

A Rattled China Opposes India's NSG Bid

by Brig Arun Sahgal, Senior Visiting Fellow



A lot has been written about India having expended huge diplomatic and political capital chasing the chimera of NSG membership. The rationale offered by old status quoist "China hands" and neo elites is that once China had openly indicated its resistance, it was a wasteful effort on the part of India to have even persisted with attempts at securing the NSG membership. They highlight the fact that with the 2008 exemption in place, there was no hurry for India to take on this failed effort that, apart from damaging India's reputation, has the potential of rupturing the delicate balance of India-China relations.

The subtext behind this perspective is that India got carried away by its burgeoning strategic partnership with the US, indulged in this premature enterprise based on the belief that US heft, backed by India's own growing global standing in the wake of strong economic indicators, would carry the day. Both are deemed as an over-estimation on the part of Indian diplomacy, leading to failure.

A further point made is that US global power and influence are on the decline and the US does not carry the same clout as it did in 2008. The contention that the US either did not or was unable to use its influence in pushing India's case is, under this line of argument, said to be highlighted by India's case being taken up by mid-level American diplomats, while the leadership remained dormant or uninterested even after the highly successful visit of the Indian PM to the US. The underlying theme in these arguments is to question the dependability of the US as a trustworthy strategic partner, and whether it was at all worth riling China for no apparent political gains.

While the arguments outlined above may have merit from a completely dated status quoist Indian mindset, there can be no doubt that the driving force behind the rejection of NSG membership for India was China, based on the latter's own political calculations. This begs the question: what are the motivations and compulsions that have made China come out in the open against India and its strident and rigid stand?

IN THIS ISSUE

- ❖ **A Rattled China Opposes India's NSG Bid**
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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
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The discourse becomes even more interesting going by the commentaries in the Chinese press, which talks about India misunderstanding the Chinese perspective. One such discourse in the Global Times¹, the CPC’s English mouthpiece, ticking off India for misreading Chinese intentions, makes a push for a sort of compromise by talking about closer India-China cooperation, not in the geo-strategic sense but in the geo-economic arena, emphasizing that the two countries need to cooperate closely to build an Asian century as a desired goal for all Asia. Conclusions are obvious: China can do business with India but without compromising its strategic interests. India, presumably, does not have that luxury.

Another Chinese opinion piece discusses India’s position and more importantly objections for not joining the “Belt and Road”, a major Chinese geo economic initiative aimed at Asian connectivity and integration. Blaming India for giving precedence to geo-politics over geo-economics, this piece accuses India of following a hedging strategy with strong military and strategic implications. It accuses the present Indian government of “adopting asymmetrical strategy to secure a dominant position in the Indian Ocean through bolstering military and security cooperation with these island nations”, highlighting PM’s visits to IOR littoral countries. It also accuses India of furthering “geo-economic and political competition in the Asia-Pacific through military and strategic coordination with the US, Japan and some Southeast Asian countries²”.

It should be apparent that Chinese motivations and actions are being driven by the unfolding geo-strategic landscape in Asia, centered on close cooperation between the concert of maritime democracies astride rimland Asia. China sees this as part of an American rebalancing strategy to contain China, as evidenced by the unfolding drama in the South China Sea. Singling out India is part of a strategy of soft coercion, and includes a rigid stand on the NSG to highlight to the Indian government the consequences of its actions.

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This brings me to the more important issue of the underlying drivers of Chinese behaviour. Two such drivers can be identified. First is the Chinese worldview and ambition of achieving great power status and hegemony in Asia. Xi Jinping has unfolded a revitalization agenda aimed at creating an economically, politically, diplomatically, scientifically and militarily strong China. As a result, in propagating its “Revitalization Agenda”, China puts itself at the “Centre of the core around which the periphery must exist”. This looks upon China as a “Geo Gravitational Centre of Asia” with influence over the abutting periphery and the maritime zones. The October 30, 2013 Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference held soon after Xi Jinping came to power was all about highlighting the security and domination of the periphery, including the abutting maritime zones, in terms of SLOCs, maritime trade and resources. In this perception, it is imperative for a revitalized China to dominate the regional political, economic, security and cultural discourse.

“Singling out India is part of a strategy of soft coercion”



“China-India relations have maintained sound and stable development over recent years. We believe the acceptance of new NSG members should be decided by all member states based on thorough discussions pursuant to regulations and rules of the group. I don’t think this is an issue concerning bilateral relations.”

