

Chinese Walls, BRICS and the Scramble for Africa

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between China and Africa in the context of BRICS (a bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). BRICS has been touted in some quarters as offering an alternative anti-imperialist road to the dominance of the North (the United States and the European Union) as well as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO). On the other hand, it has been argued that rather than challenging the present trajectory of global capitalism, BRICS acts in a sub-imperialist way, furthering global capitalism through its own regional alliances and often allying with economic super-powers. This article explores the debate, paying particular attention to the role of China in Africa.

Keywords: BRICS, sub-imperialism, anti-imperialism, China in Africa

Introduction

What potential does BRICS have and what are its future prospects? Can it really emerge as a collective that will reject the current neoliberal order and seek to promote a much more welfare form of capitalist development that might unleash a dynamic much more conducive to the emergence of more progressive social and political forces whose

pressure from below can take a more radical anti-capitalist direction? Will it seriously challenge the existing world order where the imperialist behaviour of the US continues to be highly, sometimes decisively influential in shaping the course of events? Or are these governments headed by elites whose principal preoccupation is forging a more cooperative system of global management of a world capitalist order in which their voices will be more seriously listened to and in which their own rankings in the global pecking order of elites rise much more significantly? (Vanaik 2015: 261).

Vanaik elegantly summarises the possible potential and pitfalls of BRICS as a force to change the balance of forces in the global economy, a system marked by huge inequalities.

In order to get a grip on the uneven playing field of the global capitalist system and numerous attempts to chart alternate paths, a possible starting point is the anti-colonial movements that gathered force in the second part of the twentieth century. This saw the colonial powers of Europe lose their grip on an increasing number of colonies worldwide.

As liberation movements assumed power, they faced the challenge of taking charge of economies that were tied to the old colonial powers. Despite the rhetoric of nationalism, many African governments tied themselves into trade and military dependencies on the old overlords. However, alongside this, concerted attempts were made to build a ‘non-aligned’ movement, where African and other ‘Third World’ governments would chart a middle path between the duelling Western and Soviet blocs. This would encompass both an ideological and economic mix, adopting heterodox policies deemed to work best under local conditions. But these attempts soon fell prey to the Cold War, the demands of transnational capital and the powerful reach of a Western imperial system. The fall of the Berlin Wall saw the world facing the prospect of a unipolar global system under United States hegemony (Hobsbawm 1995).

Seen by many as foisting economic adjustments functional to Western financial interests upon national economies across the globe, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) were

ubiquitous. It is in the context of NATO military supremacy, the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the ubiquity of neo-liberal economic precepts that Francis Fukuyama was to write of the 'end of history' and the triumph of liberal capitalist democracy (1993). For Fukuyama, with only one protagonist left standing, the dynamic of rising and falling empires, classes and economic systems that drove history had surely ended.

During this period, under-valued if not unnoticed China, underwent some incredible and far-reaching changes. These involved audacious experiments in tying a burgeoning economy onto an autocratic state, whose control over state entities was loosened in order to play the market. China jettisoned the communist rhetoric against profit and the middle class but without ceding much in the way of personal freedom or civil rights. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, much emphasis was placed on an economic programme that would make China globally competitive even if this meant the spread of market relations. This was epitomised by Xiaoping's famous statement: 'It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice' (quoted in Brautigam 2009: 9).

This was Socialism, or Capitalism if you prefer, with Chinese characteristics. It was an experiment at the level of growth, inventive and vociferous trade and global reach that reaped tremendous rewards. The Chinese attempt at market and planning or, to use the more official language, 'socialist market economy', emerged at a time of great turmoil and realignment in global politics towards the latter part of the 1990s. A weakened and demoralised Russia felt threatened by NATO and the European Union, India was bursting at the seams with a middle class consumer market that strained against an economy beset by rules and regulations, and Brazil elected a once trade union leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as President, who sought to marry the goals of redistribution with global competitiveness. In the background soared the eagle of the United States' continuing power and dominance of the dollar.

