

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nation branding and feminist diplomacy after crisis: France's response to SEA allegations in Central African Republic

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Abstract

This article makes the case that gender and racial analyses of the constitutive interplay between nation branding and diplomacy advance understandings of how liberal states use feminist agendas in response to political crises. Adopting a feminist post-colonial approach and drawing on a discourse analysis of French diplomatic speeches made in the UN Security Council between July 2011 and January 2020, the article examines how male and female diplomats address France's accountability failures when French peacekeepers sexually abused children in Central African Republic in 2014–15, widely known as the Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, or SEA crisis. Operating as embodied brand ambassadors, diplomats use affective and performative strategies to progress through the political crisis life cycle quickly and re-establish France's ontological security. It is contended that while feminist foreign policy and feminist diplomacy serve as short-term solutions to reputational damage, France's longer-term nation-branding project, which follows a masculine, white-supremacist neoliberal logic, stabilises the grand narrative of the middle power and its projected image as a legitimate strategic leader in global governance. Yet in attempting to control the narrative on the SEA crisis, French diplomats downplay the global crisis of accountability surrounding sexual exploitation and abuse and silence the personal crises of SEA survivors.

Keywords: brand ambassadors; diplomacy; nation branding; peacekeeping; sexual exploitation and abuse

Introduction

In today's complex geopolitical ecology, liberal states engage in ontological (in)security management by presenting themselves as 'good' global governance actors domestically and internationally. How states promote gender equality and empowerment of women are core areas of scholarly focus. Yet little attention has been paid to understanding the role of public crises and increased accountability demands on states as conditions under which feminist foreign and security policy agendas are adopted to secure state legitimacy and ontological security. Feminists and gender scholars have advanced understandings of how states manage their reputation and ontological (in)security through practices underscored by heteronormative gender and racial logics and orderings.¹ Predominantly focusing on the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda

¹V. Spike Peterson, *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)visions of International Relations Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992); Iris Marion Young, 'The logic of masculinist protection: Reflections on the current security state', *Signs*, 29:1 (2003), pp. 1–25; Swati Parashar, J. Ann Tickner, and Jacqui True, *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

by Global North states, a key concern centres on whether feminist policies change liberal states or whether feminist goals and agendas are co-opted.² In diplomacy studies, scholars are applying feminist and post-colonial approaches to examine the gendered performative and affective practices of foreign and security policy production, and to examine how and under what conditions these policies are used in gendered diplomatic practice.³ Until now, nation branding and nation-brand ambassadors have been absent from these debates, despite the prolific use of these image-management practices by states globally. This article contends that gender and race analyses of the constitutive interplay between nation branding and diplomatic practice facilitate more informed understandings of how liberal states use feminist agendas to build state legitimacy and establish ontological security after political crises.

Nation branding is a strategic approach to implementing communications, reputation management, and relationship-building practices employed by a state to present itself to other states and publics in the international system.⁴ Borrowing techniques from corporate brand marketing, nation branding facilitates state responses to market forces and global public opinion by adopting a 'brand-orientated', competitive identity promoted through discourse and the embodied practices of brand ambassadors.⁵ Through crafting a positive self-image, states accrue economic, cultural, and political capital in the global political economy. In competitive global markets, this means making the nation and its people attractive to encourage inward investment. Yet nation branding is also used to build legitimacy, promote a positive image as a 'good' global actor, respond to accountability demands, and manage ontological security, defined as the state's ability to 'secure and stabilize a sense of subjectivity and identity' in a changing world.⁶

Mainstream nation-branding scholars discuss nation branding positively as a practice and form of soft power that builds political legitimacy among domestic and external publics, enabling states to power maximise within the international system.⁷ Yet they neglect how nation branding depends on gendered and racialised processes of othering and the marginalisation of histories and peoples that threaten or weaken the nation brand. Nascent feminist and gender studies infer that nation branding is informed by patriarchal and colonial logics⁸ but neglect how nation branding supports the modern liberal state's efforts to manage ontological (in)security over extended periods of time, across governments, and when political crises occur. WPS-orientated studies focus on how feminist foreign policies are incorporated into a state's overarching nation-branding strategy as niche components⁹ but have not explored the longer-term gendered and racialised project of nation branding nor examined the embodied performances and speech acts of nation-brand ambassadors, such as diplomats.

²Edna Keeble and Heather Smith, 'Institutions, ideas, women and gender: New directions in Canadian foreign policy', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 35:4 (2001), pp. 130–41; Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Annica Kronsell, 'Theorising feminist foreign policy', *International Relations*, 33:1 (2019), pp. 23–39; Karin Aggestam and Jacqui True, 'Gendering foreign policy: A comparative framework for analysis', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16:2 (2020), pp. 143–62.

³Keeble and Smith, 'Institutions, ideas'; David Durie-Smith, 'Manly states and feminist foreign policy, revisiting the liberal state as an agent of change', in Parashar, Tickner, and True, *Revisiting Gendered States*, pp. 51–68; Catriona Standfield, 'Gendering the practice turn in diplomacy', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:1_suppl (2020), pp. 140–65.

⁴Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Keith Dinnie, *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁵Anholt, *Competitive Identity*.

⁶Christopher S. Browning, 'Nation branding, national self-esteem, and the constitution of subjectivity in late modernity', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 11:2 (2015), pp. 195–214.

⁷Anholt, *Competitive Identity*.

⁸Kristín Loftsdóttir, 'The exotic north: Gender, nation branding and post-colonialism in Iceland', *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 23:4 (2015), pp. 246–60; Þorgerður J. Einarsdóttir, 'All that glitters is not gold: Shrinking and bending gender equality in rankings and nation branding', *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 28:2 (2020), pp. 140–52.

⁹Katarzyna Jezierska and Ann Towns, 'Taming feminism? The place of gender equality in the "Progressive Sweden" brand', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 14:1 (2018), pp. 55–63; Georgina Holmes and Ilaria Buscaglia, 'Rebranding Rwanda's peacekeeping identity during post-conflict transition', in Hannah Grayson and Nicki Hitchcott (eds), *Rwanda since 1994: Stories of Change* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 104–24.

To address how these co-constitutive legitimising and recognition practices interact over time, we examine how the liberal state engages in the anxious labour of nation branding and feminist diplomacy during and after political crisis through a case study involving France. We conceptualise political crisis as a single event or set of events resulting in reputational damage for the state and a potential loss of legitimacy, status, and soft power in the international system. We undertake a feminist post-colonial analysis of French diplomatic responses in UN Security Council meetings to the allegations that French Sangaris soldiers deployed as UN peacekeepers committed SEA in Central African Republic (CAR) in 2014 and 2015, commonly known as the ‘SEA crisis’. Among international publics and UN member states, the SEA crisis is widely considered to have threatened the legitimacy and reputation of both the UN and France.¹⁰ We first theorise nation branding as a reputational management and legitimising practice underscored by gender and race power logics and discuss how the embodied diplomat performs as a nation-brand ambassador of the patriarchal liberal state. Through critical discourse analysis of speeches given by French diplomats in UN Security Council meetings between 2011 and 2019 and diplomatic commentary in French and international media, we examine France’s engagement in nation branding and gendered diplomacy over three phases of the SEA crisis life cycle. We show how diplomats are liminal actors, performing a dual role as the embodied nation-brand ambassadors and UN representatives. When performing as nation-brand ambassadors, French diplomats mobilise France’s nation brand to progress the SEA crisis through the crisis life cycle quickly to limit reputational damage. We contend that while promoting feminist foreign and security policies and feminist diplomacy serve as short-term solutions to limit reputational damage, the longer-term, slower project of France’s nation branding, which follows a masculine, white-supremacist neoliberal logic, stabilises the grand narrative of the middle power and its projected image as a legitimate strategic leader in global security governance. We choose France as our case study because it is a founding member of the UN, one of the Permanent Five (P5) within the UN Security Council, an established penholder on conflict resolution mandates, and the strategic lead of the Department of Peace Operations (DPO).

