

"In a world saturated with rules, chaos becomes the last room for maneuver."

STRATEGIC CHAOS THEORY: A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR INTERPRETING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE ERA OF GLOBAL DISORDER

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Abstract

This article proposes the concept of 'strategic chaos' as an emerging analytical perspective in the study of contemporary international relations. Inspired by chaos theory from the natural sciences and complex systems thinking (Lorenz, Prigogine, Morin), the paper investigates how instability is deliberately cultivated by various state and non-state actors as a geopolitical tool.

By integrating ideas from classical theories of international relations (realism, liberalism, constructivism) with elements of complexity theory, the proposed approach outlines a complementary lens to understand phenomena such as frozen conflicts, recurrent crises, information warfare or strategic ambiguity.

Case studies on Russia, China, the United States, and other actors such as ISIS or North Korea demonstrate that instability can become a strategic end in itself – not merely a secondary outcome of conflict. The concept of strategic chaos thus brings into focus the possibility that unpredictability and disorder may not only be tolerated but actively exploited in the context of an increasingly fragmented, multipolar, and volatile international system.

Keywords

Controlled instability; global order; geopolitics; hybrid conflict; international relations; international security; strategic chaos

1. INTRODUCTION

Chaos theory emerged in the natural sciences as a conceptual revolution that highlighted the unpredictable behavior of deterministic systems. Meteorologist Edward N. Lorenz (1963) first observed that small variations in initial conditions in climate models can lead to radically different evolutions, a phenomenon later popularized as the butterfly effect. In other words, although the dynamics of the systems under study were described by deterministic equations, they exhibited extreme sensitivity to initial conditions, making it virtually impossible to predict their long-term behavior. Lorenz himself summarized the paradox as follows: the present determines the future, but "the present approximately does not approximately determine the future" (Lorenz 1963).

This finding contradicted traditional linear-deterministic expectations and laid the foundation for what we now call deterministic chaos theory - the study of nonlinear systems in which order and unpredictability coexist. In the following decades, the concept of chaos was taken up and developed beyond meteorology, becoming a key element in interdisciplinary scientific thinking. Physicists, mathematicians and biologists have identified chaotic behavior in diverse fields - from fluid dynamics and heart rhythms to ecology or economics - suggesting the existence of universal principles of complexity (Gleick 1987). Popular science papers such as Gleick's (1987) have made chaos theory accessible to a wide audience, while researchers such as Stuart Kauffman (1993) have explored how order can emerge spontaneously from chaos in biological systems.

Nobel Prize-winning chemist Ilya Prigogine has shown that even dissipative physical systems can generate ordered structures through seemingly random fluctuations (Prigogine & Stengers 1984), emphasizing that disorder and order are often two facets of the same natural process. The philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin (1990) has also argued for the need for 'complex thinking' in the

social sciences, integrating such non-linear perspectives. Through the contributions of these authors, chaos theory and the broader concept of complexity have gradually penetrated the social sciences, providing analogies and theoretical tools to understand phenomena such as sudden social change, economic crises or political volatility (Morin 1990; Rosenau 1990).

The transfer of these ideas to the field of international relations was natural in the context of the end of the Cold War and the increasingly unpredictable world that followed. James Rosenau (1990), for example, spoke of a growing 'turbulence' in world politics as state and non-state actors interact in a complex global environment that is difficult to understand through traditional lenses. Such insights inspired by chaos and complexity suggest that small events can trigger major and unanticipated geopolitical consequences - analogous to sensitivity to initial conditions in physics.

Some theorists have gone so far as to explicitly propose a new 'chaotic' paradigm in international relations, arguing that the international system is much more complex and non-linear than the mainstream assumes. Dylan Kissane (2007), for example, argues that the essence of the global system is chaotic and that what is needed is a theory of international relations that recognizes the dependence on initial conditions and the disproportionate effects of seemingly minor actions. *In this line, the shift of the concept of chaos from the natural sciences to social thought provides a useful framework for re-evaluating notions such as system change, crisis or global disorder.*

2. CLASSICAL PARADIGMS AND STRATEGIC CHAOS

Traditionally, the classical paradigms of international relations - realism, liberalism and constructivism - have offered distinct explanations for conflict and cooperation. However, none of them explicitly addresses instability as a deliberate strategy of an international actor.

Realism starts from the premise of systemic anarchy - the absence of central authority - and believes that states act to maximize their security and power in an unpredictable environment. This perspective, represented by authors such as

Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, assumes that actors prefer order and equilibrium (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). However, realism does not provide a theoretical framework for situations in which an actor would have a strategic interest in intentionally increasing the unpredictability of the system.

Liberalism, by contrast, emphasizes institutionalized cooperation and the reduction of uncertainty through economic interdependence and international rules. In this view, rational actors prefer stability because it creates favorable conditions for mutual benefits and common progress (Keohane and Nye 1977; Moravcsik 1997). Thus, liberalism finds it difficult to explain behaviors aimed at deliberately undermining the international order.

