DOI: 10.30612/mones.v15i29.20155

MONÇÕES
Revista de Relações Internacionais da UFGD

China's diplomatic communication with the Brazilian public: strategies during the Bolsonaro government (2019-2022)

Aline Mendes
Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF)
Niterói, RJ, Brasil
E-mail: aline_ms@id.uff.br
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3189-0512

Abstract: Between 2019 and 2022, under President Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's foreign policy aligned closely with the United States, despite China being its largest trading partner. This alignment intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, as Brazilian officials echoed the conspiratorial rhetoric of the Trump administration (2017-2021), accusing China of creating the virus. This study investigates how Chinese public and media diplomacy countered anti-China narratives and maintained its foreign policy agenda in Brazil during Bolsonaro's presidency. It examines the role of the Chinese Embassy in defending China's interests and managing diplomatic crises, focusing on shifts and continuities in diplomatic strategies compared to the Temer administration (2016-2018). Methodologically, the research employs (i) a comparative analysis of the Chinese Embassy's media presence and diplomatic agenda across both administrations and (ii) a thematic analysis of China's diplomatic narratives in Brazil, particularly during moments of crisis. The findings highlight three new themes in China's diplomatic agenda in Brazil during the Bolsonaro admi-

nistration: the Coronavirus, crisis management, and Sino-Brazilian friendship. Furthermore, the study reveals that China's public and media diplomacy increasingly relies on digital platforms and social media, rather than traditional media outlets, to communicate its narratives and manage its image in Brazil.

Keywords: China; Brazil; diplomacy; foreign policy; Bolsonaro

A comunicação diplomática da China com o público brasileiro: estratégias durante o governo Bolsonaro (2019-2022)

Resumo: Entre 2019 e 2022, durante o governo do presidente Jair Bolsonaro, a política externa brasileira alinhou-se fortemente com os Estados Unidos, apesar de a China ser seu maior parceiro comercial. Esse alinhamento se intensificou durante a pandemia de COVID-19, quando autoridades brasileiras ecoaram o discurso conspiratório do governo Trump (2017-2021), acusando a China de criar o vírus. Este estudo investiga como a diplomacia pública e midiática chinesa respondeu a narrativas anti-China e manteve sua agenda de política externa no Brasil durante o governo Bolsonaro. Analisa-se o papel da Embaixada chinesa na defesa dos interesses da China e no gerenciamento de crises diplomáticas, com foco nas mudanças e continuidades nas estratégias diplomáticas em comparação com o governo Temer (2016-2018). Metodologicamente, a pesquisa emprega (i) uma análise comparativa da presença midiática e da agenda diplomática da Embaixada chinesa nos dois governos e (ii) uma análise temática das narrativas diplomáticas chinesas no Brasil, especialmente em momentos de crise. Os resultados destacam três novos temas na agenda diplomática chinesa no Brasil durante o governo Bolsonaro: o Coronavírus, o gerenciamento de crises e a amizade sino-brasileira. Além disso, o estudo revela que a diplomacia pública e midiática da China passou a depender mais de plataformas digitais e redes sociais, em vez de veículos tradicionais, para comunicar suas narrativas e gerenciar sua imagem no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: China; Brasil; diplomacia; política externa; Bolsonaro

La comunicación diplomática de China con el público brasileño: estrategias durante el gobierno de Bolsonaro (2019-2022)

Resumen: Entre 2019 y 2022, bajo el gobierno del presidente Jair Bolsonaro, la política exterior de Brasil se alineó estrechamente con Estados Unidos, a pesar de que China era su mayor socio comercial. Esta alineación se intensificó durante la pandemia de COVID-19, cuando funcionarios brasileños repitieron la retórica conspirativa del gobierno de Trump (2017-2021), acusando a China de crear el virus. Este estudio investiga cómo la diplomacia pública y mediática de China contrarrestó narrativas anti-China y mantuvo su agenda de política exterior en Brasil durante el gobierno de Bolsonaro. Se examina el papel de la Embajada china en la defensa de los intereses de China y en la gestión de crisis diplomáticas,

centrándose en los cambios y continuidades de las estrategias diplomáticas en comparación con el gobierno de Temer (2016-2018). Metodológicamente, la investigación emplea (i) un análisis comparativo de la presencia mediática y la agenda diplomática de la Embajada china en ambos gobiernos y (ii) un análisis temático de las narrativas diplomáticas chinas en Brasil, especialmente en momentos de crisis. Los hallazgos destacan tres nuevos temas en la agenda diplomática china en Brasil durante el gobierno de Bolsonaro: el Coronavirus, la gestión de crisis y la amistad sino-brasileña. Además, el estudio revela que la diplomacia pública y mediática de China depende cada vez más de plataformas digitales y redes sociales, en lugar de medios tradicionales, para comunicar sus narrativas y gestionar su imagen en Brasil.

Palabras clave: China; Brasil; diplomacia; política exterior; Bolsonaro

Recebido em: 16/05/2025
Aceito em: 20/11/2025

INTRODUCTION

Brazil and China established formal diplomatic relations in 1974. Since then, Sino-Brazilian relations have undergone significant progress, and by 2009, China had become Brazil's primary trading partner (Nascimento; Benevides, 2024). The administrations of Lula (2003-2010) and Dilma (2011-2016) strengthened this partnership through enhanced commercial ties and closer alignment on the international stage, particularly within the BRICS framework. Although the Temer administration (2016-2018) pursued a distinct political agenda compared to its predecessors, it did not underestimate the importance of Sino-Brazilian relations.

However, this period of strengthened Sino-Brazilian ties began to face challenges, starting in 2017 and coinciding with the rise of Jair Bolsonaro's administration in Brazil (2018-2022). Although Bolsonaro initially signaled the continuation of Sino-Brazilian relations, mainly due to China's economic significance as Brazil's major trading partner, his alignment with the policies of the first Trump administration (2017-2021) and the anti-China rhetoric propagated by politicians and ministers close to Bolsonaro threatened the stability of the bilateral relationship. In this context, the Chinese Embassy in Brazil actively addressed allegations against China and managed diplomatic crises. To this end, public and media diplomacy strategies were employed.

