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Making foreign policy matter

A discursive analysis of the strategic communication of Sweden's feminist foreign policy

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Making foreign policy matter

A discursive analysis of the strategic communication of Sweden's feminist foreign policy

Isabelle Karlsson

LUND
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract: This dissertation examines strategic communication of foreign policy as a dynamic process, in which a variety of actors are involved. To achieve this, foreign policy is conceptualized as a discourse that is co-produced by the government, public diplomacy practitioners, and publics in different communication settings. The thesis argues that in these practices of co-production, power flows in and from different directions. Thus, it provides a critical examination of what happens with foreign policy in communication and how communication impacts policy. The thesis employs an overarching discourse approach, which is elaborated into the theoretical concepts of legitimation, discursive closure, counter- and brand publics, and applied discourse theory in four papers. The papers compiling the thesis focus on government’s legitimation practices; public diplomacy practitioners’ meaning construction of ambiguous foreign policy; formation practices of unintended publics in the digital sphere; and practitioners’ and government’s discursive (re-)negotiation of foreign policy change. The thesis builds on empirical material from Sweden’s feminist foreign policy context, which was collected in interviews with public diplomacy practitioners, texts in the form of policy documents and statements of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and debates on the digital platform Reddit. Overall, the thesis shows the complex discursive constructions and negotiations involved in the strategic communication of foreign policy. Feminist foreign policy discourse is co-produced differently by different actors: The government constructs the policy as a unique selling point, public diplomacy practitioners construct it as a depoliticized asset that can be downplayed, and publics construct it as a contrastable position. Publics are actively involved in strategic communication, albeit in unforeseeable ways. Thus, the control of state actors is limited. Practitioners are guided by the (imagined) perception of publics in making foreign policy meaningful for these, which results in downplaying the disruptive potential of foreign policy. The underlying logic is the attention economy, which leads strategic communication to structure international relations in a consumer-oriented way. In consequence, frictions between international politics and strategic communication can emerge. The thesis contributes to research mainly in the fields of strategic communication and public diplomacy, but also to the fields of international relations and diplomacy.

Key words: strategic communication; public diplomacy; nation branding; foreign policy; foreign policy discourse; feminist foreign policy; Sweden

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Isabelle Karlsson

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To my parents, Barbara and Kent.

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You may wonder about the cover of this thesis. It looks the way it does because purple is a color of the women's rights movement. The gradient shifting in intensity looks nice, I think. It also reminds me of the support for women's rights across the globe, which may grow stronger or weaker at different points in time. Probably, not one of us can individually put a halt to the global backlash on promoting gender equality. Yet, it is public opinion and transnational discourse(s) that can strengthen or weaken a collective vision of a more world that is more just and equal. Therefore, I believe that we all can and should use our voice to argue for such a world. Hopefully, this thesis will inspire you, the reader, to reflect on how you can use your voice to make a difference.

This dissertation is the result of five years and one month of work, almost to the day. I look back on my PhD time with great joy, gratitude, and pride, and I am thankful to the many great people that have accompanied me on this journey.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines strategic communication of foreign policy as a dynamic process, in which a variety of actors are involved. To achieve this, foreign policy is conceptualized as a discourse that is co-produced by the government, public diplomacy practitioners, and publics in different communication settings. The thesis argues that in these practices of co-production, power flows in and from different directions. Thus, it provides a critical examination of what happens with foreign policy in communication and how communication impacts policy. The thesis employs an overarching discourse approach, which is elaborated into the theoretical concepts of legitimation, discursive closure, counter- and brand publics, and applied discourse theory in four papers. The papers compiling the thesis focus on government's legitimation practices; public diplomacy practitioners' meaning construction of ambiguous foreign policy; formation practices of unintended publics in the digital sphere; and practitioners' and government's discursive (re-)negotiation of foreign policy change. The thesis builds on empirical material from Sweden's feminist foreign policy context, which was collected in interviews with public diplomacy practitioners, texts in the form of policy documents and statements of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and debates on the digital platform Reddit. Overall, the thesis shows the complex discursive constructions and negotiations involved in the strategic communication of foreign policy. Feminist foreign policy discourse is co-produced differently by different actors: The government constructs the policy as a unique selling point, public diplomacy practitioners construct it as a depoliticized asset that can be downplayed, and publics construct it as a contrastable position. Publics are actively involved in strategic communication, albeit in unforeseeable ways. Thus, the control of state actors is limited. Practitioners are guided by the (imagined) perception of publics in making foreign policy meaningful for these, which results in downplaying the disruptive potential of foreign policy. The underlying logic is the attention economy, which leads strategic communication to structure international relations in a consumer-oriented way. In consequence, frictions between international politics and strategic communication can emerge. The thesis contributes to research mainly in the fields of strategic communication and public diplomacy, but also to the fields of international relations and diplomacy.

List of papers

Paper I

Karlsson, I. (2024). Legitimating policy branding: Constructing "sellability" of Sweden's feminist foreign policy. *Media and Communication, 12*.

Paper II

Karlsson, I. (2021). "We try to be nuanced everywhere all the time": Sweden's feminist foreign policy and discursive closure in public diplomacy. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, 18*(4), 325-334.

Paper III

Karlsson, I. (2022). Debating feminist foreign policy: The formation of (unintended) publics in Sweden's public diplomacy. *Journal of Public Diplomacy, 2*(2), 65-85.

Paper IV

Karlsson, I. Undoing feminism in foreign policy: State actors' meaning making in foreign policy change. (Unpublished manucript)

Introduction

> The Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the missions abroad have examined gender equality efforts in each mission's context. Our embassies in particular have proposed ways of pursuing and implementing our feminist foreign policy agenda in practice in different countries.
> (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, p. 23)

In 2014, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs launched a feminist foreign policy. Until the policy was officially ended in 2022, action plans delineated the ambitions and objectives of the policy, as well as the instruments to achieve these. The feminist foreign policy is an example of an activist, even radical policy (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016; Rosén Sundström & Elgström, 2020; Zhukova et al., 2022). Such a policy, as well as Sweden's intentions with it, may be understood, perceived and evaluated differently, depending on context. Globalization and digitalization are rapidly opening and closing spaces in which a wide range of actors can engage in more or less deliberate debate about countries' foreign policy ambitions. Consequently, what a foreign policy *means* is not fixed but changes in time and space. Moreover, states must be seen and heard to even be able to pursue their policy objectives. In other words, without publics being aware of, and, ideally, approve of, countries' intentions, small states in particular may remain on the margins of attention. Besides being a political program that helps states pursue certain ambitions and objectives, foreign policy can also in itself be a means for small states to draw attention to themselves and become relevant to publics, as this thesis will demonstrate based on the context of Sweden. However, the policy objectives, aspirations and instruments must, in the first place, be constructed as meaningful and appropriate given context, time, and space.

States use communication strategically to construct a meaning of foreign policy that allows them to pursue their objectives. However, communication is inherently relational and can only take place in relation to publics. In other words, more actors than the state are actively involved in constructing meaning of foreign policy. The thesis adopts a view of communication that allows to embrace this. Therefore, it conceptualizes strategic communication as a continuous, complex, participatory, and omnidirectional process, in which meaning(s) of foreign policy are constructed and negotiated (see van Ruler, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2018). The line – if one can speak of a line at all – between what is within a states' strategic reach and what is outside of it is blurred. Given that also the practices of communication that lie rather outside of states' strategic reach can impact the meaning of foreign policy, the concept of strategic communication as used in this thesis includes these.

The study of strategic communication of foreign policy can be found across various research fields. These include foremost the research field of public diplomacy (e.g., Cull, 2023; Dolea, 2015, 2018; Pamment, 2013, 2014; Pamment et al., 2023; Zaharna, 2021), but also the fields of nation branding (e.g., Kaneva, 2011, 2014; Kaneva & Cassinger, 2022; van Ham, 2001, 2008, 2014) and international relations (e.g., Browning, 2015, 2021; Wright & Bergman Rosamond, 2024). Public diplomacy as a research field has been growing in the past decades (for a historical overview, see Cull, 2008; Storie & Marschlich, 2022), with growth spurts, among others, in the aftermath of 9/11 (see, for example, Cull, 2020; Gilboa, 2008; Zaharna, 2010) and, more recently, with the full-scale war of Russia on Ukraine (see, for example, the special issue edited by Kaneva et al., 2023). As public diplomacy evolves, it constitutes a well-fitting context for examining strategic communication as a global practice. The thesis identified three research problems, mostly concerning state-centricity in public diplomacy, which point to a view of strategic communication that tends to overlook the nuances and details of different actors' construction and negotiation of meaning.

The first problem is that the state tends to be regarded as the primary actor in public diplomacy (as pointed out also by Zaharna, 2021). The state indeed *initiates* foreign policy, and the notion of strategic communication assumes that its purpose and objective is to advance the interests of an organization. In the context of this thesis, the state may be viewed as such an organization, represented by its government, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and other state organizations (see, for example, Christensen & Christensen, 2022; Falkheimer & Heide, 2018, 2022b; Pamment, 2013). However, this assumption tends to reject actorness of publics (see, e.g., Ayhan, 2019) and thus perpetuates a view in communication in which a sender is in control. Such a view, however, would be "inherently faulty, distorted, incomplete" (Craig, 1999, p. 147). It also undermines, to some extent, the considerable efforts of distinguishing the concept and practice of public diplomacy from international propaganda (see Cull, 2020; Gregory, 2008; Melissen, 2005a; Pamment, 2020; Pamment et al., 2023; Zaharna et al., 2014). Propaganda is a communication practice in which the state is clearly recognized as the initiator (as explained by, e.g., Zaharna et al., 2014) with harmful effects for those subjected to it (Snow et al., 2024). It is, in other words, not something that all states that engage in strategic communication do. The view of a sender in control is further reflected in the notion of publics[1] as passive targets, which, however, does no longer hold in the digital age (see, e.g., Bjola et al., 2019, 2020; Pamment, 2018, 2021).

The second problem is the notion that meaning of foreign policy is determined by the state and will, by certain intended publics, be accepted. For instance, the use of war metaphors in research reflects a pervasive, albeit implicit, assumption of control on the part of the sender (as noted, in different ways, also by Szostek, 2020; Zaharna, 2004, 2016). Such a view places the focus on output and obscures the notion that a *multitude* of actors are continuously engaged in the process of constructing meaning of foreign policy, also beyond the strategic reach of the state. Also the role and agency of public diplomacy practitioners is often taken for granted and referred to as the collective entity of "the state" communicating (as seen in, for example, Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2017; Roselle, 2019). Consequently, the notion that one foreign policy may mean different things to different actors is concealed. However, it is in and through complex and multidirectional communication practices that fluctuating relationships between state actors and publics are constructed and meaning(s) of foreign policy are negotiated.

The third problem is that public diplomacy tends to be undergirded by the notion of states being able to unidirectionally and unilaterally exert control and thereby power over publics (as noted, in various ways, also by Cull, 2023; Szostek, 2020; van Ham, 2014; Zaharna, 2016, 2022). Such a view goes against a perspective on strategic communication as dialogical and genuinely participatory, which also suggests moving away from a view on power as unidirectional (as discussed also by Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Hallahan et al., 2007; Heath et al., 2018). Also in dialogical and participatory communication, persuasion persists, but it tends to be concealed in research (as noted by Comor & Bean, 2012; Pamment, 2020; Pavón-Guinea, 2024). To challenge the notion of the state's control, it would be useful to embrace actors' intentions of persuasion *and* to adopt a view on strategic communication as a dynamic, interdependent process, in which public are actively involved (see, e.g., Snow et al., 2024). It would also be useful to explore the constraints placed by publics on strategic communication of foreign policy. Thus, also the notions of only the state defining participants in communication and publics necessarily accepting the meaning of policy intended by the state could be challenged. Such a view implies a dimension of unpredictability, which has been pointed out in, for example, organizational contests (see, e.g., Christensen & Christensen, 2022; Falkheimer & Heide, 2022a). Studying a foreign policy context allows to expand this view toward a perspective that incorporates international relation issues, and to develop the understanding of strategic communication in global contexts.

---

[1] The term "publics", as used throughout the kappa and the papers, refers to members of the transnational civil society who engage in foreign policy discourse.

In conclusion, this thesis suggests developing a perspective that acknowledges critical voices (also adopted also by Browning, 2015, 2021; Comor & Bean, 2012; Dolea, 2015, 2018; Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Jansen, 2008; Kaneva, 2011, 2014; Pamment, 2014; van Ham, 2001, 2008, 2014; Wright & Bergman Rosamond, 2024), which are needed because they allow studying power dynamics. The thesis further argues that a discourse approach (as adopted also by Dolea, 2018; Kaneva, 2014, 2023; Kaneva & Cassinger, 2022) is needed because it allows studying strategic communication of foreign policy with a multi-actor, practice-focused approach.

Aim and research questions

The aim of the thesis is to contribute to a better understanding of strategic communication of foreign policy as a dynamic process. To this end, the thesis will study how meanings of foreign policy are discursively constructed and negotiated, and thus co-produced, by different actors. Accordingly, the thesis focuses on the discursive *practices* of actors, including the government, public diplomacy practitioners, and publics. It argues that state actors have an interest in a *certain* meaning that can only be attached to policy and activated in and through strategic communication, but that communication also unfolds beyond the strategic reach of the state. To achieve the research aim, the thesis empirically traces instances of co-producing Sweden's feminist foreign policy discourse through different settings in which communication takes place, asking the following research questions:

1) How is Sweden's feminist foreign policy legitimated by the government?
2) How is Sweden's feminist foreign policy co-produced by practitioners involved in its communication?
3) How is Sweden's feminist foreign policy co-produced by publics in the digital participatory space?
4) What challenges does an activist foreign policy pose for strategic communication in international relations?

Overview of the papers

The first research question is addressed mainly in the first paper, which explores how foreign policy is legitimated in a promotional international environment. The paper employs the theoretical framework of legitimation theory (van Leeuwen, 2007) to conduct a discourse analysis of key policy documents. The question is also addressed in the fourth paper, which explores how meaning of policy change is (co-)constructed in government outlets and in state organizations. The paper employs an applied framework of discourse theory (Bacchi, 2012; Hall, 1997) and conducts a discourse analysis of the Minister for Foreign Affair's statements, as well as of interviews with public diplomacy practitioners. The second research question is addressed mainly in the second and fourth paper. The second paper explores the discursive practices of public diplomacy practitioners in relation to local communication challenges. The paper employs the theoretical framework of discursive closure (Deetz, 1992) to conduct a discourse analysis of interviews with practitioners. The third research question is addressed mainly in the third paper of the thesis, which explores the formation of (un-)intended publics of public diplomacy in the digital participatory space. This paper employs the theoretical framework of brand public (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) and counterpublics (Asen, 2000; Warner, 2002a) to conduct a discourse analysis of a debate on Reddit. The fourth research question is addressed throughout all four papers. It is intended as a means for discussing and interrogating the (other) findings in relation to the "realities" and implications of an activist foreign policy for strategic communication in sociopolitical context(s).