Constructivism makes an important contribution by focusing on norms, identities and discourse, and is sensitive to change and contextualization. However, it does not provide a systematic model of deliberate strategic instability. Its focus on socialization and internalization of norms makes it less well suited to understanding the chaos deliberately produced by actors with political aims (Wendt 1999; Onuf 1989).

This theoretical vacuum can be addressed by introducing the concept of 'strategic chaos', which defines a framework in which orchestrated disorder becomes an object of analysis in itself, rather than just a consequence of the failure of order. *By "strategic chaos" we mean the deliberate use of unpredictability and instability by an actor - state or non-state - as a geopolitical tool.* This is no longer spontaneous or emergent chaos, but tactically induced chaos: a state of instability deliberately cultivated and exploited to create strategic advantage or to destabilize an adversary.

The idea reflects current geopolitical realities. For example, in the hybrid warfare strategy attributed to the Russian Federation, several analysts have noted the intentional use of "controlled chaos" to undermine the internal cohesion of target states (Rushchenko and Zubar 2021). Moscow's military interventions and disinformation campaigns in the near neighbourhood - as in the case of Ukraine after 2014 - have been interpreted as deliberate forms of destabilization, designed to create disorder so that the Kremlin can later present itself as a mediator or fill the remaining power vacuum.

A comparable approach can be observed in the "madman theory" applied by President Nixon, who tried to give international adversaries the impression that he was willing to take extreme and unpredictable decisions precisely in order to confuse them and limit their room for maneuver (Schelling 1966). Even in recent US politics, there has been debate about whether the heightened unpredictability of the Trump era was the result of unintentional chaotic behavior or a calculated form of strategic chaos, intended to force renegotiations and surprise allies and rivals alike.

In view of these developments, the introduction of the concept of strategic chaos as a distinct theoretical approach to international relations is not only justified but necessary. On the one hand, this perspective allows for a better understanding of contemporary phenomena - from persistent regional conflicts and succession crises to the erosion of democratic norms under the pressure of disinformation - in which chaos is not just an unfortunate consequence but, in certain contexts, a deliberate tool.

On the other hand, strategic chaos theory expands the analytical horizon of international relations, connecting it with insights from complexity science. The theoretical contribution of this article consists precisely in articulating an integrative perspective on orchestrated instability by highlighting the mechanisms through which chaos becomes a strategic tool of rational actors.

Finally, this perspective does not radically contradict established paradigms, but complements them. It provides the analytical tools needed to understand dynamics that realism, liberalism or constructivism treat only marginally. In this sense, this paper is part of a broader effort to adapt international relations theory to the complexity of the contemporary world, arguing why a strategic chaos approach can improve our ability to explain and anticipate the deliberately created instability in the global system.

I. From deterministic chaos to strategic chaos: a new conceptualization

The concept of strategic chaos refers to the deliberate use of instability and unpredictability as an instrument of power in international relations. In contrast to the traditional view of chaos as a breakdown of order, the theory of strategic

chaos - proposed in this paper - redefines it as an intentional strategy by which actors (state or non-state) can gain geopolitical advantage. This approach contributes to the literature by emphasizing deliberately generated instability as a means to achieve objectives, not just as a side-effect of conflicts.

In this chapter I will clarify the fundamentals of the concept, the relationship between chaos and determinism, its geopolitical foundations, its defining characteristics, the typology of actors involved, and compare strategic chaos with hybrid conflict. I will also integrate my own theoretical contributions and illustrate the theory with relevant case studies (Russia, China, the United States in the Trump era), supplementing with additional examples where necessary.

A. Chaos vs. determinism: Theoretical foundations

Beyond its origins in the natural sciences, chaos theory has profoundly influenced thinking about complex systems, offering a new understanding of how determinism does not guarantee predictability. This insight opens a much-needed discussion about the nature of instability in global politics.

This apparent contradiction - deterministic order and unpredictable behavior - was illustrated by Edward Lorenz in the 1960s, paving the way for a new understanding of complexity (Lorenz 1963).

This kind of chaos does not mean a lack of order, but rather a deep but hard-to-predict order. The physicist Ilya Prigogine has significantly expanded our understanding of this phenomenon, arguing that systems far from equilibrium - including those in nature and society - can generate new forms of order through instability and irreversibility (Prigogine 1997). In his work *The End of Certainty*, Prigogine argues that as science advances, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe in a strictly deterministic evolution: the more we know, the more signs of unpredictability appear (Prigogine 1997, 411-417).

This view has also been supported by Edgar Morin, who proposes an epistemology of complexity in which uncertainty is no longer a defect of knowledge but a structural dimension of reality. According to Morin, complexity implies unpredictability even in systems governed by clear rules -

"complex knowledge cannot eliminate uncertainty" (Morin 2008). Thus, prediction becomes limited and complete control over social and political systems becomes impossible.