Bolstered by a huge population and unfettered by onerous labour standards or enforcement of patent rights and environmental laws, China's growth rate hit double digits for a decade. It ran trade surpluses with many countries across the world, making things that did not last, but cheaply and to order. Cities sprang up everywhere as peasants flocked towards wages and away from rural drudgery and near starvation. Suddenly, in terms of Gross

Domestic Product (GDP) size, the US and indeed the entire West, had a contender. Soon, China began making subtle geo-political moves too, seeking to rally other non-Western powers into a bloc (Ferguson 2012).

How would struggling economies play out their politics? Would they simply play by the rules, hoping to slowly move up the pecking order from emerging to developed economies or would they seek to chart an alternate path? Ironically, it would take a person from the lofty heights of financial capital to hint at a possible realignment.

BRICS was first mooted in 2001, by Jim O'Neill, then chair of Goldman Sachs Asset Management. He authored a piece for Goldman Sachs' in-house journal, entitled 'The World Needs Better Economic BRICS'. O'Neill was referring to the so-called emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China, and advocated them as the economic 'future' of the world-economy. In time, the small 's' would become a big 'S' with the addition of South Africa. This was reward for South Africa's changing foreign policy during the Mandela years. In the beginning, the ANC government sought to develop a 'two China policy' (Barber 2004: 107). Their support for Taiwan, it was rumoured, was helped by a hefty donation to the ANC's election coffers. But in November 1996, Mandela announced the dropping of Taiwan and the singular embrace of China (Marais 1995).

Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa. These five countries occupy different continents geographically and in some instances, different continents economically. Despite this, they have come together in an uneasy alliance under the rubric of BRICS¹. BRICS has been trumpeted in some quarters as potentially sowing the seeds of an anti-imperialist bloc, challenging the United States, Europe as well as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). It would do so by being the axis of an alternative site of joint economic might and, perhaps even hegemony. In other quarters, it has been touted as sub-imperialist or even inter-imperialist.

In the sections that follow, I attempt to tease out these various positions.

¹ China and India in particular do not make for easy geo-political partners, due to disputes over Tibet and Pakistan, as well as the fact that China accuses India of closing the doors to Chinese trade and vice-versa.

The (Rail)road of Friendship²

Arguably one of the most spirited defences of BRICS as a potential radical force was articulated by South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Nkoana-Mashabane in 2013 in Durban:

What make Brics timely and historic are few factors which I wish to emphasize. Firstly, is the common history that brings the Brics countries together. This is a history that distinguishes the Brics countries from the traditional powers. It is a history of struggle against colonialism and underdevelopment, including the spirit of Bandung. Circumstances of history have put these countries on the same side.

Secondly, the Brics countries have common challenges as developing nations. Here at home, we speak of the triple challenges of inequality, poverty and unemployment....Other Brics member states are dealing with similar challenges that, however, differ in scale and degree.

Thirdly, we are driven by shared interests not only in the definition of our respective national interests as individual Brics countries. We also share a common vision of the world of the future.

Fourthly, each of the Brics countries works for a true partnership with Africa and this resonates well with us because Africa is the centre-piece of our foreign policy (Nkoana-Mashabane 2013: 7).

With this common vision in mind, increasing trade and political ties between BRICS countries began in earnest. Strategic trade and bi-lateral agreements between China and South Africa in particular catapulted Chinese investment in the country to the fore, a pattern which has been replicated across Africa. South African government trips to China increased, with President Zuma leading a high profile delegation to the country in December 2014, his second state visit. In terms of trade, China is South Africa's single largest trading partner, while South Africa is China's largest trading partner on the continent.

²A television series entitled *The Road of Friendship* was shot to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to Africa (Cheun 2008: 71).

China's total trade with South Africa rose from approximately 'R190-billion to R270-billion in 2013, and is rapidly approaching R300-billion' (*South Africa Info*, 16 April 2014).

