

Disinformation and Counternarratives in International Security

Cognitive Competition

**Edited by Gustavo Díaz Matey
and Pablo Moral**

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in a porcelain system

Gustavo Díaz Matey

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1.1 Introduction: the multiple crises of the liberal international order

The ultra-interdependent and complex international system is going through sensitive and porcelain times (i.e. it is fragile and delicate). These are times of growing uncertainty, lack of hope, and fear of looking to the future when thinking about our reality.¹ Times of social fragmentation and extreme polarization. Moments of growing debt, inflation, cuts, and inequality. Our capacity for movement, action, and response has been reduced in every way, physically and mentally. The voices preaching and the forces promoting the end of the universal ideas of Illustration and casting doubt on the Western liberal order and the institutions that represent it are becoming more and more present than ever.²

In general terms, the liberal international order based on rules, norms, and values was created and developed after the Second World War and is composed of a system of states and based on its sovereignty. H. Bull understands an international order as *a pattern of activity that supports the elementary or primary objectives of the society of states, or international society*. Therefore, these objectives include preserving this system, with state sovereignty as a principle, and limiting violence to protect property.³ We speak, therefore, not only of an open, rules-based international order that is enshrined in institutions such as the United Nations and tools such as multilateralism but also of the economic and trade institutions created in the *Bretton Woods* agreements of 1944 and the *General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade* of 1947.⁴

An order rests on the premise that actors accept the rules in their interactions and resolve their differences within that framework either through the system's legitimacy or through the coercive power it exercises. *The principles of the UN Charter are, by far, greater than the Organization in which they are embodied, and the aims which they are to safeguard are holier than the policies of any single nation or people.*⁵ This model, based on hegemonic stability and structured around the structural power exercised by the United States, has lost some of its strategic usefulness for Washington. In a context of growing multipolarity and transforming the liberal international order, these structures no longer effectively guarantee US primacy, as they did in the immediate post-Cold War period.

In this sense, we cannot lose sight of the fact that global governance is a collective effort to identify, understand, or address global problems that go beyond the capacities of individual states to solve⁶ trying to equalize the different actors in the system by setting aside the law of the strongest. As J. Nye points out: *By governance, we mean the processes and institutions, both formal and informal, that guide and constrain the collective activities of a group.*⁷ In short, the system comprises values, rules, norms, procedures, practices, policies, and organizations through which an entity manages (or pilots or directs) a set of issues perceived as common by its members. Since the end of the Second World War, global governance has been embodied in the complex system of the United Nations, which in turn is based on the idea of the Collective Security system and is closely related to both international peacekeeping and limiting access to nuclear weapons. This system seeks to maintain international peace as the UN Charter codifies the major principles of international relations, from sovereign equality of states to prohibiting the use of force in international relations.

This order has a clear Western sense, and although in the 1990s, authors such as Fukuyama declared the triumph of the so-called liberal democracies, today, this model seems to be questioned, and we are witnessing a growing drift toward a systematic loss of legitimacy on the part of revisionist actors who used the liberal order itself for their development. In this sense, actors such as Russia or China make use of the rules and regulatory structure of the established order and, finding them useful, attack the norms of the system itself, which are based on ideas on legal precepts that express the existence of a normative foundation or a shared understanding of the desired objectives and relevant forms of conduct. At the same time, as long as the United States perceives its hegemonic position to be under threat, its commitment to the liberal international order it once championed becomes increasingly ambivalent. Faced with the rise of rival powers, shifting alliances, and a fragmented global governance landscape, the United States has sometimes challenged or bypassed the institutions and norms it helped to establish. This tension reflects a broader dilemma for Washington: the struggle to maintain global leadership while adapting to an international system that no longer guarantees uncontested dominance. It is precisely the structures of this complex system, its effectiveness, and distribution of adequate power (and thus legitimacy) that are most criticized in this revision of the international order.

Moreover, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the forces advocating this change or rupture do not always come from outside. These ideas are also present in our societies and have specific support from political voices represented in the different national parliaments. In this sense, the drift of the current international situation has meant that other actors, such as the United States, have taken a more pragmatic and nationalistic view. The second Trump administration is greatly accelerating this trend, which already existed as a political approach within the West. For example, the budget for the US State Department has been decreasing. In 2014, the budget reached its highest point, accounting for 0.83% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It declined steadily until 2020, reaching 0.53% with a slight recovery from 2020 to 2024, rising to 0.6% of the GDP.⁸

In the end, this decline of the liberal order would mean a shift toward another system in which multilateralism, democracy, and trust in institutions would no longer be the main elements of the system. Indeed, according to the Democracy Index⁹ and Freedom House, in recent years (due to the 2008 international economic crisis and COVID-19), both the quality and quantity of free and democratic states have declined significantly.¹⁰

The crisis of the liberal international order is complex and has different complementary layers that undermine it. To understand the phenomenon of narratives built around disinformation campaigns, it is essential to consider the trends within the international order that enable and encourage such campaigns. These efforts should be viewed within a broader framework of narrative struggle. Mainly because disinformation campaigns ultimately have clear objectives, as will be seen throughout the different chapters of this volume. They may be political or business (public or private), but these objectives are present in one way or another. In this chapter, we have dissected them from the crisis of the state system, the crisis of the mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes, and the crisis of economic and commercial governance. Ultimately, the struggle for narratives creates different systems of permeable blocks where different audiences feedback and justify each other to give legitimacy to those systems, ultimately equalizing and sustaining them, breaking the trend toward freedom and democracy as the best form of government.

1.1.1 The crisis of the state system

In this section, we will examine how traditional forms of governance are increasingly inadequate in addressing the complexities of a rapidly evolving global landscape. New forces, including international organizations and non-state actors – such as the network of entities collectively referred to as global civil society (comprising NGOs, activist groups, social movements, and international advocacy organizations) – alongside transnational corporations such as the technology monopolies (which will be explored in more detail in the second Section 1.2 of this chapter), are reshaping the global balance of power. These actors, with their often fragmented and diverse interests, challenge state authority and undermine the ability of governments to regulate effectively. Additionally, the growing irrelevance of national borders in addressing transnational issues has further complicated the state's role in global governance.

As these non-state actors gain increasing influence, states face mounting challenges not only from internal fragmentation – such as populism and social unrest – but also from external pressures, with global institutions and norms becoming less effective amid rising nationalism and regional conflicts. In this section, we will focus on the proliferation of interests within the framework of non-state actors and the development of the so-called global civil society.

