

Mexico's Contemporary Popular Geopolitics about the Silk Road

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This article attempts to explain current social perceptions in Mexico about the Silk Road. Based on a critical geopolitics approach, the author analyzes how the idea of the Silk Road is socially constructed in Mexican popular geopolitics, focusing on studying digital mass media between 2013 and 2020. The main research questions are: how is the Silk Road notion constructed in Mexican popular geopolitics and what are the geopolitical implications for Mexico? The article discovers that in Mexico, the idea of the “Silk Road” is profoundly close to the idea of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) given China’s geostrategic discourse that constructs the BRI as a “New Silk Road”. The article also argues that Mexico’s social-political agency to deal with China may be hindered by divergent social perceptions in favor and against the “Silk Road”.

Keywords: China, Mexico, Silk Road, Belt and Road Initiative, Popular Geopolitics

Introduction

The present-day world is being drawn into an age of containment geopolitics, in which world and regional powers are defining zones of influence and in which other countries are being forced to choose sides. One of the most important of these zones of influence is the Belt and Road Initiative; formally proposed in 2013. This is a project that officially aims to promote regional and global connectivity via numerous economic corridors, infrastructure projects, transport routes diversification, and cooperation development plans (Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative 2017, 4-5). Even though the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been discursively inserted into the “historical trends” of globalization and open economies, it is a situation that has resulted in identifying China as the “guardian of globalization” (Xi 2019, Yap and Khan 2017). The reality is that the BRI is a reaction to “de-globalization” and “neo-protectionism” tendencies in world politics and the economy, partially as a consequence of the 2008 Global Financial Recession, and manifested in the “balkanization” of political processes –such as the Brexit decision in 2016 (Bugajski 2019)–, the “regionalization” of trade blocs –like the Eurasian Economic Union’s¹ entry into force in 2014, the CPTPP² in 2018, or the RCEP³ in 2022–, and the consolidation of particular geopolitical thoughts –such as the emergence of the “Indo-Pacific” concept that underwrites the United States Indo-Pacific Strategy of 2022 (Blinken 2021).

As it has been widely discussed, the Belt and Road Initiative has brought back the remembrance of Silk Road “nostalgia” into the public arena (Andrea 2014, Gu 2018). Particularly, the BRI narrative rescues the Silk Road idea due to historical legitimacy (Chan and Song 2020, Dadabaev 2017, Winter 2021), promotes Eurasia connectivity (Summers 2016, Winter 2020), and offers a definition of regional and global spaces for political actions (Bhattacharya 2016, Malik 2020, Sidaway and Woon 2017). In addition to this, the BRI has also been conceptualized as a geopolitical project that defines China’s zone of influence to assure its interests and limit regional foreign presence (Clarke 2018, Lee, Wainwright, and Glassman 2017). Understanding the international reach of the BRI as a geopolitical project remains an open and complex research agenda.

The Latin American and the Caribbean region (LAC) is one of the global spaces in which China has notably increased its presence and influence through the BRI. Originally, the LAC region was not included in the Belt and Road Initiative, but when the 2017 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation took place (a significant event that attracted world headlines because of the attendance of several world leaders), the presence of two Latin

¹ Includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia (EUEU n/d).

² Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Transpacific Partnership, derived from the failed Transpacific Partnership after the United States withdrawal in 2017 and which integrates Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam (Australian Government n/d).

³ Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership participants: Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam (ASEAN Secretariat 2019).

American presidents –of Argentina and Chile– drew attention to the political significance of the BRI in Latin America. Up to 2021, 20 LAC countries have signed the Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) which formally recognize attachment to the BRI (Nedopil 2022).

Regardless of the apparent Latin American willingness to participate in the BRI, some countries in the region seem to be reluctant to join the Chinese project. The statement of the current president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), about the strategic necessity to remain attached to the North America region through “Plan Mexico”, a project that aims to deepen regional economic integration facing China’s global challenge (Presidente 2021), elucidates an example of a political choice of belonging to a non-Silk Road geopolitical region, given the actual trend of containment geopolitics. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply that the Silk Road idea has not penetrated the Mexican collective imagination on some level.

According to Morales (2020, 36), Mexico is located in the structural position of regional powers or “high-periphery”, very close to world powers at the center of the world system. Besides, Mexico suffers from the geopolitical conundrum of being the southern neighbor of the United States, the most powerful world power and center of the world system, while at the same time, having China as its second most important trading partner. Also, especially during AMLO’s administration, Mexico has traditionally played the important diplomatic role of being Latin America’s leader and/or mediator (Lozano 2021). Regarding the Silk Road, it has been argued that Mexico could scheme its own “Silver Road” project in order to re-gain the historical status of a “bridge-country” to connect Asia, America, and Europe. Considering that it has been an outsider to the consolidation of the Belt and Road Initiative (Tzili-Apango 2018) and although Mexico has not signed the BRI MoU, it has welcomed the participation of BRI-related agents in infrastructure projects, such as the China Communications Construction Company’s (CCCC) participation in AMLO’s flagship Maya Train project (Mat 2020). All these factors justify the adoption of Mexico as a case of study to explore the Silk Road’s global reach as a current feature of world geopolitics.

