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Special Issue: Southern Regional Powers in a Post-Western Global Order

Huawei or the US way? Why Brazil and South Africa did not securitize 5G

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Abstract

In the face of growing restrictions against Huawei in much of 'the West' because of the US' efforts to portray its 5G roll out as a security threat, most of the developing world has resisted such efforts. By drawing on Balzacq's analytical framework - centred on the degree of congruence between the audience, the securitizing agent's ability to construct a convincing frame of reference, the role of contextual factors, and securitization counterclaims - it is argued that 5G securitization failed in Brazil and South Africa (2019-2022). Although the contextual factors in both cases were similar (economic interests with China, Huawei's established role and access to Covid vaccines), in South Africa, narratives of development and cost/benefit considerations overshadowed perceptions of security risk. In Brazil in contrast, some factions within the Bolsonaro government agreed to the US' securitization frame, whilst others, citing the risk of damaging relations with Beijing and the sheer costs of replacing Huawei infrastructure, disagreed. In both cases, the contextual factors diminished Huawei as a source of risk, especially in the Brazilian case, tipping the scale in support of those seeking to maintain good relations with Beijing.

Keywords: Geopolitics of 5G; Brazil and South Africa; Huawei, data and geopolitics.

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Introduction

In the context of more salient geo-political risks and economic fragmentation, even the IMF has warned of an emerging 'new Cold War' (Partington 2023). Yet, even before the Ukraine-Russia war in 2022, the Huawei conflict revealed much about the increasing polarization between 'the West', China and the growing instability arising from a 'post-liberal' and certainly less Western dominant global order. As Farell and Newman (2023) argue in *Underground Empire: How America Weaponized the World Economy*, the US' attempt to 'contain' Huawei was much more than simply

a trade dispute, protectionism or about protecting intellectual property in relation to 5G, but preventing Beijing from developing not only an alternative information and communication technology order (ICT) over which Washington would have little control, but could potentially supplant a crucial part of its 'underground empire' (the other being control of the global financial system).

However, well before the Huawei dispute, the academic literature – too voluminous to review in this paper - detailed the extent to which multilateral polarization was also reflected in debates about *data governance models and norms* (Carr 2015; O'Hara and Hall 2018) and the role of 'emerging powers' (Ebert and Maurer 2013; Barrinha and Renard 2020; Erie and Streinz 2021; Kim 2022; Chen and Yang 2022). Although similarly extensive research has also emerged on Huawei itself (Wen 2020), and more recently on its geopolitical ramifications (Zhang 2021; Lee and Zhu 2022; Moore 2023), not as much research has emerged examining how developing countries have 'looked' at and responded to, the Huawei dispute (notable exceptions include Christie et al. (2023) and Vila Seoane (2023). This paper seeks to contribute to this emerging literature by comparing the responses of two regional powers geographically located at opposite sides of the South Atlantic[1].

Comparing Brazil and South Africa's responses to the Huawei conflict reveals much about the challenges facing regional powers with significant trade and investment ties to both Beijing and Washington. As young constitutional democracies grappling with poverty and inequality, South Africa and Brazil are also non-nuclear founding members of BRICS. However, despite these similarities, Brasilia and Pretoria responded very differently to the US' demands to restrict Huawei's 5G roll out in the two countries.

In terms of methodology, this paper has developed over a number of stages. The first phase involved an initial and exploratory review of academic literature in January and February 2023. During March 2023, ethical clearance was obtained and three sets of focus groups with ten to twelve International Relations students per group was conducted. The next stage of the project involved a more detailed and extensive literature review drawing on both academic and newspaper reports in June 2023, followed by the presentation of a first draft. The final stage of the project involved informal interviews with academics and the incorporation of revisions from July to December 2023.

The paper is structured as follows. After presenting the analytical framework, I contextualise the emergence of the US' attempts to securitise Huawei, highlighting differences in responses between the developed and developing world. The third and fourth section of the paper examines how South Africa and Brazil responded to the Huawei dispute, whilst the conclusion highlights similarities, differences and reviews why the US' attempts at securitization failed.

[1] Christie et al. (2023) extrapolated findings from a dataset of 70 developing countries, whilst Vila Seoane (2023) examined US-Chinese public diplomacy about Huawei in Brazil and Chile. Although Huawei also appears in the literature on the Digital Silk Road, that literature is too vast to include herein and only indirectly relates to the Huawei dispute.

Analytical framework: The Three Faces of Securitization

This paper contends that US attempts to securitize Huawei and 5G technology in Brazil and South Africa largely failed by drawing on Balzacq's (2005) analytical framework. Building on the earlier work of the Copenhagen School (CS), Balzacq (2005, 172) contends that for the CS, 'the discursive action of security holds a high degree of formality', requiring the conditions of success to fully prevail 'for the act to go through'. In contrast, he argues, securitization is better understood 'as a strategic (pragmatic) practice that occurs within, and as part of a configuration of circumstances, including the context, the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience, and the power that both speaker and listener bring to the interaction' (Balzacq 2005, 172).

