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The New Diplomacy of the South: South Africa, Brazil, India and trilateralism

CHRIS ALDEN & MARCO ANTONIO VIEIRA

ABSTRACT In the aftermath of 9/11 surely of great significance is the reassertion of the South–North divide as a defining axis of the international system. In this context the emergence of a coterie of Southern countries actively challenging the position and assumptions of the leading states of the North is an especially significant event. The activism on the part of three middle-income developing countries in particular—South Africa, Brazil and India—has resulted in the creation of a ‘trilateralist’ diplomatic partnership, itself a reflection of broader transformations across the developing world in the wake of globalisation. This article will examine the rise of the co-operative strategy known as ‘trilateralism’ by regional leaders within the South. Specifically it will look at the relationship between emerging regional powers in the context of multilateralism, as well as at the formulation and implementation of trilateralism. As with previous co-operative efforts in the developing world, the prospects of success are rooted in overlapping domestic, regional and international influences on South African, Brazilian and Indian foreign policies. The article will conclude with an assessment of these influences over the trilateral agenda.

Friendship exists between those of like habits and temperament.

(*Panchatantra*, Book I, Verse 285)

The failure of the negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial in Cancun in September 2003 could well have marked a turning point in the emergence of a new post-Cold War paradigm. Indeed, while much has been made of the realist ‘world restored’ (or its converse) in the aftermath of 9/11, surely of greater significance is the reassertion of the South–North divide as a defining axis of the international system. In this context, the emergence of a coterie of Southern countries actively challenging the position and assumptions of the leading states of the North is an especially significant event. What has been missing from most of the international accounts of the

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Cancun meeting and its repercussions is a recognition that the positions adopted there were part of a broader strategy formulated and implemented by key states within the South. This activism on the part of three middle-income developing countries in particular—South Africa, Brazil and India—has resulted in the creation of a ‘trilateralist’ diplomatic partnership, itself a reflection of broader transformations across the developing world in the wake of globalisation.

The establishment of this new diplomatic partnership of the South raises a number of questions about the states involved, the nature of their co-operation and its relationship to the international system as a whole. Specifically:

- What are the motivations and dynamics of ‘trilateralist’ co-operation among these middle-income developing states?
- What role does ideology play in this process?
- Given the uneven record of co-operation across the South and the growing economic diversity between developing countries, how sustainable is the ‘trilateralism’ initiative?

This article will examine the rise and promulgation of the co-operative strategy known as ‘trilateralism’ by regional leaders within the South. It will examine the role of middle powers and the South; the domestic, regional and international factors which have traditionally conditioned the foreign policies of Brazil, South Africa and India; and the formulation and implementation of ‘trilateralism’ as an initiative framed within the context of the new regionalism. Finally, it will conclude with an analysis of the initiative’s prospects for success in the contemporary environment.

Middle powers, regional hegemony and multilateralism

The established discourse on middle powers is fixed within a relational dynamic that is essentially derived from a materialist account of states and power set within the framework of the international system as a whole.¹ From this perspective middle powers are understood to be committed multilateralists as a means of overcoming their material deficiencies in terms of structural power. While the debates over material criteria can somewhat obscure the category (indeed, this is one of the shortcomings of a reading based on spatially defined hierarchies of power), an approach which focuses on *conduct* provides a more telling definition and account.² According to Cooper *et al*, middle powers’ behaviour can be better characterised as that of a ‘catalyst’ to promote global issues, a ‘facilitator’ to build coalitions, and a ‘manager’ acting within their region to promote and/or enforce norms and institutional rules.³ While middle powers are said to ‘pursue multilateral solutions to international problems ... embrace compromise positions in international disputes and ... embrace notions of “good international citizenship” to guide their diplomacy’ they nonetheless pursue ‘niche diplomacy’ because they are unable to marshal the requisite resources to conduct foreign policy within the context of a grand global strategy.⁴

However, as with most accounts written from the proverbial ‘centre’, the periphery is represented and interpreted in terms and through imagery that both reflect and reify the interests of the core. Support for multilateralism as an alternative to classic great power politics is a misreading of the nature of functional support provided by middle powers in their promotion of international institutions and international law. What is important about middle powers is that they are situated ideologically and materially within the dominant hegemonic paradigm but are limited (by both power and disposition) in their capacity to act. As Cooper *et al* point out, they engage in ‘followership’ and ‘leadership’ behaviour in response to relative changes in the status of the hegemonic power, the USA, but crucially do not challenge the underlying structures of the international system.⁵ Indeed, they actively promote the idea that, as middle powers, they are ‘bridge builders’ between constituent elements within the international system, be they the two ideological blocs during the Cold War or the North and South in the heyday of the New International Economic Order (NIEO).

