

Imperialism's Junior Partners



On May 12, Brazil's democratic government, led by the Workers' Party (PT), was the [victim of a coup](#). What will the other BRICS countries (Russia, India, China, and South Africa) do? Will they stand by as the reactionaries who took power in Brasilia [pivot](#) closer to Western powers, glad to [warm](#) Dilma Rousseff's seat at the BRICS summit in Goa, India in five months' time? Or take a stronger line, following the [lead](#) of Latin American progressive countries (Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua and El Salvador)?

Here in [South Africa](#), few expect Jacob Zuma's African National Congress (ANC) government to react constructively on the international stage. Making waves isn't likely at a time when Standard & Poors and Fitch are on a South Africa visit, deciding whether to downgrade the country's credit rating to "junk" status, as happened in Brazil late last year.

This is a shame because the last two weeks have offered excellent opportunities for diplomatic rebellion: [revelations](#) have emerged implicating the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in assisting the apartheid state's 1962 arrest and twenty-seven-year imprisonment of Nelson Mandela. This isn't exactly surprising; the State Department did keep Mandela on its terrorist watch list until 2008.

Following these revelations ANC spokesperson Zizi Kodwa [charged](#) that the CIA "never stopped operating here. It is still happening now – the CIA is still collaborating with

those who want regime change.”

BRICS and Empire

South Africa's chief foreign policy spokesperson Clayson Monyela [responded](#) to Kodwa's accusation with assurances that South Africa's relations with the United States “are strong, they're warm, and cordial.” But Kodwa's cry of imperialism, in light of the Brazilian coup, has struck a nerve. Indeed, the argument that Rousseff's ouster demonstrates that the purportedly anti-imperialist BRICS are under sustained attack by U.S. empire is being repeated in a number of corners. Commentators like [Eric Draitser](#), [Pepe Escobar](#), [Paul Craig Roberts](#) and [Hugo Turner](#), along with officials from [Venezuela](#) and [Cuba](#), all make this claim.

A founder of Brazil's heroic Movement of Landless Workers (MST), João Pedro Stedile, was [asked](#) by *Il Manifesto* about why “a group of deputies from right-wing organizations went to Washington before the last elections.” He replied, “Temer will arrange his government in order to allow the U.S. to control our economy through their companies.. Brazil is part of the BRICS, and another goal is that it can reject the South-South alliance.”

Another version of this anti-imperialist framing was [heard](#) at the South African Black Consciousness movement's Black First Land First launch conference on May 13:

“Brazil and South Africa are seen by the Western imperialist forces as the weak link in the BRICS chain. The strategy of imperialism is to get rid of presidents who support the BRICS process. Imperialism works with internal opposition parties to effect regime change.”

The eloquent South African commentator Siphamandla Zondi, who directs the Institute for Global Dialogue (one of South Africa's main foreign policy institutes), also shares this

view. Zondi defends the BRICS project and disputes the argument [put forth](#) by myself and others that the BRICS actually serve a “[sub-imperialist](#)” role in the global economy – that they are fully complicit in reproducing inequality both within their own countries and between others in the Global South. In a challenge posted on [Facebook](#) he called for observers to recognize that “imperialism has, in the modern age, taken on racism, crude capitalism and patriarchy as its forms.”

No to the Coup, No to Imperialism

Rousseff is of course the victim of a coup. I hope the Brazilian people will rise up against the illegitimate interim government. But whether the coup was a product of imperialism, as Zondi and many others argue, requires a bit more circumspection.

As WikiLeaks cables [revealed](#), Temer was a mole for the U.S. State Department a decade ago, playing what Washington considered to be an incompetent, ideology-free role as a political “opportunist.”

Indeed, we [witnessed](#) a similar problem here in South Africa, with the country's then lead spy, Moe Shaik, offering the same sort of tell-all function – before becoming a key [liaison](#) to the BRICS New Development Bank.

But as concrete evidence of a U.S.-led coup in Brazil this fact seems insufficient. Moreover, Rousseff herself [denied](#) the role of imperialism a week after the impeachment, during a *Russia Today* interview: “I don't believe external interference is a primary or a secondary reason for what's happening now in Brazil. It's not. The grave situation we see now has developed without any such interference.”

She repeated this when pressed by the interviewer, so it was crystal clear that she blames the old oligarchs for her

downfall. This point was reinforced by subsequent [revelations](#) about the coup plotters' local motivations, to avoid their own prosecution for corruption.