Contributions

The thesis contributes to the research field of public diplomacy by elaborating a discursive perspective on strategic communication of foreign policy. It further contributes by studying actors that tend to receive less attention, including individual practitioners and counterpublics. In addition, the thesis contributes to the fields of political science, international relations and diplomacy studies, and within these to research on feminist approaches to foreign policy, by offering an in-depth communication perspective that views *practicing* foreign policy slightly different than what is common in these fields. Furthermore, it contributes to the field of strategic communication by developing a discursive perspective and offering insights into the communication of and around foreign policy with a particular focus on the roles and practices of individual actors. In this regard, the thesis offers insight into realities of communication practice in the political realm. The thesis further contributes to communication studies by developing the concepts of unintended publics and foreign policy branding. By turning to the realm of international politics, the thesis provides insights into the mechanisms and rationales of communication practice in a global context. By interrogating communication dynamics in relation to a state's promotion of gender equality, the thesis advances research that addresses the consequences of strategic communication for the global society. It also contributes by showing how frictions between international politics and strategic communication can emerge. Finally, the thesis offers insight into the power dynamics and relations constructed in and through strategic communication. The insights gained from this thesis are not only relevant for researchers, but also for communication practitioners and political decision makers.

Outline of the thesis

The thesis takes the form of a compilation thesis. It consists of two parts: the "kappa", which is the comprehensive overarching summary, and four papers. The kappa starts with a literature review of the previous research on the strategic communication of foreign policy and its intersections with public diplomacy, nation branding, and international relations. Thereafter, the discourse approach, as well as the methodology and the empirical material are presented. Then, to contextualize this study, an overview of the Swedish feminist foreign policy and a summary of the four papers are provided. The kappa concludes with a discussion of the overarching findings. The remainder of the thesis is comprised of the four papers.

Literature review

This chapter maps out the research on strategic communication of foreign policy, which can be found across the fields of strategic communication, public diplomacy, nation branding, and international relations. The chapter discusses how the understanding of communication of foreign policy can move beyond a state-centric view that is reflected in use of war metaphors and the notion of control as a characteristic of international propaganda. It illustrates how the terminology of practice and performance is used in research and argues for the necessity of studying the *doing* of communication in depth. The chapter also demonstrates the emergence of (critical) discourse perspectives, which remain relatively scarce. It concludes by advocating for a foreign policy as discourse approach, thereby transitioning to the subsequent chapter concerning the theoretical approach.

Strategic communication of foreign policy: moving beyond a state-centric view

Particularly public diplomacy and nation branding prioritize the international context of the field and practice of communication. In the following section, an analysis will be presented of how the notion of state-centricity underpins these fields and what the consequences thereof are for the understanding of strategic communication of foreign policy.

Strategic communication of foreign policy as a dynamic process

The literature is underpinned by an assumption of the state being the main communicator of foreign policy to selected public through strategic efforts. According to Pamment (2013, p. 5), “strategy refers to the overall plan for communication of policies. (…) Since a policy is essentially a statement of interests and intentions, strategic communication is a means of pursuing those objectives using communicative methods.” Strategic communication is “a powerful practice in society” (Falkheimer &

Heide, 2018, p. xii) and crucial to governments. It "includes all forms of communication – internal and external, formal and informal – that are consistent with overall values and visions of the organization" (Falkheimer & Heide, 2022b, p. 85) – in this case, the state or its (sub-)organizations such as the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

State-sponsored international communication with foreign publics is, as Szostek (2020) illustrates, increasingly framed in the metaphorical language of "information war" instead of, for example, public diplomacy. The (problematic) consequence is the assumption "that communication can be targeted like a weapon to achieve a predictable impact", and "that 'winning' in an information war means getting citizens to believe particular facts" (Szostek, 2020, p. 2728). Such metaphors "structure the 'discourse' of foreign policy in the deepest sense – not just the words used but also the mode of thinking" (Chilton & Lakoff, 1995, p. 37) and suggest that communication can be controlled. Furthermore, such metaphors point to the prominence – albeit sometimes in concealed ways – of a view of communication in which the focus lies on the "sender", that is, the state, who is in control. The concept of strategic communication originates in military theory (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014, 2018) and is as such still closely connected to military communication (Zerfass et al., 2018). However, the use of military-inspired metaphorical language also in today's research on communication is problematic insofar as such language creates a view of communication as a controllable process. In practice, however, the outcomes of strategic communication are oftentimes unpredictable (e.g., Christensen & Christensen, 2022; Falkheimer & Heide, 2022a). Further, the metaphorical language of *winning a battle*, which is used commonly in, for example, the public diplomacy literature, worked in the context of a bipolar world, such as during the Cold War; however, it does not work any longer in today's multipolar context with its new communication challenges, Zaharna (2004) argues. The idea of a *winnable narrative battle* is, in other words, an illusion because "it is no longer as simple as whose story wins" (Zaharna, 2016, p. 4431). For a nuanced understanding of how the strategic communication of foreign policy plays out today, it is, therefore, important to explore its practice and the power dynamics it is entangled with in depth and beyond a notion of the state controlling it, which does not reflect the "reality" of communication practice (anymore).

The metaphorical language that seems to, at times, "imprison" the practice and research of the strategic communication of foreign policy also shows, for example, in the phrase of soft power, which (still) underpins vast parts of the research body (key readings include, Bátora, 2006; Chitty, 2017; Davis Cross & Melissen, 2013; Hocking, 2005; Melissen, 2005b; Nye, 2008; Pamment, 2016). Soft power is generally seen as the idea of states having the "ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction" (Nye, 2008, p. 94). It constitutes the counterpart to hard power, which relies on payment or coercion, such as warfare or military interventions (see Nye, 2004, 2013, 2021; for further discussions on the soft power-hard power relation, see Ayhan, 2023; Rothman, 2011). Soft power may also be seen as morally superior to hard power (van Ham, 2014). Nevertheless, it is still about one actor achieving *their* preferred outcome. Thus, the soft power concept contributes to perpetuating the idea of one actor being in or having control over others.

Inspired by feminist thinking, soft and hard power can be seen as metaphors that must be critiqued in several ways. Towns (2020, p. 574) points out that "diplomacy is regularly differentiated from the military as a 'soft' and putatively 'feminine' alternative to military force". Kaneva and Cassinger (2022, p. 305) argue that it reveals an implicit hierarchy in the sense that "[w]hen classic diplomacy, public diplomacy, and nation branding, are understood as 'instruments' of state power, they are implicitly subordinated to the masculinist logics of international relations and assigned a lesser position in the management of international affairs." Kaneva and Cassinger (2022, p. 305f.) also point out Fisher's (2011) argument in this context, who stated "that the understanding of power in public diplomacy follows a masculinized view of power as domination as opposed to a feminist view of power as shared and linked to capacity". The soft power concept has also been critiqued by Cull (2023) as a frame for understanding the role of image in international life which no longer really fits with our world. Cull (2023, p. 13) points out that "Nye himself acknowledged problems, including the dilution of the concept", and points to others who have gone so far as to call soft power "irrelevant" (Manor & Golan, 2020) and "banal" (Manor, 2019). Cull (2023, p. 11) further argues that major problems are the tendential focus of soft power discourse on the largest actors, as seen, for example, in various indexes and rankings; a "tendency of the frame of soft power to emphasize a unilateral perspective"; and "the simultaneous focus on the notion of nation brands", which "strengthened [this] trend as soft power came to be conceptualized as an international league table or even beauty pageant of the most developed states." Thus, the soft power concept contributes to understanding strategic communication of foreign policy as a tool to "get" power "over" others. However, as Enloe (1996, p. 190) points out, international relations analysts "mistakenly assume that the narrative's 'plot' is far more simple and unidirectional than it may in truth be". And while it is usually a state or a ministry that initiate foreign policy and, commonly, also strategic communication around it (see, for example, also Heath et al., 2018), communication is a process, in which necessarily many more actors are involved (for a similar arggument, see Falkheimer & Heide, 2022a; Heath, 2018). In other words, strategic communication of foreign policy *includes* state-initiated, strategic communication, but is not *limited* to these forms. Therefore, a *multi-setting* and *multi-actor* view on strategic communication of foreign policy is necessary (for a valuable overview of the different research positions relating to this, illuminating also the prevailing dominance of state-centric approaches to public diplomacy, see Ayhan, 2019).

Public diplomacy, van Ham (2014, p. 22) argues, is rather "about showing others what we consider to be desirable, in the hope (and expectation) that it will be emulated". This view emanates from a branding perspective, entails the notion of "sellability", and indicates a possible avenue away from the masculinist logic of the soft/hard power metaphor. Also Zaharna (2021) challenges the dominant vision of a self-oriented, "competitive state-centric" (p. 27) power, which has led to a quest for individual domination and a primacy of states' actorness, resting on the notion of imperialism and neglecting fellowship as well as "the needs, interests and goals of humankind and the planet" (p. 43). The metaphorical language of war, in other words, obscures the view of communication as multidirectional, productive, and in pursuit also of "good" purposes (a view that Cull, 2023 seems to share; see also Anholt, 2020). Or, in the words of Enloe (1996, p. 188f.): "Today's conventional portrait of international politics (…) probably should resemble a Jackson Pollock." Moreover, today, "an important part of security comes from being well thought of in the world, such that when bad things happen the world reacts", Cull (2023, p. 30) argues. This argument rests on the idea that "seeking a positive reputation based on realities (…) can rally supporters and assist with defense in a time of crisis" (ibid). Positive realities include the genuine commitment to collaboration for solving the shared problems of our time (Cull, 2023; Zaharna, 2022). Such a view puts relationality into the center, meaning that even if different actors have different interests, they are in this *together.* Thus, the way they communicate about foreign policy issues could be seen more as a *performance*, which paints a picture of co-construction and co-production, rather than as a *war*, which paints a picture of destruction. The concept and terminology of performance has been used to study diplomacy (Giblin, 2017; Jones & Clark, 2019; McConnell, 2018; Shimazu, 2014), oftentimes from a postcolonial, critical, or feminist perspective, and suggests viewing it as a dynamic practice. Like diplomacy, strategic communication of foreign policy benefits from being studied as a dynamic and co-productive practice that takes place in a multitude of communication settings.

The limits of states' strategic communication

An implicit state-centric view, built on the notion that states' communication can influence and even control public opinion, underpins the public diplomacy literature (see Ayhan, 2019). Most of the strategic efforts of communication of foreign policy are, in practice, state-initiated and state-sponsored with a "predetermined outcome [that the state] seeks to achieve" (Zaharna, 2021, p. 39). A focus on predetermined outcomes in communication that favors the sponsor is, in its most extreme form, embodied in the concept of international propaganda (e.g., Snow et al., 2024). In the early twentieth century, the discipline of strategic communication arose from propaganda (Zerfass et al., 2018), and includes the latter until today (e.g., Alghasi & Falkheimer, 2024; Falkheimer & Heide, 2022a; Macnamara, 2022). Propaganda can be seen as "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols" (Lasswell, 1927, p. 627). However, from this form of communication, public diplomacy research strives to (conceptually) distance itself (see, e.g., Cull, 2020; di Martino, 2020). International propaganda and public diplomacy share similarities, such as an instrumental, goal-oriented focus. However, in propaganda, the state is more clearly recognized as the initiator whose intended goals justify the means of communication, including deliberately withholding or manipulating information (Zaharna et al., 2014). Thus, propaganda is attributed with pejorative connotations (see Snow et al., 2024). In the historical context of the Cold War, the distinction of international propaganda and public diplomacy was used to legitimize the latter as the way to respond to external threats and domestic political pressures (see, e.g., Gregory, 2008). Today, public diplomacy "often seeks to become aligned with the common good" (Pamment, 2020, p. 430f.), which is mirrored in the strands of literature strivig to legitimate it (see Pamment et al., 2023). The conceptual move away from propaganda is a way of problematizing state-centricity and thus also the notion of control in strategic communication of foreign policy. However, to develop such a view, it necessary to understand the "realities", and thus the practices of those *doing* communication.

One concept that is central in a state-centric view on communication is strategic narrative, which embraces the element of *messaging* (e.g., Miskimmon et al., 2013). Strategic narrative is used throughout the international relations and public diplomacy literature to capture how "political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 7). Strategic narrative and messaging are "for finding common ground around a common good; imparting cautionary ideas about where a society's evolution is headed; shaping people's social space-time-agency perceptions; framing preferred values and sharing best practices; or letting someone know 'there's a better way'", Ronfeldt and Arquilla (2020, p. 473) argue. These forms of communication are certainly important for the implementation of foreign policy. For example, Roselle's (2019, p. 2) referral to foreign policy as "a communicated message" further illustrates the notion of foreign policy and communication being closely interwoven. However, with the elements of formation, projection, and reception being placed at its center (Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2017), the strategic narrative concept can be seen as resting on a one-way transmission view of communication. As such, this concept focuses on outcomes and rests on a positivist perspective (Kaneva, 2023). To grasp the dynamic character of strategic communication of foreign policy beyond practices of messaging, it is useful to look at the details, rationales, and nuances of state actors' communication practices. Practice theory, which is helpful for adopting such an approach, is increasingly used in international relations research (e.g., Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022; Constantinou et al., 2021; Cooper & Cornut, 2019; Hedling, 2021; Hedling & Bremberg, 2021; Pouliot & Cornut, 2015; Standfield, 2020). Such a view would also benefit strategic communication research as it allows studying the (micro-)practices of state actors. This can also provide insight into the constraints that practitioners face in the realities of strategic communication practice.

Furthermore, state-centricity or a "state-based view on public diplomacy" cannot be taken for granted anymore due to the "the emergence of global civil society as a mediating force on international politics during the 1990s" (Pamment, 2018, p. 3). This emergence coincided with the rapid digital development that has given rise to forms of communication that enable more participatory interaction of states and publics, albeit oftentimes in disruptive ways (e.g., Bjola et al., 2019, 2020; Pamment, 2021). However, although they may be concealed as forms of dialogue and engagement, state-initiated programs of strategic communication of foreign policy "are often limited to persuading others to support their policy objectives" (Pamment, 2020, p. 434). This results in public diplomacy strategy at times being "both contradictory and, ultimately, delusional" (Comor & Bean, 2012, p. 203). One reason is that the normative idea(l) of dialogue in public diplomacy may be de-politicized "into an activity of mutual exchange and understanding", either leaving out "the conflict, power, and differences which accompany these" (Pavón-Guinea, 2024, p. 46), or obfuscating these (Pamment, 2020). Thus, in "the sense of a shift in global power relations towards interconnected citizens" and the "call to further empower such groups by emphasizing their actorn*ess*", the underlying political interests of states should not be obscured (Pamment, 2020, p. 435). Therefore, a certain dominance of state-actors in the strategic communication of foreign policy should be acknowledged. However, this does not imply that one actor is necessarily in *control* in communication. Rather, it would be useful to adopt a view on strategic communication as permeated by persuasion *and* as a reciprocal, interdependent, and dynamic process, in which meaning can be *co*-created (Snow, 2024). Such a view brings relationality to the center. It acknowledges that actors pursue their interest and intentions, but that power flows in and from different directions between state actors, including policy-makers and practitioners that have a certain agenda, and publics that might contest the state's strategic efforts. After all, the latter interpret and negotiate meaning of foreign policy as well. On the one hand, publics are subjected to state actors' efforts of influencing public opinion and reaching a certain objective. On the other hand, they are active participants in communication and construct public opinion on their own terms in – for state actors

– unforeseeable ways. Therefore, publics must be seen as one of the *actors* in strategic communication of foreign policy, and their participation and practices must be studied in detail.

