

The Discursive Construction of BRICS: Brazilian Legacy Media and (Non-) Western Alignments

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Received: 25/07/2025

Submitted to peers: 13/10/2025

Accepted by peers: 9/11/2025

Approved: 22/01/2026

DOI: 10.5294/pacla.2026.29.s1.8

Para citar este artículo / To reference this article / Para citar este artigo

Camelo, P. (2026). The discursive construction of BRICS: Brazilian legacy media and (non-)Western alignments. *Palabra Clave*, 29(s1), e29s18. <https://doi.org/10.5294/pacla.2026.29.s1.8>

Abstract

This study investigates the construction of the BRICS bloc in Brazilian mainstream media discourse, drawing on a thematic analysis of 100 articles published in the three most influential outlets of the local print press: *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, and *O Globo*. Theoretically, it engages with previous scholarship on the centrality of Western parameters in the identities of Latin American elites—including the legacy press—as well as on patterns of Brazilian media coverage of domestic and foreign politics. Incorporating analytical and methodological procedures from Critical Discourse Studies, this investigation spans 15 years and further reflects on the mediated representations of BRICS across six subsequent intervals. The analysis points to an overarching discursive shift in the representation of the group in selected outlets of Brazilian mainstream media, from portraying BRICS as an artificial, ill-matched assemblage of incompatible countries to depicting the bloc as a powerful and potentially menacing actor in global geopolitics. Furthermore, a concluding discussion—based on both previous literature and the empirical analysis—reflects on the

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steady salience of Western imaginaries in Brazilian media discourses and further situates the mediated representation of foreign relations against the backdrop of the rise of the local far right, which has seemed to confound sedimented patterns in the dynamics between media and politics in the country.

Keywords

BRICS; Brazilian legacy media; Critical Discourse Studies; media and identity; media and imaginaries.

Construcción discursiva de los BRICS: medios de comunicación tradicionales brasileños y alineamientos (no) occidentales

Resumen

Este estudio investiga la construcción del bloque BRICS en el discurso de los principales medios de comunicación brasileños mediante un análisis temático de 100 artículos publicados en los tres medios impresos más influyentes del país: *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Estado de S. Paulo* y *O Globo*.

A nivel teórico, dialoga con estudios previos sobre la centralidad de los parámetros occidentales en las identidades de las élites latinoamericanas (incluida la prensa tradicional), así como con los patrones de cobertura mediática brasileña de la política nacional e internacional. A partir de procedimientos analíticos y metodológicos de los Estudios Críticos del Discurso, esta investigación abarca 15 años y reflexiona sobre las representaciones mediadas de los BRICS en seis periodos posteriores. El análisis señala un cambio discursivo generalizado en la representación del grupo en determinados medios de comunicación brasileños, que pasa de presentar a los BRICS como un conjunto artificial y desequilibrado de países incompatibles a describirlos como actores poderosos y amenazas potenciales en la geopolítica global. Además, una discusión final —basada tanto en la literatura previa como en el análisis empírico— reflexiona sobre la constante relevancia de los imaginarios occidentales en los discursos mediáticos brasileños y sitúa la representación mediada de las relaciones exteriores en el contexto del auge de la extrema derecha local, que parece haber trastocado los patrones establecidos en la dinámica entre medios y política en el país.

Palabras clave

BRICS; medios de comunicación brasileños tradicionales; estudios críticos del discurso; medios de comunicación e identidad; medios de comunicación e imaginarios.

Construção discursiva dos BRICS: meios de comunicação tradicionais brasileiros e alinhamentos (não) ocidentais

Resumo

Este estudo investiga a construção do bloco BRICS no discurso dos principais meios de comunicação brasileiros por meio de uma análise temática de 100 artigos publicados nos três jornais impressos mais influentes do país: *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Estado de S. Paulo* e *O Globo*. No plano teórico, dialoga com estudos anteriores sobre a centralidade dos parâmetros ocidentais nas identidades das elites latino-americanas (incluindo a imprensa tradicional), bem como com os padrões de cobertura midiática brasileira sobre a política nacional e internacional. Com base em procedimentos analíticos e metodológicos dos Estudos Críticos do Discurso, esta pesquisa abrange um período de 15 anos e reflete sobre as representações mediadas dos BRICS em seis períodos subsequentes. A análise aponta para uma mudança discursiva generalizada na representação do grupo em determinados veículos da mídia brasileira, que passam de apresentar os BRICS como um conjunto artificial e desequilibrado de países incompatíveis a descrevê-los como atores poderosos e potenciais ameaças na geopolítica global. Além disso, uma discussão final — baseada tanto na literatura anterior quanto na análise empírica — reflete sobre a permanente relevância dos imaginários ocidentais nos discursos midiáticos brasileiros e situa a representação mediada das relações exteriores no contexto da ascensão da extrema direita local, que parece ter alterado os padrões estabelecidos na dinâmica entre meios de comunicação e política no país.

Palavras-chave

BRICS; meios de comunicação tradicionais brasileiros; Estudos Críticos do Discurso; meios de comunicação e identidade; meios de comunicação e imaginários.

