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In global geopolitics, truth is one, but the wise interpret it differently.

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ANALYSIS

Economic Warfare and Anticipatory Insecurity: Why Weaponised Interdependence Demands a New Strategic Logic

States increasingly seek security by weaponising the very networks on which their prosperity depends. Lasting security requires calibrated interdependence, not decoupling.

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The container terminal at Tanjong Pagar, Singapore, one of the world's busiest trade gateways and a node of the interdependence states increasingly seek to weaponise. Photo: Dietmar Rabich / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

When does interdependence become a weapon? For much of the post-Cold War era, policymakers believed that expanding economic integration would make conflict less likely. In today's geostrategic landscape, the opposite is increasingly evident as the financial networks, supply chains, technological ecosystems and maritime routes that underpin global prosperity become instruments of geopolitical competition and strategic leverage.

Understanding this transformation requires a new strategic logic that helps explain why competition and interdependence are features of an increasingly hyperconnected international system that is both anarchic and hierarchical. The defining paradox of our age is that states increasingly seek security by weaponising the very networks upon which their own long-term prosperity and resilience depend. This raises some timely questions: what does power mean in an age when no nation can fully disentangle itself from its competitors? And if economic warfare is now the defining expression of geopolitical rivalry, can states preserve international order without destroying the connective tissue that binds them together?

Economic coercion is hardly a new phenomenon. Throughout history, states have sought to outfox their rivals by restricting trade, controlling strategic resources or denying access to vital markets. The British naval blockade of Napoleonic France, the Union blockade during the American Civil War, and the Allied maritime blockade of Germany during the First World War all demonstrated that economic power could shape military outcomes. During the Cold War, the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls (COCOM) sought to deny the Soviet Union access to strategically significant technologies.

What is new is the degree of interconnectedness upon which the world now operates. Instead of competing with separate economic systems, today's rival powers are embedded in the same global financial architecture, technological ecosystems and production networks. This is one of the central insights of what I describe as Symbiotic Realism, a framework that helps explain why this transformation is more than a consequence of changing technologies or globalisation. It begins from the premise that states are ultimately governed by human beings whose behaviour reflects the enduring emotional, amoral and egoistic dimensions of human nature, where emotion and cognition are inseparable and values are shaped by context and (often skewed) historical narratives. In an increasingly digitised environment, these vulnerabilities extend to the cognitive domain itself, where external actors can exploit emotion, bias and attention to shape perception and decision-making. Protecting cognitive security is therefore becoming integral to strategic resilience, alongside the management of material interdependence. In an era of hyperconnectivity, deeply rooted biological and psychological drivers are increasingly expressed through networks of interdependence, making economic statecraft an attractive instrument for advancing national interests. In particular, these trends are being reinforced by what I have described as the Neuro-P5 framework, the enduring pursuit of power, profit, pleasure, pride and permanence that shapes individual and collective political behaviour.

Recent developments illustrate this evolving geostrategic landscape with striking clarity. American export controls on advanced semiconductors seek to constrain China's technological advancement, while Beijing has responded by leveraging its dominance over rare earth processing and critical minerals. Financial sanctions imposed on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the extraordinary reach of economic statecraft, with Moscow

attempting to weaponise energy exports in response. Maritime chokepoints, from the Strait of Hormuz to the Red Sea and the Taiwan Strait, have become increasingly central to calculations of strategic risk. Edward Fishman's recent book Chokepoints offers a compelling account of this new era of economic warfare, illustrating how control over critical nodes of the global economy has become a central instrument of geopolitical power. His analysis complements an important body of scholarship, including the work of Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman on weaponised interdependence, which shows how influential states can transform economic connectivity into strategic advantage. These developments point towards a deeper paradox: the same interdependence that creates strategic vulnerability also constitutes the foundation of global stability. States cannot simply withdraw from one another without undermining the very systems upon which their own prosperity and long-term security depend. Complete economic decoupling is not politically realistic (or economically sustainable) in a world confronting shared frontier risk challenges such as climate change, pandemic preparedness, energy transitions, outer space security, cyber insecurity and the governance of artificial intelligence and other disruptive technologies.

On a conceptual level, neither liberal optimism nor classical realism fully captures this reality. Liberal theories underestimate the persistence of strategic competition under conditions of globalisation. Classical realism, meanwhile, often assumes that security ultimately depends upon reducing dependence upon others. This assumption falls short in a hyperconnected world, as dependence is a structural condition that needs to be managed. Understanding this paradox requires a sense of why states repeatedly seek both cooperation and strategic advantage, often through the very networks upon which they depend. What is needed is a grand-strategic perspective, in which states recognise how strategic culture and human predispositions shape their responses to an increasingly interconnected security environment. With this in mind, Symbiotic Realism bridges the gap between the enduring drivers of human behaviour and the realities of an increasingly hyperconnected international system. The framework accepts that the economic, technological and ecological systems underpinning modern societies bind states together in ways that make them mutually exposed to one another's actions. The emergence of geostrategic near-parity – a more distributed balance of power – can also encourage reciprocal restraint and non-conflictual competition, rather than intensifying hegemonic ambitions and zero-sum rivalry.

