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van Noort, Carolijn

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Seeking strategic narrative alignment: the case of BRICS and Brazil on the issue of infrastructural development

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges of multilateral forums to form coherent ‘strategic narratives’ that align positively with foreign policy narratives of member states in a multi-stakeholder society. Specifically, it focuses on whether and how BRICS’s communication on the issue of infrastructural development is strategically aligned with Brazil’s foreign policy narrative towards Africa. The case study involves interview data from 2016 with non-state actors in Brazil. This empirical case highlights how narrative misalignment on the national and multilateral level results from a high degree of ambiguity in the narratives, their problematic relation to actual events, and faulty practices of ‘inclusive’ participation.

Keywords: Brazil; BRICS; Foreign Policy; Non-State Actors; Strategic Narratives.

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Introduction

The twenty-first century has seen an intensification of actors engaged in the battle of narratives to shape the meaning of the international order. In this global media environment “the ether of international affairs is filled with multiple narratives – competing and overlapping, epochal and issue-specific” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 102). In this setting, the BRICS multilateral forum, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, holds an important role in re-ordering the meaning of international affairs. The BRICS forum commenced cooperation in 2009 and invited South Africa in 2010 to develop a “multipolar, equitable and democratic world order” (“Second BRIC Summit of Heads of State and Government: Joint Statement.”, article 2). The state leaders of the BRICS forum convene annually to

address pressing matters including trade, global governance and international security, and they communicate their commitments in joint communiqués.

These documents aim to convey strategic narratives about a preferred international order, BRICS as a credible collective actor, and a coordinated position with regards to numerous policy debates. As an overarching term, “strategic narratives” are important political tools to “construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 2). Strategic narratives in policy communiqués can be categorized in three levels: system, identity and issue narratives. System narratives “are about the nature of the structure of international affairs,” identity narratives “are about the identities of actors in international affairs that are in a process of constant negotiation and contestation,” and issue narratives “are strategic in the sense of seeking to shape the terrain on which policy discussions take place” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 7).

One significant issue narrative identified in the BRICS joint statements addresses cooperation in infrastructural development (van Noort 2017). Recent trends in infrastructural cooperation and planning, alongside investments and funding mechanisms have heightened the need for understanding the soft power of infrastructure in forging international relations. This is due to the institutionalization of the BRICS’s New Development Bank in 2014, as well as the emergence of rising powers – such as Brazil – to engage abroad in large-scale infrastructure projects, in the role of both investor and donor (White 2010). The formation of strategic narratives that make sense of these coordinated and state-led practices is problematized in this paper.

There is limited knowledge in the literature about the challenges underpinning strategic narrative alignment on the national and multilateral level. The term *strategic narrative alignment* refers to the *repeating and retelling* of strategic narratives (or the ideas underpinning them) in associated communication. This article explores the challenges of multilateral forums to form coherent ‘strategic narratives’ that align positively with foreign policy narratives of member states in a multi-stakeholder society. Specifically, it focuses on whether and how BRICS’s communication on the issue of infrastructural development is strategically aligned with Brazil’s foreign policy narrative towards Africa by drawing on the perceptions of non-state actors in Brazil regarding both these narratives. Brazil’s foreign policy narrative can be considered as a strategic issue narrative, because it involves “political actions in a context, with an explanation of who the important actors are, what the conflict or issue is, and how a particular course of action will resolve the underlying issue” (Miskimmon et al. 2017, 8).

The foci on Africa and infrastructural development are chosen because the BRICS forum and Brazil are both committed to the development of Africa, they encourage cooperation in infrastructural development, and they promote the democratization of policy-planning. The perception of non-state actors helps clarify whether and how there is a strategic narrative alignment between the two communication practices. The views of non-state actors in Brazil are important in this research because of the increasing role of non-state actors to form and contest strategic narratives, hence validating their effectiveness (Miskimmon et al. 2013). Brazil is an active participant in

the Civic BRICS, BRICS Academic Forum and the BRICS Business Forum. These are events where professionals from the member states, including Brazil, share knowledge, seek possibilities for cooperation, and draft recommendations on policy debates. Representatives of civil society, business and academia in Brazil have therefore well-defined perspectives on whether and how BRICS's and Brazil's communications on the issue of infrastructural development are aligned. Moreover, they are key audiences of BRICS's and Brazil's communication. Therefore, studying the perceptions of non-state actors in Brazil on the communications' strategic alignment enhances the validity of the overall qualitative analysis.

The article proceeds as follows. The first part elaborates on the article's theoretical approach. Secondly, it deals with the research design. Thirdly, it gives a brief overview of BRICS issue narrative on infrastructural development. Next, it explains Brazil's foreign policy narrative towards Africa. Then, it evaluates the alignment between these narratives by presenting the results of the in-depth interviews with non-state actors in Brazil. Lastly, it discusses these findings within the context of strategic narrative alignment.

