

**ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK**

FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF 'INADMISSIBILITY'**Manpreet Sethi**, APLN Senior Research Adviser

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No one can dispute the fact that the world is living in the shadow of weapons of mass destruction. The shadow has, in fact, progressively lengthened in the last decade as relations between major nuclear powers have deteriorated and nuclear arsenals across nations have seen modernisation and expansion.

The sense of nuclear risks has further aggravated since the start of the Russian special military operations against Ukraine in February 2022. The conflict has dragged on for twenty long months by now and has often been punctuated with nuclear threats by Russia. The period has also seen missile tests by Russia and USA, conduct of military exercises by both and a suspension of the last remaining arms control agreement between the two. There are also reports on ongoing activity at nuclear test sites of USA, Russia, China and even North Korea as the four have built new facilities and tunnels at their respective testing sites. A breakdown of the nuclear taboo by the use of 'tactical' nuclear weapons has become a cause for concern as brinkmanship strategies and lowered thresholds are being signalled to ostensibly enhance nuclear deterrence.

Amidst this nuclear cacophony, it was refreshing and reassuring that the final declaration at the recently concluded G-20 Summit in New Delhi could be issued as a consensus document. The very fact that this was possible at all given the existing fractious political atmosphere is no mean achievement itself. For a grouping primarily focussed on economic and financial issues to have pulled this off was obviously enabled by recognition of the fact that stresses that characterise international relations have a bearing on economic relations too. And these relations are not trivial given that the G-20 comprises economies that constituted 85-90 per cent of global GDP and 75 per cent of global trade.

Steep geopolitical humps were skilfully negotiated to overcome differences over the description of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Consensus was achieved by drafting a more generic and universally applicable sentence that reads "In line with the UN Charter, all states must refrain from the threat or use of force to seek territorial acquisition against the territorial integrity and sovereignty or political independence of any state." This appeared

acceptable to Russia, and China. The West could choose to interpret it more widely to sound a note of caution to any future such possibilities, especially by China.

Meanwhile, from the nuclear lens, the sentence of particular consequence is the one that states “The use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible.” It may be recalled that the declaration from the G-20 Summit in Bali in November 2022 had also included this sentence. With its reiteration, even as the war in Europe continues, the effort of the states to underscore the norm of non-use of nuclear weapons is evident.

The statement on *inadmissibility* of the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons seems to go a step ahead of the Reagan-Gorbachev formulation that had spoken about the *inadvisability* of nuclear war. Originally made in the bilateral context of US-USSR relations, it acknowledged their mutual vulnerability to destruction in case of a nuclear war between them, and hence, underscored the prudence in not fighting one. The statement has since been reaffirmed in another bilateral context, that of Russia and China and subsequently, in January 2022, all the P-5 reiterated it in the run up to the last NPT Review Conference.

However, the validity of this statement is being tested in contemporary times by the idea of limited nuclear war that has surfaced in nuclear strategies of many nuclear armed states. The idea of small nuclear wars, that are imagined as containable in the regional context are buoyed by a belief that they can be won, and hence may be fought. The sentence in the G-20 declaration seems to be plugging this gap. Making this statement in a forum that includes six of the nine nuclear armed states (P-5 plus India) and all of the three US allies in Northeast Asia (Australia, Japan and South Korea) and that also includes the EU (which houses several NATO countries as well) gives it a certain gravitas.

Acceptance of non-use of nuclear weapons, including its threat, has the potential to be a meaningful first step towards elimination of nuclear weapons by facilitating their devaluation. In fact, one of the reasons why nuclear armed states have rejected the treaty on prohibition of nuclear weapons (TPNW) is that it delegitimises the weapons without first devaluing them. This is where the problem lies since nations cannot be expected to eliminate their nuclear weapons till they begin to perceive them as unusable, and hence useless. Unfortunately though, in the present times, nations seem to be vesting a higher salience in nuclear weapons. Those with nuclear weapons are modernising and expanding their arsenals, while those without are ruminating over the possibility of facing a fate such as that of Ukraine. Russian nuclear behaviour has drawn attention to the political value of nuclear weapons.

It is at a moment like this that statements such as the one made at the G-20 Summit could prove to be helpful. By declaring the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons as inadmissible, which literally means not to be allowed or tolerated, it minimises the possibility of their military use, and hence eventually their political value too. Frequent reiteration of such language can reinforce the norm of non-use by keeping it in the consciousness of national leaders and populace. Just as casual references to use of nuclear weapons create an atmosphere of nuclear permissiveness, statements that decry their use can have a restraining influence.

Norms may not have legal or enforceable value. But, they can be effective psychological guardrails that nations cannot easily ignore or breach. This can especially so if the norms are repeatedly stated by leaders of major nations in important fora. It is also imperative that the strategic community, as well as the civil society, reinforce the import of this statement and keep it in the consciousness of the policy makers and the public. Consensus-based statements offer an opportunity to hold nations to the highest standards of nuclear behaviour and action. The opportunity offered by the New Delhi G-20 statement should be effectively exploited.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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