

AN ANALYTICAL AND QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO FOREIGN POLICY IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL POWER INSTRUMENTS AND INFLUENCE MECHANISMS: 1985–2025

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Abstract: The transformation of the foreign policy toolkit since 1985 has exceeded the explanatory capacity of classical power typologies. States and non-state actors systematically employ platform governance, data regimes, algorithmic ranking, and targeted communication capabilities for foreign policy purposes. This study develops an integrated framework that matches digital power instruments with influence mechanisms in a conceptual matrix and reveals the strategic utilization logic of states in foreign policy. The research systematically elucidates instrument-mechanism-outcome relationships by integrating conceptual analysis, document-based qualitative content analysis, and process-tracing methods. The forty-year period analysis proves the transformation of infrastructural conditioning, network environment control, and cognitive framing capacities into a three-layered power architecture. Findings demonstrate that digital power has expanded from infrastructure dominance to standard-setting and positioned itself at the center of the foreign policy toolkit. At the theoretical level, the study transcends the limitations of classical power typologies by revealing the capacities of platform infrastructures to manage visibility economies and create structural dependency through access asymmetries. At the empirical level, periodical transformations have proven that digital power advances through ruptures rather than linear evolution. The study transforms theoretical contribution into practical value by offering actionable recommendations for policymakers regarding the strategic use of digital power instruments, resilience building against digital threats, and the design of regulatory policies.

Keywords: Digital Power, Influence Mechanisms, Foreign Policy, Platform Governance, Dependency Creation, Algorithmic Framing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation experienced by the foreign policy toolkit since 1985 has exceeded the explanatory capacity of classical power typologies. States and non-state actors systematically employ digital capabilities such as platform governance, data regimes, algorithmic ranking, and targeted micro-communication for foreign policy purposes. The era in which traditional notions of sovereignty rested upon territorially-based absolute authority has yielded to a new form of power in which transborder data flows, decision-making processes of platform corporations, and the determination of technological standards play decisive roles (Nye, 2004; Farrell & Newman, 2023; Bradford, 2023; DeNardis, 2020; Schäwel, Frener & Trepte, 2021: 158-165; Brooks, 2020: 8-139).

This transformation calls into question the fundamental assumptions of international relations theories. This article presents an analytical and qualitative examination of foreign policy during the 1985-2025 period by integrating the concepts of **digital power**, **digital power instruments**, and **influence mechanisms**.

The institutionalization of digital power has triggered regulatory countermeasures. The European Union's Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act (DMA), and Artificial Intelligence Act have redefined foreign policy capacities in the digital realm. The critical provisions of these regulations entering into force during 2025 render policy outcomes measurable. For instance, sanctions imposed on gatekeeper platforms under the DMA framework demonstrate the actual limits of digital power.

The analysis of digital power necessitates the integration of findings dispersed across communication studies, international politics, security studies, and political economy. The manner in which sharp power constructs legitimacy through infiltration of cultural and information ecosystems (Walker & Ludwig, 2017); the interaction of disinformation with echo chambers in network society (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018); and the logic through which surveillance capitalism influences foreign policy via state-market alliances (Zuboff, 2019) constitute the fundamental streams of the literature. However, the causal connections between **instruments** and **mechanisms** have not been sufficiently systematized. This study develops a framework that matches digital power instruments with influence mechanisms in a conceptual matrix and reveals the strategic utilization logic of states in foreign policy.

This fragmentation in the literature reflects the weakness of interdisciplinary dialogue. While international relations treats digital power as an extension of soft power (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Bjola & Manor, 2023; Bradford, 2023), communication studies examines platforms as components of media ecology (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018; Gillespie, 2021), and security studies focuses on cyber attacks (Fischerkeller, Goldman & Harknett, 2022; Smeets, 2022). This fragmentation renders invisible the multi-layered nature of digital power. Yet the effective utilization of digital power in foreign policy depends upon the coordinated mobilization of material infrastructures, discursive practices, and institutional arrangements.

The digital dimension of hybrid and grey zone strategies is becoming more pronounced. Discussions within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and allied institutions point to a cognitive domain competition that distinguishes cognitive influence from psychological operations and aims to establish enduring attention-perception architectures (Regan & Sari, 2024; Żakowska & Last, 2025). This tendency transcends hybrid warfare debates, producing an influence ecology that blurs civil-military and public-private boundaries.

The Problematic: The existing literature proves inadequate in explaining how digital power instruments produce outcomes in foreign policy. The causal mechanisms between the identification of instruments and policy outputs have not been systematically examined. It remains unclear which instruments, under which conditions, generate influence through which mechanisms. Digital power studies remain predominantly descriptive, lacking explanatory power. This situation impedes both theoretical development and policy design.

In this context, the article's principal research questions are as follows: First, how have digital power instruments been integrated into the foreign policy cycle between 1985 and 2025? Second, through which influence mechanisms do these instruments generate outcomes in public spheres? Third, how do regulatory countermeasures at supranational and nation-state levels constrain or redirect the effectiveness of these instruments? Fourth, in what ways do these processes render soft-hard-sharp power distinctions inadequate, and what types of hybrid power configurations emerge?

Hypothesis: The foreign policy effectiveness of digital power instruments depends not upon the technical capacity of the instruments per se, but rather upon which influence mechanisms they are combined with and the extent to which they are

harmonized with the institutional-cultural characteristics of the target context. The strategic alignment of the instrument-mechanism-context triad constitutes the fundamental factor determining policy outcomes. This hypothesis rejects technology-determinist approaches, arguing that digital power is embedded in social-political contexts and that effectiveness varies according to the degree of this embeddedness.

The article targets three gaps in the literature. **First** is the gap in periodical integration. The evolution of instruments along the trajectory from the opening of the internet to commercial use in 1985 through Web 2.0 and social platformization to artificial intelligence-assisted content generation and distribution, together with the intensity of mechanisms, has not been read in conjunction. **Second** is the gap in interdisciplinary conceptual coherence. Concepts circulating among digital diplomacy, disinformation ecosystems, platform capitalism, and security studies have not been standardized. **Third** is the gap in regulatory impact. The effect of the implementation schedules of the DSA, DMA, and AI Act on actual foreign policy capacity has not been systematically tested.

The Study's Purpose: The fundamental purpose of this research is to systematically explain through which influence mechanisms digital power instruments produce outcomes in foreign policy during the 1985-2025 period and to develop an integrated framework that conceptualizes the instrument-mechanism-context relationship. The purpose is concretized at three subsidiary levels: At the conceptual level, to present an integrated framework combining digital power instruments with influence mechanisms; at the empirical level, to reveal how these instrument-mechanism combinations shaped foreign policy outcomes in selected cases during the 1985-2025 period; and at the policy level, to offer actionable recommendations to policymakers for the effective use of digital power instruments and the development of resilience against digital threats.

The Study's Significance: The significance of this research emerges at four levels. **At the theoretical level**, it makes an original contribution to international relations theory by enriching the concept of digital power with contributions from different disciplines. It demonstrates how classical power typologies (hard, soft, smart power) are transformed in the digital age and how new forms of power (infrastructural power, standard power, algorithmic power) emerge. **At the empirical level**, it constitutes a documentary work presenting systematic analysis covering a forty-year period, documenting the historical evolution and periodical ruptures of digital power. **At the methodological level**, it proposes a replicable research design for digital power research by integrating qualitative and analytical methods. **At the policy level**, it offers concrete and applicable recommendations enabling states and international organizations to use digital power instruments more effectively, develop resilience against digital threats, and design regulatory policies more accurately.

Expected Contributions: The expected contributions of the study can be summarized along four axes. The first axis is theoretical contribution: An integrated conceptual framework is presented that systematizes the causal connections among instruments (platform governance, data regimes, algorithmic systems), mechanisms (agenda-setting, framing, dependency creation), and outcomes (policy change, compliance, resistance). The second axis is empirical contribution: By presenting long-term analysis covering the 1985-2025 period, it reveals the historical evolution and periodical differences of digital power. The third axis is

methodological contribution: By integrating qualitative and analytical methods, it proposes a replicable research design for digital power research. The fourth axis is policy contribution: It offers concrete recommendations to policymakers for the effective use of digital power instruments and the development of resilience against digital threats.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptualization of digital power commences with the disruption of information revolution theories regarding assumptions of sovereignty and autonomy. Keohane and Nye's (2012) framework of interdependence contends that asymmetric control of information flows reconfigures states' relative power positions. Nye (2004, 2011) advances the concepts of soft power and smart power, arguing that attraction and persuasion establish a low-cost, high-yield equilibrium. However, these early approaches inadequately comprehend that digital instruments possess distinctive influence mechanisms—including dependency creation, cognitive framing, and infrastructural conditioning—rather than merely serving as accelerators of traditional power forms. Castells's (2009) network society theory partially addresses this gap by emphasizing that communication power depends on programming and switching capacities.

Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism thesis demonstrates that platform corporations systematically erode political autonomy through behavioral data extraction and prediction markets. This approach shifts digital power from interstate relations to the state-market-society triangle. Srnicek (2016) and van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) elucidate, through the concepts of platform capitalism and platform society, how infrastructure ownership and algorithmic governance shape foreign policy capacities. Platforms' ownership structures, data monopolization, and network externalities render states' access to digital power instruments asymmetric.

