

India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA)

Can a global tripartite alliance work?

Can the three giants of the South form an alliance to challenge the dominance of the North? **Darlene Miller** explores the potential of such an alliance but argues that the forging of global co-operation will be suppressed in favour of bilateral arrangements, which will ensure continued US dominance.

In June 2003, the foreign ministers of Brazil (Celso Amorim), South Africa (Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma), and India (Yashwant Shna) met in Brasilia after informal talks between their respective heads of state at the G-8 meeting in Evian. The basis for these talks were the shared characteristics of these three semi-peripheral powers – strong democracies, three different regions of the developing world and a dynamic engagement with global multilateral initiatives, or as some call it 'insider activism'. The IBSA initiative is motivated in the following way in the declaration: 'In the past few years, the importance and necessity of a process of dialogue amongst developing nations and countries of the South has

emerged.'

Unlike previous Third Worldist initiatives that aimed at an alternative, independent multilateral order for the South (e.g. the New International Economic Order – NIEO), this initiative locates itself within the existing international order with its focus being: 'respecting the rule of International Law, strengthening the United Nations and the Security Council and prioritising the exercise of diplomacy as a means to maintain international peace and security.'

Immediate goals are reforming the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The three partners prioritise the need to counter 'terrorism' and to promote social equity and inclusion through effective policies.

The IBSA initiative is premised on the dominant regional roles that the participating countries play in their respective regions – Latin America, Asia and Africa. The role of this new G-3 in the Cancun negotiations suggested the possibility for a fresh alliance between countries of the South under the leadership of these three developing countries.

Others have characterised the IBSA initiative as an 'emboldened triangle' involving a Southern pact amongst three leading Southern giants that seeks to 'rival the North's dominance' and 'tip the global scale back into balance'. These divergent perspectives on IBSA capture the contrasting possibilities for this South-South alliance.

At the IBSA Trilateral Forum in New Delhi (2–5 March 2004), consultation with other developing countries and the G20+ appears to have been left somewhat open-ended, with a commitment to finding a modus operandi for these consultations. A pragmatic focus on various sectoral engagements (aviation and shipping, tourism, trade and investment, infrastructure, job creation,

science and technology, information society, capacity building, energy, defence, education and local content development) structured the deliberations at this Dialogue Forum. Collaborative efforts around indigenous manufacturing expertise and the need to make available low cost, low priced, safe and effective pharmaceutical products flagged the contentious areas of TRIPS and generic medicine manufacture. Developing synergies in the above-mentioned sectors between the three economies informed these discussions, rather than the social justice issues underlying the North-South divide.

The agreement to launch the IBSA Facility for Alleviation of Poverty and Hunger demonstrates the ongoing awareness amongst the participants of the uneven impact of globalisation. Any notion of a combined challenge to the developed world in general and the domination of the US in particular appeared, however, to be absent. The possibilities generated by the 'G-3 leadership role in the Cancun G20+ skirmish with the Northern giants appear, for now at least, to have been put aside for a tentative, piecemeal plan. This approach is defended as a practicable and measurable effort, rather than the global 'talk-shop' approach. Past radical, Third Worldist programmes are seen as part of the 'talk-shop' approach where many resolutions were taken at global forums but little implementation followed.

However, the 'soft' engagement of the IBSA is out of touch with the conservative trajectory of the US. Rather than moving into a phase of benign hegemony/global rule, the belligerence of the US restricts the possibilities for global cooperation and undermines efforts at 'insider activism' in the global arena. Friendly global relations that allow for cooperation between countries of the South will be suppressed in favour of bilateral arrangements that ensure US dominance. The US's national economic crisis,



evidenced in a ballooning fiscal and trade deficit, impels it in the direction of global bully-boy (or bully-girl when Condoleezza Rice is the key diplomat), with little largesse for potential South-South alliances that can strengthen the hand of less developed nations.

IBSA AND THE DANGERS OF A DECLINING HEGEMONIC POWER

The class politics evoked by IBSA and Third World Alliances exposes more starkly the extent of US domination and unilateralism. While prospects for an 'emboldened triangle' are unlikely, the vision of such a combined 'middle power' (semi-peripheral) challenge is in itself an additional danger to a tottering hegemony. Many observers have charged America with a shift from consensual global leadership to 'Empire' in the post-9/11 phase.

Constructing its democratic transition within the framework of the Washington Consensus required a shift to the new market orthodoxy for the new South African state, and a repudiation of its populist economic strategies. This required a reorientation from redistribution to 'market rationality' and took place at the neo-liberal moment in global history. Democratic South Africa has been born in two historical moments, however: a

neo-liberal swing away from social redistribution in the 1990s and a 'New Imperialist', neo-conservative thrust in the post-9/11 period, at

the precise moment when some commentators anticipated a Polyanian shift back to redistributive policies in the face of globalisation's crisis. The force of international pressure has domesticated South African both foreign economic relations and hopes of different international relationships.

While the phase of neo-liberal consensus in the 1990s still saw the US in the role of the empire 'lite', the post-9/11 phase heralded a shift to official and belligerent proclamations of Empire, signalled most strongly by the US' unilateral stance in the Iraq conflict. Many US policy-makers supported a shift from informal to formal empire. The new millennium ushered in the Pax Americana, despite US President George Bush's protestations to the contrary. Reflecting this shift from Empire 'lite' to overt Empire, US international interventions shifted from multilateralism to selective unilateralism.

