Article

Mediated public diplomacy and securitisation theory: the US campaign against Chinese 5G in Brazil and Chile

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Abstract

Amidst the transition to the fifth generation of mobile telecommunications (5G), the US has launched a diplomatic campaign to prevent other states from acquiring such technologies from Chinese providers. In reply, China has launched a similar campaign to rebut being perceived as a security threat. However, the outcomes of such influencing campaigns in other states have been varied. This article argues that mediated public diplomacy and securitisation theory offer complementary ways to research the competition between the US and China in terms of influencing the policies of foreign states. Empirically, it examines the cases of Brazil and Chile, where the US campaign against Chinese 5G suppliers was successful in setting the agenda. However, neither the increased economic interdependence of Brazil and Chile with China nor their close political cultural congruency with the US, though, are enough to explain the different outcomes of the US campaign against Chinese 5G providers in each country. Indeed, Chile rejected the US securitisation move, while in Brazil it was successful, but partial in that it only refers to government 5G, not commercial 5G. The article argues that the degree of consensus among national political elites and other non-state actors to endorse or reject the US narrative explains such differences.

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Introduction

Amidst the transition to the fifth generation of mobile telecommunications (5G), the US has launched a diplomatic campaign to prevent other states from acquiring such technologies from a Chinese provider, namely Huawei.[1] In reply, China has launched a similar campaign to rebut being perceived as a security threat, as it did on previous occasions against narratives that sought to present it in such a negative light.[2] However, the outcomes of such influencing campaigns in other states have been varied. US allies, such as the UK, Japan, and the Czech Republic, among others, have restricted Chinese 5G providers,[3] whereas Chinese partners, such as Russia or Thailand have not done so. The remaining countries lie somewhere between these two extremes. This article understands these campaigns as examples of mediated public diplomacy, that is, the efforts of states to influence how their foreign policies are covered by foreign media,[4] in particular in relation to security. As such, it seeks to advance the nascent scholarship examining the complementarity of the framing approach in communication studies with securitisation theory.[5]

The 5G affair matters, because it sheds light on the reach and limits of the US as the leading actor in setting the global security agenda amidst rising competition with China. Indeed, the Trump administration intensified the negative rhetoric of China, characterising the Asian state as a revisionist power,[6] the launching of a so-called trade war, and making inflammatory statements during the COVID-19 pandemic, among others. These were not isolated events but rather the outcome of a broader process in the US which understands that whatever emanates from China is a national security threat. Since the 1990s, this so-called 'China Threat Theory' has warned of the political, economic, human rights, environmental and other risks linked to the expansion of a rising China, governed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).[7] The negative portrayal of Chinese telecommunication companies is one of many examples of such broader efforts to present Chinese actors as a security threat.[8]

This article explores how the contest between the US and China over 5G unfolded in Brazil and Chile. These cases are important, because they were the first South American states to announce 5G auctions; accordingly, they were targets of US and Chinese-mediated public diplomacy campaigns. Furthermore, even though these nations are dependent on US digital firms, they are becoming increasingly more entangled with China's rising digital economy.[9] Moreover, both states have China as their main trading partner and the US as their second-a situation which, to a certain extent, is challenging the historical influence of the US in the Southern American continent. Hence, the two countries shed light on whether mediated public diplomacy can hinder economic interests. In particular, the article explores why the US mediated public diplomacy campaign to trigger a securitisation process on 5G in Brazil and Chile against Chinese providers had different outcomes.

This article argues that mediated public diplomacy and securitisation theory offer complementary ways to research the competition between the US and China in terms of influencing the policies of foreign states. Empirically, it shows that the US campaign against Chinese 5G suppliers was successful in setting the agenda in both Brazil and Chile, albeit the Chinese and local actors sought to contest it. Neither the increased

economic interdependence of Brazil and Chile with China nor their close political cultural congruency with the US, though, are enough to explain the different outcomes of the US campaign against Chinese 5G providers in each country. Indeed, even though these two variables were similar in both cases, Chile rejected the US securitisation move, while in Brazil it was successful, but partial in that it only refers to government 5G, not commercial 5G. The article argues that the degree of consensus among national political elites and other non-state actors to endorse or reject the US narrative explains such differences.

The rest of the article is organised in five sections. The first introduces the key concepts from mediated public diplomacy and securitisation. The second contextualises Brazil and Chile's relations with China and the US, followed by a third section detailing the methods employed. The fourth section examines US and Chinese-mediated public diplomacy on 5G in Brazil and Chile. The article concludes with a summary of the findings and its broader implications.

Mediated public diplomacy and securitisation theory

In order to explore how a state's efforts to persuade foreign actors of its security frame are embraced or challenged by different agents, this section outlines links between securitisation theory and mediated public diplomacy.

As regards the former, in contrast to the belief that security is defined by a set of objective criteria, the original formulation of securitisation theory understands security as a speech act.[10] This means that the invocation that some referent object is under threat, known as a securitisation move, is a linguistic construction promulgated by a securitising agent. This only becomes a successful securitisation process if significant audiences accept the urgency of the threat,[11] thereby legitimising the introduction of exceptional measures that sidestep established processes to address the perceived threat. Securitisation theory has been highly influential in examining the construction and broadening of threats in numerous areas, such as in the study of migration, the global environment, critical infrastructure, cybersecurity and data flows, among others.[12] Within this framework, President Trump's 2019 executive order blocking the acquisition of telecommunication equipment from foreign adversaries, was a result of the securitisation of US 5G networks against the potential threat of alleged Chinese espionage.[13] Others have observed that the US has tried to trigger such a securitisation process in foreign countries,[14] albeit without an in-depth analysis of any outcomes.