Methodology

Crisis as a concept varies depending on who experiences, defines, and narrates it.¹¹ In this article, we regard the SEA crisis as existing on multiple levels, with the most profound crisis being experienced by the women and children in CAR who were violently attacked. This crisis became a political crisis for France when the crimes were exposed. The political crisis constitutes reputational threats placed on France’s nation brand and its role in global security governance resulting from the alleged sexual misconduct of its peacekeepers, placing increased accountability demands on France and the UN. Reputational threats constitute a means of the public sanctioning of governance actors who violate integrity expectations and fail to comply with expected norms and standards.¹² To understand France’s response to its political crisis and the liberal state’s attempts to control the global narrative on the SEA crisis, we apply communications theorist Timothy Coombs’s (2007) three-stage model of the political crisis life cycle. Phase one, the ‘pre-crisis’ phase, is characterised as ‘an incubation period where a series of warning signals come out before the crisis event’. The second phase, the ‘crisis event’, constitutes a ‘sequence of events in an unstable or crucial time in which a decisive change occurs’. The third phase, the ‘post-crisis’ is the ‘period in which the safety level is restored’ and ‘learning and/or continuity mechanisms are initiated’.¹³ We identify three phases of France’s SEA crisis: pre-crisis (July 2011–April 2015); the crisis event (May 2015–August 2016) and

¹⁰Jasmine-Kim. Westendorf, *Violating Peace: Sex, Aid, and Peacekeeping* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

¹¹Annika Bergman-Rosamond, Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, Mo Hamza, Jeff Hearn, Vasna Ramasar and Helle Rydstrom., ‘The case for interdisciplinary crisis studies’, *Global Discourse*, 12:3–4 (2022), pp. 465–86.

¹²Jens Steffek, ‘Public accountability and the public sphere of international governance’, *Ethics & International Affairs*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 45–67.

¹³Timothy W. Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing and Responding*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2007).

post-crisis (September 2016–November 2019), which we identify as France’s period of reputational recovery.

Adopting a feminist post-colonial theoretical approach, we examine France’s engagement in nation branding and feminist diplomacy. Feminist post-colonial theory offers a conceptual framework for critically analysing the coloniality of power, international structural violence, and oppression in historical context¹⁴ and exposes how socially constructed gender categories become fixed and positioned within sexual and racial hierarchies.¹⁵ We conceptualise the UN Security Council as a public sphere in which diplomats as nation-brand ambassadors communicate, embody, and perform the nation brand.

The text corpus was retrieved from the Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations in New York’s website and the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library.¹⁶ Using a keyword search for themes ‘sexual exploitation and abuse’, ‘sexual violence’, and ‘peacekeeping’, we downloaded 111 speeches made by 24 French officials, including two presidents, François Hollande and Emmanuel Macron during UN Security Council meetings between 12 July 2011 and 15 November 2019. A coding frame based on the keywords and themes was developed, and speeches were manually coded, divided into three time periods, and analysed using discourse analysis. In the pre-crisis phase (July 2011–April 2015), 26 speeches were made by French diplomats within the UN Security Council, 22 in the crisis (May 2015–August 2016), and 63 in the post-crisis recovery phase (September 2016–November 2019). We first identified how France constructed its political image and positioned itself as a leader in global security governance during the pre-crisis stage. We then identified the middle power’s key niche areas of feminist foreign and security policy expertise related to civilian protection and examined how these niche areas strengthened France’s nation brand. Finally, we traced how France’s nation brand was mobilised in the second and third phases of the crisis life cycle as diplomats aimed to limit reputational damage.

State survival, nation branding, and gendered diplomacy

Feminist and gender scholars show how the liberal state’s everyday ontological (in)security management practices are underscored by heteronormative gender and racial orderings and patriarchal logics that rely on violent practices of domination, subordination, and silencing of peoples inside and outside of state borders.¹⁷ Modern patriarchal statecraft discursively constructs a normative, heterosexual, manly conception of sovereignty connecting recognition with masculine state authority and control over its population (the society and nation) and territory.¹⁸ The post-9/11 political landscape, globalisation, marketisation, increased cooperation through international organisations, and the mobilisation of transnational networks are perceived to erode state sovereignty – and to reduce a state’s ability to be independent, autonomous, and authoritative.¹⁹ External threats exacerbate anxiety for modern liberal states fearing loss of geopolitical power, the ‘unravelling of patriarchy and the emasculation of the state.’²⁰ Determining their own foreign and

¹⁴Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Anibal Quijano, ‘Coloniality and modernity/rationality’, *Cultural Studies*, 21:2–3 (2007), pp. 168–78.

¹⁵Cynthia Weber, *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality and the Will to Knowledge*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁶<https://onu.delegfrance.org/-France-at-the-United-Nations>; www.research.un.org.

¹⁷Weber, *Queer International Relations*; Columba Achilleos-Sarll, ‘Reconceptualising foreign policy as gendered, sexualised and racialised: Towards a postcolonial feminist foreign policy (analysis)’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 19:1 (2018), pp. 34–49; Toni Hastrup and Jamie J. Hagen, ‘Global racial hierarchies and the limits of localization via national action plans’, in Soumita Basu, Paul Kirby, and Laura J. Shepherd (eds), *New Directions in Women, Peace and Security* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), pp. 133–52.

¹⁸Duriesmith, ‘Manly states’, p. 52; Christine Agius, ‘Rescuing the state? Sovereignty, identity, and the gendered re-articulation of the state’, in Swati Parashar, J. Ann Tickner, Jacqui True (eds), *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 69–84.

¹⁹Weber, *Queer International Relations*, p. 6.

²⁰V. Spike Peterson, ‘Foreword’ in Parashar, Tickner, and True, *Revisiting Gendered States*, pp.vii–xi (p.x).

security policies and operating independently, liberal states increasingly seek status as ‘good’ global governance actors by demonstrating a commitment to shaping and implementing international norms on protecting global citizens – norms that reconstitute sovereignty by shifting emphasis onto biopolitics and onto the requirement of states to protect and securitise bodies against deviant states and non-state actors.²¹ Recent evaluations of state ‘goodness’ have questioned the ethical basis of feminist foreign policies in Denmark, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere.²² Promoting good governance through advancing gender equality is a key point of contention, as some identify it more as a matter of legitimacy and reputation in contemporary statecraft than sincerity of normative concerns.²³

In the post-colonial era, all states, whether former colonial powers or newly independent, reconstruct their political image and identity, either by rejecting their former identity as a colonial power or – for independent states – by creating new ones.²⁴ Former great powers such as France publicly reject the ‘principal of imperial legitimacy’ to promote a new middle-power status.²⁵ This requires emphasising their position as strategic players and leaders in the international system while demonstrating sovereign-state support for the UN’s international value system and involves substituting, forgetting, or camouflaging old colonial narratives of self-legitimation and self-recognition and old border management practices. As Strang observes, the ‘political identity of a protecting power’ inherited since colonial times has been repurposed by liberal states in self-referential acts of recognition in the post-colonial era.²⁶ This presents a focused area of anxious labour and status-seeking on the part of former great powers as they redefine their identity as ‘good’, protecting, middle powers.²⁷ For Agius, middle powers provide an alternative way of examining the complexities of the gendered construction of a state’s political image and identity through their unique position to defend their position, negotiate, and challenge great powers. Yet, constrained by the limitations of their material capabilities, statecraft often follows traditional gender and racial logics, though there is some room for manoeuvre for enacting ‘different notions of masculinity, power, security, and protection specific to ideas about the self’ and their positionality internationally.²⁸

Recent feminist diplomacy studies investigate how the discursively constructed liberal state’s political identity becomes embodied in the affective performances of state representatives and in gendered diplomatic practice.²⁹ These scholars challenge the transcendentalism inherent in traditional conceptions of the sovereign state by identifying contradictions and tensions that arise when state representatives perform. For example, Duriesmith shows how male diplomats adopting feminist mantles are often presented as ‘already formed feminist change agents’, though in reality they adapt their performance and continue to benefit from their male privilege, limiting transformative

²¹Lauren B. Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 168.

