

What Makes Diplomacy Successful?

New Lessons From Evaluative Research On Effective Diplomatic Engagement

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[Author Manuscript - Post-peer review; 22 April 2025 – final PDF-version published 10 June 2025 in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 20, Issue 2 by Brill|Nijhoff:

https://brill.com/view/journals/hjd/20/2/article-p337_6.xml?ebody=Abstract%2FExcerpt]

Subjects / keywords: Diplomacy, Evaluation / Evaluative Research; Success, Effectivity, Netherlands MFA, Capacity, Reputation, Timing

Summary

How countries engage diplomatically with the rest of the world is at the heart of the work of Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA's). In recent years, IOB – the Independent Evaluation Directorate of the Netherlands MFA – has conducted many evaluations that have addressed that country's diplomatic engagement. These studies have yielded significant findings on what makes diplomatic engagement successful. This practitioner's essay, with characteristics of a 'positive evaluation', provides an overview based on a review of recent IOB evaluations, a special case study, and background interviews. The conclusion is that diplomatic success can be explained through a combination of the seven factors: mission, capacity, commitment, teamwork, networking, timing, and reputation.

Prologue

The images go around the world on August 11, 2023. Off the coast of Yemen in the Red Sea, Dutch company Boskalis pumps the last of the crude oil from the wrecked supertanker 'FSO Safer' to another ship. It is a euphoric moment: the immediate threat of some 180 million liters of the poisonous black stuff ending up in the Red Sea has been averted. The United Nations communications department is working overtime: Secretary-General António Guterres talks about a 'gigantic ecological and humanitarian catastrophe' that has been prevented.

Less well known is that in the months and indeed years leading up to this success, Dutch diplomats and their ministers played a decisive role. It is thanks to them that the momentum of the ceasefire in the Yemeni civil war is used to carry out the salvage operation. Through their co-ordinated efforts in The Hague, New York, the Gulf region and Yemen itself, this multifaceted diplomatic engagement leads to the funding, security, knowledge, and machinery that are necessary for the salvage operation.

1. Introduction: Learning From Diplomatic Success Through Evaluation

'Diplomacy' can be traditionally defined as the organised representation of interests by and between states¹. A classic goal is to maintain good relations with other countries in favour of one's own interests. Effective diplomacy occurs when these interests – which may be national, but also global – are successfully represented, and policy goals attained thanks to the efforts of diplomats.

¹ Constantinou et al., 2016, 14; compare Cooper et al., 2013.

In recent years, IOB has carried out several evaluations in which diplomatic efforts have been assessed. These evaluations provide a wealth of findings on its effectiveness, the factors that influence it, and the way in which it can be investigated. We hope to contribute to the growing number of publications measuring, analysing, and evaluating the influence of diplomatic efforts in a systematic way².

IOB is the independent evaluation directorate of the Netherlands MFA. It is a separate office, placed outside of the MFA and staffed by both permanent researchers from outside the ministry (approximately 67%) and diplomacy practitioners on a rotational assignment. IOB has statutory authority that strengthens its independence (approximately 33%; IOB, 2019). When programming or conducting evaluation research, IOB is not influenced by political or commercial considerations. IOB formulates the demarcation, the research questions, the way in which the research is conducted, and the external communication of evaluation results. To augment independence, the director of IOB is recruited from outside MFA and is appointed for a fixed period of seven years. He or she is not eligible for a follow-up appointment within MFA.

Diplomacy can be evaluated in various ways (Power and Curran, 2018; Arsenault, 2025; see Van der Knaap et al., 2023, for a discussion on the merits of quantitative versus qualitative evaluation for learning and improvement). For the IOB-report underlying this article (IOB, 2025b), we have examined ten evaluations and a special case study, carried out under the research project 'So that's how it can be' about successful government policy of the University of Utrecht ('t Hart et al., 2025). The research behind this article and the IOB-essay can therefore be regarded as a 'synthesizing exploration' with characteristics of a 'positive evaluation': what makes the deployment of diplomacy successful (Van der Knaap, 2017)? The focus is on 'what works': which factors influence the chance that diplomacy will effectively contribute to achieving objectives?

