

India-Brazil ‘Strategic Partnership’: Rhetoric and Reality

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The recent visit of the Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro, as the chief guest at India’s celebration of its Republic Day in January 2020 has given a new impetus to India-Brazil relations. While a ‘strategic partnership’ had been formalised in 2006 (during the visit of the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Brazil), in the course of this visit, an Action Plan was formalized to further strengthen that partnership.

This paper defines what ‘strategic partnership’ means for India, tracing its usage in Indian foreign policy. While assessing briefly the importance of the partnership for Brazil’s foreign policy goals, an attempt is made to discuss whether the India-Brazil strategic engagement is an effort at political image building or whether it is more a move towards a concrete economic relationship? The paper analyses and evaluates the significance of Brazil as a ‘strategic partner’ for India.

Concept of Strategic Partnership

It has often been a complaint of scholars that Indian foreign policy has been plagued by the absence of a grand strategy, and where there is no real long-term strategic thinking.¹ It has also been said that it has been characterised by a desire for India to emerge as an internationally recognised major league player, prompted by a search for ‘status and symbolism’.² Guided by its historic policy of nonalignment, defined by its quest for strategic autonomy in decision making, and following the maxim of ‘cautious prudence’ is what seems to define policy making in the Indian context. It also entails a distaste for entering into iron clad alliances and agreements. India’s international interests are pursued in a manner that is shaped less by a strongly enunciated

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central 'idea', and more by situationally defined imperatives, as and when they may acquire importance. It is argued that 'strategic partnership' used as a foreign policy tool allows it to do just that, which probably explains the wide range of India's strategic partners which range from the USA to Rwanda - where India did not even have a functional embassy at the time of entering into the partnership.

So, what does strategic partnership mean for India?

With the end of the Cold War and the subsequent dispersion of the bipolar alignment, there has been a proliferation of agreements to forge 'strategic partnerships' in the international arena. Various and widely used, the concept 'remains ill defined.'³ There is a certain aura of common sense about the usage of the term, but it has little to no definitional clarity, so much so that it has been called 'the new joker of international politics.'⁴

Nevertheless, attempts to define strategic partnerships point out that they are bilateral in their membership, geared towards the promotion of cooperation between members in several important arenas, and their composition is such that members share common values as well as are similarly positioned in their worldview. For example, Jonathan Holslag offers the following definition:

Strategic partnerships are characterized by five main features, which include 'identified common interests and expectations'; are 'formulated for the long term'; are 'multidimensional and operationalised in the economic, political and military areas of interest'; have a 'global range'; and are relationships in which incentives should be of such a nature that they cannot be achieved without partnership and serve to distinguish it from other relationships.⁵

Giovanni Grevi has also stressed that the mere nomenclature of a partnership as 'strategic' does not automatically make it into one: '... partnerships do not become strategic by virtue of defining them as such', and that both parties must view the strategic partnership as 'essential' to the achievement of basic goals. Strategic partnerships therefore, are 'important bilateral means to pursue core goals.'⁶

However, when these definitions are viewed in context of their diverse usage in the international system in the 21st century, there are contradictions in several important and identifiable strategic partnerships. It is a term that is used to define relationships as disparate as the EU-India strategic partnership and a simpler trade-based relationship like the Argentina-China strategic partnership. It is this diffusion of the usage of the term that underlines the limitations of available definitions to explain both the widespread popularity

and employment of the term 'strategic partnership' as well as what constitutes a partnership so defined. Luis Fernando de Moraes Blanco argues that, instead of attempting to fix definitional criteria, it is more useful to view each strategic partnership as having a 'variable meaning', differing with each bilateral relationship where it is employed.⁷ Further, he also argues that the mere decision undertaken by a state to utilise the nomenclature of 'strategic partnership' offers a normative intent that distinguishes, and that such a marked differentiation ranks and marks the partner as special. Therefore, 'strategic partnership' is not merely a descriptive concept, but is also a political one, employed by political actors to act upon their counterparts. It is a context specific term where its usage significantly alters its meaning.