Harvey (2003), commenting on the 'New Imperialism', advances three arguments for the US shift:

- The fear of Iraqi power destabilising American influence in the Middle East.
- The need for power accumulation within the borders of the US, where a crisis-

ridden national economy is reflected in a fragmenting civil society. Neo-conservative order has thus replaced the neo-liberal consensus approach.

- The quest for oil. Unlike those who emphasise America's domestic need for cheap fuel, however, Harvey argues that the US wants an oil monopoly to enhance its global control; a monopoly of key oil production will simultaneously hold China back as a rising global power and the largest national consumer of oil. The war on Iraq disrupted the access of French, Russian and Chinese companies, opening up space for US companies to gain access to oil rights.

While the IBSA initiative may be seen as an effort to increase the bargaining power of developing nations, the utilisation of bilateral engagements such as the talks around Free Trade Agreement between SACU (South African Customs Union) and the US suggests a shift towards efficiency, pragmatism and reduced multilateralism by the South African state. Where increased democratic participation of all the SADC partners slows down South Africa's global participation, the pattern is to overstep these regional engagements and participate directly in focused, bilateral trade arrangements.

The domestication of South Africa's foreign policy is evident in a declining emphasis on the ideological aspects of South-South cooperation, and a pragmatic emphasis on the concrete focal points where the three countries may collaborate. The



foreign policy of South Africa entails no single or consistent approach. The ambivalent shifting between a bilateral engagement with the US, on the one hand, and a robust G20+ negotiation stance on the other, demonstrates a pragmatic, multi-pronged approach with the principle aim of enhancing the national economy's investment opportunities. Niche-marketing of value-added products prevails as an overarching concern of the NEPAD secretariat. The Troika initiative is yet another endeavour to ratchet up South Africa's global bargaining power, with its national interest ever present. This national interest may converge with the general interest of its African partners if South Africa's role is one of leadership and not dominance. If the general interest of Africa entails a challenge to the 'New Imperialism', then this is clearly not the stance of the South African state.

Notwithstanding South Africa's broad compliance with the framework of neo-liberalism, its foreign policy periodically shows a propensity to revert to liberation-type as reflected in the following instances: South African diplomats and activists were publicly appreciative of the friendship shown towards the country by Libya's Muammar Qaddafi (he has frequently visited the country and has garnered an enthusiastic following). Another so-called international pariah who has a dedicated following in South Africa is Cuba's Fidel Castro. During his first visit to the country, at the inauguration of former president Nelson Mandela, he was rapaciously received and reference made – again and again – to the role of Cuban forces in the war in Angola. In more recent times, South Africa (and President Thabo Mbeki) displayed support both of Haiti and its now exiled leader, Jean Bertrand Aristide. Mbeki visited the country for its independence celebrations and now Aristide is living in exile in South Africa.

The IBSA initiative is guided by the desire

for cooperation between states that enjoy a similar position in the global order. What is necessary, however, is the recognition that there is a declining World Order. The Washington Consensus and 'New World Order' of the 1990s have been superseded by the potentially destructive self-interest of a flailing global power. The global interventions of the US are based on a self-interest that goes against the general interest of global stability. This closes down space in the multilateral global arena rather than opening it up. In this context, nation-states may opt for greater pragmatism and multiple strategies in their international relations.

The potential for cooperative alliances and interventions is closed down as each nation-state struggles to find room in a narrowing global political environment. Prospects for the reform of the multilateral institutions are diminished when the foreign policy of nation-states is domesticated by an overpowering global hegemonic power. Cooperative alliances are still possible, in this context, but are likely to be given less priority in the face of the pragmatic choices states will make. This is, however, unfortunate, as a flailing global hegemony also represents a time of global political opening, a new beginning of history, rather than an 'end of history'.

A challenge to the 'partnership with the North' is an attempt by the NEPAD to push the boundaries of Africa's structural constraints by improving the continent's export conditions. (These structural constraints, including the terms of (un) fair trade with Africa; the imposition of unsound macroeconomic policies through structural adjustment programmes and unsustainable and unjustifiable debt are contained in a declaration adopted by TWN-Africa/CORDESIA in April 2002 on Africa's Development Challenges). But this comes with a political price: act as the continent's political and economic gatekeeper for our

global dictates or there is no deal or partnership.

CONCLUSION

This article thus questions the assumption of 'insider activism', namely, that there is an expansive moment for multilateral reform. If we are facing a tightening unilateralism by the global hegemonic power, then a phase of destructive capitalism is ahead and alliances like the IBSA need to be contextualised within a context of closing down options rather than opening up spaces. If there are shifting lineages of empire underway, and if regional conglomerations are lining up to realign global politics, then the world is a much more unfriendly place than the 'reform of multilateralism' perspective suggests. Trans-regional alliances then need to countenance the need for a more robust alliance amongst mass-based formations such as trade unions, in alliance with new social movements such as the landless and the anti-privatisation committees, with less expectation of expansive multilateral democracy in the global arena. The robust Third Worldism of the NIEO (New International Economic Order) needs to be reinstated with fresh resolutions but also fresh activist vigour, drawing on the energies and imagination of the youth.

Fusing the rhetoric of the old with the concerns and passions of the new has tremendous portent. At Shoe City in the Eastgate Mall, Johannesburg, beautiful leather shoes come at the reasonable price of R100. They come from none other than Brazil. The zestful colours of Indian silk clothing are a fitting complement to South Africa's multiple cultural colours. Good commodities, good prices, good style – a new tripartite alliance in the making?

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