

Response to PacNet #52 “Reward India’s nonproliferation good behavior”

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In PacNet #52, Kelly Wadsworth suggests that India should be rewarded for its good non-proliferation behavior by receiving full membership to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). This argument is problematic on several accounts. NSG members would be ill-advised to grant membership to India as a reward without looking at the broader issues that affect the non-proliferation regime.

For starters, the NSG was established following the so-called peaceful nuclear explosion conducted by India in 1974. At the core of NSG policy is the desire to prevent the spread of nuclear technology directly applicable for weapon production to new countries, especially if they haven’t joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and conclude a comprehensive safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), allowing international inspectors to verify non-diversion of nuclear materials and technologies for nuclear weapon program.

India has not joined the NPT and has consistently called it a “nuclear apartheid treaty” for creating two groups of states with unequal obligations and rights. However, from the point of view of the 189 NPT member states, India is a proliferator. New Delhi removed any doubt regarding its possession of nuclear weapons when it conducted nuclear weapon tests in 1998.

The 1998 tests were central to India’s quest for great power status. Since then, while refusing to endorse the NPT, New Delhi has sought to integrate itself into the broader non-proliferation regime and reap benefits without subscribing to underlining obligations. Despite its self-view as a champion of nuclear disarmament and its lofty rhetoric, India has developed a nuclear arsenal and its track record of making practical and tangible disarmament steps remains poor (albeit it is also reflective of the global situation). Now, India doesn’t have any concerns regarding joining an export control regime, which non-nuclear weapon states, especially from the developing world, have criticized as an attempt to place limits on their technological development.

India has already received a waiver from NSG guidelines. It was not given as a reward for India’s non-proliferation behavior but, rather, hammered through by Washington, which sought to establish closer strategic relations with New Delhi. Other nuclear suppliers eager to access India’s lucrative nuclear market were eager to comply, making it easier to crush any principled opposition to the waiver.

The ripple effect of the NSG waiver is not over yet. It violates the core bargain of the NPT of giving up the right to

develop nuclear weapons in exchange for assistance with the development of nuclear energy programs and other benefits of nuclear technology. It has raised concerns in Pakistan, which has argued that, with access to foreign uranium supply, India would be free to use its limited domestic resources for nuclear weapons rather than nuclear power generation. Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal, which now outpaces India’s, could be a direct side-effect of the waiver. It has also led to calls in Islamabad to correct the imbalance and give a similar exception to Pakistan. Granting NSG membership to India could also lead to an Israeli bid, which would create even more complicated challenges.

Finding ways to integrate outliers in the nonproliferation regime is tough business. There is an urgent need to find new and innovative ways to inject momentum in nuclear disarmament. Rewarding Indian nuclear exceptionalism won’t help. What we need instead are tangible and practical steps to a more secure and safer world.

When the NSG waiver for India was debated to the disdain of many, India reaffirmed its voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing, stopping short of making a legal commitment. This voluntary moratorium should be converted into a legal obligation under the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. This would demonstrate India’s commitment to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, creating an environment more conducive to sound debate regarding its role vis-à-vis the NSG.

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