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THE ARCHITECTURE OF COLLAPSE

Structural Drivers of Systemic Fragility in High-Complexity Environments



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THE ARCHITECTURE OF COLLAPSE

INFORMATION, INSTITUTIONS, AND THE POSITIVE PEACE IMPERATIVE

A Systems-Analytic Essay on the Convergence of State Fragility and Digital Conflict

By M. Nuri Shakoor

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Chapter 1

The Two Failures

State collapse and information warfare are often narrated as if they belong to different worlds. One is usually discussed in the language of institutions: sovereignty, administrative capacity, coercive order, fiscal reach, political legitimacy. The other is framed through media systems: disinformation, influence operations, narrative capture, cognitive pressure, and the strategic manipulation of attention. In conventional analysis, these appear as adjacent but separable crises. A state weakens, and hostile narratives move in. Or an information environment is polluted, and trust in institutions decays after the fact. That distinction can be useful at the level of bureaucratic organization. It is less persuasive at the level of systems diagnosis.[1,2]

The difficulty begins when the two crises repeatedly appear together, not incidentally, but structurally. States experiencing severe fragility are defined not simply by danger, but by exposure to risk combined with insufficient resilience in the state, the system, or the community to absorb and mitigate shocks. The OECD's multidimensional fragility framework is explicit on this point: fragility is not exhausted by state weakness in the narrow administrative sense; it extends across political, security, economic, societal, environmental, and human dimensions. Once fragility is understood in that wider way, the information sphere can no longer be treated as external to the problem. It becomes one of the conditions through which resilience is either sustained or broken.[1]

This chapter therefore advances a stricter claim. State fragility and information warfare are not best understood as two separate emergencies unfolding side by side. They are more accurately read as two expressions of a single systemic failure. One expression appears in the degradation of institutions. The other appears in the degradation of shared informational reality. Neither is wholly reducible to the other. Yet each feeds, reveals, and reproduces the other. When this occurs, the distinction between institutional breakdown and informational disorder remains descriptively possible, but analytically insufficient.

That insufficiency matters. If institutions are viewed only in their formal aspect, analysts may conclude that order remains intact so long as ministries still operate, elections still occur, courts still issue rulings, or security forces still patrol the street. But political order depends on more than visible form. The World Bank's World Development Report 2017 argues that governance effectiveness rests on the capacity of actors to commit, coordinate, and cooperate within unequal

and contested political settings. Where these capacities erode, even well-designed policies fail to generate security, equity, or durable order. Governance, in other words, is not merely the existence of institutions; it is the social and political capacity that makes institutions function.[3]

The same is true of the information environment. It is not merely a channel through which politics is described after the fact. It is one of the media through which politics is perceived, trusted, contested, and enacted. The OECD's 2024 trust survey notes directly that the information people are exposed to shapes their perceptions of, and trust in, public institutions. People do not encounter the state in pure form. They encounter it through mediated signals: reporting, public communication, social media, rumor, institutional transparency, official silence, and the cumulative social judgement these produce.[2]

This is where the apparent sequence between the two failures begins to collapse. Declining institutional performance creates an opening for narrative distortion because failure produces interpretive vacuum. Services falter. Corruption becomes legible. Violence appears unevenly governed. Public communication loses credibility. In such a setting, manipulated narratives do not enter an otherwise stable domain; they enter a field already loosened by distrust. Conversely, once disinformation, misinformation, and strategic narrative operations take hold, they intensify the burdens under which governance already struggles. They can reduce compliance, fragment public consensus, harden polarization, and complicate crisis response. The U.S. Government Accountability Office has warned that the contemporary information environment allows malign actors to target the cognitive foundations of individuals—beliefs, emotions, and experiences—at scale, while the OECD has argued that effective responses require a holistic governance approach rather than a narrow content-moderation reflex.[4,5]

At that point, what we face is not a linear chain of cause and effect, but a recursive pattern. Institutional weakness enlarges informational vulnerability; informational disorder deepens institutional weakness. Outputs from one domain return as inputs into the other. Trust declines, and therefore compliance becomes harder. Compliance weakens, and therefore state performance deteriorates further. Performance deteriorates, and therefore adversarial narratives become more plausible. Those narratives spread, and therefore legitimacy erodes again. The system begins to reproduce its own failure conditions.

