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India and the Parleys for Nuclear Supply Group Membership

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(though this paper is a little dated, the points mentioned are still relevant. The fault was not his, but there were problems in opening his mail.)

The last few weeks have witnessed intense discussions and lobbying both in India and the rest of the world about how the NSG membership by India would be dealt with .The ultimate result notwithstanding, such intensity and astute campaigning by India has brought out the best Indian diplomacy has worked under the new Government.

India was seen engaging at many levels both with the supporters and the detractors including the main opponent China. No stone was left unturned to enlist the support of the members of the NSG. China ultimately turned out to be the main spoil sport by clubbing India and Pakistan together and insisting on the signing of the NPT prior to being admitted in to the NSG. It is important to note that Modi (on the side lines of the Shanghai Cooperation organization (SCO) where India is now a formal member) requested Xi to carry out a “fair and objective”^[1] assessment of the India’s bid for entry to the NSG. China however has remained unmoved and is likely to delay the entry of India to the NSG. The delayed entry in to NSG would come in the way of India’s quest for nuclear power to meet its increasing energy requirements in the coming decades. This move by China is not just about restricting the entry of India in to the NSG but has other hidden objectives of China to contain India at any cost. This paper seeks to analyse the multi-faceted implications of this standoff between India and China.

First and foremost it is about China’s disquiet about the growing stature of India a rival in Asia in international relations. That USA another opponent and the main adversary of China has supported India to the hilt is again a factor that has unnerved China. China is already weary about the enhanced levels of engagement between India, USA, Japan, Australia and other major players. Though India has not joined the

joint patrols^[ii] in support of the Freedom of Navigation operations with USA in the South China Sea where tensions are mounting, it has been vocal about the concept of the FONOPs as enshrined in the UNCLOS. It has deployed high value war ships ^[iii]for Malabar exercise being conducted in East China Sea along with USA and Japan. India also did not worry too much including Japan in the 20th edition of Malabar conducted in the Bay of Bengal ^[iv] which was successfully concluded in October 2015. In China's assessment, this is building up considerable pressure points against China in SCS, ECS and also in the Indian Ocean. As highlighted by this author in another analysis, the pivot to Asia, the joint patrols in the South China Sea, the Malabar exercise in the East China Sea have all the potential to physically contain China with in its own nine dash line.

Within the South China Sea, the smaller neighbours Vietnam, Philippines, Taiwan and even Indonesia are challenging the might of China with active support of USA. India which has substantial interests in the South China Sea has increased the level of engagement with the key players in the Pacific. The training support to the Air Force and Navy of Vietnam has brought about new security dynamics in SCS. India has also set up satellite monitoring facility in Vietnam though for civil purposes. It has also recently supplied Indian built ASW corvettes to Philippines. These engagements in China's neighbourhood are stifling as far as China is concerned.

The recent efforts by some of the ASEAN members to bring out a joint statement against China^[v] is again discomfoting for China which sees a renaissance of anti-China sentiments particularly from the countries who have a dispute with China on maritime territories. However, the fact that China was able to ensure that there was no joint statement issued (in fact though it was issued by Malaysia, it was also retracted under pressure by giving some excuse of modifying the statement which never saw the daylight) demonstrated that China can still browbeat its smaller neighbours particularly in regional organisations such as the ASEAN. China was obviously worried about the impact of this declaration by the ASEAN members which would show China in poor light as the world awaits the decision (by the arbitration court in Hague) in respect of the claim by Philippines which is expected to uphold the claim of the smaller neighbour. This is again a factor that would work in India's favour as the members of the region would welcome an opportunity to engage with India with a view to counter Chinese influence in the region.

