

THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF IBSA

OLIVER STUENKEL | FEBRUARY 18, 2015

In 2003, India, Brazil, and South Africa united behind a new vision for South-South cooperation and global leadership. Through the June 6, 2003, Brasilia Declaration, the three countries launched the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA). Like many other developing country groups, IBSA advocated a more equitable international economic system and greater influence for its members in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations Security Council.¹

Yet IBSA also had the potential to play a unique role in global governance reform. As regional economic powers, the three member countries were in a good position to promote South-South trade and cooperation and reduce their dependence on Western economies. As diverse and populous democracies, they embodied for developing countries a powerful alternative vision to both mainstream Western neoliberal models and the model of Chinese-style authoritarian development that was gaining attention at the time.

Twelve years later, to what extent has IBSA lived up to these possibilities? The group's founding in itself made a strong statement about the ambitions of emerging powers to seize a greater role in shaping the Western-dominated international order, as well as their willingness to work within that system. In its early years, IBSA also made impressive efforts to bring together policymakers, bureaucrats, and civil society from the three countries with the aim of establishing long-term ties. Yet concrete successes in promoting trade or spurring joint

diplomatic efforts have remained largely elusive, highlighting the many challenges of effective South-South cooperation among formerly distant countries.

A NEW KIND OF CLUB

IBSA has its origins in a meeting among the leaders of India, Brazil, and South Africa at the 2003 G8 summit of leading economies in Evian, France. They had been invited to the summit as observers, yet they felt that their presence was merely symbolic. "What is the use of being invited for dessert at the banquet of the powerful?" Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, then Brazilian president, said later, explaining, "We do not want to participate only to eat the dessert; we want to eat the main course, dessert and then coffee."² It was after the summit that the three leaders decided to create their own organization.

The IBSA forum emerged within the broader context of the rising economic clout of large developing countries and

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver Stuenkel is an assistant professor of international relations at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation in São Paulo. He is also a nonresident fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin and a member of Carnegie's Rising Democracies Network. This article is drawn from Stuenkel's recent book, *India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA): The Rise of the Global South?* (Routledge, 2014).

efforts by these emerging powers to force international institutions to accept a shift of power away from Europe and the United States. As Celso Amorim, Brazil's foreign minister at the time, argued several years after IBSA's founding, it was "time to start reorganizing the world in the direction that the overwhelming majority of mankind expects and needs."³

Despite this rhetoric, IBSA's demands were far less revolutionary than those of older developing country organizations such as the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement. While IBSA countries are at times called revisionist by some academics,⁴ leading policymakers in New Delhi, Brasília, and Pretoria do not see themselves as challenging the existing global order, even if in their mind it is often unjust and hegemonic. The current system continues to provide plentiful benefits for emerging powers, and IBSA is confident of its members' power and capacity to increasingly make international rules and norms rather than follow them. No IBSA member wants to rock the boat—just make it bigger and more balanced.⁵

Moreover, emerging powers still lack the capacity to develop alternative paradigms that could rival those that undergird today's order. The solution, they believe, lies instead in step-by-step reforms.

INTRA-IBSA COOPERATION

How were these ideas and goals translated into practice? IBSA's first major moves were aimed at strengthening relations among its three member countries, whose ties previously had been extremely weak. Each government committed to embed the IBSA process within its ministerial bureaucracies and to select sectors in which it would actively seek to develop cohesive policies. As a result, IBSA established trilateral working groups in sixteen areas such as agriculture, the environment, defense, and energy.

Ministerial-level IBSA gatherings were held every year from 2004 to 2011 in one of the three countries. The meetings were bolstered by five presidential summits during the same period, which strengthened the three countries' commitment to this process. In a sign of how limited previous bilateral

relationships had been, in 2006 Manmohan Singh became the first Indian prime minister in thirty-eight years to travel to Brazil.

In addition to the ministerial-level meetings and presidential summits, IBSA created the so-called Focal Points—groups of selected senior officials responsible for transforming the leaders' joint political vision into actual cooperation on the ground. The Focal Points have met more than twenty times since the group's inception.⁶ Given that the three governments' structures had virtually no knowledge of each other, the Focal Points' main task was to establish and institutionalize channels of communication—an arduous job that has not always produced tangible outcomes.

These activities represented an unprecedented level of dialogue and cooperation among the three countries. Despite these advances, however, IBSA working groups are often ineffective, and they would almost certainly benefit from focusing on a smaller number of issue areas and obtaining stronger political support at the highest level.

Perhaps more significantly, this process has not resulted in substantial progress on one of IBSA's key aims: increasing intra-IBSA trade. Despite countless attempts to facilitate trade, internal protectionist forces make reducing trade barriers toward other IBSA countries as difficult as opening up toward the Global North. More than a decade after IBSA's creation, trade among the three countries remains negligible and there are few signs that this will change anytime soon.

While the general concept of South-South cooperation may find support among high-level bureaucrats in India, Brazil, and South Africa, the three countries' societies are far less likely to view such cooperation as very different from trade relations with Western industrialized countries. That does not mean that they consider trade within the Global South unimportant—but governments have not yet been able to generate the same excitement for the topic among their citizens as is present in their official declarations.

