In his opening address at the 2011 India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) summit held in Pretoria/Tshwane, President Jacob Zuma of South Africa said the essence of the grouping was ‘Back to Basics: When Democracy and Development Work Together for a Better Life’. He argued that the ‘basic building block of the kind of societies the IBSA countries continue to strive for’ are those where ‘democracy and development work together’ because such societies ‘prosper and create a better life for their people’. \(^1\)

By encapsulating the underlying values and purposes of IBSA in this way, President Zuma seemed to set the grouping quite clearly apart from other formations of the South, such as the BRICS, where the IBSA trio share a space with China and Russia, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian great powers respectively. His words emphasised the key opportunities and challenges that the IBSA states face domestically, but which also have resonance across many other developing states. In so doing he seemed to put distance between those who see the Chinese (non-democratic) experiment with development as a model for other developing states and those who believe that development should not happen at the expense of democracy. The answer to these dilemmas was to share domestic experiences with other democratic developing states (a key pillar of South–South cooperation) to learn how to achieve inclusive development and change the skewed global system of governance.

Still young in institutional terms as it celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, IBSA nevertheless faces a challenge from its much younger ‘rival’, BRICS, over the global role it has assumed as the voice of the South. IBSA, which was formed in 2003 in Brasilia, soon became the féted body among established powers who wanted to engage with it. It had emerged from an idea to create a G8 of the South, which reflected the world view and approach, particularly of the South African president, Thabo Mbeki. Coinciding with the blocking (or spoiling) power displayed by the group of 20 agricultural countries (in which all three countries played an important role) at the Cancun ministerial of the World Trade Organisation in 2003, the establishment of IBSA signalled the arrival of a more active Southern power configuration. It might not have had the capacity to change the global rules, but it had the mobilising power to block multilateral agreements which it saw as inimical to its interests. This would not have been possible 10 years earlier.

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new-found sex appeal of BRICS, which has stolen the global limelight incorporating as it does both a former superpower (and a significant natural resources power) as well as an aspiring superpower (Russia and China respectively).

The argument made in this commentary is that if IBSA is to retain its distinct role in the panorama of informal groupings or clubs, it will have to differentiate itself more clearly from BRICS and other Southern configurations. Furthermore, its purpose should have an overt geopolitical and global governance thrust, i.e. provide an alternative construct of the international institutional landscape and multilateralism that is proactive rather than reactive. This global governance thrust must be rooted in the three countries’ underlying domestic values of democracy and social justice.

The commentary will first discuss IBSA’s identity as determined by the formal communiqués of summits or ministerial meetings. It will then examine the issues that IBSA has prioritised in the last decade, and what potential niche it can fill in the future. Finally, it will ask whether IBSA should be expanded. Would the expansion allow it to break away from BRICS as a ‘wholly owned’ subsidiary?

**IBSA’s identity**

In the decade since it was created, IBSA has highlighted the democratic credentials of its members, their solidarity with the South, their focus on giving expression to South–South cooperation, advancing socially inclusive development and the imperative of changing global institutions to reflect the changed global political and economic landscape.

In the founding Brasilia Declaration of 2003, India, Brazil and South Africa defined themselves as ‘vibrant democracies, from three regions of the developing world, active on a global scale, with the aim of examining themes in the international agenda and those of mutual interest’. This was motivated by their belief that dialogue among developing nations and countries was becoming increasingly necessary.

The second summit in 2007 stressed that IBSA provided the three countries with an ‘important instrument for cooperation on regional and international issues and promoting the interests of the developing countries, thus contributing to the strengthening and deepening of South–South cooperation’. The 2010 summit communiqué refers to IBSA’s commitment to democratic values, inclusive social development and multilateralism as constituting the basis of their growing cooperation and close coordination on global issues. It also emphasises that their work is aimed at ‘enhancing the role of developing countries’. The communiqué at the most recent summit in 2011 again defined IBSA as ‘three large pluralistic, multi-cultural and multi-racial societies from three continents’, which were committed to ‘inclusive sustainable development, in pursuit of well-being for their peoples’. The underlying values of the forum were ‘participatory democracy, respect for human rights, and the Rule of Law’. It was at this summit that President Zuma articulated that development and democracy were the guiding principles of IBSA.