Following Cornejo, Haro, and León-Manríquez’s (2013) theses about the importance of perceptions concerning political relations and competition among emerging powers such as China and Mexico, as well as the theses of Dittmer and Gray (2010) and Saunders and Strukov (2018), about the connection between the political and the popular in the formation of perceptions –which ultimately reproduces constituent power in audiences, vital for political agency–, this article is interested in understanding and explaining how perceptions of the Silk Road are socially constructed in Mexican media. Therefore, the main research questions are: how is the Silk Road notion constructed in Mexican popular geopolitics and what are the geopolitical implications for Mexico? As hypothesis, it is claimed that the construction of the notion of the Silk Road in Mexican popular geopolitics is divergent, with some social voices in favor and others against it - a situation that, in the end, could prove difficult for Mexico’s agency in the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

The article is divided as follows: the first section defines the theoretical approach based on critical and popular geopolitics, in the second section a description and data analysis are

offered, and in the third section the article interprets geopolitical codes as a product of a particular “Silk Road” discourse that is present in Mexican mass media. The final section offers some general conclusions and potential research agendas that could complement this study.

The Popular Geopolitics Approach

The Belt and Road Initiative is a current and useful phenomenon that exemplifies how geographies are socially constructed. It is important to recall that the Silk Road idea was first introduced by Ferdinand von Richthofen, who conceptualized it as a “space-time” notion which, in turn, characterized cultural and trade exchanges in Eurasia that transcended time (Kwon 2018). As noted by Winter (2020, 903-907), the Cold War period shaped a particular geopolitical reality that relatively diminished the importance of the Silk Road idea and it was first Japan, during the 1950s, and then the UNESCO, at the end of the Cold War, which kept the Silk Road concept alive in some collective imaginaries, deepening knowledge around the historic phenomenon, and organizing cultural events, diplomatic collaborations, and media projects, particularly in Asia. Even if the Chinese government initially proposed to revive the Silk Road through the “original” earth and sea routes in 2013 –along the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road–, over time the BRI project evolved and amplified its reach, from Eurasia to the world. In 2018, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi formally introduced the BRI project to Latin American countries in the Second Ministerial Meeting of the Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and distinguished Latin America as the “natural extension” of the maritime Silk Road (Wang 2018). To declare that the Silk Road is no longer a Eurasian phenomenon but a global one, or at least that it goes beyond the Eurasian space, is to re-write the geographical meaning of the concept, or as Ó Tuathail (1999) puts it, is to “geo-graph” a territory, to adjudicate a historical and social meaning to space. For this, the BRI as a geopolitical phenomenon is a study-object of critical geopolitics, understood as “the writing of the geographical meanings and politics of States” (Ó Tuathail 1999, 109).

According to Moio (2015, 223-225), critical geopolitics conceptualizes geopolitics as “culturally embedded” spatial practices of statecraft and as the process in which the signification of the territory is bound to larger questions regarding identity and difference, a situation that considers the production of “geopolitical truths” via the main social mechanism of discourse operations. Consequently, to analyze the international phenomenon of the conception of Latin America as the “natural extension” of the BRI is to study discourse from the critical geopolitics point of view.

Methodologically speaking, a notorious way in which critical geopolitics has studied the many discourses of several agents in the world was presented in the work of Ó Tuathail (1996, 1999), who identifies representational discursive practices in specific social agents that reproduce geopolitical codes and geostrategic discourses, both that, in the end, conform to

a geopolitical imagination within specific structures and contexts. Ó Tuathail defines three sets of representational discursive practices formal geopolitics (academia and think tanks), practical geopolitics (decision-makers and officials), and popular geopolitics (mass media). Despite several critics and updates, many studies have reproduced this analytical method (An 2020, Ouellette and Weiss 2015, Saunders and Strukov 2018), a situation that may display its utility for explanatory purposes.

