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From Panel 1 The World Land-Bridge: It’s Being Built!

The Power of the BRICS Process: Views from the UK — Jeremy Corbyn

Interview with Jeremy Corbyn, MP (Labour), Member of the House of
 Commons, United Kingdom

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Gabrielle Peut: Good afternoon. My name is Gabrielle Peut and I am here in Westminster London. And today joining me is Labour MP, Mr Jeremy Corbyn. Good afternoon Jeremy. Thanks for your time today, because I know you are very busy.

Jeremy Corbyn: You're very welcome. Nice to see you here.

Peut: It is nice to be here, believe you me. Now, for the benefit of our audience Jeremy, you have been a member of the UK parliament since 1983, 32 years now, and if I were to list everything that you have done, the key leading roles that you had in your political career, I think we would be here all day, but just to mention a few of them. You were the national chairman of the “Stop the War Coalition”.

Corbyn: I still am.

Peut: You're the national vice-chairman of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the chair of its parliamentary group in Westminster. You've also been very active in many human rights cases and have taken a particular interest in defending nations in Latin America, as vice-chairman of your Parliamentary Group for Latin America and the secretary of your parliamentary group for Mexico, the secretary of your parliamentary group for Venezuela and also you are a member of the all-party groups for Brazil, the Caribbean, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. And of course you have also campaigned to defend Argentina against the predatory vulture funds that were trying to loot the country. Now obviously, being involved in those groups you would know the BRICS meeting that took place in Brazil in July 2014 where they inaugurated the dramatic escalation of the BRICS process overall. So, how do you specifically see that impacting Latin America as a total?

Corbyn: I think it's fascinating looking at the process in Latin America. I am very involved in Latin American issues and have been ever since I went there as a 19-year-old—when I was 19 in the sixties—I had been working in the Caribbean as a youth worker and teaching, and then I went from the Caribbean to Latin America and I went all around the continent on my own. And it was a fascinating time. This was a time of military government and American domination of the whole continent—brutal. And this was just before President Allende was elected in Chile and three years before he was assassinated. Interesting period.

Take it forward now, and Latin America is a totally different place in that there is a greater division between north and south American continents than there's ever been. There's less direct U.S. control over the economies, or politics or military of most of Latin America than there was in the past. There is a huge political debate between, broadly speaking, the ALBA PAC countries of Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and the more pro-American ones such as Peru. And to some extent Brazil, although that comes and goes, and very close American domination in Mexico.

So, if we take the things separately. First of all in the case of Mexico, massive human rights abuses continuing, a hundred thousand people died or disappeared in the past decade and a bit. The 43 students who disappeared from Ayotzinapa were an example of how bad it is, but they're only part of the whole story. And two weeks ago we had the visit of President Pena Nieto from Mexico to Britain, extolling the virtues of a market economy, selling off of natural assets, or exploitation of natural assets to British companies and the marketisation of the Mexican economy in line with NAFTA. So they see there an economic relationship between the USA, Canada and Mexico which is actually very damaging to the interests of small farmers and the working class in Mexico, not to mention those that live in marginal existence.

Mexico is not part of the BRICS process but there is some, not a huge amount, some Chinese involvement in Mexico, but not as much as in other countries. Central America, there is a very big Chinese involvement. They are funding the possibility of a new canal through Nicaragua and they are funding quite a lot in Costa Rica. Move further south and what you've got there is a government in Venezuela under pressure from the right in Venezuela, to try and create problems and shortages and difficulties for them. But very interesting, the ALBA Pact works in terms of promoting trade through reducing the gap between the rich and the poor and improving the life chances of the poorest young people. That's got to be a good thing.

The BRICS process is essentially an alliance, as we know, of Russia, China, Brazil, South Africa. What does it mean for the continent as a whole? I suspect it means, in the long term, a much larger level of Chinese investment throughout South America and much greater trade with China, because the possibilities of increasing trade between Latin America and South Africa are fairly limited, since they are broadly producing similar kinds of things. Ditto Russia. It is China that is the big consumer of natural resources and Latin America is the big consumer of industrial and other products, so I see the development in that way.