South Africa's bilateral trade with China increased by 32% in 2013 to R270bn...China became South Africa's single-largest trading partner in 2009, but the trade balance has been in favour of China, with South Africa's trade deficit increasing from R36bn in 2012 to R38bn last year. 'The composition of our bilateral trade remains a concern. Over 90% of South Africa's top 10 exports to China are in raw materials while 100% of our top 10 imports from China are manufactured products' according to the Minister of Trade and Industry, Rob Davies (*Business Day*, 12 March 2014).

Across Africa, it is a similar story. Indeed, 'over the past decade African trade with China has risen from \$11 billion to \$166 billion' (*The Economist*, 2 March 2013). Chinese money is being used to rebuild railway lines across Africa, airports are springing up at a rate of knots and infrastructural development is heavily financed by Chinese money. In January 2015,

China inked a deal with the AU that commits to a staggering plan to connect all 54 member states through a network of modern highways, airports and high speed railways. The Chinese Special Envoy to the AU Zhang Wing said: 'This is a very grand and ambitious project but it is a feasible project. Secondly, the African economy is taking off and is in the early days of industrialization ... and there is a huge demand on Africa's part' (*Mail and Guardian*, 15 February 2015).

Other deals in the pipeline include a \$12 billion deal between Nigeria and China Railway's Construction Corporation to build 870 miles of railroad in the country, linking Lagos to Calabar in the east.

Increasing trade in many African countries is the spur for this expansion, as the chief executive of Rift Valley Railways, Darlan Fabio de David, points out: 'The demand [for freight transport] is huge. Railways are key to increasing regional trade' (*Financial Times*, 27 November 2013). Rift Valley Railways is a private equity-backed company which is rehabilitating

the Mombasa to Kampala line built originally by British rulers between 1896 and 1901.

In South Africa, plans are afoot to build a high speed monorail between Durban and King Shaka International Airport as well as a bullet train between Durban and Johannesburg that is estimated to make the journey a mere three hours. Talks between China Railway International Group and provincial government in December 2014 put in motion the rail links and will come at a cost of 530 billion dollars (*IOL*, 10 December 2014).

In Ethiopia, a railroad between Addis Ababa and Djibouti is being built to link the two cities at a distance of 756km. Again, the project has majority financial backing from the Export-Import Bank of China. This frenetic development in transport infrastructure on the part of Chinese companies is matched by an equally hefty investment in presidential palaces and government buildings across Africa. Presidential palaces have been built by the Chinese in Sudan, Guinea-Bissau, Burundi, Malawi, and Sierra Leone – the list trundles on like the proverbial railroad.

Cat and Mouse?

There has been an insistent argument from the Left that BRICS, rather than acting as a magnet for anti-imperialist forces, is actually sub-imperialist. Luce (2015: 29) presents a sophisticated analysis of the idea of sub-imperialism:

... sub-imperialism has to be understood as a hierarchical level of the world system and at the same time as a stage of dependent capitalism (its highest stage) out of which some socio-economic formations are transformed into new links in the imperialist chain without ever leaving the condition of economic dependency. Besides transferring value to imperialist centres, they also move into appropriating the surplus value of weaker nations for themselves. The socio-economic formations that ascend to the sub-imperialist condition succeed in displacing the very conditions of dependent capitalism in a way that ensures expanded reproduction and mitigates the effects of dependency through forms that are specific to the pattern of capital reproduction and a policy of antagonistic co-operation with dominant imperialism in different situations; they claim relative autonomy for

the sub-imperialist State without, however, questioning the framework of dependency.

Accumulation of resources, raw materials and the ties that bind political and governmental elites to new waves of external investment ultimately lead Africa down a similar trajectory to that of its colonial past. It seems that the continent is the new resource hunting ground. Gold, platinum, diamonds, oil, offshore gas – the abundance of the African continent has long been a source of vast wealth and there is always a hungry predator waiting to pounce and extract for their own benefit.

Baruti Amisi, arguing from an African context, explains why BRICS could be viewed as sub-imperialist, laying out what he sees as four similar characteristics. Through mega projects targeting mineral extraction, BRICS countries attract vital foreign direct investment and

impoverish the same people that they should empower. Impoverishment occurs through dispossession of natural resources with little or no compensation, unequal shares of the costs and benefits of mega development projects, repayments of debts incurred to build these projects, and structural exclusion from accessing the outcomes of these initiatives.