MODEST JOINT EFFORTS

IBSA has faced even greater challenges in its attempts to influence international affairs and shift the global balance of power. Despite at times bold rhetoric in IBSA summit declarations, attempts to act in unison have been sporadic at best. IBSA remains a fringe topic in the three countries' foreign relations communities and has only indirectly affected their foreign policies, largely by increasing the frequency of top-level meetings and beginning to register the importance of the Global South in major foreign policy speeches.

IBSA foreign ministers meet regularly on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly to discuss ways to strengthen cooperation, but joint initiatives have been few and far between and largely fallen short of expectations. In 2011, for example, negotiators from IBSA countries traveled to Damascus in a failed attempt to initiate a dialogue with the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad about a possible ceasefire in the Syrian civil war—arguably a difficult mission. The effort did not lead to any sustained engagement on the Syria issue, and their attempts to mediate in other, less complex conflicts were unsuccessful as well.

The IBSA Fund, which finances development projects around the world, is one of the rare examples of a concrete joint initiative. The fund aims to alleviate poverty and to contribute to the debate around innovative strategies for poverty reduction and South-South cooperation more generally. Some small projects have been implemented in developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. For example, in Burundi, the IBSA Fund supported a project to increase the government's capacity to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS. In Cape Verde, a public health center was reformed and modernized. In Guinea-Bissau, an agricultural project was implemented. However, given the size of the IBSA Fund—each country contributes just \$1 million per year—it has failed to make a substantial impact on global development discussions.

In addition to the modesty of its joint initiatives, IBSA faces a more fundamental problem of legitimacy. While its members hold themselves out as regional democratic leaders with some capacity to speak on behalf of the Global South, their regional

roles are in fact highly contested. Argentina, Pakistan, and Nigeria, among others, oppose the notion that Brazil, India, and South Africa, respectively, can make legitimate regional leadership claims. As Professors Chris Alden and Marco Antonio Vieira rightly note, this introduces “important constraints on IBSA and its prospects to act as an effective diplomatic partnership aimed at influencing international processes.”⁷

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

IBSA's slow progress in strengthening economic and diplomatic ties exposes the difficulties of South-South cooperation, even among ideologically similar actors with important common interests. Still, while most analysts are skeptical of the grouping, it would be wrong to describe IBSA as altogether ineffective.

After all, it has, to some degree, contributed to reorienting each country's foreign policy perspective and strengthened the significance of South-South cooperation. Several members of IBSA governments still believe that working together can strengthen each country's bargaining power in its quest to reform global order, even though knowledge about each other and people-to-people ties remain very limited.

IBSA still has the potential to become an important force in international politics, but it is also in danger of fading into irrelevance. Enthusiasm among policymakers for IBSA weakened markedly in 2012, when only a reduced number of meetings took place. The lull continued in 2013 and 2014, when the IBSA summit was postponed without setting a new date. Public debates about IBSA have become dominated by the question of whether the grouping will survive.

India, Brazil, and South Africa have all elected new leaders since IBSA was created, and it remains to be seen how supportive the new generation will be toward the organization. With both Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and South African President Jacob Zuma more concerned about domestic challenges and less focused on foreign policy than their predecessors, IBSA's fate seems to depend on India's new prime minister, Narendra Modi.

NOTES

- 1 “Brasilia Declaration - Brasilia - 6 June 2003,” accessed February 12, 2015, http://ibsa.nic.in/brasil_declaration.htm.
- 2 Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, “Defending the IBSA Model,” *beyondbrics* (blog), *Financial Times*, April 29, 2013, <http://blogs.ft.com/beyondbrics/2013/04/29/guest-post-defending-the-ibsa-model>. Also see Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, “What Is IBSA Anyway?,” *Americas Quarterly* (Spring 2013), www.americasquarterly.org/content/what-ibsa-anyway.
- 3 Celso Amorim, “Os Brics e a reorganização do mundo,” *Folha de S. Paulo*, June 8, 2008, <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/opiniaofz0806200807.htm>.
- 4 Randall Schweller, “Emerging Powers in an Age of Disorder,” *Global Governance* 17, no. 3 (July–September 2011): 285–97.
- 5 See, for example, Matias Spektor, “A Place at the Top of the Tree,” *FT Magazine*, February 22, 2013, www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/9c7b7a22-7bb9-11e2-95b9-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3QyWuqpxG.
- 6 Not all of the Focal Point meetings led to a final document. See Fundação Alexandre de Gusmão, ed., *III Conferência Nacional de Política Externa e Política Internacional, “O Brasil no mundo que vem aí”*—III CNPEPI—*Seminário IBAS* [Third national conference on foreign policy and international politics, “Brazil in the world that is coming”—III CNPEPI—IBSA seminar] (Brasília: Fundação Alexandre de Gusmão, 2008).
- 7 Marco Antonio Vieira and Chris Alden, “India, Brazil, and South Africa (IBSA): South-South Cooperation and the Paradox of Regional Leadership,” *Global Governance* 17, no. 4 (October–December 2011): 507–528.

The Carnegie Endowment is grateful to the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the Ford Foundation, and the UK Department for International Development for their support of the Rising Democracies Network. The opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author.

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

RISING DEMOCRACIES NETWORK

The Rising Democracies Network is an initiative of the Carnegie Democracy and Rule of Law Program, which rigorously examines the global state of democracy and international efforts to support democracy's advance.

 @CarnegieDROL

© 2015 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

 @CarnegieEndow

 [facebook.com/CarnegieEndowment](https://www.facebook.com/CarnegieEndowment)