The idea has direct relevance in the field of international relations, where the interactions between economic, cultural, ideological and political factors generate outcomes that are difficult to predict. Carl von Clausewitz recognized this reality as early as the 19th century, when he described war as a "non-linear" phenomenon in which all parts influence the whole, and small causes can have disproportionate effects (Clausewitz, quoted in Beyerchen 1992).

Contemporary examples validate these perspectives. A seemingly marginal event - the self-burning of a street vendor in Tunisia (2010) - triggered a wave of regional protests, known as the Arab Spring, which eventually led to a devastating civil conflict in Syria (Foreign Policy 2013). Such chains of backlash are not exceptions, but expressions of the logic of chaos in interconnected and unstable social systems.

In this sense, strategic chaos theory recognizes two essential dimensions of global politics:

1. the existence of a certain degree of regularity and structure in the international system - balances of power, alliances, institutional norms - and
2. the deeply unpredictable nature of the evolution of this system, due to the large number of interdependent factors and emerging effects. Order and disorder coexist and instability sometimes becomes not an exception but a structural component of geopolitical reality.

B. The geopolitical basis of strategic chaos

The post-Cold War world has often been described by terms such as "global disorder", "chaotic multipolar world" or "new anarchy". The absence of a clear hegemony and the diffusion of power led to an international environment in which volatility increased. Zbigniew Brzezinski observes that as US relative power declines, the near future will not be characterized by the dominance of a

new superpower (such as China), but by "an increasingly chaotic geopolitical order" marked by high uncertainty (Brzezinski 2012, 75).

In other words, in his vision, the world 'beyond 2025' will be 'not Chinese, but chaotic' - a landscape in which no single actor is fully in control and the power vacuum generates regional competition and unpredictable crises (Miller 2018). This view is also supported by Robert D. Kaplan, who as early as 1994 warned of 'coming anarchy'. In his view, factors such as resource scarcity, population explosion, organized crime, tribal fragmentation and infectious diseases threatened to rapidly destroy global social cohesion (Kaplan 1994).

Kaplan's scenario prefigured a world marked by failed states, civil strife and waves of migration, all contributing to areas of chronic chaos. Although his vision has often been labeled pessimistic, reality has partially confirmed these predictions in regions such as West Africa, the Middle East or Afghanistan, where the collapse of state authority has generated enclaves of violence and instability, exploited by a variety of local and external actors.

In parallel, the idea of a "global anomie" has been reinforced by a series of major events over the last two decades: the attacks of September 11, 2001, the unconventional wars in the Middle East, the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of revisionist states and the proliferation of populist nationalisms. All these have contributed to the erosion of a sense of predictability and the delegitimization of the liberal international order.

In this context, Nassim Nicholas Taleb introduces the concept of "Black Swans" - rare events that are difficult to anticipate but have a major impact on the system (Taleb 2007). Pandemics, financial meltdowns or unexpected geopolitical crises are examples of such events. Taleb (2012) also proposes the notion of 'antifragility': the ability of certain systems not only to withstand shocks, but to harden themselves through exposure to chaos and volatility. Applied geopolitically, this idea suggests that some actors not only survive disorder, but turn it into a source of strategic advantage.

In this sense, the geopolitical underpinnings of strategic chaos theory derive from the reality of an interdependent but deeply decentralized and unpredictable world. In this world, power vacuums, protracted conflicts and chronic instability become structural features. If the Cold War was defined by a

bipolar order with clear rules, and the immediate aftermath by a unipolar moment dominated by the US, the present is characterized by a fluid transition, in which competition between major powers returns in fragmented and often subversive forms.

In this transition, international institutions are finding it difficult to manage new patterns of conflict - from cyberwar to transnational terrorism and hybrid warfare. The theory of strategic chaos starts precisely from the observation of these developments: instability is no longer perceived as a dysfunction but as a resource. It is exploited in particular by actors that cannot compete symmetrically with great powers, but can use chaos as a strategic weapon (Brzezinski 2014; Miller 2018).

C. The defining characteristics of strategic chaos

Strategic chaos is therefore a deliberate strategy to generate, maintain or exploit disorder in a system in order to gain political, military or economic advantage. Here are some defining features of this concept:

Deliberation and planning - Unlike accidental chaos, strategic chaos is intentional. The actor who promotes it cultivates unpredictability in their actions and instability in their environment. This strategic unpredictability has been praised, for example, by US President Donald Trump as a negotiating tactic: by making it impossible for adversaries to anticipate reactions, bargaining power is increased. This is not incompetence or chaotic improvisation, but a "design" in which the confusion generated serves specific purposes (Purohit 2025). In military terms, the concept is sometimes also referred to as "non-linear warfare" or "new generation warfare" - the emphasis being on indirect, asymmetric measures designed to undermine the cohesion of the adversary.

