Interview – Marianne Hanson

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Marianne Hanson is a migrant to Australia of Sri Lankan and Irish descent, who has always been interested in International Relations, Peace, and Conflict Studies. However, coming from a family from a very low socio-economic background, nobody she knew ever went to university. It was not until she was almost 30, therefore, that she realized that she could, and should, get a tertiary education. Hanson completed a Bachelor of Arts with First Class Honours at the University of Queensland, after which she received a scholarship to complete a Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy in IR at Oxford University. Her first academic position, as soon as she finished her Doctorate, was Lecturer at Magdalen College, Oxford University where she taught Politics and IR. She then returned to the University of Queensland where she has taught for 28 years. Her focus has been on international security, emphasising international law and organisations, norms, human rights and humanitarianism, and especially the control and abolition of inhumane weapons. She has published widely in these fields, and her latest book, *Challenging Nuclearism: A Humanitarian Approach to Reshape the Global Nuclear Order*, was published by Manchester University Press in 2022.She also works as an advocate for civil society groups, including the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear weapons (ICAN), Australia (an organisation that won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017). She has spoken at the United Nations on the need for education in peace studies and is an invited member of the Asia Pacific Leadership Network.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think that interesting research is being done on resistance to dominant narratives, especially in the field of security. There has been interest in this for a few decades of course, especially the focus on critical security studies. What strikes me is how little the actual practice has changed. That is, in the world of politics, very poor decisions, domestically and globally continue to be taken. *Why* is there no progress on addressing climate change? *Why* are we closer to nuclear weapons being used now than we have been in over 30 years? *Why* do the great powers (or some of them anyway – and here I have in mind particularly the US – make so many poor strategic decisions, such as invading Iraq, expanding NATO repeatedly, which I've long argued needlessly provokes Russia; a pan-European security system is a much better strategy than NATO, in my view), and why are governments not addressing what people – especially young people – desperately want them to address? I don't know the answer to these questions, except to say that political decisions have been captured by specific groups with vested interests and make it almost impossible for good policies to be implemented. This is a pessimistic conclusion, because it suggests that fossil fuel groups, a military industrial complex, etc. are shaping politics. If that's the case, then where does that leave democracy? There is some work on this vexed issue, but I think there needs to be a lot more. Please note: I am of the view that what we do in universities should be related to the broader goal of the greater good, i.e., of advancing knowledge and making the world better, more just, more peaceful, more equitable etc. So, this is why this question – of who has agency and how/why are our systems of democracy being corrupted by vested interests – is important to me.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Related to my answer above, I would suggest that, unlike the optimism that we had at the end of the Cold War, power has actually been wrested away from people more than ever before. It's insidious – and not so insidious in some

cases – but the extractive industries, weapons corporations, neoliberal economic advocates etc., have been able to wield enormous influence over domestic and global politics, especially in the last 30 – 40 years. This poses a dilemma for me as an academic – it has made me think about how we actually achieve positive change against such enormous barriers. As a result, I've also become a little frustrated with academia at times. Sometimes it seems like academics are focusing on fairly abstract issues, and the aim is to publish in top ranking journals, etc., but these writings are usually only read by fellow academics, and they remain obscure to many. I'm not knocking it completely; I understand there is a place for knowledge for its own sake.

But I've become more inclined towards using my skills as an academic – teaching and researching – to trying to achieve positive change. And we're not achieving change today. Given the (very negative and undemocratic) elements of agency in politics today, I see a real need for greater advocacy on the part of academics. Instead, the trend is for governments – and not just in populist countries – to disregard academics, specialists, scientists etc. Meanwhile vested interests make a fortune. I find that disturbing. What's the point of us being involved in academia, unless we call this out and argue more strongly for peace, the health of our planet and the well-being of our fellow humans?

To what extent does nuclear warfare represent a humanitarian threat and the undermining of rights for future generations? How has the notion of ethics in world politics been absent for nuclear strategy debates in the past? To begin with, we have placed too much faith in nuclear deterrence always working – one day, it won't. This is why we have to consider the consequences of nuclear use. The focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons has been key to getting a treaty in the UN which now renders them illegal. This is the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). The nine nuclear weapon states, and especially the P5, have of course resisted any such treaty. They didn't mind chemical weapons and biological weapons being made illegal, but the other kind of weapon of mass destruction – nuclear weapons – was sacrosanct. And so it took 72 years since the first nuclear weapon was dropped for the world to get a treaty outlawing these weapons.