Overcoming state-centricity in research on strategic communication

Viewing strategic communication as controllable by state actors implies that foreign policy can have only one meaning, which by the state intended publics accept. The use of war metaphors in research illustrates the notion of strategy and control underpinning this view. However, different state and non-state actors are constantly engaged in making meaning of foreign policy in a complex communicative interplay also beyond the strategic reach of the state. Thus, strategic communication of foreign policy can be seen as coming to life through communication practices of many individuals, for each of whom foreign policy may mean something different. It is in these communication practices, both professional and non-professional, that foreign policy receives its meaning(s). Consequently, for gaining a better understanding of strategic communication of foreign policy as a dynamic process, the thesis argues for a multi-actor approach.

Furthermore, the state and its (sub-)organizations may be regarded as those who initiate foreign policy and strategic communication thereof. This constitutes a valuable and relevant starting point. However, to differentiate public diplomacy from international propaganda, positing that it is not (as) manipulative and controlling, it is useful to approach strategic communication as a dynamic process, in which communication practices of the government, individual practitioners, *and* publics play an important role and inform each other. Going beyond a state-centric perspective allows gaining insight into practitioners' practices of constructing meaning of foreign policy and negotiating this intended meaning with publics, who then make their own meaning of policy. Such an approach also suggests viewing publics as actively constructing public opinion. Understanding publics' meaning-making of foreign policy is key in the digital age, where they are no longer passive targets of states' communication initiatives. A more expansive perspective allows to embrace the complex and fluctuating relationships between state and non-state actors, which entail both opportunities and constraints for their communication. Therefore, the thesis argues for an approach that looks into the details of practicing strategic communication of foreign policy in different settings.

Moreover, strategic communication of foreign policy tends to be undergirded by the notion of the state being able to unidirectionally and unilaterally exert control and thereby power over others. While strategic communication efforts are indeed a means to advance the interests and intentions of states, they must be seen as *also* happening beyond their strategic reach in unforeseeable ways. Therefore, a dialogical and participatory view on communication is in many places advocated. At the same time, the notion of persuasion also persists in dialogue-oriented approaches to communication and should not be concealed. Therefore, attention should be paid to practitioners' meaning making of foreign policy in today's complex communication environment, where they are tied into both local societal contexts and an organizational context. Further, to not perpetuate the notion that only the state defines participants in communication, it is necessary to embrace the notion that the many (individual) state actors as well as publics that participate in communication can construct meaning of foreign policy, at times also in unforeseeable ways. Therefore, the thesis argues for an approach that allows to analyze the multidirectional power dynamics in strategic communication of foreign policy.

A discourse approach to strategic communication of foreign policy

A transmission-reception view of communication, which is mirrored in the notion of control and tends to underpin the state-centric approaches to strategic communication of foreign policy – even if concealed as dialogical – is "inherently faulty, distorted, [and] incomplete", Craig (1999, p. 147) argues. This issue is addressed by the growing, yet (still) comparatively small body of critical research on strategic communication of foreign policy. This body is dispersed over the research fields of public diplomacy (e.g., Comor & Bean, 2012; Dolea, 2015, 2018; Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Pamment, 2014), nation branding (e.g., Dolea et al., 2020; Jansen, 2008; Kaneva, 2011, 2014; van Ham, 2001, 2008, 2014), and international relations (e.g., Browning, 2015, 2021; Wright & Bergman Rosamond, 2024). The critical tradition, Craig (1999, p. 147) argues, appeals to "the potential for discourse with others to produce liberating insight [and] demystification". This thesis therefore joins the critical voices in the literature in interrogating and moving beyond state-centricity in strategic communication of foreign policy.

Communication, Craig (1999, p. 149) further argues, "is not only something we do, it is something we recurrently talk about in ways that are practically entwined with our doing of it." In other words, the study of communication is "an ongoing process of meaning construction" (van Ruler, 2018, p. 367). It has "implications for the practice of communication" (Craig, 1999, p. 120), which is why I aimed for being reflective throughout the research process. This is particularly important as the thesis also joins the voices that have introduced and argue for discourse-based approaches (as, for example, seen in Dolea, 2018; Kaneva, 2014) to strategic communication of foreign policy. Discourse approaches are more open-ended in that they enable to talk about and "to focus on the actual interplay and interactions between actors", as well as on communication practice "within the global public sphere where distinct and diverging agendas interact" (Dolea, 2018, p. 334f.). A discourse approach also enables to explore the relational side of strategic communication, its interdependent character, and the notion of power as emerging in and being enacted through relations (Kaneva & Cassinger, 2022). This provides a perspective that does justice to the dynamics of today's communication landscape. Kaneva (2023, p. 235), further, advocates for a critical discourse perspective, as this allows to rethink power in relational terms and to include an interrogation of the conditions "that make certain messaging strategies possible and plausible" in the first place. In conclusion, adopting a critical discourse perspective in this thesis allows to treat discourse as situated in a specific context at a specific point in time, as practiced in a social context, and as being highly relational. However, the thesis does not view *communication* as discourse; instead, it focuses on *foreign policy discourse* and its *co-production* in communication by different actors.

The terminology of *foreign policy discourse* can be found, among others, in literature on public diplomacy (see, for example, Adler-Nissen & Tsinovoi, 2019; Çevik, 2016; Hayden, 2007, 2013), international relations (see, for example, Hansen, 2013; Lawler, 2013), and feminist foreign policy (see, for example, Achilleos-Sarll, 2018; Alwan & Weldon, 2017; Bergman, 2007; Bergman Rosamond & Hedling, 2022; Haastrup, 2020; Nylund et al., 2023). The phrase is commonly used in relation to practice and to power. The increase of its use indicates the emergence of a turn. However, while the studies cited above employ the terminology of foreign policy discourse, several of them do not pursue a discourse *approach.* Thus, a discourse *perspective* tends to remain absent. Moreover, although the notion of discourse is inherently *communicative,* approaches foregrounding the notion of foreign policy as discourse have not yet been used extensively in communication research.

In conclusion, the thesis builds on and develops previous studies by examining strategic communication of foreign policy as a dynamic process. The following chapter elaborates on foreign policy discourse being co-produced by both state actors and publics in the dynamic process of strategic communication of foreign policy.

Theoretical approach

This chapter presents the thesis' theoretical approach, which conceptualizes foreign policy as a discourse that is co-produced by different actors. It establishes the view of discourse as language-based, being spoken (and written) by these actors. The chapter conceptualizes discourse as a practice that structures and organizes the social world, foregrounding the practices of discursive co-production at the micro, meso and macro levels. Furthermore, it explains how the overarching discourse approach, as inspired by Foucault, is elaborated into the theoretical concepts of legitimation, discursive closure, counter- and brand publics, and applied discourse theory, which will be applied in the four papers. The chapter illustrates how these concepts enable a detailed analysis of discursive (co-)production of meaning, in and from which also relations of power emerge.

Foreign policy as a discourse

There are manifold understandings of what "discourse" is, what it means, and how it can be used as a more neutral or critical approach (for an elaborate debate, see, e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b; Bacchi, 2000, 2005; Sawyer, 2002). The growing recognition of language and language use as a key phenomenon has led to a turn toward linguistic analysis in social science. In consequence, societies, social institutions, and identities are often seen as discursively constructed and as accomplished through text (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a). The discourse approach in social sciences encompasses a broad range of elements, extending beyond the immediate spoken and written words and including also the accomplishments and consequences of discourse. Following this approach, discourse is seen in this thesis as a spoken and written practice that constructs, shapes, and maintains social reality. This understanding is inspired by the work of Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b) and builds on Foucault's perspective, who conceptualizes discourses "as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972, p. 49). Practices of discourse, then, are instances of language use (Foucault, 1972; Sawyer, 2002). As such, they are *done* by individual actors, that is, people. Foreign policy *can exist* without discourse; however, it is here understood as not *having meaning* outside of discourse (see Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997). Because the thesis studies *meaning* and power struggles thereover – more specifically, how different actors ascribe meaning to foreign policy – I chose to employ a Foucault-inspired approach.

The concept of discourse should be regarded as an approach rather than a singular theory. This approach includes the notion of foreign policy *as* discourse, which is inspired by Bacchi (2000, 2005). The foreign policy as discourse approach adopted in this thesis is a combination of different theoretical strands and focuses on patterns of speech to better understand the ways in which issues are given a particular meaning within a specific social setting (see Bacchi, 2005). Following this, the thesis argues that foreign policy must be talked into being. Accordingly, the conceptualization of foreign policy as discourse unlocks the possibility of examining communication as a dynamic *process* in which meaning of foreign policy is *produced* through practices of construction and negotiation. Different actors are actively involved herein, which is why the thesis refers to this as a process of "*co*-producing" meaning.

The thesis assumes that for foreign policy discourse to emerge and come to life in instances of spoken and written discursive co-production, foreign policy as a political program must, in the first place, be initiated by a state actor. Such initiation could be as little as the thought of a politician. However, the *meaning* of foreign policy is co-produced by a multitude of actors in multifaceted and multilayered ways. Inspired by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b), the thesis adopts the view of discourse being produced at various levels, from micro over meso to macro, which are interconnected and interwoven. To fully unfold the potential of the discourse perspective taken in this thesis, discourse is regarded as both the theoretical and the methodical approach to analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b). This allows studying the more local practices, which happen on the discursive micro and meso levels, for the purpose of gaining knowledge about the societally overarching (foreign policy) discourse, which happens on the macro level. In other words, the overarching societal discourse is "activated" and thus achieved in manifold practices of talking and speaking, which can be empirically studied at the local level (ibid). To capture this, the thesis "operationalizes" the overarching Foucault-inspired discourse approach by elaborating it into several more applicable theoretical concepts developed by scholars other than Foucault. Accordingly, the thesis follows the somewhat pragmatic theoretical and methodological approach of employing concepts that serve as relevant tools for specific problems and contexts (as advocated by, e.g., Wodak & Meyer, 2001). These will be used to empirically analyze the co-producing of foreign policy discourse on local levels in the four papers. In turn, the analysis of the empirical material from the papers can be synthesized to address societal discourse(s) as a structuring and productive force (see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b).

Discourse as socially productive practice

This thesis builds on the notion of discourse being socially productive (see, e.g., Foucault, 1972). Being interested in the rules regulating discourse over time as well as the events that shape discursive practices, the thesis is inspired by Foucault's archaeological and genealogical approaches (see also, e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b). Spoken and written discourse can order, structure, and constitute the social world (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, 2000b). As such, it enables certain ways of speaking about and experiencing a foreign policy issue as well as the societal problem(s) addressed therewith, while limiting others. Thus, discourse produces "reality" by making possible and impossible ways of talking about and acting upon issues. This implies that there is always the potential for an alternative construction of "reality". More concretely, at a certain point in time and within a particular societal context, foreign policy discourse mirrors *one* of several possible ways of understanding social and political issues, the roles of and relations between different actors in political endeavors, and the ways in which the world can be organized. The thesis, therefore, builds on the understanding of discourse as a dynamic and productive practice with "real" consequences. Accordingly, discourse is to some extent also regarded as being material, that is, a "societal means of production" that produces subjects and societal realities (Jäger, 2001, p. 38).

As carriers of meaning, discourses have the capacity to influence how we think about and consequently act upon issues. More specifically, all statements and all meanings imply "socially determined restrictions for the understanding of the social world", thus expressing power (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 187). As communication happens between and by a multiplicity of actors in interchanges (Deetz, 1992), in each of these, power emerges in the form of asymmetries. This shows, for example, when state actors instrumentalize language to justify their authority, the prioritization of certain social issues over others, and their preferred world order. As communication necessarily happens in relational ways, power flows through *relations* and cannot exist outside of these. To use the words of feminist political scientist Enloe (1996, p. 188): "Power, of course, is a relationship". In turn, relations of power "have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play" (Foucault, 1978, p. 94). At the same time, language users, that is, the actors speaking and writing discourse, are "socially situated, discursively constituted, sensitive, and responsive to dominant cultural norms [and] social rules" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, p. 154). This assumption is important for the thesis, as it can account for actors' ability to promote their interests when speaking and writing foreign policy discourse, as well as the constraints they may face in doing so. This applies to state actors in particular, given that they operate within an organizational context that is inherently characterized by power relations.

Dynamics and relations of power are also *being produced* in action and in discourse in a “multiplicity of force relations (…) from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another” (Foucault, 1978, p. 92f.; see also Foucault, 1980). Building on view, the thesis challenges the notion of power being solely exercised or wielded in a linear, unilateral process, which is implicit for example in the notion of soft power (for an elaborate critique, see Cull, 2023). It argues that a variety of actors is or can be involved in the co-production of power (relations) and meaning of foreign policy in dynamic and multidirectional ways. With different actors speaking and writing discourse, and with discourse being the producer and enabler of power, power is *dispersed*. As such, it is not only “executed” in a top-down manner by governments or “held” by these. Instead, it permeates all communication practices, including those of publics, who also produce meaning of foreign policy. In conclusion and inspired by Foucault (1980), all speakers and writers of foreign policy discourse are viewed as vehicles of discourse and, therewith, also of power. Therefore, the thesis argues that it is crucial to closely examine the different actors. They discursively exercise power in multidirectional ways while pursuing different aims and objectives, which are not always those that they have chosen themselves (Foucault, 1978). This assumption is important for the thesis as public diplomacy practitioners, in particular, operate within organizational settings in which overarching aims, objectives, and strategies may be(come) imposed upon them, for example by the government or political decisionmakers (see also Deetz, 1992).