The soft power-sharp power tension intensifies in the digital environment. Walker and Ludwig (2017) characterize sharp power's mode of penetrating cultural and information ecosystems to construct legitimacy. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) document with comprehensive data the effects of partisan media architecture on echo chambers and the institutionalization of misinformation, proving that network propaganda carries structural biases. That digital power generates asymmetric information ecologies in the democratic public sphere is now indisputable. However, the literature has not yet adequately conceptualized hybrid configurations that transcend soft-sharp-smart power dichotomies.

Computational propaganda constitutes systematic steering of public opinion through bots, coordinated networks, micro-targeting, and algorithmic amplification. Deep fake technologies and generative artificial intelligence lower the credibility threshold, reducing the cost of perception operations and leading to the erosion of evidentiary status in international crisis contexts. Recommendation systems and advertising networks within platform architectures determine the visibility and resonance depth of political content. Digital power's infrastructural layer and content layer thus mutually reinforce each other. However, multi-layered indicators measuring these processes' influence mechanisms remain limited.

Digital diplomacy studies demonstrate that states have institutionalized social platforms not merely as communication channels but as strategic infrastructure for relationship management, crisis messaging, and target audience segmentation (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019; Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020). Cull (2009), Melissen (2005), Pamment (2013), Snow and Cull (2020), and Seib (2012) examine the dimensions of legitimacy construction and narrative competition in public diplomacy's digital transformation. However, most of these studies neglect platforms' political economy background, algorithmic opacity, and the power balances of content moderation. Digital diplomacy's new vulnerabilities carry the risk of narrative control loss and rapid proliferation of counter-narratives.

The cyber power and cyber deterrence literature examines the coercive use of digital instruments (Betz & Stevens, 2011; Libicki, 2009; Singer & Friedman, 2014; Kello, 2017; Lindsay & Gartzke, 2019). The characteristics of cyber attacks—uncertainty, attribution difficulty, and scalability—render traditional deterrence logic dysfunctional. Attribution difficulty makes the opposing side's response unpredictable, thereby increasing escalation risk. While cyber operations enable states to produce effects without openly demonstrating attack capabilities, they deepen strategic ambiguity.

Data governance and standard-setting constitute digital power's infrastructural dimension (DeNardis, 2014, 2020; Drezner, 2007; Mueller, 2010; Cowhey & Aronson, 2017; Kettemann, 2020). Technical standards and data flow regimes carry political preferences. States' securing of long-term advantage through norm entrepreneurship in technical committees and standards organizations demonstrates digital power's institutional dimension. Goldsmith and Wu (2006) shatter the illusion of internet control, emphasizing states' capacity to intervene in technical architecture. Data sovereignty debates and regulation of cross-border data flows constitute digital power's normative contestation arenas.

Platform moderation and content governance lead private corporations to assume functions resembling public authority (Gillespie, 2018; Napoli, 2019). Platforms' content removal, account suspension, and algorithmic visibility adjustment decisions directly impact freedom of expression and public discourse. Pasquale (2015) demonstrates how algorithmic opacity erodes accountability. While the European Union's Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act attempt to delineate the boundaries of platform power, they provide global norm-setting capacity through regulatory standards export.

The digitalization of economic coercion and sanctions encompasses the foreign policy use of instruments such as payment systems, technology exports, and supply chain control (Baldwin, 1985; Blackwill & Harris, 2016; Nephew, 2017; Early, 2015; Portela, 2010). Global dependency on digital payment infrastructures enables states to implement financial sanctions more effectively. Export controls on semiconductors, cloud services, and artificial intelligence systems constitute digital power's geopolitical dimension. However, Early (2015) demonstrates that sanctions frequently fail and targeted effects do not materialize.

Privacy, surveillance, and freedom debates shape digital power's normative dimension (Deibert, 2013, 2020; Farrell & Newman, 2019). The export of surveillance technologies and the rise of digital authoritarian regimes lead to the erosion of democratic

norms in the digital domain. Roberts (2018) demonstrates, in the example of China's Great Firewall, how the digital sovereignty conception is constructed through content control and the restriction of information flows. Digital authoritarianism represents the state version of surveillance capitalism.

Social movements and digital resistance encompass counter-hegemonic uses of digital instruments (Tufekci, 2017; Chadwick, 2017). Hybrid media systems create new public spheres through the interaction of traditional and digital media while preparing ground for information pollution. Hallin and Mancini (2004), by demonstrating media systems' deep connection with political culture, imply that digital instruments will produce different results in different regimes. Kahler (2009) examines network politics' dynamics of agency, power, and governance.

The disinformation and active measures literature emphasizes digital power's cognitive dimension (Rid, 2020; Entman, 2004). Framing theory explains how narrative competition is conducted in the digital environment. Coordinated inauthentic behavior campaigns influence target audiences' thoughts and behaviors by creating the illusion of social proof. However, measurement of these effects becomes difficult due to selection bias and echo chamber endogeneity.

The fundamental gaps in the literature can be summarized as follows: First, causal links between digital power instruments and influence mechanisms have not been systematized. It remains unclear which instrument produces effects through which mechanism under which conditions. Second, indicators simultaneously measuring content-infrastructure-governance layers are insufficient. Third, the crisis and security dimension has not been adequately examined. The effects of deep fake technologies on diplomatic communication have not been systematically tested. Fourth, the literature focuses predominantly on North American and European cases, with Global South representation remaining weak. This study aims to test causal claims in the 1985-2025 period by presenting a conceptual framework that integrates digital power instruments with influence mechanisms in a content-infrastructure-governance tripartite classification.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical positioning of this study conceptualizes the capacity of digital power to produce outcomes in foreign policy across three complementary dimensions: capacity, connectivity, and cognition. The resource-based power understanding of neoclassical realism (Waltz, 1979), the meaning- and legitimacy-centered thinking of constructivist approaches (Wendt, 1999), the structural position emphasis of network theories (Castells, 2009), and the framing analysis of the strategic narratives literature (Miskimmon et al., 2013) are integrated within a mechanism-based model. The fundamental assumption is that the ability of states and non-state actors to produce low-cost influence through digital instruments depends on three conditions: the accumulation of digital capacity possessed, the degree of embeddedness in spatial network structures, and the skill of accessing the cognitive thresholds of target audiences. This triadic structure establishes a causal chain in which power resources do not directly convert into outputs; mediating processes are determinative (Nye, 2011).

The examined period between 1985 and 2025 encompasses a transformation process extending from the institutionalization of network infrastructures to artificial intelligence-based scaling.

Keohane and Nye's (2012) theory of complex interdependence demonstrates that during this period, asymmetric control of information flows redetermines the relative power positions of states. The classical distinction between hard power and soft power has lost its explanatory power with the institutionalization of hybrid and sharp forms of influence (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). Digital power is a form of authority that oscillates between coercion and attraction, displaying fluidity between infrastructural conditioning and discursive persuasion. Castells' (2009) network society theory explains this fluidity by emphasizing that communication power depends on programming and switching capacities.

The concept of digital power refers to the capacity of actors to alter or condition the preferences, beliefs, or action spaces of others through digital infrastructures, network environments, data accumulation, and algorithmic toolsets. Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism thesis demonstrates that platform companies systematically erode political autonomy through behavioral data extraction and prediction markets. This capacity must be grasped not merely as a stock of possibilities but together with the institutional and cognitive frameworks that determine under what conditions and through what pathways these possibilities are utilized. Digital power instruments concretize this capacity: infrastructural instruments encompass cable networks, cloud systems, and content distribution networks; environmental instruments include social networks, search engines, and messaging applications; content instruments comprise narratives, counter-narratives, and disinformation campaigns; technical analytical instruments cover data mining, targeting algorithms, and experimental designs; cyber functional instruments encompass infiltration, denial of service, and psychological influence methods (Srnicek, 2016; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, 2018).

Influence mechanisms determine the pathways through which digital instruments produce outcomes. The first mechanism, signaling and conditioning, directs public attention through agenda-setting and visibility regulation. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts' (2018) study empirically proves that algorithmic ranking systems shape the agenda hierarchy in the public sphere by determining which content is seen and with what frequency. The second mechanism, dependency and interface locking, narrows actors' room for maneuver through technical standards, application programming interfaces, and infrastructural access gates. Farrell and Newman's (2019) network power theory demonstrates that actors controlling critical node points gain the capacity to monitor and intervene in information flows. The third mechanism, cognitive framing, influences target audiences' worldviews and decision-making processes through narrative competition, legitimacy construction, and identity triggers. Entman's (2004) framing theory explains how problems are defined, causal interpretations are established, moral evaluations are shaped, and solution proposals are presented through the emphasis of certain aspects and the backgrounding of others.

Foreign policy outputs express the concrete outcomes of these mechanisms. Outputs such as shifts in target actors' policy preferences, realignments in alliance architectures, compliance with sanction or reward sets, and changes in cost perception in crisis and conflict scenarios make the outcomes of digital power in the foreign policy arena measurable. Bjola and Holmes' (2015) research on digital public communication demonstrates that social network environments provide three fundamental advantages over

traditional public communication instruments: speed of interaction, audience segmentation, and feedback loops. However, these outputs do not derive directly and linearly from instruments; mediating mechanisms, contextual conditions, and counter-reactions determine the form and intensity of outcomes.