Introduction

The 2009 inauguration of the BRICS geopolitical bloc cemented the creation of a global geopolitical player, as the new group—initially composed of Brazil, Russia, India, and China and soon thereafter joined by South Africa—would encompass not only a significant percentage of the global population but also substantial and rapidly emerging economies outside the orbit of the Group of Seven. Sixteen years after its creation, BRICS, which now groups eleven countries, has become an important topic of discussion both within and beyond its member states, attracting praise and criticism in worldwide political and media discourse.

A longstanding advocate for strengthening the bloc, current president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was also the Brazilian head of state in 2009, when the bloc was first formalized. Beyond his 2022 win over far-right former president Jair Bolsonaro, Lula—of the center-left Workers' Party (PT)—has seemed to reprioritize BRICS as a core strand of the country's foreign policy. In this context, this study focuses on the discursive construction of BRICS by the Brazilian mainstream press, which has historically frowned upon efforts to enhance relations with non-Western countries in previous PT administrations (Gagliardi & Albuquerque, 2021). With the return of Lula and the PT to presidential power, accompanied by a seeming re-prioritization of BRICS, it is imperative to address media representations of the bloc.

Previous studies have shown how European and North American parameters for media and journalism have long served as a mystified, paradigmatic standard for the Brazilian traditional press (Albuquerque, 2022; Jácome, 2020). Moreover, Latin American elites—including the mainstream press—have long perceived themselves as members/proxies of the West (Gagliardi & Albuquerque, 2021). If such a background would suggest the continuity of a seamless pro-Western identity, recent developments in Brazilian politics appear to have confounded traditional media–politics dynamics, especially since the Jair Bolsonaro government, during which media outlets and journalists were ostensibly targeted by the very administration. Past Bolsonaro's rule, it is

pivotal to reassess Brazilian media representations of initiatives for non-Western alignments in light of a novel political ambiance, now affected by a newly emboldened far right. For such an analysis, BRICS constitutes a privileged entry point.

To assess the discursive construction of BRICS by the Brazilian legacy media, this study examines a corpus of 100 articles published between 2009 and 2024 in three of the most influential Brazilian newspapers: *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, and *O Globo*. Incorporating elements of Critical Discourse Studies (Fairclough, 1992; Krzyżanowski, 2010; Reisigl, 2018), the thematic analysis of this material revealed significant shifts in media depictions of the bloc over this 15-year period. Accordingly, the findings of this study point to a significant discursive shift, in which mediated representations of BRICS are recast from depicting the bloc as a fragmented and abstract entity to portraying it as an increasingly relevant and dangerous institution. Beyond the thematic analysis, this study reflects on the further implications of the discursive representation of BRICS in Brazilian media.

Background and Context

BRICS

First formalized in 2009, BRICS is an intergovernmental group that includes eleven member countries, as of 2025. In its self-description, it pledges to be “a political and diplomatic coordination forum for countries from the Global South and for coordination in the most diverse areas” (BRICS, 2025). The origins of the bloc date back to a 2001 report by economist Jim O’Neill, who then coined the acronym BRIC to refer to Brazil, Russia, India, and China, four countries whose emerging economies could, in his assessment, figure amongst the most important in the world by 2050 (Coulibaly et al, 2018). In 2011, South Africa became a full member of the group, which would henceforth be referred to as BRICS. In addition to these five countries, the group currently comprises Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Iran, as well as a broader number of partners

and applicant countries awaiting potential integration into the bloc. Throughout its existence, the bloc's annual summits have yielded a range of joint projects, including the creation of the New Development Bank and the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement.

As the bloc approaches its 15th anniversary with an ever-expanding membership, BRICS has attracted widespread attention. Indeed, economic indicators have pointed out that its member countries have grown to the point of directly rivalling the Group of Seven: "In 2022, BRICS accounted for 36% of the global economy, against 30% for the G7, forecasting that by 2040, the share of BRICS+ will be 45% compared with 21% for the G7" (Thussu, 2025, p. 364). In scholarly accounts, scrutiny of BRICS has been far-ranging, from the evaluation of the bloc as an interesting platform for the promotion of multipolarity (e.g., Albuquerque, 2023; Albuquerque & Lycarião, 2018) to an oft-reiterated questioning of the democratic credentials of its member-states' rulers (e.g., Heldt & Schmidtke, 2019).

Within Media and Communication Studies, the seminal 2015 book *Mapping BRICS Media* (Nordenstreng & Thussu, 2015) amassed essays elaborating on debates and concepts underpinning the emergence of the group, as well as analyzing and comparing media systems/landscapes in each of the (then) five member states (e.g., Paiva et al, 2015; Straubhaar, 2015). In this volume, Straubhaar (2015) highlighted the very genesis of the notion of BRICS as a movement of rupture from hegemonic categorizations commonly used in the analysis of its founding countries, often underlaid by "world systems or dependency theories" (p. 87). At the same time, he acknowledged potential axes of conflict among the interests of the then-members, triggering "increasingly complex economic relationships between the BRICS countries themselves," particularly in light of China's exceptional position as the world's second-largest economy. In this respect, Straubhaar (2015) underscores the dynamics between Brazil and China as particularly ambivalent, as the latter had, even before 2015, "overtaken the US as the number one trading partner of Brazil"

(p. 95), simultaneously triggering economic opportunities yet potential vulnerabilities for Brazil due to asymmetries in such a relationship. Ten years removed, China's penetration into the economies of several Global South states—indeed, beyond BRICS membership—has been even more pronounced, to the point that its influence is depicted as defying U.S. hegemony in many countries (Thussu, 2025).