1.1.1.1 The end of the Cold War and the proliferation of fragmented interests

The point of departure is that today's international order is shaped by nation-states as its leading actors. However, the end of the Cold War gradually changed this

situation. In fact, after the Cold War, the diminished centrality of power among the great superpowers has increased the likelihood of conflicts escalating and various international crises emerging at the regional level. Today, there are more regional actors capable of imposing their interests on specific scenarios. With the end of the bloc struggle, nationalism entered a new phase, leading to the emergence of various long-standing tensions worldwide, resulting in numerous “low-intensity conflicts” that threatened the stability of the international sphere. Low-intensity conflicts today are often prolonged, involving irregular warfare, insurgencies, and ethnic or ideological strife. While they do not escalate into full-scale wars, their impact on local populations is profound. The Balkan wars (Bosnia 1992 and Kosovo 1999) and the Rwandan genocide (1994) in the 1990s serve as examples of this argument.

Nowadays, this type of situation is being replicated, such as the war in Yemen, which is characterized by the complex interaction of multiple internal and external actors, transforming the conflict into a multifaceted struggle. Another example is the situation in the Sahel, where the final months of 2022 and the year 2023 represented a critical juncture in the Sahel’s security architecture, marked notably by the termination of *Operation Barkhane* in November 2022 and the dissolution of the G5 Sahel in 2023. These developments were accompanied by the withdrawal of French military forces, underscoring a broader shift in the region’s security dynamics with the dismantling of key joint security frameworks and the emergence of new external actors seeking to redefine the regional security landscape. The Sahel now finds itself at a critical crossroads, facing the dissolution of long-standing regional security initiatives and the departure of major international forces that once played a central role in maintaining stability.

Despite all this, the struggle for territorial control and geopolitical and political tensions have by no means disappeared, as the invasion of Ukraine reminds us. In January 2022, the United States and Russia met at the Blinken-Lavrov bilateral summit to avoid war. Three years later, in February 2025, Russia and the United States met again to negotiate peace in Ukraine without the European Union’s or NATO’s involvement.

We live in a globalized world based in the services sector, the most dynamic sector in international trade, but with a clear tendency toward regionalization, not so much because of proximity but because of affinity in interpretative frameworks. An affinity that is also based on pragmatism founded on intangible interests. The Trump administration’s relationship with Argentina or El Salvador in the framework of the tariff war to the detriment of traditional partners of the United States, such as Japan or Canada, illustrates this clearly. In this framework, countries prefer to establish bilateral relations where the larger ones have more capacity to negotiate and obtain more advantageous agreements from a nationalist perspective related to relative advantages. China establishes this type of negotiation in its closest regional framework, but this is also reflected in trade agreements with more distant actors such as Greece, Peru, Djibouti, Egypt, and South Africa. Finally, due to the current international reality based on the competition of the major powers, other, more

modest actors tend to adopt pragmatic measures to achieve a better position, moving away from multilateral positions based on absolute gains.

1.1.1.2 The crescent role of the global civil society

The development of information technologies and the growing interconnection of the whole world have exponentially boosted the role of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) who traditionally enhance global cooperation, promote accountability, and often act as intermediaries between governments, civil society, and private sector in creating a kind of global civil society that seeks to bring to the forefront of political debate issues that in themselves do not capture the attention of the major actors or not in the way they should.¹¹ In a certain way, these groups challenge state authority by advocating for specific solutions and policies on international issues, holding governments and corporations accountable, and even, in some cases, promoting alternative forms of governance that transcend national borders. Their influence shapes global policy and fosters cooperation on transnational challenges. Although the first *World Congress of International Associations* was held in Brussels in 1910, with 132 INGOs, the idea of global civil society was developed in the 1990s based on concepts such as globalization and global governance.¹²

Through their efforts, INGOs help to fill governance gaps, especially in regions where state authority is weak or absent, ensuring that global priorities are addressed across borders. These issues are nowadays very diverse, and the interests behind them are increasingly varied. So much so that the Second World Social Forum attracted 68,000 participants from 131 countries.¹³ Although the figure varies according to sources, in 2024, there were an estimated 44,714¹⁴ active international organizations, of which around 534 are considered International Governmental Organizations (IGOs).¹⁵ According to the United Nations, only 6,468 of those nongovernmental organizations had consultative status with Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).¹⁶

In any case, nongovernmental actors within the framework of International INGOs have played an essential role in the international sphere, for example, in the creation of the International Criminal Court, in the improvement of international standards on child exploitation, in the identification and dissemination of numerous environmental problems such as global warming, or in the development of measures to protect endangered species, among many other issues.¹⁷ For example, a notable achievement in this regard was the 1997 treaty banning antipersonnel landmines, the primary outcome of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize that same year.

Today, INGOs play a prominent role in the UN System. Article 71 of the UN Charter gave the ECOSOC the power to “make appropriate arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations concerned with matters within its competence.”¹⁸ Similarly, the combination of public and private initiatives has resulted in several significant achievements, from the rescue of the Abu Simbel temple to the James Webb telescope consortium involving up to 14 states.

1.1.1.3 The relationship between the states and the fragmented interest in the international arena

There are many examples of successful collaboration within the framework of international civil society, business consortia, and private activities. Still, the state has gradually recovered from its former international monopoly position and is adapting to this new reality, as David Hernández Martínez clearly states in his contribution to this volume. State actors are using this idea of complex interdependence and the development of different communities of fragmented interests for two primary purposes: to control audiences and disseminate specific ideas on a given issue and, at the same time, to fragment those audiences to nullify the capacity of the civilian population to respond together. As an example, against the backdrop of the trade war and the imposition of tariffs by the Trump administration, in April 2025, a multitude of accounts on various social networks have developed a coordinated campaign where content creators are exposing the manufacturing systems of the big Western luxury brand accounts. The objective is clear: China is spreading the idea of the success of Chinese development, and at the same time, it is revealing the flaws in the Western luxury brand production system by highlighting the contradictions inherent in Western commerce, which relies on cheap labor and the artificially constructed value of brands.

Social media campaigns that support Chinese developmentalism play a crucial role in the Chinese government's broader strategy to project its image on the global stage and present its development model as a successful paradigm for other nations. These campaigns primarily emphasize China's economic achievements, its significant strides in infrastructure development, and its approach to sustainable growth. Additionally, the official narrative aims to address and counter international criticisms regarding human rights, democracy, and political transparency by positioning China as a leading force in the global fight against poverty and inequality. Through these campaigns, the Chinese government seeks to shape global perceptions of its development trajectory while promoting its model as a viable alternative to Western approaches.

This is not new. In the West, we often see content creators showcasing their success routines, characterized by exaggerated individualism and a clear disconnect from class consciousness and collective achievements. This trend is often set against a backdrop of evangelical tendencies that emphasize personal salvation, individual responsibility, and the power of personal faith. They advocate bringing out the best in oneself to step out of one's comfort zone by breaking away from ideas of class and association. In such an environment, the concept of success is reframed as a purely individualistic pursuit that is increasingly detached from social structures, historical contexts, or collective endeavors. These have multiple ramifications, ranging from economic trends such as cryptocurrency networks and speculation to more philosophical ones based on personal development.