This is why a systems frame is indispensable. The language of incidents—one riot, one rumor, one election dispute, one platform operation, one surge of violence—captures visibility but not architecture. Systems fail long before they collapse in public. Corrosion precedes rupture.

Positive Peace is useful here precisely because it asks us to examine the quality of the underlying architecture rather than merely the drama of breakdown. The Institute for Economics and Peace defines Positive Peace as the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies, and treats it not only as a normative aspiration but as an empirical measure of societal resilience. Its 2024 report argues that Positive Peace can serve as a predictor of substantial future falls in peace and describes it as an excellent measure of societal resilience.[6]

The importance of this shift is methodological as much as conceptual. Positive Peace invites us to ask not merely why a particular crisis occurred, but why a given system was unable to absorb disturbance without spiralling. That is a different question. It moves analysis upstream. It asks about institutional reliability, social trust, inclusion, corruption, information integrity, elite incentives, civic cohesion, and the legitimacy of public authority. It also clarifies that fragility is not an exotic condition confined to the officially "fragile" state. The OECD's 2025 report explicitly moves away from a binary label toward spectrum analysis, recognizing fragility as a condition that can affect states, systems, and communities in varying degrees.[1]

This matters because hostile actors rarely create social fracture from nothing. More often, they exploit, accelerate, and weaponize fractures already present. The OECD's 2025 assessment is especially clear that state and non-state actors increasingly analyse the sources of risk and resilience in fragile settings not as conditions to repair, but as opportunities to leverage and exploit for political, economic, and security ends. That observation should not be confined to conflict theatres alone. It describes a wider strategic logic: fragility itself becomes terrain.[1]

For that reason, root-cause analysis is not a luxury. It is the minimum standard of serious diagnosis. If we stop at proximate triggers, we remain trapped at the level of symptoms. An online falsehood sparks unrest; a manipulated video inflames communal tension; a contested count fractures legitimacy. All of this is real. None of it is deep enough. The deeper question is what kind of political and informational order makes such episodes recurrent, believable, and difficult to reverse. When a population no longer trusts that institutions are reliable, fair, open, and capable, disinformation gains not only reach but plausibility. When public communication is weak, opaque, or delayed, strategic falsification fills the interpretive gap. And when governance is already marked by exclusion, capture, or clientelism, the information sphere becomes less a mirror of disorder than one of its active mechanisms.[2,3,5]

The argument of this book begins, then, with a refusal of false sequencing. It is too simple to say that institutions fail first and narratives follow. It is also too simple to say that information

warfare begins outside the state and corrodes it from the perimeter inward. In reality, the visible starting point is often not the true beginning. The first public fracture may only be the first moment when a much older weakness becomes legible.

So the question that opens this inquiry is not rhetorical. It is diagnostic, and it must remain open longer than policy discourse usually allows: what fails first—the institution, or the information environment that makes the institution thinkable, believable, and governable at all? The answer, in many cases, is that by the time the crisis becomes visible, the two failures are already inside one another.

Notes

1. OECD, States of Fragility 2025 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025).
2. OECD, OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions: 2024 Results (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), especially the chapter 'Trust and Information Integrity'.
3. World Bank, World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017).
4. U.S. Government Accountability Office, Information Environment: Opportunities and Threats to DOD's National Security Mission, GAO-22-104714 (Washington, DC: GAO, 2022).
5. OECD, Governance Responses to Disinformation: How Open Government Principles Can Inform Policy Responses (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).
6. Institute for Economics and Peace, Positive Peace Report 2024 (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024).