²²Claire Turenne Sjolander, ‘Canadian foreign policy: Does gender matter?’, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 12:1 (2005), pp. 19–31; Laura Parisi, ‘Canada’s new feminist international assistance policy: Business as usual?’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16:2 (2020), pp. 163–80.

²³Judith Squires, *The New Politics of Gender Equality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Laura Hebert, ‘Analyzing UN and NATO responses to sexual misconduct in peacekeeping operations’, in Annica Kronsell and Erika Svedberg (eds), *Making Gender, Making War: Violence, Military and Peacekeeping Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 107–20; Jacqui True, ‘The global governance of gender’, in Anthony Payne and Nicola Phillips (eds), *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Governance* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014), pp. 329–43.

²⁴David Strang, ‘Contested sovereignty: The social construction of colonial imperialism’, in Cynthia Weber and Thomas J. Biersteker (eds), *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 22–49.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁷William C. Wohlforth, Benjamin de Carvalho, and Halvard Leira, ‘Moral authority and status in international relations: Good states and the social dimension of status seeking’, *Review of International Studies*, 44:3 (2018), pp. 526–46.

²⁸Agius, ‘Rescuing the state?’, pp. 70–2.

²⁹Keeble and Smith, ‘Institutions, ideas’; Aggestam and True, ‘Gendering foreign policy’; Standfield, ‘Gendering the practice turn’.

potential.³⁰ This foregrounds the ontological insecurity of individual state representatives themselves when they engage in the anxious labour of performing and being feminist change agents or feminist allies. Yet how and why diplomats perform and exhibit a state-sanctioned feminist consciousness requires further consideration. Moreover, feminist and gender scholars are yet to engage with the vast body of theorising on nation branding and on the role of nation-brand ambassadors in embodying and performing the patriarchal modern liberal state.

Mainstream nation-branding literature identifies global governance as an arena in which competitive states engage in nation branding and promote their respective power images as cooperative and attractive partners but have not theorised the gendered dynamics at play. Nation-branding theorists focus analytically on how nation branding is perpetuated on social media and through public diplomacy but perceive the production of foreign and security policy discourse as disembodied. They have not examined how classical diplomatic practices are co-constituted by nation-branding strategies. The few gender studies theorising nation branding have examined how gender politics play in nation branding following political crisis but have not examined a political crisis life cycle in its entirety. For example, studies trace how gender equality and ‘country-specific’ brands of feminism are niche components of Iceland’s nation brand.³¹ Jeziarska and Towns investigate how a ‘Swedish feminism’ is brought into Sweden’s nation-branding policy to counter negative images of Sweden as Europe’s rape capital, strategically advanced by far-right political actors to criticise immigration policies.³² Holmes and Buscaglia examine how gender equality and women’s empowerment are niche components of Rwanda’s post-conflict nation brand, used to discursively transition the authoritarian state’s negative nation brand from helpless, ‘peacekept’ nation to proactive peacekeeper and ambitious strategic player in global security governance. This study highlights the contribution nation branding plays in (re)positioning states within the international political system, while reshaping the patriarchal state’s political identity and power image by advancing niche foreign policy areas using patterned narratives promoting the nation brand.³³

However, scholars are yet to examine how nation branding, as a gendered and racialised nation-building project, is configured in relation to competitions and contestations of power between states within the international system. This focus is important, since the practice of nation branding illuminates the context within which ‘good’ governance-oriented policies emerge and advances understanding of how states respond to reputational crises. Contestations of power pose implications for how patriarchal states, as gender regimes, operate, how states engage in legitimising and reputation-management practices, and how diplomats use these gendered practices when responding to political and reputational crises and accompanying accountability demands within international venues, such as the UN.

Nation branding and nation-brand ambassadors

A nation brand is described as complex and multifaceted, developed from smaller ‘sub-systems’ independent of one another but functioning together.³⁴ These subsystems include economic investment, tourism, and place branding, country-of-origin branding and cultural heritage branding, diplomacy, and public diplomacy. Each component, including global security governance, is an ‘asset’ of the overall nation brand.³⁵ A ‘strong’ nation brand incorporates consistent messaging delivered through multiple channels including diplomacy and public diplomacy. Whereas mediated public diplomacy focuses on short- to medium-term interests related to immediate issue areas, nation branding, like relational diplomacy, focuses on the longer-term narratives of a state’s political identity and power image. Above all, nation branding is a long-term, strategic commitment to

³⁰ Duriesmith, ‘Manly states’, p. 65.

³¹ Loftsdóttir, ‘The exotic north’; Einarsdóttir, ‘All that glitters’.

³² Jeziarska and Towns, ‘Taming feminism?’.

³³ Holmes and Buscaglia, ‘Rebranding Rwanda’.

³⁴ Dinnie, *Nation Branding*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

developing and promoting the ‘grand narrative’ and ‘background reputation’ of the state.³⁶ Public diplomacy, including digital diplomacy – integral for promoting the nation brand – is most effective when a state has a positive background reputation and well-established strategic narratives.³⁷ Nation branding therefore draws on the principles of corporate branding and marketing to create and promote a competitive identity that articulates a state’s role as ‘facilitator of industry’ and ‘leader of citizens’ in the international system.³⁸

Nation branding is informed by the patriarchal liberal state’s affective and cognitive knowledge structures and the gendered and racial logics underscoring the broader nation-building project. Promoting the grand narrative of the state, the practice merges the political images of the ‘security state’ and the ‘neoliberal state’, each valuing the coded ‘masculine qualities of rationality, competitiveness, and risk-taking’.³⁹ The patriarchal liberal state does not always operate defensively or offensively, as gender scholars infer, and may at times behave opportunistically. As a competitive state, it engages in ontological (in)security management practices to fix state borders when required, stabilise or transition its power image, and maintain or advance its geopolitical power position. The recent revival of the sovereign state and the shift towards conservative and nationalist foreign policies and statecraft also compel governments to adopt a competitive and corporate approach to brand and reputation management. Public relations consultants and civil servants responsible for developing the nation brand rely on patriarchal configurations of gender in their marketing of the modern (liberal) state as a ‘good’ global governance actor. We propose that gendered nation-branding projects are informed by global structural inequalities and are an important feature of the modern liberal state and the patriarchal international hierarchy of states in which it operates and reproduces through its foreign policy activities.

A well-executed nation brand should be ‘ethical and sincere’ to secure buy-in from domestic and international publics, yet apolitical and bland to appeal to domestic and external publics and to be transferable to successive governments, facilitating continuation of the patriarchal state’s longer-term grand narrative. Nation brands are flexible, have greater depth than consumer brands, and draw on long and rich histories about the state, its territory, and its populations.⁴⁰ For middle powers, nation branding legitimises their existing geopolitical power image built up over decades and inherited from the colonial era, while also reconciling contradictions inherent in wielding geopolitical power as former colonial and imperial powers. Therefore, nation branding, as a reputation-management and legitimising project, conceals gendered and racial state violence to present the best image of the state to the world.⁴¹ The flexibility and transferability of the nation brand reduces the threat internal political crises in the domestic political ecology have on the state’s ontological security by providing a toolkit on how to respond to accountability demands resulting from public reputational crises.

Nation brands often have a ‘positioning strategy’, or strapline, which markets the state’s niche areas of expertise and business in a competitive global market economy.⁴² In global governance, competitive states also develop niche areas of interest and expertise within the UN system – a process which is being observed in the way in which middle powers are focusing on implementing specific aspects of the WPS agenda within the UN Security Council, some in a leadership capacity as penholders. In doing so, diplomats use venues within the UN system, such as the Security Council, as arenas in which to promote and perform the nation brand and accrue political

³⁶ Anholt, *Competitive Identity*, p. 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁸ Melissa Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁹ Parashar, Tickner, and True, ‘Introduction’ *Revisiting Gendered States*, pp. 1–15.

