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China and IBSA: Possible BRICS Overreach?

Jagannath P. Panda

The India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) forum, which was formalised in June 2003 through the adoption of the Brasilia Declaration based on the spirit of South–South solidarity, turns a decade old in 2013. The event will be celebrated at its first decadal summit in New Delhi. At the same time, this event needs to be juxtaposed with the fifth consecutive leadership summit of Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa (BRICS) in Durban in March 2013. Both IBSA and BRICS are in the limelight for their cross-continental politics. It has also been noted that China may have upped the ante against India by bringing South Africa into BRICS to demote IBSA as a multilateral organisation.

The nature, spirit and objectives of both IBSA and BRICS are complementary in many respects. BRICS today constitutes a superset of developing countries that IBSA as a forum originally represented. IBSA fundamentally depicts South–South solidarity, harnessing a ‘tripartite’ continental framework among the three large multicultural democracies of three major continents: Asia, South America and Africa. IBSA deliberates about three aspiring powers that have asked for permanent seats for themselves in the UN Security Council (UNSC). On the other hand, BRICS broadly defines three things in world politics: firstly, as a multilateral forum it belongs to rapidly emerging economies; secondly, its core members, possibly with the exception of Russia, are well-known powers from the developing world; and thirdly, it is a grouping based more on the North–South divide, and aims to bring reforms to the global financial institutions in favour of the developing world. What really puts IBSA in a separate stream from BRICS is its ‘democratic’ ethos.

IBSA: politics without China?

Much like BRICS, IBSA has addressed issues related to trade measures in global financial bodies, climate politics, developmental issues, challenges in developing countries, and so on. Its members are also linked with China in the climate politics of the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) framework. But the time has perhaps come to revisit IBSA as the Chinese have not only pushed BRICS ahead but have also tried to take a lead in BRICS by establishing closer relations with Brazil and South Africa. More interestingly, Beijing has taken note of the political and security issues that IBSA has so far been trying to cover.

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Firstly, IBSA has coordinated in security and political issues more closely than BRICS. Its declarations place enormous weightage on the interests of the developing countries and discuss developmental as well as political and security issues. Under India–Brazil–South Africa Maritime (IBSAMAR), the navies of the IBSA countries held joint exercises in the Indian Ocean in 2008, 2010 and 2012. China’s maritime posture in the Indian Ocean has expanded rapidly in recent years. The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean have been prime targets in the Chinese maritime drive recently. Carrying out offshore military manoeuvres, escort missions and anti-piracy exercises in various parts of the Indian Ocean has been a core strategy of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLA Navy). China would not want to permit India much advantage as a sole power in this ocean and it has placed stress on Russia’s maritime activity as a BRICS country in this ocean. An example is a recent Xinhua piece, which noted that a Russian sailing vessel Pallada was on a ‘tour of the Pacific and Indian Oceans’ as part of its ‘African Odyssey’, and its ‘main event’ will be ‘the BRICS summit in Durban’ on 26–27 March 2013.

Secondly, IBSA demands UN and UNSC reforms unanimously. China’s assistance in this matter is different. As a P-5 country in the UNSC, China has strongly backed the African case for greater participation in the UN and UNSC. Its position paper at the 65th session of the United Nations General Assembly (2010) advocates increasing the ‘authority and efficiency of the UNSC’ and greater ‘representation of developing countries, African countries in particular’. China mostly perceives the rise of BRICS as an opportunity to prune other power blocs, mainly Western dominance in global financial and political institutions. It would not want IBSA to steal a march over it in these matters, or Beijing may lose its tag as leader of the developing world. China knows well that the US does not believe in democratic accountability for its global actions. The Chinese strategy is not only to advocate in favour of the developing world, but also to take a lead on its behalf, while giving the US the least quarter to support South Africa and Brazil just as it has supported India for UNSC permanent membership.

**BRICS billiard: Beijing’s sidelining of IBSA**

To see it holistically, while the membership of Russia and China makes BRICS a wealthier organisation than IBSA, the involvement of three democracies from the three continents puts IBSA in a different league. In short, BRICS is a notion of ‘revisionist’ powers, having the association of two UNSC P-5 nations, while IBSA is more about ‘middle power’ arrangements. Being primarily a grouping of developing countries, IBSA aims at coordinating policies mainly among the developing countries, with a pan-continental framework in mind. BRICS also stresses cooperation among developing countries, but a fundamental distinction between the two forums is that they are great multilateral ideas based on ‘intercontinental’ or ‘cross-continental’ frameworks.

