

# The dragon at the NSG high table

India's bid for NSG membership will continue to see hurdles, with China being vocal in its opposition



SMITA SHARMA

At the Carnegie Endowment International Nuclear Policy Conference in 2015, a polling question asked to the hall full of global diplomats and foreign policy experts was: "Is there a likelihood of more than 50% that by March 24, 2017, India will become a participant in the Nuclear Suppliers Group?"

Only one panellist and 37% of the audience responded positively. Three panellists and 67% of the audience were naysayers, and they were proved right.

A similar question asked to some 800 delegates recently at a subsequent chapter of the Carnegie conference in Washington DC gave way to a fragmented response. An average of 25% were hopeful of a 50% chance of New Delhi making it through by 2019. As India continues to push for a seat at the nuclear high table, it seems an uphill task, and the view from the Hill isn't rosy either.

The former UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, An-

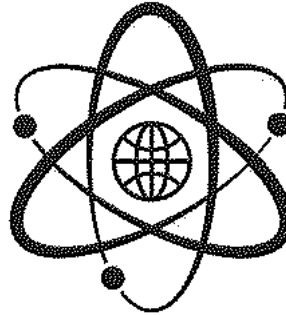
gela Kane, believes that India stands a good 55% chance to make it but is opposed to India's push. "I do not believe India should be a member of NSG because of criterion. In a meeting that I attended, the Chinese representative, a high-ranking ambassador, was very vocal, opposing the U.S. position on this."

Speculation is rife if over the next two years, either India or India and Pakistan or none could make it through the NSG.

In the NSG plenary session in Seoul in June 2016, New Delhi blamed Beijing for the "Consensus Minus One" hurdle to its bid even though close to a dozen countries including Mexico, Brazil, Norway, Ireland expressed serious reservations over India not being signatory to the Non Proliferation Treaty.

It is now learnt from U.S. diplomatic sources that calls were generated from the White House as well as the State Department to some naysayers including New Zealand and Italy. Italy had wanted a way out on the diplomatic tangle around its two marines charged with the murder of Indian fishermen. They had sought trial in a third country as a possible option. New Delhi dismissed the proposals and Italy stuck to its opposition in the closed-door sessions.

Since the Seoul summit, a committee under Rafael Mariano



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Grossi, Ambassador of the Argentine Republic and Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna and Chair of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, was tasked with backdoor consultations for expansion of the elite club. According to him, "several formulations are on the table to deal with the central issue of relationship with the NPT".

"The jury is still out and we need to wait a little bit," he says.

## The India-China-U.S. tango

Indian and Chinese interlocutors too have held rounds of discussions to resolve mutual issues. But with a public opposition unlike a quiet one in 2008, Beijing looks less relenting.

Laura Kennedy, former U.S. Am-

bassador and Board Member at the World Affairs Council, says, "Even if India were to allow Pakistan to come in, some have suggested China might still be averse because they see this as elevating India to almost ranks of the P5 or Security Council membership."

A view from Capitol Hill is that China is positioned as a focal point of resistance for those who were persuaded or coerced earlier in 2008 by the Bush regime but remain resentful of a country-specific waiver for India. But if China were to shed its resistance, it would be easier to achieve consensus.

Meanwhile, India would have to find ways to woo the dragon. With the Trump administration busy with domestic agendas ranging from health care to the economy and also North Korea, Iran and the Islamic State being the focus areas overseas, the U.S.-China dialogue will hardly hinge on Beijing's position on the NSG tangle for now. The U.S. continues to advocate support for India's membership. Dr. Christopher Ford, U.S. President Donald Trump's adviser at the National Security Council, says that while the NSG stand-off requires a change in tactics or circumstances for resolution, there have been no indications of change in the U.S. administration's approach to India's membership so far.

With the NSG plenary set to meet again in Bjern in June this year, despite technical preparations, a resolution will be difficult to reach without political will. A top diplomat privy to the negotiations stressed that a green light to India's entry is a political decision that China will have to make.

China may not shy away from advocating keeping out all-weather friend Pakistan in order to keep India out. Meanwhile, American diplomats advise patience as India already has the functionality it needed with the 2008 waiver for nuclear commerce. A seat at the high table will be required to influence decisions and nuclear export in future. So, any proposal to woo baiters would have to be window-dressed to look considerate of future bids from other non-NPT players including Israel, instead of appearing to be tailor-made only for India.

For now, NSG will be an uphill task with China unwilling to play nice, and contentious issues of the H-1B visa, intellectual property rights and trade dominating the India-U.S. agenda when Prime Minister Narendra Modi goes to Capitol Hill.

Smita Sharma is a former broadcast journalist with India Today and Network 18