

# How Has South Africa's Membership of BRICS Intensified Uneven and Combined Development in the Country and Beyond?

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## ABSTRACT

The recent African scramble has resulted in uneven and combined development (UCD) in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) throughout the 21st century due to unequal exchange. South Africa plays a sub-imperial role in this scramble in SSA. It both exploits and is exploited. The mining industry in South Africa has attracted interest from colonial powers, English-speaking businesses, and foreign investors, making it a highly lucrative sector. Furthermore, most black South Africans have been employed in the mining industry since the late 19th century. Over the past 25 years, the African National Congress government has utilised the mining industry to achieve economic transformation through black economic empowerment policies. This study proposes that the mining sector in South Africa is responsible for the ongoing UCD, despite receiving new investments and empowerment policies. South Africa's inclusion in BRICS has broadened its range of international partners beyond its traditional Western or African counterparts. However, South Africa's decision to join the BRICS group in 2011 has not yet yielded the expected transformation in the country's economy and growth. As a result, it is uncertain whether South Africa's BRICS membership has addressed the country's persistent problem of UCD. This study argues that South Africa's BRICS membership has exacerbated UCD in the country. This study proposes that Trotsky's UCD analytical framework is useful for analysing South Africa's policy choice to join BRICS, which strengthens its sub-imperial role.

**Keywords:** Unequal Exchange, Sub-imperialism, Mining Industry, Economic Transformation, Transnational Capital

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## Introduction

The expansion of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) bloc to include four more countries<sup>1</sup> in 2024 proves the tendency toward South–South Cooperation within the Third World. The governments of these countries have looked for new ways of doing diplomacy during the 21st century as international institutions, such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), do not work properly. The Group of 20 is

1 Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and United Arab Emirates joined the BRICS group in 2024. Saudi Arabia is still considering whether to join the bloc as of April 2024.

an important alternative for BRICS, but it still includes the Group of 7 countries. BRICS supplies an alternative for developing countries in terms of South–South Cooperation. South Africa joined the BRICS group in 2011 as the sole member from Africa. The country has a sub-imperial position in southern Africa and beyond; therefore, BRICS has strengthened this position during the last thirteen years.<sup>2</sup> However, the domestic problems of South Africa are still waiting for solutions. This study proposes that the mining sector in South Africa is responsible for the ongoing uneven and combined development (UCD), despite receiving new investments and empowerment policies. South Africa’s decision to join BRICS has not yet yielded the expected transformation in the country’s economy and growth. As a result, it is uncertain whether South Africa’s BRICS membership has addressed the persistent issue of UCD in the country. Indeed, this study argues that South Africa’s membership of BRICS intensified UCD in the country.

Mineral and energy resources of SSA have been attractive not only to western investors since the colonial period but also to emerging countries’ investors during the 21st century with the “Africa rising” narrative (Bond 2008; Taylor 2014; Carmody 2016). However, the new dependency between African countries and foreign investors in the West and the global South has been a source of persistent UCD through unequal exchange in SSA (Ashman 2009; Bieler and Morton 2014). South Africa is a part of the persistent UCD of SSA with a sub-imperial role, which gives it both an exploiter and exploited role (Bond 2013; Martin 2013). The mining industry in South Africa has been one of the most attractive industries as it has attracted the attention of colonial powers, English-speaking businesses under white minority rule, and Chinese and other foreign investors. The discovery of diamonds and gold in 1867 and 1886, respectively, was a crucial point in the expansion of capitalism in South Africa. The agricultural development model of the Boers<sup>3</sup> was also part of this expansion, but the extraction of precious minerals accelerated the process of capitalist development in South Africa. Ashman (2009: 37) argues that “once capitalism is established in one part of the world it affects and changes the form of transition to capitalist development elsewhere.” The discovery of diamonds and gold by British explorers was therefore another step in the transfer of capitalist development from the West to Africa. Agricultural development was beneficial to the settler colonies in South Africa. However, the extractive industries have been beneficial to both settler-owned and non-settler-owned mining corporations. Since the 17th century, agricultural activities have been the first step toward uneven development in South Africa. In addition, the mining industry has not only been a driver of uneven development but also a driver of combined development in South Africa by becoming part of the international division of labour (Ashman 2009: 37). In other words, “capital-intensive production releases workers for super-exploitation” in South Africa (Ashman 2009: 36). Proletarianization began after decolonisation in the non-settler colonies of Africa. In South Africa, however, proletarianization began in the late 19th century and European, Indian, Chinese and African labour were part of the extractive activities in South Africa.