In practice, discourse in international relations is constructed and sustained through repetition, such as public events, as for example Miskimmon et al. (2013) argue. Herein, there is “always scope for error, divergent understandings, creativity, and discovery, as well as the interaction of multiple discourses (…). Consequently, discourses are never quite fixed” (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 24). Rather, they can be understood as fluid and in flux. Jäger (2001, p. 37) sees discourses as living “a ‘life of their own’ in relation to reality, although they impact and shape and even enable societal reality.” The thesis does not argue that discourses can *exist* on their own, as they need to be spoken and/or written by actors. Rather, it adopts from Jäger’s argument that discourses can *construct* reality/realities which cannot always be strategically foreseen or planned. This notion is particularly relevant considering that elements of foreign policy discourse may be picked out and developed in the speaking and writing of publics in ways that were not intended by state actors. This notion further implies that it is not the facts about, but rather *discourse* of foreign policy that enables and delimits truth claims about it. Accordingly, the notion of discourse being in flux and developing in its own ways is foundational for gaining a better understanding of strategic communication of foreign policy as a dynamic process. It allows to view the speaking and writing of discourse as being informed and guided by the varying *interests* of actors, who thus partake in constructing a "reality" in which communication can function as an organizing practice. Jäger (2001, p. 37) argues that discourses "are not static but in constant motion forming a 'discursive milling mass' which at the same time results in the 'constant rampant growth of discourses'". It is this mass, he further argues, "that discourse analysis endeavours to untangle" (ibid). Embracing such a processual perspective on (foreign policy) discourse, the thesis will focus on different actors' speaking and writing, in which discourse is *being produced* (see also Foucault, 1971).

Practical applications of the discourse approach

Discourse can be "classified" into different levels, ranging from language use in specific micro-contexts over generalization thereof to similar local context to more general ways of constituting societal phenomena (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b). In this thesis, the overarching discourse approach to studying strategic communication of foreign policy is, therefore, elaborated into four more analytically applicable theoretical concepts. This allows to empirically explore the mechanisms of discursive co-production on local micro and meso levels, focusing on language use in social context. Building on the notion that different actors are involved in the local speaking and writing of discourse, and that this happens in and is productive of power relations, theoretical concepts with a critical perspective were selected. Thus, practices of exclusion, domination, and strategic meaning-making that occur in the co-producing of foreign policy discourse can be uncovered. Furthermore, this allows to synthesize and abstract the findings of the papers to a more overarching perspective on foreign policy discourse without the risk of a "grandiozation" thereof (see also Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b, p. 1147).

First, the mechanisms through which states use socially salient topics to position themselves advantageously are produced in foreign policy discourse and can, in consequence, be "found" there. One key prerequisite for being able to "use", or "capitalize" on socially salient topics is the legitimation of states' foreign policy actions and decisions in relation to these. The thesis, therefore, employs legitimation theory by van Leeuwen (2007), which originates in discourse theory and linguistics. With this theoretical concept, links of social practices to "discourses of value" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 109) can be explored. Thus, this concept helps to analyze how legitimacy of foreign policy is constructed in connection to countries' intended positioning, and how discursive practices are employed to activate and construct (power) relations between the state and publics. It also allows to explore how a country strives to *make itself* a legitimate speaker who then can – persuasively and effectively – produce its preferred meaning of foreign policy.

Second, the meaning-making of public diplomacy practitioners in their work of communicating a country and its foreign policy in the most advantageous way can be "found" in discursive practices. To understand how foreign policy discourse is produced by practitioners, the thesis uses the theoretical concept of discursive closure by Deetz (1992), which originates in organizational communication research. This concept allows to explore where and how marginalization and prioritization of discourses happen, presuming that these practices exist "wherever potential conflict is suppressed" (Deetz, 1992, p. 187). Thus, it allows to trace how meanings of foreign policy are produced in a promotional context, and how states' intentions are strategically constructed in communication with what consequences, also for power relations.

Third, the dynamics of publics making meaning of foreign policy can be found in their co-production of foreign policy discourse beyond the states' strategic reach. To theoretically capture publics' production of foreign policy discourse, the thesis uses the theoretical concepts of counterpublics (Asen, 2000; Warner, 2002b) and brand public (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). The concept of counterpublics originates in public sphere theory and in queer theory and proposes that "publics do not exist apart from the discourse that addresses them" (Warner, 2002b, p. 416). This builds on the proposition that "the often-implicit norms regulating discourse in any one sphere at one time are likely to advantage some participants and to disadvantage others" (Asen, 2000, p. 425). The theoretical concept of brand public (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) originates in a critical strand of consumer research. Combined with counterpublics theory, it helps to explore the notion of active publics forming in and through discursive co-production of foreign policy discourse by debating and contesting foreign policy issues.

Fourth, the meaning of foreign policy change is constructed in discourse. To study such construction by public diplomacy practitioners and the government, the thesis draws on the discourse-analytical concepts of problematizing and silencing understandings of an issue (Bacchi, 2012), as well as ruling in and ruling out acceptable ways of talking about it (Hall, 1997). The former concepts originate in feminist political and international relations theory; the latter originate in critical cultural studies, sociology, and media studies, and build on the work of Foucault. By allowing to analyze the constructing and (re-)negotiation of meaning of foreign policy, these theoretical concepts help exploring how state actors construct their shifting priorities to rationalize policy change. Further, they allow exploring how state actors justify the pursuit of changing interests, which includes (re-)constructing the importance attributed to different socio- and geo-political issues.

Co-production of foreign policy discourse

The thesis' overarching discourse approach, combined with the theoretical concepts outlined in the previous section, enables grasping the local discursive practices embedded in strategic communication of foreign policy. From these, the thesis can generalize and thus facilitate theorization on strategic communication of foreign policy. The practices in focus are legitimation practices (van Leeuwen, 2007), (micro-)practices of discursive closure (Deetz, 1992), practices of forming counter- and brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Asen, 2000; Warner, 2002b), and practices of meaning-making (Bacchi, 2012; Hall, 1997). Language use, which is the very practice that the analysis in the papers focuses on, is active and processual (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a). Therefore, the notion of *doing* is particularly useful for advancing beyond an understanding of strategic communication of foreign policy as a means for states to "exert power" unilaterally. Instead, it offers a perspective for understanding the involvement of many different actors and the processual notion of co-producing discourse. Accordingly, the theoretical approach of the thesis enables interrogating by whom foreign policy discourse is co-produced, how it is produced, and why this is being and can be done (only) in certain ways in a societal context at a specific point in time. Foucault (1978, p. 94) argues that "the manifold relationships of force (…) take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions". Inspired by this view and building on the notion of discourse being done "via intervening active subjects in their societal contexts as (co-)producers and (co-)agents of discourses" (Jäger, 2001, p. tbd), the thesis zooms in on different actors in their social and organizational contexts.

In conclusion, the theoretical approach of this thesis is to conceptualize foreign policy as a discourse that is co-produced by different actors involved in strategic communication. The ways in which foreign policy discourse is co-produced have the potential to legitimate a government's policy actions and its intended positioning; highlight certain meanings of an issue and thus marginalize others; initiate the formation of (by the state) intended and unintended publics that make new meaning(s) of foreign policy; and enable state actors to rationalize foreign policy change. The following chapter will elaborate on the operationalization of these theoretical underpinnings into a methodological approach, with which the co-production of discourse can be empirically traced by following Sweden's feminist foreign policy trajectory through different communication settings.

Methodology and empirical material

Building on the theoretical approach, the thesis argues that a multitude of state and non-state actors are involved in co-producing foreign policy discourse. The following chapter presents the methodology for tracing Sweden's feminist foreign policy discourse through three settings: official communication by the government, non-official communication by practitioners, and non-formalized communication by publics. From these settings, empirical material is collected in interviews, texts, and online conversations. The chapter elaborates how the theoretical concepts will be used in the analysis of the empirical material to examine the co-production of feminist foreign policy discourse in the different actors' speaking and writing. This approach enables to capture "snapshots" of different points in the strategic communication of foreign policy, thereby providing unique and valuable insight into the dynamics thereof.

Studying one foreign policy in different communication settings

Methodological approach

The process of co-producing meaning of foreign policy is the object of study of this thesis and will be captured in the speaking and writing of feminist foreign policy *discourse*. Strategic communication of foreign policy is conceptualized as the "space" in which foreign policy discourse is done. The notion of foreign policy discourse being *co-produced* allows foregrounding activity, thus offering an understanding of foreign policy as an ongoing accomplishment (for the theoretical argument undergirding this, see Andersson, 2023; Nicolini, 2012). Thus, the thesis takes the ontological position that things can have a real, material existence in the world but that meaning is *constructed* in discourse (see also Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997), albeit with real consequences for people's lived realities. This position implies that meaning, which is a construct in and of itself, is changeable.

Discourse can appear in different variations at various sites, and by closely examining variations at local levels, overarching themes can be constructed (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b). To gain insight into the mechanisms of the co-production of foreign policy discourse, the thesis therefore looks at specific instances of different actors speaking and writing it. This can be achieved with the methodological strategy of selecting an empirical context that offers rich material. Within such a context, a range of communication *settings,* in which foreign policy discourse is co-produced by different actors, is selected and subsequently examined. Building on the overarching theoretical approach, the thesis then employs the theoretical concepts of legitimation, discursive closure, brand publics and counterpublics, as well as applied discourse theory to analyze the mechanisms of the co-production of foreign policy discourse in those settings.

The empirical context studied in the thesis is Sweden's strategic communication of foreign policy. Therein, the thesis looks at the *trajectory* of Sweden's feminist foreign policy over time. It takes several "snapshots" at settings where construction and negotiation of the foreign policy discourse take place. These snapshots cover a period of eight years and, thus, capture different points in time and space which can be synthesized into a trajectory. The metaphor of trajectory illuminates the processual and dynamic character of strategic communication of foreign policy. Thereby, it embraces the notion of time. Time is an important aspect of the object of study given that the feminist foreign policy has a start and an end point and is situated within a historical context. More specifically, the policy relates to the past by implying and building on the previous absence of similar approaches, while also maintaining continuity with a Swedish tradition. It relates to the present and the future by providing inspiration for other countries to adopt feminist approaches, and by offering an "anti-position" that the current and any future government of Sweden can distance itself from.

The different theoretical concepts used for analyzing the empirical material are rooted in critical strands of discourse theory. Accordingly, the analysis – built on the analys*es* conducted in the papers – is underpinned by the assumption that societal conditions, including those in which feminist foreign policy discourse is co-produced, are constructed over time and "heavily influenced by the asymmetries of power" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 180). The reason is that some actors have greater authority in the international arena than others, which impacts on their ability to pursue their interests (for an interesting discussion of marginalization, see Enloe, 1996). The aim of (critical) social sciences, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018, p. 179) argue, "is to serve the emancipatory project, but without providing any given formulaic solution and without making critical interpretations from rigid frames of reference". Therefore, the analysis includes an interrogation of the notion of authority (Craig, 1999) in strategic communication of foreign policy, and pursues an open-ended approach that is interested in *understanding* (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

A focus on one policy and the co-production of its discourse

In accordance with an information-oriented selection approach, the thesis focuses on the context of Sweden's strategic communication of foreign policy, with a particular focus on feminist foreign policy as an illustrative information-rich case (e.g., Patton, 2022). Sweden, a comparatively small and rich country, engages in comprehensive and sophisticated communication of itself and its foreign policy. Furthermore, the feminist foreign policy discourse is predicated on the concept of "firstness". This implies breaking with tradition and brings with it challenges for communication, such as a need to discursively establish and defend, in unprecedented ways, the state's (subject-)positioning. This, as well as the unusually manifold, disruptive, and occasionally controversial character of the feminist foreign policy promise multifaceted, nuanced, and potentially contradicting expressions in constructing and negotiating its meaning. Combined, these characteristics make Sweden's feminist foreign policy discourse an interesting example to study. More specifically, Sweden's feminist foreign policy discourse, especially in its early years, entailed a struggle between different "sub-discourses". These included a discourse of difference based on Sweden's self-image associated with superior knowledge, which was in opposition to a discourse of valuing local knowledge in other countries; and a discourse of essentializing women based on the assumption of women as a fixed, homogenous group, which contrasted with a discourse of intersectionality with transformative potential (Nylund et al., 2023). Overall, the strategic communication of Sweden's feminist foreign policy provides a wealth of details and, therefore, a substantial empirical foundation for generating valuable insights.

The advantages of focusing on one country's – Sweden's – feminist foreign policy trajectory include the potential to inspire a rethinking of how a humanitarian issue is positioned at the political forefront and to whom this may be beneficial. This undertaking addresses in particular the (still remaining) scarcity of research on public diplomacy and nation branding with regard to gender dynamics and discourse (Erlandsen, 2021; Kaneva & Cassinger, 2022; Snow, 2022). The Swedish feminist foreign policy represents an *example* of an activist approach to foreign policy (see, e.g., Aggestam, Rosamond, & Hedling, 2024). Studying its trajectory offers insights that are valuable for researchers and practitioners who are interested in the potential of foreign policy to make a difference for the lives of people who may otherwise be left on the margins of attention (see, for example, also Enloe, 1996).

Tracing co-production of discourse in different communication settings

The theoretical approach of the thesis is centered on and designed for the analysis of language-based discourse. Consequently, discursive co-production is understood as a process that occurs through and in the use of words. It can be argued that discursive practices also occur through images and visual content. The empirical material, which the following section will elaborate on, indeed contains some visual elements[2]. However, the feminist foreign policy discourse is not reflected in these visual elements to the same extent as it is in the textual material collected through interviews, texts, and online conversations. Therefore, throughout the articles, this thesis limits its scope to an analysis of spoken and written words.

In alignment with the proposed conceptualization of discourse as emerging and coming to life in instances of active subjects' speaking and writing, the methodological approach of this thesis is to focus on *settings* where Sweden's feminist foreign policy discourse is co-produced. A setting is here understood not in a physical sense (as, e.g., in Tracy, 2013), but in a metaphorical one. The selected settings are official communication in government outlets, non-official communication in different organizations, and non-formalized communication in the public sphere. Within each setting, different participants are active. Some of the many settings and participants – or *actors,* as I will call them – are more insightful to study than others. Therefore, following the research questions and theoretical approach, three main actors were pinpointed. These are the 1) Swedish government[3], 2) Swedish public diplomacy practitioners[4], and 3) publics[5]. In accordance with the theoretical approach, the thesis studies legitimation practices of the government, communication and meaning-making practices of public diplomacy practitioners, and debate practices of publics.

This choice allows to gain comprehensive, in-depth knowledge about the process of constructing meaning of foreign policy by key actors in key settings. This, in turn, provides empirical and theoretical insight that helps develop a multi-actor, practice-focused approach to strategic communication. While making such choices is an inherent part of the research process, they also always constitute a limitation. Thus, other actors, including non-governmental organizations, supranational bodies, or activist groups, who can also be involved in the co-production of (feminist) foreign policy discourse, are not included in the analysis.

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[2] For example, the television interviews with the Minister for Foreign Affairs include videos of him speaking, and the briefing that initiated the debate on Reddit included a small photograph of the state visit.

[3] This includes and will be used interchangeably with the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. These two terms must be seen as a form of synecdoche: they are referred to as *actors* even though it is not the organization that communicates but individual practitioners therein.

[4] The notion of public diplomacy practitioners includes also professionals with other work titles, for example, diplomats, project managers, and communication strategists. Therefore, it must be understood in a wider and more open sense.

[5] Publics are understood as members primarily of the transnational society but may also include members of the Swedish society.