Contending that the CS emphasis upon security as a speech act, 'overlooks the external context' (Balzacq 2005, 174), his analytical approach highlights three dimensions critical to the success of a securitizing move, namely the (i) the securitizing agent, (ii) the context and (iii) the audience. The *securitizing agent* – in this case, the United States - refers to the power position and identity of the persuader and involves 'a set of attributes, beliefs, desires or principles of action' as well as the agent's social identity which may 'both constrain and enable' its behaviour (Balzacq 2005, 179). For the securitizing agent to convince *the target audience* – in this case – government and business elites in Brazil and South Africa - that 'a specific development (oral threat or event) is threatening enough to deserve an immediate policy to alleviate it' (Balzacq 2005, 173), it needs to craft a *common frame of reference* between the target audience and the securitizing actor. To do so, the securitizing actor must identify with the target audience's feelings, needs and interests[2].

The success of securitization is also contingent upon *context*, which includes the audience's collective, historical memories, or the *Zeitgeist* condition through which the given community perceives and symbolizes urgency' (Balzacq 2005, 186). Moreover, successful securitization also depends upon whether 'the times are critical enough' (Balzacq 2005, 182) to enhance conditions for the recognition of a security threat by the target audience. In this paper, three factors are considered contextually relevant, namely (i) the importance of China as a trade and investment partner to Brazil and South Africa, (ii) Huawei's established presence and role in the South African and Brazilian telecommunication sectors and (iii) on the issue of timing, the emergence of the Covid pandemic and the issue of vaccine access. These factors strongly shaped the *Zeitgeist* during which the US sought to construct a securitizing frame towards Huawei.

Finally, an additional factor that complicates and could effectively stymie securitization claims, are *opponents or alternative voices*. Balzacq (2005, 179) only refers to these in passing – noting that these could be individual, corporate, ad hoc or institutionalised – yet as this comparative case study suggests, alternative voices also played a key role in countering the US'

[2] Although Balzacq (2005) does not explicitly conceptualise 'frame of reference', Payne (2001) defines a frame as 'a persuasive device… to fix meanings, organize experience [and] alert others that their interests and possibly their identities are at stake, and propose solutions to ongoing problems'.

attempts to securitize Huawei. Boosted by the contextual conditions, these opposing voices were not only limited to Huawei or Beijing itself but, as the Brazilian case reveals, even rivals within Bolsonaro's cabinet.

This analytical framework seeks to 'inquire into causal adequacy rather than causal determinacy' and focusses on 'the *degree of congruence* between different circumstances driving and/or constraining securitization', rather than 'a precise causal link as the exclusive source of a securitized issue' (Balzacq 2005, 192). Neither this framework nor this comparative case study seeks to identify a one-directional relationship in terms of causality, but rather seeks to show 'how these various factors blend' (Balzacq 2005, 193) that reveals the outcome of the securitization process.

The US' securitization of Huawei

Contending that 'data, like energy, will shape US economic prosperity and our future strategic position in the world, the US' 2017 *National Security Strategy* directly tied issues of critical infrastructure to national security. It was triggered by the Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation's (CNOOC) unsolicited bid to acquire the US firm Unocal for US 18.5 billion, a higher bid than Chevron's 16.5 billion (Compion 2020, 55). Decrying the fact that 'this transaction poses a clear threat to the energy and national security of the United States', as stated by Congressman Joe Barton (Republican, Texas) Washington's response to CNOOC became the precedent for the US' response to Huawei as it became the world's largest smartphone producer in the world by 2018. As Compion (2020) illustrates, both the CNOOC and Huawei became the target of securitization moves for similar reasons. Both were seen to be very successful due to Chinese governmental largesse, which went against liberal international principles whereby extensive state subsidies for industrial firms are considered unfair. Second, as a result, both were seen as extensions of the Chinese government whilst restricting access to the Chinese market for US firms. Third, as a former French government official noted, 'this is not about shoes…this is about giving a foreign company major power over your data' (cited in Compion 2020, 58).

When US president Donald Trump announced a ban on Huawei infrastructure in the US in May 2019, it followed a litany of accusations and counteraccusations of hacking and industrial espionage between US and Chinese telecom firms dating back to at least 2003. These included Chinese suspicions that the National Security Agency (NSA) hacked Huawei systems to determine the firms' possible connections to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 2014, China's removal of Cisco and Apple from its procurement lists in 2015 and US fears that article 7 of China's 2017 National Intelligence Law directs individuals and citizens to provide support and assistance to co-operate with state intelligence networks. By 2018 these tensions came to a head, following the arrest of Meng Wanzhou (Huawei Chief Financial Officer and daughter of Huawei founder, Ren Zhenfei) in Vancouver, Canada on charges of violating sanctions against Iran and Beijing's subsequent arrest of two Canadians on charges of espionage in China. Whilst Australia was the

first to ban Huawei in July 2018, the US' Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced a ban in May 2019 and budgeted US $ 1,9 billion dollars to replace Huawei and ZTE systems in the US. By May 2020, the US State Department announced the creation of a 'digital alliance' of telecom and associated service providers as part of a 'Clean Network' ('Clean Carriers, Clean Stores, Clean Apps, Clean Cloud and Clean Cable Path') which would avoid Huawei 'an arm of the PRC surveillance state' and to 'remove app's from Huawei's app store to ensure they are not partnering with a human rights abuser' (U.S. Department of State 2021). Public opinion polls suggested that in 2020 74 percent of US citizens thought Huawei should be removed from the US (Conklin 2020), whilst only one in ten Brits trusted Huawei (Feldman and Rowe 2020). Most of the US' allies either immediately or gradually adopted outright bans or more technical restrictions on the use of Huawei (Dutta and Marek 2019).

