



Economic Diplomacy in Developing Countries: Diplomats' Experiences and Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Economic diplomacy plays a crucial role in shaping the international relations of developing countries, yet the personal, emotional, and subjective experiences of diplomats in this field remain underexplored. While previous research has primarily focused on the strategic outcomes of economic diplomacy, little attention has been given to the lived experiences of diplomats from developing countries, particularly in terms of the challenges they face in negotiations. The gap in the literature is the lack of understanding of how diplomats perceive their roles and navigate complex global negotiations. In this study, we adopt a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of diplomats engaged in economic diplomacy, aiming to fill this gap. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 diplomats from developing countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America who had direct professional experience in economic diplomacy and international negotiation processes. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their diplomatic roles, involvement in economic diplomacy activities, and experience representing national interests in bilateral or multilateral negotiations. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to their perceptions, challenges, and emotional experiences. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, peer debriefing, and systematic coding procedures to ensure credibility, dependability, and consistency in the interpretation of the data. The results reveal that diplomats from developing countries experience significant emotional and psychological challenges in global negotiations, including the struggle to overcome power imbalances and the burden of representing national interests. These findings offer valuable insights into the personal dimensions of economic diplomacy, enriching the broader understanding of international relations. Our findings highlight the importance of addressing the emotional and subjective experiences of diplomats in economic diplomacy studies, suggesting that future research should further explore these aspects. This research has important implications for how diplomatic training programs are developed, emphasizing the need to better prepare diplomats for the personal challenges they face in global negotiations.



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INTRODUCTION

Economic diplomacy is a pivotal aspect of international relations, particularly for developing countries striving to enhance their global economic standing (Omidi & Roustaei, 2024). It refers to the strategic use of diplomatic channels to secure economic interests such as trade agreements, foreign investment, and economic cooperation. In the context of global diplomacy, economic diplomacy involves navigating complex international negotiations where countries leverage their resources, expertise, and political influence to create favorable conditions for national economic growth. For developing countries, economic diplomacy serves as a vital tool to mitigate the challenges posed by global inequalities and the shifting economic power structures dominated by more developed nations (Zainal et al., 2024). Despite its significance, there is limited understanding of the personal and subjective experiences of diplomats from these countries, particularly regarding the emotional and strategic complexities they encounter while negotiating in global forums.

The relevance of studying economic diplomacy lies in its profound impact on the lives of individuals who navigate its intricate processes. Diplomats and policymakers involved in shaping their country's economic future often find themselves at the intersection of national interests and global economic dynamics (Cabral et al., 2025). Their experiences are shaped by the political, cultural, and economic contexts in which they operate. These experiences are not just professional but are deeply embedded in personal perceptions of power, identity, and responsibility. In many cases, the challenges they face such as overcoming power imbalances or securing beneficial deals for their countries carry personal weight and emotional significance. Understanding these subjective experiences is critical for appreciating the broader impact of economic diplomacy and the role it plays in shaping the global economic landscape.

Given the complexities and nuances inherent in economic diplomacy, there is a need for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of those involved. Traditional political and economic analyses often overlook the personal, emotional, and subjective dimensions of these diplomatic processes (Davies et al., 2025). A phenomenological approach allows for a more nuanced understanding by focusing on the meaning that diplomats attach to their experiences (Bollempalli, 2024). This approach prioritizes the voices of those directly engaged in the field, offering insights into their perceptions, motivations, and challenges. By exploring the subjective experiences of diplomats from developing countries, this study seeks to contribute to a richer understanding of economic diplomacy and its impact on global economic governance.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals involved in economic diplomacy has emerged as a critical area of study, particularly for understanding the complex, dynamic, and often personal aspects of global economic negotiations. While the field of international relations and diplomacy has extensively explored the political, economic, and strategic dimensions of diplomatic efforts, the lived experiences of diplomats especially from developing countries remain underexplored. A growing body of literature emphasizes the importance of understanding how diplomats perceive their roles and challenges, yet most studies have focused on the broader, institutional aspects of economic diplomacy rather than the nuanced, individual experiences that shape diplomatic outcomes (Osman et al., 2024). This gap highlights the importance of a phenomenological approach, which can offer deeper insights into the subjective realities faced by diplomats and policymakers.

