Decline or Disruption?

The West and the Transformation of the International Order

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PROJECT REPORT
November 2025

Cover image credit: freepik.com

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Opening Remarks

Stefano Ruzza *opened the symposium 'Declining Disruption: The West and the Transformation of the International Order' with thanks to the institutions and colleagues who made it possible, including LSE IDEAS, the University of Turin, T.wai, and the late Professor Christopher Coker – whose vision inspired the series in 2019. The symposium's debates have already shaped published work, showing their value beyond the event itself.* **Chris Alden** *followed, echoing thanks and stressing the informal, idea-incubating spirit of these symposia, distinct from larger academic conferences.*

Predictions of Western decline have echoed for over a century, from Spengler to today's media and policy debates. This gathering aimed to probe whether decline stems from external pressures, internal failings, or even the West's own choices – and whether a 'post-liberal West' would necessarily mean decline. The Symposium held three panels: on the meaning of disorder in international relations, on historical and economic perspectives of change, and on the evolving role of military power in an age of hybrid warfare. 'Decline is not destiny', Ruzza concluded, 'so let us better understand what lies ahead'.

Leadership and Gangster Diplomacy

Richard Higgott *began his intervention with the explanation that the idea of 'gangster diplomacy' had first emerged from his work on strongman politics and his recently presented paper in Bologna. What had started as a playful label soon grew into a serious concept and has since formed the basis of a report published by LSE IDEAS – a hybrid of scholarship and journalism aiming to capture the contours of today's world. One of the central themes of Prof Higgott's report is the decline of globalisation as the organising principle of international affairs.*

At the heart of the argument lies the shifting narratives of global order. For decades, we have relied on convenient clichés – the 'end of history', the 'new Cold War', the 'Asian Century' – without clarifying what they truly mean. Yet today's world defies such neat categories. It is neither unipolar, nor bipolar, nor multipolar, nor a return to the Cold War. Instead, it is a fuzzy, fungible and bifurcated order, shaped above all by the United States and China but not locked into rigid ideological confrontation. Other actors, from Russia and India to the European Union, remained significant players. Strikingly, the so-called middle powers – long dismissed as secondary – were now being rediscovered, a reminder that patterns in world politics tend to recur after decades of neglect.

Neoliberal globalisation – distinct from classical liberalism – had undoubtedly delivered extraordinary growth and lifted millions from poverty. Yet its darker legacies, such as rising inequality, the alienation of working classes, and the hubris of global

elites, were left unaddressed. The backlash opened the door to the resurgence of sovereignty-driven geopolitics. Neoliberalism lingered in practice, but geopolitics has become the dominant metaphor. Rooted historically in the work of thinkers like Mackinder and later refined by Kissinger and Brzezinski, it is now revived by figures such as Hal Brands. Geography, territory, and state power are once again at the forefront, pushing aside multilateral approaches.

The consequences are profound. Geostrategic competition has left ever less space for cooperation, while the militarisation of geopolitical strategy risks becoming self-fulfilling. The revival of geopolitics, and of the strategist as its protagonist, encourages a form of threat inflation reminiscent of how economists once exaggerated neoliberalism's superiority in its heyday. US primacy is far less secure than commonly believed. The costs of hegemony are higher than anticipated, while rivals like China and Russia resist more actively. American economic and military strength look increasingly fragile. Signs of this shift had appeared well before Donald Trump, with Putin's 2007 Munich speech and the 2008 financial crisis serving as turning points. Obama's hesitant responses to Syria and Crimea, and his uncertain pivot to Asia, further revealed the trend. Trump, however, accelerated the process with his preference for transactional bilateral deals and his nostalgia for spheres of influence. He envisioned a US-dominated Western Hemisphere balanced by other great powers dividing the globe – an improbable vision in a deeply interconnected economy, but one that revealed much about his worldview.

This points to the critical role of strongman leadership. Traditional international relations scholarship had long emphasised institutions and practices, but institutions do not think or speak – leaders do. The return of geopolitics cannot be understood without examining the psychology and personal style of today's leaders. Figures like Trump, Putin, and Xi share traits poorly suited to diplomacy: narcissism, fragility, arrogance, loyalty over expertise, and a zero-sum approach to bargaining. Diplomacy itself has become personalised and performative, governance reduced to networks of loyalty and style. In this sense, gangster diplomacy means international conduct resembling mob behaviour more than professional statecraft.

The consequences of this new style of leadership are visible everywhere. The anti-globalisation narrative has hardened into policy, even within Europe. Democratic backsliding has deepened, fuelled by the influence of technological oligarchies. Global trust in the United States has collapsed, with Trump – whether by accident or by design – squandering decades of accumulated soft power. The transatlantic relationship is fractured, forcing Europe to recognise that it can no longer rely fully on Washington. As Ursula von der Leyen had remarked: "The West as we knew it no longer exists."