BRICS countries share the same *modus operandi* at their different stages of imperialism, either as countries which have been active in Africa for a very long time (Russia and China); newly arrived (India); or playing their traditional sub-imperialist countries (Brazil and South Africa). Accumulation by dispossession occurs through the abuse of local politics, national elites, warlords, and war economies.

BRICS countries share the same interests in natural resources including but not limited to mining, gas, oil and mega-dam projects for water and for electricity to meet their increasing demands for cheap and abundant electricity. They are also actively involved in the search for new markets, and hence they promote construction of roads, railways, bridges, ports and other infrastructure. But this infrastructure is often indistinguishable from colonial-era projects, meant to more quickly extract primary products for the world market.

BRICS countries have poor records of environmental regula-

tion. There is virtually no commitment to mitigate climate change and invest in truly renewable energy, to take environmental impact assessments seriously, and to consult with and compensate adversely affected communities (Amisi 2015: 98).

This has been the case with regards to China in Africa, with environmental degradation, pollution and instances of worker exploitation being significant factors.

There are also warning signs on the horizon for the BRICS alliance. Following the financial and economic crash of 2008, BRICS countries have faced up to a precarious future. Politically volatile actions by Russia recently, the annexation of Crimea and ongoing support for a separatist movement in Ukraine, have caused concern amongst the alliance towards Russia and may lead to increasing isolation. China also reported a trade deficit in February 2014 with many major industrial companies reducing their production. The price of important commodities, such as copper and iron are falling as a result. New markets for trade, along with cheap energy through oil, coal and hydroelectricity are vital.

‘Once more unto the breach’: The Counter-argument

The sub-imperialist position has been forcefully countered by Minister Nkoana-Mashabane who stated that:

There are those who do not have a positive appreciation of Brics because they believe that its continued existence will threaten the status quo and tamper with the current international balance of forces These critics talk of what they call a ‘new scramble’ for Africa, comparing the growing interest on our continent by Brics countries to the late 19th century when European colonial powers partitioned Africa among themselves.

What these two groups of critics have in common is their lack of appreciation of multipolarity for the geopolitical health of our international system. The first group views multi-polarity in a negative sense -as a threat; while the second group would rather

remain in the old system than to see it being shaken by emerging players from the South.

To see BRICS countries as ‘sub-imperialists’ is the result of a dogmatic application of classical notions of imperialism and Immanuel Wallerstein’s centre-periphery model to a situation that is fundamentally different from what these theories were trying to comprehend and explain. Our scholars have to be innovative and courageous enough to develop new tools of analysis and theoretical models when history challenges us to do so (Bond 2013: 6-7).

For some writers like Alden (2008: 4), the story of China in Africa is more than a simple fable of exploitation:

For in addition to new public buildings serving the needs of politicians and bureaucrats in African capitals, these same Chinese construction firms were building dozens of hospitals and schools and, most of all, hundreds of miles of tarmac and railway tracks...As communication networks spread and infrastructure projects continue to upgrade communities and link rural areas, Chinese involvement, far from being a curse, had actually been the catalyst for development and, with that, a new level of improved livelihoods such as Africa had not known for decades.

President Hu Jintao, defending China’s role in Africa, argued that:

China has never imposed its will or unequal practices on other countries and will never do so in the future. It will certainly not do anything harmful to the interests of Africa and its people. China respects the political systems and paths to development independently adopted and pursued by the African people that suit their national conditions (cited in Alden 2008: 120).

In particular, the hallmarks of colonialism– the ideology of a ‘civilizing mission’, the accompanying territorial imperative and forging of exclusionary trade relations– are distinctly lacking in China’s Africa policy. The close proximity between Chinese economic engagement and African elites, however, especially those characterised as ‘pariah regimes’, will influence

attitudes both in Africa and the West to China's underlying aims and ambitions for the continent (Alden 2008: 127).

