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Sub-imperialism as Lubricant of Neoliberalism: South African ‘deputy sheriff’ duty within BRICS

PATRICK BOND

ABSTRACT South Africa’s role in global economy and geopolitics was, during the apartheid era, explicitly sub-imperialist, as the West’s ‘deputy sheriff’ in a tough neighbourhood. But, with democracy in 1994, there arose a debate surrounding the difference between the liberation government’s (leftist) foreign policy rhetoric and its practice. Defining the sub-imperial standpoint at this stage is important in because of the extreme economic, social and environmental contradictions that have worsened within South Africa, for which anti-imperialist rhetoric is sometimes a salve. However, the explicit strategies for global engagement chosen by Pretoria, including joining the Brazil–Russia–India–China (BRIC) alliance in early 2012, have not proven effective in reforming world power relations. The degree to which BRICS has recently accommodated imperialism—especially in matters related to economic and ecological crises—suggests that critics should more forcefully confront the general problem of sub-imperial re-legitimation of neoliberalism. That problem requires a theory of sub-imperialism sufficiently robust to cut through the domestic and foreign policy claims made by the BRICS regimes, of which South Africa’s are among the most compelling given the ruling elite’s ubiquitous ‘talk left, walk right’ tendency and the extremely high levels of social struggles against injustice that result.

In 1965 Ruy Mauro Marini defined the Brazilian case of sub-imperialism in a way that fits contemporary South Africa: ‘It is not a question of passively accepting North American power (although the actual correlation of forces often leads to that result), but rather of collaborating actively with imperialist expansion, assuming in this expansion the position of a key nation.’[†] Nearly half a century later such insights appear prescient in the wake of the rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) as an active alliance. By 2013 these five key nations encircling the traditional Triad (the USA, European Union and Japan) were decisive collaborators with imperialism. They advanced the

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cause of neoliberalism by reaffirming its global institutional power structures and driving over-productive and over-consumptive maldevelopment, and they colluded in the destruction not just of the world environment—through prolific contributions to climate change—but in the sabotage of any potentially workable global-scale ecological regulation (favouring instead deepened commodification through emissions trading). Confusingly to some the BRICS regimes carried out this agenda quite consistently at the same time as they offered radical, even occasionally ‘anti-imperialist’ rhetoric and mainly trivial diplomatic actions, eg in the United Nations Security Council, mainly for the sake of their internal nationalist political needs. Their growing alliance was not entirely coherent, of course, as can be observed in the interface between BRICS and the Bretton Woods Institutions, or in the UN Security Council.

The BRICS agenda of re-legitimising neoliberalism does not just reinforce North American power, of course. In each case, the grouping’s countries’ control of their hinterlands for the sake of regional capitalist hegemony was another impressive feature of sub-imperialism, especially in South Africa’s case. Much of the long-standing (apartheid-era) critique of South African sub-imperialism still applies, but what is new is that, thanks to financial deregulation associated with the country’s ‘elite transition’ from racial to class apartheid during the 1990s, what were formerly Johannesburg- and Cape Town-based regional corporate powers—Anglo American Corporation, DeBeers, Gencor (later BHP Billiton), Old Mutual and Liberty Life insurance, SA Breweries (later merged with Miller), Investec bank, Didata it, Mondi paper, etc—escaped. Their financial headquarters are now in London, New York and Melbourne, and the outflows of profits, dividends and interest are the main reason South Africa was ranked the ‘riskiest’ amongst 17 emerging markets by *The Economist* in early 2009, requiring vast new foreign debt obligations to cover the hard currency required to facilitate the vast capital flight. Meanwhile, the African continent expanded its rate of trading with the major emerging economies—especially China—from around 5% to 20% of all commerce in the post-apartheid era (1994–2012). By 2012 the rationalisation and facilitation of tighter continental economic relationships was one of Pretoria’s leading objectives, according to its main foreign official dedicated to BRICS, deputy minister Marius Fransman: ‘South Africa also presents a gateway for investment on the continent, and over the next 10 years the African continent will need \$480 billion for infrastructure development.’²

Aside from lubricating world neoliberalism, hastening world eco-destruction, and serving as coordinator of hinterland looting, what are the other features of sub-imperialism that must be assessed, in a context of Washington’s ongoing hegemony? As argued below, if a ‘new imperialism’ entails—as David Harvey suggests—much greater recourse to ‘accumulation by dispossession’ and hence the appropriation of ‘non-capitalist’ aspects of life and environment by capitalism,³ then South Africa and the other countries comprising BRICS offer some of the most extreme sites of new sub-imperialism in the world today. The older generation of arguments about South Africa’s ‘articulations of modes of production’—migrant male workers from Bantustans providing ‘cheap labour’ thanks to black rural women’s unpaid reproduction of children, sick workers and retirees generally without state support—seems to apply even more these days,

when it comes to notorious Chinese pass-laws or the expansion of the South African migrancy model much deeper into the region in the wake of apartheid (notwithstanding tragic xenophobic reactions from the local working class).

In the contemporary context what, then, is the meaning of ‘sub-imperialism’, and how does this label apply to South Africa’s role in BRICS, including hosting the March 2013 heads of state summit in Durban (where at the time of writing, it is anticipated that a BRICS Development Bank will be established)? First, consider the broader empirical context, ranging from the international scale to South African political economy. Second, it is worth reviewing Pretoria’s most ambitious foreign economic policy strategies dating to 1994, when an often radical-sounding leadership achieved strong positionality in a world that even Mbeki came to refer to as ‘global apartheid’. There were, as we will see, few positive reforms achieved within the institutions of global governance, while at the same time extreme domestic contradictions worsened within South Africa. Next, we review the recent role of BRICS members in matters as diverse as climate and world finance, an exercise which provides empirical support for the charge of sub-imperialism. The final section returns to a theoretical problematisation of the concept.

