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## Framing China: The Belt and Road Initiative in Argentine national media outlets

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### Abstract

This article studies how Argentine national media outlets reported on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) between 2013 and February 2022 (this covers the period from the launch of the BRI to Argentina's official accession to the initiative). Based on a framing analysis of 272 articles, this study argues that national media outlets tend to reproduce two frames about the BRI: they either present it as an opportunity or as a threat. The balance between them matters when attempting to understand how media organisations shape citizens' perceptions of China and the BRI. In the case of Argentina, even though its political and economic relations with China have become closer, reports on the BRI were quite polarised. Indeed, national media outlets' portrayal of the BRI as an opportunity has been slightly more prevalent than negative portrayal (41% vs. 35%). However, national media firms covered the BRI in different ways. Some organisations conveyed largely positive frames, some chiefly presented negative ones, and others were more balanced. The specific editorial lines of the

newspapers and their affinities to national political alliances explain these different patterns. Furthermore, although articles citing Western sources were indeed more negative about the BRI, many of the op-eds and reports criticising the BRI were produced by Argentine journalists and other local actors. Thus, Chinese academics exaggerate Western media sources' influence on Argentina's national media critical coverage of China while overlooking reasonable concerns about the impacts of Chinese projects.

### Keywords

**Framing, China, Belt and Road Initiative, Argentina, media outlets.**

### 1. Introduction

Since the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, China's economic and political clout has increased across different regions of the world. Indeed, in 2000, the Chinese economy represented 3.6% of the world GDP (versus the USA's 31%), whilst in 2021, China's percentage grew to 18.5% (versus 24%)<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, during the last 20 years, China has displaced the US as the most important partner of most countries in the world (Rajah & Leng, 2019). Since 2013, under the leadership of President Xi, China has become more assertive in shaping the global international order via its increasing structural power to create institutions and initiatives that serve as alternatives to and that compete with Western-led ones (Yan, 2014). Among them,

<sup>1</sup> See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=US-CN-1W>

the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has attracted the most attention. According to official Chinese sources, the BRI is an inclusive market-oriented cooperation framework, seeking mutual benefits for all parties involved. It was introduced to increase connectivity between China and other parts of the world through policy coordination, infrastructure projects, investment and trade, financial integration, and more people-to-people exchanges (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015; Xi, 2017). Since its launch in 2013, almost 150 countries have joined the BRI; as such, it exemplifies the Chinese global projection of power.

However, during the last two decades, the translation of China's economic power into a positive image abroad has been a fraught process (d'Hooghe, 2005; Madrid-Morales, 2017; Mingjiang, 2008; Zhao, 2013). According to Xie and Jin (2022), in developing countries, Chinese foreign direct investment has positively affected public opinion towards China, whilst Chinese exports have caused a negative perception. Differently, Eichenauer, Fuchs and Brückner (2020) argued that China's economic engagement with Latin America did not change citizens' opinions of China. They even suggested that it led to a more polarised view between the winners and losers of trade with China.

Nevertheless, these economic determinist arguments are unconvincing since they overlook the central role that media outlets play in shaping public opinion. In contrast, media scholars have focused on how China is portrayed by the national media of different countries. To a large extent, these studies have found that media companies depicted China more negatively than positively (Chen & Gunster, 2019; Peng, 2004; Ramírez, 2012; Rodríguez-Wangüemert *et al.*, 2019). However, most of these studies have examined Western media outlets or only a sample of media organisations from different Anglophone countries (H. Yang & van Gorp, 2021). Moreover, with a few exceptions (Prates *et al.*, 2020; Zhang & Wu, 2017), little attention has been given to how China and its initiatives have been covered by recipient states (Armony, 2012; Ospina Estupinan, 2017), such as various Latin American countries.

This article contributes to the literature by examining how Argentine national media reported on the BRI between 2013 and February 2022 (this covers the period from the launch of the BRI to Argentina's official accession to the initiative). The BRI was selected to indirectly study the reporting about China because it has become one of the most important initiatives of President Xi. Although Latin American countries were not initially part of it, in January 2018, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi invited Latin American and Caribbean states to join the BRI. Since then, despite US public officials' warnings about the risks of such a decision, most countries of the region have enlisted. Furthermore, Argentina represents a worthwhile case study for several reasons. First, despite its strong economic relations with China, the state did not immediately join the BRI. However, reports on the initiative and discussions on whether it would be convenient to enter were frequent from 2017 until the country's formal accession in 2022. Second, Argentina is geographically distant from China; hence, citizens' perceptions of China are highly dependent on the media representations that they consume. Finally, despite China's increasing economic footprint in Argentina, national media are closely linked to traditional Western media organisations and culture. Accordingly, Argentina is a good case for examining how national media outlets portray China amidst their deepening economic relations and Western criticism.

The present article argues that national media outlets tend to reproduce two frames about the BRI: they either present it as an opportunity or as a threat. The balance between them matters when attempting to understand how media organisations shape citizens' perceptions of China and the BRI. In the case of Argentina, even though its political and economic relations with China have become closer, reports on the BRI were quite polarised. Indeed, national media outlets' portrayal of the BRI as an opportunity has been slightly more prevalent than negative portrayal (41% vs. 35%). However, national media firms covered the BRI in different ways. Some organisations conveyed largely positive frames, some chiefly presented negative ones, and others were more balanced. The specific editorial lines of the

newspapers and their affinities to national political alliances explain these different patterns. Furthermore, although articles citing Western sources were indeed more negative about the BRI, many of the op-eds and reports criticising the BRI were produced by Argentine journalists and other local actors. Thus, Chinese academics exaggerate Western media sources' influence on Argentina's national media critical coverage of China while overlooking reasonable concerns about the impacts of Chinese projects.

The rest of this article is organised into five sections. The next section reviews the literature about framing China by foreign media. Then, Argentina's relation with China is contextualised. After that, details are given regarding the data acquisition process and the methods used, followed by the results of the analysis. The last section provides conclusions regarding the overall findings of the study.