IOB evaluations examined for this essay (all reports may be retrieved from www.iob-evaluatie.nl):

- Consular services in motion (IOB, 2019b).
- Economic diplomacy: What you see is not always what you get (IOB, 2020).
- Trading interests and values: International trade and investment policy (2021a).
- Improve the connection: International Cybersecurity Policy (2021b).
- Trust, risk and learn: Humanitarian aid - financial support and diplomacy (2022).
- Inconvenient realities: Contributions to stability, security, and rule of law (2023a).
- Rising seas, raising ambitions: Evaluation of Dutch Climate Diplomacy (2023b).
- Consistent efforts, persisting challenges: Contributing to sexual and reproductive health and rights (2023c).
- 'Grip' through understanding: Dutch influence in the EU (2024).
- Between paper and reality: Evaluation of Human rights policy (2025a).

The IOB evaluations and their background documents were systematically reviewed by IOB researchers on the components that related to diplomatic engagement and its effects. For this purpose, MAXQDA was used, a software program designed for the use in qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research. In the underlying evaluations, existing monitoring and evaluation by

² Power and Curran 2018; Spokojny 2023; Arsenault 2025.

MFA itself and/or other (non) government organizations was used. Most of these evaluations were of a qualitative nature. In addition, a special case study was carried out, reconstructing how a looming big oil disaster off the coast of Yemen was successfully prevented thanks to Dutch diplomacy. Finally, background discussions were held with MFA diplomats and with Louise van Schaik, diplomacy expert of Clingendael Institute.

In order to do justice to the positive nature of the study, two choices were made. First, while acknowledging that successful and unsuccessful diplomatic engagement is often not a hard binary, we did include partial successes in our review. Second, and more importantly: although contrasting cases that illustrate how the absence of success factors did decrease the impact of diplomatic engagement could be instructive – and ‘normal’ IOB-evaluations certainly contain plenty of those – we deliberately focused on the positives.

2. Dutch Diplomacy: Continuous Development

There are, of course, many definitions of diplomacy (see Melissen and Fernández, 2005; Cooper c.s., 2023; Qin, 2020). In practical terms, there is wide consensus that its key elements are cooperation, consultation, but also negotiations between representatives of countries to achieve certain goals. But when do we consider foreign policy and the role therein of diplomatic engagement a success, and when is it a failure?³ As the Foreign Ministry evaluation directorate, IOB considers diplomacy to be effective and, hence, successful when ‘Dutch’ interests and values are successfully represented and goals are achieved due to well-executed diplomatic engagement.

The Netherlands MFA is working on a diplomatic renewal strategy under a 2011 memorandum titled ‘Modernisation of Dutch diplomacy – a timeless profession in a contemporary style’. This document formulates a several guiding principles: Dutch interests are central, structure follows function, flexibility, focus, integrated working and an effort to ‘operate more dynamically’ by making full use of technology and communication resources.

The ‘Vision postennet’ from 2023 – a policy document in which those principles are translated into concrete objectives for the future of embassies and diplomatic posts – is clear about the success that strived after: the mission is to make the Netherlands safer and more prosperous, the world fairer and more sustainable and to help Dutch people abroad (MFA, 2023a). As may be clear from this, Dutch government and diplomacy are not limited to Dutch interests, but rather also represent global interests such as expressed in the Sustainable Development Goals or SDG’s. Recently, the 2011 renewal strategy was augmented with the project ‘Strengthened engagement’ (MFA, 2023b). The core of this enhancement is the increased importance being attached to listening to and delving into – the opinions and interests of – others.

3. Success Factors For Effective Diplomacy

What factors often emerge in IOB evaluations as important for the conduct of effective diplomacy?