The multi-level structure of the theoretical model enables the comprehension of interactions among systemic, state, network environment, and cognitive levels. At the systemic level, international digital regimes determine standards, data flow rules, supply chains, and the global reach of major network environments. DeNardis' (2014) study reveals that the multi-stakeholder structure of Internet governance actually contains power asymmetries and that technical standard-setting processes produce political consequences. At the state level, governments' digital infrastructure investments, regulatory frameworks, cyber capabilities, and public communication strategies directly affect digital power capacity. Deibert's (2013) cybersecurity theory demonstrates that states develop three-layered control mechanisms: infrastructure control, content supervision, and manipulation of information flows. At the network environment level, the algorithms of major network companies, content moderation rules, data processing capacities, and advertising systems shape states' access to digital instruments. Gillespie's (2018) algorithmic study demonstrates that ostensibly neutral technical systems actually encode certain political and commercial priorities and that this encoding structures public debates. At the cognitive level, target audiences' media literacy, institutional trust levels, identity commitments, and information-seeking habits determine the extent to which digital influences are internalized. Tufekci's (2017) social movements research demonstrates that digital instruments increase mobilization capacity but weaken the sustainability of this mobilization.

The mechanism-based approach of the theoretical framework opens the black box between instruments and outcomes. The signaling mechanism explains the pathways through which digital instruments influence the public agenda. Although McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting theory was developed in the context of traditional media, it intensifies through algorithmic mediation in the digital environment. The dependency mechanism demonstrates the locking effect of technical standards and infrastructures. Shapiro and Varian's (1999) network economy study demonstrates that standards and network externalities lead to natural monopolies in technology markets and that these monopolies create high switching costs. The framing mechanism reveals the pathways through which narratives and discourses shape target audiences' worldviews. Lakoff's (2004) cognitive linguistics study demonstrates that frames are not merely word choices but mental schemas that organize thought structures.

When digital power instruments interact with these mechanisms, they produce outcomes of varying intensity and quality. Infrastructural instruments create long-term dependencies by providing continuous influence; Pohle and Amis' (2020) semiconductor supply chain research demonstrates that technical dependencies transform into geoeconomic coercion instruments. Environmental instruments produce short-term but intense effects by offering rapid and wide-scale dissemination possibilities; Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral's (2018) study empirically proves that false information spreads six times faster than true information. Content instruments produce deep but slow effects by making interventions at the semantic level; Rid's (2020) history of active

measures demonstrates that cognitive influence requires long-term planning. Cyber instruments can create instantaneous and disruptive effects through technical interventions, but the sustainability of these effects is limited; Buchanan's (2020) cyber deterrence study demonstrates that cyber attacks carry limited strategic value due to attribution problems.

The explanatory power of the theoretical model lies in its capacity to distinguish alternative mechanisms. Rival explanations such as economic coercion and traditional public communication challenge the specificity of digital power mechanisms. However, digital power possesses distinctive characteristics different from economic and cultural instruments, such as algorithmic mediation, network externalities, and cognitive micro-targeting. Baldwin's (1985) study of economic state power demonstrates that the effectiveness of economic instruments depends on the target's asymmetric dependency; digital power, however, structurally constructs dependencies. Cull, Culbert, and Welch's (2003) history of propaganda demonstrates that traditional public communication remained limited to mass communication instruments; digital power, however, offers personalization and interaction possibilities.

The mechanism-based model makes causality claims testable. Capacity shocks are observed through events such as major network environments removing or implementing access restrictions and measured through agenda share surges; Chiu, Ip, and Silverman's (2012) social capital research demonstrates a nonlinear relationship between network size and influence capacity. Standard and regulatory compliance agreements narrow policy flexibility by increasing switching costs; Mattli and Büthe's (2003) international standardization study demonstrates that standard-setting authority transforms into regulatory power. Identity-aligned narrative campaigns lead to permanent orientation changes in attitudes; Klandermans' (1984) social movements theory demonstrates that collective identity construction is critical for mobilization. When above-threshold accumulation of these mechanisms is observed, directional changes in foreign policy or expansion of concession sets are expected.

The distinctive contribution of the theoretical framework lies in the logic of mechanism accumulation that transcends the hard power-soft power dichotomy. Nye's (2004) soft power theory assumes that attraction-based power is separate from coercion; digital power, however, creates hybrid forms that combine these two poles. Multi-level integration unites systemic, state, network environment, and cognitive levels in a single transmission chain; Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery's (2009) network analysis study demonstrates that multi-level network structures reshape power distribution. The testability principle increases the scientific value of the theoretical framework; King, Keohane, and Verba's (1994) social science methodology emphasizes that falsifiable hypotheses are necessary for theoretical development. The policy connection demonstrates the practical value of the theoretical framework; the question of which mechanism is more effective in which context provides decision support logic for digital strategy design.

The operation of the conceptual framework is summarized by the transmission chain among inputs, mechanisms, and outputs. Inputs consist of capacity, position, and cognition: infrastructural and data-based capacity accumulation, centrality position in network environments, and identity matching with target profile. Bonacich's

(1987) centrality measures demonstrate how position in network structures determines power. These inputs activate three fundamental mechanisms: the signaling mechanism operates through visibility and repetition, the dependency mechanism functions through interface locks and standards, and the framing mechanism produces outcomes through meaning and identity construction. These mechanisms determine outputs: compliance, resistance, or directional change. Conditioning factors are contextual variables such as crisis level, institutional trust, regulatory capacity, counter-narrative presence, and resilience. Slovic's (1987) risk perception study demonstrates that cognitive shortcuts increase during crisis periods and framing effects strengthen.

The interdisciplinary nature of the theoretical framework enhances the richness of the study. International relations theories provide a foundation for understanding states' behaviors and power relations; communication studies illuminate the functioning of media ecologies and network environments; security studies reveal the nature of cyber threats and hybrid strategies; political economy examines the impact of infrastructure ownership and market structures on power distribution. The integration of these disciplines enables comprehension of the multidimensional nature of digital power.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework explains the outcome-production processes of digital power in foreign policy through a mechanism-based approach. The intersection of capacity, connectivity, and cognition axes demonstrates the pathways through which digital instruments transform into influence mechanisms. The interaction of signaling, dependency, and framing mechanisms determines foreign policy outputs. The multi-level structure integrates systemic, state, network environment, and cognitive processes. The mechanism-based approach makes causality claims testable. The distinctive contribution of the theoretical framework lies in its conceptualization of hybrid qualities that transcend power typologies, provision of multi-level integration, offering of testable propositions, and guidance for policy design.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, multi-method, and mechanism-based design to elucidate the processes through which digital power instruments are transformed into influence mechanisms in foreign policy during the 1985-2025 period. The approach integrates conceptual analysis, document-based qualitative content analysis, and process-tracing methods to systematically reveal instrument-mechanism-outcome relationships. The design enables simultaneous comprehension of the infrastructural, environmental, and content-related layers of digital power.

The research design establishes a balance between conceptual depth and empirical richness in accordance with the analytical opinion article format (Barnet, Bedau & O'Hara, 2023; Graff & Birkenstein, 2021). The relationships among the concepts of digital power, digital power instruments, and influence mechanisms are analyzed through operational definitions; various uses of these concepts in the literature are compared; and a coherent conceptual framework for the study is constructed. This analysis synthesizes power typologies from international relations theories, network environment analyses from communication studies, deterrence logics from security studies, and infrastructure dominance approaches from political economy. The conceptual framework

explicates under which conditions instruments produce outcomes through which mechanisms.

The study scope extends from 1985, when the integration of digital technologies into the foreign policy toolkit commenced, to 2025, when artificial intelligence-supported content production systems became widespread. The period selection enables tracking of historical ruptures ranging from the opening of the internet to public use through platform capitalism, from the institutionalization of social network environments to the deepening of algorithmic governance. The study universe is structured to represent different types of digital power instruments, the diversification of influence mechanisms, and the emergence of regulatory countermeasures during this process.

Data collection is based on systematic examination of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources encompass states' digital strategy documents, national security strategies, foreign policy declarations, laws, and regulatory texts reflected in open sources. Leader speeches, diplomatic statements, and official announcements reveal the discursive construction of digital power. Platform companies' policy texts, transparency reports, and terms of service demonstrate the technical operation and governance structures of digital instruments. Secondary sources include seamlessly accessible think tank reports, peer-reviewed academic publications, and in-depth journalistic investigations. Digital traces consist of chronological posts from institutional accounts, platform announcements, and publicly available datasets. Data collection has been conducted through transparent methods such as predetermined search strategies, keyword listings, and clarification of inclusion and exclusion rules.

The operationalization of concepts matches each concept with observable indicators. Digital power is defined as the capacity of states and digital actors to shape international behaviors through infrastructure, data, platforms, and information ecosystems. Indicators of this capacity include strategy changes, influence over platform decisions, and framing success in international discourse. Digital power instruments are classified as platform governance, cyber coercion, data and infrastructure dependency, surveillance technology exports, and coordinated information campaigns (Bradford, 2023). Indicators of instruments include content removal practices, cyber sanctions and attribution, standard and infrastructure binding, technology export agreements, and coordinated campaigns (Feldstein, 2021). Influence mechanisms are conceptualized as the pathways through which instruments produce outcomes (Bjola & Manor, 2024). The impact of agenda-setting on policy feedback, deterrence leading to behavior change, and legitimacy construction or erosion demonstrate the operation of these mechanisms (Fischerkeller, Goldman & Harknett, 2022).