⁴⁰ Bernard L. Simonin, ‘Nation branding and public diplomacy: Challenges and opportunities’, *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 32:3 (2008), pp. 19–34 (p. 28).

⁴¹ Dinnie, *Nation Branding*, p. 179.

⁴² *Ibid.*; Simonin, ‘Nation branding and public diplomacy’.

legitimacy and recognition. Successful nation brands require brand ambassadors, who are commonly conceptualised as communicators of the nation brand and individuals (for example, state representatives) who perform the nation brand in their everyday lives and during interactions with international actors.⁴³ Building on this, we suggest that diplomats operate as nation-brand ambassadors and transmit the affective and cognitive knowledge structures informing the nation brand through performing, ‘being’, and embodying the state. Since diplomats operating within international venues are governed by domestic and international institutional rules, norms, and practices, they serve as conduits of both national and international policy and practice, enacting and embodying the liberal state’s political identity and image, as well as the political image and identity of international institutions. Diplomats in UN venues are therefore liminal actors representing the state and the international institution concurrently. By conceptualising diplomats as nation-brand ambassadors, we can investigate how state representatives refer to the nation brand during their embodied and discursive performances when making official speeches in international venues. These insights are important for understanding how nation branding and brand ambassadors contribute to revealing modes of responding to accountability demands and to political crises. We now turn to examine how these discursive dynamics play out during France’s response to the SEA crisis.

Case study: France’s nation brand and the SEA crisis

Brand France is strong according to European and American-devised nation-branding indexes, indicating that the brand is globally well received in several economic, social, cultural, and political areas. The middle power is ranked 14th in the world in the FutureBrand Country Index (2020), sixth in Brand Directory’s (2020) Nation Brands 100, and seventh in the Good Country Index (2019),⁴⁴ though these indicators are based on Western criteria and concepts of goodness. France’s official nation brand was created in 2004. The Invest in France Agency (IFA) launched ‘The New France’ (La Nouvelle France) brand to encourage inward financial investment,⁴⁵ and following the 2008 global financial crisis, President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–12) further developed ‘Brand France’ (*maque France*) and initiated a ‘fresh start’ for French foreign policy, promoting a return to NATO and improved relations with EU member states and supporting multipolarity by advocating for an enhanced role for the G20 in global governance.⁴⁶ This accompanied an expansion of niche cultural and scientific diplomacy in 2010 to promote French influence abroad.⁴⁷ Sarkozy’s rebranding reconfigured the French national narrative, history, and identity devoid of self-criticism,⁴⁸ including of its colonial past.⁴⁹

France’s contemporary nation brand continues a grand narrative articulating the state’s political image, identity, and regional and international power position after the Second World War and is strongly influenced by Gaullist foreign policy.⁵⁰ The realisation that France was no longer

⁴³Dinnie, *Nation Branding*, p. 179.

⁴⁴Good Country Index, ‘The Good Country Index’, 2019, available at: {<https://index.goodcountry.org/>}; FutureBrand, Country Index 2020 (2020), available at: {<https://www.futurebrand.com/futurebrand-country-index-2020/>}; Brand Directory, ‘Nation Brands 2020 Brand Value Ranking League Table’, 2020, available at: {<https://brandirectory.com/rankings/nation-brands/table>}.

⁴⁵Philippe Favre, ‘Country case insight-France’, in Keith Dinnie (ed.), *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 2008), pp. 239–245.

⁴⁶Banque des Territoires, ‘Désindustrialisation: Nicolas Sarkozy veut “ressusciter la marque France”’, Banque des Territoires (2010), available at: {<https://www.banquedesterritoires.fr/nicolas-sarkozy-veut-ressusciter-la-marque-france>}; Frédéric Bozo, *French Foreign Policy since 1945: An Introduction* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016).

⁴⁷Philippe Lane, *French Scientific and Cultural Diplomacy* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

⁴⁸Jan C. Jansen, ‘Memory lobbying and the shaping of “colonial memories” in France since the 1990s: The local, the national, and the international’, in Manuel Borutta and Jan C. Jansen (eds), *Vertriebene and Pieds-Noirs in Postwar Germany and France: Comparative Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 252–71.

⁴⁹Herman Lebovics, ‘The future of the nation foretold in its museums’, *French Cultural Studies*, 25:3–4 (2014), pp. 290–8.

⁵⁰Wally Olins, ‘Making a national brand’, in Jan Melissen (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 169–79.

a great power and the destabilising effects of decolonisation saw France lose influence in Africa and other colonial territories. From 1958 onwards, the Gaullist Fifth Republic aimed to rebuild France's global power image, rewriting 'the history of imperialism and anti-imperialism' to suggest that decolonisation was a 'predetermined end point'⁵¹ and shaping a strategic narrative about the moral mission of France. Leadership in the EU was central to the political elite's rebuilding of the state, as was presenting France as the 'fourth' big power in the UN Security Council.⁵² To establish a new middle-power legitimacy, France's political elite constructed the *pré carré* or 'areas of exclusive French influence' and publicly rejected labelling its former colonial territories as a 'private estate'. De Gaulle also developed an ambitious diplomacy 'centred on an active, interventionist nation-state' which promoted national cohesion in the wake of the domestic political crisis brought about by the Algerian War (1954–62) and decolonisation.⁵³ Drawn from rich and selective histories, France's contemporary nation brand and power image is promoted through de Gaulle's leitmotif *grandeur* and *une certaine idée de la France* as 'unique, united, and superior; destined to lead humanity and to spread civilisation.'⁵⁴ Its positioning platform – *liberté, égalité, fraternité* – denotes 'progress, rationalism, justice and tolerance', linking the nation's revolutionary past with the idea that France is the birthplace of universal human rights.⁵⁵ Its foreign policy describes France as 'a force for good in the world',⁵⁶ a military power and a moral warrior,⁵⁷ promoting peace, protection, and universal values.⁵⁸ In late 2013, France was among the first member states to deploy in the high-risk Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR, with a strong mandate for the protection of civilians, reflecting President Hollande's efforts to revive French influence in Africa.⁵⁹ Within the UN Security Council, France is only represented by white diplomats, the majority of whom are men, exposing the limited power people of colour have in France's political system and demonstrating how France's nation brand foregrounds the interests of the white political elite.

Pre-crisis phase (July 2011–April 2015)

Prior to the SEA crisis, white male diplomats engaged in niche-building tactics to strengthen an ethical and sincere Brand France by discursively constructing the state's political image as a moral authority and strategic player in global security governance. Diplomats frequently evidence France's leadership by calling for UN reform, promoting multilateralism, and facilitating cooperation between member states. French diplomats distinguish France from other Western middle powers by asserting the states' unique position as a defender of universal human rights capable of realising its foreign and security policy pledges by taking a lead role in UN peacekeeping and by deploying peacekeepers when other Western P5 states, including the USA and UK, did not. Performing as nation-brand ambassadors within the Security Council, French diplomats leverage France's positioning platform *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and promote four niche areas of foreign policy expertise: halting sexual violence as a weapon of war; ending peacekeeper-perpetrated

⁵¹Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 4.

⁵²Bozo, *French Foreign Policy*, p. 9.

⁵³Tony Chafer, 'Chirac and "La Françafrique": No longer a family affair', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 13:1 (2005), pp. 7–23 (p. 10).

⁵⁴Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 23.

⁵⁵Lawrence D. Kritzman, 'Identity crises: France, culture and the idea of the nation', *SubStance*, 24:76–7 (1995), pp. 5–20 (p. 7).

⁵⁶Tony Chafer, 'Hollande and Africa policy', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 22:4 (2014), pp. 513–31 (p. 524).

⁵⁷Thierry Tardy, 'The reluctant peacekeeper: France and the use of force in peace operations', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 37:5 (2014), pp. 770–92.

⁵⁸Eglantine Staunton, 'France and the responsibility to protect: A tale of two norms', *International Relations*, 32:3 (2018), pp. 366–87.