They all have one thing in common: you are solely responsible for your well-being and situation, leaving aside everything that has to do with the system and the relational situation surrounding the individual. We can see a small reflection

of this tendency when, in the NBA, LeBron James broke Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's all-time regular season scoring record on February 7, 2023 – the record had stood for 39 years. The basketball game was paused as cameras flooded the court to celebrate a personal milestone – ironically, in a sport that is fundamentally about the team.¹⁹

Many of these trends have provided feedback and intertwined with each other basically because they have their origin in postmodernist visions that place the individual at the center of a world that is interpreted according to each individual.²⁰ This break with the ideas of enlightenment and the development of the great paradigms has led to a proliferation of parochial interpretations and responses, all of which have been exploited economically. With the ideas of Herbert Marcuse or Theodor Adorno and the development of critical theory, class militancy, centered on collective organization and the transformation of society, gradually gave way to a range of fragmented activism: environmentalism, feminism, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex (LGTBI) rights, or racial struggles, among others. As Michel Clouscard points out, “We are faced with a new left that has embraced the capitalism of seduction, an ideology that promotes hedonism and transgressive consumption as forms of individual liberation.”²¹

In the contemporary international system, information serves as a strategic asset, a point of vulnerability, and a tool of influence. The advent of digital technologies and the expansion of transnational communication networks have led to a proliferation of platforms – often referred to as information highways – that not only facilitate the rapid dissemination of content but also enable competing narratives to emerge and challenge the established truths. This complex informational environment is further characterized by the fragmentation of global interests and the formation of transnational networks aligned around shared ideologies or strategic objectives. Consequently, the role of information in international relations has become increasingly multifaceted, with propaganda functioning as a potent instrument in the pursuit of soft power, disinformation campaigns, and influence operations to impose certain narratives controlled by various state and non-state actors.

States often monitor civil society actors through intelligence agencies, law enforcement, or private companies to discourage dissent or activism and to promote and justify policies, actions, and personalities. By controlling access to public spaces and funding opportunities, the state can also influence which voices are amplified and which are marginalized. At the same time, the state may channel resources and media attention toward organizations that support its agenda, effectively amplifying pro-government voices while marginalizing or silencing opposition. This strategic control of visibility and resources allows the state to shape the public narrative, maintain political dominance, and weaken the potential of civil society to serve as a check on state power. In the end, this creates a climate of fear and self-censorship among civil society organizations, activists, and ordinary citizens, and it is something that happens in all kinds of regimes, both democratic and nondemocratic.

In short, the proliferation of non-state actors spreads interest and thus breaks the unity of action on an issue. A very significant example can be found in using coercive power to settle international disputes, as we shall see below. Then, in the next section, we will analyze the role played by the companies discussed in the following section.

1.1.2 The crisis of the mechanisms for peaceful settlement of disputes

As we have seen in the previous section, while the state remains the predominant actor in international relations, it is no longer the only one sharing the stage with other actors who play their part in a common proscenium. As we will see in the following sections, international organizations, like the United Nations or the World Trade Organization (WTO), set rules that states must adhere to, thus limiting state autonomy in certain areas.

Even when since 1648, the State has been a source of legitimate political authority based on the principle of nonintervention in the internal affairs of a State enshrined in Article 2.7 of the UN Charter. Similarly, Article 4.2 of the Treaty on European Union also clarifies that

[t]he Union shall respect the equality of Member States before the Treaties as well as their national identities, inherent in their fundamental structures, political and constitutional, inclusive of regional and local self-government. It shall respect their essential State functions, including ensuring the territorial integrity of the State, maintaining law and order, and safeguarding national security. In particular, national security remains the sole responsibility of each Member State.²²

Since the end of World War II, international organizations have played a key role in developing a rules-based international order, where violence is banished, and peaceful settlement of disputes is the norm in international relations. In fact, at present, there is already much literature on the importance of international organizations as subjects of public international law. While this idea qualifies the concept of national security, it also complements it with the development of *Collective Security* as a base of international order. At the same time, after the end of the Cold War, some states sought to introduce new elements to this original liberal order by incorporating specific institutional innovations (such as the *International Criminal Court*, 1998 – Rome Statute) and conceptual innovations (such as the *Responsibility to Protect*), which challenged the Westphalian principle of national sovereignty.

Nevertheless, the argument is not a simple one, as today, although entities such as the European Union have an idea of shared security and reinforce the common defense of Member States, these (the states) continue to play a key role in the definition and defense of so-called national security. Even more, one of the fundamental principles of the international system under the complex system of Collective Security is based on legitimacy, where multilateralism is a precise instrument of

global governance institutionalized and exemplified by the United Nations – an institution that spreads ideas around the world according to a system of shared values and norms (as standards of behavior).²³

At the same time, the complexity and multidimensionality of international threats, risks, challenges, and their interrelatedness require integrated and dynamic responses under peaceful dispute settlement. It is not easy to find simple solutions to today's challenges, although the main danger facing humanity since its beginnings is its predatory instinct. The construction of commonly accepted international rules allows us to speak of legitimacy (along with power, the most studied term in international relations) in international society.

These ground rules are based on the principles of the United Nations, specifically Article 2.3 of the UN Charter, *All Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered*. In Article 2.4 of the same Charter, *All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations*.²⁴

However, while at the macro level, the system designed after the Second World War has served to underpin an environment of global peace, at the micro level, the situation is very different, and we are living through times of extreme international violence. Although it was initially thought that the end of the Cold War would bring less need for the use of force and military coercion, things have evolved in a very different way. As noted in the previous section, despite major changes in the international sphere, overall, the post-Cold War situation is one of great violence, much more interdependent and insecure. Where conflicts are common and the question of military intervention remains important.²⁵

Sometimes, the state loses its monopoly of force; in other cases, insurgent organizations confront state institutions. The militarization of the cartels represents a significant transformation of these criminal organizations as they evolve into highly sophisticated and violent entities. These groups have increasingly adopted military-grade weaponry, strategies, and organizational frameworks, enabling them to operate with a level of efficiency and force comparable to formal military institutions.²⁶ Another compelling example is the insurgent organizations challenging state institutions, such as those in the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which faces the persistent presence of numerous armed groups. These groups encompass a wide spectrum, from local militias aiming to safeguard their communities to rebel factions pursuing broader political and economic objectives.²⁷

Although the road traveled has been long, conflicts have also evolved, reaching very high levels of violence. The weight of all the actors involved cannot be clearly identified, has imposed changes, broadened the very concept of security (*Human Security*), and placed emphasis on the security of people and the responsibility to provide it on states and subsidiarity and on international organizations (*Responsibility to Protect* (R2P)). At the same time, mandates have had to

be adjusted toward protecting the deployed force and civilians, and the idea of peacekeeping operations themselves has been blurred to adjust to the course of events.

