

Session on "India's future with Latin America and Caribbean"

Friday, November 20, 2015 | 4:30 PM – 6:00 PM
WWF Auditorium, 172-B, Lodhi Estate, New Delhi-110003



The panel was comprised of the Minister of State for External Affairs, General (Retd) V K Singh, who delivered the keynote address, Ambassador (Retd) Deepak Bhojwani, and the Ambassadors of Mexico, Ms Melba Pria, and Brazil, Mr Tovar da Silva Nunes, in India. The discussion was introduced and moderated by Ambassador (Retd) S K Lambah, Chairman, Ananta Aspen Centre and former Special Envoy of the Prime Minister of India.

Remarks by Panel

Ambassador Lambah pointed to the immense increase in trade and economic exchanges between India and Latin America & the Caribbean (LAC). Import of hydrocarbons by India from Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and Ecuador constituted over fifteen percent of India's total hydrocarbon imports. India's exports of pharmaceuticals, automobiles, textiles and other value added products were also growing though India had a trade deficit with LAC. Trade with the major LAC countries exceeded India's trade with important partners in Europe, Asia and elsewhere.



Ambassador Bhojwani referred to the lack of consciousness within India of the reality of LAC. Its cities are not further than North American destinations. Unfamiliarity with Spanish and Portuguese, even in India's academic institutions, hampers independent, deeper and objective assessment of the potential of LAC. More official patronage is required to promote the relationship.

The Mexican Ambassador outlined the historical connections and deepening economic relations, particularly with Mexico. Latin America seeks closer ties with India as an emerging power. PM Modi's visit to Brazil in July 2014 was an important starting point. Despite the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean and Panama, economic links are greater with other LAC countries. There are 66 Indian companies and joint ventures in Mexico and 13 Mexican companies in India.

The Brazilian Ambassador said the relationship went beyond trade and investment. Business will find solutions to problems it faces. Governments need to facilitate where necessary and focus on social inclusion, poverty alleviation, essential technologies and techniques for common problems. He referred to India's strong relations with Brazil and recent meetings by the Foreign and Agriculture Ministers of Brazil in India.

Minister of State V K Singh outlined the government's interest in LAC, pointing out his own recent and earlier visits to that region. Political relations are excellent, and economic relations with India are growing. India offers hundreds of technical scholarships to LAC every year. He stressed the need for more steps to realize the full potential that exists. An Action Plan is required for the region.

The audience, which included Heads of Mission and diplomats from several LAC countries, commented on the ethos of the region, the political evolution, with reference to the traditional presence of the US and Europe, and the growing importance of India in this context. They sought more and better diffusion of cultural and academic activities and offers from Latin America in India.

Conclusion

All agreed that a vision and a strategy should be evolved. More interaction is required at a political, institutional and individual level. All aspects of the relationship – economic, social, technical and academic – need Ideas, Institutions and Initiatives.



Ideas

- It was recognized that ideas should be formulated by associating LAC Embassies – and nominated agencies – with identified Indian academic, official and business entities, in a core group to formulate plans and suggestions on the way forward.
- A plan of action is needed to capitalize on existing prospects and opportunities. Indeed different groups of people should discuss specific issues for mutual benefits.
- Certain perceptions need to be changed and myths exploded, for example the myth of lack of connectivity between the two regions. The region is not far from India as claimed by many. Furthermore, offering more connecting flights, shipping connections, industries, universities and governments-level contact points would greatly help in overcoming the issue of connectivity.
- India and the region need to come together for the cause of South-South solidarity as both share similar views on critical issues like climate change, nuclear disarmament, trade, and peace keeping. India needs to involve more in international multilateral cooperation with the region.
- India and Latin America and the Caribbean need to understand each other better. The deficit in knowledge persists because the two regions did not invest in this aspect. In this regard, education can be used as a means to prepare the younger generation to be more aware of the region. Compared to China, that has 33 Confucius Institutes in the region, India is not doing much. Hence, more institutions can be set up in the region. Indian students also need to learn more of Spanish and Portuguese.

Institutions

- Institutions, official and unofficial, should be sponsored, monitored and held responsible for the completion of the tasks set for them.
- On the diplomatic front, only 20 embassies of the region are set up in India out of 34 countries and only 14 India embassies are present in the region. An enhanced political and diplomatic presence will open up new vistas in the region.



- The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), whose Troika of Foreign Ministers made its first ever visit to India in July 2012, could serve as counterpart for institutionalising exchanges, as in the case of China, which holds summits at the highest level with CELAC.
- Indian companies should establish infrastructure so that the technological base of Indian expertise can become known to others. India can also learn a lot from Latin America. For instance, 50% of manufactured goods in Latin America are made in Mexico. Mexico can share this experience with India which would benefit its Make in India initiative.

Initiatives

- Initiatives should receive adequate patronage and funding to ensure appropriate attention and follow up. These could be spearheaded by the Ministry of External Affairs, working with government, private and academic agencies, to take concrete steps in areas of finance, trade barriers, science and technology, agriculture, tourism, education and language, etc.
- Specific initiatives which are already in motion should be given priority, such as civil aviation agreements for code sharing between Indian and LAC airlines; finalisation of preferential and free trade agreements; collaboration in outer space and renewable energy; grant of scholarships; and more connections between think tanks to encourage exchange of ideas and expert dialogue.
- On the FTA negotiations, political will is needed to make it happen. This would help bring down the tariffs, which is the need of the hour.
- Instead of mainly focusing on trade, it was suggested that both should look into broader issues like poverty alleviation, social inclusion, sustainable development, and energy with a lens of science, technology, and innovation.
- People to people contact should be enhanced to nurture the relationship. There is warmth in the relationship, but more communication is required.