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Dignity in International Relations

BY DAVID I. STEINBERG

David I. Steinberg, Distinguished Professor of Asian Studies, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, writes that “The need for dignity in international negotiations is an essential component for dealing with unpleasant or enemy regimes if one is to attain some of the objectives of such negotiations.”

Recent vituperative comments by the North Korean regime can normally be dismissed as the ravings of a state that either misinterprets their negative external impact, or as rhetoric that is intended for consumption by a remarkably unsophisticated internal audience. Yet amid this dross from North Korea there is often repeated a term that foreigners frequently neglect or dismiss and to which attention should be paid. That is the call for “dignity.” Indeed, this call for “dignity” is a common sentiment that is usually ignored but was included, for example, in the 2008 inaugural speech of President Lee Myong Bak, as part of his policy for a more prominent role for South Korea within the realm of international relations. More recently, Lieutenant General Qi Jianguo of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army in a January 2013 article in an official Chinese journal wrote, “If a nation loses its dignity, how can it speak of freedom?” Previously, the term was often used by the Burmese junta in its anti-foreign statements. It appears that the quest for “dignity” is a relatively common aspiration collectively amongst peoples who have felt diminished as a state, right down to the level of the individual.

It is perhaps significant that the term has been used by the leadership of states that in the past were humiliated by arrogant colonial rule, or in the case of China, the one hundred years of “semi-colonial” status. Unequal treatment, in treaties or otherwise, creates resentments and long memories. Such memories linger, and heightened nationalism on the side of the oppressed is a normal consequence.

“Dignity,” from the Latin *dignitas*—the inherent right to be valued or esteemed—is something more profound and important than “respect,” which itself is more substantive than “face,” which is often considered an Asian concept but in reality is a human universal desire for respectability. It is the basis on which much of our lives operate, or on which we hope that they would. Humans try to ensure dignity in our normal activities through protocols and good manners, means to codify dignity so that everyone understands what is expected, and thus dignity is maintained—we are being treated as we should. As established customs erode in globalized societies, such as the United States, these unofficial and often unarticulated rules are modified or ignored, leading to confusion. So, one can be accused of “dissing” someone—not providing the proper demeanor or response, and thus not providing the dignity sought. This can become more acute when cultures cross. Many African Americans during the 1992 Rodney King Riots in Los Angeles accused Korean businessmen of “dissing” them—destroying their dignity—by not looking them in the eye as one would do with an equal in American culture, even though direct eye contact between strangers is considered completely inappropriate in traditional Korean culture.

Unfortunately, this stated or inchoate cry for dignity in international relations is sadly often ignored. The stronger power usually overtly or indirectly destroys dignity by attempting to force conditions or acquiescence upon other governments for numerous reasons; they are often labeled as “evil empires,” “pariah regimes,” “rogue states,” or



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“outposts of tyranny.” However egregious their mistakes or violations of what have become (Western) international norms, those *other* governments, at least within the realm of normal bilateral relations, are deprived of the dignity that could potentially allow them to transform themselves on their own volition and at their own speed. They are not, of course, being treated as equals—with the dignity that one would expect from others. This dialectic is, in effect, paternalistic—the powerful parent chastising a child. In such circumstances, the public airing of such views, however justified, means that to acquire internal dignity—with or among their own peoples—the weaker government must respond negatively to such criticisms. For if it does not, that government has the potential to lose internal political legitimacy—dignity.

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Public negative characterizations of such governments are designed to affect positive change of some sort, yet they can often have the opposite effect, though one opposed to this position might argue that the government in question does not have legitimacy to begin with. Yet that is not necessarily the case. External “pariah” status does not always equate to internal vilification. Authoritarian leaders can be popularly, and even fairly, elected.

Sometimes there are requests, even demands, for access to the elective process of a country. From the more benevolent “observer” status to that of “monitor,” implying, implicitly, that the state in question cannot be trusted to conduct fair elections, just as students are supervised during examinations to prevent cheating. Dignity is thus denied. This is not to argue that efforts should not be made to change individual government’s negative and/or abusive behavior, both domestically and internationally. Quiet arguments for change should be made when the effects of some governments’ actions are destructive. Incentives can be proffered, and negative responses discussed. But the use of the ill-phrased “carrots and sticks” approach is demeaning. As a former Burmese foreign minister said, “We are not donkeys.” So the phrase itself is another, and not a singular, example of the demeaning rhetoric used that in fact undermines the foreign policy goals it seeks to achieve. During wartime, some in the United States have claimed that if enough force is used, the “hearts and minds” of the people on the receiving end will follow. One wonders what evidence exists for such assumptions, especially when one recalls “shock and awe.” Indeed, the very opposite seems more than likely—suspicion and distrust will follow.

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The use of sanctions for “benevolent purposes” against another state are often cited to convince the government in question to reform. Those who impose such sanctions no doubt have some powerful stimulus—either of a military or economic nature, or even moral suasions. The very act of advocating such sanctions or imposing them, however, rests on the underlying assumption that the particular state in question does not have the status, strength, moral position or concepts that would induce them to change on their own. However, the very act of imposing sanctions, in effect, deprives such governments of dignity. Furthermore, by implementing sanctions, is not the opportunity of achieving the desired goals limited? This position is nothing new in Western or other societies who have become, as others have sometimes pointed out, the ethical or political missionaries who are out to convert the unwashed heathens—those individuals or regimes who by their very status are lacking the dignity that only we can confer. To maintain internal dignity, regimes must go out of their way to deny such characterizations and to strike back with rhetoric that simply exacerbates the unpleasantness of the relationship. So these actions, in a good Hegelian way, produce the opposite reactions that defeat their purpose. Even some modern missionaries have learned that conversion by example is often more effective than verbally beating people around the head.

The need for dignity in international negotiations is an essential component for dealing with unpleasant or enemy regimes if one is to attain some of the objectives of such negotiations. This lesson, alas, is seldom learned.

David I. Steinberg is Distinguished Professor of Asian Studies, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. His latest volume (with Fan Hongwei) is *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence* (2012). He can be contacted at steinbdi@georgetown.edu.