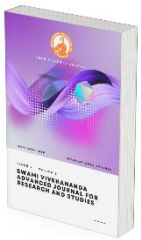
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Global South and the Liberal Order's Selective Justice

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Abstract

The Post-war International Liberal Order worked on a bargain among the nations; the norms, ideas and principles, such as democratisation, free markets and American leadership, were enshrined in institutions that produced peace and prosperity, to which Mark Carney called 'pleasant fiction'. This was not the case for the Global South, which operates on a different set of political, cultural, and economic experiences. Carney's 'rupture narrative' fundamentally misunderstood the order's history: selective enforcement, hierarchical rule application, and structural asymmetry were inherent to the post-war framework. Analysis of critical international political economy (IPE) literature and postcolonial International Relations (IR) scholarship demonstrates that the liberal order functioned as a hierarchy dressed in procedural language; imposed conditionality on security guarantees, financialised development through structural adjustment programmes, and engineered trade dependency. The proposed 'middle power coalition' based on 'value-based realism' must go beyond the selective honesty of current violations, take accountability for historical complicity, and dismantle the existing hierarchy.

Keywords: *Global South, Liberal World Order, Middle Power, American hegemony*

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1. Introduction

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's (2026) Davos confession: "calling the international rule-based order a 'pleasant fiction' and 'partially false'" has come to the global South's ears as an unwitting validation of what they have experienced since this post-war order was established. For postcolonial and developing nations, this was a structural reality ever present. The acknowledgement arrived decades after the scholars and practitioners of the global south had documented and lived the contradictions.

Although this moment has received emphasis, the concern has been raised in Western intellectual tradition for quite some time. John Ikenberry (2011), arguably the foremost liberal internationalist theorist, had highlighted the system's growing tension and its declining capacity to sustain consensual legitimacy. Martha Finnemore (2009) exposed the legitimation crisis inherent in American unipolarity, particularly the gap between proclaimed universal norms and their selective application, which has eroded the moral authority that upheld the liberal hegemony. Realist scholars, perhaps more blunt in their assessment, such as Stephen Walt (2016) and Graham Alison (2018), systematically identified the structural shortcomings of the American-led liberal order. Mearsheimer (2019) made a categorical claim that the order was destined to fail not by external assault but by internal contradiction.

While Carney's realism is commendable as a departure from liberal triumphalism, his 'rupture narrative' overlooks a crucial truth about the workings of the rule-based international system, which hides hypocrisy at its core. When he proposed, 'this bargain no longer works', it suggests that the current moment represents a fundamental break in the previously functioning order, obscuring an uncomfortable historical truth. What he identifies as 'emergent dysfunction' in the system is not an aberration but a constitutive feature. For the actors of the global South, selective enforcement, hierarchical application of rules, and American exemption have been the norm, not a recent deviation.

This article proceeds with the contention that the international liberal world order operated as a '*hierarchy with procedural language*'; a stratified system of power in which the formal vocabulary of rules, norms, sovereignty and consent serves to legitimise and conceal the asymmetric relations of authority. The universalist idiom of the order, presented as a structure that demanded compliance, varied in its respect for sovereignty, contingent on the state's position in the hierarchy.

What the middle powers of the prosperous world are now experiencing is not, therefore, the novel experience of powerlessness, but rather a condition long familiar to the Global South: 'ever-present constraint' put on by hegemonic power whose benevolence was always conditional. The current moment reveals itself as a systemic rupture as the withdrawal of preferential exemption coincides with the removal of the sign of compliance from the window.

The 'Bargain' and the 'Pleasant Fiction'

The symbolic significance of this acknowledgement happening at events like World Economic Forum at Davos is unimaginable. The Forum represents perhaps the most important institutional expression of the liberal economic order. The arena where its architect and beneficiaries deliberate on its governance annually. The admission of systemic failure from within renders it not merely a political upheaval but a deeper structural repositioning, which demands a prior question. Why this confession is happening now, is it because the 'order' is unjust, does this reflect a genuine reckoning with the order's selective justice, or is it no longer exclusively beneficial to those who build and

uphold it? The answer required a preliminary account of what the bargain actually was.