Reversely, a desecuritisation process succeeds when an actor brings back to normal politics an issue that had been previously securitised.[15] In contrast, a complementary interpretation argues that desecuritisation moves can also be launched pre-emptively to prevent the successful securitisation of an issue by a securitising actor.[16] For example, during the 2000s, China's foreign policy maxims of a 'peaceful rise' and 'peaceful development' can be considered pre-emptive desecuritisation moves that sought to rebut the nascent securitisation moves in the US targeting China as a threat.[17]

Another pertinent concept is macrosecuritisation, which extended the initial agent-centric and issue-specific definition of securitisation to include higher-level referent objects ᵗhat traverse numerous sectors.[18] Indeed, this concept considers larger levels of

analysis (civilisational, system level, global), the degree of comprehensiveness of sectors spanning the macrosecuritisation (niche, partial and inclusive), and the support given by relevant audiences.[19] For instance, Buzan and Wæver argued that the Cold War and the Global War on Terror were both examples of macrosecuritsations.[20]

Notwithstanding its numerous applications, several criticisms have been raised against securitisation theory's initial formulation, such as its neglect of non-discursive practices, an overly stringent division between normal politics and exceptional measures or the scant attention paid to media, the material and non-humans in shaping securitisation processes,[21] among others. For this article, the criticisms that matter the most are those aimed at the context of securitisation and the conceptualisation of the audience. In terms of the former, although ontological and epistemological debates persist on how to incorporate it into securitisation theory, most recent empirical cases attempt to disentangle how external wider cultural, social and historical contexts influence the success of a securitisation move.[22] This is linked to the literature about vernacular security, which has highlighted the variation of the security concept and its associated practices, depending on the scale under analysis (e.g., global, national and local) and the particular historical ways of overcoming with uncertainty.[23]

Moreover, in line with media studies perspectives, the literature suggests considering that audiences are active agents, whose engagement in a securitisation move has to be thought of as a deliberative process in time.[24] Other contributions have observed how the securitising move depends on whether the securitising actor is trying to persuade elite, scientific, popular or technocratic audiences,[25] or on the phases of the policy process, namely problem definition, policy and politics.[26] In democracies, it is generally assumed that securitising agents need to persuade a key audience: the general public.[27] However, Roe argues that the importance of the general public is limited to providing moral support for a securitisation move, while the success of a securitisation depends on the formal institution enacting the exceptional measures.[28] Furthermore, in such cases of institutionalised securitisation in democracies, the support of the general public may not even be necessary for a securitisation move to succeed. For example, the UK's Parliament decision to invade Iraq was taken despite the majority opposition by the general public.[29] Nonetheless, media outlets remain relevant sources to examine how a securitising agent seeks to persuade public opinion of the need for a securitisation.

Considering these limitations, a nascent group of researchers have remarked on the complementarities between securitisation theory and the framing approach in communication studies.[30] Within the latter, a frame can be defined as a way to choose and stress some aspect of an issue '[. . .] in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation'.[31] This influential approach, though not without criticism, has paved the way to investigations examining the circulation of security frames in national media and/or the effects they may have on audiences.[32] Nevertheless, few studies have explored how a securitising agent may internationalise the construction of a perceived threat with the aim to influence foreign audiences through media.

This article advances Lukacovic's proposal[33] that securitisation theory can be complemented by Entman's theory of mediated public diplomacy, defined as '[. . .] the organized attempts by a president and his foreign policy apparatus to exert as much control as

possible over the framing of U.S. policy in foreign media'.[34] This perspective draws from the cascading network activation model thought for the US national media system, which assumes that frames flow in a hierarchical way from political elites, and then passing through media, and on to citizens.[35] In fact, Entman[36] postulated that US-mediated public diplomacy could also be conceptualised as a kind of cascading process, whereby the nation's public diplomacy actors, such as ambassadors and other public officials, seek to disseminate their preferred policy frames via the targeted state media system. It also includes the coverage of US media outlets by those of the targeted country.[37] Apart from this mediated role, Entman[38] acknowledged attempts to influence through direct private messages aimed at the political elites of the targeted country. A key presumption of the model is that the influence of mediated public diplomacy will be greater in those states sharing political cultural congruency with the US.[39] Furthermore, the model hypothesises that it depends on the targeted state political elites' motivations, strategy and power to portray the US frames positively.[40] Beyond the US case, empirical evidence supports the notion that political cultural congruency with the targeted state gives an advantage to the foreign state promoting its frames.[41] However, this success also depends on the frames mobilised by the targeted state's government and its national media,[42] which may challenge the foreign frames.

Notwithstanding, the media environment has changed considerably since the original cascading network activation model was published. Platforms, algorithms, ideological media and rogue actors, among others variables, matter when seeking to understand how frames flow in contemporary media systems.[43] For example, the fragmentation of media has led to the strengthening of ideological media outlets that produce content aimed at partisan audiences, which in turn accentuates political polarisation. Moreover, digital platforms have become key intermediaries, which in turn undermines the role that institutional media had as gatekeepers.[44] Hence, states and political elites can influence national and foreign publics and journalists by how they frame political conflicts via their social media accounts,[45] also known as 'digital diplomacy'. Despite the multiple new avenues through which to spread frames in contemporary media, Entman and Usher[46] stress that there is still a hierarchy of actors more capable of propagating them, with political elites leading, followed by institutional media. Thus, in the study of how states attempt to spread their frames in targeted countries, although social media outlets are becoming increasingly important, it is still reasonable to assume that foreign traditional media remain the primary goals of such mediated public diplomacy campaigns.

In sum, mediated public diplomacy helps examine the internationalisation of frames by a state into the media system of a foreign nation. Meanwhile, securitisation theory stresses the specificities of speaking security, and suggests considering the engagement of key audiences with such frames under specific contexts, in order to understand whether they unleash a securitisation process in the target state.

