

IBSA: Ambitious exercise in transformational diplomacy

By Manish Chand

THREE COUNTRIES located in three continents. One vision. Thousands of miles separate India, Brazil and South Africa across oceans, but this has not hindered these three emerging major economies of Asia, Africa and Latin

America speaking in one voice on pressing global issues, be it the global financial meltdown, the war against poverty, the UN reforms or climate change.

This convergence of views and positions on pressing global issues of the time is no accident of global diplomacy. It all started in the summer of 2003 in the leafy city of Brasilia when the foreign ministers of the three countries met to evolve a trilateral dialogue forum that will give them a bigger, common voice at international fora. The three countries found that they have enough in common - vibrant democracy, multicultural societies and rapidly expanding economies - to straddle barriers created by geography.

History and culture also favoured the coming together of the three countries located in three continents. The three major economies of the developing world have stood together at various multilateral fora many a time and were instrumental in setting up the G-20 of developing countries in the WTO at Cancun in 2003. That group of 20 has now emerged a voice of the South in critical area of negotiations like agriculture.

What also drove these regional juggernauts to pool their economic and technological strengths was a symmetry in their developmental curve - growing economies with large masses of the poor and deprived in islands of plenty - and synergies in diverse fields that made trilateral cooperation a win-win partnership.

Thus, the three countries, home to one-fifth of the world's humanity and boasting a combined GDP of over \$2.5 trillion, began what a senior diplomat has called "an ambitious exercise in transformational diplomacy". And the IBSA Dialogue Forum, an exemplar of South-South cooperation, was born with a plan to hold an annual summit by rotation in key capitals of the three countries.

The idea of trilateral cooperation was institutionalised when Brazil hosted the first IBSA summit in Brasilia September 13, 2006. The historic summit brought Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and then South African President Thabo Mbeki together to forge multi-faceted links at a trilateral level to address developmental aspirations of the three countries. It was hailed as big success. South Africa hosted the second summit in Johannesburg in October 2007 that saw the signing of seven agreements in a wide range of areas.

The spirit of IBSA, revolving around solidarity and shared worldview, was again on full display at its third summit in New Delhi mid-October this year that underlined the growing weight of the grouping in the emerging world order.

The summit took place against the backdrop of the global financial crisis that emanated from the US and other developed countries and soon spread to developing countries.

"Our voice on how to manage this crisis in a way that does not jeopardize our development priorities needs to be heard in

international councils," said the Indian prime minister. Hailing IBSA as "an effective model of South-South cooperation", the economist-turned-prime minister also vigorously advocated a renewed effort to reform the institutions of international governance, including the United Nations, and the G-8.

In a striking instance of symmetry in views, the Indian prime minister's views were echoed by the presidents of Brazil and South Africa. They minced no words in attacking the wealthier Western countries for the monumental financial mess. In his characteristic straight talk, Brazilian President Lula da Silva said it was unfair that poorer nations had to pay for the irresponsibility of speculators and wealthier nations "who have transformed the world into a gigantic casino". "We did not participate in the casino. Why should we suffer?" the Brazilian president asked.

South African President Kgalema Motlanthe was equally unflinching in his critique, saying that "one-size-fits-all solutions prescribed to us by the developed world" no longer holds. "The pillars of stability, potentially lie in the South," he said.

Moving beyond rhetoric, the three countries asked their finance ministers and governors of central banks to convene a meeting soon to establish a coordination mechanism to address issues relating to the financial crisis.

Building upon the success of the earlier summits in Brasilia and Johannesburg, the third IBSA summit ended with the Delhi Declaration that set an ambitious intra-IBSA trade target of \$25 billion by 2015, symbolising the long distance the trilateral grouping has travelled since the summer of 2003 in Brasilia.

The three countries also signed seven accords in diverse areas, including environment, commerce, maritime projects, tourism, gender equality and human settlements that underscored the expanding canvas of their trilateral cooperation. In yet another significant step that underlined growing IBSA solidarity, Brazil and South Africa supported civil nuclear cooperation within international safeguards and agreed to sell uranium to India.

The concrete action-bound agenda envisaging cooperation across sectors, including agriculture, trade and commerce, energy, science and technology, education and tourism, defied sceptics who were prone to dismiss IBSA as a mere talk shop. Trilateral cooperation in energy sought to reinforce one another



BRAZILIAN PRESIDENT LUIZ INACIO LULA DA SILVA, SOUTH AFRICAN PRESIDENT KGALEMA MOTLANTHE AND INDIAN PRIME MINISTER MANMOHAN SINGH AT THE THIRD IBSA SUMMIT IN NEW DELHI OCTOBER 15.

er's core strengths - India has formidable prowess in wind and solar energy, Brazil's forte is ethanol and bio-diesel and South Africa is a leader in clean coal technologies.

The focus on inclusive development and globalisation pivoting around multi-pronged attack on mass poverty in these countries, underlined the unique nature of an international forum that seeks to harness their collective diplomatic and economic energies for transformation of the lives of poor people who live not just in these countries, but on other parts of the developing world as well. In the spirit of South-South cooperation, the IBSA funding facility for developmental projects with capital contribution of \$1 million from each country aids projects on developing agriculture and livestock in Guinea Bissau and waste collection in Haiti.

The IBSA has also set new benchmarks by proactively involving business, NGOs, women groups and civil society in their overarching goal of creating a model of people-friendly development.

Ahead of the summit, an Editors' Conference and an Academic Forum was held in New Delhi to bridge knowledge gap as the founding fathers of IBSA saw robust people-to-people contacts being central to the success of this ambitious trilateral grouping. Business leaders and women's forum of the three countries also held meetings to brainstorm on how to imbue the IBSA initiative with the character of a popular movement of change. Along with mental connectivity, the three countries are also trying to address the problems of physical connectivity by enhancing air and maritime links.

Despite continental distances separating them, the three countries have proved beyond doubt that it is the geography of mind that holds the key to a new international architecture reflecting popular aspirations in the developing world. "It is very important to perceive that IBSA has no executive secretariat; it has no headquarters," the Brazilian president said at the New Delhi summit Oct 15. Illuminating the essence of the IBSA, the irrepressible Lula da Silva said: "What drives IBSA is motivation and the understanding that three very strong countries from the South are together adding up their forces, are becoming even stronger; and together we can do much more."

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