
An interview article with Dr. Manpreet Sethi, a member of the International Group of Eminent Persons for a World without Nuclear Weapons, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies and a senior research adviser at Asia-Pacific Leadership Network.

--The first session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons will be held from the end of July. What do you think should be the focus of the session?

The NPT is one of the most universal treaties, with 191 state parties. So, it is really a very important treaty for the world. But the treaty is facing some strong headwinds. There are problems in terms of the exact purpose and the objective of the treaty. There are fissures within the nuclear weapon states and the non-nuclear weapon states. The nuclear weapon states say it's a non-proliferation treaty, so the non-proliferation element is very strong. But the non-nuclear weapon states feel that the treaty was built on a three-legged stool. The second leg, which is of nuclear disarmament, is also very important, and unless there is a balance between non-proliferation and disarmament, the treaty will be on shaky ground. The non-nuclear weapon states have been asking the nuclear weapon states to make more movement towards disarmament, and that has not been forthcoming. As a result of this, we've not had a consensus document come out of the treaty in the last two review conferences.

Therefore, it is important that the mood of the treaty become positive, and that's where the Preparatory Committee has a role to play in terms of setting the ground so that we can, at least, have the next review conference with some kind of a consensus document, because that is seen as a sign of success of the treaty. If such a document is unable to be reached over many review conferences, then it is a sign of lack of consensus on many issues, which is not a good thing for a treaty like this.

--International Group of Eminent Persons for a World without Nuclear Weapons released a message in April. What are the main inputs to the first session of Preparatory Committee?

We recommended three important things.

The first is reinforcing and expanding norms. The existing norms need to be strengthened, and some new norms need to be established. The norm of not conducting more nuclear tests or non-use of nuclear weapons are the norms that need to be strengthened. Or the norm that you respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of a country, that there should not be

the use of force from one sovereign country upon another sovereign country. These are some norms that need to be strengthened in today's times, and that is what should be one of the tasks of the Preparatory Committee. I think this will evoke a certain amount of consensus. Nobody can argue against the value of these norms. That then sets the tone in a positive way. Instead of looking at issues which are dividing us, let's start with issues which are bringing us together.

The second important thing that the IGEP message has given to the Preparatory Committee is to take some concrete measures on nuclear risk reduction, on initiating dialogues for arms control measures, on asking the countries to practice strategic restraint in their behaviour. What we are seeing is modernization of nuclear weapons. We are seeing expansion of nuclear arsenals. Essentially, can the focus be brought on some kind of restraints on such behaviour? That's another message that has been delivered.

The third one is to revitalize the review process itself, because there are a lot of question marks raised on the transparency and the accountability of countries to the review process. The idea of setting up a preparatory process was to slowly build on the agenda over three such meetings, to have something ready for the review conference. As the first Preparatory Committee begins, the important thing is to come up with a consensual agenda to create that atmosphere.

--What should be the first step to avoid further escalation of the threat of nuclear weapon use?

The risk of escalation to the use of nuclear weapons is going up because of some factors. One of these is the belief by some countries that nuclear brinkmanship is one way of deterring the other side. And also, some countries tend to believe that increasing risk is a good thing, and therefore, they don't want to reduce risk, because by increasing risk, they believe they are deterring the other side better.

Regarding nuclear brinkmanship, in order to make it credible, the countries have to build military capability, which they will be able to show that they can use, for instance, having 'tactical' nuclear weapons, putting nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert, raising the readiness of nuclear weapons. But the chances are that all of these can lead to inadvertent escalation -- where you don't want to use the weapon, but you can stumble into a nuclear war because the military preparedness, which has been done, can come into play. It can be an unauthorized use. It can be miscalculation. It can be a misperception of intention, which has brought you to this particular

position. Without deliberately wanting to use nuclear weapons, you could end up with use of nuclear weapons. That's the risk of escalation in today's times.

Now, in order to cut down these chances of inadvertent escalation, first of all, we need to talk to each other, but we are not doing that. Therefore, the chances of miscalculation or misperception are extremely high. That's where the role of academia and think-tanks or institutes like Toda come in. They provide the channels or the platforms, at least at non-governmental levels, to be able to talk to each other. Once we talk to each other, we understand each other's perceptions and concerns, which gives the ability to come up with some realistic proposals on how to get over the challenges that we are facing. The conferences and events held by Toda institute are one such example. Politically, at the official level, no dialogue mechanisms are present between adversarial nuclear armed states as of now. So, certainly, think-tanks have a role to play in trying to address the situations.

--Daisaku Ikeda, the founder of Toda Institute, issued a statement calling on the leaders of the G7 countries meeting to guarantee the security of all humanity by taking the lead in discussions on pledges of No First Use of nuclear weapons.

I do give a lot of credence to the idea of no first use. If more countries put their weight behind no first use, that can be itself a way of not having escalation.

Normally, we think of no first use as a morally good policy to have, but I go one step further to say that no first use also is a militarily good policy. The purpose of nuclear weapons is deterrence, and you don't want the weapon to be used against you. By having a first use policy, you are pushing the adversary into believing that I might use my nuclear weapons against you. The chances that he will be tempted to use earlier goes up. So, you are not doing deterrence, rather, you're actually baiting the other person. Whereas with the no first use policy, you are assuring the adversary to say, I am not going to use my nuclear weapons. It's up to you whenever you want to use it, but once you use it, there is going to be retaliation. So, no first use is actually stabilizing the situation by putting the adversary at ease.

--Next month marks 6 years anniversary of adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons(TPNW). And the TPNW is a treaty inspired by "humanitarian initiative". To what extent moral/ethical perspectives could play a role in promoting of abolition of nuclear weapons?

The Humanitarian Consequence Initiative, which actually led to the creation of the Ban Treaty, has played a very important role. But unfortunately, we've seen whether it's the humanitarian consequences or whether it is moral and ethical route to disarmament, it always seems to come up against the wall of national security. Therefore, while the humanitarian consequences, moral, ethical, legal, all of them are very valid and solid arguments in favour of disarmament, I think the biggest argument has to be made from the national security perspective to say it is in my national security to move away from nuclear weapons.

We've been in this Russia-Ukraine conflict for more than a year now, and when it started, people had started saying, now the nuclear weapon will get used, but President Putin has not found any place where the use of that nuclear weapon will bring him any military benefits. In so many wars that we have seen in the last 70 years, countries have accepted defeat, but they have not used nuclear weapons, because the military value of that weapon has not been seen to be there.

On the one side, what we are seeing today is that the risks are going up, and at the same time, the military value of the nuclear weapon is very low. Using these two things, we should be making an argument to say it's in national security interest of countries to get rid of this nuclear weapon. It doesn't help you militarily, and it is creating risks which might be beyond your control after a period of time.

Getting acceptance for this thought process will be a long haul. It will need the wisdom of leaders. It will need the push from down below of the public which understands these issues and only then collectively can we move towards a world without nuclear weapons.