The values and principles they espouse apart, they are all regional powers, with two aspiring great powers (India and Brazil). They have a greater coherence of interests on the global agenda given that, unlike China (an aspiring superpower) and Russia (a former superpower with similar ambitions), they do not have permanent seats on the UN Security Council. Equally, while they see themselves as system transformers, they do not challenge the existing system in all respects, as they also benefit from some of
seen to be co-opted into liberal international institutions. Positioning themselves as authentic voices of the Global South, the IBSA states must be understood as deriving some of their philosophical motivations from the ‘ideational legacy of South–South activism’. Yet, as regional and systemically important powers, there is likely to be a continuous ambivalence between this status, which differentiates them from the poorer, less developed countries, and their Southern solidarity personae.

Can they speak for the Global South’s interests? Can they play a constructive regional role through the provision of regional public goods? Can they provide alternative visions of a global order around which consensus between many Northern and Southern countries can be attained?

Notwithstanding their historical association with the Global South, questions can be raised about the legitimacy of this self-proclaimed Southern grouping. After all, it is an informal multilateral arrangement. Legitimacy, in the first instance, emanates from the linkages these states have with their respective regions.

The IBSA states have had varied experiences with their regions. Recognised as the regional hegemons in South America, southern Africa and South Asia, they are nevertheless often begrudged the position by rivals for the mantle. Yet all three states’ power status is recognised externally by non-regional players as being systemically significant. However, in a multipolar world, the assumption of regional responsibility for peace, stability and good governance are the crucial attributes of regional powers. In his book *Does the Elephant Dance?*, David Malone reflects the perspective of some analysts that India’s global outreach in fact represents a ‘flight from the region’. It illustrates the tension between their regional and global foreign policies that was alluded to earlier. In South Africa’s case, however, it has placed Africa clearly at the centre of its various plurilateral engagements (IBSA, BRICS, G20). A perusal of the communiqués reveals that the only continental programme that is mentioned is the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). In many ways all three countries have contributed to regional public goods, but this in itself does not guarantee the support of other Southern states for their regional and global governance aspirations.

These challenges are not unique to IBSA, but reflect the question of legitimacy in many informal groupings.

As democratic states, however, their support for global democracy and accountability has greater resonance than that of states with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian domestic regimes. Legitimacy for IBSA is thus perhaps more critical than for other formations. How may IBSA acquire it, given the lack of input legitimacy (participation)? How can it garner output legitimacy—the acceptance by others of its political decisions or outcomes, or the normative aspect of good governance, of equitable distribution and fairness?

**IBSA’s agenda and future niche**

In Ian Bremmer’s G-Zero world, where no one country plays the global leader, governments must create their own opportunities. Pivot states are able ‘to build profitable relationships with multiple other countries without becoming overly reliant on any one of them’. The three IBSA states, both collectively and individually, can be such pivots, both from a normative as well as a geopolitical perspective.

The IBSA agenda has expanded over the years. It can be broadly defined as covering the following themes.
the reform of the UN Security Council to include more states from the developing world to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, human rights, intellectual property rights and trade. Aspects of this agenda have legitimacy elements, as gains are not limited to the three members but may positively affect other developing countries too.

**Trilateral cooperation.** Encapsulated in the broad range of working groups among the three, this includes science and technology, agriculture, social protection and a mooted trilateral free trade area. This theme most strongly reflects the peer learning encompassed in the principles of South–South cooperation.  

**IBSA development fund.** Managed by the UN Development Programme, the fund is associated with making a contribution to alleviating poverty and hunger in other developing countries. This has the potential of ensuring greater Southern legitimacy for IBSA, as a group of countries that cares for the ‘underdog’. However, the fund currently is small and its overall impact limited.  

**Regional developments.** The summits make a point of referring to regional developments in each of the members’ geographical locations—from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe and Haiti. However, this is more of an expression of solidarity than for action by IBSA.

Legitimacy is an important element in determining the value of a particular formation. IBSA’s value addition and bases for legitimacy are democracy, solidarity, empathy with the poor and social justice as the outcome of development. However, IBSA is not the only such informal arrangement having to deal with questions of legitimacy. The first decade of the 21st century has been defined by the fragmentation of multilateralism and the mushrooming of informal club diplomacy. ‘Informal formats have become a structural element of global governance outside established multilateralism.’ Nevertheless, the efficacy of informal clubs is measured as much by their perceived legitimacy as by their contribution to the advancement of public goods and their impact on addressing global politico-security, economic and development challenges. If IBSA becomes a sub-category of BRICS in these domains, it will be lost in the cacophony of club acronyms. A new world architecture in which systemically important democratic states play a soft-balancing or more direct norm-creation role may have a more benign outcome for developing states, although it is not necessarily a certainty. Brazil’s contribution to the debate on the responsibility to protect after the NATO intervention in Libya that tried to reaffirm the original principles of the doctrine, terming it ‘responsibility while protecting’, is one such example. In the case of South Africa, the principles that it has advocated and which are now entrenched in the various founding documents of the African Union (good governance and democracy, even though much still has to be achieved) also fulfil this requirement, as do its inputs on the nuclear non-proliferation regimes.

