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William Hague's activist foreign policy: the perils of merging practices

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Abstract *Assuming office as UK Foreign Secretary in 2010, William Hague asserted a desire to pursue an 'activist foreign policy'. Despite studies into Hague's period in office, the significance of this phrase and its implications for Hague's diplomacy have been overlooked. This article plugs that gap. It suggests 'activist foreign policy' merges two separate and potentially conflicting practices, namely, activism and diplomacy. Using insights from the practice turn, we examine two policies of Hague's tenure: his promotion of the Prevention of Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI), 2012–2014 and his diplomatic response to the Syria conflict, 2011–2014. Exploring these cases highlights the creative potential of merging practices, but also the extent to which they can conflict in ways that provoke resistance from other participants. The article concludes that policymakers looking to merge practices need to be aware of the underlying logic of behaviours and actions within each practice to transpose them successfully.*

When William Hague became UK Foreign Secretary in 2010, he set about providing an intellectual framework for British foreign policy based on his understanding of the 'networked world' the UK now inhabited (Hague 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2012c). According to Hague, 'influence increasingly lies with networks of states with fluid and dynamic patterns of allegiance, alliance and connections, including the informal, which ... require new forms of engagement' (Hague 2012c). Those informal channels were comprised of non-state actors and non-traditional means of communication, such as social media and the internet. As a result, Hague argued, 'we must become more active, the ever-accelerating development of human networks means that we have to use many more channels to do so, seeking to carry our arguments in courts of public opinion around the world as well as around international negotiating tables' (Hague 2010). Outlining the UK's soft power resources in 2013, Hague asserted, 'we need to bring all this activism, resolve and understanding to bear on the pressing problems we face today' (Hague 2013).

To achieve this, Hague declared his intent to pursue an 'activist foreign policy ... in support of our values' (FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) 2010; FCO 2012, 3; FCO 2013, 8, 17). The phrase 'activist foreign policy' was not new to British political discourse. It had occasionally been used to mean an active foreign policy by parliamentarians (Wallace 2000; Bellingham 2011); but Hague referred to his desire to have an 'active and activist foreign policy',

suggesting that the 'activist' element was separate, if linked, to the active part (Hague 2010; 2010a). From Hague's description, 'activist foreign policy' involved adopting the methods of activists, using non-traditional forms of communication, promoting policies associated with activism, and coopting activist groups to advance policy goals. As a typical example, he asserted in 2012: 'we have sent teams to Syria's borders to help document human rights abuses, and the activists who uncovered the El-Houleh massacre received training from the United Kingdom' (Hague 2012c). Activists had been brought into the foreign policy sphere in the past (Hill 2003, 270–71; Cook 2002); but Hague represented 'activist foreign policy' as a step change in frequency as well as their centrality to policymaking.

Despite various studies into Hague's policies as Foreign Secretary, none have considered the significance of this reference to 'activist foreign policy' (Daddow and Schnapper 2013; Davies and True 2017). Even practice-based approaches did not link the style and content of Hague's foreign policy with this declared intent to adopt the language, beliefs and types of behaviour of another field of practice (Ralph 2018).

In this article, we argue: 1) that references to 'activist foreign policy' are important and consequential markers of Hague's approach to foreign policy, and 2) that distinctions between these practices would impact on how this initiative was received. To do so, we begin by defining a practice. We then seek to establish that Hague's 'activist foreign policy' elides two distinct if interacting practices, namely activism and diplomacy, each of which has their own set of expectations about who can participate, how they should behave, and what goals are appropriate for them to pursue.

To explore Hague's effort to meld these practices, we examine two of his policy priorities, namely, the Prevention of Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI), and the UK's diplomacy regarding the Syrian Civil War from 2011–2014. These were selected on the basis that they were most associated in Hague's rhetoric with an activist approach to foreign policy. We find that transposing elements of activist practice into the diplomatic sphere encounters less resistance when it is applied to an issue associated with activism, but more resistance when it comes to one which is perceived as 'core' to traditional foreign policy. Thus, our findings shed new light on Hague's foreign policy and the way other actors accepted or challenged it. They also allow an appreciation of the difficulties in merging practices and the importance of practices in regularising behaviour over time.

The practice turn

International Relations theory has undergone a 'practice turn' in the last two decades, with many scholars exploring the social workings of world politics (Neumann 2002; Frost 2009; Adler and Pouliot 2011). Practices are defined as 'socially meaningful and organized patterns of activities. In lay parlance, practices are established ways of doing things' (Pouliot and Therien 2018, 164). They are made up of actions, which in turn consist of types of behaviour. Thus, the practice of diplomacy is made up of actions like issuing visas, making speeches, or signing treaties, which involve behaviours such as going to work, arranging a press conference, or flying to another country (Cooper and

Cornut 2019, 303). To qualify as a practice, these activities must be repeated rather than isolated instances.

