



The rise and fall of Brazil and Israel's sub-imperialism

A ascensão e queda do subimperialismo do Brasil e de Israel

El ascenso y caída del subimperialismo de Brasil e Israel

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Ruy Mauro Marini's concept of sub-imperialism, analyzing Brazil and Israel as key examples during and after the Cold War. It explores whether these nations continue to function as sub-imperialist powers in the post-Cold War era, considering shifts in U.S. imperialism and its regional impacts. The study also assesses how Brazil and Israel's roles have evolved within South America and the MENA region, highlighting their strategic alignments and influence. By revisiting Marini's framework, the article offers insights into contemporary geopolitical dynamics and the enduring relevance of sub-imperialism in a changing global order.

Keywords: *Sub-imperialism; Brazil; Israel.*

RESUMO

Este artigo examina o conceito de subimperialismo de Ruy Mauro Marini, analisando Brasil e Israel como exemplos centrais durante e após a Guerra Fria. Explora se essas nações continuam a atuar como potências subimperialistas no período pós-Guerra Fria, considerando as mudanças no imperialismo dos EUA e seus impactos regionais. O estudo também avalia como os papéis do Brasil e de Israel evoluíram na América do Sul e na região MENA, destacando seus alinhamentos estratégicos e influência. Ao revisar o arcabouço teórico de Marini, o artigo oferece insights sobre a dinâmica geopolítica contemporânea e a relevância duradoura do subimperialismo em uma ordem global em transformação.

Palavras chave: *Sub-imperialismo; Brasil; Israel*

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el concepto de subimperialismo de Ruy Mauro Marini, analizando a Brasil e Israel como ejemplos clave durante y después de la Guerra Fría. Explora si estas naciones continuán actuando como potencias subimperialistas en el período posterior a la Guerra Fría, considerando los cambios en el imperialismo estadounidense y sus impactos

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regionales. El estudio también evalúa cómo han evolucionado los roles de Brasil e Israel en América del Sur y en la región de MENA, destacando sus alineamientos estratégicos e influencia. Al revisar el marco teórico de Marini, el artículo ofrece perspectivas sobre la dinámica geopolítica contemporánea y la persistente relevancia del subimperialismo en un orden global en transformación.

Palabras clave: *Subimperialismo; Brasil; Israel.*

INTRODUCTION

Ruy Mauro Marini (2012), the Brazilian theorist who introduced the term sub-imperialism, identified Brazil as the primary example of a sub-imperialist nation during the civil-military dictatorship (1964–85). His aim was to elucidate Brazil's role in South America under the conditions of dependence and industrialization. He saw Israel as an additional paradigmatic example of sub-imperialism during the Cold War.²

Using the concept of sub-imperialism, this article examines the relationship of the US with Brazil and Israel during and after the Cold War. The primary goal is to analyze if Brazil and Israel remain as sub-imperialist nations after the Cold War. I argue that both nations have transitioned away from sub-imperialist status post-Cold War for divergent reasons. The democratization of Brazil and its foreign policy entailed the dismissal of the US policy of coups and dictatorships in South America; whereas the continuation of the US's aggressive agenda towards the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) necessitated the preservation of Israel's apartheid state.

Nevertheless, I claim that both nations remain as subordinate partners in the US-led "collective imperialism". Samir Amin (2004) referred to the triad of the US, Europe, and

Japan as "collective imperialism". This alliance has been pivotal for US strategy during and after the Cold War. As Israel aligned more closely with the US, it forfeited its relative autonomy and became a co-empire; whereas Brazil distanced itself from the US without breaking its state of dependence.

Since the late 1970s, Brazil and the US have experienced tensions in their bilateral relations, resulting in increased estrangement after the Cold War. Following the conclusion of the dictatorship, Brazil's military operations no longer aligned with capitalist interests; the nation has fostered increased respect for the sovereignty of its neighbors; and it has ceded its autonomy to the US in certain moments. South America has decreased in significance within US strategy, which has primarily engaged in the region through the War on Drugs. This has diminished US pressure on Brazil to take assertive action in the region.

The rapprochement between the US and Israel following the 1979 Iranian Revolution has resulted in a level of proximity between the two nations that transformed Israel into a co-empire. In the 1980s, the military-industrial complexes of both countries became significantly intertwined. Even with the crisis in the US-Israel relationship during the Gulf War (1991) and the reorganization of MENA after the Cold War, Israel maintained its strategic importance with the rise of the War on Terror. In addition, Israel acts as a proxy against

² Other cases appointed by Marini were South Africa, which was under the apartheid regime, and Iran, which was under the dictatorship of Shah Reza Pahlavi.

Islamic nations and groups, including Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, which oppose the US's unchallenged dominance in the region.

