



ENTRY INTO NSG – SELF-HELP TO THE RESCUE



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23 September 2017

Tucked away in the inner pages of a national newspaper on 28 Aug 2017 was a short and cryptic news item that the US was “eyeing more ways to back India’s NSG bid”. It may be recalled that at the last plenary meeting of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in June this year, no progress was registered on the Indian application for membership. An informal discussion is now scheduled for November 2017. While Indian diplomacy would be undertaking the necessary outreach, the news report datelined Washington appears a curious one at this juncture.

What “more ways” can the US hope to find to “actively support” India’s membership bid? It is well known that China is the biggest hurdle to India’s joining the NSG. What has changed in US-China relations to give the Trump administration any hope that Washington would be able to persuade Beijing to concede? Rather, from all that’s visible, China has only become more assertive in its posture. Having amassed economic and military strength, and the political clout that goes with it, today’s China has made it amply clear that it would rather be giving orders than taking them. In any case, US-China relations have only become more troubled in recent times over the North Korean imbroglio as well as bilateral trade issues. In the contemporary scenario then, US may not have leverages to force China’s hand on grant of NSG membership to India. So, despite all its good intentions and the belief that India’s NSG membership is “very important for the US”, there is not much that the US can practically do. While its willingness to do so is certainly welcome, India must not pin its hopes on this alone.

Self-help will have to be the answer in this regard. This would mean finding modes of engaging directly with China. Much like the handling of the Doklam stand-off, India must stand its ground on the issue of NSG membership too with a quiet confidence and firm demeanour. India can move on some fronts to fortify its case for membership with a view to changing the Chinese position.

Firstly, the Indian nuclear power programme must remain on track, in fact gain momentum, to showcase its strength and scale. The lucrative nature of the Indian nuclear market must once again become evident. When this was so in mid-2000s, the US found the means to exceptionalise India's engagement with the international nuclear regime. Thereafter, the attraction of the promised expansion of the Indian nuclear programme dimmed in the aftermath of the nuclear accident at Fukushima and the rather stringent nuclear liability law that the country passed. Owing to this, domestic and foreign nuclear suppliers expressed reservations on building nuclear reactors in India. While India was finding ways to resolve the issue, China's nuclear programme raced ahead. Hopefully, however, the period of lull for India is now over since the Indian government has recently announced approval of ten new indigenous nuclear plants of 700 MW capacity each. This move will rekindle faith in the Indian commitment to nuclear power and revive the promise of the many MOUs that India has already signed.

Secondly, India must take active measures to emerge as a nuclear supplier itself. It has the capability and the capacity to do so. And once that happens, it would change India's de facto position too. Interestingly, in fact, one of the criteria posted on the NSG website for membership is having the ability to supply items covered by NSG. With the capability that India has today and what it plans to build in the coming years, the country will be a major player in the nuclear power domain. The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL), the only designer, constructor and operator of Indian nuclear power plants, already has the technical expertise to provide nuclear technology of 220 and 540 MWe capacity reactors to developing countries. It might be lacking in the ability to provide financial and fuel guarantees. But this matter can be resolved by entering into an agreement of sorts with another nuclear supplier. It would be worthwhile to explore such possibilities, especially since the global nuclear industry is in a state of flux right now.

Thirdly, India must attempt to look for concessions to offer a climb down possibility to China. This is the first time China has dared to stand alone as a principal obstructionist. Having taken a strident position on the matter, a change in China's position will require some deft backdoor diplomacy, a la Doklam. One idea here could be some kind of nuclear cooperation with China. This could take many forms: R&D on new generation of reactors (both have a mutual interest in this owing to their energy demand and growing environmental concerns); cooperation between their nuclear Centres of Excellence on training on nuclear safety and security etc. Such collaborative ventures could not only soften China's position over time, but make it respect India's nuclear capability too.

The bottom-line is that entry into the NSG will require display of Indian clout and capacity, rather than by depending on others. The US did the heavy weightlifting for India at a crucial time when the circumstances allowed it to do so. The scenario is different today. It would be best for India to find ways of doing more for itself to facilitate its own entry into the NSG.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Keywords: India-China relations, Doklam stand-off, Border Disputes, PLAAF, Indian Air Force

