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Dilma Thumps for Women

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In her historic opener to the U.N. assembly, Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff declared a “century of women” and championed gender equality as the key to prosperity. Mac Margolis on her defiant address.

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In a powder-blue, flowered dress, with a tight smile, her voice slightly tremulous at first but warming to the hearty applause—strong enough to make her pause—Brazilian President [Dilma Rousseff](#) wrote history this morning when she became the first woman to open the debate at the United Nations General Assembly in New York. With [representatives](#) from 191 member states listening, Rousseff, 63, spoke in a cadenced monotone, about this rising Latin American nation but also on the European debt crisis, turmoil in the Arab world, the need to create a Palestinian state, combating global warming, and ending gender inequality.

“I speak to you with a feminine voice. It’s the voice of democracy, of equality,” she began. “I am certain, ladies and gentlemen, that this will be the [women’s century](#). In the Portuguese language, words such as life, soul, and hope are of the feminine gender, as are other words like courage and sincerity,” she added, segueing quickly from the leitmotif of women’s rights to facing up to a world in peril.

“The world today is at an extremely delicate moment,” she continued. “We face an economic crisis that, if it is not contained, can transform into a grave political and social rupture, an unprecedented rupture with the

potential to provoke serious imbalances between people and nations. Either we get together, all of us, and defeat this crisis, or we all will be defeated.”

In Newsweek: Don't Mess With Dilma

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Addressing the issue of creating a [Palestinian state](#), she said, "Recognizing the legitimate right of the Palestinian people to sovereignty and self-determination increases the possibilities of [reaching] a lasting peace in the Middle East. Israel's legitimate concerns for peace with its neighbors, security on its borders, and regional political stability can only be achieved by creating a free and sovereign Palestine." Mention of Palestine won Rousseff voluminous applause from an otherwise understated audience.

If there was nothing remarkable in these talking points, the fact that a Brazilian leader addressed them before an international forum was a signpost of a time that has seen wealth, power, and diplomatic initiative shift hands and latitudes in less than a generation.

Barely 20 years ago, Brazil was a drowsy, underperforming Third World nation, plagued by hyperinflation and boom-and-bust growth. Global worries such as international peace and security were someone else's quarrel. Like her country, Rousseff—a former Marxist guerrilla during the Brazilian dictatorship—came of age in a time when international decision making was a proxy affair, outsourced to the legacy powers. No longer.

With its \$2 trillion GDP, Brazil today is a stable, prosperous market democracy. The ninth economy in the world and on course to become the fifth-largest economy within the decade, Rousseff's Brazil is now flexing its muscle as a

regional powerhouse, clamoring for a seat at the head table of international affairs and unabashed about lecturing the nations that have run the world to now for making a hash of the job.

"This crisis is too serious to be left to manage by only a few countries," she said. Just a handful of countries and their central banks continue to call the shots, she noted pointedly, adding: "But as all nations suffer the consequences of crisis, all have the right to take part in finding the solution."

And in a blunt criticism of global powerbrokers through the recent economic turmoil, she said, "It's not for lack of financial resources that the leaders of developed countries have yet to find a solution to this crisis. It is rather, allow me to say, for lack of political resources and, occasionally, of a lack of clarity of ideas."

She went on to score the richest nations for failing to "separate partisan interests from legitimate social interests." The challenge of the crisis, she said, is to substitute "outdated theories from an old world for new formulas and actions for a new world."

"We have 205 million unemployed in the world, 44 million in Europe, 14 million in the United States," she said. "It's vital to combat the disease and stop it from spreading to other regions of the planet."

According to Rousseff, responsible emerging nations like Brazil ("We have done our part," she said) must be equal partners in this new world order. To that end, she called on member states to finally enact the "urgent" reform of the U.N. Security Council, which she said has dragged for the last 18 years. "The world needs a Security Council which reflects current-day reality—a council that incorporates permanent and nonpermanent members, especially representatives from developing countries," she said.

Touting the fact that Brazil has not fought a war in 140 years, wrote a ban on nuclear weapons into its constitution, and has embraced peace-keeping and nation-building missions from Haiti to Guinea-Bissau, she plainly made the case that other Brazilian leaders have danced around for years. "Brazil," she said, "is ready to assume its responsibilities as a permanent member of the council."

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A longtime correspondent for *Newsweek*, Mac Margolis has traveled extensively in Brazil and Latin America. He has contributed to *The Economist*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*, and is the author of *The Last New World: The Conquest of the Amazon Frontier*.

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