Despite the definitional ambiguity, the term and its usage as a foreign policy tool has gained traction in the last few decades. Firstly, with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent diffusion of ideologically organised politics, the change in the foreign policy orientation of newly liberalised and 'emerging economies' like India, as well as the impressive economically growing countries like China, there was a need for a foreign policy tool which, unlike earlier alliance-based cooperation agreements, did not require complete consonance in value structures between the partners to become functional. 'Strategic partnership' emerged as a concept, which enunciated a language that 'moves the focus from a discussion on 'values' to a discussion on 'common goals'... This 'pragmatic move' is a discursive tool to enable cooperation while avoiding a discussion on axiological incompatibilities which could undermine cooperation between the parties.'⁸

Secondly, though 'strategic partnership' can be situated in the gamut of cooperation terminology already available – like 'special relationship', 'essential relationship' and so on – the usage of this particular term allows for an instantiation of hierarchisation, where by the very act of being so prioritised, the degree of the bilateral relationship assumes significance. This is precisely why Blanco terms 'strategic partnership' as a performative 'speech act' where value is imbued not only by the content of the agreement signed, but by the marked preference expressed, allowing states to manoeuvre the rigors of international politics. The way this strategic partner label is assigned to specific partners and the different relationships that are constituted by means of this 'speech act' show that the use of this term transcends the limits of bilateral interaction and become part of a broader foreign policy discourse with systemic implications.⁹ Hence, a strategic partnership allows for unlikely, disparate states to overcome the value gap that may curtail cooperation possibilities. It also allows for the setting of a

diverse, context specific agenda to bolster their own normative outlook as well as for the functionality of maximum economic cooperation in a highly globalised world. It is therefore 'a bilateral instrument to achieve not only bilateral but also systemic goals.'¹⁰

There seems to be a consensus among scholars that the biggest transformation in the orientation of Indian foreign policy has been its acknowledgement of the necessity of interdependence in a globalised world; it is propelled by the immediate necessity of economic success but ultimately directed by its search for 'status' in the international system. Motivated by the dynamics of power transition and system transformation, Indian foreign policy has attempted to reflect its interests at the international level in its bilateral engagement as well - especially as is the case with its strategic partnerships with the countries of Latin America.

India boasts a wide gamut of strategic partners, ranging from major powers, such as the USA, Russia, China, Germany, France, Japan, to the wide dispersion of the same with countries like Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico and Rwanda - all located in diverse regions of the world. It may be surmised, then, that Indian policy makers have found the concept of a 'strategic partnership' useful, and are comfortable in employing the same in policy formation.

The Indian stand on comprehensive alliances - for example, something like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation - has always been diffident. As Pratap Bhanu Mehta explains, its approach to alliances has been 'pragmatic and motivated by a concern for maintaining its own foreign policy autonomy.'¹¹ Further, the choice of partners is defined less by concerns of balancing and more by 'contingent circumstances.' The proliferation of strategic partnerships in India, therefore, is best understood in the context of this cautionary outlook where the ambiguity of strategic partnerships allows their utilisation by India as 'declarative instruments of policy... an effort to underline its commitment to build a longer-term relationship... by deepening ties and promoting convergence in external policies on issues of mutual interest.'¹² The aforementioned 'value gap' between members is also rendered easily traversable by the 'non-alliance' character of strategic partnerships, where historical or present ideological inimicalities are not allowed to become a problem in the matter of economic, political, and strategic cooperation.

Thus, a strategic partnership is a 'politically convenient' concept for a country defined and shaped by its long history of nonalignment. Indian strategic engagements are 'compatible with the philosophy of engaging with countries

with a variety of political and economic profiles, without any desire to get caught in rivalries or threaten peace and stability.¹³ It is, as Ankit Panda puts it, a type of 'beneficial ambiguity' for India.¹⁴

Brazilian Aspirations and Expectations from the Strategic Partnership

Brazilian foreign policy has been marked by its aspiration to 'achieve international recognition in accordance with the belief that it should assume its natural role as a big country in world affairs.'¹⁵ Marked by its own exceptionalism¹⁶ within its region, Brazilian foreign policy has been uniquely attuned to finding an intermediary middle power role of importance for itself by emerging as a mediator in the realm of inter-state affairs. Coupled with this has been its search for autonomy and development, especially via the conduit of economic security.