Huge divergence characterized how Europe responded, ranging from the Swedish approach for an outright ban on the one end of the spectrum to absolutely no restrictions, in the case of Hungary at the other end of the spectrum. In executive dominated systems such as France and the UK, government centralized decision-making, whilst parliament dominated systems such as the Netherlands and Italy devolved decision-making to industry to by-pass power sharing and fragmented coalitions (Calcara 2022). Given Europe's digital backlog and the need to not risk Chinese counter-restrictions (especially towards Ericson and Nokia) many European countries opted not to restrict Huawei by name but rather indirectly through technical industry requirements or to only impose restrictions where government or official information systems are concerned. In Europe, the fundamental concern involved 'technological autonomy' as 'strategic autonomy', a concept reiterated for example, no more than 14 times in Italy's cyber security strategy[3]. As a recent policy paper advised: 'A more coherent regulatory approach across Europe and investment in European technological strongholds is essential to avoid the political costs that result from overdependence' (Van der Perre and Ruhlig 2022).

Yet few countries in the Global South actioned similarly extensive restrictions against Huawei. Traditionally a rather politically 'dull' and highly technical endeavour, information and communication technology and specifically the roll-out of 5G capacity by Huawei had now become a new high stakes global faultline between 'us' and 'them'. How many in the US viewed Huawei's role in the developing world is well captured by Alon et al. (2021):

> Huawei's increasing presence as a new source of investment and technological support in the Global South exemplifies China's effort to extend the country's control over transnational network infrastructures and to reconstruct an alternative model of globalization towards a multipolar political economic order in the digital economic era. Huawei's 5G technology is fast expanding and warmly accepted across a large part of the developing world. Most of these countries are run by non-full liberal regimes. Governments cite Huawei's censorship capability as a major attribute to

[3] Author's confidential interview with a professor of Security Studies, Rome, 21 June, 2022.

> contracting Huawei's 5G service. By lending a hand to authoritarian regimes, Huawei is supporting and perpetuating this system of governance. Huawei brings two non-Western world powers, China and Russia, closer at a time when these two countries are diverging from global standards of democracy and freedom.

The following section examines Brazil and South Africa's responses to US-led efforts to securitize Huawei as a means of pressuring third countries in the Global South to ban the rollout of 5G by the Chinese ICT conglomerate. There are various reasons to assume that, given some *common frame of reference* between Brazil, South Africa and the US, that the latter should have been more successful in convincing Brazilian and South African audiences of the 'Western' perceived imminent threat posed by Huawei and by extension, China. Although neither country is considered an alliance partner of the US, South Africa and Brazil share an identity as 'semi-peripheral' democracies with strong, vibrant civil societies, a free press and media sector and independent judiciaries. In fact, Freedom House ranks both as 'free' with Brazil ranking 72 and South Africa ranking 79 in terms of political rights and civil liberties. Remarkably, in terms of Internet freedom, Brazil is considered 'partly free' at 64 and South Africa, 'free' with a score of 73[4]. In terms of global data governance regimes, both states are also considered 'swing states'. In other words, those states that are open to be convinced to either support a Chinese top-down data governance model or a more pluralist, liberal multi-stake holder model favoured by the US (Maurer and Morgus 2014).

SA's response to US efforts to securitize Huawei

After Huawei was added to the so-called Entity List, banning US firms from selling or conducting business with Huawei without prior permission in May 2019, the CEO's of South African telecom firms MTN, Vodacom, Cell C and Telkom wrote to the South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa on June 7 requesting the President's intervention given that the expectation for South Africa not to adopt Huawei 5G technology would jeopardise over R100 billion in infrastructure investment (Hunter 2019). On the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Osaka, Japan in June 2019 Ramaphosa confirmed to Chinese President Xi Jinping that South Africa remained committed to Huawei. At a later meeting between Trump and Jinping it appeared that Washington relaxed some of the sanctions against Huawei (Gavaza 2019). Contending that 'we want 5G and we know where we can find 5G', Ramaphosa announced that

> They've [the US] been unable to imagine what 5G can offer and now clearly, they are jealous. They're jealous that a Chinese company called Huawei has outstripped them. And because they've been outstripped, they must now punish that company

[4] Freedom House. *Countries*. https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores

> and use it as a pawn in the fight they have with China (Gavaza 2019). We cannot afford to have our own economy being held back by this fight between the US and China ("Ramaphosa South Africa must not let economy." 2019).

Uncharacteristically blunt, Ramaphosa's comments on the Huawei issue revealed the extent to which South Africa-United States relations in some instances are marked by a 'heavy-handed US approach towards blocking Huawei that was directive rather than deliberative and a South African response that features a high-profile public rejection when a more subtle refusal would have sufficed' (Williams 2022, 353). In contrast to Brazil under Bolsonaro, US attempts to securitize the adoption of Huawei 5G systems in South Africa were very quickly de-securitized as the audience questioned the motives of the securitizing agent. As one South African foreign policy analyst noted

> As was the case during the Cold War, Western intentions over Africa should be scrutinised because they may not necessarily be for Africa's benefit. They could be gambits used to curtail the influence of America's foes. As South Africa appraises the pros and cons of engaging Huawei, it should keep these eventualities in mind (Monyae 2020).

