



United Nations Security Council Chamber in New York City. Photo by Neptuul, Wikipedia Commons.

[Just Power For A Reformed UN – Analysis](#)

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For legitimacy in an interconnected world, UN reforms must consider “just power” and the strategic relevance of justice and dignity.

By Nayef Al-Rodhan*

The [UN secretary-general](#) began his mandate in January 2017, renewing hope about the organization’s reform. Repeated failings of the UN Security Council during various conflicts like the Palestinian issue or the Syrian conflict are sharp reminders that the United Nations simply is not delivering on its aims of global peace.

Reforms must consider justice and dignity, both of which have strategic relevance for powerbrokers with the [all-encompassing connectivity](#) of the contemporary world alongside heightened attention to values, reputation and credibility in terms of legitimacy and regard for human rights.

The merits of the UN in global governance should not be understated. A wide range of contemporary challenges – from climate change to terrorism – cannot be adequately addressed unilaterally or even multilaterally. Facing these challenges requires a level of cooperation only achievable under the auspices of institutions with global reach. Yet scope alone is not sufficient – the nature of the power exercised in such institutions significantly determines the likelihood of their success.

Only the use of [just power](#), and the legitimacy it confers upon institutions, is sustainable in the long-term. *Just power* integrates justice in the exercise of power – and must be defined according to

ethical benchmarks that underscore international law. Obstacles that prevent the United Nations from assuming its rightful role as the arbiter and executor of just power are not insurmountable. A reformed UN may yet become an important contributor to [sustainable history](#).

International relations discourse continues to be framed largely within the parameters of Realism. [Thucydides](#) summarized this theory in his account of the Athenian generals who said: The strong do as they like, and the weak endure what they must. The historical mode of foreign affairs has largely involved an over-reliance upon hard power and mobilization of military forces. Yet all strategic goals cannot be achieved via force, and diplomacy and attraction can be more persuasive. Theorists began emphasizing a role for soft power and later “[smart power](#),” intended to balance effective applications of hard and soft power on appropriate occasions, based on “contextual intelligence.” Though not accidental, the near complete absence of any reference to justice in these accounts of power is striking.

My invocation of [just power](#) goes beyond smart power to include considerations of fairness and regard for international law and norms, including those concerned with human rights. Power that manifests itself in dominating ways and fails to respect the dignity of individuals is inherently unstable. Compromise of essential human needs threaten community, social and political systems. Regimes that repeatedly [assault the dignity](#) of their constituents or perpetuate forms of injustice are bound to crumble, irrespective of the strength and reach of their military and security apparatuses. Ultimately, the costs of not exercising power alongside justice and inclusiveness lead to social turmoil, political instability and potentially revolutions.

Displays of military might, including military undertakings with names like “[Operation Shock and Awe](#),” do succeed in shocking people mainly through the temerity of their unilateral character, while notably damaging the legitimacy of the actors involved.

The application of [just power](#) imposes critical parameters upon the use of force, ruling out the possibility of justification when there is a lack of regard for individuals and their dignity. Pragmatically speaking, just power also emphasizes the attractiveness of nations and regimes that adhere to high standards of justice and a willingness to abide by the same set of standards that apply to all other parties.

The United Nations draws frequent criticism regarding its unbalanced focus on the interests of great powers. In its more cynical form, this perspective paints the UN as an organization created by great powers for great powers, in line with the Realist conclusion that WWII victors would not do anything to undermine their own advancement. Scholarly works demonstrate the early UN’s historically [entrenched biases](#) and comfortable coexistence with the continued colonialism of its founding members and authors of the UN Charter. Staunch advocate of the UN Thomas Weiss sees it as maintaining attachment to a largely obsolete Westphalian conception of sovereignty. Still, evidence suggests that the UN is in transition and optimism regarding further reforms is justified.

Two recent UN events indicate the magnitude of change underway. The 2006 resolution enshrining the Responsibility to Protect, R2P, attenuated claims to absolute state sovereignty while shifting emphasis from the concerns of states to those of victims and drew consensus of all member states. While more recent developments, especially the 2011 Security-Council-mandated intervention in Libya under the auspices of R2P, distorted the 2006 resolution’s spirit they do not preclude the UN’s great potential.

Another UN accomplishment was the 2002 establishment of the International Criminal Court despite strong resistance from all permanent members of the Security Council. The UN achieved legitimacy

in terms of support garnered through consultative procedures – the overwhelming democratic consensus in the General Assembly was required to sidestep Security Council reservations – and its aim to uphold justice. The ICC signals heightened global interest in just power though it remains vulnerable to commandeering by those in positions of power and criticisms of a disproportionate focus on less powerful states, as highlighted by African Union calls for a collective African [withdrawal](#) from the ICC.

To realize its potential as a mechanism of just power, the UN must become more democratic and develop ways to minimize the structural power asymmetry enshrined in the Security Council. Structural reform of the Security Council is unlikely in the near future, given the enduring opposition of three of five permanent members. Still, concerted efforts should follow up on proposals to encourage permanent members to waive their veto rights in the case of mass atrocities – a need made all the more apparent by the civil war in Syria, which the UK permanent representative [called](#) a “stain on the conscience of the Security Council.”

The United Nations is one of the pivotal organizations contributing to global governance. In order to further the objective of *good* global governance, the work of the UN must be guided by the [minimum criteria](#) for sustainable global governance, which apply to all international organizations: 1.effective multilateralism, 2.effective multilateral institutions, 3.representative multilateral decision-making structures, 4.dialogue, 5.accountability, 6.transparency, 7. burden-sharing and 8. stronger partnerships between multilateral organizations and civil society actors.

Secretary-General Guterres is correct to state that “all that we strive for as a human family – dignity and hope, progress and prosperity – depends on peace,” but as I have argued elsewhere, a greater emphasis on [dignity at the heart of good governance](#) – an intrinsic result of the implementation of just power – is equally a fundamental imperative for resolving and preventing conflict.

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