Theoretical framework

The strategic narrative approach is situated within the 'narrative turn' in the discipline of International Relations (Roberts 2006). This approach analyzes the structure of narratives in political communication (Hanska 2015). Narratives are "constellations of *relationships* (connected parts) embedded in *time and space*, constituted by *causal* emplotment" (Somers 1994, 616). To look at narratives from a strategic point of view, it "stresses how language is used to construct meaning" and "consequently, it explores ways in which organizational stakeholders create a discourse of direction (whether about becoming, being, or having been) to understand and influence one another's actions" (Barry and Elmes 1997, 432). This then captures how "actors select from the raw materials of international affairs to lend narrativity to the experience of international affairs so as to try to create the intended meaning to the political, past, present, and future" (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 12). While the raw materials constitute the ideas, norms and values in a society, it is the narrativity aspect that is at the core and is the strength of strategic narratives. A narrative cannot do without narrative discourse, but a narrative discourse is never a narrative in itself. Indeed, a narrative assembles these variables so as to shape meaning about an issue area.

As there is no perfect formula for drafting strategic narratives, contestation is a probable outcome due to the narrative's contest with other competing narratives. Understanding whether and how strategic narratives on the national and multilateral level are aligned will help explain their success or failure (Oppermann and Spencer 2016). Strategic alignment is explored using a 'narrative grammar' approach. The term 'narrative grammar' refers to Dimitriu and Graaf's systematic approach of examining strategic narratives (2016). One of these grammatical rules deals with the embeddedness of the strategic narratives within "an overall strategic communication

plan, created at the highest level,” because “[s]trategic communication is not only about sending messages, but also about repeating and retelling them continuously, engaging in dialogue, and building a net of relationships around them” (Dimitriu and Graaf 2016, 7). With this in mind, here it is intended to determine if BRICS issue narrative on infrastructure development *repeat and retell* the ideas that underpin Brazil’s foreign policy narrative towards Africa. This strategic narrative approach fosters understanding of whether and how BRICS’s communication about the issue of infrastructure development is embedded within communication activities in one of the member states.

Research design

Data for this study were collected using a qualitative research design to investigate the challenges of multilateral forums to communicate strategic narratives that are aligned with narratives disseminated by the member states (Andrews et al. 2008). A combination of three qualitative approaches was used in the data analysis.

First, a document analysis was adopted to describe Brazil’s foreign policy narrative towards Africa. In order to establish this narrative, an extensive data sample of public documents were examined, including press releases, interviews, and speeches available on the Brazilian Foreign-Ministry website (sources cited as ‘Itamaraty’ – this is how the Brazilian Foreign-Ministry is called in Brazil, and ‘Brazil Gov News,’ short for Brazilian Government News). Additionally, topic-related reports were analyzed, including reports by the World Bank and the Brazilian-based Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) (“Bridging the Atlantic - Brazil and Sub-Saharan Africa: South-South Partnering for Growth.” 2012; “Infrastructure Development: Within the Context of Africa’s Cooperation with New and Emerging Development Partners.” 2015). The description of BRICS issue narrative on infrastructural development was based on existing scholarship.

Second, an in-depth interview approach was used to elicit how various Brazilian non-state actors viewed BRICS’s communication on the issue of infrastructural development in light of Brazil’s foreign policy towards Africa. The twenty interviewees were selected on the basis of their interest or active involvement with BRICS and Brazil’s foreign policy, and their position outside official politics. The chosen professionals resulted from the snowball technique and the geographical location near Rio de Janeiro (e.g., where the author was conducting her fieldwork). The participants represented the interests of three loosely explained ‘groups’ of Brazil’s multi-stakeholder society. For the purpose of this paper, the perceptions of the three groups are not compared with each other. Instead, they characterize the diverse identities and interests that make up Brazil’s involvement with BRICS and Africa’s development. The first group comprised representatives of multinationals from Andrade Gutierrez, Camargo Corrêa, Odebrecht, Petrobras, and Vale. These multinationals pursue activities predominantly in the energy, mining and infrastructure industries and have

an extensive portfolio in Africa. Their participation in BRICS-led discussions vary, and their presence in Africa commenced earlier, in the 1980s. The second group comprised representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGO's) who have been involved in BRICS-led processes, including Oxfam Brasil, Ibase, Fase, and Action Aid. The third group were leading specialists in foreign affairs, including academics and think tank experts from the Institute of Social and Political Studies, Fundação Getulio Vargas, Rio+ World Centre for Sustainable Development, Instituto Brasil Africa, IPEA, the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro, PUC University, the Centre for Integration and Development Studies, the Institute for Brazil-China Studies, and the Brazilian Centre for International Relations.