Interestingly, the way that happened was that non-nuclear states (guided by civil society) eventually decided they would just have to go ahead and do it on their own. In the past, we tended to hope that the major powers – especially the US, Russia, Britain, – would drive the development of international law. They did, with regard to chemical and biological weapons, bilateral arms control agreements etc. But then we saw the US actively resisting the formation of international law: Washington refused to join the International Criminal Court, the Comprehensive (nuclear) Test Ban Treaty, the landmines treaty, cluster munitions treaty, and the Arms Trade Treaty. I'm not saying Russia and China have signed all those – in some cases they haven't. But the US stands out as being against attempts to bring international law into politics most of all.

When it came to nuclear weapons, it was not surprising that the nuclear states were going to resist a ban on nuclear weapons. Thus, they continued to pay lip service to a promise that yes, of course they *will* eliminate all their nuclear weapons. They've said that many times, and indeed under the terms of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty they are obliged to eliminate their nuclear weapons. But it's been clear for a long time that they remain fixated on keeping them.

Their use of the language of 'strategy' and 'deterrence', as Carol Cohn and others have long observed, remained sanitized and separated from what would be the real impact of using nuclear weapons. Because they violate the principles of distinction and proportionality, international humanitarian law suggests that using these weapons would be completely unlawful. But more recent research has detailed how these weapons would destroy environments and perhaps all life forms, and would violate the rights of future generations, who would face a ravaged earth and severe radiation impacts. Even a 'limited' use of nuclear weapons – using just one percent of the existing global stocks – is likely to create a climate disaster which would see up to two billion people around the world starving to death. So yes, law and ethics have come into the picture much more recently, and this has helped to galvanize opposition to nuclear weapons from environmental, youth, faith-based groups, health workers, lawyers, and a range of other civil society groups, as well as the 93 states so far which have signed the TPNW.

You point out that states with nuclear weapons have repeatedly promised to move towards disarmament

and risk reduction. What would the world look like today if nuclear countries did hold themselves accountable to these resolutions?

For a start, perhaps the roughly $83 billion that nine states spend on nuclear weapons every year could be deployed to addressing climate change, poverty, and global health issues. I know it's not as simple as that, but as a rule, world military spending is enormous, and too little is spent on the things that matter to most people. Cutting those nuclear budgets would be a good start.

Second, we would probably continue to rely on deterrence by conventional weapons (which is pretty much the case today anyway; nuclear weapons are not suited to achieve political aims or strategic objectives – so why not just get rid of them, as Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev suggested). Advocates of nuclear weapons say we will face more warfare between the large states, but this is an assumption – nuclear weapons might have played some role in keeping the long peace between major states during the Cold War, but there were also other reasons for this. And what we see today is that some nuclear states, notably Russia, are using their nuclear weapons as a coercive and threatening tool. If nuclear weapons were eliminated, even if we did see the prospect of states resorting to war more frequently there is still a lot we can do to minimize this warfare. Diplomacy, confidence and security building measures, strategic empathy, dialogue etc. have all gone out of fashion recently – but they can play a big part in avoiding war. At the end of the day, avoiding catastrophic nuclear war – even full-blown annihilation – is better than the potential risk of more conventional wars, although as I said, we can do much to prevent those also.

Third, we need to remember that only nine out of some 196 states have nuclear weapons. If these states gave up these weapons, the chances of other states wanting to acquire nuclear weapons would also drop. As long as any one state has nuclear weapons, others will want them too – this is the story of proliferation. It is difficult to tell one state – say, Iran, or South Korea – they can't have nuclear weapons while other states have them and threaten to use them (for example, Israel has twice recently threatened to use them, and North Korea continues to issue nuclear threats). Any possession of nuclear weapons breeds proliferation.

