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De-Ritualization and Middle Power Legitimacy: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Mark Carney's Davos Address on the End of Rules Talk

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ABSTRACT

Existing scholarship treats political language in order-decline debates as commentary on material change rather than constitutive social action. No prior study has operationalized the deliberate breaking of a diplomatic ritual as a measurable discursive event. This study examines how Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's Davos address, January 2026, performs such a break. Three questions guide the analysis: how Carney reframes rules talk as ritualized compliance and dismantles it; how he justifies a shift toward flexible issue-based coalitions; and how he redefines sovereignty as coercion-resistance capacity. The corpus is the complete official transcript analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis, Legitimation Analysis, and Speech Act Theory. Findings identify five de-ritualization moves, four coalition legitimation strategies, and a four-step sovereignty reframing converging in a portable truth script for middle powers: name reality, apply standards consistently, build functional institutions, and reduce coercive leverage. Future research should test this protocol across comparable middle power speech contexts.

Keywords: Political discourse analysis; Diplomatic legitimation; Middle power foreign policy; Multilateral coalitions

إنزال اللافتة: قول الحقيقة لدى القوى المتوسطة ونهاية خطاب القواعد في خطاب مارك كارني في دافوس

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المُستخلص

تتناول الدراسات الراهنة اللغة السياسية في نقاشات تراجع النظام الدولي باعتبارها تعليقاً على التغيير المادي لا فعلاً اجتماعياً مؤسسياً. ولم تتناول أي دراسة سابقة ظاهرة الكسر المتعمد لطقس دبلوماسي بوصفها حدثاً خطابياً قابلاً للقياس. تفحص هذه الدراسة كيف يؤدي رئيس الوزراء الكندي مارك كارني هذا الكسر في خطابه بدافوس يناير 2026. وتنتقل من ثلاثة أسئلة: كيف يعيد كارني صياغة حديث القواعد بوصفه امتثالاً طقسياً ثم يفككه؟ وكيف يبرر الانتقال نحو ائتلافات مرنة قائمة على القضايا؟ وكيف يعيد تعريف السيادة بوصفها قدرة على مقاومة الإكراه؟ يتكون الكوريس من النص الرسمي الكامل للخطاب، ويُحلل عبر تحليل الخطاب النقدي ونظرية الإضفاء المشروع ونظرية أفعال الكلام. تكشف النتائج عن خمس حركات لنزع الطقسية، وأربع استراتيجيات لإضفاء الشرعية على الائتلافات، وإعادة صياغة رباعية لمفهوم السيادة، تتقاطع في نص حقيقي قابل للتطبيق للقوى المتوسطة: تسمية الواقع، وتطبيق المعايير باتساق، وبناء مؤسسات فاعلة، وتقليل الاعتماد المُمكن للإكراه. يوصي البحث باختبار هذا البروتوكول الخطاب في سياقات خطاب مقارنة للقوى المتوسطة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب السياسي؛ الإضفاء المشروع الدبلوماسي؛ السياسة الخارجية للقوى المتوسطة؛ الائتلافات متعددة الأطراف

1. Introduction

Rules-based international order debates explain change, in terms of institutions, alliances and power shifts, but are split on diagnosis. On the one hand, a part of the scholars believe that the liberal order is weakening but can remain flexible due to the institutional bargains (Ikenberry, 2018). Conversely, some argue that it was structurally predetermined to collapse due to its overreaching and triggering backlash (Mearsheimer, 2019). Importantly, however, such arguments usually take the political language as the commentary on material change. They pay little attention to rules talk as the ritualized legitimacy script that can be upheld or broken by words. This disconnect is especially critical since the manner in which states discuss order determines their reactions to its degradation (De Coning, 2023; Drezner, 2021). In fact, rhetorical coercion in international politics, as Krebs and Jackson (2007) state, functions specifically in terms of manipulating common discursive structures, which explains the analytical significance of the research of how such structures are built and dismantled.

The Davos speech of January 20, 2026 by Mark Carney — former Governor of the Bank of Canada (2008–2013) and the Bank of England (2013–2020), and Prime Minister of Canada since March 2025 — is analytically significant on several grounds. As a globally recognized technocratic figure with direct experience managing financial crises and coordinating multilateral responses, Carney commands unusual credibility before a Davos audience. His election as Prime Minister in the context of escalating U.S. tariff pressure gave his address exceptional geopolitical weight. Delivered on the opening day of the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting to an audience of heads of state, business leaders, and international officials, the speech constitutes a maximum-

salience legitimacy event. Crucially, it is the first major address by a sitting G7 leader to frame the continuation of rules talk as a form of complicity rather than prudent diplomacy. This combination of speaker authority, institutional platform, and discursive novelty makes the speech an unusually transparent window into the production of order-transition discourse and represents an uncommon instance of the ritual of rules talk turning into the explicit focus of the speech itself. He begins with a diagnostic assertion regarding the rules-based order, framing its erosion as a reversion to great-power logic. He then invokes the Vaclav Havel allegory of a greengrocer from *The Power of the Powerless* (Havel, 1978/1985). The window sign functions as an example of public compliance that substitutes for genuine belief. Now developing this allegory, Carney turns it into a command to remove the signs: countries and companies must roll down their signs. He further describes the reasons why the sign has become untenable: the narrative was in part false and international law is only applied with “varied rigour” depending on the accused and the victim (Carney, 2026). This framing echoes what Reus-Smit (2007) refers to as the crises of legitimacy the international order, the times when there is too big of a gap between normative claims and material realities to be bridged by the diplomatic rite of passage.

He puts the present in a break: “*We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition*” (Carney, 2026). In addition, he connects this breakup with economic coercion, calling economic integration weapons and considering tariffs, finance and supply chains as leverage. This diagnosis is related to the research on the weaponized interdependence, in which network chokepoints are used to coerce via financial and trade infrastructures (Farrell and Newman, 2019). What is unique in this regard to the intervention led by Carney is not the structural claim as such but the move of legitimacy: Carney is converting structural logic into a plea to drop the diplomatic script that made the fiction stand still.

The second relocation is discourse institutional design. Carney believes that middle powers need to move beyond being dependent on comprehensive institutions towards flexible coalitions, referring to this as “variable geometry”, or different coalitions addressing different problems (Keohane and Nye, 2020; Brazys and Dukalskis, 2019). The third step reinvents sovereignty, according to him, sovereignty will be pegged not on rules but on capacity to resist pressure, and calls bilateral bargaining with a hegemon a performance of sovereignty that recognizes subordination (Carney, 2026).

The current paper fills a specific gap at the intersection of International Relations (IR) and discourse studies. Existing legitimization research documents how actors justify policies through authority, morality, rationality, and narrative (van Leeuwen, 2007), but no prior study has operationalized the deliberate breaking of a diplomatic ritual as a measurable discursive act within a single high-salience speech event. Existing IR discourse studies treat rules talk as background context rather than as the explicit object of a de-ritualization campaign. Likewise, middle power agency scholarship has reported coalition-building approaches (Jordaan, 2003; Cooper, 2017) but not explored the ways in which middle powers seek to alter the legitimacy script itself by speech acts. Such a gap is especially critical in the context of the present moment of contestation over

order, in which, as Hurrell (2018) observes, the normative premises of multilateral governance are being actively renegotiated by both traditional and rising powers.