Adopting the concise definition of Nicholas Cull, this study understands public diplomacy as "an international actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public" (2009, p. 12). This concept provides the foundational framework for the present analysis. On the other hand, media diplomacy encompasses both the aspects of public diplomacy involving the media and different dynamics, including governmental strategies that utilize communication channels to convey diplomatic messages (Cohen, 1986).

This research analyzes China's public and media diplomacy in Brazil, focusing on the Bolsonaro administration (2019-2022). It examines how the Chinese Embassy defended Beijing's interests and managed diplomatic crises during this period, and identifies the key policy agendas promoted by China. The study aims to understand how China's diplomatic and communication strategies operated within Brazil's specific political context under President Bolsonaro. The study seeks to answer the following question: How did Chinese diplomacy in the public and media spheres operate in Brazil during the Bolsonaro government to counter anti-China positions and advance the interests of China's foreign policy agenda? We hypothesize that during Bolsonaro's administration, the Chinese Embassy in Brazil strengthened its use of public and media diplomacy strategies to manage diplomatic crises triggered by the Brazilian government. In this context, it expanded its media presence, adopting a more active communication approach with the Brazilian public and reinforcing Brazil's relevance within its diplomatic agenda.

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To address this question, the research employed the following methodological approaches: (a) a comparative mapping of the central themes in the diplomatic agenda and the media presence of the Chinese Embassy during the Temer and Bolsonaro administrations. This aims to identify trends in Chinese diplomatic actions in Brazil, highlighting changes and continuities following the transition to the Bolsonaro government; (b) a thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within central themes (Braun; Clarke, 2006).

First, we mapped the actions of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil through its official platform, focusing on the sections dedicated to embassy news and Sino-Brazilian relations. The news section stands out as it compiles the majority of diplomatic actions relevant to this research, including the publication of diplomatic articles in local newspapers, the positions of Chinese ambassadors in Brazil on international issues, and the interactions between Brazil and China.

We collected 121 publications related to the Temer and Bolsonaro administrations. Although the focus of the study is on the latter, the analysis of the preceding period allows for a comparison that highlights changes and continuities in Chinese diplomacy in Brazil during the Bolsonaro government. As a delimitation, we selected articles that directly addressed diplomacy and the promotion of China's image in Brazil, excluding those unrelated to the communication agenda or lacking elements relevant to the study of diplomacy. Subsequently, we conducted a thorough reading of the selected material and developed categorizations based on this analysis, which enabled us to identify the main themes of China's diplomatic agenda in Brazil.

Starting in 2020, we identified gaps in the official platform of the embassy, such as the omission of two opinion articles by Ambassador Yang Wanming published in Brazilian newspapers. In our analysis, these gaps reflect the growing importance of social media in the communication strategy of the Chinese Embassy with the Brazilian public. This shift is consistent with a broader transformation in China's diplomatic communication: in late 2019, Chinese diplomats opened new accounts on Twitter in large numbers, seeking to respond more directly to accusations from Western countries regarding the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, alleged human rights violations in Xinjiang, and restrictions on freedoms in Hong Kong (Nip; Sun, 2022).

Within this context, platforms such as Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) have been increasingly used by the Chinese Embassy in Brazil to disseminate its activities, while the official website has seen less frequent updates. To address these gaps, we expanded our observation to other sources, including the embassy's pages on X and Instagram, as well as texts and interviews by Yang Wanming in Brazilian media. Nevertheless, the material collected from the official website proved effective for a comprehensive understanding of China's diplomatic agenda during this period.

Following data collection, we applied thematic analysis, a methodological approach used to identify, analyze, interpret, and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Souza,

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2019). In accordance with this method, after gathering publications from the Temer and Bolsonaro administrations, we systematically searched for patterns of meaning and issues relevant to the research scope (Souza, 2019). We then analyzed these publications, that is, the qualitative data, and identified recurring patterns, which formed the basis of our themes. Based on the most frequently occurring themes, we developed our analysis, presenting illustrative examples using excerpts collected from the publications and interpreting the data in alignment with the research objectives and questions (Braun; Clarke, 2006).

This study is organized into four sections: the first addresses the concepts of public and media diplomacy; the second examines Sino-Brazilian relations during the Bolsonaro administration; the third provides a brief comparison of China's diplomatic communication under the Temer and Bolsonaro governments; and the fourth analyzes the actions and changes in China's diplomatic strategy toward Brazil during this period.

PUBLIC AND MEDIA DIPLOMACY

The term "public diplomacy" was first formally defined in 1965 by Edmund Gullion, Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, a pioneer in International Relations studies. Gullion described it as a discipline focused on how public attitudes influence foreign policy formulation and implementation. Public diplomacy extends beyond traditional diplomacy, encompassing government efforts to shape public opinion, cross-border interactions among private groups, information on international relations, and professional exchanges involving diplomats, journalists, and intercultural communication practitioners (Gullion, 1965 apud Cull, 2008).

Ramaprasad (1983) highlights that public diplomacy emerged as a transformative approach, moving away from the traditionally secretive nature of pre-20th-century diplomacy. Before World War I (1914-1918), elites conducted diplomatic negotiations privately. However, the rise of mass communication technologies, radio, television, and print media, shifted diplomacy toward a more transparent and inclusive process. As Metzl (1999) notes, globalization and the internationalization of media have reshaped foreign policy, requiring governments to complement traditional state-to-state diplomacy with communication strategies that build global public support and goodwill.

According to Melissen and Wang (2019), public diplomacy requires rethinking diplomatic practices to adapt to evolving public-private collaborations and decentralized global systems. Its integration into governmental structures has made it the "new conventional" approach in diplomacy. In the 21st century, Ministries of Foreign Affairs must master communication principles and techniques, engaging diverse actors, such as foreign publics, diaspora communities,

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subnational entities, international institutions, multinational corporations, and civil society, to navigate global interactions effectively.

