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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The Digital Foreign Policies of the US, the PRC and the EU towards Latin America and the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

Digital foreign policy is an important area of international relations through which states seek to shape the digital transformation in others. It can be studied by examining the different goals, instruments and resources employed in its formation. Based on this approach, an analysis of the digital foreign policies of the United States (US), the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the European Union (EU) towards Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) highlights similar goals in terms of shaping regional digital development by advancing their own normative approaches and the interests of their national companies. However, differences were identified in the implementation of such policies.

KEYWORDS

digital foreign policy; United States; China; European Union; Latin America and the Caribbean

Digital technologies have become an important component of geopolitical, economic and strategic competition. Advancements in artificial intelligence and telecommunications infrastructure, to name a few, promise growth opportunities but also pose new international security challenges. Given the significance of this area, within the current geopolitical context, the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are engaged in intense competition for leadership in digital-related domains, with the European Union (EU) trying not to fall behind. Previous studies have examined the cyber and digital strategies of these powers, including their external dimensions (Barrinha and Christou 2022; Burt 2023; Creemers 2021; Lilli and Painter 2023; Renard 2018). Other scholars have employed a comparative perspective to examine the similarities and differences between US and Chinese digital policies and their implications for other actors (Rolf and Schindler 2023; Mori 2019; Huang and Mayer 2023; Malkin and He 2023). However, the existing literature provides only a limited comparative analysis of how these three leading actors in the digital economy aim to influence digital transformation in the Global South.

This article contributes to this literature by examining how the US, the PRC and the EU have sought to shape digital transformation in one of the regions of the Global South: Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Despite significant asymmetries among countries, this region was chosen because most states within LAC lag behind the Global North in terms of digital infrastructure, digital skills, the development of their national digital ecosystems, regulations and competition policy, among other areas

(ECLAC 2022). As such, on the one hand, foreign expertise and technologies are essential for regional digital markets, making LAC a focus of international digital development. On the other hand, as other parts of the Global South, LAC is the target of ‘digital’ or ‘data colonialism’ due to the asymmetric patterns of relations it has with foreign digital economy companies (ALAI 2021).

LAC also represents a significant case because the traditional influence of the US and its digital corporations has recently been challenged by initiatives from the PRC and the EU. Despite these shifts, little attention has been paid to how these powers shape digital policies in LAC. For example, previous scholars have examined the roles of the US as a key partner for cybersecurity and in shaping cyber norms (Solar 2020; Vila Seoane 2022). Likewise, others have assessed the opportunities and challenges provided by the PRC’s digital expansion in the region (Malena 2021). Similarly, Mario Torres Jarrín (2023) has described and advocated for closer digital cooperation between the EU and LAC. However, comparative analyses of these distinct strategies remain scarce. This type of approach is crucial for understanding the digital component of contemporary geopolitics and the opportunities and challenges that target LAC states may have at this juncture.

This article argues that the digital foreign policies of the US, the PRC and the EU have sought to shape LAC’s digital transformation in different ways. The concept of digital foreign policy refers to a sub-component of a political community’s broader foreign policy, which can be studied by examining the different goals, instruments and resources employed. It is argued that digital powers adapt policy instruments from other areas, such as economic diplomacy, international development, science, technology and innovation diplomacy, and defence diplomacy. The analysis shows that the US, the PRC and the EU have similar goals in terms of shaping regional digital development by advancing their own normative approaches and the interests of their national companies. However, differences were identified in terms of how these policies were implemented. For example, the uncoordinated approach of the US has enabled the EU to lead in policy advocacy in LAC, whilst the PRC can be described as adopting a middle position, as its digital foreign policy is more organised than that of the US but less than that of the EU. Due to space constraints, this article does not address the reception of these initiatives or the various ways in which LAC states have engaged with them.

The article is divided into seven sections. The next section introduces the analytical framework to investigate digital foreign policy, followed by a segment explaining the methodological approach. The next three sections present the results of the analysis of the American, Chinese and European digital foreign policies, followed by a comparative discussion. The final section synthesises the main conclusions and indicates potential avenues for future research.

Towards an analytical framework to study digital foreign policy

As a nascent and evolving practice, the term ‘digital foreign policy’ does not yet have an established definition. Scholars have mainly used the terms digital diplomacy and cyber diplomacy in reference to the links between digitalisation and foreign policy. However, these concepts have distinct connotations. Digital diplomacy has been used to examine how diplomats and ministries of foreign affairs incorporate digital technologies – especially social media – into their practices (Bjola and Manor 2024). In contrast,

Shaun Riordan (2019, 5) has argued in favour of the term “cyber diplomacy”, understood as “the use of diplomatic tools and mindsets in resolving, or at least managing, the problems in cyberspace”, including negotiations over cyber norms, international cooperation to tackle cybercrime and establishing confidence-building measures in cyberspace, among others. Thus, this concept is linked to the incorporation of cyber-related topics into diplomatic practices (Barrinha 2024) and foreign policy. In contrast, relatively few texts have made use of the term ‘digital foreign policy’ (Burkadze 2021; Król 2016). Jovan Kurbalija and Katherina Höne (2023, 9) have defined the term as: (i) the use of digital tools by diplomats, (ii) the incorporation of digital as a topic for foreign policy and (iii) the consideration of digital as a factor influencing geopolitics. This definition blends the previous two approaches but introduces a rather vague third dimension connected to the external environment in which such a foreign policy is conducted. However, none of these texts has delved into the specifics of what constitutes a digital foreign policy within the broader framework of foreign policy studies.