Whereas challenges stemming from the (not solely) economic differences among its member countries have long been documented in the literature on BRICS (Straubhaar, 2015)—in particular, the disproportionate weight of China's economic power—BRICS has recently become the subject of further layers of politicization. Notably, amidst the context of tariff-driven protectionism of the second Donald Trump administration, the far-right American president has recurrently targeted the bloc, further announcing intentions to retaliate against its member countries should they attempt to challenge the global hegemony of the U.S. dollar (e.g., Chia & Jordan, 2025; Honderich, 2024). Far from an opposition restricted to the far right, Anglophone legacy media have likewise often depicted BRICS as a direct threat to the geopolitical interests of the West, particularly those of the United States (e.g., Ganesh, 2023; Mead, 2023). Whereas controversies and disputes regarding the bloc have cast global ripple effects, this study focuses on media representations of BRICS by empirically assessing legacy news texts about the bloc in one of its founding states, namely Brazil.

Brazilian Media and Politics

To further situate the disputes at hand, it is pivotal to outline the characteristics of Brazilian mainstream media and the sedimented patterns of their relationships with political actors. Broadly speaking, the Brazilian media landscape is a composite system chiefly centered on privately owned outlets, in which several of the most influential outlets rose to prominence amid the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1964 to 1985. Albuquerque and Pinto (2019) describe the Brazilian media system as a puzzle, wherein “a handful of powerful

families control most of it” (p. 115, *our translation*) while regional outlets are closely aligned to local political interests. In this sense, a deep entanglement between the interests of political and economic elites has created challenges for media democratization in the country (Paiva et al, 2015). At the national level, the notion of “traditional media” or “Big Press” has come to be associated with a few outlets, mostly based in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, that were historically family-controlled. Whereas such concentration can be transversally perceived across the media landscape, the notion of “Big Press” applied to print journalism—which this study focuses upon—has consistently referred to newspapers *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, and *O Globo* (Albuquerque, 2022; Fontes & Marques, 2023; Gagliardi et al, 2022). Although each of these outlets has a specific trajectory and nuances in its ideological leanings, they share characteristics such as a past allegiance to the Brazilian military dictatorship and a sustained connection to economic elites (Albuquerque, 2022; Gagliardi et al., 2022). Similar to previous accounts, this study will examine hegemonic media discourses in Brazil by analyzing texts from these three newspapers.

Furthermore, for the purposes of this study, it is important to address historical patterns in the dynamics of media and politics in the country. In 2009, the year BRICS was founded, Brazil was governed by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, then in his second term as president, a center-left PT leader. The relationship between the Brazilian legacy press and the PT governments of Lula and Dilma Rousseff was characterized by a well-documented pattern of turbulence. In this sense, Albuquerque and Pinto (2019) argue that a strong anti-government bias governed the dynamics of the Brazilian government and the press during the so-called “PT era,” stemming from contrasting interests and identities. It has been argued that this antagonism was ever-present in the disputed 2016 impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, as, from van Dijk’s (2017) perspective, Brazilian media vehemently sought to assert the process’s legitimacy. Since Dilma’s removal and the end of the first “PT era,” it has been argued that a far milder pattern would underlie press coverage of the

succeeding president, Michel Temer, whose market-driven reforms were ostensibly supported by Brazilian legacy media (Gagliardi et al., 2022; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023).

If patterns of hostility between the Brazilian legacy press and the PT have been traced back to the party's very formation (Albuquerque, 2022), the recent emergence of radical actors in Brazilian politics has triggered new lines of contention. Accordingly, the 2018 presidential election of the far-right Jair Bolsonaro would inaugurate a new phase in the dynamics of local politics and media, notably due to the then-head of state's unabashed aggressiveness toward the press. Whereas previous studies have questioned the notion that the dynamics of Brazilian legacy media and Bolsonaro were purely antagonistic (Gagliardi et al, 2022; Ronderos & Glynos, 2023), it is notorious that the former president targeted the press on several fronts, such as in his threats to undermine the renewal of broadcasting concessions and in his public attacks against journalists. Albuquerque (2022) stresses how "Bolsonaro established a pattern of extremely hostile relations with the traditional media, in fact much more so than had occurred during the period in which the PT was in the presidency" (p. 186, *our translation*). In this sense, the emergence of the Brazilian far right has appeared to confound long-sedimented patterns in the relationship between local media and politics, thus reasserting the relevance of empirical accounts focusing on such dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

To assess the construction of BRICS in Brazilian media discourse, this study engages with prior research on the centrality of Western identities among local elites. As in other South American countries, Brazilian private conglomerates have historically constituted a discursive elite closely connected to political and economic power. Far and wide across the continent, such a concentrated ownership structure has helped solidify a historical alignment of local media not only with fellow elites but also with their Western self-identification. Focusing on the Venezuelan context, Abalo (2016) has discussed the centrality of Eurocentrism as a device for "the construction of difference *between*

groups within postcolonial societies” (p. 99, emphasis added), fostering an “elite perspective [that] can thus function to distinguish certain groups from others” (p. 99). In a similar vein, Bolaño (2014) has argued that “the configuration of cultural production and the media structure in Brazil have responded to accommodations and impacts from external and globalized processes throughout history” (p. 226), structuring a type of media arrangement wherein Western cultural references are systematically positioned in a higher status. Regarding the historical constitution of Brazilian journalism, Jácome (2020) has reflected on the centrality of modernization discourses fostering “the reflection of a single desirable journalism, whose genesis could be found in the United States” (p. 18, *our translation*). Accordingly, Albuquerque (2022) has highlighted the existence of hegemonic paradigms in Brazilian journalism, in which the West is positioned as the ultimate site of normative aspiration for values and practices.