What explains the failed 'take off' of this securitization move at the southern tip of Africa? In the following section it is argued that a lack of a common frame of reference and contextual factors between the securitizing agent and the audience, stymied effective securitization claims. As is the case for Brazil, the US' basic social identity enjoys some resonance in South Africa (not least because of a common *lingua franca*), abetting its ability to construct a common frame of reference. For example, a 2021 opinion poll found that the South African *public* continued to generally have a *slightly* more positive association towards the United States than with China. For example, more respondents considered the US to be the best model of development for South Africa, *followed* by China. The US gained 36,7 percent followed by China at 19,9 percent, even though most respondents (42.4 %) agreed that China has a strong influence on South Africa's economic activities (Afrobarometer 2021). Although South Africans typically have a 'non-aligned' position between China and the US – with a tad pro-US position – they do consider that China takes South Africa's own interests into account more seriously than does the U.S.[5]. In addition, South Africa, like Brazil shares some political cultural congruence with the US. For example, local media cover US political news with far greater frequency and detail, than say India. As Friedman (2021, 18) notes, 'in contrast to the rest of the continent, millions of people remain in South Africa who see North America and Western Europe as the most important regions on the planet'.

[5] Pew Research Centre, 2023 'Comparing the Views of the US and China in 24 Countries' https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/11/06/comparing-views-of-the-us-and-china-in-24-countries/

Yet, to develop the frame of reference to win the support of its target audience, the US needed to reflect or identify with the needs, interests, and feelings of its audience. It failed to do so, firstly due to a few contextual factors and secondly, due to Huawei's counter moves. After discussing the contextual factors (China's growing significance as a trade and investment partner, Huawei's established presence in South Africa and the impact of the Covid pandemic on vaccine access), Huawei's counter moves will be examined.

As is the case for Brazil, a key contextual fact is that China has become South Africa's most important trading partner *followed* by the United States. In 2021 Beijing accounted for 11,19 percent of South African exports, the U.S., 10.69 percent, Germany 7,73, Japan 6.78 and the UK 6.74 percent. However, imports are even more striking with fully 20.58 percent of South African imports coming from China, followed by Germany at 8.07 percent, the US at 7,04 percent and India at 5.72 percent and Saudi Arabia at 4.39 percent (World Integrated Trade Solution)[6].

More specifically in relation to Huawei, the company has – since its inception – had a long-standing focus on the development of ICT markets in the Global South. Its founder Ren Zhengfei adopted Mao's guerilla war strategy of "encircling cities from the country" and turned to rural and remote markets (p. 36). "All of [our] fertile lands have been occupied by Western companies. Only in those remote, turbulent regions with adverse natural conditions where they (foreign firms) entered at a slower pace and had less investment did we have a window of opportunity" (p. 69). In 1998 Kenya and South Africa became the first countries in Africa in which Huawei invested and by the early 2000s the vast majority of 4G base stations across the continent were Huawei-run[7]. Thanks to considerable concessional financing and the fact that Huawei systems were on average 30 to 40 percent cheaper than those of Western competitors such as Ericsson or Nokia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East became Huawei's most lucrative markets outside China[8]. By 2019, these regions accounted for US $ 29.5 billion in revenue, China 72.6 billion and the America's only 7.5 billion (2020 "ties between SA and Huawei"). In addition, China's Digital Silk Road also tied several African economies into a growing digital network, despite allegations that the Chinese government and by implication Huawei (as the technology provider) had been complicit in an organised programme of data surveillance at the African Union in 2018 (Aglionby et al. 2018)[9].

For many, both in South Africa and the continent generally, three matters that arose during the Covid crisis underscored the degree to which Western responses perpetuated global inequity.

[6] In 2022, US FDI to South Africa amounted to US 7,4 billion (Office of the US Trade Representative 2023), whilst Chinese FDI to South Africa amounted to Us $ 5, 74 billion ("Total stock of foreign direct investments from China in South Africa between 2012 and 2022." 2023). https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/ZAF/Year/LTST/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/all/

[7] Although some of the academic literature contends that 70% may be somewhat high. In South Africa Huawei's strategic partner was MTN which chose Huawei's GSM base station system to support its systems and South Africa's internet provide, Rain, is (so far) the only formal 5G agreement on the continent that has been signed.

[8] During 2000-17 47 Chinese loan backed projects involved Huawei of which 45 were underwritten by China's Exim bank. Huawei has been involved in at least 23 African countries, accounting for just over 2 percent of all Chinese loans to Africa (US 3.4 billion). (Link 2019).

[9] By 2019 China invested, in US $ 2,4 billion in Ethiopia; 1,8 billion in Nigeria, 1,8 billion in Zimbabwe, 1,7 billion in Angola and 0,73 billion in Zambia as part the Digital Silk Road project (Chimbelu 2019).

These factors not only eroded trust in 'the West' and the US in particular, but also led many to question the validity of the Huawei threat, given the more immediate Covid threat.

Firstly, global structural power determined which countries had access to the first roll-out of vaccines. First in line were countries that had invested in developing Covid 19 vaccines, namely the UK, followed by the US, Germany, China and Russia. Second were rich countries who could afford to make advance order purchases with manufacturers, such as Israel, Denmark, Canada and Australia. These countries, such as Canada had bought sufficient doses to vaccinate each citizen five times over. Third in line were countries that had accepted vaccine donations from producer countries such as China and Russia as part of a 'vaccine diplomacy' programme (as was the case for Brazil). The fourth and largest group were countries that concluded bilateral purchase agreements after efficacy had been established. The last group, comprising most of the low- and middle-income countries were participants in the Covax programme[10]. By 12 May 2021, when 47 percent of US citizens had received at least one dose of a vaccine, less than 1 percent of the South African population had received a single dose. In fact, 77 percent of all vaccine doses had been administered in only 10 countries (the US, China, India, the UK, Brazil, Turkey, Germany, Indonesia, France and Russia (Karim 2023, 4499 of 6693, 4523).