Brazil and Chile amidst China-US rivalry

This section briefly contextualises the bilateral relations of Brazil and Chile with China and the US. The main trend to consider is that Brazil and Chile's relations with China are characterised by rising economic interdependence, thus suggesting that this should

Table 1. Brazil and Chile's trade balance with the US and China in US Dollars, millions.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Brazil's trade balance with the US	−2,310.66	497.84	−2,010.42	−2,694.68	−4,248.20
Brazil's trade balance with China	10,552.68	18,532.46	27,089.91	24,879.93	32,300.39
Chile's trade balance with the US	−1,856.99	−1,702.75	−3,594.00	−4,173.41	−864.51
Chile's trade balance with China	3,027.94	3,367.61	7,407.50	5,617.66	12,090.67

Source: data.imf.org.

discourage them from entering into political conflicts,[47] such as prohibiting Chinese 5G providers under US pressure. Indeed, over the last two decades, China has become the main trading partner of Chile and Brazil, displacing the US down into second place. Besides, as Table 1 shows, the trade balance of both countries with China is positive, while it is negative with the US, with an even steeper trend for Brazil.

In the case of Chile, the country signed an FTA with the US in 2003 and one with China in 2005. The former led to a two-fold increase of Chilean exports to the US during 2004–2020, while the latter brought about a six-fold increase of Chilean exports to China during 2005–2020.[48] Since 2007, China has become the main destiny of Chilean exports, surpassing the US and Japan. Consequently, Chile currently has a trade surplus with China, instead of the deficit it has with the American economy.[49] However, critics have pointed out that this intertwined economic relationship is asymmetrically in favour of China, which exports a diversified set of products to Chile while buying mostly copper from the South American nation.[50] Moreover, Chinese investments in Chile have not grown to any great extent.[51] By contrast, the Central Bank of Chile informed that by 2020 the US had the largest stock of FDI in the country, with investments in numerous sectors and cooperation projects on a wide range of issues.[52]

With regard to Brazil, historically, the US has been its main trading partner. Likewise, both countries have a long trajectory of pragmatic cooperation, though it has not been without mutual misunderstandings over different policy issues.[53] However, during former President Lula's administrations, economic and political relations with China improved significantly.[54] This led to an upsurge of Brazilian agricultural exports to the Asian nation, which, after 2008, has been Brazil's main export destiny,[55] surpassing the US. Nonetheless, this growing economic interdependence has also accentuated a reprimarisation of Brazilian exports, mainly of crude oil, iron ore, soybean and sugar, whereas China has a far more diversified basket of products that its sells to Brazil.[56] Furthermore, the rising Chinese footprint in other South American countries offers a stiff competition to Brazilian enterprises in the region and to its ambition to be a regional leader.[57] In contrast, Brazil exports to the US a much more diversified basket of products, many of them with higher value added.[58] In addition, according to the Brazilian Central Bank, in 2020 the US had the largest stock of FDI in Brazil, while China occupied the sixth position.

However, the increasing economic interdependence of the South American countries with China may not necessarily lead to their automatic political alignment. In fact, other factors may hinder such trade-driven political rapprochement,[59] such as the ideology of decision-makers. This matters for the period under analysis, during which time both

countries were administered by right-wing coalitions. In the case of Chile, since 2018 to 2022, the country was presided over by Sebastián Piñera, while since 2019 to 2022, Brazil was led by President Bolsonaro. Both politicians have sided with the US on some issues, most notably in condemning Venezuela's crisis and in establishing a new right-wing regional organisation, ProSur, subordinated to US interests, to replace the former and more autonomous UNASUR.[60] This shared ideological leaning would suggest a strong realignment with Trump's foreign policies; however, their positions diverged on China. While President Piñera sought to preserve Chile's good relations with China (he even joined the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative), President Bolsonaro frequently echoed the US's confrontational views on China.[61] Such affinity offered an opportunity for the Trump administration to spread its preferred policy frames to the Brazilian government on many issues, especially on 5G.

Nevertheless, if we consider the political cultural congruency as suggested by Entman's mediated public diplomacy model, it is reasonable to argue that the two Latin-American countries are relatively closer to the US than they are to China. Indeed, Brazil and Chile are both democratic states with similar civil and political rights to the US. Furthermore, US media and popular culture are widely consumed in both countries, whereas Chinese popular culture influence is minimal. Likewise, if we consider travel as a measure of closeness between countries, in 2018, 2 million Brazilians and 438,000 Chileans travelled to the US,[62] but in the same year, China only received 453,000 Latin-American tourists.[63] In sum, despite Brazil and Chile's increasing economic interdependence with China, political cultural congruency with the US seems a strong counter-factor to side with the American framing on 5G.

Methods

In order to examine how the US and China spread their preferred policy frames on 5G, these frames were first characterised based on public documents and diplomatic statements.[64] Next, the web pages of the US and Chinese embassies in Brazil and Chile were examined to identify the media instruments they used. The results of this analysis indicated the salience of opinion pieces in national media and the use of social media to convey the embassies' views on 5G. Considering the importance given to Twitter during the Trump administration, only the respective accounts of the American and Chinese embassies in Brazil and Chile were examined, to assess their attempts to engage with local publics on 5G through social media. In practice, this involved collecting all of the tweets produced by embassy accounts[65] that mentioned 5G as a keyword, selecting only those that conveyed a frame about it to local audiences and retrieving the numbers of likes and retweets to estimate their reach.

In relation to national media, among the multiple ways to study securitisation,[66] content analysis was employed to detect and count the spread of US and Chinese frames about 5G in two national newspapers in Brazil and Chile. This analysis included questions on whether actors in each country embraced or challenged the US and Chinese frames about 5G. The selected national newspapers were *Folha de São Paulo* and *O Globo* in Brazil and *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera* in Chile. They were chosen because US and Chinese ambassadors were interviewed by them, expressing their countries' 5G

policy frames. Moreover, they are among the most influential national newspapers in each country, with a large circulation and an accessible online news archive. It is important to note that media freedom is constitutionally protected in Brazil and Chile, though not always respected in practice.[67] The high level of media ownership concentration is a common challenge that both nations face. Furthermore, during the years considered for this article, Reporters Without Borders noted that media freedom had slightly deteriorated both in Brazil and Chile.