The initial section will examine the transformations of the concept of sub-imperialism since its elaboration by Marini in the 1970s. Next, we will examine the relationship of the US with Brazil and Israel through the concept of sub-imperialism.

1 IMPERIALISM AND SUB-IMPERIALISM

Lênin (2021) defined imperialism as the colonial and warlike expansion of states that is based on the formation of monopolies from the combination of financial and industrial capital, which enter into a crisis of overaccumulation. Imperialism enables capital to exploit native labor, expropriate natural resources, and conquer new captive markets to dislodge systemic crises through state force.

Marini (2012) formulated the concept of sub-imperialism to address the diversity of dependent nations. This is because Brazil and Bolivia, for instance, were both dependent states, albeit in distinct positions within the global hierarchy. Marini regards sub-imperialism as a method for dependent national capital to circumvent the constraints of realizing the surplus value resulting from the domestic market's atrophy as a consequence of the super-exploitation of labor. Sub-imperialist nations strived to export these goods and capital to weaker nations in their regions to realize the value contained in the commodities. The outcome was a hierarchy among states, such as between the US, Brazil, and Bolivia. In this hierarchy, Brazil continued to be exploited by the US while simultaneously exploiting Bolivia.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of sub-imperialism should not be limited to economic considerations. This is the factor that distinguished Brazil from Argentina and Mexico. These countries did not have the geopolitical characteristics of a sub-imperialist nation. Mexico lacked the relative autonomy indicative of sub-imperialism due to their proximity to the US. The Mexican capital had no national project that could deviate from US imperialism. Argentina had greater autonomy, as shown in the Malvinas War (1982). However, the Argentinian bourgeoisie lacked regional leadership in comparison to Brazil.

2 SUB-IMPERIALISM IN THE COLD WAR

2.1 Brazil

Following the 1964 military coup with US political and military support, Brazil was designated as the representative of American interests in the Nixon-Kissinger strategy (1969–74) of “spheres of influence” to impede the spread of communism and popular nationalism in South America. Brazilian assistance was provided to coups in Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, and Bolivia as part of Operation Condor (1975–83). For instance, in Bolivia, this was combined with Petrobras' involvement in the exploitation of natural gas and the export of Brazilian capital. Brazil also established the second-largest arms industry in the Third World during this period, trailing only Israel (Luce, 2015). Thus, Brazil's sub-imperialism was defined by the combination of its coercive role and the extension of Brazilian capital within US objectives for South America.

Nevertheless, the Brazilian elites had their own national project, which occasionally deviated from that of the US. This was apparent during the Ernesto Geisel administration (1974–79). Brazil voted in favor of UN resolution 3379 in 1975, which classified Zionism as a form of racism, because of its rapprochement with MENA nations to promote oil imports. This illustrates the divergences inside US-led “collective imperialism”.

In 1975, the Brazilian nuclear project was developed to compete with Argentina for technological dominance and military hegemony on the continent. The agreement with West Germany to advance the project reinforced the country's relative autonomy. However, the US agenda was centered on the containment of atomic expansion. Consequently, the Americans were at odds with Brazil's decision to enhance its nuclear capabilities, even for energy purposes (Sotelo Valencia, 2017). Brazil and the US experienced a gradual separation as a result of this crisis and the human rights foreign policy of the Jimmy Carter administration (1977–1981). The economic and social crisis that ensued in Brazil as a consequence of the abrupt increase in interest rates by the Federal Reserve in 1979 ultimately resulted in the end of the dictatorship in 1985.

2.2 Israel

During the Cold War, the US' foreign policy toward the MENA was designed to facilitate access to the region's oil (Hanieh, 2024). The sub-imperialist alliance with Saudi Arabia and Iran, which control the two largest oil reserves in the region, serves as evidence (Hanieh, 2021). Despite the absence of energy reserves, Israel was perceived as a solid ally in the fight against Arab nationalism.

The 1967 war marked Israel's rapprochement with the US, as the Israelis emerged victorious over Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian forces. This was considered a humiliation for Arab nationalism, which began to perish (Hanieh, 2024). The Yom Kippur War of 1973, which was a surprise attack by Egypt and Syria, was the final gasp of pan-Arabism. It was also a crucial moment for the US-Israeli alliance. American air support was instrumental in Israel's response, which successfully contained the enemy troops (Hanieh, 2021).

The US strategy was altered in 1979. The US mediated a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt instead of engaging in military conflict with Arab nationalism. The outcome was the subjugation of Egypt to the US and the collapse of pan-Arabism. However, 1979 also witnessed the Iranian Revolution. This confluence of factors made Israel the US's main ally and established political Islam as the primary adversary in the region. This led to an increase in the alliance. Neoliberal reforms in both countries and a bilateral free trade agreement in 1985 facilitated the advancement of American capital over Israel, particularly in the military sector (Hanieh, 2003).

