

INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY


TOWARDS RESURGENCE


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As a geopolitical construct, Latin America is a term, used, to connote the 20 sovereign constituents, straddling the Western Hemisphere, which comprise, what we routinely in geographical terms, comprehend and aver, as 'Central' (seven) and 'South' (thirteen) America. However, in India's strategic calculus, the region, though distinct, has found itself sweepingly clubbed, with the adjoining Caribbean region, with its loose skein of 13 islands countries, strewn across the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, to constitute, what the Ministry of External Affairs, of the Government of India, perfunctorily dubs, as the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region. The composite region of LAC, hems-in a populace, in excess of six hundred million, embodying a rising middle class, and a younger work-force, and which, despite its predominantly primary commodities-based production hue, has exuded relative economic resilience, that has witnessed the region's economies, accretion themselves, in the vicinity of 3-4 per cent annualised growth, over much of this century.

The region, harking back into history, manifested a colonial patchwork of the multitude of European imperial powers of yore. Nevertheless, it was overwhelmingly under the tutelage of the Spanish (virtually all of Central and South America) and the Portuguese (Brazil), with circumscribed influence of the French and the Dutch, and with the British sway sweeping across much of the Caribbean. These countries have been independent for close to two centuries barring the exception of Cuba. India's relations with the region and most of its constituents, particularly those of Iberian colonial heritage, remained notional and stunted. For New Delhi, the Latin American region represented a political

backwater, firmly ensconced within the American strategic orbit, during the breadth of the bipolar Cold War, with its yawning geographical detachment, and linguistic and cultural divergence, further accentuating the sense of being removed from each other, notwithstanding the literary contacts that existed between celebrated, luminous exponents, at either end. Whatever little coordination and convergence was in evidence, became possible on account of solidarist notions of South-South cooperation, in the context of the riven North-South axis, over trade and development issues, pursued through the aegis and auspices of the agency of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

With Latin America oscillating, between intermittent periods of democracy, interspersed, with substantive epochs of praetorian military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, and smitten, by the Raul Prebisch enjoined economic philosophical moorings of Import-Substitution Industrialisation (ISI), and India, for its part, steeped in the socialist mixed economic model delivering anaemic growth, the context and rationale for material mutual cooperation failed to beckon beyond sporadic instances, blighted by the visible commonality of their economic production content-configuration and structures, rather than being complementary to each other.

The demise of the bipolar schema in world affairs, brought on a tectonically transformed concourse of circumstances, within which to forge a new framework and template for India-Latin America ties. While India had unshackled the labyrinthine fetters on its centrally planned command economy, and wittingly embraced the trinity of economic liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation, precipitating the commenced pursuit of a veritably global foreign policy based on diversified diplomatic engagement and interchange, the region of Latin America emerged as an inclined juxtaposing counterpart, with its countries emerging out of the despairing decade of the 1980s, proverbially termed as the "Lost Decade," putatively marked by profound hyper-inflation and the spiralling mire of public-debt, not to mention these sovereigns turning their backs on military dispensations and opting for predilections in entrenching constitutional and popular democracies, as exemplified and borne-out in 21st century Chile, for instance.

Even as Washington's fetish for the region subsided, its vice like grip over the region's economic fortunes wasn't ready to yield just yet, anchored and

emanating in the 'Washington Consensus' phalanx of neo-liberal economic prescriptions, that were forthcoming, from the portals of the Bretton Woods institutional firmament, of the IMF and the World Bank, putting a premium on macro-economic stabilisation and management, trade and investment liberalisation, and ordaining an expanded role for market forces, bringing undulating trajectories of economic growth and imbalanced development, amidst widening socio-economic inequalities and exacerbating income-disparities. Yet, on the whole, the United States strategically retreated from the region, a vacuum that is abhorred in the realm of international statecraft, and the space of which has since been progressively consumed by a surging China and a resurgent Russia. The overweening US covert action in engineering the coup that sought to depose military fatigues man turned populist Communist leader Hugo Chavez in oil verdant Venezuela, sullied Washington's image across the region, with its action seen as an unsavoury throwback to the Reagan era surreptitious shenanigans and the clandestine sleight-of-hand operations, dating back through the decades of the Cold War.

This said, the scope and tenor of India-Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region trade has traversed a long way, emerging out of its meagre sum of about USD 200 million back in 1991, to approximately USD 45 billion, currently; however, for a constellation of 33 sovereigns, this volume represents a case of being much underwhelmed, and poignantly pales in inevitable comparison with the peer power China, whose trade interchange has burgeoned exponentially with the region. Plausibly, New Delhi's trade exchanges remain circumscribed, with few product-lines, a set of countries with whom intensified relations persist, and a stereotyped conception and policy-conceptualisation of the region, that refuses to be shed by the politico-diplomatic establishment, to obvious mutual detriment. From a one-time straitjacketed view that Latin America militated under the wings of Washington, to an equally parochial notion that the region is sold-out on being suborn to Beijing, New Delhi's understanding of the complexity of the region, has been sanguinely simplistic and agonisingly superficial. There are more than handy instances, to disabuse this starry-eyed erroneous belief, of Latin America disposing, as a full-on supplicant, to the big powers in town. Back in 1994-95, it was Latin American consensus led by the proverbial France of the region, Brazil, that saw the still-born abort of the Clinton touted initiative of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), mooted in the wake of the seminal consummation of the North

American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 1994, which incorporated Mexico from the region. In 2002, at the apogee of the Bush administration's diplomatic push to elicit a UN Security Council Resolution authorising its invasion of Iraq, it was the likes of Mexico and Chile, which despite being sentient of what punitive measures lay in store from a US administration that had shown itself to be vengeful, nevertheless, held firm against the US-UK misadventure, contributing to the diplomatic contretemps at the horse-shoe, which ultimately saw the UN process terminated, to the chagrin and consternation of Washington. Similarly, over recent years, Latin American countries have tended to band together to assert their presence as being more than just lining-up the numbers behind Washington within the OAS, as had been the norm since the institution's inception in 1948. The Latin American coalition of ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance) of Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, was able to successfully galvanise support for Peruvian Caesar Gaviria's candidature against the US-sponsored candidate of the Mexican Foreign Minister Ernesto Derbez, with the latter ultimately pulling out, in favour of the former.

Latin American countries too, stand culpable, in their stereotypical view that holds India as the land of charm, mystique, intrigue, even harbouring the colonially perverse imagery perpetuated about India, of being the land of snake-charmers, primal subsisting individuals and the ilk. Its nigh that Latin American societies including those within academia, acquainted themselves with the breadth and depth of socio-economic transformations underway across India, which ought to begin with migrating away from archetypal research about socio-economic phenomenon, prevalent within antiquated India, but relics to reality. A salutary beginning to strategic understanding came by way of the Government of India's 'FOCUS LAC' initiative of the year 2000, a strategy enunciated by the Ministry of Commerce, which sought to capture its outreach to the expansive distant region of Latin America and the Caribbean, through a fifteen-point agenda, premised on an approach to five countries and across five product-lines in what could be termed the 5x5 proposition in action. Needless to state, that an overtly transactional scheme operated, as India, requiring a slew of strategic natural resource and industrially sourced raw-materials, foraged for its hydrocarbons needs from Venezuela and Ecuador, with its copper, gold, silver and attendant minerals and metals requirements sourced from Chile and Peru. Brazil being the largest country, economy and society within the LAC region, and a regional and global powerhouse in its