Policy Paper: The Cost of Unpredictability

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Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited Bucha, where he talked to local residents and journalists. More: President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited the city of Bucha in the Kyiv region, where mass killings of civilians took place during the occupation by Russian troops. The Head of State visited the humanitarian aid center and talked to local residents. Bucha Mayor Anatoliy Fedoruk told the President about the humanitarian situation in the city, the progress of the search for the bodies of the dead, the assessment of the damage caused by the occupiers to private and communal property, and the pace of reconstruction of the city. Volodymyr Zelenskyy awarded Anatoliy Fedoruk with the Order of Courage of the III Degree. The Head of State also spoke with international and Ukrainian journalists who came to Bucha to document Russia's war crimes. "It is very important for us that journalists are here. We want you to show the world what was happening here, what the Russian military was doing, what the Russian Federation was doing in peaceful Ukraine," the President said, addressing the media. As Volodymyr Zelenskyy noted, what the Russian occupiers did to this modern town is genocide. "These are war crimes and they will be recognized by the world as genocide. We are aware of thousands of people killed and tortured, with their limbs cut off. Raped women, murdered children. I believe this is genocide," the President said. In addition, the President watched the road with destroyed equipment of the Russian army, as well as the destroyed bridge across the Irpin River on the M-06 Kyiv – Chop highway. The President noted that part of the bridge over the Irpin River will be repaired and opened in a few months. Preparations for the construction of a temporary crossing have now begun. It will be opened in about two weeks, said Minister of Infrastructure Oleksandr Kubrakov. According to him, full-fledged movement of one passage of the bridge can be started in two months, both passages – in three or four months. Volodymyr Zelenskyy also visited the destroyed bridge over the Irpin River on the R-30 highway. It will take ten days to build a temporary crossing here, and a full-fledged repair will take two to three months. Original public domain image from Flickr

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Europe, whole world

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strategic positioning within an increasingly uncertain international environment.

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We live in an era of intensified great-power rivalry, in which major powers possessing both hard and soft power shape the behaviour of other actors in the international system. Their actions increasingly send shockwaves across the global community, generating destabilising signals that suggest the rules-based order can no longer be reliably upheld. This dynamic operates through a credibility mechanism: when major powers behave inconsistently, their signals become less reliable, increasing uncertainty about future actions. As a result, the credibility of commitments is undermined, trust between states erodes, and incentives for cooperation weaken. At the same time, such behaviour creates strategic opportunities for other major powers to position themselves as credible alternatives to norm-breaking actors.

In this context, great power competition is not only material but also reputational. States seek to present themselves as more stable, predictable, and legitimate actors in order to gain influence within the international system. However, the global system lacks a central authority capable of consistently punishing violators and rewarding compliance. The absence of a central authority above states in international relations is traditionally understood as anarchy in the international system. This idea was first proposed by Kenneth Waltz, who defines anarchy as the absence of a centralised authority or hierarchical governing body capable of regulating the behaviour of sovereign states (Waltz, 1979). Thus, states' behaviour is not formally constrained.

In periods of heightened rivalry, this absence becomes more visible, amplifying the effects of unpredictability and accelerating the erosion of shared norms. Consequently, the international order is gradually transforming from one based on relative stability and predictability into one characterised by uncertainty and strategic competition. Articles featured in this report suggest that a primary driver of shifts in the global order is the unpredictable and rule-breaking foreign policy behaviour of the United States. These actions serve as a catalyst for responses from other actors in the international community, which vary widely from deploying hybrid warfare tactics and increasing military capabilities to adopting less viable, yet still strategic, positions.

Recent U.S. foreign policy under the Trump administration illustrates this shift. Rather than being inherently irrational, it can be characterised by increased unpredictability and inconsistent signalling, which complicates other actors' ability to interpret intentions and anticipate future behaviour. In cases such as Venezuela, Greenland, and Iran, U.S. actions appeared difficult to reconcile within a coherent strategic framework. This ambiguity weakens the reliability of U.S. commitments and encourages other actors to adjust their strategies accordingly. At a broader level, great power rivalry

is driven by the pursuit of influence, resources, and legitimacy, as states compete to shape both material outcomes and global perceptions.

Delfina Ertanowska's article argues that Russia, for instance, relies heavily on instruments of information warfare, including propaganda and disinformation, alongside conventional military tools. It operates simultaneously in physical and informational domains, strategically amplifying narratives that serve its interests. These narratives are often aimed at delegitimising the United States as a rule-breaking actor and questioning the legitimacy of Western dominance. This strategy exploits informational asymmetries and weakens the normative authority of the rules-based order by reinforcing perceptions of inconsistency and hypocrisy. Its effectiveness is amplified by the relative weakness of current efforts to counter disinformation.