## **2. Framing China**

A country as large, complex and diverse as China naturally evokes multifarious interpretations from those attempting to examine it. Nevertheless, as Pan (2015) has observed, two main lenses are recurrent in the patterns found in Western literature: China is seen either as a threat or as an opportunity. On the one hand, the former represents a tradition that possibly began with Marco Polo's trips, which stresses the economic opportunities that China offers. The period of reform and opening up initiated in 1978 renewed such a narrative. Indeed, during the 1980s and 1990s, numerous Western transnational corporations moved their production factories to China. The massive inflow of foreign direct investments led to accelerated economic growth in the country, and its GDP per capita increased. For example, in 2000, the Chinese middle class represented 3% of the population, whilst in 2018 it reached about 50.8%, which amounts to approximately 707 million people. The increasing purchasing power of this massive group is the main reason that businesses across the world have perceived China as an opportunity. Furthermore, China's growing gravitas in global governance via the creation of new institutions, initiatives, and groups, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRI, has led several states to join and back these policy initiatives for the benefits they might obtain in return.

On the other hand, the opposite view focuses on the threat that China poses to the world. This so-called China threat theory has deep roots in the US (Broomfield, 2003; Pan, 2015; Roy, 1996; Vuori, 2018) and posits that the rise of China, led by the Chinese Communist Party, is a grave national security threat to the US and the rest of the world. This narrative, reproduced since the 90s by various politicians, think tanks, pundits and some academics, became a centrepiece of former President Trump's foreign policy. Although the Biden administration toned down the Trump administration's Cold War-style rhetoric against China, it still views the Asian nation as "the most serious long-term challenge to the international order" (Blinken, 2022). Chinese academics understand that this is a foreign policy narrative that intends to portray China as a threat, as the US previously did with the Soviet Union and Japan (Yuan & Fu, 2020). In this context, the US government has depicted the BRI as a serious national security threat to the country and foreign partners (Shah, 2021).

Considering these bipolar views about China, several studies have examined the role of media outlets in propagating such views, and many have focused on the printed press (Golan & Lukito, 2015; Peng, 2004; Ramírez, 2012; Sparks, 2010; Y. E. Yang & Liu, 2012), while others have focused on TV news (Li, 2012; Rodríguez-Wangüemert *et al.*, 2019). Methodologically, these articles employed framing analysis, discourse analysis or other narrative analysis methods to examine how media outlets portray China. In general, these articles concluded that Western media reports often exhibit a prevalence of negative framing of China over neutral or positive framing (Chen & Gunster, 2019; Peng, 2004; Ramírez, 2012; Rodríguez-Wangüemert *et al.*, 2019). However, some articles have also found caveats to such assertions; for example, Sparks (2010) found that elite UK newspapers had more balanced coverage than

the popular press. Similarly, Li (2012) observed that political issues were reported negatively on Australian TV while economic and environmental ones were not. Likewise, Yang and Liu (2012) found that the coverage of China as a threat in US media is cyclical, whilst Golan and Lukito (2015) concluded that editorials and opinion pieces in the Wall Street Journal covered China far more negatively than those in *The New York Times*.

Recent media studies research has investigated how China's BRI was projected and received. Some of these studies have used different types of discourse analysis to examine the characteristics of the BRI (Chan & Song, 2020; Costa, 2020), while others have analysed the public opinion of the initiative in recipient states (Cheng, 2018). However, the types of research most pertinent to this article are those that specifically delved into the various portrayals of the BRI by foreign media outlets. For instance, studies comparing reports on the BRI in Western versus Chinese media have found similar patterns to those described above. Specifically, Western media conveyed the initiative in a negative light, whilst Chinese media gave the opposite view (Teo & Xu, 2021; H. Yang & van Gorp, 2021; Vila Seoane, 2023; Zhang & Wu, 2017). In contrast, Kuteleva and Vasiliev (2021) found that Russian media reported on the BRI positively, reproducing the official state narrative of its contributions to Sino-Russian relations. The work by Yang and van Gorp is particularly relevant to the present research since it followed a similar methodological approach. The authors identified fourteen cultural frames about the BRI propagated in the media outlets of Australia, China, Japan, India, the UK, and the US (H. Yang & van Gorp, 2021). Despite the breadth of countries under consideration, the different ways that the initiative might have been covered in the media systems of each country have been overlooked. Furthermore, the authors have not considered media outlets of Global South countries directly involved or interested in joining the BRI.

In Latin America, increasing bilateral trade with China has led to rising coverage of the Asian power in national media. Chinese analysts who write about Latin America have criticised local media for having a biased understanding of China or for reproducing partial views emanating from Western media firms (Guo, 2018, p. 309). However, only a handful of studies have empirically explored how media organisations portray China. For instance, Armony (2012) compared the image of China in the two most-read national Colombian newspapers. Armony found that these media outlets reported both positive and negative aspects of the Asian power, such as its auspiciously increasing economic relations with Colombia and the negative consequences of Chinese investments. In a similar vein, Ospina Estupinan (2017) compared the image of China reported by Latin American media outlets of different countries that recognised the People's Republic of China versus those that recognised Taiwan. An important finding was that Latin American media outlets frequently cited foreign Western news agencies to cover China, which, according to Ospina Estupinan (2017), very often reproduced negative views. Similarly, in a qualitative analysis of Argentine media coverage of the installation of a Chinese space base in the country, Blinder (2017) found that Argentine media companies reproduced the fears of Western powers regarding the installation of a Chinese space base in the country. Finally, the article by Prates, Lages and Menezes (2020) argued that until 2019, the Brazilian national media coverage of the BRI had been limited and superficial.

In summary, research investigating reports on the BRI is still nascent. Furthermore, little is known about how media outlets in states that are part of (or that want to join) the BRI have covered the initiative. Finally, although Western media outlets have been accused of shaping the negative views about China produced by media outlets in the Global South, no convincing empirical evidence supports this accusation.

### **3. Argentina's partnership with China**

If the framing of the BRI in Argentina's media is to be understood, it is important to briefly contextualise mainstream readings of its bilateral relations with China over the last two decades. In terms of trade, according to the World Bank trade stats, exports and imports between Argentina and China increased from 1.9 billion in 2000 to 16 billion in 2019. Thus, in two decades, China became Argentina's second most significant economic partner after Brazil, displacing the US to third. Regardless of the political coalitions (Peronists vs. anti-Peronists) that have ruled Argentina since 2000, political ties with China grew stronger. Indeed, the high rates of economic growth that Argentina experienced after its steep 2001 economic, financial and political crisis, were mainly due to the export of soybeans to China. Between 2008 and 2015, during the administrations of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK), China was a central source of funding for the government, which had a policy of not borrowing from the International Monetary Fund. This materialised in several currency swap deals involving the renminbi with China. In 2014, both countries signed a comprehensive strategic partnership that propelled Chinese investments in key strategic projects in the country, such as the upgrading of railways, the construction of hydroelectric dams and the development of renewable energy projects.