Middle powers—at least the ‘classic’ ones that academics have theorised about such as Canada, Australia, Scandinavia and the Netherlands⁶—have used their status to attain key positions within the decision-making hierarchies of important international institutions such as the IMF’s Board of Governors and influential bureaucratic appointments within the UN. They justify their positions within these institutions not on the basis of economic or military importance on the global stage but through their activism in the name of international norms and/or their position as an intermediary for those states (developing countries in fact) excluded from the ranks of power. But, in a substantive way, they are wedded to the ideological paradigm of neoliberalism that infuses the outlook and programming of these institutions and, through the systemic bias inherent in selection (the IMF quota system springs to mind), owe their very position within the institutional hierarchy to a tacit acceptance of structural inequalities in the international system. So one could rightly say under this account that Canadian foreign policy is less a commitment to a rules-based international system than essentially US foreign policy with a human face.

While multilateralism may work as a middle power strategy for states already situated within the formal (IMF and World Bank) and informal (G-7/8) institutional framework of global governance, it is much more problematic for states outside that framework.⁷ For those developing countries such as Brazil, India and China, whose economic and military position already exceeds the material situation of the middle powers mentioned above, multilateralism is both an obstacle and an opportunity. It is an *obstacle* in the sense that the established middle powers, not to mention some sectors within larger powers like the USA or the European Union, are deeply ambivalent about the challenge these countries pose to their own status within the international system of governance. The resistance to change is rooted in a recognition that the underlying normative calls for restructuring international institutions to reflect greater global representivity is ultimately a materialist account of power that threatens their own position and may even undermine the

principles that they as middle powers have been espousing. More complicating is the fact that the procedural rules which guide international institutions are designed in a such a way as to delineate difference and, supported by informal networks, restrict access through the very exercising of these procedures. It is an *opportunity* in the sense that multilateralism provides key ideological tools, in the form of the twinning of two core (and contradictory) principles—the sovereign equality of states and the allocation of key positions within international institutions on the basis of resources and capability—which are necessary to furthering the interests of these states. Invoking these principles has proved invaluable in constructing an argument for inclusion within the international hierarchy of leading states from among the developing countries.

While ‘classic’ middle powers opt for multilateralism as a cornerstone of their foreign policy on the basis of principle and pragmatism, for emerging states in the developing world there are compelling circumstances that militate against making such a choice. Countries like Brazil, India, China and South Africa all share singularly complex relations with their respective regions, grounded in their preponderant economic and military position relative to other states. Confounding this situation further is a history of aggression or economic activism by these powers that has sought to undermine if not absorb the territories of the region on the basis of a unifying national myth of ‘manifest destiny’. The onset of open regionalism has provided new opportunities for regional hegemonies to solidify their hold on their ‘near abroad’ through the pursuit of regional trading arrangements such as Mercosur, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) that institutionalise their economic dominance through the promulgation of rules and agreements. This consolidation of their leading economic position over the region in institutionalised form provides a springboard for global action as local actors are drawn into explicitly subordinate relationships with their larger neighbours and increasingly co-ordinate positions in extra-regional settings. As Neack asserts, their special status as regionally based middle powers means that these states ‘are the only middle powers that act independently of the great powers’.⁸

Middle power conduct in the dual contexts of the international stage and its regional setting needs to be recognised and understood to provide an account of the foreign policy approaches of developing countries. Hegemonic stability theory maintains that the existence of a dominant state or hegemon was a prerequisite for states to co-operate but it does not explicitly address the regional context. Furthermore, as theorists on hegemony such as Robert Cox have emphasised, the economic and military pre-eminence of a given state within a region are an insufficient source of coercive power to ensure localised acceptance of hegemony.⁹ Rather, to be effective hegemony requires consent among the weaker states, or at least among their elites, built around the acceptance and internalisation of the universalising ideology as expressed by the leading power; it is usually echoed or reified through the construction of collectively based institutions. Here, the international community plays an

important role in fostering recognition of this regional dominance among the otherwise recalcitrant neighbouring states. By conferring the status of regional leader upon emerging states in the developing world, actively encouraged in multilateral settings such as the WTO or the G-7/8 where Brazil, India and South Africa have all been selectively invited to participate with leading industrial states as representatives of their respective regions, the industrial states effectively shepherd weaker states into a subordinate hierarchical framework.

The South and the crisis of global governance

The crisis of legitimacy facing international institutions underlies much of the conduct of developed and developing states in the aftermath of the Cold War. While the Northern countries have tended to emphasise issues of UN credibility in the light of significant operational failings, cost-effectiveness and other policy dilemmas, the Southern critique has been rooted in a deeper structural analysis.