During an inflation crisis in the 1980s, Israel was rewarded with huge investments from American capital and the opening of new markets for Israel, especially in the Third World. Israel exported arms and trained counter-revolutionary forces in regions where the US could not be directly involved (Halper, 2015). A significant market was Latin America, particularly the dictatorships of Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. Therefore, Brazil's sub-imperialist actions facilitated Israel's arms exports to the region, despite the vote against Israel in the UN, and strengthened US-led collective imperialism.

3 SUB-IMPERIALISM AFTER THE COLD WAR

3.1 Brazil

Some authors have characterized Brazil's rise following its re-democratization in 1989 as sub-imperialist (Bond; Garcia, 2015; Luce, 2015; Sotelo Valencia, 2017) or imperialist (Fontes, 2010). Brazil's (sub-)imperialism would be characterized by the transnational expansion of finance. The establishment of Mercosur in the early 1990s was a significant manifestation of Brazil's power project in South America and relative autonomy to US imperialism. It promoted free trade and reproduced the exploitation of Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. Mercosur was also an alternative to the US-sponsored Free Trade Area of the Americas, which was rejected by the Brazilian elites.

Brazil's regional project was to be continued with the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), established in 2008 as an alternative to the US-led Organization of American States (OAS). Unasur's objective was to fortify South America's defense and economic autonomy. It aimed to advance regional integration through the Initiative for the Integration of South American Regional Infrastructure (IIR-SA) with the investment of the National Development Bank (BNDES) and the support of the Brazilian monopoly capital. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also played a role in opening new business opportunities (Bond; Garcia, 2015; Luce, 2015; Sotelo Valencia, 2017). Despite the country's deindustrialization and the increasing influence of agrarian and mining capital, Brazil continued to export manufactured goods and capital to the region (Luce,

2015). On a geopolitical level, Brazil assumed the leadership of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) at the request of the US. Bond (2015) contends that Brazil has served imperial interests in the same manner as other BRICS nations.

Nevertheless, I agree with Katz (2020) and Berringer (2013) that Brazil's military extension and its project for South America are not articulated to classify Brazil as a sub-imperialist. Both authors perceive an economicism in the classification of post-democratization Brazil as a sub-empire. To begin with, the interests of Brazil's bourgeoisie are not a factor in its military intervention in Haiti. Additionally, Brazil is not accountable for the regional intensification of the War on Drugs, the primary coercive instrument of US imperialism in South America. Colombia, a nation with US military bases but lacking the economic profile of sub-imperialism, fills this role. Furthermore, the Brazilian capital has not established a specific projection space in South America; rather, it has pursued opportunities throughout the Global South, building relationships with countries in Africa, the MENA, and China (Berringer, 2013; Katz, 2020). The Brazilian bourgeoisie, according to Berringer, lacks the political and economic capacity to initiate an autonomous project.

Consequently, Brazil did not implement coercive measures in conjunction with the expansion of national capital. On the contrary, Brazil acknowledged Bolivia's sovereign decision to nationalize the natural gas, in 2006, that Petrobras had been exploiting since the dictatorship. Berringer observes that Brazil confronted coup attempts in Venezuela in 2002, Bolivia in 2003 and 2008, Ecuador and Honduras in 2008, and Paraguay in

2012. Moreover, the 2016 parliamentary coup against Dilma Rousseff (2011-16), which the US supported, as well as the dismantling of a portion of Brazilian capital as a result of the Lava Jato operation, have had a significant impact on the global expansion of the Brazilian state and capital.

On the other hand, the geopolitical role that the Jair Bolsonaro government (2019–2022) played was consistent with sub-imperialism. Its support for the 2019 coup in Bolivia, the 2019 coup attempt in Venezuela, and the efforts to strengthen the far right on the continent are examples of this. Nevertheless, Bolsonaro has diminished the extent of Brazilian autonomy concerning US imperialism by submitting the country to the Donald Trump administration (2017–20), as evidenced by the transfer of the Alcântara space base to the US. In addition, he has reversed initiatives to fortify Brazilian autonomy, including the weakening of the BNDES, IIRSA, and Unasur. Therefore, Brazil is neither sub-imperialist nor anti-imperialist. It remains a dependent nation under US-led collective imperialism.

3.2 Israel

The geopolitics of the MENA were altered as a result of the unipolar order that the US established after the Cold War. Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf War garnered the backing of nearly all Arab nations. Syria and Libya, which remained neutral, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which supported Iraq, were the exceptions. The US resumed its role as a peace broker to further its undisputed hegemony. The objective was to transform the resolution of the Palestine Question, which was gathering global atten-

tion since the first Intifada (1987–93), into a means of normalizing Israel's diplomatic relations with Arab nations and facilitating the establishment of a free trade zone in the MENA (Hanieh, 2024). Nevertheless, Israel initially declined to engage in peace negotiations. President George H.W. Bush's (1989–1992) threats to cut military aid. Assurances of new business opportunities for the Israeli bourgeoisie sparked Israel's participation in the Madrid Conference in 1991 (Shlaim, 2015). This led to the Oslo Accords (1993–95).