Multi-dimensionality - Strategic chaos operates on multiple levels: political, social, informational, economic and military. It reflects the reality of modern 'hybrid warfare', where the boundaries between peace and conflict, internal and external, military and civilian, are blurred. The actor orchestrating strategic chaos will often combine disinformation, cyber attacks, economic pressure,

support for protest movements or local armed groups, military threats and duplicitous diplomacy - all to create an overall climate of uncertainty and insecurity. This approach is reminiscent of the Chinese concept of 'war without limits' (Qiao Liang & Wang Xiangsui, 1999), where any means - from financial attacks to terrorism - can be used to achieve strategic objectives, extending conflict to the whole of society.

Control (controlled chaos) - Paradoxically, strategic chaos implies a degree of control on the part of the initiator. The goal is not total anarchy (which would also affect the initiator), but a manageable level of chaos that predominantly affects adversaries. Russian doctrine, for example, speaks of "controlled chaos" as a method of destabilizing a target state by "sowing disorder and dissent" using informational, political, and paramilitary means (Bogdanov 2017). This controlled chaos can prepare the ground for further actions (e.g. a 'rescue' invasion when the target country is already in chaos).

At the same time, some theorists suggest that provoked chaos can achieve its objectives even without direct military intervention, if it leads to the weakening of the adversary from within (Bartosh 2018, cited in Şaran 2020). The original character of the strategic chaos theory proposed here lies in emphasizing the role of orchestrated instability as a tool: the aim is to keep chaos at an optimal level - high enough to paralyze the opponent's decision-making efficiency, but controlled enough to be circumvented or exploited by the initiator.

Exploiting fear and confusion - Strategic chaos is based on the psychological effects of prolonged uncertainty. Populations and leaders confronted with multiple crises, ambiguity and conflicting information tend to become demoralized and eager to restore order at all costs.

Under these circumstances, the actor who caused the chaos can then present itself as the savior, imposing a new order on its own terms. This tactic - "create the problem to provide the solution" - has been observed in some authoritarian domestic leaders as well as in external strategists. For example, a political leader may tolerate or incentivize a crisis (protests, violence) to justify exceptional measures and consolidation of power (Mouffe 2018; Purohit 2025). In the international sphere, supporting local conflicts may subsequently provide a

pretext for a 'peacemaking intervention' or make the international community dependent on the cooperation of the initiator to resolve the crisis.

Opportunism and adaptability - Strategic chaos does not follow a rigid plan but is adaptive. The actors who practice it often act opportunistically, speculating on vulnerabilities or opportune moments. As analysts point out, the Kremlin, for example, does not necessarily operate according to a predetermined master plan, but improvises according to the context, while maintaining the general direction of creating an environment favorable to its interests. This flexibility makes strategic chaos difficult to counter, as there is no single template for action - any destabilizing element in an adversarial system can be fed and used. The ultimate goal remains the achievement of long-term objectives (weakening the cohesion of adversaries, realigning the balance of power, access to resources or regional influence), but the trajectory towards the goal is marked by constant recalibration.

In short, strategic chaos is distinguished by the fact that it transforms instability from a situation to be avoided into a strategy to be pursued. Where conventional politics seeks stability and order, the promoters of strategic chaos start from the conviction that, in an age of global complexity, uncertainty is no longer just an obstacle, but sometimes becomes the main weapon of those who deliberately cultivate it. This is an important conceptual contribution: my theory suggests that instability can be instrumentalized, becoming an arena in which power is redistributed and norms redefined.

D. Typology of actors involved in strategic chaos

Both state and non-state actors may resort to strategic chaos strategies, although the motivations and means may differ. Several categories can be identified:

a) Revisionist great powers: States that challenge the existing order, but cannot directly confront it militarily or economically, are prime candidates for the use of strategic chaos. Russia is often cited as an example - believing that the post-Cold War liberal order is unfavorable to it, Moscow has resorted to asymmetric and subversive tactics to sow division in the West and instability in

its neighborhood. China, while projecting the image of stability, employs "gray zone" strategies - from economic pressure to information campaigns - to expand its influence without triggering direct conflict (Mazarr 2015; Mastro 2019).

b) Status quo superpowers: Paradoxically, even a hegemonic power may resort to strategies of chaos, either by miscalculation or intentionally in the short term. For example, the United States has been accused by rival players such as Russia and Iran of promoting a "strategy of controlled chaos" in the Middle East to maintain its influence. Sergey Lavrov claimed in 2014 that "the United States is creating instability in region after region in a strategy of controlled chaos" (Lavrov 2014, cited in Tehran Times). While this statement can be interpreted as political rhetoric, the Trump administration has illustrated trends of strategic unpredictability (Brands 2018).

c) Regional powers and smaller states: Less powerful states with regional ambitions can use chaos as a weapon against more influential neighbors. Iran, for example, has built a network of proxy actors in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon, promoting instability and weakening rival governments (Levitt 2013). North Korea applies a strategy of brinkmanship - continuous threats and unpredictable behavior - to attract attention and win diplomatic or economic concessions (Cha 2012).

