

# Seeing India through Brazilian eyes

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INDIA'S rise is certainly one of the most fascinating stories in international politics of the past decades; yet the interpretation of the country's ascendancy differs according to the observer's perspective. Seen as a regional threat by Pakistan and China, the United States has identified India as an important partner in Asia and beyond. At the same time, there is evidence that India is increasingly regarded, in several places, as comparable to China, representing a mix of economic threat and opportunity. In the Middle East, for example, Indian engagement is fundamentally framed by India's growing need to import energy to sustain its rise. Yet how is India seen in Brazil, the geographically most distant BRICS member? How is Brazil studying, viewing and deciding issues related to India?

Despite the many common challenges and a shared BRICS and IBSA identity, India remains remarkably underexplored by Brazilian academics and policy makers, and India-related decisions are often based not on country-specific information, but on vaguely defined images and concepts, the most prominent of which is the South-South partnership promoted by Brazil's former President Lula da Silva. Brazil's diplomatic presence in India

remains far smaller than in countries such as France, Italy or China. This lack of knowledge is surprising given the near consensus about India's long-term economic growth and certain medium-term importance in both the political and economic realms. Brazil's India strategy is strong on grand rhetoric and high-profile encounters, but it is yet to be seen whether Brazil is able and willing to engage India in a more lasting and substantive partnership.

How can we explain this gap? A look into the past can be instructive. The history of India-Brazil relations, though generally benign, is marked by accidental and haphazard encounters. Five centuries ago, the Portuguese seafarer Pedro Alvares Cabral, on his way to India, was blown off course and landed on the Brazilian coast. After some initial excitement about the discovery, the Portuguese came to regard Brazil as much less strategically or economically valuable than India, and the South American discovery remained an emergency pit stop for ships that had run into technical or logistical problems. Still, this was enough to allow for the exchange of plants between India and Brazil early on. Manioc and cashew, both native to Brazil, were introduced in India, and India's coconut and mango entered Brazil.

While introduced much later, most of the cattle in Brazil today are of Indian origin.

Yet for the following centuries ties between the Portuguese and British colony lay largely dormant. Upon gaining independence in 1947, the Indian government allocated land for important allies' embassies along Shanti Path, the most luxurious street in New Delhi's diplomatic neighbourhood, but the Latin American nations were not considered. The region, including Brazil, was simply not on India's diplomatic or economic radar. Very much the same applied to India in Brazil, which was seen as an exotic place too far removed from Brazil's more immediate concerns in its region.

Until well into the 1960s, there was not a single trade agreement between the two, and no more than 20 Indian visas were issued for Brazilians annually, most of them for diplomats. Despite the mutual ignorance, India did figure in the Brazilian universe as an ally in spirit. Particularly for Brazil's leaders with a more developmentalist outlook, India's world view seemed to be largely aligned with its own, and in the 1960s, the recently-founded UNCTAD (UN Conference on Trade and Development) and the G-77 were platforms that allowed both countries to articulate joint positions on several important issues.

For example, both Brazil and India were highly critical of nuclear weapons early on, and both condemned the enactment of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1967, calling it an attempt to 'freeze' the international power structure to contain emergent powers such as Brazil. Both countries supported the idea that rich countries should use the money not spent on arms to help developing countries fight poverty. The '3 Ds' (disarmament, development, decolonization)

represented an important aspect of their foreign policy. Although India embraced its natural claim to global power status earlier, and in a less ambiguous fashion, there seemed to be a common notion that the current, western dominated world order was fundamentally unjust, and that Brazil and India would somehow play an important role in correcting this plight.

However, the decolonization process of Portugal's major enclave in India, Goa, showed that sharing a similar world vision had little impact on Brazil's policy decisions. When Portugal and India broke off diplomatic relations, Brazil came to represent Portuguese interests in New Delhi. Despite mounting pressure from India on Portugal to retreat from the subcontinent, Brazil staunchly supported Portugal's claim to Goa. Brazil changed course only in 1961, when it became increasingly clear that India would wrest control of Goa from an increasingly feeble Portugal, which faced too many internal problems to pose a potent military threat to India. Still, when Indian troops overwhelmed Portuguese resistance, the Brazilian government criticized India sharply for violating international law, and the Brazilian press castigated Nehru for his policy.

While Brazil's decision to support Portugal could be explained by the long tradition of friendship with its former colonial master, it put Brazil on the wrong side of history, as it supported autocratic Portugal against India's fledgling democracy. It also showed that Brazilian diplomats failed to recognize the great importance the reintegration of Goa represented to both Nehru and Indian society. This would not be the last time Brazil misjudged India's position. Brazil was caught by surprise in a similar fashion when the two countries jointly led the developing world during the trade ne-

gotiations in Cancun in 2003, only to be disappointed by India's intransigence relating to its unproductive agricultural sector, and in 2005, when India and the United States signed a nuclear agreement, rewarding India for defying a regime Brazil had reluctantly accepted years earlier.