Second, whilst South Africa strongly supported global multilateral efforts to ensure more equitable vaccine access for the developing world, especially the African continent, the Trump administration's announcement that it was cancelling financial support for the WHO due to the latter's failure to respond to the outbreak of Covid in China ran directly against the development of a global response (van Wyk et al. 2022, 207). Although the Biden administration in May 2021 reversed its position, the US initially also opposed South Africa and India's attempt to broker general intellectual property waiver for Covid vaccines at the WTO (Horti et al. 2022).

Thirdly, when South African epidemiologists promptly warned of the outbreak of the Omicron variant in November 2021, the country as well as the rest of southern Africa were immediately and without warning subjected to an international travel ban (Khoza 2021). Firstly, by the government of the UK, followed by the US and others in Europe, even though no similar bans were imposed on Hong Kong 'which had uploaded an Omicron genetic sequence …even before South Africa had done so, and the Netherlands, which reported Omicron shortly after South Africa did not get travel bans' (Karim 2023, 2564 of 6693). Public discussions in the country raised not only Western hypocrisy but as the South African government's lead Covid 19 advisor, Prof. Karim Abdul Karim writes, 'I could not help but see the racist element to this' (Karim, 2023, 2562 of 6693). These bans also went against the spirit of the G20 Rome summit where it was agreed to open travel and revive the tourism industry (Khoza 2021).

Amidst these contextual factors shaping the *Zeitgeist* of a new multipolar order, Huawei made a few countermoves. It stepped up its pro-Africa narrative, by hosting the 'first Africa 5G

[10] Covax is a partnership programme between the WHO, the Gavi Alliance and the Coalition for Epidemic Prepraredness Innovations (CEPI) to make vaccines available to low- and middle-income countries (Pichon 2022).

digital summit' (oddly, in Bangkok).[11] In South Africa, it launched a number of *additional* social responsibility initiatives including a new Digi School project which aims to connect 100 urban and rural schools in July 2020 and the development of a Science Lab and library at Siqonweni High School in Imbali township in Pietermaritzburg in September 2021 at a cost of US $ 35 000 to support STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education (Lourie 2022). In March 2020, Huawei made a R100 million donation to the South African government's Covid relief fund and in July 2023 Ramaphosa opened Huawei's state-of-the art Innovation Centre[12]. Given that Sub-Saharan Africa generally is the most expensive region in terms of data cost (South Africa only being the 149th most affordable), with limited Internet access in rural areas, the fact that Huawei systems are more affordable and that most 4G stations are based on pre-existing Huawei infrastructure enabled Huawei to de-securitize US narratives by emphasizing digital *access* to many in the Global South.

Whilst the Trump administration offered some financial compensation to Brazil if it chose to remove Huawei's 5G systems (see below), no similar enticements were offered to South Africa. In fact, it was only under the Biden Administration in *December 2022* that the White House announced its New Initiative on Digital Transformation in Africa (DTA) at the US-Africa Business Forum in Washington ("Fact sheet: new initiative on digital transformation in Africa." 2022). What had become clear, is that Western reluctance to support Africa's ICT sector had opened a strategic window for Chinese firms such as Huawei to develop deep and effective commercial relationships in nearly every country in Africa. Whereas the US sought to frame Huawei as a security threat, Huawei projected a counter-frame centred on the narrative of *development*, with strong resonance in the Global South. As Cobus Van Staden (2021), a prominent South African scholar of China remarked: 'For African policymakers, the choice frequently isn't between Chinese internet versus Western internet, it's between Chinese internet and no internet at all. Considering that the average African is 19.5 years old, that decision makes itself' (Van Staden and Wu, 2021). As a focus group participant responded to the question regarding the risk of digital privacy, particularly in relation to Chinese devices noted:

> people are still dying from pit toilets. I don't think anybody is worried about the Chinese government spying on them when they don't even have access to a cell phone. They don't even have access to proper waste management like sewage management. People are still dying in pit toilets in 2023. That is insane. To me, I don't think anybody is worried about the Chinese government's spying on us on a so-called laptop. We don't even have [proper] cell [phone] towers that don't even work[13].

[11] "Huawei and AICTO Hosted the 1st Africa 5G Summit." *Huawei*. November 1, 2022. https://www.huawei.com/en/news/2022/11/africa-5g-summit

[12] "Unveiling Huawei's Innovation Centre: an exclusive tour into technological advancements" *ItWeb*. July 14, 2023. https://www.itweb.co.za/videos/j5alrMQAE5rMpYQk

[13] Focus group conducted by the author, March 2023, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

Consequently, the idea that the country's reliance on Huawei constituted a possible security risk, became a 'non-issue' both in government circles as well as in broader public debates[14]. For example, in Parliament the matter was mentioned in passing by a member of the Opposition in July 2019 and briefly raised during a meeting of the Portfolio Committee on Communications in June 2020[15]. Similarly, except for one set of substantive newspaper exchanges, the issue of Huawei as a security threat also barely emerged[16]. In fact, the risk that South Africans might not have access to Google apps because of the Huawei ban, triggered much more media publicity (Khumalo 2022).

