

Indian President Ram Nath Kovind's recent visit to Bolivia and Chile was indeed a success and another milestone in India's approach towards the Latin American policies

Abhinav Kaushal, The Kootneeti's Program Coordinator for Latin America, in an interview with Dattesh D. Prabhu-Parulekar, Assistant Professor of International Relations and Area Studies, at the UGC Centre for Latin American Studies, Department of International Relations, Goa University, discuss the different aspects of India-Latin America relations and importance of Indian President's visit to the Latin American countries.

Question: Comparatively, India's policies are less spoken in media, when it comes to Latin America, do you think any factor other than language and geography responsible?

While the perfunctory attributes of geographical detachment, cultural and linguistic distinctness, and the divergent tenor of ideological predilections and posturing in erstwhile epochs, have blighted mutual equations, what's kept the relationship enduringly anodyne and mutedly ebbing in recent years, has been the inability of both sides, to carve-up an actionable and tangible agenda for bilateral cooperation, and to be able to perceive convergences between each other, from a trans-regional and global context, in addition to the bilateral frame of ties, which, despite certain lone furrow achievements by individualised entities on either side, has remained largely sporadic, underwhelming and punching-below-its-weight. Media conjecture or ravings become incandescent when either the engagement, catches and fires-up popular consciousness and public imagination, or when the relationship creates economic inflexion-points in the fortunes of both sides, or when the level of political affinity and cultivation, is such, which behoves it, to be spoken off. Contextualised to India and Latin America, despite the fact that mutual societal spaces harbour goodwill for each other, shorn of any historical baggage, what hobbles greater engagement, beyond the logistics of distance and the consequent fiduciary tab of itinerancy, is the inadequateness of sensitization about each other's contemporary milieus, transcending inveterately held predominating but redundant, stereotypes of yore.

Furthermore, despite the potential for substantive avenues in trade and investment interchange, in realms of mutual complementarities, again, on account of a dearth of sensitization and information endowment of the pertinent

stakeholders, about business environments, neither side constitutes a traditional or a modern-day mainstay commercial proposition, for each other. However, the strong irony shows-up in the proud and veritable touting of the Indian External Affairs Minister on the one hand, that under the current dispensation, the configuration and scope of India's strategic outreach and engagement of Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC), has expanded, to two dozen of the region's sovereign-constituents, capped of course, by the rising incidence of Presidential and Vice Presidential sojourns to the region, yet, on the other hand, the region has witnessed, the minimalist peregrinating footprint of the incumbent Indian Prime Minister, who has otherwise made effective global barnstorming, his emblematic insignia, so-to-speak (*visits to Brazil and Argentina, ostensibly for the BRICS and G20 Summits respectively, of course with bilaterals thrown into the mix, and a five hour stop-over in Mexico, for what was quintessentially an NSG membership canvassing-stump, is all that Prime Minister Modi has to show for, during this term*). This despite the fact that the region's incandescent sovereigns have effusively embraced, the twin flagship strategic initiatives, pioneered in Prime Minister Modi's 'diplomacy-for-development-compact', viz., *the inception of the International Yoga Day, and instituting the International Solar Alliance (ISA)*.

Question: President Kovind's recent visit to Bolivia and Chile concluded, with MOUs, in a wide range of areas, including energy. What does this mean to India?



Indian President Ram Nath Kovind with Chilean President Sebastian Pinera/Image: President of India

The narrative that exudes, out of the profile of the twin visits, and in terms of the tenor of the MoUs so concluded, can be decoded on varied levels. Firstly, despite the current Modi government remaining steeped in the same syndrome of treating the LAC region with a secondary brush, in the almost non-existent visits by the Prime Minister or in continuing with the Joint Commission and other bilateral dialogue meetings of the Foreign Office being conducted at the Latin American end by visits of our Minister of State (External Affairs), and not by the full Foreign Minister, in stark contrast to how the Chinese and other major powers indulge, nevertheless, this Presidential visit, together with a string of them including the Vice President, to should I say lesser countries within the region, is a welcome development, anchored in the diplomatic engagement mantra laid down by the Prime Minister of “no country left behind”, regardless of the protocol level, at which the outreach, may be at. So, despite being a halfway

house of sorts, this ought to be welcomed.