- **Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying**
(source:http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1374859.shtml)

China’s perception of its growing power has resulted in a “China First Syndrome”, implying that “China will accept and support the existing order as long as it serves its

strategic interests; otherwise, it will play by its own rules and norms.³⁷ This motivates Chinese behaviour in three different ways. One, its engagement and cooperation is designed to increase perceptions of China as a regional and a global leader. Second, China is particularly sensitive to events that the Chinese perceive as affronts to their dignity as a nation or undermine its interests. Third, and most importantly, China can be expected to react strongly to developments or actions by powerful states or their allies and partners on their periphery, such as a neo containment or rebalancing strategy.

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Thus, from the Chinese perspective, growth of an alternate power center is an anathema, howsoever remote the proposition may be. Seen in this context the rise of India, its global standing and economic growth that out paces that of China is simply unacceptable. Even more is India’s attempts to sit at the high table as China’s co-equal and be feted by same western powers who were responsible in the first place for the rise of China with their economic engagement, investments and markets. Having two rising powers in the same region in one century is unacceptable to the Chinese establishment. Under the circumstances, India has to be denied this growing status come what may, through subterfuge, coercion, and inducements. The present Chinese leadership believes that it understands power politics much better than the Hu Jintao regime did.

Next is the new model of big power relations propagated by President Xi, which is aimed at freeing China from strategic competition with the US that could make the two super powers collide, particularly as their strategic mistrust worsens and rivalry intensifies in the Asia-Pacific. Chinese leaders openly assert China as a ‘big power’, one that now equals the US. In the perception of Chinese leaders, only the US and China qualify as big powers that must work together to build the “new model”.

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China’s ‘unilateral’, ‘provocative’, ‘coercive’ and ‘escalatory’ behavior is being driven by perceptions of a US regional decline and its decreasing appetite to get enmeshed in regional conflicts. As a result, Chinese foreign policy behaviour has begun to take on a more aggressive turn by leveraging its rising economic and military power to serve its expanded foreign policy and strategic objectives.



“India will keep impressing upon China that mutual accommodation of interests, concerns and priorities is necessary to move forward bilateral relations”

*– Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Vikas Swarup
(Source: <http://indianexpress.com/>)*

The regional scenario for the Chinese, however, began to change in 2015 and thereafter, when the US began to take counter-measures to check China’s territorial advances, including sending a warship into the SCS across a Chinese claimed EEZ, as part of freedom of navigation patrols, as also questioning China’s Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea.

The multilateral Malabar maritime exercises involving major naval platforms, growing India-Japan entente, talk of common maritime architecture, advancing India-US strategic partnership, the Modi-Obama Vision Statement of 2015 focusing on the South China Sea, as also growing India-US defense cooperation, has sent a clear signal to China that a counter strategy to contain assertive Chinese behaviour and enforce a more rule based regional order is being put in place.

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This is highly destabilizing from the Chinese perspective, which sees China’s strategy of revitalization coming unstuck or at least under serious challenge. The issue then is, where does India fit into this scenario?

India is China’s neighbour and not an US alliance partner. The calculating Chinese leadership realizes that lingering discourse within India still questions the legitimacy of India-US strategic convergence as one between co-equals. Second, China has cleverly put in place, or at least is trying to, an India-containment strategy in South Asia, through

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its proxies like Pakistan. It is also cleverly working to bring Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar under its sphere of influence and weaken India’s political and economic hold.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the flagship scheme to seek access to the warm waters of the Arabian Sea, influence the Persian Gulf region and incrementally dominate the IOR and littorals. This is being countered by India’s strategic partnership with the US and growing convergence of interest between IOR and Asia-Pacific littorals. This again is being seen as against Chinese core interests and clearly as a ‘China containment strategy’.

Strong arm tactics against India and overtures of geo-economic cooperation are part of tactics to wean away India from a more than acceptable tighter embrace with the US, and to indicate the costs of such a misadventure. Little known is the fact that as part of its “carrot” strategy, China has unleashed a major charm offensive in India precisely at a time when it is arm-twisting us on the NSG. Scores of our “think tank” experts are being taken on multi-city junkets by the Chinese Embassy aimed at creating a favourable support base in India.

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But the unmistakable reality is that the “stick” strategy of China on India’s NSG membership is more of a reaction by a somewhat rattled China whose “revitalisation dream” appears to be going awry. India’s strategic and think tank community would do well to have a clear understanding of

China’s unwavering opposition to India’s rise to global power status and help create public awareness of this reality.

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