During the semi-structured interviews, the queries ranged from relatively open-ended questions, to more topical questions about BRICS and Brazil and the communicated policies regarding Africa and infrastructural development. These open-ended questions “are concerned with *why and how, beliefs, opinions, forecasts and narratives*” (Pierce 2008, 118). The semi-structured approach was of particular use to accommodate the different professions and experiences of the interviewees. The technique is flexible, as “you use a schedule of a limited number of topic-related questions and pre-determined, alternative supplementary questions” (Pierce 2008, 118). The interviews lasted approximately one hour each. After the interviews, transcripts were coded for statements about BRICS issue narrative on infrastructural development, and Brazil's foreign policy narrative towards Africa, as well as the alignment between the two. The data collection was conducted in 2016. Therefore, the developments of Brazil's politics after 2016 are not examined in this paper.

Third, these findings were explored using a narrative grammar. The discussion section engages first with the narrative grammar rules that seek to understand whether the strategic narratives communicate a compelling mission purpose, and whether this is justified through procedural and legal practices, and cultural norms (Dimitriu and Graaf 2016, 7). It then relates this analysis to the concept of strategic alignment. Evaluating the strategic narrative perceptions through these grammatical rules helps clarify whether cooperation in infrastructural development is coherently communicated, and subsequently, to identify the challenges in communicating multilateral forums' strategic narratives that are aligned with member state narratives.

In order to assess the alignment of BRICS's and Brazil's political communication about Africa and infrastructural development, these strategic narratives are observed in more detail below.

BRICS issue narrative on infrastructural development

This narrative promotes hard infrastructure, including the development of rails, roads, and ports, and soft infrastructure such as technology-cooperation and knowledge-sharing. van Noort analyzed the BRICS joint communiqués from 2009 to 2016 “to understand how a credible storyworld is evoked” (2017, 122). This analysis highlighted BRICS's action-oriented approach to infrastructural development, for the “systematic strengthening of economic partnership for the

recovery of the global economy” (“Ufa Declaration and Action Plan.” 2015, article 12), buttressed by the institutionalization of the New Development Bank in 2014 (“Agreement on the New Development Bank.” 2014). Important themes supporting this issue narrative have been identified as “strategic synergies for prosperity,” “do-it-yourself” attitude, and the fostering of “sustainable deliverables for global well-being” (van Noort 2017, 125). Indeed, the BRICS forum aims to re-order the world by means of a progressive narrative about innovation and change (Gergen and Gergen 2001, 175). Moreover, the issue narrative on infrastructural development embodies solidarity, geostrategic and economic narratives (van Noort 2019). The BRICS forum advocates for horizontal relations, economic partnerships, and a fairer and more democratic multipolar world order.

Additionally, the BRICS joint communiqués convey a strong commitment to the development of Africa. A notable example is expressed in the Delhi Declaration of 2012:

We attach the highest importance to economic growth that supports development and stability in Africa [...] We will take our cooperation forward to support their efforts to accelerate the diversification and modernisation of their economies. This will be through infrastructure development, knowledge exchange and support for increased access to technology, enhanced capacity building, and investment in human capital [...] (“Delhi Declaration.” 2012, article 36)

The BRICS summit in 2013 was held in Durban, South Africa and pushed an articulated Africa agenda. The summit’s overarching theme was “BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Development, Integration and Industrialisation” (“eThekweni Declaration and Action Plan.” 2013, article 1). Highlighting the New Partnership for Africa’s Development, which is the development organization in Africa committed to integration and infrastructure, the BRICS forum expressed its aspiration to “seek to stimulate infrastructure investment on the basis of mutual benefit to support industrial development, job-creation, skills development, food and nutrition security and poverty eradication and sustainable development in Africa” (“eThekweni Declaration and Action Plan.” 2013, article 5). Sustainable growth is critical in pursuing this infrastructural development objective.

Given the definition of strategic narratives, BRICS issue narrative on infrastructural development is communicated by the BRICS forum to contextualize their multilateral cooperation. Specifically, cooperation in infrastructural development is considered as a causal factor to advance a fair and more democratic multipolar world order. The current encouragement of dialogue, cooperation, sharing of best-practice, and innovative and supportive frameworks such as the New Development Bank promotes sustainable growth and mutual gain, based on fair processes and the inclusive participation of stakeholders. This then is a clear improvement of the past, given the domination of Western powers in the twentieth century, and it paves the way of a Post Western world (Stuenkel 2016).