Empirical material

The three main settings selected for this study constitute both professional contexts and less organized or formalized contexts. The thesis zooms in on the different layers of these contexts in the most nuanced way possible. For this, unique empirical material was collected for each setting, which is elaborated in the individual papers (for an overview, see table 1).

Table 1. Overview of methods and empirical material in the papers

	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3	Paper 4
Main method	Document study	Semi-structured interviews	Study of online debate	Study of public statements, semi-structured interviews
Main empirical material	Six action plans on the feminist foreign policy	Twelve interviews with public diplomacy practitioners, three policy documents	2000 comments of a debate on Reddit	Two policy statements and three media interviews, nine interviews with public diplomacy practitioners

This thesis employs an iterative methodological approach (Tracy, 2013), wherein the different settings and actors, as well as suitable empirical material and analytical concepts are selected. After mapping the possibilities for collecting substantial empirical material, the decision was to study the discursive practices of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs in policy documents, which are conceptualized, written, designed, and launched by ministry staff. Furthermore, the practices can be studied in public statements by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The discursive practices by Swedish public diplomacy practitioners can be studied in their meaning-making practices, most suitably in those taking the form of retrospective reflections on the context of their work in their respective organization. The practices of publics can be studied in debates in digital participatory spaces.

As documents, the six available action plans in English on feminist foreign policy published by Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs were selected. The first action plan was published in 2015, and the last one in 2021. Additional relevant documents include the nation branding strategy of "Progressive Sweden", which was published by the Swedish Institute in 2017, and the handbook on feminist foreign policy, which was published by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in 2019. The action plans and the handbook were previously publicly accessible on the government's website, and the nation branding strategy was accessible on the Swedish Institute's website. The actions plans are no longer accessible since the change of government and the subsequent official withdrawal of the feminist foreign policy in 2022; the nation branding strategy is no longer accessible due to an ongoing updating process, which, at the time of writing, had commenced over two years ago. Though most of the documents were published in both Swedish and English, only English versions were analyzed. It is possible that some nuances and meanings of the text may have been lost in translation, given that Swedish is the official language of authority used in all state organizations and that the documents were probably initially formulated in Swedish and then translated. However, as this research is conducted in English, it was deemed more appropriate to use the officially approved English version than to rely on my own translation, which would inevitably have also resulted in minor variations and interpretations. In general, it can be assumed that the documents were primarily intended for practitioners and domestic Swedish audiences, indicating a form of auto-communication with the organizational and/or national self (see Christensen, 1997). The nation branding strategy and the handbook were used primarily as a source for background information on the work of the public diplomacy practitioners. The action plans were analyzed in consultation with the theoretical concept of discursive legitimation (van Leeuwen, 2007).

For the public statements of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the foreign policy declarations of 2023 and 2024 were selected, as well as television and radio interviews in which the official ending of the feminist foreign policy was addressed. The official English transcribed versions of the policy declarations, which are accessible on the government's website, were used. The strategy for collecting the interviews was to search for the term "feministisk utrikespolitik" (in English: feminist foreign policy), and the term "feminist foreign policy" in connection with Tobias Billström, who served as Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2022 to 2024 and, on his first day of office, proclaimed the discontinuation of the feminist foreign policy. The search was facilitated by the media archive tool Retriever and covered the period from October 18, 2022, when Billström took office, to August 2024. This resulted in three relevant interviews that were still accessible in 2024: one conducted by Sveriges television and one by Aftonbladet, both from October 18, 2022, as well as one by Sveriges Radio from November 22, 2022. Billström tends to eschew the terminology of "feminist foreign policy", which is one of the reasons that not more interviews were found. However, as these interviews mainly served as supplementary material to the policy statements, this was not deemed a significant issue. The statements were analyzed in consultation with theoretical concepts of applied discourse theory (Bacchi, 2012; Hall, 1997).

For the reflections shared by public diplomacy practitioners, interviews were conducted. In the first round, which was conducted in 2018, the focus was on their internal sense-making practices. To gain the most comprehensive understanding possible of the co-production of feminist foreign policy discourse in the setting of such non-official communication, public diplomacy practitioners in Swedish state organizations in both Sweden and abroad were interviewed. The organizations included the Swedish Institute, Swedish embassies and consulates, and Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Swedish embassies and consulates represent the state of Sweden. The Swedish Institute is a state-sponsored, public agency with the mandate of communicating the image of Sweden. Although only a professional role involving the communication of Sweden abroad and a willingness to speak about feminist foreign policy in an everyday work context were primary inclusion criteria, the objective was to create a pool of interviewees that was as diverse as possible in terms of seniority, geographical location, gender, professional title, and work tasks. The interviews were analyzed in consultation with the theoretical concept of discursive closure (Deetz, 1992).

In the second round of interviews, the focus was on the reflections of public diplomacy practitioners over the role of the feminist foreign policy in their work with communicating foreign policy change. These interviews were conducted in 2023 and 2024, hence, after the feminist foreign policy had officially ended. The primary inclusion criterion was a position at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swedish Institute, or a Swedish mission abroad at some point during which the policy was in place, and/or some professional contact with it. One of the reasons for loosening the criteria was that in comparison to the first round of interviewing in 2018, this material would be analyzed in consultation with a broader discourse-theoretical frame. Another reason is that the possibility of gaining access to research participants who were both able and willing to discuss feminist foreign policy was, at that time, even more limited than it had been in 2018. In addition to the general difficulty of accessing professionals in state organizations, many of them appeared reluctant and cautious to speak about feminist foreign policy. In the first round of interviewing, a "strategic"[6] snowball sampling method to recruit interviewees could be pursued; in the second round, a more classical snowball sampling method (Atkinson & Flint, 2004; Boyle & Schmierbach, 2023; Morgan, 2008) was employed. In addition, some personal contacts were utilized to recruit interviewees. Without direct referral or recommendation, this setting would not have been accessible for me. One shortcoming of this approach is that it compromises, to some extent, the anonymity of the interviewees, as some of them are aware of the identities of others with whom I have spoken. Nevertheless, this was considered an acceptable limitation, as the readers of the published articles will be unable to identify any of the interviewees. The interviews were analyzed in consultation with an applied discourse-theoretical approach building on Bacchi (2012) and Hall (1997).

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[6] This was strategic insofar as I sometimes asked for contacts to specific persons.

For the study of the online debate, and to best capture the setting of non-formalized communication in the public sphere, it was decided to focus on a digital space that lies beyond the strategic reach of public diplomacy practitioners. This resulted in the collection of material on the digital platform Reddit, which is perceived as less elitist than, for instance, X (formerly called Twitter). Moreover, users on Reddit have the option of remaining completely anonymous, which may contribute to a greater proclivity for expressing opinions freely. At the time the material was collected, Reddit was not restricted in terms of using its contents for research purposes. This is a challenge that researchers face on other platforms, such as X. Following the approach of a deliberate sampling strategy (e.g., Boyle & Schmierbach, 2023), a search for the term "feminist foreign policy" was conducted on Reddit in August 2021, covering all the entries that were available at that time. The number of comments on the entries was relatively low; however, one thread stood out with over 2,000 comments, indicating a high level of engagement with the topic. This thread was selected as a source of material due to its potential to entail a rich and diverse debate. The debate was conducted in English and hosted in the subreddit[7] r/Europe, which described itself as "Europe: 50 (+6) countries, 230 languages, 746M people… 1 subreddit". The thread was based on an entry that linked to a briefing by the non-governmental organization UN Watch, titled "Walk of shame: Sweden's 'first feminist government' don hijabs in Iran" from February 12, 2017. Hence, the thread was already four years old when I initially accessed it, and it had been archived, seemingly already in 2017, thereby precluding the submission of any new comments. In 2021, screenshots were taken for the purpose of preserving the empirical material. Sometime after that, the thread was deleted from the platform and became inaccessible. The debate was analyzed in consultation with and building on the theories of brand public (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) and counterpublics (Asen, 2000; Warner, 2002b), focusing on the emergence of publics.

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[7] Subreddits are a form of topic-specific sup-group, or sub-platform on Reddit.

Discourse analysis

The analytical approach of the thesis is iterative and abductive (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Tracy, 2013), and aims at understanding (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). In line with the research questions, categories of analysis were developed, followed by "a constant movement back and forth between theory and empirical [material]" (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 27). As the empirical material was visited and revisited, it was connected to emerging insights, which progressively led to a refined focus and understanding (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). This approach embraces the element of surprise, which may emerge from engaging with the material in relation to established theory (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) and constitutes a hermeneutic process that helps develop and elaborate theory (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

The analysis is interested in the language use in specific contexts, as well as in "finding broader patterns and going beyond the details of the text and generalizing to similar contexts" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b, p. 1133). The concrete process, as practiced in the articles, looked as follows. Initially, the material was marked and "filtered" in an open coding approach that allows to strategically examine speech and text for embedded sociopolitical meanings (Saldaña, 2013). The theoretical framework of each paper, as well as the social, historical, and political context of the respective communication setting informed the selection of the most important text passages, phrases, and expressions. These were then organized into patterns, which were clustered into categories and labelled. This entire process was iterative. Subsequently, the red threads that emerged throughout and between these categories were analyzed and formulated into themes which are presented in the findings section in each paper. In the kappa, these are synthesized and abstracted into overarching findings (as advocated also by, e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b).

The analysis pays attention to instances of inclusion and exclusion in the co-production of feminist foreign policy discourse. Due to its iterative approach, it is largely steered by my own interpretation as well as my own practices of inclusion and exclusion (see also Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b). With this, I mean that I chose which elements of the texts I select and what meaning I make of these in the analysis (see also Wodak, 2001). As such, the analysis does not evaluate "what is 'right' or 'wrong'", but "make[s] choices at each point in the research itself", which are made transparent and theoretically justified (Wodak, 2001, p. 67). This is in the "nature" of qualitative research, but it also shows the importance of being reflexive about my own research, not least because it is rooted in a critical and, at times, normative paradigm. In addition to being reflexive and reflective throughout the thesis, I will in the following elaborate on some aspects that deserve highlighting.

Reflections and a note on research ethics

Social science is a social phenomenon that supports, (re)produces, but also challenges existing societal conditions, including political and ideological conditions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). The theories employed in the four papers, combined with their methodology, not only permit for but encourage critical reflection on the potential implications of the findings for practitioners, who are among those capable of effecting change. Thus, the approach taken in this thesis may be described as phronetic (Flyvbjerg, 2004).

I am researching a discourse that also concerns feminism, and I consider myself a feminist, which, in practice, is inextricably linked to the philosophical premise of my study. I acknowledge that my personal philosophical and ideological standpoint, which is informed of me being a female, white, North European researcher, influences the research process. I as a person intersect with the "intended publics" of feminist foreign policy because I am at home in both Sweden and Germany. In addition, I engage in the discursive (co-)production of the notion and ideology of feminism, as well as the idea of "Swedishness". I am, therefore, part of and within the discourse that I study (Jäger, 2001).

Snow (2020, p. 3) argues that "we need to (…) find the larger meaning in what we do as public diplomacy scholars", and urges us to ask ourselves, "What is our mission? What are our collective goals greater than our individual selves? How do we put the chaos of the modern world into a global community context?" This captures also my own reflections as a researcher who engages in the construction of knowledge by debating, presenting, and publishing on the given topic. By providing insight and understanding, which I endeavor to do with this thesis, I pursue what could be described as "a strategy toward recovering alternative practices and marginalized alternative meanings" (Deetz, 1992, p. 87). When I embarked on my PhD journey, I felt quite activist for aiming to do so. With time, I realized that I find myself in a position where I can influence the discourse and raise awareness of issues that I find important, such as systematically promoting gender equality. In that sense, I hope to be part of uncovering dynamics that repress these.

Being a researcher at this point in time, in this social context and (academic) culture where it is possible, acceptable, and encouraged to conduct research the way this thesis does with an open mind and without self-censorship is a privilege that cannot be taken for granted.

The thesis is not a critique of the feminist foreign policy itself, but a critical examination of the co-production of feminist foreign policy discourse in communication. As such, it takes a critical perspective on what happens with foreign policy in communication and on how communication impacts policy.

In accordance with the principles of ethical research conduct, statements provided by interview participants are anonymized and, when necessary, paraphrased in a manner that ensures the anonymity of the individuals and their organizational affiliation. In the study based on the Reddit debate, the participants were assigned pseudonyms, and it was not possible to trace the identity of the individual behind any account. All documents were publicly accessible via the websites of the government or the Swedish Institute. As these documents are public records, they are not considered confidential and therefore no permission to access and study them was required. The same applies to the minister's statements, which were publicly accessible on Swedish news media. Thus, this thesis strives to achieve a balance between the two criteria of protecting the individual and conducting research with an important purpose (e.g., Swedish Research Council, 2017).

The thesis sets out to contribute valuable, current, and useful knowledge to both the academic community and professionals by publishing two of the three articles in open-access outlets.

The context of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy

This chapter provides an overview of the context of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy. It demonstrates the development of Sweden’s politics and foreign policy approach, the country’s feminist foreign policy, and the role of different state organizations as well as of foreign policy in positioning the country internationally. The chapter also shows how launching as well as the ending of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy were not isolated political decisions but situated within a broader sociopolitical context. It further shows how these foreign policy incidents were intertwined with Sweden’s ongoing efforts to externalize domestic values and priorities, to “manifest” a perceived and perhaps self-proclaimed international role duty, and to align the political agenda with international developments and the domestic shift to the political right.

The development of Sweden’s politics

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Sweden witnessed the emergence of several popular movements, including those advocating for women’s rights and labor reforms. After the turn of the twentieth century, these movements evolved into a reformist orientation (Swedish Institute, 2022a). The concept of social equality became a core value in Sweden during the twentieth century (Borchorst & Siim, 2008), reaching its zenith with the notion of Swedish “state feminism” (Aggestam et al., 2024; Borchorst & Siim, 2002; Hernes, 2022). The first Social Democrats, for whom the issue of employment has remained a pivotal concern throughout their history, entered government in 1917. During the 1930s, plans for the establishment of a social welfare state were formulated and implemented after the end of the Second World War (Swedish Institute, 2022a).

Despite its geographical proximity to the European continent, Sweden has historically maintained a policy of “neutrality” during periods of armed conflict. Since 1814, the country has not actively been involved in any war, not even in the First and Second World Wars. The Swedish stance of neutrality was not perceived as an impediment but rather as a prerogative and obligation for voicing opinions on global and ethical matters. This stance was underpinned by the conviction that assisting developing countries through generous foreign aid policies was a moral obligation (Browning, 2021). Nevertheless, Sweden joined the League of Nations in 1920 and the United Nations (henceforth UN) in 1946. The country is one of the strongest contributors to the UN, meeting the target allocation of 0.7% income to development assistance as the first country in 1975 and remaining over this threshold since then (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, n.d.). Since 1994, Sweden has also engaged in extended security cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (henceforth NATO) under the Partnership for Peace (Bjereld & Möller, 2015). In January 1995, Sweden joined the European Union (henceforth EU), thereby ending its policy of neutrality. In May 2022, the country applied to join NATO in response to the emergence of a novel security situation. During the 2017–2018 term, Sweden held a seat on the UN Security Council. In 2021, the country chaired the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (Swedish Institute, 2022a). In 2024, Sweden became a member of NATO, which reconfirms the end of the country's military non-alliance.