For the established powers situated within these institutions the question of legitimacy is seen through issues of activism and state-invested interests.¹⁰ President George Bush senior sought to re-legitimise the UN, primarily for the American domestic audience, through activism and coalition-building strategies at the Security Council. His son, George W Bush, demonstrated the limits of US commitment to international institutions in the aftermath of 9/11 and the concomitant embrace of the new strategy of pre-emption. For other industrialised Northern states with key positions in the decision-making hierarchy, engagement with international institutions mirrors the middle power theory as discussed above. In contradistinction, for developing countries the crisis is fixed less in activism and interests *per se* and more in terms of structural concerns. Participation in the UN was, for many newly independent states of Asia and Africa, a triumph of faith over experience.¹¹ Indeed, Sukarno's initial ambition for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was to create an alternative world order to that of the Western-dominated UN.¹²

This impulse for reform of international institutions did not, however, disappear, but became a renewed source of contention in the waning days of the Cold War.¹³ The South Commission, authorised by the NAM and funded primarily by the Malaysian government, launched a study in 1988 in which it called for reform of the Security Council and the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWI) to better reflect the concerns of the developing world.¹⁴ The Commission for Global Governance, whose report was issued in 1995, set out the general case for significant reform of international institutions to take into account the changing dynamics of the international system, as did a number of UN commissions.¹⁵ The focus of structural reform remains the UN Security Council, with its permanent membership and veto privileges, and the BWI. The weighted voting system of the IMF and World Bank, based upon what is in effect a politically negotiated interpretation of relative economic standing dating back to the second world war, is particularly contentious for developing countries, given BWI influence over many of their

economies. Disquiet among the established industrialised states, while rarely aired in public, coupled with disputes between potential candidates, has effectively paralysed the reform process.

This route out of the logjam has, ironically, been paved by the world's only superpower. According to Josef Joffe, the USA's post-cold war grand strategy was to devise and secure a 'hub and spoke' relationship with key states and regions in the world, one in which the 'association with the hub was more important to them than their ties to one another'.¹⁶ The US Commerce Department's identification of 10 key emerging markets in the developing world—which included Brazil, India and South Africa—provided the economic rationale for recognition of the superior economic standing of many Southern economies over that of some of the traditional industrialised OECD countries of the North.¹⁷ The impulse in the Clinton years to draw strategic partners like Russia and China into key institutions such as, respectively, the G-7/8 and the WTO demonstrated US self-confidence in its position as *primus inter pares* in multilateral settings.¹⁸ In the post-9/11 setting the US National Strategy Paper provided the geostrategic rationale supportive of the importance of the status of these countries that accompanies the earlier economic assessment and rather pointedly accords no apparent role for Europe in the USA's assessment of the international environment.¹⁹ Thus Washington's activism in pursuing its economic and security interests has set the stage for the recognition of a new source of legitimacy for international institutions, one which is based upon the criterion of emerging regional powers.

Trilateralism's strategic partners

The three states involved in the trilateral initiative have somewhat different, though complementary, rationales for embarking upon this endeavour based upon their history, economic standing, domestic politics and regional ambitions. These provide both the materialist and ideological foundation for their claim to special status within the context of the developing world and (as will be seen) impose limits on the fulfilment of the broader objectives of trilateralism.

South Africa

South Africa's historically dominant economic position on the African continent, which was actively resisted by neighbouring states during the apartheid years, gave way to democratic rule in 1994, ushering into power the African National Congress (ANC). Although originally democratic socialist in orientation, the ANC shifted its economic policy upon taking office to embrace a neoliberal approach that emphasised opening markets, robust trade and a preference for foreign investment as a source of capital accumulation. The impulse towards multilateralism in foreign policy, reinforced by negative responses to Pretoria's unilateralism among African states, mirrored aspects of classic middle power strategy as the new government sought to leverage its

material deficiencies through recourse to international organisations. Where it differed from established middle powers was that Pretoria sought to position itself, first and foremost, within the institutional and ideational framework of Southern international organisations such as NAM, the Organisation for African Unity (AU) and UNCTAD.²⁰

Under Thabo Mbeki the South African government grew increasingly confident in the promotion of its position as a 'natural' leader of the African continent.²¹ From this process flowed the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), an initiative that sought to engage industrialised countries in a programme of trade and development assistance to foster development within African countries.²² This has involved diplomacy at two levels, first within Africa to secure support for NEPAD and, second, with the G-7/8 states through bilateral and multilateral contacts as a recognised interlocutor for African interests.²³

Economic and trade policy produced by an outward looking Department of Trade and Industry, which culminated in the launching of the 'butterfly strategy', was a deliberate attempt to promote trade links with Brazil and India (the wings) and concurrently with continental Africa (the body).²⁴ This coincided with the establishment of bi-national commissions with both countries, which meet annually to discuss issues at the ministerial level, including trade, defence and general co-operation. Mbeki himself declared his ambition to create a 'G-7 of the South' and by 2001 this had been integrated into Department of Trade and Industry policy:

In relation to possible future rounds of the wto, our policy will be to seek to bring developing countries around a common agenda—the so-called G-South. It is evident that only a co-ordinated response from the South will be able to secure sufficient concessions from the powerful industrialized countries.²⁵

Domestic politics in the post-apartheid period continues to reflect the socioeconomic divisions of the recent past and to frame, if not intrude upon, the country's foreign policy. For instance, the growing presence of white-owned MNCs operating in the rest of Africa has drawn criticism and even fears of South African 'neo-colonialism'.²⁶ Contributing to this perception is the enduring presence of white South Africans in middle management positions within key government departments, in part a reflection of the historic compromise negotiated in the early 1990s, but also a lingering residue of the reconciliation policy pursued by the ANC.²⁷ Outside the business community and the new black elite, the country's foreign policy seems out of touch with many key domestic constituencies and constrained by an absence of resources. With an estimated five million black South Africans living in poverty and over 30% unemployment, the pursuit of neoliberalism at home and abroad has come in for considerable criticism as detrimental to the former's basic interests.²⁸ With respect to the Mbeki government's attempts to restructure the continent's economies and state system along neoliberal lines, as manifested in NEPAD and the AU, the hard truth of limited administrative and financial capacity has begun to make its impact.