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2 The concept of sub-imperialism represents “the middle layer of global capital accumulation” (Van der Merwe 2016b: 18).

3 The name given to settlers from the Netherlands who came to South Africa as farmers from the 17th century.

The mining industry of South Africa has been the source of this persistent UCD, although it has attracted new investors during the last three decades. In addition, the black majority of South Africa has worked in the mining industry since the late 19th century, and the African National Congress (ANC) government has used it as a source of economic transformation through black economic empowerment (BEE) policies during the last quarter of a century. The ANC governments implemented divergent economic policies, such as the socialist-inclined Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and neo-liberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), as economic policies in South Africa (Ashman, Fine and Newman 2011). In addition, the ANC governments have broadened the range of international partners the country has beyond the traditional western or natural African partners with the help of the country's inclusion in BRICS.

The decision to join the BRICS group in 2011 has not worked out yet as it does not help the required transformation in the South African economy and development (Carmody 2012). Successive ANC governments have sought solutions to the legacies of racial segregation, including inequalities, unemployment, and underdevelopment, through various policies such as the RDP, GEAR, BEE, and even BRICS membership over the last twenty-five years. By joining the BRICS bloc, South Africa has moved away from the West and toward the South. The continuing racial inequalities in South Africa have been a visible representation of "unevenness", which was the case at the beginning of apartheid. South Africa's sub-imperial role is the visible representation of the "combination" with the capitalist system. South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries in the world, and the ANC's decision to join the BRICS bloc was not a solution to this problem. Despite these policies, the mining industry of South Africa has been a source of UCD in the country as the numbers show that it is still dominantly owned by white businesses. Has South Africa's membership in BRICS been an answer to persistent UCD in the mining industry? This study suggests that the UCD analytical framework of Trotsky (2010) is useful in explaining how South Africa links the rest of the continent with its sub-imperial role.

This is a qualitative small-N case study. I shall primarily receive help from UCD and South African political economy literature. The method used in this study is the historical materialism of Marxism. The method of historical materialism "explained different international systems by analyzing their respective societies' methods for organizing the transformative metabolism with nature, that is, their 'modes-of production'" (Rosenberg 2021: 146). Linklater and Saramago (2022: 107) believe that historical materialism "refers to a way of understanding the long-term development of the human species that analyses how history is shaped not by the autonomous development of human ideas and social formations but by their interrelations with changing material conditions through human productive activity". It also supplies tools to investigate the puzzle, as it considers the critique of the capitalist mode of production and its class struggle (Claar 2018: 10). Using the method of historical materialism allows this study the opportunity to analyse relations in various times and periods. Also, it provides a broader analysis than the classical International Relations (IR) theories as it is not just about political affairs between sovereign states but also the economic and social relations of societies (Rupert 2007: 35; Pal 2017: 43). Indeed, Pradella (2021: 27) suggests that according to Marx and Engels, historical materialism argues that "world history made possible

by the development of global interconnections”. Historical materialism, therefore, is a useful method for analysing the various stages of capitalism experienced in South Africa from the settlement of the European colonies to the present day.

The following section examines the fundamental elements of UCD and its critique when analysing the South African mining sector’s role in global capitalism. It supplies insight into the topic by illustrating how South Africa is a proper example for discussing the UCD method. The subsequent section explores the unevenness and combined effects of capitalism in South Africa and its mining sector. The penultimate section discusses South Africa’s BRICS membership and the sub-imperial role of the country in the 21st century. The concluding section of this paper examines the potential of the UCD approach in analysing societies experiencing racial discrimination in the contemporary world and its contribution to the concept of sub-imperialism.

## **The Uneven and Combined Development Framework**

Trotsky’s (2010) UCD perspective is the main theoretical framework of this study that explains the expansion of capitalism in South Africa through the mining industry. Several UCD studies have been conducted in developing countries and regions, such as Africa (Brown 2018), China (Hardy 2017), India (D’Costa 2023), Latin America (Antunes de Oliveira 2019), and Turkey (Avci 2022; Yalvaç and Akcalı 2023). This study proposes an alternate UCD approach to discussions on the mining industry and racial segregation in a former settler colony, specifically South Africa. The UCD approach is a conceptual tool for explaining unjust, unequal, class-divided and unevenly developing societies in Africa (Bond 2008: 12; Ashman 2009: 43; Rosenberg 2021: 147; D’Costa 2022: 2). Therefore, South Africa is a suitable example of an unevenly developing country since the 17th century. This study argues that the UCD is a component of capitalism, and beyond the trade activities with African societies or Asians, the agricultural ones of Boers were the beginning of capitalism in a society like South Africa. Anievas and Nisancioglu (2014: 21) also argue that “uneven development must be viewed as a constitutive property of capitalism whether conceived as an abstract or historically determinate system of social relations.” Using the case of South Africa, this study tries to link Trotsky’s UCD approach to the expansion of capitalism and racial segregation in Africa.