Central to understanding the possibilities of BRICS is to come to terms with the fact that the key is China.

China – Big Cat

There have been some questions raised as to whether this new bloc can remain together due to an array of differing agendas and internal economic pressures. Moyo and Yeros (2011: 19) summarise this dilemma:

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 'sub-imperialism'.

As Moyo and Yeros (2011: 19) point out, there is great diversity in the BRICS approach to investment. But there is also great diversity in the relative strengths of the different BRICS economies and the way they are inserted into the global economy. Leading the BRICS pack is China by a long shot.

China's economy is two-and-a-half times bigger than India's and four times bigger than that of Brazil or Russia. Moreover, its growth rates have been much higher and its accumulated reserves far surpass the sum of all three of these nations combined. These distinctions are compounded by a very different insertion into the international economy. While China directly impacts the flow of the global circuit, these other countries have only a secondary influence (Katz 2015: 76).

In terms of differentials in the volumes of trade in Africa between China and

India, China is now Africa's largest trading partner, surpassing the United States a few years ago. Contrary to early estimates (which suggested that China Africa trade had reached USD200bn in 2012), last year China-Africa trade reached USD169bn, a 1.8% lift from USD166bn in 2011. Interestingly though, in the first six months of 2013, China-Africa trade totalled USD105bn, compared to USD79bn in the first half of 2011 (*Standard Bank BRICS-Africa Trade update*, 8 October 2013).

Trade between Africa and India also continues to increase steadily,

In 2012 India-Africa trade lifted by 11% from USD63.1bn to USD 70.3bn boosted by a steady rise in both Indian imports from Africa (from USD39.8bn to USD43bn) as well as Indian exports to Africa (USD23.3bn to USD27.3bn). Last year India accounted for one-quarter of total BRICS - Africa trade, up from one-fifth in 2007 (*Standard Bank BRICS-Africa Trade Update*, 8 October 2013).

China is the only country in BRICS that has a chance of entering the ranks of developed country. Brazil, South Africa and Russia in this model would be seen as part of the semi-periphery with no chance of catching up with developed countries. This intermediate position supports the idea of a tri-polar order postulated by world systems theorists and their characterisation of the semi-periphery as a segment which serves as a buffer between the two poles of global capitalism. This group is currently playing a leading role in creating the bifurcation which traditionally separates the emerging economies from their under-developed peers. This is how the trajectory followed by countries who, through contradictory periods, cross over from proximity to the centre to convergence with the periphery, is repeated.

As Ho-fung Hung (2015: 224) points out:

While China's export expansion led to the deterioration of the US current account deficit, China's large trade surplus enabled China to accumulate substantial foreign-exchange reserves. It devoted most of these reserves to the purchase of US Treasury bonds, turning themselves into the largest creditor to the US. Their financing of the US fiscal deficit allowed the US government to expand expenditures while cutting taxes. It fueled the American appetite for Chinese exports, and the resulting increase in China's trade surpluses leading

to yet more purchases of US Treasury bonds. These constituted two mutually reinforcing processes of increasing Chinese exports to the US and increasing Chinese holdings of US public debt, continuously deepening the market and financial dependence of China on the US. China's massive investment in low-yield US Treasury bonds is tantamount to a tribute payment through which Chinese savings were transformed into Americans' consumption power. In 2008, China surpassed Japan as the biggest foreign holder of US treasury bonds, and its holding continued to escalate despite the financial crisis that broke out in Wall Street in 2008 Though China has the geopolitical autonomy that theoretically enables it to end its dependence on the dollar and even end the dollar standard, in reality, it has been helping perpetuate the standard, and hence US geopolitical dominance, through its insurmountable addiction to US Treasury bonds caused by its export driven growth. Compared to China's 1.2 trillion holding of US Treasuries, the BRICS bank forex reserve pool of 100 billion and China's pledged contribution of 400 billion is little more than a drop in the ocean.