Regarding media depictions of Brazilian foreign relations, one account is particularly relevant to the objectives of this study. Focusing on the newspaper *O Globo*, Gagliardi and Albuquerque (2021) reflected on how the relationship between Brazil and fellow Latin American countries was depicted in Brazilian legacy media discourses during the first “PT era.” Accordingly, Gagliardi and Albuquerque (2021) demonstrated how efforts by PT administrations to strengthen such connections were met with resistance in the pages of *O Globo*, which depicted them as “threats to the fundamental values of the West and, in particular, of representative democracy” (p. 13, *our translation*). Accordingly, the authors revisited the historical process of the formation of the Brazilian hegemonic press and displayed how the “reference to the West became a central element of the identity of Latin American societies” (p. 5, *our translation*), especially among the elites aligned with these media outlets. The notion of “exotic alliances,” which titles their article, reflects the Brazilian press’s overall discomfort with foreign policies that allegedly departed from the “natural” alliances with Western countries that the Brazilian state should prioritize. In this sense, Gagliardi and Albuquerque (2021) discuss how, far from “pragmatic” or “natural,” policies of approximation with fellow

Latin American countries were depicted by *O Globo* as “ideological,” “populist,” “anti-American,” “Bolivarian,” and “Third-Worldist.”

The conclusions elaborated by Gagliardi and Albuquerque (2021) constitute a pivotal starting point for the analysis proposed in this study. Considering previous patterns of opposition from local media to Brazil’s cooperation with non-Western countries, the relevance of the discursive representation of BRICS becomes apparent. Such problems become particularly apparent as the bloc attracts worldwide scrutiny and criticism, often articulated precisely in relation to its perceived anti-Westernism (e.g., Piña, 2024). In light of the longstanding self-identification of South American and Brazilian elites—including the local legacy media—with Western values, as well as their historical opposition to “unnatural” approximations to non-Western countries, this study zooms in on the case of BRICS.

Methodology and Sampling Strategy

In its research design, this study incorporates elements from Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). A broad research tradition, CDS is characterized by an overarching emphasis on the dialectics between social structure and discourse, aided by a “critical” disposition that seeks to make “explicit the implicit relationship between discourse, power, and ideology” (Wodak, 2014, p. 304). The notion of *discursive change* is particularly relevant to this study, given the understanding that “discursive events themselves have cumulative effects upon social contradictions and the struggle around them” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 26). Moreover, a sensitivity to the “historical dimension of discourses” (Reisigl, 2018, p. 48), particularly emphasized in the Discourse-Historical Approach to CDS (Krzyżanowski, 2010), informs the analysis’s time span and layout. Moreover, the interpretation of the selected texts was oriented by procedures of thematic analysis as proposed by the Discourse-Historical Approach, albeit not engaging at an in-depth, strategy-oriented level.

Multiple procedures were mobilized to construct a sample of relevant texts. Using the Factiva research tool, the initial filter selected texts from

the newspapers *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, and *O Globo* that referenced the keywords “BRIC” or “BRICS” between January 1st, 2009, and December 31st, 2024. The first scan yielded a total of 5,806 texts, unevenly distributed across the time span. Afterward, results were inspected by month to restrict the analysis to periods when discussion of BRIC/BRICS was more pronounced. To emphasize more recent pieces and to highlight the interval after Bolsonaro’s 2018 election, it was decided that the analysis would encompass one month per year from 2009 to 2018 and two months per year from 2019 to 2024, thereby reducing the sample to 1,620 texts.² Moreover, a filtering tool was then applied to ensure that all retrieved texts referenced BRIC/BRICS within designated sections of the articles—as enumerated in Table 1—thereby narrowing the sample to more relevant content. In cases where such filtering yielded fewer than 9 results, all monthly texts referring to BRIC/BRICS were read. Such procedures narrowed the sample to 716 texts, which were then manually filtered, based on further criteria specified in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the Down-Sampling Procedure

	(1) Initial mapping	(2) Monthly filtering (Factiva)	(3) Relevance filtering (Factiva)	(4) Manual filtering
Criteria	Database: Factiva Keyword search: BRIC or BRICS Outlets: <i>O Globo</i>, <i>O Estado de S. Paulo</i>, <i>Folha de S.Paulo</i> Timespan: Jan 1, 2009, to Dec 31, 2024	Identification of months with more accentuated discussion 2009–2018: One month per year 2019–2024: Two months per year	Filtering by “HLP” tool (Section Name, Column Name, Heading, Corrections, and/or Main Paragraph) Post-HLP correspondences ≥ 8 texts: qualitative filtering, reduced sample Post-HLP correspondences < 8 texts: qualitative filtering, all texts of the month	Criteria for further down-sampling (when applicable): Prioritization of analytical/opinion pieces and of Brazilian texts Avoiding, e.g., interviews, “dry” texts, and “factuals”
No. of texts	5,806	1,620	716	100

Source: Own elaboration

2 Such a methodological choice stemmed from a desire to closely inspect the discursive construction of BRICS in a context of far-right radicalization while navigating the sharp decline in the frequency of texts about the group during periods of non-PT rule—an issue to be revisited in the Results section.