Following a similar conceptual trajectory, Gregory (2011) argues that, in the 20th century, public diplomacy was seen as a state tool used by Ministries of Foreign Affairs and government agencies to engage and influence foreign publics, aiming to sway their governments. Today, however, public diplomacy is also employed by state associations, substate actors, and non-state entities to understand cultures, attitudes, and behaviors; build relationships; shape perceptions; and mobilize actions to advance their interests. This shift reflects global trends and the changing role of the state, as new actors increasingly reshape diplomatic practices.

In the 21st century, public diplomacy has become a cornerstone of China's diplomatic strategy. The Chinese leadership increasingly employs public diplomacy tools to reshape its international image, aiming to present China as a trustworthy, cooperative, peace-loving, and developing nation capable of effectively managing its vast population (D'Hooghe, 2011). In China, public diplomacy serves as a functional instrument for communicating intentions, enhancing its global image, countering international criticism, and influencing foreign policy decisions (Hartig, 2016). This approach is vital for China, as global narratives about the country remain largely non-dominant. At the same time, the United States, a prolific user of public diplomacy tools, particularly through media, often promotes negative portrayals of China (Hartig, 2016). As a result, China combines public diplomacy and media diplomacy to defend its interests and articulate its positions in response to Western narratives.

According to Cohen (1986), media diplomacy encompasses all aspects of public diplomacy involving media engagement and governmental strategies that utilize media channels to convey diplomatic messages, not necessarily targeting foreign publics. For example, governments may use the press to send diplomatic signals to other states. In this context, media diplomacy can complement public diplomacy or operate as an independent diplomatic tool, serving similar purposes: promoting a country's agenda and enhancing its international image.

The media serves as a crucial bridge between nations and foreign audiences, complementing official diplomatic channels (Cohen, 2012). Media diplomacy leverages information-age tools, such as television networks, for diplomatic purposes (Valente; Santoro, 2007). According to Gilboa (2001) and Valente and Santoro (2007), it facilitates dialogue between states and international audiences through communication systems. Unlike public diplomacy, which includes non-media activities like exchange programs, scientific collaborations, and bilateral meetings, media diplomacy specifically relies on contemporary communication technologies.

Media diplomacy also plays a strategic role in China's diplomatic approach. President Xi Jinping has frequently urged Chinese media outlets to strengthen their international communication capabilities to "tell China's story well" and effectively project the country's voice (Xu;

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Gong, 2024). As a result, media organizations such as China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Daily, Global Times, and Xinhua have expanded their global reach, actively promoting Chinese initiatives.

This emphasis on international communication is embedded in broader principles guiding China's public diplomacy, particularly the objective of reinforcing a positive national image in developing regions, including Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Within this framework, Latin America occupies a strategic position as part of China's engagement with the Global South, where media diplomacy is mobilized to foster favorable perceptions of China's development model, values, and international role (Mo; Zhou, 2012). Beyond state-affiliated media outlets, China also employs media diplomacy through its embassies abroad. For example, the Chinese Embassy in Brazil uses media as a diplomatic tool to advance China's interests, values, and objectives in the international arena.

During the Bolsonaro administration, China's communication strategy in Brazil focused on public diplomacy with a greater emphasis on digital platforms and social media. This approach aligns with what Arsenault (2014) defines as networked public diplomacy, in which electronic networks and social media are leveraged to enhance a country's public diplomacy efforts. This shift is driven by the proliferation of the Internet and mobile networks, which have overshadowed traditional mass media and surpassed the reach of interpersonal communication efforts. In this context, countries have increasingly recognized digital platforms and social media as highly relevant communication channels for engaging with international audiences (Arsenault, 2014). The use of digital platforms has become essential in an era where the internet has transformed the operational environment of public diplomacy, as the circulation of information has become horizontalized and disseminated by a range of official and non-official actors (Cull, 2013). In this context, public diplomacy faces the challenge of leveraging these networks to effectively communicate with its target audiences.

It is important to highlight that this approach represents a form of public diplomacy closely linked to media diplomacy. Although during the Bolsonaro administration, Chinese diplomacy shifted its focus toward reaching a broader audience through networked public diplomacy, significantly reducing the number of articles published in traditional Brazilian newspapers, digital platforms themselves are also media resources. Thus, while traditional forms of media diplomacy declined, they were simultaneously expanded through media-based communication via digital technologies and social media, an approach defined by Saliu (2022) as digital media diplomacy. According to Adesina (2017), this type of strategy fosters communication between policymakers and citizens and may potentially enable countries to more effectively influence foreign publics and achieve their diplomatic objectives.

It should be noted that these approaches have been increasingly adopted by countries and governments. For instance, the United States Department of State, which handles foreign

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policy and diplomacy, maintains a dedicated YouTube channel for disseminating content related to foreign policy, such as press conferences and visits by the Secretary of State to other countries. As for governments, the Bolsonaro administration itself utilized YouTube live streams to communicate with its constituents during the Coronavirus pandemic. However, since this constituted domestic rather than international public engagement, it does not directly qualify as a form of networked public diplomacy, though it illustrates the significant role digital platforms have acquired in political communication. On platform X, there is a verified account named "Xi's Moments" that shares information about China in English for international audiences, along with subtitled speeches by the Chinese president, thereby expanding the country's reach in communicating with the global public.

Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X have become central to contemporary diplomatic communication in an era of information revolution, where online information flows are accelerated and widely distributed. This phenomenon complicates the control over disseminated information and requires governments to adopt evolving roles in informing and engaging with the public (Nye, 2002). These platforms have become significant not only in countries' diplomatic communication with international audiences but also, and more prominently, in the circulation of information and disinformation about nations. In the contemporary landscape, digital platforms are widely consumed and highly influential. The narratives propagated by both state and non-state actors on these platforms can shape international opinions (Lanoszka, 2019) and exert considerable effects on governmental policies.