Today's multidimensional peacekeeping operations are called upon not only to maintain peace and security but also to facilitate the political process, protect civilians, assist in the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants; support the organization of elections, protect and promote human rights and assist in restoring the rule of law.²⁸

Despite all these efforts, the UN has not demonstrated sufficient coercive capacity to cope with abrupt changes in the interventions deployed; examples include the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, and the current situation in Congo or Mali. In general, political haste and the adoption of a narrow approach to end hostilities aimed at coercion through the projection of force rather than addressing the root causes have not worked as expected.²⁹ In this sense, the UN mission in Mali, *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali* (MINUSMA), completed its withdrawal from the country on 31 December 2023. This withdrawal was at the request of Mali's transitional government. In the same way, the largest active UN mission in Africa, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), has a mandate that runs until the end of 2025. Still, the process of gradual withdrawal has been initiated.

Overall, it is clear that, in general terms, the evolution of IGOs has lagged far behind the emergence of collective problems with cross-border dimensions.³⁰ On the other hand, the ability to govern state and non-state behavior in pursuit of perceived common goals has been limited by restrictive treaty mandates, close oversight by Member States, and limited financial and administrative resources.³¹ In addition, the profiling of nongovernmental actors presented in the previous section does not help to maintain a coherent course of action within a single intergovernmental organization, and due to the multiplicity of interests in the international sphere, the coordination of policies is more complex.

Thus, due to the evolution of the international sphere and driven by national interest, other models of regional cooperation emerge in different parts of the world with their own rules and structures that condition the behavior of their participants.³² In short, today, more than ever, "[s]ecurity is determined by actor and is subjective and socially constructed."³³ In fact, one of the main criticisms of global governance is that it is a tool of cooperation based on Western values and, therefore, constitutes a certain imposition of the issues on the international agenda. Thus, there are authors who, for some time now, have pointed out that to unite perceptions and concerns, there is a hegemonic discourse, a battle of ideas to recognize points of insecurity.³⁴ It is precisely from this argument that revisionist actors, state and non-state, are constructing narratives against beliefs based on feelings rather than against ideas based on reason, as discussed throughout this volume.

1.1.3 *Postmodernism and the evolution of capitalism – foundations of fragmented interest*

Nowadays, the concrete issues on the international agenda are mere exemplifications, minor battles that seek to undermine confidence in the system, in values, and deeply held beliefs; in short, in all the values of Illustration. To this end, two trends have paved the way: postmodernism and surveillance capitalism.³⁵ Both are committed to fragmentation and emphasize individual visions with different objectives but similar results. Postmodernism seeks to undermine universal truths, equalizing, relativizing, and emphasizing emancipatory processes;³⁶ capitalism aims to expand the market and uses this division to validate and reinforce particular interests, thus encouraging *à la carte* consumption and creating positive reinforcement in the identification of *I am like you* and from the negative . . . *I am not like you*. By breaking these standards, a sense of unease, a lack of reference points, and emptiness has been created, which is filled with pagan liturgies in prime time and homilies that dictate political correctness and acceptable behavior.

The development of aspirational fantasies promoted by the logic of consumption contributes significantly to individual isolation and the fragmentation of the sense of community. In a society where identity is constructed, to a large extent, through what is acquired, the idea that we deserve to satisfy every desire immediately is imposed, which responds to a strategy aimed at stimulating constant consumption. This model fosters an individualistic perception of personal fulfillment, detached from social ties and collective commitment. As a result, citizenship is progressively replaced by a logic of clientelism in which individuals cease to see themselves as active political subjects and become mere consumers.³⁷ This transformation has profound implications for democratic life, weakening social ties and eroding spaces for common participation.

A clear example of these aspirational fantasies is the idealization of the luxury lifestyle, exotic past, tourism, or interior design promoted in social media and advertising campaigns. These images project a desirable life that, in most cases, is beyond the real reach of much of the population but is presented as attainable if one “works hard enough” or consumes the right things.

Leaving aside the sociological side of this argument to return to international relations, the consequences are devastating for the liberal international order. Interventions such as the one in Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 highlight how different actors do not share the minimum political motivations to achieve real change beyond imposition (military and Western approach). Similarly, the recent fall of Al-Assad in Syria is yet another example of the fragmentation of an international order that only seeks continuity through stability.

1.1.4 *The economic and trade governance crisis*

In July 1944, delegates from 44 countries met in New Hampshire (the United States) in what became known as *the Bretton Woods Conference*. These meetings resulted in the rules for trade relations between the United States, Canada, Western European countries, and Australia and also laid the foundations for the creation

of two international governing institutions that are still in place today: the first is the *International Monetary Fund* (IMF), whose original mission was to ensure exchange rate stability and financial flows and to support economic policies that promote financial stability and monetary cooperation. The second is the *International Bank for Reconstruction and Development* (IBRD), one of the five entities that make up what is now known as the *World Bank Group*, whose initial objective was postwar reconstruction in Europe and which today constitutes an institutional framework for addressing structural development projects around the world.

Similarly, a few years later, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was created in 1947. Although it did not have a constituent treaty, it gradually established itself as a de facto international organization with permanent structures. Its main objective is to promote trade negotiations and establish a dispute settlement system. In fact, from 1948 until 1994, when it was replaced by the WTO following the Marrakesh agreements after the Uruguay Round, the GATT established the rules applicable to a large part of world trade by developing the multilateral trading system. The current multilateral body, which today has 164 members, is responsible for regulating trade globalization and structuring the multilateral trading system, although it lacks the power to generate secondary legislation. Its creation and development run parallel to the history of protectionism and free trade. In this regard, both protectionist measures and the development of preferential agreements greatly influence the use of multilateralism in the international arena.

It is evident that since the end of World War II, trade has grown exponentially. Globalization and the technological revolution helped to relocate production centers and reorient the economy toward the service sector, creating an interconnected global economy while regional trading blocs developed. After the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Soviet bloc, and the development of the European Union and its Single Market, trade has progressively become one of the pillars of international society with the development of multinationals and increasingly complex and interdependent business models (end of the gold standard in the 1970s), resulting in the creation of large capitals (they already existed before, but now new sources of wealth are being created).³⁸

In fact, the development of the “hyper-globalization” of the 1990s means not only the expansion of the free market but also the standardization of rules and procedures.³⁹ Today, after a long period of hyper-globalization, dominated by the fragmentation of world production through long global supply chains, the volume of trade fluctuates according to different products and regions, but it is clear that services are maintained and even increased, so that globalization becomes more nuanced according to changes in the international sphere.⁴⁰

At present, the GATT Appellate Committee, the key mechanism for settling trade disputes of 164 states, is blocked and in the WTO’s own words on this body (December 2023): *the Appellate Body is not in a position to consider appeals because of unfilled vacancies. The term of office of the last active Appellate Body Member expired on 30 November 2020.*⁴¹ In this regard, in order to move forward and due to the developments of nuanced globalization, mainly as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic at its twelfth ministerial conference (MC12), held in

Geneva from 12 to 17 June 2022, the WTO developed a self-exclusion mechanism that could serve to allow some members to opt out when they are unable or unprepared to implement the outcome of an agreement by facilitating the negotiating role of the organization. This is yet another example of *nodal strategies* and the retreat from multilateralism in global terms in favor of a *multilateralism understood as a way to improve its own position*.⁴² In conclusion, as the Elcano Royal Institute in Spain rightly points out, nowadays, countries continue to promote incentives for certain forms of cooperation. Still, they are not willing to sacrifice part of their sovereignty. Multilateralism, although it continues to function, is being instrumentalized to improve one's own position in the international sphere.