One of the significant methodological challenges in exploring the meaning of these experiences lies in the limitations of traditional quantitative approaches, which often fail to capture the richness of individual perspectives (Dzomonda et al., 2025). Quantitative methods, such as surveys or statistical analyses, provide valuable data but lack the depth needed to understand the emotional, psychological, and personal factors that influence diplomatic decision-making. These approaches tend to reduce complex phenomena to measurable variables, which may overlook the subtle and subjective nature of human experience in the diplomatic process. As a result, many studies fail to fully address the complexities of how diplomats engage with global economic systems on a personal level.

The limitations of these traditional methods highlight the need for an alternative approach that can capture the essence of diplomatic experiences (Komolafe et al., 2021). Phenomenology, with its emphasis on in-depth, subjective understanding, is uniquely suited to explore the personal experiences of diplomats. By focusing on the meanings that individuals attribute to their diplomatic work and the emotions they associate with their roles, phenomenology provides a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the phenomenon. In doing so, it allows for an exploration of economic diplomacy that goes beyond statistical measures, uncovering the deeper layers of human experience that shape the way diplomats interact with the global economic landscape.

In the context of economic diplomacy, most existing studies have employed practical and institutional approaches to explore the dynamics of global economic negotiations (Lasso & Dahles, 2023). These approaches often rely on statistical methods, surveys, or strategic analyses, focusing on measurable outcomes such as trade agreements, foreign investments, or diplomatic alliances. While these methods provide valuable insights into the broader structures and processes of economic diplomacy, they fail to capture the nuanced, personal experiences of diplomats and policymakers. As a result, the richness of their lived experiences, which shape their decision-making and diplomatic

strategies, remains largely overlooked. This lack of depth in understanding the subjective dimensions of economic diplomacy represents a significant gap in the current literature.

The existing research tends to prioritize objective outcomes, leaving little room for the exploration of how diplomats perceive their roles, the challenges they face, and the emotional weight of their diplomatic efforts (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). These limitations mean that the understanding of economic diplomacy is often incomplete, as it neglects the personal and experiential factors that influence diplomatic decisions (Farooq et al., 2025). Consequently, the experiences of diplomats—especially those from developing countries are inadequately understood, limiting our comprehension of how they engage with the global economic system on a personal level.

An alternative and more holistic solution is to adopt a phenomenological approach, which can capture the essence of diplomats' experiences in a way that traditional methods cannot. Phenomenology, by focusing on the subjective experiences and meanings attributed to these diplomatic processes, allows for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of how diplomats navigate the complexities of international relations (Fry et al., 2024). This approach enables the exploration of the personal dimensions of economic diplomacy, offering a richer, more nuanced perspective on the roles and perceptions of diplomats (Hasan et al., 2025). By adopting phenomenology, this study aims to fill the gap in the literature by providing insights into the lived experiences of diplomats and policymakers from developing countries, shedding light on the personal, emotional, and subjective aspects of economic diplomacy that are essential for a complete understanding of the phenomenon.

Previous research on economic diplomacy has predominantly focused on objective outcomes and strategic analyses, often using quantitative approaches to measure success in areas such as trade agreements or foreign investments (Hu & Senawi, 2024). While this has provided valuable insights into the broader structures of international diplomacy, it has largely overlooked the personal, subjective experiences of diplomats. Studies examining the lived experiences of diplomats in developing countries remain scarce, particularly in understanding how they perceive their roles, the challenges they face, and the emotional and psychological toll of their diplomatic work (Koerner et al., 2024). Additionally, existing theoretical frameworks often neglect the complexities of personal agency and the emotional dimensions of diplomatic work, limiting the depth of understanding in this field.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, which focuses on exploring the lived experiences of diplomats and policymakers engaged in economic diplomacy (Habib et al., 2024). Phenomenology allows for the investigation of how these individuals experience their roles, navigate challenges, and attribute meaning to their diplomatic activities. By using this approach, the study aims to provide a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of economic diplomacy, moving beyond the limitations of quantitative methods and offering insights into the personal, emotional, and subjective aspects of the phenomenon (Chen et al., 2021). This method is particularly appropriate for capturing the complexity and uniqueness of each participant's experiences, which are central to understanding the full scope of economic diplomacy in the global context.