South Africa's economic ascendancy over SADC, where it produces 70% of regional GDP, sits uneasily with its poor record of management of regional security issues. The split within SADC over military intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 1998, and the inability of South Africa's 'quiet diplomacy' to have any discernible effect on the conduct of an increasingly despotic Robert Mugabe in neighbouring Zimbabwe, point to additional limits on Pretoria. These patent failures in imposing its vision of security on the region are attributable to the absence of 'common values', or more particularly the unwillingness of African government elites to embrace in full what are seen to be alien ideas and institutional arrangements.²⁹ The attractive pull of South Africa is evident across many parts of the continent, driven by the expansion of South African companies in highly visible sectors such as cellular telephones, hotels, television and, above all, commercial retail.³⁰ Nevertheless, many African states and NGOs remain uncommitted, resistant to or even ignorant of South Africa's emblematic foreign policy agenda, the NEPAD programme.³¹ The result is a paradox, with South Africa's inability to exercise effective influence over its region, despite the employment of military, economic and 'soft power', all of which calls into question its ability to carry on in this classic middle power role.³²

Brazil

Brazil's position of dominance in South America, a product of its geography, population and economic status, as well as of its military capacity, has shaped its sense of distinctiveness from the rest of the region.³³ With the consolidation of its national borders and the neutralising of the secessionist movements completed by the early 20th century, the Brazilian government developed what has been called the 'two axes of diplomacy'.³⁴ The first axis represents the symmetric relations with relatively 'equal' states in South America; these states are themselves under similar pressures from the asymmetric axis, which is represented by the leading industrial (or 'core') states in the international system. With respect to the asymmetric axis, Brazil has utilised two approaches to overcome its relative weakness within the international system. The first approach has been to actively seek a form of partnership with the hemispheric leader, the USA; the second approach has been to utilise multilateralism as a means of enhancing its status as a global player of significance.

Within South America the maintenance of friendly and constructive relations with its neighbours in the region conformed to a significant strand of principled idealism within Brazilian diplomacy. Building on the successful negotiation of territorial issues with its own neighbours, Brazil has mediated between Peru and Ecuador with the aim of resolving their century-old border dispute.³⁵ Economically the advent of open regionalism, which flowed from changes to the international political economy of trade and the reconciliation between newly democratising governments in Brasilia and Buenos Aires in the late 1980s, resulted in the formation of a Southern Cone Common Market (Mercosur). While trade initially surged within the region, the

dominance of the Brazilian economy over the region was underscored by the unilateral decision to devalue its currency in 1999, a move that (concurrent with the East Asian financial crisis) precipitated a meltdown in the Argentine economy and demonstrated that even the newly founded benevolent relationship could have a negative impact upon its neighbours.³⁶

To manage the challenges posed by the 'asymmetric axis', Brazil has sought to pursue an unwritten alliance with the USA coupled with active multilateralism.³⁷ The former has been manifested through Getulio Vargas's alignment during the second world war, followed by the military junta's active support of US anti-communism during the Cold War and, in its aftermath, Collor de Mello's belief that the USA was the key source of domestic and international legitimacy for Brazil; he used this to support the deep structural liberalisation of the economy. Notwithstanding this 'unwritten alliance', Brazil has skilfully employed international law to counter-balance the power politics of core states, all the while actively seeking to be accepted into this special group. An illustration of the long-standing Brazilian aspiration of being recognised as an important international player was its attempt to become a permanent member of the League of Nations, the precursor to the UN.

During the 1960s a revised foreign policy paradigm took hold, launching a nationalist critique of the Brazilian 'Americanist' perspective that actively sought to identify the country as an important member of the Third World. This new interpretative framework had its roots in the 'independent foreign policy' implemented under the leadership of Janio Quadros and Joao Goulart. It represented a point of divergence from the traditionally aligned Brazilian position towards the North American international agenda and sought to link an endogenous process of economic development with a proactive and independent foreign policy.³⁸

The election of Luis Inacio 'Lula' da Silva to the presidency in 2003 heralded a change in tone and substance in Brazilian foreign policy. A concerted effort was made to court Southern states, with numerous high-profile visits to Africa, Southeast Asia and China. Coupled with this was the raising of rhetorical concern for the poor, echoing Lula's trade unionist background and his seminal role in the founding of the Partido dos Trabalhadores, as well as his close association with the global civil society movement's annual World Social Forum in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre.³⁹ His speech at the opening of the UN General Assembly in September 2004 was noted for its passionate depiction of the plight of the poor and global inequities in the new millennium. Concurrently, the unprecedented deployment of Brazilian troops in wartorn Haiti in 2004 was a clear sign that the government was willing to play a stabilising role in hemispheric conflicts.