As the 2015 national elections approached, Mauricio Macri, the candidate of Let's Change (*Cambiamos*), the main centre-right opposition coalition, promised a tougher stance on China and realignment with the US. Soon after his inauguration as president, the Argentine coastguard sunk a Chinese fishing ship. Afterwards, President Macri initiated a renegotiation –and in some cases the cancellation– of infrastructure projects signed with Chinese firms by the previous centre-left administration. These decisions provoked a diplomatic rift with China. Nonetheless, the new ruling coalition estimated that such distancing from the Asian country, together with Argentina's realignment with the US, would attract much-needed Western investments. However, after a year in power, and owing to the context of Trump's America First policy agenda, few of these US investment promises materialised. Hence, in 2017, in a sharp turnaround from his campaign vows, President Macri sought again to strengthen ties with China. Indeed, Macri participated in the first Belt and Road Forum, where he stated that the BRI was “an opportunity that we do not want to miss” (Casa Rosada, 2017). During that trip, the administration signed the 2017–2021 China–Argentina Comprehensive Five-Year Plan for Cooperation in Infrastructure, encompassing infrastructure projects in transport, energy, natural resources and the ICT sectors. These announcements were in line with the previous left-wing administration projects with China; nevertheless, the Macri administration did not join the BRI.

After the 2019 national elections, a new centre-left coalition, Everyone's Front (*Frente de Todos*) defeated the Let's Change centre-right coalition, which brought President Alberto Fernández to power. Immediately, US public officials reiterated their concerns about China to a leading member of the new government (Lugones, 2019). After the COVID-19 outbreak began in China, many Argentine media outlets covered it critically by reproducing news from foreign media outlets, including reports supporting conspiracy theories. Notwithstanding, after Argentina established its lockdown on March 20, 2020, to stop the spread, China was a key provider of much-needed medical supplies, and it later acquired millions of the Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine. In this context, in October 2020, the Argentine Congress formalised the nation's accession to the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Likewise, in February 2022, Argentina officially joined the BRI, a decision that unleashed intense coverage of the initiative by national media.

In the last two decades of intensified bilateral relations, government sources, think tanks, media reports, academics and other sources, have conveyed a bi-focal reading about Argentina–China's relationship as synthesised by Pan (2015). On the one hand, advocates of a

closer relation have stressed the unique opportunity that Argentina has to bandwagon with Chinese economic growth to attract investments, increase exports and surpass the historical development challenges of the country (Cancillería, 2018; CFKArgentina, 2014; Escudé, 2011; Shixue & Mallimaci, 2018). Politically, China favours Argentina's claim of sovereignty over the Malvinas Islands (or the Falklands Islands for the UK), and Argentina reciprocates by endorsing the One China policy. Regarding public opinion, the available data collected by the Pew Research Center's Global Indicators Database on the image of China and the US from 2013–2019 indicated that, on average, Argentines had a more favourable image of China than of the US (46% vs. 38%); meanwhile, fewer Argentines had an unfavourable image of China than of the US (26% vs. 43%).

On the other hand, the consequences of these close ties with China have raised diverse criticisms. First, many analysts have denounced Argentina's entry into a new type of core-periphery relationship with China because it mostly exports few natural resources, mainly soybeans, whilst it imports a diverse set of industrialised products from China (Bernal-Meza & Zanabria, 2020; Laufer, 2013). Even though the agricultural sectors may profit from this type of trade, this pattern has undermined Argentina's industrialisation capabilities (Bolinaga & Slipak, 2015). Second, Argentina suffers from a persistent trade deficit with China, which has led to an increased financial dependence on the Asian country (Oviedo, 2018). Third, the relationship with China is deepening an extractivist development model in Argentina through projects with grave environmental, political and social consequences, such as hydroelectric dams, lithium mining and land grabbing (Mora, 2018, 2022; Saguier & Vila Seoane, 2022). Fourth, the close links with China may weaken Argentina's economic and political integration with other Latin American countries (Oviedo, 2015). Finally, the rising political influence of China is a matter of concern for the US government and US analysts, who have criticised numerous Chinese projects in Argentina (Ellis, 2021; Escudé, 2011; Lugones, 2019). In some cases, these criticisms have translated into US pressure against cooperation projects between Argentina and China, such as in the nuclear sector (Blinder & Vila Seoane, 2023).

Overall, this synthesis highlights that many political elites in Argentina would agree that China's rise represents an economic opportunity. Hence, one would expect that they would frame the BRI positively. However, it is questionable whether such views are shared by all political parties, national media outlets and citizens, who may also suffer from the negative externalities of China's projects in Argentina. The rest of this article shall explore how Argentine media outlets have reported on these different views about the BRI.

#### **4. Data and methods**

The article employed content analysis to study media frames. In this regard, it utilised Entman's (1993) definition of framing: "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." Among the varied methodological approaches utilised to investigate framing, this article applied the constructionist approach proposed by van Gorp (2005, 2010), which indicates that the frames that journalists use are culturally embedded. To identify such frames, van Gorp suggested an initial inductive phase of analysis, during which the researcher collects several reports and news covering the issue of interest to reconstruct the frames that journalists frequently use. The analysis proceeds with a second deductive phase in which more articles from different media outlets are coded to detect and quantify the presence of the proposed frames.

The first inductive phase of this approach involved gathering a variety of documents representing frames about the BRI. This included English sources from the US and Chinese governments, academic articles and think tank reports embracing and criticising the BRI (U.S. Department of State, 2020; U.S. Southern Command, 2018; Xi, 2017, 2019). Likewise,

documents in Spanish in favour of and against the BRI were collected (CEPAL, 2018; Shixue & Mallimaci, 2018; Vaca Narvaja & Zhan, 2018). Then, following van Gorp (2010), these documents were managed and coded (open, axial and selective) with ATLAS.ti to identify recurrent elements in the way the BRI was portrayed. This analysis led to the proposal of two prominent frames: one representing the BRI as an opportunity and one portraying it as a threat. These frames were characterised based on Entman's definition of a frame plus a set of common lexical choices and metaphors that were recurrent in the documents under analysis (see Table 1). Although more frames could have been differentiated, such as those found by Yang & van Gorp (2021), these two frames were the most prominent, and they matched the previous literature on the prevalence of the use of a bi-focal lens when representing China (Pan, 2015).