As individual states, IBSA countries are engaging in norm creation or setting agendas. However, it is likely that this can be further optimised via the forum. The area of development cooperation is potentially one aspect where IBSA may test principles that are different from those of the North. Marco Vieira (2012) argues that in the case
where ‘the reorganisation of international governance structures [occurs] in a way that they would promote a more equitable distribution of wealth and political participation of the developing world.’ Although small at present, the IBSA fund’s underlying concept is based on the principle of South–South solidarity. All three states are also emerging ‘donors’ or development cooperation partners. Thus, an increased role for IBSA in development cooperation—both in the discourse around the post-Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) development landscape and in the provision of alternative instruments and assumptions for achieving development—can be a powerful niche that it can carve out. In doing so, it needs to consider how to position itself once a BRICS development bank is established, although its presence does not mean that IBSA’s development cooperation becomes emasculated.

In the geopolitical terrain, IBSA does not straddle the Eurasian land mass—a particular characteristic of the RICs in BRICS—but IBSA countries play a different maritime pivot role. All three countries occupy significant geostrategic locations in the south Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The oceans have become terrains of contestation, more so now than in the last decade of the 20th century. Threatening the sea lanes of communication, pirates in both the eastern Atlantic and Indian Oceans have become an international problem that has brought many external navies to the Indian Ocean in particular. Both these factors pose threats to IBSA states and the international community. Moreover, the oceans are arenas for non-security challenges too, especially in the over-exploitation of natural resources, including fisheries. They are also recognised as critical components of a sustainable planet. As marine environments are increasingly being considered as global public goods, and the need for more effective ocean governance becomes clearer, bodies such as IBSA (and the various other groupings they are members of, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation) should take up this issue as a priority at the regional and global level. Indeed, President Zuma underscored maritime cooperation as an area of future cooperation at the 2011 IBSA summit, highlighting the need to combat piracy and to facilitate non-security functional maritime cooperation.

Expanding IBSA?

Before South Africa was invited to join BRICS, many of the concerns about the declining unique role for IBSA were less overt. Once South Africa joined and IBSA came to be perceived as a subset of BRICS, some identity searching was inevitable, especially because of the greater media and ‘chattering classes’ hype around BRICS. In the South African context, much of the focus over the last three years has been on the global and regional benefits of BRICS. However, it does not have to be a case of ‘either/or’. While it is important to recognise the value of BRICS as a diplomatic grouping that provides a counterpoise to the G-7, it is also necessary to appreciate that global governance reforms preferred by IBSA may be better promoted in that forum, rather than in BRICS, given the different interests of Russia and China. IBSA may play a more effective role as a facilitator of global cooperation to achieve consensus on such reforms.

As I have argued in this commentary, there are many ways for IBSA to differentiate itself and advance an agenda on which the three members can generate more cohesion. There are a number of options available to it for doing so. First, it can focus on developing a stronger caucus within BRICS on priorities identified within IBSA. Second, it can
issues in both forums. Third, it can expand its membership, based on its underpinning values, and thus escape the characterisation of being ‘assimilated’ into BRICS. The hazard of the last step is that it may dilute its identity, without necessarily gaining greater legitimacy, unless it seeks to tackle the issues outlined above.

The preference should be for a combination of the first and second approaches, but they will require a clear delineation of priorities based on IBSA’s strengths and comparative advantages to avoid being ‘BRICked’ up over the next decade.

**Notes**


7. For an elaboration of the IBSA states as balancers, spoilers and as being co-opted, see M.D. Stephen, ‘Rising Powers and International Institutions: The Foreign Policy Orientations of India, Brazil and South Africa’, *Global Society*, 26(3), 2012, pp. 289–309.


16. B. Rinke and U. Schneckener, no. 10, p. 27.


19. President Zuma, opening remarks, no. 1.