To advance this debate, this article adapts and extends the definition of the term proposed by Kurbalija and Höne. Foreign policy is understood as the array of actions through which a political community engages with its external environment (Morin and Paquin 2018, 3) and the prefix ‘digital’ specifically refers to technologies that manipulate digital information. Thus, digital foreign policy is defined as the realm of foreign policy dedicated to digital-related issues. Accordingly, digital foreign policy should be regarded as one of several issue areas within the broader framework of a state’s foreign policy.

Having defined the concept, this article proposes to examine digital foreign policy by scrutinising the aims, policy instruments and resources used by a political community in its development. Aims may be outlined in all-encompassing foreign policy documents, or specialised policy documents and strategies for digital policies (Kurbalija and Höne 2023). These documents are produced by the key actors involved in the formulation of digital foreign policy, which may vary from one political community to another. In broad terms, these actors could include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and other ministries or state agencies responsible for externalising digital policies. Different types of states may follow different objectives via digital foreign policy, though they all face the same issues related to digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, Internet governance, telecommunications infrastructure, among others (Ibid).

Regarding policy instruments, these are understood as the means by which a political community seeks to accomplish the aims of its foreign policy (Brighi and Hill 2016). Scholars of public administration have developed various typologies for classifying policy instruments (Howlett 2020). Given the early stage of research on digital foreign policy, this article primarily contributes to identifying the different types of policy instruments that have been deployed in this policy area to date. For this purpose, this article hypothesises that states adapt or use pre-existing policy tools designed for other areas of foreign policy or diplomacy to the digital field. In particular, this article assumes that digital foreign policy may adopt or extend instruments used for (i) economic diplomacy, (ii) international development, (iii) science, technology and innovation diplomacy, and (iv) defence diplomacy. For example, digital foreign policy may employ economic diplomacy instruments (Okano-Heijmans 2011), such as sanctions against hackers,

prohibitions of digital technologies from perceived foreign rivals on national security grounds or establishing trade and investment agreements with foreign partners in the digital economy sector. Likewise, a digital foreign policy may use international development funding instruments to build digital capacities in foreign countries. Science, technology and innovation diplomacy instruments could also be deployed (Leijten 2017), such as the funding of joint research and development projects, laboratories, or technology companies. Digital foreign policy may further mobilise instruments of defence diplomacy (Drab 2018), such as exchanges among militaries or training in cyber defence.

Finally, if such information is available, the resources allocated to implement a digital foreign policy represent another important dimension for analysis. This includes the human and financial investments, which can provide insights into the priorities of, and commitments to, digital foreign policy. However, such information may not always be publicly accessible.

It is important to highlight that the proposed working definition of digital foreign policy differs from the existing definitions in two ways. First, it distinguishes between the analysis of a digital foreign policy strategy by a state and the use that diplomats might make of digital tools. In the case of the latter, the term digital diplomacy may suffice. Second, this perspective foregrounds the crucial link to a country's wider foreign policy, instead of limiting the concept to the activities of diplomats specifically in the digital realm, as the term cyber or digital diplomacy suggest. Ultimately, the proposed definition of digital foreign policy aims to foster further dialogue and connections with the foreign and public policy-oriented literature.

Methods

This article studies and compares the digital foreign policies of the US, the PRC and the EU from 2018 to mid-2024. This time frame coincides with the final two years of Donald Trump's first administration and most of Joe Biden's, Ursula von der Leyen's presidency of the European Commission and part of President Xi Jinping's second and third terms as president of the PRC. The timeframe was also chosen due to the fact that, beginning in 2018, the US government undertook measures against Chinese digital companies – notably ZTE and Huawei – which underscored the significance of the digital aspect of geopolitics. During this time, the US, the PRC and the EU developed and implemented different initiatives related to the external dimension of digital policies. While the EU is not a state, comparisons with the PRC and the US are reasonable, as numerous digital policies and regulations, including those with an international focus, are formulated at the EU level.

The research entailed gathering primary documents and news articles published by governmental actors and associated media outlets from the US, the PRC and the EU. These sources covered both topics related to the general digital foreign policy and particularly those concerning LAC or its member states. When necessary, documents and strategies from previous years were also consulted as background information to understand prior initiatives that may have influenced those under analysis. In the case of the US, 38 documents were retrieved from the websites of the US Department of State and the White House. Regarding the PRC, 68 sources were obtained from the website of the MFA and from the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean states

(CELAC) forum website. The latter is managed by the MFA of the PRC and was chosen due to the importance of this forum for the exchange of views between states of the region and Chinese partners. However, it is important to underscore that the majority were news reports from state media. In relation to the EU, 14 documents were gathered from the Council of the EU and the websites of the European Commission and the EU External Action. These sources were analysed through open coding to identify recurring themes that characterised the public goals, the instruments and, whenever possible, the resources used by the three actors under analysis.

