Why it is important for Brazil-India partnership to gain new impetus

Published: June 3, 2019

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Long-lost brothers, Brazil and India begin to converge in their interests as they slowly identify complementarities and share perceptions about the evolving international order. The two countries, however, have not yet developed clear strategies towards each other and stereotypes continue to reinforce the existing lack of knowledge between both societies. As Brazil and India elect their new leaders, they are presented with an opportunity to review the mechanisms that can take bilateral relations to a new high.

Dismal until the early 2000’s, Brazil-India relations gained new impetus as reflected in the increase of high-level visits and trade flows between the two countries. This process culminated in 2006 with the signing of the Brazil-India strategic partnership and the placement of trade, agriculture, and science and technology at the core of bilateral relations. The strategic partnership also pointed the need to start a dialogue on regional and international issues like energy security and international terrorism, as well
as to undertake closer coordination in international fora like the World Trade Organization and the United Nations Security Council.

A decade later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Michel Temer agreed to scale-up Brazil-India strategic partnership during a bilateral meeting in Goa. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs had set out on its agenda to improve New Delhi’s ties with countries across the globe. Latin America offered an alternative source for India’s demand for raw material as well as new markets for value-added exports of Indian goods and services. Aside the economic argument, it was also in India’s interest to reduce its dependency on West Asia for its energy security. On the Brazilian side, increasing economic and trade ties with foreign countries and blocs could provide the country with wider commercial openness and attract foreign investments.

The resulting joint statement acknowledged that the decade-long strategic partnership had “opened a new phase” for Brazil-India relations. The document covered issues like trade, agriculture, science and technology and elaborated upon the institutional mechanisms for its implementation. The two countries agreed to deepen bilateral relations and leverage existing complementarities in areas like the production of pulses in Brazil, investment in the poultry sector in India, research and development of second generation biofuels, and the joint development of chemical and biological products to make the treatment of tuberculosis, cancer and HIV/AIDS more affordable and accessible. Brazil and India further reaffirmed their commitment to “increase the participation of developing countries in the decision-making bodies of multilateral institutions.”

Brazil-India strategic partnership has deepened with both countries cooperating within BRICS, IBSA, G4, G20, BASIC and the wider multilateral context of the United Nations. Yet, bilateral dialogue and cooperation still need to gain more density and autonomy. At a time when the world is witnessing the rise of China, its steadily growing presence and influence across Latin America and the Caribbean should be enough of an incentive to drive India to bolster its ties with countries in the region and Brazil in particular. Yet, Brazil and India have the opportunity to build an autonomous agenda based on areas in which the two countries have made strides and could learn from each other.

Realizing this potential will require people-to people initiatives to complement traditional diplomatic channels. Historical migration flows between Brazil and India have owed economic, scientific and cultural innovation as well as the emergence of several enterprises. As it has been in the past, human capital mobility will be fundamental for the future of bilateral relations. Brazil-India cooperation therefore could involve greater engagement and dialogue with scholars, scientists and business people through the creation of networks connecting universities, non-governmental organizations and companies amongst themselves and with governments. These networks could assist policy makers to identify new opportunities for collaboration, by bringing fresh views and new perspectives. They could also contribute to confirm or redefine priority areas as well as advance projects of mutual interest. Such initiative could be launched during PM Modi visit to Brazil for the occasion of the 11th BRICS Summit in November 2019 and followed by structured dialogues in the two countries.
If Brazil-India partnership gained new impetus with the signing of the strategic partnership, the realization of its full potential remains a challenge. Reimagining Brazil-India relations beyond cabinets is therefore necessary to advance a thriving partnership in the years to come.

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