**Table 1.** Frames about the BRI as an opportunity and as a threat.

Frame	The BRI as an opportunity	The BRI as a threat
<b>Definition of the problem</b>	What are the opportunities of joining the BRI?	What are the threats of joining the BRI?
<b>Causal reasoning</b>	BRI projects can contribute to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· address countries serious infrastructure deficits</li> <li>· attract Chinese investments</li> <li>· link firms to Chinese-led global value chains</li> <li>· diversify exports to China</li> </ul>	BRI projects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· use unfair business practices</li> <li>· do not respect labour standards</li> <li>· employ mainly Chinese labour</li> <li>· do not respect international environmental standards</li> <li>· are financially unsustainable</li> </ul>
<b>Consequences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Increased political ties with China</li> <li>· Increased economic growth and development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Economic dependence on China</li> <li>· Political and economic elites become more vulnerable to the Chinese Communist Party's influence and coercion</li> <li>· Chinese infrastructure projects pose security threats</li> </ul>
<b>Possible actions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· States need to reassess their US and Europe-centred foreign policies</li> <li>· Join the BRI</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Reject and/or renegotiate BRI projects</li> </ul>
<b>Moral judgements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Joining the BRI is an opportunity for the development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· It is a risk to accept BRI projects, which are constructed by the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party, which has hegemonic intentions and cares little about human rights</li> </ul>
<b>Lexical choices and/or metaphors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Win-win/mutual benefits/shared prosperity</li> <li>· World order in the transition towards Eurasia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Neocolonialism/neoimperialism</li> <li>· Dependency</li> <li>· Authoritarian/regime</li> <li>· Environmental predator</li> </ul>

Source: Own elaboration.

The deductive phase involved coding a corpus of articles about the BRI published by different Argentine media outlets. Within the scope of this project, seven national media outlets were selected, namely, *Clarín*, *Infobae*, *La Izquierda Diario*, *La Nación*, *Página 12*, *Perfil*, and *Télam*. These media outlets were selected to include organisations that are among the most read in the country<sup>2</sup> and that represent different elements of the Argentine political spectrum. The latter criteria mattered, because, due to the sharp political polarisation in the country, media

<sup>2</sup> The statistics provided by TotalMedios were used to estimate which are the most visited news sites. See <https://www.totalmedios.com/nota/46754/ranking-de-sitios-digitales-la-nacion-sigue-al-acecho-del-lider-infobae>

outlets in Argentina tend to cover news differently according to what political party they support (Vincent, 2017). For instance, *Clarín*, *Infobae* and *La Nación* supported the Macri administration (anti-Peronist) and opposed the CFK and Fernández administration (Peronist), while *Página 12* had an inverse preference. Meanwhile, *Perfil* and *La Izquierda Diario* were critical of the three administrations, whereas *Télam* conveyed the official state view (see Table 2).

The articles were retrieved from Google by gathering all the news reports sourced from the websites of the seven media outlets that contained keywords related to the BRI<sup>3</sup>. Then, each article was read to check whether it was specifically about the BRI. Articles were included if they reported on the BRI in general, discussed a specific project or conveyed an opinion on its implications. Otherwise, if an article merely mentioned the BRI without further development or any framing, it was excluded. Ultimately, this procedure resulted in 272 articles. A coding guide was developed that contained questions to identify the components of each of the two frames. If any component of the two frames was present in an article, it was counted as conveying the frame. Moreover, for each article, the coders registered the nationality (Argentine, Chinese, European, American, other) and the type of source (government official, journalist/article's author, academic, business, other) within the article that communicated the frame of the BRI as an opportunity or as a threat. All articles were coded by the researcher, and a sample of 30% was coded by a second coder. Intercoder reliability (based on Krippendorff's alpha values) was high for both frames and the identification of sources propagating them (alpha > 0.80). The usual limits to content analysis are applied; hence, the results cannot be generalised beyond the media outlets under analysis.

**Table 2.** Features of Argentine media outlets under investigation.

Argentina media outlet	Unique online visitors in millions (2020/12)	Ownership	Political ideology	Position with respect to the ruling administration		
				CFK (2013-2015)	Macri (2015-2019)	Fernández (2019-2022)
<i>Infobae</i>	24,7	Private, owned by Daniel Hadad	Right	Opposition	Supporter	Opposition
<i>Clarín</i>	20,4	Private, owned by Grupo Clarín	Centre-right	Opposition	Supporter	Opposition
<i>La Izquierda Diario</i>	n/a	Backed by the Socialist Workers' Party	Left	Opposition		
<i>La Nación</i>	23,6	Private, owned by MNMS Holding	Economic Liberalism Right	Opposition	Supporter	Opposition
<i>Télam</i>	n/a	State channel	Official view of the ruling administration			
<i>Página 12</i>	10,1	Private, owned by Grupo Octubre	Centre-left	Supporter	Opposition	Supporter
<i>Perfil</i>	9,6	Private, owned by Grupo Perfil	Critical journalism, independent of political partisanship	Critical reporting about the three administrations		

Source: Own elaboration and TotalMedios.

<sup>3</sup> The search was conducted with the following keywords: a) in Spanish: 'nueva ruta de la seda', 'iniciativa de la franja y la ruta', and 'una franja y una ruta'; b) in English: 'one belt, one road' and 'belt and road initiative'; c) in Mandarin: 一带一路.



## 5. Results

The results are presented in three subsections. The first one shows results on the number of articles published by Argentine media outlets on the BRI. The second subsection examines the role of foreign news agencies as sources of articles in Argentina media outlets, followed by a final subsection on what types of sources were cited within each article framing the BRI.

### 5.1. *Frames of the BRI in Argentina media outlets*

From 2013–2022, among the 272 articles about the BRI published by Argentine media organisations, 41% contained only the frame that represents the BRI as an opportunity, 35% only had the frame that portrays the BRI as a threat, and the remaining 24% included both frames. However, this pattern varied according to whom was in the presidency and other contextual factors.