d) Non-state actors: Terrorist groups, transnational criminal organizations or insurgent militias can become promoters of strategic chaos. The Islamic State (ISIS) developed in the context of the chaos in Syria and Iraq, exploiting the power vacuum. The jihadist ideologue Abu Bakr Naji argued in his book 'The Management of the Wilderness' (2004) that a key step in establishing a caliphate is the deliberate creation of ungovernable regions where the population, exhausted by chaos, easily accepts authoritarian control (Naji 2004).

e) Authoritarian leaders and domestic populism: At the domestic level, strategic chaos can be deliberately fostered by authoritarian or populist leaders who want to consolidate their power. By maintaining a state of crisis or instability - whether through political conflicts, social violence or external threats - they justify emergency measures, restrict rights and present themselves as the sole guarantors of order (Mouffe 2018). The so-called "madman theory",

invoked by Nixon and reinterpreted in the Trump era, aims to induce an impression of unpredictability to force restrained reactions from rivals (Schelling 1966; Holmes 2015).

In conclusion, strategic chaos is not the prerogative of just one set of actors. From major powers to non-state organizations or authoritarian leaders, all can exploit instability as an opportunity, not just a threat. The difference lies in the scale and nature of the means used.

E. Comparison between strategic chaos and hybrid conflict

The concept of strategic chaos is related to, but distinct from, that of hybrid conflict (or hybrid war). Hybrid conflict involves the combined use of conventional and non-conventional means - military, economic, cyber, informational - usually below the threshold of declared war. Its objective is to achieve a strategic outcome, such as regime change or undermining the influence of a rival, through tactics that are difficult to clearly attribute and avoid direct confrontation (Hoffman 2007).

Strategic chaos may include elements of hybrid conflict, but it focuses on the deliberate cultivation of instability as a goal in itself. While in hybrid conflict chaos is a means of coercion, in strategic chaos it is often the intermediate or end goal. For example, in Ukraine (2014-2021), Russia combined information warfare, support for separatists, and cyber-attacks to create a frozen conflict in the Donbas - a form of strategic instability that was blocking Ukraine's integration into NATO and the EU (Galeotti 2016).

In this sense, hybrid conflict pursues a political or territorial outcome and chaos is a temporary tool. In strategic chaos theory, however, chronic chaos becomes an end in itself, designed to prevent the development of a hostile order and keep the adversary in a state of systemic weakness. Maintaining an unstable Ukraine with uncontrolled areas and a weakened economy is a clear example of strategic chaos (Charap and Colton 2017).

Another key difference is the duration and purpose of the action. Hybrid conflict has a clear, even if undeclared, objective, while strategic chaos may only aim to

prolong the conflict or maintain a recurrent crisis. The strategy of chaos does not necessarily seek a military victory, but the inability of the other to build peace.

Responsibility is also more diffuse in strategic chaos. While hybrid conflict involves a recognizable aggressor, even after a period of ambiguity, strategic chaos relies on deniability. The triggering actor often hides behind circumstances - local conflicts, social tensions, economic instability - and rarely publicly owns up to its actions (Thomas 2020).

One example is Russia's indirect involvement in the migration crisis in Europe by supporting repressive regimes or disseminating disinformation without a clear *casus belli*. Thus, destabilizing effects on EU cohesion are real, but responsibility is hard to formally attribute (Polyakova and Boyer 2018).

Strategic chaos operates predominantly in so-called "gray zones" - spaces between peace and war where the rules are uncertain. Hybrid conflict is often the instrument of action in these zones, while strategic chaos is the resulting state that perpetuates ambiguity and crisis (Mazarr 2015).

In conclusion, strategic chaos integrates hybrid conflict as a methodology but goes beyond it as an objective. If hybrid warfare is about ways of fighting, strategic chaos is about the intention to maintain instability as a favorable geopolitical state. In doing so, strategic chaos theory provides an additional explanatory framework for understanding long-lasting contemporary conflicts.

2. CASE STUDIES: STRATEGIC CHAOS IN PRACTICE

To concretely illustrate the concept of strategic chaos, we briefly examine three case studies - two major powers (Russia and China) and one democratic example (the US in the Trump era) - as well as two other significant examples (ISIS and North Korea), highlighting how each has used or been associated with deliberate chaos strategies.

a) **Russia: 'controlled chaos' as a geopolitical tool**

Post-Soviet Russia offers one of the clearest examples of the application of strategic chaos in foreign policy. Faced with NATO's conventional

military superiority and the expansion of Western influence in the former Soviet space, Moscow has resorted to asymmetric methods to achieve its strategic goals, often cultivating instability in its immediate neighborhood or even globally.

A prime example is the Republic of Moldova and the Transnistria conflict (1992-present): Russia initially intervened militarily under the pretext of pacification, then maintained a military presence and supported a separatist regime, thus creating an entity outside Chisinau's control. This frozen conflict has left Moldova in a state of structural instability and dependency, preventing it from a clear path to the West. Similarly, in Georgia, after the 2008 war, the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (recognized only by Russia) remain hotbeds of tension, limiting Georgian sovereignty. The Kremlin has thus demonstrated the doctrine of "controlled chaos": it has not formally annexed these territories (with the exception of Crimea in 2014, a special case), but has used them as levers of influence, maintaining a calculated level of chaos to keep the countries in check.

