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The bricks to rebuild IBSA



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IBSA need not be about the UN Security Council alone. Apart from common security concerns that India, South Africa and Brazil share, IBSA could articulate the need for maritime peace, stability and the rule of law in the Indian Ocean and the South Atlantic

Google the acronym “IBSA” and you will get news about the International Blind Sports Federation and the Illinois Baptist State Association. When was the last time you heard about the other IBSA?

democracies of Asia, Latin America and Africa – India, Brazil and South Africa. In his address at IBSA's first summit in Brasilia, in September 2006, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said, "The idea of IBSA is without precedent." Today, the Indian Foreign Minister is trying hard to find a meeting date convenient to all to host a pre-summit meeting; the next summit is scheduled to be held in New Delhi later this year.

The rise of BRICS

IBSA was visualised as the coming together of three great democracies of the developing world, all three, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multicultural, committed to the rule of law in international affairs and the strengthening of multilateral institutions. IBSA, its founding heads of government said, would not just be a trilateral gathering of officials; it would also facilitate the coming together of businesses and civil societies in these three democracies.

> Read: BRICS set to outshine IBSA?

Launched with much fanfare and promise, as an association of developing country democracies that believe they have a right to claim permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), IBSA has been overshadowed over the past few years by that other acronym without an adjective, BRICS. Launched by Russia and repeatedly injected with life by China, BRICS has moved beyond ritual to claim for itself the status of being a counterpoint to the Group of Seven (G7). Cleverly manipulated by Russia and China, and with India adding purpose to it with its sponsorship of the idea of a BRICS New Development Bank, the summit of the five-nation BRICS gets 6,40,000 search results on Google, compared to the 88,200 results for an IBSA summit.

But the issue is not about such trivial differences. The fact is that the political leadership of both Russia and China have shown greater commitment to the idea of BRICS, and pushing their anti-West agenda through it, than have the political leadership of Brazil, India and South Africa to IBSA, and to its pro-democracy agenda. IBSA observers – and there are not too many of them around – believe that China has been successfully influencing South Africa's current leadership to ignore IBSA and pay more attention to BRICS.

UNSC link

However, to be sure, in a world where countries have multiple interests and loyalties, most are members of several and a growing number of associations. Indeed, many countries have become members of associations that often have conflicting objectives. In a globe where no one wants to be left out of any new group, the proliferation of groups has crowded the travel itinerary of foreign ministers. It's like New Delhi's elite who seek membership of all available clubs but have

Something like this fashion victimhood has befallen IBSA. Its government leaders are so busy at home and with other summits that they have no time for IBSA. One reason for this is that the compelling shared objective that brought IBSA into being a decade ago, namely UNSC restructuring and membership, seems to have become less compelling. Countries aspiring for UNSC reform and restructuring and for permanent membership seem to have given up all hope of change.

Reviving IBSA

Interestingly, though, there seems to be a change in India's stance on this score. Prime Minister Narendra Modi signalled a renewed commitment to the goal of UNSC membership when he told an audience in Paris earlier this month that permanent membership of the UNSC is "India's right", and not just a favour it begs for. Are Brazil and South Africa also ready to assert this right?

> Read: IBSA: talking shop or powerhouse?

The argument that since the world's status quo powers are only paying lip service to UNSC reform and expansion and will not allow any change, the IBSA must give up staking their claim is ridiculous. The UN governance system, as indeed that of all the post-Second World War multilateral institutions, has become moribund. The bankruptcy of the UNSC is all too visible in its inability to deter unilateral action by powerful countries. So, if the UNSC had failed to prevent action by the United States in Iraq, it failed to thwart Russian action in Crimea and Saudi Arabia's bombing of Yemen. Against this backdrop, the voice of the three great democracies of the developing world would carry weight, if properly and appropriately articulated. But IBSA need not be about UNSC alone. The three countries have some common security concerns. Drug trafficking, money laundering and terrorism is one such. Maritime security is another. Just as the world has sought stability and the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific region, IBSA could articulate the need for maritime peace, stability and the rule of law in the Indian Ocean and the South Atlantic. If Brazil dominates the South Atlantic and India dominates the Indian Ocean, South Africa shares a coastline with both oceans.

As the dominant power of what can be called the Indo-Atlantic region, Brazil, India and South Africa can come forward with a maritime doctrine for the region based on international law and democratic principles. Maritime security, freedom of navigation, climate change and energy security could be the common agenda that IBSA can pursue, adding meat to the trio's skeletal structure.

While distance acts as a disincentive in Brazil-India relations, the structure of their economies is such that there is great complementarity. Brazil has a high land-man ratio, with ample natural

capita basis. This creates synergy. Equally, Brazil and India can work together to build a stronger manufacturing base, with untapped potential in defence manufacturing. The potential for India-South Africa business relations remains high and not fully tapped.

As 'East-West' bridge

Beyond the potential for deeper and wider bilateral economic relations, IBSA have shared political concerns. While all three emerging powers feel equally frustrated by the West's unwillingness to yield space in global governance, they also have a shared concern in China's growing influence in their own individual neighbourhoods. If India worries about China's rising profile in South Asia, Brazil worries about China's growing clout in Latin America, and South Africa finds its influence in Africa receding as more of its neighbours turn to China.

Thus, both on account of their inability to get the G7 and the P-5 (five permanent members of the UN Security Council) to raise their stake in global governance, and on account of the challenge they face within their own neighbourhood from China's growing economic presence, IBSA have a substantial, shared, meaningful agenda to chalk out and pursue. The problem is that not many in the three capitals are paying any attention to these issues.

Also, recall the fact that while the international community responded with alacrity to the Trans-Atlantic financial crisis of 2008-09 and elevated the G20 into a summit level forum of developing and developed economies, the G20 have since been riven by differences between the G7 and BRICS. While some portray the G7 vs BRICS interplay as a "North-South" divide, the fact is that IBSA are today the real representatives of the South on most multilateral economic issues and on subjects pertaining to global governance.

Rather than being content with membership of BRICS, there is a case for IBSA – the Indo-Atlantic powers – to step up their interactions in dealing with both the countries of the North Atlantic and the rising powers of Eurasia, and arrive at a shared strategic perspective on a range of global issues. As countries of the "South", and given their shared concerns, IBSA could in fact act as a bridge between the "West" and the "East", so to speak.

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