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India-South Africa Multilateral Engagement: Contextualizing IBSA and BRICS

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In an era of growing multilateral mechanisms and increased global communication, India and South Africa, as representatives of emerging economies and developing countries, are enthusiastically engaged in the construction of multilateral systems to promote democratization of international relations, and safeguard their rights and interests to fully realize their political and economic objectives. Through various multilateral forums and platforms, they are articulating their positions on reform and alternative development agenda. The Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) group and the trilateral forum of India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) are two such multilateral mechanisms, in which both India and South Africa enjoy pivotal positions. For both countries, these two blocs have a comparative advantage in terms of their multilateral utility. However, the distinctness of multilateral value of each of these groups has often been questioned, on the ground that three members (India, South Africa and Brazil) are common to both these groups. China, in particular, tries to project IBSA as irrelevant, arguing that in many ways, it duplicates the functioning of BRICS. Despite such attempts and concerns, IBSA has not become redundant, and need not be so. India and South Africa still attach enormous strategic importance to this group, and chose to keep the two entities separate, as they believe that both groups are distinct in terms of power, priorities and political character.

The fact that on the sidelines of Fortaleza BRICS Summit, held on 15 June 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the South African President, Jacob Zuma, announced to hold the IBSA Summit in 2015, though after two successive postponements, speaks volumes about the weight the current leaders attach to this group, as a distinct multilateral entity. This decision is largely political, as IBSA allows its member countries to keep a certain autonomy *vis à vis* China and continue existing collaboration through a democratic and more balanced process, as there is no economic hegemon in IBSA, as China in BRICS.

New Delhi is now getting ready to host the IBSA Summit in 2015. This Summit is intended to give greater thrust to its exclusivity in terms of its autonomy and identity *vis-à-vis* BRICS. The year 2015, therefore, should tell us a lot about how important IBSA is in New Delhi's strategic calculus, as it cannot avoid the demand of showing leadership as the host. However, one wonders whether the New Delhi IBSA summit will explain India's distinct position and policy approach towards IBSA? This is important at a time when China is trying to undermine the weight and significance of IBSA, by enhancing its ties with South Africa and Brazil. Will India and South Africa show the vision and political will to jointly take IBSA to another level along with Brazil? How would the new elected leaders of India and South Africa, along with Brazil, consolidate and strengthen the mechanisms instituted within IBSA, in order to keep its multilateral value relevant *vis-à-vis* BRICS?

India, South Africa and the BRICS Context

The Indian approach to the BRICS group has been more about democratization of global order and promotion of economic development, peace, stability and prosperity. During the recently held BRICS Summit at Fortaleza, India very clearly spelt out the opportunity that the BRICS forum provides to address regional crises and security threats and to advance intra-regional economic cooperation and global economic stability. India supports the creation of alternative financial structures for benefitting growth and stability in BRICS and other developing countries. India, however, is very cautious to raise political issues within the BRICS, which may complicate its foreign policy postures on global issues. Primarily, three imperatives explain India's approach to BRICS: (i) pursue the interests of the developing world; (ii) exploit cross-regional economic and political cooperation, without really mixing the dealings between BRICS

and IBSA; (iii) be proactively engaged in global issues without affecting the relations with power blocs, like the United States and the EU.

South Africa's outlook towards BRICS can be categorized at three levels. Firstly, national, where it aims at advancing its national interests; secondly, regional, where it promotes regional integration and interactions, with specific emphasis on the African Union mandate to promote infrastructure development across the continent; and thirdly, at the global level, where it advocates for a more inclusive global governance system that would benefit the development agenda of African and other developing countries. Unlike India, South Africa's approach towards BRICS stands out for its regional context, as its BRICS agenda is very much informed by Africa's development agenda and global aspirations.