Two elements sustain practices. The first is habit, which is tacit knowledge that is accrued through inhabiting a practice over time (Svendsen 2020, 8; Navari 2011, 613). The second is the conscious reflection and effort needed to maintain and adapt practices. Since the organization of social life is largely arbitrary and subject to challenge from other possible ways of living, practices must be reinforced and re-legitimised on a regular basis. As Ted Hopf has suggested, these elements are interdependent (Hopf 2018). We only have the time and space to reflect on and create practices because so much is habitual.

The conscious and unconscious aspects of practice create meaning and provide form to disparate social activities, fostering a sense of community in which 'participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities' (Hofius 2016, 945). This process is political and reflective of hierarchies of power (Schindler and Wille 2019, 1017). Pouliot (2016) notes that 'willingly or not, players struggle to establish the competence of their ways of doing things over that of others. By the simple fact of playing the game, they jockey for position in and through practice' (14). Competence is not merely about technical skill but is also subject to the interpretation of other participants in the practice. According to Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014), 'whether a practice is performed well, badly, correctly, or incorrectly depends on social negotiation' and thus 'competence ... emerges out of a never-ending struggle for authority' (895).

Indeed, Ralph and Gifkins (2017) suggest that perceiving competence only in terms of a mechanistic process of achieving one's immediate aims risks missing the bigger picture of whether that competence aligns with the interests of the actor, or the logic of the practice overall. As noted above, attempts to define competences in a practice are subject to challenge. This may emerge either from 'competing ways of doing things in the web of practices' or from competences derived from other practices impinging on this social terrain (Pouliot 2020, 751). To be accepted, it is often necessary to portray these 'alien' competences as natural and in alignment with existing expectations, what Pouliot calls 'competence transfers' (2020, 751).

These transfers are a delicate process. Diplomats are sensitive to the views of their peers and habit has a powerful disciplining effect on notions of what is appropriate in a given practice (Neumann 2007; Ambrosetti 2010). Moreover, the fact that efforts to change elements of a practice must be accepted by other participants means there can be inconsistencies and even contradictions in the rhetoric and behaviour of actors depending on the audience they are seeking to persuade. What 'competence' means in practice is thereby a fluid and contested terrain.

In sum, practices are patterns of social activity that over time become habitual, but which are subject to challenge and whose principles must be reaffirmed. In the following sections, we contend that Hague's references to an 'activist foreign policy' elide two separate practices: diplomacy, which is a key means by which foreign policy is pursued by governments; and activism, usually associated with campaigning by civil society actors. These practices differ not only in their participants, but also in their techniques and, often, the ends they seek. As such, we argue they present 'mutually distinctive meaningful

wholes' with 'each practice ... a distinctive unity, a "form of life"' (Frost and Lechner 2016, 307). These differences, we suggest, impacted how these policies were received in the two practice areas.

Diplomacy as a practice

In Hague's desire for an 'activist foreign policy', his use of the term 'foreign policy' alludes to the practice of diplomacy (Nicolson 1942, 15–16). Traditional diplomacy involved managing relations between different political communities. The recognition of difference was therefore a key element. James Der Derian (1987) described diplomacy as about 'mediating estrangement'. As such, the practice of diplomacy is antagonistic to conceptions of world order that dissolve differences and universalize human experience—since if there is no estrangement there would be no need of diplomacy (Sharp 2009, 81–82; 159). It is also an activity largely directed by governments, even if they sometimes employ private individuals or groups as intermediaries.

Styles of diplomacy and the virtues of a diplomat vary historically, but certain traits are associated with diplomatic practice (Roberts 2011, 617–625; Nicolson 1942). To be 'diplomatic' is a byword for exercising forbearance, moderating one's language and downplaying disagreement. Harold Nicolson set out the diplomatic virtues as 'truth, accuracy, calm, patience, good temper, modesty and loyalty' (Nicolson 1942, 126). He described a model diplomat as someone who is 'above all ... not swayed by emotion or prejudice' (Nicolson 1942, 76) and frequently emphasized the need for tact. Much traditional diplomacy necessarily takes place in secret, or at least, beyond the public gaze, and its impact can be diffuse (Broinowski 2016, 41). As Lord Salisbury put it,

There is nothing dramatic in the success of a diplomatist. His victories are made up of a series of microscopic advantages; of a judicious suggestion here, of an opportune civility there; of a wise concern at one moment, and a far-sighted persistence at another; of sleepless tact, immovable calmness and patience (as cited in Hurd (Hurd 2011, 162).

Diplomats have been critiqued by activists for being unduly conservative, favouring the status quo and resisting reform (Sharp 2009, 19–20).