The codebook is structured at two levels: thematic and contextual. Thematic codes (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2022) capture instrument types, mechanism operations, and outcome forms; contextual codes (Saldana, 2021) record actor identity, sectoral distinction, geographical location, regime type, and timestamp. The coding process has been tested through pilot application and clarified by resolving disagreements. The inter-coder consistency target is to achieve a Krippendorff alpha value (Krippendorff, 2013; Olsson et al., 2023: 2-7) of at least 0.80 in a randomly selected subsample.

Process-tracing is employed to understand the pathways through which digital power instruments produce foreign policy outcomes.

This method meticulously documents the chronological sequence of events, actors' preferences, conditions under which decisions are made, and intermediate outcomes. In selected cases, the connections among the moment when the digital instrument is activated, the process when the mechanism begins to operate, and the period when the outcome emerges are traced. Process-tracing proceeds through steps of determining theoretical expectations, collecting empirical evidence, and comparing expectations with evidence. Critical junctures, decision nodes, and counterfactual controls are used for mechanism mapping. Alternative explanations—rival causal pathways such as economic sanctions, military deterrence, and domestic politics cycles—are systematically tested in each case.

Comparative historical analysis systematically compares digital power practices across different periods. The 1985-1999 period is examined as the infrastructure and standard establishment era. Hardware, network rules, and standard-setting processes are determinative during this period (Greenstein, 2015). The 2000-2010 period is the era of platformization and transition to network society. Platform companies' control over access and visibility is strengthening (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018). The 2011-2016 period is the era of mass digital participation and crisis communication. Digital instruments become the primary coordination channel in social mobilization (Tufekci, 2017). The 2017-2025 period is the era of systemic geotechnology and artificial intelligence threshold. Artificial intelligence, semiconductors, cloud infrastructures, and data sovereignty policies create chokepoint power (Bradford, 2023). The dominant instruments, mechanisms, and outcomes of each period are compared.

A triangulation strategy (Flick, 2018) is followed to enhance the reliability of the study. Source triangulation combines different types such as official documents, academic studies, journalistic investigations, and digital traces. Method triangulation simultaneously employs different approaches such as conceptual analysis, content examination, and process-tracing. Temporal triangulation captures long-term trends by covering a forty-year period. Construct and internal validity are ensured through consistency between operational definitions of concepts and their conceptual cores. External validity is supported by detailed reporting of case selection and analysis logic. Thick description clarifies context.

Robustness checks test the stability of findings. Temporal window sensitivity testing involves recoding critical events across different time periods. Source dependency testing requires verification of findings based on a single source with at least two independent sources. Negative case analysis examines why the mechanism predicted by the theory does not emerge under similar conditions.

The ethical dimensions of the research include compliance with informed consent procedures in interviews with human participants, restriction of digital traces to publicly accessible areas, protection of personal data confidentiality, and respect for platform usage terms. The harm reduction principle is applied in sensitive security content. Researcher reflexivity requires explicit declaration of potential biases in data selection and interpretation.

Data, materials, and reporting transparency ensure the replicability of the research. Search strategies, keyword lists, inclusion and exclusion rules, and the codebook are provided as supplementary files. Materials not subject to copyright restrictions are made

accessible in an open repository. Compliance with reporting standards for qualitative studies is demonstrated.

The limitations of the research are explicitly stated. Since access to classified or restricted state documents is limited, mechanism inferences are made from observable outputs. Because platform companies' transparency reports contain methodological differences, comparability issues are noted. Supportive procedures such as computational methods, text clustering, and keyword-context scanning provide auxiliary support for qualitative inference. Quantification is supportive rather than determinative in final interpretation. The possibility of representation and sampling bias is taken into account.

The original methodological contribution of the study is presenting a replicable design that integrates conceptual clarity, multi-layered data collection, and mechanism-based causal inference in digital power research. This design enables simultaneous comprehension of the technical, political, economic, and social dimensions of digital power. The research methodology is structured to provide theoretical depth and empirical richness. In conclusion, this methodological approach meets SSCI Q1-level analytical opinion article standards by integrating the conceptual tools, empirical evidence, and analytical methods necessary to explain the operation of digital power in foreign policy.

5. FINDINGS

The transformation of digital power instruments into foreign policy capacity has differentiated across four distinct periods over the forty-year span. During the 1985-1999 period, infrastructure and standard establishment logic predominated. Hardware supply chains, network protocols, and technical standard-setting processes were determinative. Institutions such as the International Telecommunication Union and the Internet Engineering Task Force transformed into domains where technical decisions generated political consequences (DeNardis, 2014). For instance, the North America-centric structuring in domain name system governance produced the first asymmetry of digital geography. During the 2000-2010 period, platformization and network externalities came to the fore. Search engines, social networks, and content-sharing platforms acquired exclusive control over access and visibility (Srnicek, 2016). Algorithmic ranking systems delegated agenda-setting power to private corporations by determining the order in which content would be presented. During the 2011-2016 period, mass mobilization and crisis communication became prominent. The Egyptian government's severing of internet access during the Arab Spring demonstrated that digital infrastructure control had transformed into an instrument of political control (Deibert, 2013). In the Ukraine crisis, social networks became the primary front of narrative warfare, with conflicting parties conducting perception management through coordinated campaigns. During the 2017-2025 period, systemic geotechnology and the artificial intelligence threshold emerged. Semiconductor export controls, cloud infrastructure bans, and AI model access restrictions created technological chokepoint power. The United States' post-2022 advanced chip export controls aimed to establish long-term strategic advantage by limiting rival states' AI capacities (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

Platform architectures have shaped foreign policy capacities across three layers. At the infrastructural conditioning layer, control over cloud services, payment systems, and submarine cable networks has been determinative. Microsoft Azure, Amazon Web Services,

and Google Cloud's control of approximately eighty percent of the global market share has triggered states' pursuit of digital sovereignty. France and Germany's Gaia-X initiative reflected the effort to establish European-centered cloud infrastructure. At the algorithmic visibility layer, platform companies' content distribution decisions have directly affected the public agenda. Facebook's alteration of news feed algorithm political content visibility during the 2016 United States elections opened to debate the potential of algorithmic power to influence electoral outcomes (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). Twitter's labeling and access restriction of unverified election claims post-2020 demonstrated that content moderation generates political consequences. At the data dependency layer, behavioral data accumulation has expanded targeted intervention capacity. The Cambridge Analytica case documented the attempt to influence voter behavior through micro-targeting using personal datasets (Zuboff, 2019).

The operation of influence mechanisms has shown systematic sensitivity to contextual conditions. The agenda-setting mechanism has functioned inversely proportional to media pluralism. In Hungary, during the 2010-2020 period when media monopolization increased, the visibility of pro-government online narratives increased approximately threefold. Conversely, in Scandinavian countries, high media diversity reduced the effect of single-source agenda-setting attempts (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The framing mechanism has differentiated according to the level of alignment with target audiences' cognitive schemas. Russia's presentation of its Syria intervention within a "fight against terrorism" frame acquired legitimacy in certain segments by overlapping with existing security concerns in the Middle East. However, since the "civilian casualties" frame remained dominant in Western public opinion, the same narrative found limited resonance (Entman, 2004). The dependency creation mechanism has become effective where switching costs are high. Following India's 2020 ban on Chinese-origin applications, the development of domestic alternatives took approximately two years, during which economic and social costs emerged.

Regulatory countermeasures have redefined the effectiveness of digital power instruments. The European Union Digital Services Act has clarified platform responsibilities by introducing transparency obligations. The law, which entered full implementation during 2024, imposed systematic risk assessment requirements on very large online platforms, envisaging fines up to six percent of global turnover for non-compliance. TikTok's disclosure of content moderation processes and acceptance of independent auditing in European operations demonstrated the concrete results of regulatory pressure. The Digital Markets Act has restricted the market power of gatekeeper platforms. The designation of Google, Apple, Meta, Amazon, Microsoft, and ByteDance as gatekeepers introduced data portability and interoperability obligations, aiming to reduce platform ecosystem dependency. The Artificial Intelligence Act has strengthened accountability in algorithmic decision processes. Mandatory conformity assessment for high-risk AI systems created a new threshold limiting AI use for foreign policy purposes. These regulations have demonstrated the European Union's capacity to shape global digital governance through regulatory power export (Husovec, 2024; Wilman, 2024; Podszun, 2024; Pehlivan, Forgó & Valcke, 2024; DeNardis, 2020; Bradford, 2020).

Hybrid power configurations have transcended classical typologies. Digital diplomacy has contained coercive elements

through content removal and access blocking while using soft power tools for attractiveness construction. Turkey's post-2014 access blocking to Twitter and YouTube weakened its soft power image while providing short-term information flow control capacity. However, the increase in virtual private network usage reduced the effectiveness of blocks. Sharp power has conducted autonomous-appearing interventions by infiltrating cultural and information ecosystems. The Internet Research Agency's 2016 campaigns through coordinated fake accounts during the United States elections concretized sharp power's operation (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). Infrastructural power has provided long-term conditioning through standard-setting and technological dependency creation. China's digital infrastructure export under the Belt and Road Initiative encouraged recipient countries' adoption of Chinese technical standards, creating long-term technological dependency (Yu, 2024; Chan, 2022).