For Europe, this realisation demands urgent adaptation. It would need to build cooperative defence capabilities, strengthen economic resilience, and cultivate partnerships beyond the Atlantic if it hoped to preserve what remained valuable in the liberal international order, especially trade. NATO itself requires reconsideration, for Trump's presidency has exposed the fragility of transatlantic commitments. Europe now faces not only economic and political challenges but also a growing divergence of values from those shaping American politics.

The age of geopolitics has firmly arrived. Strongman leaders, transactional spheres of influence, and personalised diplomacy now dominate global affairs. International cooperation can only survive if leaders are willing to champion it at home and abroad. For Europe, adaptation is no longer optional: it needs to rethink security, economics, and partnerships, while acknowledging that the US can no longer be taken for granted as a source of leadership. That is the core message: we are living in an era of gangster diplomacy and finding ways to navigate it is an urgent task.

Making Sense of Disorder

Anna Caffarena *began by reflecting on the context of this edition of the Symposium. In recent months, she observed, she had encountered something unprecedented in her thirty years as a scholar of international relations: people seem disoriented, expressing an almost palpable sense of apprehension. The level of uncertainty they perceive in world affairs appears greater than they can comfortably endure. It is not clear whether expert knowledge had truly risen to the challenge of such a demanding moment. Prof Caffarena hoped that the Symposium would help strengthen collective capacity to face the moment, for clear and compelling explanations of current dynamics could offer citizens meaningful reasons to stay engaged.*

The core question of the discussion: are we witnessing a decline of the international order, or its disruption? The answer: What the world is experiencing was no longer the gradual transformation of the rules-based order observed over the past two decades, but a genuine disruption of that very process, regardless of whether it was ultimately leading to decline.

This disruption is twofold. The first stems from the deliberate choice by the US to unmake the international order. Long-anticipated shifts in global power, which the West had watched with mounting concern, were dramatically interrupted when the Trump administration openly embraced disorder as its preferred international condition and deliberately fostered it in critical domains such as security and trade. Trump's hostility to international rules and his conviction that great powers thrive in anarchy are well known, but the intensity of his efforts to generate disorder since January 2025 has still been surprising. The second disruption, equally consequential,

has reshaped the transatlantic relationship itself. The United States and Europe now hold fundamentally opposing visions of what kind of international system best serves their interests. This divide is so deep that the very notion of a unified West can no longer be taken for granted. It is no longer plausible to argue that the challenges of a transforming global system could be collectively managed by the countries once grouped under the banner of the West.

As a result of this twofold disruption, we now find ourselves in uncharted waters, without reliable reference points and with little clarity about what a realistic destination might look like. The key question is whether these disruptions can be navigated at all. Many people believe they cannot – that we risk paralysis in the face of chaos. The constant circulation of the image of disorder in the media reinforces this sense of helplessness, giving the impression that events are being driven by forces entirely beyond our control. Disorder increasingly seems to define international affairs, fuelled by the return of power politics, the growing weight of security concerns and national interests, and the weakening of norms and institutions. The result is fragmentation and a rising risk of confrontation among major actors. It is tempting, therefore, to conclude that US foreign policy – Trump's in particular – is the primary driver of this shift. Trump openly embraces raw power and has made himself the leading advocate of disorder, convinced that it multiplies American strength. While this interpretation is partly correct, it must be questioned as to whether we should still attribute to the US such overwhelming power that it alone can reshape international affairs. Is disorder truly the defining reality of today, or is it an image we ourselves project, shaped by the exaggerated centrality we continue to grant to America?

It is largely the latter. Our inclination to dramatise America's retreat from liberal internationalism has amplified the perception of disorder. Yet, assuming disorder as the natural condition of world politics is dangerous. It risks cementing the belief that the US embrace of disorder, and the transatlantic rift it caused, is insurmountable. History, however, showed that the international community had repeatedly withstood deep and complex crises. When confronted with so-called revisionist powers like Russia and China, the West had seemed confident in its ability to guide change, relying on the institutions and norms of the multilateral order. For a time, the way that change unfolded 'within the system' confirmed this confidence. Europe had remained firmly committed to upholding the rules-based order, contributing to the regulation of emerging domains, while countries such as Japan advanced innovative proposals to adapt it to evolving realities. There is no reason to assume that these actors are helpless without US leadership. On the contrary, there are many grounds for confidence in their collective ability to navigate the current disruptions.

What is missing, and urgently needed, is a political platform to reactivate engagement, grounded in an affirmative consensus about the kind of system required to safeguard essential international interests. What is required is a strong discursive alternative to disorder – an alternative capable of restoring direction, coherence, and legitimacy

to global engagement. The first step in this effort is to reject the idea that disorder or chaos represents the natural behaviour of great powers. The rules-based order had been created precisely because it delivered advantages, even for great powers themselves. Middle powers, even more numerous, have still stronger incentives to preserve it. While they lack the capacity of great powers, collectively they possess substantial influence, especially when acting together to defend norms, institutions, and predictability in international affairs. Through multilateralism, they can ensure more inclusive and participatory decision-making.