Ultimately, 100 texts were selected for thematic analysis. As seen in Table 2, there is a significant discrepancy in the number of texts analyzed per year, primarily due to the uneven publication frequency of articles about BRIC and BRICS across the three outlets. Although the final sample is not a representative sample of the distribution of texts yielded by the first keyword search, it does reflect the asymmetrical distribution of articles across the time span, an aspect to be elaborated on in the discussion. The distribution of texts per outlet is shown in Table 3.

Table 2. Texts for Thematic Analysis, Yearly Distribution

Year	No. of texts	Year	No. of texts	Year	No. of texts	Year	No. of texts
2009	17	2013	5	2017	1	2021	2
2010	10	2014	21	2018	0	2022	7
2011	5	2015	1	2019	4	2023	13
2012	5	2016	1	2020	3	2024	5

Source: Own elaboration

Table 3. Texts for Thematic Analysis, Distribution per Outlet

Outlet	No. of texts
<i>O Estado de S. Paulo</i>	40
<i>Folha de S.Paulo</i>	28
<i>O Globo</i>	32

Source: Own elaboration

Results

Phase 1: BRICS, Not So Welcome

The first phase of analysis encompasses 17 texts published in June 2009, in the context of the first BRICS summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia. Texts from this month mostly reflected an overarching pessimism, critiquing the foreign policy of the time—the second Lula administration—and expressing low expectations for the bloc’s future relevance. While it is acknowledged that significant transformations occurred in the global

geopolitical and economic order, and that the 2008 U.S. economic crisis posed widespread economic challenges, the notion that the new bloc could serve as a powerful counterweight to the (then) G-8 was highly contested. Several accounts highlighted the artificiality of the acronym as a symptom of the very lack of cohesion among the member countries, which are depicted as lacking converging interests or socio-cultural affinities. In this phase, accounts that were less critical of the BRIC foundation stressed that even if the then-new bloc could serve as an interesting platform for Brazilian interests, it was still a second-class player in global geopolitics.

Articles in this phase often referred to a dichotomy between idealism and pragmatism—to be further reiterated in the following phases—regarding the member states’ agendas in relation to BRIC. In this sense, countries such as Russia and China are depicted as having tangible commercial interests, whereas the Brazilian government was primarily oriented by ideological, “Third-Worldist” values:

Only the Brazilian government [...] seems to believe in a brave journey by the four [then members of BRIC] to “change all this that is there!”—as our president never tires of proclaiming. (Rocha, 2009, *our translation*)

Moreover, texts in Phase 1 generally treated BRIC as an acronym lacking real meaning or cohesion. Whereas some analyses were more optimistic about possible benefits of Brazilian participation in the forum, the overarching premise reinforces the idea that Western (particularly, American) hegemony in global geopolitics was unavoidable and that Brazil could be put in harm’s way if the government—“ideologically”—decided to join forces with the “wrong countries.” Whether seen as a minor agent or as a merely rhetorical non-factor, BRIC is depicted as belonging to a lower echelon in global geopolitics:

It seems clear that, although the BRICS have, in a decade, jumped from 7.5% of the world economy to 15%, they still have an uphill battle to move from the second to the first division in the global power game. (Rossi, 2009, *our translation*)

Phase 2: Growing Pains

The second phase of analysis encompasses 25 texts that were published from 2010 to 2013. During this extended timeframe, BRICS (joined by South Africa after 2011) is depicted as facing fundamental challenges, and it is often reiterated that the bloc still operates as a rhetorical device—particularly for the Brazilian government—thus lacking “real content.” The interests of the member countries are still depicted as disparate, at times in direct conflict, and the claim of ideological interests underlying Brazil’s participation, now led by Dilma Rousseff of the PT, is ever-present. China is often depicted as the most relevant BRICS nation and as the one country in the group that Brazil should prioritize in its foreign policy, due to its expanding trade relationship. Overall appraisals of the bloc are often accompanied by considerations of Brazilian domestic politics, as critiques of BRICS uncertainties are crisscrossed by repeated denunciations of the Rousseff government. In addition to depicting skepticism about the strength of BRICS as a bloc, several articles reiterated the dichotomy between the “Third-Worldist idealism” of PT’s foreign policy and the pragmatism of fellow BRICS countries:

Russia, India, and China have well-defined ambitions to occupy growing spaces in the international economy and politics. These ambitions are national projects and are not subordinated to any Third World fantasy. None of their leaders prioritize South-South trade relations, nor are they willing to participate in movements to reform the global order. (O Estado de S. Paulo, 2010, *our translation*)

Whereas Phase 2 encompasses a long and heterogeneous timeframe, an overarching grand theme is the continuity of existential concerns regarding the bloc, even when it is argued that participating in BRICS could be beneficial for Brazilian interests. Despite the acknowledgment of China’s growing relevance in international politics, there is a continued reiteration of the United States as the sole global superpower, along with a pledge that BRICS actions should not antagonize American interests. Whereas the emerging individual power of the member states is often recognized, BRICS was still portrayed as an artificial grouping without concrete outcomes.

