

# Analyzing Jair Bolsonaro's COVID-19 War Metaphors

Written by Matheus Hoffmann Pfrimer and Ricardo Barbosa, Jr.

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## Analyzing Jair Bolsonaro's COVID-19 War Metaphors

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In our recent article 'Brazil's war on COVID-19: Crisis, not conflict—Doctors, not generals' (Pfrimer and Barbosa Jr, 2020), in *Dialogues in Human Geography*, we drew attention to how militaristic terms have been used to communicate Brazil's response to the pandemic and we warn of the negative consequences of portraying the current public health crisis as a conflict. Herein, we present our argument to International Relations scholars with an updated account of what has taken place in Brazil since our intervention was written in late March. Our argument has two explanatory dimensions that complement each other: security and geography.

Authorities have long used war metaphors and analogies to persuade citizens to adhere to emergency measures (Hartmann-Mahmud, 2002; Steinert, 2003). In the same way, war and infectious disease are closely related (Hagopian, 2017; Ingram, 2009): 'war metaphors' are widely used as 'medical metaphors' (Hodgkin, 1985) and, likewise, war is a key vector for and the spread of disease (Bashford, 2014). While we focus on Brazil (see also Augusto, 2020), others have similarly drawn attention to the dangers of talking about COVID-19 through war-framings across the world (e.g., Barker, 2020; Connolly, 2020). The US President Donald Trump has received the most attention as he claimed the COVID-19 pandemic makes him a 'wartime' president. Yet, other world leaders such as French president, Emmanuel Macron have also made public statements, in a nationalist tone, that depicts the COVID-19 pandemic as a state of war. War metaphors are also used in framing internal responses to COVID-19, including countries that have successfully contained the virus, such as China and South Korea, where anti-democratic measures were grounded on metaphors of conflict against an internal enemy.

1,179 deaths were reported in Brazil on 22 May, which accounted for 25% of worldwide COVID-19 deaths in the previous twenty-four hours. Infection data shows that, on that same day, Brazil became the country with the second-highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world (Roser et al., 2020), surpassed only by the United States, with nearly 30 thousand deaths attributed to COVID-19 as of writing. Reports have identified Brazil as the world's fastest growing coronavirus hot spot, set to be the new epicenter of COVID-19. Given that Brazil is trailing behind other large countries in testing (Hasell et al., 2020), these numbers are expected to be higher still. Even if these data are underreported, it is evident that infection and death increase exponentially in Brazil without any expectation for containment. This occurs because politics continues to undermine health, social, and even sanitary problems in Brazil.

Over the past three months, Jair Bolsonaro's administration has used war metaphors to talk about the COVID-19 pandemic, routinely treating the virus as an 'invisible enemy'. Why do Bolsonaro and his administration insist on framing the pandemic and their response through war metaphors? And what does it mean to treat the COVID-19 virus as an enemy?

### Security

To situate our intervention within the Security Studies literature we depart from the 'securitization of politics' vs. the 'politicization of security' debate between the Copenhagen School of Security and the Wales School of Security. Authors from the Copenhagen School of Security, such as Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde (1998) were the first to outline the Securitization Theory. Their main argument sheds light on the intersubjective nature of security and characterizes securitization efforts as 'speech acts' identifying an existential threat against a referential object of

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security. A successfully securitized matter is no longer dealt with as a matter of 'common politics' but, rather, as a question of National Security, i.e., grounded on practices and principles of secrecy, urgency, and priority. This process implies in the securitization of the various dimensions of politics which, in turn, centers securitizing efforts and discursive practices on the subject.

Scholars from the Wales School of Security responded by suggesting that Securitization Theory advances an instrumental rationality that enables states to forgo democratic principles during a state of emergency (Wyn Jones, 1999). As Booth (2007) argues, this posits individuals, instead of states, as the referential object of security. Another substantial contribution by the Wales School of Security is their claim that the politicization of security allows the civil society to take part in discussions about securitized matters.

Scholars from the Paris School of Security further advanced this debate, initiating the 'second generation' of Security Studies, by maintaining individuals as the referential object of security while stressing the importance of security practices within national bureaucracies. In these sites, everyday practices frame what ought to be considered internal and external threats (Bigo, 2016), therefore positioning 'the international' and 'the domestic' as two sides of the same coin.