⁵⁹Jean-Pierre Darnis, 'François Hollande's presidency: A new era in French foreign policy?', *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 1219 (2012), pp. 1–10.

SEA against women and children; enforcing international human rights law; and reforming peacekeeping. Ending sexual violence is the most prolifically discussed issue area, followed by establishing justice and fighting impunity. Diplomats state that French leadership in UN peacekeeping is key to developing and implementing the UN's zero-tolerance policy for SEA, which by prohibiting sexual relationships between peacekeepers and the host population establishes expected standards of behaviour and accountability. However, French diplomats focus more on addressing local perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) than preventing peacekeepers committing SEA. Diplomatic discourse on ending sexual violence is replete with stock phrases used by middle powers such as the UK and the Nordic countries at the time, with emphasis placed on 'ending the silence' around rape as a weapon of war.⁶⁰ Leveraging what by 2012–13 had become within the UN an institutionalised moral outrage narrative about rape as a weapon of war and articulating France's support for implementing the UN's WPS agenda through the development of France's 1325 National Action Plan, French diplomats strengthen France's nation brand by ensuring its feminist foreign policy goals are bland enough to appeal to a breadth of domestic and external publics and apolitical enough to allow successive governments to employ them when building France's reputation and legitimacy over time.

White male diplomats also present France as a feminist ally, for example, by asserting that women's rights, as human rights, are universal and that Middle Eastern and African women should be active partners in ending sexual violence and establishing the rule of law. Diplomats overwhelmingly describe women from the Global South as passive and 'helpless victims' and 'vulnerable victims' of violence, minimally referring to these women as agentive survivors and political actors. Diplomats also use militaristic language to describe France's success in protecting women, illustrated by emphasis on their work to fight impunity and fight against sexual violence. As with other middle powers at the time, the male diplomats promote a white, Western, neoliberal feminist foreign policy and embody the figuration of France as white, masculine, rational, and enlightened (pro-gender) protective liberal state. This exposes discordance between France's foreign and security policy pledges and the colonial and racist language they use to delegitimise states located in the artificially constructed *pré carré*, which are imaged as requiring civilisation and moral order. France cannot conceal the contradictions inherent in wielding geopolitical power as a former colonial and imperial power, despite recasting its political identity and image as a post-colonial liberal state and middle power.

Male diplomats speak emotively to convey hope and energy when promoting UN progress or France's future plans and adopt the calm, bureaucratic language of the UN when articulating France's commitments and achievements, reinforcing France's commitment to building the UN's legitimacy and reputation. However, diplomats use affective discursive strategies when highlighting failings within the UN system. For example, mid-way through his 2012 speech on peacekeeping reform, permanent representative of France to the UN Gérard Araud stops talking in the third person, drops his factual language, and speaks in the first person, using affective language to convey disappointment and resignation that the UN's culture will not change. He states:

It is deeply regrettable, and I wish to stress once again to the Secretariat the need to put an end to this practice and for recruitment boards on the ground to give priority to French over English, especially in French-speaking areas. I know that what I said was a waste of breath and that the Secretariat will do nothing, but sometimes it is good to say what we think.⁶¹

Drawing attention to his own corporality (his breath), Araud signifies that his work as a diplomat is in vain. In doing so, he subtly embodies Brand France, while also promoting French language

⁶⁰ Georgina Holmes, *Women and War in Rwanda: Gender, Media and the Representation of Genocide* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

⁶¹ Gérard Araud, 'Security Council—DPKO', Permanent Mission of France to the UN (2012), available at: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/20-June-2012-Security-Council-DPKO>).

and culture and maintaining French influence in its former colonies, as indicated in his use of the word 'we' and the reassertion of France's 'goodness'.

The final speech made in the UN Security Council two weeks prior to the public SEA crisis, permanent representative of France to the United Nations in New York and senior diplomat François Delattre, a white male French senior diplomat who had served since 1989, having previously been press and communications director at the French Embassy in Washington (1998–2002). Delattre was head of France's UN mission (2014–19) and an integral actor handling the SEA crisis throughout its life cycle (see Figure 1). By this point in the pre-crisis phase, France had received a series of warnings about sexual misconduct in its armed forces. In early 2014, researchers exposed the prevalence of sexual violence in the French army,⁶² and later in July 2014 French officials had been informed of the child sexual abuse allegations in CAR and commenced an internal investigation, which was covered up by the UN. Despite France's internal investigation into SEA allegations, in Delattre's Security Council speech on WPS, French violence in CAR is concealed, while France and the UN's fight to end sexual violence committed by 'violent extremist groups' and 'terrorist armed groups' in Africa and the Middle East is emphasised.⁶³ Performing as a nation-brand ambassador, Delattre positions himself as a male feminist change agent from the Global North, opposing Black and Brown 'toxic men' and 'pathological states' of the Global South, framed as responsible for women's oppression.⁶⁴ This reinforces France's political identity as an enlightened and civilised moral leader. Delattre confidently states that 'acts of sexual violence committed by violent extremist groups, however barbaric, should not let us forget those committed by other actors', before using CAR as a case study to demonstrate France's own actionable results in ending sexual violence by providing 'technical and financial assistance' to Central African authorities to establish enhanced criminal investigatory capacity. Ignoring the crimes committed by French soldiers, Delattre turns to the subject of SEA and laments poor vetting of personnel known to have been suspected of SEA against host populations, including children, remarking:

I have already said, and I repeat, we must be especially vigilant and apply zero tolerance on this matter if we wish the United Nations to retain its credibility and serve as a model ... [sic] The fight against sexual violence in conflict must be waged every day ... The Council may rest assured of the firm commitment of France to the fight.⁶⁵

He performs in the liminal role as a male French nation-brand ambassador and male UN representative, attempting to instil moral authority and reiterating France's commitment in a manner that further strengthens Brand France.

Crisis phase (29 April 2015–August 2016)

France's reputational crisis begins on 29 April 2015, when the British newspaper *The Guardian* publishes allegations of French military peacekeepers committing sexual abuse in Central African Republic (CAR) and stating that a 'senior United Nations aid worker had been suspended for disclosing to prosecutors an internal report' on the abuse.⁶⁶ The violence perpetrated on young African boys and girls by French soldiers and the mismanagement of the allegations within the UN prompted public moral outrage in France and internationally. In response to public outrage,

⁶²See Leila Minano and Julia Pascual, *La Guerre invisible: Révélations sur les violences sexuel dans l'armée française* (Paris: Arènes et Causette, 2014).

⁶³François Delattre, 'Women and peace and security: Conflict-related sexual violence', *Permanent Mission of France to the UN* (2015), available at: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/Conflict-related-sexual-violence>.

⁶⁴Duriesmith, 'Manly states', p. 64.

⁶⁵Delattre, 'Women and peace and security'.

⁶⁶'UN Aid Worker Suspended for Leaking Report on Child Abuse by French Troops', *The Guardian* (29 April 2015), available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/29/un-aid-worker-suspended-leaking-report-child-abuse-french-troops-car>.

