



# **Policy Compass**

## **The Role of Selective Enforcement in Sustaining Global Order**

**By**  
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**13 February 2026**

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### ***The Role of Selective Enforcement in Sustaining Global Order***

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#### **Executive Summary**

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#### **The Conceptual Framework: Hegemonic Exceptionalism and the Power of Rhetorical Signalling**

- Hegemons impose norms on others, exempt themselves.
- “Rules-based order” rhetoric signals alignment and obedience.
- Excess hypocrisy erodes soft power; full unveiling frees mid-powers, causes entropy.
- Scholars see it as functional hierarchy tool needing balance.

#### **Human Rights as a Case Study: Legal Asymmetry in Action**

- Great powers avoid key treaties, use norms against others.
- Opt-outs (ICC, ICESCR, CRC) enable selective enforcement.
- Compliance = loyalty; violations = sanctions/intervention.
- Burdens mid-powers, reveals instrumental use.

#### **Contemporary Insights: Carney's Davos Address and the Perils of Fraying Norms**

- Carney (Jan 2026) calls order “partially false,” urges middle-power autonomy.
- Rupture from multipolarity, backlash, populist erosion.
- Trump’s 2025– term lifts veil: tariffs, territorial claims, institution disdain.
- Mid-powers (Turkey, Poland, Israel, Japan) pursue independent agendas, increase entropy.

#### **Conclusion: Balancing Realism, Communication, and Order in a Fractured World**

- Selective enforcement + rhetoric deters mid-power adventurism.
- Human rights & Carney illustrate utility/fracture; Trump accelerates breakdown.
- Too much hypocrisy hurts soft power; too little unleashes entropy.
- Empires endure via precise, pragmatic asymmetry.

#### **The Role of Double Standards in Sustaining Global Order**

We title this article “The Role of Double Standards”, but probably the most appropriate title could have been “The importance of Hypocrisy” in sustaining the global order. This is because, in the intricate arena of international relations, realism remains a cornerstone for crafting foreign policy, prioritizing raw power dynamics, national interests, and the unforgiving logic of anarchy. However, intertwined with this is the deliberate practice of selective enforcement, where hegemonic powers espouse an ostensibly universal rules-based system—one they frequently circumvent— hence the hypocrisy, while selectively applying it to subordinate states who fall out of line or out of favor. This is not a whimsical mechanism and not even merely a

tactical oversight but a deliberate stabilizer: it communicates to mid-tier powers and allies that compliance is non-negotiable, with swift penalties for transgressions, even as the architects retain unchecked latitude.

The core communiqué is unequivocal: we, as the hegemon, define and transcend the rules; you, however, must abide or face repercussions, and this framework of rules is what we are going to use to punish you in case we step out of line. This asymmetry, when effectively managed, upholds a hierarchical order. However, its erosion—through unvarnished realism in discourse or action—can unleash disorder, as lesser actors seize opportunities for autonomy. Excessive selectivity, on the other hand, can tarnish soft power by breeding cynicism and resentment. This essay delves deeper into this paradigm, incorporating scholarly insights, juridical precedents, and contemporary analyses, including Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's recent speech at Davos, to demonstrate how hypocrisy in the communication – realism in actions, fortifies global structures against the entropy of unbridled competition.

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### *The Conceptual Framework: Hegemonic Exceptionalism and the Power of Rhetorical Signalling*

Selective enforcement operates as a linchpin for systemic stability, enabling great powers to impose norms that foster predictability and restraint among clients and mid-powers without binding themselves. Rooted in realism, this allows hegemons to navigate existential threats unencumbered, while the normative facade legitimizes their primacy and integrates others into a manageable framework. Crucially, this extends beyond mere policy to the realm of communication: invoking a "rules-based international order" serves as a potent signal of camp alignment and obligatory deference. Much like the Soviet Union's rhetoric of the "international of socialist states" during the Cold War—evoking bodies like the Comintern or Warsaw Pact to denote ideological fidelity and submission to Moscow's directives, or China's more recent "Win-win" strategies, effectively plunging countries into debt traps—contemporary appeals to a rules-based order telegraph inclusion in the hegemon's sphere, demanding adherence to its edicts. This linguistic framing reinforces order by delineating insiders from outsiders: professing commitment to such rules affirms loyalty, while deviation invites isolation or punishment. It maintains cohesion without the need for constant coercion, as mid-powers internalize the narrative to access benefits like trade, security guarantees, or diplomatic cover.