Although there are many critical geopolitics studies about the Belt and Road Initiative –some of them mentioned in this article’s introduction–, there are very few about the geopolitical implications of the BRI to Latin American countries, viewed from a critical geopolitics approach. Most of them are concentrated around discourses of practical geopolitics. For Oliveira and Myers (2020), the BRI notion in Latin America and the Caribbean has been mainly “co-produced” between China and LAC practical geopolitical agents, such as government officials and diplomats, a situation of particular interest to Latin American governments due to investment necessities. Serrano, Telias, and Urdinez (2020) think that there is a gap between what is said about the BRI and what is done through the BRI, a condition that causes optimism about BRI opportunities for the LAC region. A problem identified in the literature is the consideration of the whole Latin American region, so case studies are practically non-existent. An exception is the contribution of Montoya, Lemus, and Kaltenecker (2019), who study geopolitical codes derived from the conception of the BRI project in the cases of Brazil and Mexico and whose conclusions suggest that China’s increasing presence in Latin America and the Caribbean through the BRI is geopolitically motivated. The article of van Noort and Colley (2021) is also illustrative in this sense because even if they do not engage in a LAC case-study analysis, they scrutinize how the BRI as “strategic narrative” shapes Mexico’s policies in maintaining national security and securing economic benefits; the authors find that Mexico’s construction of the BRI idea reflects a partial embrace of the BRI project, mainly deducted from official discourses and documents. In order to contribute to a critical geopolitics research line about LAC and Mexico’s geopolitical discourses that signify the Silk Road idea, this article is focused on studying the construction of the Silk Road idea as a geopolitical code in the representational discourse practice of Mexican popular geopolitics, particularly on digital mass media. Moisió (2015, 226) defines “popular geopolitics” as geopolitical narratives and discourses that are simultaneously consumed and (re)produced in audiences and popular cultures. As for a geopolitical code, it is defined as a strategic and specific calculation of relational nature that identifies benefits or menaces and the conjunction of geopolitical codes forms a particular geopolitical vision or imagination (Flint and Zhu 2019, 96). Therefore, the article aims to understand how the “Silk Road” notion is geopolitically coded and how close is to the Belt and Road notion in Mexican popular understanding.

The development of popular geopolitics as an analytical tool has widened the agents and sources of discourses susceptible to study. Saunders and Strukov (2018, 8) draw attention to four modalities for studying popular geopolitics phenomena: institutions and processes involved in cultural and textual production, “geopolitical moments” in media representations,

the ideological structure of texts, and audience reception of discourses. Dittmer and Gray (2016) propose a methodological synergy between the study of social activism (feminist geopolitics), performances (non-representational theory), and media (audience studies) to conform to a “popular geopolitics 2.0” that could explain “the everyday”. This article agrees with the necessity of methodological diversity as a condition to study popular geopolitics, particularly “digital geopolitics” (Debrix 2007) and “tabloid geopolitics” (Suslov 2014) since they are expressions of popular geopolitics and facilitate access to official and grassroots discourses at the popular level. This includes mediatized discursive formations that take advantage of social subjectivities to produce political realities and in which it is possible to find modalities. Hence, this article studies how the “Silk Road” as a geopolitical code is discursively constructed in Mexican digital mass media.

In essence, critical geopolitics is a useful approach to understand how particular geographies assemble and popular geopolitics offers the sphere through which particular geopolitical codes are communicated to audiences, which, in the end, contributes to the social (re)production of a particular geographic meaning. It is noteworthy that popular geopolitics focuses on understanding how particular ideas about geography are (re)produced in mass media, which makes them available for consumption. Therefore, this article is not concerned with how Mexican society understands the Silk Road idea but with what geopolitical codes surround the Silk Road in Mexican mass media and thus makes a particular meaning of “Silk Road” available for mass consumption.

Silk Road in Mexican Popular Perceptions

The period of study ranges from 2013 –the year of the start of the BRI project– to 2020. For data collection and analysis, the article attempted to find balance among the left, center, and right-oriented digital publications; the most representative newspapers and news websites in Mexico were taken into consideration. According to Huerta and Gómez (2016, 677), the *Organización Editorial Mexicana* (OEM) group is the biggest publishing house for newspapers, which makes *El Sol de México*, one of the more circulated nationwide newspapers in Mexico, as is one of its many publications. After OEM there is the *Grupo Reforma* editorial but access to this newspaper is limited to subscribers. Then, the most circulated newspapers in order of market shares are *El Universal*, *La Jornada*, and *Milenio*.

Based on Rodelo and Muñiz (2016), it is possible to identify *Aristegui Noticias* and *La Jornada* as left-oriented news websites, while *El Sol de México*, *El Universal*, and *TV Azteca* are included in the center spectrum, and *Milenio* as well as *Televisa* are more right-wing news sources. It is fair to say that this categorization is not conclusive, as many opinion articles may differ from the generally accepted political orientation of the media. In consequence, 49 articles were reviewed from these seven sources; 24.5% of entries related to the “silk road” search keyword appeared in the *Milenio* news website, followed by 20.4% in *La Jornada*, 18.4%-*El Universal*, 16.3%-*El Sol de México*, 8.2%-*Aristegui Noticias*, 8.2%-*Televisa*, and finally

4.1%-TV *Azteca*.