This methodological approach entails certain limitations that should be kept in mind. First, only publicly available documents were considered. Second, the study did not consider the various initiatives of individual EU member states for digital foreign policy, which could be a valuable focus for future research. Third, the number of documents gathered for each actor was rather unbalanced. However, it is important to highlight that the EU sources were more specific and detailed than those of the other actors. In contrast, although more content was obtained from US and Chinese sources, many of these were news reports, or publicity of bilateral agreements and projects by national companies. This trend was particularly evident in the sources from the China-CELAC forum.

The US's digital foreign policy

The Trump administration's digital foreign policy was both similar and different to the Obama administration's, which pioneered many US efforts in this realm (Lilli and Painter 2023). On the one hand, the US government continued bilateral cooperation with key partners in digital affairs, while also rebranding and extending initiatives of the previous administration. For example, the Trump administration announced the Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership (DCCP), which had very similar aims to Obama's Global Connect Initiative. Indeed, the DCCP was introduced as a "whole of government effort to promote an open, interoperable, secure, and reliable Internet" (US Department of State 2024c) with several goals. Among them, this initiative aimed to enhance Internet access in foreign markets, advocate for the preferred policies and regulations advanced by the US government, facilitate the export of ICT goods and services by US companies, and improve cyber capacity in recipient countries (Ibid).

On the other hand, a main difference from the previous administration was the 'America First' foreign policy, which resulted in the adoption of a more aggressive campaign against perceived revisionist powers within and without the digital field, especially the PRC, and a diminished emphasis on multilateral diplomacy. Indeed, in 2018, the Trump administration unilaterally initiated a Trade War against the PRC, along with different measures targeting Chinese telecom companies. Later, these measures against Chinese firms became part of the Clean Network, an initiative that sought to persuade foreign partners to exclude Chinese digital companies from their digital networks (US Department of State 2020a).

The Biden administration further prioritised the country's digital foreign policy (Lilli and Painter 2023) amidst the intensifying geopolitical tensions with the PRC. For example, the US Department of State continued to denounce what they referred to as "digital authoritarianism" (US Department of State 2023a), namely the proliferation of

digital tools and practices that violate human rights. Perhaps the main difference with the Trump administration was a major focus on the language of human rights and the creation of US-led initiatives or alliances to advance American digital foreign policy. Likewise, in 2022, the Biden administration attempted to reduce dependency on the PRC in the digital sector via funding from the Chips Act, which had the goal of diversifying the semiconductor supply chain. These funds have been used to bolster the DCCP by supporting the deployment of digital infrastructure in foreign countries, conducting capacity building and selling tools to foreign partners so they can deter cyberattacks (US Department of State 2023b). Another relevant proposal was the Build Back Better World, later rebranded as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, a US-led G7 initiative to compete with the PRC by mobilising private investment in infrastructure – including the digital infrastructure – of less developed economies. Moreover, the Biden administration worked in partnership with the private sector to advance US digital foreign policy in other countries by shaping norms regarding the governance of digital technologies and by advancing sustainable development goals through digital technologies (USAID 2023).

However, during most of the period under analysis, there was no overarching policy document articulating these initiatives. Only in the last year of the Biden administration did the US Department of State release a new document titled ‘International cyberspace and digital policy strategy’, which exemplified the growing use of the ‘digital’ prefix. As opposed to a narrative of digital sovereignty, a notion of digital solidarity permeates the document. This term conveyed the US’s aspiration to take a positive lead in the development and use of cyber and digital technologies, while it sought to cooperate with allies and partners to “align rights-respecting approaches to digital and data governance” (US Department of State 2024a, 7). In the strategy, the US committed to leading the development of new digital technologies “in line with democratic values and respect for human rights” (8), while also supporting capacity building in other states. Overall, this document shows the rising relevance of digital foreign policy for the US Department of State.

The US’s digital foreign policy towards LAC

The US did not release a specific digital foreign policy document concerning LAC. Nonetheless, the government has sought to influence digital policy in the region via global initiatives and bilateral agreements, together with the deployment of different policy instruments. To differing extents, these efforts have aimed to accomplish a combination of normative, business and digital development objectives, as exemplified below.

Regarding normative goals, many states of the region joined US-led global alliances, such as the Declaration for the Future of the Internet (US Department of State 2022). The signed document included several normative commitments concerning digital technologies, including the protection of “human rights and fundamental freedoms”, the promotion of the “free flow of information”, the “protection of privacy” and support for the multistakeholder model of Internet governance, among others (Ibid). The declaration also highlighted concerns regarding the “rising digital authoritarianism” of certain states that violate these principles. Moreover, the US government prioritised the

inclusion of digital issues in bilateral agreements and working groups. For example, the Trump administration announced bilateral exchanges with Argentina, Brazil and Chile, in which the US shared its policy approaches and practices concerning different digital issues, especially those focused on cybersecurity, cybercrime, cyber defence and data protection. Depending on the issue and partner, different US agencies were involved, such as the Department of Commerce, the Department of Justice and the Department of Defense. The Biden administration continued this bilateral approach with, for example, Mexico and Paraguay. During both administrations, the official records of these meetings consistently referenced the US normative stance in favour of an “open, interoperable, reliable, and secure Internet” or variations thereof, and occasionally included references to the defence of the free flow of data or information. Additionally, the US promoted its preferred cyber norms via the Organisation of American States (OAS) (Vila Seoane 2022).