UCD is one of the five major Marxist (or neo-Marxist) contributions to the field of International Relations (IR): 1) Theory of Imperialism, 2) World-System Analysis (WSA) and Dependency Theory, 3) The Frankfurt School (post-positivist and emancipatory approaches), 4) (Neo) Gramscian approaches, and 5) UCD (Rosenberg 2021: 146). The concepts of UCD, along with neo-Gramscian approaches, have gained considerable influence within the discipline of IR in recent years (Linklater and Saramago 2022: 111). Marxist theories provide an important basis for explaining inequalities in South Africa and similar former colonial countries.

Lenin’s theory of imperialism might be proper for analysing former colonies. According to Lenin, imperialism was the vehicle for the expansion of capitalism into the colonies (2009: 89). However, Lenin’s analysis of the relationship between imperialism and capitalism was

mostly limited to the great powers. Trotsky's UCD approach is more applicable to cases from backward countries, as he focused on the October Revolution in Tsarist Russia, which was also a backward country. A backward country absorbs the material and intellectual achievements of advanced countries, but this does not mean that it slavishly follows them and reproduces all the stages of their past (Trotsky 2000: 2).<sup>4</sup> Also, the imperialism thesis is mostly about the colonialism period, and it was a useful framework for analysing the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Rupert 2007: 42; Teschke 2008: 167-168). Allinson and Anievas (2010: 213) believe that a "theoretical articulation of UCD in the capitalist epoch would need to incorporate and sublate the classical Marxist conception of imperialism, providing a much richer and multi-dimensional understanding of imperialism." In this sense, UCD can be seen as a periodic complement to imperialism theory, but it is still insufficient for the South African case.

Denemark (2021) believes that there are some differences and similarities between the UCD approach and other Marxist explanations of international political economy (IPE). In this regard, he believes that UCD shares many similarities with the WSA approach.

"Both schools rely upon material foundations, are fact-based, derive their understandings from historical exposition, interrogate those understandings to explain outcomes that remain puzzling to others, and reject methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism. Each wrestles with arguments about their applicability to pre-capitalist conditions. UCD and WSA have both identified trade triangles as potentially important." (Denemark 2021: 330).

Similarly, Antunes de Oliveira (2019: 1157) argues that there are some crossing paths between UCD and Dependency Theory. This study suggests that the WSA is the closest perspective to the UCD for explaining inequalities in the world. However, the WSA categorises countries but not societies (Pal 2017: 44). Teschke (2008: 172) also criticises the WSA approach for its "trade-mediated integration" of the core, semi-periphery, and periphery spectrum. The main difference between the WSA and the UCD for analysing inequalities in South Africa, for example, is their units of analysis. Davidson (2006: 23) suggests that the major achievement of the UCD theory is to identify "both the relative changes in position between the advanced capitalist powers and the structural inequalities between these powers and the colonial and neo-colonial world which they dominated."

Indeed, Trotsky's UCD approach is an appropriate analytical approach, especially concerning the articulation of a society to capitalism and the spread of capitalism in a society. As a pioneer of the UCD approach in the contemporary world, Justin Rosenberg (2010; 2013a; 2013b; 2016; 2021; 2022) links Trotsky's UCD approach to IR. Rosenberg (2013a: 183) suggests that Waltz's approach to IR has attracted a considerable number of critics from different schools because he separated domestic and international politics:

"No feature of Kenneth Waltz's neorealist theory has attracted more criticism over the years than its analytical separation of domestic and international politics.

<sup>4</sup> This is about the "privilege of historic backwardness" which is that late-developing countries can catch up by borrowing technologies from those already developed (Rosenberg 2016: 23).

Embodied in the contrast between ‘unit-level’ and ‘system-level’ phenomena, this separation has been widely challenged by interdependence theorists, historical sociologists, Marxists, post-structuralists, constructivists and even some realists.”