In short, multilateralism, as a tool of global governance and a former capacity multiplier for smaller actors, has been adjusting toward nodal positions due to highly competitive environments. The result is that, on the one hand, with the development of protectionist trade policies, geopolitics gain weight, and situations of "loss without gain" are produced by this competition (where both competitors lose).⁴³ In the words of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres: *But at a time when our challenges are more connected than ever, the outcome of a zero-sum game is that everyone gets zero*.⁴⁴ On the other hand, this situation leads different actors to seek the best possible outcome in a lose-lose situation. They thus seek partial alliances and join projects that, in principle, provide them with a more satisfactory result or strengthen their positions. Spain's change of position on the Sahara is a clear example of this shift toward nodal positions. Another example can be found in the situation that Israel is undertaking after the attacks of 7 October 2023 and the position of the rest of the actors in the international sphere.

At the same time, from a governance perspective, all these rules and organizations are being questioned on the grounds that they were created around a series of economic and geopolitical arrangements from the West and are, therefore, a reflection of its structural power at that time. Today, emerging economies such as China or India have already far surpassed the size of some of the G7 economies. China, the world's largest trading economy and the world's largest exporter, is experiencing a shift in its export processes, reducing the volume of trade with the United States, the European Union, and Japan in favor of developing countries.⁴⁵ In this same vein, at the end of 2024, China announced that it would remove tariffs for the most underdeveloped states and impose sanctions on Western companies. *China now produces about a third of the world's manufactured goods, according to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. That is more than the United States, Japan, Germany, South Korea, and Britain combined*.⁴⁶

In the context of the Trump administration's use of tariffs as a trade renegotiation measure in April 2025, one of the first steps China has taken in this regard has been to meet with Japan and South Korea to improve trade relations. *The ministers agreed to speed up negotiations toward a free trade agreement (FTA) between the three countries, which have not been able to deliver any tangible results since the negotiations started in 2012*.⁴⁷

Specifically, China, which has been integrating into all traditional structures and currently holds considerable influence in them,⁴⁸ is, at the same time, promoting the

development of “alternative” structures such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank, popularly known as the BRICS Bank. These criticisms and emancipatory visions resonate with public opinion, as despite efforts and all resources employed, the gap between the world’s poorest and richest countries is widening, and a “historical regression” is occurring in the most vulnerable countries. In fact, *the difference in per capita income growth between the poorest and richest countries has widened in the last five years.*⁴⁹ News such as Forbes reported that there were more billionaires than ever in 2024 (up to 2781)⁵⁰ serves as an argument for positions against the utility of traditional institutions and the development of the structural power they underpin. Through the AIIB and other initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, China is promoting an alternative development model that challenges traditional Western-dominated frameworks. This model is characterized by less political conditionality, making it particularly attractive to states with weak institutional structures or authoritarian regimes, which have historically been subject to demands for democratic or economic reforms by Western organizations.

In this first part, we have analyzed the different crises that make up the fracture of the liberal international order. We have seen how the state, as the actor that serves as the basis of the system, is being questioned. In the same vein, so are the international organizations that have been created to deal with the various common problems in the international sphere, but, above all, the systems for the peaceful settlement of disputes. At the same time, we have also seen how international interests have grown along with the number of actors involved. All of these are framed in the expansion of postmodernist ideas and the development of capitalism. We need to go a little deeper on this point as the development of international economic players, exemplified by the large technological companies, has had a significant impact on the international sphere.

1.2 The rise of technological monopolies and their political influence

As we have analyzed in the previous section, the international system based on the institutions built by states after World War II is in crisis. In this sense, we have already introduced how the proliferation of international non-state actors, such as global civil society or international organizations, has, to some extent, undermined the traditional position of the state as the sole actor in international relations. Today, the state competes with multiple fragmented interests in the international sphere, and due to the very evolution of the international system, the traditional role of the state has been challenged.

In parallel, the globalizing process has gradually eroded international barriers, breaking down traditional centers of power and creating a homogenizing tendency all over the world. As pointed out in a recent article in the Spanish newspaper *El País*,

Globalization has served, above all, to make life easier. In some parts of the world, such as rural China or India, the lives of hundreds of millions

of people have been much better because, quite simply, they were able to escape poverty. In the West, globalization brought not only a brutal decline in our industrial activity but above all low prices – from cheap clothes to countless plastic knick-knacks – cheap labor, and the taken-for-granted habit of having an international and almost infinite supply of things to choose from.⁵¹

But at the same time, it is this process that has also fueled international rivalries of competition between the different powers and fostered de-globalizing tendencies based on nationalist sentiments.⁵²

It is in this particular context that technological monopolies emerge with force. The race for monopolization of technological innovations concentrated a large part of the power in small fiefdoms dominated by new lords. According to *Fortune* magazine, companies such as Walmart (the United States), Amazon (the United States), State Grid (China), China National Petroleum (China), Sinopec (China), Saudi Aramco (Saudi Arabia), and Apple (the United States) have incomes higher than a large part of the GDPs of the world's countries.⁵³ It is clear, therefore, that these types of actors play a vital role in international relations that largely go unnoticed. At the same time, four of the top five most expensive companies have technology monopolies. The power of technology companies and their impact on the political arena are exemplified in the nomination of Elon Musk, owner of Tesla and X, into Donald Trump's cabinet or in the purchase of *The Washington Post* by Amazon owner Jeff Bezos.⁵⁴ Similarly, the technological giant Meta, formerly Facebook, led by its creator Mark Zuckerberg, has been involved in various scandals concerning influencing elections.

Large technology companies could influence the information users consume by concentrating vast resources and data. This power can be used for commercial, political, or ideological purposes. For example, manipulating algorithms to favor certain content or collecting personal data without proper consent are practices that can contribute to disinformation and cognitive warfare. However, it is important to note that these actions are strategic decisions made by companies, not inevitable consequences of technology.