Context

First, to make the case that sub-imperialism lubricates global neoliberalism in these various ways, and that within BRIC South Africa joins the other ‘deputy sheriffs’ to keep regional law and order (eg in the Central African Republic at the time of writing in early 2013), requires dispensing with naïve accounts of foreign policy that remain popular in the international relations field. Those scholars who argue that South Africa’s role is neither anti-imperialist nor sub-imperialist—that as a ‘middle power’, Pretoria attempts to constructively ‘lead’ Africa while acting in the continent’s interests,⁴ by ‘building strategic partnerships...in a constant effort to win over the confidence of fellow African states, and to convince the world community of its regional power status’,⁵ thus seeking ‘non-hegemonic cooperation’ with other African countries⁶—are missing an opportunity to interrogate the power relations with the critical sensibility that these times demand. Not least because super-exploitative extractive industries based upon migrant labour, without regard to community degradation and ecological damage (eg the well known Marikana platinum mine so profitable to Lonmin until 2012), continue to be the primary form of BRICS’ engagement with Africa.

Occasionally this agenda leads directly to war, a fetish about which is also a common distraction among scholars attempting to elucidate imperial–sub-imperial power relations. In the recent era the main military conflicts associated with Washington-centred imperialism have been in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa, and so Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are often cited as the West’s sub-imperial allies. But it was not long ago—from the 1960s until the late 1980s—that Southern Africa was the site of numerous wars featuring anti-colonial liberation struggles and cold war rivalries, with apartheid South Africa a strong and comforting deputy to Washington. Over two subsequent

decades in this region, however, we have witnessed mainly state–civil tensions associated with resource battles (eg in the Great Lakes region where southern Africa meets central Africa and where millions have been killed by minerals-oriented warlords), neoliberalism (eg South Africa and Zambia), an occasional coup (eg Madagascar), dictatorial rule (eg Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Malawi), or, in many cases, a combination. The civil wars engineered by apartheid and the CIA in Mozambique and Angola had ceased by 1991 and 2001, respectively, with millions dead but with both Lusophone countries subsequently recording high GDP growth rates, albeit with extreme inequality. Across Southern Africa, because imperial and sub-imperial interests were mainly aimed at resource extraction, a variety of cross-fertilising intra-corporate relationships emerged, symbolised by the way Lonmin (formerly Lonrho, called by British Prime Minister Edward Heath the ‘unacceptable face of capitalism’ in 1973) ‘benefited’ in mid-2012 from leading ANC politician Cyril Ramaphosa’s substantial shareholding and connections to Pretoria’s security apparatus, when strike-breaking was deemed necessary at the Marikana platinum mine. South African, US, European, Australian and Canadian firms have been joined by major firms from China, India and Brazil in the region. Their work has mainly built upon colonial infrastructural foundations—road, rail, pipeline and port expansion—for the sake of minerals, petroleum and gas extraction.

As for Washington’s ongoing coercive role in this continent, the Pentagon’s Africa Command has prepared for an increasing presence across the Sahel (eg Mali at the time of writing) out to the Horn of Africa (the USA has a substantial base in Djibouti), in order to attack al-Qaeda affiliates and assure future oil flows from Africa. Since taking office in 2009 Barack Obama has maintained tight alliances with tyrannical African elites, contradicting his own talk-left pro-democracy rhetoric in a well received 2009 speech in Ghana. According to Sherwood Ross, one reason is that, among 28 countries ‘that held prisoners in behalf of the US based on published data’, are a dozen from Africa: Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gambia, Kenya, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, South Africa and Zambia.⁷ In Gambia, for example, President Yahya Jammeh’s acquiescence to the CIA’s need for a rendition site for US torture victims may explain Obama’s blind eye towards his dictatorship. Likewise, the US role in Egypt—another rendition–torture hotspot—in propping up the Mubarak regime until the final days spoke volumes about the persistence of strong-man geopolitics, trumping the ‘strong institutions’ that Obama had promised.⁸

With fewer direct military conflicts in Africa but more subtle forms of imperial control, and with ‘Africa rising’ rhetoric abundant since the early 2000s commodity price boom, the continent and specifically the Southern African region appear as attractive sites for investment, in no small measure because of South Africa’s ‘gateway’ function, with Johannesburg as a regional branch-plant base for a variety of multinational corporations. Once known mainly because of Nelson Mandela and high crime rates, post-apartheid South Africa has been in the spotlight recently thanks to two high-profile hosting responsibilities—the mid-2010 World Cup and late-2011 United Nations Climate Summit—as well as the Marikana massacre and, in addition, the country’s unending political hijinks, including prolific corruption. Internecine conflict within the ruling ANC

has been in the news the past five years because, in a peaceful palace coup, its leader Thabo Mbeki—best known for an earlier episode of AIDS denialism that left hundreds of thousands dead for lack of medicine⁹—was fired first as party president in late 2007 and then as the country's leader in September 2008 (eight months before his term was to end). He was replaced initially by ANC secretary-general Kgalema Motlanthe and then in May 2009 by Mbeki's former deputy president, Jacob Zuma, who had been fired by Mbeki in 2005 for presumed corruption (by a French firm) in the course of a still-festered \$5 billion arms deal. Zuma was able to take the presidency in 2009 because, in the previous month, 84 counts of racketeering and fraud against him were simply dropped by a conspicuously generous state prosecutor. Zuma was also notorious for his 2006 rape case—he won with a he-said, she-said defence—in which Zulu ethnicism, open misogyny and boorish patriarchy featured prominently.¹⁰ Zuma's main opposition in subsequent years was the ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema—a young tycoon thanks to provincial patronage systems¹¹—who achieved notoriety in vociferously criticising the slow pace of racial transformation and persistence of class injustice, and who was expelled from the ANC as a result.

In 2010 the surprisingly crisis-free World Cup—the first in Africa, with vast public expenditures on 10 white-elephant stadiums and luxury transport (new Johannesburg fast trains, highway improvements and an unnecessary new airport in Durban)¹²—provided Zuma with increased credibility on the international stage. But it was only in 2011 that he became more visible as a world statesperson, briefly co-chairing a UN Sustainability Commission, hosting the UN climate summit in Durban and then in March 2012 joining BRICS at the New Delhi summit. Also during the course of 2012 he ensured that his ex-wife Nkosozana Dlamini-Zuma was elected as chair of the African Union Commission in a closely fought election pitting Anglophone against Francophone countries. Aside from the ANC's December 2012 endorsement of the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions strategy against Israel on behalf of Palestinian liberation, there were few regional or international initiatives of note (leaving disappointed many Zimbabwe and Swazi democrats who had naively hoped for assistance). In early 2013 Zuma's deployment of 400 South African troops in the Central African Republic was meant to prop up an authoritarian leader under coup threat.

