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India and the Missile Regime

India's long-awaited entry into the Missile Technology Control Regime is beneficial to both India and the international non-proliferation community

By Arka Biswas

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In June 2015, India formally applied for membership to the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), and a decision on India's membership is expected to be taken at the upcoming annual plenary of the MTCR in October 2015. Once a target of the regime and treated as an outsider by the global non-proliferation community, India has traversed a long way to now becoming a strong partner of the same community. As India seeks to contribute further to the cause of non-proliferation, it is also in the interest of the global non-proliferation community to bring New Delhi—a potential industrial producer and supplier of many, if not all, sensitive items covered—into its folds to ensure that the same rules apply to India as they do to other suppliers. While MTCR members assess India's membership application, it will be important to understand what the objective of the regime has been and to identify how India can contribute to the same. Also critical will be assessing if India meets all the technical requirements to be a part of the MTCR. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the benefits of India's entry into the MTCR.

Established in 1987, MTCR is a voluntary and consensus-based association of countries, set up to build a level of export control measures focused on curtailing the horizontal spread of missile systems capable of delivering weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). As Barry J. Hurewitz notes, it was the inadequacy of the pre-existing non-proliferation bodies—namely the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)—in addressing the challenge of global nuclear proliferation through export of weapon delivery systems which led to the inception of the MTCR. Though the initial focus was on missile systems capable of delivering nuclear weapons, the regime later expanded its scope to include the missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) which could deliver chemical and biological weapons.

India has applied for MTCR membership as a part of its efforts to integrate itself with the global non-proliferation community. As C. Raja Mohan notes, the efforts began right after its nuclear tests in 1998, when India expressed its support for the basic objectives of the NPT—marking a complete turnaround from the approach it had previously demonstrated. The United States, one of the founding designers of the existing global non-proliferation architecture, realized that while India would not join the NPT, it could play a crucial role in strengthening other non-proliferation and export control bodies. This was the premise of the India-U.S. nuclear initiative which began in 2005, and over the years, the importance of integrating India with the global non-proliferation architecture has now been realized by many other governments, including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United Kingdom.

This understanding resulted in the first phase of India's acceptance into global non-proliferation architecture, channelled via the waiver from the NSG's full-scope safeguards requirement in 2008 and a special safeguards agreement signed with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for India's civilian nuclear facilities, allowing India to engage in global nuclear commerce.

India's entry in the four export control bodies, including the NSG, the Wassenaar Arrangement, and the Australia Group, is the next phase of India's integration into the global non-proliferation community and New Delhi's application for membership to the MTCR is the first step of this phase.

Considering that MTCR's sole objective has been to globally control exports of missile technologies and related items, standards of the non-proliferation and export control policies and practices of a particular country shape the prospect of its inclusion in the regime. While India has always remained committed to non-proliferation of sensitive items covered by the MTCR, it has updated its domestic laws as well as its Special Chemicals, Organisms, Materials, Equipment, and Technologies (SCOMET) List in the last five years, harmonizing them completely with the MTCR guidelines. This has been recognized by the US and all other like-minded partners.

Meanwhile, it has been argued that a country's pursuit of developing and modernizing missile technology could go against the spirit of the regime and that such a country should not be included in the MTCR. In the Indian context, skeptics argue that New Delhi is treated as an outsider for its pursuit of a guided missile development program. Such arguments, however, do not hold strong ground, because the MTCR, far from requiring it, does not even suggest that its members curb indigenous development of missile technologies or related items. This is further exemplified by the fact that some of the current members of the regime are known to have run or are currently running their own missile development programs.

India's entry into the regime will benefit both India and the MTCR. Membership in the regime will allow India to better contribute to the global non-proliferation cause. It will also enhance the level of understanding between MTCR members and India, allowing the latter to import dual-use technologies and items for peaceful purposes. On the other hand, by including India, MTCR members will ensure that all supplies of sensitive missile and related technologies that India exports will adhere to MTCR guidelines and that the same rules will apply to New Delhi as they do to other MTCR suppliers. The proceedings and outcome of the upcoming MTCR plenary will shape the future of India's engagement with not just the MTCR but also the broader global non-proliferation community.