To understand Lula's foreign policy and its focus on trilateralism, it is important to bear in mind that one of Brazilian diplomacy's particularities is what is called 'paradigmatic resilience'.⁴⁰ Foreign policy paradigms that were defined and first implemented in the past are still influencing the mind-set and world-view of Brazilian decision makers. In this sense Lula's present

investment in co-operative arrangements between middle-power states from distinctive regional contexts is part of a revised foreign policy strategy that has its conceptual foundation in both of the aforementioned diplomatic paradigms. What is indeed new with respect to trilateralism is that it envisages formalised co-operation between regional hegemonies who pool together their material and principled assets to achieve clear national interests in multilateral fora of negotiation.⁴¹

Domestic support for trilateralism remains limited, however. Right-wing parties, liberal segments within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, academics and representatives of business and agricultural sectors have all criticised the government's attempt to create deeper ties with the South. From their perspective the negotiating power of developing countries was shown to be limited in the past and they do not believe that Brazil's interests will be better achieved through deeper economic and political links with these states. For example, important sectors in Brazil's diversified economy believe that a conflictive stance towards the USA in discussing the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) has the potential to cause great damage to their business abroad. After the most recent failure in the trade negotiations between Mercosur and the EU, Brazilian businessmen attacked Itamaraty's (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) prioritisation of the South–South agenda, with the international relations manager of São Paulo's Federation of Industry stating categorically: 'we need less ideology and more strategy'.⁴² Some exporters have even threatened to move their companies to countries that will adhere to the FTAA or have already obtained wider access to US and EU markets, such as Mexico and Chile. Along the same lines, Brazil's representative on agriculture told the American Chamber of Commerce in São Paulo:

Trade policy should be aligned with countries in which generating trade is possible. It is good to intensify trade with India and China, but they do not replace the US and EU markets.⁴³

With roughly 1% of the world's total trade, Brazil is still very dependent on the markets of the developed world. This suggests that any project that challenges these established economic priorities will continue to come under intense scrutiny. Moreover, growing dissent among Lula's domestic allies, including the trade unions, over issues as diverse as pensions and persistent socioeconomic inequities will act to constrain further liberalisation at home as well as limit initiatives abroad.

India

India, like South Africa and Brazil, dominates the South Asia region in which it is found by virtue of its continental size and population, economic standing and military might.⁴⁴ India's founding leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, articulated foreign policy goals—the improvement of the international economic and political order, independence in foreign relations, equal treatment among

states, independence of colonies and many others—which placed a premium on the building of peace and co-operation in the world.⁴⁵ However, within South Asia itself India's position has been systematically challenged by Pakistan, the latter having broken away from the Raj to form a separate Muslim state. The seminal role played by India in fostering the break-up of Pakistan and consequent founding of Bangladesh, as well as its forcible incorporation of smaller territories into its formal and informal orbit, have all contributed to deep suspicion of New Delhi's intentions. This regional animosity has created a localised version of the Cold War in the sense that rivalry has informed decision makers' interpretations about other regional issues and affected the actions of smaller states.⁴⁶ The Indian prominence in South Asia was balanced by Pakistan's military alliance with the USA and China, which was instrumental in triggering a reorientation of India's foreign policy in the direction of the USSR. Therefore, India's post-independence foreign policy under the Congress Party was driven by two sometimes contrary strands: first, power and national interest and, second, the idea that an activist role ('non-alignment') in international affairs would secure not only the interests of India but also of humanity at large. However, with the outbreak of the Indo-Chinese War in 1962 and subsequent clashes with Pakistan, the emphasis has moved away from Southern solidarity to a more pronounced expression of nationalism.

India's complex sociopolitical heterogeneity and its uneven economic development have acted as a constraint on the 'developing and consolidating a national identity appropriate for a major power'.⁴⁷ Despite the strong hand of the Indian central government in foreign policy, Bradnock notes that 'it is impossible to understand the origins of India's permanently strained relationships with Pakistan, for example, or its difficulties in the late 1980s over Sri Lanka, without reference to the domestic interests of which foreign policy was a projection'.⁴⁸ The abiding sectarian tensions between the majority (80%) Hindu and the minority (13%) Muslim populations, as well as other ethnic, separatist and social strains, made governance by the Congress Party a balancing act that ultimately diminished its ability to achieve effective action.⁴⁹ More recently the ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) into government in 1998 raised further questions as to the influence of Hindu nationalism over foreign policy. For example, the initial reconciliatory gestures by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee towards Pakistan were followed by bellicose rhetoric and the testing of weapons and formal declaration of India as a nuclear power. At the same time the problematic of this strain of political Hinduism and its relationship to social stratification, caste and non-Hindu minorities poses its own threat to unity, as demonstrated by the unrest fomented in the state of Gujarat.⁵⁰ India's commitment to an open market economy is more limited than that of Brazil or South Africa. The creation of the SAARC in 1983 represented a step towards reconciliation with the region as well as an opportunity to shift the balance of trade, which was oriented outwards, towards local sources.⁵¹ However, enduring interests primarily within the smaller countries have resulted in few trade concessions, rendering SAARC little more than an annual diplomatic