In practice, the articles were retrieved by searching Google for the keyword 5G in both media outlets from January 2019 to January 20, 2021. This covered the period when the Trump administration's campaign about 5G, run by the US Department of State, was more intense in Brazil and Chile. Then, only those articles conveying a frame were coded (252 in total), in order to count the presence of US and Chinese frames about 5G – and the corresponding ones by Brazilian and Chilean actors. Within the scope of this project, only textual framings were analysed. All articles were coded by one researcher, while a sample of 35% of articles was coded by a second coder. Intercoder reliability, using Krippendorff's alpha, was high for all seven coded frames (alpha $\geqslant 0.82$). The analysis further included a synthesis of the debate reported by national media in each country, outlining the process that shaped the decisions made by politicians on whether or not to securitise 5G.

US- and Chinese-mediated public diplomacy on 5G in Brazil and Chile

Table 2 provides a tentative systematisation of the media instruments used by both embassies to spread competing frames about 5G in Brazil and Chile.

The US frame understands 5G as a revolutionary technology that will transform multiple areas of our societies; hence, the selection of 5G providers is an important national security question. Specifically, it claims that China's National Intelligence Law, passed in 2017, forces every national firm to share data with the government. Therefore, it contends that Chinese 5G firms are the arm of a surveillance state led by the CCP, who could endanger the personal data and intellectual property of any actor using such providers. Consequently, the moral evaluation is that Chinese firms are untrusted providers, which is why they should be excluded from 5G bids across the world. Therefore, the securitisation move that this frame advances would succeed if the target state changes the normal rules of the national 5G spectrum auction, prohibiting telecommunication operators from using equipment supplied by Chinese firms. To encourage such a decision, in 2020, the US Department of State launched the Clean Network programme, which aimed to build and support a coalition of states and telecommunication providers pledging to exclude Chinese firms.[68] This US frame drew from the China Threat Theory playbook and also echoes a lot of Cold War rhetoric, since the decision on whether or not to permit Chinese 5G providers was presented as a choice between 'the free world' and authoritarianism.[69]

It is worth highlighting that the US frame to securitise 5G can be considered a macrosecuritisation that had a global scope, but was niche in terms of comprehensiveness, since it was targeted to the telecommunications sector. Nonetheless, this securitisation

Table 2. Media used by the US and Chinese embassies in Brazil and Chile to spread content related to 5G.

Media	US	China
Embassy's webpages	• Ambassador and other US diplomats' statements in Brazil and Chile • News on diplomatic events and visits of high-ranking US public officials to Brazil and Chile • Sharing of US Department of State content (ex. share.america.gov)	• Ambassadors' statements • News on diplomatic events • Sharing of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs content
National media	Ambassador and other US diplomats' • Opinion pieces in national media of Brazil and Chile • Interviews and opinion pieces on CNN Brazil and CNN Chile	• Ambassadors' opinion pieces and interviews in national media of Brazil and Chile • TV program by CCTV (Mundo China) transmitted on national media of Brazil (BandNews TV)
Social media	Production and sharing of 5G-related content on US-based social media reproducing the US frame: • Embassy in Brazil and Chile: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Flickr	Production and sharing of 5G-related content on US-based social media reproducing the Chinese counterframe: • Embassy in Brazil: Twitter, Instagram and YouTube • Embassy in Chile: Twitter

Source: Author.

move about 5G can also be interpreted as a component of the broader efforts by the Trump administration to present China as a global threat. In other words, it was part of a nascent macrosecuritisation that many analysts and journalists call a New Cold War or Second Cold War, though this time between the US and China.

In reply, the Chinese counterframe communicated by government officials and Huawei coincides with the American one, in that 5G will shape the future of industrialisation. However, it claims that the US frame aims to contain China's high-tech development and its challenge to American firms.[70] Besides, it asserts that the US is not sincerely concerned about the privacy and security of data; instead, it is worried that if Chinese firms build 5G infrastructure, the US may no longer easily spy on other states.[71] Morally, the Chinese counterframe accuses US government officials of being liars, who spread malicious narratives against China to deceive foreign publics. In the end, it observes that if Chinese 5G providers are excluded, states will be forced to choose more expensive, alternative 5G providers, and consumers will have to bear the higher costs of doing so.[72] Therefore, the counterframe urges countries to make a technical, rather than an ideological or a geopolitical decision, on who will build their 5G infrastructure.[73] As such, this counterframe is a desecuritisation move that intends to rebut the US securitisation move for 5G.

Overall, the US played the offensive in disqualifying Chinese 5G providers and the production of such media content was complemented with in-person diplomatic meetings and events, such as the visits of high-ranking diplomats and public officials to Brazil

and Chile. In the meantime, the Chinese embassy has been on the defensive, to debunk such allegations. However, the reception of such frames, and their potential to trigger a securitisation process in Chile and Brazil, has been varied.

5G for Chile

The US and Chinese embassies' exchanges over 5G in Chile were mild. From January 2019 to the end of the Trump administration, the US did not even have an official ambassador, just a Chargé d'Affaires. Critics understood that this signalled the low priority assigned to Chile by the US, while the Chargé d'Affaires argued it had more to do with the slow confirmation process for a new ambassador. In contrast to the US, China had two ambassadors during the analysed period, one of whom, Xu Bu, was quite outspoken during his service. In this context, the digital diplomacy on 5G by both embassies was unremarkable. For instance, the US embassy published 10 tweets spreading the US frame. None had many likes or retweets, which suggests that it was not a very engaging issue for its followers. Four tweets referred to longer articles published on Share America, a platform owned by the US Department of State. Surprisingly, the Chinese embassy on Twitter posted no tweets on 5G or any rebuttal to the frames emanating from the US embassy. The most reasonable explanation for this neglect is the limited presence of the Chinese embassy on social media. In fact, it only opened its account on December 2019, and by March 2021, it had barely more than 1000 followers. These numbers are insignificant in comparison to the US embassy's account in Chile, which was opened on January 2010 and in March 2021 had approximately 32,000 followers. More generally, this points to the persistent challenges that many Chinese embassies face on Western social media.