3.1 A Clear Mission With Authority

There is a well-understood difference between knowing clearly what you want to achieve and communicating clearly about it, or not. Announcing your end goal in advance is not always wise: it

³ As Scherer points out, many articles and reports in this field fail to specify criteria for success or offer evidence to support their claim (2023, 1).

can make diplomatic maneuvering difficult and put you as a country outside of discussions. Still, many IOB evaluations show that for successful diplomatic efforts it is important to know what you want: diplomatic campaigns and cases in which The Netherlands achieved good results for all parties were accompanied by clear ambitions, concrete goals and good management.

For such a clear mission, it is important that politicians and the ministry formulate clear ambitions, so that everyone knows exactly what the intention is. It is important that these goals are realistic and lie within the competencies and expertise but also the 'sphere of influence' of the Netherlands and its partners. The policy goals should then be made as concrete as possible. In doing so, it is important – like in a *theory of change* – to make a clear distinction between 'intermediate goals' and 'final goals' and which interventions should contribute to which objectives. Moreover, it helps if it is clear to all concerned what the priorities are, which target group(s) must be reached or which treaty texts must be changed, but also what the ultimate goals are (for example better trade conditions or protection of human rights). And what 'we', as a country, are prepared to do for them.

Policy objectives are often set at a high – effect or impact – level and tend to apply to the long term. It helps, therefore, to have a strategy which can be made explicit in an 'action plan': which objectives are pursued in which order and which diplomatic efforts should be made at which time with whom and in which forum? When an action plan is supported by the MFA, diplomats become empowered to act more quickly and to better involve others in a diplomatic effort, as the evaluation of climate diplomacy shows. Such a 'mission command', to borrow a military term, can help diplomats to make the right choices 'in the hustle and bustle' of diplomatic engagement in the real world.

IOB evaluations show that this contributes to their ability to act as a credible spokesperson and to negotiate and decide more effectively. At the same time, a strong mandate means that the relevant representatives have the authority to deviate from instructions whenever flexibility is needed in the negotiations. Instructions should be clear, but not too restrictive (see paragraph 3.6 on flexibility).

3.2 Sufficient Skilled Capacity, Knowledge, and Means

Without skilled people, expertise and financial resources, there can be no effective diplomatic efforts. All these parts are important for effective diplomacy

These can be no diplomatic engagement with the deployment of sufficient skilled people: diplomatic efforts must be accompanied by adequate staff capacity, so that the workload does not become too great and – pursuing – ambitions remains realistic and achievable in the available time. Literally, it is about having 'the right people in the right place' and then also at the right time. Setting up a special team or 'task force' for a priority theme, a diplomatic campaign or important discussions often works out well, as demonstrated by the evaluation of the UN Security Council. The same applies to special envoys and 'thematic ambassadors' who are deployed for foreign policy priorities (e.g. climate and human rights).

Diplomats are expected to play different roles and must therefore have different knowledge and skills. In general, MFA diplomats and attachés (representing other/line ministries) can achieve more if their knowledge and information positions are strong.

Both (1) specific, issue-related knowledge and (2) knowledge of 'the relevant processes', institutions, and fora matter: together, diplomats must know their professional file, understand the processes and the forum where the diplomatic effort takes place (such as the UN Human Rights Council or the European Commission). Knowledge of specific substantive issue-areas (referred to as 'dossiers') is important for both policy quality and negotiations: it is always better that debates are won by the strength of one's evidence (Spokojny and Scherer, 2021). Yet without knowledge of the associated

procedures and social norms of the institutions involved, achieving optimal results will be much harder if not impossible.

The task of MFA in foreign policy is often – but not always – a coordinating one. Therefore, social and networking skills are needed to establish and maintain relationships, as evaluations show. Diplomatic practice and communication and tactical skills also help to build trust and authority with other players and stakeholders. To be effective, diplomats must be socially adept, with knowledge of and respect for the positions and culture of other players. Understanding the positions and interests of other parties improves when you listen to them regularly and seriously.

Finally, the means to operate. Representatives and embassies have various resources at their disposal. In addition to the permanent MFA workforce, there are also funds and programs to hire short-term experts or consultants, finance pilot projects, or organise meetings or missions. This is done, with success, in trade promotion, public diplomacy, and climate diplomacy. Assistance in demonstrating the feasibility of green investments or organising events on a particular theme (such as climate, water management, or sexual and reproductive health and rights) can be effective in persuading governments and others to adjust their decision-making and policy-making.

