial services into trade agreements would ensure fair data flow provisions.
- Advocate for sustainable tech standards at fora such as the Conference of the Parties, aligning digital infrastructure with climate goals.
- Shape regional data protection laws (for example, the Africa Data Protection Act) and engage big tech on compliance and internet protocol protection of African knowledge and companies, especially start-ups.
- Mediate joint research centres, innovation hubs and funding mechanisms to accelerate home-grown solutions, strengthening both innovation and diplomatic ties.

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8 See <https://c4ir.rw/docs/Africa-Declaration-on-Artificial-Intelligence.pdf>.

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