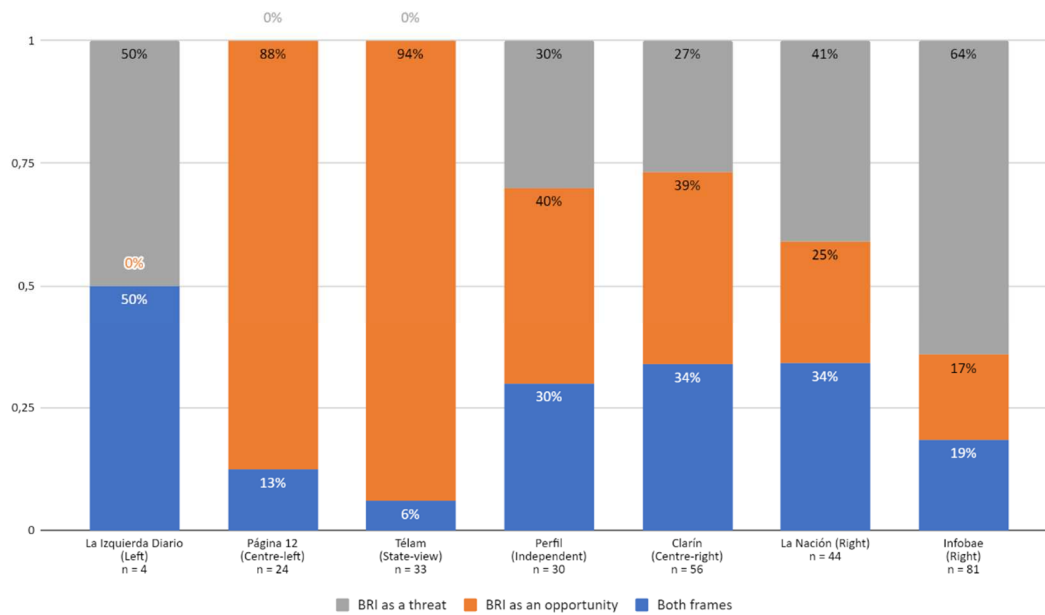
During the Presidency of CFK (2013–2015), the analysed media published fewer than ten articles about the BRI per year, which mirrors the weak interest that Argentinian authorities initially had in the initiative. This limited reporting continued during the first year of President Macri's government, but in 2017, after Macri participated in the first Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, the trend began to change. In that year, more than 10 articles were published with BRI frames, and most of them (10 out of 14) conveyed frames that the Chinese initiative was an opportunity for Argentina. During the last two years of the Macri administration (2018–2019), the number of articles reporting on the BRI continued to increase. In 2018, the number of articles that framed the BRI as an opportunity was slightly above those portraying it as a threat (6 vs. 4 articles), while the results inverted in 2019 (6 vs. 7 articles).

In 2020, Argentine media outlets dedicated far more articles to the BRI. Two reasons explain such growth. First, after the results of the national elections of October 27, 2019, media articles began speculating that the new ruling centre-left coalition, led by President Fernández, would formally join the BRI promptly. Second, the rising global tensions between the US and China led to more reports from Argentine media outlets about this geopolitical rivalry and the BRI. However, fewer articles on this topic were published in 2021 than in 2020 (38 vs. 48), although the number was still higher than in all other earlier years of the series. Perhaps this reduced interest was related to President Fernandez not immediately joining the BRI as expected.

Until 2021, the negative frame about the BRI prevailed in the 167 articles published by Argentina media outlets. Indeed, the negative frame was present in 40% of this subset (versus 36% for articles with only the positive frame and 25% for articles with both). However, this trend changed during the two months under analysis during the following year. On 6 February 2022, during a meeting in Beijing between President Fernandez and President Xi, Argentina announced that it had joined the BRI. In January and February 2022, Argentine media outlets published the largest quantity of articles about the initiative (105 in total), with articles propagating only a positive frame prevailing over those conveying the BRI as a threat (49% vs. 29% respectively). Thus, the coverage in 2022 explains why positive framing prevailed in the total corpus of articles under analysis; otherwise, the negative frame would have been slightly higher.

Nevertheless, not all media organisations published articles framing the BRI in similar proportions. Figure 1 shows the number of articles in each newspaper that framed the BRI only as an opportunity, only as a threat, or with both frames. The quantities suggest a three-tier classification of the newspapers.

**Figure 1.** Frames of the BRI in Argentine media outlets.



Source: Own elaboration.

The first group contains media outlets that produced articles with a clear bias in favour of the BRI: *Página 12* and *Télam*. This standpoint is reasonable for the state agency since it propagates the government’s official policy toward China, which has remained positive regardless of the political party in power during the period under analysis. For example, a *Télam* article cited the Argentine ambassador to China, who said that the BRI aims to “[...] build a new type of international relations by extending high-quality development and stimulating global innovation.” This, in his opinion, will “create a favourable framework for the deployment of the Argentine development agenda” (Vaca Narvaja, 2022). Similarly, *Página 12* articles praised infrastructure projects and the expected Chinese investments in Argentina due to its accession to the BRI. The articles also highlighted that joining the initiative will lead to “the participation of Argentine suppliers in these projects and the increase of exports to China and to all of Asia” (Dellatorre, 2022). The ownership structure of *Página 12* explains the pro-BRI bias that its articles conveyed. The media outlet is part of Grupo Octubre, an Argentine multimedia company led by Víctor Santa María, a trade unionist who presides over the Justicialist Party (Peronist) chapter of the city of Buenos Aires. Therefore, the newspaper distributed views consistent with the centre-left Justicialist Party, which has historically favoured a close partnership with China.

The second group is composed of media outlets that sought to produce a more balanced coverage of the BRI, such as *Clarín* and *Perfil*, though to different degrees. These media outlets published articles with only positive, only negative, and (especially) both frames. Therefore, their journalistic practice is closer to the professional idea of reporting different views about an issue –in this case, the pros and cons of the BRI. For example, an article from *Perfil* highlighted that Latin American countries joined the BRI to gain access to “Chinese financing for energy, road, port and other types of works.” However, it also warned about the potential risks of debt and the requirements of employing “Chinese material, labour and know-how” in such projects (Barrio, 2018). The inclusion of *Perfil* in this group was unsurprising since this newspaper claims to avoid siding with any major political rifts in the country. However, the results for *Clarín* are rather unexpected because this media outlet is a publicly known spreader of staunch anti-Peronist views, preferring those of the Let’s Change coalition.

Nevertheless, the organisation published a balanced number of articles both against and in favour of the BRI. Indeed, although *Clarín*'s articles communicated criticisms of the BRI, they also published articles by the Chinese ambassador and many other Argentine government officials and members of civil society who expressed positive opinions about the initiative.