During the Second World War, the Swedish government was formed by a coalition of the country's four democratic parties (excluding the Communist Party). Upon the end of the war, a Social Democratic government resumed office. The foundations of the Swedish welfare state were established during the 1940s and 1950s, when a series of reforms were implemented under the guidance of the Social Democratic Party (Swedish Institute, 2022a).

In the 1970s, Sweden's pursuit of economic democracy and gender equality served to reinforce its reputation "as a symbolic front-runner with regard to 'progressive values'" (Marklund, 2017, p. 627). However, the economic crisis of the early 1970s marked the end of the Social Democrats' long period of hegemony (Swedish Institute, 2022a). Since 1976, there have been frequent changes in political parties that governed the country. In 1982, the Social Democratic Party was the incumbent administration with Olof Palme serving as prime minister until his assassination on February 28, 1986. This came as a shock to the Swedish people, "who had been spared such political violence for almost 200 years" (Swedish Institute, 2022a). In 1991, a non-socialist coalition government was elected, with Carl Bildt, the leader of Moderate Party, serving as prime minister. In 2010, for the first time, eight parties were represented in the Riksdag, which is the highest decision-making assembly in Sweden. This included the populist far-right Sweden Democrats. In 2014, the Social Democrats and the Greens won the election, forming a minority coalition led by Stefan Löfven from the Social Democratic Party (Swedish Institute, 2022a, 2022c). As part of this government, in her capacity as Minster for Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström from the Social

Democratic Party introduced a feminist foreign policy. Following the 2018 elections, a lengthy process of negotiations resulted in the formation of a minority government, once again led by the Social Democrats and the Greens. This coalition government was supported by the Liberal Party and the Centre Party. In 2021, Löfven resigned, and Magdalena Andersson who is also from the Social Democratic Party became the first female prime minister of Sweden. After the 2022 elections, a coalition government was formed by the conservative bloc, including the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberal Party (Swedish Institute, 2022a, 2022c). This election marked the highest percentage of votes ever received by the Sweden Democrats. As part of this government, Tobias Billström from the Moderate Party served as Minister for Foreign Affairs. Immediately upon assuming office, he officially ended the feminist foreign policy (see Billström, 2022). In September 2024, Maria Malmer Stenergard who is also from the Moderate Party assumed the role of Sweden's Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Sweden's foreign policy approach over time

During the Cold War, Swedish foreign policy was exceptionally internationalist, with an active foreign aid policy and a focus on welfare. Sweden being "associated with activism far beyond its national territory" (Brommesson, 2018, p. 391) peaked with the "Palme era" in the 1960s and early 1970. This era was characterized by high levels of foreign aid, a commitment to peace, the pursuit of mediation efforts, a rise in activism, and a progressive approach to social and political issues (Brommesson, 2018). This approach to foreign policy focuses on multilateralism, global development and peace within the UN (Bergman, 2007).

Sweden's pursuit of internationalism was inspired by social democracy and based on a notion of cosmopolitan duty. As such, Sweden pursued an approach that was generally characterized by an active foreign policy and marked by non-alignment and solidarity also beyond its own borders (Bergman, 2007; Pierre, 2015). Olof Palme advocated this approach, believing in "a mutually co-constitutive relationship between domestic and international appeals to justice", meaning that "the domestic and the international realms are part of the same narrative rather than two separate entities" (Bergman, 2007, p. 74). Sweden's role as an international critic "largely disappeared with Olof Palme's removal from the political scene in 1986" (Pierre, 2015, p. 10). Former Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Jan Eliasson from the Social Democratic Party similarly argued for a fluid borderline between the national and international, as well as a between domestic and foreign policy (Bergman, 2007).

After the end of the Cold War, "Swedish foreign policy went through a rapid process of Europeanization, during which the geographical and ideological focus shifted towards Europe and a foreign policy ideology associated with European norms rather than internationalism and neutrality" (Brommesson, 2018, p. 391). This manifested in a policy that espoused greater regionalism and less foreign aid. Consequently, Sweden's foreign policy initiatives were not any longer primarily guided by a self-understanding of playing an international role; rather, they were frequently mediated through the EU (Bergman, 2007).

This development was followed by a return to "Nordicness" (Brommesson, 2018) with an increased focus on the closer geographic neighborhood. This was also a consequence of a changing security environment, which made closer collaboration in security policy with Sweden's immediate neighbors, especially Finland, more attractive. However, upon being elected President of the 60th session of the UN General Assembly in 2005, Eliasson, who was then serving as Minister for Foreign Affairs, expressed a desire to conduct his duties in alignment with the fundamental tenets of Sweden's foreign policy. These tenets, he argued, are the "belief in multilateral co-operation … respect for the rule of law and human rights, solidarity with the poor …[and] concern for the rights of women" (Eliasson, 2005; in Bergman, 2007, p. 91).

In 2007, Bergmann argued that social democratic ideas would be challenged, which, in the long run, could result in a reduction of Sweden's commitments to international justice. Paralleled by increasingly conservative voting and a growing support for the Sweden Democrats also among young voters (Aylott & Bolin, 2023), this seems to be, indeed, happening.

Sweden's feminist foreign policy

As an egalitarian welfare state with high standards of living, Sweden has historically prioritized gender equality as a core social and political concern. In 2014, the Swedish government, then led by a social democratic and green minority coalition, announced that it would pursue a feminist foreign policy. This suggests a normative direction closely linked to the Minister for Foreign Affairs at the time, Margot Wallström, who had previously strongly advocated for gender justice, most notably in her role as the very first UN Special Representative on sexual violence in conflict (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016).

Wallström served as the Swedish Minster for Foreign Affairs from 2014 to 2019, when she was succeeded by Ann Linde. Linde had previously served as Minster for Foreign Trade and subsequently assumed the role of Minster for Foreign Affairs until the change of government following the 2022 elections. Thereafter, Tobias Billström from the Moderate Party assumed the position. He announced within his first days of office that the term “feminism” would no longer be used to label Sweden’s foreign policy. Yet, he underscored that gender equality would continue to be a pivotal aspect of the country’s foreign policy approach (Billström, 2022). However, the feminist foreign policy had been declining in the years preceding its official end. It was, in practice, dropped and thus also removed from the Swedish security agenda already in early 2022, which paved the way for the following government to officially abandon it (Wright & Bergman Rosamond, 2024).

As a response to the systematic discrimination and subordination of women and girls in the world, the term “feminism” was supposed to signal a strong political commitment to global efforts of promoting gender equality, which followed the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016). This resolution

> reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. (United Nations Women, n.d.)

In accordance with the resolution, Sweden sought to redefine also security with a greater focus on women and girls, and to prioritize women’s inclusion and participation in peace processes (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016). Sweden has been described as an idealistic nation (Bergman, 2007; Brommesson, 2018). This was exemplified by the feminist foreign policy, which was guided by normative and ethical principles and departed from traditional elite-oriented foreign policy practices (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016).

Gender equality has been a priority area for Sweden since the 1990s, when the country entered the EU (Towns, 2002). Therefore, adopting a feminist approach to foreign policy can be seen as a continuation of Sweden’s pro-gender equality stance. In other words, “the ‘feminist’ term (…) was clearly a label to rebrand already ongoing practice” (Towns et al., 2023, p. 94; see also Aggestam et al., 2024). Additionally, the introduction of the policy aligns with the broader concept of Nordic exceptionalism, which captures the idea of the Nordics “being different from or better than the norm” and being “a model to be copied by others” (Browning, 2007, p. 27). Simultaneously, Sweden moved away from its presentation as an “exceptional” country towards one among others in Europe (see Browning, 2007; Pierre, 2015), possibly also due to globalization as a driver of convergence between countries.

The feminist foreign policy circulated the notion of the “3 Rs”, which both Wallström and Linde oftentimes referred to. It stands for the rights, representation, and resources that should be granted to women and girls around the world. As stated in the action plans that were published annually by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the objectives of the policy are to contribute to all women’s and girls’

1. Full enjoyment of human rights
2. Freedom from physical, psychological and sexual violence
3. Participation in preventing and resolving conflicts, and post-conflict peacebuilding
4. Political participation and influence in all areas of society
5. Economic rights and empowerment
6. Sexual and reproductive health and rights.

It is noteworthy that soon after the change of government in 2022, only the statements of foreign policy presented by the previous government seem to still be accessible on Sweden’s government website. Neither the action plans nor other documents or information on feminist foreign policy can be found on the website any longer. Some of the documents have since then been made accessible by other organizations.

Since the launch of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy in 2014, several other countries have initiated or been inspired by feminist approaches to foreign policy to various degrees. These include Canada (initiating such an approach in 2017), France (2019), Mexico (2020), Spain (2021), Luxembourg (2021), Germany (2021), and Chile (2022). Additionally, there is a feminist foreign policy group (FFP+) that, at the time of writing, includes 18 countries (see Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, 2024).

The Swedish feminist foreign policy faced many challenges, most notably the controversy surrounding Sweden’s export of arms to authoritarian regimes (see, for example, Browning, 2021). The policy has also been critiqued of portraying a re-articulation of colonialism that creates a “false ethical image of the caring feminist state” (Bergman Rosamond et al., 2024, p. 626). There has also for some time been a “growing (inter)national discussion” on whether Nordic countries, especially Sweden, “actually do live up to their reputation of being ‘good’, ‘open’ and ‘safe’ societies, following recurrent reports on rising inequality, growing right-wing populism and persistent structural discrimination” (Marklund, 2017, p. 624).

The official end of the feminist foreign policy in 2022 was parallelled by, and probably related to, the rise of nationalist right-wing forces in Sweden, which manifested in the government ending the previous *cordon sanitaire* around the radical-right party Sweden Democrats and allowing the government’s collaboration therewith (for an overview of the domestic political development in Sweden, see Aylott & Bolin, 2023). The gradual policy change and the subsequent official termination of the feminist foreign policy were also concurrent with the full-scale war of Russia on Ukraine. Related to this was a geopolitical shift that resulted in a fundamental change of attitude (see Hermann, 1990) in Swedish society. This ultimately led to Sweden's bid for NATO membership in 2022 and the country's entry in 2024. However, it could be argued that ending the policy was mostly an opportunistic move by the incoming government to distinguish itself from the preceding government and to facilitate a context in which it can more effectively establish its legacy. In this case, the end of the feminist foreign policy might have been more a result of domestic motivation than a logical consequence of international developments, such as securitization processes. After all, other NATO-countries like Germany and Spain employ a feminist foreign policy, and the policy had previously not "been viewed as incompatible with militarism in practice" (Wright & Bergman Rosamond, 2024, p. 601). Overall, the retraction was undoubtedly a powerful signal "and a source of inspiration for those in opposition to women's rights, including within Sweden" (Towns et al., 2024, p. 1272).

Ultimately, the question remains whether states can even have a feminist foreign policy in the first place. One reflection (not answer!) is that feminism may not be "something that can be achieved, or arrived at, but (…) always a work in progress, requiring continuous self-examination, accountability, and a willingness to evolve", as Conway (2024) writes. Therefore, one could argue that states can have a feminist foreign policy, but that they cannot claim to solve everything.

State organizations involved in promoting Sweden abroad

Sweden maintained a "neutral" position in both World Wars, although it did adopt a pro-German position in the 1930s, supplying the country with iron ore and poison gas (Hildeman, 1995, in Cassinger et al., 2016). Subsequently, Sweden struggled with this association. In an effort to improve the country's image, the Swedish tradition of consensus emerged (Cassinger et al., 2016), traditionally characterizing also the country's public diplomacy (Pamment, 2013).

After the Second World War, in 1945, the Swedish Institute was created, thereby formalizing the country's efforts to promote itself abroad. The institute was established as an association for facilitating cultural exchange and enhancing the country's global reputation through collaboration with cultural institutions, universities, businesses, and popular movements (Cassinger et al., 2016). In 1998, the Swedish Institute became a public agency. From 2007, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs' Unit of Promotion and EU's internal market was responsible for its administration. This transfer was the consequence of contention between institutions of foreign and trade policy from 2005 to 2007, by which also Sweden's public diplomacy was affected (Cassinger et al., 2016; Pamment, 2013). During this period, as Cassinger et al. (2016, p. 181) argue, the Swedish Institute's public diplomacy work "was consolidated into nation branding and the promotion of Swedish trade and investments". Indeed, Sweden's public diplomacy is (or at least, used to be) inseparably linked with nation branding and the "Brand Sweden". Brand Sweden encapsulates a strong sense of consensus, which is – or was – supposed to enhance the country's international image and profile (Pamment, 2013).

As captured in the nation branding strategy from 2017, Sweden used to portray itself as a progressive country (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2017). The "Progressive Sweden" brand, into which this self-image was distilled, built on the value-based keywords of openness, authenticity, care, and innovation. It has recently been updated and/or changed to what is now referred to as "the Sweden brand", wherein the terminology and concept of progressiveness seem to have disappeared. Instead, the essence of the Swedish nation brand is now described as "pioneer[ing] green transitions, the ingrained culture of cooperation, and the unwavering commitment to democracy" (Swedish Institute, n.d.-a)[8]. Overall, Sweden's image abroad is relatively positive, though it has been slightly deteriorating in recent years (see Swedish Institute, 2022b, 2024). In terms of being a "good country", Sweden scores first according to the Good Country Index[9]. However, by the early 2020s, increased far-right populism and social polarization, as well as adversarial disinformation narratives targeting Sweden ignited reputational crises, which constitute a threat to the country's prosperity (Pamment, 2022). Therefore, Pamment (2022, p. 237f.) believes that now and in the foreseeable future, "Brand Sweden will struggle to represent plurality while battling the image of a country in permanent crisis". While he believes that Brand Sweden will persist, albeit most likely in a different form than before, Pamment (2022, p. 238) also finds that "the heyday of Brand Sweden is over."

Swedish public diplomacy is centralized, although there are important divisions between the Swedish Institute and Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The public diplomacy work of the ministry is in general conducted "quietly", while the Swedish Institute "represents the public face of Sweden's overseas image" (Pamment, 2013, p. 99). The work with communicating Sweden is assigned by the Ministry for Foreign

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[8] The strategy document for the "Progressive Sweden" brand used to be accessible on Sharingsweden.se. However, neither any equivalent document nor any detailed strategic instructions regarding the updated branding strategy other than instructions about visual identity were published at the time of writing.

[9] The most recent ranking uses mainly data from 2020 (The Good Country Index, n.d.). Therefore, Sweden's position in this ranking could deviate from the one stated here.