A key challenge to the secretive nature of diplomacy came from President Woodrow Wilson and the advent of 'new diplomacy' in the early part of the twentieth century (Nicolson 1966). Secret agreements beyond the knowledge of the public were blamed for the outbreak of World War I and diplomacy as a practice was portrayed as 'a reactionary artifice dangerously irrelevant to the altered circumstances of world politics' (Keens-Soper 1975, 915). During the period of decolonisation, anti-colonial leaders often saw the cautious and incremental style of traditional diplomacy as a barrier to the swift resolution of their desire for political freedom and justice. They also used a different tone in their calls for action. Roland Burke notes a 1953 US State Department report argued,

When it came to human rights questions, representatives from outside the political West were not classically diplomatic. Unlike Western foreign-service officers, they 'apparently feel free to express their personal views and are moved by emotional reactions to the

orations of their colleagues'. Their approach was, in the phrase of the authors, inclined 'toward excessive emotionalism', most especially on 'the issue of racial discrimination' that 'was an important factor in the emotional reactions of many delegations'. (Burke 2020, 310)

Advocacy of human rights was associated with 'emotionalism' and attempts were made to exclude this from the practice of diplomacy, as in Henry Kissinger's comment that 'I hold the strong view that human rights are not appropriate in a foreign policy context.' (Keys 2010, 823; Burke 2020). Nevertheless, at the same time they were emerging as an important element of diplomatic practice (Vincent 1987). Indeed, the UK became increasingly associated with human rights promotion in the post-colonial era. As Smith et al. put it 'For generations the United Kingdom (UK) has identified as a forerunner in the international human rights project, leading on specific issues and joining in the collective advancement of others' (as cited in Burke 2020, 14). This has even been portrayed as a defining element of the UK's position on the UN Security Council (Ralph, Gifkins, and Jarvis 2020); however, that shift in practice is incomplete. There remains a powerful discourse positing an ethics of statecraft as the defining logic of the practice of international diplomacy (Jackson 2000; Porter 2019; Walt 2018). This position sees inconsistency as a necessary facet of the need to be flexible due to the existence of competing demands on the time and resources of policymakers (Brown 2003). Universal conceptions like human rights are subordinate to the particular requirements of order and security in a given moment. Leaders must temper compassion with practicality and make hard choices between the needs of their own citizens and those of others.

Ironically, it is Western countries that are now accused of emotionalism and failing to consider the practicalities of humanitarian crises. Key states like Russia and China assert the need to revert to traditional ways of managing conflict like more circumspect language, moderated action and an emphasis on national sovereignty—even when governments are the main perpetrators of human rights abuses (Brown, 2015). At times their representatives may not live up to this aspiration. China's 'wolf warriors' are routinely undiplomatic in their language, drawing a backlash from other governments and advice from a sympathetic commentator that 'as a nation proud of its glorious ancient civilization, China should remain humble, benevolent, and magnanimous' (Zhu 2020). The fact this behaviour elicits such a response is arguably evidence of these underlying expectations.

In short, the traditional view of diplomacy as a practice has it being carried out by governments and statespeople acting on the behalf of political communities. These individuals are expected to behave in a certain way (with tact, forbearance, subtlety, and consensus)—but this framing is not settled and has been challenged in the past by beliefs and actions derived from other practices, such as anti-colonialism and human rights activism.

Activism as a practice

The practice of activism contains a diverse range of actors employing a variety of methods to different ends (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 7–8). As with any

practice, there are differing interpretations of who carries out this social activity and what this social activity consists of and how it should be performed. Yet, it can be understood as a practice since there is a regularized pattern of behaviour labelled as activism which has a place in global civil society (Price 2003).

Activism is primarily associated with the mobilisation of collective action by non-state actors (Tarrow 2005). Participants must be ‘active’ since they are usually seeking to overturn or reform prevailing social attitudes and practices which may have official support or acquiescence. They are often described as ‘fighting’ or ‘campaigning’, using metaphors of conflict and struggle (Amnesty 2021).

In contrast to diplomacy’s historical emphasis on secrecy, activists rely on drawing public attention to an issue. This may be to raise funds to pursue campaigns, to garner the attention of the international community, or to elicit a reaction from the perpetrators via naming and shaming tactics (Koliev, Sommerer, and Tallberg 2021; Hafner-Burton 2008; Murdie and Peksen 2014). As Park et al. put it ‘without naming and shaming actors for their abuses, human rights improvement may not happen. Mobilization and socialization about a specific abuse depend first on the issue’s adoption and articulation by entrepreneurial activists’ (Park et al. 2019, 314). Where change is brought about, activists are normally keen to celebrate and promote their success to enthruse fellow activists while demonstrating their relevance and impact to funders.