Though its commitment to participation in multilateral fora as well as emerging as an arbitrator of international norms is historic, it is the quest for *grandeza*¹⁷ that has been wholly embraced by its leaders post the democratic transition which ended the isolationist stance adopted under a military dictatorship. The India-Brazil strategic partnership formalised in 2006 represents the perfect vehicle for the achievement of Brazilian goals of autonomous development and international leadership in the garb of an economically beneficial and ideologically coterminous partnership.

The strategic partnership between the two countries came to fruition in an environment of unprecedented proximity that was favoured by a mix of international and domestic developments.¹⁸ The booming IT and pharmaceutical trade between the two countries, the sustained growth in Indian GDP that compelled the world to take notice, the sustained cooperation in multilateral fora, the formation of IBSA and G4, and the coordinated participation in G20+, all combined to render the partnership as extremely amicable to both sides.

The 2006 document laid down a tripartite level of engagement as part of the newly defined strategic partnership - the three levels being bilateral, regional, and international.¹⁹ At the bilateral level, a commitment was made to 'intensify' links in trade, agriculture, and science and technology. Along with this enunciation, the two countries signed various MoUs, ranging from those in science and technology, plant health protection as well as the conduction of 'culture weeks' in both states. In terms of regional coordination, both states agreed to start a 'strategic dialogue' on 'regional and international issues' having wide coverage, ranging from energy security to international terrorism.

Finally, various international institutions and the need to reform them was underlined, including reform in the UN Security Council and the IMF. A commitment was made by both to bolster closer coordination in international forums. The released statement underlined the mutual desire to impart a strong impetus to the growing bilateral ties with a view to realising the full potential of the relationship between the two countries.

The next important document in terms of defining goals and the evaluation of the status of the strategic partnership between the two countries was the 2016 Joint Statement by President Temer and Prime Minister Modi, released at the eighth BRICS Summit in Goa. This statement was directed towards a 'reinforcement' of their strategic partnership, with a commitment by both leaders to 'scale up' their engagement.

Much like the decade old 2006 statement, cooperation between the two countries was again defined at the bilateral, plurilateral, and international (or multilateral) levels. This statement, however, delved into the discussion of institutional mechanisms containing the list of a fairly large number of commissions, committees, and panels for dialogue, and hammered out convergences to cover a host of issues from trade to agriculture, science and technology, to animal husbandry.

At the bilateral level, a commitment was made towards building 'a forward-looking' relationship by 'deepening' engagement, and 'better leveraging' existing complementarities. Energy, food and agriculture, defence, space, cyber security, and infrastructure development were some of the identified issues for cooperation.²⁰ More specifications were introduced in defining the areas of cooperation, like the production of pulses in Brazil; Brazilian investment in the poultry sector in India; R&D in 'second generation biofuels'; and the joint development of 'five chemical' and 'five biological' products so as to make medical treatment 'affordable' and 'universally accessible' for tuberculosis, among other areas of cooperation. Three new MoUs were signed for cooperation; these were in the fields of genetic resources; Zebu cattle genomics and assisted reproductive technologies; and pharmaceutical production regulations.

At the plurilateral level, the coordination of India and Brazil at forums like BRICS, IBSA, BASIC, G-20, and G-4 was highlighted. Further, their mutual commitment to the Paris Climate Agreement was reflected in the discussion of the International Solar Alliance and Biofuel Platform.

During the recent visit of President Bolsonaro to India, an action plan was signed with Prime Minister Modi in order to revitalise the strategic

partnership. For Brazil, apart from the 'multilateral nexus' along which its relationship with India operates, the partnership allows for the possibility of carving out for itself an important bargaining position in negotiations with its largest trading partner, China. It also hopes that access to India might allow for increased access to emerging markets in South and Southeast Asia as well as bolstering international solidarity in an international scenario where it has largely abandoned its regional policies within Latin America.²¹

Thus, the India-Brazil strategic partnership is a complex, multi-layered, and dynamic phenomenon. It is guided by the individual pursuit of each country for greater autonomy in its foreign policy decision-making as well as transforming the international agenda to include its national interests. It is also emboldened by their shared economic pursuits, with Brazil finding in India a source for pharmaceutical and technological skill exchange, and Brazil representing the answer to India's quest to become secure in its needs for energy and food.

