

Aggestam, Karin, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Elsa Hedling. (2024). *The Politics of Feminist Foreign Policy and Digital Diplomacy*. Palgrave Macmillan, Global Foreign Policy Studies Series, 109 pp., ISBN 978-3-031-63697-4.

Anya Kuteleva

University of Wolverhampton

Received: April 15, 2025 | Accepted: April 15, 2025

Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Elsa Hedling's *The Politics of Feminist Foreign Policy and Digital Diplomacy* (2024) offers a comprehensive analysis of the intersection between feminist foreign policy and digital diplomacy. Using Sweden as their primary case study, the authors examine how the first self-declared feminist foreign policy in the world was articulated, communicated, and contested through digital means from 2014 until its discontinuation in 2022.

The authors use Chantal Mouffe's concept of "the political" (2013) as a foundational element of their analytical approach (pp. 19-20). For Mouffe, "the political" refers to the inherent antagonism that exists in all human social relations and political communities. The authors explain that this concept captures the "fluctuation between antagonistic and agonistic political dynamics" that occur across different political spheres (p. 18). The goal of democratic politics should be to transform antagonistic relations into agonistic ones. In this transformation, political actors shift from seeing others as enemies and sources of existential threats to

*Corresponding author: a.kuteleva@wlv.ac.uk

©2025 This is an Open Access paper distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. However, the work may not be altered or transformed.

recognizing them as legitimate adversaries, acknowledging the validity of their political claims while maintaining respectful disagreement. Crucially, the authors emphasize Mouffe's argument that agonistic struggles are actually essential to vibrant democracy—confrontational dialogues are not inherently problematic but rather central to democratic politics.

By analyzing feminist foreign policy through Mouffe's concept, they frame it as a highly politicized and contested area that inevitably produces antagonism and agonism in global politics, because it functions as a transformative vehicle for change that naturally generates discomfort among some world leaders (p. 18). Gender, they argue, constitutes a “major fault line” in contemporary global politics, with digital resistance to gender equality reflecting these antagonistic political dynamics (p. 20).

This theoretical framework enables the authors to move beyond understanding digital diplomacy as merely technical or communicative practice. Instead, they define it as “a relational practice that relies on dialogue” (p. 3) and emphasize that it “not only gives rise to different policy positionings in global politics but also triggers clashes between and within states” (p. 16). The authors further argue that digital diplomacy involves processes of politicization characterized by three key dynamics: articulation, resonance, and contestation.

The empirical analysis of Sweden's leadership, branding, and visuality demonstrates how digital diplomacy served as a critical arena for articulating, amplifying, and contesting its feminist foreign policy positions between 2014 and 2022. Methodologically, the book employs a mixed-methods case study design, drawing on document analysis, social media data, campaign materials, online observations, and interviews with Sweden's government representatives and diplomats.

Chapter 3 explores the role of political leadership, particularly that of former Foreign Minister Margot Wallström, in articulating and diffusing Sweden's feminist foreign policy. It shows how Wallström leveraged digital platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, to gain global visibility and promote Sweden's feminist agenda, inspiring other states like Canada and Germany to adopt similar approaches.

Chapter 4 analyzes how Sweden constructed its feminist foreign policy as a national brand, building on its longstanding tradition of state feminism. It examines how “hashtag feminism”—the strategic use of hashtags on social media to organize, amplify, and connect feminist messaging—helped Swedish politicians gain resonance among global audiences and mobilize support for Sweden's feminist values. The chapter also discusses instances of contestation, particularly during Sweden's controversial state visit to Iran in 2017 (pp. 60-65).

Chapter 5 investigates the visual dimension of Sweden's feminist foreign policy, exploring how visual language and digital visibility structures were politically mobilized. It analyzes

specific examples like the “Swedish Dads” photographic exhibition and the WikiGap initiative, showing how visual campaigns aimed to challenge gender inequalities and increase women’s visibility in digital spaces.