Affairs to the Swedish Institute in so-called annual "regleringsbrev", which can be translated as "regulatory letter". These letters are the Swedish government's most important operational instrument for guiding the activities of the agencies and for implementing government policy (The Swedish Post and Telecom Authority, 2022). The letter to the Swedish Institute is issued in December every year, coming into effect in January of the subsequent year. In the letter from 2016, it is stated,

> The Swedish Institute shall (…) report on how it contributes to the implementation of the government's feminist foreign policy. The assignment also includes reporting on how the Swedish Institute, in cooperation with the missions abroad, supports and conducts activities that contribute to the implementation of the feminist foreign policy. The assignment is to be reported to the government offices (Ministry for Foreign Affairs) no later than May 31, 2016. (My own translation[10])

In the letters from 2017 and 2018, the task of the Swedish Institute is framed in a somewhat similar way, although the formulations get less detailed. However, in the second letter from 2019[11], which came into effect in 2020, as well as in the letters from the following years, the feminist foreign policy is no longer mentioned. Instead, the Swedish Institute is tasked with reporting how it contributes to the implementation of the government's "feminist trade policy". This coincides with Ann Linde succeeding Margot Wallström as Minister for Foreign Affairs. Also on the Swedish Institute's website, the terminology of public diplomacy and foreign policy does not seem to appear as prominently anymore as it previously did. Instead, in the description of the agency's mission, for example collaboration in the Baltic area is highlighted (see Swedish Institute, n.d.-b). This may be more consistent with the political trend of fostering closer collaboration with Sweden's immediate neighbors.

Since 1995, the Council for the Promotion of Sweden (in Swedish: Nämnden för Sverigefrämjande i utlandet), has strategically worked toward developing a favorable image of the country abroad by telling a consistent story of the nation and national experiences (Cassinger et al., 2016). The council was a cooperation committee and discussion forum, representing Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, the Ministry of Culture, the Swedish Institute, Business Sweden, and Visit Sweden, which owned and continuously developed the identity of Brand Sweden (Swedish Institute, n.d.-c). In April 2024, it was announced that the council would be closed down and partly substituted by the Team Sweden group (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2024). In conjunction with other developments, such as the ending of the feminist foreign policy, this illustrates a shift in Sweden's image work. The country's previous focus on promoting progressive gender norms and its status as a "the goodest" country now seems to give way to a growing emphasis on securitization and a pursuit of excellence in trade and business.

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[10] The official government language is Swedish. The translation from the regulatory letters is my own.

[11] Apparently, in that year, two letter were issued.

It is unlikely that the retraction of the feminist foreign policy will result in the reversal of all the gender equality activities that the policy has hitherto entailed, but it has "undoubtedly been a blow to efforts to promote gender equality" (Towns et al., 2024, p. 1272f.). The tangible consequences of this development are reflected, for example, in the 2024 regulatory letter of the government to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (henceforth SIDA), in which, apart from a reporting assignment, no new assignments linked to gender equality were given to the agency. In contrast, two years before, SIDA had an assignment on gender mainstreaming that should be continued (see analysis of Concord, 2023). Also, support to UN Women is in continued decline (ibid). In addition, SIDA has terminated agreements with strategic partner organizations such as the foundation Kvinna till Kvinna (in English: Woman to Woman), which is dedicated to defending women's rights. This termination has resulted in significant repercussions for women's rights activists across the globe (see Kvinna till Kvinna, 2024). The consequences of this development can also be seen in the amounts of gender-focused aid. In a somewhat paradoxical manner, the introduction of feminist foreign policy was accompanied by a reduction in gender-focused aid in 2015. This type of aid, then, significantly increased from 2016 to 2020. However, already in 2020, these commitments dropped again (see Papagioti et al., 2022). In the context of a global resurgence of patriarchal ideology and an increase in authoritarianism, the developments illustrated here are cause for concern.

Foreign policy as a means for positioning Sweden internationally

By adopting a feminist foreign policy, Sweden strived to extend the country's welfare model beyond national borders (Bergman, 2007). This adoption can be seen as a strategic maneuver designed to disrupt the status quo by foregrounding the issues of feminism and humanitarian concerns on the global agenda (e.g., Aggestam & True, 2020). While it is not entirely clear what kind of feminism the Swedish government sought to implement, the feminist foreign policy demonstrates the "attempt of the Swedish government to brand its state machinery as explicitly feminist" (Bergman Rosamond, 2020, p. 218). Thus, the policy can also be seen as a lever for constructing an image of Sweden as a frontrunner and thus as a model to follow (Jezierska & Towns, 2021; Marklund, 2017; Towns, 2002). Thus, Sweden's feminist foreign policy "added force to its identity construction" (Bergman Rosamond, 2020, p. 218). It can be argued that the feminist foreign policy was aligned with the progressive character of the Swedish "persona" created in the Progressive Sweden brand. However, the brand was not in alignment with the feminist foreign policy in the same way, given that it was based on consensus, and that feminism, discord, and political struggle were notably absent in the brand's narrative (Jezierska & Towns, 2018; see also Jezierska, 2021).

In the context of today's image politics, Sweden, like other smaller states, performs quite well (Marklund, 2017). It might have helped that that the feminist foreign policy was formulated in a manner that ascribed agency to others and emphasized the significance of local knowledge (Nylund et al., 2023). However, at the same time, the feminist foreign policy "[drew] upon and reproduce[d] postcolonial language, consequently reinforcing the power relations that it entails", for example, by positioning Sweden as benevolent, morally superior donor (Nylund et al., 2023, p. 8). Moreover, branding the policy as feminist has also raised questions regarding "the distinction between 'doing good' and the imperative to 'be seen to be doing good'" (Browning, 2021, p. 26). The notion of "goodness" in international relations commonly refers to the foregrounding of "moral conduct" (Wohlforth et al., 2018), which is highly context-dependent. The quotation marks do not imply that fundamentally moral values such as freedom, democracy, or human rights can or should be invalidated. Rather, they are intended to signal that what is *considered* as good or moral in one situation by some may be perceived differently in another situation and/or by others. Although the notion of "goodness" has become fairly common in international relations scholarship (see, for example, Bergman, 2007; Browning, 2021; Goldsmith et al., 2014; Henrikson, 2005; Wohlforth et al., 2018), a as descriptor of states, it might, therefore, be questionable (see also Lawler, 2013). Moreover, the imperative of being seen to be doing good, as captured by different rankings, creates social hierarchies of superordination and subordination and, thus, social pressure on states (see also Towns & Rumelili, 2017). This can in many ways create incentives for states to constructively consider what kind of impact on and contribution to the world they want to make. However, it can also lead to states "'gam[ing]' rankings while making few real improvements" and "prioritize[ing] scoring high in a particular indicator while missing important non-quantified goals" (Beaumont & Towns, 2021, p. 1468). In this way, states may let rankings "depoliticize issues and undermine domestic democratic processes" (ibid). In conclusion, the idea(l) of an image as "good" international actor, which many smaller states including Sweden strive for, must be seen as a construct that benefits those who champion the rankings, which, in and of themselves, are a debatable construct.

Finally, not everyone may agree that the values that Sweden sought to promote with its feminist foreign policy are desirable. Furthermore, with a current government that has implemented budgetary reductions for development aid (e.g., Hivert, 2023) and focuses on "Nordicness" as well as collaboration with immediate neighbors, Sweden seems to be (and to have been for some time) undergoing a transformation regarding its positioning in the world. Moreover, if the trends from the general election in 2022 and, for example, expressions of xenophobia (see, e.g., Nobis, 2021), antisemitism (see, e.g., Wiklund & Hedberg, 2023), or anti-Islam provocation (see, e.g., Colla, 2024) gain momentum, Sweden's image in the world is likely to change into a less favorable, yet possibly more accurate one. It remains to be seen how the climate of increasing securitization might influence the country's society and (international) politics in the long term, and what strategies for the development and communication of foreign policy the current and future governments might pursue.

Summary of the papers and contributions

The following chapter provides a summary of the four papers compiling the thesis (for an overview, see table 2).

Table 2. Overview of the papers

	Paper 1	Paper 2	Paper 3	Paper 4
Overarching research question	How is Sweden's feminist foreign policy legitimated by the government?	How is Sweden's feminist foreign policy co-produced by practitioners involved in its communication?	How is Sweden's feminist foreign policy co-produced by publics in the digital participatory space?	How is Sweden's feminist foreign policy co-produced by practitioners involved in its communication?
	What challenges does an activist foreign policy pose for strategic communication in international relations?			
Theoretical concepts	Legitimation	Discursive closure	Brand publics, counterpublics	Discourse theory
Settings	Official communication in government outlets	Non-official communication in different organizations	Non-formalized communication in the public sphere	Official communication in government outlets, non-official communication in different organizations
Actors	Government	Public diplomacy practitioners	Publics	Government, public diplomacy practitioners
Main method	Document study	Semi-structured interviews	Study of online debate	Study of public statements, semi-structured interviews
Main empirical material	Six action plans on the feminist foreign policy	Twelve interviews with public diplomacy practitioners, three policy documents	2000 comments in a debate on Reddit	Two policy statements and three media interviews, nine interviews with public diplomacy practitioners

Legitimating policy branding: Constructing "sellability" of Sweden's feminist foreign policy

This article examines how foreign policy branding is legitimated as a response to human rights crises. Drawing on legitimation theory (van Leeuwen, 2007), this study takes a discourse perspective with a focus on the performance of foreign policy in communication and argues that legitimacy is the foundation for constructing a convincing and credible image of a country and its foreign policy. Building on the example of Sweden's feminist foreign policy and an analysis of relevant policy documents, three themes were formulated. These illustrate that Sweden's feminist foreign policy branding was legitimated by framing the policy as a form of "good" activism, creating a knowledge brand of the policy, and aligning the policy branding with established discourses of solidarity. Thus, the study thus suggests that a branding logic imposed by the attention economy leads strategic communication of foreign policy to focus on constructing "sellability" of foreign policy, legitimating it in ways that makes it relatable to wider publics. This article contributes to research on the strategic communication of foreign policy through the conceptual development of foreign policy branding.

This article explores the setting of official communication in government outlets. By drawing on the logic of branding, this article "experiments" with the more tangible element of attention economy, in which foreign policy discourse is, as a first step, legitimated. This illuminates how foreign policy discourse is co-produced in a social environment, which governments strive to "play" to their advantage.

"We try to be nuanced everywhere all the time": Sweden's feminist foreign policy and discursive closure in public diplomacy

This study examines how public diplomacy practitioners deal with gender dynamics as a form of ideological issue in foreign policy. Informed by the theory of discursive closure, this study focuses on understanding how Swedish public diplomacy practitioners make sense of the country's feminist foreign policy in their daily work and what consequences this has for the communication of it. Based on semi-structured interviews and policy documents, the research finds that the practitioners discursively perform certain meanings of the feminist foreign policy. This is illustrated as downplaying and packaging feminism as entertainment, associating feminism with male practices and the terminology of "gender equality," and subordinating feminism to an economic growth paradigm. Thus, the tension created by the issues raised in the feminist foreign policy is neutralized in Sweden's public diplomacy while a different meaning of these issues is created. The research contributes to a more practitioner-focused view on public diplomacy.

This paper explores the setting of non-official communication in different organizations, more specially, Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Swedish missions abroad, and the Swedish Institute. By closely examining public diplomacy practitioners' reflections about their communication work in relation to issues that are important to Sweden, this article provides a valuable glimpse into power-performance in foreign policy discourse.

Debating feminist foreign policy: The formation of (unintended) publics in Sweden's public diplomacy

Investigating how publics form, this study aims to develop an understanding of how publics of Sweden's feminist foreign policy are constructed in public diplomacy discourse. To this end, the study conceptualizes publics as forming around perceptions of foreign policy that are mediated through public diplomacy events. Based on a debate on Sweden's feminist foreign policy on the digital platform Reddit, the research suggests three features of publics that become visible in the formation process. These are 1) relationality, 2) performance of meaning, and 3) temporariness in the form of shifting views. The study thus argues that the formation of publics in public diplomacy is highly context-dependent, and that also "unintended" publics are important for the performance of public diplomacy. The study contributes to a practice focused and more inclusive approach to publics in public diplomacy.

This paper explores the setting of non-formalized communication in the public sphere, which provides new insights and reflections on how publics form through co-producing Sweden's feminist foreign policy discourse according to their "rules". Thus, this paper illuminates what happens to foreign policy discourse beyond the state's strategic reach. It also shows how power flows through the strategic communication of foreign policy in and from different directions.

Undoing feminism in foreign policy: State actors' meaning making in foreign policy change

This article examines how foreign policy change is constructed in states' strategic communication. Using a foreign policy as discourse approach, the study focuses on key state actors' practices in negotiating and making meaning of foreign policy change. Based on the empirical context of Sweden and its foreign policy change away from an explicit "feminist" approach, an analysis of official statements by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and semi-structured interviews with public diplomacy practitioners was conducted. The findings suggest that state actors rationalize the foreign policy change by constructing the feminist foreign policy as obsolete, as a fantasy, and as based on an unhelpful ideology. It is argued that in times of securitization, states communicate foreign policy change in ways that favor their interests over "doing good" beyond national borders. The article contributes with a communication and discourse perspective on foreign policy change, and a practitioner-focused view of states' strategic communication.

This paper explores and revisits the setting of non-official communication in different organizations, including Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Swedish missions abroad, and the Swedish Institute. In conjunction therewith, it explores the setting of official communication by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. Thus, it illuminates the high-stakes practice of making meaning of foreign policy change.

Concluding discussion

This concluding chapter presents a synthesis of the main findings of the four papers. It illustrates the mechanisms by which the meaning of Sweden's feminist foreign policy is constructed at the local level. More specifically, the chapter discusses how the feminist foreign policy is co-produced as a unique selling point, as a depoliticized asset, and as a contrastable position in the speaking and writing of state actors and publics. It synthesizes these empirical findings to elaborate how foreign policy discourse is informed by and structures the social world. The chapter draws up the empirical and theoretical contributions, including the development of the concepts of foreign policy branding and unintended publics. Finally, it shows how the thesis contributes to developing strategic communication research through a discourse approach with a global perspective.

Discussion: Co-producing the feminist foreign policy

This thesis explored feminist foreign policy as a discourse, which is co-produced in a multiplicity of communication setting by various actors. Empirically, the thesis concentrated on three communication settings: official communication in government outlets, non-official communication in different organizations, and non-formalized communication in the public sphere. It examined the discursive practices of the government, public diplomacy practitioners, and publics at different points in time and space, in which meaning of the policy was and is constructed in strategic communication. Covering an eight-year period, the thesis followed the trajectory of Sweden's feminist foreign policy. Thus, it embraces a temporal perspective, encompassing the discursive co-production practices of publics in 2017, when debate and contestation could assume various forms and had some substance to build on as the policy had been in place for already three years; of public diplomacy practitioners in 2018, after the policy had been through its formative years and was still in place; of the government from the inception of the policy to its formal termination; and, finally, the production practices of practitioners and the Minister for Foreign Affairs in 2023 and 2024, after the policy had been officially ended. These findings can be synthesized into three overarching themes that capture the practices of and challenges in co-producing meaning of Sweden's feminist foreign policy.

