

Emerging Trends in Latin America, Rise of Brazil and Potential for India

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In 2008, the leaders of South America assembled in the capital city of Brasilia at the behest of the then President of Brazil, Luis Inazio Lula da Silva. As the leader of the largest and the biggest of Latin American countries, President Silva had asked other leaders of the region to form a bloc of nations, which once agreed to, came to be known as the Union of South American Nations or the UNASUR.¹ At the meeting, the leaders voted unanimously to form a regional group of nations in order to champion three major problems bedevilling the entire region: poverty, energy, and infrastructure. In the not so distant past, such actions would have been unthinkable by leaders of Latin America. Very rarely had they acted in unison and without the presence of the colossus of the North – the United States of America.

Much has happened in the past three decades that signifies a changing nature of the ties, not only between major Latin American nations and the United States but also among the countries of the region. The winds of change have been blowing in Latin America for quite some time and these can only be properly understood by examining the changing political, economic, and social conditions on ground. Several global, regional, and local factors have contributed to such transformation. These changes have opened up opportunities for emerging powers, such as India.

This essay, therefore, is organised into three parts. In Part I, the nature of the transformations unravelling in Latin America are described. In Part II, the recent rise of Brazil and what it means for inter-American relations, is highlighted. Finally, in Part III, the potential for Indian economic and political actors in the emerging region of Latin America is explored.

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Latin America Transformed

Never before in the history of Latin America have there been so many countries living under functioning democracies, as they do today. After the group of developed countries, the Latin American region boasts of the maximum number of democratic countries. According to the 2011 *Freedom House* data, 70 per cent of the thirty-three Latin American and Caribbean countries are branded politically “free” while only one (Cuba) is considered politically “not free”. Twenty-seven per cent of the countries are at various degrees of being “partially free”. In contrast, only 41 per cent of the Asia-Pacific, 21 per cent of the sub-Saharan, and 6 per cent of the middle eastern countries are considered politically democratic and free.² This is a far cry from the heyday of authoritarian and brutal dictatorships in much of the region in the late 1960s and 1970s.³ Such a political opening has unleashed an explosion in the number of groups and organisations that are now competing for the loyalty of Latin American citizens. Such high levels of political freedom and democracy are bound to usher in greater popular pressure on elected governments to be more sensitive to their citizens’ demands.

In addition, there has been a significant rise in the number of female chief executives in power in many prominent countries, a cultural shift, it seems, that is a striking departure from Latin America’s past. The fact that countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Costa Rica now have (or recently had) female presidents accompanied by a greater number of female legislators and other popularly elected officials at all levels of government augurs well for a heightened sense of gender empowerment and the deepening of democracy. Furthermore, in a number of countries, such as Guatemala, Peru, and Mexico, female presidential candidates, though have lost key elections, have represented mainstream political parties that indicate a greater societal willingness to accept female leaders at the top of a political party’s national platform.

As a corollary to the above, new political movements have appeared on the scene that seem to represent the long neglected sections of Latin American societies, more specifically its indigenous groups. Many of these indigenous pre-Columbian ethnic groups have had highly developed civilisational legacies in countries, such as Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador, among many others. Recent political organisations have empowered many of the indigenous members by bringing them into the political process through efforts by new political parties. For example, in countries such as Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, and Guatemala, in recent years, there has been a rise in the number of candidates, new political parties, and civic groups with

significant support from the indigenous ethnic populations. For example, *Movimiento para el Socialismo* (MAS) in Bolivia, *Alianza Social Indigena* (ASI) and *Autoridades Indigena*, both in Colombia (AIC), *Pachakutik* in Ecuador, *Alliance for an Alternative Humanity* in Peru (APHU), *Movimiento Indigena Autonomo de Julia* in Venezuela, and *Encuentro por Guatemala* are just a few of these political parties.⁴

Among other factors, the failure of traditional political parties to address the sense of deprivation and alienation felt by most members of these indigenous communities has played an important role.⁵ In these countries, many of the new political parties have made a significant difference at the local level, resulting in the election of candidates sympathetic to the plight of the indigenous population. At the national level, it has quite significantly altered the balance of power among the traditionally dominant political parties of Conservative, Liberal, and Christian-Democratic orientations.⁶ A lot more pragmatism can be seen now in the politics of many Latin American countries. In that respect, the multi-party systems with niches in regional and local, ethnic or tribal bases of support resemble India more than any other place in the world. Political pluralism and fragmentation has become a major new political development in many Latin American countries with smaller, more organised political parties making their voices heard in the debates about making national policies.⁷

Why is this important? It is important because so many more organisations these days base their claims on the strategy of politicising the economic, political, and cultural grievances held by indigenous populations in a wide swath of Latin America. More and more candidates in countries such as Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, and Venezuela emphasise indigenous identities and are associated with political parties that have affiliations with indigenous social movements.⁸ Through such affiliations, these political parties have been able to gain control of significant chunks of local and national legislatures, a sign of their rise in political power. In Bolivia and Ecuador, such a rise in new political alignments has produced presidents of indigenous origin. It can be argued that to the extent possible, such alignments are also in formation in many other countries of the region to different degrees of success. In countries such as Peru, for example, the traditionally dominant parties themselves have chosen candidates of primarily indigenous origin who did become president over time (e.g. Alejandro Toledo).