Brazil's response to US efforts to securitize Huawei

In societal terms, Brazil probably shares much more political congruence with the US than South Africa. Not only because both have federal and presidential political systems or the US' long historical and geographic 'reach' since the Monroe Doctrine but the sheer capacity of the US' soft power in Brazil remains unrivalled. Not surprisingly, Freedom House' survey of *Beijing's Global Media Influence*, found South Africans' 'resilience and responsiveness' towards China to be much higher than Brazilians[17]. Yet the two countries share broadly similar orientations in terms of trust towards the US and China[18]. Nevertheless, given that Brazil has historically been politically closer to the US than South Africa, the election of Bolsonaro in 2018 and the subsequently attempt to align Brasilia much closer to Washington exacerbated the contradictions between Brazil's growing economic ties with China and its political orientation towards the US. As Gonzalo and Haro-Sly (2022) argued, 'there currently seems to be a dichotomy between the strong ideological-political affiliation between Brazil and the US, which is somewhat caricatured in President Bolsonaro's interventions, on the one hand and the *real* economic interests linked to China, primarily related

[14] However, what became contentious about Huawei's role in South Africa related to its labour practices. In February 2022, The Department of Labour took Huawei Technologies SA to court for violating labour regulations that require at least 60% of its employees to be South African. It has been alleged that 90 percent of its workers were foreigners. An out of court settlement was reached whereby Huawei agreed to submit an employment plan to conform to employment regulations within three years (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre 2022).

[15] House of Assembly Debates, 11 July 2019 'but you need to tell the President to stop beating one of our biggest trading partners over the head and biting the hand that trades with us when he goes and say silly things like the United States is just jealousy with China over Huawei. https://pmg.org.za/hansard/30097/ . Also see: https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/30492/

[16] Heidi Swart, "Are South Africans safe with Huawei'? Part One. https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-03-05-part-one-are-south-africans-safe-with-huawei-its-all-about-the-risk/ and part two https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-06-10-are-south-africans-safe-with-huawei-part-2-a-different-kind-of-virus/. Critique against these, David Monyae, 'Is Huawei any different to other tech giants or are we just getting caught up in Trump's mud slinging' https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2020-06-16-is-huawei-any-different-to-other-tech-giants-or-are-we-just-getting-caught-up-in-trumps-mud-slinging/

[17] South Africa is scored 'very high' at 58 out of a total of 85, whereas Brazil is scored 'high' at 46 out of 85.

[18] In response to the question whether the US or China 'takes into account interests of countries like theirs', South Africans agreed with 53 percent for the US and 56 percent for China. Brazilians allocated 56 percent to the US and 44 to China. However, in response to the question whether the US or China 'interferes in the affairs of others', South Africans said the US at 63 percent and China at 50 percent, whilst Brazilians said the US at 76 percent and China 59 percent. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/11/06/comparing-views-of-the-us-and-china-in-24-countries/

to the Brazilian agribusiness sector on the other hand'. Whereas the US attempt to frame Huawei as a threat, became a 'non-issue' in South Africa (as noted above), in Brazil, the Huawei debacle became one of the defining developments to reveal the emergence of what Schenoni and Lieva (2021) describe as 'dual hegemony'. Trapped in dual hegemony, subordinate states 'can be simultaneously embedded within the hierarchical structures imposed by each of the hegemons' thereby losing considerable autonomy (Schenoni and Lieva, 2021, 235-236). Unlike the case of South Africa, under Bolsonaro Brazil was torn between political identification with Washington against the reality of growing economic interests with China.

Like SA, China overtook the US as its most important trading partner. In 2000, Brazil sent 25 percent of its exports to the US and only two percent to China. By 2020, China accounted for 34 percent of Brazilian exports whilst exports to the US declined to 10 percent. In addition, Brazil and the US are *rival exporters* in key commodities such as soybeans, petroleum, and iron ore, all in high demand from Beijing (Trevisan 2021, 192, 194). Although the US has invested in Latin America for more than a decade and has a larger stock of capital than China, recent flows have substantially altered this pattern. In 2022 Brazil became the 9th most important destination for Chinese investments at US 1.34 billion. During 2021 Brazil was China's leading investment destination, mostly in the electricity (45,5 %) and oil (30,4 %) sectors (Carriello, 2023:12, 15). Even though Huawei had been in Brazil for 21 years, has been one of the most important telecom suppliers to local telecoms and accounted for at least 35 percent of the mobile network and ran between 40 and 50 percent of the country's 4G infrastructure, Huawei became the 'core of the US campaign against Beijing' (Trevisan 2021, 194).

When Bolsonaro visited Trump in February 2019, the latter made it clear that stronger ties between the two countries was dependent on Bolsonaro limiting Chinese influence in the region. More specifically, Trump made continued intelligence sharing, US use of the Alcantara base and the recently concluded US-Brazil defence technology agreement dependent on Brazil's capacity to restrict Huawei's 5G network from entering the Brazilian market (Schenoni and Leva, 2021, 246).

