

# The Validity of Normative Power in International Politics in the Twenty-First Century

Sabbir Ahmed<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *The concept of “normative power” has emerged, as states continuously looked for additional ways to infuse norms within a system. Normative power refers to the power of governing the creation, deletion, or modification of norms within a system or society, and thus entails a strong power of attraction. As most norms are informal having no legal binding, therefore, they seem to be weak in their application. This raises the question of the effectiveness of normative power in the twenty-first century. However, universality, equality, similarity, necessity, etc. provide the moral justification of norms and help them to be infused within state and social systems. Universality also provides the legitimacy of the use of normative power by its actors across the globe. As the world is changing, therefore, more norms will be created and due to the increased interdependency and connectivity, the necessity of norms will also increase. At the same time without legal binding, norms provide greater flexibility in states’ actions. Therefore, instead of entering into legal binding, states will attach more importance to norms and normative power in the twenty-first century.*

**Keywords:** *Normative power; Norms; Globalization; International Politics; Twenty-first century Politics; Governing*

## 1. Introduction

Normative power refers to the power of governing the creation, deletion, or modification of norms within a system or society, and thus entails a strong power of attraction. The concept of “normative power” has emerged, as a result of continuous search for additional ways to infuse norms within a system.

In the post-cold war era, the world has experienced a rapid and radical transformation of global order such as economy, politics, security, and society. According to Manners (2005) three major incidents i.e. fall of communism, war on terror, and world economic recession have contributed in different ways to this transformation and created new global agenda focusing on the ‘power of ideas’ in world politics. He argues that the power of ideas involves the use of moral justification rather than the application of physical force or material inducements.

Norms are practiced in absence of legal bindings that provide flexibility in the actor’s action and guided by moral justification, where standard acceptance limits the range of flexibility. In simple terms, norms are standard practices accepted by different actors. Here the ‘standard’, ‘acceptance’, and ‘practice’ are based on moral justification and the actors can be states, institutions, or individuals.

The concept of normative power has developed in the twentieth century when good numbers of new norms were developed especially after the cold war, and countries increasingly looked for different ways to infuse norms within different systems. Normative power refers to the power of governing the creation, deletion, or modification of norms within a system or society (Oren, Luck, and Miles, 2010 cited in [8]).

However, there are strong arguments to ignore the whole issue as the issue of moral justification is very complex and subjected to social, political, and economic realities. For example, Russian support to Asad’s government in the Syrian war has its own explanation of ‘responsibility to protect’ that

---

<sup>1</sup> Deputy Project Director, Bangladesh Army, Dhaka, Bangladesh

contradicts the understanding of the majority of the western world. Similarly, something justified in one society may not be the same for others, that is why some norms are readily accepted in the society while others are not. For example, the norm of free trade has been opposed by small farmers/traders worldwide since its creation. Therefore, the realist can argue that states, nations, institutions, or individuals can never be bound of only by the norms in absence of legal or corrosive forces.

This paper will critically assess the effectiveness of 'normative power' in international politics in the twenty-first century. To do so, the concept of normative power will be developed through the discussion with different forms of power along with realists and liberalists' debate. Later the necessity and influence of norms in the twenty-first century will be discussed following a brief discussion on three effective norms and their influence.

## **2. Difference between Hard Power, Soft Power and Normative Power**

Power can be defined as the ability to influence others' behavior, actions, or ideas (or all) towards the desired directions. In global politics, power can be exercised and categorized in different ways broadly known as hard power and soft power. Hard power refers to the use of military force, money, and legal obligation to influence or direct others' behavior. On the contrary, soft power refers to various methods of attraction and cooperation towards the desired direction. In hard power, coercion is the driving force whereas in soft power seduction is the driving force. Culture, political values, policies, etc. are different categories of soft power where democracy, human rights, strategic communication, economic restructuring, development, individual opportunities, etc. work as seductive assets.