Chapter 2

What We Mean by Fragile

Policy discourse often treats fragility as if it were self-evident. A state is called fragile when violence rises, elections fail, ministries stall, or authority looks thin. That usage is convenient. It is also analytically weak. It collapses distinct conditions into a single label and then mistakes visibility for diagnosis. The result is predictable: interventions are designed against the most visible symptom rather than the structural condition producing it. A government may look intact and already be fragile. Another may look disorderly and still retain significant load-bearing capacity. Optics are not the measure. Structure is .[1,2]

The first distinction is between weakness and fragility. State weakness is partial erosion of capacity. It describes reduced performance in one or more domains without assuming systemic destabilization. A weak state may tax unevenly, govern peripheral territory badly, deliver services inconsistently, or rely on patronage to maintain political order. Yet weakness alone does not tell us whether the system can absorb further strain. It is a functional description, not a structural diagnosis. Fragility is narrower and more consequential. It refers to deterioration in the system's ability to manage, absorb, and redistribute stress across institutions, communities, and time. The OECD definition is useful here because it treats fragility as the interaction of exposure to risk and insufficient resilience in a state, system, or community to manage or mitigate that risk . Weakness concerns impaired performance. Fragility concerns impaired endurance.[1]

Failure is different again. A failed state has lost core governance functions to a degree that central authority no longer reliably provides security, enforces rules, or sustains minimal political legitimacy across its territory. Rotberg's formulation remains useful because it links failure to the inability to deliver essential political goods, above all security and predictable rule structures . Failure is therefore not a low score on administrative quality. It is a more advanced condition in which the state's monopoly functions have become discontinuous, contested, or hollow. Collapse goes further still. Collapse is not severe weakness. It is systemic dissolution — the point at which central institutions no longer operate as an organizing authority and political order fragments into rival, local, or improvised forms. Here the architecture of the state does not merely bend. It ceases to coordinate the system as a system .[3,4]

These distinctions matter because they change the diagnostic question. If weakness, fragility, failure, and collapse are treated as interchangeable, analysis becomes temporally flat. Everything appears as a version of the same problem at different levels of alarm. It is not. A weak state may remain durable for decades. A fragile state may still display impressive formal continuity. A failed state may continue to hold diplomatic recognition and even some bureaucratic routines. A collapsed state may contain islands of local governance amid national disintegration. Conflation obscures sequence, mechanism, and remedy. Capacity-building may help weakness. It will not, by itself, repair fragility if the problem lies in declining systemic resilience. Security-sector support may address failure in one domain while leaving the underlying fragility gradient untouched. And collapse cannot be understood as simply "more failure." It is a different structural condition .[2,3,4]

That is why fragility should be treated as a gradient rather than an event. It is not a threshold crossed at the moment violence becomes visible or institutions stop performing in public. It develops through the progressive erosion of load-bearing capacity — the ability of a system to continue producing functional output under increasing strain. This matters because systems do not fail only when functions disappear. They fail when stress can no longer be redistributed without cumulative damage. A ministry may still exist, courts may still sit, and a currency may still circulate, while the system's capacity to absorb another fiscal shock, legitimacy crisis, communal rupture, or informational assault has already narrowed sharply. Formal architecture survives. Structural tolerance does not .[1,5]

Load-bearing capacity is therefore the more precise analytic term. It directs attention away from whether institutions are present and toward whether they can carry weight. In practice, that means asking whether governance can correct error, maintain compliance, preserve legitimacy, and coordinate response under pressure. It also means asking whether strain in one part of the system can be contained without triggering failures elsewhere. This is where fragility becomes visible as a systems condition. The danger is not simply low performance. It is interdependence under stress. A state becomes fragile when setbacks stop being local and start becoming transmissible .[1,2]

The Positive Peace framework helps map that condition with unusual clarity. Its value is often misunderstood because its language sounds aspirational. Analytically, it is better read as measurement architecture. The eight pillars identify structural variables that shape whether a society can absorb shocks without political and institutional unraveling . A well-functioning government matters not as an ideal type but because it determines whether decisions can be

implemented with legitimacy and continuity. A sound business environment matters because productive economic coordination reduces the volatility that turns fiscal strain into social breakdown. Equitable distribution of resources matters because concentrated exclusion raises the probability that stress will be experienced as abandonment rather than hardship. Acceptance of the rights of others matters because systems fragment faster when difference is coded as threat. Good relations with neighbors matter because external pressure and regional contagion can overwhelm already thin margins of resilience. Free flow of information matters because systems cannot adapt when feedback is distorted, suppressed, or strategically polluted. High levels of human capital matter because institutional recovery depends on cognitive, technical, and social capability. Low levels of corruption matter because corruption diverts resources while also degrading trust in the fairness of allocation and rule enforcement .[5,6]