In some ways, the activity of activism mirrors that of diplomacy. Information gathering and reporting are key aspects of activist work (Koliev, Sommerer, and Tallberg 2021), as is the need to listen and engage with others (Greenpeace 2020). Activism seeks to mobilize others by forming coalitions with like-minded actors, including governments. Activists are also in the business of negotiation and must develop powers of persuasion and influence. Yet, some of the virtues considered core to activists are distinct from diplomats. Passion, plain speaking, commitment to values, and consistency are valued highly. As Keck and Sikkink (1998, 2) put it, activists are ‘motivated by values rather than by material concerns or professional norms’. A widely used definition of activists is ‘people who care enough about some issue that they are prepared to incur significant costs and act to achieve their goals’ (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 14). Indeed, activists are encouraged not only to make a personal commitment to their cause but also to fashion their lives in a way that is consistent with it (Greenpeace 2020). For activists, being internally consistent is central to their moral integrity. Reversing their position attracts criticism—as when Amnesty revoked the label of ‘prisoner of conscience’ from the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2021, only to restore it later in the year (BBC. 2021).

By contrast, career diplomats represent the views of others (even if they run contrary to the diplomat’s individual beliefs). Professional norms are an important part of the practice of diplomacy, which has dense patterns of behaviour and modes of expression going back centuries (Nicolson 1966; Roberts 2011). A diplomat may change their line of argument in response to a change of policy or government at home, even asserting something in direct contravention of a position they had recently taken (Roberts 2011, 623–625).

Meanwhile, national leaders engaging in diplomacy are supposed to act according to a collective interest and are discouraged from making decisions based on personal conscience that would impose costs on others (Morgenthau and Thompson 2005, 14).

As noted above regarding human rights advocacy, there is a strong strain of emotionalism in activist practice. To mobilize support and prick the conscience of target governments, activists utilize pleas that are intended to elicit an emotional response. For Eschle and Maignashca (2006, 119), activists are framed as 'animated by passion' and as 'partisan, polemical advocates'—positions which are often contrasted with supposedly analytical and objective practices like academic research.

Yet passion-driven activism can be alienating, especially in the context of a practice like diplomacy which emphasises civility and tact. That passion also generates a tension within activist practice itself. Richard Ghere (2015, viii) notes 'we need to reconcile mixed messages that on one hand convey absolutist resolve to 'denounce injustice' ... but on the other call for pragmatic collaboration that brings diverse stakeholders to the table'. Compromise and incremental progress may bring more long-term positive outcomes, but they do not always sell well in the third sector, where charities and aid organizations are competing for attention and funding. Richard Price has noted a division between 'pragmatic' and 'purist' activism, with long running debates over their relative effectiveness (Price 2003, 585–587).

A prominent critique of activism is that it reflects and reinforces social hierarchies. The poor pay and insecurity of jobs in the sector mean that many professional activists come from privileged backgrounds (Sharman 2018). In addition, global civil society is dominated by activist groups from the global North (Sriskandarajah and Tiwana 2014). Despite professing universal values, international activism has been critiqued for reflecting the tone, style and agenda of Western, privileged elites rather than the breadth of global attitudes and experience. As one critic notes, 'The underlying principle of diplomacy is reciprocity, but in human rights diplomacy, even the most open bilateral dialogues are rarely pursued in a way of reciprocity, but often in a way of foreign scrutiny and criticism.' (Zhu 2011).

Activism is also partial in the matters it chooses to highlight. The geopolitical significance of a state can affect the extent to which it receives activist attention (Park et al 2019). Commentators have further noted that 'advocates often focus on issues involving bodily harm and abuses that fit neatly within the existing advocacy agenda' (Park et al. 2019, 314). Activists emphasise the personal and 'concrete, lived experiences' to bring home to their target audience the human impact of the issue in question (Eschle and Maignascha 2006, 129). Saul Alinsky (1989, 134) advised activists to 'Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it'. The result may be that complex global social problems, where agency is diffuse and multiple causal factors are in play, are individualized and simplified to arrive at a solution that activists can promote.

A further (perhaps unfair) critique is the sense that activism is more about talk than concrete actions or outcomes. Advocating for development, international law or human rights is associated with a 'declaratory tradition', whereby goals are expressed as 'declarations of intent regarding future conduct rather than acknowledgement of actual practices' (Jackson, as cited in

Navari 2011, 623). This interpretation is problematic as activism is meant to be about realising tangible social change (White 2016). Yet, the difficulty of achieving this in the international realm, beyond the micro-level of grassroots community work, can leave that impression.