After the Goa incident, during which Brazil's position caused disappointment among India's foreign policy makers, governments were able to normalize ties in the late 1960s, and in 1968, Indira Gandhi visited Brazil, showing that India was ready to move on towards a closer relationship. Brazil and India also aligned often during trade negotiations in GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade). Despite the apparent alliance in some areas, the geopolitical positions of the two countries during the Cold War were often different. While Brazil was geopolitically tied to the United States, India turned out to be much more aligned with the Soviet Union.

In 1976, a constitutional amendment was passed to make India a socialist republic, which did little to improve relations. Ten years later, India unofficially invited Brazil to turn into a full member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to balance leftist radical countries, but Brazil declined and preferred to remain an observer, as it sought not to alienate the United States. Throughout the decades bilateral ties remained insignificant, and in 1990, less than 100 Brazilians lived in India, allowing for only a very small amount of political or cultural exchange.

The end of the Cold War brought fundamental change to the geopolitical landscape, allowing Brazil and India to make a fresh start. At the time, India was undergoing a paradigm shift as it began to increase its international profile in the economic realm. Brazil's

President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994–2002) interpreted the end of the Cold War in a similar fashion, liberalized the economy and pragmatically decided to diversify Brazil's partnerships. While not abandoning traditional allies in Europe and North America, Cardoso carefully articulated and implemented Brazil's new global strategy, which involved stronger ties with other developing countries such as India.

Cardoso visited India in 1996; President Narayanan paid a return visit in 1998. President Lula (2003–2010) promptly built on his predecessor's preparatory work and sought to institutionalize Brazil-India ties in 2003, when the two countries jointly led the developing world during the trade negotiations in Cancun, and when IBSA, a trilateral outfit with South Africa, was created, underlining further than Brazil understood India's importance in the South-South context, which involved not only China but also Africa, rather than looking at bilateral ties.

Previously, India, Brazil and South Africa had been known as G-3, a group that had jointly decided to break the patent of an HIV/AIDS drug and to provide generic drugs to domestic patients, a policy designed by then Minister of Health, José Serra. Only a little later, Brazil and India joined the G-4 (consisting of India, Brazil, Japan and Germany) which made a formal bid to enter the UN Security Council, a strategy that ultimately failed in 2005 due to African, Chinese and American opposition, but which is set to continue once a new opportunity arises. The growing partnership could not avoid disappointment on the Brazilian side when India's insistence in protecting its unproductive agricultural sector put it squarely against Brazil's position (and that of most other developing countries), showing the clear limits to

the South-South alliance Brazilian diplomats had envisioned. As the joint bid for permanent UNSC membership, this episode showed that while Brazil and India share several larger goals, they are not necessarily willing or able to spend political capital on their partnership.

Ties again suffered after the signing of the US-India nuclear deal of 2005, in which the United States recognized India as a nuclear power. Brazil harshly criticized the deal. Aiding India's nuclear weapons programme, the Brazilian government argued, violated the NPT, which banned such help to any country not recognized as a nuclear power by the treaty. Brazil had signed the treaty and refrained from developing nuclear weapons. India, Brazil claimed, had disregarded the rules and was rewarded for it. Worse, India continued to refuse to sign the NPT (although accepting India to the NPT as a nuclear weapon state would have been unlikely anyway, since this would require the approval of all 189 signatories to the treaty).

Yet Lula, believing in the long-term benefits of the partnership, sought to not let the disturbances permanently damage flourishing Brazil-India relations, and the two countries continued their project to strengthen ties. In 2004, a trade agreement between Mercosur and India was signed, and although it covers less than 1000 products, it did point towards a mutual willingness to strengthen economic ties. Trade between the two grew from (US) \$ 0.4 billion in 1999 to \$2 billion in 2005, and to \$5.6 billion in 2009, approaching \$ 10 billion in 2011.

In 2006, Manmohan Singh was the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Brazil in almost four decades. After IBSA, the G-20 in the WTO and the G-4, the BRIC label provided yet another opportunity to engage. As Jim

O'Neill's invention of the BRIC label turned even more popular, Russia invited the foreign ministers of Brazil, India and China in order to formalize the BRIC summit as a means to strengthen their international weight. In 2009 President Lula, Russia's Prime Minister Medvedev, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and China's President Hu Jintao met for a BRIC summit in Yekaterinburg. A second BRIC summit followed in April 2010 in Brasília.