During Jair Bolsonaro's administration (2019-2022), digital platforms were extensively employed as a tool for governmental communication in Brazil, and narratives opposing China were propagated by state actors on these platforms. This period witnessed a reconfiguration of Chinese public diplomacy in Brazil, which increasingly turned to social media as a strategic means of engaging with the Brazilian public.

BRAZIL-CHINA RELATIONS DURING THE BOLSONARO ADMINISTRATION (2019-2022)

According to Spektor (2019), during his presidential campaign, Jair Bolsonaro promised a break from previous administrations' foreign policy. This shift not only rejected his predecessors' stance but also redefined Brazil's approach to sensitive issues, including relations with Cuba, Venezuela, and China, as well as human rights and climate change.

The Bolsonaro administration brought significant changes to Brazil's domestic politics, including the politicization of administrative structures, ministerial restructuring, the rise of authoritarian populism, and the centralization of presidential power (Inácio, 2021). Simulta-

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neously, his government reflected and was influenced by global trends, such as the rise of conservative leadership, escalating U.S.-China geopolitical competition, the weakening of international institutions like the UN and EU, and the resurgence of non-cooperative nationalism (Spektor, 2019).

The Bolsonaro administration's foreign policy is often seen as ideologically driven, lacking a coherent vision of national interests (Gonçalves; Teixeira, 2020). This aligns with Bolsonaro's political persona, a retired military officer and staunch advocate of ultraconservative agendas, including "traditional values" like the traditional family, Christian faith, and anti-communism, alongside neoliberal rhetoric promoting entrepreneurship and meritocracy (Lima; Albuquerque, 2019). In this context, Brazil's foreign policy prioritized ideological alignment over national interests, leading to an uncritical alignment with Donald Trump's United States (Gonçalves; Teixeira, 2020).

Bolsonaro frequently expressed admiration for Donald Trump, seeking recognition as a close U.S. ally (Gonçalves; Teixeira, 2020). His alignment with U.S. policies included symbolic gestures, such as saluting the American flag (Menezes, 2019), and substantive shifts, like Brazil's 2019 vote to maintain U.S. embargoes on Cuba, a departure from its consistent opposition since 1992. Other examples include the threat to move Brazil's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, mirroring Trump's decision, and discussions of joint measures to pressure countries supporting Nicolás Maduro's government in Venezuela (Passarinho, 2019; Gonçalves; Teixeira, 2020). Regarding China, there were uncertainties about how Bolsonaro's foreign policy would unfold since the electoral campaign, when the then-presidential candidate visited Taiwan. That visit, along with trips to Israel, the United States, and Japan, signaled from the outset Bolsonaro's alignment with Donald Trump's United States (Saraiva; Silva, 2019).

Beyond Bolsonaro's alignment with Trump's ideals, his administration implemented a "diplomacy of rupture" (Spektor, 2019). Traditionally respected for their expertise and discipline, Brazilian diplomats were sidelined, with key positions filled by inexperienced individuals favored for their proximity to U.S. authorities (Gonçalves; Teixeira, 2020). Central to this shift was Ernesto Araújo, Bolsonaro's Minister of Foreign Affairs and a vocal Trump admirer. In 2017, Araújo praised Trump as a defender of the West against Islamic forces (Schargel, 2023). As one of Bolsonaro's most ideologically aligned ministers, Araújo's leadership deviated from Brazil's diplomatic tradition, reducing strategic partnerships, reversing regional integration efforts, and straining relations with key nations like China (Mori; Idoeta, 2021).

Araújo served as Brazil's Foreign Minister from 2019 until March 2021 under the Bolsonaro administration. Toward the end of his tenure, his rhetoric increasingly targeted China. Zahur (2021) reports that Araújo criticized China on at least seven occasions, accusing it of being undemocratic and violating human rights. While his remarks on the COVID-19 pandemic garnered the most attention, he had previously alleged that China sought totalitarian control

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through its technologies, which he termed "techno-totalitarianism." He also attributed Brazil's economic stagnation to its trade relationship with China and accused the country of restricting free expression by intimidating citizens and interfering in local institutions to advance its global ambitions (Zahur, 2021).

It should be noted that Araújo was not the only figure involved in Sino-Brazilian relations. Even during the campaign, Congresswoman Tereza Cristina Dias, who was later appointed Minister of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply, stated that she had spoken with Araújo and highlighted the needs of the agribusiness sector, emphasizing the importance of moderating declarations regarding fears of Chinese expansion in the country, which could harm trade with the Asian nation (Saraiva; Silva, 2019). Likewise, Vice President Hamilton Mourão emphasized during the administration that, despite the trade war between the United States and China, Brazil would not join the ban on Chinese technology companies such as Huawei, and reaffirmed China's importance as a commercial partner (Saraiva; Silva, 2019). In this sense, although Bolsonaro's foreign policy was widely recognized for its ideological stance, there were actors within the government who held less hostile positions toward China, largely due to the latter's commercial significance. This illustrates the persistence of a degree of pragmatism in foreign policy, specifically, the defense of domestic interests, particularly those of agribusiness, in international relations.

Due to this pragmatism, the disagreements between Bolsonaro, his sons, and Araújo with the Chinese government did not cause significant harm to Sino-Brazilian trade relations. In fact, trade between China and Brazil grew throughout this administration, exceeding US$100 billion in 2019 (Marchesini, 2021). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, this pragmatism, which had been consistently overlooked in favor of appealing to the government's most loyal and ideological support base during previous conflicts (Saraiva; Albuquerque, 2022), was once again called into question as anti-China ideological rhetoric gained strength.