For those who say that giving up nuclear weapons is dangerous because some other state will cheat and develop them covertly, thus posing a threat to the world, we need to keep the following in mind: detection of nuclear activity is very advanced and any state which tries to develop these weapons secretly will not be able to do so. Once any such development is detected, clearly the full weight of the international community can be brought to bear against that state. You can imagine that the current nine nuclear states, if they give up their weapons, will not tolerate another state developing these weapons. In other words, it is much easier to sustain a non-nuclear norm in a world without nuclear weapons than it is to try and stop proliferation in a world where some states seem to be permitted to have them, but others are not permitted to have them.

It's also important to remember that the call for nuclear weapons elimination is *not* for unilateral or unbalanced disarmament: it is for a gradual, balanced, phased and fully verified process of disarmament of all nuclear states, including the non-democratic ones. It won't be easy, but it can be done – there are already plenty of blue-prints out there for doing this in a phased and systematic way, with security assurances given to states who are in the process of dismantling their weapons.

In your recent book, you expand on the notion of 'nuclearism' to help the reader envision a radical shift in the normative discourse on the international scene. Can you explain this notion and what key aspects of international security it helps deconstruct?

In my book, I argue that at least five inter-related factors have enabled 'nuclearism' to flourish. These are a) the nuclear weapon states' ability to avoid examination of what would be the real impacts of nuclear weapon use, by focusing on a discourse of 'strategy' and 'rationality' rather than on actual effects; b) the nuclear weapon states' ability to avoid bringing humanitarianism and international humanitarian law into the picture; c) the restriction of voices in the debate to 'security elites' and at worst just a few individuals/policy makers in nuclear weapon states who hold the power of life and death over their state and even over the planet (see Benedict and Dahl for some excellent work on this); d) the dedication of massive amounts of money to nuclear spending which has reified the idea

and seemingly vindicated the 'sacredness' of nuclear weapons; and e) the non-proliferation treaty (NPT) itself which the P5 states have hijacked to serve their own purposes, namely their indefinite retention of nuclear weapons.

I examine how each of these seemingly entrenched factors of nuclearism has now been challenged by the TPNW and especially by the processes that have enabled the TPNW to come into existence and which follow it. I don't argue that these will have an immediate effect – this is a longer-term process. But I suggest that the TPNW has allowed for new areas of agency, new voices, new processes of diplomacy, etc. which have not really been highly visible before – and in time, this might shift public perceptions and policy choices.

The TPNW is not any guarantee that the nuclear states will not use nuclear weapons or that they will definitely move to disarmament. At the end of the day, they retain the material power to destroy our world, and it is hard to change that. But we hope that these new processes will make them think, will make them more receptive to global opinion, international law, and plain common sense. If the TPNW cannot change their mind-sets, then perhaps nothing else can.

What are the causes of the failures of nuclear abolition measures? Does the more recent Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) represent a more realistic challenge to the normalization of nuclear weapons globally?

I wouldn't say that calls for nuclear disarmament have failed completely. We had around 70,000 nuclear weapons at the height of the Cold War, and that number has come down to about 12,500, as a result of the US and Russia greatly decreasing their arsenals. But 12,500 is still too many.

To answer the question more directly: it is hard to get the public involved in this *en masse* for a few reasons. First, many people think the danger is over now that the Cold War is over, but we know that's not the case. Second, many people even if they are aware of the dangers, they think 'nothing can be done' – whereas we know that a lot can be done. It is the power of ideas and people's activism that brought about the norms against slavery, the fight for civil rights, racial equality, women's rights etc. So, I believe we *can* do something about this. But in the face of great power machinations, it can be hard for people to think they can do anything. Third, we haven't (thankfully) seen a nuclear weapon used in war since 1945. This means that the issue isn't in the public eye, or not in the same way that landmines were in the public eye, where thousands of people were being killed or maimed every week. It's not easy to motivate people to an existential threat when they aren't really aware of that threat.