Such new political formations are all the more important to note at a time when traditional political parties have failed to deliver their promises to the people resulting in high levels of alienation and disenchantment in the larger

population. The perennial social problems of poverty and inequality now coexist with the rising tide of lawlessness and delinquency, as well as widespread abuse of human rights.⁹ In such dire circumstances, innovative political reactions have occurred and such developments would influence the style of governance and policy making in the years to come. This, in general, augurs well for the growth of a robust civil society in the region.

It is important to note that Latin American democracies have opened up political space not only for the rise of new political parties and for other political movements, but they have also facilitated the presence of a multitude of National and International Non-Governmental Organisations. These Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have proliferated and staked out social and institutional space in the emerging political landscape of the region.¹⁰ The presence and consistent campaigning by these organisations on issues that are either specific to a particular country or general to the region are becoming increasingly visible. In particular, the critical importance of the NGOs in pressing ahead with environment, human rights, family poverty, education, or freedom of the press issues that still bedevil much of the region have been effective in making governments become more aware of these concerns.

International NGOs such as Amnesty International, the Environmental Defence Fund, or the International Red Cross, have pushed ahead to make their issues regionally important. At the same time, domestic NGOs have been aggressively active in providing specific services in many countries of the region. These national groups may address specific gender rights issues or may target racial or ethnic discrimination issues. For example, groups extending credit to slum dwellers in Brazil or asserting greater women's rights in Argentina strive to empower their constituencies.¹¹ They try to accomplish this by not exclusively focusing on the failings of the government but through nurturing a network of other national and international allies, which put pressure on the authorities to formulate a helpful policy, a fact that should not go unnoticed.

The widening of the political competition can also be seen in multitudes of sample surveys and popular polls undertaken in various Latin American countries about the quality of democratic governance and the availability of political space. In surveys undertaken by the Santiago-based *Latinobarometro*, a reputed polling firm, it was found that an increasing number of Latin American citizens now say that they are "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with the ways in which democracy functions in their country. In 2010, the percentage of people who are "somewhat satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the way democracy works reached 80 per cent in Uruguay, 60 per cent in

Costa Rica, 55 per cent in both Chile and Panama, and about 50 per cent in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela. These are important societal trends, which testify to the maturing of the democratic processes in Latin America. To cite another trend in the same *Latinobarometro* surveys across Latin America, responses to the question, “Is democracy preferable to any other form of government?” yielded fascinating results. Except for three countries, namely Mexico, Guatemala, and Paraguay, where the percentage of those believing that democracy is preferable to the alternative registered in the upper 40 per cent range, the rest of Latin America recorded significant numbers. In eleven other countries, this popular support for democracy exceeded the 60 per cent range.¹² These indicate the deepening nature of the democratic process, which should have a lasting impact on governance and policy making in Latin America for years to come.

Changing Inter-American Economic Relations, and the Rise of Brazil

Latin American economic landscape has also changed within the wider context of a global realignment. As recently as in 2000, the economy of the United States accounted for 32 per cent of the world economy. However, a decade or so later, in 2011, the share of the United States in the world economy had declined to 22 per cent.¹³ In other words, the United States is less able to use its economic muscle to win policy approval that it favours. With the attention of the US fixed elsewhere in the Middle East and South Asia, the political space for assertive politics has increased in Latin America.

Furthermore, in recent years, Chinese investment in Latin America has skyrocketed. In an attempt to meet its own energy needs, China has been increasing its business and investment relationships in South America. Although European investments, in particular those of the British and French, have existed since the nineteenth century, Chinese encroachment is rather new.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, China’s trade with Latin America grew the fastest than its trade with any other world region. For example, during 2005-2010, China’s exports to Latin American countries grew by 31 per cent while its exports to the European Union, the area that experienced the second biggest increase in trade with China, grew by 17 per cent. In comparison, Chinese exports to Asia-Pacific and the United States grew by 14 per cent and 12 per cent respectively during the same period. Similar trends are also registered when it comes to Chinese imports from Latin America. During 2005-2010, Chinese imports from Latin America grew by 28 per cent while its imports from the European Union increased by 18 per cent. The

United States and Asia-Pacific experienced a 16 per cent and 15 per cent annual growth rate respectively.¹⁴ These data indicate that China has made a significant entry into Latin America and its presence is increasing by the year.