Activism's commitment to (supposedly) universal, ideal principles risks faltering in the face of the hard realities of post-conflict or transitioning societies. In Burma, activists repeatedly called for Aung San Suu Kyi to condemn the military, whereas her position was to 'leave moral condemnation to the human rights absolutists', with her overriding aims being 'to get her party into power and to ensure that the democratic transition itself was not swept away in a wave of interethnic warfare' (Ignatieff 2017, 131). Similarly, Michael Ignatieff (2017, 95) notes of Bosnia 'outsiders want to preach reconciliation, forgiveness, accommodation, virtues of which they are mightily tired'. In many places, people want to live separately, and it can take a long time for the wounds of inter-ethnic strife to heal.

Yet, the experience of Burma perhaps shows the limits of compromise. Suu Kyi's appeasement of the military over its persecution of the Rohingya did not stop them from imprisoning her and overturning the election in 2021. Alex Bellamy (2016, 112) has argued that 'the evidence of declining mass violence and growing international activism' is 'compelling' and 'the two phenomena are connected'. Bellamy sees an 'emerging pattern of practice towards heightened activism' translating into stronger human rights protection in UN Security Council resolutions (Bellamy 2016, 118).

To summarise, while the practices of diplomacy and activism can take many forms, they do contain regularized patterns of beliefs, behaviours and actions which are distinct. At least since the advent of 'New Diplomacy', diplomatic practice has been subject to contestation, with activist voices calling for diplomacy to reflect domestic values and modes of expression. Yet, these have been resisted, at first by European governments wedded to traditional ways of practising diplomacy, and then by non-Western states who perceive much of this discourse as underpinned by hierarchical assumptions about the cultural superiority of Western values. We can therefore identify tensions between these two practices, as they impinge on each other's political terrain. The rest of this article will explore William Hague's foreign policy in light of his implied intent to merge these practices.

Hague's 'activist foreign policy'

Further to the above discussion, the announcement of an 'activist foreign policy' is arguably more radical and significant than current commentary suggests. Hague's early speeches, emphasising frequent engagement with a wider range of actors, including activists, imply a broader scope for diplomatic activity (Hague 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2011; 2012c). Seeing the UK as operating in a 'networked world' also suggested new techniques would be brought into play. But for foreign policy to itself become activist indicates something more transformative.

In a variety of speeches, Hague constructed a picture of British foreign policy as incorporating activist actors, techniques and policy priorities in the conduct of diplomacy (Hague 2011; Hague 2013). Commentators have noted that

this was borne out by Hague's prioritisation of the issue of sexual violence as a key policy focus (Megeer 2016; Kirby 2015; Gray 2019). Hague had focused on the problem of sexual violence in opposition and it was a signature aspect of his foreign policy whilst in office (Davies and True 2017, 707). On 29 May 2012, Hague initiated the PSVI. Announcing this policy, he noted that its importance 'was brought home to me most starkly when I met women in refugee camps in Darfur who had been viciously assaulted.' He was 'shocked' by the lack of convictions for sexual violence and stated that 'As Foreign Secretary, I am appalled by the scale of sexual violence against women, men and children in situations of conflict and repression' (Hague 2012b).

As such, Hague is clearly responding to activist campaigning and coopting an activist agenda into his foreign policy. He pays tribute to the 'dedicated work by the UN and its agencies and by NGOs over the last decade: providing care and sexual health support on the ground, raising global awareness, pursuing ground-breaking legal cases and working with member states to frame vital UN Security Council Resolutions on women, peace and security, including Resolutions 1325 and 1820' (Hague 2012b). The actors he sees as important in implementing this initiative go beyond traditional diplomacy to include 'doctors, lawyers, police, psychologists, forensic specialists and experts in the care and protection of victims and witnesses' (Hague 2012b). Celebrity diplomacy also featured heavily in Hague's policy, with Angelina Jolie confronting the event and being praised as a longstanding advocate in this area.

The techniques used to publicize this initiative would draw heavily on activist methods. Hague's emotional language—'viciously', 'shocked', 'appalled'—resonates closely with the activist emphasis on eliciting emotional responses and provoking reactions. The personal nature of Hague's engagement with the issue is underlined by his statement that 'It is my firm conviction that tackling sexual violence is central to conflict prevention and peace-building' (Hague 2012b). Again, this framing echoes an activist emphasis on the personal: 'I am appalled', 'It is my conviction' to suggest moral commitment. Hague concludes his speech by explicitly linking this initiative to activist campaigns, 'none of the strides we have made in human rights would ever have been possible without high ambition and resolute determination—from the abolition of the slave trade to the global arms trade treaty' (Hague 2012a).

High-profile events flowed from this announcement. Hague and Jolie would visit Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo in March 2013 to meet with activists and UN personnel working with victims of sexual violence. Hague's commentary on the visit is very reminiscent of activist, campaigning literature, with his call for 'real, meaningful action by the Governments of the world to say that the use of rape as a weapon of war is unacceptable, to bring perpetrators to justice and to lift the stigma from survivors.' (FCO 2013) Again, this is framed in individual terms, as 'my personal priority for the meeting of G8 Foreign Ministers in London in April and at the UN later this year' (FCO 2013).