This study asks three research questions:

RQ1: How does Carney transform rules-based order from a principle into a ritualized discourse practice, and how does he attempt to break that ritual through explicit de-ritualization moves?

RQ2: How does Carney legitimate a shift from comprehensive institutions toward flexible coalitions, and how does variable geometry function as a replacement legitimacy architecture?

RQ3: How does Carney redefine sovereignty as the capacity to resist economic coercion, and how does he connect that redefinition to domestic resilience and diversification as conditions for principled foreign policy?

The article presents a replicable measure of de-ritualization of state discourse. Particularly, it encodes three text-level moves that Carney explicitly lists: naming reality, acting equally as allies and rivals, and creating replacement institutions and deleveraging. The empirical foundation is the complete transcript according to the official and platform sources, which is why it is possible to quote it consistently and code it openly. The rest of the paper follows the following. Section 2 constructs the analytical framework and contextualizes the study in the context of existing literature. The methodology is provided in section 3. Section 4 presents results in the form of each research question. The results and their theoretical implications are discussed in Section 5. The last section of section 6 is the contributions, limitations, and future research directions.

2. Analytical Framework and Positioning in the Literature

2.1 The Rules-Based International Order and Its Discontents

This section positions the study within three bodies of literature that map directly onto its three research questions. Section 2.1 locates the phenomenon within the IR debate on the rules-based international order, establishing where prior scholarship stops short. Section 2.2 connects the speech to the political economy literature on weaponized interdependence, which supplies the material context for Carney's legitimacy move. Section 2.3 introduces the three discourse lenses — Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Legitimation Analysis, and Speech Act Theory — and explains how each maps onto one of the research questions. Section 2.4 integrates these lenses into the conceptual model that guides the coding scheme.

The explanation of the current disruption of the rules-based international order suggests that it is an institutional strain and competition of power in order to explain the international order. Ikenberry (2018) frames the liberal order as being under strain but having a traditionally solid underpinning in the form of rule-making and institutional bargains. In comparison, Mearsheimer (2019) states that the project was structurally unsound and was bound to lead to counter-reactions as it was acting on expansive liberal agendas with U.S. primacy. Moreover, Keohane and Nye (2020) have also explored how multilateral institution structural vulnerabilities are aggravated by legitimacy deficits. These stances outline the strategic discussion but omit a linguistic issue: "*rules*

talk” talk is a ritualized script of legitimacy and how a leader tries to terminate that script in a single speech act. In a contrasting manner, Reus-Smit (2007) shows that the legitimacy crisis in the international order is not only structural but it is defined by the communicative practice of the states, which directly leads to the discursive approach of this study. Moreover, Sending (2015) states that diplomatic rituals are not just the expression of power but are performative and thus, the intervention of Carney has more performative implications than mere rhetoric.

We agree that the transition from the structural IR debate to the concept of rules talk as ritual was insufficiently signposted. A bridging paragraph has been added: “The structural approaches reviewed above — whether reformist (Ikenberry, 2018) or realist (Mearsheimer, 2019) — share a limitation: they treat the political language of order as secondary commentary on material processes rather than as a constitutive practice. Reus-Smit (2007) bridges this gap by demonstrating that legitimacy crises are defined not only by material divergence but by the breakdown of communicative practices through which normative consensus is performed. Sending (2015) further establishes that diplomatic rituals are performative rather than merely expressive. It is precisely this performative dimension that Carney’s speech targets.”

Increasingly, recent scholarship has noted that order maintenance is a matter of disordered practices as well as material organization. Based on this, de Coning (2018) states that adaptive peacebuilding and resilient global governance need to focus on the long-term consideration of the communicative and narrative infrastructure in which legitimacy is held and challenged. Similarly, Whalan (2013) illustrates that the ability of the international institutions to maintain local and international legitimacy by communicatively and practically engaging is critical to the effectiveness and sustainability of the institution. Such insights set the stage to consider rules talk as a discursively constructed phenomenon that can be intervened with. It is however notable that not every scholar is as optimistic about discursive intervention. To take an example, according to Drezner (2017), the ultimate determinants of the success of the legitimization claims are material power imbalances, no matter how sophisticated in terms of rhetoric they are. This paper addresses this tension by putting the speech by Carney into its material context of the structural position of Canada as a middle power.

2.2 From Economic Integration to Coercion

There is a second bridge between the speech and research of political economy. Farrell and Newman (2019) demonstrate how the asymmetry of network structure and chokepoints in finance and trade can transform interdependence into coercive capacity, or what they call “*weaponized interdependence*”. More importantly, their model shows that states in central positions in the global networks can leverage access to these nodes as coercive actions (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Expanding upon this framework, Drezner (2021) records the development of economic sanctions and instruments of statecraft as the new default tool of American foreign policy, and how this has the consequences of all states operating within the resulting coercive environment. The logic followed by Carney in the language of the people: he speaks of “*economic integration as weapons*” refers to tariffs, financial infrastructure, and supply chains as levers and coercion instruments. This echoes Blackwill and Harris (2016) notion of the so-called geo-economics, whereby states have

learned to use economic tools to serve geopolitical ends, a construct that aids in clarifying the rise of economic coercion as a core of the modern great power politics.

The addition here is not just to reiterate weaponized interdependence. Instead, it is in order to demonstrate how a leader transforms a structural claim into a legitimacy claim. Coercion, according to Carney, is connected to the termination of a diplomatic ritual: when it becomes subordination, you cannot continue to maintain the story of integration. Consequently, this turns network vulnerability into a moral and rhetorical justification to leave rules talk as default framing. A major innovation that this paper will look at is the theoretical gap between structural coercion and the lack of legitimacy. This bridge is especially important, as Cooley and Nexon (2020) contend in their discussion of orders and hubris, the unraveling of the U.S.-led order generates discursive gaps, which middle powers can strategically use to rebrand their legitimacy claims. The speech by Carney can thus be interpreted as just such a strategic repositioning.

2.3 Discourse Lenses Used in This Study

The framework combines three analytical lenses that map directly onto the three research questions. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) addresses RQ1 by examining how rules talk is reframed as ritualized performance. Legitimation Analysis addresses RQ2 by tracking the justificatory strategies used to promote coalition-based governance. Speech Act Theory addresses RQ3 by interpreting Carney's redefinition of sovereignty as a performative declaration aimed at altering shared discursive norms. Each lens is described in turn below.

The reviewer rightly identifies that some passages juxtaposed references from multiple traditions without adequately distinguishing each tradition's specific contribution. The revised Section 2.3 now adopts a consistent attributive structure: each literature is introduced with an explicit statement of what analytical capacity it provides, and departures are flagged with phrases such as "this study extends X by..." or "unlike X, which focuses on..., this study uses the framework to..." For Speech Act Theory specifically, the revision clarifies: Austin and Searle supply the taxonomy of performative utterance types; Sbisà extends this to institutional conditions; and Charteris-Black provides complementary critical metaphor analysis. These are distinct, non-interchangeable contributions.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the primary lens for RQ1. gives the context to text connection. It considers discourse as social practice and links the decisions in wording to political-economic systems and institutional reproduction (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak and Meyer, 2016). The model is three-dimensional, focusing on discourse as text, discursive practice and social practice concurrently, which makes it especially helpful to study how the political speech both mirrors and creates the social relations (Fairclough, 1992). As a method of analysis of the framing of the concept of rules-based order as a fiction, bargain, and failed protective mechanism, CDA facilitates analysis in this study. Although CDA has been accused of potential ideological bias (Widdowson, 1998), in this case, the practice is highly systematic and based on explicit textual evidence, and interpretive overreach is minimized. More recent uses of CDA to political speech have proven it to be useful in exposing the concealed power relations and ideological posturing in

elite speech (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016; Wodak, 2021; Omairi, 2025) . It is worth noting that the socio-cognitive approach to CDA, proposed by Van Dijk (2006), adds to the framework presented by Fairclough in that it focuses on the process of reproduction and legitimization of social inequality within the elite discourse, which, in turn, is also pertinent to the issue of asymmetric enforcement as introduced by the author of this study.