Initially, some news titles may reveal bias in the social construction of the “Silk Road” concept. In this sense, it is fundamental to inquire if the BRI project is in fact a “new Silk Road” as Chinese political discourse has tried to characterize it. This paper argues that the ancient Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative are two completely different phenomena, the first being a historical and cultural process of early globalization that interconnected several societies across Eurasia, while the second is a China-led geopolitical project with global reach that aims to induce complex interdependence between many nations based on infrastructure developments (Tzili-Apango 2018). As stated in the introduction, one important feature of the BRI is to lean on the “Silk Road” idea for legitimacy purposes, so it is safe to affirm that portraying the Belt and Road Initiative as a “new Silk Road” is also to reproduce Chinese political discourse. The following table is a sample of the titles that appear in some Mexican digital newspapers. As is seen, the first feature of the idea of “Silk Road” in Mexican popular perceptions is the characterization of the BRI as a “New Silk Road”, therefore reproducing China’s political discourse.

Table 1. Pattern of “New Silk Road” references in Mexican digital mass media titles

Title	Source
The New Silk Road, the key to fulfill the development goals	Aristegui Noticias (2017a)
New Silk Road? We explain the greatest challenge to world economy	El Sol de México (2019)
The "Silk Roads" were inaugurated	El Universal (2018)
IMF and WB warn about the New Silk Road difficulties	Hernández (2017b)
The New Silk Road: an optimized Marshall Plan?	Jalife (2017a)
The three times that the U.S. tried to derail the "New Silk Road" of China and Russia	Jalife (2017b)
The Duisburg-Chongqing Train, the "New Silk Road"	Milenio (2014)
China seeks for a New Silk Road	Milenio (2015)
This is the dark side of the Silk Road	Rickleton, Thomet, and Abbas (2019)

Source: author.

Nevertheless, it is possible to read some news about the ancient Silk Road. During the period of study some news about the discovery of the “Oriental Pompeya” ruins, the archeological robbery in Syria, or the restoration of archeological pieces located in Palmira destroyed by the Islamic State were found (*El Sol de México* 2017, *El Universal* 2017, *Vértigo Político* 2017). In these publications, the Silk Road is presented as a “trade route” between

China and the Western world via Central Asia. A particularly interesting note about the white mulberry (or *Morus Alba*) offers a more precise tone of the Silk Road because it characterizes the Silk Road as the backbone that linked East and West in addition to quoting Ferdinand von Richthofen's conceptualization and to identifying many "Silk Routes" through which the white mulberry got to Europe, routes that not necessarily started in China (Vázquez 2017). Along this line, a pair of news stories have also transmitted the idea that Mexico was connected to the Silk Road aslant the Manila Galleon (Moll 2019, Zambrano 2020). However, the general tone found in Mexican digital news media is focused on the Belt and Road Initiative as a "New Silk Road".

A second feature of the Silk Road in Mexican popular perceptions has to do with some "triangulation" of news sources. Almost 25% of data collected about the "Silk Road" are reproductions of some other newspapers, such as *Agence France-Presse*, *China Today*, *Economic Intelligence United*, *EFE Agency*, and *Xinhua*. It is noteworthy that some of the most critical publications in Mexican digital news media about the BRI come from these sources but also some of the most lenient publications that appraise the Belt and Road Initiative are found in some of these news sources too. In an article based on *AFP* and *EFE* news, it is avowed that "the 'New Silk Road' is a titanic plan of transports [...] with the potential to change thoughts and cultures in its wake" (*El Sol de México* 2019). In another article originally published in *AFP*, but republished in *El Sol de México*, Rickleton, Thomet, and Abbas (2019) accuse Beijing of orchestrating an anti-Islamic campaign in Xinjiang, "[...] a region at the center of the 'New Silk Roads' project." Similarly, a note based on *AFP* news emphasizes the African debt to China in the context of the "Belt and Initiative" project promoted by the Chinese government (*El Sol de México* 2020). The cited declaration of Ernesto Renato from an *EFE* news story, Assistant Director-General for Culture of UNESCO, about the international organization's support to China in its efforts to "preserve the Silk Roads spirit" draws attention (*El Universal* 2018).

In contrast to these general criticisms, some other digital publications reproduce China's stance on the BRI and its effort to construct it as a "New Silk Road." These articles are generally obtained from *Xinhua* and they stress the economic and trade benefits along with the consolidation of the Belt and Road Initiative (*La Jornada* 2017a, 2017b) as well as how the BRI project as a direct continuation of Zhang Qian's efforts to open trade routes between Asia and Europe represents an opportunity for a closer relationship between China and Latin America (Cui 2019, Zárate 2017). Thus, whether critical or supportive articles, a lot of news is mere reproductions of discourses that came from other parts of the world.