China’s approach to BRICS is somewhat exclusive. Not only is BRICS a ‘cross-continental’ grouping, it also comprises what are known as ‘emerging economies’ from the developing world, on which China has lately relied heavily to maximise its global economic and political leverage. Both Brazil and South Africa are given special importance in Chinese foreign policy because they are tied with India in the IBSA formulation and carry forward the slogan of ‘emerging economies’ in global politics, which China is currently pursuing at many levels. China is currently known as a ‘trading nation’, and Brazil and South Africa in particular facilitate meeting its energy and commercial needs and open opportunities for its goods, trade and economic pursuits in
their respective continents. China’s trade relations with both Brazil and South Africa are conspicuously ahead of their relations with India (see Figure 1). Three perspectives need to be highlighted in this context.

Firstly, reaching the key continental powers has been a calibrated approach in Chinese foreign policy. Brazil and South Africa being tied up with India in the IBSA formulation as developing countries also helps to maximise South–South cooperation. Depending upon its evolving political and economic considerations, China has employed a mixture of political, ideological, economic and strategic stretch towards Africa.8 In the Latin American region, China has shown an enormous interest in Brazil, which is a leading economy in the region and where the presence of the US is still widely felt. China’s growing presence in Latin America is aligned with its global politics with the US, and the closer relationship between China and Latin America has been seen as causing concern in the US.9 In its current reaching out and open strategy, Beijing has reached out extensively to these remote countries.

Secondly, the rise of BRICS is conducive to China’s rise as an economic power. China’s outgoing president Hu Jintao noted in the 18th Party Congress report that ‘China will actively participate in multilateral affairs’ and would give special importance to bodies like BRICS and G-20 and some other organisations.10 China has not hitherto explicitly asked for the merger of IBSA into BRICS but Beijing would at least prefer BRICS to completely overshadow IBSA. Interactions with Chinese experts and scholars indicate that China backs the idea that developing countries, mainly from the IBSA, BRICS and BASIC forums, must align together and forge a credible union at the global level to promote and defend the ideas and demands in favour of the Southern world. It should not be overlooked that China lobbied hard for South Africa to become a member of BRICS, expecting this to downgrade the prominence of IBSA and diminish India’s hold over both Brazil and South Africa. Matching the Chinese notion, South African President Jacob Zuma stated: ‘We believe that the IBSA will get a better balance and become even stronger with South Africa now as a member of the BRICS, more especially since the mandates of BRICS and IBSA complement each other’.11

Thirdly, IBSA, known as a ‘people’s project’, tends to promote Asian–African–Latin American solidarity, which China finds a little to its own interest. IBSA deals

Figure 1. Bilateral trade, 2011 (US$, billion).

Note: All figures are approximations.

Source: Data collected from various sources, including Secretariat for Social Communication—International Area, Presidency of the Federative Republic of Brazil, Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of South Africa, Ministry of Commerce & Industry and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of India.
with governance issues that China has aimed to achieve over the years with the developing countries’ alliance. A prominent example in this regard is the climate politics that the developing world is currently dealing with. BASIC, which was established in December 2009 at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) summit during the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) in Copenhagen, has been exclusively voicing the concerns of the developing world vis-à-vis the climate change issue. It is primarily a consultative mechanism among the developing countries. The politics just before COP15 indicated sufficiently that the developed countries would not initiate steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions if developing countries failed to do so, targeting mainly China and India. In principle, BASIC broadly agrees that the climate change negotiations should be carried out under the framework of the UNFCCC, the Kyoto protocol and the Bali roadmap, but they also realise that there has to be some concrete understanding among themselves to counter Western pressure on the climate issue. For this reason, China needs to be in touch with Brazil, South Africa and India and has started raising the climate change issue in BRICS for a coordinated position on behalf of the developing countries.