Araújo's stance toward China during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly strained bilateral relations. In March 2020, federal deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, the president's son, publicly attributed the pandemic to China and disseminated defamatory remarks on social media (Quinan; Araujo; Albuquerque, 2021). In response, Chinese Ambassador Yang Wanming demanded a formal apology from the Brazilian government. Rather than seeking to de-escalate tensions, Araújo defended him, characterizing the ambassador's reaction as "disproportionate," "unacceptable," and offensive to Brazil's head of state (Zahur, 2021). Instead of mitigating the crisis, Araújo further exacerbated the diplomatic rift, ultimately necessitating President Bolsonaro's direct intervention through a call to Chinese President Xi Jinping. Meanwhile, Araújo and Yang Wanming never resumed diplomatic dialogue (Zahur, 2021).

The Bolsonaro government's relations with China were frequently strained due to its ideological alignment with Trump's U.S., often overlooking China's importance in Brazil's trade. Ten-

sions worsened during the pandemic, as Trump's denialist stance included anti-China rhetoric and distrust (Quinan; Araujo; Albuquerque, 2021). Throughout this period, particularly during the pandemic, Chinese diplomacy in Brazil worked to counter negative narratives and present its perspective on international dynamics, employing both public and media diplomacy.

CHINESE PUBLIC AND MEDIA DIPLOMACY IN BRAZIL: A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE TEMER AND BOLSONARO GOVERNMENTS

First, it should be noted that although the Temer administration was shorter, which might suggest a limitation for comparative analysis, 63 of the 121 publications in the initial data collection from the embassy's platform corresponded to the Temer government. Thus, the comparative basis between the two administrations remains substantively similar, despite Temer's shorter term. Moreover, these two governments benefit from more comprehensive coverage on the website of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil, as publications only became frequent starting in 2014 and remained regular until 2021. Although the platform remains active, only three publications were made in 2023, for example. While the comparison with the Temer administration will be briefer due to the article's primary emphasis on the Bolsonaro government, the two administrations were nevertheless compared based on the principal themes present in the embassy's publications and their channels of dissemination, namely, newspapers versus digital platforms.

Table 1: Diplomatic Communication Under the Temer and Bolsonaro Administrations

Temer (2016-2018)	Bolsonaro (2019-2022)
Main Themes: Defense of Multilateralism (12,4%); Belt and Road (13,8); Benefits of the China-Brazil and/or Latin America Partnership (27,7%); BRICS (14,6%); Technology and Innovation (16,9%); Others (14,6%)	**Main Themes**: Defense of Multilateralism (9%); Benefits of the China-Brazil and/or Latin America Partnership (13,4%) China-Brazil Friendship; Coronavirus (26,9%); Crisis Management (28,3%); Others (22,4%)
Number of articles published in Brazilian media outlets: 23 (92%)	**Number of articles published in Brazilian media outlets**: 2 (8%)
Number of articles/statements on the embassy's official digital platform: 2 (10,53%)	**Number of articles/statements on the embassy's official digital platform**: 17 (89,47%)

Source: Author's elaboration based on the website of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil.

While some themes, such as the defense of multilateralism, remained present across both administrations, Table 1 indicates notable variations in their relative prominence, as well

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as the emergence of new topics during the Bolsonaro government. In addition to thematic shifts, the table also highlights a significant reconfiguration of communication channels, with a notable contrast between the use of Brazilian media outlets and the embassy's own digital platforms across the two periods. Taken together, these patterns suggest distinct conditions under which China's diplomatic communication operated in Brazil during each administration.

Thus, our second table explores China's diplomatic agenda during the Temer administration based on public diplomacy materials, particularly articles published in major national media outlets by China's ambassador to Brazil at the time, Li Jinzhang, who held the position from 2012 to 2018.

Table 2: The Diplomatic Agenda of China in Brazil during the Temer Administration (2016-2018)

Theme	Diplomatic Objectives	Excerpts from articles published in Brazilian media outlets
Defense of Multilateralism	Intervene in favor of the multilateral world trade order; Strengthen the vision of global economic governance.	"We must defend multilateralism. The creation and evolution of the G20 is a new manifestation of multilateralism and an important step forward in the reform of global economic governance. Today's world needs multilateralism more than ever. We must adhere to the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and the basic norms of international relations, clearly oppose unilateralism and protectionism, safeguard international justice and equity, and defend the multilateral trade system with the WTO at its core" (Li, 2018a, para. 6, translated by the author).[1]
Belt And Road	Share China's visions; Promote multilateralism and international cooperation through joint infrastructure projects.	"China has grown and, at the same time, brought benefits to everyone. Currently, through the 'Belt and Road Initiative', China seeks to unlock the potential for cooperation with other nations and achieve economic integration, coordinated development, and shared results, creating more opportunities for the global economy" (Li, 2018a, para. 7).

contínua

1 All translations from Portuguese to English, throughout this article, are the author's own.

Theme	Diplomatic Objectives	Excerpts from articles published in Brazilian media outlets
Benefits of the Chinese partnership to Brazil and/or Latin America.	Strengthen China's position as Brazil and the region's main trade partner; Promote a joint agenda focused on common trade objectives, such as the defense of multilateralism.	"Our relations with Latin America will not follow the old path of colonialism but will be based on principles such as equality, mutual benefit, openness, and mutual respect, without the imposition of any political conditions. In the last five years, President Xi Jinping visited the region three times and held bilateral meetings with leaders of almost all countries. These meetings served to take the partnership to a new phase, strengthen the joint voice in defense of multilateralism and the free trade system, seek balanced and sustainable growth, as well as safeguard the legal and legitimate rights of developing countries and emerging economies" (Li, 2018b, para. 5). "Over the last decade, trade between China and Latin America has grown 20 times, with China now being the region's second-largest trading partner and, for nine years, Brazil's largest partner. The stock of Chinese investment exceeded US$ 200 billion, and more than 2,000 Chinese companies operating in the region have created over 1.8 million jobs. This partnership has thrived on the pillars of trade, investment, and finance, bringing real benefits to the local population" (Li, 2018b, para. 7).