On the economic front, meanwhile, South Africa had a brief rise in per capita GDP growth after a 2009 recession yet, because of extreme commodity-related vulnerability to world markets, more than a million workers lost their jobs and these were not recovered. South African capital continued leaking to offshore corporate headquarters at record rates (as high as 20% of GDP in 2007),¹³ with no prospect short of exchange controls and nationalisation able to reverse the rot, given the parasitical character of the indigenous bourgeoisie. The latter is best represented by Ramaphosa, the second richest black South African, with a net worth estimated by Forbes at more than \$600 million, whose offer of \$2.3 million for a prize buffalo at a game-farm auction in April 2012 symbolised the rise of the black elites' hedonistic values (he later apologised). Although a major strategic leader in the anti-apartheid movement, as mineworker leader and then ANC secretary general, he lost an internal power struggle to succeed

Mandela and so in 1996 moved to business where, during the late 1990s, he played a key role in the destruction of two major firms and vast amounts of black household savings. But by the early 2000s Ramaphosa had made a financial comeback. He soon gained control of the country's McDonalds fast food franchise and by 2012 owned 9% of the London mining house Lonmin, before on 15 August 2012 emailing his ANC allies in the police and mining ministries with a request that they move in on 'dastardly criminal' wildcat strikers at Marikana platinum mine. The following day that move left 34 dead, a workforce enraged and—after a stunningly successful 22% wage settlement which proved the depth of the workers' stamina and their hatred for Ramaphosa's former National Union of Mineworkers—wildcat strikes spreading across the country. This combination of chaos soon compelled Moody's and Standard & Poor's to downgrade South Africa's credit rating, which in turn led to more intensive lobbying that the ANC turn more business friendly by late 2012. They did so explicitly by electing Ramaphosa to the position of deputy president and hence Zuma's presumed successor.¹⁴ Even some liberals applauded, relieved that the challenge to class privilege might be arrested by fresh political blood.¹⁵

As a result of the system personified by Ramaphosa, South Africa maintains the world's highest Gini coefficient among large societies—far higher than it was in 1994—and the World Economic Forum's September 2012 rating as the most class-conflicted workforce among 144 countries surveyed.¹⁶ Annual police counts of community protests are in the range of 10 000 per year (which per capita is among the world's highest), although these 'popcorn protests' rise into the air often very visibly but fall back just as quickly, sometimes blowing onto xenophobic terrain if the wind is moving rightwards on any unpredictable day. (For example more than 60 people were killed in May–June 2008 pogroms). Ecological processes and gender relations have had similar setbacks.¹⁷ The embarrassing local configuration of accumulation dynamics, parasitical class formation and degenerative nationalist politics could not be disguised by the sometimes leftist narratives that Pretoria deployed when looking outwards.

Talk left to walk right

To illustrate South Africa's anti-imperialist rhetorical twitch, one of the most confusing features of the post-apartheid era has been foreign policy, especially in view of the conflicting traditions of internationalism from which the ANC—in exile from 1963 to 1990, during the period Nelson Mandela was imprisoned—launched its bid for power. Material and ideological supporters of the ANC ranged from the UN, the USSR and Sweden to black-consciousness, Third Worldist and international progressive movements and institutions in civil society. Hence it was not out of character, given the ANC's hot political traditions, to hear Mandela declare, just before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, that George W Bush, 'who cannot think properly, is now wanting to plunge the world into a holocaust. If there is a country which has committed unspeakable atrocities, it is the United States of America.'¹⁸ Yet, within weeks, three Iraq-bound US warships had docked and refuelled in Africa's largest harbour in Durban, and South Africa's state-owned weapons manufacturer sold \$160 million worth of artillery

propellants and 326 handheld laser range-finders to the British army, and 125 laser-guidance sights to the US Marines. Bush visited Mandela's successor, Mbeki, in the South African capital Pretoria in July 2003, and left the impression, according to Johannesburg's *Business Day* newspaper, 'of a growing, if not intimate trust between himself and Mbeki. The amount of public touching, hugging and backpatting they went through was well beyond the call of even friendly diplomatic duty.'¹⁹ By May 2004 Mandela had withdrawn his criticism: 'The United States is the most powerful state in the world and it is not good to remain in tension with the most powerful state'.²⁰

Mandela's outburst was one of many confusing signals from South Africa's leaders: occasionally talking left while mainly walking right, indeed sometimes talking left *so as to walk right*. Yet there can be no doubt that the international political power centres showed increasing trust in Mandela, Mbeki, long-serving trade, finance and planning minister Trevor Manuel and a few others of Pretoria's neoliberal leadership, giving them insider access to many elite forums. At the same time, at the turn of the Millennium, global-establishment institutions came under often fierce attacks in sites like the Seattle and Cancun World Trade Organization (WTO) summits, the annual meetings of the World Bank and IMF, G8 and European Union summits, and the Davos World Economic Forum. Given the global elites' increased need for legitimacy, it was not surprising that recently liberated South Africa's leaders were allowed to preside over the UN Security Council, the board of governors of the IMF and World Bank, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Commonwealth, the World Commission on Dams, and many other important international and continental bodies from 1994 to 2000. Simultaneously assuming Third World leadership, Pretoria also headed the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organisation of African Unity, and the Southern African Development Community.²¹ Then, during a frenetic two-year period beginning in September 2001, Mbeki and his colleagues hosted, led or played instrumental roles at the following dozen major international conferences or events: the World Conference against Racism in Durban (September 2001); the launch of the 'New Partnership for Africa's Development' (NEPAD, in Abuja, Nigeria, October 2001); the WTO ministerial summit (Doha, Qatar, November 2001); the UN Financing for Development conference (Monterrey, Mexico, March 2002); the G8 summit (Kananaskis, Canada, June 2002); the launch of the African Union in Durban (July 2002); the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg (August–September 2002); the World Economic Forum (Davos, Switzerland, January 2003); the 2003 G8 summit (Evian, France); George W Bush's first trip to Africa (July 2003); the WTO ministerial summit (Cancun, Mexico, September 2003); and the IMF/World Bank annual meeting (Dubai, September 2003).