Nevertheless, the real question is how this development in China-Latin America trade will affect existing US-Latin American relations. Even though the definitive impact is unclear yet, one thing is certain that Latin American countries can lessen their extent of historical dependency on the United States. In other words, the US has less of a stake in the region compared to ten years ago and vice versa, meaning that Latin American countries in general are less dependent on the United States.

There is however, a wild card in this equation that complicates this supposed decline in the US influence in Latin America. While the US economic control in Latin America may be on the wane, the rising tide of the Latino or Hispanic population in the United States changes the equation. Since the 1990s, the majority of immigrants to the United States have come from Latin America.¹⁵ The rising number of Latinos in the US population has been fast and steady in recent years. In 2008, the total number of Latinos in the US population overtook that of the African-American population, which made them the largest ethnic minority in the country. It is predicted that by the year 2100, the overall share of Latinos in the total population of the US would constitute 44 per cent.¹⁶ The rise in the Latino population inevitably makes the group a powerful political force in American national politics. Such political strength was in clear display in the last US Presidential elections in November 2012. Latino voters came out in overwhelming numbers and voted to re-elect President Barack Obama in key battleground states of Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, and Virginia. These states until very recently had been considered strong bastions of Republican politics but the rise of Latino voters has made these states lean more towards the Democratic Party in the US politics. As far as local and state level elections are concerned, the south western states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, the four that physically share a common border with Mexico, have always had a significant number of electoral representatives of Latino origin. Such a rising tide could have implications for not only specific bilateral relations between the United States and a Latin American country, but also for the US policies for the region in general.¹⁷

At the same time, many Latin American countries, notably Mexico, have accorded voting privileges to its expatriates living in the US. This particular act makes it an interesting political dynamic in which Latin American politicians campaign for votes and raise campaign contributions within the territorial

limits of the United States.¹⁸ Hemispheric political linkages have become more dynamic than before as travels between the countries of origin and the United States become not only more frequent but the reaction time for Latino citizens of the United States to get involved in the politics of their countries of origin is much greater today than at any time during the 200 years of immigrant history of the United States. The changes described above do not, in any way, replace the critical roles played by the national state and foreign economic forces in the Latin American region, but they do indeed make the states and economic powers pay attention to the rising popular power of competing forces.

The political diversity of Latin America makes its politics inherently fascinating as well as a rich trove of comparisons. Historically, the region had experienced campaigns by generals struggling to restore order, guerrillas fighting for social justice, union leaders organising for better working conditions, party leaders planning for re-election, women demonstrating for rights, and indigenous people demanding respect.¹⁹ However, in the current and widening political space, the jury is out as to who would control or have disproportionate influence over the national policy-making in the various countries. What is clear though is that there exists a wide range of options for political actors to behave and engage in fruitful policy debates over important issues.

Novel developments in the region suggest that the biggest country and the largest economy in the region, namely, Brazil, has become increasingly assertive in staking its political leadership over the region. Economic data suggests that such political moves are not without an economic basis, perhaps to ascertain a larger economic stake in the long run in other Latin American markets. For example, Brazil's share in the overall Latin American Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased to 43 per cent in 2011 from 39 per cent in 2006.²⁰ Its most telling dominance is felt in MERCOSUR, the economic union of countries in the Southern Cone, which comprises four countries: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Within MERCOSUR, Brazil's share of the total GDP has increased to 80 per cent in 2011, from 76 per cent in 2006.²¹ Such economic weight is bound to create its own advantages in creating inroads in terms of political influence, which could lead to greater economic influence in the long run.

This particular fact became clear from a recent development in Central America. In 2009, when the Presidential succession crisis in Honduras kept the Central American region on edge, the role played by Brazil as a political intermediary became critical and kept the crisis from not turning into a full-

blown political stalemate. The Honduran case demonstrated the increasingly limited impact of the US political preference in Central America, as the Obama Administration prevaricated on the question of restoration of ousted President Manuel Zelaya – a position that was far-distanced from the Latin American position. In the end, Manuel Zelaya had to seek refuge in the Brazilian Embassy to escape arrest by Honduran authorities, and Brazil's influence facilitated his peaceful exit from Honduras to the Dominican Republic.