Hague advanced the importance of considering sexual violence as a security issue in traditional security fora, such as the UN Security Council (in a debate on the Women, Peace and Security agenda in June 2013), coopted fellow Foreign Ministers as sexual violence champions (Davies and True 2017, 709) and in June 2014, the UK hosted the first global summit on sexual

violence in London. In April 2013, Hague announced the G8 Declaration on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, and in September 2013, he worked with other G7 members to cosponsor the launch of the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, which was endorsed by 156 UN Member States by January 2020 (Loft, Robinson, and Gill 2021). Between 2012 and 2014 UK PSVI teams were deployed 49 times (Ibid). Hague also tried to make UNSC resolutions 1325, 2016 and 2122 more than declaratory, writing to the UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi in 2013 requesting a direct role for women's groups in the Geneva II process (Hague 2013b). Yet, even when they did later achieve representation, their role was dismissed as 'mere 'add-ons' to an otherwise malfunctioning system' (Paffenholz 2021, 376).

Evaluations of the PSVI initiative have been mixed. In particular, it is interesting how closely reactions seem to mirror the praise and criticism which activist campaigns attract. Hague is given credit for drawing attention to this issue, for providing innovative interpretations of how sexual violence should be understood, and for mobilising support for efforts to counter this phenomenon (ICD (International Development Committee) 2020, 45–46). His good faith and personal commitment were also perceived to be genuine and contributing to the policy's moral authority (Davies and True 2017). In short, Hague embodied the virtues of an activist and achieved some of the prime aims of activism—raising the profile of social problems and seeking to galvanize support for reform. In 2015, Germany, then holding the Presidency of the G7, produced a report on the progress of the 2013 declaration. It was suffused with activist language, talking about 'A call to action', 'Raising Awareness', 'Support for Survivors', and 'Building the Evidence Base' (G7 2015). Clearly, this initiative had established some momentum and was being interpreted through an activist lens.

Yet it has also been critiqued for displaying some of the vices of activism, such as focusing on a single issue at the expense of wider structural problems (Guerrina 2014), engaging in high flown rhetoric rather than with the difficulties of implementation and relying on individual passion—which dissipated when Hague left office (ICAI (Independent Commission for Aid Impact) 2020). In a sympathetic critique, Paul Kirby noted that despite the UK's efforts, other governments generated 'more performative statements of concern than active efforts to unite against gendered violence' (Kirby 2015, 472). Moreover, the hardening of the UN's stance on amnesty for those accused of sexual crimes as part of conflict resolution efforts, encapsulated in UN Security Council Resolution 2106, risked putting principle over practicality in a way that activists have often been accused. As Kirby asks, 'Where multiple protagonists have records of condoning or commissioning sexual violence, how is conflict to end?' (Kirby 2015, 465–466).

In sum, Hague's initiation of the PSVI aligns with a broader strategic attempt to merge the practice of activism with the diplomacy underpinning British foreign policy. Not only is an activist theme (preventing sexual violence) promoted as a core policy priority, but activist actors are coopted as participants, from individuals like Angelina Jolie to NGOs and civil society actors. As part of this move, activist techniques and language are deployed to promote this new agenda. Yet the extent to which this led to genuine transformation of diplomacy is questionable. While activist practices drew a lot of light

to the issue, and resulted in a flurry of declarations, debates, resolutions and protocols, the tendency was to focus on discrete projects (G7 2015). As one critic noted, changes to UN approaches to peacebuilding 'have proven to be merely superficial, revealing a lack of meaningful engagement with the new frameworks envisioned from 2011 onwards' (Paffenholz 2021, 373). In that sense, the merger is incomplete.

UK diplomacy on Syria, 2011–2014

Hague's term of office as Foreign Secretary coincided with a timely moment for activist foreign policy. In January 2011, a series of protests across the Middle East and North Africa region brought down governments and seemed to augur real change. When the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi threatened to 'cleanse Libya house by house' to eradicate protests (BBC 2011a), the UK, along with France and the US, urged the international community to intervene and mobilize the responsibility to protect doctrine (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). The UN Security Council authorized action in the Libya case under UNSC1971 and military intervention followed which eventually helped to topple Gaddafi. Although this could be seen as a success for activist-inspired foreign policy, the intervention was subsequently criticized for going beyond the UNSC mandate and threatened to harm both the International Criminal Court and Responsibility to Protect regimes (Ralph and Gallagher 2015). This was apparent particularly when it came to efforts to resolve the Syria crisis, which also erupted in 2011. When Syrian protests were met by a brutal government crackdown in March 2011, a conflict broke out that would result in one of the bloodiest civil wars of the century so far.