Brazil's foreign policy narrative towards Africa

The Brazilian Foreign Ministry has since President Lula's election in 2003 diversified its international relations, in particular towards its Latin American neighbors and African partners. There are three objectives supporting this development, according to former Foreign Minister Celso Amorim. First it was a "diplomatic strategy" that originated "from an authentic desire to exercise solidarity toward poorer countries" (Amorim 2010, 231). Second, he argued that "cooperation among equals in matters of trade, investment, science and technology and other fields" reinforced Brazil's stature and strengthened their "position in trade, finance and climate negotiations" (Ibid). And third, Amorim believed that "building coalitions with developing countries" also supported Brazil's effort to reform "global governance in order to make international institutions fairer and more democratic" (Ibid). Brazil's economy and international reputation rapidly grew during the eight years that President Lula was in power. As a strong advocate for multilateralism, Brazil presented itself as a rising star in international organizations (Amorim 2010), consistent with its international status-seeking policy (Stolte 2015). Brazil's advocacies for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council furthermore suggested its great power aspirations ("Brazil and UNSC Reform." n. d.). In essence, Brazil's foreign policy narrative combined solidarity, economic, and geostrategic narratives.

With Lula's intensification of Brazil-Africa relations, it is claimed that "*the new Africa coincides with a global Brazil*" ("Bridging the Atlantic - Brazil and Sub-Saharan Africa: South-South Partnering for Growth." 2012, 3). As member of the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP), Brazil has strong relations with the six Lusophone countries in Africa ("Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries." n. d.), in particular Mozambique and Angola. With the rise of Brazil as a global actor, the country deepened and broadened its partnerships in Africa ("Bridging the Atlantic - Brazil and Sub-Saharan Africa: South-South Partnering for Growth." 2012). Lula's regular visits to Africa shaped the importance of the African agenda and resulted in the opening of twenty new embassies on the continent (Ibid). Solidarity and historical indebtedness motivated Lula's outreach towards Africa, because of Brazil's role in African slavery ("Brazil's Lula 'Sorry' for Slavery." 2005). Amorim argued that "beyond incidental political and economic gains," Brazil's "search for closer relations with Africa [is] guided by historic, demographic and cultural bonds" (2010, 233). The incidental economic gains that Amorim referred to, described Brazil's search for new markets and natural resources in Africa (in compliance with commercial diplomacy- "Commercial Diplomacy." n. d.). The solidarity-motive is pursued by means of development cooperation, which makes Brazil both a receiver and a donor of development aid (Dauvergne and Farias 2012). Technical cooperation, which is a preferred concept according to Brazilian policymakers, encourages technological exchanges and knowledge-sharing ("Technical Cooperation." n. d.). Brazil presents technical cooperation as a more suitable model than North-South donor practices.

President Rousseff's foreign policy narrative towards Africa was communicated as a continuation of President Lula's. However, in practice, domestic challenges restrained her international engagement (Freitas 2016). While there was considerable success in poverty and inequality reduction, in 2015, the economic growth in Brazil stagnated ("Brazil: Overview." n. d.). Ever since, the country has been faced with a severe economic recession, shaken up by the *Lato Jato* investigation which is incriminating many top politicians and businessmen (Moro 2016), and it has been exposed to the impeachment process that was initiated against President Rousseff at the end of 2015. For reasons of fiscal malpractice ("Brazil Impeachment: Key Questions." 2016), President Rousseff was formally impeached on 31 August 2016 and replaced by her Vice-President, Michel Temer ("Michel Temer takes office as President of the Republic." 2016).

The impeachment broke the coalition between the Workers' Party (President Lula and Rousseff) and the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (President Temer) and resulted in a center-right conservative government. Foreign Ministers José Serra and his successor Aloysio Nunes Ferreira revised Brazil's Africa narrative, due to the politicization of the foreign policy agenda ("Brazil: Overview." n. d.). Serra pointed out in his new foreign policy strategy that Brazil's new partners "cannot be restricted to fraternal ties of the past and to cultural similarities, but must, above all, be a way to forge solid partnerships in the present and for the future" (Serra 2016). Furthermore, he argued that "contrary to what was propagated among us, modern Africa does not ask for compassion, but expects an effective economic, technological and investment exchange" (Ibid.). With President Temer renewing Brazil's commitment to BRICS and the Africa agenda ("Brazilian Government reaffirms Commitment to Brics." 2016; "Michel Temer takes office as President of the Republic." 2016), the economic narrative started to dominate the Africa agenda. Furthermore, Serra emphasized the importance of bilateral agreements at the expense of soft power balancing in multilateral institutions.

State assistance, in terms of human resources, technology-exchange, and capital is offered in support of Brazil's Africa agenda. Various Brazilian state incentives have encouraged the internationalization of Brazilian multinationals towards Africa. This includes the "Integration with Africa" initiative of 2008, which provides "\$265m support to Brazilian companies" ("Infrastructure Development: Within the Context of Africa's Cooperation with New and Emerging Development Partners." 2015, 31); the organization of trade fairs by the Brazilian Export Agency ("Bridging the Atlantic - Brazil and Sub-Saharan Africa: South-South Partnering for Growth." 2012, 7); the opening of a Brazilian Development Bank branch in South Africa ("BNDES inaugurates its Representative Office in Africa." 2013); and Rousseff's debt cancellation of US\$ 897.7 million total for twelve African countries. The latter was significant for Brazilian businesses because the Brazilian Development Bank can only grant investment funds when there are no debts outstanding in foreign countries (Renzio et al. 2013). Furthermore, specialized government agencies are involved in policy implementation including the Brazilian Cooperation Agency, the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation and the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation.