The US pursued business goals via economic diplomacy, with one of the key aims being the promotion of the expansion of US digital companies in LAC countries. Diplomatic sources frequently refer to the promotion of public-private partnerships and sometimes directly mention a specific American firm operating abroad. For example, the US cyberspace and digital policy ambassador, together with representatives of American digital corporations, visited Costa Rica and Colombia, to “cultivate and shape the environment for digital transformation” (US Department of State 2023c). Likewise, the US Department of State publicised projects between American private companies and LAC governments, such as Google’s participation in the Humboldt subsea cable connecting Chile and Australia. From the perspective of the US, this illustrated “a commercially viable, multi-stakeholder approach to trusted information and communications technology development” (US Department of State 2024b). It is noteworthy that, in this instance, Google secured the contract for constructing these cables. According to Chilean media, this was the outcome of an offer that the US made to prevent Huawei from building the submarine cable, which was initially planned to connect Chile with the PRC (Durante 2024).

In particular, the US has used two main instruments for economic diplomacy. First, the Trump administration announced the Growth in the Americas Initiative to compete with the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by encouraging US private investments in LAC infrastructure, including telecommunications networks (US Department of State 2019). This programme was later rebranded by the Biden administration as the American Partnership for Economic Prosperity, which added as an objective the development of a workforce suitable for leading digital economy sectors (US Department of State 2025). Second, during the Trump administration, the aforementioned Clean Network initiative was the means by which the US aimed to persuade foreign partners, via rhetoric and economic incentives, that it would be convenient for them to ban Chinese digital companies. During Mike Pompeo’s time as Secretary of State, these reactive efforts against the PRC’s digital expansion into LAC were a priority on the cyber policy agenda. However, the campaign succeeded only in a handful of LAC states (Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Ecuador), which pledged adherence to the principles of the Clean Network (US Department of State 2020a), though not all implemented them in practice. In contrast, the vast majority of states rejected the initiative, which was discontinued after Biden assumed office.

The DCCP has been the main instrument used by both administrations to support digital development projects in foreign countries. For example, the Trump administration announced USD 10 million in funding to encourage private sector investments in the digital sector of LAC via this programme (US Department of State 2020b). The Biden administration continued the DCCP, particularly through the US Agency for International Development's investments to help catalyse private-public digital development-related projects. Another instrument used by the Biden administration was the Partnership for Central America, which had the aim of mobilising public-private funding to address the root causes of migration from those countries to the US, a crucial issue in American domestic politics. Within this framework, many US companies announced investments to address digital inclusion challenges and to build digital infrastructure in the region, exemplifying the overlap between business and digital development goals. Finally, the US also supported digital development projects more indirectly via the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), in which the country has the largest share of voting power (30 per cent).

During the years under analysis, there were no references to joint science, technology and innovation projects between US and LAC actors in official documents. However, it is possible that such activities could have occurred without the US government's direct involvement. On the other hand, in terms of defence diplomacy, the topic of cyber defence appeared frequently in the bilateral agreements signed between the US and LAC partners. The Inter-American Defense Board, based in Washington, organised regional cyber defence conferences, in which US military personnel and other public officials played pivotal roles in disseminating knowledge about cyber defence among LAC countries.

The PRC's digital foreign policy

Digital technologies and related issues play a crucial role in the PRC's economic development strategy, diplomatic initiatives and involvement in global normative and standard-setting processes (Creemers 2021; Gao 2022). The explicit goals of the PRC's digital foreign policy have been outlined in several different documents (MFA of the PRC 2023; The State Council Information Office 2022; MFA of the PRC 2017). These sources highlight similar objectives spanning the projection of normative positions and the support of international development-related goals. For example, the Chinese government advocated for the principle of cyber sovereignty, by which states have a leading role in Internet governance, followed by other non-state actors, which they call "multi-party participation" (The State Council Information Office 2022). Furthermore, the PRC stressed its preference for the United Nations (UN) as the central forum for discussing and establishing rules and norms for the Internet, a proposal that goes against the multistakeholder governance model advocated by the US. Apart from these positions, the sources conveyed the PRC's intention to cooperate in the digital economy and cybersecurity with other countries. In particular, the PRC has pledged to support information infrastructure development and critical information infrastructure protection in foreign countries, as well as contributing to the capacity building of other states in the digital economy, especially developing ones. This emphasis must be understood

within the context of the PRC's diplomatic narrative, which aims to position the state as still part of the Global South (Char 2024).