John Ikenberry (2011) provides the foundational liberal institutionalist explanation. After the Second World War, the United States emerged as a power with such an immense capacity that smaller nations faced uncertainty in how to engage with it. The resolution came in the form of institutional binding; the United States, with its partner, built an international quasi-constitution, a set of relationships to which it binds itself, "a multifaceted and sprawling international order organised around economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation and democratic solidarity" (Ikenberry 2011). America, binding this hegemonic power within rules and institutions, provided the much-needed anchor, in theory, to other states to make predictable choices, fostering alliances, stabilising the global economy, and championing the 'free world' values (Mearsheimer, 2019). In this view, 'Liberal International World Order' functioned on 'openness' and 'rule-based' enshrined in institutions such as the United Nations, Bretton Woods Institutions and norms such as 'multilateralism', that proved more efficient than hawkish structures such as regional rivalry, sphere of influence, or mercantilist trade behaviour (Ruggie, 1982; Keohane, 1984).

The ideological and intellectual imperative of liberal institutionalism reached its peak at the end of the Cold War. The belief in this universalism was so impenetrable that it led to the proposal that rule-based order had defeated the great evil of communism and left the humane kind at the 'end of history,' marked by rule-based norms, respect for multilateral institutions, and a coercion-free financial system (Fukuyama, 1992). The world has entered a place where sovereignty is no longer a deal-breaker. Within this framework, the United States pursued what Walt (2016) described as democratic enlargement: actively pursuing regime change in autocratic states, on the premise that enlarging the sphere of democratic governance would solidify this self-sustaining international liberal order. This was the 'bargain' in its most ambitious form and the 'fiction' at its grandest.

Yet, the fiction was never equally shared. The optimism of the post-Cold War began to fade at the onset of the twenty-first century, not least because of the shift in global wealth and power from the North and West to the global East and South, bringing new voices in the international arena. Countries like India, Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa, with their distinct cultural, political, and economic experiences, saw the world through their own anti-imperial and anti-colonial lenses. As Ikenberry (2009) himself acknowledged, the old international order was built in the West for Western purposes. It was never too pleasant to begin with for the Global South.

American Hegemony's Duality

While Carney admits that American hegemony helped deliver 'public good and stable financial system', this framing conceals the conditionality rooted in these arrangements. These 'public goods' came with strings attached and asymmetric costs to be borne. American security guarantees came with a price tag; it was never meant to be neutral: political alignment, policy conformity, asymmetric military resource agreements, hosting American military installations, and supporting American geopolitical objectives. Countries operating under such arrangements, such as the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan, among others, were required, to varying degrees, to formulate their foreign policies in accordance with American preferences (Hayes, 1998).

The 'stable financial system' Carney referred to was similarly structured with asymmetric terms. The crisis assistance came with 'prescribed terms' that were conditioned on mandated privatisation, deregulation, and fiscal austerity, operationalised principally

through the IMF and the World Bank. These prescriptions were delivered disproportionately to the domestic populations of recipient countries. The 1998 Asian financial crisis and the 2008 American financial crisis were handled differently. While the previous triggered stringent conditionality and harsh structural adjustment, the latter were dealt with expansionary fiscal and monetary intervention that was structurally denied to the developing state (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

The 'Washington Consensus' was framed as a universal development model, presenting trade liberalisation, capital account openness, and fiscal discipline as technically neutral frameworks. As Babb (2012) argues, these were not technocratic neural instruments but an ideological framework that systematically narrowed the policy choices of developing economies. Economist Ha-joon Chang (2002) explicitly identifies this asymmetry: Western industrialised nations used protectionism, industrial policy, and state intervention to achieve developed status, but precisely the same instruments were denied to the developing countries, to which he termed 'kicking away the ladder' once they had climbed it.

Taken together, these arrangements, what Rayes (2026) identified as the defining feature of the order, "it was never that the rule restrained the strong, but rather rules were frequently applied through power". The proclaimed universalism of liberal international norms, in practice, was used to legitimise the structure of differential obligation. This duality of proclaiming the universal principle while maintaining structural advantage through hierarchical enforcement is precisely what characterises '*hierarchy with procedural language*', and this duality is what Carney's rupture narrative fails to adequately account for.

