

India's NSG overture to China can bring the two Asian giants closer

India's reported outreach to China on its bid to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group during the bilateral Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Dialogue in Beijing is a significant development, coming as it does in the wake of efforts to reboot relations between the two Asian giants. Officially, the focus of the fifth round of the dialogue on Tuesday was global security and disarmament in outer space, but reports suggest that India engaged China on dropping its objections to New Delhi's membership of the elite club controlling access to nuclear technology. It is now becoming apparent that India is pursuing a new path in its ties with China under foreign secretary, Vijay Gokhale, an old China hand who played a crucial role in resolving last year's military standoff at Doklam while serving as the envoy in Beijing. This is reflected in India's new stance on issues such as Tibet that have the potential to irk China. Beijing too has displayed some amount of flexibility in its position on issues that are crucial to India. For instance, China did not oppose a US-backed move at the Financial Action Task Force in February to place Pakistan, its "iron brother ally", on a terror financing watch list. There have also been suggestions that India and China, with their massive economies, could play a greater role in shaping debate on global issues as the US cedes its leadership position. Provided the two countries can build on such developments, there could be greater scope for cooperation between them.

It must be remembered that China is not the only country opposing India's application to join the NSG. However, getting China to change its position could certainly help to swing the other naysayers such as Turkey and Ireland. India also believes its hands have been strengthened by its membership of three key multilateral export control regimes, the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Wassenaar Arrangement for controls on dual use technologies and the Australia Group.

China has proposed a two-step approach for making countries that haven't signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty members of the NSG. This involves forging a universal formula for such countries and then taking up their applications. Detractors say this was done with an eye to helping Pakistan gain membership of the NSG alongside India. However, with India becoming a member of the three other export control regimes and continuing questions about Pakistan's non-proliferation record, such an approach could even work to New Delhi's advantage provided Beijing is willing to play ball.

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