

Jun 12 2016 : The Economic Times (Delhi)

The Great Wall Around NSG

Rajesh Rajagopalan

China's opposition to India's membership is only the latest indication of its strategy to contain New Delhi

China's decision in Vienna to object to India entering the [Nuclear Suppliers Group](#) (NSG) should not come as too much of a surprise. China has been uncharacteristically open about opposing India's membership. This also makes it unlikely that it will change its view in the next 10 days, before the NSG meets in plenary in Seoul on June 24.

China's action has little to do with NSG, but is simply the latest indication of [China's containment strategy against India](#).

Understanding this reality is the first step to finding an appropriate strategy to managing India's relations with China.

The [NSG membership](#) is important for India but not so much for any material gain. Its [importance is mostly](#) that it [strengthens the legitimacy of India's nuclear programme](#) and permits India to [have some say](#) in making the rules of the global nuclear order, all without joining the Nuclear Non proliferation Treaty (NPT). Since the [NSG](#), under American pressure, had in 2008 [already permitted India to engage in nuclear commerce](#) with other countries, what China's veto does mostly is hurt India's pride but not much more.

China's objections have little to do with its fidelity to NSG rules. NSG has admitted members who were not NPT members. Moreover, China's own actions after it joined the NSG demonstrate a completely dismissive attitude towards

NSG rules. Against these rules, and its own solemn commitment, China agreed to supply additional nuclear power plants to Pakistan.

China's actions are not about the NSG as much as an attempt to balance and contain India within South Asia. This is why it might not object if India and Pakistan join together, thus ensuring both their hyphenation and having someone inside to use as its cat's paw against India. But this is not likely to happen for a while because Pakistan's terrible proliferation record makes other NSG members wary of letting it join.

The policymakers in New Delhi need to recognise China's containment strategy against India and respond accordingly. China's behaviour is a reflection of three factors. The first is the balance of power in Asia. It was clear since the 1950s that India and China would be the most powerful countries in Asia.

This led China to form an axis with Pakistan that is based on nothing but their common desire to balance India. India has never fully acknowledged or responded to this axis.

The second is China's rise, which has led to greater aggressiveness with all of its neighbours and with the US. Though China initially attempted to portray its rise as “peaceful“ and different from previous great powers, these are now distant memories. China's behaviour has become increasingly unyielding and pugnacious, as when the Chinese foreign minister told his Singaporean counterpart in 2010, in effect, that small countries should know their place.

It is important to remember this because in the coming days there will be arguments that China's actions are the consequence of India getting closer to the US. That would be wrong. There is a certain uniformity in Chinese behaviour that

applies to all of its neighbours, not just India. These are, moreover, neighbours with which China has close economic ties, countries that tried hard to engage with China in order to integrate it into the regional order in the hope that this would tame any temptations of power. They have all reluctantly concluded that China's power can only be balanced, not tamed, and are seeking closer security ties with the US because it is the only country that can effectively provide such balance.

The US too tried hard to integrate China into the existing international order, seeking to partner with it rather than contain it. For almost a decade, the US was also diverted by its entanglements in the Middle East, giving China plenty of space to grow.

US President Barack Obama's initial instinct, as befits his liberal view of international politics, was also to frame the relationship as a partnership, the G-2. None of this has helped keep China's rise peaceful. As China's power grew, its ambitions have also expanded. China, it turns out, is just another great power and its change in behaviour tracks well with its growing power.

Finally, China also has a paranoid strategic culture that automatically sees the world in terms of conflicts. This is sometimes short-sighted. Indian leaders should be intimately familiar with this. It is this short-sightedness that unnecessarily antagonised a very pro-China Jawaharlal Nehru, helped cement the Indo-Soviet alliance, forced India to restart its nuclear programme by helping Pakistan's nuclear weapons quest and is driving an instinctively anti-American Indian strategic elite into reluctantly considering an alliance with the US.

Strategic Blindness

That Beijing's behaviour is so self-defeatingly short-sighted should provide no comfort to New Delhi because it has led to a policy that has consistently sought to balance and contain India. China's decision to object to India's entry into the NSG is no different. **China is reacting** not so much to India's behaviour as much as **to India's power**. As India's power grows, India **should prepare for China's containment strategy** to become even more frenetic. In New Delhi, there is almost a wilful blindness to this. The dangers of such strategic blindness cannot be overstated.

If there is one positive outcome of the NSG issue, it is that it provides a further demonstration of China's containment strategy. If India's strategic community and decision-makers continue to sleep on, they will have no one to blame but themselves.

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