Peut: And I think one of the things with China, and of course the Brazilian arrangements, there is the question of “the advantage of the other”, which of course, as you said, the consumption of industrial goods coming back from China, because the BRICS I think, as a whole, is looking at that collaborative exchange—it’s a cultural paradigm shift for the world. Do you see it in that context?

Corbyn: Yes, it’s an interesting historical reversal of trends. We think of history in far too short-term a process; we think of history as the last 50 years, 100 years and occasionally a bit longer than that. Essentially we look at a period when there's been European economic and cultural domination of the planet, which came with European expansion principally in the 18th and 19th centuries. It started before that, but

principally then, and the relative decline of China from being incredibly powerful in the 15th/16th century to its lowest point which was in the 19th century when it was virtually colonised by Europeans.

What we see is a historical reassertion of China's role in the world. And because technology, communications, everything, has moved on quantumly since that time, it's going to be a very interesting century that we move into and people are going to have to reckon with China's economic power. And in a sense their economic model has been very clever, in that they have a relatively controlled and closed economy, they have a fixed exchange rate, they can depress the value of their own currency, suck in loads of dollars, and now more dollars than the USA. It's very clever.

Peut: [T]he overall political situation globally is extremely fragile and of course you fiercely opposed the Iraq war in 2003 and of course in 2006 you were one of six Labour MPs to back the call by the Welsh Party, Plaid Cymru, and of course the Scottish National Party for an inquiry into the Iraq war, which among other things, led to calls for the impeachment of Tony Blair for having lied outrageously for starting the war in the first place. Now, again we have a steady escalation of NATO troops and manoeuvres in Eastern Europe and of course in Ukraine. You had the whole coup d'état that was run by the far extreme right wing groups and then you had Russia being named as the aggressor, right, in terms of the whole Ukrainian situation and yet it was foisted on them, the other way around. So we are potentially on the verge of a thermo-nuclear crisis. Now you have spoken out strongly against this escalation and said that NATO should be disbanded, but how much is this war danger understood at present in the UK and what actions are being taken against it, and how do you see the alternative of peace through development as Pope Paul VI once put it? And it really is embodied in the BRICS process, that idea is embodied there in terms of the collaboration for peace through economic development as opposed to what we are getting from the UK and the U.S. now.

Corbyn: A number of things. That aspect of the BRICS development is the good one, because it is an alternative strategic view of the world which doesn't include the United States or Europe and that is culturally, historically, very, very significant. That part of the BRICS process I absolutely welcome. What concerns me is the level of exploitation of natural resources that goes with some of that development so it's not a zero sum game.

On the questions of global peace I think there are two significant dates—1989 and 2001. 1989 the fall of the Berlin Wall, collapse of COMECON, collapse of the Warsaw Pact, collapse of the Soviet Union, and a period of mass privatisation and marketisation in Russia, and a period of deep corruption in Russia for which we are all still paying a price. 1989-90, with the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, should have been the time for Gorbachov's vision of a common European home, should have been a time for the organisation of security and cooperation in Europe to take over. And instead, NATO panicked, because NATO is a very powerful organisation and it has a North Atlantic centre to its ideal; that is where it comes in the name, but it is also a massive cooperative buyer of arms, particularly from the U.S. and to some extent

European arms industries. It is a self-perpetuating power structure. It panicked in 1990 because suddenly the whole *raison d'être* of opposing the Soviet Union had disappeared. In English terms, “the fox had been shot”. There was nothing to chase anymore.