What matters most is that these variables are interdependent. The IEP's work shows that the pillars are mutually reinforcing rather than isolated traits . That makes them useful for fragility analysis. The degradation of one pillar rarely remains confined to one pillar. Corruption weakens government performance and public trust. Distorted information degrades cooperation and policy feedback. Unequal distribution sharpens political exclusion and lowers legitimacy. Poor neighbor relations raise external stress. Fragility, in that sense, is not the absence of a single function. It is the cumulative reduction of structural support across multiple load-bearing variables.[5,6]

The diagnostic consequence is significant. A state can retain the outward form of governance while losing the capacity that makes governance resilient. It can still issue decrees, hold elections, and police urban centers while becoming less able to absorb shocks, correct failures, or maintain legitimacy when pressure rises. That is fragility in the precise sense relevant to this essay: not institutional absence, but structural thinning. Not collapse, but the condition that makes collapse thinkable. Once defined this way, the next analytical step becomes unavoidable. If fragility is partly determined by the integrity of the system's feedback channels, then the information environment is not adjacent to governance. It is one of the structures through which governance bears weight at all.

Notes

1. *OECD. States of Fragility 2025. OECD Publishing. 2025. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/states-of-fragility-2025_81982370-en.html*
2. *Cebotari, Aliona, et al. State Fragility: Towards a Conceptual Framework. IMF Working Paper WP/25/205. International Monetary Fund. 2025. https://www.imf.org/-/media/files/publications/wp/2025/english/wpiea2025205-source-pdf.pdf*

3. *Rotberg, Robert I. "Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators." In State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror. Brookings Institution Press. 2003. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/statefailureandstateweaknessinatimeofterror_chapter.pdf*

4. *Di John, Jonathan. Conceptualising the Causes and Consequences of Failed States: A Critical Review of the Literature. Crisis States Research Centre Working Paper No. 25. London School of Economics. 2008. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/57427/wp25.2.pdf*

5. *Institute for Economics and Peace. Positive Peace Report 2024. 2024. https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/PPR-2024-web.pdf*

6. *Institute for Economics and Peace. "Positive Peace." 2026. https://www.economicsandpeace.org/research/positive-peace/*

Chapter 3

The Information Environment as Infrastructure

Infrastructure is easiest to notice when it breaks. Roads announce themselves in closure. Currency announces itself in panic. Courts announce themselves when judgment no longer settles dispute but extends it. In ordinary time, infrastructure recedes from attention because its real function is not spectacle but possibility. It permits movement before anyone names the road, exchange before anyone thinks about the note, adjudication before anyone questions the court. A functioning political order depends on such background conditions. They do not merely support the visible system. They make coordinated life legible enough for the visible system to operate at all.

The information environment belongs in that category. It is often discussed as though it were adjacent to governance: a domain of media, platforms, messaging, and public opinion that sits near the state without being constitutive of it. That framing is too weak. Information is not simply what circulates around institutions. It is one of the conditions through which institutions become intelligible to the people expected to obey, contest, trust, or repair them. Governments do not govern populations that encounter the state in pure form. They govern populations that encounter it through reports, signals, narratives, claims, corrections, rumors, official statements, leaks, images, and the cumulative credibility of these forms. Where that environment degrades, state capacity does not merely become harder to exercise. Statehood itself becomes harder to read.[1,2,3]

This is not a metaphorical claim. It is a structural one. A court depends on more than judges and statutes; it depends on a public information environment in which rulings can be known, interpreted, transmitted, and distinguished from fabrication. Currency depends on more than paper or code; it depends on a shared belief that value signals are credible enough to coordinate exchange. Roads depend on more than asphalt; they depend on signage, maps, rules, and a common understanding of how movement is organized. In each case, the physical or formal system requires an informational counterpart. Governance is no different. The state can only act coherently when decisions, intentions, capacities, and limits are communicated through channels that retain enough credibility to organize public response. When those channels are persistently distorted, governance loses not only efficiency but legibility.[3,4]