These observations suggest that Brazil's foreign policy narrative towards Africa – since Lula's appointment in 2003 – combines geostrategic, economic and solidarity narratives. In other words, there is no single strategic narrative, but rather three. These are independent, and thus may diverge in terms of their political motive to engage with Africa. The document analysis also indicates a changing rhetorical emphasis from solidarity narratives, to geostrategic and economic narratives. This then contextualizes the Africa agenda in relation to the political and economic circumstances in Brazil, it explains whether (or not) groups such as non-governmental organizations are elicited in the formation of strategic narratives, and it shapes the discussion about how infrastructure plans are envisioned and implemented.

Narrative contestation in Brazil

Within the context of the BRICS issue narrative on infrastructural development and Brazil's foreign policy narrative towards Africa, non-state actors in Brazil are members of the target audience of these communications. This section presents prominent perceptions from these individuals with regards to BRICS's and Brazil's communication about Africa and infrastructural development – and whether and how they are associated –, and exemplifies these results with several interview comments. These perceptions are given as overarching themes listed below. I have concealed the names of the interviewees, but included the organization's names.

1) The communication of solidarity, economic and geostrategic narratives in both Brazil's Africa agenda and BRICS's communication about infrastructural development perpetuated narrative contestation. This reveals the lack of a narrative alignment between the three narratives on the national and multilateral level. A professor pointed out that *'there is this very delicate linking between public development cooperation, investments by the Brazilian Development Bank, and private investments.'* Changing emphases in Brazil's foreign partnerships and foreign policy objectives produced significant skepticism. Indeed, an interviewee of the Centre for Integration and Development Studies argued that, *'[w]e do not have an integrated strategy towards Africa. Not even among governmental agencies. So, you have different agencies, in the government doing different things without communication.'* As a root cause, the Foreign Ministry of Brazil is perceived to be divided about its relationship with the West. An eminent professor pointed out that *'there is a cleavage within the Brazilian elite, about are we or are we not humiliated by the West?'* For most of the interviewees, communication on infrastructural development by both the Brazilian Government and the BRICS forum was considered weak and ambiguous.

2) The economic recession and the political turmoil in Brazil have intensified the feeling of lack of direction, regarding foreign investment and development in Africa, and cooperation facilitated by the BRICS mechanism. Spokespersons of Vale and Petrobras – two Brazilian multinationals – described this process as a natural turn of events. They were optimistic about a revival of Brazil-Africa relations when Brazil's economy would improve again. In addition to economic growth

indicators, the business professionals emphasized the importance of coherent and persuasive political communication and international recognition thereof. One spokesperson of the mining company Vale reasoned that, *'the moment is that the game has changed'* but that the game was not over. This suggests that BRICS issue narrative on infrastructural development would only be aligned with Brazil if its national identity narrative as a rising power was restored. A key word in the conversations was *trust*. An economist at IPEA pointed out eloquently that, *'to rebuild trust is the name of the game in 2016.'* This reinforces the necessity for multilateral issue-narratives to be aligned with persuasive national identity narratives, as well as coherent foreign policy narratives.

3) BRICS's communication on infrastructural development failed to indicate how the means (i.e., the mobilization of infrastructure finance), the ways (i.e., cooperation in infrastructural development), and the end objectives (a fairer and more democratic multipolar world order) were connected. Academics and civil society members questioned the meaning of 'development' in BRICS's communication on infrastructure, building on their present concerns about Brazil-Africa relations that blur foreign direct investment with development. Moreover, an interviewee of the NGO Ibase wondered who the real beneficiaries of this multilateral forum narrative were. Infrastructure as an uncontested area in the Brazilian government communiqués resulted in strong disapproval, because it brought to mind the large-scale infrastructure projects that neglect social and environmental justice (exemplified in interviewees working for NGO's Fase and Ibase). Due to Brazil's identity as a *'multilateral animal,'* as a researcher at the Brazilian Centre for International Relations called it, Brazil's foreign policy promises (i.e., resources) were stretched too thin. The means, the ways, and the end objectives in the BRICS issue narrative did not make sense as stand-alone communication, and neither in alignment with Brazil's foreign policy narrative towards Africa.

Interviewees representing Brazilian multinationals questioned the communicated means and ways. A spokesperson of the construction company Andrade Gutierrez commented *'there is no movement just because we are inside the BRICS,'* signaling the absence of actual cooperation in infrastructural development that should be facilitated by multilateral engagement. While academics and civil society members highlighted the preferential treatment of the private sector, various business representatives underplayed the role of the Brazilian government and its membership of the BRICS forum to facilitate any favorable conditions. As a spokesperson of the mining company Vale said: *'In my own experience, being in Africa, I've been there 5 years – I haven't seen any kind of real support from international banks or agencies to really you know[sic] really support the companies. Say hey, let's go together. We're going to help you.'* This experience then influenced the expectations of the business professionals regarding the operations and the real value of the New Development Bank.