The UK's response to the Syrian conflict was initially contrasted with that of Libya. In April 2011, William Hague said of President Assad, 'you can imagine him as a reformer'; he noted that Assad had pledged to initiate reforms in two speeches; and he showed empathy with the domestic political constraints he might be working under, 'one of the difficulties in Syria is that President Assad's power depends on a wider group of people in his own family and, of course, other members of government, and I am not sure how free he is to pursue a reform agenda, even if he wanted to do so' (Mulholland, Borger, and Black 2011). This approach was defended via an attempt to locate it within traditional diplomatic practice, in which 'diplomacy was about talking to people you disagree with' and that he 'would keep the lines of communication with the Syrian regime open' (Ibid).

Two months later, in response to further crackdowns, Hague's rhetoric began to shift. Calls were still being made for reform, but an alternative of Assad leaving office was also raised. As Hague put it, 'he is losing legitimacy, and needs to reform or step aside. I think that is how the world will judge him now' (BBC 2011b). By August, David Cameron, then Prime Minister of the UK, along with the leaders of France and Germany, issued a joint statement calling for Assad to 'face the reality of the complete rejection of his regime by the Syrian people and to step aside in the best interests of Syria and the unity of its people' (UK Government 2011). In October 2011, after an unsuccessful effort to persuade the UNSC to condemn the violence and threaten sanctions, Hague again appealed for Assad to go. In a statement to the House of

Commons Hague argued, ‘Too much blood has been spilled for that regime to recover its credibility. President Assad should step aside now and allow others to take forward reform’ (Hague 2011). Russia and China’s veto of the UNSC resolution, after member states expressed support, was framed in binary terms, as supporting Assad, ‘It is a mistake on their part to side with a brutal regime, rather than with the people of Syria’ (Hague 2011).

This framing was rejected at the time by Russia and China in UNSC (2011) debates. As the Russian representative put it:

At the heart of the Russian and Chinese draft was the logic of respect for the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as well as the principle of non-intervention, including military, in its affairs; the principle of the unity of the Syrian people; refraining from confrontation; and inviting all to an even-handed and comprehensive dialogue aimed at achieving civil peace and national agreement by reforming the socio-economic and political life of the country. Today’s rejected draft was based on a very different philosophy—the philosophy of confrontation. We cannot agree with this unilateral, accusatory bent against Damascus. (UNSC 2011)

Similarly, the Chinese representative argued ‘the draft resolution focuses solely on exerting pressure on Syria, even threatening to impose sanctions. It does not help to facilitate the easing of the situation in Syria. China therefore voted against it.’ (UNSC 2011).

Each of these statements takes issue with the style as well as content of the UK’s preferred proposal for a UNSC resolution, seeing it as confrontational, ‘accusatory’ and ‘threatening’. In contrast, they favour ‘even-handed and comprehensive dialogue’ and aim to ‘facilitate the easing of the situation’. As such, in the language of practice theory, they advance alternative competences to those deployed by Hague. The diction used—‘respect’, ‘unity’, ‘refraining’, ‘civil’—is redolent of those associated above with traditional diplomacy. Reading between the lines, we can see the UK and their allies being implicitly accused of behaviour and actions that are ‘undiplomatic’, that is, not belonging within the practice of diplomacy. The kind of emotional language associated with activism is being resisted and ‘traditional’ approaches to diplomacy, such as tact and reasoned dialogue, re-affirmed in their place.

Nevertheless, the UK persisted with this policy for the rest of Hague’s time in office and beyond. In February 2012, a further veto by Russia and China of a proposed UNSC resolution on Syria led to increasingly bitter rhetoric from both sides. William Hague asserted that ‘future blood spilt would be “on their hands”’ and this led Russia and China to entrench their position (Spencer 2012). Again, Russian representatives took issue with the tone of interactions. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, argued ‘Some comments from the West on the UN Security Council vote, I would say, are indecent and bordering on hysteria ... It reminds me of the proverb, “He who gets angry is rarely right”’ (Spillius 2012). China was said to be ‘keen not to see a regional strategic shift brought about by “pro-democracy” activism’—underlining the sense that the merging of activist practices into the diplomatic realm, with its emotional language and transformative agenda, was being resisted by these two states (Spencer 2012).

Despite this, Hague repeated his call for Assad to leave power, stating on television ‘This is a doomed regime as well as a murdering regime. There is no way it can get its credibility back either internationally or with its own

people' (Syal 2012). In fairness, this belief that Assad would have to go was one that many other statespeople shared (Bellamy 2022). Indeed, it was a view expressed by UN envoys seeking a resolution to the crisis (Annan 2012; Reuters 2013). Similarly, the use of emotional rhetoric was not confined to Hague. Samantha Power, US Ambassador to the UN, was herself engaged in an effort to merge activist techniques and themes with those of diplomacy, with her first speech as Ambassador entitled 'when activists are diplomats, and diplomats are activists' (Goldberg 2013). Power would later issue a blistering attack on her Syrian, Russian and Iranian counterparts in the Security Council in December 2016, following another impasse, asking, 'Are you truly incapable of shame? ... Is there no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under your skin?' (Wolfe 2016).