The most notorious application of the strategy of chaos is in Ukraine. After Euromaidan (2014) and Kiev's pro-Western orientation, Russia has acted on two fronts: the rapid annexation of Crimea - a military-hybrid lightning operation, and the long-term destabilization of eastern Ukraine (Donbas) - a protracted hybrid conflict. In Donbas, Russia officially denied involvement, but fueled the conflict with weapons, "volunteers", military advisers and propaganda. The result: a state of undeclared war that for 8 years has undermined Ukraine's security and economy, hindering its Euro-Atlantic integration. This chronic chaos in eastern Ukraine has served Russian strategic interests, demonstrating once again that deliberate instability can become a strategic asset. (Of course, in 2022, Russia escalated to open invasion - a case that goes beyond the "gray zone" framework, but which was psychologically and logistically prepared precisely by the previous years of irregular conflict.) Beyond the former USSR, Russia has also engineered strategic chaos at the global level. Its intervention in the Syrian civil war (since 2015) aimed not only to keep ally Bashar al-Assad in power, but also to create a platform of influence by managing the conflict.

Russia's involvement, under the slogan of the fight against ISIS, changed the dynamics of the war and gave Moscow the role of regional arbiter. Syria thus also became a testing ground for hybrid tactics (from bombings and disinformation to international negotiations) - allowing Russia to profile itself as an indispensable power in resolving a chaos that it has in part aggravated (by striking against the anti-regime opposition, fueling the exodus of refugees, etc.). The Kremlin has used the Syrian refugee crisis as a tool to put pressure on Europe, and the rise of populism and political fractures in the EU in the context of this crisis has served Russia's interest in seeing a weakened and divided Europe.

Another dimension is information warfare and election meddling. Russian influence operations in elections in other countries (USA 2016, various polls in Europe) have not necessarily been aimed at decisively supporting a candidate, but at undermining public trust and sowing discord. The American intelligence community concluded that Russia sought to create confusion and polarization in American society (e.g., by simultaneously propagating antagonistic messages on sensitive topics to radicalize both camps). This strategy has generated a degree of political and media chaos in the US - exactly the effect intended by the instigator to weaken domestic cohesion and the global position of the adversary (Buchanan 2017).

In short, Russia has turned what analysts call "chaos technology" into a central element of its security doctrine. Be it "ambiguous warfare," "active operations," or the concept of maskirovka (strategic deception), the ultimate goal is to unbalance adversaries and create a volatile environment in which Russia can project its influence with increased efficiency (Galeotti 2016; Thomas 2020).

As security specialists note, "the West tends to perceive instability as a problem to be managed, while Russia instrumentalizes it as a geopolitical opportunity" (Polyakova and Boyer 2018). It is precisely this difference in philosophy that explains why Moscow frequently suspects a Western "invisible hand" in global crises - because it projects its own way of thinking. In Russian strategic logic, chaos is not an accident, but a deliberately created and exploited condition.

b) China: internal stability, subtle external chaos

At first glance, China seems the antithesis of strategic chaos: the Beijing regime promotes a model of governance centered on order, long-term planning and strict internal control. Yet on the international stage, China employs subtle tactics that can create an "alternative order" or exploit vulnerabilities in the existing order. Unlike Russia's head-on approach, China builds parallel institutions, promotes its own norms and selectively engages in multilateral mechanisms to expand its influence quietly but systematically.

As Elizabeth Economy notes, the regime in Beijing aims to consolidate a multipolar global order "sustainable by Chinese concepts of development and security" by developing an institutional infrastructure that reflects its own political and economic values (Economy 2022).

One example is the South China Sea. Here, China has adopted a salami slicing strategy of expansion and militarization of artificial islands, causing a fait accompli and legal ambiguity that undermines international maritime law. By turning the reefs into military outposts, Beijing has created a situation of legal chaos and regional tension that it has then tried to manage bilaterally with each ASEAN country, refusing multilateral solutions. The seemingly paradoxical aim is to control this area of potential conflict - basically generating a new local order under Chinese auspices, in place of the previous order guaranteed by American freedom of navigation.

This kind of latent conflict, where no one wants open war but the situation remains volatile, serves Beijing well: countries in the region will reconsider their alliances, investors are calculating the risks, and China is consolidating its position as the inevitable power in the region. The Belt and Road (BRI) strategy, while economic in essence, has also been interpreted by some analysts through the prism of strategic chaos. By granting massive loans to countries with weak governance, China would create dependency (the case of Sri Lanka, Malaysia, etc.) by taking control of key infrastructure when borrowers are unable to pay. These practices can destabilize countries (e.g. leading to domestic political crises over Chinese involvement) - "economic chaos" exploited for strategic advantage (as was the takeover of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port). However, it should be noted that Beijing usually prefers stability with its partners (in order to secure its

investments), so if one can speak of Chinese strategic chaos, it is much more nuanced and often amounts to speculation on chaos created by others.