4) The perceived competition between the BRICS powers for the 'hearts and minds' of the African people (i.e., markets and resources) undermined any real or imagined collaboration that Brazil would have with the other four powers in areas of infrastructural development. In terms of the perception about BRICS's objective to cooperate on behalf of Africa's economic growth, most of the interviewees highlighted the influence of the historical relationship between Brazil

and Africa, and how distinct this perception is from actual developments. A notable example is a comment by a Brazil-Africa specialist: *‘If you ask Africans if they want to work with Brazilian or Chinese companies, almost 100% of them will say Brazilian. [...] But they work with China, because they have money.’* Furthermore, an interviewee at the Centre for Integration and Development Studies argued that the Brazil-BRICS narrative will be replaced by a Brazil-China narrative in the near future. Indeed, the perception of a new scramble for Africa, and Chinese foreign direct investment in Brazil, undermined the persuasiveness of strategic synergy communicated in BRICS issue narrative on infrastructural development.

Taken together, these results suggest that BRICS’s and Brazil’s communication on the issue of Africa and infrastructural development were not adequately aligned. The interviewees indicated that: the communication of solidarity, economic and geostrategic narratives in both Brazil’s Africa agenda and BRICS’s communication about infrastructural development was problematic; that the lack of direction was intensified and postponed by the economic recession and the political turmoil in Brazil; that the means, the ways, and the end objectives in BRICS’s communication were flawed, also in relation to Brazil’s foreign policy agenda towards Africa; and that talk of collaboration was undermined by economic competition in Africa, especially in light of China’s economic weight.

Discussion

The present study was designed to explore the challenges of multilateral forums to form coherent strategic narratives that align positively with foreign policy narratives of member states in a multi-stakeholder society. Based on the interview data from 2016 in Brazil, the communication of the BRICS issue narrative on infrastructural development was unsuccessfully aligned with Brazil’s foreign policy narrative towards Africa. What follows is a discussion of these findings using a narrative grammar approach. It analyzes how the two narratives share a compelling mission purpose, and it considers the legitimate approaches in achieving this. Subsequently, the challenges that multilateral forums face in communicating strategic narrative alignment are interpreted. Where available, secondary sources were triangulated with observations from the document analysis and the in-depth interviews.

Mission purpose

BRICS’s mission about a fair and more democratic multipolar world order is reiterated in Brazil’s foreign policy narrative towards Africa. The solidarity narrative explains this overarching objective, buttressed by geostrategic and economic narratives. Specifically, BRICS’s narrative is presented as an unproblematic, uncontested narrative that would foster ‘win-win’ solutions under the heading of ‘horizontal cooperation,’ and Brazil’s communication towards Africa encompasses the

same solidarity speech. What causes tension is the subsequent blurring of geostrategic, economic and solidarity narratives on the national and multilateral level to achieve this fair and democratic multipolar world order.

Indeed, Brazil's foreign policy narrative towards Africa switches between strategic, economic and solidarity narratives (Visentini 2010). Diverging from President Lula, Rousseff highlighted the Brazilian business interests, while at the same time urging the companies "to leave a 'legacy' to Africa through the transfer of technology, training and social programmes" (Cabral and Shankland 2013, 8). In comparison, President Temer underscored economic and trade policies for Brazil's benefit in Africa by denouncing ineffective multilateral talk (Barasuol 2016). This balancing-act is not new; instead "the combination of altruistic and self-interested drives in Brazilian cooperation mirrors competing perspectives within Brazil with regards to international relations" (Cabral and Shankland 2013, 17). As a result, "[p]olicy makers and analysts have pointed to a complex mosaic of various groupings that are emerging in a process of 'global à la cartism' or 'messy multilateralism'" (Hurrell 2010, 62). This then results in messy politics following a constantly changing emphasis in Brazil's foreign policy narratives towards Africa.

The blurring of "political diplomacy, African neo-mercantilism and development co-operation" coincides with the formulation of BRICS issue narratives on infrastructural development (White 2010, 222). Accordingly, in terms of their joint vision, the "BRICS policy mantra is to make trade and business partnerships a major component of DC [development cooperation]" (Chenoy et al. 2016, 222). The resemblance therefore makes both narratives discordant with demands for social and environmental justice and ideas of best practice. Indeed, Brazil's pursuit in technical cooperation with Africa is particularly attacked because its invasive and unfair practices (Nogueira and Ollinaho 2013), which leaves Brazil's solidarity rhetoric "more exposed to accusations of hypocrisy" (Cabral and Shankland 2013, 21). A fair and more democratic multipolar world order brought about through cooperation in infrastructural development is too ambivalent in its current narrative form. Though the solidarity and geostrategic narratives are mostly reinforcing, the subsequent communication of the economic narrative problematizes this congruence.

