

Cult of Personality vs Institutional Diplomacy: A Comparative Study of Leader-Driven Outreach (Modi Era) and MEA-Led Practices (UPA Era)

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Abstract

This paper studies how India's diplomatic communication has changed over time, moving from an institution-based model under the UPA government (2004–2014) to a leader-driven, digitally active model under the NDA government (2014–2024). The UPA period focused on MEA-led communication with emphasis on bureaucratic procedures and policy-oriented messaging. In contrast, the NDA period emphasized personal diplomacy led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, involving international visits, diaspora outreach, and active social media use. Digital platforms evolved from administrative tools into instruments for shaping India's global narrative, creating what is often called a "cult of personality." While this approach increased India's international visibility, it also raised challenges related to institutional independence, centralized messaging, and continuity of policy. The study suggests that combining strong institutions with dynamic leadership is essential for sustainable diplomatic success.

Keywords: India, diplomacy, digital diplomacy, Modi, UPA, MEA, leadership, foreign policy, public diplomacy

1. Introduction

Diplomacy today is no longer limited to traditional statecraft; it is influenced heavily by leadership, media visibility, and digital platforms (Hall 2019). India presents an interesting case to study this transformation, showing a contrast between the UPA era (2004–2014), which was institutional and MEA-led, and the NDA era (2014–2024), which is highly personalized and leader-driven.

Under the UPA, diplomacy followed bureaucratic rules, emphasizing policy consistency, technocratic communication, and minimal leadership visibility (Malone 2011). Social media platforms, such as the MEA's Twitter accounts, were mainly used to share information and manage crises. Leadership was less visible internationally, and India's foreign policy projection relied more on institutional credibility than individual leaders.

The NDA government shifted towards personal diplomacy, led by Prime Minister Modi, using international visits, mass diaspora events, and social media to communicate directly (Pant 2019). Digital diplomacy moved from simple information sharing to constructing narratives, using slogans, visuals, and personal branding. While this increased India's global presence, it raised questions about the balance between leadership and institutions, and the continuity of policy over time.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How did the UPA's institution-focused approach shape India's diplomatic communication from 2004 to 2014?
2. What factors led to the rise of leader-centric diplomacy under Modi?
3. How has digital diplomacy shifted from MEA-led administrative use to PM-led narrative control?
4. What are the main differences between institutional and personality-driven diplomacy in terms of visibility, coherence, and messaging?
5. What are the long-term implications of leader-focused diplomacy on institutional autonomy, soft power, and continuity of policy?

2. Literature Review

Research shows that digital platforms and leadership play a growing role in diplomacy (Bjola and Holmes 2015; Cull 2019). Nye (2004) emphasizes that soft power, visibility, and narrative-building are key alongside traditional state tools. Manor (2019) and Khatri (2020) point out that India shifted from administrative, MEA-led digital diplomacy during the UPA to personalized, narrative-focused communication under Modi.

Hall (2019) and Pant (2019) argue that leader-led diplomacy allows quick influence over foreign audiences and diaspora communities but can reduce institutional authority. Malone (2011) stresses that institutional diplomacy is important for consistency, credibility, and technical soundness in policy.

Two main approaches emerge:

1. Institutional Diplomacy:

Policy-centered, low leadership visibility, and bureaucratic authority.

2. Leader-Centric Diplomacy:

High personal visibility, narrative control, broad engagement, and digital amplification.

A gap exists in empirical research comparing India's shift from UPA institutional diplomacy to Modi-era leader-driven diplomacy, particularly in the digital domain.

3. Methodology

This study uses a **qualitative, comparative approach**. Data include:

- Official documents, speeches, and press releases from MEA and PMO (2004–2024)
- Social media content from Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube
- Secondary academic sources, policy papers, and news reports

Analysis includes **content analysis, comparison of leadership visibility, and evaluation of digital narratives**. The study contrasts UPA-era institutional communication with NDA-era leader-driven communication to identify strategic, stylistic, and impact differences.

4. UPA Era: Institutional Diplomacy (2004–2014)

Key features:

Bureaucratic decision-making: MEA led all communication.

Low leadership visibility: Prime Ministers rarely attended major diplomatic events abroad.

Policy-centered communication: Focus on multilateralism, trade, and issue-based diplomacy.

Digital communication: Social media and website were mainly informational (MEA 2014).

This approach prioritized institutional credibility and policy substance over personal branding or public spectacle.

5. NDA Era: Leader-Centric Diplomacy (2014–2024)

Key features:

Centralized messaging: PM is the main communicator.

Spectacle diplomacy: High-profile visits and mass diaspora events.

Digital narrative leadership: Social media actively used to shape narratives and engage audiences.

Personalized symbolism: National identity and development messages linked to the PM’s image (Hall 2019; Pant 2019).

This approach enhances India’s visibility but depends heavily on one leader.

6. Comparative Analysis

Aspect	UPA (Institutional)	NDA (Leader-Centric)
Decision-making	Collective, bureaucratic	Centralized, PM-led
Leadership visibility	Low	High, symbolic
Digital diplomacy	Informational updates	Narrative-driven, branding
Diaspora engagement	Limited	Extensive, organized
Communication style	Formal, policy-focused	Emotional, personalized
Institutional role	Strong	Reduced autonomy

The comparison shows a clear shift from **bureaucratic authority** to **personalized leadership**.

7. Digital Diplomacy Evolution

UPA Era:

- MEA Twitter accounts (2009 onwards)
- Focus on transparency and information sharing
- Limited narrative influence

NDA Era:

- PM-led social media strategy
- Hashtags, visuals, live streaming
- Direct communication with global audiences and diaspora
- Centralized narrative under the PM

Digital diplomacy shifted from **administrative information sharing** to **strategic narrative building**.

8. Implications and Challenges

Advantages of leader-driven diplomacy:

1. Greater global visibility
2. Quick communication via digital platforms
3. Effective diaspora engagement
4. Enhanced soft power

Challenges:

1. Reduced institutional independence
2. Over-reliance on the Prime Minister
3. Risk to policy consistency
4. Potentially performative diplomacy

9. Conclusion

India's diplomacy has shifted from the UPA's institution-led model to Modi's leader-centric approach. The UPA emphasized policy, institutional authority, and administrative digital engagement, whereas the NDA emphasizes visibility, narrative control, diaspora outreach, and digital branding.

While leader-focused diplomacy strengthens global visibility and soft power, it may weaken institutions and continuity. Effective future diplomacy in India requires a balance between charismatic leadership and strong institutions, maintaining visibility without compromising governance or policy consistency.

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