Despite these apparent lacklustre efforts by both embassies on social media, the content analysis of Chilean national media illustrates that their frames about 5G were more widespread. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the Chinese and US frames per semester
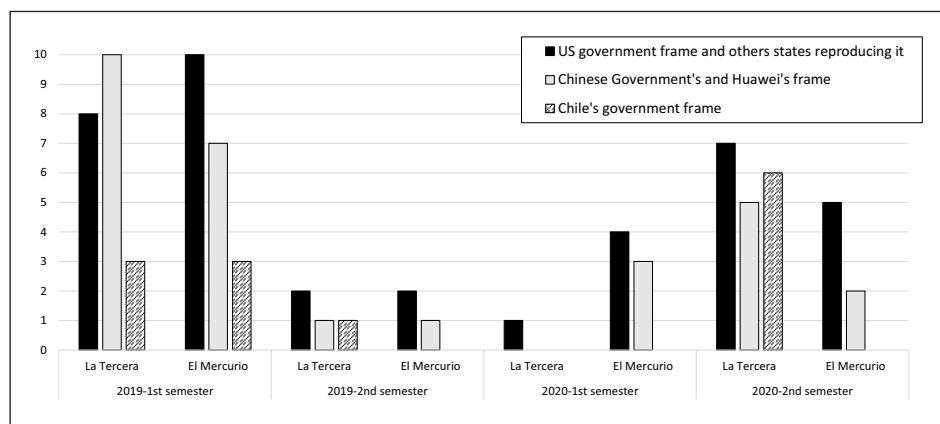

Figure 1. Number of articles from El Mercurio ($n = 23$) and La Tercera ($n = 29$) conveying 5G frames by semester.
Source: Author.

in Chile's national media. Overall, in both cases, the US frame was reproduced more than the Chinese alternative (62 vs 55% in articles by *La Tercera*, and 96 vs 61% in articles by *El Mercurio*). Many of these reports ran stories about similar debates on 5G in foreign countries (83% of *El Mercurio* articles vs 48% *La Tercera*), largely US allies, such as the UK, Australia and other European nations, which is an indirect way in which the US frames were conveyed to Chile's national media outlets. The frames also appeared in texts reporting explicitly on how the global debate over 5G impinged upon Chile, which were reproduced by the following three groups of actors: the US government, the Chinese government and Huawei and Chile's government.

The US government frame was conveyed by public officials abroad, or living in or visiting Chile. This included the few statements made by the US Chargé d'Affaires, and, most importantly, statements made by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who in a visit to Chile in April 2019 said that Huawei was controlled by the CCP, and so it was a serious risk for Chilean citizens to hold their data on such infrastructure.[74] He added that if Chile nevertheless decided to use untrusted Chinese systems, the US would be forced to place their information elsewhere.[75] Such allegations, with no evidence to support them for the case of Chile, were in line with the vast hype that characterises securitisation grammar in the cybersecurity sector.[76] Despite the US warnings, 2 weeks later, President Piñera travelled to China, where he participated in the 2019 Belt and Road Forum. Moreover, Piñera met with Huawei executives in Shenzhen and welcomed the participation of the company in Chile's upcoming 5G public tender. One year later, on November, 2020, Keith Krach, Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment, visited Chile to repeat the US frame against Chinese 5G providers and to persuade Chile to join the Clean Network programme. In his view, this was a prerequisite if Chile actually aimed to become a regional technology hub.[77] In essence, Krach's visit explains the increase in reported US frames during the second semester of 2020.

The Chinese government, as well as its ambassadors in Chile and Huawei, conveyed a counterframe with a desecuritisation move that sought to prevent the securitisation processes over 5G that the US tried to initiate. In contrast to the low profile of the American representative, China's ambassador has frequently expressed his views in national media, refuting statements made by US government officials against China, and echoing the general frame that China used globally on 5G, albeit with some local adaptations. For example, he accused Pompeo of 'having lost his mind' and reminded readers of the historical record of the US in the region, its so-called 'backyard', where it had launched several military interventions or imposed sanctions.[78] Statements made by Huawei's representatives were also covered in Chile's national media, such as interviews with its CEO and with Huawei's Chile country manager, who rebutted the US frame. Additionally, they tried to charm national politicians and the public by accelerating investment projects in the country.

Apart from the US frame and the Chinese counterframe, national media outlets conveyed Chile's government frame about 5G (34% of articles in *La Tercera* and 13% of articles in *El Mercurio*). In a nutshell, this frame also expressed a desecuritisation move. Indeed, Piñera's administration considered the 5G spectrum auction a national priority, because 5G was seen as a revolutionary technology that would benefit citizens, increase the productivity of firms and contribute to higher GDP growth. Accordingly, the

government aimed to situate Chile at the forefront of the 5G rollout in Latin America, thereby preserving the pioneer role that the country had in previous generations of mobile telecommunications. In all media articles where Chile's government officials were asked about whether or not Huawei would be excluded from the 5G auction, the same answer was given, namely that Chile was aware of the views of other actors, but it would make an independent and technically-based decision.[79] This position was strengthened with the support of many ex-public officials and opposition leaders, who also rejected US pressures to align Chile against China. For example, members of the Permanent Foreign Policy Forum criticised the 'degraded and extemporaneous' US Cold War rhetoric.[80] Hence, there was consensus among the political elite to reject the US securitisation move around 5G.

In this context of elite consensus to avoid taking sides, Chile's Telecommunications Subsecretary formalised the country's desecuritisation move with a national cybersecurity norm for telecommunications, which introduced the regulatory principle of technological neutrality.[81] This concept implies that firms in Chile have the freedom to adopt the most appropriate technology to achieve the results required by a regulation, regardless of which technology is used. Thereby, telecommunication companies would be free to choose Chinese providers, which was not a course of action the US government would have preferred.

In February 2021, Chile's Telecommunications Subsecretary announced the results of the 5G spectrum tender, which brought $ 453 million to the state and saw among a number of winners a Chilean mobile operator company, WOM, which has Huawei as one of its main suppliers. Thus, the Chilean government's decision to pre-emptively desecuritise 5G prevailed over the US government attempt to trigger a securitisation process. However, even though the national administration had little interest in politicising the 5G auction, journalists in the national media continuously pressed national policymakers on what they thought of the US pressure over 5G. In this way, the US-mediated diplomacy was at least successful in setting the agenda, though not in persuading Chilean politicians to securitise 5G. As the next section shows, the outcome in Brazil differed somewhat.