Legitimacy

The narrative grammar rule of legitimacy "dictates that a mission should not only be covered legally and that the decision-making process should be considered procedurally correct, but that it should also tune in to cultural and public norms and values and should be perceived as justified and legitimate by the public at large" (Dimitriu and Graaf 2016, 7).

In the procedural and legal sense, the development of strategic synergies and complementary cooperation is justified in Lula's foreign policy of "autonomy through diversification," which is "an adherence to international norms and principles by means of South-South alliances, including regional alliances, and through agreements with non-traditional partners" (Vigevani and Cepaluni 2007, 1313). This political agenda encouraged the inclusiveness of non-state actors, while in

practice, it favored some actors over others (Pomeroy et al. 2016). Indeed, Brazil's national interests are promoted through the internationalization of Brazilian multinational 'champions' (de Renzio et al. 2013), using public funds from the Brazilian Development Bank. Procedural commitments to benefit Brazil's economic interests is difficult to justify in light of the highly championed solidarity narrative, especially because it "replicates or exacerbates disadvantages of its Southern partners through its trade, investment, and development engagements" (Pickup 2016, 56). While cooperation on infrastructural development is definitely needed in Africa, Taylor argues that "new roads and railways in the absence of serious reforms will hardly make a sustainable and long-term contribution" (Taylor 2016, 181). Indeed, while inclusiveness of non-state actors is encouraged, it does not translate into an accepted paradigm of international development among the groups that make up Brazil's multi-stakeholder society, in particular to representatives of civil society and academia.

Furthermore, Brazil-BRICS cooperation, "can be seen as an example of shifting views around partners and strategies, conferring priority to countries with significant economic power rather than other coalitions" (Suyama et al. 2016, 48). This reinforces the view that "national interests are more important than values in the changing world order and summits might transform into locations of highly complex cross-issue bargaining" (Cooper and Flesmes 2013, 958). Talk surrounding the BRICS summits and the Brazil's Africa agenda were considered empty signifiers and far removed from actual events. It reinforces the idea that solidarity 'talk' is dispensable and that trade and investment are central in Brazil's politics. Be that as it may, Brazil's reliance on sustained market growth and exports of primary commodities brings about other forms of dependencies (Pereira et al. 2016). This then influences the perception of Brazil's engagement with the BRICS forum— especially when taken into consideration the more successful economic members (e.g., China).

In terms of cultural and public norms and values, Brazil tries to distinguish itself from the other BRICS members by highlighting its historical and cultural ties with Africa. Lula's 'turn to Africa' promoted this message through his repeated visits to the continent and promotion of commercial interests. Accordingly, "Brazil's self-serving economic and political interests remain a primary motivator, but are cleverly expressed in a more inclusive and gentler manner" (Borges 2014, 370). The blurring of the three narratives, solidarity, economic and geostrategic, jeopardizes this favorable relationship. Inconsistent values and ideas underpinning the foreign policy agenda towards Africa (by President Lula, Rousseff and Temer) explained narrative contestation in the recorded interviews. This places restraints, for example, on Brazil's technical cooperation, as its recipients "still regard Brazil as a cooperation partner that is distinct from traditional donors, but this perception can only be maintained if the cooperation is not conditioned by commercial interests" (Bry 2015, 453). Attaching South-South Cooperation with a 'price-tag' undermines the legitimacy of Brazil's foreign policy narrative towards Africa.

The early years of BRICS cooperation were considered a welcome change, due to the development of South-South cooperation. However, recent years are marked with skepticism, as

the interviewees stressed multiple times. BRICS *raison d'être* was founded by the idea “that the 21st century should be marked by peace, security, development, and cooperation” (“eThekweni Declaration and Action Plan.” 2013, article 22), but the meaning of these very concepts – in particular development and cooperation – are ambiguous. Therefore, the interviewees were not very confident about how BRICS's cooperation in the area of infrastructural development would unfold in legitimate ways.

Strategic Narrative Alignment

Narrative contestation observed in the interviews dealt with the degree of ambiguity in the strategic narratives, its relation to actual events and the formation processes (echoing the three aspects producing narrative contestation, see Miskimmon et al. 2013). Narrative contestation of one or both strategic narratives was not necessarily considered an indication of weakness or failure of political communication. This engagement suggested that the interviewees deliberated the meaning, while revealing a spectrum of narrative persuasion. However, extensive narrative contestation about all these aspects is considered as a challenge to form strategic alignment between BRICS's and Brazil's communications.