Thus, UCD not only rejects domestic and international distinction but also brings “a new sociological explanation of international dynamics” (Linklater and Saramago 2022: 113). Indeed, Rosenberg (2013a: 185) believes that UCD helps construct a theory of IR.

There are two separate ways of discussing UCD in the literature: international historical sociological (Rosenberg 2010; 2013a; 2013b; 2016; 2021; 2022; Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015) and IPE-based adaptations of Trotsky’s thought (Bond 2008; Ashman 2009; Bieler and Morton 2014; Antunes de Oliveira 2021; Denmark 2021). This study does not reject the international historical sociological approach but suggests that the IPE approach to UCD is more useful for discussing the South African case. According to Antunes de Oliveira (2021), the IPE and UCD perspectives are different but not contrasting approaches. Indeed, these approaches “operate at fundamentally dissimilar levels, shedding light on different aspects of the historical process” (Antunes de Oliveira 2021: 289). One of the points of distinction between the two approaches to the UCD theory is that they are historical and transhistorical. While thinkers on the IPE side, notably Ashman (2009), argue that UCD applies to the spread of capitalism over the past few centuries, Rosenberg (2010; 2016) thinks that it is a transhistorical approach and can be applied to pre-capitalist societies (Allinson and Anievas 2009: 55; Hobson 2011: 153-154). According to Rosenberg (2010: 187), UCD is the source of “international” and therefore, he suggests that UCD “is not only the enduring substance of the international today: it is also its antediluvian source.” Ashman (2009) rejected this suggestion and argued that UCD “is best understood within the relations, processes and tendencies of the capitalist mode of production”. The UCD-IPE literature “remains marginal”, but there have been many studies of the Trotskyist political economy tradition within Marxist approaches (Antunes de Oliveira 2021: 276).

This study also argues that unequal exchange is the source of UCD in African countries and South Africa. According to Bieler and Morton (2014: 36), the UCD literature hardly engaged with unequal exchange. As a source of UCD, the expansion of capitalism “has also been pursued through so-called ‘free trade’ policies, used to open up other countries along these dynamics and integrate them into relations of unequal exchange” (Bieler and Morton 2014: 35-36). Indeed, the free trade form of capitalism is the source of unevenness and free trade “locks countries into further relations of unequal exchange” (Bieler and Morton 2014: 41). The mining industry in South Africa has become a source of unequal exchange and thus the maintenance of UCD in the country through free trade arrangements in the capitalist global economy.

Traces of racial discrimination in the social sense are being erased in the former unsettled colonies. However, when the international division of labour or unequal exchange is considered, unequal and unified development can be seen more clearly in these former colonies. On the other hand, in societies with a settler colonial past, UCD can be seen at every stratum of society and every moment of daily life.

Africa's minerals and oil have been a major factor in violent conflict across the continent, as the West has been the drain on the South (Bond 2008: 5). Although this creates UCD on the continent, the white-owned mining industry in South Africa drains from within the country. This is the main difference between South Africa and other peripheral African countries. However, this relative "whip hand" does not make South Africa an advanced country. It only reinforces the unevenness that is "the most general law of historic process" in a backward country (Trotsky 2000: 3; Löwy 2010: 87). There are "developmental variations within and between societies" not only in Africa but also in the world as an expression of unevenness (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015: 44). Unevenness is not limited to the relations between countries, as Ashman (2012: 60) suggests:

"There is the unevenness of development between units of capital in a sector, between sectors, between and within regions of a country, and between and within nations and regions within the world economy as a whole. There is unevenness in profitability, in productivity, in compositions of capital, between departments of production, between circuits and fractions of capital. There is unevenness in the development of the forces and relations of production."

According to Trotsky (2010), industrial capitalism is the major source of unevenness. Rosenberg (2022: 273) states that "industrial capitalism, with its accelerated momentum of social, economic and technological development, is the major source of unevenness in the modern world". South Africa has the characteristics of the centre or core and the periphery because of its sophisticated mining industry on the one hand and existing inequalities and youth employment on the other.