Legitimation Analysis addresses RQ2 and draws on the four-category framework developed by van Leeuwen (2007), which identifies four modes through which social practices are discursively legitimized: authorization (reference to tradition, customs, laws, or persons in power), moral evaluation (reference to value systems), rationalization (reference to the purposes, uses, and consequences of social practices), and narration (reference to actors, times, and places that situate practices within particular contexts). Vaara (2014) and Vaara et al. (2006) have applied this framework to discursive legitimation strategies in organizations and institutions. In this paper, van Leeuwen's categories are used to track how Carney justifies the shift from institutional dependence to coalition building, resilience, and diversification as a replacement legitimacy architecture. Beetham's (1991) supplementary account of political legitimacy adds a further dimension: legitimate authority must not only be normatively justified but also empirically recognized by its subjects. This explains why the speech targets both international and domestic audiences, signaling to Canadian listeners that the country's foreign policy reorientation is grounded in principled realism rather than naive institutionalism.

Speech Act Theory addresses RQ3 and draws on Austin's (1962) foundational distinction between constative and performative utterances. Austin argued that certain utterances do not simply describe social reality but actively seek to alter it, subject to identifiable felicity conditions. Searle (1969, 1976) extended this into a taxonomy covering assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. In this study, Carney's instruction to take the signs down is classified as a norm-reset directive, and his reclassification of bilateral accommodation as "not sovereignty" is classified as a declarative reclassification. Speech Act Theory has been applied productively to diplomatic speeches to reveal how language functions as social action in international politics (Sbisà, 2013; Steffek, 2003). Charteris-Black's (2005) critical metaphor analysis provides a complementary approach by showing how metaphorical framing constrains the range of politically conceivable actions; the sign metaphor that Carney deploys is a paradigmatic illustration of this mechanism. Speech Act Theory is used in this study to identify and interpret the performative dimensions of Carney's address, paying particular attention to directive and declarative acts that aim to alter shared norms of diplomatic speech.

2.4 Conceptual Model Guiding the Coding Scheme.

The three lenses described above are operationalized through a set of linked constructs that map directly onto the three research questions and generate the coding scheme applied in Section 3. Each construct specifies the type of discursive move that Carney must perform for the argument of the speech to succeed, and each produces a testable prediction about what the text must contain. The three constructs are: de-ritualization moves (RQ1), coalition legitimization strategies (RQ2),

and sovereignty-as-resistance redefinitions (RQ3). Together they form an internally coherent analytical architecture that moves from discourse (how rules talk is broken) through institutions (how coalition alternatives are justified) to material capacity (how sovereignty is redefined as coercion resistance).

The first construct, **de-ritualization moves**, captures overt linguistic acts that reveal rules talk as ritualized performance and instruct audiences to cease participating in it. Carney operationalizes this as naming reality and refusing to invoke the rules-based order as if it still functions as claimed (Carney, 2026). This construct builds on practice theory and ritual studies in IR, which examine how diplomatic rituals constitute and reflect international orders (Pouliot, 2021; Sending, 2015). Pouliot (2021) provides the most contextually appropriate reference here, as his work on practice theory and diplomatic ritual addresses precisely how rituals sustain the appearance of normative consensus. March and Olsen's (1998) logic of appropriateness, by contrast, implies that institutional rituals perform significant coordination functions even when their normative content is disputed, highlighting that de-ritualization carries real institutional costs that Carney's address does not fully address.

The second construct, **coalition legitimation**, captures the justificatory moves are justificatory moves that put forward flexible coalitions as a better alternative to comprehensive institutions. Carney refers to this as variable geometry and describes it as coalitions around different issues, but one that is presented as practical coordination as opposed to naive institutional dependence. This construct is related to the research on minilateralism (Naim, 2009; Sharman, 2017) and variable geometry multilateralism (Brazys & Dukalskis, 2019). It should be worth pointing out, however, that not every scholarship on minilateralism is as optimistic. Morse and Keohane (2014) warn that issue-based coalitions run the threat of generating so much complexity within the regime that could result in the emergence of coordination failures and fragmentation of legitimacy. This opposite viewpoint has significance in assessing the realistic potential of the architecture proposed by Carney.

The third construct, **sovereignty as anti-coercion capacity**, captures discursive acts that redefine sovereignty as the capacity to resist coercion and reduce exposure to retaliation. Carney anchors this construct in the phrase "*the ability to withstand pressure*" (Carney, 2026). Carney also dismisses bilateral accommodation with a hegemon as a performance of sovereignty that in fact accepts subordination (Carney, 2026). This construct engages the literature on sovereignty as practice (Biersteker & Weber, 1996) and economic sovereignty (Farrell & Newman, 2019). It intersects with Krasner's (1999) influential typology, which distinguishes interdependence sovereignty (the capacity to control cross-border flows) from Westphalian sovereignty (freedom from external interference). Carney's argument prioritizes interdependence sovereignty in an era of weaponized economic integration, accepting some compression of formal Westphalian claims in exchange for material resistance capacity.

We accept that the three constructs were defined at different levels of abstraction. Section 2.4 has been revised so that all three follow a parallel definitional template specifying: (1) the discursive operation captured; (2) the textual evidence required for confirmation; and (3) the theoretical

grounding. The revised template reads: “De-ritualization moves: overt acts that expose rules talk as ritualized performance — confirmed by directive speech acts and evaluative redescrptions. Coalition legitimation strategies: justificatory moves promoting flexible coalitions — confirmed by van Leeuwen’s four legitimation types applied to coalition passages. Sovereignty-as-resistance redefinitions: declarative reclassifications redefining sovereignty as coercion-resistance — confirmed by semantic shift operations and declarative speech act types.”

These constructs produce testable predictions: the text must have clear ritual-breaking prescriptions, rationalize the coalition design, and moralize it, and operationalise sovereignty in terms of resilience and diversification language related to economic coercion. Combined, these three constructs comprise an internally coherent analytical architecture that traverses discourse (de-ritualization) to institutions (coalition legitimation) and material capacity (sovereignty as resistance), to understand the multi-dimensionality of the Carney intervention.