Such outbursts are a natural reaction to repeated diplomatic failures on the Syria issue as the death toll climbed (Bellamy 2022). Many of these endeavours were conducted through traditional diplomatic channels and, as we have seen, in the early months of the conflict efforts were made to offer Assad a means to negotiate a settlement and remain in place with the support of the international community. However, as the facts on the ground began to shift in Assad's favour (with the support of Russian and Iranian military intervention), the policy of personalising the issue as one of his leadership and insisting on his removal as a precondition of peace clearly obstructed progress (Van Dam 2017, 176–177).

Drawing on our earlier discussion of the contested nature of practices, we can see tensions here over what constitutes appropriate diplomatic practice. On the one hand, we have Hague and others personalizing the issue around Assad, making emotional appeals to support action, and highlighting the suffering of civilians (in line with the logic of activism). On the other hand, we have Russian and Chinese representatives appealing to traditional diplomatic modes of address (tact, moderation, patience) and priorities (order, security, stability, non-intervention). Using their veto in the UN Security Council, Russia and China were able to resist attempts to transfer competences from the practice of activism into the practice of diplomacy. They justified this based on alternative, 'traditional' understandings of diplomatic practice, which, however accurate or inaccurate, were clearly felt to carry rhetorical weight.

This outcome demonstrates the inherent difficulties surrounding the concept of 'activist foreign policy'. Techniques which are effective in the activist realm, such as personalising problems to elicit public interest and draw a human connection (Freedman 2013, 383), can narrow the options for a negotiated settlement and remove an opponent's incentive to make concessions, if transferred to the practice of diplomacy. Furthermore, the activist emphasis on personal commitment and consistency increases the costs for statespeople wishing to reverse their earlier position for the sake of expediency. Their personal association with a policy such as regime change, and the way it is conveyed as having a moral basis, makes it much harder to subsequently accept that facts have changed and compromises may be necessary to secure peace (Van Dam 2017, 120–121).

Conclusion

This article has drawn attention to a neglected aspect of British foreign policy during Hague's tenure as Foreign Secretary—his declared intent to pursue an 'activist foreign policy'. We argued that this phrase elided two distinct practices, activism and diplomacy, which, when put into operation, impacted the reception of Hague's foreign policy initiatives. In the case of PSVI, 'activist foreign policy' encountered less resistance as it was a discreet issue, with a very specific application, naturally lending itself to activism. Rather than being transformative, PSVI added an extra component to the foreign policy agenda by transplanting this matter wholesale from one practice to another. Consequently, it achieved significant support but was felt to have had a limited impact on diplomatic practice.

By contrast, applying activist language and methods in response to the Syria crisis, with its underlying contestations over sovereignty, non-intervention, coercion, and international law, threatened to be far more controversial. Russian and Chinese policymakers were (rightly or wrongly) able to portray this approach as transposing 'alien' competences and priorities into the traditional sphere of diplomacy and thereby delegitimize this move.

Thus, the article's contribution to existing knowledge is twofold. Firstly, by applying practice theory to the study of British foreign policy, we sought to provide a deeper understanding of Hague's approach to diplomacy and its reception by other practitioners. Secondly, we see 'activist foreign policy' as a useful case study in the challenges of merging practices to promote humanitarian aims. Hague acknowledged the risks of an activist approach to foreign policy in 2013. Noting emerging powers' resistance to the responsibility to protect, he argued: 'we will not change this by lecturing them ... We will change it by inspiring them and their citizens to join us' (Hague 2013). It is clear from the reactions of those powers mentioned above that this is not how they felt this 'competence transfer' was being brought about. Given that Russian and Chinese governments routinely define activists as threats to their own domestic order, they were unlikely to respond favourably to an 'activist foreign policy'. Framing the policy in the language, tone and logic of traditional diplomacy might have been more effective at building support (McCourt 2014).

Of course, this depends on why 'activist foreign policy' is being pursued in the first place. Picking up on the distinction noted earlier by Ralph and Gifkins (2017), if it is seen as a more effective method of pursuing British interests via diplomacy, we can see the results are mixed. However, if the goal is to transform the logic of the practice of diplomacy itself, it may make sense to continue this approach, even if it encounters resistance and alienates other participants. In that light, 'activist foreign policy' becomes another moment in the historical struggle to incorporate human rights as a core concern of diplomatic practice.

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