These ideational commonalities created a common frame of reference enabling the Trump Administration to cast Huawei as a threat to Brazil's sovereignty and national autonomy. In addition, the Bolsonaro administration became increasingly embroiled in anti-Chinese, even Sino phobic utterances, most notably Bolsonaro's own son, Eduardo and his minister of foreign affairs, Ernesto Araujo (Philips 2020). During his presidential campaign Bolsonaro himself often claimed that 'China doesn't want to buy in Brazil, it wants to buy Brazil' (Schenoni and Lieva 2021, 247). Given such predilection amongst key players in Bolsonaro's cabinet, the US narrative reframed the Brazilian debate about 5G as 'not [being] about telecommunication, but one about Brazil's national identity, place in the world and the question of whether it belongs to the West'. Indeed, amongst the so-called anti-globalist faction, Araujo even contented that 'moving closer to the United States was a civilizational or even spiritual matter' (Stuenkel 2022, 98).

However, two conditions diminished the degree of Brazil's receptivity to Washington's securitizing efforts. Firstly, not all circles within the Bolsonaro administration shared the Trump-

based worldviews of the government's most outspoken ideologues and second, as in South Africa, a key contextual factor, namely access to Covid vaccines, tipped the scales politically against the pro-Trump faction and consequently eroded the ability of the US to construct a persuasive threat narrative against Huawei.

Although the US enjoys remarkable soft power and cultural attraction across the region, most policy makers in Latin America 'considered *Washington* as the biggest threat to international peace and their national security' (Stuenkel 2022, 97, my emphasis). Brazilians considered US accusations of Chinese spying particularly rich given earlier revelations of spying by the US National Security Agency on former president Dilma Rousseff's mobile phone and on Petrobras. Given the US' long and traumatic history of intervention in Latin America and the fact that policy makers in Latin America approach the US' role in supporting international order with 'cautious ambiguity' as Stuenkel (2022, 98) argues, did not exactly make the Huawei scare an 'easy sell'.

As in South Africa, the business sector and the telecommunications industry in particular, re-framed the debate in terms of cost-benefit considerations and argued that the removal of Huawei as a competitor would severely push up prices as Brazil would only have two possible suppliers, Ericsson and Nokia. The CEO of Claro, one of Brazil's leading telecom firms noted that Brazil would face 'hell' if it were to ban Huawei and asked who would pay for the replacement of the Chinese infrastructure. An advisor to the Federation of Industries of Sao Paulo (FIESP) and former ambassador to the US, Ruben Barbosa contended that it would run counter to Brazil's interests (Trevisan, 2021, 195). Leading media outlets such as *Folha de S. Paulo* as well as *O Globo* were equally critical and highlighted US hypocrisy by citing the Snowden case. Some telecom firms threatened to litigate against the government and contended that the cyber risks were manageable (Vila Seoane 2023, 14-15).

Third and most significantly, some members of Bolsonaro's cabinet, such as vice-president Hamilton Mourão, Science and Technology Minister Marcos Pontes as well as the Minister of Agriculture, Tereza Cristina feared that by excluding Huawei from the 5G telecommunications auction, the decision would severely threaten Brazil's increasingly important economic ties with Beijing. The agribusiness lobby, powerfully represented in the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate and the Brazilian Foreign Trade Association lobbied against the anti-Chinese narratives emanating from within the Bolsonaro government (Brun 2022).

As the Huawei issue was not nearly as politicized in South Africa as in Brazil, much of the counter narrative in South Africa, was almost completely 'technical', focussing on narratives of development rather than geopolitical concerns. In Brazil, in contrast, given the extent to which Huawei had become politicized, developmental counter-narratives were not enough. As a result, Beijing argued that Brazilian dependence on the US undermined the country's autonomy by highlighting the US history of unilateral intervention in Latin America and that the US was not a reliable ally against the backdrop of dashed Brazilian hopes of a free trade agreement with the US and Washington's reluctance to push for Brazil's membership of the OECD (Stuenkel 2022, 99). To highlight this narrative of the US only acting as being Brazil's fair-weather friend,

China - even before the Huawei crisis began - responded positively and quickly to Bolsonaro's request for bids to participate in Brazil's oil auction in November 2019. Helping Bolsonaro avoid embarrassment due to the lack of interest from other parties, the state-owned firms CNOOC and China National Oil and Gas Exploration Development Company (CNODC) became the only foreign bidders. Similarly, at a time when Brasilia came under heavy international criticism for not doing enough to combat the Amazon Forest fires in August, Beijing publicly praised Brazil's environmental record (Steunkel 2022, 99).

Yet the outbreak of the Covid crisis enabled Beijing to prove its reliability and reframe the context through which the US sought to securitize Huawei. As Balzacq (2005, 182) argues, the issue of appropriate *timing* is crucial for the recognition of a threat. In Brazil as in South Africa, the urgency of vaccine access simply overshadowed whatever threat Huawei may have posed.

On April 8, 2021, Brazil recorded 'the highest daily fatalities of the disease on Earth' (Saad-Filho and Feil 2021) and desperately sought masks and ventilators, especially from China. It did not help that Eduardo Bolsonaro, the president's son and de facto minister of foreign affairs tweeted that the Covid pandemic was caused by the Chinese Communist Party (Philips 2020). Yet individual states were more successful. Maranhão obtained 107 mechanical ventilators and 200 000 masks and Sao Paulo 342 ventilators. Given Bolsonaro's denialism, various governors (including Distrito Federal, and Rio Grande do Norte) sought to get vaccines directly from China, most notably Sao Paulo governor João Doria, one of Bolsonaro's political rivals, who was able to distribute a few million doses of CoronaVac in early February 2021[19]. In addition, Bolsonaro was unable to retain health ministers – Brazil had four ministers of health in one year, with one of these, Luiz Henrique Mandetta openly distancing himself from the president and sought to directly negotiate with China. In fact, in April 2020, Mandetta revealed that 600 Chinese mechanical ventilators *en route* to Brazil were being blocked in Miami for 'technical reasons' and that the US' massive buy up of Chinese equipment caused the cancellation of Brazilian orders (Schenoni and Leiva 2021, 248).

