For South Africa and India, 2013 promises to be a year of "Chinese interesting times" in navigating the IBSA-BRICS equation at a pivotal juncture for both groupings. The BRICS forum convenes in Africa in March with South Africa hosting the 5th Leaders’ Meeting in Durban. Later in the year, in October, India will host the 6th IBSA summit marking the 10th anniversary of the Brasilia Declaration which launched this troika. Meanwhile, the fact that South Africa’s hosting of BRICS will reflect a special Afrocentric twist in its thematic emphasis on “BRICS and Africa” has drawn a sharp reaction from one of India’s leading civil society BRICS intellectuals, Samir Saran(1). And this is a good thing.

More often than not the coterie of academics and intellectuals networking the BRICS and IBSA confabs skirt around contradictions amongst ourselves which might upset individual and collective apple carts known as “polite company.” This is by avoiding candidly expressing some of what is eating us.

In as much as this reticence tends to be at the expense of genuinely edifying intellectual discourse advancing mutual understanding, Samir Saran has done a much needed service in raising “The Africa Question” in Indian media. And SAFPI has done a great service in disseminating this “question” throughout its African network.

Saran, senior fellow and Vice-President of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF)(2), the think-tank that did the initial spade work on BRICS for its founding summit in Russia in 2009, penned an op-ed in the December 12th edition of The Indian Express voicing exception with South Africa taking upon itself the “onerous task of discovering and representing a unified African voice.”

In the process of arguing this point, Saran demonstrates why it is critical that intellectual as well as governing elites of the five countries really make an effort to get to know one another in more depth, where we are all respectively coming from – and really get a handle on what BRICS is all about apart from, as seems to be suggested, simply a collectivity of national interests converging on reforming global governance generally, global economic governance in particular.

**From Saran’s vantage point there are several flaws in South Africa’s approach to BRICS:**

- Presumptuously taking it upon itself to speak on behalf of all of Africa;
- Misunderstands why it has been included in BRICS which is not to be a “proxy” for Africa but, as an emerging power with a unique perspective, to add value to BRICS by itself;
- It’s misunderstanding reflects a lack of appreciation for the objective of BRICS which is to convey a counter-narrative on global governance to that of the West and to collectively leverage their individual weights in engaging western incumbents at “the global high table.”

Now presumptuous as it might seem for SA to take it upon itself to speak on behalf of Africa, the same question could be posed about who anointed BRICS countries to engage the West at this hierarchical “global high table” and on whose
behalf? Their own individual behalf separately and collectively without regard for the interests of other emerging and developing economies?

And to what purpose if global governance is not about how various and sundry national interests are to be coordinated and if possible harmonized in a manner acknowledging how global economic integration has eroded the prerogatives of national sovereignty? No country is an island in today’s world, least of all in its own region.

Some countries are more capacitated than others within their regions to articulate aspirations that are transnational even though there may be (indeed are) national jealousies about the capacity of given regional powers to convey a regional agenda which, in concert with other regional agendas, may add up to a continental agenda. It is not for nothing that, in southern Africa there is a SADC to which South Africa belongs or a Mercosur to which Brazil belongs which, in turn, feed into the respective continental agendas of the African Union and the Union of South American Nations. The same might apply to India within the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation though it is often pointed out that India aspires to escape its region in ascending to ‘the high table.’

No, no one anoints these members of IBSA as well as BRICS to represent them at the “global high table.” Yet there is an unspoken if often grudging understanding that by default, South Africa, Brazil and India are better placed than their neighbours to engage at a global governance level which includes other emerging powers within the G20: Indonesia, Turkey, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Argentina.

Now honing in specifically on South Africa, what pray tell informs this “unique perspective” for adding value to BRICS if this uniqueness is not informed by an African identity on a continent saddled by history with a unique set of problems at a time when all of the BRICS countries are scrambling to avail themselves of Africa’s resources? This question strikes at the very heart of what constitutes “The Africa Question” in a manner in which South Asia cannot compare, saddled by history as India and South Asia are with their own unique challenges which, again, ought to inform a South Asian regional sensibility underpinning efforts to come to terms with those challenges.

Now perhaps India is so big, constituting a subcontinental region in itself that some of its sons and daughters may not be able to appreciate a transnational vocation to the same degree that applies to South Africa within Africa. Be that as it may, the national sovereignty that Indians are so attached to simply does not work for South Africa in its relations within a fragmented Africa where national sovereignty is the essence of the continent’s weakness; a weakness that South Africa along with other AU members must work to overcome.

This is a contemporary and historical circumstance compelling a pan-Africanist perspective and agenda for any country on the continent that aspires to continental leadership as does South Africa.

South Africa, within its African context, therefore stands apart from other BRICS whose perspectives are informed by what might be termed “big country sovereignty” which is tantamount to continental sovereignty. This is what Africa aspires to and informs South Africa’s African and BRICS agendas. This is a perspective informed by the realities of global economic integration which dictates a pan-African future as the only scenario that makes sense for

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South Africa and Africa – which by the way does not mandate a “united African voice” as such.