The PRC also included the digital sector among the priorities of many of the global policy initiatives announced by President Xi. One of the most prominent initiatives is the BRI, which was launched in 2013 to increase connectivity between the PRC and its partners via all kinds of infrastructure. Although digital infrastructure was not initially part of the BRI, it was later incorporated due to the advocacy of private Chinese firms (Cheng and Zeng 2023). Since then, the digital dimension of the BRI has been acknowledged as the digital Silk Road in official documents, though no plan has been publicly released about such a proposal (Ibid). Other more recent proposals are the PRC's Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative, which also incorporated digital issues. However, the former deployed an international development lens, while the latter opted for a security perspective on elements of the digital agenda.

The PRC's digital foreign policy towards LAC

The PRC has projected its digital foreign policy towards LAC by incorporating digital issues into its broader diplomatic agenda for the region. For example, in 2016, the MFA published a white paper outlining priorities for cooperation with LAC, which included the field of "information and communication technology" (MFA of the PRC 2016). The document also explained the PRC's interest in cooperating in cybersecurity, which was still top of the agenda at the time due to the global repercussions of the revelations by the ex-NSA contractor, Edward Snowden, about US mass surveillance programmes targeting governments and citizens across the world (Bauman *et. al.* 2014).

Since then, the China-CELAC forum has become the most important venue for diplomatic exchange and coordination of priorities between both regions, including on cyber and digital issues. For example, the 2022-24 China-CELAC joint cooperation plan declared the digital economy as one of the relevant sectors for industrial cooperation, trade and investment (MFA of the PRC 2021), and listed several digital technologies in which they would seek partnerships. This led to the organisation of three China-CELAC digital technology forums which, according to the PRC's Vice Minister for Industry and Information Technology, aimed to "establish cooperation channels, share experiences, strengthen policy coordination, plan new development opportunities, and promote common development" (CGTN *Español* 2022). This regional agenda has been complemented by various diplomatic meetings at the bilateral level, which also include digital issues. Different Chinese actors have participated in these events, such as authorities from the MFA and other ministries as well as other relevant agencies, like the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Science and Technology, the Chinese Council for the Promotion of International Trade, Chinese ambassadors in LAC states and public officials from provincial governments, firms and universities.

The explicit goals of the PRC's digital foreign policy towards LAC are linked to economic and international development cooperation. Indeed, most of the retrieved sources in the China-CELAC forum website covered cases of Chinese firms' expansion into Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Panama. These countries have larger markets and stronger economies than others, which further suggests a business-oriented goal in the PRC's digital foreign policy towards LAC, as demonstrated

in previous studies (Cheng and Zeng 2023). There were also some explicit attempts by the PRC to pursue normative goals via digital foreign policy. For example, in response to the Trump administration's Clean Network programme, the PRC's MFA launched the Global Initiative on Data Security (2020), which proposed useful guidelines for handling data. However, support from regional governments has been rather limited. The China-CELAC 2022-4 action plan (2021) mentioned that LAC states 'highlight' the PRC's data security initiative. However, at the bilateral level, only a handful of LAC states, such as Cuba, Ecuador and Venezuela, explicitly supported the initiative.

To advance its digital foreign policy in LAC, the PRC has employed different policy instruments. In terms of economic diplomacy, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay and Venezuela on cooperation and investment related to the digital economy. Policy coordination and the internationalisation of Chinese standards were also an aim of this instrument. In one publicly available MoU, the PRC and Uruguay pledged to cooperate on different kinds of projects related to digital technologies and to exchange information about policies and standards for the digital economy. Moreover, considering its competitiveness in the digital economy, the PRC applied for accession to the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement, which was signed in 2020 by Chile, New Zealand and Singapore to facilitate digital trade. For this reason, the PRC sought and secured Chile's support for the accession process. In addition, the PRC's organisation of international trade fairs has been another important economic diplomacy instrument for further linking its digital economy with foreign partners. In particular, the China International Fair for Trade in Services (CIFTIS) has become one of the main fairs in which Chinese and LAC representatives have sought to increase trade related to the digital economy, by encouraging LAC companies to sell on Chinese e-commerce platforms, for example.

Regarding international development-related instruments, the Chinese government published a list of the first projects to be funded by the Global Development Initiative in 2024 (MFA of the PRC 2024). This included a project in Bolivia which consisted of the donation of 1,548 tablets at a cost of USD 462,000 (Ministerio de Relaciones Exterior de Bolivia 2023). Furthermore, Chinese diplomacy indirectly supported development projects in the region by backing events led by Chinese firms, such as Huawei's *Seeds for the Future* programme, which trained numerous LAC students in digital technologies.