Moreover, the interweaving of racism, patriarchy, and global capitalism is also not as straightforward as it once was. When Obama's allies hit the Honduran government in 2009, for example, it was a black man and a woman (Hillary Clinton) in Washington who [gave international credence](#) to the local capitalist elite's coup against a progressive democrat.

Similar concerns about Obama's role on the African continent have also been expressed – appropriate considering the [Africa Command's agenda](#). But the role of the BRICS countries shouldn't be downplayed in these geopolitical power plays.

The United States is made more dangerous by the sub-imperialist geopolitical functions that Deputy Sheriff Zuma regularly [accepts](#), such as endorsing NATO's bombing of Libya which led to regime change in 2011, supporting Israel even during its periodic mass murder of Gaza civilians, happily hosting U.S.-South African military exercises, and even bragging openly that the South Africa army will serve as Obama's “boots on the ground.”

This isn't to say that crude imperialism has faded away. Looking just at the 2009–2012 years when [Hillary Clinton](#) was secretary of state, *Washington's Blog* writer Eric Zuesse [summarizes](#) repeated U.S. incursions in Honduras, Haiti, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine (and one might add Paraguay too).

Yet, despite this impressive list of imperialist interventions, U.S. “regime change maneuvers in the rest of the black world,” as Zondi phrases it, are not that common. They are not needed at the moment, especially in Africa, where the local leadership is already supine when it comes to Washington's agenda.

Neoliberal Multilateralism

Simply put, “racism, crude capitalism and patriarchy” associated with twentieth-century U.S. imperialism have been largely replaced by Obama's neoliberal multilateralism – a style of governance that the BRICS have bought into, not opposed. This isn't something to celebrate. Multilateral neoliberalism leaves the BRICS countries far less able to pursue any positive South-South interventions.

Indeed, Rousseff's ouster demonstrates this clearly and the incoming Temer regime is likely to pursue a desperate course to re-establish its global position. The westward drift [announced](#) last week by Temer's foreign minister, José Serra, plus Brasilia's renewed neoliberal agenda on the home front, suggest this will be the case.

But while it's obvious that Serra is going to become much more active as a sub-imperial ally of the United States than was Rousseff, Rousseff also did little of substance on the foreign policy front aside from occasional anti-Yankee rhetoric (such as when she learned from Edward Snowden that Obama had bugged her phone and email).

As the thoughtful (and generally pro-BRICS) commentator Oliver Stuenkel recently [lamented](#):

“Rousseff failed to articulate anything resembling a foreign policy doctrine, and Brazil's foreign policy since 2011 was shaped, above all, by the President's mind-boggling indifference to all things international and foreign policy makers' incapacity to convince Rousseff that foreign policy could be used to promote the government's domestic goals – as both [former Brazilian presidents] Lula and Fernando Henrique Cardoso so skilfully showed.”

Serra, on the other hand, has [promised](#) that:

“Priority will be given to the relationship with new partners

in Asia, particularly China, this great economic phenomenon of the twenty-first century, and India. We will be equally committed to modernizing the bilateral exchange with Africa, the big neighbour on the other side of the Atlantic...

“We will also take advantage of the opportunities offered by inter-regional fora with other developing countries, such as the BRICS, to accelerate commercial exchanges, investments and sharing of experiences.”

Sub-Imperialism

Many who see Brazil as the victim of imperialism also hold the corresponding view that Brazil, along with the other BRICS countries, plays a progressive role on the global stage. Zondi [articulated](#) this viewpoint concisely in a recent piece for the *Cape Times*:

“The [BRICS] platform has become the most powerful platform for the pursuit of global reform ... Brazil has been a crucial voice in global debates about the reform of global governance, including the IMF and World Bank, and about fair and just outcomes for the developing world in world trade negotiations ...

“Brazil has spoken out on the agenda of decent work, food sovereignty, a greater Western contribution to the global response on climate change, ecological justice and the end to ecological imperialism. Brazil has also been an advocate of the responsibility to protect.

“We may miss this now. Brazil is an important part of the effort today to shift global power from the former colonial powers and their diaspora in North America to all regions of the world. It is a key partner in South-South co-operation.”

Many South Africans are impressed with the BRICS, but the reality of Brazil's global maneuvering is much less rosy. In the most important multilateral settings, BRICS elites have

worked against the interests of the world's majority and against the environment.