Structural continuity and Western-centric rupture narrative

The 'pleasant fiction' that Prime Minister Carney describes was pleasant for the countries whose self-determination was never genuinely questioned, whose economic autonomy was never genuinely threatened, and whose development choices were not subjected to structural adjustment programmes. The framing of this moment as the 'rupture' in that 'fiction' describes a fundamentally Western-centric interpretive lens. What the Western leaders and the Canadian Prime Minister are experiencing as 'departure' from the existing norm: territorial threats, weaponisation of tariffs and unilateral military actions, has been used in the global South as the tactical choices just under different pretexts (Mgbeoji, 2006; Anghie, 2004).

The historical parallels reflect the continuity in the global South experience visible across three interconnected domains. First, regarding territorial integrity, while European leaders have invoked the inviolability of sovereignty with respect to Greenland, the same principle has operated differently elsewhere. Territorial integrity has been conditional for Panama (Scranton, 1991), Libya (Kuperman, 2015), Iraq (Hinnebusch, 2007), Afghanistan (Maley, 2021), and Venezuela (Smilde & Ramsey, 2020). Military Invasion and drone campaign were part of the 'rule-based order' in these states, not an aberration (Cronin 2013; Shaw 2016). Second, the legal doctrine that legitimised this operational framework as neutral humanitarian instruments, not as a tool of geopolitical leverage. The doctrines of 'humanitarian intervention' (Chandler, 2002), 'responsibility to protect' (Hehir, 2013), and democracy promotion (Bridoux & Kurki, 2002) were selectively applied to serve the strategic interests of intervening powers, while the language of sovereignty was invoked as a rhetorical cover (Csaky, 2020). In this regard, universalist legal norms were operating as a legitimate vocabulary for the exercise of

hierarchical power. And third, the economic structure that engineered dependency through trade and finances. The debt accumulation in Latin American and African nations in the 70s, followed by the commodity price collapse and interest rate shocks of the 80s, resulted in a crisis that was managed in accordance with the World Bank and IMF conditionalities: requiring privatisation of government enterprises, eliminating subsidies, deregulating industries, and allowing foreign institutions (Stiglitz, 2002; Easterly, 2006). Failure to comply with these directives resulted in a credit freeze, capital flight and expulsion from the international market. This created a vicious cycle of dependency that persisted well beyond the immediate crisis. Trade architecture developed such that developing countries were incentivised to focus on primary goods, agricultural products, raw materials and minerals. At the same time, high-end services and manufactured goods remained centred in the developed West. This was not West's natural competitive advantage but was engineered through the tariff structure and protectionist policy: importing cheap raw material and protecting finished goods (Chang, 2002). Bangladesh's cotton exports, Zambia's copper dependency, Ghana's cocoa concentration; this dependence on a single agricultural product was not an organic economic outcome, but the result of trade policies that made specialisation necessary for survival.

In essence, what this 'rupture' notion actually exposes is the order's underlying logic of structural consistency. The contrast is now that the actors have changed, the pretence has withered, and the previous sign holders are at the receiving end. For the global South, this moment demonstrates a stark validation, not disruption (Acharya, 2014), validating that sovereignty was not a right guaranteed by rules-based order but a condition contingent on power. As Rayes (2026) observes, the fiction was always unpleasant for much of the world; the difference is that then it did not register as a crisis for the systems architect. What has changed now is not the structure, but the audience.

The Middle Power's Selective Realism: From Confession to Complicity

Carney's most rhetorically striking intervention at Davos was not the diagnosis of the order's systemic failure but his reference to Vaclav Havel's 1978 essay, "The Power of the Powerless". In Havel's allegory, the greengrocer displays a sign of support for the regime in his window: he participates in the rituals to avoid trouble, not because he believes in the system. He calls this 'living within a lie'. Carney applied this framework, critically assessing the institutional workings of their own countries: for decades, middle powers joined the institutions, praised the principles, and benefited from the order while, at some point, understanding that the rules were applied selectively and that the proclaimed universalism was partially fiction. The bargain was beneficial, so the sign remained in the window. But more than disillusionment, what this assessment reveals is complicity.