Notwithstanding this high profile and a strong mandate from the African continent in most of these settings, Mbeki's administration failed to capitalise on these opportunities:

- at the UN racism conference, Mbeki colluded with the European Union to reject the demand of NGOs and African leaders for slavery/colonialism/apartheid reparations;

- NEPAD provided merely a homegrown version of the Washington Consensus;
- at Doha, South African Trade and Industry Minister Alec Erwin—a Friend of the Chair—split the African delegation so as to prevent a repeat of the denial of consensus that had foiled the Seattle WTO summit in December 1999;
- Manuel was summit co-leader in Monterrey, where he legitimised ongoing IMF/World Bank strategies, including the lack of progress on debt;
- from G8 meetings, Mbeki departed with only rhetorical commitments, invariably to be violated in practice;
- the African Union supported both NEPAD and the Zimbabwean regime of President Robert Mugabe, suggesting that good governance would not be considered a component of Africa's new partnerships;
- at the Johannesburg WSSD, Mbeki undermined UN democratic procedure, facilitated the privatisation of nature, and did nothing to address the plight of the world's poor majority;
- in Davos, global elites generally ignored Africa;
- for hosting a leg of Bush's Africa trip, Mbeki became the US 'point man' on Zimbabwe, and avoided any argument over Iraq's re-colonisation;
- in Cancun the collapse of WTO trade negotiations—again (like Seattle) catalysed by an African walkout—left Erwin 'disappointed';
- in Dubai, with Manuel leading the IMF/World Bank Development Committee, there was no Bretton Woods democratisation, new debt relief or post-Washington Consensus policy reform.²²

After 2003 the pace slowed, and in the later years of Mbeki's rule the problems encountered in establishing NEPAD as an all-encompassing assertion of South Africa's strength and values on the continent deserve more consideration. The origins of NEPAD and the African Peer Review Mechanism are revealing. Mbeki had embarked upon a late 1990s 'African Renaissance' branding exercise, which he endowed with poignant poetics but not much else. The lack of content was somewhat remedied during 2000 in a powerpoint skeleton unveiled in Mbeki's meetings with Clinton in May; at the Okinawa G8 meeting in July; at the UN Millennium Summit in September; and at a subsequent EU gathering in Portugal. The skeleton was fleshed out in November 2000 with the assistance of several economists and was immediately ratified during a special South African visit by World Bank president James Wolfensohn. By this stage Mbeki had managed to sign on as partners two additional rulers from the crucial north and west of the continent: Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, both leaders of countries that suffered frequent mass protests and various civil, military, religious and ethnic disturbances. Later he added Senegal's Abdoulaye Wade, who in 2012 had to be ousted from power by mass popular protest, when he attempted to change the constitution to allow further rule.

Addressing an international gathering in Davos, January 2001, Mbeki made clear whose interests NEPAD would serve: 'It is significant that in a sense the first formal briefing on the progress in developing this programme is taking place at the World Economic Forum meeting. The success of its implementation would

require the buy in from members of this exciting and vibrant forum!²³ International capital would benefit from large infrastructure construction opportunities, privatised state services, ongoing structural adjustment (which lowers the social wage and workers' real wages), intensified rule of international property law, and various of NEPAD's sectoral plans, all coordinated from a South African office at the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA), a World Bank-styled institution staffed with neoliberals and open to economic and geopolitical gate-keeping. Once Mbeki's plan was merged with an infrastructure-project initiative offered by Wade, it won endorsement at the last meeting of the Organisation of African Unity, in June 2001. (In 2002 the organisation evolved into the African Union and NEPAD was made its official development plan.)²⁴

The actual NEPAD document was publicly launched in Abuja by African heads of state on 23 October 2001. In February 2002 global elites celebrated NEPAD at venues ranging from the World Economic Forum to a summit of self-described 'progressive' national leaders (but including Britain's Tony Blair), who gathered in Stockholm to forge a global 'Third Way'. Elite eyes were turning to the 'scar on the world's conscience' (as Blair described Africa), hoping NEPAD would serve as a large enough bandaid, for G8 leaders at their June 2002 summit in Canada had rejected Mbeki's plea for an annual \$64 billion in new aid, loans and investments for Africa.²⁵ He was simply not a sufficiently reliable deputy sheriff for imperialism at that stage. The main reason for doubts about Mbeki's commitment to neoliberalism and the rule of law was his repeated defence of the continent's main violator of liberal norms, Mugabe. This loyalty was in spite of NEPAD promises such as: 'Africa undertakes to respect the global standards of democracy, the core components of which include political pluralism, allowing for...fair, open and democratic elections periodically organised to enable people to choose their leaders freely'. Mbeki would term Zimbabwe's demonstrably unfree and unfair March 2002 presidential election 'legitimate', and repeatedly opposed punishment of the Mugabe regime by the Commonwealth and the UN Human Rights Commission. In February 2003 South African foreign minister Dlamini-Zuma stated: 'We will never criticise Zimbabwe'. The NEPAD secretariat's Dave Malcomson, responsible for international liaison and coordination, then admitted to a reporter, 'Wherever we go, Zimbabwe is thrown at us as the reason why NEPAD's a joke.'²⁶

In the meantime South African capital's drive to accumulate up-continent continued, as Johannesburg business sought out new opportunities especially in mining, retail, banking, breweries, construction, services and tourism. The largest South African corporations benefited from NEPAD's lubrication of capital flows out of African countries, yet most of the money did not stop in Johannesburg, as was the case before 2000. The financial flight went mainly to London, where Anglo American Corporation, DeBeers, Old Mutual insurance, South African Breweries, Liberty Life insurance and other huge South African firms had relisted at the turn of the Millennium (thanks to permission from Mbeki and Manuel). Within Africa regional acquisitions by South African corporations were in any case mainly takeovers, not 'greenfield projects' involving new fixed investments. This was not difficult insofar as in 2010, 17 out of Africa's top 20 companies were South African, even after the capital flight a decade earlier.²⁷