Yet this signaling must be calibrated. If overplayed—manifesting as egregious inconsistencies—it erodes soft power, the hegemon's capacity to attract and persuade rather than compel. As Joseph Nye articulates in his seminal work on soft power<sup>1</sup>, credibility hinges on perceived authenticity; blatant double standards can foster global backlash, diminishing influence. Conversely, stripping away the veil entirely—embracing overt realism in rhetoric, as seen in certain populist leaders—might send out the message that compliance is not mandatory anymore and enforcement against neighbors is not guaranteed, therefore signaling that rules are illusory and self-help is paramount. This can precipitate entropy: alliances splinter, proxy conflicts proliferate, and the system devolves into a Hobbesian free-for-all.

A stark example is the foreign policy approach of Donald Trump, whose "America First" doctrine lifted the veil of hypocrisy by openly prioritizing U.S. interests without the traditional normative veneer. Trump's intentions were crystal clear, with realism on full display—demanding allies pay more for defense, imposing tariffs on partners, and withdrawing from multilateral agreements like the Paris Accord or Iran nuclear deal. While this candor eliminated pretense, the message transmitted was that middle powers now had free rein to pursue their own agendas, unbound by the hegemon's selective norms.

We see many hotspots in the world where this might find fertile ground: Turkey, under Erdogan, expanded its influence in Libya and Syria, clashing with NATO interests and purchasing Russian S-400 systems despite U.S. sanctions, asserting regional autonomy. Poland, during the Law and Justice era, defied EU rule-of-law standards while bolstering its anti-Russian stance, leveraging Trump's support to prioritize national sovereignty over collective European norms and now is trying to become Central Europe's main military player. Israel felt emboldened to advance annexation plans in the West Bank and strengthen ties via the Abraham Accords, operating with reduced concern for international criticism under Trump's pro-Israel tilt. Japan, facing U.S.

pressure on trade and defense spending, accelerated debates on constitutional revisions to enhance its military capabilities, hedging against perceived U.S. unreliability and China's perceived threat<sup>2</sup>, signaling that they would militarily support Taiwan in case of invasion from the mainland<sup>3</sup>. Such shifts increased systemic entropy, as allies pursued divergent paths, weakening alliances and amplifying multipolar fragmentation. Historical precedents abound; the decline of empires, from Rome to the British, often accelerated not solely through direct confrontations but via internal discord when subordinates perceived the central authority's norms as hollow, leading to rebellions or defections.

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Scholars have extensively dissected this interplay, portraying it as an intrinsic element of international architecture. Realists like Morgenthau and Waltz both argue that the international system is fundamentally shaped by power and the distribution of capabilities, implying that international norms and rules tend to be interpreted and enforced unevenly across states, echoing Thucydides' ancient dictum that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."<sup>4</sup> One could extend this, arguing in venues that selective enforcement facilitates "hegemonic stability," where the leader provides public goods (e.g., security) in exchange for deference. Constructivists, such as Alexander Wendt in *Social Theory of International Politics*, highlight the social construction of norms, noting how they are selectively deployed to perpetuate hierarchies, with rhetoric playing a key role in identity formation and alliance signaling<sup>5</sup>.

Critical perspectives from scholars like Robert Knox critique this as neocolonial, where accusations of inconsistency mask deeper power imbalances, yet acknowledge its role in order maintenance. Liberal institutionalists, including John Ikenberry, posit that such systems endure through "strategic restraint" by hegemons, but warn in works like *After Victory* that overhypocrisy alienates partners<sup>6</sup>. Empirical analyses from think tanks like the Cato Institute<sup>7</sup> and Brookings emphasize the soft power pitfalls, and the need of a legal cover to save the narrative, keeping in mind however that it as an inescapable political reality—effective until exposed. Together, these viewpoints affirm that selective enforcement, amplified by communicative signaling, navigates realism's demands while averting chaos, though it demands a delicate equilibrium to preserve legitimacy and curb entropy.

#### *Human Rights as a Case Study: Legal Asymmetry in Action*

The human rights regime vividly exemplifies this selective framework, where superpowers trumpet universal principles as rhetorical tools for alignment and discipline, yet opt out of binding commitments. This not only enforces order among mid-powers but communicates expectations: adherence signals fealty to the hegemon's camp, much as socialist states once pledged to "proletarian internationalism" to affirm Soviet loyalty. The International Criminal Court (ICC), born from the 1998 Rome Statute, targets atrocities like genocide and war crimes, but its architects evade accountability. The U.S. signed in 2000 under Clinton but "unsigned" in 2002 under Bush, fearing prosecutorial overreach, and has enacted laws like the American Service-Members' Protection Act (2002) to shield citizens<sup>8</sup>. Russia ratified then withdrew in 2016 amid probes into Crimea and Georgia<sup>9</sup>. China abstains entirely, decrying sovereignty erosion. Israel mirrored the U.S. path, unsigned in 2002 amid Palestinian conflict scrutiny. Ukraine, while invoking ICC jurisdiction ad hoc since 2014 for Russian actions, remains a non-party, preserving flexibility.