Much of this new power emanates from the information business, which has affected every aspect of our lives, as we analyze in the following section. Moreover, technological giants' political influence and control over information flow can exacerbate social polarization and undermine democratic processes by shaping public opinion, manipulating narratives, and suppressing dissenting voices. Based on the development of capitalism itself and the impact of postmodernist ideas on society that we have already pointed out, their ability to curate and prioritize content through algorithms gives them an outsized role in determining what people see, leading to echo chambers that deepen societal divides. In this sense, Artificial Intelligence (AI) plays a significant role in enhancing the power of technological giants, especially in terms of political influence and information control, through its ability to analyze, curate, and manipulate vast amounts of data.

1.2.1 *Cognitive warfare in the era of AI*

The birth of the web in 1989 was a revolution in the way we relate to each other, as well as in the development of the data business.⁵⁵ The technological revolution has progressively changed the relationship between humans and information. It has transformed how we access and share information, altering many relationships between human beings. More recently, the expansion of social media and the widespread availability of digital tools enabling the creation and distribution of content to every corner of the world have had a clear impact on public opinion, which increasingly uses these new channels for all aspects of our lives. AI is a step further in this revolution.⁵⁶ AI is often said to be like the new electricity because we are no longer talking about faster and more secure communications, but about learning, deciding, and predicting to improve efficiency and competitiveness through “understanding.”⁵⁷

AI has emerged as a new competitive axis in which the United States and China have become leaders since 2017, mainly due to their strong promotion of AI investments: between them, they account for 63% of all AI investments.⁵⁸ The European Union (EU) joined this geopolitical scenario somewhat later with 9% of the investment and with a distinctive approach that prioritizes the guarantee of rights and the defense of common principles over selfish and anarchic market-centered action. In a context favored by economic benefits, the EU seems to understand that data knows no borders and that AI regulation, if not cautious, would contradict the fundamental and digital rights on which its very existence rests.⁵⁹

Cognitive warfare involves using techniques to influence people’s perceptions and behaviors. Although digital technologies facilitate the implementation of these techniques, cognitive warfare is a deliberate strategy used by various actors, including governments, organizations, and companies. Its goal is to shape opinions and behaviors to achieve specific ends such as political destabilization or the promotion of ideological agendas. Disinformation and cognitive warfare are not inevitable consequences of technological advancement but rather the results of strategic decisions made by actors with specific interests. In this sense, the main conclusion is clear: it is not about a technological race; it is about the type of social system we want to build, with a perspective that includes sociological, ethical, political, environmental, and economic aspects and that involves all sectors of society as a whole. It is about transitioning from programming passive automated tools to replicating human cognitive functions in order to learn and solve problems.⁶⁰

In the words of José Miguel Calvillo,

The evolution of AI is reshaping interactions and relationships between nations, businesses, and individuals, presenting far-reaching risks and benefits for global security. This new phase of the technological revolution introduces a broad spectrum of tools to monitor, defend against, and address threats that were previously difficult to identify, but, at the same time, new challenges emerge that are complex to address with traditional approaches.⁶¹

The immediacy and networked nature of digital interactions, reinforced by attention-seeking algorithms designed to exploit cognitive and motivational biases, have transformed how information is consumed and spread.

1.2.1.1 Technology and the economic and political interest

Technology and social media have contributed to connecting people worldwide, along with their interests and core beliefs, creating and linking groups with similar ideas and interests across the globe.⁶² Just a few years ago, it was more challenging to be in contact with people who thought like you. Now, thanks to social media, even the most disparate interests are amplified. This development has two clear objectives. The first is commercial, as “personalized” micro-marketing campaigns are developed by identifying groups with common interests. Due to lax regulations, we encounter targeted campaigns and hidden marketing within false commercial initiatives. There is a process of social fracturing linked to the development of capitalism, which has utilized postmodernism and the segmentation of interests. In a second sense, political parties, companies, and governments have found the ability to develop ideas that favor various trends and make people believe that certain brands and beliefs are correct, positive, or good. It is not necessary for everyone to “buy” these narratives; it suffices for a certain number of people to internalize them, allowing them to spread like wildfire. All this ends up with a process of social fracturing because, with different motivations, state and non-state actors nowadays engage in disinformation campaigns. Disinformation campaigns enhance the feelings of belonging and reaffirm one’s own positions while despising others; this leads to polarization.

Our societies are very polarized, and polarization and disinformation campaigns are two issues that feed each other by building narratives, myths, and justifications to support certain ideas and despise those of others who are not like us. Rising societal polarization fosters dichotomic worldviews, increasing the appeal of simplistic yet compelling narratives that reinforce group identities while deepening divisions. In many instances, propaganda does not aim to alter deeply held beliefs but rather to reinforce them. It draws upon the audience’s preexisting interpretive frameworks, amplifying latent perceptions, fears, or aspirations and presenting them with a heightened sense of legitimacy or urgency. In this sense, propaganda functions less as a tool for ideological transformation and more as a catalyst that intensifies the existing convictions.⁶³

As we have seen in the first part of this chapter, in a world where there is an evident lack of new ideas and references and where many of the structures created after World War II are considered ineffective in responding to current realities, there is a new battlefield for narratives in which different actors are not seeking only to conquer territory. Beliefs, models of society, and, ultimately, explanations of reality are at stake.

Narratives function as cognitive shortcuts for interpreting reality, offering a metaheuristic framework for determining what constitutes truth. Narratives are considered a uniquely persuasive mode of communication that enables individuals

to connect seemingly unrelated events and formulate expectations about actors and their behavior.⁶⁴ At the same time, as Pablo Moral demonstrates in this volume, emotions play a significant role in how individuals process information, particularly when confronted with complex or contentious topics. Individuals are drawn to information that aligns with their emotional state.⁶⁵ In this sense, narratives are particularly compelling in exploiting emotions and biases because they evoke emotional responses, foster a sense of belonging, and create collective meanings while remaining flexible enough to adapt to the individual's perceived reality.⁶⁶

1.2.1.2 Disinformation campaigns in cognitive warfare: the war of narratives

The cognitive operating scope can be defined as a nonphysical space that aims to influence *people's beliefs, emotions, and motives, affecting their perceptions, as individuals or in groups, with the intention of modifying their decisions and, consequently, their behaviors.*⁶⁷ Cognitive warfare is, therefore, an emerging concept in the field of security and defense, focused on the manipulation of perception and thought at the individual and/or group levels. Cognitive warfare, understood as “the weaponization of public opinion, by an external entity, for the purpose of influencing public and government policy and destabilizing public institutions,”⁶⁸ constitutes the extension of the battlefield to the human mind, using disinformation as one of its essential instruments. Cognitive warfare means winning the minds and hearts of the population while creating an explanation of the past that justifies the present and allows a future in which power is not imposed on the majority by force of arms but by their own acceptance and resignation.