India-Brazil Strategic Partnership: Rhetoric & Reality

The Foundation for National Security Research (FNSR) group published a report in 2011 offering a comparative assessment of India's strategic partnerships with six different countries.²² It emphasised that, as a concept, a 'strategic partnership' entails ambiguity and a great degree of specification case to case, 'some partnerships are more comprehensive than others, depending on the number of areas in which the two sides can fruitfully and actively engage to mutual benefit and the scope and depth of their relations.'²³ The partnerships were evaluated along three parameters that were individually defined: political and diplomatic cooperation, economic cooperation, and defence cooperation. Brazil was not among the countries surveyed because, as is the case in most literature on Indian foreign policy, it was not considered 'strategic' enough.

This section has utilised the variables as defined by the FNSR group to conduct an analysis of the India-Brazil strategic partnership. As has been discussed in the definitional section of this research essay, a strategic partnership, however, is a diffuse category where the very act of defining a partner as 'strategic' belies normative, structural, and systemic significance. This section adds to the parameters identified in the FNSR report where those mentioned are found lacking in explanatory potential in the case of the India-Brazil relationship. An important corollary must be mentioned here. While the FNSR has conducted a quantitative analysis of this calibration, in this

case, the analysis is qualitative as the research is subjectively and eclectically constructed, without access to similar data sets utilised by the research group. Further, this essay is concerned with situating the India-Brazil partnership in the hierarchy of India's strategic partners.

Political and Diplomatic Cooperation

The FNSR report identifies concomitancy in political stands between partners as an important measure of the usefulness of strategic partnerships. In the context of India, they have identified three different issue areas where a partner could lend support to increase its own importance in the hierarchy of India's strategic partners. These three issues are: firstly, support given to Indian policy in the matters of the issues of Pakistan and Kashmir, or its fight against terrorism in general; secondly, support for India's Nuclear Policy; and lastly, support extended to India's bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

In terms of political support on the matter of Pakistan, Brazil has an operational embassy in Islamabad, and there have been discontinuities between what India would have liked the Brazilian position to be and what it has been. This has been evident in the 2009 sale of MAR-1 anti-radiation missiles by Brazil to Pakistan, which went through despite Indian opposition to the said deal.²⁴ The Brazilian government justified its stand, and enunciated the necessity of separating the state of Pakistan from the terrorist factions that may be functional within it. The two countries have also cooperated with each other on matters of food security, especially with the launch of the initiative 'Zero Hunger Action Plan' by the Pakistani government, which was inspired by the 'Brazilian Zero Hunger Programme.' Under the recent leadership, Bolsonaro and Modi have met thrice in the last three months; and, of the two visits he has made to Asia, one has been his recent attendance as the honorary guest at the Republic Day celebrations of India.

As far as the matter of Kashmir is concerned, Brazil has safely employed the option offered by the tool of a 'strategic partnership' not to interfere in the domestic concerns of its partner. There has been some criticism on the silence that Brazil has maintained on the issue of Kashmir, and the human rights violations that have occurred during the conflict there.²⁵ The Brazilian External Affairs minister, Maura Vieira, had argued in 2015 that while Brazil as a nation supports non-intervention in domestic affairs, if asked to play peacemaker in the India-Pakistan conflict, it would be willing to employ the lessons it has learnt in conflict resolution in South America in this case as

well. Neutrality seems to be the name of the game. While India has faced some international criticism over the abrogation of Article 370, the Brazilian leadership has not spoken out against the Modi government. In fact, the hardliner attitude adopted by President Bolsonaro on national security further anoints him as an ally of the Indian government.