Broader treaties reveal similar patterns. The U.S. champions the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) but shuns ratification of the ICESCR (1966), CRC (1989), and CEDAW (1979), prioritizing domestic sovereignty<sup>10</sup>. Russia and China ratify the ICCPR (1966) with caveats undermining enforcement, rejecting supranational courts<sup>11</sup> and Israel reserves on self-determination in the ICCPR and ICESCR. These exemptions empower great powers to deploy human rights as weapons—e.g., ICC indictments against African leaders or sanctions on rogue states—while immunizing themselves.

As legal scholars in *Opinio Juris* observe, this fosters "glaring inequalities," disproportionately burdening Global South nations and exposing the regime's instrumentalism<sup>12</sup>. In communicative terms, promoting these norms signals alignment: mid-powers ratifying treaties affirm their place in the order, enabling selective punishment

(e.g., NATO interventions in Kosovo or Libya) to maintain discipline without universal reciprocity. Overuse risks soft power erosion, as seen in accusations of Western bias, but abandonment could liberate mid-powers from restraints, inviting proliferation of abuses and alliances. On an historical note, when asked about U.S. actions in Japan during World War II, McNamara responded, "LeMay said if we'd lost the war, we'd all have been prosecuted as war criminals. And I think he's right. . . . LeMay recognized that what he was doing would be thought immoral if his side had lost. But what makes it immoral if you lose, and not immoral if you win?"<sup>13</sup> However, US won the war and had not trials while installing the Nürnberg process for nazi Germany, a heinous regime that was possible prosecuting only because they were defeated. The proof is that, on the other side, Stalin, a person who, during his tenure, killed far more Soviet Citizens than Nazi Germany, in all his cruelty, managed to do<sup>14</sup>, remained in power with still a considerable amount of prestige and soft power.

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#### *Contemporary Insights: Carney's Davos Address and the Perils of Fraying Norms*

Recent events underscore the fragility of this system, particularly when its communicative veneer cracks. In his pivotal January 20, 2026, address at the World Economic Forum in Davos<sup>15</sup>, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney delivered a forthright critique, openly acknowledging the double standards embedded in the U.S.-led rules-based order. Declaring a "rupture" in the post-1945 framework, Carney stated, "We knew that the story of the international rules-based order was partially false," exposing how great powers preached universality while practicing exceptionalism. He likened it to a convenient narrative that masked power imbalances, urging middle powers like Canada to forge "strategic autonomy" through alliances to counter hegemonic overreach.

This confession resonates with fears that overt realism, embodied by leaders like Donald Trump who scorned multilateral facades, erodes the signaling power of rules-based rhetoric, emboldening mid-powers to defy norms without reprisal. Trump's unmasking of U.S. hypocrisy—through "naked imperialism" that openly asserted spheres of influence for America while denying them to others—further amplified this, leaving allies to navigate coercion and uncertainty. Analysts argue this shift toward crude realism, devoid of hypocritical pretense, signaled to middle powers that the old restraints were optional, fostering independent agendas and entropy. As commentator on X nailed it on the head: "Carney is, at heart, a central banker. As such he understands the power of words and beliefs better than anyone: when you strip things down to their core, a world order - like trust in a currency or a financial system - fundamentally relies on the maintenance of belief. Systems of power exist because participants act as if they exist. That's pretty much it: perception is reality."<sup>16</sup>

Carney's acknowledgment captures the current precarious state of global affairs in early 2026, where the U.S.-led order is fracturing under the weight of exposed asymmetries. This rupture stems from a confluence of factors: the inherent tensions in hegemonic systems, where selective enforcement has long been tolerated as a pragmatic necessity but now faces backlash amid rising multipolarity and domestic populism. The "rules-based order" narrative, once a unifying signal, has been undermined by great-power rivalries—such as U.S.-China trade wars and Russia's defiance in Ukraine—exposing it as a tool for dominance rather than equity. As Economically, globalization's inequities have fueled resentment, with mid-powers and the Global South increasingly viewing Western norms as neocolonial impositions. Politically, the rise of authoritarianism and anti-establishment sentiments has amplified calls for sovereignty over multilateralism, eroding the soft power that once masked hard power plays.