There are some serious criticisms of UCD in terms of its method, uniqueness, differences with other Marxist IR approaches, and lack of hypotheses. However, the UCD approach is an evolving theory and there are different interpretations of it. Therefore, the UCD approach has immense potential for transforming IR theories and IPE. According to Antunes de Oliveira (2021: 289), the first problem with UCD is that it does not propose hypotheses like other IR theories, and the second problem is that it is to some extent a Eurocentric approach (Rosenberg et al. 2022: 321; on the Eurocentric critique see also Tansel 2015; Pradella 2021: 29). I attempt to overcome this by adapting the UCD approach to explain the legacies of apartheid both in the economy and politics of South Africa. Thus, this study contributes a non-Eurocentric analysis of the UCD concept to the existing literature. This paper argues that South Africa or other BRICS members are the most active members of this capitalist network through "the sub-imperialism" approach in the Global South and beyond.

Van der Pijl, Teschke, and Rioux have argued that UCD's general abstraction is not a theory (Teschke 2008: 180; Rosenberg 2022: 268-269). On the contrary, Rosenberg (2022: 270) argues that UCD has all aspects of a theory. Moreover, Rosenberg (2022: 275-276) claims that UCD is a *meta*-theory: "Unlike liberalism, constructivism, feminism and even Postcolonial theory, therefore, UCD provided not just another international theory, but a metatheoretical grounding for international theory per se. And it was the general abstraction that enabled it to perform this wider role." Trotsky's theory of the UCD was based not only on capitalist

economic relations in the local or regional sense. On the contrary, Trotsky demonstrated that UCD takes place within the framework of a global capitalist system (Pröbsting 2016: 392-393). “The whip of external necessity”<sup>5</sup> and “privilege of historic backwardness” are reflections of this internationalism.

The following section examines how a backward country like South Africa has been linked to the global economy since the late 19th century through the expansion of capitalism through the exploitation of its mining industry.

## UCD of the South African Mining Industry

The UCD literature is not largely focused on Africa or African countries, although there are a considerable number of studies (Bond and Desai 2006; Bond 2008, 2013, 2015, 2022; Ashman, Fine and Newman 2011; Ashman 2023). Thus, there is a huge gap for UCD in Africa, as Anievas and Nisancioglu (2015: 278) state “...our inclusion of the African continent is unfortunately marginal” as “numerous histories that have been overlooked or underexplored.” Therefore, the thinkers of the UCD approach should explore cases such as South Africa to strengthen their argument. UCD has some intersections with the history of Africa and South Africa in particular.

In his famous study of imperialism, Lenin argued that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism (2009: 100). For example, he argued that the British colonisation of South Africa in the late 19th century was a result of the discovery of diamonds and gold in the north of the country by British explorers (Lenin 2009: 133). The British also colonised the north of South Africa and, in return, gave the country the name of the infamous explorer Cecil Rhodes, resulting in Rhodesia. The looting of diamonds and gold started complex capitalist activities in southern Africa. South Africa had become the most notable target for investment because of its racial segregation-based rule gained independence in 1910. Most African colonies did not produce an opportunity for investment like South Africa did because economic activities depended on colonial rules. As a free state and a mineral-rich country, South Africa became the powerhouse of the mining industry in the 20th century. English-speaking businesses founded giant corporations such as Anglo-American and De Beers in South Africa during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The discovery of precious metals toward the end of the 19th century heightened the capital’s interest in South Africa and its neighbourhood. Anglo-American and De Beers mining companies, among other English-speaking investors, invested in extracting precious minerals from this region. This makes way for the creation of the Minerals-Energy Complex (MEC) in South Africa during the 1870s (Fine and Rustomjee 1996; Ashman, Fine and Newman 2011). Over the past 125 years, the MEC has become a crucial element of global capitalism. According to Ashman, Fine, and Newman (2011: 180), the extraction process relied on the harsh exploitation of black workers through a system of migrant labour. During the apartheid era, Afrikaners had control of politics and the economy,

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5 The effects of “competitive pressures of the world economy” and “geopolitical competition” on the revolution in Tsarist Russia were about “the whip of external necessity” (Allinson and Anievas 2009: 51).



though not to the same extent when it came to mines, which remained largely in the hands of the English-speaking minority. The process was enabled by “an uneasy compromise between Afrikaner political power and foreign economic control and ownership of mining capital” (Ashman, Fine, and Newman 2011: 180-181). The MEC was served by state-owned enterprises, particularly those in steel and electricity, and by labour control. Under the apartheid regime, the mining industry had a profound influence on South African politics as British mining capital entered into “a class compromise” with the substantial Afrikaner capital and the state (Claar 2018: 82).