From this perspective, the preference for disorder will remain the exception, not the rule, which opens space for proactive strategies to carve out zones of predictability in global politics. Any action that constrained raw power, fostered mutual trust, and encouraged rules-based behaviour can help preserve the social fabric that the US appears intent on unravelling. Such actions should be actively pursued by all those committed to resisting the dismantling of the international order. As had been emphasised many times, the fate of that order cannot, and should not, rest solely on the will or role of the United States. Avoiding a regression into the destructive patterns of the past is difficult, but not impossible. The scale of the challenge should itself serve as the catalyst for generating the energy required to foster meaningful progress in international affairs.

Finally, **Chris Alden** *concluded the panel, explaining that his original intention had been to focus closely on domestic discussions – exploring what it means to break the international order from Atlantic City to transatlantic relations and alliances. However, his perspective shifted to something less familiar.*

Recall an image from the Trump's inauguration: Bay Area tech CEOs seated prominently in the front row at Trump's swearing-in. Rivals though they might be, they were also bound together in the same story; their presence at the centre unmistakable. Among them was a figure well known to all, representing a line of continuity in the ongoing questions of order, democracy, and their possible futures.

From here, three questions. The first concerns the realm of ideas, what some in the literature describe as techno-fascism or techno-feudalism. How did we arrive at this moment? To grapple with that, the political and moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's deep critique of the liberal West offers a framework to connect with today's dynamics of social media and widening inequality. This, in turn, leads to a Leninist-style question: what is to be done? For some, these debates echoed futurism as an ideology and recalling Italy's past, when Marinetti and others had called for the destruction of democracy and its institutions, to be replaced with authoritarian or dictatorial structures.

Exploring the literature of techno-fascism can feel like descending into a rabbit hole. Figures such as Nick Land, formerly at Warwick, or Curtis Yarvin – who, despite his casual, surfer-like appearance in photographs, openly advocates the end of democracy – advanced visions of governance by a technocratic elite. In their designs, the state would no longer be bound by social contracts or collective deliberation but managed like a corporation and led by a CEO. Their manifestos were often disjointed, more scattered blog posts than systematic treatises, yet recurring themes emerge clearly.

Post-libertarian futurists, particularly prominent on America's West Coast, fused libertarian impulses with technology-driven visions of societal remaking. Their shared diagnosis is stark: democracy is dead. Though their reasoning varied, they agreed that democracy no longer functioned and ought to be discarded. In its place, they proposed a model centred on 'great men' – almost always explicitly men – who would guide a new form of governance. Sometimes this was imagined as a return to monarchy, with 'techno-princes' ruling algorithmically managed and feudalistic orders, governed by artificial intelligence. In this vision, states as we know them would vanish, replaced by hyper-capitalist, authoritarian city-states – 'gov-corps' – scattered around the globe. Models like Singapore and Hong Kong are frequently invoked: efficient, attractive, and non-democratic hubs of corporate governance. Citizens, in this scheme, would cease to be members of a polity and instead become customers, opting in or out of transactional contracts depending on the deals offered.

Yarvin and his peers expanded this logic through their attack on what they called the 'cathedral' – a term encompassing education, media, and NGOs. They saw these as retrograde strongholds of egalitarian ideology, suffocating innovation. This language had already seeped into the rhetoric of political and business figures such as JD Vance, Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, and Marc Andreessen. From dismantling universities to rejecting diversity initiatives and egalitarian norms, they frame democracy itself as a disease corroding Western civilization. The result was a loosely connected but increasingly influential constellation of ideas. Its echoes could be heard in Trump's rhetoric, Steve Bannon's strategies and within the president's advisory circle, where dismantling large parts of the administrative state resonated with these techno-authoritarian visions. Scholars like Yanis Varoufakis offer a structural reading, interpreting techno-feudalism as capitalism's latest mutation – an outgrowth of its own contradictions, driven by the concentration of technological power. Beneath all these perspectives lay a stark conviction: Western democracies must die if Western civilization is to survive.

Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1984) closed with a chilling line: "The new dark age is already with us." MacIntyre had argued that Western liberalism, and the institutions built around it, had been hollowed out by the absence of shared moral foundations. Contentious debates – abortion, for instance – were not paralysed by irreconcilable facts but by what he termed 'emotivism': positions rooted in personal preference, dressed in the guise of rationality. What appeared as reasoned debate

was, in truth, only the clash of emotive assertions, producing fragmentation and polarisation. He likened it to a society that had lost the foundations of natural science, retaining only fragments and broken instruments, mistaking their reconstruction for genuine knowledge. Liberal societies, he warned, were doing exactly this with ethics, politics, and democracy.