Both India and Brazil have presented a united front against terrorism, and have strongly advocated a 'determined' policy without 'distinction' for counter-terrorism. Both countries have advocated a counter-terrorism policy at the UN, and Brazil has extended its support to India in its fight against terrorism, a support that was acknowledged by Prime Minister Modi at the 2016 BRICS Summit.²⁶ Under the close alliance between the Bolsonaro government and the Trump led USA, the Brazilian stance on anti-terrorism has only solidified.

Both countries have also reaffirmed their partnership in the early adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. Thus, while the Brazilian position on the matter of Kashmir and Pakistan is neutral, it is a firm supporter on the anti-terrorism stance that India has adopted.

Due to its own pacifist history as well as being a signatory of the Tlatelolco treaty, Brazil had long opposed India's nuclear policy, and expressed its displeasure when India conducted its 'peaceful' nuclear tests. However, there has been a shift in the Brazilian stand today, and it has firmly extended support to India's bid to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), with an expression of keenness to collaborate in the peaceful usage of nuclear technology and energy despite its own non-weaponised stance. This support has been acknowledged by Prime Minister Modi who thanked his Brazilian counterpart Temer in 2016 for 'understanding' the necessity of India's bid to join the NSG.²⁷

As far as the support to India's candidacy for a permanent membership in the UN Security Council is concerned, there can hardly be a bigger champion for India's cause than Brazil. This is due to the consonance of its own interests in India's bid. As members of the G4 grouping, Brazil and India both represent two countries from the developing world who petition for reform in the structures that exist, along with Germany and Japan. In a recent meeting conducted in September 2018 in New York, the G4 countries strongly voiced the need for UN Security Council reform as well as extended support for the candidature of the other members of the grouping for permanent membership.

The FNSR report identified Russia as the biggest political ally of India in terms of the support it lends to India on the three identified issues. While

Brazil's stand on the matter of Pakistan and Kashmir may be neutral, it has extended support on the other two identified issues of NSG membership and, especially, India's bid for permanent membership to the UN Security Council. Thus, as far as diplomatic and political cooperation is concerned, India and Brazil seem to be strong allies.

Defence Cooperation

According to the SIPRI Fact Sheet 2018,²⁸ India is the largest importer of arms in the world, with a significant increase in the percentage of arms imported from the last assessed cycle. India accounted for 12 percent of the global total, with Russia being its largest supplier with a share of 62 percent. Among the other big suppliers were the USA and Israel. Brazil featured as the penultimate country on a listing that identified the top twenty-five suppliers of arms, with its largest exports being to Afghanistan.

Due to the pacific bent of Brazilian foreign policy as well as its position as a signatory of the Tlatelolco treaty, Brazil generally refrains from forging international defence cooperation. India and Brazil, moreover, exist in very different security environments and have less exigencies to collaborate in security areas. While India has become the largest importer of arms to face the challenges it confronts, Brazil seeks to project its soft power.

Nevertheless, defence cooperation is routinely an area mentioned in the joint statements released by both countries. They signed an agreement for defence cooperation in 2003 which calls for cooperation in defence related matters, markedly in the field of research and development, acquisition, and logistic support between the two countries.²⁹ A Defence Wing was established in the Embassy of India in Brasilia in 2007, and the same was carried out by the Brazilian Embassy in New Delhi in 2009. A Joint Defence Committee, which came to be because of the Defence Cooperation Agreement between the two, has met regularly since its inception. In a meeting between the Defence Ministers of the two countries in 2017, both agreed to explore cooperation in the areas of ship building, aircraft manufacturing and space and concluded its sixth meeting in Brasilia in 2019. In the fifteen agreements signed between the two states in January 2020, defence cooperation has again been specified as an important area for cooperation, with private Indian players like the Jindal Defence and Taurus Armas of Brazil signing a joint venture for the manufacture of small arms.

In terms of defence cooperation, there remains a lot to be achieved by Brazil and India. As per the parameters of this level of cooperation at least,

this partnership leaves a lot to be desired, and Brazil is nowhere in the league of India's other strategic partners like Russia, the USA, or Israel.