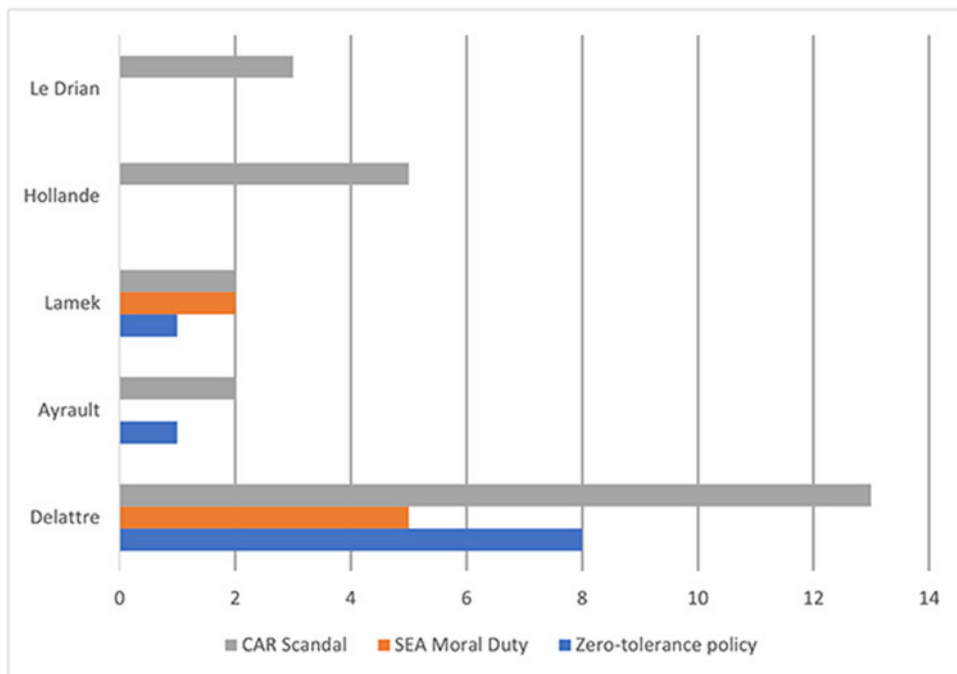


Figure 1. Security Council speeches made on SEA by France's brand ambassadors during the crisis phase.

the French investigation was upgraded to a criminal enquiry, which was completed in January 2018.⁶⁷

The violation of an international moral standard by peacekeepers from a P5 state caused significant reputational damage to the UN and undermined the P5's right to claim moral leadership over Global South states. Within the UN, the 'view was held that France should have known better', and the Security Council could 'no longer hide behind the racial stereotypes' that it was mainly Black or Brown military men from the Global South who committed SEA.⁶⁸ Racial and colonial tropes have consistently exceptionalised peacekeeper violence 'in the name of nation',⁶⁹ failing to acknowledge how everyday racial and gendered violence normalises structural violence.⁷⁰ It was no longer appropriate for diplomats to use the pre-crisis discursive strategy of mobilising moral-outrage narratives about other local perpetrators of violence in Africa and the Middle East. French diplomats instead drew on the longer, grand narrative of France's nation brand to progress the crisis through its life cycle quickly and limit reputational damage. During the crisis phase, François Delattre and two white male senior diplomats from his office, Alexis Lamék and Philippe Bertoux, attended Security Council meetings. Figure 1 below shows how Delattre served as France's spokesperson on the SEA crisis in Security Council meetings during this phase.

⁶⁷'Magistrates dismiss sex abuse case against French soldiers in Africa', Reuters (15 January 2018), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-centralafrica-justice-idUSKBN1F4245>).

⁶⁸Georgina Holmes, Katharine A. M. Wright, Soumita Basu, Matthew Hurley, Maria Martin de Almagro, Roberta Guerrina, and Christine Cheng, 'Feminist experiences of "studying up": Encounters with international institutions', *Millennium*, 47:2 (2018), pp. 210–30 (p. 221).

⁶⁹Sherene Razack, *Dark Threats and White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping, and the New Imperialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 12.

⁷⁰Jelke Boesten, 'Analyzing rape regimes at the interface of war and peace in Peru', *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 4:1 (2010), pp. 110–129.

In the first eight weeks of the crisis phase, a period of uncertainty for France (May–June 2015), French state representatives engage in public diplomacy in international and French domestic media, but diplomats are notably silent during Security Council meetings and on the issue of the sexual abuse in CAR. Silence can be a powerful reputational-management tactic to prevent further weakening of a nation brand, and the SEA crisis became framed as a domestic accountability issue to be handled by France rather than the UN. In the media, state representatives use affective discursive strategies to deflect outrage towards the deviant French Sangaris soldiers. For example, asserting militarised masculinity, Defence Secretary Jean-Yves Le Drian articulates his outrage ‘strongly’ as unmeasurable anger but draws on Brand France’s positioning platform, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, to emphasise the need for due process, adding:

[Translation] If the facts are proven, I am saying it strongly, I will not contain my anger, because when a French soldier is on a mission, he is France ... If someone has soiled the flag ... it amounts to betraying his comrades, the image of France and the mission of the armies.⁷¹

The French soldier – the moral warrior, like the diplomat – is an embodied nation-brand ambassador, though once fallen he transitions to a deviant to be purged.

French diplomats first discuss the crisis during a Security Council meeting in June 2015, where Delattre states that the debate on the protection of children in armed conflict ‘comes at a particularly busy time, politically and emotionally, in terms of the United Nations agenda.’⁷² Intimating that France is mourning, Delattre acknowledges the gravity of the ‘recent allegations of sexual abuse’ and calls on member states ‘to solemnly reaffirm today our commitment to the protection of children.’ In an unusual move for French diplomats, Delattre thanks several women attending the Security Council, strengthening his own image as a male feminist ally supporting, empowering, and enabling a platform for women from the Global South. Delattre then shifts attention to widespread CRSV committed by local armed groups as means of articulating France’s leadership and commitment to protecting women and children, including through tending to the needs of survivors. Delattre directly addresses the SEA crisis, emotively claiming the case has ‘struck at France’s very heart’, before outlining remedial measures France is engaged in, namely the judicial enquiry.⁷³ This tonal shift by Delattre reinforces France’s political image as a moral leader and defender of universal human rights, including the right to due process. Delattre embodies France and discursively constructs a seemingly measured response to the SEA crisis, emphasising rationality of the law and France’s efforts as a P5 member state.

However, France is plunged deeper into reputational crisis when between January and April 2016 new allegations of child sex abuse implicating French soldiers in CAR emerges,⁷⁴ including allegations of forced bestiality of children.⁷⁵ Diplomatic confidence wanes dramatically, and speeches performed become longer, more detailed, and more repetitive, demonstrating France’s heightened ontological insecurity amidst increased accountability demands. Delattre quickly asserts France’s competencies and credibility, iterating the ‘firm commitment of France’, that it will ‘spare no effort’ to address SEA, that the international community should be ‘rest assured’

⁷¹François Clemenceau, ‘Le Drian sur les accusations de viols en Centrafrique: “Que les soldats se dénoncent”’, *Le Journal du Dimanche* (3 May 2015), available at: {<https://www.lejdd.fr/International/Afrique/Le-Drian-sur-les-accusations-de-viols-en-Centrafrrique-Que-les-soldats-se-denoncent-730722>}.

⁷²François Delattre, ‘Children and armed conflicts’, *Permanent Mission of France to the UN* (2015), available at: {<https://onu.delegfrance.org/France-is-determined-to-shed-full-light-on-the-allegations-of-sexual-violence>}.

⁷³Delattre, ‘Children and armed conflicts’.

⁷⁴Associated Press in Geneva, ‘UN finds more cases of child abuse by European troops in CAR’, *The Guardian* (29 January 2016), available at: {<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/29/un-finds-more-cases-of-child-abuse-by-european-troops-in-car>}.