Consider Brazil's actions in the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Since 2010 it has been working to reconfigure voting power ("voice") in the institution. It has successfully increased its vote by 23 per cent (with China also up 37 per cent, India up 11 per cent and Russia up 8 per cent). Yet the U.S. still won't give up its veto power – it is the only country with more than 15 per cent required – and the BRICS' total vote is now just 14.7 per cent.

Worse, the [restructuring deal](#) that made this rise possible was detrimental to African countries: Nigeria just lost 41 per cent of its voting power, along with Libya (39 per cent), Morocco (27 per cent), Gabon (26 per cent), Algeria (26 per cent), Namibia (26 per cent) and even South Africa (21 per cent). From this perspective "BRICs versus Africa" seems a more apt way to describe Brazil's role in "reform of global governance" at the IMF.

Brazil's maneuvers at other global governance institutions – including the World Trade Organization (WTO) which is currently headed up by Brazilian Roberto Azevêdo – are equally damaging.

According to the ordinarily pro-BRICS NGO Third World Network (TWN), Brazil conspired with the United States and the European Union at the WTO to "[ensure] that India did not get the language it proposed" to maintain vital food subsidies, which in coming years will lead tens of millions of Indian peasants to suffer. As TWN's Chakravarthi Raghavan [put it](#), "on the eve of Nairobi, Brazil unilaterally abandoned the G20 alliance to join the U.S. and EU, in trying to act against China and India," not to mention against the world's poor.

Of course, Brazil's behavior is not unique. China and Russia persistently block efforts by Brazil, India, and South Africa

to permanently join the Security Council. The point is simply that intra-BRICS solidarity, let alone broader South-South solidarity, is hard to find in reality.

The issue of Brazil's role in battling the global environmental crisis also deserves greater scrutiny. In 2009 Lula supported – alongside the United States, India, China, and South Africa – the Copenhagen Accord, which voided the Kyoto Protocol's binding emissions-cut premise, contained utterly unambitious emissions targets, and also wrecked the UN process that year.

Moreover, Rousseff was a booster of the pro-corporate “[Green Economy](#)” gambit at the Rio Earth Summit in 2012 that was (semi-successfully) rejected by most of the Global South. She is also a proud signatory to the 2015 [Paris UN climate deal](#), a deal which assures catastrophic global warming and also now legally prevents climate victims in the Global South from suing the Global North for its climate debt.

Brazil has also combined forces with the EU – against Bolivia – to “open the same carbon trading loopholes that undermined the last global climate deal,” [according to](#) Oscar Reyes of the Institute for Policy Studies. He notes that “the Paris Agreement explicitly allows countries to count emissions reductions made in other countries as part of their own domestic targets, referring to these by the euphemism ‘internationally transferred mitigation outcomes’.”

Finally, the claim that “Brazil has also been an advocate of the responsibility to protect” simply doesn't hold water. Consider Haiti and the “right to protect” role countries like Brazil are tasked with carrying out. As Brazil expert Mark Weisbrot of the Center for Economic and Policy Research [explains](#),

“The UN occupation of Haiti is really a U.S. occupation – it is no more a multilateral force than George W Bush's

“coalition of the willing” that invaded Iraq.

“And it is hardly more legitimate, either: it was sent there in 2004 after a U.S.-led effort toppled Haiti's democratically elected government. Far from providing security for Haitians in the aftermath of the coup, [the UN mission in Haiti] stood by while [thousands of Haitians](#) who had supported the elected government were killed, and officials of the constitutional government jailed.

Despite Brazil's UN-designated “right to protect” responsibilities it has done nothing to expose or oppose these crimes of occupation which include the rape and sexual abuse of Haitian children by UN soldiers. The Haiti experience, [according](#) to Weisbrot (a PT sympathizer), “eviscerates Brazil's potential for moral leadership in the world.”

Meanwhile back in Johannesburg, lefty-sounding rhetoric from the ANC's Luthuli House is nothing more than politicians blowing dust into the air.

When ANC leaders [call](#) the courageous South African public protector Thuli Madonsela a “CIA agent,” or [declare](#) that the Mandela Washington Fellowship program of the U.S. Embassy is training kids for “regime change,” they show off anti-imperialist feathers. But in reality, Washington has no beef with Pretoria. The ANC has always [excelled](#) at talking left while walking right.

U.S. empire is real and oppressive, but it shouldn't prevent a clear and critical appraisal of the BRICS countries' true role in the world. Especially if we want to forge alliances to change the world, not merely shift around the Titanic's first-class deck chairs. •

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editor of [BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique](#). An earlier version appeared at [Jacobin](#).

Originally posted [here](#).