Brazil's rise in economic and political terms has to be seen in the context of the US engagement in military campaigns in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa, which hamper its traditional free-play in other regions, such as Latin America. There are other forces, some domestic and some external, that have limited its ability to act assertively in Latin America in recent years. As the largest debtor nation in the world today, the US is handicapped by an intense political polarisation from within. The schism between the Democratic Party and Republican Party views of the world has become so polarised that Washington D.C. seems more paralysed than ever before when it comes to judicious policy-making. The precipitous decline in non-discretionary US government social spending has hampered much social and human development that is sorely needed to compete effectively in a highly globalised world. To top it all, the continuing campaign against international terrorism is draining the US of treasure and blood that has contributed to a greater sense of insecurity in the domestic population. It is in this kind of climate in the US, then, that the rise of Brazil has to be understood.

In addition to the Brazilian story, one must consider the intra-Latin American trade data, which has increased significantly. During 2006–2011, the intra-Latin American exports increased by 9 per cent annually while the region's exports to the United States increased by 1.4 per cent annually. The total volume of intra-regional Latin American trade is now 54 per cent of the region's total trade with the United States, while it was only 43 per cent in 2006.²² These activities provide a glimpse of a stirred landscape in which not only are Latin American countries more engaged economically with countries other than the United States in far-off regions, such as Asia, but they are also more involved in each other's economies. These changes suggest that the spread of globalisation has created greater opportunities to diversify not only in economic terms but also in forming political alliances with local and regional leaders.

However, the rise of Brazil does not mean that it would immediately take the place of the United States in Latin America. All said and done, the United States is still the largest investor in the region of Latin America as a whole.

The superpower status of the United States is sustained by the very fact that it has been able to provide public goods for the entire international community. These public goods include creating an array of international institutions since World War II to facilitate global transactions of trade, investment, and security over international commerce, as well as its role as a key source of credit when needed.²³

The relative decline discussed earlier, infringes upon the abilities of the United States to continue to function as effectively as before. In this scenario, there may be an important role to be played by Brazil in Latin America as a power broker. Throughout world history, this has been the case. As the dominant power declines in its ability to provide public goods for members of the international community, middle powers rise to take up the slack, and this movement in the power dynamic opens up possibilities for other emerging powers not seen earlier.

In this scenario, several of the following may happen:

1. Brazil increases its hard power vis-à-vis the rest of Latin America.
2. Brazil politically engages itself more in the Central and South American regions within Latin America.
3. Brazil gradually defines its own sphere of orbit and moves away from the US sphere of influence.
4. It engages in issue-specific hard bargaining with the US, European Union, and other dominant powers, such as Japan on issues affecting trade of agricultural products.
5. Brazil becomes a key intermediary between other big powers, a kind of “bridge power”.

As has been seen so far, the increasing weight of Brazil relative to the rest of Latin America amounts to an increase in its hard power, which indicates that the first possibility narrated above, has been taking shape. Brazilian companies are much more active in Latin America, Africa, and now venturing into many countries of Asia in newfound confidence to display the Brazilian advantage in agricultural, industrial, and energy sectors. As a concomitant to the economic engagement, Brazil’s foray into exerting political influence in the Central and South American regions has started to happen. In analysing Brazil’s role in the earlier example of Honduras in 2009, it could be argued that Brazil’s political posturing has changed more in the direction of being assertive in the extended neighbourhood. The third option as narrated above is not so easy, since the US is still the largest economy in the world and it is

still the most dominant military power the world has ever seen. Many of Brazil's exports of arms are tied to the continuing display of the US military campaigns around the world, which creates a market for medium and small arms exports from Brazil. Brazil could act as an intermediary and thus fulfil the role of a "bridge power" between antagonistic powers. Brazil's effort to facilitate a resolution of Iran's enrichment of nuclear fuel by having it sent to a third country, in this case, Turkey, was unsuccessful due to a very vocal negative reaction from the United States. In that respect, it is a limiting possibility. Nevertheless, there are areas in which Brazil could show its inbuilt advantages in not only providing products and services unavailable elsewhere but it could also offer potential opportunities for Indian economic and political actors to gain a greater presence in Brazil and the larger Latin American region.

Opportunities for India in Brazil and Latin America

In the past twenty years, Brazil's poverty rate has declined significantly, much faster than that of India. In 1990, the percentage of people living at or below poverty line in Brazil was 43 per cent. By 2010, this rate had fallen to 21 per cent.²⁴ In India, on the other hand, the percentage of people in poverty is at 37 per cent, a much higher proportion of people. Programmes implemented by Brazil include many innovative ones, such as *Bolsa Familia* and conferring land ownership to slum dwellers in selected urban areas.²⁵ *Bolsa Familia* in particular is important in the Indian context since it involves direct payment to the mother. Recently, the Indian government introduced a direct cash payment programme to needy families in extreme poverty in select locales. The Brazilian model of success should be studied to gain insights into how to better implement such direct cash payments to the poor and how best to gauge their impact after delivery.