The third main feature of the Silk Road in Mexican popular perceptions is a general agreement about the identity of the "New Silk Road" in the BRI project and the possibility for it to be advantageous to Mexico and the world. Beyond staff writings, generally, these articles are authored by Mexican columnists and intellectuals, which supports Suslov's (2014) thesis about the utility of studying mass media because it brings some discourses to the popular level. In this line, Fernández (2018) understands the Belt and Road Initiative as a "design to promote common development along the "old Silk Road" and as a connection

between China and Latin America. Granados (2019) warns about the challenges that China could face if there is no convincing evidence about the economic benefits that the Belt and Road Initiative may bring to doubtful nations. León (2017) argues that the Belt and Road Initiative is the materialization of the “Community of Common Destiny” concept promoted by Chinese President Xi Jinping and that the “synergy between discourse and action” explains China’s increasing leadership in the global arena.

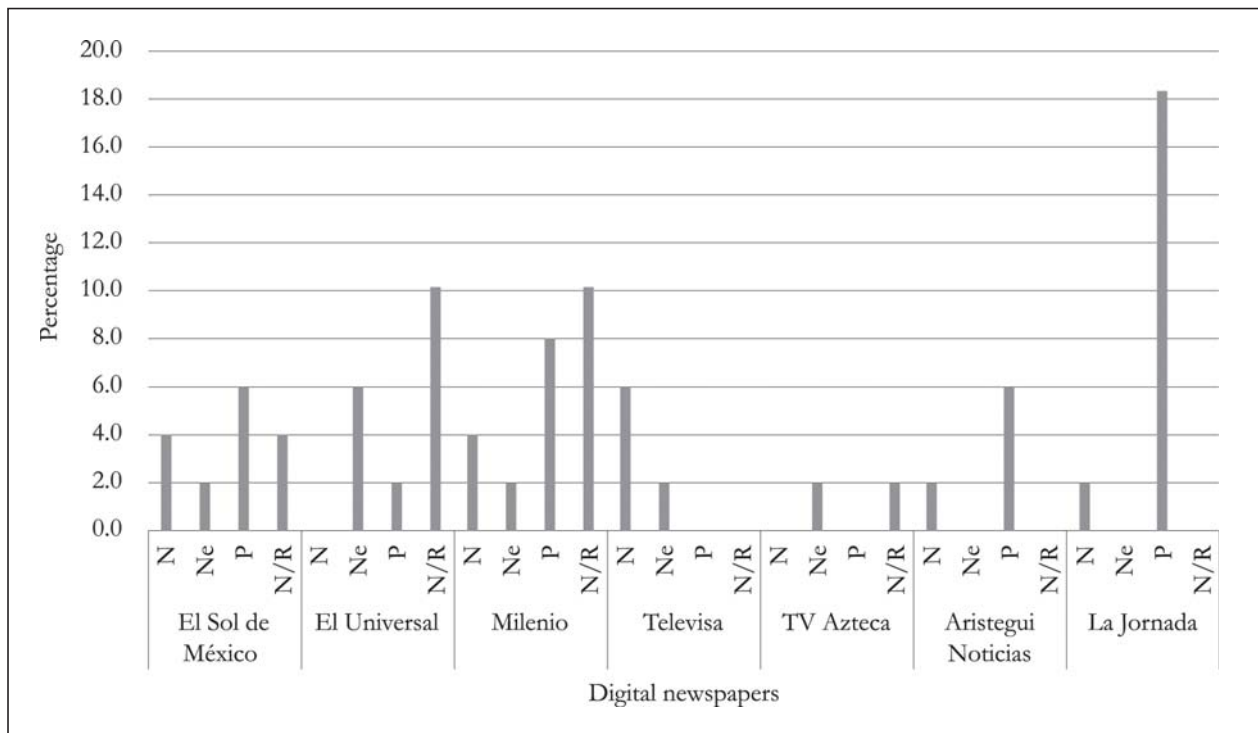
In an interview made by *El Universal* (2020) newspaper, a Mexican scholar, Arturo Oropeza, highlighted that China broke through the noxious effects of the Covid19 pandemic based on the Belt and Road Initiative, offering a world leadership shift in the absence of Western guidance in world politics. Naveja (2019) writes that the Chinese government has promoted the “New Silk Road” as a catapult to promote cultural and trade exchanges, although he also warns about geopolitical “fears” from China’s opponents, Japan and the United States. Naveja also sees a digital component in the BRI due to heavy Chinese investments that are aimed to modernize the technological infrastructure of developing countries.