Phase 3: BRICS Has Arrived

The third phase of analysis encompasses 21 texts published in July 2014, in the context of the sixth BRICS summit in Fortaleza, Brazil. Notably, 2014 had the most texts analyzed. Texts from this period indicate a significant discursive shift in which BRICS began to be taken more seriously in the analyzed articles, a change that seems closely related to the creation of the New Development Bank. Whereas considerations of conflicts of interest amongst the group's member countries remain, BRICS is now depicted as a noteworthy institution that, although inscribed within a global order still centered on Western hegemony, presents itself to the world as a major player. Whereas "South-South perspectives"—associated with the actions of the then-PT government—are still criticized, there now appears to be a general view that participation in the bloc is convenient and beneficial for Brazil, especially in providing opportunities to strengthen collaboration with China.

The 2014 BRICS summit, held in Fortaleza (Brazil), is depicted in the analyzed texts as the most consequential meeting of the group, particularly for the announcement of the New Development Bank and the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement. In fact, several texts present such developments as the ultimate sign that the group would have finally moved beyond sheer rhetoric, although many articles call for caution against unrealistically high expectations:

The recent BRICS meeting held in Fortaleza showed that the bloc can go beyond words, although the results are much more modest than the government intends. (Abreu, 2014, *our translation*)

Whereas the results indicate notable discursive change, with BRICS now perceived as relevant to Brazilian foreign policy, many reservations are reiterated. In this sense, pledges to temper "exaggerated" expectations, alongside critical considerations of democracy and authoritarianism in member states, point to ongoing hesitations about the bloc. On the other hand, an explicit defense of BRICS in some of the analyzed texts, accompanied by considerations regarding changes in the global balance of power, indicates transformations. Nevertheless, even when welcomed,

the texts generally refer to the outcomes of the 2014 BRICS summit as instruments which should be taken as complementary to—rather than in opposition to—Washington-based institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF.

Phase 4: BRICS Off the Radar

The fourth phase of analysis encompasses 3 texts published between 2015 and 2017. While the 2014 texts indicated incipient excitement about the group's new developments, the most noteworthy trait of Phase 4 is a sharp drop in discussion of BRICS in the Brazilian mainstream press. Notably, the down-sampling procedure detected no relevant text for analysis in 2018. In this regard, it is important to recall that this interval encompassed a period of significant change and instability in domestic politics, from the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and thus the end of the initial "PT era" to the April 2018 arrest of Lula and the October 2018 election of far-right president Jair Bolsonaro.

In 2015, an opinion piece published in *O Estado de S. Paulo* reflected on Brazil's legacy in BRICS, questioning the results of its involvement and even arguing that participating in the group may have harmed the country. This article depicts BRICS as a fundamentally fragile bloc, argues that its very origin stemmed from the emergence of BRIC as the result of "intellectual fatigue," and questions the criteria for Brazil's inclusion (Ferreira, 2015). An October 2016 article published in *O Globo* reflects on the accomplishments of BRICS, at the brink of its eighth summit in Goa (India), in very different terms. Whereas the text argues that the group had, by then, achieved less than it had initially aspired to in its formation, it highlights the creation of the Contingent Reserve Arrangement and, especially, the New Development Bank—described as "the main achievement of the group"—as particularly relevant (Batista Jr., 2016). Importantly, the author of the text was then vice-president of the New Development Bank. In September 2017, an opinion piece of *O Globo*, written by a secretary of the then Michel Temer administration—interestingly titled "*Pragmatic* foreign economic policy"—elaborates on how BRICS contradicted skeptics and managed

to achieve many results, again highlighting the creation of the National Development Bank (Estevão, 2017). For the purposes of this study, the main outcome of this phase appears to be less about the content of these few texts and more about the scarcity of material referring to BRICS during this interval, particularly compared with the previous phases when the PT was in power.

Phase 5: BRICS and Bolsonaro

The fifth phase of analysis encompasses 15 texts published from 2019 to February 2022, thus covering the bulk of the Jair Bolsonaro administration. During this interval, the discussion of BRICS is mostly situated within broader considerations of the Bolsonaro government's foreign policy. Unlike previous periods, collaboration within BRICS is generally portrayed as a positive agenda and an important strand of Brazilian international policy, although greater emphasis appears to be placed on reinforcing bilateral relations rather than strengthening the bloc.