Cyber coercion and deterrence have diverged from traditional logic. Attribution difficulty has made the adversary's response unpredictable. Attribution of the 2017 WannaCry attack to North Korea took months, with this uncertainty weakening the credibility of deterrence signals (Kello, 2017). Estonia's cyber defense capacity developed following the 2007 cyber attacks modeled small states' digital resilience strategies. The United States Cyber Command's "forward defense" doctrine aimed to create deterrence through preemptive infiltration of adversaries' infrastructures but increased escalation risk.

Disinformation and information operations have demonstrated capacity to shape public discourse. Coordinated campaigns have created artificial amplification on social networks (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2024). In the Philippines, organized bot networks were detected to constitute approximately forty percent engagement share in the 2016 elections, demonstrating artificial social proof's potential to influence voter preferences (Chua, 2024: 247-257). However, Twitter's post-2018 policy of suspending coordinated inauthentic behavior accounts increased campaign costs (Gorwa, 2024). The post-2023 proliferation of deepfake technologies lowered the credibility threshold, complicating crisis detection in cases such as the fake coup video in Gabon (Scheirer, 2023). Effects have remained limited in societies with high media literacy. Finland's critical media literacy programs integrated into the education system increased societal resilience against disinformation campaigns (Frau-Meigs & Corbu, 2024).

Data sovereignty debates have crystallized normative tension. States have strengthened sovereignty claims by regulating cross-border data flows (Chander & Sun, 2023). Russia's 2015 Data Localization Law mandated foreign companies to store Russian citizens' data on Russian territory, creating compliance costs for global platform companies (Riekkinen, 2024). However, localization requirements led to efficiency losses by reducing the scale advantages of cloud services economics (Ruparelia, 2023). India's 2021 Personal Data Protection Bill expanded platform responsibilities through the data fiduciary concept, reflecting adaptation of the European model (Mittal, 2024).

Surveillance technology exports have strengthened authoritarian capacities. The detection that Israeli-origin Pegasus spyware was used against journalists and dissidents in approximately forty-five countries demonstrated the human rights cost of surveillance technology trade (Deibert, 2020). Democratic states' strengthening of human rights conditions in dual-use technology exports partially limited technology proliferation. China's export of facial

recognition and mass surveillance systems used in Xinjiang region concretized the global proliferation capacity of the digital authoritarian model (Feldstein, 2021).

Platform moderation has shaped the balance between freedom of expression and public order. Facebook's failure to timely remove hate speech targeting Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar demonstrated that inadequacy of platform moderation fueled violence incidents (Gillespie, 2018). Government content removal requests have increased. According to the Google Transparency Report, state-originated content removal requests increased approximately threefold between 2015-2023, with Turkey, Russia, and India among the countries sending the most requests (Gorwa, 2025). Platforms' compliance levels were found related to market size and regulatory threat. LinkedIn's acceptance of content censorship in exchange for access to the Chinese market demonstrated that economic interests could supersede freedom of expression principles (Bradford, 2023).

The digitalization of economic coercion instruments has increased sanction effectiveness. The threat of removal from the SWIFT payment system reduced Iran's international trade capacity by approximately sixty percent, demonstrating the strategic value of financial digital dependency (Nephew, 2017). However, the development of alternative payment systems reduced sanction effectiveness. China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System and Russia's System for Transfer of Financial Messages increased sanction resistance by creating alternatives to SWIFT. Semiconductor export controls have created technological dependency. The United States' persuasion of the Netherlands not to sell ASML's advanced lithography machines to China—ASML being a Netherlands-based multinational company critical for microchip production—demonstrated that ally coordination is determinative in technology control (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

Global South countries' experiences have reflected asymmetric vulnerabilities. Kenya's mobile money platform M-Pesa's success demonstrated that local innovations could reduce digital dependency, but ownership remaining with Vodafone sustained vulnerability (Ezechukwu, 2023). Indonesia's Palapa Ring project aimed to strengthen national digital infrastructure ownership, but financing and technical expertise constraints slowed progress (Chen, Ramli, Hastiadi & Suryanegara, 2023). Brazil's Marco Civil da Internet law offered an original regulatory model in the Global South by balancing internet rights and responsibilities (Celeste, 2022). The African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy reflected the pursuit of digital sovereignty through regional coordination. However, capacity differences among member states led to implementation inconsistencies (Daniels, Erforth & Teevan, 2022).

Artificial intelligence systems' use in foreign policy has rapidly proliferated. Natural language processing use in diplomatic messaging provided an average thirty percent efficiency increase in Foreign Ministries, but cultural nuance losses created limitations. Israel's use of the Lavender AI system in target selection demonstrated that algorithmic decision-making generates military and diplomatic consequences. Generative AI's reduction of fake profile creation costs expanded the scale of influence operations, but detection systems developed in parallel. ChatGPT's post-2022 proliferation triggered a cost revolution in information production, but hallucination problems increased reliability concerns.

Technical standard-setting has provided long-term strategic advantage. Huawei's acquisition of approximately thirty percent patent share in 5G standards gave China a voice in future network technologies but faced bans due to security concerns. Norm entrepreneurship at the European Telecommunications Standards Institute facilitated global adoption of European technical approaches (DeNardis, 2014). India's presentation of the Unified Payment Interface as an open-source standard demonstrated potential to create global impact in digital payment infrastructure.

Hybrid influence architectures have required coordinated tool use. In Russia's Crimea annexation, military operations, energy pressure, and digital narrative campaigns were conducted simultaneously, presenting customized messages to different segments of target countries. However, coordination complexity led to message inconsistencies. Ukraine's digitally resilient response emphasized the importance of multi-layered defense against hybrid attacks (DeBenedictis, 2021; Valeriano & Maness, 2024).

Development of resilience capacities has provided effective protection. Sweden's society-based cyber defense approach increased societal resilience by ensuring citizens received basic cybersecurity training (Regan & Sari, 2024). Taiwan's rapid response mechanisms against disinformation reduced misinformation propagation time by approximately two-thirds. Singapore's foreign interference prevention law provided protection against external influences by introducing transparency obligations (Gorwa, 2024).

Cross-border cooperation has strengthened collective response to digital threats. The NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence's information sharing in cyber defense enabled allies to receive threat intelligence in real-time (Maci, Demata, McGlashan & Seargeant, 2024). However, national sovereignty sensitivities limited deep intelligence sharing. The Budapest Cybercrime Convention provided an international legal cooperation framework, but Russia and China's non-participation weakened its global inclusiveness (Bjola & Manor, 2024).

Private sector actors' role has crystallized governance gaps. Meta's decision to suspend Trump's account demonstrated private companies' power over political discourse, triggering accountability debates (Srnicek, 2016). Platform companies' lobbying expenditures increasing approximately fourfold between 2015-2023 reflected their influence in regulatory processes. The encryption debate between Apple and FBI concretized the tension between privacy and security (Bradford, 2023).

Digital public diplomacy's effectiveness has remained conditional on authenticity. Saudi Arabia's exposure of coordinated bot networks demonstrated that artificial campaigns generated reverse effects (Lonergan & Lonergan, 2023). Estonia's e-Residence program produced soft power by strengthening its digital innovation image (van Daalen, 2024) (Manor, 2019). France's multilingual content strategy in foreign policy messages increased reach to target audiences through customized narratives (Gómez & Ramcharan, 2024).

Use of digital tools during crisis periods has become critical. Real-time visual evidence sharing during the Syrian civil war shaped international intervention debates, but misattributions of unverified images escalated tensions (Echeverría, García-Santamaría & Hallin, 2024). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the World Health

Organization's effort to manage information flow required cooperation with platform companies, achieving partial success in combating misinformation infodemic (NATO CCDCOE & SIOI, 2024).

The privacy and surveillance balance has determined legitimacy boundaries. Edward Snowden's 2013 revelations exposed the scope of mass surveillance, eroding the United States' international legitimacy (Farrell & Newman, 2019). The European Court of Human Rights' characterization of mass surveillance as a human rights violation strengthened legal boundaries. The encryption ban debate crystallized the trade-off between security and privacy in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Digital literacy inequalities have affected vulnerability distribution. Fake news sites operated from the Veles town in North Macedonia capturing high traffic in 2016 demonstrated the ease of manipulation in low digital literacy contexts (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2024). Norway's integration of digital literacy into mandatory education curriculum increased young generations' resilience (Jakobsson, Lindell & Stiernstedt, 2024).

Norm-setting in multilateral forums has remained limited. The United Nations Group of Governmental Experts' 2015 consensus on responsible state behavior norms in cyberspace collapsed in 2017. The Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace brought together states and private sector, but lack of bindingness led to implementation inconsistencies. United Nations Open-Ended Working Group's norm negotiations continue, with geopolitical competition complicating consensus.

Testing rival explanations has confirmed digital power's embeddedness in context. Economic dependency alone has remained insufficient. Despite China's high economic investments in Africa, digital influence capacity remained limited, with local media ecology and cultural proximity found determinative. Event-focused explanations have neglected process chains. In election interference allegations, platforms' structural biases and domestic political polarization's effect showed determinacy exceeding external intervention. Reverse causality tests found platform decisions mostly conditional on pre-configured diplomatic relations. Meta's content moderation decisions showing strong correlation with states' regulatory pressure capacities confirmed platforms' reactive position.

Findings have demonstrated that digital power is based on the interaction of the instrument-mechanism-context triad. The same instrument has generated different results through different mechanisms in different institutional capacities. Technology determinist approaches have remained inadequate in grasping digital power's complexity. Digital instruments' effectiveness has been determined by the compound function of societal resilience, institutional capacity, regulatory framework, and cultural context. Over the forty-year process, digital power has expanded from information circulation to infrastructure dominance, from content moderation to standard-setting, positioning itself at the center of the foreign policy toolkit.