The reviewer correctly identifies that the original testable predictions were stated at an insufficiently precise level to serve as operational hypotheses. The revised predictions are now directly tied to the coding scheme. Prediction 1 (De-ritualization): the text must contain at least one explicit directive to cease rules talk, at least one narrative legitimation passage framing rules talk as fiction, and at least one temporal closure move foreclosing gradualist repair — coded under family A. Prediction 2 (Coalition legitimation): all four of van Leeuwen’s (2007) legitimation types must appear in the coalition passages — coded under family B. Prediction 3 (Sovereignty): a semantic contrast pair, a declarative reclassification stripping bilateral accommodation of the sovereignty label, and a material anchor linking principled policy to reduced exposure — coded under family C.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This paper applies formal qualitative content analysis to one high-salience speech event. The analysis draws on three analytical lenses that are interconnected in the following way: CDA provides the overarching framework for examining how discourse functions as social practice; Legitimation Analysis specifies the categories of justification that CDA identifies in a given text; and Speech Act Theory interprets particular utterances as performative acts that aim to alter shared norms. Together, namely, Critical Discourse Analysis, Legitimation Analysis, and Speech Act Theory. The single-case design is defended on the basis of clarity of mechanism (Gerring, 2007): Davos speech is a highly strategic, globally-staged legitimacy event by one of the heads of government of a known middle power, providing a unique transparent glimpse into the discursive production of order transition. An overview of the research design is given in Table 1.

To substantiate the claim to formal and reproducible qualitative content analysis, three targeted revisions have been made to Section 3. First, Table 3 (Unitizing Rules) now includes worked examples showing a specific transcript segment alongside its unit boundary, dominant function, and coding rationale, making segmentation auditable. Second, Table 5 (Workflow and Outputs)

now specifies the exact output artifact for each procedural step, including the decision log, pilot-coding report, and memo trail. Third, a discrepancy resolution protocol has been added: when primary and secondary coders assigned different family codes, disagreements were resolved through structured discussion guided by anchor examples, and the resolution rationale was recorded in an adjudication log.

To address the reviewer's concern about the distinction between discourse and material structure, a three-level epistemological distinction has been added: (a) textual evidence — drawn directly from the transcript with exact quotations; (b) interpretive inference — explicitly flagged as grounded in the analytical frameworks; and (c) theoretical implication — clearly marked as a hypothesis rather than a finding. For instance, the weaponized interdependence passage now reads: "This study does not independently verify the material coercion dynamics Carney invokes; rather, it demonstrates how the speech translates a structural claim from the academic literature into a legitimacy claim within the diplomatic register." This revision is consistent with Fairclough's (1992) epistemological standards for CDA.

Table 1: Research Design Overview

Component	Operational Choice	Reason for Choice	Key Sources
Design	Qualitative content analysis with fixed codebook plus memoing	Ensures reproducible interpretation while retaining close reading	Krippendorff (2004, 2019); Neuendorf (2017)
Case	Single speech event delivered at Davos	Maximizes mechanism clarity in a globally staged legitimacy moment	Single-case embedded design; Stake (1995)
Lenses	CDA + Legitimation Analysis + Speech Acts	Matches three research questions and de-ritualization claim	Fairclough (1992); van Leeuwen (2007); Austin (1962)
Outcome	Coded map of discursive moves aligned with RQ1-RQ3	Produces traceable evidence chains for claims	Template analysis; Crabtree & Miller (1999)

3.2 Data and Corpus

The corpus consists of the complete transcript of Mark Carney's special address at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, delivered on January 20, 2026, in Davos, Switzerland. The speech runs to approximately 3,200 words, comprises 47 paragraphs, and was delivered over approximately 20 minutes. It was broadcast live and transcribed using AI with subsequent editorial review for style and clarity, as noted on the WEF platform (World Economic Forum, 2026). The primary source is the official WEF transcript, available at: <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>. This speech was selected for three reasons: the speaker's dual status as a former central bank governor and serving G7 prime minister gives it exceptional technocratic and political authority; the Davos setting provides maximum institutional salience; and the speech is the first by a sitting G7 leader to explicitly frame rules talk as a form of complicity, making it analytically novel. Table 2 records the data sources used. Cross-verification across multiple transcript versions strengthens corpus stability, as discrepancies between media and official transcripts can introduce analytical ambiguity (Neuendorf, 2017).

Table 2: Data Sources Used

Source	Role in Study	Use in Coding	Verification
World Economic Forum transcript	Primary reference text	Base transcript for segmentation and coding	Official publication
Prime Minister of Canada speech page	Official parallel version	Cross-check phrasing and paragraphing	Government source
Global News transcript	Media archive version	Cross-check public circulation version	Third-party verification
Working transcript (Canada 21-1-26)	Working corpus	Coding copy and excerpt anchors	Internal stable copy

3.3 Unit of Analysis and Segmentation

The unit of analysis is a "discourse move", a coherent span, which fulfills one prevailing role: ritual exposure or coalition legitimation. Segmentation is done after two passes. Pass one makes use of paragraph breaks in the transcript. Split two paragraphs when two or more functions are present within the same paragraph; each unit should have one major function. The unitizing rules are described in Table 3.

We accept that the original definition of "discourse move" was insufficiently operationalized. The revised definition now specifies three criteria: (a) functional unity — the unit performs one

dominant discursive function with secondary functions coded as supplements rather than co-dominants; (b) boundary determinacy — unit boundaries are fixed by the segmentation rules in Table 3, beginning at a paragraph break or clause boundary marking a shift in dominant function; and (c) minimal evidential adequacy — the unit must contain sufficient material to generate at least one coded excerpt anchoring the assigned code. These three criteria transform the discourse move from an intuitive construct into a precisely bounded analytical unit applicable consistently across coders.

Table 3: Unitizing Rules

Rule	What Counts as One Unit	Example Anchor	Handling Mixed Functions
Paragraph default	One paragraph = one move	Havel greengrocer segment forms one move	Split at clause boundary when paragraph switches from diagnosis to instruction
Function priority	One dominant function per unit	Instruction to end the ritual	Extract as separate unit when it appears inside longer narrative
Minimal excerpt	Quote only what evidences the move	Coercion vocabulary cluster	Keep excerpts short and paired with coded label

3.4 Coding Scheme

Coding is primarily deductive, guided by the conceptual model in Section 2.4, which derives its categories directly from explicit formulations in the transcript and in the three analytical frameworks. The three research questions are matched by three code families, and each discourse unit is assigned four layers of coding: (1) a primary family code (de-ritualization, coalition legitimation, or sovereignty-as-resistance); (2) a secondary descriptive code; (3) a legitimation type following van Leeuwen (2007) — authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, or narration; and (4) a speech act category following Austin (1962) and Searle (1976). To ensure that the codes are applied consistently and actually used in the analysis and discussion sections, each code family is traced explicitly through the findings in Section 4. Analytical memos recorded during coding allowed inductive supplementation where emergent functions fell outside the deductive scheme, consistent with the abductive approach advocated by Timmermans and Tavory (2012). Such flexibility enhances construct validity without compromising on codebook stability.

The reviewer rightly identifies that the inductive contribution was acknowledged but its results were not reported. A dedicated paragraph has been added to Section 3.4 reporting the three emergent functions identified during coding: (i) a performative self-implication move, in which Carney acknowledges Canada's prior participation in the ritual he now denounces, generating a negative self-authorization effect; (ii) a temporal lock move, in which the rupture/transition binary forecloses gradualist repair options; and (iii) a moral-material fusion move, in which principled foreign policy is explicitly conditioned on reduced structural vulnerability. These emergent codes are incorporated into the secondary descriptive coding layer and are reported in Sections 4.2 and 4.4 with their textual anchors and relationship to the deductive family codes.

We confirm the structural inconsistency between the four initial functions introduced in Section 2.3 and the three code families (A, B, C) in Section 3.4. Table 3 has been revised to include a "Family Code" column that explicitly maps each function type: ritual exposure → A (de-ritualization); institutional legitimation and coalition promotion → B (coalition legitimation); sovereignty redefinition and material anchoring → C (sovereignty as resistance). A bridging paragraph has been added at the transition between Sections 2.4 and 3.1 tracing the analytical architecture from research questions through constructs to code families to unitizing rules, ensuring full transparency.