And so I just remember the early nineties, these endless strategic breakfasts one was invited to, to discuss the possible threats of the future and they kept running computer models about where the war threat was coming from next. So they were sort of looking for it. What do we do, what do we do, what do we do? How do we justify our existence? And I just remember a long meeting we had with British Aerospace as it was then called, BAE Systems now, about the future of an aircraft factory near London, and I was making the point that surely we should be pleased about the drop in defence contracts and what we needed was a process of arms conversion, and the gentlemen—they were all gentlemen from BAE—said, “Yeah, we can make anything. We don't have to make weapons. We don't have to make war planes, we can make anything, but we do need the orders to do it, we do need an arms conversion process.” It never happened. It never happened! And NATO continued to look around for a strategic reason and instead of using the opportunity of the 1990s for disarmament, for *détente*, for arms conversion exercise and a more positive role for Europe in the world, what instead happened, was an increasing of American power in the world. We saw the beginnings through Jesse Helms, and the others in the USA, of the Heritage Foundation and then the Project for a New American Century, and then came 2001.

Now Bush, if ever there was the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time, in the wrong occasion historically, it has got to be George W. Bush as president of the USA in September 2001. Obviously what happened was appalling, the World Trade Centre and the deaths that went with it. The response of invading Afghanistan, which was of course amazingly successful. It wasn't very difficult for the U.S. Air Force to bomb and invade Afghanistan. The thing is that just like Russia before them, just like the British before them, just like everybody else before them, they couldn't hold the ground and the British and Americans were forced to withdraw with their tails between their legs 14 years later, thousands dead, billions spent and the war spread all over the region. We then had Iraq, we then had Libya, we had Mali. We've had war after war after war, and in 2006 we had the NATO Summit in Lisbon which gave itself an “out of area status”, which gave itself a global role.

So we have NATO developing into a global role, essentially protecting Western commercial interests and fighting for resources around the world and becoming a creature of the arms manufacturers. And the schism between the perceptions of Islam and the perceptions of Western/Romano Christian tradition are now bigger than they have ever been and the bitterness is worse than it's ever been....

Peut: [Y]ou fought against the relentless expansion of the draconian laws of anti-terrorism in the United Kingdom and in an interview you gave in December 2014, you said, and I quote here: “While ISIL, or ISIS, didn't come from nowhere, it didn't all emerge in a few weeks. It's been growing for a very long time, it's very well armed, very well equipped and very well financed.” Now, you went on to elaborate that somewhere along the line, that money has been transacted from the world's banks in

general, from the world's arms industries, as you were just expressing, and much of that equipment, one suspects, may have well come from a combination of the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia. And you said that although military force has to be used against ISIS, you said, even more importantly, “there has to also be a concerted pressure on ISIS funding and sources of arms, because that is the key to it all.” Would you like to elaborate that further in terms of what you were saying before?

Corbyn: ISIS is very well-funded, as I said, and very well resourced and quite well organised, and it appears to be emanating as much from the huge supply of Western weaponry into the Gulf region. Think of the amount of arms sales that have gone to Saudi Arabia, \$2 billion worth of arms through the Al-Yamamah arms contract alone to Saudi Arabia, a British base now being constructed in Bahrain, the first one for many, many years, expansion eastwards and arms sales to UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, all across the piece, and ISIS forces that control parts of Iraq. Where do they come from? They come from the deliberate break-up of the Iraqi army after the invasion; they come from the looseness of weapons supply in Iraq at that time, so to some extent, it is a reassertion of the old Ba'athist regime in Iraq because they were never included in any post-invasion process. And we need to examine that in some detail, but we also need to examine the funding issues surrounding it, because they are selling oil, quite clearly. That money is being processed somewhere. Which Western banks are involved in transferring that? HSBC got done over for transferring vast amounts of drug-related money in Mexico. Who is going to get done over for all this ISIS money that is floating around? And so I would look at it two ways.

One is to cut off the supply of arms and money that ISIS develops, but also some sort of process that the people in Iraq and Syria feel a sense of security in their lives rather than being stuck between a war between the rather shadowy leadership of ISIS and the more obvious and open leadership of the USA and the West, of propping up a government that is selling off the oil resources very cheaply. It's not a happy position to be in if you are a poor person stuck anywhere in Syria or Iraq. ...