The PRC's use of science, technology and innovation diplomacy tools for digital foreign policy has been nascent. The main instrument mentioned in official documents is the establishment of joint laboratories between Chinese actors and LAC partners (MFA of the PRC 2021) as exemplified by several announcements on this collaboration in the digital sector. For example, in 2021, the PRC and Colombia announced a research consortium between Colombian universities, led by the Santiago de Cali University and Chinese counterparts. Another case was the China-Chile Information and Communication Technology Joint Lab created in 2017 by the University of Concepción of Chile, the Harbin Institute of Technology and China Information and Communication Technology, a state-owned company (Pezoa *et al.* 2021). By 2024, in these and other analogous cases, the availability of online information about these projects had become rather limited. This suggests slow progress in the implementation of joint laboratories, which could be partly attributed to the restrictions imposed by the PRC during COVID-19

that limited in-person cooperation with foreign partners, but may also indicate the existence of other barriers affecting digital cooperation between the Chinese actors and LAC partners.

The EU's digital foreign policy

The Council of the EU first used the term cyber diplomacy in a 2015 document, which advanced a comprehensive narrative for the EU's external cyber policy (Council of the European Union 2015a). This policy prioritised protecting the EU's values in cyberspace, aimed to expand the EU's preferred cyber norms, regulations and standards, and give support to the capacity building of partner countries in areas linked to cybersecurity (Ibid). The von der Leyen Presidency (2019-24) incorporated many of these ideas under the umbrella term 'digital diplomacy', though the range of activities was expanded. These were outlined in a Council of the EU document, which considered digital diplomacy as a "core component and an integral part of the EU external action" (Council of the European Union 2022, 1). Accordingly, alongside green diplomacy, digital diplomacy was introduced to advance the Union's ambitions in the global green and digital transitions. In fact, the document begins by mentioning that digital technologies bring both opportunities and risks, but most importantly, that they have become "key competitive parameters that can shift the geopolitical balance of power" (1).

The digital diplomacy document listed numerous goals. Several aimed to project the EU's normative approach to digital affairs, such as by promoting a "human-centric and a human rights-based approach" to digital technologies and standards, supporting a multi-stakeholder model of Internet governance and defending the "free flow of data with trust" (3). Furthermore, the document included cybersecurity-related objectives to bolster the EU's security and defence foreign policy, including fighting against cyber and hybrid threats (4). Many of the document's other goals advanced the EU's international development agenda. For instance, the EU has committed to leveraging digital diplomacy to further the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, to build digital infrastructure in foreign countries and to support "democratic digital societies" (4). These international development goals were linked to both normative positions and business interests. Indeed, the EU pledged to engage with different foreign stakeholders to "identify opportunities that could match the political, economic and geostrategic goals of the EU in third countries" (5). In a similar fashion, the EU's document articulated the intention to "support European businesses' global reach" (5). One of the main instruments used to accomplish such aims was the Global Gateway Initiative, which seeks to fund various connectivity projects between the EU and partner countries, including digital ones (European Commission 2021). Thus, the Global Gateway exemplifies the EU's geopolitical ambitions under von der Leyen's leadership and its objective of competing with the PRC's BRI (Heldt 2023).

The EU's digital foreign policy towards LAC

The EU has implemented its digital foreign policy towards LAC at the bi-regional and bilateral levels. For instance, in 2013, the EU established an agenda with LAC countries via CELAC, which began earlier than with the PRC. The first two initiatives for EU-

CELAC collaboration included agreeing to cooperate in the digital economy and prioritising the reduction of the digital divide within LAC (Council of the European Union 2013; 2015b). However, since 2015, this cooperation process has lost momentum mainly due to disagreements regarding how to face the Venezuelan crisis¹ (Torres Jarrín 2023, 204). Since 2022, the EU and its LAC partners have sought to reinvigorate their bi-regional partnership.

In July 2023, the bi-regional partnership reached a turning point when authorities from both regions signed the EU-LAC Joint Declaration on a Digital Alliance, an “informal, values-based framework for cooperation” (European Commission 2023a). The Digital Alliance declaration listed several topics for cooperation, including supporting digital infrastructure in LAC to improve connectivity, “regulatory dialogue to boost digital compatibility” in areas like 5G, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity, among others (Ibid). The declaration also outlined a mix of normative, business and international development goals. For example, the document acknowledged that the EU sought to support an investment agenda, though it highlighted that digital cooperation would be conducted “based on a common human-centric vision of the digital economy and society” (Ibid). These phrases underline the perceived preference for democracy and the defence of human rights in many of the states of both regions. This emphasis on common or shared values is also a way in which the EU underscored its difference from the PRC (Torres Jarrín 2023, 207). Moreover, the declaration’s aims include the goals of closing digital divides, developing digital skills and promoting gender and racial equality (European Commission 2023a), foregrounding international development aims.

In terms of instruments used to advance these goals, the EU has given preference to projects funded under the Global Gateway Initiative. In June 2024, the official webpage mentioned nine such projects that pursue, to varying degrees, a mixture of normative, business and international development goals. For example, one of the projects, the EU-LAC Digital Alliance, which has a €172 million budget, seeks to “bring the EU and LAC digital markets closer together” via several multistakeholder policy dialogues, encompassing different digital issues (European Commission 2025a). For instance, in March 2023, the EU presented the ground-breaking AI Act to LAC policy makers, members of civil society, academia and the private sector.