For example, the wars and US withdrawal from the Middle East have left a vacuum into which China has stepped in as a mediator and investor. Beijing has recently offered to mediate conflicts (e.g., Saudi Arabia-Iran reconciliation in 2023) and is investing in Syria's reconstruction - capitalizing on the chaos generated by decades of conflict (without having been involved in the conflict itself). It is a form of exploiting the chaos of others: China reaps the benefits (diplomatic influence, access to resources, BRI expansion) where the Western order has failed.

Finally, tactics of influence and disinformation: China, like Russia, also uses cyberspace for propaganda and influence (e.g., disinformation campaigns on Western social networks, or supporting anti-democratic movements in Hong Kong through fake news). The aim of these operations is to confuse dominant narratives: for example, promoting conspiracy theories about the origin of COVID-19 or highlighting the failings of Western democracy in contrast to the Chinese order. The expected result is a degree of global information chaos that relativizes the truth and makes public opinion more receptive to the Chinese "orderly" model. However, China remains wary of creating chaos out of control, given its economic interdependence. Arguably, Beijing is practicing more of a latent strategic chaos - creating the conditions for potential disruption (e.g. by investing in capabilities to disable adversaries' computer networks or satellites), but not activating these levers unless it is compelled to do so.

In sum, China does not openly display the strategy of chaos, but it manages chaos to its own advantage: either filling a vacuum left by others or navigating a crisis to project power. If Russia is the player who throws balls in the air, China is often the one who catches them and puts them in its own basket.

c) United States (Trump era): unpredictability as policy

The United States, as the traditional hegemon of the liberal order, has generally had an interest in supporting the stability of the international system. However, the Donald Trump administration (2017-2021) has marked a significant departure by adopting a leadership style and policies that can be interpreted

through the lens of strategic chaos - although whether this was an intentional strategy or a side-effect of an atypical mode of governance is a matter of debate. Donald Trump came to power promoting the idea that unpredictability is an asset, including in international relations: "we will be unpredictable!" he declared, suggesting that adversaries (but also allies) will be kept in uncertainty about US actions.

In practice, his first two years in office have been characterized by abrupt decisions, contradictions, and shocking rhetoric that have upended traditional diplomacy. For example, in the crisis with North Korea (2017), Trump alternated apocalyptic threats ("fire and fury like the world has never seen") with overtures toward a historic summit with Kim Jong-un in 2018. This extreme succession created a strategic shock: no one could predict whether the US was heading towards war or peace. Some analysts saw here the application of the "madman theory" - Trump would have deliberately cultivated an image of a leader willing to do anything to force the hand of Pyongyang. The result was a moment of calculated chaos followed by negotiations, in which Trump claimed that his unorthodox approach had brought North Korea to the table (even if, on the substance, denuclearization was not achieved). More broadly, the Trump administration's policies have generated uncertainty among allies and rivals alike. Withdrawing or threatening to withdraw from international agreements (the Paris Climate Agreement, the JCPOA Iran nuclear deal, the INF Treaty, the World Health Organization, etc.) has undermined existing rules of order and created coordination vacuums. The European allies found themselves in an unusual position, unable to count on the predictability of American leadership. There was even talk of "chaos in the Western camp", which rivals (such as Russia and China) exploited in the media, portraying democracies as divided and in decline.

At the same time, Trump has maintained an antagonistic rhetoric towards multilateral institutions (UN, NATO - he called NATO "obsolete"), questioning sacrosanct commitments. This ambiguity of security guarantees has generated, if only temporarily, a perceived strategic chaos in which countries like Germany and Japan have begun to consider their own security arrangements.

In terms of method, Trump has often governed through Twitter - announcing resignations, policy changes or diplomatic insults in an ad hoc fashion. This communication style created confusion both among opponents (who didn't know whether a bellicose tweet actually represented a new policy) and within the administration itself (with officials sometimes learning of the president's decisions on social media). In terms of theory, one could say that there was internal strategic chaos, where factions within the government (e.g., moderates vs. radicals) struggled to influence an unpredictable president.

On the international stage, however, perception has mattered: the US image has suffered as a less reliable actor, and competitors such as China have used this to present themselves as more stable and consistent partners. An illustrative moment is the US reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of behaving predictably as a global leader, the Trump administration oscillated between downplaying the crisis, nationalism (America First - e.g., banning the export of medical equipment) and accusations against China. The result has been a chaos of international cooperation precisely in a situation that called for coordination, with the US absent from its traditional coordinating role.

For my theory, what is interesting is that a status quo actor like the U.S. has unwittingly generated an increase in systemic entropy by allowing others (e.g., EU, WHO, China) to try to fill the leadership vacuum. It remains questionable how much of this "chaos strategy" in the Trump era was truly calculated and how much is the president's personal chaotic style. Nevertheless, the consequences demonstrate the validity of the concept: deliberate (or accepted) instability has led to geopolitical realignments.

