

AS INDIA PREPARES TO HONOUR BOLSONARO

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi often does the unexpected, the surprise sometimes being agreeable, at other times the reverse. His invitation to leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) at his inauguration in 2014 and hosting all the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders at the Republic Day in 2019 were in the first category; the demonetisation in the second. He has now produced another surprise by inviting Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro to be his guest of honour for Republic Day 2020.

Mr. Bolsonaro, a pro-gun lobby, homophobic, far-right religious former Army Captain, came to power in 2018. The defining aspects of his administration have been a strong inclination towards the U.S. and damaging policies affecting the Amazon rainforest. In foreign policy, his affiliation with the U.S. is driven by admiration for President Donald Trump. Brazil has been designated a 'major non-NATO ally', a status held by close U.S. allies like Japan, Israel and South Korea. Mr. Bolsonaro has also followed Washington by relocating its Israel Embassy in Jerusalem, a city contested by Palestinians. On the Amazon delta, his policy has been to withdraw regulation and enforcement, facilitating the utilisation of the indigenous people's land for the purposes of agri-business, mining and cattle-ranching. He has belittled climate activists like Leonardo DiCaprio and Greta Thunberg and compared indigenous communities living in previously protected areas to animals in zoos. Under his presidency, the number of black and indigenous people murdered has increased. His domestic approval rating stands at only 30%.

Apart from Mr. Bolsonaro's woeful record as President, a larger question pertains to the future of BRICS, the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. This was set up as a move towards greater multi-polarity; hence the spread across three continents and both hemispheres. The BRICS combination accounts for about one-third of global output, but a glance at the GDP table and growth rates will show the infirmities of the group: in terms of GDP, China occupies the second position; India the fifth; Brazil the ninth; Russia the 11th; and South Africa the 35th. In terms of growth rates, China grew at 6%; India at 4.5%, Russia 1.7%, Brazil 1.2% and South Africa 0.1%. Both politically and economically, Brazil and South Africa have been the laggards in recent years.

But, the leaders of the five nations still see purchase in keeping this group together. Each country has different economic and political leverage, and its own burden of domestic and external issues. But they all share the benefits of autonomous decision making and non-affiliation with any binding alliances and the group's informal structure is an advantage for coordination among the most influential non-Western countries.

The BRICS summit in Brasilia last November was an exercise in diplomatic tightrope walking. Despite having made disparaging remarks about China in the past, Mr. Bolsonaro was aware that sharing a platform with the heads of China, Russia and India magnified his own significance both within and outside his country.

The BRICS group can survive only if its members maximise their congruences to the extent possible, despite the growing intensity of Sino-Russian ties; the pro-American leanings in Brazil; the socio-economic difficulties of South Africa after nine years under the controversial Jacob Zuma; and India's many difficulties with China, including its abstention from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

The main achievement of BRICS is the New Development Bank, with each country contributing

equally to its equity. The bank has so far financed over 40 projects at a cost of \$12 billion. The BRICS countries are also developing a joint payments mechanism to reduce foreign trade settlements in U.S. dollars. An offshoot of the group, dealing with climate change, is BASIC (BRICS without Russia), which met at the Spain conference last month and reiterated its support to the Paris Agreement.

The closing statement of the last BRICS summit deftly steered clear of the pitfalls of clashing ideologies and interests, while containing many formulations of self-congratulation that officials in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs can produce in their sleep. It enumerated 30 statements and communiqués as a result of two summit meetings, 16 ministers meetings, and others at various levels totaling 116 gatherings. Under the forthcoming Russian chairmanship, this number could exceed 150. India is taking the lead role in digital health, digital forensics, film technology, traditional medicine, sustainable water management, internships and fellowships.

Mr. Modi is evidently not concerned about Mr. Bolsonaro's status as Washington's most loyal follower in Latin America, and could justify his invitation to Mr. Bolsonaro with references to the enduring quality of BRICS, Brazil's agreement to waive visa requirements for Indian citizens, and the potential for Brazilian investments in the sectors of space and defence, agricultural equipment, animal husbandry, post-harvest technologies, and bio-fuels. But the total two-way trade is at a paltry \$8 billion, and the prospect of closer economic ties, however desirable, would require considerable optimism. Mr. Trump will be pleased by the Indian honour for his Brazilian alter ego; perhaps this was what mainly motivated Mr. Modi's invitation.

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