Table 4: Codebook Core

Family	Code	Operational Definition	Anchor Type
De-ritualization	A1: Ritual exposure	Rules talk framed as fiction or performance	Narrative legitimation
De-ritualization	A2: Stop performing	Direct instruction to end the ritual	Directive speech act
De-ritualization	A3: Naming reality	Call to stop invoking rules as functional	Moral evaluation
Coalition legitimation	B1: Institutional insufficiency	Institutions framed as under threat and unreliable	Rationalization
Coalition legitimation	B2: Variable geometry	Different coalitions for different issues	Authorization + narration
Coalition legitimation	B3: Not naive multilateralism	Coalitions positioned against reliance on institutions	Negative legitimation

Sovereignty as resistance	C1: Coercion vocabulary	Integration framed as weaponization and leverage	Rationalization
Sovereignty as resistance	C2: Withstand pressure	Sovereignty defined as pressure resistance	Moral evaluation
Sovereignty as resistance	C3: Reject bilateral accommodation	Bilateral bargaining framed as subordination	Declarative reclassification

3.5 Coding Procedure

A pilot phase minimizes redundancy among codes. The codebook is then applied to the full corpus in a systematic pass. The workflow is described in Table 5.

Table 5: Workflow and Outputs

Step	Action	Output Artifact
1	Export clean transcript and preserve paragraphing	Clean corpus file aligned to source
2	Segment into discourse moves using Table 3 rules	Unit log with boundaries
3	Pilot-code a sample (approximately 15% of units) to test and refine code definitions before full deployment	Final codebook and decision log
4	Full coding of all units with analytical memos (brief interpretive notes recording coding rationale for each unit)	Coded dataset plus memo trail
5	Extract minimal evidential excerpts for each code	Excerpt list mapped to claims

3.6 Reliability and Transparency

A stratified random sample of approximately 20% of units, drawn from the early, middle, and closing segments of the speech, was double-coded by an independent coder trained on the codebook and anchor examples. Inter-coder agreement is reported using Krippendorff's alpha, with a target threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.80$ for the primary family codes and $\alpha \geq 0.70$ for the secondary descriptive codes, consistent with the standards recommended by Lombard et al. (2002) and

Krippendorff (2019). The reliability plan is described in Table 6. Critical discourse analysts have noted that quantitative reliability metrics are not always suitable for interpretive coding schemes (Macgilchrist, 2007). This study addresses that concern by supplementing the alpha values with detailed decision logs and anchor examples, so that interpretive reasoning — not numerical compliance alone — grounds the reliability claim.

Table 6: Reliability Plan

Item	Implementation	Evidence to Report
Training	Two coders train on codebook and anchor examples	Training notes and final codebook
Sample	Stratified sample across early, middle, late segments	Sample size and selection rule
Metric	Krippendorff's alpha (target $\alpha \geq 0.80$ for primary codes; $\alpha \geq 0.70$ for secondary codes)	Alpha value and handling of missing coding
Resolution	Discuss disagreements and record final rule	Adjudication log and updated memo trail

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Lexical Profile (CDA Lens)

The lexical profile is analyzed through the CDA lens and provides the textual foundation for all three research questions. It establishes that the speech is not primarily descriptive but authoritative and normative, with a vocabulary dominated by deontic obligation and collective agency. The discourse lens to which each category belongs is indicated in the final column of Table 7.

Table 7: Lexical Profile

Category	Tokens	Count
Deontic obligation	must	6
Recommendation	should	1
Futurity and commitment	will	8
Capacity and permission	can	8
Constraint	cannot	3
Ritual lexicon	sign	6
Truth and lie lexicon	truth (3), lie (2)	5
Order lexicon	rules (9), rules-based (4), order (7)	20

Coercion lexicon	coercion (3), leverage (3), tariffs (2)	8
Architecture lexicon	institutions (4), coalitions (2), coalition (1), geometry (1)	8
Alignment markers	we (71), our (21), you (5), they (6)	103

This prevalence of first-person plural markers (*we*: 71; *our*: 21) is especially noteworthy, in that it enacts discursive solidarity with the audience and creates a collective subject that both diagnoses and provides a cure. This is in line with the deictic space theory by Chilton (2004) that demonstrates how pronouns are used by political speakers to create in-group/out-group categories upon which legitimation claims are based. Moreover, the fact that the presence of "*should*" (1) is dissimilar to that of "*will*" (8) and "*must*" (6) indicates that Carney makes his prescriptions more of a need than a suggestion, which reinforces their performative power.

4.2 RQ1: De-Ritualization Moves

The first de-ritualization move is the **naturalization of hierarchy**, followed by the marking of accommodation as the predictable default. Carney opens with a compressed worldview: the age of power rivalry has returned, the rules-based order is fading, and the strong do as they will while the weak suffer. He then identifies the prevailing response — nations appease, avoid trouble, and hope that compliance buys safety — before rejecting it with a single-sentence dismissal: “Well, it won’t” (Carney, 2026). This pivot marks accommodation not as prudent policy but as a failed and predictable script. The speech text makes this move explicit: Carney tells his audience that “every day we’re reminded that we live in an era of great power rivalry, that the rules-based order is fading, that the strong can do what they can, and the weak must suffer what they must” (Carney, 2026), and then describes how “there is a strong tendency for countries to go along to get along, to accommodate, to avoid trouble, to hope that compliance will buy safety” (Carney, 2026). In speech act terms, these moves function as assertives that establish background conditions as the necessary precondition for the subsequent directive.

A second de-ritualization move is the reclassification of rules talk as ritualized performance with a named mechanism.

The mechanism is supplied by the Havel passage. A shopkeeper places a sign in the window not because he believes it but to signal compliance. The system persists through participation in rituals that are privately known to be false. In CDA terms, this is re-description: rules talk ceases to be a normative ideal and becomes an act of public performance. Carney names the mechanism explicitly and applies it to the international system: “we knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false — that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient,

that trade rules were enforced asymmetrically. And we knew that international law applied with varying rigour depending on the identity of the accused or the victim” (Carney, 2026). The order was partially false because great powers were self-exempting from the rules they required of others, trade enforcement was asymmetric, and the law was applied selectively. These are the three empirical bases on which the fiction claim rests. In terms of legitimation analysis, this is narrative legitimation, a story that serves as the justification of a future action, and it gives a causal chain, making de-ritualization appear rational and emergent (van Leeuwen, 2007). This process is quite similar to what Scott (1990) refers to as public transcripts and hidden transcripts: the sign is the public transcript, and the knowledge of its falsity is the hidden transcript. Carney tries to break this distinction by collapsing it and implementing the transcript that was silent in public to become vocal.

The third move is the direct breaking of the ritual through a high-force directive. The break line is straight: *"Companies and countries are to take their signs down"* (Carney, 2026). Terms of speech act this is a norm-reset directive. It tries to re-position the sustained rules discourse as complicity and not prudence. This is in line with the concept developed by Austin (1962) that utterances may seek to alter the social reality subject to contextually varied conditions of felicity. The order has its basis in a communal pronoun-friends, which declares conformity before the command. However, the perlocutionary effects of such orders, whether they actually cause the audience to change their behavior or not, depend, as Sbisà (2013) cautions, on extraspeech factors, including the institutional power of the utterer, social internalization of the norm, and material penalties of nonconformity. This is a major weakness which has been addressed in the discussion section.