This diagnosis resonates powerfully today. Social media, with its endless fragmented streams of decontextualised information, exemplifies MacIntyre's critique: fragments are pieced together without shared foundations, producing polarisation rather than deliberation. The COVID-19 crisis had laid this bare, with conspiracy theories, anti-science movements, and emotive forms of anti-intellectualism overwhelming rational policymaking. Combined with the deepening structural inequality of contemporary societies, these conditions fostered cynicism, anti-government sentiment and, ultimately, hostility to democracy itself. Populist movements seized on these dynamics, amplifying them into spirals of disillusionment and resentment.

While the implications of these connections are not yet fully worked out, at the very least they suggest that the interplay of social media, inequality, and populism align uncannily with MacIntyre's warning: we live in a new dark age, where the façade of rational debate masks the erosion of shared foundations. This alignment illuminates the unsettling rise of techno-fascist and techno-feudalist imaginaries, where democracy is treated as obsolete and algorithm-driven corporate governance gains traction among influential elites. Such developments may help explain why societies seem increasingly unable to respond to pressing domestic and international challenges. They suggest, too, that the real struggle is not merely over institutions or power, but over whether societies could reclaim the moral and intellectual foundations necessary to sustain democratic life itself.

Bringing Disorder into Focus: Old or New?

Delving into the topic, the conversation continued with a note by **Giuseppe Gabusi**, *focusing on the global trade regime.*

The crisis of this system began long ago – essentially right after the launch of the World Trade Organization in 2001 – and from it emerged what we now call hybrid trade governance. Looking back at this history is essential to understanding where we stand today.

A pivotal moment came with the WTO ministerial conference in Cancun in 2003, when developing countries demanded greater market access and an end to subsidies in developed economies. The United States and the European Union responded with only modest concessions, which India and Brazil rejected outright. In response, the two countries joined forces, creating the G20 trade group that China would later

join, and together they used their newfound influence to block deals they considered hypocritical. This marked the decisive entrance of power politics into the WTO, shattering the old pyramidal model where the US and EU set the agenda and others had little choice but to follow. By 2007 the Doha Round was effectively over, not because rising powers rejected free trade but because they demanded to reshape it according to their own interests.

Meanwhile, preferential and regional trade agreements proliferated. Encouraged by the end of the Cold War, the rise of neoliberalism, and the pressures of sustaining globalisation through global value chains, these agreements became the backbone of a new system. The outcome was today's hybrid governance, in which some issues are managed multilaterally while others are governed by a patchwork of preferential arrangements. This system, however, is more discriminatory, more complex, and more driven by power than by rules.

The second key point is the trade–investment nexus at the heart of global value chains. Globalisation as it unfolded in the 1990s and 2000s cannot simply be undone. Even in advanced economies, workers faced insecurity as outsourcing and offshoring fragmented production, and China became an easy scapegoat. Discontent fuelled populism and proved politically decisive, paving the way for Trump's election in 2016. Yet Biden, despite his differences in tone, has largely continued the protectionist stance. The dilemma is obvious: in the US today, it is politically impossible to campaign openly for free trade, yet dismantling global value chains would be prohibitively costly and disruptive.

Sectors like automobiles illustrate the point: the production ecosystem across North America is so deeply integrated that tariffs and barriers can only be managed selectively. The reality, therefore, is that globalisation is far from over. Global value chains continue to bind states and firms tightly together, making a complete retreat unfeasible. For this reason, even in an age of rising protectionism, keeping trade open, at least among like-minded partners, remains the most realistic option.

The third point concerns the new wave of preferential and regional trade agreements. Economists have long debated whether these deals are stumbling blocks that undermine multilateralism or building blocks that expand it. Let us suggest a different perspective: they should be seen as enabling blocks, arrangements that provide states with alternative routes to manage globalisation when the WTO stalls.

Obama's pivot to Asia, embodied in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), offers a clear example: a regional deal designed to set standards for the 21st century without ever naming China, though clearly meant to pressure it to adapt. Trump abandoned the TPP, but its successor, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), has attracted diverse members across both the global North and South, even including the United Kingdom. In an ironic twist, China

itself has applied to join. At the same time, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership has brought together Southeast Asia with China, Japan, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The United States, excluded from both frameworks, has become increasingly absent from Asia's trade architecture, while the European Union has accelerated its own agreements with the Southern Common Market (*Mercosur*), India, Chile, Kenya, and others.

Taken together, these developments reveal a trade regime that is fragmented but still very much alive. Hybrid governance persists; the US-centred model of globalisation has ended, but another cycle of globalisation continues, this one reshaped by power politics and regional initiatives. Preferential trade agreements do not replace or destroy the multilateral system, but they do allow states to adapt, resist, and pursue their national interests in a more complex environment.

For countries like India, this pragmatism is explicit. Asked to choose sides, officials reply simply: "We take India's side." This remark perfectly captures the spirit of today's global trade politics: not the death of globalisation, but its transformation into a more pluralist, interest-driven order.

