

THE IBSA TASK LIST

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: BRICS, IBSA and India

Even as [two member-states \(India and South Africa\) of the IBSA Dialogue Forum](#) have been busy with national elections and the third (Brazil) is settling down after its recent presidential elections, their foreign policy mandarins met in Kochi, May 3-5. The central goal was to develop a blueprint to rejuvenate IBSA, widely viewed as a unique voice for the Global South. Will this endeavour succeed?

First, some candour and recall are needed to trace the past trajectory. The idea of creating a grouping composed of major democracies of three continents, Asia, Africa and South America, emerged from the disarray at the end of the 20th century, and the perceived need for developing countries to forge decisive leadership. IBSA was launched through the Brasilia Declaration in 2003. Its summits, between 2006 and 2011, gave it a special global profile.

South Africa's new Indian migrants

But, 2011 onwards, BRICS, the larger group comprising IBSA countries, China and Russia, started to overshadow IBSA. IBSA has been unable, until now, to hold its sixth summit. Nevertheless, a series of events marking its 15th anniversary, held during 2018-19, have imparted new momentum to the endeavour to revitalise IBSA.

Throughout the period of its marginalisation by BRICS, a strong body of officials and experts in the three countries has held the view that IBSA is the true inheritor of solidarity among developing countries, which was nurtured from the Bandung Conference (1955) through UNCTAD and G-77 to the BAPA+40 Declaration (2018). It is the champion of South-South Cooperation, and the advocate of a coordinated response by developing economies to secure the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The glue that binds IBSA countries together is their faith in democracy, diversity, plurality, inclusivity, human rights and rule of law. This was reiterated through the IBSA Declaration on South-South Cooperation, issued in Pretoria in June 2018.

Notably IBSA remains determined to “step up advocacy for reforms of global governance institutions in multilateral fora”. In particular, it is strongly committed to the expansion of the UN Security Council. As Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj put it, “We three have to ensure that our collective voice is heard clearly in BRICS and other groups on UN Security Council reforms, since if we do not speak for our own interests, no one else will.”

Against this backdrop, IBSA Sherpas and senior officials of the three countries held detailed deliberations on all aspects of the grouping. The IBSA Academic Forum, comprising independent experts, held its sixth session in Kochi after a hiatus of over seven years. This forum hosted a candid and comprehensive exchange of views on the continuing relevance of IBSA; the need for a strategy to secure SDGs and cement South-South Cooperation; expanding trade cooperation; and the shared goal of enhancing academic collaboration on issues relating directly to the needs of democratic societies.

Getting back on track

In fact, IBSA has been notching up a number of quiet successes. First, the three Foreign Ministers have been meeting regularly to provide a coordinated leadership to the grouping. The last meeting of the Trilateral Ministerial Commission took place in New York in September 2018.

Second, while the India, Brazil and South Africa Facility for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation (IBSA Fund) is small in monetary terms, it has succeeded in implementing 31 development projects in diverse countries: Burundi, Guinea-Bissau, State of Palestine, Cambodia and Vietnam, among others.

Third, India has been running an innovative IBSA Visiting Fellows Programme through the Delhi-based think tank, RIS or Research and Information System for Developing Countries. A strong case exists for expanding its reach. Both South Africa and Brazil should initiate their own editions of this programme, as an investment in building intellectual capital.

A new NAM for the new norm

The idea of IBSA remains valid. The grouping has its tasks cut out. The special responsibilities it bears cannot be discharged by BRICS. In fact, strengthening IBSA could increase the effectiveness of BRICS and encourage it to follow a more balanced approach on key issues of interest to India, Brazil and South Africa.

Hence, the current endeavours to infuse greater dynamism in IBSA are well-timed. They would need buy-in by the government that comes to power in India. Support by Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro and South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa, who has just won re-election as President, would be crucial. An early convening of the next summit is the pressing priority.

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