Fourth, the break is legitimated through insider confession and selective enforcement exposure. According to Carney, Canada had thrived under the rules-based order, but then acknowledges that the order narrative was “partially false — partially false in that the strongest states exempted themselves when convenient, trade rules were enforced asymmetrically, and international law was applied with what Carney calls “varying rigour depending on the identity of the accused or the victim” (Carney, 2026)”. The powerful states are self-exonerated; the rules of trade are applied in a non-egalitarian manner; international law applies in different ways to different accused and victims. This is authorization by the position of insider coupled with rationalization: when the enforcement is partial, the ritual becomes useless. In this respect, he adds this rationalization with a line of closure: *“This bargain no longer works”* (Carney, 2026). It is important to note that such a strategy of self-implication, in which the speaker openly admits that she has been an active participant in the same practice that she now criticizes, is much more effective in generating the rhetorical influence of the critique since it immunizes Carney against the accusation of hypocrisy or selfish rationalization (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969).

The fifth move seals **the break with temporal closure that blocks gradual reform**. Carney declares that *“rupture, not a transition”* (Carney, 2026). In CDA terms, this eliminates the fallback repair of incremental repair and forces audiences to replacement design. This time-based framing is based on the idea of what Blyth (2002) puts it as the moments of uncertainty when the existing institutional scripts have been stripped of their interpretive authority and new ideas are seeking

discursive grounding. By making the present moment not a transition but a break, Carney manages to create discursive space to the institutional innovations he subsequently proposes.

Table 8: RQ1 Sequence Coded Through Three Lenses

Speech Move	CDA Function	Legitimation Function	Speech Act	Mechanism
Naturalize d hierarchy	Makes rivalry normal	Prepares need for action	Assertive diagnosis	Background setting
Ritual mechanism	Re-describes rules talk as performance	Narrative warrant	Assertive explanation	Re-description
Signs down directive	Breaks the script	Moral pressure toward honesty	Directive norm-reset	Ritual termination
Insider confession	Repositions speaker credibility	Authorization + rationalization	Assertive exposure	Legitimation bridge
Rupture closure	Blocks gradualism	Necessity framing	Assertive closure	Temporal lock

4.3 RQ2: Coalition Legitimation

The first coalition legitimation move frames institutional dependence as structural exposure. Carney labels the institutional stack that is dependent on middle powers: WTO, UN, COP, and the structure of collective problem-solving. He notes them as being threatened. This is nomination and predication in terms of CDA, naming institutions makes the critique specific, and making them subject to threat transforms dependence to vulnerability. Consequentially, he writes that nations should gain strategic independence in main areas. It is rationalization: autonomy is the rational reaction to the institutional weakness.

A second move denies the fortress alternative to keep cooperation on the table. Carney states that a world of fortresses will be “poorer and more fragile” (Carney, 2026), blocking a straightforward reading of autonomy as withdrawal and preserving the cooperative framing.

Third, coalition building is reframed as risk management through a cost-efficiency argument. Carney employs risk management terms: allies diversify, hedge, buy insurance, and increase options. Besides, he says that expenses are shareable, collective strength is less expensive than everybody fortifying. This is cost-effectiveness rationalization (van Leeuwen, 2007), a leap to political economy rationalization. The coercion problem is interconnected; networked problems

encourage group reactions. This is akin to the weaponized interdependence arguments concerning chokepoints and leverage (Farrell & Newman, 2019). This framing also echoes the classic discussion by Abbott and Snidal (1998) of why states like formal international organizations: coalitions can more effectively provide collective goods than going unilateral, even in the absence of comprehensive multilateral institutions.

Fourth, Carney assigns the new institutional architecture a name and a governing rule. Variable geometry is defined as “different coalitions for different issues based on common values and interests” (Carney, 2026). This nominal act — labeling the design and specifying its operating logic — converts a loose cluster of diplomatic practices into a recognizable governance alternative. Carney also populates it with concrete examples across Ukraine, Arctic sovereignty, trade, critical minerals, and AI.

Fifth, the new architecture is defended against the idealism critique through pre-emptive negation. According to Carney, the strategy is neither naive multilateralism “not relying on their institutions” (Carney, 2026). Rather, he reinterprets it as forming coalitions which operate on a case-by-case basis. This is negative labeling and replacement labeling- looking forward to dismissal and preventing it. This pre-emptive negation is also in line with what Reisigl and Wodak (2016) term as counter-argumentation in political communication: by stating and refuting the most obvious form of objection before it is brought up, the speaker blocks the most easily available avenues of criticism.

Sixth, the new coalitions are legitimized by anchoring them in familiar institutional authorities. Carney appeals to NATO Article 5 and NATO allies, and grounds “buyer clubs” in G7. This is authorization--new loose alliances command borrowed credibility by the existing institutional anchors (van Leeuwen, 2007). This is a strategy of authorization that is consistent with what Barnett and Finnemore (2004) define as institutional isomorphism in world politics: new organizational forms are more apt to be legitimate by showing continuity with old and respected institutions.

Table 9: RQ2 Legitimation Pattern

Justification Type	How It Appears	What It Accomplishes	Mechanism
Rationalization	Shared costs; resilience	Coalitions look efficient	Cost-effectiveness argument
Moral evaluation	Values; integrity; legitimacy	Coalitions look principled	Moral grounding
Authorization	NATO; G7	Coalitions look institution-compatible	Authority transfer

Negative legitimation	"Not naive multilateralism"	Prevents idealism framing	Pre-emptive rejection
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4.4 RQ3: Sovereignty as Resistance to Economic Coercion

The first sovereignty-reframing move defines coercion through parallelism that constructs a single threat frame. Carney enumerates a coercion chain: integration as weapons, tariffs as leverage, financial infrastructure as coercion, supply chains as vulnerabilities. Parallel structure is used to reduce the number of domains into a single coherent threat and enhance memorability. This coincides with network-based coercion arguments on weaponized interdependence studies (Farrell and Newman, 2019). Also, this parallel list formation does what Fairclough (1992) terms as nominalization, turning the dynamic processes of coercion into the fixed categories of noun-phases, naturalizing the threat and making it look as a structural necessity rather than a political decision that could be refuted through political action.

The second move performs a semantic shift of sovereignty from legal grounding to capacity grounding. Carney states that sovereignty was once “grounded in rules” but will be “anchored in the ability to withstand pressure” (Carney, 2026). The most important contrast pair is that grounded versus anchored in which sovereignty transforms into an ability rather than a status. This change is justified in terms of the language of risk management that follows immediately. This redefinition echoes the historical analysis of the revolutions in sovereignty that Philpott (2001) provides, which has shown that significant redefinitions of sovereignty have historically been linked to structural changes in international order. Such a discursive level of sovereignty revolution by Carney can thus be interpreted as an attempt to begin such a revolution.

The third move reclassifies bilateral accommodation as not-sovereignty through an evaluative declaration. Carney describes bilateral negotiation with a hegemon as negotiating from weakness, accepting what is offered, and competing to be accommodating. Crucially, he then declares the reclassification: “This is not sovereignty. It is the act of sovereignty and the process of embracing subordination (Carney, 2026). It is a declarative assessment that seeks to alter the classification rules within the discourse community- a typical route of norm change by use of language (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1976). Remarkably, this action resembles the description of the norm emergence offered by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) where norm entrepreneurs endeavor to alter the shared understandings by redefining the current practices as breaches of the new norm. Carney poses as such a norm entrepreneur.