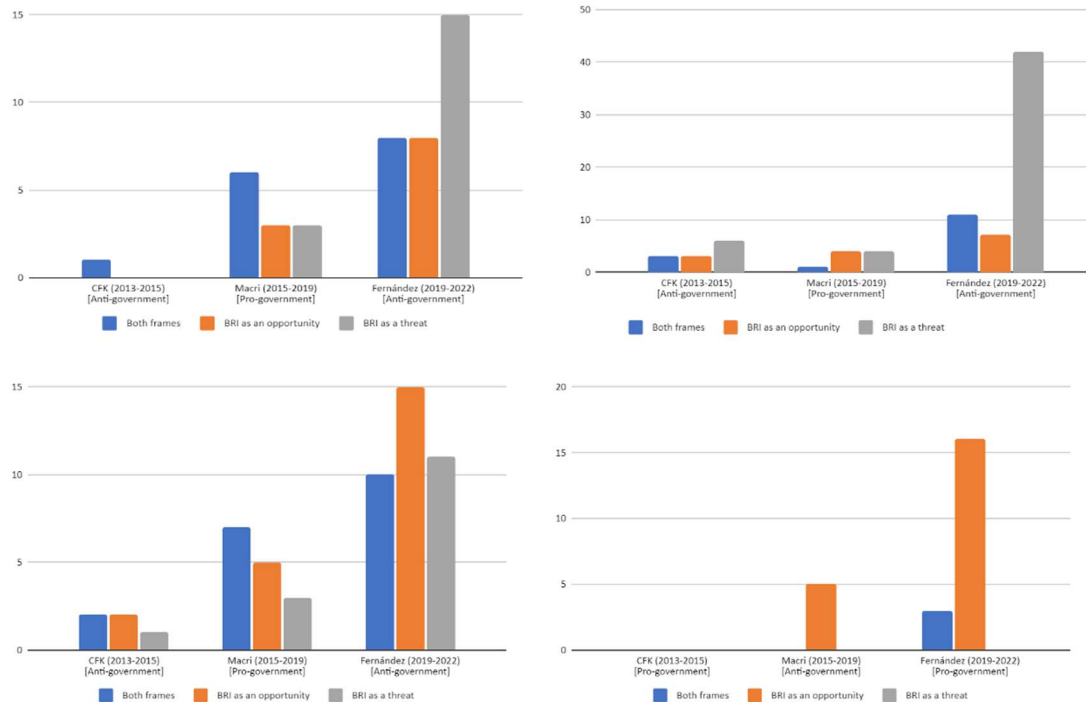
The third group encompasses media outlets that portrayed the BRI as more of a threat than as an opportunity. *Infobae* unequivocally exemplifies this group. Indeed, *Infobae* circulated 54% of the negative articles about the BRI in the corpus. The most negative articles did not mention the authorship, which casts doubt on whether they were written by journalists within the media or paid for by external sources. Furthermore, their titles clearly portrayed the BRI as a threat, with examples like: i) "The dark side of Chinese investments: ecological disaster and labour exploitation" (*Infobae*, 2019); ii) "For the renovation of an airport, Uganda is the latest victim of the 'debt trap' of the Xi Jinping regime" (*Infobae*, 2021); and iii) "Ports, trade and military expansion: the imperial strategy of the Chinese regime" (*Infobae*, 2022). This bias can be explained by the editorial line of *Infobae*, which is closely aligned with US foreign policy. Indeed, *Infobae* critics use the term "infoembassy" (*infoembajada*) to denounce the presumably close links between this media outlet and the US Embassy in Argentina. Although no public sources have confirmed these allegations, the analysis does show that *Infobae* prioritises the US government's views about China, though they also had a minority of articles conveying only the frame of the BRI as an opportunity. *La Nación* had a higher percentage of articles with a frame portraying the BRI as a threat, which became more pronounced after 2019. As will be detailed below, this can be explained by which was the ruling coalition in power. Finally, *La Izquierda Diario*, a left-wing newspaper, though it did not cover the BRI as much as the other sources, also gave preference to a negative frame, which parallels this media outlet's condescending view of what they understand as the Stalinist bureaucracy of the Chinese Communist Party. The criticism against China that this left-wing media outlet propagates contradicts the claim by some US authors that left-leaning parties uncritically side with China (Ellis, 2021).

Figure 2 explores how reports about the BRI by Argentine media outlets vary according to whether they had an anti- or pro-government editorial line. Only media outlets that have supported one of the coalitions in power are plotted. *Infobae*, *Clarín* and *La Nación* had an adversarial position to the governments of CFK and Alberto Fernández but were pro-government during the administration of Macri. Oppositely, *Página 12* supported the CFK and the Fernández administration, whilst it was a fierce critic of the Macri administration. Regarding the coverage of the BRI during the Macri administration, *Infobae* and *La Nación* kept a balance of articles framing the initiative as an opportunity and as a threat. This was in line with the favourable coverage they had of the centre-right political alliance in power. Likewise, when the centre-left Fernández administration came to power, these media outlets prioritised the publication of articles framing the BRI as a threat, a pattern that was especially pronounced in the reporting of *Infobae*. In fact, from 2020–2022, *Infobae* published 41 of the 52 articles that had only a negative frame about the BRI. This negative reporting could also be a result of *Infobae* echoing the Trump administration's criticisms of the BRI and subsequent ones by the Biden administration. Therefore, in these two cases, the reporting about the BRI was dependent on the media outlets' affinities with the administration in power in Argentina. The remaining two media outlets did not follow such a pattern. In the case of *Clarín*, it would have been reasonable to find a similar trend as in *Infobae* and *La Nación*, because this media outlet is known for its support of the Macri administration and its adversarial positions to the other two. Nonetheless, in all periods under analysis, *Clarín* published more articles framing the BRI as an opportunity than as a threat. Finally, *Página 12* maintained its positive reporting of the BRI, even when the Macri administration, which they opposed, governed the country.

In summary, at least in the cases of *Infobae* and *La Nación*, reports on the BRI seem to have been influenced by the administration in power. If the country was ruled by the political

alliance that the media outlet supported, the coverage was balanced; when the ruling coalition that they opposed ruled, the media outlets produced more articles with a negative frame about the BRI. In other words, the political polarisation in the country shaped how these two media organisations reported on the BRI.

**Figure 2.** Frames of the BRI in *Clarín*, *Infobae*, *La Nación*, and *Página 12*, according to the ruling administration.



Source: Own elaboration.