Yet in spite of a high-profile mid-2002 endorsement of NEPAD by 187 business leaders and firms, led by Anglo American, BHP Billiton and the ABSA banking group, there were no investments made in 20 key infrastructure projects two years later, only vocal corporate complaints that the peer review mechanism had insufficient teeth to discipline errant politicians. According to the chief reporter of (pro-NEPAD) *Business Day* in mid-2004, ‘The private sector’s reluctance to get involved threatens to derail NEPAD’s ambitions.’²⁸

On the other hand, the prospect that Johannesburg-based corporations would be ‘new imperialists’ was of ‘great concern’, according to Pretoria’s then public enterprises minister, Jeff Radebe, in early 2004: ‘There are strong perceptions that many South African companies working elsewhere in Africa come across as arrogant, disrespectful, aloof and careless in their attitude towards local business communities, work-seekers and even governments’.²⁹ To illustrate by drawing upon a telling incident in 2012, the Johannesburg parastatal firm Rand Water was forced to leave Ghana after failing—with a Dutch for-profit partner (Aqua Vitens)—to improve Accra’s water supply, as also happened in Maputo (Saur from Paris) and Dar es Salaam (Biwater from London). Rand Water had long claimed its role in Ghana was part of both the NEPAD and Millennium Development Goals mandate to increase public–private partnerships in water delivery.³⁰

Radebe could also have been describing his Cabinet colleague Mbeki. The Johannesburg *Sunday Times* reported from the July 2003 African Union meeting in Maputo that Mbeki was viewed by other African leaders as ‘too powerful, and they privately accuse him of wanting to impose his will on others. In the corridors they call him the George Bush of Africa, leading the most powerful nation in the neighbourhood and using his financial and military muscle to further his own agenda’.³¹ These critics of Mbeki were joined by African intellectuals who demanded better from their leaders as well, including those who understand Pretoria’s continental ambitions. To illustrate, at a joint conference in April 2002 in Accra, the Council for Development and Social Science Research in Africa and Third World Network-Africa identified the ‘most fundamental flaws of NEPAD’ as follows:

- the neoliberal economic policy framework at the heart of the plan...which repeats the structural adjustment policy packages of the preceding two decades and overlooks the disastrous effects of those policies;
- the fact that in spite of its proclaimed recognition of the central role of the African people to the plan, the African people have not played any part in the conception, design and formulation of the NEPAD;
- notwithstanding its stated concerns for social and gender equity, it adopts the social and economic measures that have contributed to the marginalisation of women;
- that in spite of claims of African origins, its main targets are foreign donors, particularly in the G8;
- its vision of democracy is defined by the needs of creating a functional market.³²

It did not take long for the pessimists' predictions to come true for, even on its own terms, NEPAD was fundamentally flawed. As Wade stated in October 2004: 'I am disappointed. I have great difficulties explaining what we have achieved when people at home and elsewhere ask me...We're spending a lot of money and, above all, losing time with repetition and conferences that end and you're not quite sure what they've achieved.'³³ In June 2007, at the World Economic Forum meeting in Cape Town, he acknowledged that NEPAD 'had done nothing to help the lives of the continent's poor'.³⁴ Later that year Wade was even more frank: 'The redirection of the project has become inevitable, because nobody has yet understood anything from NEPAD and nobody implemented NEPAD.'³⁵ As Mbeki himself confessed a few weeks after his ouster from power, in December 2008, 'I am afraid that we have not made the progress we had hoped for. Indeed, and regrettably, I believe that we have lost some of the momentum which attended the launch and detailed elaboration of the NEPAD programmes.'³⁶

Mbeki's African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) itself was conceived so that African regimes—including South Africa's, to great internal consternation—would essentially review themselves with kid gloves, and when civil society critique emerged, this was repressed.³⁷ According to Bronwen Manby from Afrimap (a pro-APRM NGO)

Although each country that has undergone the APRM process is supposed to report back to the APR Forum on its progress, there is no serious monitoring exercise of how effectively this is done. Nor any sanctions for failure to act. Nor, apparently, is there any real system to ensure that the commitments the government makes address the most important problems highlighted in the APRM review...The implementation of the APRM programme of action is also left entirely to the executive, with no formalised role for parliamentarians or civil society to hold the government's feet to the fire should it fail to perform...Even the continental APRM secretariat failed to engage in any serious way with national institutions...Without this sort of integration into other national planning systems, debates and oversight mechanisms, the APRM process seems doomed to become little more than a cosmetic exercise without effect in the real world of policy and decision making.³⁸

In sum, the imposition of NEPAD's neoliberal logic soon amplified uneven development in Africa, including South Africa. Adding to the invasion by Chinese firms—specialising in neocolonial infrastructure construction, extractive industries and the import of cheap, de-industrialising manufactured goods—and the West's preparations for military interventions from the oil-filled Gulf of Guinea in the west to the Horn of Africa in the east, Africa was squeezed even harder. Patents, marketing restrictions and inadequate state-financed research made life-saving medicines unreasonably scarce. Genetically modified food threatened peasant farming. Trade was also increasingly exploitative because of the 'Singapore issues' advanced by the G8 countries: investment, competition, trade facilitation, government procurement. The new conditionalities amplified grievances of developing nations over the G8's vast agricultural subsidies, unfair industrial

tariffs, incessant services privatisation and intellectual property monopolies. Together they prompted African–Caribbean–Pacific withdrawal from the ministerial summit of the WTO in Cancun in September 2003, leading to its collapse, with no subsequent improvements in the following years. Although there was talk of ‘Africa Rising’ thanks to high GDP growth in several countries—mainly those that benefited from the commodity boom or civil wars ending—the actual wealth of sub-Saharan Africa shrank dramatically during the 2000s once we factor in non-renewable resource depletion, with the height of the boom recording a -6% annual decline in ‘adjusted net savings’ (ie correcting GDP for ecological and social factors typically ignored).