In the context of cognitive warfare, as we will see through this volume, the primary tool employed is disinformation campaigns. As discussed throughout the book, these activities have expanded significantly due to advancements in technology and the rise of social media⁶⁹ which allow audience segmentation, orienting the target audience of the different marketing and influencer campaigns. Campaigns are specifically designed to reach specific target populations and their sociological characteristics. In a broad sense, we are talking about active measures to destabilize, with the goal of causing different groups of citizens to question the legitimacy of institutions, forms of organizing the public sphere, and even the system as a whole. Disinformation spreads through various online channels, contributing to societal polarization. People isolate themselves from information that does not fit with what they want to hear and end up creating nodes that replicate false or manipulated information.

In a restricted sense, disinformation is not new; it has always existed. Humans have long used false or incorrect information to manipulate or intensify controversies for political, military, or commercial purposes. In fact, disinformation has emerged as one of the most complex challenges in 21st-century international relations, defined as the intentional spread of false or misleading information aimed at manipulating the public perception of specific events or actors.⁷⁰ As stated correctly throughout the book, unlike unintentional misinformation, disinformation

is deliberately crafted for specific geopolitical, military, or diplomatic objectives, often serving as propaganda or psychological warfare.

The central objective of disinformation operations is to destabilize and demoralize. These actions aim to erode social cohesion; discredit the legitimacy of institutional actors; and generate emotional states such as apathy, fear, or hopelessness, ultimately undermining the values of perseverance and responsibility within the target population. All messages are designed to spread a particular idea, amplify content, exaggerate, and even create hoaxes to polarize, confuse, or manipulate audiences. Commonly used methods include trolls, bots, and high-visibility digital actors such as influencers, opinion leaders, alternative media, or pseudo-media. The underlying objective is progressive delegitimizing democratic institutions and eroding the culture of effort. This occurs through disseminating campaigns that generate narratives to question the legitimacy of electoral processes, fostering distrust in the judiciary, and undermining the media's credibility.

First, these campaigns seek to sow doubt about the integrity of electoral processes by suggesting the existence of fraud, manipulation, or irregularities – even in the absence of verifiable evidence. This tactic weakens the public perception that political power derives from the people's will and fosters civic disengagement from democratic mechanisms of representation. Second, they promote the notion that judicial systems are politicized, ineffective, or biased to undermine their role as guarantors of the rule of law. Confidence in the legal system erodes by casting doubt on the impartiality of the courts or the legitimacy of their decisions, weakening the state's ability to exercise authority legitimately. Finally, the media's credibility is under constant attack, particularly through labeling content as “fake news” or accusations that the media functions as a propaganda tool for specific political or economic interests. This contributes to structural disinformation, where citizens can no longer distinguish between reliable sources, thereby increasing their vulnerability to manipulated narratives.

Taken together, these actions create a climate of structural distrust that weakens the democratic system's fundamental pillars, erodes confidence in collective effort and cooperation, and paves the way for the rise of authoritarian or populist discourse.

One of the key ideas also analyzed in the book is that cognitive warfare implications for democratic states are profound, as they blur the lines of conventional warfare. Its operations are often covert, deniable, and challenging to trace. Furthermore, its effects are cumulative, slowly eroding the legitimacy of political institutions and the cohesion of societies. Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) threats arise when

[f]oreign actors, who engage in intentional, strategic and coordinated attempts to manipulate facts, to confuse, sow division, fear, and hatred. FIMI is closely connected to both hybrid threats and cyber threats and has become a crucial component of modern-day warfare.⁷¹

As Katrina Kurtelius Calderón et al. point out in this volume, FIMI operations exploit the cognitive and behavioral predispositions of target audiences to achieve their goals.

Once again, technology alone does not determine these phenomena; it is the actors' intentions and actions that shape their impact on society. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a critical and reflective approach that considers both technological capabilities and the social, political, and economic contexts in which they develop. In that sense, innovations in AI, audiovisual manipulation, and deepfakes have transformed how disinformation is generated and spread, making campaigns more sophisticated, personalized, and challenging to detect.⁷² It is essential to ascertain whether there is a specific correlation between internet penetration and the capacity of narratives to disseminate information to target audiences.⁷³

Within this framework, various actors (both state and non-state) have distorted the concept of public diplomacy to the point of turning it into genuine campaigns to support or destroy reputations in what are known as personalized digital journalism campaigns, which are capable of elevating personalities or destroying the reputation of a person, an electoral candidate, or a specific policy.⁷⁴

The emergence of new interconnected digital ecosystems has given rise to a flood of slogans, messages, and narratives that, in some cases, respond to real events and, in others, are presented in a distorted, exaggerated, or even completely fabricated manner.⁷⁵ Both companies and governments are fully aware of the existence of disinformation and influence campaigns, and there is even a price tag for the cost of "likes."⁷⁶ In this context, reputation systems (within the framework of counterintelligence) are also increasingly developed to measure the impact of such campaigns, act accordingly, and even prosecute such actions. In this context, so-called "reputation genetics" is becoming increasingly important, conceived as a mechanism to counteract the coordinated and false behavior of trolls, bots, local experts, influencers, and sock puppets.

Destabilization by division is an example of the effects of polarization on the population. Over time, disinformation campaigns have become increasingly sophisticated in camouflaging their origins by outsourcing posting operations to local "franchised" influencers. The proliferation of new educational, economic, cultural, religious, and political leaders capable of generating highly active fan communities is another threat as a weapon of cognitive warfare against institutions. In this sense, microtargeting is a key advancement in information warfare because it tailors disinformation to specific audiences through personal data and online behavior.⁷⁷

As an example, during the months of the start of the war in Ukraine, between February and August 2022, the Spanish army located 179 sources of arguments, statements, and hoaxes in the framework of the Kremlin's well-known "active measures," the usual strategic campaigns of external influence deployed by Russia throughout the West. According to the Spanish military research, this content is aligned with 18 Russian narratives, which are distributed through 4 "pillars" of this ecosystem, broadcasting up to 8,000 messages by different media in the 6 months studied.⁷⁸

Since the 2022 invasion, Russian disinformation campaigns have utilized AI and machine learning to identify social media users' opinions, directing narratives that resonate with those specific groups.⁷⁹ This personalization enables messages to align with users' preexisting beliefs, effectively casting doubt on the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government and Western involvement in the conflict.⁸⁰ As an example, the Global Engagement Center (2024) highlights that Russian disinformation campaigns have exploited political fatigue and economic discontent in Western democracies, promoting conspiracy theories about the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government.⁸¹ In a similar manner, the Romanian Constitutional Court had annulled the results following the discovery of a network of 25,000 TikTok accounts and Telegram groups coordinated by Russia to destabilize the Romanian regime through the spreading of false content. As we have already pointed out in this introduction, and as we will see throughout the book these campaigns are not intended to change the opinion of the entire population. They are enough for a small group to internalize them and thus become a loudspeaker. In most cases, the objective is to call into question the whole belief system. When talking about the complexities of information warfare, we need to keep in mind that Russia is trying to undermine the confidence of Western citizens in the democratic system and the institutions that have taken so much effort to build. China, for its part, is directing its efforts against the culture of effort and work capacity developed by the West and, above all, by the United States after the Second World War.⁸² It is also important to acknowledge that other states and non-state actors with different motivations engage in disinformation campaigns; this provides us with a more comprehensive picture.