Normative power can be identified as the combination of both soft and hard powers. At the very outset, it works as soft power based on moral justification. Equal benefits, human rights, development, cooperation or global standard, etc. work as seductive force to follow the norms. In absence of legal instruments over the period, the practices of norms become customary and precedent for the actors. The norms mentioned in conventions, covenants, or treaties become international customary law for those states that have voluntarily entered into it. A norm attains the force of customary international law when it reflects the general practice of the overwhelming majority of states and the practice is seen by states as an obligation rather than mere convenience or courtesy (Rhoda and Jack 1987). Therefore, norms can also become customary international law even for those countries that have not signed but practice it as an obligation. A new strength of normative power in the twenty-first century is the universal collectiveness through individualism. For example, the conditions of readymade garments labors in the third world were miserably poor, and due to the competitive market, both buyers and factory owners were reluctant to improve their conditions. The ILO (International Labour Organization) and the UN failed to bring any change as these buyers and factory owners also had a strong influence in state politics. At the beginning of the twenty-first century when the concept of 'clean clothes' developed and spread amongst the consumers the situation changed dramatically. Retail buyers started looking for clean clothes, as a result, factory owners and suppliers started improving the labor conditions.

## **3. Realists and Liberalists Debate on Normative Power**

The two most important and influential thoughts in the discipline of International relations related to world politics are liberalism and realism. The realist characterizes global politics as 'unending conflict' and, is about power and self-interest (Heywood 2011). As Dnnelly (2000 cited in *ibid*) argues that the theory of power politics is based on two core assumptions; firstly, people are essentially selfish and competitive; secondly, there is no authority higher than the sovereign state. According to the realist, there is no practical implication of the norm because as soon as there is a conflict of interest, state often ignores them. For example, liberals view the treaties of Westphalia as a

milestone in establishing the norms of sovereignty, but it was violated by powerful states in every century because of their self-interests. Similarly, in spite of strong global appeal, the developed countries failed to reach an agreement on the reduction of carbon emissions for last twenty years because of their individual interests.

On the contrary, the liberals view global politics as the ‘possibility of cooperation and enduring peace’ therefore they have a different perspective of the creation, practice, and violation of norms. They believe that there are conflicts of interests; but due to a natural equilibrium, at a deeper level the competing interests of individuals or states complement one another; the notion of harmony and balance amongst competing interest can reduce the risk of conflict (Heywood 2011). In other terms, norms are created not only for self-interest but also for the recognition of mutual interests which maintain the balance amongst the competing interests. Over the period norms become stronger by repeated practice and many of them get legal enforceability in course of time by the mutual agreements. Again, the realist argument of self and isolated interest does not justify many norms of present world politics. For example, ‘support weak states’ is a well-practiced global norm that hardly serves the self-interest of developed countries. Realists may argue indirect economic, political or security interest works behind such support. There are many examples in the twenty-first century where the taxpayers’ money of developed countries are being spent in third world countries for the development of humanity and moral justification. For example, the UK or Japanese support Maldives’ environmental projects when there is hardly any political, economic, or security interest. Sometimes norms are also violated for the implementation of greater norms such as the responsibility to protect, human rights, etc. The Bosnian war or the First Iraq war are good examples where the world communities united together and ignored the state sovereignty on humanitarian grounds.

#### **4. Major Norms of the Twenty First Century**

There are a number of norms actively influencing present personal, social, state and international affairs. Many norms are as old as human civilization and many of them were developed in the twenty first century. Three major norms from three different disciplines are discussed below:

##### **A. *International Accountability Standards***

The rapid development in overall communication and transportation and shifting of Russia and China from a socialist economy to a market economy began a high degree of economic interdependency in the post-cold war era. This interdependency of the economy resulted from global connection is called economic globalization. Again, due to the development of science and technology the concept of wealth is no longer confined to the possession of land or natural resources, rather intellectual capital and capacity to produce high-quality, high value, high technology products (Bluth 2004). In the post-cold war era, the ‘globalization of economy’ and the new ‘concept of wealth’ has brought many changes in global economic system such as: firstly, due to the higher interdependency economic collapse or boost in one country has direct effect on others; secondly, the emergences of new issues like global social and environmental affect of industries/financial institutions; thirdly, the growing influence of different stake holders in business decision making etc. These economic changes have made economic norms more influential in the twenty first century. International accountability standards (IAS) are such influential economic norms.

ISA was mainly developed due to the lack of existing international laws on corporate activity related to social and environmental issues (Gilbert et al. 2011) There has been huge development of IAS since the early 90s with the aim to encourage and guide multinational corporations’ responsibility by providing ways to assess, measure and communicate their social and environmental performance. The standards of IAS can be categorized into four different groups namely: principle based standards, certification standards, reporting standards and process standards.