With more than 270 000 deaths in Brazil, the minister of communications, Fabio Faria approached various telecoms firms (including those in Europe) for help with vaccines. During a meeting in Beijing in February 2021 with Huawei executives Faria also repeated the request. Huawei noted that the company 'could help with communication in an open and transparent manner in a topic involving the two governments. On February 11, the Chinese ambassador to Brazil responded to Faria, noting the request 'and wrote that "I give this matter great importance". By late February, the first doses of Chinese vaccines were being administered in Brazil and two weeks later, the Brazilian government announced that Huawei would not be excluded from the country's 5G auction (Londono and Casado 2021). Breaking the news, *The New York Times* (15 March, 2021) noted,

[19] Sao Paulo state already had facilities to manufacture CoronaVac with Sinovac and in cooperation with Instituto Butantan.

> The precise connection between the vaccine request and Huawei's inclusion in the 5G auction is unclear, but the timing is striking, and it is part of a stark change in Brazil's stance toward China. The president, his son and the foreign minister abruptly stooped criticizing China, while cabinet officials with inroads to the Chinese, like Mr Faria, worked furiously to get new vaccine shipments approved. Millions of doses have arrived in recent weeks.

Through this process of what Stein (1980) described as 'linkage politics' – between making vaccines widely available to Brazil in exchange for lifting restrictions on Huawei's right to participate in Brazil's 5G network auction- Beijing succeeded to *de*-securitize Washington's attempts to forestall the adoption of Huawei technology in Latin America's largest economy. It is unlikely that the issue of vaccine access *alone* explains Brasilia's conversion. Rather, as Schwartz (2021) has argued, political contestation at the *domestic level* also proved decisive, with Beijing's use of linkage politics, 'tipping the scales' in its favour.

Conclusion

The Huawei case reveals the complexities facing most states in the developing world in navigating the intricacies of a multipolar world order in which power has become much more diffused. According to Balzacq's (2005) framework securitization is a highly context-dependent strategic practice, consisting of the construction of a frame of reference by the securitizing actor directed to a target audience by stressing common needs, interests and even feelings. As the securitizing actor, Brazil and South Africa were generically receptive towards the US' social identity, given their democratic, cultural and to some extent, linguistic commonalities. Yet Washington was unable to persuade government and business elites that the rollout of Huawei-based 5G constituted a security risk. The US' reference frame did not recognize the extent to which the inequality of Internet access, especially in rural areas in Brazil as well as South Africa, and the lack of ICT infrastructure were fundamental concerns. In addition, the significance of Chinese trade and investments in both countries as well as Huawei's long-standing role in the South African and Brazilian market meant that simple cost/benefit considerations militated against the US' securitization move. 'If times are critical enough' notes Balzacq (2005, 182), 'securitization will successfully take place'. What this comparative analysis suggests, is that bad timing can also contribute to the *de*-securitization process. As a contextual factor, the emergence of the Covid pandemic, not only made Covid the more immediate and acute threat, but also how the West and especially the US responded to demands for vaccine access by Brazil and South Africa, moulded *their* frame of reference. In contrast, the optics of China, Russia and India deftly providing respiratory equipment and personal protection apparel, prompted many in the developing world to question the West's reliability. Equally significant then – although Balzacq

largely underplays it – is the role of *counter-narratives or moves* towards de-securitization, an issue of considerable consequence worthy of being a separate analytical indicator within Balzacq's framework. On this point, Huawei's (and subsequently China's) responses in South Africa and Brazil were different. In the former, Huawei launched several social responsibility initiatives to frame a discourse of access and development. Both amongst state elites and much of South African society, the Huawei 'threat' was seen as a non-issue, most likely also given the degree to which South Africa is not as closely aligned to the US as Brazil. In contrast, in Brazil, the Huawei issue exposed the tensions between the Bolsonaro government's aims to *ideologically* align with Washington against the country's growing *economic dependence* on Beijing. As a result, US frames of reference emphasizing social identity claims (Brazil's 'Western' or civilizational identity and social values like those of the Trump administration) clearly echoed amongst the more 'anti-globalist' Bolsonaro camp for whom the Huawei threat were salient. Open anti-Beijing pronouncements from this faction, prompted Beijing to escalate counter narratives, emphasizing the US' history of unilateral intervention in Latin America and disregard for Brazil's sovereignty (Balzacq's 'collective memories') whilst stressing China's role as a much more reliable partner. This strategy proved to be prescient as Covid's destructive consequences forced Bolsonaro to mitigate the damage – especially in political terms. Although it is not clear whether Beijing *explicitly* made the lifting of restrictions against Huawei a *quid pro quo* for the provision of vaccines, as a contextual factor, it certainly contributed to tipping the scales against the 'anti-globalist' camp within the Bolsonaro administration evidenced by less anti-Chinese rhetoric and as a compromise to this group, the adopted policy that federal government services would not be allowed to use Huawei equipment. Finally, the analytical model seeks to delineate degrees of congruence rather than a one-directional causality claim, making it difficult to determine whether pre-existing interests are more consequential than contextual conditions.

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