The Indian elephant which has a phenomenal memory will not forget that it is China that is blocking the NSG aspirations, it is China that is not willing to admit India on the high table of the United Nations Security Council, and it is China that despite clear evidence has blocked the resolution against the founder of JeM Masood Azhar^[vi]. Every action listed above is aimed at blocking India's entry in to the big league and also to support its all-weather ally Pakistan which is considered strategically important. Having invested 46 billion US Dollars in China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)^[vii] which will connect China through the Central Asian Republics to Gwadar which is the gateway to the Arabian Sea, China has no choice but to protect its interests and investments in Pakistan by supporting Pakistan even when it is in the wrong. This in the long run is self-defeating and China appears to ignore this unfolding reality. From the point of view of Pakistan, with increasing issues with USA which is disappointed with Pakistan (which was seen as using USA under the ruse of counter terrorism in Afghanistan) the dependence on China will increase tremendously. The case in point is about the reluctance of USA to sell F-16s to Pakistan unless it paid for it^[viii]. Those in the Pakistan establishment have gone on record indicating that if that be the case; they would look

elsewhere for their military hardware is illustrative of the deepening mistrust between Pakistan and USA. China on its part would like to invest heavily in Pakistan both for economic, military and strategic leverages which also have a convergence in anti-India factor.

Coming back to the main issue of the membership of NSG, China has been categorical about its objection to the entry of NSG to the exclusive club. While it quotes the non-signing of the NPT as the main cause, it has tried to club Pakistan a known offender in proliferation with India which has demonstrated to the world that it is a responsible nuclear power. By the determined action to block India's membership in the NSG, it has won no friends in India. China has colluded with Pakistan on every action aimed at putting India on the defensive.

China has itself to blame for the hardening of the Indian resolve to work at many levels. While in the last few days, China's statements were seen as some softening of the stand, in reality, it has not diluted its stand and is unlikely to budge from its original position. Any dilution of its stand would be seen by Pakistan as being let down by its all-weather friend China.

China officially has maintained that this would not affect bilateral relations with India. But it is clear that India will remain suspicious of all the actions of China that are aimed at containing India by finding excuses. India cannot be blamed for being unenthusiastic about the nature of engagement with China in future. While India cannot overnight change its economic or political relations with China, it will start exploring options for meeting its aspirations as a growing Asian power of eminence in global affairs. China hardly needs to be reminded that many nations who are deeply engaged economically with China are also looking to move away their assets from China and bring it to India where the climate for investment and the growth patterns are conducive for economic and strategic engagement. The recent economic trends have shown that India is on a positive trajectory ahead of even China and India will pull out all stops to ensure that its trajectory is not at the mercy of China's manipulations.

All responsible nations need to work on the worst case scenario and India is no exception. Should the NSG admission be delayed due to the Chinese stand, it is not the end of the world for India. To that extent, some in India have even argued that there is no need to chase this membership with such intensity^[ix] and in the Hindu today (24th June 2016) Satyabrata Pal who was the High Commissioner in Pakistan has gone to the extent of suggesting that it was not warranted. But, there are obvious benefits of being members as many amendments have been issued since the waiver to India was granted. They may have to be renegotiated from inside and not from outside.

It might even propel India to look at other alternatives for meeting its energy demands. The case though not entirely similar reminds one of the sanctions that were imposed soon after the nuclear blasts in 1998 when India was isolated and was denied many dual use technologies. India reinvented itself at that time and was able to find innovative solutions to many of the technological challenges that confronted it. The notable example is of the LCA which was heavily dependent on US support for testing many of the flight algorithms, hard ware and software. That the team came out victors demonstrated the inherent strength of the nation which was capable of facing stiff sanctions^[x]

In the worst case scenario of a deferred NSG the situation now is so much more different where India has the backing of the majority led by

USA who would like to see India in the exclusive club. That it would also help their own nuclear industry/trade is also a factor that cannot be ignored.

The worst case scenario for India is also ominous for China as it will continue to be isolated due to its perceived unreasonable approach in respect of India and backing for Pakistan. Even after the present impasse created by China as the main obstructionist China maintains that bilateral relations would not be affected. China cannot expect India to be enthusiastic about any bi lateral initiatives after being the main factor for coming in the way of India's aspirations.