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Theme	Diplomatic Objectives	Excerpts from articles published in Brazilian media outlets
BRICS	Strengthen the partnership between countries via BRICS; Promote cooperation in the economic and commercial areas; Promote common agendas such as multilateralism and combating protectionism.	"The BRICS will continue to promote cooperation with concrete results. It is the consensus of all that the BRICS should leverage their respective comparative advantages, strengthen the complementarity of their development strategies to achieve the integration of trade and investment, monetary and financial circulation, as well as infrastructure interconnectivity" (Li, 2017, para. 2). "The five countries will remain firmly committed to multilateralism and the basic norms of international relations in pursuit of a new type of connection between nations. We must make economic globalization more open, inclusive, balanced, and beneficial for all, build an open world economy, defend the multilateral trading system, and combat protectionism. We will move forward with the reform of global economic governance, increasing the representativeness and voice of emerging markets and developing countries" (Li, 2017, para. 3).
Technology and Innovation	Position technology and innovation as central elements of Sino-Brazilian cooperation.	"The enhancement of scientific and technological innovation capacity, the acceleration of the cultivation and growth of emerging industries, and the stimulation of entrepreneurship and mass innovation are the main drivers for the transformation and upgrading of China's economic growth model. Meanwhile, in Brazil, the Brazilian Agenda for Industry 4.0 was recently launched, with incentives for 3D printing, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things, among others" (Li, 2018c, para. 5). "I believe that there will be more and more points of convergence in our partnership and increasingly broader spaces for mutual learning. Cooperation in innovation will become a new engine for joint development and bring more benefits to our people" (Li, 2018c, para. 6).

Source: Author's elaboration based on the website of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil.

As shown in the table above, Chinese diplomacy in Brazil employs communication strategies to promote its economic and trade agenda. This focus permeates all themes and objectives observed during the Temer administration. Multilateralism stands as the central agenda promoted by China in Brazil, a concept also reflected in other significant themes such as BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative.

According to Wu and Lansdowne (2008), in the 21st century, China shifted toward multilateralism in its foreign policy, as evidenced by declaratory policies, such as diplomatic speeches defending the multilateral agenda, and operational policies, such as the country's involvement in global and regional multilateral organizations. Although China also participates in multilateral security institutions, multilateralism in the economic arena is the most prevalent.

Multilateralism is institutionalized through laws, norms, and frameworks that regulate international relations (Oviedo, 2005). For China, multilateralism serves as a tool to foster global economic growth, peace, stability, and shared prosperity (Li, 2018a). However, critics argue that China's advocacy for multilateralism aims to surpass the United States as the leading global multilateral actor, eventually replacing it with a China-centric hierarchy (Mastro, 2019). To counter these criticisms and protect its international reputation, China has actively employed public and media diplomacy to defend its commitment to multilateral cooperation. For this reason, the defense of multilateralism is evident in themes such as BRICS, and the Belt and Road Initiative.

Thus, under the Temer administration, Chinese diplomacy in Brazil reinforced the country's economic and trade agenda, engaging with a wide range of issues to advance this goal. Under the Bolsonaro administration, these themes resurfaced in China's public and media diplomacy, though less frequently, giving way to three central axes: Coronavirus, Sino-Brazilian friendship, and the management of internal diplomatic crises.

CHINESE PUBLIC AND MEDIA DIPLOMACY DURING THE BOLSONARO GOVERNMENT (2019-2022)

Based on Table 1, it is possible to identify both changes and continuities between the Temer and Bolsonaro administrations. Overall, China's diplomatic agenda in Brazil maintained its core themes during Bolsonaro's presidency. However, while the themes of China's public and media diplomacy largely remained the same, their frequency varied. In 2018, for instance, the Chinese embassy in Brazil issued eight official statements in defense of multilateralism, whereas throughout Bolsonaro's four-year term, the topic was mentioned in only six diplomatic actions.

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Although themes such as BRICS, the Belt and Road Initiative, and Technology and Innovation remained relevant to China's diplomatic agenda in Brazil, they lost prominence in diplomatic communication to more urgent issues that had not been present during Temer's administration, such as the Coronavirus and crisis management in diplomatic affairs, and therefore appeared less frequently in this communication. This fluctuation in frequency, together with the introduction of new topics, directly reflects the diplomatic challenges China faced during Bolsonaro's government. However, before examining the dynamics of China's diplomacy in Brazil, it is essential to address a broader issue: the coronavirus and the accusations directed at China in the international arena.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, acknowledging its global spread and the severity of the health crisis. The virus responsible for the pandemic was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. As the situation escalated, some international authorities, including U.S. President Donald Trump, held China accountable for the spread and/or creation of the virus.

In this context, the Coronavirus became a central theme of China's public and media diplomacy in Brazil, appearing in 18 official communications from the Chinese embassy on its primary platform alone. Initially, these communications aimed to disseminate information about the crisis and China's role in addressing it, particularly highlighting the support provided to Brazil:

> China consistently develops partnerships with other countries, including Brazil, based on mutual respect, equality, reciprocal benefit, openness, and transparency. The goal of these partnerships is to foster shared progress rather than target or exclude third parties. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, China and Brazil have maintained cooperation in combating the pandemic, with China providing support to Brazil through donations of medical supplies, the sharing of expertise in diagnosis and treatment, and close collaborations in vaccine development, among other initiatives (Chinese Embassy in Brazil, 2020a, para. 3).

Secondly, the Chinese embassy actively sought to refute political statements that defamed the country. Initially, these statements came primarily from U.S. politicians, prompting China to issue diplomatic communications countering rumors, such as the misinformation spread by Donald Trump, who claimed that China had engineered the virus in a laboratory and concealed information about the outbreak's early stages (UOL, 2020). As seen in the previous section, it was not uncommon for Chinese diplomacy in Brazil to respond to tensions with the United States. However, more frequent engagement was required during this administration due to the alignment of Brazilian politicians with Donald Trump's agenda.

