

South Africa Hosts Major BRICS Summit as Bloc Eyes Expanding in Global South to Counter Western Powers

Wednesday 23 August 2023, by [BOND Patrick](#), [GOODMAN Amy](#), [NGWANE Trevor](#) (Date first published: 21 August 2023).

BRICS — the five-country bloc of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — is holding a monumental summit in Johannesburg this week where the group will discuss a number of major issues, including expanding membership and how to improve financial cooperation. Over 40 countries have expressed interest in joining BRICS, and 23 countries have formally applied to join the bloc, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Indonesia, Egypt and Ethiopia. The summit is a “very unstable situation,” as member countries vary greatly on priorities and many potential candidates for membership are “mostly tyrannies, carbon-addicted economies,” says Patrick Bond, director of the Centre for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg. “Some of these machinations are hegemonic projects to stop dissent at home and actually call for a unity that does not benefit the masses,” says South African activist and scholar Trevor Ngwane, who criticizes BRICS as “projecting a false hope to the masses” for posing as an alternative to U.S. and Western imperialism.

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#), *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman, as we turn now to South Africa, where leaders from BRICS — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — are holding a major three-day summit this week where the group looks to expand its leadership. Chinese President Xi Jinping is heading to the summit today for just his second trip abroad this year. The Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi of India, and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva will also attend, but Russian President Vladimir Putin decided not to travel to South Africa to avoid facing possible arrest on war crimes charges, because South Africa is a member of the International Criminal Court, a signatory. The five BRICS nations' presidents represent about 40% of the world's population, about a quarter of the global economy. Over 40 other countries have expressed interest in joining BRICS, but major questions lie ahead for the group.

We go now to South Africa, where we're joined by two guests. Trevor Ngwane is Soweto-based scholar and activist, part of the struggle against apartheid, chairperson of the United Front, an umbrella body of community and labor groups. Patrick Bond is a distinguished professor and director of the Centre for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg. His recent *CounterPunch* [article](#) is headlined “The BRICS Johannesburg Summit's Hype, Hope and Helplessness.”

We welcome you both back to *Democracy Now!* Professor Bond, why don't we begin with you? Talk about what you expect of the summit, the significance of it, and the fact that it's taking place in South Africa, the leaders there, but not the Russian president, who's afraid of being arrested if he steps foot in South Africa.

PATRICK BOND: Well, thanks for having Trevor and I back with you. It's great to be on the finest show inquiring in a creative way at what is presently a major left contradiction, which is that there's

a great deal of anti-imperialist rhetoric, and particularly if Vladimir Putin, had he come, and certainly Sergey Lavrov, his foreign minister, in his place, along with China are so strongly against the U.S., at the same time India is leaning much more, with the trip to visit Joe Biden, and then to Emmanuel Macron in France after that, and South Africa being pulled, really, with Brazil a solid progressive democracy, but where the president, Lula, is not his own master.

So, it's a very unstable situation in which this expansion of 23 candidates, mostly tyrannies, carbon-addicted economies and their leaders possibly looking for a way out after the U.S. financial sanctions were so tough, on the one hand, and then there's a lot of talk about dedollarization — lots of talk, but not much we can expect. So I'm looking at a bit of a damp squib when they leave on — it will be Wednesday afternoon — Thursday afternoon.

AMY GOODMAN: And, Trevor Ngwane, your concerns about what's happening right now?

TREVOR NGWANE: Well, thank you very much for having us here, *Democracy Now!*

Yeah, one of our concerns is this binary division of the world into West and East, and a degree and element of intolerance, hostility, and projecting a false hope to the masses that answers are coming from what I think is a state-centric, top-down new world order project. Half of the leaders are actually elected dictators, the way they're running their countries. So, my concern is how all this, you know, pans out for ordinary people, for the working class, who are facing everyday hardships, the rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer, austerity programs. That is our concern here.

AMY GOODMAN: And can you talk about the significance of Russian President Vladimir Putin not coming? It's not that South Africa wanted to arrest him, but as signatory to the ICC, International Criminal Court — which, of course, the United States and Russia are not — they would have been obliged to arrest him. So, he is the one leader who will not be there. He'll be, I guess, zoomed in. Your thoughts on this, Trevor? And if you can talk about the power of both Russia and China in Africa, and the U.S. seeing Africa as a place of competition for U.S.'s expanding power in Africa versus China and Russia?

