



Why Does South Africa Need Armed Forces?

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March 22, 2016

Laugh, the Beloved Country

In a recent [video](#), a South African Navy Commander revealed that the country needs its three diesel-electric German-built submarines to keep the rainbow nation safe from... sharks. Predictably, hilarity ensued. The mind-numbing stupidity of the Commander aside, the renewed focus on South Africa's submarines raises an important question.

Why does South Africa need armed forces to begin with? The country is a regional hyper-power. There is no earthly way in which any of South Africa's neighbors—the microscopic Lesotho, impoverished Mozambique and Swaziland, starving Zimbabwe, and sparsely populated Namibia and Botswana—could ever threaten its national security.

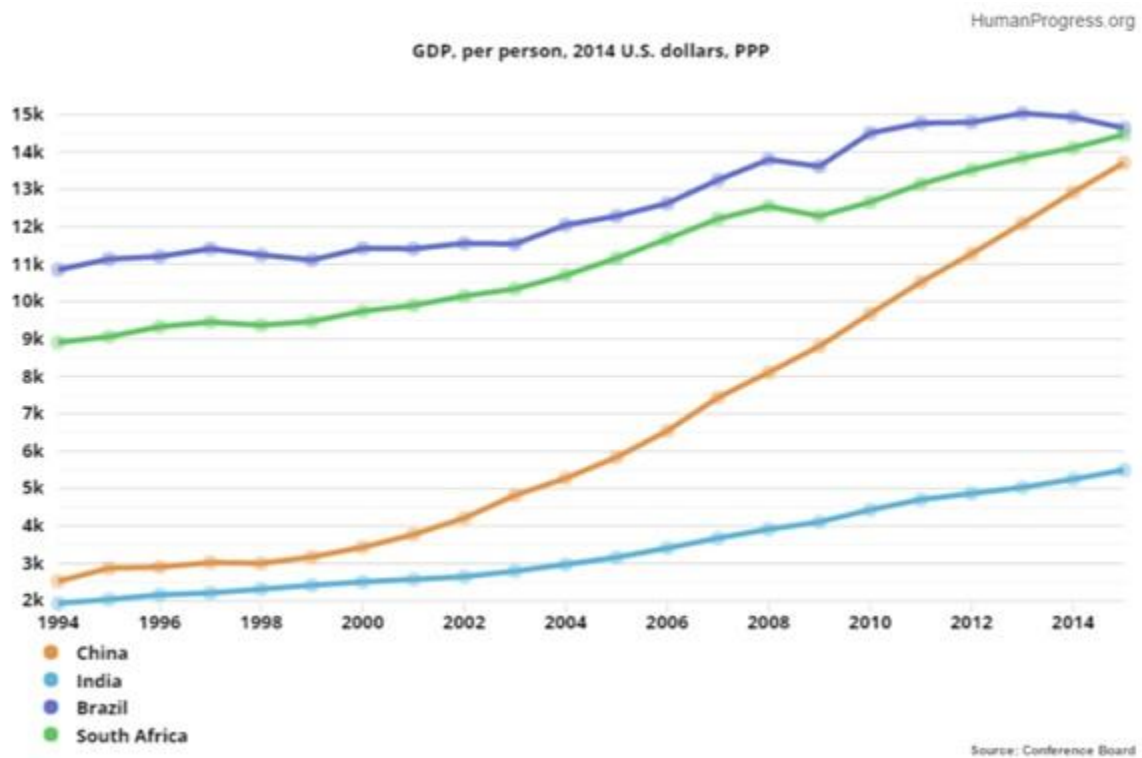
Zimbabwe, which is the only state whose leadership is deranged enough to trouble any of its neighbors, has 29,000 soldiers. The South African police force alone has 150,000 officers and better equipment. Simply put, South Africans could beat back an invasion from a neighboring state with a pogo stick. So, why spend \$5 billion on a military that no one needs?

Three reasons come to mind. First, the nation's military is a massively inefficient jobs program that soaks up some of the country's unemployed and a patronage system that provides sinecures to the lackeys of the ANC government. Second, it offers marvelous opportunities for self-enrichment to the country's corrupt elite, which negotiates arms purchases from foreign suppliers. Third, it is a status symbol. All serious nations have a military and so must South Africa—whether it needs one or not.

The giant waste that is the South African military is not new. It was a massive burden on the country's economy under apartheid and, shock and horror, under Nelson Mandela. In fact, a comprehensive revamping of the country's military was the first (yes, first) large spending project embarked upon by the newly-elected African National Congress government in 1994.

One of the main beneficiaries of that titanic boondoggle was South Africa’s current president, Jacob Zuma.

In the meantime, South Africa’s economy—the measure of the country’s fortunes as well as the government’s commitment to the welfare of its people—grew at a slower pace than any other BRICS country, save Brazil. Between 1994 and 2015, Brazil, Russia (not shown), India, China and South Africa grew 35 percent, 83 percent, 184 percent, 443 percent and 62 percent respectively.



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