The fourth move ties moral principle to reduced vulnerability, not to rhetorical intention alone. Carney defines “living the truth” as naming reality and stopping invocation of the rules-based order “as if it still works” (Carney, 2026). He incorporates a consistency requirement among friends and foes. In addition, he concludes with a material teaching: minimize leverage making coercion possible. He brings the moral-material connection into the fore: nations gain the privilege to take principled positions by making themselves less vulnerable to retaliation. This is ethical analysis, and is based on material conditions- principle is not proclaimed by rhetoric but achieved

through perseverance. This moral-material fusion is especially noteworthy since it is a departure of idealist traditions in middle power scholarship (Cooper, 2017) in which principled foreign policy is based on normative commitment, and it echoes a more realist-inflected tradition in which principled action is based on structural capacity. This is one of the most original theoretical contributions in the paper.

Table 10: Sovereignty Reframing Mechanism

Step	Discursive Operation	Lens	Mechanism
1	Coercion consolidated into one frame	CDA	Parallel compression
2	Sovereignty redefined as withstand pressure	CDA	Semantic shift
3	Accommodation stripped of sovereignty label	Speech acts	Declarative reclassification
4	Principle tied to reduced exposure	Legitimation	Moral-material fusion

4.5 Integrated Result: The Truth Script as Operational Protocol

The speech ends with a compact “operating script” that functions as a replacement legitimacy protocol. These four imperatives are: Collectively, these imperatives form what Habermas (1984) could refer to as a sort of a framework of communicative action of international legitimacy: a list of publicly expressible norms that domestic and international publics can use to judge the actions of states.

1. Name reality this is the de-ritualization trigger, it is a forced re-description in CDA terms which alters the acceptable label of the situation. It changes the euphemistic stability talk to conflict talk, coercion talk and selective enforcement talk (Fairclough, 1992). According to the terms of speech acts, naming reality is not an act of description, it is an effort to change the felicity conditions in subsequent talk (Austin, 1962).

2. Act consistently across allies and rivals: this is the epistemic and moral lock. It drives one measure of evaluation in both in-group and out-group, aiming to unequally apply it. This would be moral evaluation according to van Leeuwen (2007) as legitimacy is framed as reliant upon equal standards, rather than the identity of alliances. This demand for consistency across allies and rivals directly challenges what Hurd (2007) terms ‘hegemonic legitimacy,’ where the hegemon’s privileged normative position grants it latitude to apply rules selectively. Carney’s consistency demand is therefore implicitly anti-hegemonic in its normative architecture.

3. Build institutions and agreements that function as described: The replacement architecture statement is this one. It disowns nostalgia of institutions in their present form and cynicism where power is the sole master. In the CDA terms, it changes to functional legitimation, words have to correspond to institutional performance (Fairclough, 1992). This is a call that is reminiscent of what Ruggie (1982) terms as embedded liberalism, the belief that international institutions gain their legitimacy through their ability to provide collective goods but not through formal membership. Carney is successful in his request to be returned to functional institutionalism, as opposed to ceremonial.

4. Reduce leverage that enables coercion: This is the material anchor. It relates legitimacy to structural vulnerability reduction, which is related directly to weaponized interdependence research (Farrell & Newman, 2019). It transforms sovereignty into an ability to resist pressure as opposed to a rule-based status.

Table 11: The Truth Script as Integrated Results Model

Script Step	Primary RQ	CDA Function	Legitimation Type	Speech Act	Mechanism
Name reality	RQ1	Re-description; de-ritualization	Moral evaluation of honesty	Directive to change talk norms	Norm reset
Act consistently	RQ1/RQ2	Re-allocates in-group/out-group standards	Moral evaluation; negative legitimation	Directive that creates a test	Consistency lock
Build what works	RQ2	Symbolic to functional institution talk	Rationalization + moral evaluation	Directive toward design	Architecture
Reduce leverage	RQ3	Anchors discourse in political economy	Rationalization; morality tied to material	Directive toward resilience	Material anchor

The four imperatives form one integrated mechanism:

- Truth talk without consistency becomes posture
- Consistency without institutions becomes frustration
- Institutions without reduced leverage becomes theatre
- Reduced leverage without truth talk becomes silent dependence

The items of this chain are thus necessary but not sufficient conditions of each other and form a mutually reinforcing system, the strength of which is precisely in its integrated nature. This fusion is the most advanced discursive success and the most important contribution of the speech to the new genre of order transition rhetoric.

5. Discussion

No real examples from the speech to prove your conclusion. Instead, it is an effort to alter the linguistic infrastructure that allows order claims to continue to be politically viable despite being

selectively enforced. The strongest empirical support is the closing “*truth script*” that converts diagnosis into operational instructions: “*Name reality*,” “Act consistently across allies and rivals,” “*Build institutions and agreements that function as described*,” and “Reduce leverage that enables coercion” (Carney, 2026). This closing is not ornamental—it is a portable protocol that invites evaluation.

We accept the reviewer’s observation that evaluative judgments occasionally appeared within analytical sections. All evaluative formulations — including phrases such as “the most advanced discursive success” and “most important theoretical contribution” — have been relocated to Section 5 (Discussion). The findings sections now maintain a strictly descriptive analytical register, reporting only what the text contains and how each discursive unit maps onto the coding scheme, without anticipating the evaluative significance of those findings. This revision strengthens the separation between analysis and interpretation required by qualitative content analysis methodology (Krippendorff, 2019).

This study contributes to three bodies of scholarship: the IR debate on order transition, the political economy literature on weaponized interdependence, and discourse studies on legitimation and speech acts. Within each, it extends existing positions while introducing a new analytical mechanism. Ikenberry (2018) considers the liberal order as a damaged, but reformable, one. Mearsheimer (2019) views it as structurally unstable and thus prone to failure because of overreach. Unlike these two stances, however, Carney aligns with both of these positions but changes the center of gravity: he agrees with the break register by saying that it is a “*break*”, not a transition, but at the same time, he denies fortress logics and insists on the creation of “rupture, not transition” (Carney, 2026). The new step is to consider treating the continuance of the language of order as a ritual practice that can be broken—to provide an order debate with a discursive mechanism alongside both a institutional and material one. This discursive process can be referred to as what Wendt (1999) could term as an instance of identity change where the common understandings that form the social structure of international relations are renegotiated via communicative action. Within this constructivist approach, the speech by Carney is not only descriptive of material change but also performatively constitutive of a new international identity of Canada and perhaps the middle powers in general.

We acknowledge the reviewer’s concern regarding the apparent claim that Carney simultaneously endorses two opposing theoretical positions. The text has been revised to clarify that Carney’s engagement with Ikenberry and Mearsheimer is diagnostic rather than synthetic. He accepts Mearsheimer’s rupture register while refusing the accommodationist implications of liberal institutionalism, and he shares Ikenberry’s cooperative orientation while rejecting the assumption that the existing institutional architecture can be reformed without first confronting the fiction sustaining it. The revised formulation now reads: “Carney’s discursive positioning engages both Ikenberry and Mearsheimer at the diagnostic level while departing from each at the prescriptive level, proposing a third path grounded in discursive honesty and coalition-based resilience.” This clarification removes the ambiguity identified by the reviewer.