Economic Cooperation

The authors of the FNSR report have argued that trade flows, their sustained nature as well as their potential for growth are an important indicator of the importance of a partner for India. As has been mentioned in a previous section, Indian policy makers have understood the importance of a 'strong economic base' for the propulsion to great power status.

Brazil has traditionally been an important partner for India, especially in the LAC region. With its production of high-quality agricultural products and energy resources, it has acquired significant importance in the trade structure of India. This has consequently led to growth in bilateral trade between the countries post liberalisation. Further, it also represents an important market for Indian products with the terms of trade routinely being in favour of India. However, with the fall in commodity prices, rising inflation, and the growth slump it is currently experiencing, overall trade has suffered a setback in Brazil. Total trade between India and Brazil was USD 5.64 billion in 2016, which was 28.62 percent less than the total trade recorded in the same period in the previous year (USD 7.90 billion).³⁰ Both countries represent a very small share in each other's markets. However, this trade has recovered lost ground and has grown to around 8.2 billion USD for the 2018-2019 cycle. Several agreements have been signed to bolster trade and commerce between India and Brazil, with a commitment to double trade figures to USD 15 billion by 2022.

In this category, the USA trumps all other strategic partners of India with an extremely large margin. Nevertheless, the immense natural and energy resources of Brazil as well as the growing middle class of the nation spell an important economic destination for India. There is immense potential for growth in trade between the two countries, especially with India being viewed in favour as compared to China by some Latin American firms regarding the diversification of its trade export structure.

Conclusion

Given the suitability of 'strategic partnerships' for India's broader foreign policy goals, it is not surprising that India has entered into several such agreements, including with the USA and China. India also has strategic

partnerships with Mexico (2016) and Argentina (2019) in Latin America. While the security component may be identified in every strategic partnership, either explicitly or implicitly, not all strategic partnerships need to be security driven - they can cover a broad range of issues. Given that Brazil and India are medium-sized, less developed states in an increasingly interdependent environment, they seek to pursue more than power and economic advances. They are equally concerned with the kind of gains that come from cooperative games: image, reputation, and identity building. Perhaps this is what explains that even though India's largest trading partner in the Latin American region at a point of time was Venezuela, the two countries did not sign a strategic partnership. This supports the claim that India's strategic engagement in Latin America is driven by 'systemic' and not 'transactional' concerns.³¹

While the strategic partnership between the two giants of the Global South, India and Brazil, portends - and is propelled by - almost an unprecedented vista of possibilities, it remains a political project of solidarity and often falters in terms of real economic cooperation. The participation of both these countries in multilateral endeavours is driven also by the intention to address domestic needs. Thus, what is most important to identify in these partnerships is the 'political intent'. An observer of India's foreign policy making has emphasised the significance of strategic intent as opposed to a strategic plan. A strategic plan simply fits 'current capability into a medium-term objective', whereas intent implies a well-conceived long-term core goal that is achievable and innovative.³² This is what India has lacked so far. The increase in high level diplomatic meetings in the last year suggests renewed policy priorities on the part of both countries. At the moment, the relationship remains one of rhetorical importance, especially in the light of Brazilian setbacks within the region, but may grow more robust depending on the clear focus of political intent and strategy.

Notes :

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- ⁷ Luis Fernando de Moraes Blanco, 'On the Uses and Functions of 'Strategic Partnership' in International Politics: Implications for Agency, Policy and Theory', Ph.D Thesis, 2015, Bielefeld: Bielefeld University, p.8.
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- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84
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- ¹⁴ Ankit Panda, 'Why Does India Have So Many 'Strategic Partners' and No Allies?' *The Diplomat*, Online, 2013, at <https://thediplomat.com/2013/11/why-does-india-have-so-many-strategic-partners-and-no-allies/>, accessed 3 January 2019.
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- ¹⁶ Devika Misra, 'Brazil: Clear Visions and their Contested Acceptance,' *GNLU Journal of Law, Development and Politics* 9(2), 2019, pp. 106–126.
- ¹⁷ Varun Sahni, 'Brazil: Fellow Traveler on the Long and Winding Road to Grandeza,' in David M. Malone et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, London: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 651–678.
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