The structure of this article begins with an introduction to the phenomenon of economic diplomacy and its relevance to global economic governance (Resler et al., 2024). Following this, the article delves into the phenomenological approach used to explore the subjective experiences of diplomats, explaining the data collection and analysis processes (Li et al., 2024). The study employs thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns in the experiences shared by the participants, providing a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives (Komaludin et al., 2025). The results are discussed in relation to the broader context of economic diplomacy, and the article concludes with a summary of the findings and their implications for future research and policy development.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

The study adopted a phenomenological approach, which is particularly suited for exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals within specific contexts. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of phenomena as experienced by participants, prioritizing their subjective accounts over objective analysis (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). This design allows for in-depth exploration of the meanings that participants ascribe to their experiences, providing rich, contextualized insights. Given the research question, this approach enables the examination of how diplomats and policymakers from developing countries perceive and navigate economic diplomacy in the global economic arena. The study employs a descriptive phenomenological approach, which focuses on describing the participants' lived experiences without interpreting or inferring meaning beyond their direct accounts. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee, and all research procedures followed ethical standards for studies involving human participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with relevant experiences were included in the study. The criteria for inclusion required participants to be diplomats or policymakers from developing countries who have been actively engaged in economic diplomacy at the international level. Participants were recruited through professional diplomatic networks, institutional contacts, and referrals from individuals familiar with economic diplomacy practices. The recruitment process prioritized participants who had direct experience in bilateral or multilateral economic negotiations, trade-related diplomacy, investment promotion, or international economic policy forums. Exclusion criteria were set to omit those without significant involvement in diplomatic activities related to economic policy. In total, 12 participants were involved in the study, comprising a diverse group of male and female diplomats aged between 35 and 60 years, with an average age of 47 years (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). All participants had a minimum of five years of experience in economic diplomacy, ensuring they could offer substantial insights into the subject matter. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, indicated by the repetition of key meanings across interviews and the absence of substantially new themes in the final interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face to facilitate a comfortable and conducive environment for sharing personal experiences. The interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and took place at the participants' offices or designated meeting spaces that ensured privacy (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). An interview guide was employed, focusing on the diplomats' personal experiences, challenges, and perceptions regarding economic diplomacy. The guide was developed based on the study's research question and was flexible enough to allow for exploration of relevant topics that emerged during the conversations. To strengthen the validity of the interview guide, the questions were reviewed by experts in international relations, qualitative research, and diplomacy studies. A pilot interview was also conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and sequencing of the questions, after which minor revisions were made to improve the guide. The data collection process was designed to encourage open dialogue and ensure that participants felt at ease to share their authentic perspectives. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of participants' narratives.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The analysis followed a systematic process of data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, and theme refinement (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Thematic analysis was chosen as it allows for an in-depth examination of participants'

subjective experiences and enables the researcher to identify recurring patterns that capture the essence of the phenomenon under study. NVivo software was utilized to assist with the organization and management of data, though the analysis was predominantly manual to maintain the integrity of the phenomenological approach. The final themes were derived by reflecting on the meaning and significance of participants' narratives, with each theme representing a key aspect of their experience with economic diplomacy. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, peer debriefing, audit trail documentation, and repeated reading of transcripts. Selected participants were invited to review summaries of their interview interpretations to confirm accuracy, while peer review was used to minimize researcher bias in coding and theme development. Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of analytical decisions, and confirmability was strengthened by maintaining reflective notes throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Perception of Economic Diplomacy as a Strategic Tool

A dominant theme across the interviews was the perception of economic diplomacy as a strategic tool for enhancing national development. Diplomats described how they view economic diplomacy as an essential instrument for negotiating trade deals, attracting foreign investments, and creating economic opportunities for their countries. One participant, a senior diplomat from a small African nation, expressed:

"Economic diplomacy is not just about establishing relations; it's about shaping the global economic environment to benefit our country's growth. Every decision we make in the diplomatic arena affects the economic trajectory of our nation."

This quote highlights the personal sense of responsibility and urgency that diplomats associate with their diplomatic efforts. The participants consistently pointed out that the success of economic diplomacy often lies in the ability to navigate complex multilateral negotiations, where national interests must be weighed against global economic dynamics.