As to the wider question concerning Saudi Arabia and its involvement, well that is a very important one, because the British involvement with Saudi Arabia is huge. Historically, the Foreign Office got it wrong. They thought there was no oil in Saudi Arabia, there was only oil in the gulf states, so they handed this massive area they named Saudi Arabia to the current royal family there, who later discovered there was oil there. It was all a bit late for the British and so basically American oil companies got it rather than BP, so BP is much more powerful in Iran than they are in Saudi Arabia, even now. And we have created this huge powerful force massively armed, deeply abusive of human rights, and it is all very muted. Any criticism of Saudi Arabia is very muted. I raised Saudi human rights abuses the whole time in Parliament and at the UN and all these places and they sort of say, well, they are a big arms buyer. Well sorry, if you believe in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the name is in the title—“Universal”.

And so I think we have to be far more assertive on human rights issues, but quite honestly, every government to some extent tailors its human rights concerns to its economic and military interests. In the case of the West, to the most extraordinary

degree. And in the case of Saudi Arabia, ministers glibly tell me here that they welcome the direction of travel of Saudi Arabia and quiet diplomacy is more effective than making a noise outside. I'm not sure about that! I think you promote change by making a lot of noise about human rights abuses and standing up for people that are being abused, and that is what I spend my time doing.

Peut: [T]o end on a more positive note, because it is interconnected with the crisis we are seeing in the Middle East, because in 2013 you voted for Glass-Steagall and this was one of the reasons we came to the UK, because it was such an extraordinary debate that happened on the floor of the House of Commons, that a lot of people missed it in the world, and I am sure even here in the United Kingdom. But would you like to say something on the necessity for Glass-Steagall, which of course would change everything?

Corbyn: Glass-Steagall had origins in the USA in the 1930s—the separation of speculative banking from normal savings banks and that sort of process and it was a revolution in the USA. Five thousand banks had already collapsed at the start of the recession, ... and what Glass-Steagall did was separate out and give a degree of regulation to banking to protect depositors so that people had confidence to invest in a bank that they knew was not going to run off and buy futures in cocoa, oil, coffee or whatever anywhere around the world, highly speculative or property speculation.

The systematic deregulation of the banking systems of the West following Reaganomics of the 1980s, Thatcher over here, and what was known as “Big Bang” in the City of London, when all this regulation was taken away and the banks were encouraged to be speculative. It was like reinventing the South Sea Bubble of the 18th century and that resulted in a lot of loss and a lot of misery for a lot of people. And what Glass-Steagall does, is create a secure savings environment, that people can put their money in and know that it is going to be okay, and that they are going to get it back and that they are going to get some kind of reasonable return on it, from inevitably slightly risky investment banking. You actually need to have investment banking to get development and to get growth, but it needs to be regulated; it needs to be publicly controlled and there needs to be a public participation in it. If we want to build housing, for the people of Islington who desperately need it, we need to borrow money somewhere to do it. We either get it through what, in Britain, is still called the Public Loans Board, or we borrow the money on the private money market, but that is, I would argue, a secure investment.

If somebody wants to invest in something speculative, I don't want my council housing put at risk by that with the bank foreclosing and demanding all its money back straight away. That is the danger of it, so it is a question really of public ownership, public control and public accountability. You start with Glass-Steagall to separate out these two arms, but you move on to ensure a socially responsible banking system. We have a high degree of public ownership presently, temporarily, of banking shares in Britain. This government is determined to sell them off as quickly as possible. I think instead, we should convert them into equity in the banks and maintain a high degree of public control of what the banks do and the golden share

option, when they can't make major decisions without public authority to do so. That would make for a much more stable economy.

Peut: Absolutely. Thank you, Jeremy.

Corbyn: You're very welcome. Thank you very much.