As far as the TPNW (also called the ban-treaty) goes, I argue that yes, it does represent a real challenge to the normalization of nuclear weapons which has dominated politics for the past 70+ years. I argue that it does this by a) changing the discourse on nuclear weapons from one focused on 'strategy' to one focused on 'people'; b) bringing humanitarianism into the picture explicitly; c) bringing new voices into the debate (hibakusha and other affected communities, 'ordinary' people like doctors and local government officials who would be tasked with dealing with a nuclear strike, women's groups, youth groups etc; d) drawing away financial support from investment in nuclear weapons, through BDS actions (this has been growing); and e) by creating a new forum – the TPNW and its Meetings of States Parties – where non-nuclear states can use their agency to press for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Until the TPNW, all we really had was the NPT, and there, the nuclear weapon states ruled over everything, enabling them to skirt around their obligations to disarm, and the non-nuclear states were left with no agency at all. I'm not saying the NPT is not important, but increasingly, it was not able to achieve the objective of moving towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

Proponents of the TPNW do not believe that it will bring about quick disarmament – the hard work is still ahead. And of course all nine nuclear states have rejected it. But we also know that over time, treaties and norms can have an important cumulative effect, and it is hoped that the presence of the TPNW will be one more barrier against any contemplated use of nuclear weapons, and as time goes, it will acquire more signatories (it already has 93) and come to have an influence on the nuclear weapon states to move towards disarmament. We have seen in the past that it takes time for states to internalize a norm, but that even if they don't sign up to the norm, that norm can have a restraining effect on these states.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which you have been an advocate for, earned the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize. Are there other notable successes to deter nuclear weapons which did not receive this type of recognition but are worth bringing into the limelight?

Yes, there are. The creation of the TPNW, which ICAN was instrumental in bringing about, was the result of a long history of activism against the bomb. Since 1945, NGOs and some states have been calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons. In fact, this was the subject of the very first UN General Assembly Resolution, in 1946. And various arms control measures, such as the nuclear test-ban treaty, reducing numbers etc., have also been driven by advocates of a nuclear free world, or at least by those wanting a saner approach to nuclear weapons. We've also seen NGOs involved in bringing about a call to the International Court of Justice to examine the legality of the use of nuclear weapons, back in 1995, in demonstrating against nuclear testing in the South Pacific and elsewhere. Organizations like the ICRC, human rights groups, Greenpeace, the Catholic Church, etc. have long been involved in this issue. But it was not really until they coalesced, largely under the banner of ICAN, and formed strong links with like-minded states – especially Austria, Ireland, New Zealand, Mexico, South Africa – that they were able to push for the TPNW in 2017. So ICAN sees the Nobel Peace Prize as belonging to all those individuals and groups who for decades have argued for a way of addressing regional and global security that doesn't involve incinerating millions of people and possibly destroying vast regions of the planet.

To that I would also add that some states did some remarkable things to reduce nuclear dangers, especially just after the Cold War ended. The US's Stimson Center put out some useful reports from 1992 onwards, arguing that states should now consider destroying their nuclear weapons, given the end of the Cold War and the spirit of partnership which prevailed with Russia at the time. The Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating convened the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons in 1995; the Japanese and Canadian governments put together similar studies. All argued that on balance, the world would be better if the nuclear weapon states moved to nuclear disarmament, arguing that these weapons had little to no utility, gobbled up huge amounts of money, encouraged other states to develop their own nuclear weapons, and posed too great a danger – it is sheer, dumb luck, as former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans argued, that we have not seen these weapons used. We have had numerous close calls and accidents and it is time to remove these dangers.

You have long been active in envisioning an effective and inclusive regional strategy for Australia and other middle powers in the Indo-Pacific Region, arguably the epicenter of potential nuclear conflict. What leverage do regional initiatives have and what are the limits of such attempts?

The view I have (reluctantly) come to is that Australia has become far too compliant with whatever the United States wants us to do. We've been a loyal ally for decades, but we've been too quick to jump in and join their wars of choice and that hasn't helped our own strategic position or our reputation. It was a mistake to go to war in Vietnam, to invade Iraq, to agree to the folly of Afghanistan. But we don't seem to learn this lesson. I think – and I'll speak frankly here – the US has become far too aggressive for its own good, and for the good of our region or the world. I think the picture of China as a threat to the region and to Australia is somewhat overblown. America cannot seem to accept that its hegemonic position in the world and especially in the Asia-Pacific is in decline. It is trying to shore up this position by a vast number of military bases and postures – such as AUKUS – which are in my view provocative. I'm not saying China is not expanding; clearly it is. But it is behaving much as any other rising power would behave, asserting its sovereignty and strengthening its regional defence capabilities. I do not believe China is intent on upsetting the world order or invading Australia. It's benefitted enormously from this order and economically speaking; it is unlikely to spark war with its trade partners. The US, Australia and most of the world have accepted a one-China policy. If reunification of Taiwan into the PRC occurs, we hope that this will be done peacefully. But I don't accept that this issue is something over which we would go to war with China. It would be regrettable if Beijing used force against Taiwan, but that is the way great power politics has operated. We need to tread carefully in this issue: do we really want to risk war over what is, ultimately, a civil war involving China and Taiwan?