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As mentioned in Section 3, during the pandemic, federal deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, one of the president's sons, directly blamed China for the crisis. Rather than mediating this diplomatic dispute, the Brazilian foreign minister chose to defend the deputy. In response, the Chinese ambassador to Brazil, Yang Wanming, addressed the issue on social media, particularly on platform X, and gave an interview to the newspaper *Correio Braziliense*. However, he did not publish articles in Brazilian newspapers, an approach that had been common during the previous administration to formally present China's position on such matters.

This reflects a pattern observed during the Bolsonaro administration, which differs significantly from the Temer government, as shown in Table 1. Under Temer, several articles written by the Chinese ambassador were published in major Brazilian media outlets, such as *Estadão*, *O Globo*, *Folha de S.Paulo*, and *Correio Braziliense*, aiming to promote China's positions through media diplomacy. However, during Bolsonaro's presidency, the Chinese embassy's presence in Brazilian newspapers was significantly reduced, signaling a shift in its communication strategy.

During the Bolsonaro administration, China's communication strategy in Brazil increasingly emphasized public diplomacy through digital platforms and social media, that is, it applied concepts such as networked public diplomacy (Arsenault, 2014) and digital media diplomacy (Saliu, 2022). As part of this strategy, Ambassador Yang Wanming not only used social media platforms such as X but also began publishing statements and articles directly on the official digital platform of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil, bypassing traditional newspapers, a departure from the approach taken in the previous administration, as shown in Table 1. Additionally, in 2020, the embassy launched an Instagram account, further expanding its digital presence.

Leveraging this new diplomatic communication strategy, the Chinese embassy in Brazil addressed not only the issue of COVID-19 but also traditional topics from the Temer administration, along with new dynamics, such as tensions in Sino-Brazilian relations during Bolsonaro's presidency. While the diplomatic dispute triggered by one of Bolsonaro's sons over COVID-19 has already been mentioned, Eduardo Bolsonaro had previously caused friction with China by accusing the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese companies of engaging in cyber espionage and supporting the U.S.-led initiative to form an international alliance rejecting China's 5G technology.

An article written by the spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil, published exclusively on the embassy's official digital platform, not only defended China against the deputy's accusations but also reinforced a key message that became increasingly prominent in Chinese public diplomacy during this period: Brazil and China had been friends throughout their historical relationship, and despite occasional disturbances in the Sino-Brazilian partnership, this friendship would endure.

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> Against the tide of Brazilian public opinion, Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro and certain public figures have made a series of infamous statements that not only disregard the facts of Sino-Brazilian cooperation and the mutual benefits it provides but also undermine the friendly atmosphere between the two countries and damage Brazil's international image. We believe that Brazilian society, in general, does not endorse or accept such behavior. We urge these individuals to cease following the rhetoric of the U.S. far right, to stop spreading misinformation and slander about China and Sino-Brazilian friendship, and to refrain from going too far down the wrong path, keeping in mind the interests of both peoples and the broader trajectory of the bilateral partnership. Otherwise, they will bear the negative consequences and carry the historical responsibility of disrupting the normal course of China-Brazil relations (Chinese Embassy in Brazil, 2020b, para. 4).

In other words, the rhetoric of friendship between the two countries had to be continuously reinforced, something that had not been necessary in previous administrations. This was one of the crisis management strategies adopted by China during this period, a demand that also arose during the Bolsonaro government.

During the Lula (2003-2010) and Dilma (2011-2016) administrations, Sino-Brazilian relations were deepened (Berringer; Belasques, 2020), and under the Temer administration, dialogue with China was one of the priorities of Brazilian foreign policy (Molin; Castelli; Luz, 2019). This period marked over a decade of positive strengthening of bilateral relations, which was hindered by diplomatic friction, making the role of the Chinese embassy essential in managing these challenges.

Eduardo Bolsonaro's remarks were not the only ones to challenge the stability of Sino-Brazilian relations. The Minister of Economy in the Bolsonaro government, Paulo Guedes, accused China of "inventing the Coronavirus," creating a "less effective vaccine" to combat it (Martello, 2021), and described it as an "authoritarian political system riding on capitalism" (Bonin, 2022). Furthermore, he stated that he did not want Chinese companies operating in Brazil (Rodrigues, 2022). China's diplomatic responses to Guedes' comments were made through the X platform and the embassy's website.

Moreover, networked public diplomacy and digital media diplomacy were also employed by the Chinese Embassy in Brazil to respond to accusations against the country that did not originate from individuals directly linked to the Bolsonaro government. For instance, *O Globo* columnist Merval Pereira accused China of permitting slave and child labor, disregarding intellectual property rights, and being a country with significant social inequality. In response, the embassy published an article on its official platform addressing each of these claims and inviting the columnist to visit China to "gain a deeper understanding of a real and authentic China, discover the societal changes taking place, and recognize the role China can play in the international community" (Chinese Embassy in Brazil, 2021).

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Similarly, another *O Globo* columnist, Rodrigo da Silva, wrote an article criticizing various aspects of China, including the Communist Party's leadership and its treatment of ethnic groups such as the Uyghurs and Tibetans. Once again, the embassy chose to respond exclusively through its digital platform, further reinforcing the narrative of Sino-Brazilian friendship.

> Different in history, culture, and social system, China and Brazil, two major developing countries, face the same challenges of economic growth, improvement of social welfare, and strengthening governance capacity. Therefore, our relationship should be based on mutual respect and learning. We hope that Mr. Rodrigo da Silva sets aside his prejudice against China, shows more respect and less hostility, and adopts a more objective and less narrow-minded perspective. He should learn to assess the Communist Party of China and the Chinese nation from an objective standpoint and cease being a negative force that generates friction in the Sino-Brazilian friendship (Qu, 2021, para. 5).