3.3 Commitment: Enthusiasm and Drive

In addition to sufficient staff time, knowledge, and means, personal involvement and enthusiasm can also make a big difference. An active and cooperative attitude often helps to achieve results, as do good personal contacts and – in the background – a favorable reputation of the Netherlands, of the embassy or of the diplomat as an individual (compare Holmes, 2018). It contributes to others being convinced and granting you something. Desirable qualities for diplomats are therefore – in addition to curiosity, pro-activity, approachability and flexibility – also involvement and even ‘drive’.

The chance of effectiveness increases if ministers or senior civil servants and diplomats also show involvement. Visible political guidance confers status: involved diplomats will experience more authority, more clout and more cooperation from colleagues, as emerged from the evaluation of climate diplomacy. A personal and positive commitment from a minister often works well, too, in lobbying, negotiation, and advocacy efforts because of their visibility, their authority and their ability to mobilise actors, as was evident from the oil tanker case.

In addition, when political and senior leaders feel responsible for an issue, they are more accessible to consider escalation strategies proposed by diplomats when a negotiation is stuck and needs a higher level shot in the arm. Calibrated escalation is effective in practice, especially when combined with the delegated authority to make final decisions.

3.4 Good Teamwork: Cooperation and Coordination ‘Back Home’

At the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, ‘Team NL’ won 34 medals, fifteen of which were gold. ‘The Dutch’ finished in sixth place on the medal table, finishing ahead of more populous countries such as Great Britain and Germany and reflecting the country’s considerable soft power. Prime Minister Schoof praised the Olympians: ‘You have given the Netherlands a club feeling!’. Without wanting to stretch the metaphor too far: to be internationally effective with diplomatic efforts, such a club feeling helps. Networking and co-ordination within the MFA, with specialists from other ministries and other actors increases the chance of success when it leads to clear objectives and an optimal use of knowledge that is available in ‘The Hague’. If the policy that the Netherlands promotes internationally is uniform, coherent and consistent, then that is good for the country’s influence, as is evident from the evaluation of EU influence.

Because of its coordinating role, MFA employees benefit from maintaining good relations with all relevant stakeholders. Fixed consultation structures and intensive working relationships do enable effective coordination. Although challenges around expertise and interests remain, good examples from IOB research can be found in the Permanent Representation to the EU and in embassies where diplomats and attachés work together in an integrated manner. An up-to-date policy framework, in which interests are explicitly weighed against each other and clear choices are being made, also increases the chance of success (for example in climate diplomacy).

Communication and coordination between 'The Hague' and bilateral posts or with multilateral international organisations is important for context-specific, targeted and effective engagement:

- Embassies have up-to-date knowledge of the positions of 'their country'.
- Permanent representations to the EU, UN and other international organisations understand the processes, procedures and negotiations in 'their forum'.

Embassies benefit from regular consultations with the policy directorates and regional directorates at the MFA and with line ministries. The deployment strategy at country level formally lies with the regional directorates (for attachés this lies with line ministries), but evaluation research shows that it is important that they have sufficient capacity to be able to play that role well.

3.5 International Networking: Connections and Real Interest

Informal coalitions of like-minded countries have more clout than an individual country alone, and that is especially true for a medium-sized player like The Netherlands. IOB evaluations contain several examples where The Netherlands took the initiative to set up leading groups or other coalitions to promote certain positions. And that leads to results, as was evident from the climate initiative.

Forging coalitions requires international networking: establishing and maintaining contacts that can be useful for achieving objectives. Networking is important for your information position: what do the players involved think, what are their interests, how are they developing and how much power do they have (to hinder or to help). A good information position is beneficial for the chances of success of a diplomatic effort in negotiations and lobbying.