First, there is too much ambiguity in what is considered ‘cooperation’ in the area of infrastructural development, and how that is tied to the identity narratives of the BRICS forum and Brazil as one of its members. The *repeating and retelling* of strategic narratives on a national and multilateral level seeks to normalize this partnership. However, the blurring of solidarity, economic and geostrategic narratives on both levels perpetuate narrative contestation. Specifically, the communication is too ambiguous in terms of BRICS's and Brazil's relations with ‘old’ and new partners, and the diverging values that underpin these international partnerships. While the BRICS forum contest the existing world order, integration into the global economy boosted the BRICS emerging market economies considerably. Additionally, counter-narratives evolve from the antagonistic and cooperating relations between Brazil and China, and the new scramble for Africa (Ayers 2013). The intensification of BRICS activities in Africa is arguably nothing new, but just a shift in global political and economic power.

Second, the interviewees demonstrated that BRICS's mission objective to achieve a fair and more democratic world order buttressed by cooperation in the area of infrastructural development is not an actual reality. In fact, the non-state actors questioned who the beneficiaries of infrastructure are, when development is achieved, and how cooperation on the national and multilateral level would look like. Despite all the attention to solidarity and geostrategic narratives, the emphasized economic narrative seems to best explain current affairs according to Brazilian civil society and academia. In comparison, multinational representatives were hesitant about a multilateral approach to infrastructural development, due to the competing nature of the business. Therefore, communication practices by BRICS have not been instrumental in

shaping the perceptions in Brazil's multi-stakeholder society in terms of win-win outcomes in the area of infrastructural cooperation.

Third, in terms of the formation of strategic narratives, the BRICS forum have engaged the multi-stakeholder society in Brazil. This suggests the forum's commitment to inclusive participation. This practice can be considered as a desirable model in light of BRICS's advocacy for more fair and democratic global governance. However, the BRICS fora are predominantly government-led and therefore, occasionally, critiqued by NGO representatives and leading experts for the debate's co-optation into state-logic and rhetoric (Pomeroy et al. 2016). Being included in the dialogue, and having the opportunity to provide recommendations suggests progress. However, this does not necessarily mean that all the recommendations are included in the joint declarations, and are subsequently repeated and retold. Indeed, positive perceptions of BRICS and Brazil on the topic of infrastructural development is therefore subject to the communication outcomes, and not only to the forum's access to the debates.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore the communication challenges of multilateral forums to form coherent strategic narratives that align positively with foreign policy narratives of member states in a multi-stakeholder society. Using a data set of twenty in-depth interviews with various non-state actors, this study examined the strategic alignment of BRICS issue narrative on infrastructural development with Brazil's foreign policy narrative towards Africa.

The interviews illuminated that the communication of solidarity, economic, and geopolitical narratives – with a constantly changing focus point – produced narrative contestation. The discussion part elaborated on these results using rules from the so called 'narrative grammar.' Overall, the article demonstrates that the BRICS forum faces communication challenges as a result of the ambiguous meaning of 'cooperation' in the area of infrastructural development, and how that is tied to the identity narratives of BRICS and Brazil. The study also found that BRICS's mission objective to achieve a fair and more democratic world order by means of infrastructural cooperation failed to relate to actual beliefs and experiences among Brazil's multi-stakeholder society. Furthermore, it revealed that the decision-making processes were considered fairer, but that the communication outcomes were lacking substance. In short, there was no substantial strategic alignment between the communication practices observed.

The results of this study offer some important insights into the communication practices of the BRICS forum and will be of interest to scholars who are seeking to understand what influences the success or failure of political communication. An integrated approach towards strategic communications seems to be far-reaching for BRICS for the time being. It could be suggested that this is propelled by the rotating chairmanship of the BRICS Summits. Strategic alignment is challenging, especially when there is a lack of direction in a member state over a period of time. Also, the meaning of strategic narratives is interdependent on the economic and

political situation, which in the case of Brazil was specifically tough. The importance of material resources as well as communicative tools confirms the means-ends calculation that is typical for “rationalist literature concerning order” together with “constructivist understandings of international relations” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 89).

More broadly, the findings contribute to existing knowledge on rising powers in global governance, as well as the experiences and practices of non-state actors in the ‘Global South’ with regards to the architecture of governance. Being limited to in-depth interviews in Brazil, the perceptions of non-state actors in the other four BRICS countries are not included. Strategic narrative misalignment is therefore only observed in Brazil on the subject of BRICS’s and Brazil’s communication about Africa and the issue of infrastructural development. In spite of its limitations, this study suggests that an overarching and interconnected strategic communications plan is important for multilateral forums in achieving narrative strength, and public support as a result thereof. It also reveals the complexity in achieving this networked communication effort in view of the commitment to inclusive participation.

Further research could evaluate how cooperation in infrastructure in the operational context of BRICS’s New Development Bank is perceived. The procedural practices of the BRICS Bank can be better assessed now that some time has passed to plan and implement large-scale infrastructure plans.

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