Secondly, there seems to be a strategic appreciation of potential partners within Latin America. For instance, while all along, New Delhi has looked purely in transactional terms at Latin American countries satiating our hydrocarbons requirements, now it's willing to perceive that there is more to this equation than just mundane crude oil sourcing, in the form of active cooperation and collaboration, around sustainable energy development, towards meeting the hallowed objective of energy independence, going beyond energy security. With Chile onboard the International Solar Alliance and Bolivia also expressing its desire to be inducted, this explains the newly formulating approach, although it's far from being crystallised. There is equally a premium emphasis being placed on manifesting Indian involvement in these countries' socio-economic landscape on a differentiated paradigm and along a distinct template, than that of China and others, who are seen as proactive on the continent, swaddled in suspicions of peddling time honoured imperialist exploitation in a new hue. India's MoUs with Chile and Bolivia, but also with other countries during recent visits by Vice President Venkaiah Naidu to Central and South America, girdle sectors of societal capacitation and empowerment, concentrating on imparting higher education and fostering innovation, proffering services-sector solutions, extending expertise in conventional healthcare but also wellness mediums, institutional experience sharing and temporal knowledge dissemination in areas of civic engagement, financial inclusion, and others. Inking of such MoUs, which in themselves don't mean much more than the paper on which they are inscribed, need to be matched with germane lines of credit and identification of partner entities on both sides, so as to realise the optimal potential in these mechanisms for mutual beneficence.

Going beyond the ostensible bilateral import of these MoUs comes the scope for them to become lodestars for transnational cooperation, whose time has long come to make the erstwhile solidarist notions of South-South cooperation, more meaningful and material in terms of its tangibility, embracing an actionable agenda and thereby deriving credence to the process. Towards this end, the solar energy revolution underway in Chile, and the prospective potential of Bolivia to be a futuristic energy hub on the back of its lithium, offers avenues to make such bilateral cooperation as a guidepost for others to emulate.

Question: India is negotiating a BIPPA (Bilateral Investment Promotion and

Protection Agreement) with Bolivia. How this will shape trade ties between two distant nations?

The early conclusion of negotiations and consequent inking of the BIPDA, is epochal, as the lack of it, has been mutually identified, as one of the impediments, to smoothening the landscape for accelerating and enhancing mutual commercial interchange, by encapsulating an important confidence imparting consideration for modern-day global businesses, viz., the framework that would insulate enterprises and their invested resources, from cataclysmic rupturing social events and the disruptions brought on by abrupt changes in national legislation and attendant decision-making, with no disregard to or derogation from the inherent rights of sovereign privilege, at either end. In recent years, certain sections of Indian industry, particularly the big daddies in the minerals and metals space, such as the Jindal Steel and Power company, have plausibly gushed and gravitated, towards investing in the Andean sub-region, including in this landlocked country, which is verdant, in a spectrum of strategic natural resources, from profound iron ore and gold deposits to deep-seated lithium reserves (the world's largest), and the ilk, only to experience and encounter certain adverse and unsavoury experiences, owing to socially precipitated unrests, and being left ham-handed and short-changed, by changes in sovereign government policies, and allegedly arbitrary reneging on sovereign commercial commitments and contractual obligations, made by the federal government in La Paz, triggering the collapse of the \$2 billion investments in the El Mutun mines for long term exploration of iron-ore, from the Jindals in 2012. This said the blame can also be apportioned on the Indian commercial entities, for failing the test of due diligence and of coming across to the Bolivian and allied locales as insensitive and even predatory.

However, all said and done, such sour experiences leave a lingering taste of apprehension and distrust, which undermines the case for Indian industry, pitching their tent in Bolivia and across resource-rich Latin America. The early consummation of BIPPA, would inject an impetus, to Indian industry focussing itself onto Bolivia, at a time when the Indian government's EV batteries manufacturing policy framework albeit a work-in-progress, seems propitious and exhortative to industry investment overseas, and congruently aligns with the Bolivian government's own conscious desire, to scale-up investments from diversified suitors, into its sprawling lithium-pans. With the Indian market for lithium-based EVs batteries, pegged at a staggering \$300billion into 2030, it's a

no-brainer truism to suggest that Indian industry would be a prime prospector for Bolivian lithium, going forward, provided the investment policy environment is predictable and scrupulously upheld.

Question: Previous Indian government under UPA turned down the request by Bolivian government for a line of credit to purchase seven HAL Dhruvs. What are the current developments? Should India approve the line of credits?