The impact of Donald Trump's second term, which began in January 2025, exemplifies and accelerates this unraveling. Trump's "America First" agenda, now in full swing, has lifted the veil of hypocrisy more aggressively than in his first presidency, prioritizing transactional deals over normative rhetoric. In 2026, this manifests in bold actions: a U.S. military operation in Venezuela to capture President Nicolás Maduro, framed as a hemispheric security imperative but criticized as imperial overreach; threats to "take back" the Panama Canal, annex Canada as the 51st state, acquire Greenland, leaving free rein to Israel in Gaza and sweeping tariffs that target allies like the EU and Japan, reshaping global trade under an "America First" lens. These moves, executed via executive orders and a revamped 2026 National Defense Strategy emphasizing homeland and hemispheric

priorities, have demolished remnants of the post-WWII order. Trump's disdain for international institutions, including the UN, has further eroded multilateralism, signaling that rules apply only when convenient for U.S. interests.

The consequences are profound, fostering entropy as mid-powers interpret Trump's overt realism as permission to forge independent paths. Ultimately, while Trump's clarity might be refreshing and eliminates pretense, it removes the communicative restraints that once bound the system, inviting a post-hegemonic world where middle powers step up, but at the cost of increased rivalry and disorder.

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### *Conclusion: Balancing Realism, Communication, and Order in a Fractured World*

In summation, realism underpins foreign policy, but selective enforcement and, yes, unfortunately, hypocrisy—fortified by communicative rhetoric—ensures a semblance of order amid anarchy. By promoting a rules-based narrative akin to historical ideological signals, hegemons foster alignment and obedience, deterring mid-power adventurism. Scholarly consensus spans realism's power logic to constructivism's norm-building and critical exposes of inequality, all affirming its stabilizing role. Human rights asymmetries exemplify this, enabling targeted discipline while preserving hegemonic freedom.

Carney's Davos revelations starkly illuminate the double standard, warning that its overexposure damages soft power and, if fully unveiled, unleashes entropy through unrestrained actors. Yet empires thrive on this calibrated illusion: too much pretense breeds resentment; too little invites chaos. As global rivalries intensify, sustaining this balance—through astute signaling and restrained selectivity—remains essential to avert collapse from infighting or external shocks. The lesson is timeless: order endures not through purity, but through pragmatic asymmetry communicated with finesse. So, while Trump's approach might be very practical in terms of medium-term tactical goals, he risks to undermine on the long term the very foundation on the US empire, at least we have known them for the last 80 years.

### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.diplomacy.edu/resource/soft-power-the-means-to-success-in-world-politics/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://constitutionnet.org/news/japan-ruling-parties-start-talks-constitutional-amendment-military>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/japan/japan-taiwan-china-crisis-sanae-takaichi-b2908252.html>

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege\\_of\\_Melos](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Melos)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239065011\\_A\\_Social\\_Theory\\_of\\_International\\_Politics](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239065011_A_Social_Theory_of_International_Politics)

<sup>6</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1369148118791402>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-maduro-operation-five-insights-on-power-and-international-relations/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2024-05-23/the-complicated-relationship-between-the-u-s-and-the-icc-explained>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38005282>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/whither-united-states-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/10/30/china-must-stop-making-a-mockery-of-the-rights-treaties-it-signs/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://yjil.yale.edu/posts/2024-06-12-weapons-against-the-weak-international-law-and-the-political-economy-of-coercion>

<sup>13</sup> <https://medium.com/retro-report/the-u-s-general-who-called-himself-a-war-criminal-8789703305f5>

<sup>14</sup> <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2010/09/naimark-stalin-genocide-092310>

<sup>15</sup> [Davos 2026: Special address by Mark Carney, PM of Canada | World Economic Forum](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/10/30/china-must-stop-making-a-mockery-of-the-rights-treaties-it-signs/)

<sup>16</sup> [Arnaud Bertrand auf X: „Who could have expected Mark Carney, a liberal establishment figure if there ever was one, to be the flag-bearer for the end of the US-led order? And from a podium at Davos, of all places? The more you think about it, though, the more it makes sense. Carney is, at heart, a https://t.co/IHMSL6S6By“ / X](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/10/30/china-must-stop-making-a-mockery-of-the-rights-treaties-it-signs/)