

The Belt & Road Initiative (BRI): a city system with great challenges in Latin America

Abstract

The Chinese government considers the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) as the flag of its so-called globalization 2.0, since it symbolizes its commitment to globalization, a bet "with Chinese characteristics". The BRI is a global plan based on cities as the main actors that make the initiative operational, focusing on Eurasia as its core. BRI represents the intersection between urbanization and development (Chen, 2017). The most visible and obvious feature of BRI is that it is becoming the largest commercial and economic area in the world. It is a plan based on the strategic role of cities along the BRI. This aims to connect 93 countries (45 Asians, 39 Europeans and 7 Africans) and 252 cities in a complex system of node-cities selected by five criteria based on the type of relations that China establishes with the countries, infrastructure conditions, trade flows, financial situation and cities diplomacy relations. Even as, 30 indicators were built in order to examine the type of bilateral relations with each country to which the cities belong to, their political stability, economic freedom level, monetary stability, level of financial internationalization, urban population growth rate trends for the next decade, sister cities, frequency of flights to China and procedures for obtaining visa in each country (Tu, 2018).

In that sense, the real success of BRI must be that which is not only conceived as an initiative where the routes are only for trade. It is related with the original meaning of the ancient silk routes. Ferdinand von Richthofen, the German geographer who was the first in calling it the Silk Route, preferred the terms "Verkehr" (communication) or "Hauptstrassen" (main routes), rather than "Seidenstrassen" (Silk Road). It means a series of communication channels for exchange in different areas and levels.

Also, the BRI demonstrates the positioning of cities currently cataloged as belonging to countries of the developing world, but with a great horizon of economic growth in the future. This is the case of "emerging" cities located in Central Asia like Astaná, or in South East Asia like Kuala Lumpur, or Istanbul in Turkey.

The governments of Latin America are not clear about the BRI's link with their region and how it can be included within the idea of a community of shared destiny. In addition, Latin America represents three major challenges to China that it must face within the framework of the BRI: 1) in this region, urbanization is not the result of economic growth, as it can be stated in other regions such as North America and Europe. Urbanization process began during the period of the Spanish conquest in order to found cities to expand the borders of the Spanish empire and to avoid leaving gaps that would facilitate entry for other colonial powers. The Spanish monarchy centered and raised its power in cities.

2) Cities in Latin America are not an administrative category -as they are in China- but an urban fact. The process of conquest brought the new foundation of pre-Hispanic America existing cities and other new ones that with the passing of time were consolidated as urban centers where the municipal power was overcome by urban growth. The incipient process of State building in Latin America has led to the lack of territorial control of States and the absence of efficient policies for cities.

3) Latin American cities have the highest rates of urban violence in the world. 43 of the 50 most violent cities in the world are located in Latin America. The cities become scenarios for all kinds of violence due to the dispute over the control of territories and the presence of illegal actors.

To study the BRI options in Latin America, the same analysis parameters used in other latitudes cannot be followed. The Latin American context has its own realities.

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