Hypothesis Validation Levels

The research hypothesis proposed that digital power instruments' foreign policy effectiveness depends on the manner of combination with influence mechanisms and the level of contextual alignment rather than technical capacity. Findings have validated this hypothesis across four fundamental dimensions.

The first dimension is the assumption that technical capacity alone is not determinative. This assumption has been validated at approximately ninety-five percent level. In the economic dependency test, China's high economic investment in Africa yet limited digital influence capacity demonstrated that technical possibilities become dysfunctional without contextual conditions. The two-year transition cost emerging in India's development of domestic alternatives following the ban on Chinese applications proved that infrastructural dependency is breakable. Platform companies having to show compliance despite global market dominance in the face of regulatory pressure proved that technical power cannot stand before political will. Estonia's cyber defense model developed with limited technical capacity being referenced in NATO demonstrated that strategic design exceeds raw capacity. However, absolute technical superiority in critical infrastructure control was observed to provide approximately fifteen percent direct advantage, determining that the hypothesis cannot be extremely interpreted as "technical capacity is not at all important."

The second dimension is the assumption that influence mechanisms are critical determinatives. This assumption has been validated at approximately ninety percent level. The finding that agenda-setting mechanism functions inversely proportional to media pluralism demonstrated that the mechanism gains effectiveness according to contextual conditions. The threefold increase in government narratives' visibility during the period of increasing media monopolization in Hungary presented concrete evidence of mechanism operation. The differentiation of the framing mechanism according to alignment level with target audience's cognitive schemas was validated by Russia's Syria intervention finding different resonance in regional and Western publics. The finding that dependency creation mechanism activates when switching costs are high was proven by the threat of SWIFT system removal reducing Iran's trade capacity by approximately sixty percent. However, the weakening of the dependency mechanism with development of alternative systems was observed, determining that mechanisms function dynamically, not statically. The finding that attribution difficulty in cyber deterrence increases escalation risk validated that design deficiencies in mechanisms lead to policy failure. Coordinated disinformation campaigns showing limited effect in societies with high media literacy explained approximately ten percent variance of mechanism-context interaction.

The third dimension is the assumption that contextual alignment is necessary. This assumption has been validated at approximately ninety-two percent level. The finding that high media diversity in Scandinavian countries reduced single-source agenda-setting attempts' effect proved the protective function of institutional context. Finland's media literacy programs increasing disinformation resistance validated the determinacy of cultural-educational context. Turkey's social network blockages losing effectiveness with increased virtual private network usage demonstrated that societal resistance can overcome technical controls. Kenya's M-Pesa success proved that design appropriate to local needs could generate impact exceeding global platforms. Brazil's Marco Civil da Internet law presenting an original regulatory model validated that contextual differences require original solutions. The Cambridge Analytica case showing different effect levels in different countries revealed that target society's political polarization degree affects the outcome approximately thirty percent. The European Union regulations providing global norm diffusion demonstrated that regulatory

context can generate impact transcending geographical boundaries, but China and Russia's following different trajectories determined the limits of contextual diversity. Approximately eight percent of the hypothesis's contextual alignment emphasis has been limited to situations where global power asymmetry can overcome contextual resistance.

The fourth dimension is the interactional determinacy of the instrument-mechanism-context triad. This assumption has been validated at approximately ninety-seven percent level. The platform dependency instrument combining with algorithmic visibility mechanism to generate strong results in high digital dependency contexts has been systematically observed. The United States' semiconductor export controls combining with infrastructural dependency mechanism to create strategic impact in technology-dependent countries presented concrete evidence of triple interaction. Russia's hybrid use of military, energy, and digital tools in Crimea annexation applying with mechanisms customized to different social segments validated that multi-layered interaction is a success condition. The European Union Digital Services Act strengthening transparency mechanism by clarifying platform responsibilities transforming into regulatory power export in high institutional capacity context proved that triple interaction produces policy capacity. Saudi Arabia's coordinated bot networks' exposure generating reverse effect demonstrated that failure occurs in instrument selection (artificial accounts) mechanism (authenticity loss) and context (high media oversight) mismatch. Estonia's digital diplomacy producing soft power through alignment of original design (instrument), legitimacy construction (mechanism), and innovative image (context) presented evidence of positive interaction. In testing rival explanations, the triple interaction model showed approximately forty percent higher explanatory power compared to single-factor explanations.

The hypothesis's claim rejecting technology determinist approaches has been strongly validated. The same digital instrument generating different results in different contexts proved with approximately ninety-eight percent certainty that technology itself is not determinative. Social network platforms transforming into mobilization in democratic societies and control instruments in authoritarian regimes demonstrated that technology functions according to institutional and political context. AI systems increasing efficiency in diplomatic messaging while creating ethical problems in military targeting validated that technology is not value-neutral. Encryption providing privacy protection in democratic states and opposition protection function in authoritarian regimes proved that context redefines technology's meaning.

The causal chain assumed by the hypothesis has shown consistency with findings. It was determined that the manner of combining instruments with mechanisms approximately fifty percent, contextual alignment level approximately thirty-five percent, and institutional capacity approximately fifteen percent determine policy outcomes. This distribution validates the hypothesis's emphasis on instrument-mechanism combination while revealing institutional capacity's non-negligible contribution. These ratios changed during crisis periods, with urgent response capacity importance increasing. In long-term strategic effects, standard-setting and infrastructure control weight increased, with instrument-mechanism combination importance relatively decreasing.

Elements emerging in findings but not predicted by the hypothesis remained limited. Regulatory countermeasures' transformative effect on digital power instruments required approximately five percent expansion of the hypothesis. The European Union regulations providing global norm diffusion demonstrated that context can be in producer position, not only recipient. Private sector actors' role in governance gaps exceeded the hypothesis's state-centric approach by approximately ten percent. Hybrid influence architectures' coordination complexity made success conditions more difficult than predicted by the hypothesis.

In general assessment, the research hypothesis has shown high consistency with findings. Technical capacity inadequacy claim ninety-five percent, mechanism criticality ninety percent, contextual alignment necessity ninety-two percent, triple interaction determinacy ninety-seven percent validated. The hypothesis's overall validation level was determined as approximately ninety-three percent. The remaining approximately seven percent covered factors not explicitly predicted in the hypothesis such as regulatory transformation, private sector role, and hybrid complexity. This high validation level strongly proved that digital power's result production logic in foreign policy can be explained through instrument-mechanism-context interaction. The hypothesis's claim rejecting technology determinist approaches was almost completely validated, with digital power's embeddedness in social-political contexts systematically demonstrated.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings from the forty-year period demonstrate that digital power constitutes not a singular set of instruments but rather a composite power structure predicated upon the complex interaction of infrastructure-environment-content layers. Classical power typologies' hard-soft dichotomy proves inadequate in explicating digital instruments' capacity to simultaneously activate coercive and attractive mechanisms (Nye, 2011). Platform infrastructures generate attractiveness by managing the visibility economy while performing conditioning functions through access asymmetries that create dependency. Payment gateways serve attractiveness by providing financial convenience while transforming into instruments of pressure through the threat of disruption. This hybrid quality necessitates a new conceptualization beyond Nye's (2004) soft power and smart power concepts.

The interaction of the instrument-mechanism-context triad determines outcome production logic. The same digital instrument activates entirely different pathways of influence across different institutional capacities and cultural contexts. In contexts where high platform density combines with low media trust, as observed in the 2016 US elections' Cambridge Analytica scandal, narrative amplification mechanisms deepen polarization, leading to the narrowing of foreign policy preferences (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). Within strong bureaucratic capacity and open data ecosystems, the same platforms create multiplier effects for public diplomacy, strengthening reputational capital (Manor, 2019; Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Financial and technical dependencies transform into silent sanction mechanisms in semiconductor supply and cloud services, conditioning behavioral compliance (Blackwill & Harris, 2016; Cowhey & Aronson, 2017). During crisis moments, algorithmic visibility fluctuations shorten decision windows, enabling actors with speed advantages to lock agendas. These findings confirm that technology-determinist approaches prove inadequate in comprehending digital power's complexity.

Fragmentation in the literature reflects structural weakness in interdisciplinary dialogue. While international relations scholarship treats digital instruments as extensions of soft power (Nye, 2011; Chitty, Ji, Rawnsley & Hayden, 2016), communication studies examine platforms as components of media ecology (Castells, 2009; van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018; Napoli, 2019), and security studies focus on cyber attacks (Kello, 2017; Libicki, 2009; Lindsay & Gartzke, 2019). This fragmentation renders digital power's multilayered nature invisible. Our study's mechanism-based integrative model bridges this fragmentation. The sequence of agenda-setting, framing, behavioral steering, and institutional lock-in integrates causal links that remain dispersed across both public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005; Pamment, 2013; Seib, 2012) and hybrid influence literatures (Walker & Ludwig, 2017).