This is an interesting shift, as during the Temer administration, the Chinese embassy in Brazil purchased space in *O Globo* to address controversies and international tensions. However, under the Bolsonaro government, digital communication became the dominant strategy in these interactions. Brazilian newspapers, which had previously been widely used to respond to friction with the United States, were replaced by social media as the primary channel for the Chinese embassy, even for addressing these same issues. It is worth noting that a significant portion of Bolsonaro's presidency coincided with the pandemic, a period in which digital platforms and social media became essential for communication. However, even after the pandemic and into the Lula administration (2023-present), the embassy has maintained this approach in its diplomatic communication with the Brazilian public. Thus, the end of the pandemic did not lead to a return of embassy-published articles in traditional Brazilian newspapers but rather to a progressive strengthening of China's networked public diplomacy and digital media diplomacy in Brazil, particularly on Instagram, where the Chinese Embassy in Brazil has over 250,000 followers, making it the most-followed embassy account in the country.

Therefore, the Bolsonaro administration brought about three key shifts in China's diplomatic communication with Brazil: the replacement of traditional media diplomacy through conventional channels with networked public diplomacy and digital media diplomacy, the use of public diplomacy to manage diplomatic crises triggered by individuals close to the president, and the frequent emphasis on Sino-Brazilian friendship in diplomatic discourse as a crisis management strategy.

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FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In 2024, Brazil and China celebrated the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Over this half-century, the two nations have fostered a relationship grounded in mutual respect, trust, and the pursuit of shared benefits (Brasil, 2024). However, during the Bolsonaro administration, the stability of these relations was threatened by an ideologically driven Brazilian foreign policy agenda, hateful rhetoric directed at the Chinese by individuals associated with the government, and an alignment with the external policies of Donald Trump.

Given this context, this research sought to answer the following question: How did Chinese diplomacy, in the realms of public and media engagement, operate in Brazil during the Bolsonaro administration to counter anti-China positions and advance the interests of China's foreign policy agenda?

Our hypothesis was based on two related points: the intensification of public and media diplomacy strategies by the Chinese Embassy in Brazil to address the diplomatic crises during the Bolsonaro administration, and the expansion of its presence in Brazilian media to communicate more actively with the local public. Through a comparative mapping between the Temer and Bolsonaro governments, we observed a higher frequency of diplomatic articles during the Temer administration, particularly in traditional Brazilian press outlets. This data could suggest a reduction in the Chinese Embassy's public and media diplomacy strategies, which would also imply a contraction in communication with the Brazilian public. However, our observation was primarily focused on the official website of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil, which allowed us to note an increase in communication through digital platforms and identify the main themes of China's diplomatic agenda in Brazil. Nevertheless, the website proved less comprehensive in understanding the scope of public and media diplomacy.

In this regard, we observed the presence of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil on the X and Instagram platforms. Although we have mentioned only these platforms due to space limitations for a broader analysis, we identified, alongside the increased incidence of exclusive diplomatic articles on the embassy's website, a reduction in diplomatic communication through traditional media outlets. In contrast, there was an expansion of public and media diplomacy through digital platforms and social media, a shift that can be defined by the concepts of networked public diplomacy (Arsenault, 2014) and digital media diplomacy (Saliu, 2022).

Ambassador Yang Wanming published fewer articles in traditional Brazilian media than his predecessor but became prominent among Brazilian media and political circles due to his active presence on platform X. He used this platform to manage diplomatic crises by responding to anti-China narratives propagated by politicians and ministers close to Bolsonaro, defending China's foreign policy agenda, and addressing emerging themes such as Sino-Brazilian friendship and the Coronavirus. Notably, during the pandemic, the ambassador also hosted online debates to discuss topics like Brazil-China trade relations.

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Additionally, the Instagram account of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil, created in 2020, has become a relevant channel for strengthening communication with the Brazilian public through public and media diplomacy. The profile posts daily about political dynamics, defends Sino--Brazilian relations and the main themes of China's diplomatic agenda in Brazil, and promotes cultural, tourist, educational, and technological aspects of the country (Araujo; Mendes, 2025). This account has become the largest among embassies in Brazil, emerging as a successful communication strategy for China in Brazil that began during the Bolsonaro administration.

With the end of the Bolsonaro administration and the return of Lula to the presidency of Brazil (2023-present), we argue that Chinese diplomacy in Brazil is likely to reinforce its usual themes observed during the Temer government, reducing the need for managing diplomatic crises and the frequent defense of Sino-Brazilian friendship, which no longer appears to be under threat. However, all indications point to the continuation of communication with the Brazilian public through networked public diplomacy and digital media diplomacy. In other words, the Bolsonaro administration left an important legacy for Chinese diplomacy in Brazil: the expansion of public and media diplomacy through digital channels, capable of reaching a broader audience, and a reduction in diplomacy through traditional media outlets, which have seen their influence decline in this period of constant transformation in the communication landscape. This shift reflects the adaptation of Chinese diplomacy to new information dynamics, prioritizing digital platforms and social media to strengthen its presence and engagement with the Brazilian public.

In summary, this research into China's public and media diplomacy during Brazil's Bolsonaro administration reveals a dual reality of expansion and limitation. Despite its considerable digital reach, these efforts faced inherent constraints. Their primary challenge stemmed not from a lack of activity, but from achieving uneven social visibility and limited public recognition among broad segments of the Brazilian audience. Thus, although China maintained an active and sustained diplomatic presence, it often failed to be interpreted by the public as diplomacy per se, remaining largely peripheral to everyday informational routines.

At the same time, these strategies carried significant potential impacts. By maintaining a continuous presence in digital environments, Chinese diplomacy contributed to the gradual incorporation of China as a recognizable diplomatic actor within Brazil's information ecosystem. Rather than aiming at immediate persuasion, this networked public diplomacy operated through the gradual expansion of awareness, the shaping of interpretive frames, and the normalization of China's diplomatic voice beyond traditional media mediation. From this perspective, it can be understood as influencing the conditions under which perceptions of China are formed in Brazil, while also making visible both its long-term potential and the structural constraints involved in engaging a public for whom official communication competes with multiple, and often more relevant, informational actors.

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