The MEC has been a key force in shaping the South African economy for several decades. Moreover, the mining and energy sector in South Africa has been the central pillar of the economy (Bond 2000: 18). The MEC accumulation regime has led to a significant concentration of capital in certain sectors, with an emphasis on the domestic economic sectors of gold, coal, diamonds, and platinum mining (Claar 2018: 81-82). South Africa’s MEC is a core industry that influences the development of other sectors, and it is indicative of a specific form of industrial development. Therefore, it is not just the significance of the mining and energy industries and their determining influence on the wider economy must be considered (Ashman, Fine and Newman 2011: 180). South African economy depends on the mining industry and inflows of foreign capital to acquire foreign exchange (Freeman 2022: 37). Nearly half a million people are employed in the mining sector, and the contribution to the GDP of the mining industry is almost half a trillion Rand (equal to more than 26 billion USD) in 2022 (Minerals Council South Africa 2023).

The Minerals Council of South Africa has been a representative of the industry since its foundation in 1889 as the Witwatersrand Chamber of Mines. As a part of global capitalism, the mining industry supported another mineral mogul, Cyril Ramaphosa, for the presidency in the 2018 general election. There are no national or transnational company boundaries in South Africa for the mining industry as mining companies are active in other SSA countries. Due to restricted economic redistribution and the black economic empowerment (BEE) policies that have only somewhat succeeded in altering ownership formation, “large white capital still dominates South African capitalism” (Claar 2018: 225). According to Ashman, Fine, and Newman (2011: 186), South Africa represents an extreme case of UCD during the post-apartheid period since it has been:

“... an advanced industrial economy and first world lifestyles exist with abject poverty and unequal social relationships and resource distribution of all kinds. The picture of slow growth, declining investment, rising unemployment, rural degradation, and income and wealth inequality that revealed the key features of the economy towards the end of the 1990s remains little changed over a decade later.”

Ownership in the mining industry is an issue that successive ANC governments have aimed to address through policies and regulations. This agrees with the Broad-Based BEE Act. The ANC introduced a BEE policy for mining company ownership, gradually stipulating that 30% of companies in the sector should belong to black entrepreneurs. Bond (2000) criticized

ANC's BEE policy because it did not empower most blacks instead of black elites. Taylor (2016) suggested that the ANC has transformed the economic structure of South Africa on behalf of the black elites rather than the South African black majority. During late 1996, only 300 blacks became rich thanks to BEE (Bond 2000: 39). In 2023, 6 of Africa's 19 billionaires are from South Africa, and only one is a black South African, Patrice Motsepe, who has been a close ally of the ANC (LaFranco 2023).

Although the South African public held lofty expectations of becoming a member of the BRICS in 2011, it is not directly relevant to eliminating the legacies of apartheid. I contend that while strengthening South Africa's dominant position in Africa through membership of international organizations, associations, or temporary membership of the UN Security Council is conducive to stability, it cannot resolve the legacies of apartheid by itself. The South African government should address the economic imbalances to eliminate the legacies of apartheid. Historically, the mining industry has been a complement to global capitalism and dominated by English-speaking white people has been one of the most notable consequences of racial segregation. According to the 2022 World Inequality Report, South Africa is one of the most unequal societies, and one source of this inequality is the persistence of racial segregation in the economy (Chancel et al. 2022). The following section analyses the sub-imperialism concept and South Africa's incorporation into the BRICS to understand the global reasons for the persistence of UCD.

## **BRICS Membership and the Sub-imperial Role of South Africa in the 21st Century**

The BRICS membership of South Africa stands for the country's shift from liberal internationalism toward non-Western countries (Qobo and Dube 2015: 145). The first attempt came in 2000 to move away from the core to the Global South through diversifying economic and trade relations with new partners (Qobo and Dube 2015: 151). President Nelson Mandela (1994-1999) was friendly to the white-dominated business community in South Africa during the political transition period (Taylor 2016: 24). South Africa played a sub-imperial role both during the apartheid era, when it co-operated with the dictators in Malawi and Zaire, and after 1994, when it sought to expand its capital across Africa (Garcia and Bond 2019: 14).