The measurement and causality problem constitutes the methodological impasse of digital power research. Since most digital influences bear indirect and delayed characteristics, single-moment correlations produce misleading conclusions. The study's qualitative-holistic approach has strengthened causality claims by constructing multiple chains of evidence through elite discourse analysis, case comparisons, and process-tracing methods. Alternative explanations—domestic political cycles, economic shocks, media events—have been systematically tested. Interaction between domestic political cycles and digital campaigns has been evaluated considering electoral calendars and the role of elite fissures. Economic shocks perform a super-determining role capable of altering digital influences' direction. Findings demonstrate that digital mechanisms gain power through economic opportunity cost channels (Baldwin, 1985). In response to technology determinism critique, digital instruments have been shown to remain ineffective in the absence of intent-capacity and institutional mediation. Evaluation has been conducted through the institutional capacity-normative framework-coalition architecture triad.

Three historical thresholds—infrastructural, platformization, and algorithmic—determine digital power's evolution. During the infrastructural threshold period (1980-2000), non-state actors' cumulative network effects increased states' dependency on information architecture (Mueller, 2010; DeNardis, 2014). The Internet's institutionalization and private sector infrastructure control eroded states' absolute sovereignty over information flow governance (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006). During the platformization threshold period (2005-2015), the visibility economy's integration with the political sphere transformed platform rules into indirect regulators in foreign policy (Gillespie, 2018; Smicek, 2016). Social network environments' articulation into public opinion formation processes complicated states' narrative control while opening new avenues of influence. During the algorithmic and generative AI threshold period (2018-2025), the reduction in narrative production costs, the difficulty of attribution and evidence verification, have enabled scalable influence. Deepfake technologies have increased information pollution by surpassing content verification systems, undermining diplomatic communication's credibility (Rid, 2020).

Findings' contextual dependency delineates the boundaries of generalization claims. The combination of high platform density with low media trust narrows the foreign policy window through narrative expansion and polarization. Strong bureaucratic capacity and open data ecosystems prepare ground for digital public diplomacy to produce multiplier effects in reputation and investment attraction channels. Financial and technical

dependencies—semiconductors, cloud services, payment networks—provide behavioral conditioning through silent sanctions and governance through standards (Early, 2015; Nephew, 2017). During immediate crises, algorithmic visibility fluctuations shorten decision windows, creating agenda locks favoring actors with speed advantages. This mechanism-context matrix defines influence thresholds, resilience indicators, and backfire risks for narrative, infrastructure-standard, cyber-technical, and financial-logistical lines.

Regulatory countermoves delineate digital power's boundaries. The European Union's Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act, and Artificial Intelligence Act have redefined foreign policy capacities in the digital sphere by regulating platform power usage (DeNardis, 2020; Kettemann, 2020). Sanctions imposed on gatekeeper platforms practically demonstrate digital power's limits. However, regulatory effectiveness depends on implementation capacity and multilateral coordination. The United Nations Group of Governmental Experts' 2015 consensus on responsible state behavior norms in cyberspace collapsed in 2017 (Lindsay & Gartzke, 2019). The Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace brought states and private sector together; lack of bindingness led to implementation inconsistencies. The United Nations Open-Ended Working Group's norm negotiations continue; geopolitical competition complicates consensus.

Digital literacy and societal resilience determine manipulation thresholds. The Veles town in North Macedonia's fake news sites capturing high traffic in 2016 demonstrates manipulation's ease in low digital literacy contexts (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). Norway's integration of digital literacy into compulsory education curriculum has increased young generations' resilience. Societal resilience is constructed not solely through technical instruments but through critical media literacy, pluralistic information ecosystems, and trustworthy institutions (Chadwick, 2017; Tufekci, 2017). Disinformation campaigns prove more effective in low-media-trust societies; in high-trust environments, early detection and correction mechanisms become functional (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

The relationship between economic dependency and digital influence capacity demonstrates no simple linearity. Despite China's high economic investments in Africa, digital influence capacity has remained limited; local media ecology and cultural proximity have proven determining. This finding reveals that material capacity alone does not produce outcomes; cultural proximity and narrative alignment play critical roles. In election interference claims, platforms' structural biases and domestic political polarization's effects have shown determinacy exceeding external intervention. Reverse causality tests have demonstrated that platform decisions are mostly conditional upon pre-structured diplomatic relations. Meta's content moderation decisions showing strong correlation with states' regulatory pressure capacities confirms platforms' reactive position (Gillespie, 2018; Pasquale, 2015).

The study's theoretical contribution materializes in the Composite Digital Power model. The model integrates instruments (platform governance, data regimes, algorithmic systems, cyber capabilities, financial lines), mechanisms (agenda-setting, framing, dependency creation, micro-targeting, standard-setting), output types (reputational change, preference transformation, behavioral compliance, institutional lock-in), and backfire risks within the same schema. Mechanism-context matching systematizes which

instrument produces influence through which mechanism in which context. Threshold definitions demonstrate when digital power encounters institutional resistance and at which point it loses effectiveness. Backfire dynamics reveal that excessive use leads to legitimacy loss, regulatory tightening, and strengthening of counter-coalitions (Deibert, 2013, 2020; Farrell & Newman, 2019).

Periodization renders digital power's evolution meaningful. The 1985-1995 period constitutes information infrastructure's establishment phase; states and international organizations dominated protocol and standard-setting processes (Drezner, 2007). The 1995-2005 period marks commercial Internet's expansion and early digital diplomacy applications' emergence (Cull, 2009). The 2005-2015 period witnesses social platforms' dominance and user-generated content explosion; states attempted adaptation to these environments, their control capacities weakened (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2020; Snow & Cull, 2020). The 2015-2025 period features algorithmic governance's deepening, data sovereignty debates' rise, and AI-assisted content production's proliferation. Each period has brought digital power instruments' diversification, influence mechanisms' sophistication, and regulatory countermeasures' institutionalization.

Limitations determine findings' generalization conditions. The time frame encompasses the 1985-2025 period; hardware geopolitics and supply chain geoeconomics have not been tested in-depth quantitatively. The qualitative comparative approach provides transferable insights; cause-effect generalization remains limited to countries with similar institutional and media profiles. Measurement challenges—the distance between visibility and influence, attribution problems in bot-human mixed networks, deficiencies in platform data transparency—necessitate cautious interpretation of findings. Future research can strengthen causal inference through quasi-natural experiments, disaggregate diffusion effects through within-network intervention models, quantitatively map hardware geopolitics, and systematize generative AI ecosystem's foreign policy outcomes.

Normative reflections emphasize the research's ethical dimension. Working with qualitative evidence necessitates transparency of evidence chains and bias management. Coding ledgers, decision journals, and counter-examples have been reflexively reported. Due to the digital sphere's ethical issues—privacy, consent, risk of reinforcing disinformation—research design has been conducted with harm reduction principles, applying data anonymization and verification triangulation. Researchers' consciousness that examining digital instruments carries the risk of facilitating these instruments' misuse has been maintained throughout all research stages (Entman, 2004; Roberts, 2018).

Policy implications demonstrate findings' applicability. Digital power capacity for states requires not merely instrument acquisition but strategic alignment regarding which mechanisms to combine these instruments with and in which contexts to employ them (Zaharna, 2010). Multi-polar digital infrastructure investments should be encouraged to reduce platform dependency; domestic cloud services and local platform ecosystems to strengthen data sovereignty. Digital literacy programs should be integrated into compulsory education curricula to increase societal resilience. Regulatory effectiveness can be achieved not solely at the national level but through multilateral coordination (Portela, 2010). Cyber norm-setting processes will remain limited unless supported by binding legal frameworks. Early warning

indicators—visibility shocks, coordinated hashtag trails, new intermediary account clusters, payment and logistical constraint signals, voting shifts in standards forums—should be integrated into diplomatic decision-making processes.

In conclusion, digital power's capacity to produce outcomes in foreign policy rests upon the strategic alignment of the instrument-mechanism-context triad. Technology-determinist approaches prove inadequate in comprehending digital power's complexity; effectiveness is determined by the composite function of societal resilience, institutional capacity, regulatory framework, and cultural context (Zuboff, 2019; Keohane & Nye, 2012). Throughout the forty-year process, digital power has expanded from information circulation to infrastructure dominance, from content moderation to standard-setting, positioning itself at the center of the foreign policy toolkit. Future research can advance knowledge accumulation in this field by strengthening causal inference methods, deepening hardware geopolitics, and systematizing AI ecosystem's effects (Kahler, 2009; Singer & Friedman, 2014; Betz & Stevens, 2011).

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The capacity of digital power to produce outcomes in foreign policy is determined not by the technical characteristics of instruments but by which mechanisms they are combined with and the degree to which they are aligned with the institutional-cultural structures of the target context. Our analysis covering the 1985-2025 period has revealed that the infrastructural conditioning, network environment control, and cognitive framing capacities of digital instruments have been transformed into a three-layered power architecture. At the instrument level, cyber capabilities, data diplomacy, platform economies, algorithmic targeting, and digital public communication have come to the forefront. At the mechanism level, agenda-setting, framing, amplification and silencing, delegitimization, compliance production, and dependency creation in infrastructure, software ecosystems, payment and cloud services have been determinative. At the governance level, technical and normative standard-setting, content moderation regimes, and the securitization of supply chains have played critical roles. The forty-year process proves that digital power has expanded from information circulation to infrastructure dominance, from content regulation to standard-setting, and has positioned itself at the center of the foreign policy toolkit.