Moreover, the EU advanced this alliance through other projects supported by the Global Gateway Initiative. For example, the BELLA program, which has an EU budget of €26.5 million, aims to build submarine cables connecting the EU and Brazil, with additional connections to other LAC countries. The aim of this project is to enhance secure and high-speed data flows between the two regions, thereby supporting research, education and business partnerships (Directorate-General for International Partnerships 2024). Likewise, the EU-LAC Digital Alliance announced the creation of an EU-LAC Digital Accelerator in the LAC region to support joint ventures in digital sectors.

The Global Gateway also included other projects directly linked to international development. For instance, the Digital for Development hub for LAC, which has a budget of €145 million, “aims to bring in EU digital expertise and technology to the LAC region”,

¹This refers to the political, economic and social crisis that Venezuela experienced during the first two terms in office of President Nicolás Maduro. In 2017, the EU sanctioned Venezuelan public officials due to the deterioration of democracy, the rule of law and violations of human rights. Not all Latin American countries agreed with such an approach towards the crisis, whereby the US and the EU sought regime change in the country.

including “convergence on rules and standards” (European Commission 2025a) via different kinds of multistakeholder engagements, such as forums and advisory services. Other projects, such as the Digital Jamaica Initiative, target the digital divide and pledged investments of up to USD 10 million for broadband access, Wi-Fi networks and digital skills training. The EU publicised other projects to address connectivity challenges in the Brazilian Amazon and Colombia, and a digital trade platform to foster trade among Central American countries.

The EU has also mobilised instruments as part of its previous cyber diplomacy agenda (Council of the European Union 2015a). These have been mainly cybersecurity-related projects that promote both normative positions and international development goals. One example is the organisation of policy dialogues with partner countries in LAC to seek convergence on cyber norms and other issues related to cyberspace. In addition, since 2022, Estonia has led the EU-funded LAC Cyber Competence Centre in the Dominican Republic, which provides cyber capacity building to regional actors.

In terms of economic diplomacy instruments, the European Commission, which is exclusively responsible for the external trade and investment policy of the bloc, has included chapters related to digital trade in updated free trade agreements (FTAs) with LAC partners or those that remain under negotiation. For example, the 2023 modernisation of the EU-Chile FTA contains chapters related to digital trade and telecommunications services (European Commission 2023b). Likewise, there are similar chapters in the FTA between the EU-Mexico (European Commission 2025b), though the ratification of this agreement is pending. In all cases, the EU seeks to remove barriers to digital trade that may impact European businesses.

Regarding science, technology and innovation diplomacy instruments, the EU has used its flagship Horizon programme to support bi-regional research consortiums related to digital topics. For instance, the RISC2 consortium coordinates high-performance computing research between both regions. Submerge is another project led by EU research institutions that incorporated LAC partners, which uses subsea fibre cables as sensors to collect data for diverse scientific purposes. Finally, the Horizon programme has announced calls for joint projects related to the cloud, IoT and 5G.

Discussion

The digital foreign policies of the US, the PRC and the EU have the similar goal of shaping digital transformation in other regions by advancing their own normative approaches and the interests of their national companies. For this purpose, they have employed different policy instruments, detailed in [Table 1](#).

According to the consulted sources, the US government frequently highlighted normative preferences for digital technologies, such as the defence of an open, interoperable, secure and reliable Internet, the free flow of data, and the multistakeholder Internet governance model. The US also referenced public-private partnerships in relation to achieving its digital foreign policy objectives, accomplished through projects undertaken by leading American digital companies. Likewise, Chinese diplomacy has publicised and backed the internationalisation of Chinese digital companies into LAC, overshadowing some Western competitors. Thus far, Chinese diplomats have placed less explicit emphasis on normative issues related to digital technologies in the region, such as the promotion of

Table 1. Digital foreign policy instruments employed by the US, PRC and the EU in LAC.

	Economic diplomacy instruments	International development instruments	Science, technology and innovation diplomacy instruments	Defence diplomacy
EU	■ Global Gateway projects			■ No
	■ FTA with digital-related chapters	■ LAC Cyber Competence Centre	■ Horizon for funding bi-regional research consortiums	
PRC	■ MoUs for the digital economy ■ Trade fairs ■ Digital Economy Partnership Agreement	■ Global Development Initiative Projects	■ Joint laboratories	■ No
US	■ Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity ■ Clean Network	■ Partnership for Central America	■ None	■ Yes
	■ Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership			

cyber-sovereignty. By contrast, the EU's influence in LAC has been mainly as an advocate for normative positions, especially concerning the internationalisation of its pioneering digital regulations, such as the AI Act or the Digital Services Act. To a lesser extent, it has also supported the expansion of European companies into the region.

Apart from these similarities, the comparative analysis also indicates some noteworthy differences. First, the US's digital foreign policy has been formulated on a global scale, with much fewer regional specificities, favouring instead a bilateral approach to digital foreign policy with LAC partners. Nonetheless, in the case of LAC, the US also sought to exert influence through pre-existing multilateral regional institutions, such as shaping cyber norms debates in the OAS or by funding digital-related projects via the IADB. This contrasts with the EU and the PRC, which have established bi-regional frameworks and agreements to promote digital cooperation with LAC partners.