⁷⁵AIDS Free World, ‘Shocking new reports of peacekeeper sexual abuse in the Central African Republic’, *Code Blue* (30 March 2016), available at: {<http://www.codebluecampaign.com/press-releases/2016/3/30>}.

of France's commitment to bring perpetrators to account.⁷⁶ Lamék adds that states should prevent SEA and bring perpetrators to justice, as 'we do in France',⁷⁷ discursively reinforcing a sense of moral superiority. President Hollande engages directly with French and international media, referring to the allegations as 'painful', 'particularly shocking and hateful', 'unspeakable'.⁷⁸ Drawing on France's nation brand and positioning platform when explaining his meeting with then-UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon to 'establish the truth and take appropriate action', Hollande states:

[Translation] If the facts were confirmed, let the courts make exemplary punishments. There can be no impunity. While France has the greatest recognition for its army and the highest esteem for the action carried out by our army in external operations and in our country, we cannot and I cannot accept that there is the slightest stain on the reputation of our army, that is to say of France. It would be the honour of France that would be engaged in this way. This is why the greatest demand for truth and the greatest affirmation of refusal of impunity must be expressed today by the voice of the Head of State.⁷⁹

The theme of France's honour is replicated, as Hollande repeatedly emphasises France's integral role in global security governance, and significantly in CAR, which he describes as having been 'on fire' prior to French intervention – a metaphor which implies that locally perpetrated violence is in chronic crisis and more harmful than the SEA committed by French soldiers on civilians:

Our armies have done a remarkable job in Central Africa ... thanks to them and thanks to the United Nations, massacres have been avoided, security has been restored ... I want to salute Operation Sangaris without which the Central African Republic would be a field of ruins today.⁸⁰

The discursive strategy to resurrect France's racist, colonial narrative, presenting CAR as barbaric, requiring France's military intervention (salvation), is used by other French male diplomats in the Security Council in the months that follow. However, by June 2016 French minister for foreign affairs Jean-Marc Ayrault articulates several civilian protection commitments, including a commitment on SEA. Ayrault proposes that France is infallible in the 'fight against' SEA, before returning to narratives demonstrating how French action in CAR prevents mass atrocities. This strategy aims to legitimise France as a global leader in security governance, delegitimise and position CAR firmly in France's *pré carré*, and, by returning to France's pre-crisis narrative patterns, re-establish France's status quo. The move enables France to discursively transition through the SEA crisis life cycle. The former Great Power's middle-power nation brand is promoted, and France's accountability failures are concealed. Instead, France's fall is temporary: deviant soldiers are blamed, but chronic gendered, racial, and colonial structural violence is whitewashed.

During the crisis phase, French diplomats draw most heavily on France's niche area of foreign policy expertise, defending universal human rights and promoting international rule of law, with France's commitment to fighting impunity, sexual violence, and SEA. This reproduces France's political identity as a militarised but enlightened white manly protector of more vulnerable Black

⁷⁶François Delattre, 'Sexual abuses and exploitation – Security Council – Explanation of vote by Mr Francois Delattre, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations', France ONU, 11 March 2016, available at: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/Fighting-sexual-abuse-in-peacekeeping-mission-an-imperative>.

⁷⁷Alexis Lamék, 'Sexual abuses and exploitation – Security Council – Speech by Mr Alexis Lamék, Deputy Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations', France ONU, 10 March 2016, available at: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/Zero-tolerance-for-Sexual-Abuses-in-Peacekeeping-Missions>.

⁷⁸Françoise Hollande, 'Déclaration à la presse de M. François Hollande, Président de la République, sur l'intervention militaire en Centrafrique et sur le risque d'utilisation de matériels liés au nucléaire par les terroristes', Élysée (1 April 2016), available at: <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-13641-fr.pdf>.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Hollande sur la Centrafrique: 'L'honneur de la France est engagé', *Journal du Dimanche* (2 April 2016), available at: <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/Afrique/Hollande-sur-la-Centrafricke-L-honneur-de-la-France-est-engage-779343>.

and Brown peoples in the *pré carré*. While diplomats promote France's commitment to bringing justice for SEA survivors (therefore performing as a role model), their discursive strategies reveal that French diplomats construct through their performances a very French traditionalist concept of the state and its power position within the international system. Mobilising its long-standing nation brand, France subtly argues that global governance cannot be possible without 'good' liberal states like France. By leveraging France's nation brand, diplomats discursively attempt to transition France from sexually deviant state to legitimate liberal state providing moral and strategic leadership in global security governance.

Post-crisis recovery phase (September 2016–December 2019/January 2020)

In the post-crisis recovery phase, French diplomats no longer firefight and revert back to the pre-existing nation brand's grand narrative about France in the world, though modifying some elements of the narrative after a period of learning. Diplomats promote two foreign policy interest areas: facilitating women's empowerment and exporting a 'Made in France' feminist diplomacy. The centrality of women in France's post-crisis foreign policy is notable in diplomatic speeches made in the Security Council. Women (mentioned 673 times) are no longer victims but political actors, and the word 'empowerment' features frequently. French diplomats also promote a new slogan 'protection, participation and empowerment of women'.⁸¹ Yet in October 2016, Delattre asserts that the 'promotion of women at the UN is not a marketing ploy or public-relations operation' – a move that exposes France's ontological insecurity and concern their feminist foreign policy appears disingenuous.⁸² Figure 2 below shows the increase in references to women in France's foreign policy niche areas.

Macron's presidency from May 2017 sees a further strengthening of the gendered nation brand. He expresses France's need to 'become a proud country again', reiterating familiar narratives about France's moral authority and 'unique military power'⁸³ and that France has a 'special responsibility' as a 'balancing power' on defence and security issues.⁸⁴ Emphasis on security reasserts France's desired role in the world and responds to the middle power's domestic concerns about national security threats, especially terrorism. Domestic child sex abuse, sexual violence, and sexual harassment allegations, including in the military, increase during this period of renewal, signalling further dissonance with France's nation brand. Partly due to the #MeToo movement, global attention on gender inequality, sexual violence, and sexual harassment rises in 2017. The French public responds with their own version '#balancetonporc' (expose your pig), prompting Macron to address gender inequality as a 'national cause'.⁸⁵

Amid this political climate, France strengthens its nation brand, drawing on strategies found in 'country-of-origin' branding to incorporate what the government terms a 'made in France' feminist diplomacy in early 2018.⁸⁶ This new niche area of foreign policy expertise modifies the liberal state's political image as embodied masculine, enlightened protector/keeper of peace by presenting France as having developed an affective, feminist consciousness, capable of feeling, knowing, and

⁸¹François Delattre, 'Safety and performance of UN peacekeepers: Training is a crucial element', *Permanent Mission of France to the UN* (2019), available at: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/Safety-and-performance-of-UN-peacekeepers-Training-is-a-crucial-element>).

⁸²François Delattre, 'Women, peace and security', *Permanent Mission of France to the UN* (2016), available at: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/The-promotion-of-women-at-the-UN-is-not-a-marketing-plot>.

⁸³Emmanuel Macron, 'President Macron outlines France's foreign policy goals', *France in the United Kingdom* (2017), available at: <https://uk.ambafrance.org/President-Macron-outlines-France-s-foreign-policy-goals>.

⁸⁴Jean-Yves Le Drian, 'France: Creative, agile and pragmatic', *Permanent Mission of France to the UN* (2017), available at: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/France-creative-agile-and-pragmatic>.

⁸⁵William Horobin and Stacy Meichtry, 'France grapples with sexism and sexual violence', *Wall Street Journal* (2017) (25 November 2017), available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/france-launches-battle-against-sexism-and-sexual-violence-1511614146>.

⁸⁶Marlène Schiappa, 'France is back and so is feminism', *Permanent Mission of France to the UN* (2018), available at: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/France-is-back-and-so-is-feminism>.