What will happen to others in the semi-periphery? Katz's views here are apposite:

Many analysts estimate that these countries will tend to converge in common blocs in order to contend with the central powers. However, clear indications of this coming together are few and far between, and the disparate treatment meted out to each by imperialism only makes this convergence less likely They accept free trade, the primacy of the transnational corporations, and the continuity of cross-border financial flows. In contrast to what occurred during the 1930s, there has been no attempt to erect protectionist networks, nor to construct militarist coalitions. All the players have agreed to work within the existing international organisations to reinforce their own influence. They promote reforms to the voting system within the IMF and propose the creation of global reserve funds in hopes of gradually replacing the dollar Some members on this fringe compete among themselves on various economic terrains and others still maintain old

border disputes. And, many times, their strategic priorities do not converge (Katz 2015: 78).

Katz's view of the potential for an anti-imperial politics to emerge from the loose economic bond formed by BRICS economies is a sceptical one. It seems there is little appetite for anti-imperialist politics. The attitudes of the ruling classes are dominated by the bond they develop with big capital.

They are bourgeois and have discarded the old pretences of the anti-imperial projects of the 1960s and 1970s. A 'Non-Aligned' bloc or a summit like the one celebrated in Bandung³ are beyond their horizons. They play their part on the neoliberal stage alongside the multi-millionaire elites who are deeply integrated in the global club of the most powerful (Katz 2015: 79).

Given that both the ruling classes and those who challenge them from the Left often use Wallerstein's world systems theory as a starting point, what does the grand old man of social science have to say about BRICS?

Wallerstein

In a typically nuanced analysis, Wallerstein argues that if the litmus test for anti-imperialism is decreasing the power of the United States, then one could see BRICS as 'an anti-imperialist force', especially in its efforts to create an inter-bank system. Samir Amin (2010: 13) makes a similar point:

For its part, China has begun to build - in a gradual and controlled manner - alternative regional financial systems free from the US dollar. Such initiatives complete on the economic level the promotion of political alliance within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Seo), which is a major obstacle to NATO's belligerence.

³ The Bandung Conference was a meeting of newly independent Asian and African states held in Indonesia on 18-24 April 1955.

It should be noted that this point has been challenged by Patrick Bond, who argues that China is reinforcing the power of the dollar rather than building an alternative and that the BRICS bank

amplifies IMF power. If a BRICS borrower wants access to the final 70 percent of its credit quota, the founding documents insist, that loan can only come *contingent* on ‘evidence of the existence of an on-track arrangement between the IMF and the Requesting Party that involves a commitment of the IMF to provide financing to the Requesting Party based on conditionality, and the compliance of the Requesting Party with the terms and conditions of the arrangement’ (2015: 290).

The BRICS Bank thus partially imports into its assessment the creditworthiness of potential borrowers, whatever structural adjustments the IMF might see fit to impose. Wallerstein’s main focus though in seeking to understand BRICS is not whether it achieves an anti-imperialist badge by specifically undermining the United States. It lies elsewhere. He argues that we must go below the ruling classes to the class struggles that unfold inside BRICS countries, tracking the way BRICS view each other and other non-BRICS countries in the South. Wallerstein argues that on these matters, ‘the record of the BRICS is murky, to say the least’ (2015: 272).

Economic relations between BRICS and their relations with other countries in the South are highlighted as being not necessarily ‘sub-imperial’ but rather of an ‘imperialist’ nature. This, coupled with the fact that these countries are struggling with high degrees of poverty and inequality, makes one wonder whether BRICS will hold. As Wallerstein points out, it is only Brazil which has made any significant inroads into reducing the degree of polarisation. On top of this,

The world-system’s structural crisis is moving too fast, and in too many uncertain ways, to assume sufficient relative stability to allow the BRICS as such to continue to play a special role, either geopolitically or economically. Like globalisation itself as a concept, the BRICS may turn out to be a passing phenomenon (Wallerstein 2015: 273).