Nevertheless, certain segments of the Israeli elite, particularly those associated with Likud and the far-right settler movement undermined the agreements. I do not, however, interpret this opposition as a Israeli relative autonomy. The neoconservatives, an ideology that emerged in the 1980s and opposed peace agreements in the MENA, were a crucial part of the American establishment and supported the Israeli position. Neoconservatives advocated for war to defeat the enemies of the US and Israel (Huberman; Santos; Nasser, 2024). Even the Democratic presidents Bill Clinton (1993–2000) and Barack Obama (2009–16) were not mediators who were dedicated to justice and peace (Khalidi, 2013).

Moreover, Benjamin Netanyahu (2009–21) attempted to undermine the nuclear agreement between US and Iran and confronted Obama's decision to halt the construction of settlements in the West Bank to facilitate the negotiations with the Palestinians. However, during a speech in 2015 that challenged Obama's foreign policy toward the MENA, Netanyahu was met with a standing ovation from members of both parties in the US Congress. Israel ceased to be an external partner and has become an actor in the internal disputes of the

US. This is the reason Katz (2020) and Martinelli (2022) designate Israel as a co-imperial state. Katz compares Israel to two other settler colonies: Canada and Australia. These three settler nations are unconditional allies of the US, also a settler state. The outcome has been the preservation of Israeli settler colonialism, apartheid, and occupation.

Furthermore, a notable rapprochement occurred between the American and Israeli bourgeoisies, particularly following the onset of the War on Terror in early 2000s. US capital investments have stimulated the civilian and military technology sectors in Israel. Consequently, Palestine was transformed into a testing ground for arms and security technologies utilized and exported by the Israeli and US military-industrial complexes (Graham, 2011).

The US has prioritized war as the primary method of imperialist intervention in the MENA. The region has been engulfed in several imperialist wars: Afghanistan (2001–21), Iraq (2003–11), Lebanon (2006), Gaza (2008–), Libya (2011), Syria (2011–), and Yemen (2004–). In 2024, the US Air Force intervened to safeguard Israel from Iranian drone attacks. This reaffirmed Israel's alliance with the US during a time of widespread protests against Israeli genocide in Gaza (2023–).

Capasso and Kadri's (2023) comprehension of contemporary imperialism helps understand the centrality of war in the MENA. The authors contend that the wars fought by US-led collective imperialism are a form of production, accumulation, and profit. War is a mode of accumulation by waste that results in the destruction of human life and nature by Western bombs. The commodities produced are the bodies of the surplus populations who resist the undisputed hegemony of the US.

The Israeli military-industrial complex is pivotal in reinforcing US dominance in the MENA, ensuring unobstructed access to oil, and thwarting Chinese influence in the area. The agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, mediated by China in early 2023 to promote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and enhance Chinese access to regional oil, has increasingly impeded American and Israeli strategies in the area due to Saudi Arabia's growing autonomy (Nasser; Oliveira, 2024). The Saudis frequently conflicts with the US, as evidenced by the negotiation of oil prices with Russia in OPEC and the joining of BRICS+.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia consented to the 2020 Abraham Accords, which normalized Israel's relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, and engaged in their own normalization negotiations with Israel (Hanieh, 2024). Nevertheless, the Palestinian attack on October 7 halted this regional reorganization in disregard of the Palestine Question. This has challenged the US initiative to establish an alternative to the BRI in the region via the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Also, it illustrates the current contradictions in US-led collective imperialism, considering the strategic significance of MENA in countering China's ascendance.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we argued that Brazil and Israel ceased to be sub-imperialist nations in opposing ways. This resulted from internal transformations within these nations and their foreign policies, along with the evolving significance of MENA and South America for US strategy. The democratization of Brazil and the persistence of apartheid in Israel are internal

factors that elucidate the alteration in foreign policy towards the US and its regions.

Although the US has moved away from Brazil and closer to Israel, indicating that both nations are no longer sub-imperialist, I contend that they continue to be integral to the US-led collective imperialism. Nonetheless, their significance markedly differs from the greater resemblance they embodied during the Cold War, when Marini saw both as sub-imperialist nations. The cessation of Brazil's acquisition of Israeli military vehicles amid Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza in 2024 exemplifies the divergent trajectories of the two nations since the conclusion of the Cold War. It also exemplifies the persist divergences within the US-led collective imperialism.

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