The panel concluded with **Marco Mariano's** *contribution, being perhaps the only historian among the participants and focused on the intellectual and cultural foundations of the Atlantic community – more recently on the US empire in the Western Hemisphere. Against that backdrop, he wished to reflect on whether we are currently living through a moment of disruptive decline. Was the United States reacting to real or perceived decline in international leadership, and was that reaction itself disruptive for the international order? The short answer is yes, but rather than dwell on the answer, Dr Mariano sought to highlight the kinds of questions historians ought to be asking in this predicament.*

One unlikely starting point came from a 1990 interview in *Playboy* magazine with Donald Trump, who was asked what his foreign policy might look like. He emphasised extreme military strength, deep distrust of both adversaries and allies, and resentment at the costs of defending wealthy nations. Allies, he declared, were 'making billions screwing us', a phrase that already contained the disruptive impulses that would later characterise his presidency. The striking point is how early these ideas appeared.

To situate such views historically, scholars usually turn to two axes: isolationism versus internationalism, and exceptionalism versus its decline. On the first axis, Trump was not an isolationist; whatever else his policies were, they did not amount to withdrawal. On the second, the key question became whether 'America First' represented continuity with the exceptionalist tradition or a rupture from it.

Historians often approach this puzzle by hunting for precedents, drawing analogies with earlier presidents. Trump has been compared to Nixon – with his fascination for strongmen, executive overreach, and realpolitik – or to Andrew Jackson – with his populism, militarism, and disdain for elites. But these analogies are easy and misleading. Nixon, for all his flaws, had a coherent vision of America's role in the world and valued its alliances. Jackson, by contrast, operated in an entirely different America, one that cannot be meaningfully compared to today's global superpower. Such analogies oversimplify what is opaque and complex, and risk becoming weak arguments – or even forms of legitimation.

A more fruitful line of inquiry concerns political culture and the interaction between domestic political orders and international orders. Here Gary Gerstle's recent book, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*, proves helpful. Gerstle defines a political order as a constellation of ideologies, policies, and constituencies that shape American politics over long cycles, bending even the opposition to its will. The New Deal order, for example, lasted from the late 1930s to the early 1970s, and even Republican presidents like Eisenhower operated within its framework. That order was replaced by the neoliberal order, which emerged in the 1970s, dominated through the 1990s and 2000s, and is now in crisis.

These domestic orders overlap with international ones: the New Deal era corresponded with embedded liberalism, while neoliberalism paralleled accelerated globalisation from the 1970s onward. The demise of one inevitably raises questions about the stability of the other.

Thus, the issue is not to search for historical analogies for Trump, but to ask how domestic political change interacts with international leadership. What credibility or leadership can the United States offer when domestic opinion is polarised, institutions are dysfunctional, constitutional norms appear under siege, and no clear alternative to the neoliberal order has yet emerged?

The answers are not yet clear. But the questions themselves are crucial. They illuminate the ways in which political culture shapes international order, and the uncertainty that follows when that culture begins to fragment.

Violent Disruption: Changes in the Use of Force

The final panel explored whether and how the use of force has been undergoing changes, beginning began with a note by **Peter Watkins** *on deterrence – a concept rooted in the threat of force with the hope that violence itself can be avoided. Much of his career had been spent in the British Ministry of Defence, culminating in service as Director General for Defence Policy between 2014 and 2018. Throughout those years, deterrence had been at the very core of his work.*

First during the Cold War, and then in the decades that followed, officials began to shape a concept they called 'modern deterrence'. The Americans later rebranded it as 'integrated deterrence', though the essence remained largely the same.

At its heart, deterrence has always aimed to persuade adversaries that the costs of aggression outweigh any possible benefits. Two forms stand out: 'deterrence by punishment', threatening devastating retaliation; and 'deterrence by denial', raising the costs of aggression by strengthening defences. These principles remain consistent, but the use of force itself began to shift after 2010, and especially after Russia's illegal seizure of Crimea and intervention in the Donbas in 2014. What the world witnessed then was not conventional armies in plain sight but unacknowledged troops – the infamous 'little green men' – operating alongside proxies, the subversion of local authorities, cyber-attacks, and disinformation campaigns. These were fused with large troop deployments and even nuclear exercises, forming a calibrated blend of military and non-military means, carefully designed to remain just below NATO's threshold for armed response.

Over time, Russian actions in the Donbas grew more openly kinetic, with massive transfers of conventional weapons to the so-called separatists and the involvement of regular forces. Across Europe, the pattern widened: sabotage, subversion, destructive cyber-attacks, and even attempted assassinations – most notably the Skripal case in 2018. Soon this mode of confrontation was labelled 'hybrid warfare', later also described as 'grey zone conflict' or 'state threats'. In response, Western defence thinking sought to adapt. Modern deterrence did not discard the foundations of classical theory but emphasised four key priorities: first, improving intelligence and understanding of adversaries; second, coordinating all tools of state power – economic, legal, cyber, and military – through what was often called integration or the 'fusion doctrine'; third, building resilience against multiple vulnerabilities, particularly in advanced societies where threats are ambiguous; and fourth, closer coordination with allies to close off indirect vulnerabilities and amplify the effects of collective measures.

