



OPINION

# The world order has changed. Now comes the hard part

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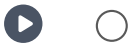


Prime Minister Mark Carney speaks at the 2026 Global Progress Action Summit in Toronto, on May 9.

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It is now commonplace to say that the international rules-based order is dead. Indeed, in his speech at Davos in January, Prime Minister Mark Carney not only pronounced its death but outlined a strategy for middle powers to adopt in response.

There are two elements of the rules-based order that have been challenged by recent events. The first is that there can be no changes to borders through the forcible annexation of territory or unilateral secession. This is one of the main pieces of the international order that appears to have fallen. The first

serious brick in the wall was removed in 2014, with general acquiescence to Russia's takeover of Crimea and eastern Donbas. It was also challenged more recently by the United States' stated desire to purchase Greenland, as if it was a piece of real estate, and against the wishes of both Greenlanders and Denmark.

The second challenge is to conventions of free trade, and respectful relations between states. These have been replaced by a transactional and, some might say, exploitative set of economic relations that powerful countries, most notably the United States, exert over other countries, including long-standing allies.

The spectre of punishing tariffs, threatened and enacted by the powerful on the less powerful, sometimes to gain political leverage, rather than on economic merits, was front and centre at Davos.

VIDEO 0:40

Prime Minister Mark Carney gave a speech at the World Economic Forum that blamed U.S. President Donald Trump, without naming him, for what Carney described as a rupture in global relations.

Some might complain that Mr. Carney's speech assumed that we are in a

new world, and that this is far from clear. Perhaps these changes to the world order will not survive Donald Trump's presidency. But if we accept the premise that there is a radical shift in the world order, then it is noteworthy that the solutions offered by Mr. Carney for middle powers mainly addresses the second – economic challenge – not the change to conventions around territorial integrity.

Mr. Carney argued for diversifying our trade, creating new trading blocs based on shared values and common interests. Liberal-democratic states, he argued, should not only work collectively with liberal democracies that share the same values, but also with non-liberal and undemocratic states that have similar interests. This solution was summed up in the phrase “variable geometry.”

It is less clear how to address the threat to the international norm that borders of states cannot be changed without their consent. This rule was developed because of the fear that accepting forced border changes would mean endless wars and conflicts.

Some challenges to a state's territorial integrity can take a secessionist form, as in Scotland; Quebec; Catalonia; the Basque area of Spain; East Timor; as well as in the Kurdish areas of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Others take the form of (military) annexation, such as with the Russian occupation of Crimea and the eastern part of Ukraine, Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem, and its related actions, seen as possible precursors to annexation, in the rest of the West Bank and in Gaza.

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There are also many boundary disputes between neighbouring states, such as between India and Pakistan over Kashmir or Morocco and Algeria over the Western Sahara. And in a world where boundaries could be challenged without a strong collective international response, we can imagine many wars based on nothing more than the acquisition of resources or old-

fashioned imperialism.

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So, a potential quagmire has opened up. Under the rules-based order, we tried to prevent this with a red-line rule that territorial acquisition or boundary changes should not be rewarded. In many cases where that rule was flouted – think of Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus – the territories have been stuck in frozen zones, with very little travel or development, which served as a caution to other countries about the dangers of that path. This hasn't been good for the people who lived in those places, but it has been good for international peace and stability.

In that world, there was the assumption that all states, by definition, have territory and that they should get to keep the territory they have.

Now that the international consensus not to reward territorial aggression and occupation appears to be gone, we may truly be in a world that was

feared: endless conflict over land and resources.

If we reject that future, as we should, we need to think about the kind of rules-based order relating to territory that can be developed by middle powers. While it is doubtful that we can put the genie back in the bottle, the effects of this breakdown could perhaps be mitigated.

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The old order only worked because almost every country agreed not to reward boundary changes that were not agreed. Maintaining that system required a nearly unanimous response to such aggression or such changes.

In a world of variable geometry, new territorial configurations formed by annexation or by secession will likely find some partners. This might make territorial challenge rational.

So, the question is: Is there a way to handle territorial changes peacefully and through a fair procedure? This might provide a mechanism besides force to countries that have what they believe to be justified territorial claims. This may, at the same time, promise trade and acceptance into the international order if the states in question are willing to accept certain processes and principles.

There has been serious academic work done on rights to territory in the past 10 or so years that suggests not all territorial claims are equal. For example, secession is more justifiable than annexation because it is more in line with international norms such as self-determination. But it, too, should have a high bar for acceptance, because it can be very destabilizing.

Whatever rule or process is developed and accepted cannot be justified only on grounds such as self-determination, but must also work in practice. We must also consider the likely consequences of countries acting on the rules once they are in place.

If, for example, we develop international norms around secession referendums, we must acknowledge that such referendums are easily manipulated and have been used by authoritarians to consolidate power. And the process is also at risk of foreign manipulation, a particular concern today, as foreign influence over elections and social media are serious problems.

At every point, the principles have to be supported by sound policies aimed at mitigating conflict and avoiding harm.

Solving this problem is urgent: there will be no winners in a world where force settles things. As the taboo against territorial change fades, countries without superpower leverage must lead the search for new rules to manage inevitable territorial disputes without war.

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