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Status Politics: India, China and the Nuclear Suppliers Group

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Synopsis

Contrary to appearances, India's "failure" to obtain entry to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) at the recent Seoul meeting has not left it significantly worse off. China's strategy of keeping India out of the NSG has, however, left it no better off.

Commentary

INDIA'S DETERMINED effort to become a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which regulates civilian nuclear commerce, has once again met with resistance from China and a few smaller states and the issue has been postponed for a future date. At the NSG's Seoul meeting in June 2016, China emphasised the need to formulate rules-based criteria for membership, called for India to sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), and argued in favour of Pakistan's entry.

Given Beijing's willingness in 2008 to allow a path-breaking special waiver for India to trade in nuclear materials despite its refusal to sign the NPT, this was hardly a consistent argument. In any case, China's apparent success in keeping India out of the NSG has been limited.

Status and Respect

Why has India doggedly pursued NSG membership? Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj told a press conference on 19 June 2016 that there is a difference between sitting inside and sitting outside a room. But India's quest is not just about its desire

to participate in making the rules of nuclear commerce: since the NSG's rules are made by consensus and every member has a veto, India cannot do much.

What Swaraj was pointing to is the importance for India of having a seat at the table in a major international institution. The NSG issue is not so much about nuclear commerce as about status. It is about being treated with respect and not as an outcast in the global nonproliferation regime, which – as a non-signatory to the NPT – India has long experienced. But India is not too badly off despite its apparent setback in Seoul.

Like rising individuals and social groups, rising nations too desire status and want to be treated with respect by other nations. The major power status that India seeks typically requires, it is said, two chief markers of high status: possession of material (economic and military) power and membership of elite institutions that regulate the system. There is also a third marker built upon the first two: respect gained from contribution to public goods, i.e. active provision of support for the stability and welfare of the global system. India, still in the relatively early stage of emerging as a major player in global politics, has begun to make significant status gains in all three realms.

Three Markers of Big Power Status

First, since the 1990s, India has embarked on a period of rapid economic growth, which makes it potentially a major engine of global economic growth. This has been accompanied by massive investment in military modernisation, making India the world's largest importer of arms in the last five years. Notably, the shift in its status from "emerging" to "rising" power followed its 1998 nuclear tests, which brought initial criticism and a brief period of sanctions, but thereafter quick recognition of its potential as a major player in Asian politics.

Second, rising India quickly embarked on a concerted effort through membership of international institutions. Apart from staking claims to permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council and entry into the NSG, it sought and gained inclusion in global-level institutions and groupings such as the Group of 20 major economies, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa); and regional institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and East Asia Summit (EAS); , the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

Additionally, India's status as a high-ranked player has been boosted by a series of strategic partnerships with the major powers – the United States, Japan, Britain, France, Germany and Russia. In short, India has made considerable headway in its efforts to enhance its international status. NSG membership is only a part of this wider and largely successful effort that has raised India's strategic profile and international status.

The NSG and India's Status

The NSG – a key constituent of the nuclear nonproliferation regime – is not insignificant. India wants to be accepted as an insider by a set of institutions and

rules that have long treated it as an outsider because of its refusal to sign the NPT, which New Delhi rejects as a symbol of “nuclear apartheid”. China’s blocking of India’s membership is from this perspective designed to deny India what it believes to be its legitimate due and to relegate it to the status of second-level powers.

However, India’s NSG setback needs to be seen in a wider perspective. Its real breakthrough occurred in 2008 when the NSG not only waived restrictions on nuclear trade with India, but – far more importantly – clearly if inferentially recognised India’s legitimate possession of nuclear weapons by agreeing to a formal division of India’s civilian and military nuclear facilities. In effect, the legal argument that India is an “outsider” possessing nuclear weapons is no longer tenable.

The fact that all NSG members (including China) did not oppose the waiver renders the arguments at Seoul about the need for India to sign the NPT an afterthought that has come too late. The fact that the great majority of states supports India’s claim to NSG membership means that, in a sense, it has already gained the recognition it wants. More recently, the way has also been cleared for India’s entry into the Missile Technology Control Regime, another key component of the nonproliferation regime.

The Responsible State

The third marker of respect comes from recognition of a state as “responsible” and as a contributor to the stability of the system. India has gone a long way to achieving this by exercising restraint vis-à-vis the use of force in relation to Pakistan specifically and its wider neighbourhood generally; actively using its military capabilities for the public good (such as disaster relief and counter-piracy action); adopting a non-deployed nuclear posture; and conforming to the norms of the nonproliferation regime.

Nothing illustrates its recognition as a responsible state more than the fact that there has been little comment on its surging military spending and advanced weapons tests – a stark contrast with the anxieties evoked by China’s military modernisation and strategic posture.

China’s determination to keep India down has had relatively little impact in the larger scheme of things. Its own status-related problems remain. China does possess the first two markers of status – power and institutional position. But it has some way to go before it achieves acceptance as a responsible state. Trying to keep India down will not help it.

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