This approach to deterrence does not need to be symmetrical. Cyber threats, for instance, could be countered through legal, diplomatic, or economic means. Nor is deterrence binary: even partial mitigation of hybrid attacks could reduce risks

to tolerable levels. For example, public attribution of the NotPetya cyber-attack on Ukraine to Russia raised global awareness. The coordinated international response to the Skripal incident – involving expulsions of Russian diplomats and spies by many governments – appeared to catch Moscow by surprise. Publicly exposing Russian agents in this episode also imposes significant reputational costs.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought back to Europe the spectre of large-scale conventional warfare – armour, missiles, infantry – but also confirmed the persistence of hybrid tactics: cyber-attacks, sabotage, and the cutting of undersea cables. Meanwhile, drones and unmanned systems dramatically altered the battlefield, allowing Ukraine – a land power without a navy – to inflict serious damage on the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Such developments raise questions about the effectiveness of modern deterrence. Yet deterrence is always difficult to measure; its success often lies in what does not happen and therefore cannot be directly observed.

What is clear is that the principles of deterrence remained valid, but they had to be applied with far greater vigour. Resilience remains insufficient, as recent events have revealed. Societies are still fragile, and sophisticated attacks require carefully prepared, well-rehearsed responses that anticipated second- and third-order effects—an area where only a handful of countries, such as the Nordics, consistently excel.

For too long, Western Europe has experienced conflicts at a distance, fought by small professional forces against insurgents or terrorists, with painstaking efforts to minimise civilian casualties. Today, however, the reality is different: adversarial states are deliberately targeting civilian societies through cyber-attacks, sabotage, drones, and missiles. The challenge is to deter such actions and, when necessary, to defend against them. That means continuing the hard work of rethinking and strengthening deterrence – making it modern, integrated, and resilient enough to meet the threats of our time.

The conversation continued with **Andrea Locatelli** *on the reconfiguring of Europe's defence posture.*

At present, the European Union and its member states are pressing for a more cooperative approach to procurement, grounded in the idea that European countries should not only spend more, but also spend better.

Yet, this ambition is fraught with challenges. Even with the best intentions, the end result could prove sub-optimal. Much money might be wasted without yielding proportional improvements. To avoid such an outcome, adjustments in process and deeper changes within the economic and technological ecosystems themselves are needed.

The benefits of collaborative procurement are clear in economic terms. In Europe, states still procure independently, leading to waste and duplication. By pooling resources to acquire the same systems, costs can be reduced through economies of scale. Interoperability is a second advantage: different systems create logistical complications and hinder soldiers from different countries in supporting each other on joint platforms. A third benefit is the strengthening of the European Defence Technical and Industrial Base. Europe's defence companies lack the sales strength, profitability, and technological edge of their US counterparts. Avoiding market fragmentation through cooperation could help make them more competitive globally. In short: spend more but also spend better.

And yet, when one looked back, similar initiatives stretched at least to the early 2000s. For decades, policymakers had recognised the problem and attempted to address it, but with poor results. The gaps remained, despite thirty years of effort. Why should the future be different? The Commission insisted that new tools are now available – that they had, as it were, 'a bazooka' to make things better. But optimism had been voiced before.

The main challenges are grouped under three categories: political, economic, and military.

The first challenge is the alignment of procurement cycles. The White Paper might articulate common goals but achieving them is not simply about identifying capabilities or assets. Procurement involves cycles of management, replacement, and planning that required synchronisation. It is not just a technological issue but also a matter of training and expertise. Consider the example of the F-35: Italy and the UK had built experience in fifth-generation warfare, but Germany had not. For military leaders and pilots, this created obstacles: joint training required shared expertise, otherwise it became impossible. Moreover, procurement cycles – the timing of system lifespans – had to be aligned. Even if states wanted to acquire the same assets, they needed to want them at the same time.

The second challenge lies in operational requirements. Unlike civilian economics, in military economics it is the states, not the companies, that define the requirements of weapons systems. Defence firms then designed systems to fit those specifications. But when states cooperated on a joint platform while pursuing different requirements, problems emerged. The joint Franco-Italian frigate project (FREMM) offers an example: built on a common platform but with divergent specifications in the two variants. This means that even if joint procurement saved money at the start, the costs of variants reappeared later. The same issues appear in the aircraft industry. The Commission has so far done little to address this, and as long as states act independently, the problem is unlikely to be resolved.

The third obstacle is political and commercial. Deciding on partners and, crucially, dividing work shares often sets political and industrial interests at odds. Previous experiences, such as the Eurofighter Typhoon, show how such tensions led to delays and cost overruns. Various cooperation frameworks exist – mini-lateral, multilateral, or off-the-shelf procurement – but each carries its own advantages and disadvantages. There is no single solution.