The white-dominated private sector in South Africa supported Thabo Mbeki (1999-2008) as Mandela's successor (Taylor 2016: 34). Mbeki's foreign policy vision was a shift from Mandela's, as he sought cooperation with Western countries through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) framework, which promised good governance through FDI projects in the African continent from 2001 to the late 2000s (Qobo and Dube 2015: 151). However, the NEPAD framework did not produce the expected results, such as FDI and aid from Western countries (Qobo and Dube 2015: 151). Mbeki took a crucial step in changing South Africa's foreign policy direction and introduced the slogan "African Renaissance" in the early 2000s. He criticised Western perspectives and policies towards Africa with a foreign policy discourse that emphasised ideas, policies and decisions inspired by Africanism (Neethling 2017: 42).

South Africa's biggest foreign policy shift came under the presidency of Jacob Zuma (2009-2018). South Africa's membership in BRICS would have provided an alternative to the mining industry's long partnership with Western capital. This has to do with the uneven and combined nature of the mining industry in South Africa. It is internally uneven but internationally combined. After 13 years, South Africa's mining industry is still white-dominated and linked to the ANC. The question is how South Africa's BRICS membership may supply a solution to the legacies of the apartheid regime, despite its high unemployment rate and unequal society. (Asuelime 2018b: 135).

There are undoubtedly many advantages to South Africa's participation in the BRICS, including enhanced trade and market access, increased FDI, strengthened bargaining power, and greater influence in international affairs (Asuelime 2018b: 129). Van der Merwe (2016a: 153) argues that "BRICS clearly signals that SA's 'spatial fixation' is expanding beyond Africa to encompass the global South and emerging markets more generally." However, it is questionable who benefits from South Africa's inclusion in the BRICS bloc, given the advantages it provides to other members.

Some academics contend that the actions of BRICS in Africa signify "a new scramble" for the continent in the 21st century (Carmody 2012; 2016; Bond 2013; 2015; 2022; Taylor 2014; Amisi et al. 2015; Marshall 2022). For example, Garcia and Bond (2019: 2) argue that "a resurgent imperialism is being facilitated by BRICS politics". As giant corporations from BRICS member countries continue their expansion across the African continent, they are paving the way for a new chapter in Africa's reliance on foreign powers, reminiscent of colonial powers' actions in the late 19th century (Amisi et al. 2015: 97; Garcia and Bond 2019: 12). Bond (2015: 15) believes that the BRICS bloc lubricates the neo-liberal regime in the Third World. In fact, the leaders and elites of the BRICS do not seem to be bothered by the integration of their countries into the global economy (Robinson 2015: 5).

A BRICS institution has recently emerged as a new lender for its members, the New Development Bank (NDB). From 2016 to 2022, no NDB loan within its South African portfolio could be deemed free from corruption. (Bond 2022: 150). While the BRICS have been trying to create an alternative to the West and a structure compatible with the new world with the NDB, the distance of its members to democracy and transparency has been damaging the credibility of the bloc (for a more detailed analysis of NDB and BRICS, see Kırızlı 2022).

China is the most powerful member of the BRICS and the largest trade partner of African countries. Therefore, Chinese interests supersede those of other bloc members. The overarching goals of China's global agenda are threefold: first, gaining access to crucial raw materials; second, securing market access; and third, playing a more significant role in international politics (Shelton and Kabemba 2012: 36). China uses South Africa as a gateway to Africa in terms of selling commodities through South African retailers like Shoprite (Carmody 2017: 3, 13). The port at Durban in the east of the country is useful for China's trade with Africa, and South Africa has therefore become a transit country for this trade (Carmody 2017: 12-14).

Amisi et al. (2015: 103) argue that South Africa assumes two distinct roles within Africa: first, that of a hegemon and second, that of a sub-imperialist. Sub-imperial powers operate the “inter-imperialist chains linking the dominant blocs within global capitalism” (Van der Merwe 2016b: 27). South Africa’s inclusion in the BRICS has strengthened the country’s sub-imperial position in Africa and provided a new vehicle for other BRICS members to invest in the continent (Van der Merwe 2016b: 27). Although the South African economy is not as strong as the economies of other BRICS countries, it has better institutional scores in terms of macroeconomic fundamentals, the quality of its financial institutions, and the level of enterprise (Qobo and Dube 2015: 156). In 2007, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, the largest bank of the period, acquired a billion dollar stake in Standard Bank, South Africa’s largest bank and the owner of numerous branches in Africa, providing a new investment tool for China’s investments in Africa (Carmody 2017: 7). Therefore, BRICS members’ transnational corporations and banks accelerated the group’s integration to the global economy (Robinson 2015: 3). So, BRICS became another source of surplus extraction from Africa to the owners of current neo-liberal order (Bond 2018: 3).