gathering.⁵² More importantly, since 1991 and led by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, India has begun to liberalise its economy in a belated effort to achieve the growth and investment seen in China, as well as to stave off bankruptcy.⁵³ The BJP government initially pursued a form of economic nationalism, *swadeshi*, which stalled in the prevailing climate of the Asian crisis. Thereafter it embraced privatisation and independent management of formerly excluded areas of the domestic economy, such as electrical power, and gave more latitude to state governments to encourage foreign direct investment (FDI).⁵⁴ Signalling the extent of the change, the Home Minister declared:

The BJP believes in *swadeshi*, which in essence means that India has to develop on its own. It certainly does not mean xenophobia or belief that everything foreign is bad.⁵⁵

Finally, more so than the other trilateral states, India has been directly affected by the post-9/11 environment. In particular, the NATO invasion and occupation of Afghanistan instigated a closer relationship with Washington as well as further propelling the BJP away from its autarkic impulses. The recent installation of Manmohan Singh, associated with the reforms of 1991 under Congress, as prime minister in 2004 suggests that the basic consensus towards cautious reformism will be retained. This is in keeping with general perceptions of Indian foreign policy, which—despite deep-rooted interests and fierce political debate—retains a strong degree of consensus.⁵⁶ The difficult task for the new government continues to be to distinguish itself from the BJP to the Indian electorate as well as to hold its fragile coalition of anti-liberalisation parties together, all the while pursuing essentially the same policies as the previous government.

The formalization of the trilateral partnership

The Declaration of Brasilia, which created the India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), was signed in June 2003 by the Foreign Ministers of Brazil, South Africa and India following conversations held by the three heads of state during the G-8 meeting in Evian in June 2003. Mbeki, Da Silva and Vajpayee officially presented IBSA to the international community at the 58th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2003.

Basically, the purpose of this forum is to share views on relevant regional and international issues of mutual interest as well as promote cooperation in the areas of defense, multilateral diplomacy, international trade, technology, social development, environmental issues and so forth. The Presidents and their Foreign Ministers have also given high importance to IBSA's role in enhancing South-South cooperation. The institutional format of the partnership is a Trilateral Commission, formed by the three Foreign Ministers and their respective staffs. In their first meeting in Brasilia, they decided to further promote information exchange and dialogue through a series of meetings

with top officials from the three countries in accordance with the areas of co-operation set up in the Brasilia Declaration.

The first meeting of the Trilateral Commission was held in March 2004 in New Delhi. On this occasion, the Ministers discussed the progress achieved so far on the trilateral partnership. They also talked about issues related to multilateralism and the proposed reforms of the UN, peace and security, terrorism, globalization, and sustainable and social development. In a joint statement, they emphasized that 'IBSA aspires to make a significant contribution to the framework of South-South cooperation and be a positive factor to advance human development by promoting potential synergies among the members'.⁵⁷ The second meeting of the Trilateral Commission, held in March 2005, issued the Cape Town Ministerial Communiqué, the Ministers reiterated their common views on the aforesaid issues and proposed a series of joint initiatives to be undertaken in the future. In this respect, it is worth mentioning their commitment to work together within UN towards the conclusion of the Millennium Review Summit in September 2005, as well as enhancing South-South co-operation at the second South Summit. They also committed themselves to seeking practical ways in which IBSA could support the implementation of the NEPAD and in the intensification of IBSA's political articulation within the G-20 framework in the lead-up for the WTO Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong.

The seminal role of foreign ministries in instigating and shaping this process should not be underestimated.⁵⁸ By embedding the initiative within their respective foreign ministries, the three leaders have sought to rapidly institutionalized a process that might otherwise fall victim to the vagaries of changing political fortunes or individual interest. Particularly important is the Indian bureaucracy which, partly by dint of its longstanding institutional orientation towards the twinning of non-alignment policies and nationalism, has been able to carry the project forward despite the change in government in New Delhi. The substantive nature of this endeavor is taking shape in the form of ministerial level consultations in defense and trade. With respect to the latter, the three countries co-operated at the WTO meeting in Cancun and are in the process of formalizing trade agreements between their respective regions. They have jointly issued declarative statements supporting reform of the UN Security Council and, while initially stopping short of putting themselves forward, have effectively legitimized their own claims to any regional allocation of new permanent seats. Trilateralist overtures to Russia and China speak more a strategic recognition of the need for their support as members of the P5 than winning their participation as such. Most interestingly, the position of each as a recognized economic leader with the framework of SACU, SAARC and Mercosur has been crucial to establishing the impetus to embark on region-to-region trade agreements. Each state has committed funds towards poverty alleviation within their respective countries, to be administered by the UNDP (though clearly their collective donation of US\$250,000 will have no impact).