What is striking about Brazil's notable effort over the past decade to strengthen ties with India is that it has been a top-down project favoured primarily by diplomatic elites after 2003. While President Cardoso was the first President who sought to diversify the country's partnerships, it was President Lula (2003–2010) who declared other emerging countries to be a priority, focusing on concepts such as BRICS and IBSA. Hence, India has rarely been seen as a key partner on its own; rather, it formed a part, together with China and other developing countries, of the 'South-South Alliance', so central to the Workers' Party's world view.

Strongly influenced by developmentalist thinkers and by Cardoso's dependency theory (which the author himself later questioned), the Lula administration's foreign policy was based on two fundamental notions: First, that the current world order was unjust and dominated by rich countries in the North, and second, that 'Southern' countries needed to unite to jointly undo these imbalances. For example, while Brazil officially condemned India's nuclear policy, several analysts and policy makers in Brazil secretly admired India's decision not to join the NPT, an outfit both Brazilians and Indians regard as unjust and in need of democratization. Yet in general, Bra-

zil has over the past decades tended to be less overt in its systemic criticism than India, which in the UN General Assembly voted against the United States more often than Cuba.

Seeing India mostly through the lens of South-South cooperation is not without risk because while these considerations are not entirely absent among Indian foreign policy makers, many other factors – such as regional tensions – influence India's behaviour, often causing Indian policy makers to adopt strategies unaligned with positions taken by Brazil. In addition, the limits to South-South cooperation are much more obvious to India, a country that has been invaded by China in the 1960s and considers a war with China as a real possibility that its military needs to reckon with.

Still, Brazil is careful not to alienate the other BRICS members. While Brazil has significant potential to assume leadership in the debate on climate change (most of its electricity is generated by hydroelectric power plants), its position is much aligned with India and China, whose economies are much more dependent on non-renewable energy. Critics of Brazil's focus on South-South politics argue that Brazil cares more about its BRICS fellow countries than the other way around.

While this may be true in rhetoric, actual policy decisions show no evidence for such a claim. Quite to the contrary, the Brazilian government can be faulted for failing to seriously invest in its alliance with other emerging powers. Too few diplomats are stationed in Beijing and Delhi, too few of them possess regional expertise, and Brazilian companies do not receive the necessary support to establish themselves in the Indian market. The difficulties Brazilian companies face to hire Indian nationals – mostly due to unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles – shows

that there is little conscience of India's long-term importance for Brazil. Furthermore, the Brazilian government is yet to present a serious strategy about how to facilitate contact between the two civil societies. A visa-waiver agreement, such the one signed between Brazil and Russia, would be an important first step.

None of Brazil's inertia and lack of implementing Lula's vision is specific to India. In a similar fashion, Brazil has failed to prepare itself adequately for a new reality in which China has turned into Brazil's foremost trading partner. While the Chinese government eagerly trains Brazil specialists, Brazil has failed to do so, and is thus unable to articulate a China strategy. It will take another decade before India's economic presence in Brazil will be comparable to China's, so Brazil has still time to invest in understanding India and develop ideas about how the Brazil-India partnership can provide lasting mutual benefits.

Large part of Brazil's quest to make up its mind about how to view and understand India can be traced back to a more fundamental difficulty in Brazil's foreign policy making agenda – how to integrate the nature of its political regime into its foreign policy. Should Brazilian democracy serve as a model for those fighting for democracy in autocracies in developing countries? Should Brazil not only engage when existing democracies falter, but also prod autocrats to open up? When is it justified to intervene in defence of higher universal values? Only if such a discussion takes place can Brazil begin to answer the most important question, namely, whether its democratic nature is part of its global identity. If so, how should this manifest itself in its strategy towards democratic India as compared to autocratic China?

The rationale behind the creation

of IBSA provides some insight. While the trilateral alliance's importance should not be overestimated, its continued existence as a separate entity from the BRICS shows that each country's foreign policy making elites detect some common identity amongst the three members of the outfit that does not include Russia and China, both autocratic regimes. China's decision to include South Africa into the BRICs alliance can be seen as an attempt to supplant and replace IBSA with an extended BRICS outfit, yet Brazil, India and South Africa's renewed commitment during the most recent summit in October 2011 augurs that IBSA will continue as a separate entity.

While it would be wrong to say that Brazil considers relations with India to be more promising than those with China, the example of IBSA shows that there are some issue areas for which Brazilian policy makers deem cooperation with India to be more promising. This has certainly to do with both countries' openness and the nature of their political regimes. In addition, Brazil possibly regards the types of challenges India faces as somewhat similar to those Brazil needs to confront – one may think of domestic issues such as high inequality and a lack of social inclusion. On the international front, the question of regional leadership comes to mind. Both Brazil and India seek to change the balance of power of international institutions such as the UN Security Council, while China is more of a status-quo power. In general, from both the Brazilian and Indian point of view, China may be in a different league altogether, and more comparable to the United States. IBSA thus allows for interaction among equals, while the BRICS alliance is clearly dominated by China.