

India in Australia Group: What does it mean for India?

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Summary

India's membership in Australia Group has been an acknowledgement on the part of the member states about its impeccable record on non-proliferation. India all these years have been very pro - actively working through its national legislation on export controls through which the proliferation of CBW agents can be contained. India has a rich experience and the Australia Group in particular will get benefitted in terms of understanding India's approach to the containment of CBW proliferation. The foreseeable future will see a win-win situation for both the AG and India.

India became the member of Australia Group (AG) in January 2018. Ironically, the Indian media quoted the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) immediately after getting admitted into the group that the membership will ensure a more secure world. Such comments from MEA meant as if India was responsible for proliferation of any kind. How India's membership in AG would help secure the world remains a question for the debate and discussion among the members of academic and strategic community? It must be, at the outset, emphasised here that India despite not being a members of AG which came into existence in 1985, it had followed and adhered to all the stipulations enshrined in the Group. India ratified both Biological and Toxin weapon Convention (BTWC) and Chemical Weapon Convention (CWC) in 1974 and 1996 respectively. It showed genuine commitment by declaring its stockpile of dual-use chemicals and destroying it thereafter. India's chemical industry over the years has emerged as a major sector and obviously the trade in dual-use chemicals has been intensifying. Hence, India needed to harmonise all its national export control measures in consonance with the larger requirements for the standards set with the non proliferation goals of the offensive nature of the chemical industries. India has been actively playing a dominant role in furthering the interests of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which has been the implementing body of the CWC.

The understanding of geopolitical contexts under which the AG was established in 1985 is necessary especially to understand its relevance and significance. It was disclosed by a United Nations investigation team in the early part of 1984 that Iraq had used

chemical weapons in Iran-Iraq war and had violated the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Iran had also responded by using chemical weapons. Hence, it seemed desirable to bring measures which would help tightening the exports of chemicals that could be used to manufacture chemical weapons. The existing export controls had no uniformity whatsoever. The inherent loopholes in the existing controls got reflected in the behavioural patterns of nation states. In this context, Australia took the lead in convening a meeting of the countries with export controls and having the main objective of harmonising their national laws and bringing it to a standard level practiced by the member countries. The first AG meeting took place in Brussels in June 1985 and since then it has become an annual ritual to discuss the complexities of the emerging dynamics of challenges.

Export licensing measures in tandem with the uniformity in standard practices across the spectrum has been the crux of AG. These measures have led the members to avoid both direct as well as inadvertent involvement in the spread of chemical and biological weapons. The major objective of the members of AG have been to use the licensing measures effectively and it would then ensure that exports of certain chemicals, biological agents and dual use chemical and biological manufacturing facilities and equipments do not contribute to the spread of chemical and biological weapons.

The AG has been maintaining its informal approach in an effective manner. The member states of AG through the harmonisation of their national export control laws have been fulfilling all the obligations in the manner under which the risk of chemical and biological weapon proliferation is minimised. The challenge has always been to stop would-be proliferators from obtaining materials for pursuing

chemical and biological weapons programme. Since the nature of the grouping is informal, hence technically speaking there is no legally binding obligations whatsoever on the part of the member states. The effectiveness of AG gets reflected in the shared commitments to their common non-proliferation goals. All the members of the AG have also been the parties to the CWC and the BTWC. The basic objectives of these conventions have been to get rid of chemical and biological weapons from the world.

It would be a worthwhile exercise to analyse and assess the threats emanating from both chemical and biological weapons (CBW) in the contemporary world security environment. The research and development in CBW area obviously remains an issue because of the lack of verification mechanism. There are a number of nations in both developed and developing world which have been progressing significantly in life sciences and chemical engineering research. The chemicals used in warfare are mostly derived from legitimate civil and industrial applications. All developed countries and most of the major developing states have relatively sophisticated petro-chemical industries. In this context, there is no denying the fact that all may have acquired the capability to produce chemical warfare agents including nerve gases. Whether all of them will have the capability to fill chemical warfare (CW) agents into munitions casings is left to the scholarly community for speculation.

If a country would wish, it could manufacture CW agents secretly and implicitly under the cover of civil chemical production. The line remains thin in this dual use technology. It must be mentioned here that biological warfare (BW) agent is also open to clandestine production. It will be much easier than the secret manufacture of chemical weapons. The infrastructure required for

manufacturing biological weapons is technically very small with fairly simple equipment. There is no need to dispose of effluent or waste gases as it is required in the chemical industry which can be easily detected and monitored.

Hence, cautious approach is needed especially on the issues raised by the potential threats from biological and chemical weapons. These may be distorted by the tendency of the governments to state as fact what is supposition and to place the worst interpretation on such facts. The states may use these interpretations as propaganda bred of secrecy, suspicion and disinformation. The United States' did this with Iraq despite International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) declaration that Iraq does not have Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) during the early years of twenty first century. There is no denying the fact that there are limitations on the knowledge about the CBW activities. Hence, drawing inferences or extrapolating from the behavioural patterns may not necessarily be in consonance with the real situations unfolding.

It must be reiterated here that neither chemical nor biological warfare is a twentieth or twenty first century invention. There have been the cases of use of poisons derived from plants and animals which dates back to ancient times. There are references in a number of places including ancient texts, Old Testaments and in Roman accounts of their wars which suggests the advent of both CBW agents. During the nineteenth century, developments in chemistry and industrial production techniques led to the realisation that chemicals might prove significant in future wars. Liquid Chlorine became commercially available in the late 1980s in Germany and early in the twentieth century in Britain and the United States. Phosgene had been discovered as early as 1812 and by

the second half of the nineteenth century, it was being used commercially. The possibility that these developments would lead to chemical warfare on a significant scale is still very relevant.

The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 were perhaps the starting points for prohibiting the use of CBW agents during the war. Prior to this, the Brussels Convention, which was adopted in 1874, banned the employment of poison or poisoned weapons. At the first International Peace Conference at The Hague in 1899, the signatories undertook to abstain from the use of projectiles so that the diffusion of asphyxiating or deleterious gases does not take place. The similar prohibition was followed at the Second Hague Conference in 1907. However, nothing of these sort was seriously followed during the war time situations. It was only because of the deteriorating global security environment and possible use of CBW agents, the 1925 '*Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or other Gases and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare*' was adopted. The signatories reaffirmed their commitment not to use the poisonous gases and analogous substances. The Protocol entered into force in 1928.

There have been technically a number of debates at the United Nations after the Second World War mainly on non-proliferation of CBW agents and the issues relating to compliance on the dual nature of technology. There was a dominant view during the later part of the twentieth century on the need to reach an agreement to halt the development, production and stockpiling of all chemical and biological agents for purposes of War.

The twenty first century has been witnessing complex crisis emanating from both state as well as non state actors. Hence, the

concerted effort in terms of streamlining export licensing on the part of the member states in conformity with the global standards certainly is a welcome step. India's membership in AG will help understand the functioning of such groups as well as becoming the part of the group which takes stock of the emerging situations in geopolitics relating to the prohibition of CBW agents. India already has a rich experience in dealing with these issues at length and to a larger extent the AG will benefit from India's experience in tightening the export control measures. India's non-proliferation records have been impeccable. Such membership for India has been an acknowledgement on the part of the member states of the AG about its indisputable role in handling non-proliferation issues in stringent manner.