Though IAS does not have legal enforceability and is not precisely constructed as 'hard law', its adaptation is not completely voluntary. There are three reasons for such standard adaptation: Firstly, its over time soft law can be hardened as it is seen that many government regulations accept of ISO environmental standards in their legal instrument. Secondly, many industries select standards as prerequisite for entering business because of the pressure of standard adaptation by stakeholders and authorities. Thirdly, ignorance of standard related to social and environmental impact can weaken their existing relations amongst parties. Again, where international and domestic laws face limitations to regulate the non-state actors like MNC in such complex situation, IAS can provide effective solution. For example, according to IAS most leading brands in global apparel industries require their supplier to ensure auditing labor standard in their production and supply.

### ***B. Human Rights***

Perhaps the most discussed norms in the twentieth century's world politics is the Human Rights. By definition human rights are those rights that all persons should enjoy simply as human beings (Rhode and Jack 1987). Human rights therefore by nature are universal; a core list of rights must be applied across the globe. Few people argue that it arises from basic physical and mental human needs and others argue that it is the minimum requirements for human dignity and moral personality. There is a narrow list of human biological needs, but issues related to 'mental need' or 'human dignity' are socially constructed and they created a lot of debates. However, the universality of human rights are subjected to legitimate cultural differences and capable of gradual evolution based on collective understanding of the essentials of human dignity.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) can be seen as a first attempt to outline the minimum list of universal human rights. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are the further elaboration of the declaration. Many other covenants, convention and single-issue treaties on different sensitive issues related to human rights such as racial discrimination, child rights etc. were formulated by UN covered many details of human rights than the universal declaration. Nevertheless, the Universal declaration on human rights remains the central normative document in the global human rights regime. In addition, different regional regime (such as African Charter of Human and Peoples' Right by African union) and institutions (such as UN Commission on Human Rights, Inter-American Court of Human Rights, European Commission on Human Rights, European Court of Human Rights etc) further strengthen the power of the Human Rights norms. The increasing notion of adherence of human rights is reflected through the inclusion in domestic laws and foreign policies by different states and unions. No doubt, this will give more legal enforceability and bring more political changes in near future.

There are also criticisms of human rights and doubt its future enforceability. The most prominent criticisms are: it is western originated, individual centric and contradict the concept of sovereignty as it confers right or power to individuals as opposed to collective power. It can be argued that individual rights in similar social context can form the better collective power and state does not surrender her sovereignty by ratifying the convention rather provides legitimacy of this norm to exist within the sovereignty. After all, it is the responsibility of the sovereign to ensure rights of her subjects. Again, as the social contexts are highly valued in the practice of universal human rights and it is also very flexible in evolution therefore universal human rights can be very much local as long as it maintains global standard. States and different international organizations created various instruments and institutions to achieve a global human rights standard. Other norms were also developed in light of it, adherence to human rights will bring big change in twenty first century's state politics and will also lead to more global cosmopolitanism.

### ***C. Environment***

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1964) and other articles on focusing the pollution caused by pesticide strongly influenced the environmental awareness in Europe and North America. On 22 April 1970 around 20 million Americans took part in the first 'Earth Day' rallies in the USA. As a result, US Environmental Protection Authority was established in December 1970 and Greenpeace was founded in September 1971. Greenpeace halted the US nuclear test for several months on environmental ground and caused the first UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) held in Stockholm in 1972. In early 70's the idea of limitation of natural resources and limitation of ecosystem to absorb pollution supported by the findings in 'Limits to Growth' by Meadows et al. (1974) created new dimensions of this environmental movement (Death 2014).

The discovery and debate of greenhouse effect in 80's added the issue of climate change and made the movement stronger than ever before with global perspective. As a result, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established by UN in 1988 to review and access scientific research on climate change. Three mega environmental conferences were held namely UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) also known as Earth Summit in 1992; UN General Assembly Special Session on Sustainable Development in New York 1997 also known as Earth Summit II and World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) 2002 in Johannesburg where 190 countries took part (Seyfang and Jordan 2002). According to Bluth(2004) these mega conferences provided global leadership, developed capacity, promoted global inclusiveness and legitimacy to protect the environment.