A final, sobering point concerns technology. Modern systems have become so complex that most European firms can offer only niche competencies, producing single parts rather than assembling entire systems. Without such system-assemblers, the European Defence Technical and Industrial Base would remain dependent on the United States.

In conclusion, procurement should be taken seriously, with EU defence integration requiring a concerted effort from both member states and European institutions. However, current initiatives seemed guided more by short-term ambitions than by a far-sighted strategic vision.

Eugenio Cusumano *continued the discussion of the growing privatisation of security, touching not only on the evolution of force but also directly on the broader theme of the workshop: global order and disorder.*

The growing privatisation of security has long worried scholars, often depicted as a sign of the state's decline and a harbinger of global chaos. As early as the 1990s, Martin van Creveld had predicted such developments, and subsequent scholarship echoed the concern that a world in which warfare is increasingly privatised would be mired in perpetual instability. These fears rested on the traditional understanding that the monopolisation of violence is the foundation of the state system established since Westphalia – a 'civilizing process', as Norbert Elias described it, that reduced violence by making it politically accountable.

Yet, history suggests the opposite: the state monopoly on violence has been the exception rather than the rule. For centuries, violence had routinely been outsourced to pirates, privateers, charter companies, and mercenaries. Only from the late eighteenth century, and primarily in the West, did reliance on commercial providers of violence decline.

This shift was supported by what scholars called the anti-mercenary norm: a taboo built on the idea that killing could only be legitimate when undertaken for a purpose higher than profit. Killing for money was stigmatised as illegitimate and dangerous because it threatened the state's control over violence. For a long time, this taboo acted as a normative restraint on privatised military functions. Will that taboo survive today's crisis of the liberal order, or the transition to multipolarity?

In recent decades, security privatisation has expanded. Logistics and armed security are now widely outsourced, though these differ from historical mercenary combat. Several factors explain the trend: material incentives, where governments found contractors cheaper than uniformed personnel; ideological shifts, especially the neoliberal belief in private-sector efficiency; and political expediency, where employing contractors was less costly politically than deploying soldiers. Despite these drivers, the mercenary taboo had largely kept combat within the military's purview. Recent scholarship suggests, however, that the taboo is eroding. Some argue it has lost its binding force; others suggested it has been narrowed to accommodate the expanding role of private contractors. Some see it as hypocrisy: 'mercenaries' referred to others, while our own were politely termed 'contractors.'

The United States illustrates how this erosion did not await the end of unipolarity. It began during the unipolar era, in Iraq and Afghanistan, where almost everything was outsourced except combat. Even armed security in insurgent contexts blurred the lines with direct hostilities. Under Trump, this trend accelerated: he pardoned Blackwater contractors convicted for killing Iraqi civilians, signalling political affinity with private security actors. Budget cuts and reductions in federal staff would likely push both the Pentagon and the State Department toward greater reliance on contractors, particularly as US forces concentrated on deterring China in the Indo-Pacific. The share of tasks outsourced to private actors was therefore set to rise.

Among rising powers, the picture is more varied. Some, like Russia and the United Arab Emirates, now outsource combat itself – something the anti-mercenary norm once restrained. Contractors offer plausible deniability, shielding regimes politically and diplomatically – as exemplified by the Wagner Group in Crimea. Small but wealthy states, like the UAE, can convert money into military capacity through foreign labour. Authoritarian regimes, and even some democracies, find contractors politically expedient, as they lack the legitimacy or emotional ties of soldiers. Other powers remain cautious: China bars private contractors from carrying weapons despite its global interests, and South Africa, Brazil, and India also view mercenaries warily, often due to colonial legacies.

The normative landscape reflects this diversity. Few states have signed the UN Anti-Mercenary Convention, though many African countries have adopted an AU version. The Montreux Document, which regulates rather than bans private contractors, drew support mainly from Global North actors and China. The result is a fragmented regime of norms and practices, reflecting deep North-South disagreements over private security.

Looking ahead, that instability and great-power competition will likely increase reliance on private military providers, while regulation struggles to keep pace. Yet it would be misleading to treat the mercenary taboo as purely Western. Some

revisionist powers, like China, adhere more strictly to it than the US. The stigma against profit-driven violence persists because states fear losing control over force. As Machiavelli had warned, mercenaries were either ineffective or dangerous: useless if weak, threatening if strong. Technology added ambiguity: high-tech warfare created demand for private expertise, yet automation might reduce the need for both contractors and soldiers.

The likely trajectory was an uneven landscape: privatisation will expand, the mercenary taboo will continue to erode but not vanish entirely, and states will need to balance the pragmatic advantages of outsourcing against the risk of losing control over the instruments of force.