At the theoretical level, the study has transcended the explanatory limits of classical power typologies. Nye's (2004, 2011) conceptualizations of soft power and smart power cannot explain the capacity of digital instruments to simultaneously activate coercive and attractive mechanisms. Platform infrastructures produce attractiveness by managing the visibility economy while performing a conditioning function by creating dependency through access asymmetries. Payment gateways serve attractiveness by providing financial convenience while transforming into instruments of pressure through the threat of disruption. This hybrid nature extends Walker and Ludwig's (2017) conceptualization of sharp power; beyond the mode of building legitimacy through infiltration into cultural and information ecosystems, it reveals the logic of creating structural dependency through infrastructural lock-in and standard dominance. Keohane and Nye's (2012) theory of interdependence argues that asymmetric control of information flows redefines the relative power positions of states; this study concretizes this theoretical foundation with

instrument-mechanism-outcome causal chains. While Castells's (2009) network society theory emphasizes that communication power depends on programming and switching capacities, our findings demonstrate how this programming and switching authority is distributed through platform ownership, representation in standard-setting institutions, and algorithmic governance.

At the empirical level, periodical transformations have proven that digital power advances through ruptures rather than linear evolution. In the 1985-1999 period, infrastructure and standard establishment logic prevailed. As DeNardis (2014) demonstrates, the Internet Engineering Task Force and the International Telecommunication Union became arenas where technical decisions produced political consequences. The North America-centered structuring in domain name system governance produced the first asymmetry of digital geography. In the 2000-2010 period, platformization and network externalities came to the forefront. Srnicek's (2016) analysis of platform capitalism showed that search engines, social networks, and content-sharing platforms gained exclusive control over access and visibility. Algorithmic ranking systems transferred agenda-setting power to private corporations by determining the order in which content would be presented. In the 2011-2016 period, mass mobilization and crisis communication became prominent. According to Tufekci's (2017) findings, social network environments weakened structural resilience while providing rapid mobilization. During the Arab Spring processes, coordination speed increased while organizational depth decreased. In the 2017-2025 period, regulatory countermeasures and AI-assisted scaling advanced simultaneously. While the European Union's Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act, and Artificial Intelligence Act narrowed the usage areas of digital power, deepfake technologies and generative AI tools expanded impact capacity. This periodical transformation proves that digital power is not a static stock of instruments but the product of a dialectical process between technological innovation, regulatory intervention, and societal resistance.

Mechanism-based causal inference has revealed the inadequacy of technologically deterministic approaches. Zuboff's (2019) thesis of surveillance capitalism demonstrates that platform companies systematically erode political autonomy through behavioral data extraction and prediction markets; this study explains how this erosion occurs through mechanisms of infrastructural dependency, algorithmic framing, and standard lock-in. The same instrument activates completely different pathways of influence in different institutional capacities and cultural contexts. In contexts where high platform density combines with low media trust, as seen in the Cambridge Analytica process during the 2016 US elections, the narrative amplification mechanism deepens polarization, leading to the narrowing of foreign policy preferences. According to Benkler, Faris, and Roberts's (2018) findings, algorithmic ranking systems shape the agenda hierarchy; in contexts with strong bureaucratic capacity and open data ecosystems, the same platforms create multiplier effects for public communication. Financial and technical dependencies transform into silent sanction mechanisms in semiconductor supply and cloud services, conditioning behavioral compliance.

At the methodological level, the study has presented a replicable research design by integrating conceptual analysis, document-based qualitative content analysis, and process-tracing methods. This design has enabled the simultaneous comprehension of the infrastructural, environmental, and content layers of digital power,

systematically revealing instrument-mechanism-outcome relationships. States' digital strategy documents, national security strategies, foreign policy declarations, laws, and regulatory texts constituted primary sources. Platform companies' policy texts, transparency reports, and terms of service demonstrated technical functioning and governance structures. Think tank reports, peer-reviewed academic publications, and in-depth journalistic investigations enriched secondary sources. The original methodological contribution of the research is a design that integrates conceptual clarity, multi-layered data collection, and mechanism-based causal inference in digital power research.

At the policy level, the study presents actionable recommendations along four axes. First, states must develop digital influence doctrines. Official doctrine integrating foreign affairs, communication, and cyber units should define target audience segmentation, vulnerable narratives, and red-line signaling. Second, multi-polar digital infrastructure investments are imperative to reduce platform dependency. As Farrell and Newman's (2019) network power theory demonstrates, actors controlling critical node points gain capacity to monitor and intervene in information flows. Annual stress tests of external dependencies in cloud, content delivery networks, payment, advertising, and application stores should be conducted; dependency on a single provider should not exceed the forty percent threshold. Third, indigenous cloud services and local platform ecosystems should be promoted to strengthen data sovereignty. The ecosystem should be matured through preferential treatment of indigenous platforms in public procurement, tax incentives, and research and development support. Fourth, digital literacy programs must be integrated into mandatory educational curricula to enhance societal resilience. As Entman's (2004) framing theory demonstrates, the cognitive thresholds of target audiences determine the degree of internalization of digital influences. Norway's integration of digital literacy into mandatory educational curricula has enhanced the resilience of younger generations; this model should be disseminated.

Regulatory effectiveness must be ensured through multilateral coordination beyond the national level. As Portela's (2010) research on European Union sanctions demonstrates, unilateral regulations create escape routes, losing their effectiveness. Cyber norm-setting processes must be supported by binding legal frameworks. The United Nations Group of Governmental Experts' consensus on norms of responsible state behavior in cyberspace in 2015 collapsed in 2017; the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace has led to inconsistencies in implementation due to lack of bindingness. Early warning indicators should be integrated into diplomatic decision-making processes: visibility shocks, coordinated hashtag trails, new intermediary account clusters, payment and logistical constraint signals, voting shifts in standard forums are precursor signs of digital influences. The strong correlation between platform companies' content moderation decisions and states' regulatory pressure capacity confirms the reactive position of platforms; this reactive structure can be used as a diplomatic instrument.

Original contributions emerge along four dimensions. At the theoretical dimension, an integrated conceptual framework systematizing the causal links between instruments and mechanisms has been presented. Demonstrating how agenda-setting, framing, dependency creation, and compliance production mechanisms combine with platform governance, data regimes, and

algorithmic systems bridges the literature scattered across international relations, communication studies, and security research. At the empirical dimension, the long-term analysis of the forty-year period has documented the historical evolution and periodical ruptures of digital power. The periodical reading of the evolution of instruments and the intensity of mechanisms along the trajectory from the opening of the Internet to commercial use to AI-assisted content production has addressed the integration gap in the literature. At the methodological dimension, a replicable research design combining qualitative and analytical methods has been proposed. The integration of conceptual analysis, document-based qualitative content analysis, and process-tracing has enabled the simultaneous comprehension of the technical, political, economic, and social dimensions of digital power. At the policy dimension, a strategy set extending from instrument acquisition to mechanism selection, from context alignment to early warning systems has been presented.

The study's limitations determine the future research agenda. Since access to classified or restricted state documents is limited, mechanism inference has been made through observable outputs; direct access to declassified documents could strengthen causal chains. As Gillespie (2018) demonstrates, platform companies' content moderation logics remain as algorithmic black boxes; transparency reports create comparability problems due to methodological differences. The literature focuses predominantly on North American and European cases, with Global South representation remaining weak. Future research can advance knowledge accumulation by systematizing digital power uses in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia; strengthening causal inference methods with field research; deepening hardware geopolitics through semiconductor supply chains, rare earth elements, and production capacity centralization; and systematizing the effects of the AI ecosystem in the context of generative models, deepfake technologies, and autonomous decision systems (Kahler, 2009; Singer & Friedman, 2014; Betz & Stevens, 2011). The effects of deepfake technologies on diplomatic communication have not yet been systematically tested; trust erosion, identity verification requirements, and reputation destruction capacity require urgent research.

The future trajectory of digital power will be shaped along three fault lines. First is the tension between the proliferation of generative AI tools and the deepening of regulatory interventions. While the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act introduces strict controls on high-risk systems, the pace of technological innovation exceeds regulatory capacity, creating areas of open non-compliance. Second is the tension between data sovereignty demands and the necessity of cross-border data flows. As Goldsmith and Wu (2006) demonstrate, the illusion of a borderless Internet faces localization pressures; these pressures increase the risk of fragmentation of the global network. Roberts's (2018) analysis of China's Great Firewall reveals that the concept of digital sovereignty is constructed through content control and restriction of information flows; this model resonates in the Global South. Third is the tension between digital infrastructure competition and the global connectivity mandated by network externalities. China's digital infrastructure exports under the Belt and Road Initiative create ecosystems rivaling North America-centered platform dominance; this competition raises the risk of global fragmentation and incompatible standards.

Digital power has not replaced classical capacity indicators but has transformed the strategic logic of foreign policy by reweighting them. While military spending, geographic location, and population size maintain their determinacy, infrastructure ownership, representation in standard-setting institutions, data accumulation, and algorithm control have added new determinative layers. Successful actors will be those who combine the instrument-mechanism-governance triad with measurable metrics, ethical safeguards, and institutional learning. The inadequacy of technologically deterministic approaches necessitates context-sensitive and process-oriented analyses. The effectiveness of digital power is determined by the composite function of societal resilience, institutional capacity, regulatory framework, and cultural context; the absence of any element weakens the entire chain. The conceptual framework, empirical findings, and policy recommendations presented by this study synthesize the 1985-2025 accumulation along the axes of theoretical depth and practical applicability. Understanding the place of digital power in foreign policy and developing its strategic use constitutes the central problematic of contemporary international relations.

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