## 5.2. The role of foreign news agencies as sources of articles in Argentina media outlets

Among the articles retrieved about the BRI, 50 (18.3%) explicitly mentioned at the top or bottom of the article that they were partially or entirely sourced from one or more foreign media companies. In total, fourteen different foreign sources were identified, all based in the US or European countries (mainly from the UK, Spain, France and Germany). None of these articles was overtly sourced from Chinese media firms. This result indicates the preference of Argentine media outlets to cover the BRI based on Western news companies. Except for two Spanish media organisations (EFE and El País), these articles that acknowledged the use of foreign news agencies primarily framed the BRI as a threat (50% or more). Moreover, in the case of the most mentioned foreign news agencies in these articles (AP, AFP, Bloomberg and Reuters), 67% or more framed the BRI as a threat.

This result supports the findings in the literature indicating that Western media companies convey negative frames and perceptions about China in general. This was particularly noteworthy in the cases of *Bloomberg* and *The New York Times*, whose articles were directly translated and conveyed in Spanish by *Clarín*, *Infobae*, and *Perfil* via sections devoted to news from those two sources. In certain cases, the articles exhibited a biased viewpoint. For example, *Perfil* translated a Bloomberg News (2019) article, titled “Seven risks of China’s Belt and Road projects.” At other times, foreign news agencies reproduced elements of both frames about the BRI, but tended to prioritise the US government’s viewpoint that the BRI poses a threat. For instance, *Clarín* translated a report from *The New York Times* into Spanish, which included this phrase: “The United States has warned allies in

the region about the risks of doing business with Beijing, highlighting potential dangers such as shoddy construction, predatory lending and espionage” (Semple, 2020).

This result also backs the viewpoint of Chinese scholars, who judge that Latin American media outlets are too Western-centric, either through training, an ideological preference or a lack of funds, which leads to the reproduction of Western biases in reports about China (Guo, 2018). Indeed, none of the Argentine media outlets under investigation had a correspondent in China during the period under analysis. The preference for Western sources also points to the historically well-known pattern of the north-to-south flow of news that Galtung and Ruge described decades ago, which, although somewhat challenged by the rise of counterhegemonic media and social media, remains quite influential. Although the Internet and social media have indeed facilitated transnational media flows, Western media and news agencies still hold significant influence over Argentine media as trustworthy sources and are considered to have a higher status than Chinese media outlets.

Be that as it may, blaming foreign media sources, as Chinese scholars do, insufficiently explains the type of coverage that China receives in local media. In fact, the number of articles explicitly based on such sources was not significant (18.3%). Moreover, even though these articles may acknowledge foreign news agencies as sources, in the cases when the articles were not direct translations, the journalists of Argentina media outlets may have introduced or highlighted the negative frames about the BRI on their own. As the next section shows, other dynamics were also at play.

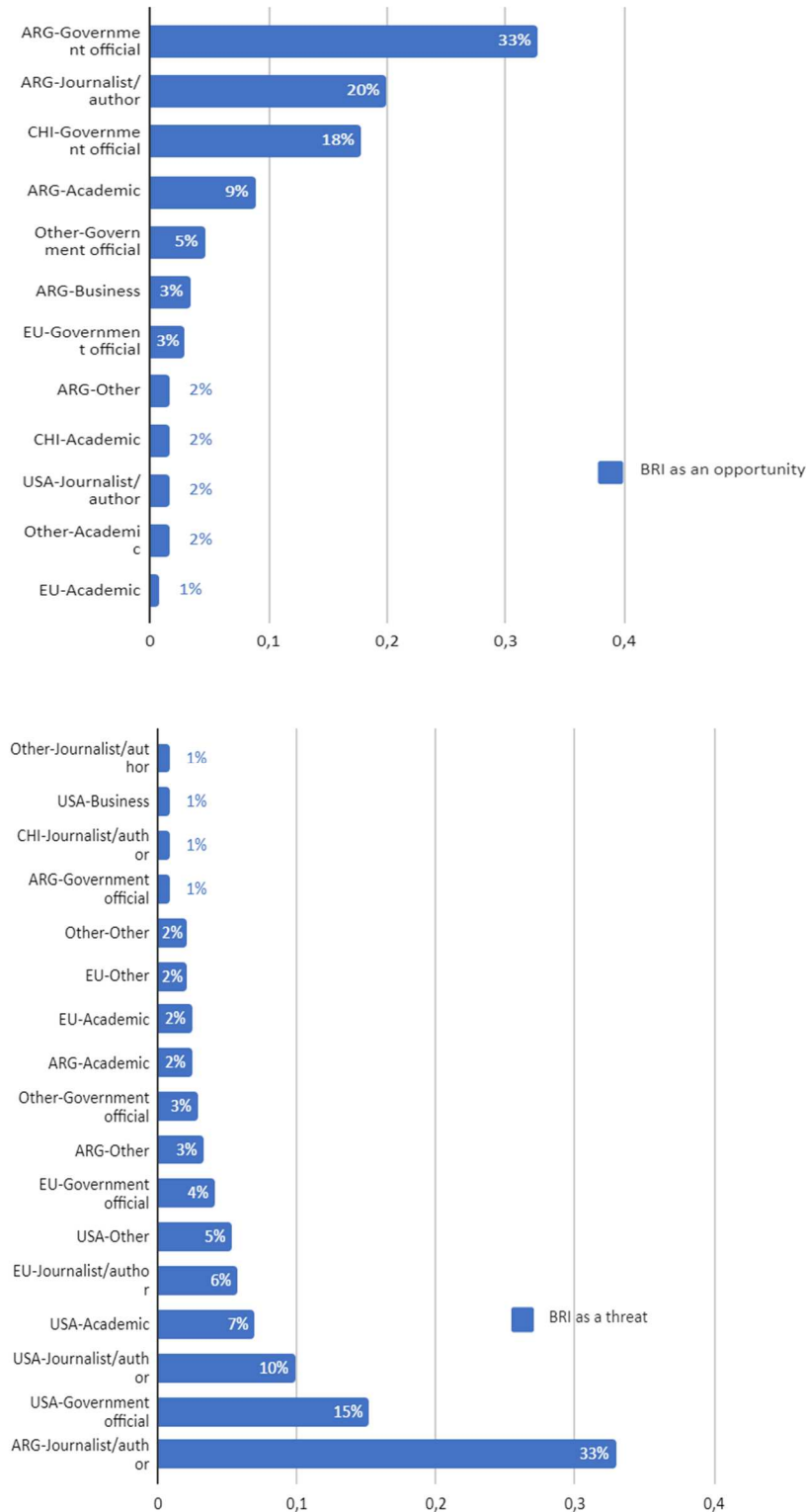
### **5.3. Frames according to the sources cited within the articles of Argentine media outlets**

Whilst the previous section considered whether an article was sourced completely or partially from a foreign source, this section takes a more fine-grained approach by examining the different sources cited within the articles. Figures 3A and 3B plot the percentages of source types by nationality mentioned within each article that conveyed the frame of the BRI as an opportunity and as a threat, respectively.