HAL Dhruv - Image for Representation/Published in Military Today

It's unclear due to the issue remaining shrouded in mystery, as to what has precisely caused the scuppering of the initial expression of interest by the Bolivian government, which came quickly on the heels of the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), bagging the Ecuadorian contract for seven DHRUV helicopters. Of course, we are most aware of what recriminations have endured between New Delhi and Quito over the crash of four of those seven helicopters, delivered during 2009-15, including the big diplomatic spat that even led to the cancellation of the Ecuadorian President's envisaged visit to India in late 2015. The presidential dispensations in Quito and La Paz have tended to be

ideologically aligned and converging in thought-processes on many issues. It's understood that amidst the contretemps of the very public blame-game that played out between Ecuador, India and HAL, over the viability of the advanced light multi-role helicopters and their feasibility for rugged and often inhospitable Latin American terrain, it led to a rethink by the Bolivians over the envisioned acquisition. Also, while New Delhi has been keen to push through deals involving its defence equipment to peer-developing countries under the ambit of South-South Cooperation in capacity building, most of its deals end-up being stalled, either due to its risk-averse cautious foreign policy rearing its head at a late stage causing cold-feet and consequent thwarting of the actual execution of the transaction, or due to the crass inability on either side, to cut through the maze of the labyrinthine bureaucratic rigmaroles and tangle, that often accompany such defence deals.

One would reckon, that despite these setbacks to Indian defence sales within the Andean bloc of nations (Ecuador and Bolivia), the potential remains for reviving these deals or stitching-up new ones, although, one cannot be sanguine to the fact that a lot has changed since 2009 and when India famously bagged the Ecuadorian contract, nudging out established competitors as in the Russians and the Israelis, in a first deal secured in an open bidding process for India. With the Chinese having made serious inroads into the region during the last decade and more, and is seen as courting like-minded sovereign partners from the socialist ALBA coalition to induct Chinese defence equipment, it's going to be formidable for India to attract these countries and their maverick leader(s) to re-explore the India track on defence, notwithstanding the recent interest shown by the Chileans for acquiring and inducting the 'TEJAS' aircraft.

Question: India and Chile are finalising of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT). Why it is so important?

Well, this announcement of normative convergence is more symbolic, than a material substance. Latin America, both as a composite region, and in terms of its sovereign constellations, is neither afflicted, by the scourge of terror, nor does it find itself in the crosshairs of the messianic agenda of global terrorists, and their outfits. The endorsement from Chile serves to send a salutary message to the global community, that a prominent Latin American nation, which has traversed a long positive way since its diabolical authoritarian past during the

Cold War heydays of the 1970s and 80s, and making a marked contribution to the development of global discourses, shaping of processes, imbuing of capacities, and re-sculpturing of institutional firmaments, is strongly aligned, alongside the world's largest democracy, in the vital existential combat of global terrorism, contributes to New Delhi's two decades long manifest determination and traction, to coalesce widening consensus around adoption of a global instrument, against all forms of terrorism, without exception. But it does not automatically conflate with or translate into any substantive cooperation, in the critical elements of mutual intelligence-sharing, law-enforcement synergies, or the concluding of an extradition treaty regime, or the ilk, just yet. This said, one can't but help feel, that such declarations of support, as momentous as they may be made out to be, are as hortative and platitudinous, like those bearing a resemblance, to continual expressions of support, in respect of India's candidature for Permanent Membership of the UN Security Council.

Question: As Chile is the nearest country to Antarctica, it carries special importance from the climate perspective. What to expect from this visit of Indian President?



Indian Antarctic Mission - Dakshin Gangotri/Published in India Today

India's maritime geographical ordainment with its three-dimensional pan-out to the Indian Ocean and a commodious Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), to boot, makes it a natural, for it, to be involved in an exploration of Antarctica. However, New Delhi's Antarctica expeditions, are very much in the nature of human-benign polar exploration and discovery and remains very much an advocate of ensuring that the South Pole is insulated, from inevitable hegemony and militarisation, distinct from what is widely being surmised to be the unfortunate truculent fate of the Northern juxtaposition. To this end, both New Delhi and Santiago partake in a convergent view, of the imperative for a free and independent character of Antarctica, and harmonized, in the ardent belief, for it to be an integral component, of the larger blue economy framework, that is not exclusionist, predatory, and revisionist. In fact, the timing could not have been more coincidental for both sides, with Chile due to host the Global Climate Change Conference in December 2019, where, in its capacity as the Chair, it is widely expected to showcase the need to preserve the deep oceans, critical to which remains, safeguarding of Antarctica. Chile has already affirmed and expressed support for India, during the latter's clarion-call at last year's G20 Summit in Buenos Aires, to work towards consummating climate-resilient infrastructure, systems and policy interventions. One can expect both sides to work more intimately, with each other, on this issue of a common concert and potential compact, going forward.

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