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Whatever narrative India internalises will have interesting implications for Indian foreign policy – and by extension the Asian security order – for years to come.



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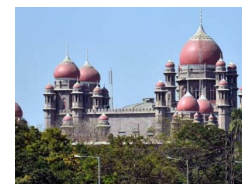
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India's bid to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) – a 48-country cartel that controls nuclear exports – failed this past Friday during the group's plenary session. Despite a well-publicised diplomatic full-court press by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his foreign secretary with meetings across the globe to advocate on India's behalf – including **with** Chinese President Xi Jinping – the NSG was unable to reach

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Most analysts agree that India's application faced predictably long odds due to China's opposition. Nevertheless India charged headlong into the plenary session. The puzzle then is if India faced such daunting odds, why did it raise expectations and put so much diplomatic capital on the line? There appear to be four dominant explanations being proffered: miscalculation, sunk costs, abandonment, or a strategic move for longer-term returns.

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Miscalculation

First, New Delhi may have simply gotten the math wrong. It knew the cost of gaining membership would be high, but **miscalculated it could squeeze out a win**. China's opposition to India's membership bid was unexpectedly tenacious. Beijing – which has historically gone to great lengths in order to avoid diplomatic isolation – demonstrated no such compulsion in taking the lead in blocking India. But India also underestimated opposition from **countries** like Austria, Brazil, Ireland, and Switzerland – countries with strong nonproliferation credentials uncomfortable with a non-NPT member like India joining the NSG. Once China's position was clear, these countries gained political space to voice reservations about India's application. The problem with

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Sunk costs

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Another logic may have compelled India to knowingly fight and lose the NSG battle. The Modi government sought a low-cost diplomatic win that turned out to be much more challenging than expected, but it had already invested too much to walk away. India – originally shut out of the NSG on the grounds that it hadn't signed the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) – received a waiver from the group to engage in nuclear commerce in 2008. This allowed the country to ink civilian nuclear cooperation deals with countries as a de facto member. Full NSG membership, then, was less about enhancing security or energy interests (since it would likely continue to be **denied** new enrichment and reprocessing technology). Instead, India truly sought the prestige and recognition of its “**place in the world**” that accompanied an institutional seat at the high table governing the global nuclear order.

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As India tread further down this path, it faced more formidable opposition than expected. As its leadership increasingly staked India's reputation on this vote, backing

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A third narrative contends India was back-stabbed and abandoned by its friends. Countries previously committed to India like Switzerland are said to have made a last-minute U-turn while the United States shirked on its commitments late and failed to fight for India as it had in 2008. American support – which was instrumental to India getting the NSG waiver in 2008 – was less robust than India expected. Although President Obama publicly called on NSG countries to support India's membership application, some were surprised that he did not personally strong-arm countries to vote in India's favour as President Bush had done in 2008.

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More likely, accusations of abandonment stem from yet another miscalculation. Many forecasted less US support in this NSG vote due to lower US stakes in Indian prestige, reduced leverage given increased diffusion of power alongside Chinese assertiveness, and an India continuously equivocating on its US partnership combined with a US president known to deplore free-riders.

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the resolve and capabilities of adversaries and allies. New Delhi went into the NSG plenary session knowing full well that it wasn't going to get membership this time around, but perhaps playing the long game to reveal information to itself, to international onlookers, and to internal audiences.

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India may have believed fighting this round would enhance learning to improve its chances in a future round – losing a battle but setting itself up to eventually win the war. Rejection may sting, but clarifies where support and opposition comes from, and which countries to diplomatically target for persuasion or bargaining. Some **reports** now suggest India's application will have another shot and may go through by the end of this year.

Another strategic take was to use the NSG process to expose adversary intentions to international onlookers and legitimate Indian foreign policy expansion. India may have pushed an NSG confrontation with China to intentionally expose what it believed to be China's **aggressive** objectives of containing India's rise to major players like Russia, Europe, the United States, and East Asian states. Now that Beijing's intentions have been exposed, New Delhi has more space to pursue a **balancing strategy** in Asia, portraying it as security-seeking.

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intentions and whether to upset the status quo. After China's overt rejection of India's NSG bid, the gulf between cautious non-aligners and aggressive counter-balancers may narrow and allow Indian strategic elites to coalesce around a more cohesive China strategy.

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Implications



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from this episode, and whatever narrative it internalises will bear implications for its future strategic behaviour.

If the dominant narrative is miscalculation, we should expect to see India expend more political capital upgrading India's foreign policy "software" and investing in serious economic reforms, both of which will be consequential in future high-stakes diplomatic negotiations. If the abandonment explanation prevails, India might embrace petulant, retaliatory behavior like threatening to scuttle important international agreements like the Paris climate agreement. A narrative around incremental learning and updated information would lead India to renew its push for membership with carefully calibrated diplomatic bargaining, though it risks reopening its waiver status and unraveling substantive gains.

Should the external balancing account take hold, we should observe India willing to take more risks like closer collaboration with the United States with the signing of foundational agreements, and enhanced military-to-military ties (joint exercise, arms sales) with Asian states balancing China. If the strategic elite unification narrative takes hold with convergence on a more coherent and confident policy towards China, we should expect to see bolder stances – for

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Only time will tell what narrative India adopts and whether it continues to invest as much in NSG membership. However, whatever narrative India internalises will have interesting implications for Indian foreign policy – and by extension the Asian security order – for years to come.

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Sameer Lalwani (@splalwani) is Deputy Director of the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center, a nonprofit, nonpartisan Washington D.C.-based think tank, where Shane Mason (@shaneamason) is Research Associate.

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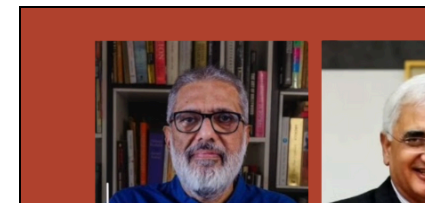
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