The last panel concluded with a contribution by **Matt Arnold**, *a practitioner who has spent the past fifteen years focused on Myanmar and its current conflict, observing how technology – particularly drones – has shaped the use of force and might inform wider discussions about the evolution of armed conflict. The central question of the discussion was how technology could help overcome disparities in firepower.*

Myanmar's story is fundamentally about a population resisting a deeply entrenched military dictatorship that has ruled since 1962. Unlike many other countries, the resistance here has achieved notable success in pushing back against the military, making Myanmar a compelling case for studying how drones have catalysed and sustained a bottom-up uprising.

Firstly, drones have enabled armed resistance to emerge in areas that previously had no insurgency, where support for the military had been strong; secondly, drones allow long-running ethnic insurgencies to escalate their operations, eventually capturing contiguous territories, including towns and cities. The argument is not that drones alone have shifted the course of the war, but that they play a significant role, enabling attacks that would otherwise have been impossible and mitigate historic imbalances in firepower.

By the end of 2024, the military controlled roughly only a fifth of the country, with resistance groups holding around 42%, and the remainder contested. Areas of strong military control, depicted in dark green on maps, were shrinking as resistance forces pressed toward central regions. Even events like the massive earthquake in Sagaing in March 2025 had not slowed the resistance. Myanmar's context was shaped by decades of military dictatorship and ethnic insurgencies but, historically, resistance groups had not been able to take towns or connect larger territories. The lowland Bamar heartland, in particular, has little modern insurgent infrastructure, making organised rebellion extremely difficult.

Two major phases illustrate the significance of drones. The first began during the spring uprising in April 2021, when a largely pacifist majority, following Aung San Suu Kyi's nonviolent approach, took up arms. The second phase occurred when ethnic insurgencies began capturing substantial territories. In both cases, drones proved crucial. Initially, insurgents faced severe shortages of ammunition and small arms. Commercially available drones filled a critical gap, allowing rebels to transition from planning rebellion to actively conducting attacks, acting as a catalytic tool that propelled growth and morale. Drones were low-cost, decentralisable, and could be procured through diaspora fundraising. Agricultural hex-rotor drones were adapted with release mechanisms to drop multiple bombs, providing actionable firepower in a context where conventional arms were scarce.

Over time, the conflict evolved toward more conventional semi-urban operations. Drones were used both in dedicated units and integrated within general resistance groups. These units handled drone logistics, armaments, and even 3D-printed parts for drones and bombs. A major milestone was Operation 1027, conducted by ethnic insurgencies from late 2023 into 2024, which enabled the capture of dozens of towns. During this period, resistance forces reportedly used tens of thousands of drone-delivered bombs against military bases, demonstrating that drones could breach fortified positions in ways small arms could not.

The military, initially slow to adopt drones, eventually recognised their value. By late 2024, the armed forces purchased thousands of agricultural drones from China, refitted them for offensive operations, and deployed them alongside conventional forces. China focused on production, Russia on focused training. While Western involvement was largely indirect – mainly through diaspora support – China and Russia supplied military-grade drones to the military, increasing its drone use fivefold.

From this case study, we can observe that drones serve as a force multiplier in two critical contexts. First, in bottom-up uprisings within populations previously unable to resist effectively, drones helped initiate, sustain, and expand rebellion. Second, in long-standing insurgencies that had plateaued, drones allowed forces to break stalemates and capture strategic points, including towns and cities, that were previously out of reach. Myanmar's experience illustrated how drones could shift local power dynamics even in low-intensity conflicts, highlighting the role of technology in altering the balance between state and non-state actors.

In summary, drones have empowered the resistance in Myanmar to grow, sustain momentum, and challenge the military's control, while the latter has begun to integrate drones at scale. Western influence has been marginal, mostly limited to diaspora fundraising and technical support, while China and Russia have played more direct roles. Myanmar demonstrates that in certain fragile state contexts, drones can significantly reshape the trajectory of conflict, enabling insurgent movements to challenge entrenched militaries in ways that were previously unimaginable.

Conclusive Remarks

The symposium successfully created an integrated space for the exchange of ideas, serving as a genuine laboratory for intellectual development. The discussions underscored several key aspects relevant to understanding the current state of the international order and its evolving political dynamics. Among these, the notion of 'defensive liberalism' emerged as a significant cross-cutting theme, in contrast with earlier forms of implicit 'offensive liberalism' – attempts at 'exporting' liberalism, sometimes also with coercive means, which contributed to weakening the core principles of the liberal international order.

This contrast raises the wider question of what liberalism is now being defended against; the West may have entered a post-liberal phase characterised by internal tensions between post-liberal and (defensive-)liberal perspectives. At the same time, some contributions indicated that parts of the non-Western world may paradoxically uphold certain liberal norms at the international level, having taken on the role traditionally upheld by the West.

Overall, the debates helped to bring into focus open issues and their root causes, deepening our understanding of the forces shaping today's international landscape – an inquiry we hope to further pursue in future symposia. ■

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