Unless BRICS as individual countries and as a collective begin to more consciously approach global governance from the vantagepoint of making economic integration work within their respective continents and regions, its long-term role as a revisionist actor in the politics of the global economy may be limited. Indeed, this is a challenge facing the IBSA countries within BRICS as it relates to their trilateral relations as the Brasilia Declaration approaches its 10 anniversary in 2013. Thus, whereas Saran asks if BRICS should not also concern itself with South Asian “tensions and imperatives” and those exercising China regarding the South China Sea, as South Africa wants to do regarding Africa, in a qualified sense, the answer is “yes.”

BRICS should concern itself with these and other regions in which its members are embedded where issues of transnational economic governance arise having a direct bearing on regional and continental integration. This is what South Africa’s African agenda relating to its hosting of BRICS is intended to address and Tshwane-Pretoria would open itself to major criticism from elsewhere on the continent if this was not its intent. Other BRICS members may not share the urgency of this imperative regarding their regions and continents as does South Africa regarding Africa.

The urgent need for Africa to overcome its fragmentation through advancing an integrationist agenda cannot be contested and if other members of BRICS cannot be sensitive to this special predicament facing the continent and South Africa’s need to address it within the context of BRICS then this raises serious questions about the raison d’etre of South Africa’s membership in this grouping if pure “national interest” narrowly defined is the be all and end all of BRICS. BRICS’ relevance for Africa and the individual agendas of BRICS members in Africa would consequently come under question.

Regional and continental integration and, indeed, inter-regional cooperation are even more explicit in IBSA given the geostrategic architecture of this grouping in two respects: the economic potential of the Mercosur-SACU-India preferential trade talks, difficult as they are; and the added dimension of security community-building in the Indian and South Atlantic oceans.

If New Delhi fails to hone in on strengthening this southern sea lanes comparative strategic advantage in its hosting of the IBSA summit later in 2013 (while also chairing the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation) this trilateral grouping could face declining multilateral utility. This would be in spite of India’s strongly held position, with China hovering in the background, of IBSA maintaining its autonomy and identity viz-a-viz BRICS.

2013 therefore should tell a lot about how important IBSA is in New Delhi’s strategic calculus regarding BRICS as it cannot avoid the demand of showing leadership on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Brasilia Declaration. Will it show the vision and political will to jointly take IBSA to another level with South Africa and Brazil?

As central as its building on IBSAMAR is to a re-energizing of IBSA, Indian Ocean-South Atlantic maritime cooperation is by no means the only challenge facing India in its hosting of the troika’s summit.

**Here are few other considerations for the three governments:**

- Given the elaborate sectoral working group agenda of IBSA and its uneven achievement
together with its business, parliamentary and academic forums plus the geostrategic maritime cooperation potential of IBSAMAR, should not this troika contemplate a more formalized structure in the form of a secretariat, perhaps situated in Brasilia? Otherwise, there is a certain superficiality to IBSA and its initiatives which, compared to BRICS, may more and more take on little more than purely symbolic imaging with the real substance of India, Brazil and South Africa residing in BRICS where the leadership edge significantly resides with Sino-Russia.

• Can the three governments continue their south-south tokenism via the IBSA Development Fund run by UNDP’s South-South Cooperation Unit with the prospect of the BRICS development bank coming on stream? Could they not negotiate some complementary synergy between the development fund under IBSA and the development bank under BRICS and up the funding level? Additionally, given the pressing developmental needs in all three countries, could not the development fund house a grassroots development “window” or facility for small-scale income-generating community-level projects in the three countries?

• Why did India and Brazil reportedly shoot down a South African proposal that IBSA establish a working group on women/gender instead of addressing gender and status of women’s issues at a purely forum level? Given the epidemic of violence against women in South Africa as well as India and how the matrix of issues surrounding law enforcement, the judiciary and general vulnerability and brutalizing of women were exposed in India at the end of 2012, will New Delhi revisit the more substantive working group versus the superficiality of a forum for gender and women when it hosts the summit in 2013?

Finally, the structure of the parliamentary forum in particular deviates from the original concept of such an IBSA structure tied as it is under the ministerial focal points of all three governments. The original intent was that it would operate more autonomously like the SADC Parliamentary Forum as one step removed from an actual legislative body. Given the 10th anniversary crossroad challenges facing an IBSA in need of reinvigorating, should not the status of the parliamentary forum be revisited as well and how it would interact with the various sectoral working groups?

All said, as some in India ponder South Africa’s commitment to interrogating the BRICS-Africa connection while reflecting on what New Delhi will make of its own hosting of IBSA, there are a raft of issues on the table for the IBSA-BRICS civil society and academic constituencies to grapple with as they try to influence the direction in which these two groupings will develop.

The question we should ask ourselves is whether we are up to it, whether we are able to move from being arm chair theorists into the agenda-setting real world of action!

Footnotes
http://www.orfonline.org/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/analysis/AnalysisDetail.html?cmaid=45518&mmacmaid=45519

2. Observer Research Foundation,
http://www.orfonline.org/cms/sites/orfonline/home.html
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** This rejoinder to Samir Saran's analysis, 'The Africa question', was commissioned from Dr Kornegay by SAFPI.