

# Geopolitics of Dignity

By Nayef Al-Rodhan

*Nayef Al-Rodhan argues that to sustainably plan for the long-term human dignity must be placed at the heart of foreign and security policy.*



The pursuit of freedom has long been thought of as the driving force of history. Freedom became the mantra of much of the Western interpretation of any popular uprising in a post-authoritarian context. However, the yearning for dignity, demonstrated for example by the Arab Spring, is a more fundamental and more inclusive human need than just the desire for freedom, and it is possible to live in freedom but not in dignity even in mature democracies.

Dignity for *all* at *all* times and under *all* circumstances, is central to

the sustainability of any political order. Dignity is an encompassing notion, meaning much more than simply the absence of humiliation. In a previous work, I identified nine essential human dignity needs which are: *reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness*. The sustainability of any political order depends on governance mechanisms that successfully balance the ever-present tension between these nine human dignity needs and the three attributes of human nature as I define them: *emotionality, amorality and egoism*.

Understanding how human beings are emotionally based may provide us with insight into many of the problems with which we are faced, such as inequality, cultural arrogance, ethnocentrism and conflict. Like Rawls, I recognize that some moral acts may be unconsciously motivated. My approach is, nevertheless, distinct because I take into account the neurochemical underpinning of emotions, which reminds us that our emotions are not purely psychological, but also material and neurochemical. This implies that while humans have a predilection for some moral sentiments under particular circumstances, they do not, in my view, possess innate morality. It is therefore important to create the conditions under which the expansion of our moral communities becomes more likely. My view of human nature also differs from the views of Hobbes and Rousseau and lays the foundation for a more pragmatic approach, in which I advocate that the moral compass of man can be influenced positively by incentive-based constructive behavioral frameworks of societies and their governance mechanisms. I suggest that the following five paradigms are essential for the attainment of dignity, and thus a more secure, peaceful and sustainable global order for all geo-cultural domains, in our brave new connected and interdependent world.

## **1. From “Smart Power” to “Just Power”**

In 2007, a group of American scholars called for the use of *smart power* in an attempt to articulate guidelines for the intelligent use of both soft and hard power that would serve US national interests by

persuading as well as coercing. However, more than being 'smart', a state's foreign policy should also be 'just'. To a greater extent than smart power, "just power" is premised on the belief that security paradigms which focus narrowly on inter-state dynamics cannot produce effective responses to today's complex threats. Just Power argues that the promotion of justice should be the aim of modern statecraft, a belief not rooted in altruism, but in the conclusion that it is the only sustainable way that states can promote their national power and interests, and achieve security and stability in a globalised world.

## **2. From "Zero-Sum Security" to "Multi-Sum Security"**

My proposed "Multi-Sum Security principle" is a more appropriate and effective approach in today's world than the security dilemma and zero-sum security paradigms and states that:

"In a globalized world, security can no longer be thought of as a zero-sum game involving states alone. Global security, instead, has five dimensions that include human, environmental, national, transnational, and transcultural security, and, therefore, global security and the security of any state or culture cannot be achieved without good governance at all levels that guarantees security through justice for all individuals, states, and cultures."

## **3. From "Realism" to "Symbiotic Realism"**

Symbiotic Realism, a theory proposed in a previous work, posits that the classical realist perception of competitive state relations, in which states are primarily concerned with relative gains in a self-help system, does not withstand scrutiny in our globalised world. In a context of deepening interdependence, states can engage in symbiotic relations. Just like symbiosis in nature, states can take part in a relationship of mutual dependence (mutualism) that allows one state to gain more than another without deleterious effects. Symbiotic Realism expands the number of relevant actors in international relations and posits that their number and their connectivity make pure power politics unsustainable and detrimental to long-term state interests.

## **4. From "Clash of Civilizations" to "An Ocean Model of Civilization"**

Historically, decisive contributions to humanity's collective knowledge have often occurred as a result of borrowing and exchanges. So rather than thinking of competing and separate civilizations, we should think in terms of only one human civilization (one human story), comprised of multiple geo-cultural domains that contain sub-cultures, much like an ocean into which many rivers flow. Many of the great achievements in history that are commonly attributed to one geo-cultural domain often owe a great debt to those of others. Conflict certainly existed, but there have also been mutually enriching exchanges, and we need to engage in collective efforts to salvage these more hopeful parts of our common history in order to construct a narrative that is not marked by 'us' vs. 'them', but is testimony to our shared history and capacity to coexist peacefully. Collective Civilizational triumph is not a zero-sum enterprise that favours one geo-cultural domain over another. Given the instantly connected and interdependent nature of today's world, all geo-cultural domains must succeed if humanity as a whole is to triumph.

## **5. From "End of History" to "Sustainable History"**

In my theory of "Sustainable History", I defined sustainable history as "a durable progressive trajectory in which the quality of life for humanity is premised on the guarantee of human dignity for all at all times and under all circumstances." This approach views history as propelled by good governance paradigms that limits excesses of human nature and these must be *appropriate, acceptable and affordable* to each system and cultural domain. They must also meet certain common global standards of human rights, inclusivity and international law, to ensure maximum and sustainable political and moral cooperation.

## **The Way Forward**

The enduring assumption that human behaviour is governed by innate morality and reason is at odds with the persistence of human deprivation, inequality, injustice and conflict.

As explained in my neurophilosophical theory of human nature, humans have the potential to be either moral or immoral, depending on their self-interest, and will be influenced in their choices by emotions and socio-cultural contexts. This requires governance mechanisms that minimize excesses, because human beings and states cannot be left to their own devices to do the "right thing", as well as stringent normative frameworks that best fulfil the potential of human beings to exist and evolve in peace and security.

Placing human dignity at the heart of foreign and security policy may seem foolish and hopelessly idealistic. Yet, the alternative is far more short-sighted. Short-term stability can be deceiving and sometimes a longer time frame is needed to judge this correctly. In the past, several centuries were needed for collective dignity deficits to effect political and structural change. In the twentieth century, only several decades were needed for such change to occur. Going forward, the timeframe for collapse of dysfunctional political systems that do not uphold dignity needs will be reduced to just years as instant connectivity will enhance the speed of transformation. Human dignity can therefore no longer be brushed aside as a philosophical and moral concern. It is a pragmatic national and global security consideration that no state or groups of states can afford to ignore.

***Najef Al-Rodhan** is a philosopher, neuroscientist and geostrategist. He is an Honorary Fellow of St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, UK, and Senior Fellow and Director of the Centre for the Geopolitics of Globalization and Transnational Security at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Geneva, Switzerland. He is the author of *Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man: A Philosophy of History and Civilisational Triumph* (Zürich: LIT VERLAG GmbH & Co. KG Wien, 2009).*