Given that, so far, contributions and critiques focused more on the referential object and levels of security, the Post-Copenhagen approaches regard the dimension of speech as a problematic element of traditional Securitization Theory since focus is excessively placed on subjects (Balzacq, 2011). Though, as Stritzel (2014) contends three layers constitute securitizing moves: the text, the context, and the actor. For securitization moves to be successful, all three dimensions must be articulated. The context is key not only to understanding how actors and texts are positioned in sociopolitical settings (i.e., geographical ubiquity); the context enables texts to transform discourses in imaginative geographies that project *proximity as familiarity* and *distance as estrangement* (Gregory, 2010).

Political frameworks are key in shaping perception around social phenomena such as the pandemic. The use of rhetorical strategies and discourses have an impact on how social realities are perceived. In this sense, war metaphors are not a coincidence or used by chance. Military terms express feelings of urgency, priority, and secrecy. Therefore, matters of defense are not subject to public debate or everyone's opinion. On matters of war, only those who have military authority decide. With the virus framed as an 'enemy', the pandemic becomes perceived as a 'conflict', not as a 'crisis' which renders a matter of public health into a matter of defense. The Bolsonaro administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is then guided by military rationality. As a result, health authorities have been subjugated to military authorities. In other words, the security *discourse* becomes security *practice*.

The use of war metaphors to frame the pandemic has allowed Bolsonaro's administration to justify replacing technical staff with military officials. As reported by the press, at least 21 military officials have been appointed to key posts in the health ministry previously occupied by civilians, with the number of expected appointments projected as high as 37. Since our intervention was written in late March, two health ministers, both of whom are medical doctors, have been pushed out of office during the pandemic leaving a general as the interim Health Minister.

## Geography

If the use of war metaphors is intentional, what are the motivations for this? The Bolsonaro administration seeks to project a sense of 'peace' and 'stability' internally, so that Brazil can 'return to normal' – namely, so that the economy may reopen. For this reason, the virus is treated as an 'enemy'. If at first the enemy was described as 'invisible', it is then aligned with specific external 'enemies'. In this, Bolsonaro's administration can divert attention from their inability to offer effective responses to the pandemic, while still projecting 'internal stability' in depicting 'turbulence abroad'. The idea of *proximity* and *distance* gains relevance through geographical expressions that manifest and transform space into a feeling of *familiarity* or *estrangement*. For this reason, geographical terms are important to understand the construction of spatialized narratives of power, or what is called imaginative geographies.

Amidst the episodes that have construed this supposedly warlike scenario, the widely publicized 'rescue' of

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Brazilians from the province of Wuhan, in China, stands out. Both the press and official state media publicized the event in a nationalist tone, construing the idea that Brazil did not leave its citizens in a place presented as 'distant' and 'dangerous' and, instead, brought them 'close', to the homeland, where it was supposedly 'safe'. If previously China – Brazil's biggest trade partner – was tacitly classified as an 'enemy', this alignment was made explicit after COVID-19 was portrayed as the 'Chinese virus' in a post retweeted by the President's son.

What is more, the closure of Brazil's border with Venezuela became a priority, not for a public health or strategic reason, but rather for ideological purposes. These imaginative geographies seek to build a perception that the threat associated with the pandemic is outside the national territory, in association with ideologically determined enemies such as China and Venezuela.

## Conclusion

In naming external enemies, the threat that was initially 'invisible' gains a reference. This allows the Bolsonaro administration's militaristic rhetoric to construe the notion that the COVID-19 threat is *external*, thus giving rise to a false sense of stability and *internal* security. Such rhetorical strategy projects 'war' at the international scale, to frame the perception of a threat that comes from outside of Brazil. Hence, 'geopolitical anxiety' replaces 'pandemic anxiety'. The internal threat is then perceived to be minimal as if the virus was not already in Brazil. In this way, such a rhetorical-spatial strategy adds to Bolsonaro's efforts to downplay the pandemic, as evidenced by speeches in which he refers to COVID-19 as a 'little flu', in consort with the president's insistent efforts to delegitimize social distancing measures implemented by governors and mayors across Brazil. This helps explain why COVID-19 remains uncontained in Brazil while heavily affected countries like China and Italy are already reopening.

As pertaining specifically to IR, our contribution points to a lack of studies in Securitization Theory that draws on geographic categories and hopes to contribute towards stimulating such theorizations in the discipline. We conclude, by asserting that another path is possible and required. A language that fosters care instead of conflict must be prioritized. Schwobel-Patel (2020) suggests we substitute war metaphors for language and actions of international solidarity, or as Connolly (2020) succinctly put it: 'make solidarity, not war'. Such calls for international solidarity, are in line with United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres' statement: "The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war. [...] End the sickness of war and fight the disease that is ravaging our world."

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