While it may be purely coincidental, the fact that the eighth India China financial dialogue that was to be held in China on 27th June has been postponed to July[xi] is indicative of the shape of things to come. The dialogue at the level of Finance Minister would review the annual progress on various financial and economic issues between the two nations. Even the future of such dialogues would be in an atmosphere of mutual distrust. This will also harden India's stand vis-à-vis China and bi lateral relations will be a major casualty. The situation along the border would also be tenuous now and any action along the border by either India or China can lead to tricky situations unless closely monitored and contained. The recent report of incursions[xii] by the PLA in Arunachal Pradesh is a case in example. One can expect more such instances in an atmosphere of distrust on both sides.

The best case scenario for China is to admit India in to the NSG by providing support thus earning good will of India and the rest of the world. But it may already be too late as it seems to have made up its mind on blocking India at any cost with the support of other smaller nations including Pakistan. As for as Pakistan is concerned, the doors should be open for even Pakistan to become a responsible member as and when the other members of the NSG are convinced that Pakistan has full control about the nuclear arsenal and demonstrates a responsible behaviour as a nuclear power state.

[i] http://zeenews.india.com/news/india/pm-narendra-modi-meets-chinese-president-xi-jinping-seeks-support-for-indias-nsg-bid_1899399.html

[1] as reported in Zee News accessed on 24th June 2016

[ii] <http://www.voanews.com/content/india-rejects-joint-naval-patrols-with-us-in-south-china-sea/3231567.html> [2]

As reported in Voice of America indicating that India would not join the joint patrols in South China Sea though it supports the concept of Freedom of Navigation. Accessed on 23rd June 2016

[iii] <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/india-sends-stealth-warships-to-south-china-sea/> [3] As brought out in an article in Diplomat by Franz Stefan Gady on 19th May 2016. Accessed on 22nd June 2016

[iv] <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/significance-of-the-india-us-japan-malabar-naval-exercise/> [4] based on a report by Pranav Kulkarni in Indian Express dated 21st October 2016 accessed on 22nd June 2016

[v] <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/asean-foreign-ministers-issue-then-retract-communique-referencing-south-china-sea/> [5] The ASEAN Foreign ministers were compelled to retract the statement against China's aggressive agenda in the South China Sea.

[vi] <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/china-sticks-to-its-guns-on-blocking-indias-bid-to-ban-pathankot-terrorist-attack-mastermind-and-jem-chief-masood-azhar-2756674/> [6] highlights the complicity of China in supporting Pakistan on the issue of banning the architect of Pathankot attack accessed on 23rd June 2016

[vii] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China%E2%80%93Pakistan_Economic_Corridor [7] complete details in Wikipedia about the China Pakistan Economic Corridor accessed on 23rd June 2016

[viii] <http://www.indiandefensenews.in/2016/05/strong-lobbying-by-india-scuttles-us.html> [8] As brought in an analysis by Subha Chandran in Indian express

[ix] <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-strange-obsession-with-the-nsg/article8765312.ece> [9] an interesting counter argument which concludes that there are already enough in the waivers issued that the membership itself is not so important at this moment.

[x] <http://icast.org.in/news/2005/apr05/apr29a1.html> [10] Extract of the video address to PMI Asia Pacific conference in April 2005 by then President Abdul Kalam at Hyderabad which brings out how India was able to support the LCA programme.

[xi] <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/amid-row-over-nuke-club-nsg-seat-india-china-finance-dialogue-cancelled-1422406> [11] accessed on 24th

June 2016.

[xii] <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/china-arunachal-pradesh-incursion-army-patrol-2854803/> [12] While China has rejected the claim of incursion, the reality is that these instances have the potential of going out of hand. Full report in the Indian Express of 15th June 2016 accessed on 23rd June 2016

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