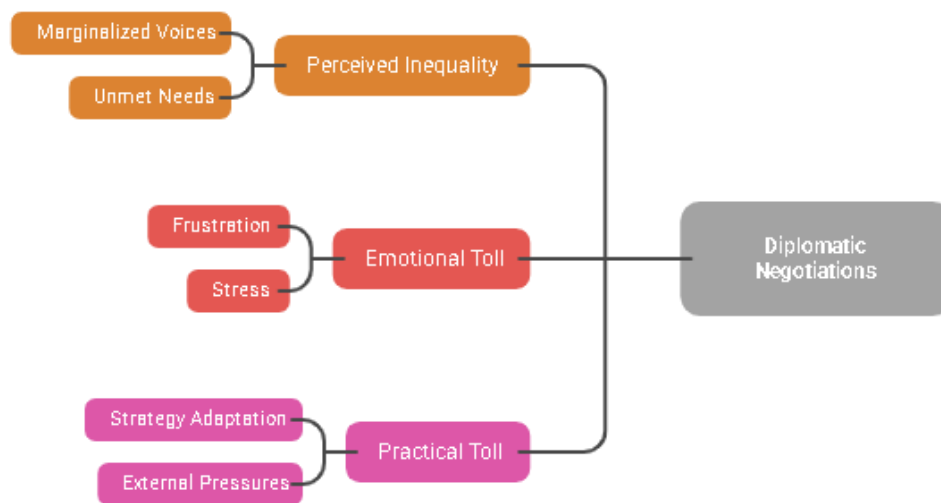
Challenges in Negotiating with Major Economies

A second significant theme that emerged from the data was the challenges faced by diplomats from developing countries when negotiating with more powerful, developed nations. These challenges were characterized by power imbalances, limited leverage, and often a lack of access to decision-making processes in global forums. As one participant noted:

"We enter the negotiations knowing that our voice might be drowned out by the larger economies, but we have to make sure our concerns are heard. It's always a struggle, and often we leave with less than we had hoped for."

This reflection underscores the perceived inequality in diplomatic negotiations, where developing nations feel that their voices and needs are marginalized. The emotional and practical toll of these challenges was evident in many interviews, as diplomats described their experiences of frustration and the constant need to adapt strategies in the face of overwhelming external pressures.

Challenges in Diplomatic Negotiations



The Role of Diplomacy in Shaping Economic Policies

Another theme that emerged was the role of diplomacy in shaping national economic policies. Several diplomats mentioned how they serve as intermediaries, conveying international economic opportunities to their governments and translating these opportunities into actionable policies. A policymaker from Latin America shared:

"Our role is to translate global economic trends into actionable policies that can strengthen our domestic economy. Economic diplomacy is not just about presenting opportunities; it's about embedding these opportunities within the national framework."

This theme reveals that diplomats are not only representatives of their countries but also active participants in shaping the economic direction of their nations. Their experiences highlight the delicate balance they must maintain between representing global interests and securing local benefits.

Personal Experiences of Success and Failure in Economic Diplomacy

The final theme revolves around the personal experiences of success and failure in the realm of economic diplomacy. Participants reflected on both their triumphs and their struggles in the diplomatic arena. One diplomat recounted:

"There have been moments where our diplomatic efforts have succeeded beyond our expectations securing major trade deals or forging new alliances. But there have also been times where we walked away feeling like we didn't achieve anything, despite our best efforts."

This theme encapsulates the emotional highs and lows that diplomats experience. The tension between success and failure was a recurring subject throughout the interviews, as diplomats continually strive to achieve favorable economic outcomes for their countries, often in the face of significant challenges.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Main Findings

The main findings of this study reveal the complex and deeply subjective experiences of diplomats from developing countries in the realm of economic diplomacy. Through a phenomenological analysis, four key themes emerged, illustrating the critical role of economic diplomacy in shaping national development, the challenges faced by diplomats in negotiations, and the emotional weight of their experiences (Hanifa et al., 2025). These findings directly address the research question by

uncovering how diplomats perceive and engage with the global economic system, shedding light on their lived realities in a highly dynamic and competitive field.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings of this study significantly contribute to our understanding of economic diplomacy by focusing on the personal, emotional, and subjective dimensions that have been largely overlooked in previous research. While traditional studies emphasize measurable outcomes and strategic success, this study highlights the psychological and emotional aspects of economic diplomacy (Andrianarimanana et al., 2023). Diplomats' experiences marked by both success and failure were found to shape their perceptions of power dynamics in global negotiations, as well as their sense of responsibility in representing their countries. The study provides valuable insights into how these individuals navigate the complex interplay of national interests, global pressures, and their own personal motivations, thus enriching our understanding of how economic diplomacy operates beyond institutional and political frameworks.