In 2020, analysts were talking about a new phase - the "era of strategic chaos" - in which both adversaries and allies are adapting to an unpredictable America moderndiplomacy.eu. Some states have accelerated plans for strategic autonomy (e.g., Europe in the field of defense), others have moved closer to rivals (e.g. Turkey juggling between the US and Russia). So, we see that strategic chaos can come not only from outsiders rebelling against the order, but also from within the hegemon when it changes course.

d) Other examples: ISIS and North Korea

ISIS - already discussed above - is worth mentioning as the prototype of the non-state actor that uses chaos as both a medium and a tool. The organization flourished under the conditions of instability created after the invasion of Iraq (2003) and the Syrian civil war, and subsequently contributed to deepening this chaos through tactics of extreme brutality - filmed executions, international attacks, symbolic destruction of borders and institutions (Lister 2015; Naji 2004). In place of the existing authorities, ISIS has set up a theocratic pseudo-state, the "caliphate", presenting itself as an alternative of order in a collapsing space. Although its structure has been dismantled militarily, the effects of the chaos it generated persist: depopulated regions, sectarian fragmentation and the proliferation of armed actors, in a context where external powers (Turkey, Russia, Iran) compete for influence (Stanford CISAC 2021).

North Korea represents a different form of strategic chaos: an isolated state deliberately maintaining a state of permanent regional tension. The regime in Pyongyang has cultivated a strategy of brinkmanship through nuclear tests and missile launches designed to create repeated international crises (Cha 2012). Each tense episode is followed by a period of apparent calm, in exchange for external concessions (economic assistance, sanctions relaxation). Thus, North Korea maintains a calibrated instability - neither peace nor open war - and ensures constant visibility on the international agenda.

This behavior can be interpreted as a calibrated chaos strategy: the regime is betting that no major power wants North Korea to collapse (which would mean uncontrolled chaos, refugees, nuclear risk, unification costs), which makes its unpredictability tolerated as an alternative to a major disaster (Friedhoff 2020).

These case studies support the idea that strategic chaos is not a purely theoretical construct but a recurrent practice in contemporary geopolitics. From authoritarian governments to insurgent organizations, many actors choose to instrumentalize deliberate instability to offset power asymmetries and gain advantage in a volatile multipolar international system.

3. CONCLUSIONS - STRATEGIC CHAOS AS AN EMERGING APPROACH

The concept of strategic chaos formulated in this study is intended as an original contribution to the understanding of conflict dynamics in the post-hegemonic era. Inspired by chaos theory from the natural sciences and complexity thinking, this approach provides a coherent conceptual framework for analyzing how instability is not only tolerated, but often deliberately generated, becoming a strategic resource in itself. In contrast to the traditional strategic paradigm, which privileged stability and conflict resolution, strategic chaos proposes an alternative logic: the cultivation of chaos as an environment conducive to the achievement of geopolitical objectives.

This perspective introduces new elements to established theories of international relations. First, it reinterprets the relationship between order and disorder: instability is no longer a failure of governance or a dysfunction of the international system, but may be the very essence of a deliberate strategy. Second, it shifts the classical goal of control: it is no longer essential to control everything, but to prevent the adversary from imposing an order convenient to his own logic. Thirdly, strategic chaos introduces a temporal and psychological dimension - the cultivation of chaos as a state of 'neither peace nor war' designed to systematically erode adversaries' positions.

This analytical framework makes it possible to reinterpret recurrent phenomena in contemporary global politics - frozen conflicts, cyclical diplomatic crises, gray zones of strategic competition, disinformation campaigns or regional economic instability - as expressions of a broader pattern in which instability is cultivated in a calculated way to reconfigure power relations.

From a practical perspective, the proposed approach emphasizes the need to adapt international security strategies to a context in which chaos is not accidental, but managed with intent. In this respect, the ability to develop resilient policies, capable of operating under conditions of ambiguity and volatility, becomes a core competence. At the same time, stabilization strategies -

deliberate, smart and sustainable - can be forms of counter-action to the logic of strategically exploited disorder.

It is important to note that strategic chaos, as presented in this article, does not assume the status of a well-established theory, but rather that of an exploratory conceptual framework, meant to complement the analytical tools of political science. The intention is not to replace established paradigms, but to provide an additional lens, adapted to an international reality marked by fragmentation, unpredictability and subversive competition.

In the spirit of the complex thinking proposed by Edgar Morin, who emphasizes that "reality cannot be separated from uncertainty", strategic chaos is the pragmatic expression of a world in which uncertainty is not only inevitable but often cultivated. This perspective can stimulate new lines of inquiry in the analysis of contemporary conflicts and contribute to the development of more nuanced foreign policies capable of recognizing and responding to the logic of deliberate instability.

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