Feminist foreign policy as a unique selling point

The feminist foreign policy was legitimated in the local setting of government communication in micro and meso discourse. The policy's core – the systematic promotion of gender equality – was constructed as a matter of Swedish national interest and expertise, and as a contribution that Sweden can make to the international community. Thus, the feminist foreign policy was portrayed as a constructive response to a significant societal challenge, making it a *unique selling point* for Sweden. These legitimation practices followed the logics of branding and were utilized by state actors as a means of distinguishing Sweden and its nation brand from others on the global stage. The consequence was that the policy and the values it set out to promote were constructed in a way that would appeal to broad publics. Thus, the (imagined) opinion of publics becomes the directive for how foreign policy is being branded. This shows that not only the state can exercise influence, but that also (imagined) publics can do so. Time and social context play a pivotal role herein, as the efficacy of policy branding hinges on whether policymakers consider the standing of a country that this promotes in the international arena beneficial given the current circumstances.

These findings also show the limits of the state's control over meaning construction of foreign policy. One limiting force is the logic of attention economy, which not only demands effective policy branding in the first place, but also imposes an alignment thereof with societal macro discourse(s). The thesis shows how Swedish state actors sought to align the feminist foreign policy through branding with the (perceived) societal discourse of "goodness", and, in addition, to reinforce the idea(l) of "goodness" as a guiding principle in international relations. However, it can be argued that a notion of goodness as a structuring metric is problematic, as it constructs social hierarchies between states on shaky grounds. As exemplified by the Swedish context, the discourse around goodness changes over time. Consequently, also the understanding of moral goodness is subject to change. In the Swedish context, it oscillated between an ideological sense of "good" that may have been too progressive for the world, and a security-oriented sense of "good". Thus, at a certain point in time, the promotion of systematic gender equality can/could be considered particularly good, which was reflected in Sweden's employment of a feminist foreign policy. It was also reinforced through the policy discourse, which led to an increased awareness of global gender (in)equality. However, the attention economy logic implies that aiming for a specific image may become even more pressing for states in the coming years. Possibly, this will incentivize states to prioritize having a unique selling point over addressing global social challenges in the most sustainable way. These two pursuits do not have to be a zero-sum game. Rather, they might be equally crucial, for example, for states' security (Cull, 2023). However, the findings of the thesis suggest that when an ideology like feminism is used in politics, it tends to be appropriated in ways that offer the state in question the benefit of being seen and heard.

Feminist foreign policy as a depoliticized asset that can be downplayed

While Sweden's feminist foreign policy was still officially in effect, it was co-produced by practitioners in the local setting of communication in state organizations in meso discourse. The policy was constructed as "business as usual" and as a matter that does not cause significant contention. During and after the foreign policy change, it was constructed as a controversial *asset* that was situated within a broader, albeit outdated political strategic framework. Thus, the meaning of the feminist foreign policy was devalued in favor of a policy approach that could at the time be more effectively embedded into a strategic framework of promoting economic prosperity. At some points in time, especially when the policy was still in effect, it was constructed as a solution to human rights crises, a platform for placing debate on gender norms higher on the international political agenda, and a strategically smart way for promoting Sweden. After policy change, it was constructed as an incompatibility to Sweden's increased focus on the national self, the closer geographic neighborhood, and the country's physical security. Thus, the thesis shows that meaning of foreign policy can change, which manifests at varying points in time in different ways. Moreover, differing and possibly even contradicting meanings of feminist foreign policy emerge in intersecting and occasionally converging local settings and sociopolitical contexts. Also shifting geopolitics and security demands impact what truth claims state actors can make at specific points in time, and which of a country's actions and assets they *can* prioritize in public diplomacy to be seen and heard in a positive way.

Especially at a later stage of the feminist foreign policy trajectory, the macro discourse of "goodness" was on meso, organizational level interpreted as imposing a focus on securitization and a turn to the closer neighborhood onto state actors. For practitioners, the underlying rationale was to keep up a sense of coherence in the country's self-understanding and policy actions over time. Moreover, macro discourse, as well as the political decision-making of the government, was interpreted by practitioners as imposing on them the necessity to justify policy change and the consequences thereof to the global society. The attention economy logic, in turn, challenged them to credibly construct Sweden's policy actions as aligned with the positive image that the country enjoys in most of the world. In essence, throughout its trajectory, those elements of the feminist foreign policy were emphasized that helped state actors promote the reputation of Sweden as a state that is relevant, be it to the global or the closer neighborhood. The turn to the latter in the later years of the policy trajectory could be interpreted as a strategy of turning from leader into follower, which would also explain Sweden's turn towards building its identity construction on securitization narratives and a comparatively unambiguous focus on trade and business.

In conclusion, the feminist foreign policy was *depoliticized* while it was officially still in place and *downplayed* during and after policy change. Thus, state actors, and public diplomacy practitioners in particular, responded to the (perceived) shifts in the opinion of publics. They construct meaning of foreign policy in ways that they deem useful for persuading (intended) publics. The thesis shows that to this end, they adapt the meaning of policy to *make* it fit to publics' expectations, even to the extent of depoliticizing it. Thus, it can be concluded that if the ideological content of foreign policy is different or more progressive than the global status quo, state actors downplay it in favor of other, less politically frictional issues. Thus, they communicate in relation to intended publics which they do not seem to imagine as progressive.

Feminist foreign policy as a contrastable position

The feminist foreign policy was co-produced by publics beyond the state's strategic reach in the local setting of the public sphere in micro discourse, or rather manifold micro discourses. The focus was on digital participatory spaces, where publics – relational, fluctuating entities with performative capacity – emerge when individuals engage in ongoing debates and form opinions. The thesis shows that publics do not necessarily accept the meaning of foreign policy that is intended by state actors, but that they also contest it. The reason may be that the intended meaning clashes with, for example, publics' image of the state or with their worldview given overarching societal discourse(s) at a certain point in time. Thus, the production of feminist foreign policy discourse on micro level includes publics' counterpositioning toward the meaning(s) intended by state actors. These micro discourses are, nevertheless, constrained by macro societal discourses, such as discourses of gender norms, which publics are also part of and informed by. At the same time, micro discourses unlock ways of de- or re-constructing meaning of Sweden's feminist foreign policy, for example, by contesting the appropriateness of a state pursuing an activist foreign policy in the first place. Thus, the thesis shows that the co-production of foreign policy discourse can be collaborative, involving different active actors. However, it also shows that this not only entails collaboration in a cooperative way, but also confrontation[12]. The consequence is that emerging publics may adopt an opinion of and position toward foreign policy that *contrasts* the efforts of state actors. Thus, publics can act as a corrective[13] to states' opportunistic and self-serving intentions, for example, by calling out discrepancies between a state's "good" image that is cultivated also through foreign policy for self-serving purposes, and its "real" positive relevance to the transnational civil society. This is a necessary part of a vivid dynamic, in which foreign policy discourse can be constructively and deliberately developed. In conclusion, the unforeseeable and at times contrasting ways in which foreign policy discourse is co-produced are both unavoidable and, in many ways, constructive. Acknowledging these complexities allows to also view power relations between different actors, as well as the power flows in and between their communication practices, as multidirectional and dispersed.

Reflections on the findings

The discursive analysis of Sweden's feminist foreign policy as an information-rich source of empirical material provided in-depth, contextual, and concrete knowledge about the co-production of foreign policy discourse by multiple actors. The thesis showed how in and through practices of co-production, meaning of the feminist foreign policy shifted over time and space, even during seemingly steady continuation of one policy approach. It also showed that throughout its trajectory, the feminist foreign policy's activist core was toned down and contested rather than supported. Thus, it can be concluded that *because* meaning making is embedded in the dynamics of strategic communication, the degree of "disruptiveness" that states can aim for with their foreign policy is contingent on the publics' openness to and readiness for the change this implies. The lack thereof may have been a contributing factor for Sweden to abandon its political course and thereby also its highly progressive foreign policy. It may also explain why other countries that adopted similar approaches have not pursued these with the same level of commitment.

The thesis strives to provide findings that can be applied in a variety of contexts. However, by focusing on aspects specific to Sweden, it also perpetuates a Euro- and Western-centric perspective in communication, particularly in the field of public diplomacy research (which has been critiqued by, e.g., Kaneva, 2023). This perpetuation is further enhanced by mostly building on and referencing the work of scholars predominantly situated within a North American and European context. Nevertheless, it is this body of knowledge that is directly relevant to my thesis, which is why it was deemed the most appropriate to build on. Future studies could and should expand their scope to encompass a broader range of empirical contexts, extending beyond the confines of the "West". This would facilitate a deeper understanding of the travelling of foreign policy ideas within the international community, the underlying power dynamics intersecting with global societal issues, and the increasing disruption(s) of communication in the transnational public sphere.

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[12] In practice, the very possibility of confrontation is contingent upon certain contextual prerequisites, such as freedom of expression, or unconstrained, uncensored internet access that individuals have within their respective social context.

[13] Such interference of (anonymous) individual actors can also take darker forms, such as hostile disruption.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows the complex discursive constructions and negotiations involved in the strategic communication of foreign policy. First, by adopting a discourse approach, the thesis shows how strategic communication can be seen as a dynamic process, in which publics are actively involved. Building on the notion of publics' actorness, especially in the digital sphere (see, e.g., also Ayhan, 2019; Pamment, 2018, 2021), the thesis contributes by showing how these are not only active but *being activated* in relation to each other and in relation to foreign policy issues, especially when their understandings and perspectives diverge. Through a discursive lens, the thesis shows how state actors strive to make foreign policy with activist ambitions and objectives meaningful for publics. It also shows that the meaning of foreign policy activism as intended by a country's government is contingent upon the reception of publics. This reception can be imagined by public diplomacy practitioners, who then communicatively adjust the meaning of foreign policy accordingly. The reception is also reflected in debate of publics, particularly in their negotiation of diverging views. Building on the notion of outcomes being, in practice, somewhat unpredictable (e.g., Christensen & Christensen, 2022; Falkheimer & Heide, 2022a), this thesis contributes to understanding the unforeseeable dynamics of strategic communication, especially in the digital realm, by developing the concept of *unintended publics*. This concept challenges the notion of passive publics by showing how publics emerge in the strategic communication of foreign policy and simultaneously become active participants who are involved in the communication process. Thus, building on the notion that persuasion also permeates participatory communication (e.g., Comor & Bean, 2012; Pamment, 2020; Snow et al., 2024) while challenging the notion of a unidirectional power dynamic (see also, e.g., Cull, 2023), the thesis contributes to a view on strategic communication in which the control of the seemingly dominant actors is limited, and where power emerges in the negotiation between different actors.

Second, the thesis demonstrates how strategic communication is constrained by an attention economy logic. Following this logic, states promote themselves and their foreign policy. In other words, this logic imposes the principles of branding on international relations, such as appealing to as many people as possible and gaining their approval. However, as communication is today increasingly participatory, countries' promotional efforts and, thereby, also the meaning of their foreign policy can and will be contested by publics. The thesis showed how, therefore, meaning of foreign policy that pursues activist objectives and ambitions is adapted to publics' (imagined) preferences, treating them as consumers. Thus, building on the notion of public diplomacy not serving only the state and being more participatory than, for example, propaganda (Melissen, 2005a; Zaharna et al., 2014), the thesis contributes by showing how strategic communication of foreign policy is both structured by, and structures international relations in a consumer-orientation way. This contribution is consolidated in the development of the concept of *foreign policy branding*. This concept capture both the "agentic" side of strategic communication of foreign policy, meaning the ability to promote, for example, a certain understanding of foreign policy activism, and the "dominated" side, meaning the subordination to the pressures of globalization and digitalization.

Third, the thesis shows the intricate dynamics of the relationships between the different actors involved in strategic communication of foreign policy. Challenging the notion of "the state" communicating (e.g., Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2017; Roselle, 2019), the thesis contributes by showing how public diplomacy practitioners are constrained by the rules, regulations, and overarching interests of their organizational context, yet at times follow rationales that differ from those of policymakers. Thus, the thesis develops and nuances the understanding of strategic communication as furthering (only) the interest of the state and state organization(s) (e.g., Christensen & Christensen, 2022; Falkheimer & Heide, 2018, 2022b; Pamment, 2013). It shows that to make foreign policy matter for publics, its meanings are *constructed* in line with the attention economy logic, in which publics are understood as consumers who (may) have certain expectations of the initiating state. In consequence, especially in the context of an activist foreign policy agenda aimed at disrupting the status quo, frictions between international politics and strategic communication can emerge. At the same time, the realms of politics and communication are closely interwoven. Challenging the notion of control on the part of the sender (as done, in different ways, also by, e.g., Craig, 1999; Szostek, 2020; Zaharna, 2016, 2021), the thesis shows how meaning of foreign policy must be *adapted* to the local context of different countries as well as to international developments. Overall, by studying a *foreign* policy, the thesis contributes to a perspective on strategic communication as political, brings strategic communication to the center of international politics, and shows how mechanisms in the international political realm, such as geopolitical shifts, guide and impose on strategic communication. In conclusion, by taking a discursive, critical perspective that demonstrates how meaning of foreign policy changes in time and space, the thesis contributes to the view of strategic communication as a very complex process.

Finally, as captured in the quote at the very beginning of the thesis, it is the context that determines how a country can practically pursue and implement its foreign policy. State actors will try to influence this context by elaborating strategic communication efforts, but they cannot control perceptions of publics. What one actor stands for can and will be contested by another. Therefore, foreign policy is about communication and must be treated as a communication problem. Making foreign policy matter *can* mean making it activist. However, when taking a communication perspective, making foreign policy matter means, foremost, synchronizing it with global discourses.

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Making foreign policy matter

A positive public opinion is important for states to realize foreign policy objectives and ambitions. Therefore, they strive to communicate foreign policy strategically in public diplomacy efforts. However, states cannot control how publics view their foreign policy. This thesis, therefore, problematizes the notion of control. By asking how meaning of foreign policy is actively co-produced by the government, public diplomacy practitioners, and publics, the thesis explores how we can understand strategic communication of foreign policy as a dynamic process. A discourse approach is adopted to examine how various actors co-produce the meaning(s) of Sweden's feminist foreign policy in different communication settings. By illustrating how publics debate this policy in unforeseeable ways and how their (imagined) opinion guides public diplomacy practitioners in downplaying its disruptive potential, the thesis shows that foreign policy is ongoingly constructed and negotiated. Therefore, its meaning changes over time. The thesis argues that the dynamics of strategic communication contribute to structuring international relations in a consumer-oriented way. Making foreign policy matter, therefore, means communicatively synchronizing it with global discourses.

Isabelle Karlsson is a communication researcher interested in international relations, gender dynamics, and diplomacy. She is particularly interested in theories of discourse and power. She has a background in communication studies, sociology, and strategic communication.

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