Connection to Existing Literature and Theory

These findings resonate with existing literature on diplomatic practices and international relations, particularly the work on power dynamics in global negotiations (Shaker et al., 2025). While previous studies have primarily focused on the outcomes of economic diplomacy, this study contributes a novel perspective by emphasizing the lived experiences of diplomats, which are often shaped by emotional and personal factors. Similar studies on the experiences of diplomats in international settings have highlighted the emotional toll and the challenges of balancing national interests with global pressures (Goulart et al., 2022), which aligns with the findings in this study. However, this research builds on those insights by applying a phenomenological lens, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of how diplomats experience and make sense of their roles in the global economic system. Additionally, the study extends the theoretical understanding of economic diplomacy by incorporating subjective experiences, which are often omitted in more traditional, outcome-focused research (Adigüzel et al., 2025). These insights contribute to a broader, more holistic view of international relations and diplomacy, emphasizing the importance of personal experiences in shaping diplomatic decisions.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have significant theoretical and practical implications for both the field of economic diplomacy and broader international relations. From a theoretical standpoint, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the emotional and subjective experiences of diplomats from developing countries, areas that have been underexplored in traditional studies focused on outcomes and strategies (Akullo et al., 2025). By highlighting the challenges diplomats face, such as power imbalances in negotiations and the emotional weight of their roles, the study provides new insights into how personal experiences shape diplomatic practices and decisions. This has practical implications for the way foreign service training programs might be structured, emphasizing the emotional and psychological preparation required for effective diplomatic engagement. Furthermore, these findings suggest that economic diplomacy is not only a political and strategic tool but also a deeply personal endeavor for the individuals involved, which can inform policy-making and diplomatic practice by recognizing the human element in international relations.

Study Limitations

While the findings provide valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research is limited to a relatively small sample of diplomats from developing countries, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across different regions or diplomatic contexts. Additionally, the study focuses on diplomats with a minimum of five years of experience, which may limit the perspectives of less experienced individuals who may face different challenges (Reindrawati, 2023). Another limitation is the use of semi-structured interviews, which, although effective in exploring personal experiences, may be influenced by the subjective interpretation of both the interviewer and interviewee. The study's focus on personal narratives means that the findings may not be directly applicable to all diplomatic contexts or countries, and further research is needed to validate the findings in different cultural or regional settings.

Prospective Research Directions

This study opens several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to expand the sample to include a broader range of diplomats from various regions, including those from more developed nations, to compare their experiences with those of diplomats from developing countries (Omidi & Roustaei, 2024). Another area for exploration could be to examine how diplomatic experiences in economic diplomacy are shaped by gender, age, or other personal characteristics, as these factors were not explicitly addressed in the current study. Additionally, the emotional and psychological aspects of diplomatic work could be further explored using longitudinal studies to track how diplomats' perceptions evolve over the course of their careers. Finally, the findings could be used as a foundation for investigating how diplomatic training programs could be improved to better address the emotional and subjective aspects of diplomacy, helping diplomats cope with the complex and often stressful nature of their work.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of diplomats from developing countries engaged in economic diplomacy, addressing the gap in existing literature regarding the emotional and subjective dimensions of their roles. The findings highlight the critical challenges diplomats face in global negotiations, such as power imbalances and the personal emotional toll of representing national interests. By applying a phenomenological approach, this research provides a deeper understanding of how these diplomats perceive and navigate their roles, enriching our knowledge of economic diplomacy beyond objective outcomes. The study contributes to the field by shedding light on the personal, psychological aspects of diplomatic work, which are often overlooked in traditional research. More specifically, the findings suggest that diplomatic training programs should move beyond technical knowledge of trade, investment, and negotiation strategies by incorporating modules on emotional resilience, stress management, intercultural communication, asymmetric negotiation, and reflective decision-making. Such training would better prepare diplomats from developing countries to manage psychological pressure, respond strategically to power imbalances, and maintain professional effectiveness during complex international negotiations. At the policy level, foreign ministries and diplomatic institutions should develop structured support systems, including mentoring schemes, negotiation simulation programs, post-negotiation debriefings, and institutional mechanisms for sharing experiential knowledge among diplomats. These practices can strengthen diplomats' capacity to represent national interests while reducing the emotional burden associated with high-stakes economic negotiations. Future studies could expand on this work by including a broader range of diplomats from diverse regions and examining how factors such as gender or age influence diplomatic experiences. This would further enhance our understanding of the complexities of economic diplomacy and inform future diplomatic training and practice.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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