

Sustainable Power is Just Power

Written by Nayef Al-Rodhan

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NAYEF AL-RODHAN, DEC 5 2013

The question of power has been a continuous preoccupation in IR debates and the recent situation in Syria has further demonstrated its complexity. The much-disputed “limited strikes” that the US threatened to take against Syria’s ruling regime in September eventually dissipated with diplomatic compromise and UN mediation. The idea that the global community could tolerate blatant atrocities against civilians, a mass genocide of more than 120,000 people and abolish declared red-lines in exchange for short-term geopolitical gains and power politics was quite daunting to those who thought human rights mattered in the global outlook of mature democracies in the 21st century. Consequently, this situation prompted numerous and open-ended questions that have the issue of power as a common denominator: Was the US strong enough to carry out, even limited, strikes against Syria? Could it afford an intervention, in political, economic or geostrategic terms? Did the US or a coalition even have enough political and legal leeway to take military action? Was it truly prepared and capable to handle the consequences? And quite critically, does the idea of standing up to mass genocide and slaughter of civilians at all matter in modern power calculations?

These questions and more were brought up in the context of this diplomatic and humanitarian crisis. More generally, the myriad of debates and speculations about an intervention in Syria brought along an opportune momentum to evaluate power in international relations and, more importantly, to raise critical questions of what defines sustainable, effective and credible power today. Academics and think tanks have proposed and mainstreamed some core paradigms in the past decades each, predictably, with a context-specific relevance. Firstly, the highly influential notion of “*hard power*” refers to the ability to influence others by coercion, by using one’s economic strength or unequivocally through military force. This definition of power, popular among the realist current of International Relations scholars, is primarily resource-bound as it explicitly links power and its exercise to the availability and accrual of resources. Then, in 1990, the conceptualization of power was further amended to include “*soft power*”, a strategy that had already been reportedly used in several instances during the Cold War. Simply put, this definition refers to leadership by attraction and the power of example, rather than by force or imposition.

To testify to the direct connection and interest of policy-makers in these interpretations of power, in 2006, a bipartisan Commission formed of both Democrats and Republicans, developed fresh guidelines for an intelligent use of both hard and soft power tools by America. The new hybrid concept was “*smart power*” and it particularly stressed the importance of diplomacy, alliances, multilateralism, international development and legitimacy. It was defined as a skillful and intelligent use of both hard *and* soft power tools. This initiative was seen as valuable and necessary at a time when US credibility and attractiveness were heavily contested. The popularity of the concept of “*smart power*” became more visible than ever when it was officially and openly taken up by the Obama administration. On repeated occasions, Hillary Clinton spoke of her mandate of Secretary of State as guided by the principles of “*smart power*” and leadership through civilian power.

Yet, despite intense diplomatic and public policy efforts, negative perceptions about global powers remain bitterly contested in areas like the Middle East and beyond. That is because what is in fact needed is more than smart power: what is needed is what I call “*just power*”. Any foreign policy must be smart but also just, justice being considered here in its minimalist sense of fairness *and* respect for international law and norms. In other words, in order for state power and leadership to be credible and sustainable in the 21st century, it needs to be *smart as well as just*; it must take into account international norms, international law, respect and the attainment of dignity of

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individuals, collective identities, and states.

Many paradigms of political power insufficiently account for the agency of others. Moreover, they minimally, if at all, account for basic traits of human nature and human needs. Dignity, recognition, identity and belonging are fundamental human needs and critical to politics, governance and security. In our connected and interdependent world, disrespect and dignity deficits – individual, collective or nation-wide – fuel contempt, turbulence, insidious and long-term instability, and asymmetric threats to national and global security. The case for a “*just power*” paradigm rests on the premise that a stronger emphasis on justice and respect for others as well as international norms, needs to accompany foreign policy calculations in order to ensure durability, effectiveness and attractiveness of a country’s foreign policy.

While this might appear hopelessly idealistic, it is firstly pragmatic and, above all, serves both short and long-term national interests. We live in an era of “open empowerment” where social media contributes to public consciousness, and where people develop networks of solidarity and mobilize much more easily than before. It is also an era of growing aspirations of human rights, an expanding middle class and the increased recognition of international norms through solid international treaties and bodies. To maintain a leadership position in the 21st century, it is necessary to align one’s foreign policy agenda and message with this evolving context. Influential political actors have already recognised this paradigmatic shift; for example, Hillary Clinton, in a speech inventorying her mandate as Secretary of State, stated:

You can’t build a set of durable partnerships in the 21st century with governments alone. The opinions of people now matter as to how their governments work with us, whether it’s democratic or authoritarian. So in virtually every country I have visited, I’ve held town halls and reached out directly to citizens, civil society organizations, women’s groups, business communities and so many others.

This understanding of 21st century reality was maintained with Clinton’s successor, John Kerry. In his words, “security is not limited to a battlefield in today’s world”; it requires greater attention to economic opportunity and human dignity. In a recent remark on the causes of the Arab Spring, he noted that sensible foreign policy must account for pleas of people and public governance and it must incorporate the changing canons of a globalizing world. This added to another recent speech in which the Monroe Doctrine was repealed, being considered incompatible with a foreign policy among equals. As all these issues become recognized as critical to foreign policy, it is evident that a new paradigm of power is needed.

In an instantly connected, interdependent and globalizing world, acting as a *just power* is critical in order to attract support, advance one’s agenda, encourage compliance, and enjoy perceived legitimacy in a sustainable way. In order words, enduring leadership must reflect a reconciliation of the smart use of power with just conduct, a concept that the idea of ‘just power’ encapsulates. Just Power is thus the only sustainable paradigm to ensure the national interest and security of a state, and policymakers must not lose sight of this or be distracted by domestic politics (such as election cycles) or short-term geopolitical gains.

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