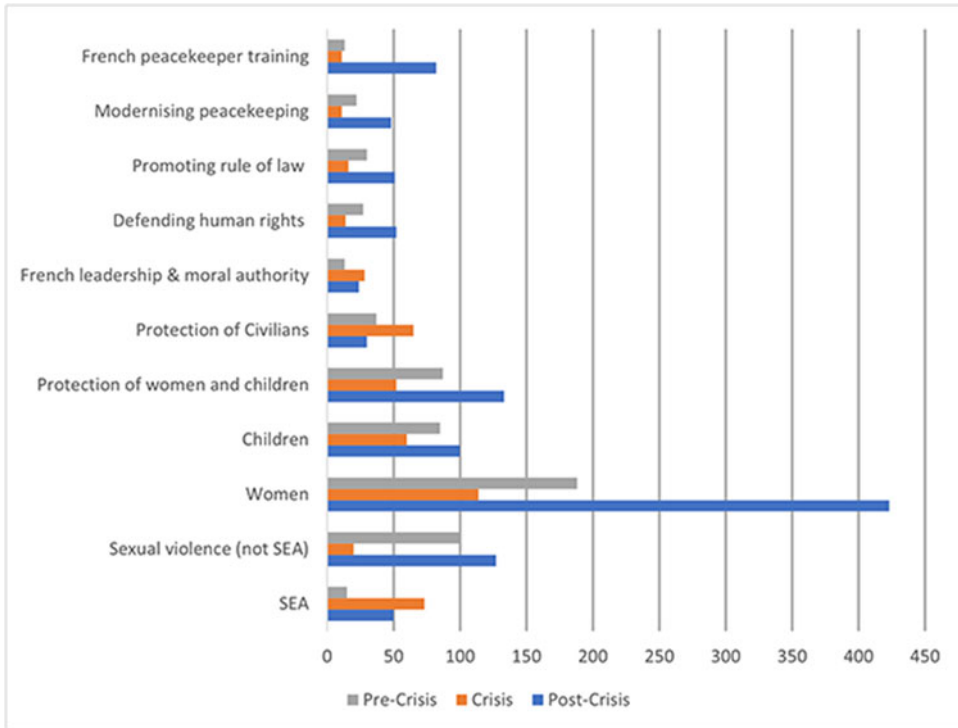


Figure 2. References to niche areas of French foreign policy during the crisis life cycle.

enabling gender-sensitive responses to counter violence and insecurity domestically and overseas. The newly appointed white female minister of state for gender equality Marlène Schiappa becomes the face of French feminist diplomacy, announcing that ‘France is back and so is feminism’ and that France is ‘the country of Simone de Beauvoir’.⁸⁷ Here, the white political elite capitalise on France’s long, white feminist intellectual and philosophical history but marginalise and silence Black French feminists such as Fania Noël, Sharone Omarkoy, and François Vergés, originating from within the Hexagon and France’s overseas territories, who challenge the whitetriarchal French system. White male diplomats perform as feminist change agents and allies, building on Delattre’s earlier performances. On International Women’s Day in March 2019, long-standing white male diplomat Le Drian and Schiappa make a joint speech – signifying the embodied performance of the white heterosexual manly state (Le Drian) and feminised, humanitarian France (Schiappa): France fights ‘for equality between men and women everywhere’.⁸⁸ As Réjane Sénac contends, the ‘political meaning of gender equality’ is incorporated into a strategy to defend France’s ‘national pride’, position France as a global protector of human rights, and ‘regain its enlightenment greatness and determination to combat obscurity’.⁸⁹ This narrative, so central to the nation brand, ‘avoids ambivalences about the heritage of human rights and republicanism’ but produces a ‘mythical [Western] conception of equality’ and ‘egalitarian consensus’, presenting ‘Made in France’ white, middle-class feminism as

⁸⁷Schiappa, ‘France is back’.

⁸⁸Jean-Yves Le Drian and Marlène Schiappa, ‘Pour une diplomatie féministe’, *Permanent Mission of France to the UN* (2019), available at: {<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/droits-de-l-homme/actualites-et-evenements-sur-le-theme-des-droits-de-l-homme/actualites-2019-sur-le-theme-des-droits-de-l-homme/article/pour-une-diplomatie-feministe-tribune-conjointe-de-jean-yves-le-drian-et>}.

⁸⁹Réjane Sénac, ‘La mythologie de l’égalité: Entre valeur républicaine et féminisme de l’altérité’, *Pouvoirs*, 173:2 (2020), pp. 89–100.

‘respectable republicanism.’⁹⁰ In this post-crisis recovery phase, diplomats frequently connect sexual violence, including against children, to terrorism and ‘southern’ Islamic men’s sexual barbarism, thereby reproducing the colonial narrative used in the pre-crisis phase.

Implying France is dependable because ‘you can count on France’⁹¹ to facilitate gender equality, French diplomats articulate key contributions and goals in three areas: (1) funding (50 per cent of development aid projects will reduce gender inequality); (2) promoting participation of women, especially in peace and security issues; and (3) tackling online abuse. France is more vocal in UN forums in this phase, reinforcing its intention to form a coalition to ‘adopt new laws for gender equality’, reflecting that it is committed to promoting universal human rights and its accountability responsibilities as a liberal state.⁹² Yet white male and female diplomats also deploy familiar mantras in the speeches, such as to ‘fight against sexual violence’ and ‘combat impunity’ for sexual violence. France returns to its pre-crisis prevent-SEA narratives, including promoting zero tolerance, increasing peacekeeping training, and reaffirming the requirement for the UN to be ‘exemplary’.

While France’s new ‘Made in France’ feminist diplomacy strengthens the nation brand by ensuring white male diplomats appear to be ‘living the nation brand’ through their everyday embodied performances, there remains significant dissonance between France’s words and actions. In 2018, French magistrates dismissed the cases implicating the Sangaris soldiers, citing a lack of evidence. Macron’s government has done little to support SEA survivors and has yet to donate to the Trust Fund in support of victims of SEA. Thus, France’s priority has been to manage the political and reputational crisis while neglecting the personal crises of the SEA survivors and whitewashing over the crisis of accountability surrounding SEA and conflict-related sexual violence more broadly.

Conclusion

This article makes the case that analysis of the constitutive interplay between nation branding and diplomacy advances understandings of how and under what conditions states adopt or co-opt feminist and gendered agendas. The article provides a thicker reading of how a liberal state’s discursive constructions of ‘goodness’ are put into practice by diplomats during periods of political and reputational crisis. The centring of nation branding helps situate feminist foreign and security policy production and feminist diplomacy in relation to longer-term processes of a state’s strategic narrative about itself and its geopolitical power position. An examination of the gendered and racial logics of nation branding exposes tensions and contradictions inherent in the modern liberal state’s legitimacy and reputation management practices which have been overlooked in the mainstream nation-branding literature. Borrowing Coombs’s crisis life-cycle model to analyse the nation brand has allowed us to assess diplomatic modes of response during and after crisis in specific political and temporal contexts. Regarding France’s response to the SEA crisis and the liberal state’s accountability failures, white male and female diplomats performed as embodied nation-brand ambassadors and drew on France’s nation brand to progress the crisis life cycle quickly and limit reputational damage. In the process of ending their political crisis and managing France’s ontological security, diplomats marginalised the personal crises of SEA survivors, silenced debate on the global crisis of accountability related to SEA and CRSV, and concealed chronic gendered and racial structural violence. Our analysis therefore reveals that France’s nation brand is informed by a white supremacist, masculine logic.

While in speeches to the Security Council French diplomats are liminal actors, operating as embodied nation-brand ambassadors and UN representatives advocating the UN’s value system, they foreground the primacy of the modern, patriarchal liberal state in global security governance,

⁹⁰Sénac, ‘Mythologie’, p. 98.

⁹¹Schiappa, ‘France is back’.

⁹²Emmanuel Macron, ‘We will win the peace in the 21st century by reinstating a Strong multilateralism’, *Permanent Mission of France to the UN* (2018), available at: <https://onu.delegfrance.org/We-will-win-the-peace-in-the-21st-century-by-reinstating-a-strong>).

using legitimising and reputation-management practices to other and delegitimise communities from post-colonial francophone states that threaten to weaken France's nation brand. France could have been more proactive in centring the needs and rights of victims, yet in the UN Security Council, diplomats chose to present France as a responsible middle power and 'good' global governance actor that meets its accountability responsibilities. Studying a given state's gendered and racialised nation brand, which forms part of a state's broader nation-building project, therefore exposes dissonance between discursively constructed foreign and security policy goals and their implementation. Many Global South states also refer to the WPS agenda in their diplomatic engagements at the UN. Indeed, comparative research would ascertain the contexts and modes of articulation used and how these may or may not differ from France and other Global North liberal states. While this article has focused on discursive practices and speech acts, our emphasis on the performativity of nation branding as an embodied practice opens up new lines of enquiry, including ethnographic research into how gendered and racialised state representatives perform the nation brand – or modify their embodied performances – during everyday interactions within international venues and when political and reputational crises occur.

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