In general, in bilateral relations, the effect of diplomatic efforts is greater if they form an integral part of broader relations with a particular country or with international organisations. But such a 'good relationship' gains an extra dimension if it goes hand in hand with diplomats who know each other personally and can easily find each other.

In general, you can achieve more if you act in accordance with, or at least take into account, the policies and interests of other players. For the best results, it is important that your efforts are aligned with the interests of others. Anyone who knows the interests and positions of others during lobbying or negotiations and takes them into account in their efforts, tactics and exchanges can ensure that the end result is acceptable to others or to a majority. This requires diplomats who have empathy, speak the language, and know the country or forum where they have to operate. Herein, the capacity to put yourself in someone else's shoes and to develop different interpretations of interests and goals can make successful diplomatic engagement more likely. Networking with an eye for the other hence forms the basis with which we started this paragraph: forming coalitions of like-minded players. After all, without access you cannot mobilise others.

3.6 Flexibility and Timing: Making Use Of Windows Of Opportunity

It is a characteristic of our modern world: everything is constantly changing at a seemingly faster pace. This is no less true – and in 2025 probably even more true – for the geopolitical context in which diplomacy is practiced (Uilenreef, 2023). Local interests or conflicts come into play, new coalitions emerge, security situations deteriorate, and the willingness of a major player to cooperate in a solution subsides due to domestic politics or unexpected events elsewhere.

Flexibility in diplomacy makes sense: various evaluations show that it is effective if you tailor your diplomatic efforts well to changed or changing circumstances. Remaining relevant and continuing to work purposefully in a changed context may require adjusting positions, but also strategy or tactics. It is also important to be able to scale up capacity (people, money, time) to what a new playing field demands.

For sufficient agility, the aforementioned 'mission command ' must provide sufficient room for maneuvering and an adequate mandate for the Dutch representatives, so that they feel authorised to adjust the deployment if necessary. If detailed instructions are nevertheless issued from – politicians in – The Hague, those instructions, too, must be tailored to the current state of affairs. Yet, as decision-making and communication takes time, it may be wise to give representatives permission to act 'as they see fit'.

The latter is also a matter of trust. If their mandate allows it, Dutch diplomats are often very capable of seizing opportunities, as IOB evaluations show. By being flexible at the right time, they can succeed in negotiations and lobbying campaigns. In the context of the EU, Dutch representatives are generally used to acting pragmatically, which often leads to positive policy outcomes.

Timing is an indispensable element of successful diplomatic engagement. Various evaluations have shown that 'using the momentum' is the decisive factor in achieving success. Early intervention in the process of agenda-setting, policy-making and decision-making – such as in the EU when the European Commission is drawing up draft texts – increases the chance of influence. But sometimes you have to be patient, persistent and wait for 'the right moment'. To be able to seize opportunities at the moment they arise requires that all the necessary ingredients are lined up: knowledgeable and motivated people, sufficient resources, a clear mandate, and connections. Which brings to the last factor: reputation.

3.7 A good Reputation: Credibility and Reliability

A good reputation of a country and a good personal reputation of a minister, the ambassador, and other members of a delegation contribute to credibility, to good relations, and hence to results. Reliability is of great importance in this: if others trust you, they are more open to your input and to cooperation.

The reputation and credibility of The Netherlands as an advocate and negotiator usually benefits from consistency in Dutch policy. Respondents in various IOB evaluations indicate that this is important for the effectiveness of diplomatic engagement: the image of being a reliable partner that has no hidden intentions and that does not go back on agreements made, has worked out favourably.

Dutch diplomats may also benefit from a good reputation in some countries and in dealing with multilateral organisations due to the fact that the Netherlands has been, sometimes for decades, a

major donor in the domain of development cooperation.⁴ In addition, Dutch knowledge, expertise, and ‘hands on’ reputation in areas such as water management, agriculture, and food security also have a positive effect: on trade promotion and bilateral relations in general.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Epilogue

Would the successful prevention of the oil spill with the 'FSO Safer' have been possible without the efforts and commitment of Dutch diplomatic engagement? We are not entirely certain: after all, we do not know what would have happened without the Dutch initiative. It is equally difficult to point to one single determining factor. In fact, the winning combination consisted of a clear goal, active involvement, a keen eye for the interests of others, ministerial commitment, sufficient means, and good relationships. Still, we are confident Dutch diplomacy did play a decisive role in taking the lead in securing sufficient funding and safety. What's more, success is no coincidence: Dutch diplomats have done their homework on all fronts. Momentum, players and their interests, money, knowledge, and a concrete perspective for a solution, it all came together.