One of the most prolific Mexican writers on the current subject is Alfredo Jalife Rahme, who writes for *La Jornada* newspaper. In the study period, he alone wrote six articles about the Belt and Road Initiative; more than any other columnist in mass media and his postures have varied over time. Jalife (2014) considered that China’s “New Silk Road” caused German bandwagoning on the Chinese project, which ultimately reduces the Western presence in Eurasia. Also, he cautions about Western attempts to wreck China’s “and Russia’s” “New Silk Road” based on containment geopolitics (Jalife, 2017a). Jalife (2017b) also characterized the “New Silk Road” forum of May 2017 as “a phase in global chaos that is marked by the U.S. decadence and China’s rise” and he criticizes Mexico’s absence in the forum alluding to pressure from Washington. He also wrote about the “Polar Silk Road”, stating that “the three silk roads (Eurasian, Maritime, and Polar) redefine contemporary geo-economics and give China conceptual and operative advantages” (Jalife, 2018a). In another piece, Jalife (2018b) affirms that Russia bandwagons with China’s Polar Silk Road by quoting Chinese sources that the Polar Silk Road idea is an initiative of the Russian government. Lastly, for Jalife (2019) the BRI has gained world legitimacy due to the United Kingdom and Israel’s participation in the project.

In summary, 40.8% of the articles reviewed keep a positive stance about the Belt and Road Initiative; they see the BRI as advantageous, as a beneficial trade project, and as a catapult for China to reach world hegemony, which it is not necessarily problematic since they praise China’s role in the global arena. 26.5% of the articles do not relate directly with the BRI idea but with the “Silk Road” idea as a historical phenomenon and not a contemporary one; they communicate news of archaeological interest and some of them deal with sports events like the “Silk Way Rally” (*El Sol de México* 2016) or the World Bike Forum that went along the old Silk Road and in which some Mexicans participated (Zamarrón 2019). 18.3% of the digital news inspected sustain a critical tone about the Belt and Road Initiative; they characterize the project as detrimental to Mexico and the world, as a transmission channel for authoritative practices, and as a source of indebtedness. Lastly, 14.2% of the articles maintain

a more neutral tone that focuses on analyzing BRI implications for China and its foreign policy, sharing as well some quantitative data about investment flows through the BRI, which do not expose a clear political posture.

Figure 1. Attitudes found in “Silk Road” articles in Mexican mass media



Source: author.

Note: “N” refers to a general negative or critical tone of the article, “Ne”: Neutral, “P”: Positive, and “N/R”: Not-related.

Most of the articles that recognize the BRI as a positive process are found in *La Jornada* (18.4% of the total), particularly authored by Jalife, which may reflect his pro-China bias. This is followed by *Milenio* (8.2%) and *El Sol de México* (6.1%). Articles that are critical of the Belt and Road Initiative are found in *Televisa* (6.1%), *El Sol de México* (4.1%), and *Milenio* (4.1%). Articles with a more neutral tone, usually from scholars that write opinion columns, are found in *El Universal* (6.1%). The rest of the articles deal with the ancient Silk Road and other events that appeared in the process of primary sources inquiry.

Recalling the first research question, how is the Silk Road notion constructed in Mexican popular geopolitics? The answer is threefold. Initially, the idea of the “Silk Road” is profoundly related to the Belt and Road Initiative, which could indicate a successful deployment of China’s soft power. Second, it was discovered that many pieces of news about the “Silk Road” in Mexico came from third-party sources, which vary from Chinese, European, and/or U.S. sources. This suggests that China’s soft power to legitimize the BRI through history is gaining momentum, although it is true that some of these third sources contain critical voices

about the Chinese project, confirming Miao's (2021) analysis that China's "spatially blind approach" has resulted in limited success for the country's soft power to promote the BRI in Europe. In this line, the "triangulation" of some news has enriched perceptions around the BRI but not around the Silk Road idea. Third, there appears to be a general agreement in Mexico that the BRI is, in fact, a "New Silk Road" that could be advantageous for the Latin American country.

Popular Geopolitics of the Silk Road in Mexico

This section tackles the second research question, what are the geopolitical implications of the "Silk Road" notion for Mexico? As it was observed in the last section, the fact that the "Silk Road" is inherently related to the "Belt and Road Initiative" as a "New Silk Road" reveals the consolidation of China's geostrategic discourse in the Latin American country, particularly because relative historical legitimation has been achieved to some extent. Nevertheless, the triangulation of sources about the BRI also elucidates a mix of geostrategic discourses that have also characterized the BRI as detrimental, therefore providing a plethora of geopolitical codes that may produce diverse geopolitical imaginations in Mexican popular geopolitics.