On the one hand, some of the results are unsurprising, such as the source type and nationality of the actors propagating the frame of the BRI as an opportunity. For example, numerous articles cited Chinese sources, comprising statements by President Xi, Foreign Minister Wang Yi and op-eds by the Chinese ambassador in Argentina, among other official Chinese sources. Likewise, Argentine government officials were the most frequent sources mentioned in articles that reproduced the frame of the BRI as an opportunity, justifying the need to join the initiative to contribute to the country’s development. Similarly, it was quite reasonable to find that US and European government officials, journalists and academics were quoted directly in numerous articles that communicated the frame of the BRI as a threat. For example, the US president, vice president, and the secretary of state, among other public officials, appeared prominently as sources criticising the BRI. Likewise, to a lesser extent, journalists and academics from the US and European countries were cited, expressing critical viewpoints about the BRI.

On the other hand, some of the results indicate two further dynamics beyond what is expected. Perhaps one of the main differences with the results of the previous section is that Chinese sources were frequently incorporated in the analysed articles; however, these were mainly parts of statements made by Chinese public officials. Therefore, Chinese views did appear in Argentine media articles, which contradicts the claims by Chinese academics that such perspectives tend to be ignored. Nonetheless, it is accurate to say that Argentine media did not reproduce full articles from Chinese media outlets in Spanish, as it did with Western ones, such as Bloomberg and the *The New York Times*.

**Figure 3. A).** Percentages of source types, by nationality, cited in articles that framed the BRI as an opportunity (Total citations of sources: 235). **B)** Percentages of source types, by nationality, cited in articles that framed the BRI as a threat (Total citations of sources: 243).



Source: Own elaboration.

Apart from that, both figures show that the category of journalist/author plays a prominent role. This tag covers the propagation of a frame of the BRI either as an opportunity or as a threat directly communicated by the Argentine author of the article. Sometimes, the journalists were from the media companies under analysis, but in many other cases, they were external individuals invited for an op-ed or to explain the relations between Argentina-China, Argentina-US or both. What is interesting about this category is that it indicates that these authors held opposite views about the BRI. In fact (as Figure 3B shows), this source type was the most prone to conveying a negative frame about the BRI and (as Figure 3A shows) the second most prone to conveying a positive frame about the BRI, thus evoking different aspects of the identified frames.

In general, the articles in the journalist/author category were not only op-eds or reports on BRI projects and China but rather reports on cleavages in Argentine domestic politics. Indeed, in many cases, authors expressed (and mostly speculated about) the impacts that the BRI may have on Argentina's foreign policy and its development model. For instance, critics opposed political parties and politicians encouraging closer ties with China, supporting instead a realignment with the US and the liberal values it claims to defend. In opposition, advocates reproduced a frame of the BRI as an opportunity, arguing for a closer partnership with China rather than persisting with the traditional prioritisation of relations with the US and European countries. These polarised views mirror the cleavages that exist in Argentina's domestic politics, which shape the different foreign policy preferences that the Argentine journalists and authors of these articles may have *vis-à-vis* the rivalry between China and the US. In summary, the various media outlets under analysis show the fragmentary interpretations that various Argentine actors have about China.

## **6. Conclusion**

This article argued that the reports on China by the national media of foreign states matter when understanding the perceptions that citizens may acquire about the Asian nation and its initiatives. Indeed, the role of national media outlets represents an important link that corrects the simplistic argument that increased Chinese investments in foreign countries do not necessarily translate into a more positive image of China in recipient states. Considering the BRI, this article proposed two opposite frames to study how national media outlets report on the initiative: either as an opportunity or as a threat. The results contradict the understanding of Chinese academics, who blame the sourcing from Western media for the biases present in the national media of foreign states. Although this trend is present, it does not sufficiently explain the diverse opinions found in national media. The findings suggest that criticisms against Chinese projects have also been driven by domestic political cleavages, where a heterogeneous group of local actors opposes, for manifold reasons, closer ties with China.

Empirically, this article contributes to the literature investigating how foreign media reports on China and the BRI by examining the reporting of Argentine national media from 2013–2022. The findings indicate that the frame that represents the BRI as an opportunity prevailed (41%), though slightly above the frame that portrays it as a threat (35%). The rest of the articles included both frames, as the professional journalism ethical code would suggest. Therefore, the increasing Chinese investments in the country and its presence in numerous economic sectors of Argentina did not necessarily transform into overwhelming positive coverage of the BRI. Furthermore, the analysis showed that national media firms had different patterns of reproducing the two BRI frames. Some conveyed largely positive frames (e.g., *Página 12*, *Télam*), some conveyed chiefly negative frames (e.g., *Infobae*, *La Nación*), and others were relatively balanced (e.g., *Clarín*, *Perfil*). These differences seem to be related to the specific editorial lines of the newspapers and their affinities to national political coalitions. Lastly, the article confirmed that national media firms' articles that reproduced Western news agencies' sources or that employed Western sources as the main input for their articles were

inclined to propagate negative frames about the BRI. However, this was not the only source of critical views about the Chinese initiative. The results showed that journalists and Argentine authors who write op-eds and report news on China and the BRI equally expressed the frame of the BRI as a threat. These views represent political positions contrary to –or at least concerned about– closer relations between Argentina and China and, in some cases, reasonable concerns about the impacts of Chinese projects.

Finally, various future research lines could extend the findings of this article. For example, the proposed framing approach could be employed to compare how media companies in different states report on the BRI and other Chinese initiatives. Likewise, the role of visual framing needs further investigation since it has become quite relevant both in traditional media outlets and in many social networks. Moreover, this research avenue could be extended via audience research methods to explore the extent to which different media frames, in comparison to other factors, influence citizens' perceptions of China. Finally, China has announced various cooperation agreements with media outlets from Argentina and other Latin American countries to address the public diplomacy challenges it faces in the region. Future research could explore the effects of such agreements on how China is covered and on the practice of journalism.

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