For the new scramble in Africa, South African mining companies have been an integral part while other BRICS members work closely with them to invest in the mining sector of Africa. Investors from the BRICS countries, namely India, Brazil, South Africa, and China, collaborated on coal projects and worked closely with the supply chains of South Africa’s well-established mining industry (Marshall 2022: 92). South African (also Chinese) mining investments in Zimbabwe could be read as a sub-imperial investment. The world’s largest platinum mines have been unpacked by large-scale South African investment, and medium-scale gold mining is expanding. In 2006, a rush for diamonds attracted South African and Chinese investors. (Saunders 2022: 305). Marshall (2022) argues that despite changing national ownership, the face of capital remains the same when we consider South African, Indian, and Brazilian mining capital in Mozambique. South African-based platinum company Implats controlled Zimbabwe’s largest mining firm Zimplats, which has been another source of sub-imperialism (Saunders 2022: 313).

China’s approach to South African mining and the rest of Africa is different because South Africa has a sophisticated mining sector. South Africa’s mining sector has benefited from the country’s sub-imperial position, as mining companies could extract minerals from other African countries. The South African mining industry has sufficient capital, technology, experienced labour, and relative government support. As a result, Chinese mining companies have limited opportunities to invest in South Africa. The BEE regulations also protect South Africa’s domestic mining industry from foreign investors to some extent. There are some active mining companies in South Africa, such as Zijin Mining, Minmetals, Jiquan Iron and Steel, East Asia Metals, and Sinosteel. These companies are not at the same level as South Africa’s domestic mining companies because their investment is restricted.

As this study argues, South Africa’s sub-imperial role perpetuates the ongoing UCD in the country and the rest of the continent. In economic relations based on inter-state or inter-communal capitalism, the expansion of the existing capitalist system is sustained through BRICS investments, economic ventures and the mining sector, particularly in South Africa.

## Conclusion

This study answers the question “Has South Africa’s membership in BRICS been an answer to persistent UCD in the mining industry?” This study shows that the UCD approach is feasible to post-colonial communities such as South Africa, as it explains that the expansion of capitalism from the centre to the periphery is possible with transnational capital. The South African mining industry has extended the reach of capitalism beyond the country, and into the rest of Africa through extractive operations. Non-settler colonialism served as the first stage in the institutional expansion of capitalism into Africa. Indeed, settler colonialism was the bigger step for them because it meant the localization of capital in the hands of whites in South Africa. Therefore, while non-settler colonialism may represent the unevenness of Africa, settler colonialism, through South Africa and other former settler colonies, brings about a combined development of the continent.

South Africa’s inclusion in BRICS was a further move to bolster capitalism on the continent by expanding competition and sub-imperialism. During the past 13 years following South Africa’s BRICS membership, the local mining industry has maintained its advantages over Chinese capital. Increasing competition in South Africa’s mining industry could exacerbate unequal exchange between the centre and the periphery of the global economy. Most of the black population in the country still experiences inequalities and unemployment, while the BEE entrepreneurs’ ownership structure is limited to only 30%. This represents merely one aspect of the inequalities in South Africa, and perhaps not the most significant. The mining industry demonstrates the hegemony of English-speaking whites and connects South African society to the rest of the world through unequal exchange (Bond 2018: 9). Despite this pessimistic picture, perhaps, as seen before the Bolshevik Revolution, South Africa will find a stepping stone to accelerate its development and reduce inequalities within the country with the advantages of BRICS membership. However, it would not be surprising to argue that while the image of South Africa’s sub-imperial role as the source of the UCD has changed from the apartheid era to the present day, internal inequalities in the country will persist for a long time to come.

Among other Marxist IPE approaches, UCD argues that as capitalism expands in peripheral countries, it spirals into the communities living there. As we have seen in the South African mining sector, an agrarian society begins to transform over time into an industrial society. However, this transformation led to the institutionalisation of both class and racial discrimination. The UCD approach shows that this transformation is a capitalist way of life that spreads from advanced to underdeveloped countries but is experienced at various stages everywhere. Societies with a history of settler colonialism, such as South Africa, experienced uneven and combined development from inside and outside at an earlier stage than former non-settler colonies. South Africa has long been an important agent of sub-imperialism, as shown in particular by leading researchers such as Ashman and Bond. This paper argues that sub-imperialism, both in the mining sector and in the membership of the BRICS, is an instrument of UCD in South Africa and in other societies of the continent.

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