As Flint and Zhu (2019, 96) recognize, "[t]he scholarly interpretation of geopolitical codes is a complicated hermeneutic exercise". Here, this paper attempts to shed light on the meanings involved in the "Silk Road" as it is presented in Mexican mass media and the underlying geopolitical constructs. There is no doubt that the first geopolitical code immersed in Mexican popular geopolitics is the idea that the "Silk Road" integrates a twofold geographic process, the "Continental" or "Eurasian" Silk Road, that connects Asia and Europe via infrastructure, and the "Maritime Silk Road", that connects China with Africa and Latin America.

For example, in an article obtained from *Xinhua*, it is affirmed that the "Belt and Road Initiative offers new cooperation opportunities for the China-Latin America relation" (Cui 2019). Following suit, an article authored by the then Chinese ambassador in Mexico, Qiu Xiaoqi, highlights that the BRI enhances China-Latin America cooperation (Qiu 2018). It is noteworthy how some Mexican media offer spaces of expression to Chinese officials. In another piece, it is read that "the initiative [...] integrates the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which is profoundly tied with Latin America" (Fernández 2018). Also, it is considered that Latin America "is a strategic part of the 'Silk Road' that China has developed during Xi Jinping's administration" (*Aristegui Noticias* 2017b).

A second related geopolitical code in this line is a "global reach", which transcends the Eurasian space and encompasses the whole world system. For instance, *La Jornada* (2017b) recognizes 29 countries committed to the Belt and Road Initiative in order to support anti-de-globalization trends. Gu (2021) affirms that until 2020, 140 countries supported the BRI, including some "Western" countries such as Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom, a position shared by Jalife (2019) to some extent. In this line, *El Universal*

(2018) shares that 1.3 thousand people from 50 countries attended the Third International Exposition of the Silk Roads inaugurated in Dunhuang city, which reflects wide support among nations that wish for the continuation of ancient trade networks. This confirms that the Belt and Road Initiative concept has disrupted the earlier notion of the Silk Road on the grounds that the Silk Road is global nowadays.

A third geopolitical code is the idea that the “Silk Road” represents a decisive action from China to position itself as a world leader or hegemon, facing U.S. strategic competition. For example, Jalife (2018) assures readers that the “Polar Silk Road [as part of the BRI] is capable of implementing a new world order”. Ferreiro (2017) states that “the ‘Silk Road’ will resurface economic globalization”, and Gu (2021) considers that the “BRI is stigmatized because the U.S. feels threatened by China’s rise”. Mexican scholar, Arturo Oropeza affirms that “the BRI represents a world leadership redefinition in the 21st century” (*El Universal* 2020). In this situation, Mexico is not considered, which is probably a result of the Latin American geopolitical conundrum of neighboring the United States. Ultimately, the “Silk Road” may be positive for Mexico and the Latin American region in a commercial fashion. At the same time, conversely, the idea of China as a world leader or gaining hegemony because of the BRI is increasingly in the geopolitical imagination of Mexican society.

A fourth geopolitical code is the idea of the “Silk Road” as a debt trap mechanism, which may be the case of the African experience. It is a geopolitical code that shapes the idea that Latin America and/or Mexico are located in the same structural world position as Africa, being developing zones that require huge amounts of investments. *El Sol de México* (2020) reproduces an *AFP* article in which it is written that “Africa’s debt with China is about 140 billion USD within the BRI framework”. In other pieces, it is stated that ‘Silk Road’ indebted countries are worried about payment capacity (*Foro TV* 2018, Naveja 2019) and in another news article, the general director of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, warns about “several difficulties” of the “Chinese global plan of infrastructure investments known as the ‘New Silk Roads’” (Hernández 2017a), a posture echoed in a note authored by the Economic Intelligence Unit (2015), which warns about the financial risks of the “Chinese Marshal Plan” (a reference to the BRI). It is noteworthy that China has announced investments of 70 billion USD to the “New Silk Roads” in order to consolidate the infrastructure project.

A fifth more isolated geopolitical code is the capacity of Mexico to serve as a “bridge-country” between Asia and “the West”, which ultimately could reconfirm Mexico’s ancient place within the ancient Silk Road (Moll 2019, Ventura 2017), echoing the “Silver Road” (Tzili-Apango, 2018). Also, Mexico appears to have been discreetly involved in the “New Silk Road” due to heavy Chinese investment in the Maya Train, which may positively impact China-Mexico relations (Alegría 2019). Nevertheless, an idea such as this, which may serve Mexico’s geopolitical purposes, is not common in Mexican mass media.