4.1 A Combination Of Factors

What becomes clear when analysing the evaluations is that there is no single factor that determines the success of diplomatic efforts. Having a clear goal is not enough in itself, but neither is political support, knowledge, capacity, strategy, or teamwork. And on its own, a middle-sized country like the Netherlands will not get far either if you want to get things done on the international playing field: you have to work together and convince others at the frontline (Cooper and Cornut, 2018). And that is only possible if your networks and reputation are in order. Finally, you have to be flexible in order to be able to ‘strike’ at the right moment.

Still, based on the IOB evaluations studied, we consider seven factors required to increase the chance of successful diplomatic engagement:

1. A clear mission with authority: goals, an action plan, mandate, and support;
2. Sufficient capacity, knowledge (substance *and* processes), and skills;
3. Commitment: enthusiasm and drive;
4. Good teamwork: domestic cooperation and coordination;
5. International networking: forging and maintaining good relationships, being interested;
6. Flexibility and timing: making use of windows of opportunity, and;
7. A good reputation: the basis for credibility and reliability.

The overall conclusion is that the diplomatic success found in the evaluations can be explained through the presence of a combination of the seven factors, in different proportions according to the mission at stake.

⁴However, it is relevant to monitor how the changes in the development cooperation strategy of The Netherlands that were announced in February 2025, in which Dutch interests in the domains of trade, security, and migration will take precedence, will influence future effectiveness of Dutch diplomatic engagement (MFA, 2025). As a result of these changes, The Netherlands will (a) stop projects focused on gender equality, vocational and higher education, and sports and culture while (b) reducing its efforts on climate, civil society and multilateral cooperation.

Diplomatic representatives have the capacity to act if they have the mission, capacity, networks and skills to do so, and if they are given the space to act according to their own insight where necessary. The context and circumstances always play a role, but a good diplomat takes this into account by being alert, seizing opportunities and focusing their efforts on the situation.

It was striking that diversity or gender were not mentioned in the underlying evaluation reports. In order to gain more insight into this, this aspect could be included more explicitly in future evaluations.

4.2 Recommendations

Diplomacy is a profession, in our view, unlike any other: it requires a special combination of character, knowledge and skills. Within MFA, that special profession should be cherished: it should have an 'owner', there must be a clearer vision, also with regard to the selection, training, career policy, and assignments of diplomats. In addition, access to information, networks and 'tailor-made resources', such as additional capacity and finance, are also indispensable for building strong and effective partnerships that constitute success. Fortunately, many of the factors mentioned above are already part of the curriculum of the Academy for International Relations, founded by MFA in 2015.

Building strong and effective partnerships is an indispensable link in effective diplomatic efforts. Here, nothing should be taken for granted: anno 2025, the world has changed to such an extent that long-term coalitions or 'good reputations' can no longer be seen as guaranteed. It is therefore good that, in the MFA's pursuit of 'enhanced engagement', more effort is being made to understand the perspectives and motivations of others. This is essential to be and remain connected and that is in turn indispensable for achieving results.

Furthermore, not everything is possible: you never have the time, capacity and possibility to do all diplomatic efforts optimally. Or: you have to choose what you use your (scarce) resources for.

IOB will continue to investigate the use of diplomacy as the most important policy instrument of MFA in future evaluation research. The insights from this synthesis report will contribute to more systematic evaluations.

At the same time, the world does not (ever) stand still and the knowledge from evaluations deserves critical reflection and, where necessary, adjustment and supplementation. We invite all readers to respond to the contents of this essay and share their insights, experience, and feedback.

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