**China–India politics**

The rise of multilateral groupings like IBSA, BRICS, G-20 and BASIC signifies that both China and India lead in many aspects of global politics among emerging economies and developing countries. Their global and continental motives and conditions as part of the dialogue of the developing world or as emerging economies in the politics of the North–South divide unite the two countries in favour of an agreed common stance, yet the same streak or label of politics that links their national interests and objectives also keeps them apart. China wants to check India’s cross-continental reach and rising presence while sharing the platform with it along with Brazil and South Africa in BRICS.

Thus, the IBSA–BRICS dynamics best explains the differing perspectives that China and India hold. Both Asian powers’ changing foreign policy priorities and their differing outlooks on foreign policy priorities and global multilateral dynamics pull them apart and compel them to think differently. For instance, the major point of contention between China and India is in regard to India’s permanent membership in the UNSC, which today involves the IBSA countries. China would have taken a bold stand in supporting India’s case for permanent membership in the UNSC a decade ago under the ‘developing country’ formula when both China and India were rising and the US was leading a unipolar world. Today, in a versatile multi-structured and multipolar world order, the tide has turned against China and India having any realistic cooperation where Beijing can openly support New Delhi’s UNSC permanent membership. Like China, India carries the tag of being the leader of developing countries at many multilateral forums, and IBSA is a reflection of that. China cannot support India’s case for UNSC permanent membership when Beijing not only aims to be the sole leader of the developing world, but is also preparing to rise to a level where it can realistically be a power pole and has designs for a ‘bipolar’ world structure in which it will be counted as having similar weight to the US.

India sees IBSA not only as a forum conducive to its democratic practice but also as a platform for addressing the needs and objectives of developing societies of Asia, Africa and Latin America, where the three countries represent these continental societies eloquently. This was clearly evidenced in the statement of Prime
Minister Manmohan Singh that ‘IBSA has a personality of its own. It is three separate continents, three democracies. BRIC is a conception devised by Goldman Sachs. We are trying to put life into it’. Broadly, India’s dialogue with regard to IBSA is a perception of its South–South politics. India has tried to institute IBSA cooperation on three constructive principles: (1) political consultation and coordination; (2) multi-sectoral trilateral cooperation; and (3) the execution of development projects in third countries. IBSA as a forum goes beyond government-to-government interaction, covering many social aspects, social groups and civil society parameters. Both IBSA and BRICS hold similar concerns on various issues such as food security, social inconclusiveness and energy issues, but India distinguishes the uniqueness of IBSA by viewing it as largely a ‘people’s project’, mainly among democratic societies.

China seems to have taken a serious note of this, and has tried time and again to downgrade IBSA. It has also shown interest in merging BRICS, IBSA and BASIC to have a stronger global say for the emerging countries. Informally, the Chinese see BRICS as a ‘bloc of emerging powers ... while BASIC is a bloc of developing countries’. Organisations like BRICS, BASIC and IBSA were seen as symbolic concepts in the broader Chinese strategic community until recently, but now they attach much more importance to these bodies. BRICS is seen as a new focus in China’s ‘multilateral dialogue’ programme where it aims to carve out a wider global role for itself in an ever-expanding multipolar world order. The rise of BRICS is a certain development that pushes Chinese foreign policy to the next level. With BRICS, China has not only attached its overseas interests but also its relationships with the developing world at various levels and stages. Through BRICS, Beijing has not only tried to check the importance of the US and Europe in global financial bodies and institutions, but has equally employed smart ‘bilateral’ and ‘multilateral’ strategies to cultivate its relationships with developing countries, both neighbouring and remote. Beijing is certainly more serious towards BRICS as the core members of this grouping originally belong to IBSA.

This is quite relevant at a time when the Chinese economy has emerged as the number two in the world. Many see China becoming the next ‘superpower’ and it is likely to emerge as the next power to share the responsibility of global politics with the US. This prompts the argument that the world may become more ‘bipolar’ in order with the rise and prominence of China. At the moment, however, the concern remains with China’s association with the developing world. There is a possibility that China could lead a multipolar world order in combination with developing economies and powers, undermining India’s presence, especially if IBSA were to vanish or were to be relegated to the sidelines in a future global order.

Notes


17. ‘Prime Minister’s Opening Remarks’, no. 15.