This complicity argument exposes the first and most fundamental problem in this analysis: the middle power experience he described as a recent and reluctant accommodation of a 'flawed order' was the only available mode of participation for the Global South. Canada's shocking discovery that 'compliance does not buy safety' and rules are applied according to the identity of the accused rather than the nature of the violation: this revelation has been the operating reality of this rule-based order for the Global South from the very onset. Narlikar (2010) and Taylor (2010) have documented a crucial distinction that Western middle powers had access to decision-making institutions, whereas the global South faced systemic exclusion. The 'reluctant complicity' to which the middle powers of the West were performing, for the global south, was

not a choice made from the position of access, result of the constraints upon them. The proposed 'value-based realism' has long been the practice of middle powers of the Global South, not as a principled doctrine but a structural necessity (Kang, 2010) .

The second problem in Carney's diagnosis is the agency of the middle powers in itself. His formulation, "if you are not at the table, you are on the menu", implies that middle powers have sufficient willingness and capabilities to shape the international system. This overstates the case. In an anarchical system, great powers possess system-shaping capabilities and shape the norms and order within which other states operate (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Middle powers retain the capacity to influence outcomes, but lack the leverage to effect systemic transformation (Holbraad, 1984). In this respect, Carney's diagnosis risks overpromising; in Havel's analogy, the power of the powerless was a form of moral refusal of the authoritarianism, not a blueprint of hard power to overthrow the system.

These two problems converge in Carney's diagnosis, which he calls variable geometry: a coalition of middle powers organised around shared values and differentiated issues-based cooperation. The fundamental question for this middle-power coalition: will it include the interests and voices of the global south? The historical record of such initiatives offers little assurance. Historically, the 'coalition of the willing' meant a coalition of capable nations that excluded the most affected. Western invocation of human rights as a collective value has turned into a selective reinforcement tool when convenient for geopolitical objectives and into ignorance when inconvenient.

For this coalition to work, it needs to address an important question: Will it ensure equitable participation from the global south? Will the old hierarchy be dismantled? New trade agreements, supply chains and technology transfers will not repeat the old extractive pattern. The challenge is not to create a new middle power coalition but to operate differently from the one they are supposed to replace.

Conclusion: Moving Beyond Selective Honesty

The post-war international system, in which the rule-based order operated not as a universal upholder of sovereign equality but as a hierarchy administered through procedural language, the gap between the proclaimed norm and the operational practices was borne differently by the global south. In the wake of this, Carney's confession at Davos was not a revelation but a belated acknowledgement. The fiction of the order did not become unjust the moment Western power found itself exposed to the logic. It was unjust the moment it was created: when sovereignty was conditional, when compliance was differentially demanded, when development choices were subjugated, the order was unjust to begin with.

If Canada and its partners wish to build a more just order, selective honesty is not a solid foundation for doing so. It has to confront older hypocrisy too, especially when victims are smaller, poorer and easier to overlook. Credibility is lost when universal principles become conditional. The moral refusal to which Carney invokes from Havel's analogy requires confronting one's own prior complicity. Removing the sign from the window is only a first step.

Genuine accountability, in this context, requires three interconnected commitments: first, acknowledgement of past complicity in asymmetric enforcement. A genuine reckoning with the past that is not as a rhetorical concession but as a self-understanding that led to just order in the future. Second, the application of uniform standards, irrespective of geopolitical convenience. The principles invoked in defence of Greenland's sovereignty cannot remain silent on the conditional sovereignty of Venezuela, Palestine, Iran or on that of sub-Saharan countries. And third, when

the new order is being formulated, the voice of the global south needs meaningful consideration, not just as consultative participants. The variable geometry coalition needs to dismantle the exclusionary architecture of the past.

Taking that sign down the window is only the beginning; the real test of Carney's realism is whether that diversification effort will avoid creating the same pattern. The global South does not simply require the Western powers to acknowledge the 'hypocrisy of hegemony': that acknowledgement, however welcome, is not enough; what it needs is for them to dismantle the hierarchies that enable them, not just when asymmetry turns on them but as a matter of principle.

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