

IBSA: talking shop or powerhouse?



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OCTOBER 12, 2010 01:09 IST



Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Brazilian President Lula da Silva (right) and South African President Thabo Mbeki (centre) at the second IBSA Summit at Pretoria in South Africa in October 2007.

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Recently, the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum received positive attention on two counts. The IBSA Fund, which extends assistance to developing countries, won the 2010 United Nations Millennium Development Goals award for South-South cooperation. A second maritime exercise, IBSAMAR II, was held in

the Indian Ocean off the South African coast, involving 11 ships of three member-states.

Clearly, IBSA has come of age. Journeying through four summits and six meetings of a Trilateral Commission comprising Foreign Ministers, the forum has scored many gains.

Unfolding changes

Of the three Foreign Ministers who signed the June 6, 2003 Brasilia Declaration, which gave birth to IBSA, one no longer holds office, the second has another portfolio, and the future of the third may be uncertain in view of the on-going presidential elections.

At the Summit level too, actors have changed. India's commitment to IBSA has remained strong, despite the change of leadership from Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Manmohan Singh. It now seems somewhat different in South Africa, which has been represented by three Presidents in recent years. Does Thabo Mbeki's passion for IBSA still guide policymakers in Pretoria?

An evaluation of the likely implications of BRIC turning into BRICS may be relevant, if and when South Africa joins the former comprising Brazil, Russia, India and China. The impact of succession in Brazil will also be watched closely.

IBSA's identity stems from its uniqueness, the ability of the three large countries — all democracies, rising economies, proponents of inclusive development and multilateralism — from three different continents to work together, despite their obvious differences. Its success lies in broadening its convergences and cooperation. As Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim once observed, IBSA is an alliance not against anyone but “in favour of our peoples;” it is also

“in favour of a multipolar world where democracy — political, social, cultural — prevails.”

Key facets

IBSA needs to be assessed in terms of four important facets. The first is coordination and articulation of common positions on international and regional issues. The joint declaration, issued at the last Summit in Brasilia in April 2010, reflects the member-states' perceptions of global governance, social dimensions of globalisation, climate change, disarmament and non-proliferation, among others. On U.N. Security Council reform, they have tried to speak with one voice, while keeping in view South Africa's dilemma (between an ardent desire for permanent membership and the anxiety not to stray from the joint African position). Regarding the Doha Round and climate change, IBSA prefers to speak after adequate internal coordination.

The tendency to hold forth on regional issues, one or more of which may be of direct interest to only one member-state, reminds old-timers of a similar impulse within the Non-Aligned Movement in the past. Are Brazil and South Africa really interested in Afghanistan, or is India in Haiti? Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that IBSA's views are monitored closely in capitals around the world.

Secondly, the IBSA Fund, a facility for alleviation of poverty and hunger, has been a notable achievement. International recognition of its success should be quite encouraging. It is apt that the three rising economic powers stand committed to assisting fellow developing countries, with specific projects in a few targeted areas. So far, seven countries — Burundi, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Laos, Cambodia and Palestine — have benefited from it. However, critics would argue that IBSA assistance is too limited, with each member-

state contributing just \$1 million annually. Surely, they can afford to be more generous. If IBSA truly wants to make a difference, it should step up its assistance, expedite its decision-making and undertake more projects.

The third facet, trilateral cooperation, has been perceived from the outset as “an important tool” for promoting social and economic development. At the Brasilia meeting in 2003, the Foreign Ministers identified five broad areas: trade, investment, tourism, defence and science and technology (including IT and energy). An extraordinary proliferation of areas has since occurred, covering a large segment of governance itself. Sixteen working groups have been in operation; 12 Memorandums of Understanding are in force; and another five are awaiting ratification. Officials of the Ministries handling education, health, revenue administration, agriculture, etc., appear engaged in frequent inter-continental travels for exchanging ideas and crafting cooperation programmes. Their labour, it is hoped, will promote taxpayers' welfare in the near future.

In this context, trade should receive a high priority as a complex structure is being put in place. The first two stages have been reached, with the signing of the Sacu-Mercosur Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) and the coming into effect of the India-Mercosur PTA in April and June 2009. Efforts to finalise an India-Sacu PTA need to be expedited. In August 2010, Minister of Commerce and Industry Anand Sharma pledged that a PTA would be finalised “soon.” If officials deliver on this quickly, the way would be cleared for forging a Trilateral Trade Arrangement (TTA) involving Mercosur, Sacu and India. This is already being hailed as “the largest trade agreement in the developing world” of future. This ambitious

goal needs a deadline. Will the TTA be a reality when IBSA turns 10 in 2013?

Energy has often been cited as an ideal field where each country has special expertise which is of benefit to others: Brazil in biofuels, South Africa in coal-to-liquid (CTL) technology, and India in renewable sources of energy. After useful preliminary work, it is now time for IBSA to launch a series of projects demonstrating synergy and complementarities.

On the face of it, defence cooperation may seem to lack potential; but the reality is different. IBSA does not face a common conventional threat, but it has been developing shared threat perceptions, especially in the region around South Africa, the geographical centre of the IBSA world. This explains its growing interest in augmenting cooperation among the three Navies. Connectivity through better transport and telecommunication links has been given due priority, but progress has been slow.

The fourth facet is a steady expansion of interaction beyond the executive wings — and indeed beyond governments. Meetings have been arranged of parliamentarians and representatives of apex courts. Business leaders, women activists, editors, academics and artistes have been engaged in frequent exchanges in order to provide a strong civil society underpinning to IBSA inter-governmental cooperation. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has been especially supportive of these endeavours, deeply conscious of the immense value of people-to-people relations.

Questions

While, admittedly, the people-to-people dimension has been growing in scope, it is still driven largely by governments. To be truly effective, the civil society leadership should lead rather than follow them. Besides, the implementation of MoUs and other agreements needs substantial improvement.

And then there are two larger political developments. President Lula's successor will make a crucial impact on the evolution of IBSA. South Africa's quest for joining BRIC is also relevant. Pretoria claims to have made a positive impression on the BRIC leaders through President Jacob Zuma's personal diplomacy. Friends of IBSA, however, hope that he remains fully committed to its further consolidation.

The answer to the titled query is thus clear: IBSA is more than a talking shop; it strives to be an influential powerhouse. In order to get there, it needs to work harder, implement its decisions faster, and involve civil society more.

(The author served as India's High Commissioner to South Africa from 2006-09.)

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