This new strategic logic rejects two incomplete assumptions. The first is that interdependence will naturally produce harmony and gradually dissolve geopolitical rivalry. The second is that security can ultimately be achieved through separation and the elimination of dependence. Instead, it recognises that interdependence is a permanent structural condition of the international system, one that must be governed strategically and responsibly. The objective of statecraft should therefore be to preserve national resilience while recognising that long-term security is inseparable from the stability of the wider systems upon which all states depend. The prospect of future dependence, and the vulnerabilities this could create, is also a source of concern for many states, whose strategic calculations are shaped by the fear that supply chains or financial systems could one day be turned against them. Technologies that compress decision-making time further heighten these vulnerabilities, increasing the risk of strategic escalation through uncertainty or human error. Semiconductors, artificial intelligence infrastructure, quantum computing, critical minerals, payment systems and cloud computing could all become instruments of geopolitical coercion. Geopolitical leverage could also be sharpened by the emergence of increasingly autonomous and potentially superintelligent AI systems.

This reflects the emergence of what might be described as anticipatory insecurity. Seen through the lens of Symbiotic Realism, these trends reflect a deeper feature of political behaviour where leaders are driven as much by the anticipation of future vulnerability and loss of strategic autonomy as by immediate material threats. For many, dependence itself has become psychologically intolerable and governments are increasingly seeking resilience before vulnerability materialises, be it through reshoring production, diversifying supply chains, or restricting technology transfers. Anticipatory insecurity thus introduces a temporal paradox into statecraft: measures taken today to prevent a possible future vulnerability can generate the mistrust and reciprocal restrictions that make that future more likely. The imagined threat becomes politically consequential before it becomes materially real. History shows that security dilemmas can also arise from mutual uncertainty. The naval arms race between Britain and Germany before 1914 was driven as much by fears of future vulnerability as by immediate plans for war. Today's competition over semiconductors, artificial intelligence and critical minerals exhibits a similar anticipatory logic. From the perspective of Symbiotic Realism, this psychology is itself a strategic variable, with perceptions of future

dependence increasingly shaping state behaviour as much as objective material capabilities. This dynamic has profound implications. Perceptions of vulnerability shape international politics and strategic competition is often driven by fears and assumptions about future coercion.

In this sense, the weaponisation of economic interdependence is reshaping the psychological foundations of geopolitical behaviour, giving rise to a new form of neuro-geopolitical insecurity. States increasingly perceive interconnectedness itself through the lens of anticipated vulnerability, where the fear of future dependence becomes as strategically consequential as dependence itself. This creates a fragmentation spiral. Policies intended to enhance national resilience may collectively erode the openness and predictability upon which the global economy depends. The irony is that efforts to maximise national security can, if left unchecked, diminish the collective resilience upon which every nation's long-term security ultimately rests. The consequences could magnify political and military hostilities and seep into the bloodstream of global trade, with competing financial architectures weakening global governance and fragmented technological ecosystems reducing opportunities for scientific cooperation.

This begs the question of how to steer clear of both naive openness and wholesale decoupling. Part of the answer is rooted in calibrated interdependence, reflecting the central insight of Symbiotic Realism that strategic resilience and the stewardship of interdependence are complementary rather than competing objectives. Equally important is the gradual development of norms and institutional guardrails that discourage the indiscriminate weaponisation of economic networks, particularly where such actions threaten the stability of global public goods. The purpose is not to abolish dependence and competition (an impossible ambition) but to prevent strategic rivalry from corroding the shared infrastructure upon which all states rely.

The task before policymakers is to govern interdependence more wisely. Competition and uncertainty will remain a defining feature of the international order, unfolding within an inescapably shared ecosystem on earth and outer space. The challenge is to build institutions that can manage rivalry and disorder constructively, channeling them towards innovation and collective progress rather than conflict. Durable security in the twenty-first century will

depend on the effective exercise of power alongside the responsible stewardship of mutual dependence. This requires effective leadership grounded in an understanding of human nature and the protection of human dignity, guiding leaders towards non-conflictual competition rather than destructive zero-sum competition. Strategic advantage increasingly depends on governing interdependence more intelligently than one's competitors. The defining strategic question is therefore not whether states can compete, but whether they can do so without undermining the shared foundations of their long-term prosperity and security.

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