Throughout this period there was a restrained yet increasingly important Washington geopolitical agenda for Africa, which Bush’s first Secretary of State, Colin Powell, described in a document, *Rising US Stakes in Africa*. This agenda included political stabilisation of Sudan (whose oil was craved by Washington); support for Africa’s decrepit capital markets, which could allegedly ‘jump start’ the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA); more attention to energy, especially the ‘massive future earnings by Nigeria and Angola, among other key West African oil producers’; promotion of wildlife conservation; increased ‘counter-terrorism’ efforts, which included ‘a Muslim outreach initiative’; expanded peace operations, transferred to tens of thousands of African troops thanks to new G8 funding; and more attention to AIDS. On all but Sudan, South African co-operation was crucial for the US imperial agenda.

However, after the US military’s humiliating 1993 ‘Black Hawk Down’ episode in Somalia, there was insufficient appetite at the Pentagon for direct troop deployment in Africa, and, as a result, President Bill Clinton was compelled to apologise for standing idly by during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Instead, as Africa Command head Carter Ham explained in 2011, Washington ‘would eventually need an AfriCom that could undertake more traditional military operations...[although] not conducting operations—that’s for the Africans to do.’³⁹ Likewise, the US Air University’s *Strategic Studies Quarterly* cited a US military advisor to the African Union: ‘We don’t want to see our guys going in and getting whacked...We want Africans to go in.’⁴⁰ In late 2006, for example, when Bush wanted to invade Somalia to rid the country of its nascent Islamic Courts government, he called in Mbeki to assist with legitimating the idea, although it was ultimately carried out by Meles Zenawi’s Ethiopian army three weeks later.⁴¹ When in 2011 Obama wanted to invade Libya to rid the country of Muammar Gaddafi, South Africa voted affirmatively for NATO bombing within the UN Security Council (where it held a temporary seat), in spite of enormous opposition within the African Union.

There was similar reliance by the G8 upon G20, BRICS and even South African ‘deputy sheriff’ support on the economic battlefield. At the nadir of the 2008–09 crisis, for example, the G20 was described by Walden Bello: ‘It’s all show. What the show masks is a very deep worry and fear among the global elite that it really doesn’t know the direction in which the world economy is heading and the measures needed to stabilize it.’⁴² According to David Harvey, the G20 asked, simply, ‘how can we actually reconstitute the same sort of

capitalism we had and have had over the last thirty years in a slightly more regulated, benevolent form, but don't challenge the fundamentals?'⁴³

South Africa within a BRICS 'bloc'

For foreign policy the big question raised by Zuma's presidency was whether the momentum from Mbeki's expansionist years would continue, given the former's preoccupations with domestic matters and comparatively weak passion for the international stage. Only in 2012 was the answer decisively affirmative: Dlamini-Zuma's engineered election as African Union Commission chair, and Pretoria's entry to BRICS. By mid-2012 Pretoria's National Development Plan—overseen by Manuel from within the presidency and endorsed at the ANC's December 2012 national conference—provided a variety of mandated changes in policy so as to align with South Africa's new BRICS identity and functions. These mainly involved pro-business statements for deeper regional economic penetration, alongside the exhortation to change 'the perception of the country as a regional bully, and that South African policy-makers tend to have a weak grasp of African geopolitics.'⁴⁴

Perhaps local elite interests conflicted most with those of the hinterland (as well as of most South Africans) when it came to climate management, given Pretoria's role, first in maintaining extremely high emissions levels on behalf of the country's 'Minerals–energy complex', and, second, with respect to sabotaging global climate talks by destroying the Kyoto Protocol in Copenhagen in 2009 and again in Durban in 2011. Indeed, an important pre-BRICS example of Zuma's personal role in adjusting, not transforming, global governance was the December 2009 line-up of 'BASIC's (Brazil, South Africa, India, China) leadership with Washington to confirm climate catastrophe. At the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Denmark Zuma joined Obama, Lula da Silva, Wen Jiabao and Manmohan Singh to foil the Kyoto Protocol's mandatory emissions cuts, thus confirming that at least four degrees of global warming will occur by 2100. 'They broke the UN', concluded Bill McKibben from the climate advocacy movement 350.org,⁴⁵ with what Naomi Klein called 'nothing more than a grubby pact between the world's biggest emitters: I'll pretend that you are doing something about climate change if you pretend that I am too. Deal? Deal.'⁴⁶

A secondary objective of the deal—aside from avoiding emissions cuts—was to maintain a modicum of confidence in what were crashing carbon markets by the late 2000s (especially after the 2008 financial meltdown),⁴⁷ which would entail increasing domination of 'Clean Development Mechanism' (CDM) carbon trading by the BASIC coalition (until year-end 2012),⁴⁸ and then new internal carbon markets, especially in Brazil and China, thereafter. As Böhm *et al* argue:

the subimperialist drive has remained the same: while domestic capital continues to invest heavily in extractive and monocultural industries at home, it is increasingly searching for investment opportunities in other peripheral markets as well, precipitating processes of accumulation by dispossession within their broader spheres of influence. This mode of development can be

observed in many semi-peripheral nations, particularly in the 'BRICS' countries. China's extensive investment in African arable land and extractive industries in recent years has been well documented. What is perhaps less well recognized in the development literature, however, is the extent to which financing from carbon markets like the CDM is now being leveraged by elites from these BRICS countries, to help underwrite these forms of subimperialist expansion.⁴⁹

In terms of global-scale climate negotiations, the Washington+BASIC negotiators can thus explicitly act on behalf of their fossil fuel and extractive industries to slow emission-reduction obligations, but with a financial-sector back-up, in the event a global climate regime does appear in 2020, as agreed at the Durban COP17. Similar cosy ties between Pretoria politicians, London-based mining houses, Johannesburg 'Black Economic Empowerment' tycoons and sweetheart trade unions were subsequently exposed at Marikana. Other BRICS members have similar power configurations, and in Russia's case this led to a formal withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol's second commitment period (2012–20) in spite of huge 'hot air' benefits the country would have earned in carbon markets as a result of the industrial economy's disastrous exposure to the world economy during the 1990s. That economic crash cut Russian emissions far below 1990 Soviet Union levels during the first (2005–12) commitment period. But given the 2008–13 crash of carbon markets—where the hot air benefits would have earlier been realised as €33/tonne benefits but by early 2013 fell to below €3/tonne—Moscow's calculation was to promote its own oil and gas industries helter-skelter, and hence binding emissions cuts were not in Russia's interests, no matter that 2010–11 climate-related droughts and wildfires raised the price of wheat to extreme levels and did tens of billions of dollars of damage.

