

Getting back on track

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa's visit to India helped further strengthen bilateral ties



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South African President Cyril Ramaphosa's visit to India last week was significant. Its value lay in strengthening the people-to-people aspect of the bilateral partnership, and focusing on the implementation of previous agreements signed by the two governments.

As the chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations, Mr. Ramaphosa followed in the footsteps of President Nelson Mandela, who played this role to perfection in 1995. The presence of a South African president at the parade was especially pertinent, as this year is the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, a common hero to both countries.

Through the first Gandhi-Mandela Memorial Freedom Lecture, hosted by the Indian Council of World Affairs, Mr. Ramaphosa related the story of Gandhiji's impact on South Africa, on Mandela, and the way the combined legacy of the two icons moulded the relationship between the two countries. He saw India and South Africa as "two sister countries separated by an ocean, but bound by history." Mr. Ramaphosa's message was that in view of the rich past of this special relationship, the two nations should strive harder to keep it strong and vibrant.

Defence and economic cooperation

As to the dialogue at the government level, there was a shared awareness that New Delhi and Pretoria had signed a large number of agreements, but it was now time to concentrate on implementation, since progress has been slow. The visit resulted in finalisation of a strategic programme of cooperation aimed at implementation in a time-bound manner.

Diplomatic sources have indicated that specific emphasis in the next three years would be on promoting defence and economic cooperation. On the former, the way was cleared last year when an agreement was reached to allow the South African public enterprise, Denel, to participate again in the procurement of military equipment by India. Earlier, for years, the company had stood blacklisted because of using agents to pay kickbacks. Its products and technology are world class, the reason why Delhi chose to devise a compromise. Defence cooperation extends to other areas too: maritime se-

curity, joint training exercises on sea and land, and provision of training facilities.

Despite promotion, bilateral trade and investment are yet to show robust and speedy expansion. A continuous process is under way to identify inhibiting factors. Some of them relate to the small size of the South African economy and its slow rate of growth. Lack of direct air connectivity and South Africa's rigid business visa regime are seen as discouragements. Mr. Ramaphosa agreed to reform the visa regime. He also identified a few sectors where India's investment would be most welcome, such as agri-processed goods, mining equipment and technology, financial sectors and defence equipment.

Multilateral groupings

India-South Africa cooperation in multilateral groupings came up for a close review, especially the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) forum and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). New momentum is being imparted to IBSA, which has been 'displaced' by the larger grouping, BRICS, in recent years. The fact that Mr. Ramaphosa's talk was portrayed as one of the select events marking 15 years of IBSA and that he met the Brazilian president just before his arrival in Delhi indicates that India may be willing to host the much-delayed IBSA summit this year. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Ramaphosa agreed on measures to further strengthen IORA. A specific decision was to enhance cooperation to harness the potential of the Blue Economy within the IORA framework.

The two leaders also witnessed the exchange of two new agreements of cooperation. These formally linked the Research and Information System for Developing Countries, a policy research institute in Delhi, and two premier South African think tanks – the Institute for Global Dialogue and the South African Institute of International Affairs. The three institutions have been entrusted with the task to conduct joint research and dialogue in 1.5 track format (i.e. involving officials and experts) on "areas to further promote practical cooperation with Africa."

In sum, the President's visit was a notable plus in the Modi government's record of deepening relations with Africa. As to the visitors, the Delhi sojourn should have sharpened their awareness of the desirability to pursue a more balanced Asia policy, factoring in the complex dynamics between India and China.



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