A Trilateral Business Council has been created to facilitate contacts and promote commerce across the three regions, underscoring their commitment

to and the competitive capacity of their own multinationals: indeed, the Brazilian president's state visits to South Africa and India have been accompanied by a large contingent of Brazilian business interests. Concurrently, a Peoples Dialogue between South African and Brazilian civil society was launched in Johannesburg in August 2004 with the support of Northern foundations and future meetings in New Delhi are envisaged. Links between advocates of agrarian reform in the two countries are particularly strong.

Finally, perhaps what is most significant about IBSA is that it is openly acknowledged by the three leaders to be a stepping stone towards broader co-operation among developing countries. They share a diagnosis of the failing health of established institutions of global governance, something recognised by the institutions themselves, and see in the application of regional representivity a means of re-legitimising these institutions, as well as of positioning themselves therein in a leadership role. Indeed, with Kofi Annan's formal announcement of the need for rapid UN Security Council reform, all three countries have formally announced their intentions to seek a regional seat on the Security Council (although Pretoria later demurred, a position designed to win support from other African states over its rival African claimants).⁵⁹ Militarily, India is a declared nuclear power, South Africa has abandoned its programme and Brazil seems to be in the process of reconsidering its closure of the nuclear option. They are among the leading democracies in the world and make up a sixth of the world's population. At the same time the trilateralist states are committed market economies which represent a combined GDP of \$1.1 trillion. And they have consciously seen themselves as upholding the mantle of developing country interests through the pursuit of this collaborative initiative. Here, Mbeki's vision of creating a 'G-7 of the South' is instructive as an indication of an analysis of the international system that is both informed by a structuralist critique and that employs the language of material power to realise its ambitions. So too, Brazil's 'Globalist Paradigm' frames its analysis within structuralism but embraces the instruments and institutions that constitute the 'woof' and 'weft' of the international system. Only India, despite its historical association with non-alignment, and imbued increasingly with Hindu nationalism, may present a more solidly statist approach to pursuing collective action.

Conclusion: towards an 'axis of the South'?

Robert Cox, writing in 1981 what appeared to be an obituary for the radicalism which informed the NIEO, pessimistically declared:

A third and more remotely possible outcome would be the development of a counter hegemony based on a Third World coalition against core country dominance and aiming toward the autonomous development of peripheral countries and the termination of core-periphery relationship. A counter hegemony would consist of a coherent view of an alternative world order,

backed by a concentration of power sufficient to maintain a challenge to core countries ... *The prospects of counter hegemony lie very largely in the future developments of state structures in the Third World.*⁶⁰

The trilateralist initiative, coupled with the emergence of the G-20+ at Cancun and with the prospects for further collaboration between developing countries, has raised the spectacle of at least some part of this scenario coming to fruition. As shown above, the notion of autonomous development has been replaced by market-orientation among the leading countries of the South, although a facet of that agenda in the form of the promotion of South–South co-operation persists. Significantly, Cox places the emphasis on the state as leader in the process of developing a counter-hegemonic project. As such, his approach seems to rule out the emergent relationship between non-state actors and multilateralism in shaping the international system through the promotion of new international norms.⁶¹

The role of Washington in conferring legitimacy upon the IBSA states as emerging regional powers remains a crucial aspect of the trilateral initiative. Beyond giving them economic recognition as key emerging economies, the USA has publicly recognised all three states as leaders in regional security management and supported the trend towards a ‘hub and spoke’ model of subsidiarity.⁶² This can be seen in the public praise for South Africa’s role as Bush’s ‘point man’ on Zimbabwe, for Brazil’s leadership in the peacekeeping mission in Haiti and for India’s co-operation in the ‘war on terror’. Balancing the importance of international recognition is the problematic of regional relations for the IBSA states and, concurrently, the weak domestic support for the initiative. On the former, regional leadership needs to be acknowledged and co-operation institutionalised to be sustainable. For all three states regional economic co-operation is being constrained by persistent neo-mercantilist tendencies and—in the realm of security—by an abiding suspicion of hegemonic intentions among the states of their respective regions. Concurrently, the domestic basis of support for trilateralism remains in all three states divided, with the ideological impulses of the leftist populism which approves of Southern solidarity at war with the determination to resist further liberalisation of their economies.