The same pro-corporate calculations are being made in the four other countries in the group, although their leaders did sometimes posture about the need for larger Northern industrial country emissions cuts. However, the crucial processes in which UN climate regulatory language was hammered out climaxed in Durban in December 2011 in a revealing manner. 'The Durban Platform was promising because of what it did not say', bragged US State Department adviser Trevor Houser to the *New York Times*. 'There is no mention of historic responsibility or per capita emissions. There is no mention of economic development as the priority for developing countries. There is no mention of a difference between developed and developing country action.'⁵⁰ The Durban COP17 deal squashed poor countries' ability to defend against climate disaster. With South African foreign minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane chairing, the climate summit confirmed this century's climate-related deaths of what will be more than 180 million Africans, according to Christian Aid. Already 400 000 people die each year from climate-related chaos due to catastrophes in agriculture, public health and 'frankenstorms'. And climate was not exceptional when it came to the BRICS approach to environmental preservation. The 2012 Columbia and Yale University Environmental Performance Index showed that four BRICS states (not Brazil) have been decimating their—and the Earth's—ecology at the most rapid rate of

any group of countries, with Russia and South Africa near the bottom of world stewardship rankings.⁵¹

Moreover, like the political carving of Africa in Berlin in 1884–85, the BRICS 2013 Durban summit had as its aim the continent's *economic* carve-up, unburdened—now as then—by what would be derided as 'Western' concerns about democracy and human rights, with 25 African heads of state present as collaborators. Reading between the lines, its resolutions would:

- support favoured corporations' extraction and land-grab strategies;
- worsen Africa's retail-driven de-industrialisation (South Africa's Shoprite and Makro, soon to be run by Walmart, were already notorious in many capital cities for importing even simple products that could be supplied locally);
- revive failed projects such as NEPAD;
- confirm the financing of both African land-grabbing and the extension of neo-colonial infrastructure through a new 'BRICS Development Bank', in spite of the damaging role of the Development Bank of Southern Africa in its immediate hinterland, following Washington's script.⁵²

In exchange for the Durban summit amplifying such destructive tendencies, Africa's elites might have hoped to leverage greater power in world economic management via BRICS. With Pretoria's finance minister Pravin Gordhan's regular critiques of the World Bank and IMF, there was certainly potential for BRICS to 'talk left' about the global-governance democracy deficit. Yet in the vote for Bank president in April 2012, for example, Gordhan's choice was Washington-Consensus ideologue Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Nigerian finance minister who, with IMF managing director Christine Lagarde, catalysed the Occupy movement's near revolution in January 2012, as a result of the removal of petrol subsidies. Brasilia chose the moderate Keynesian economist Jose Antonio Ocampo and Moscow backed Washington's choice: Jim Yong Kim. This was a repeat of the previous year's fiasco over the race for IMF Managing Director, won by Lagarde—despite ongoing corruption investigations against her by French courts, in the wake of criminal charges against her predecessor (in both jobs) Dominique Strauss-Kahn—because BRICS was divided-and-conquered. The 'emerging' bloc appeared in both cases as incompetent, unable to even agree on a sole candidate, much less win their case in Washington.

Yet in July 2012 the BRICS treasuries sent \$100 billion in new capital to the IMF, which was seeking new systems of bail-out for banks exposed in Europe. South Africa's contribution was only \$2 billion, nevertheless a huge sum for Gordhan to muster against local trade union opposition. Explaining the South African contribution—initially he said it would be only one tenth as large—Gordhan told *Moneyweb* in 2011 that it was on condition that the IMF became more 'nasty' (sic) to desperate European borrowers, as if the Greek, Spanish, Portuguese and Irish poor and working people were not suffering enough.⁵³ The result of this BRICS intervention was that China gained dramatically more IMF voting power, while Africa actually lost a substantial fraction of its share. Gordhan then admitted at the September 2012 Tokyo meeting of the IMF and World

Bank that it was likely that ‘the vast majority of emerging and developing countries will lose quota shares—an outcome that will perpetuate the democratic deficit’. And given ‘the crisis of legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness of the IMF’, it was ‘simply untenable’ that Africa only had two seats for its 45 member countries.⁵⁴

‘Sub-imperialism’?

In sum, are BRICS ‘anti-imperialist’ or instead ‘sub-imperialist’, doing deputy-sheriff duty for global corporations, while controlling their own angry populaces as well as their hinterlands? The eco-destructive, consumerist-centric, over-financialised, climate-frying maldevelopment model throughout BRICS works very well for corporate profits, but is generating crises for the majority of its people and for the planet. Hence the label sub-imperialist is tempting. During the early 1970s Marini argued that Brazil was ‘the best current manifestation of subimperialism’ for three central reasons:

- ‘Doesn’t the Brazilian expansionist policy in Latin America and Africa correspond, beyond the quest for new markets, to an attempt to gain control over sources of raw materials—such as ores and gas in Bolivia, oil in Ecuador and in the former Portuguese colonies of Africa, the hydroelectric potential in Paraguay—and, more cogently still, to prevent potential competitors such as Argentina from having access to such resources?’
- ‘Doesn’t the export of Brazilian capital, mainly via the State as exemplified by Petrobras, stand out as a particular case of capital export in the context of what a dependent country like Brazil is able to do? Brazil also exports capital through the constant increase of foreign public loans and through capital associated to finance groups which operate in Paraguay, Bolivia and the former Portuguese colonies in Africa, to mention just a few instances.’
- ‘It would be good to keep in mind the accelerated process of monopolization (via concentration and centralization of capital) that has occurred in Brazil over these past years, as well as the extraordinary development of financial capital, mainly from 1968 onward.’⁵⁵

Matters subsequently degenerated on all fronts. In addition to these criteria—regional economic extraction, ‘export of capital’ (always associated with subsequent imperialist politics) and internal corporate monopolisation and financialisation—there are two additional roles for BRICS regimes if they are genuinely sub-imperialist. One is ensuring regional geopolitical ‘stability’: for example, Brasilia’s hated army in Haiti and Pretoria’s deal-making in African hotspots like South Sudan, the Great Lakes and the Central African Republic, for which \$5 billion in South African arms purchases serve as military back-up.