In 2019, the texts retrieved generally referred to the 11th BRICS Summit, held in Brasília (Brazil). While some articles reflected on the strategic character of Brazilian participation in BRICS, criticism of the “erroneous” demeanor of the former Dilma Rousseff government in allegedly promoting “the absurd idea of ‘North-South’ confrontation” (Waack, 2019) persisted, even three years after her impeachment. Importantly, some articles commended then-president Bolsonaro for seemingly subscribing to a more “pragmatic” attitude regarding China than previously anticipated:

The emphasis on pragmatism with China revealed a President Jair Bolsonaro in stark contrast to the candidate who, a year ago, maintained a narrow—even hostile—view of Brazil's main client. The weight of power forced the change. (O Globo, 2019, *our translation*)

In a similar vein, a 2020 *Folha de S.Paulo* editorial praised Bolsonaro for a perceived change in tone toward China, which is portrayed as a win for “pragmatic” sectors of the government over “ideological” ones (Colleta,

2020). Nonetheless, such apparent goodwill regarding the then-president seems to erode in the following year. A 2021 opinion piece, published in *O Globo*, reflected on the devastating tolls of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil and directly connected them to Bolsonaro's isolationist foreign policy, as he prioritized relations with the U.S. government instead of fostering strategic partnerships with fellow BRICS countries, exemplified in Bolsonaro's delayed purchase of vaccines. Importantly, the then-president is depicted as having pursued a foreign policy "more ideological than that of PT [as] Bolsonaro does not understand foreign policy as a matter of State policy" (Pereira, 2021, *our translation*).

In the last year of Bolsonaro's administration, articles published in February 2022 revolved around his visit to Vladimir Putin on the brink of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While articles tended to coalesce that the timing of the trip was not ideal, they generally depicted the strengthening of Brazil-Russia relations as beneficial and highlighted cooperation between the two countries—oftentimes referring back to past PT administrations—as historical. In one opinion piece published in *O Globo*, the visit was depicted as a kind of necessary evil, in light of Bolsonaro's isolationist pattern and his shunning by Western leaders:

The president ushered in an era of anti-diplomacy. [...] He exposed Brazil to ridicule and became persona non grata in the White House. (Franco, 2022, *our translation*)

Phase 6: Big Bad BRICS

The sixth phase of analysis encompasses 19 texts that were published from October 2022 to November 2024. It incorporates the very last few months of the Bolsonaro administration—after Lula da Silva's 2022 presidential election—and half of Lula's third term. The thematic analysis of the material pointed to initial optimism that was gradually replaced by growing concerns about the new PT government's re-prioritization of BRICS, now perceived as a powerful bloc. In this sense, concerns regarding the democratic credentials of the bloc's member states and the preservation of Western values become more accentuated than ever.

A 2022 opinion piece published in *O Globo* portrays Lula's then-recent presidential win as a highly auspicious development for Brazilian foreign policy, especially compared with Bolsonaro. Accordingly, the text argues that Bolsonaro's reputation had become so tarnished that the "image of Brazil will automatically improve around the world with Jair Bolsonaro's defeat" (Chacra, 2022, *our translation*). As it relates to BRICS, the article stresses China's centrality in global affairs while also claiming that the bloc has weakened over time. Nonetheless, a sharp discursive shift seems to appear as early as one year into Lula's government. Then, a focal point of criticism referred to the admission of new member states to the bloc, which was perceived as a potentially dangerous development for Brazilian interests due to a loss of relative power. Moreover, BRICS is now portrayed as an increasingly anti-Western and anti-American political force, whereas the democratic credentials of the newly joining countries are often questioned. In such a cauldron, Lula was criticized for pledging the importance of democracy in Brazilian domestic politics, yet aligning with countries under authoritarian rule:

While amplifying the economic relevance and territorial distribution of BRICS, the expansion announced yesterday by the leaders meeting in South Africa opens up even greater room for questioning the emerging bloc's commitment to human rights and democratic values. (*O Globo*, 2023, *our translation*)

Similar to American Joe Biden, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva often emphatically defends human rights and democracy, as he did yesterday at the BRICS meeting, while at the same time demonstrating enormous hypocrisy when dealing with friendly dictatorships. (Chacra, 2023, *our translation*)

Unlike earlier phases, the relevance of BRICS is rarely questioned during this period. An overarching consideration across different articles is the acknowledgment of the bloc as a very prominent actor, but one that could be following a dangerous path. As for Brazil's position in the bloc, different appraisals can be found. In some accounts, the expansion of BRICS is presented as a potential window of opportunity for Brazilian foreign policy, as it would imply a growing relevance of the bloc as a whole. Other analyses view the entry of new countries as a sign

of anti-Western radicalization. In any case, the growing force of BRICS entails that withdrawing from the group is not a viable option for Brazil. Thus, Brazilian participation in the bloc is depicted as either beneficial or inevitable.

This week, a phrase circulated persistently among international analysts: Brazil cannot leave BRICS, but staying is also difficult. The risk, diplomatic sources admitted, is that BRICS could end up becoming “a political forum” identified with the anti-Western world. (Figueiredo, 2024, *our translation*)

Accordingly, accounts critical of such seeming anti-Western radicalization often denounced BRICS as a proxy for Chinese or Russian interests. In opposition to that, some articles maintained that Brazil should operate as a moderating actor within the group by preserving a “moderate tone,” maintaining distance from antagonisms and acting as a bulwark of “Western values” within the group:

Brazil must uphold its history of independent diplomacy without compromising Western values such as democracy and human rights. It makes no sense for the current government to seek its own space in foreign policy, often clashing with Washington’s interests, only to fall into Beijing’s arms at the first opportunity. (Globo, 2024, *our translation*)

Discussion

This section engages with the study’s findings by discussing emerging issues revealed by the thematic analysis of the texts. Firstly, a particularly interesting pattern is the repeated claim, especially before 2023, regarding the “artificiality” of the acronym BRIC/BRICS. As the findings show, the bloc was repeatedly criticized—especially at the outset—on the grounds that its founding member-states lacked converging interests and that the very acronym was only “an economist’s invention.” Whereas the bases for the connection between the countries can be called into question, such a notion of “artificiality” is interesting, for it suggests the “natural” character of other intergovernmental associations, as if they were solely based on the innate features of the countries involved. As one text in the very sample articulated, while “it is a fact that the members of the

BRICS present differences, [that] it is not a different reality in other groups, such as the G-7, NATO or the European Union” (Estevão, 2017, *our translation*).