Brazil: Bolsonaro's fear of red 5G

In Brazil, the US and Chinese embassies were actively involved in a protracted dispute over 5G. This included several statements published on the embassy's webpages, in articles in numerous newspapers and through digital diplomacy.

On Twitter, the US embassy was active in producing content critical of China in general and on 5G. While the firsts posts in 2019 began to stress the importance of considering security during the rollout of 5G networks, with the approaching 2020 national election in the US, they became increasingly blunter in conveying a frame with a securitising move, that highlighted the risks posed by Chinese providers. Instead of speaking of an abstract Chinese threat, the tweets speculated on how Brazilian firms and citizens would be directly threatened if Chinese firms built the country's 5G infrastructure. Take the case of the US consul in the Brazilian city of Recife, who warned that Chinese firms were obliged to provide data to the state, due to their national intelligence law, which may pose a threat to data protection and innovative local IT firms' intellectual property

Table 3. Statistics for tweets with '5G' as a keyword, posted by the official Twitter accounts of the US and Chinese embassies in Brazil.

	US embassy in Brazil	Chinese embassy in Brazil
# Followers by March 2021	96,000	82,000
# tweets on 5G	28	51
Average retweets received per tweet	340	25
Max retweets received in a tweet	5,963	232
Average likes received per tweet	1,106	143
Max likes received in a tweet	18,215	1,806

Source: Author.

rights.[82] Likewise, in November 2020, in another tweet with the hashtag #FaçaAPergunta (Ask the question in Portuguese), the embassy urged its followers to ask why security mattered for 5G, to which it replied with an image citing the dangers of providers from an authoritarian government – in an indirect allusion to China – and suggested joining the Clean Network programme as a solution.[83]

In contrast to the Chilean case, the Chinese embassy in Brazil was as popular as the American (see Table 3). The Chinese embassy published 51 tweets on 5G, most (82%) showing Chinese firms' edge in developing and applying the technology in numerous sectors, thereby conveying China's top-notch digital economy. From August 2020 onwards, the Chinese embassy posted eight tweets with content about interviews that the Chinese ambassador in Brazil, Yang Wanming, had with Brazilian media. These tweets conveyed the Chinese government pre-emptive desecuritising move to rebut the US frame about 5G, though with local adaptations. For example, on August 28, 2020, a tweet used the same hashtag as the American one described previously, that is 'Ask the question', citing how the Chinese ambassador was questioning the very problematic record of the US in terms of global mass surveillance, particularly in Brazil, while it also accused the US of using its state power to cut off Chinese firms from other markets.[84]

Despite the parity in numbers of followers, the US embassy's tweets on 5G were more liked and shared than what the Chinese embassy achieved (see Table 3), possibly due to Brazilian followers' higher political cultural congruency with the US frame. This can be explained by the vociferous extreme-right followers of President Bolsonaro on social media, who echoed Trump's anti-China rhetoric, especially during the pandemic,[85] and supported the US embassy's tweets. Thereby, this popular audience gave the US a more favourable context than in Chile in terms of spreading its 5G frame.

As for Brazilian national media outlets, Figure 2 shows the distribution of the Chinese and US frames per semester. In both newspapers, the US frame was mentioned in more articles than the Chinese (74 vs 49% in articles by *O Globo* and 86 vs 56% in articles by *Folha de S. Paulo*). The mechanisms for spreading the frames were similar to those in Chile, namely the reporting of statements made by US and Chinese government officials abroad, living in Brazil or who visited the country and the statements by Huawei, the latter of which launched an active corporate diplomacy campaign to protect its operations in the country. As regards the coverage of the 5G debate in other states, in this case
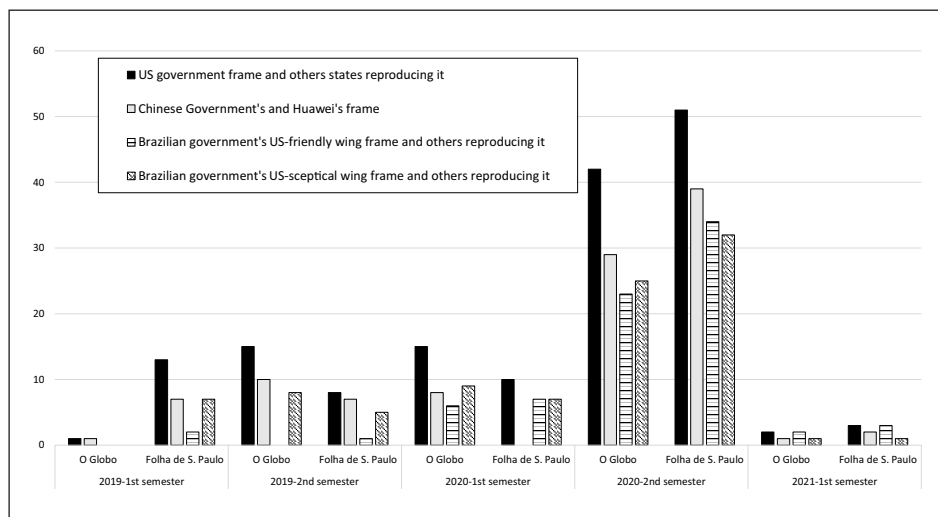
Figure 2. Number of articles by Folha de S. Paulo (*n* = 99) and O Globo (*n* = 101) conveying 5G frames.
Source: Author.

they occupied a lower percentage of total articles (31% in *O Globo* vs 24% in *Folha de S. Paulo*) than in Chile, which is an indication of the tenser debate that took place in Brazil. Apart from the imbalance between the reporting of US and Chinese frames, Figure 2 shows two frames communicated by actors within the Brazilian government and supported by non-state actors. These frames expose a stark division between an US-friendly wing in the government that advocated for a close alignment with the US and a more US-sceptical wing that sought to preserve trade with China. In both cases, various non-state actors backed and reproduced these frames.