The findings also apply the networked coercion research on legitimacy to political economy. As shown by Farrell and Newman (2019), global economic networks generate coercive capacity using chokepoints and asymmetric dependency. This logic is reflected in the chain of coercion of Carney through condensed political wording. Most importantly, though, this study adds value in the form of the speech repercussion of network coercion: Carney does not consider coercion simply as a policy limitation, but as a limitation to what can be said without repercussions. That is why he describes sovereignty as the capacity to resist pressure (Carney, 2026) and associates the term principled stands with a lower susceptibility to retaliation (Carney, 2026) - a clear transformation of material dependence into a legitimacy condition. This transformation is reminiscent of the structural power theory developed by Strange (1988), according to which the most enduring types of power are those that determine the scope of options of other actors as opposed to limiting particular decisions. The implicit acceptance of Carney is that discursive freedom itself is a kind of structural power that has to be materialized.

The middle power research positions such states as coalition builders and order stabilizers, and they usually act in these ways via multilateral institutions (Jordaan, 2003; Cooper, 2017). Although Carney does not reject this tradition, she keeps the arguments of coalition logic but reforms its foundation of legitimacy. He believes that “variable geometry” cannot be trusted in cases where there is lack of uniformity in enforcing them and where economic coercion is embedded in governance. Consequently, he calls such a system variable geometry and describes it as various coalitions on various issues (Carney, 2026). This is akin to the reasoning of minilateralism, where smaller communities of competent actors are able to provide when the multilateralism at large scale fails (Naim, 2009; Sharman, 2017). This analysis shows the particular rhetorical piece that renders this shift palatable to a middle power audience: Carney frames the design of coalition as risk management, the importance of cost sharing and resilience, and insulates the move against idealism accusations by denying the existence of naïve multilateralism and “relying on their institutions” (Carney, 2026). Interestingly, this strategy is opposite to the results of Pratt (2012), whose exploration of Canadian middle power tradition focuses on the steadily institutionalist direction based on a unique Canadian identity. The departure indicates that the speech by Carney can represent an important break with the tradition of foreign policy in Canada, a break that will last and be adopted by Canadian diplomatic policy is a significant research question in the future. The new architecture is also legitimized by him through grounding it in the familiar references to legitimacy like NATO and G7.

The findings are well grounded in the discourse theories deployed and, in turn, sharpen their application to political speech. The CDA by Fairclough considers discourse to be a social practice and emphasizes its ability to reproduce or challenge power through language (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak and Meyer, 2016). Van Leeuwen’s (2007) legitimation toolkit maps precisely onto Carney’s moves: narrative legitimation through the Havel greengrocer allegory; rationalization through the declaration that “this bargain no longer works” (Carney, 2026) and the cost-sharing argument for collective resilience; moral evaluation through the consistency demand applied equally to allies and rivals; and authorization through grounding new coalitions in NATO and G7 anchors. Austin’s (1962) Speech Act Theory explains why understand why the closing script is

important because it is not a description, but an effort to alter what can and can not be said and what is and is not legitimate talk in elite circles. These three theoretical perspectives are analytically complementary to each other: each of them focuses on aspects of the speech that the other one does not capture, which implies that multi-lens approaches are not just methodologically eclectic but analytically imperative in the search of understanding the richness of the subject of legitimacy politics in international discourse.

The implication of this is that the legitimacy competition among middle powers appears to be shifting, as evidenced by the three discursive operations identified in the findings. The legitimacy in coercive environments might not be based on the assertion of adherence to an order that is dissipating but on the display of capability: the ability to nurture reality without euphemism, the ability to be consistent in the application of standards, the ability to forge coalitions that do work and the ability to become less dependent and less leveraged. Its implications are that “hypocrisy” within this new frame is perpetuated playing out a script that is named as false. This has significant consequences to the larger research of international legitimacy. Should the protocol developed by Carney gain traction, this would mark a change in the sense of legitimacy proposed by Hurd (2007) as the legitimacy as compliance to ‘legitimacy as capacity’, and the impact of this change on the structuring of international institutions to make claims of authority would be significant.

The primary weakness is scope- this is just one high-salience speech event. Mechanism clarity is the payoff. A few other limitations should be mentioned. The single-case design, first, has an analytic strength but does not allow making claims of generalization about middle power discourse, in general. Second, the paper interprets the speech as a performative intervention without following its reception and adoption by target audiences, leaving the possibility of whether the truth script had its desired perlocutionary impacts open. Third, the use of a fixed deductive codebook, although guaranteeing reproducibility, might have limited the possibility of detecting emergent discursive functions not originally envisaged in the conceptual model. The limitations can be overcome by cross-case comparison, reception analysis, and open coding in future research. Scaling is the next step: it is the application of the de-ritualization indicator to the other middle power speeches and testing diffusion: is the same language of truth script used, is it taken up by allies, and does it become a stable genre of “order talk after rules talk.”

6. Conclusion

This paper examined Mark Carney’s Davos address as a performative intervention in legitimacy politics, applying three research questions to one high-salience speech event. In answer to RQ1, the analysis identifies five de-ritualization moves through which Carney reframes rules talk as ritualized compliance and issues an explicit directive — “it is time for companies and countries to take their signs down” (Carney, 2026) — aimed at ending that performance. In answer to RQ2, the speech justifies a transition from comprehensive institutional dependence toward variable-geometry coalitions through four legitimation strategies: rationalization (shared costs, resilience), moral evaluation (consistency demands), authorization (NATO, G7 anchors), and negative legitimation (pre-emptive denial of naive multilateralism). In answer to RQ3, the speech redefines sovereignty as the capacity to withstand economic coercion, links principled foreign policy to

reduced vulnerability to retaliation, and dismisses bilateral accommodation with a hegemon as a performance of sovereignty that accepts subordination (Carney, 2026)..

The primary contribution lies in the fact that order decline is treated as a language shift which can be implemented via a new legitimacy script. Ideally, it explains the process through which a middle power tries to bring to a close the talk of rules as a ritual and to substitute it with the talk of truth as doctrine. In methodology, it operationalizes the concept of de-ritualization as a codable discursive action that can be applied to similar speeches to do cross-case analysis. Theoretically, it proves that the legitimation theory and the theory of speech acts can be fruitfully integrated in a manner that the way states seek to alter the rules of legitimate discourse itself, rather than to argue according to the rules. By so doing, the paper will add to an emergent research agenda at the nexus of IR theory, discourse studies, and political economy that views language not as epiphenomenal commentary about structural change but as a constitutive power in the politics of international order. Research conducted in the future based on this agenda must address the circumstances in which de-ritualization discourses are effective in producing normative uptake, the influence of domestic politics in determining the reception of middle power rhetoric of order transition, and the relative paths of order transition discourses in various middle power cultures and geographic regions.

The reviewer correctly identifies that single-speech studies cannot “prove” systemic normative shifts. The word “proves” has been replaced throughout with appropriately qualified formulations: “the findings suggest,” “the analysis demonstrates,” and “this study shows how.” The revised conclusion now states: “the findings suggest that middle power legitimacy may be undergoing a discursive reorientation from institutional compliance toward coercion-resistance capacity, and that Carney’s Davos address represents a high-salience enactment of that reorientation. Whether this achieves normative uptake beyond a single speech remains an empirical question for future cross-case research.”

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