The global environment movement covers a whole range of individuals, groups, NGOs, institutions and states activities and campaign with different ideas on environmental issues to save the planet. Environmental issues include climate change, pollution, urban hazard, pressure on food and drinking water, loss of biodiversity and so on (Death 2014). In many countries especially in the west such concerns have become increasingly prominent since late 70's and become major political issues at the beginning of 21 century. The environmental activists and groups all over the world raised awareness on the issue and the increasing popular supports forced their governments to follow environmental norms in domestic and foreign policies to protect environment.

The present global environmental problems can be explained as 'the tragedy of commons' where every state is working for its own interest and ultimately harming everyone. The adherence of environmental norms causes additional cost and slow down the industrial development. Therefore, developed nations failed to reach any agreement in terms of effective implementation of environmental protection. On the other hand, the growing awareness amongst the common people encourages them to form political parties to contribute more in domestic and global politics to protect environment. For example, Bangladesh signed a treaty with Russia in 2013 to establish a nuclear power plant. The German ambassador in Bangladesh Dr Albrecht Conze expressed his country's concern about the nuclear project in different press conferences (The Daily Star 2014). He met the Bangladesh's Prime minister in March 2014 to discuss on the issue as his country's foreign policy includes 'the protection of environment'. It can be said that the environmental movement could successfully develop strong local and global norm to protect the planet which will continue its influence in the twenty first century.

### **5. Influence of Normative Power in the Twenty First Century**

In the late 20th century after the end of cold war due to the rapid growth of communication and internet, the world entered into the era of globalization. This globalization brought new dimensions in the world politics along with many practical and theoretical challenges and opportunities. Because of high inter connectivity and inter dependency in the globalized world order 'everything affects

everything' where normative power forms the basis of this multi-dimensional relations. Though the realists deny the 'concept of globalization' explaining it 'nothing new' as states are still the key players in world system and different issues of globalization such as free trade, economic interdependency, human rights etc are old concepts and practices.

The modern globalization is more complex than traditional realist or liberal thinking. States are no more only players in global politics as the concept of 'think globally' has made individuals and groups important players in present world politics. As the number of players with close 'connection and interdependency' have increased the cause and effect of any issue with different factors, process and variables have become more complex than before (Heywood 2011). In this complex world order hard powers often fail to provide effective solution of many problems where normative power can provide more effective and timely solutions. For example, if some Nigerian hackers living in India hack the US defense security system, can US declare war against all these countries? Again, in absence of legal instrument, can they be prosecuted? Again, where are they going to be prosecuted, India, Nigeria or USA? However, an anti-hacking norm can restrain individual from doing such act as well as persuade local governments to take legal action against the criminals.

The problem is, norms are voluntarily accepted and such acceptance by states do not mean that they accept any method of international enforcement unless some enforcement instrument is attached to the obligation; it depends on the good faith of the parties (Rode and Jack 2010). States develop different ways to introduce norms within their system which is also known as norm diffusion and success of norm diffusion process depend on the extent to which they provide opportunities for localization (Acharya 2004).

The strength of 'normative power' or the success of norms diffusion are well vivid in the function of different UN, global and regional agencies/organizations even NGOs (such as WHO, FAO, UNICEF, EU, ASEAN, NATO, Red Cross etc.). All these institutions, agencies, organizations, etc are built on mutual interest based on normative justification. Over the time different states voluntarily adopted their rules/ regulations/ instruction within the state's legal system. In most cases these international rules/regulations/instructions enjoy the overriding power in the domestic laws.

Again, the idea of 'cosmopolitanism' is growing very fast in the twenty-first century. Globalization or interconnectedness has developed the idea of global justice on world ethics by challenging the traditional view of the moral relationship. This ethical dimension of globalization is also known as cosmopolitanism which implies that the world has come to constitute a single moral community (Heywood 2011). Cosmopolitanism can be distinguished into two categories: right based and moral based. Now a day people are having a greater awareness of other people in other part of the world which has developed a sense of obligation based on human rights towards all other people of the world regardless of their identities. This right-based cosmopolitanism has three different elements: individualism, universality and generality (Pogge, 2008 cited in (Heywood 2011)). On the other hand the moral cosmopolitanism argues that in all circumstances people must have a universal commitment not to injure others (O'Neill, 1996 cited in (Heywood 2011)).