The second is advancing the broader agenda of neoliberalism, so as to legitimate deepened market access. Evidence includes South Africa’s NEPAD; the attempt by China, Brazil and India to revive the WTO; and Brazil’s sabotage of the left-wing project within Venezuela’s ‘Bank of the South’ initiative. As Eric

Toussaint remarked at a World Social Forum panel in 2009, ‘The definition of Brazil as a peripheral imperialist power is not dependent on which political party is in power. The word imperialism may seem excessive because it is associated with an aggressive military policy. But this is a narrow perception of imperialism.’⁵⁶ A richer framing for contemporary imperialism is, according to agrarian scholars Paris Yeros and Sam Moyo, a system ‘based on the *super-exploitation* of domestic labour. It was natural, therefore, that, as it grew, it would require external markets for the resolution of its profit realisation crisis.’⁵⁷ This notion, derived from Rosa Luxemburg’s thinking a century ago, focuses on 1) how capitalism’s extra-economic coercive capacities loot mutual aid systems and commons facilities, families (women especially), the land, all forms of nature, and the shrinking state; 2) Harvey’s accumulation by dispossession; and, in special cases requiring militarist intervention, 3) Klein’s ‘Shock doctrine’.⁵⁸

Along with renewed looting, various symptoms of internal crisis and socio-economic oppression are common within BRICS, including severe inequality, poverty, unemployment, disease, violence (again, especially against women, as India unveiled in early 2013), inadequate education and prohibitions on labour organising. Rising BRICS inequality—except for Brazil whose minimum wage increase lowered the extreme Gini coefficient to a bit below South Africa’s—is accompanied by worsening social tensions. These in turn are responded to with worsening political and civil rights violations, increased securitisation of societies, militarisation and arms trading, prohibitions on protest, rising media repression and official secrecy, debilitating patriarchy and homophobia, activist jailings and torture, and even massacres (including in Durban, where a notorious police hit squad has killed more than 50 people in recent years and, even following reports by local media and attempted prosecutions, continued into 2013).

The forms of BRICS sub-imperialism are diverse, for as Yeros and Moyo remark:

Some are driven by private blocs of capital with strong state support (Brazil, India); others, like China, include the direct participation of state-owned enterprises; while in the case of South Africa, it is increasingly difficult to speak of an autonomous domestic bourgeoisie, given the extreme degree of de-nationalisation of its economy in the post-apartheid period. The degree of participation in the Western military project is also different from one case to the next although, one might say, there is a ‘schizophrenia’ to all this, typical of ‘subimperialism’.⁵⁹

As a result, all these tendencies warrant opposition from everyone concerned. The results are going to be ever easier to observe:

- the more that BRICS leaders prop up the IMF’s pro-austerity financing and catalyse a renewed round of WTO attacks;
- the more a new BRICS Development Bank exacerbates World Bank human, ecological and economic messes;

- the more Africa becomes a battleground for internecine conflicts between sub-imperialists intent on rapid minerals and oil extraction (as is common in central Africa);
- the more the hypocrisy associated with BRICS /US sabotage of climate negotiations continues or offsetting carbon markets is embraced; and
- the more that specific companies targeted by victims require unified campaigning and boycotts to generate solidaristic counter-pressure, whether Brazil's Vale and Petrobras, or South Africa's Anglo or BHP Billiton (albeit with London and Melbourne headquarters), or India's Tata or Arcelor-Mittal, or Chinese state-owned firms and Russian energy corporations.

In this context building a bottom-up, counter-hegemonic network and then *movement* against both imperialism and BRICS sub-imperialism has never been more important.⁶⁰

Notes

- 1 RM Marini, 'Brazilian interdependence and imperialist integration', *Monthly Review*, 17(7), 1965, p 22. Recommending Marini's ideas to fellow South Africans in a *Review of African Political Economy* article, Melanie Samson offers a valid critique of my earlier analysis: 'Although Bond is clear as to who benefits from sub-imperialism, he does not explicitly elaborate a theorisation of subimperialism. As an aside he asserts that, in the earlier imperial period analysed by classical theorists, imperial capacity was "reproduced through subimperial processes."' He also notes continuities in South Africa's sub-imperial project in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Despite his careful elaboration of the changing nature of imperialism, Bond presents an ahistorical, unchanging conceptualisation of subimperialism.' M Samson, '(Sub)imperial South Africa? Reframing the debate', *Review of African Political Economy*, 36(119), 2009, p 96. The rise of BRICS offers an opportunity to correct this conceptualisation, although I hold to the standard argument that imperialism in Africa is largely exercised through the looting of resources and the application of neoliberal socioeconomic policies, with South Africa mainly lubricating that process. For an earlier version, see P Bond, *Looting Africa*, London: Zed Books, 2006.
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 - 14 P Bond, 'How the Marikana movement stunned neoliberal South Africa', *Counterpunch*, 19–21 October 2012, at <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/10/19/how-the-marikana-movement-stunned-neoliberal-south-africa/> <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-11-08-events-fail-to-stir-a-teflon-zuma>.
 - 15 The two most prominent were Ramaphosa's biographer, Anthony Butler, who defended the Lonmin emails, and commentator Richard Calland. A Butler, 'ANC needs leaders who understand business', *Business Day*, 26 October 2012, at <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2012/10/26/anc-needs-leaders-who-understand-business>; and R Calland, 'Events fail to stir a teflon Zuma', *Mail & Guardian*, 8 November 2012, at <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-11-08-events-fail-to-stir-a-teflon-zuma>. In contrast, see R Munusamy, 'Cyril Ramaphosa: the true betrayal', *Daily Maverick*, 27 October 2012, at <http://dailymaverick.co.za/article/2012-10-25-cyril-ramaphosa-the-true-betrayal>.
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- 60 The objective of a 'BRICS-from-below' counter-summit in late March 2013, described at <http://ccs.ukzn.ac.za>.

Notes on contributor

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