Diogo Albuquerque Nascimento's article argues that China, by contrast, adopts a more restrained and long-term approach. It seeks to present itself as a reliable and law-abiding alternative to U.S. leadership, emphasising principles such as non-interference and diplomatic restraint. By positioning itself as a global stabiliser and advocate of peaceful cooperation, China attempts to fill the credibility gap created by U.S. unpredictability and expand its strategic influence. This approach allows China to gradually reshape perceptions of leadership and legitimacy within the international system without resorting to overt confrontation.

Amid increasing great-power rivalry, small states occupy a particularly precarious position. As rule-takers rather than rule-makers, they are structurally constrained in their foreign policy choices and are more vulnerable to shifts in the global order. However, they are not entirely powerless. Under conditions of uncertainty, smaller states often adopt hedging strategies, seeking to minimise risk by avoiding overdependence on a single partner while maintaining flexibility. Rather than abandoning existing alliances, they pursue strategic autonomy through diversification of partnerships. As Lauren McHugh argues in the case of Ireland, smaller states can still exercise influence through relational, institutional, and normative channels, even within asymmetric power structures.

An article by Sophie Lohosha and Pedro Lima suggests that the European Union provides a clear example of this adaptive behaviour. While it continues to rely on transatlantic partnerships, particularly through NATO, abandoning these alliances would be strategically irrational. Instead, the EU has sought to diversify its external relations, for instance through trade agreements with partners such as India and Mercosur. This diversification reduces strategic vulnerability by spreading risk across multiple partnerships while maintaining core security guarantees. In response to U.S. unpredictability, the EU has thus pursued a strategy of limited strategic autonomy across defence, energy, technological, and industrial domains, without fully disengaging from existing alliances.

Taken together, these developments indicate that the transformation of the global order is not driven solely by shifts in material power, but also

by changing perceptions of credibility and reliability among key actors. Credible commitments remain central to international relations because they reassure allies and provide predictability regarding future behaviour. When credibility erodes, uncertainty increases, and states are compelled to adapt their strategies accordingly (Lohosha, Lima).

The central policy problem emerging from this dynamic is that growing unpredictability among major powers forces states to reconsider their strategic positioning within an increasingly uncertain international environment. Traditional reliance on stable alliances is no longer sufficient on its own. Instead, states are likely to combine alliance commitments with flexible, multi-vector strategies that enhance resilience and reduce vulnerability. As the international system continues to evolve, strategic autonomy and adaptive capacity will become essential components of state behaviour in navigating an increasingly complex and contested global order.

Based on these findings, policymakers should place strong emphasis on prevention at both the international and domestic levels. Prevention should focus on protecting the core values of the rules-based order from erosion, as well as on educating citizens to think critically in an age of intensified hybrid warfare.

Due to the absence of a central authority in the international system, states must rely on self-help. Policymakers should therefore adopt a hedging strategy by diversifying sector-specific partnerships in critical domains such as energy security, supply chains, and digital infrastructure, as heavy dependence on a single actor in these areas may be harmful in the long term.

Moreover, to ensure strategic survival in a changing global order, states should remain open to cooperation with a wide range of actors. The rise of multipolarity creates new opportunities for such diversification. To support this process, policymakers should increase engagement with other actors in order to build closer diplomatic ties.

At the same time, states must remain committed to the core values of the international liberal order (ILO). It is important to remain anchored in shared principles, such as international law, and to be vocal in defending these norms. Policymakers should adopt a more proactive stance in defending the rules of the ILO. In a time of increasing norm erosion, upholding these principles should be a key priority. Even if major powers act in ways that violate these norms, the international community should not follow their example. Key actors should use all available channels to communicate and highlight violations of the ILO and demonstrate how such actions affect both international and domestic stability.

Another important task for policymakers is to educate citizens on how to recognise false or misleading information in the online environment. We live in an era in which states actively deploy hybrid warfare tactics to promote strategic narratives, undermine credibility, and mobilise public opinion. Moreover, disinformation weakens the core values of the interna-

tional rules-based order, contributing to its gradual erosion. Therefore, it is in governments' interest not only to counter disinformation, but also to provide citizens with credible knowledge about the fundamental principles of the rules-based order and instances of their violation. When citizens develop the ability to filter disinformation and understand how the international liberal order functions, they gain significant resilience against attempts to manipulate public opinion. Change often begins from the bottom, as collective action by informed citizens can have substantial influence.

Overall, states should uphold the fundamental values of the international liberal order. At the same time, they must remain adaptive in order to survive in increasingly turbulent conditions. This includes maintaining close relationships with other actors and strategically diversifying partnerships. However, when the core principles of the international liberal order are contested, states should prioritise their protection. The ultimate goal should be the preservation and revitalisation of the international liberal order.

Reference List

Articles in the report
Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. McGraw-Hill

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