Moreover, a persistent dichotomy between “pragmatic” and “ideological” interests appears to be a recurrent discursive device used to question the basis for Brazilian involvement in BRICS. In such an argument, Brazil—particularly under the PT administrations—is depicted as acting “ideologically” within the BRICS, advancing South-South or “Third-Worldist” perspectives, in opposition to the “actual,” “practical” underpinnings of global policies pursued by countries such as China and Russia. Such findings resonate with Gagliardi and Albuquerque’s (2021) account of *O Globo*’s depiction of “exotic alliances,” wherein Brazilian partnerships with fellow Latin American countries were presented as problematic for their “ideological” character. Regarding this point, it is important to note that the analysis indicated some discursive change, as it seems that the relevance of the association between non-Western countries is increasingly recognized over time, or at least eventually presented as unavoidable due to the economic weight of such partnerships.

Another salient finding of the study concerns the disparate discursive representations of BRICS during PT governments compared with non-PT administrations. Not only did the discussion of BRICS appear much more pronounced during the Lula and Dilma Rousseff presidencies, but the depiction of BRICS as a problem also seemed restricted to these periods. Whereas very few relevant texts were retrieved during the short Temer administration, they contained no critique of Brazil’s involvement in the group and were instead depicted as an ordinary part of the country’s foreign policy. During the Bolsonaro administration, the then-government’s pro-American allegiance was even criticized, with BRICS depicted as an important axis in Brazilian international relations that Bolsonaro had chosen not to prioritize for crude “ideological” reasons.

At last, the analysis indicates that discussions of democracy and authoritarianism have become one of the main lines of contention

in more recent discursive constructions of BRICS. In this sense, the findings of Phase 6 indicate that the representation of BRICS as a frontal threat to Western values and interests has become increasingly salient over time. Such struggles are identified as important sources of concern for the Brazilian government, which is advised to act with parsimony to avoid undermining democracy and human rights, which are portrayed as intrinsically Western values. Especially after Lula’s third election, the bloc has been depicted as both an inescapable axis of Brazilian foreign relations and an increasingly *dangerous* player in global politics. Again, this condemnation appears to be mobilized specifically during PT administrations, as kindred criticism of Brazilian cooperation with fellow BRICS countries was not detected under non-PT presidencies, such as Bolsonaro’s visit to Russia immediately before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Over the examined timeframe, the analysis indicated a discursive shift in the Brazilian mainstream media’s representation of BRICS, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Overall Discursive Change Over Time

2009	2024
BRICS is a meaningless acronym. The group is in the second echelon of global geopolitics. Its future is uncertain and bleak, given the limited convergence of members’ interests. Despite the global crisis, U.S. hegemony remains ever-present. The Brazilian government should set aside ideological convictions when conducting its foreign policy.	BRICS is a powerful and inescapable bloc, although it still faces several challenges. Russia and China seek to consolidate the group as a broad anti-Western front. Brazil must carefully balance the trade opportunities afforded by membership with opposition to anti-Western values and practices.

Source: Own elaboration

Conclusion

This study investigated the construction of BRICS in Brazilian mainstream media discourse by analyzing 100 articles published in three influential media outlets over a 15-year period. Accordingly,

it demonstrated how the bloc was depicted differently at distinct moments in recent Brazilian history. The analysis indicated a more pronounced discussion and criticism of BRICS during periods when Brazil has been governed by the leftist PT, and also signaled tamer, more sporadic references to the bloc under non-PT administrations. The findings of this study point to a sustained commitment by Brazilian mainstream media in highlighting the need to reinforce “Western alignment”—be it to countries or “values”—although more recent texts have been more critical of the unequal representation of Brazil and fellow Southern countries in multilateral organizations. In such a context, discursive representations of BRICS have gradually shifted from depicting the group as an incoherent, rhetorical, and artificial construct to portraying it as an increasingly powerful—and menacing—institution. Referring back to Gagliardi and Albuquerque’s (2021) account of media portrayals of “exotic alliances,” Brazilian media discourses have increasingly refrained from depicting BRICS as merely an “ideological” construct, as Brazil’s engagement within the bloc is now presented as a requirement of international trade. No longer “exotic,” such alliances are now described as almost inevitable yet dangerous, as they are depicted as threatening Western values.

CrediT Categories Statement

Pedro Camelo: Conceptualization; Methodology; Formal analysis; Investigation; Resources; Data curation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing; Visualization; Project administration; Software; Supervision.

Competing Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest and states that no artificial intelligence was used.

Funding

I have not received additional funding for the paper.

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