Threats to the liberal international order created and developed after the Second World War also come from the actors within the system themselves. In this sense, President Biden's farewell speech on 16 January 2025 announced that *Today, an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms, and a fair shot for everyone to get ahead.*⁸³ The Trump administration's review of trade agreements from a unilateral point of view based on tariff pressures, the dismissal of the National Security Agency Director, Timothy Haugh, accused of disloyalty, and the reduction of the State Department's budget point in this direction.

Similarly, in June 2025, the Trump administration disinvited Republican Senator Rand Paul from the traditional White House picnic, marking an unprecedented move in the event's history. Senator Paul, a vocal critic of Trump's tariff policies and government spending, is the first Republican senator to be excluded due to political disagreements with a president from his own party. The decision not only highlights internal tensions within the Republican Party during Trump's presidency but also shows how political polarization extended even into ceremonial events. This type of action serves as a warning to others who might openly criticize Trump. It reflects a broader pattern of sidelining dissenting voices, something we've seen before, notably with Elon Musk's departure from government advisory roles during the Trump administration. These moves send a strong message: criticism comes with consequences, even from influential or high-profile allies.

In the end, polarization and disinformation campaigns feed each other by building narratives, myths, and justifications to support certain ideas and despise those of others who are “not like us.” As these narratives spread, they deepen divides, reinforcing biased viewpoints and making it harder for individuals to empathize with those who hold different beliefs. This situation divides societies and erodes trust between nations, making it more challenging to form unified, cooperative strategies on global issues. As countries become more entrenched in their nationalistic or ideological positions, the ability to effectively collaborate on shared challenges – like climate change, security threats, or pandemics – diminishes, leading to fragmented and less effective international responses.

1.3 Conclusion

In this introductory chapter, we have highlighted the main crises currently faced by actors and institutions of the liberal international order, and how these crises are rooted in the development of technology and disinformation campaigns that fall within the framework of so-called cognitive warfare. This theme revolves around the book the reader is holding.

To conclude, it is necessary to outline the three trends defined by distinct blocs on which the current international order pivots. Despite the many voices on this matter, it is not clear that we are heading toward a new Cold War. China is not the Soviet Union, and the world is no longer the one of the Cold War. However, it does seem clear that we are facing a new situation characterized by permeable blocs: (broadly speaking) surveillance capitalism versus class consciousness (through segmentation) by the United States, campaigns against democratic institutions by Russia, and actions against individual capacity by China. We do not know precisely how all of this will end. Still, it does seem clear that in this *Fourth Industrial Revolution*, there is a trend toward monopolies (Google as a search engine, Facebook in social media, and Amazon in e-commerce), which makes it seem that we are heading toward a feudal lord’s system. This new iteration of “feudal lords” is not bound by land ownership alone but involves the control of capital, technology, and vast networks of influence that extend beyond traditional governmental structures to the detriment of democratic systems.⁸⁴ Within this framework, and in very general terms, it is the vision of a society posed by the West, the United States (a significant part that does not represent the West values), China, and Russia, and the actions these blocs undertake to promote their beliefs.⁸⁵ Ultimately, citizens must critically assess their position within the sociopolitical landscape and reflect on the kind of society they aspire to leave for future generations. Understanding this is essential for informed participation and the preservation of democratic values.

In short, disinformation as a weapon aims to guide emotions and to create doubts that make citizens distrust truthful sources and spread false ideas and even conspiracy theories supporting narratives against the Western system. Suppose we discuss practical tools to safeguard societies. In that case, we need to adopt long-term thinking because the main problem is that future generations, our young

people, have been born and raised in this environment, and these disinformation trends have a significant impact on a population with an increasingly less solid education, being laxer in concepts, and with an approach more in know-how and market-oriented; leaving young people without solid related knowledge and without a clear idea of the theoretical frameworks underpinning each of the answers given to different questions.

In the end, defense in information warfare requires not only technological solutions but also a whole-of-society approach, with long-term thinking and the impact on future generations leveraging information and media literacy, regulatory frameworks, and international cooperation to mitigate its effects.⁸⁶ By understanding the unique characteristics and intents behind each type of information misuse, policymakers and security experts can better anticipate and mitigate the threats posed by foreign actors to democracies in political, socioeconomic, fundamental rights, participation, and freedom of expression areas.

But states are not the only ones interested in misinformation. As Pablo Moral points out in his chapter,

Additionally, societies must develop a greater awareness of how contemporary information environments operate, including the commercial incentives that drive clickbait and sensationalism. Audiences should be educated on common patterns of digital misinformation and raise awareness of their own psychological biases that make them susceptible to manipulation. However, this may be a difficult task, as precisely because of these biases individuals may resist engaging in self-critical reflection.

In conclusion, the point about expanding on specific educational or policy approaches could help build resilience against disinformation.

International organizations also play a crucial role in the fight against disinformation campaigns. The United Nations has launched several initiatives to raise awareness of the dangers of disinformation and foster cooperation among its Member States.⁸⁷ In addition, in response to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU has strengthened its *Code of Practice on Disinformation*, obliging technology platforms and social networks to comply with stricter standards regarding identifying and removing disinformation content. On the same path, NATO has integrated the fight against disinformation into its collective defense policies. On the other hand, collaboration with private actors, especially digital platforms, is an indispensable element in the fight against disinformation. Companies like Google and Meta (formerly Facebook) have become increasingly important in identifying and removing disinformation content.

To sum up, disinformation directly threatens global governance by undermining trust in multilateral institutions. This also complicates multilateral cooperation by fostering distrust among states, hampering coordinated responses to common threats, and destabilizing international alliances in a world where information and disinformation flow at unprecedented speed. Global information resilience has become a key priority for states, international organizations, and private actors.

Unifying messages and clear and consistent communication by authorities are essential to avoid confusion and minimize the impact of disinformation.

In this sense, the first step is good interstate cooperation, which is one of the pillars of the fight against disinformation launched by other narratives. In fact, coherent and well-articulated narratives can effectively counter disinformation campaigns. Similarly, cooperation between the State, civil society, and independent media is crucial to building a network of information resilience. However, the main problem with all this is that there is no clear and defined idea about the type of society we want to build. Without unity of criteria, we are at the mercy of the criteria of others.

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