In reality, universal moral values are developing, and the idea of cosmopolitanism is getting popular in establishing acceptable moral standard to reduce human sufferings and develop the human rights amongst the global citizens. Undoubtedly the normative power is the main driving force to govern both right and moral based cosmopolitan societies of twenty first century. However, there are also strong criticisms of moral cosmopolitanism as moral values are different in different societies and it is not possible to establish universal values, therefore cosmopolitan world order based on common moral is unrealistic and unreliable.

Finally, it can be argued that modern globalization and interconnectedness have not only developed new norms but also widened the scope of their enforceability. On one hand norm diffusion provides greater adaptability and flexibility to address new and changed situations for the states; on the other hand, states failing to adhere to global norms run the risk of being isolated from the rest of the world. This will also continuously challenge the well-established concept of sovereignty and will bring more changes in world politics in the twenty-first century.

## **6. Conclusion**

It is argued that EU which was established on a normative basis makes it liable to act in a normative way in world politics (Manners, 2002, pp 244-252 cited in [7]). The effectiveness of norms and normative power in the twenty first century can be understood by observing the construction and function of EU. Manners and others view EU as a normative superpower in global politics. The creation of EU broke the conventional practice of state centric world politics and developed a new state system based on shared values, cooperation and collective security on a normative basis. At the moment EU as a whole is not only the largest cosmopolitan society but also is the leading actor in world politics and economy.

It is to be understood that in the twenty first century states are not only players in global politics. Global organizations such as UN, Red Cross etc.; numerous regional organizations such as NATO, ASEAN etc., NGOs, agencies, multinational companies etc. are playing a vital role in global politics. Their importance is also increasing day by day. Mostly, the policies and guidance of all these global entities are governed by norms based on moral justification. States and nations are also making spaces to accommodate those norms within their system either to be benefited from these global entities or to avoid the risk of being isolated. This normative power is growing more powerful in the present century.

As most norms are informal having no legal binding, they seem to be weak in their application. This raises the question of effectiveness of normative power in the twenty first century. However, universality, equality, similarity, necessity etc. provide the moral justification of norms and help them to be infused within state and social systems. Universality also provides the legitimacy of the use of normative power by its actors across the globe. As the world is changing, more norms will be created and due to the increased interdependency and connectivity the necessity of norms will also increase. At the same time without legal binding, norms provide greater flexibility in states' actions therefore instead of entering into legal binding, states will attach more importance to norms and normative power in the twenty first century.

## **References**

- Acharya, A., 2004. How ideas spread: Whose norms matter? Norm localization and institutional change in Asian regionalism. *International organization*, 58(2), pp.239-275.
- Akmehmet, M.H., 2011. Soft and Normative Power: The Importance and Power of Attraction in International Politics and Economics. In *International Symposium on Cultural Diversity*. Washington, DC. May (pp. 18-21).
- Bluth, C., 2004. Norms and International Relations: The anachronistic nature of neorealist approaches. *University of Leeds School of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) Working Paper*, (12), pp.1-32.
- Death, C., 2013. Can we save the planet?. In *Global Politics* (pp. 89-112). Routledge.
- Gilbert, D.U., Rasche, A. and Waddock, S., 2011. Accountability in a global economy: The emergence of international accountability standards. *Business ethics quarterly*, 21(1), pp.23-44.
- Heywood, A., 2011. *Global politics*. Macmillan International Higher Education.

- Lightfoot, S. and Burchell, J., 2005. The European Union and the world summit on sustainable development: normative power Europe in action?. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 43(1), pp.75-95.
- Manners, I., 2009. The concept of normative power in world politics.
- Rhoda E. H., Jack D, Human Rights in World Politics in Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis(2010) International politics: enduring concept and contemporary issues (edited) 10th edition,1987.USA; Pearson Education, Inc.
- Seyfang, G. and Jordan, A., 2002. The Johannesburg Summit and sustainable development: How effective are environmental mega-conferences?. *Yearbook of International Co-operation on Environment and Development*, 2002/2003, pp.19-26.
- The Daily Star,2014. Bangladesh not ready for Nuke plant.,2014: February,23. Bangladesh.