Mao, Mau Mau and Mice

Without contextualising China in the neoliberal global order, it is too easy to single out the country without addressing the structural and institutional forces that are driving not only China, but also other more recently emerging powers, to look with covetous eyes at Africa's natural resources and markets. We therefore have to identify the forces driving the Chinese government and transnational enterprises to pursue their aggressive resource extraction strategy. We have to consider whether this strategy is specific to China or whether it is developmentalism and the neoliberal globalisation system that are actually shaping exploitative relations towards Africa. It is not only China that is eyeing the natural resources of the Africa continent; it is also other emerging powers in the South and even within Africa. If the problem is more about the institutional and structural forces of globalisation that are being inflicted on the ecology and people in the Africa continent, the issue should be about regulating globalisation rather than China (Cheun 2008: 14).

We live in the age of global capitalism. This system harbours a number of different styles of governance and ways of doing international trade. What has remained generally in place is a Northern dominance of the global economy. There has been shakiness in Europe but this has not dented the power of the European Union. The United States too has had to contend with its inability to dominate the Middle East, but this has not damaged its overall military hegemony. Indeed, the chaotic violence that has ensued in Libya, Syria, Yemen and Iraq is so severe that it has denied China or Russia any real foothold in territories that were in any event inclined against the United States. The United States' strategic opponents in the wider Asian region, such as Iran, are spending so much on proxy wars of their own that, aside from an occasional shipment of weapons, they make for poor trading partners.

In this context, China has developed and maintained a sound relationship with the US and both countries have built a mutually reinforcing developmental partnership, give or take a few episodes of cyber-war or the buzzing of a spy-plane over disputed islands in the South China Seas. But

perhaps the most powerful alliance lies with China and Russia, as a recent article in *The Guardian* newspaper (7 July 2015) attests:

Both countries share a desire to limit American power; they enjoy a burgeoning trade relationship in which, in essence, hydrocarbons are swapped for cheap consumer goods; and they have a mutual interest in promoting an alternative model to western diplomacy.

Trade has increased six-fold over the past decade. Last year they trumpeted the biggest gas deal in history. At the same time, China has sought new markets both to invest in and for its huge energy and mineral needs. Africa has become an important site for those activities. Across the African continent, China is buying oil and minerals and building infrastructure to facilitate the movement of precious resources back to China. It's a cat with a voracious appetite and many kittens to feed.

BRICS at one level is important to China. It provides a sense of commitment to building an alternative bloc to Northern interests and allows for a credible anti-imperialist posturing. This it does while at the same time rescuing US capitalism and siding up to the European Union, its second most important market. In everyday political life though, China acts like any other state in the global capitalist system. It seeks markets for its goods and capital and opportunities to import scarce resources at low prices.

African ruling classes on the other hand rely on primary products to fuel their economies and do not have the wherewithal to bargain for more. The failure of African economies to develop, through law or policy, a secondary manufacturing sector to benefitiate their rich raw material base is a complaint that is as long-standing and frequent as it is ignored. It is also fuelled by an internal bourgeoisie that seeks to make a quick buck rather than dig in for forms of investment that allow for inward industrialisation. The idea of a patriotic bourgeoisie in Africa was dead before it was born.

The internal class struggle inside of BRICS has not threatened the ruling classes and, in any case, is nowhere near charting a road out of the global capitalist system. The nation-state remains the ceiling of most African aspirations. As long as this is the case, African countries will continue to seek advantage as discreet entities in the global economy. Given this context, Wallerstein is absolutely right that BRICS is a passing phenomenon. At the same time, it is instructive that BRICS from below never got above the

ground. Meanwhile the Big Cat, sometimes white, sometimes black, will continue to prowl the continent and have willing mice to sustain it.

From the days of the anti-colonial struggles and the coming to power of national liberation movements, African leaders have harboured incredible dreams of what could be achieved. Remember Nyerere's *ujamaa*, Kenyatta's indigenous capitalism, Machel's Marxist-Leninism (Amin 1976). Whatever road was taken, well-travelled or less taken, it was always motivated by Nkrumah's injunction of seeking the political kingdom first and all else will follow (1965). The Left too always saw Africa as a possibility. The Argentinian Marxist revolutionary, Che Guevara came to Africa in 1965 to offer his experience to the Congolese guerilla movement. Left intellectuals flocked to the Frelimo cause, not to mention the fantasies of the ANC being the harbingers of socialism in the South. This optimism is still with us, whether through Africa Rising or Africa Uprising.