TREVOR NGWANE: Yes. So, anti-imperialism is not necessarily anti-capitalism. In other words, you know, Putin, Modi, Ramaphosa, South Africa, they can say certain things against the U.S.A., but it doesn't mean that at home their domestic policies favor the poor, favor the working class. So, that is the big issue for us. Also, there's a level of geopolitics which turns ordinary people into cannon fodder, you know, working-class children, sons and daughters, being turned into soldiers to fight wars, sometimes proxy wars all over the globe, without any real benefit to their class, to their parents, to their communities.

Now, Putin not coming here, of course, is a climb down by both Putin and the South African government. The South African government is caught between what it defines as the East and the West. You know, investment is coming from Russia. Investment is coming from the U.S.A., from Germany. It can't make up its mind on which side its bread is buttered, as it tries to play into basically inter-imperialist rivalries.

So, I think that from the point of view of ordinary people, you know, what should be the issue is: How do we stop the rich getting richer? How do we address the energy crisis? Here in South Africa, most of the time we have rolling power failures, because the government is failing to handle our energy properly. We've got austerity. We've got interest rates rising up almost every quarter. You know, even the middle class is complaining now. So, there's a lot to be done. But I think it's all happening up there on top, upstairs, but it doesn't really address the problems of the ordinary people. From that point of view, some of these machinations are hegemonic projects to stop dissent

at home and actually call for a unity which does not benefit the masses.

AMY GOODMAN: Patrick Bond, if you can talk about the countries that want to join BRICS, to expand it, like Argentina, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, what BRICS represents, and also India, for example, rejecting the idea to give up its rupee in exchange for a uniform currency?

PATRICK BOND: Yes, that latter point is a real reflection of whether there is an anti-imperialism, say, against the U.S. Federal Reserve managing the U.S. dollar very badly, with too much quantitative easing, loosening one day and too much tightening the next, and financial deregulatory ideology, and the U.S. dollar — I mean, I think the world would be much better without that dollar-centric system.

However, the Chinese and the Indians have very strong exchange controls, and they won't want to give that up. The yuan and the renminbi, in international, and the rupee, along with the ruble, which is under such crisis — it's just been crashing — and with the SWIFT system no longer accepting deals with Russia, and the very — our South African currency very unstable, the real, as well, these currencies just cannot be the basis for a new challenge to the U.S. dollar. And so, those who hope for that — for example, you'll find them in gold bugs of cybercurrency salespeople or genuine anti-imperialists who have invested this hope that this big meeting will wreck the dollar and this is the end of it — that's definitely not going to happen. It's a long, slow process with very conservative leaders in the finance ministries and central banks.

And likewise, when you look at these new countries coming in — you've mentioned some of the key ones, Amy, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran, doing the deal with China a little earlier, the petroyuan being introduced by Saudi Arabia — the fear probably that Mohammed bin Salman has, that if \$650 billion of Russian central bank and oligarch assets can be frozen and sort of taken away, maybe his money, if he's going to be the pariah that Joe Biden promised he would be. And then you have Iran and those amazing protests from women. And let's say the tyrannies of very carbon-addicted states now joining, those would be the two prizes, and if that's the case, I would worry about a new bloc of very, very strongly pro-emissions countries, including, more or less, all five of the BRICS — I think Lula's a little more reasonable — but they would go to the UAE, another candidate, at the big next United Nations climate summit and be quite formidable. And I think you remember, Amy, from 2011, the last time we saw this kind of bloc was when Barack Obama walked into a meeting of the Brazil, South Africa, India, China group, and there came the Copenhagen Accord, universally condemned as a deal between — I'm going to differ from Trevor linguistically — an imperial climate power and the sub-imperial powers, that I think the BRICS actually do represent here.

AMY GOODMAN: And again, if you could talk further about this taking place in the context of the Ukraine war, Putin not being there, and the attitude of South Africa when it comes to the Ukraine war, when it comes to NATO and the China-Russia bloc, if you will?