The authors argue that the relationship between feminist foreign policy and digital diplomacy is mutually constitutive—digital platforms did not merely amplify already-established feminist policies but actively shaped how feminist foreign policy was formulated, practiced, and perceived. According to them, this relationship explains why Sweden’s feminist foreign policy gained such international traction, inspiring other Western liberal democracies to adopt similar approaches despite significant resistance in an increasingly polarized global environment.

The concluding chapter reflects on the abandonment of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy by the new conservative government in 2022. Despite this setback, the authors contend that feminist foreign policy has become a global phenomenon. Reflecting on the limitations of digital diplomacy in sustaining policy changes, they acknowledge that “feminist foreign policy, no matter how effectively communicated across social media, cannot be confined to digital nation branding alone, but ultimately needs to be rooted in society” and requires broader structural transformation to create “a more inclusive, equitable and gender-responsive world order” (p. 95).

The book’s theoretical framework, while sophisticated in its application of Mouffe’s concepts of antagonism and agonism, could benefit from more substantive critical analysis of feminist foreign policy both as a discourse and as a practice (for some insightful examples of such analysis see Achilleos-Sarll 2018; Morton, Muchiri & Swiss 2020; Zhukova 2023, Cheung & Scheyer 2024). Though the authors briefly acknowledge existing criticisms, they fail to adequately engage with the principal argument that feminist foreign policy—including Sweden’s version—represents “an exercise in liberal interventionism” rooted in neoliberal market logic (p. 73, see also p. 5). Their analysis largely sidesteps how this approach may function as an extension of essentialist and colonial discourses. By primarily adopting liberal feminist frameworks that emphasize women’s inclusion without fundamentally challenging underlying power structures, the authors miss an opportunity to interrogate the racialized and sexualized dimensions of foreign policy that critical feminist scholars have identified as essential to meaningful transformation of global politics.

By conceptualizing digital diplomacy as a political practice characterized by articulation, resonance, and contestation, *The Politics of Feminist Foreign Policy and Digital Diplomacy* provides a robust framework for analyzing how states navigate digital spaces to promote normative agendas. It also lays a solid foundation for future research at the intersection of feminist politics, foreign policy, and digital technologies. Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond, and Hedling offer timely insights for diplomats, civil society organizations, and activists

working to advance gender equality in an increasingly hostile global environment, where digital spaces have become a battleground for gender norms and feminist values. Their concept of antagonistic politics explains both the intense resistance feminist foreign policy faces from authoritarian and right-wing populist leaders who dismiss gender equality as “gender ideology” or Western cultural imperialism and how advocates can strategically navigate this polarized landscape.

References

Achilleos-Sarll, C. (2018). Reconceptualising foreign policy as gendered, sexualised and racialised: Towards a postcolonial feminist foreign policy (analysis). *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 19(1), 34-49. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol19/iss1/4>

Cheung, J., & Scheyer, V. (2024). Feminist foreign policy and global (health) care work migration: Addressing the invisibility of colonial gaps in feminist policy making. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 30(3), 171-195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2024.2316403>

Morton, S. E., Muchiri, J., & Swiss, L. (2020). Which feminism (s)? For whom? Intersectionality in Canada's feminist international assistance policy. *International Journal*, 75(3), 329-348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702020953420>

Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso Books.

Zhukova, E. (2023). Postcolonial logic and silences in strategic narratives: Sweden's feminist foreign policy in conflict-affected states. *Global Society*, 37(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2021.2010664>

■ Anya Kuteleva

Anya Kuteleva is an interdisciplinary researcher bridging international relations, development studies, energy security, and feminist-informed analysis. In 2022, she joined the University of Wolverhampton (UK) as a senior lecturer in International Relations. Before that, she studied in Russia and China, earned her PhD in Political Science from the University of Alberta (Canada), and held a postdoctoral fellowship at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Russia).