I have been concerned by Australia's anti-Chinese rhetoric recently, which I suspect is driven by pressure from Washington. I think this has resulted in more and more Australians calling for a more independent foreign and security policy, and I for one, would support this. Doing so would also align with a view of ourselves that we have

taken in the past, as a middle power, as a bridge-builder between the West and other states. We have a unique ability to foster good relations with and between states from very different parts of the world and with very different outlooks. More than anything, I cannot fathom why we don't establish more ties and stronger relationships with our Southeast Asian neighbours. Indonesia, our near-neighbour, is tipped to become a very strong economy; it has a large and youthful population, and is a largely stable secular democracy. It has just ratified the TPNW, leaving Australia as one of the very few states in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific which haven't signed the TPNW and who continue to do US bidding almost without question.

This also affects what we can do in terms of addressing regional issues: China can play an important role in reining-in North Korea, and in fostering the stable development of states in the region. Australia can help to build a regional security architecture based on confidence building measures, dialogue and greater diplomacy between China and regional states. But if we continue to be seen as too close to the US, and by continuing with AUKUS – which is ill-advised on so many levels, in my (and others') views – it makes it hard for Canberra to play a constructive and positive role in the region.

To what extent do you believe in citizens taking part in collective action to try to reassert our basic human rights and hope for a safer future?

See my answers to Questions 2 and 5 above. I am concerned that domestic and international policy has been hijacked by vested interests, and this seems to have happened fairly stealthily – but at times also openly – over the past decades. Given this, it is all the more important that academics make their voices heard, that people make their voices heard by their governments, and that states take a principled position on particular issues.

I see too many double-standards: the callous disregard by many Western governments of the disaster that is happening in Palestine, at the same time that they staunchly defend the rights of Ukrainians to fight an oppressor, the denunciation by the US and others of certain states suspected of wanting to develop nuclear weapons while the US, Britain, France and their allies continue to hold many thousands of these themselves, the call for China and other states to abide by the 'rules-based international order' when it has all too often been Western states like the US, Britain (and Australia) which have violated these same rules at times. I am reminded of Hedley Bull's warning that unless those who formed and claim to uphold the rules of world order are seen to be obeying these rules, they may face a backlash, or a 'revolt against the West' from those who see double standards and unfairness.

But on a more promising note, we are seeing millions of people calling for a viable and just peace in the Middle East, or calling for climate action or an end to nuclear weapons, or for a more peaceful and just world with less spending on pointless military adventurism. People need to have their voices heard. The worst thing is for people to think they have no agency – we all have agency and we can use it for good causes.

What would you say is the most important advice for a young scholar in IR?

I didn't know I was going to become an academic (no one in my family went to university, and no one ever suggested to me that I should. I realized, one day, around 30, that I could get myself educated. So, I say, keep learning, keep developing, keep reading, and keep listening. I believe that we academics have a duty to use our talents and our education to make a positive difference in this world, to stand for justice and peace. I think given the dire state of the world, now is not the time for frivolities; we need to use our positions and our voices to persuade governments to take decisions that are beneficial, not ones that are damaging to large portions of society and the world. We might not have all the answers, but collectively, we can offer something to policy makers which is of use. Right now, they're not listening much, but in time, they will, I believe.

Above all, I would say try to inspire your students. Mine have been startled when I say to them that they have the power to make or to change the world. I tell them, 'If you don't do it [get out there and join an NGO, work for an organization like the UN or one of its agencies, try to shape good government policy, etc] then who will?' They like the idea that they can perhaps use the education – for which they are paying good money – to make positive change in the world. And why not?