In apartheid South Africa, there used to be a very popular TV advert for Black Cat Peanut Butter. A bather, acting as a bully on the beach, picks on a small nerdy-looking guy. Then the well-built main guy arrives and throws the bully to the ground. The hero is seen cradling a bottle of Black Cat in his hand. All the people in the advert are white. In post-apartheid South Africa, the hero has mutated into a truly Black cat. Nobody seems to ask if the ownership of Black Cat Peanut Butter has changed. What matters is that the hero is a satisfying, polar opposite of the previous hegemon.

Today in Africa, political power rests in the hands of Black people. But economic power has never been its preserve. Once, its fertile fields were the hunting ground for big cats with European stripes. Today, there is a new cat with Chinese characteristics scrambling across Africa.

In assessing the role of China in Africa, its role in Zimbabwe is instructive. After President Robert Mugabe instituted policies of radical land redistribution, with the majority of white owned farms expropriated for resettlement by landless Blacks, agricultural production plummeted. For a decade, the narrative was of a breadbasket country in dire straits. Then some agricultural economists noticed an up-turn in the yields of certain farms now run by Black Zimbabweans. This was celebrated as a sign that radical redistribution might create a temporary jolt for the economy and improvement was just around the corner (Hanlon *et al.* 2013).

The increase in agricultural yield was overwhelmingly noted in the

tobacco industry, a cash crop. The yields were not of ‘A’ grade tobacco demanded by Western consumers but a grade of leaf suitable for Chinese consumption. Chinese businesses invested resources, training and equipment in improving the yields of black farmers, not out of philanthropy or anti-imperialism. Rather, it was to meet the desperate need for tobacco back home. In the process, they distorted the local agricultural economy by abandoning maize as a crop in favour of better paying tobacco. According to Zimbabwe’s Ministry of Agriculture, tobacco earnings contribute nearly 20% of Zimbabwe’s GDP and the crop alone accounts for 40% of exports (*Financial Mail*, 30 April 2015).

In this, the economy of Zimbabwe became linked to consumption in China (Alden 2008: 64). As Dubosse (2010: 81) points out:

Chinese development assistance appears to create space and provide leverage for African countries to negotiate with western donors. However, Chinese grants and loans are linked to commodity production (e.g. oil in Angola, and minerals and tobacco in Zimbabwe) and include the requirement of a minimum of 50 per cent of all project procurement from Chinese companies. This has resulted in little employment creation, few backward linkages, a disruption in local trades and no evidence of technology transfer.

This brings Luce’s point about the principal trait of sub-imperialism in appropriating the surplus value of weaker nations back into focus. It also squares with Wallerstein’s narrow definition of imperialism proper. If the appropriated surplus value, as in the case of China, is used in large measure to shore up the economy of the United States by buying Treasury bonds, China achieves a rare feat. It is sub-imperialist, an aspiring imperialist and imperialist proper all at the same time, while often earning kudos as an anti-imperialist force.

The only difference with colonialism, and it is symbolically an incredibly important one, is the absence of overt political meddling and an overbearing civilising mission. One is reminded here of Magdoff’s evocative phrase, ‘imperialism without colonies’ (1978).

But is a cat any less a cat if it eschews looking down upon the mice at

its feet and studiously avoids meddling in rodent affairs? It meows: As long as the mice feed it, it will be their friend. The cat will respect the political systems and paths to development independently adopted and pursued by mice that suit their local conditions, creating a sense for local elites of increasing margins for manoeuvre, while for discontents, the incipient possibility of escape. The Big Cat, it insists, will not seek to civilise or dictate. It is simply here to increase its' own feed. But what happens when the cat asks for more?

It is only then that it will dawn that while you were playing with the cat, the cat was preying on you.

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