Both India and South Africa see BRICS more as a strong economic grouping, suited to address global economic issues and a counterbalance to the global balance of power. It does not provide enough space for convergence on issues, such as UNSC reforms, as it faces ambiguity on the part of Russia and opposition from China. Moreover, the China factor also prompts both countries to believe in groups, such as IBSA, at least politically, if not economically, as it provides considerably more autonomy. Particularly, in the case of South Africa, it is very much evident that the kind of strategic autonomy it enjoys in IBSA is not there in BRICS, given its membership being part of its 'comprehensive' relationship with China.

India, South Africa and the IBSA Context

India perceives IBSA as a coalition mechanism, concerning matters of soft-power, having three specific objectives: democratic credentials, developing-country status, and desire to act together globally for socio-economic development. Along similar lines, South Africa views its membership of IBSA as a mechanism not only for enhancing its trilateral partnership with India and Brazil, but also as an important pillar for strengthening the muscle of the South in global affairs.

India and South Africa recognize the importance of IBSA as a forum of members, who have long established democracies and similarities of views on various international agenda of

political and economic consequences. Both perceive it as a democratic alliance that allows its members much more strategic autonomy and visibility. Their association within IBSA carries considerably more weight, regionally and globally as compared to BRICS. Further, they believe that the institutional political set up that IBSA enjoys is unlikely to be achieved by BRICS members, who do not share the same principles, aspirations and challenges. Consequently, it is understood as a more cohesive group, unlike BRICS, where the leadership edge significantly resides with Sino-Russia.

IBSA, despite being a more substantive south-south partnership, with real focus on each other, has not been able to enjoy the high level visibility, the way BRICS has. It's time for the leaders to prioritize and revitalize IBSA by defining its distinct identity and vision. Over the years, IBSA has made considerable progress, though not noticeable, through its consultation forums, working groups, IBSAMAR exercises and IBSA facility fund established in 2004, which, however, needs to be consolidated and evaluated, so that IBSA's multilateral utility is advanced.

Keeping in view the need for revitalizing IBSA, New Delhi, as it gets ready to host the IBSA Summit, may consider the following:

- IBSA and BRICS have a distinct multilateral utility that needs to be identified and pursued. Both the inter-regional groups have their own history. They were created as a result of discontent among their member countries, which felt sidelined in mainstream international forums. As long as those issues remain, both the mechanisms would remain relevant. So, IBSA needs to be prioritized for its multilateral value.
- India should enhance its bilateral relations with Brazil and South Africa, which are also being courted by China.
- India and the members should work towards making IBSA accepted as a legitimate group by other developing countries. There is need for India and other members to introspect and streamline IBSA's agenda, so that it benefits the developing countries, at large, in a concrete manner.
- Intra-IBSA cooperation needs to move beyond the phase of trans-continental travels, meetings, studies and Memorandum of Understanding to viable and demonstrable

projects. It needs to establish effective maritime and civil aviation connectivity, develop a liberal visa scheme and try to operationalize trade arrangements between India, SACU and Mercosur.

- Given the elaborate sectoral working group agenda of IBSA and its uneven achievement, together with its business, parliamentary and academic forums, plus the geostrategic maritime cooperation potential of IBSAMAR, India and South Africa should contemplate a more formalized structure in the form of a secretariat, perhaps situated in Brasilia.
- An incremental approach is the best way forward for IBSA. There is need to harness the soft power of these countries to bring about further cooperation.
- The members need to ponder whether the three governments should continue their south-south tokenism via the IBSA Development Fund run by UNDP's South-South Joint Cooperation Unit with the launch of the BRICS development bank, or should they now consider negotiating some complementary synergy between the development fund under IBSA and the development bank under BRICS and increase the funding level. Moreover, given the pressing developmental needs in all three countries, could the development fund provide facility for small-scale income-generating, community-level projects in the three countries?
- On the issues regarding making global institutions more representative, India and other members need to articulate the qualitative transformation that they are envisaging.
- Finally, India needs to position IBSA and BRICS not necessarily as opposing each other; rather as complementing each other for achieving inclusive growth and development.

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