PATRICK BOND: Yes, and it's been fascinating, because — and distracting, because, as you said, the sense that Vladimir Putin is being kept out by President Cyril Ramaphosa's fear of a constitutional crisis if the courts rule that he would have to have Putin arrested, on the one hand. That has distracted us for months until early July. But also, there was an allegation by South Africa's — the U.S. ambassador here, Reuben Brigety, that last December, South Africa was supplying arms, and they were loaded up on a ship in the dead of night in a secretive way. And that's been the subject, since May, of enormous conflict between the U.S. and South Africa at that diplomatic level.

And what it suggests is, if Putin is thinking that now the expansion of the BRICS will solidify a bloc that would approve his invasion, as basically four of the five BRICS did, with the exception of Brazil, in United Nations summit votes — those are either voting in favor of Russia, as did Russia, or

abstaining, as did three of the others, China and India and South Africa — and now the bloc, if it's going to be all 28 proposed members, would be much more even, with many more people — countries that had voted actually against Russia. So, it becomes a quite fluid situation.

I would say that since we're looking at Russia, one of our original intellectuals, who worked very hard with us, Boris Kagarlitsky, is in jail, and he's been working with our BRICS from Below network for over 10 years. And it's a great tragedy that our freedom of expression and our analysis is now very much curtailed by the loss of Boris Kagarlitsky, we hope for a very short period of time, a great sociologist who Putin has really just clamped down on.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to turn to former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, now serving as the president of the New Development Bank, which was established by BRICS.

DILMA ROUSSEFF: [translated] Our goal is to increase the proportion to 30% within five years. We want 30% of NDB transactions to be settled in local currencies. To do this, as I said earlier, there are two initiatives: issuing local currency bonds and at the same time raising funds in local currencies and lend in local currencies. What are the consequences? For example, in the future, cases of serious consequences, such as debt crisis, can be avoided amid exchange rate fluctuations, and developing countries will no longer experience debt surges caused by U.S. dollar exchange rate changes.

AMY GOODMAN: So, Patrick Bond, if you could respond to President Rousseff? And then talk beyond economics.

PATRICK BOND: Well, I think what Dilma Rousseff, the appointed president of the BRICS New Development Bank, the NDB, is hinting, but in a careful way, illustrating these power relations, is that if you are doing development projects, especially with local currency, you shouldn't be borrowing in U.S. dollars, which are currently — U.S. dollars and euros — 78% of this BRICS New Development Bank, an allegedly new and different bank. And her objective is to move that 22% in local up to 30 by 2030. We think that's way too slow, too little, too late.

But the really critical point is that one of the controversies is whether the BRICS New Development Bank has to speak to the New York credit rating agencies — Standard & Poor's, Fitch and Moody's. And if they do, then you expect the New Development Bank to act just like any other bank. And indeed, they actually joined the financial sanctions against Russia in March last year and have continued that. And she acknowledged that herself after her meeting with Putin a few weeks ago. And those are the sorts of contradictions in the sphere of finance, that when you see the way the BRICS countries operate, they didn't put up any opposition, for example, to World Bank presidents either appointed by Donald Trump or by Joe Biden, the last two times, or the IMF. They've taken a bigger share of the IMF. They haven't got an alternative, as promised, to the IMF. We had really hoped for much more in the way of something substantive.

But it shows this imperial-sub-imperial relationship in the financial sphere. And I don't think anyone who's been looking at it closely has much hope that we're going to see new currencies or anything that would — even a cybercurrency or central bank gold-backed or any of the other innovations. It's only going to be a little bit more trade finance that we see announced, the way India has been doing with Russia. But then the big problem, again, economically is trade imbalances within the BRICS. The Chinese are still very predatory in Africa in terms of the raw materials. And then those go into their production systems, come back as finished goods. The profits go to China. It doesn't look all that much different than the standard colonial and neocolonial global division of labor.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to thank you both for being with us, Patrick Bond, distinguished professor

and director of the Centre for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg — we'll link to your new [article](#), "The BRICS Johannesburg Summit's Hype, Hope and Helplessness" — and Trevor Ngwane, Soweto-based scholar and activist, chair of the United Front.

Coming up, we go to British Columbia, where the Canadian prime minister has deployed the military as more than 400 wildfires have forced tens of thousands of people to evacuate. Back in 30 seconds.

Amy Goodman

Patrick Bond distinguished professor and director of the Centre for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg.

Trevor Ngwane South African activist and scholar, director of the Centre for Sociological Research and Practice at the University of Johannesburg.

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