More generally, trilateral co-operation still operates within the shadow of the failure of the NIEO. Although usually characterised as a ‘norm transformative’ effort thanks primarily to its rhetoric, the G-77’s attempt to influence the structure of the international system is better understood as a collection of ‘norm governed’ strategies which have sought to work within the existing framework of multilateralism.⁶³ Behind the NIEO’s confrontational stance were emerging differences between the interests of countries of the South that were at odds with the well established Southern commitment to consensus decision making and sovereign equality.⁶⁴ As Rothstein has said in analysing the failure of the NIEO:

A new approach to regime creation by the Group of 77 would have required greater understanding by the Group’s leadership of the context of decision and

greater willingness to actually exercise leadership—that is, to lead the group rather than merely express its aspirations. One key necessity was to understand correctly the power that the Group had and did not have ... It needed a strategy of persuasion, which would have meant far more concern for the technical quality of proposals so that they were convincing to both sides, and a strategy to deal with the problems of keeping its own coalition unified.⁶⁵

The absence to date of any clear strategy on the part of trilateralist partners that goes much beyond the notion of being regional claimants to a seat at the table of recognised power in international institutions is telling. While the impulse for structural change remains a feature of the rhetoric of all three governments, there is little demonstrable commitment to representing regional interests collectively in a multilateral negotiating forum that might show a genuine concern for, say, the impact of open markets on low paid textile workers or tenant farmers (whether within the IBSA states or in countries of the region). Moreover, an eclectic group of developing countries with huge asymmetries between them, as is the case with G-20+, presents significant organisational problems in finding an effective way to create a common voice and perspective on global issues. Given the resistance on the part of the North and the cacophony of voices in the South, the challenges for this state-based coalition is as much to articulate a concrete agenda that truly represents an enlightened approach to promoting Southern interests as it is to avoid the pitfalls that contributed to the collapse of the NIEO.

Ultimately, any long-term prospects for the trilateral initiative hinge more on the economic underpinnings of the relationship than on ideological ones. In this area there are considerable obstacles irrespective of the impulse of the political leadership of the day in Brasilia, New Delhi and Pretoria. For example, studies carried out by a South African think-tank on the potential impact of free trade agreements with Brazil and India found that the benefits to the South African economy would be 'relatively modest' when compared with other regional opportunities. It singled out the difficulties in negotiating reductions in tariffs to protected industries in India.⁶⁶ The failure of the Indian Ocean Rim initiative to take root, which enjoyed support from sectors in policy making, business and academic circles in New Delhi and Pretoria during the mid-1990s, is instructive.⁶⁷ As noted above, the Brazilian business community has already expressed strong reservations about any serious shift in economic priorities away from its traditional markets. In the absence of the kind of directive investment promoted by governments' use of parastatals and politically connected businesses, as has long been the case with Malaysian FDI in other parts of the South, it is difficult to envisage how this partnership will be enhanced. Whether 'South-South' co-operation, so long the mantra of developing countries and, more recently, of anti-globalisation activists, is sufficient to turn the economic 'ship of state' towards a more sustained alliance in the Coxian model remains to be seen.

Notes

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- 3 A Cooper, R Higgott & K Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993, pp 24–25.
- 4 *Ibid*, p 19.
- 5 *Ibid*, pp 20–21.
- 6 In addition to *ibid*, see C Pratt (ed), *Internationalism Under Strain: The North–South Policies of Canada, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989.
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- 12 R Biel, *The New Imperialism: Crisis and Contradictions in North/South Relations*, London: Zed, 2000, p 121.
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- 17 See J Garten, *The Big Ten: The Ten Emerging Markets and How they will Change our Lives*, New York: Basic Books, 1997.
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- 19 US Government, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, Washington, DC, 2002, at www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html.
- 20 See I Taylor, *Stuck in Middle GEAR: South Africa's Post-Apartheid Foreign Relations*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001.
- 21 South Africa's claim of regional leadership is based upon its economic, military and population supremacy over its neighbours in southern Africa. Economically South Africa's GDP of US\$113 billion is much larger than that of all the other southern African countries combined. On the military side the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) has 55 750 active military personnel, and 70 000 reservists, while countries such as Zimbabwe and Botswana have 29 000 and 9000, respectively. IMF website; UNDP reports; and International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- 22 A de Waal, ‘What's new in the New Partnership for Africa's Development?’, *International Affairs*, 78(3), 2002, pp 463–475.
- 23 The fact that Nigeria participated in this process as well, striking a different note on the contentious issue of Zimbabwe, for example, highlights the continuing inability of South Africa to exercise hegemonic influence over the continent, despite claims by some analysts of a ‘Pretoria–Abuja Axis’. A Adebajo & C Landsberg, ‘Obasanjo, Mbeki as thick as thieves’, *Mail and Guardian*, 13–19 February 2004.
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- 30 Daniel *et al*, 'The South Africans have arrived'.
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- 35 For example, the disputes over the region of Palmas with Argentina in 1895, and the Acre Issue with Bolivia in 1903.
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- 43 *Ibid.*
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- 52 Hardgrave & Kochanek, *India*, pp 431–432.
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- 55 Cited in Nayar, *Globalisation and Nationalism*, p 251. See also Brandock, *India's Foreign Policy since 1971*, p 23.
- 56 Hardgrave & Kochanek, *India*, pp 413–414.
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