To answer the research question: What are the geopolitical implications for Mexico? It is possible to observe a certain geopolitical isolation of Mexico from the global process of the Belt and Road Initiative, socially constructed as the “Silk Road”. While is true that the Mexican

popular geopolitical imagination understands the Silk Road as a “global phenomenon” that may tie Eurasia with Latin America, it has also been understood as a “hegemonic struggle” process facing China with the United States as well as a “debt trap” situation that presents risky investments. However, Mexico is thought of by some as a “bridge-country” that can connect Asia and China with Europe, therefore representing an incipient and strategic opportunity given the present Silk Road geopolitical process.

Conclusions

Popular geopolitics analysis in the case study of social perceptions of the Silk Road in Mexico represents a unique opportunity to know how present-day world perceptions are constructed in Mexican geopolitical popular imaginations. As it was argued at the beginning of this text, the construction of the notion of the “Silk Road” in Mexican popular geopolitics is divergent, with some social voices in favor and others against it, a situation that could be difficult for Mexico’s agency in the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

It is safe to affirm that independent of attitudes concerning the “Silk Road”, geopolitical codes confound the historical phenomenon with the contemporary geopolitical project of the Belt and Road Initiative. This is a direct result of the characterization of the BRI as a “New Silk Road”, a situation that assumes that the BRI is the descendent of the ancient Silk Road that connected Eurasia in an early globalization phase of world history. It is also a result of the successful reproduction of China’s political discourse that attempts to characterize the BRI as a “New Silk Road”.

Even with the “triangulation” of sources, Mexican digital mass media allows a diversity of voices for and against the “Silk Road”, both stances assuming that the BRI is a “New Silk Road”. In what can we distinguish as “Western” sources –meaning news sources from Europe and the United States–, usually voices are critical about the BRI project, particularly because it is prone to extend China’s geopolitical reach and promote debt in developing countries. In what can be distinguished as Chinese sources, Mexican mass media recover official postures about the BRI, which in turn highlights the BRI’s capacity to sustain economic globalization and infrastructure investments in an era of de-globalization processes and the need for infrastructure development. In this line, it is noteworthy that most of the positive voices about the BRI are found in left-oriented newspapers (including *Xinhua* reproductions), while negative voices diversify their expression scopes. It is important to note, however, that Chinese ambassadors or officials publish commentaries in the more right-oriented *Milenio*, a situation that may corroborate China’s willingness to maintain ties with all political voices as a general foreign policy principle.

Mexican social voices in favor of the Silk Road see this geopolitical project as advantageous and susceptible to offering strategic and development opportunities. Some Mexican formal geopolitical agents see the Silk Road as an opportunity for Mexico to achieve a strategic geopolitical status in the world arena. An article by Ventura (2017) from the *El*

Universal newspaper gathers opinions of important Mexican scholars who emphasize the necessity of Mexican rapprochement with Asia and China by retaking its historic “bridge-country” status. In his diverse articles, Jalife welcomes the BRI project and underlines its capacity to undermine the U.S.-centered world order. Although, it is fair to say that Jalife is not an agent of Mexican formal geopolitics in *strictu sensu* given his lack of rigorous training in International Studies. Nevertheless, the wide dissemination of his arguments via *La Jornada* newspaper contributes to constructing a particular geopolitical view of the Silk Road in Mexico. It is important to note that some Mexican media allow Chinese practical geopolitical agents to transmit official Chinese discourse about the BRI, which is the case of the former Chinese ambassador in Mexico, Qiu Xiaoqi.

Mexican voices against the Silk Road see this geopolitical project as detrimental due to debt promotion and risks of rising tensions between China and the United States. Some even highlight that China’s rapprochement to Latin America via the Belt and Road Initiative may promote “authoritarianism” in the Latin American region (Sáenz 2021). It is possible to consider that perceptions about the Silk Road differ in their understanding of the project’s reach because some information sources consider the BRI as having three well-defined “branches” –continental or Eurasian, maritime, and polar–, while other sources consider the BRI to be a global project. Connected with this last idea, voices against the Silk Road warn about the opacity of the project and its financial risks, a situation that may also show Mexican social indifference about events in Eurasia. In other words, only in social perceptions about the global BRI may there be a rise in concerns about its economic implications.

This article attempted to explain current media perceptions in Mexico about the Silk Road that are disposed to influence the social geopolitical imagination. Here it was discovered that the idea of the Belt and Road Initiative as a “New Silk Road” is well-consolidated in mass media and that distances the idea of the Silk Road as a historical phenomenon of the Mexican collective geopolitical imagination. Also, it was found that there are diverse social perceptions around the idea of the Silk Road, some considering it as a geopolitical opportunity and others as a geopolitical risk. It is hoped that this article may serve as part of other intellectual efforts focused on explaining how the “Silk Road” as geostrategic discourse is socially constructed by agents of practical and formal geopolitics in Mexico.

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