

Reflecting on India's Nuclear Suppliers Group Bid

Written by Zhiqun Zhu

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/07/14/reflecting-on-indias-nuclear-suppliers-group-bid/>

ZHIQUN ZHU, JUL 14 2016

India's bid to enter the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), the exclusive club that controls global nuclear commerce, was foiled during its plenary session in Seoul at the end of June, as China and a few other members – including fellow BRICS member, Brazil – reportedly insisted on India signing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) before gaining admission.

When the news reached India, many of its citizens were enraged at China, as dozens either protested outside the Chinese embassy in New Delhi or resorted to the social media vent. The story continues to make headlines in the Indian media. However, it must be noted that India's official response has been restrained, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi saying that India and China may differ on several issues, but they will continue to talk 'in a straight-forward manner.'

The incident has been overblown by the media, which provided inaccurate or incomplete accounts of what happened at Seoul. Some Indian media outlets unnecessarily raised expectations before the NSG meeting, assuming that with US support, India's NSG membership was guaranteed. Since the plenary session was held behind closed doors, such reports were only based on speculation. India's Minister of State for External Affairs, General V. K. Singh expressed surprise over reports that Beijing had blocked India's bid. 'The speculation doing the rounds in media regarding China's protest over NSG membership to India is not true,' he said.

Prime Minister Modi also claimed that the criticism in the media about the failure at Seoul was a result of heightened hype due to his successful US visit prior to the NSG's plenary session. 'Had it [the visit and the speech before the US Congress] not been hyped so much, there would not have been so much criticism on the NSG issue. [The Indian] government is being criticized not for any mishandling of the NSG issue, but because we were so successful over there [in the US],' said Modi.

Regrettable as it may be for India, the NSG issue is unlikely to precipitate anything more serious in India-China relations. The bilateral relationship is indeed multifaceted, complex, and sometimes difficult, but is also resilient and much stronger than it appears on surface.

Recent examples of close India-China cooperation can be found at the recently-launched Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the new BRICS Development Bank. High-level contacts have been frequent, including President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi's recent meeting during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Tashkent, and Indian President Pranab Mukherjee's visit to China in May. When Xi and Modi paid state visits to India and China in 2014 and 2015 respectively, they traveled to each other's hometown as a special sign of goodwill. As for entry to pinnacle multilateral clubs, China has consistently supported India's SCO membership. It has also publicly supported India's bid for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council. In contrast, China vehemently opposes Japan's bid.

While they share several international concerns such as curbing poverty and climate change, India and China may not always see eye to eye. In case of the NSG, the Chinese view is that the group itself needs to first agree on the criteria for the entry of countries that are not parties to the NPT. Hence, the recent developments were never a bilateral matter between India and China. As India's External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj remarked, China was

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not opposing India's NSG bid, but only talking about the criteria and procedures to be adopted for membership to the elite club. China's stance was reportedly backed by nearly ten other countries. However, there could be no consensus on the matter among all NSG members.

With a long history of mutual learning and fruitful interactions, India and China are friends as well as competitors today. The 1962 Sino-India War cast a long shadow on the relationship and their border dispute has remained unresolved since. The relationship has, nonetheless, improved much since the 1990s, with trade and cultural exchanges expanding amidst the post-Cold War transitions. A strong indicator of this relationship's maturity is the fact that, today, India's largest trading partner is China.

With that said, more certainly needs to be done to develop this important relationship of the 21st century at both the official and societal levels. According to a 2014 BBC World Service poll, 33% of Indians view China positively, with 35% expressing a negative view; whereas 27% of Chinese view India positively, with 35% expressing a negative view.

In 2013, India and China signed the Border Defense Cooperation Agreement during a visit by India's then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh to Beijing, establishing a formal mechanism to improve security along the Line of Actual Control in Kashmir. However, the agreement has yet to translate into real structural formulations on the ground. In November 2015, General Fan Changlong, the vice-chairman of China's Central Military Commission (the chairman of which is President Xi), led a 26-member delegation to India and held talks with the Indian side, led by Defense Minister, Manohar Parrikar. This was the highest level of a Chinese defense delegation's visit to India in recent years, which signals enhanced defense exchanges. Yet, the meeting achieved no significant progress on the border dispute, as local border-level skirmishes continue to occur sporadically even today.

In this context, India's nuclear program is a sensitive issue in India-China relations. One may recall that in 1998, as India conducted its nuclear tests, its Defense Minister, George Fernandes, called China 'India's potential enemy number one.' Though one may not hear such hostile public comments by senior officials from either side any more, the strategic suspicion runs deep.

China has a strong desire to maintain balance of power in the region, especially when tensions remain high in the South China Sea. It is deeply concerned that India has established close strategic and military ties with the United States and Japan recently. China is unlikely to support India's NSG membership without inviting Pakistan to join the group alongside, given the 'all-weather friendship' between China and Pakistan, which allegedly lobbied intensively against India's entry.

One can also argue that the Indian case at the NSG is a glaring contradiction, and an indication towards the double-standards of the US' policies, rather than simply being a result of China playing politics. The US advocated India's entry on the basis of an exclusive India-specific approach, owing largely to commercial and strategic motivations. It argued that India was like-minded vis-à-vis the NSG states with respect to its non-proliferation commitments. As a Pakistani scholar pointed out, this tailor-made India-specific approach was contrary to the criteria-based approach followed by opposing states, which emphasized equal consideration to all NSG aspirants having similar nuclear credentials.

For India, participation in international organizations is highly symbolic of its growing clout, and the NSG membership is such a pathway to great-power status. Some Chinese continue to view India as an inferior rival and do not take its pursuits seriously. Such chauvinistic mentality must be ditched in China's India policy. China is not in a position to antagonize an important neighbor like India, given the many challenges China faces in its foreign relations.

There is no need to panic about India-China relations due to India's recent NSG setback, since the relationship remains robust. Yet, China needs to reassure India that it supports India's desire to play a bigger role in international affairs. India, for its part, must continue to resist wooing from conservative forces in the US and Japan towards an anti-China alliance.

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Moving forward and taking different interests into account, the current NSG members could perhaps reach a deal on both India's and Pakistan's memberships. They can support India's membership in the near future on the condition that India will not block Pakistan's membership when it's ready. With adequate patience and wisdom, India's NSG ambition will be realized and India-China ties strengthened.

About the author:

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