On the one hand, the US-sceptical wing was composed of actors holding a view similar to Chile's government frame, in that they believed the decision over 5G ought to be technical, not geopolitical, and that no firms should be excluded. Accordingly, this frame conveyed a desecuritising move towards the upcoming national 5G auction. This group included government officials, such as vice-president Hamilton Mourão and the Minister of Agriculture, Tereza Cristina, who sought to preserve the strong economic partnership between Brazil and China. This frame was equally endorsed by other non-state actors, such as the Brazil-China Business Council (*Conselho Empresarial Brasil China*), which was concerned that a ban would harm their trade with Chinese partners. Likewise, telecommunication firms observed that cyber risks were manageable, and they warned that excluding Huawei would delay the rollout of 5G in the country. Furthermore, they alerted that a ban would also increase costs for consumers, since they would need to replace more than half of the pre-existing 2G, 3G and 4G telecommunication infrastructure in Brazil that depended on Huawei's equipment. Therefore, Brazilian telecommunication firms threatened to litigate against the government if it decided to ban Chinese

equipment. Editorials of *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Globo*, both national newspapers that were critical of President Bolsonaro, also opposed banning Huawei and criticised Bolsonaro's amateurish foreign policy. They even presented US fears about China as hypocritical, considering US surveillance against Brazil, such as Snowden's revelations and the Crypto AG case.[86] Therefore, in contrast to what happened in Chile, the Brazilian national media took an antagonistic position against the government.

On the other hand, the US-friendly wing was composed of actors advocating for an unconditional alignment of Brazil's foreign policy with that of the Trump administration. Consequently, they communicated a frame that reproduced the US securitising move on 5G. The most vocal securitising actors in this group where Eduardo Bolsonaro, the president's son chairing the International Affairs and National Defense Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eduardo Araújo. During the 2 years under analysis, mostly during 2020, both made numerous statements critical of China in general, and of its 5G firms, echoing the US frame. Furthermore, they also argued that a closer alignment with the US would pave the way to tighter cooperation in multiple areas, such as receiving benefits from the Trump administration's alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative in the region, that is, America Grows. These views were also widely reproduced by Bolsonaro supporters.

As Figure 2 shows, the salience of these frames varied over time – as did President Bolsonaro's support for them. This strengthens the view that audiences have agency and the need to understand securitisation as a process in time.[87] In effect, in 2018, during the presidential campaign, candidate Jair Bolsonaro adopted an anti-China rhetoric, accusing the Asian power of buying Brazil, and he even visited Taiwan. Considering these antecedents, Chinese analysts were concerned that Bolsonaro would align Brazil rapidly with the US.[88] However, during his first year as president, Bolsonaro visited China, where he stated that Brazil would not take sides yet on the dispute between the Asian power and the US on 5G, since the country really needed such technology and would wait for the best offer.[89] Indeed, Figure 2 confirms that during 2019, the US-sceptical frame prevailed in the reporting of the national media. From March 2020 onwards, Bolsonaro's policy position began to swing towards the opposite pole. In part, the switch must be understood in a political context of broader brawls between members of the US-friendly wing and the Chinese ambassador in Brazil amidst the COVID-19 outbreak in the country. The Chinese embassy vehemently condemned polemic and racist statements made by Eduardo Bolsonaro and the Minister of Education, Abraham Weintraub, against China. The Brazilian Foreign Minister sided with Bolsonaro's son and requested China to change its ambassador, a demand rejected by China. As a result, diplomatic relations between both states seriously deteriorated.

Amidst these tensions, the US government had a policy window to spread its 5G frame, hoping it would trigger a securitisation on 5G in Brazil. Several government officials visited the South American state, such as the US Secretary of State, the US Secretary of Commerce and the US National Security Advisor, among others, who lobbied different layers of the Brazilian government to ban Chinese 5G providers. These visits, which took place during the pandemic, were widely covered by Brazilian media outlets. Moreover, many of the public statements by US government officials were posted in its Brazilian Embassy social networks. Local journalists reported US efforts were focused

on persuading the Institutional Security Cabinet of the Presidency (*Gabinete de Segurança Institucional* or GSI), which they considered a key actor in overseeing Brazil's national cybersecurity strategy. Moreover, the US offered incentives for Brazil's alignment; for example, in March 2020, both signed the Research, Development, Testing and Evaluation (RDT&E) defence agreement, which would allow Brazilian firms to access the profitable US defence market. The catch was that the US let their South American partners know that the RDT&E would be unviable if Chinese suppliers were not banned from the 5G infrastructure, since they could compromise data transfer between them.[90] Likewise, in reply to criticism of the lack of a US provider of 5G equipment, in June 2020, the US announced that they would provide loans to Brazilian telecommunication companies in order to acquire 5G equipment from European firms, though Brazilian firms rejected the proposal for not covering all the costs of replacing Huawei's equipment. Just in case incentives were not enough, the American ambassador further warned that American investments in Brazil would be compromised, if Chinese 5G providers were not banned.

By mid-2020 onwards, US efforts to trigger a securitisation in Brazil began to pay off. On June 12, *Folha de S. Paulo* reported that the Foreign Minister and the GSI had convinced President Bolsonaro that there should be restrictions placed on Chinese firms.[91] Indeed, soon afterwards, Bolsonaro made statements reproducing the US securitisation move on 5G in one of his weekly Facebook live broadcasts with his followers. In September, Bolsonaro reaffirmed this policy during his virtual address to the United Nations General Assembly, where he said that Brazil would remain open to technological cooperation '[. . .] with all partners who respect our sovereignty and cherish freedom and data protection'.[92] In an analysis of the speech, journalists explained that the quote made reference to China.[93] Considering this turn, on November 10, public officials of the Minister of Foreign Affairs declared Brazil's accession to the US Clean Network programme.[94] This statement signalled – albeit did not necessarily confirm – that Brazil would ban Chinese 5G providers. Pompeo celebrated this decision, as did President Bolsonaro's son, who tweeted in praise of his father's commitment to ban Chinese 5G providers. Due to this decision, opponents firmly communicated their counterframe to desecuritise 5G with the hope the Brazilian government would back down. For example, the Chinese embassy spokesperson accused the US of slandering Chinese firms and warned the Bolsonaros and others in Brazil to drop their confrontational stance against China; otherwise, they should be prepared to face consequences in their bilateral relations.[95] Similarly, *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Globo* gave wide coverage to those reproducing the US-sceptical frame within the government, as well as to telecommunication operators and Brazilian firms trading with China, who were firmly opposed the securitisation on 5G.