The country of Chile, located in the southern cone of South America, offers a different model for eradicating poverty. Its poverty rate has declined from over 33 per cent in 1990 to less than 4 per cent by 2010.²⁶ But Chile has accomplished it largely through a combination of market-based incentives along with a minimum amount of income protection guaranteed by the government. In this respect, Latin America offers a rich variety of models of social development from which to compare and learn. The Indian government could benefit from studying these experiments.

Furthermore, Brazil's advantage in certain agricultural technology, in particular sugar-based ethanol production, has attracted international attention. Given India's disproportional dependence on fossil fuel for energy needs,

sugar based ethanol would go a long-way in saving precious foreign exchange for the Indian government. This is particularly important since India is the second largest sugar producer in the world after Brazil. Potentially, sugar-based ethanol products could be beneficial for India to address its own domestic energy shortfalls.

There is another angle to the energy conundrum. Brazil is self-sufficient in fulfilling its energy requirement and 45 per cent of its energy needs are met from renewable energy sources. In comparison, only 6 per cent of the energy needs of the OECD countries are met from renewable energy sources. For the entire world, the corresponding average is 13 per cent.²⁷

India sorely needs a greater amount of energy emanating from renewable sources.

Brazil, in many ways, is comparable to India in that its exports only constitute about 10–11 per cent of its GDP. In the case of India it is about 18 per cent, according to the 2010 data.²⁸ This is important since Brazil is not an export-oriented economy, unlike many other Latin American economies, such as Chile or Argentina. Therefore, Brazil's needs to increase and diversify exports are comparable to India's. Both could work towards boosting their exports to each other in areas that are in need of diversification.

Brazil is the largest Portuguese speaking country in the world with a strong middle class of about one hundred and thirty million people. Indian computer companies, such as Infosys, Wipro, and Tata Consultancy Services could use the skilled Brazilian labour force to service clients in Portugal as well as the booming Portuguese speaking Brazilian Diaspora in the United States.

Brazil has over 1300 of its large corporations now investing overseas. In the case of India, the number is much higher, close to two thousand. The emerging collaboration between the Tata Company and Marcopolo, the Brazilian bus manufacturer is a case in point. Significant room for cooperation or joint ventures exists in third countries. Petrobras, the Brazilian energy giant could potentially begin a joint venture with the Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) in third countries to jointly explore oil and other energy sources.²⁹ Similarly, Grupo Odebrecht, the large Brazilian Construction company, could potentially collaborate with large Indian construction companies to build and operate projects in third countries located in regions as diverse as Central Asia, Middle-East, South-East Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.

In matters of quality of life, many Latin American countries have excelled. For example, Costa Rica, a largely agricultural country, boasts of the highest

quality of life score of ninety from a possible 100.³⁰ India can learn a lot from Costa Rica when it comes to sustainable agriculture. Costa Rican sustainable experiments are quite unique and are comparable to the Indian rural sector, where most farmers toil on tiny plots of land. A network of agricultural universities and cooperatives teach and empower farmers to best utilise their plots of land to produce sufficient amounts of fruits, food, animal meat, and energy in order to not only survive but also to sell excess energy and other products in the market. This is a very imitable enterprise, and the Government of India should look into the matter.

Indian cities could also gain from collaborating with model city governments in Latin America. Latin America is a predominantly urban region, which means the nature of urban politics will determine the political landscape for years to come. Many cities in Latin America are on the forefront of sustainable urban living.³¹ For example, many fast rising cities mid-range cities in India could learn from many Latin American cities about how best to manage congestion, pollution, waste management, and sustain an eco-friendly livelihood. For example, the City of Curitiba in Brazil, which is an iconic city in terms of promoting environmentally sustainable urban life, could become a model for many mid-sized fast growing cities in India.

Continuing with their fight against urban problems, Latin American cities have been able to provide many basic services to their populations. Indian cities, even the large ones, such as Mumbai and Kolkata, have a lot to learn from them in terms of how best to manage this vexing problem. The data speak for themselves. For example, in Brazil, 83 per cent of urban dwellers have access to sanitation services while in Mexico 91 per cent of urban dwellers have access to such services. These two countries have cities that are larger in population than even the largest of Indian cities like Mumbai and Delhi. It is time for India and Latin American countries to come together in the pursuit of a better and more sustainable life for most of their citizens.

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