Second, the US has employed a more reactive and sometimes coercive approach against the perceived threat posed to its influence in LAC by the PRC and its digital companies. This can be interpreted as a renewal of the Monroe Doctrine (Pires and Nascimento 2020), by which the US seeks to limit extra-regional influence in the Americas in the 21st century as it did against European powers during the 19th and 20th centuries. This approach was reinvigorated by the Trump administration with the Clean Network programme and continued under Biden, although with less confrontational rhetoric. Instead, the PRC and the EU have sought to shape the digital sectors of the region, employing the rhetoric of international cooperation and development.

Third, the US has deployed broader economic diplomacy instruments in LAC, including digital components such as the Growth in the Americas under Trump, rebranded the 'Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity' under Biden. However, these endeavours have been affected by discontinuities in US politics, which convey a less consistent approach in comparison to those offered by the PRC and the EU. Indeed, the EU has implemented a centralised approach under the Global Gateway Initiative, which shows the new geopolitical ambition of the European Commission, especially in its competition for market share across foreign digital economies. Regarding the PRC, the signing of MoUs has been the preferred instrument to increase Chinese companies' influence over the digital economies of LAC countries.

Fourth, in comparison to the EU, the US and the PRC lack an instrument to systematically support cooperation with LAC partners in digital-related science, technology and innovation projects. Although Chinese sources frequently refer to the construction of joint labs and technology transfer, these ideas have rarely been implemented. No relevant announcements were identified in US sources. In contrast, the EU has used its pre-existing policy instruments to support bi-regional science, technology and innovation networks, which may be more promising for LAC partners in terms of transferring and co-developing digital technologies. On the other hand, in previous projects, LAC research groups have been integrated in EU-funded networks in a subordinate way (Feld and Kreimer 2019). More research is needed to determine if this is also the case in digital-related research consortiums.

Finally, regarding defence diplomacy, only the US has openly admitted to cooperating in cybersecurity and cyber defence with LAC militaries. This seems to give the US an edge over the PRC and the EU in shaping the strategic normative preferences of LAC military forces and their procurement processes of digital technologies. However, it is important to note that this conclusion may be limited because only publicly available sources were consulted.

Conclusion

This article argued that the study and comparison of digital foreign policy requires scrutiny of the various kinds of goals, as well as the policy instruments and resources, that are deployed for their achievement. The analysis also suggested that digital foreign policy tends to adapt and extend pre-existing instruments that have been deployed for other foreign policy areas or types of diplomacy such as economic diplomacy, international development, science, technology and innovation diplomacy, and defence diplomacy. Empirically, the article compared the digital foreign policies of the US, the PRC and the EU towards LAC countries. These actors have sought to shape the digital transformation in LAC states via different policy instruments. All have sought to advance their particular normative positions for digital technologies, to back their private digital businesses and to support the digital development goals of the LAC region. However, the results indicate some differences among them. The US had the least specific and coordinated approach, perhaps taking its leadership in this area for granted. This has enabled the EU to adopt a more articulated and coherent position, which stands out due to its regulatory and policy advocacy in LAC. The PRC sits in the middle. Its digital foreign policy is more organised than that of the US but less organised than the EU's, prioritising economic diplomacy instruments over others.

Regarding the implications of this study, the digital foreign policies of the US, the PRC and the EU present both opportunities and challenges for LAC countries. On the one hand, none of these proposals is exempt from exacerbating the well-known problems of the normative or technological dependence of LAC countries on foreign powers and their companies. On the other, their competition might offer LAC policy makers more space to choose among different approaches to digital policies and among suppliers of digital-related knowledge and technologies. In LAC, the manner in which each state engages with the digital initiatives of foreign actors is likely to remain heterogeneous and influenced by different factors such as the dynamics within each national political system or the degree of development of digital technologies capabilities of each nation.

In this author's view, LAC states could adopt at least two actions to fully leverage the potential benefits and reduce the associated costs of integrating with the digital strategies of foreign actors. First, governments should focus on improving the digital expertise of public officials, especially within the ministries of foreign affairs, to better equip them for negotiations with diplomats from other nations with greater expertise in these issues. Second, governments should formulate their own digital foreign policies, clearly outlining priorities and projects of interest, with an emphasis on those that could contribute most significantly to national technological upgrading. This is of utmost importance to ensure that cooperation with foreign powers aligns with local development needs and helps to promote economic growth, rather than solely advancing the agenda of foreign actors.

Regarding the limitations of this study, the analysis was restricted to documents specifically related to digital foreign policy. Future studies could provide deeper insights by contextualising these initiatives within the broader foreign policy framework of each actor and examining their evolution over time. Furthermore, additional work is required to identify common patterns among the various types of instruments utilised in digital foreign policy by different political communities. As the articulation and implementation of digital foreign policy evolves, future research could explore whether and how these processes were received in LAC states, as well as other states in different regions. Finally, future studies could also investigate how different Global South states develop their own digital foreign policies to engage with those of the US, the PRC and the EU.

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