Although this narrative suggests that the Trump administration was able to persuade Bolsonaro to securitise 5G, if we extend the analysis beyond the period under study, the outcome is that the securitisation effort was only partially successful. This can be explained by a change in Brazil's external foreign policy environment that lessened Bolsonaro's endorsement of the US-friendly wing's frame. Indeed, after Biden's election, Brazil came in direct tension with the US due to differences on multiple policy issues. More particularly, Bolsonaro supported Trump's claim that the US election was

stolen. Furthermore, due to mounting criticisms of the handling of the pandemic in the country, Bolsonaro had to back down on his confrontational stance against China, which was the provider of inputs necessary for COVID-19 vaccine manufacture in Brazil. These events weakened the alignment of the US-friendly wing with the US, and, owing to strong domestic political opposition, even led to the resignation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Although Biden's administration kept the pressure on Brazil to ban Chinese providers, through visits made during 2021 by the US National Security Advisor and the CIA's director, in the end, the Brazilian government sought a compromise between the US and China's policy preferences. The 5G tender released on September 2021 did not exclude Chinese 5G providers from the 5G commercial auction, but it did introduce specific requisites for firms building the private communication network for the federal public administration, namely complying with corporate governance standards for the Brazilian stock market,[96] which in practice excluded Chinese providers. In virtue of this decision, the public administration 5G network was securitised, but not the commercial ones for firms and citizens.

Conclusions

This article proposed that mediated public diplomacy and securitisation theory are complementary ways to investigate the competition between states seeking to (de)securitise referent objects. On the one hand, the framing approach of mediated public diplomacy facilitates measuring the international spread of a security frame, identifying the different audiences targeted by such campaigns, which is undetermined in securitisation theory. These campaigns are targeted to politicians and policy makers, specific actors related to the sectors that are targeted for securitisation, and public opinion at large, especially in democracies. Furthermore, the framing approach allows tracing the response of actors presented as an existential threat and of the targeted audiences. The former will understandably try to convey a counterframe with a desecuritising move for the referent object. The latter's response may consist in challenging, ignoring or reproducing the foreign frame that seeks to induce a securitisation. Thereby, in these securitisation campaigns, the role of audiences is more dynamic than what securitisation theory suggests. They can be at the same time targets of a foreign securitisation actor campaign, and (de)securitising actors who reply to such mediated public diplomacy efforts.

On the other hand, mediated public diplomacy does not consider the specificities of security frames, such as its performative powers. Besides, its most important variable, political cultural congruency, was not enough to explain the success or failure of security-related campaigns. The motivation of political elites did matter, which is a variable that has been acknowledged in Entman's model, though scarcely developed. Securitisation theory is well-suited to tackling these shortcomings, since it postulates that securitisation succeeds if key audiences share an intersubjective consensus on an urgent existential threat. Indeed, this article argued that the level of consensus among political elites and other non-state actors on endorsing or rejecting the securitising move matters to understand the success or failure of the mediated public diplomacy campaign.

Empirically, this article has shown how mediated public diplomacy and securitisation theory shed light on the US media campaigns to macrosecuritise sectors where

Chinese actors are expanding globally, such as 5G. Indeed, the US internationalised a frame targeting foreign elite and popular audiences seeking to trigger a 5G securitisation process, presumably due to the urgent threat that Chinese providers represented. This frame, communicated by US government officials and embassies, and the preferential reporting that these actors received from foreign media, set the agenda on 5G in many states, such as Brazil and Chile. However, even in these two South American states that had a closer cultural and political congruency with the US than China, the influence was not straightforward. In part, the US campaign faced the proactive replies of Chinese actors, namely diplomats and Huawei representatives, who conveyed a counterframe that sought to rebut the US frame to prevent the national policy makers from inducing securitisation.

Likewise, state and non-state actors in Brazil and Chile reproduced or contested the frames by American and Chinese actors. In the case of Chile, even though national media covered the US frame widely, national political elites and public officials articulated a counterframe to avoid taking sides, and even took preventive measures to avoid the securitisation on 5G. Namely, introducing a norm that ensures technological neutrality. In contrast, Brazil experienced an oscillation of policy preferences, from neutrality to advocacy of the US frame, which shows the importance of understanding securitisation as a process in time, in which different audiences argue publicly for and against a securitisation move. Despite President Bolsonaro and the US-friendly wing sought to follow the US in securitising 5G in Brazil, this view faced staunch opposition by the US-sceptical wing within the government and by a constellation of non-state actors, such as telecommunication firms, political opponents, firms trading with China and national media. As a result, the level of consensus over reproducing the US frame was partial and further weakened given the changing external foreign policy environment that Brazil experienced with the US and China by the end of 2020. In the end, the securitisation process was successful, but partial in that Brazil only excluded Chinese providers from the government's 5G network, not from commercial 5G commercial networks.

Regarding future research, the links between mediated public diplomacy and securitisation theory certainly require more effort to flesh out their theoretical similitudes and inconsistencies. Moreover, the approach could be extended by comparing the reception of similar securitisation moves on 5G in other states. Finally, considering the nascent macrosecuritisation of a second Cold War between the US versus China and Russia, the approach seems a promising avenue to compare and examine such process in other sectors and regions.

Authors' note

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