That is why the information environment should be treated as infrastructure in the same sense as courts, currency, and roads — not because it resembles them in form, but because it performs the same foundational function. It lowers uncertainty. It stabilizes expectation. It allows dispersed actors to coordinate around a sufficiently shared account of what is happening, who has authority, what rules apply, and which claims can be provisionally trusted. This account is never perfect. Political order has never depended on unanimity. It has depended on a floor beneath fragmentation: enough common ground for disagreement to remain political rather than disintegrative. The degradation of that floor is not a communications problem in the narrow sense. It is a governance problem of first order.[1,2,5]

Digitization has made that degradation structurally easier in at least three ways. The first is speed asymmetry between truth and rumor. The second is the platform incentive structure that rewards conflict-amplifying content. The third is the erosion of epistemic common ground. These are often treated as separate pathologies. They are better understood as mutually reinforcing fragility vectors within one information architecture.

The first vector, speed asymmetry, is often described as though it were merely a feature of human credulity. That is incomplete. Human susceptibility matters, but the more important point is architectural. Modern digital systems allow low-cost publication, high-velocity replication, and algorithmically assisted distribution before verification mechanisms can operate at comparable speed. False or destabilizing claims therefore enjoy a structural advantage in the early phase of circulation. Correction is slower not simply because institutions are cautious, but because verification is expensive, socially contested, and procedurally constrained. The burden of evidence sits with correction, while the burden of immediacy sits with rumor. In that contest, time itself becomes partisan.[6,7]

The empirical literature supports this asymmetry with unusual consistency. The large-scale study by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral found that false news on Twitter diffused farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth across all categories they examined. Falsehood reached large audiences more quickly, and the difference could not be explained away simply by bot activity; human sharing behavior was central to the effect. The point here is not that all falsehood always defeats all truth. It is that the contemporary information architecture systematically reduces the time available for deliberative correction while increasing the reward for emotionally arresting first claims. In governance terms, that matters because institutions often depend on procedural tempo. Elections, emergency response, public health guidance,

judicial clarification, and crisis communication all require time to verify, coordinate, and explain. Rumor competes against those time requirements by bypassing them.[6,7]

The structural consequence is not merely confusion. It is a change in the burden under which public authority operates. When destabilizing claims move faster than corrective ones, institutions are forced into a reactive posture. They spend more time chasing narrative consequences and less time governing underlying conditions. This is not only inefficient. It degrades credibility. A state that is perpetually late to its own interpretation begins to appear less like an authority and more like a participant in an argument it no longer controls. The cost is cumulative. Each delayed correction teaches the public that official communication arrives after affect has already hardened. Once that pattern becomes familiar, even accurate correction may register not as clarification but as spin.[2,4]

The second vector lies in platform incentive structures. Digital platforms do not need to intend social harm for their systems to produce it. Their central operational problem is ranking abundance under conditions of limited attention. Engagement-based optimization is one answer to that problem. It is commercially rational, computationally tractable, and behaviorally powerful. But optimization around engagement also privileges content that arrests, provokes, divides, or threatens, because such content often generates stronger and more immediate responses than nuance, uncertainty, or procedural explanation. The architecture does not need explicit malice to amplify conflict. It needs only an incentive structure that treats reaction as value.[5,8]

Recent evidence strengthens that concern. A preregistered audit of Twitter's ranking system found that an engagement-based algorithm amplified divisive content more than ranking based on what users themselves said they wanted to see. The study's authors concluded that posts optimized for engagement were more polarizing than a chronological alternative and underperformed on users' stated preferences. This does not prove that all platforms, all periods, or all audiences behave identically. It does establish something important: conflict amplification is not only a cultural pattern emerging from bad users. It can be an endogenous product of ranking systems designed to maximize behavioral response. That distinction matters analytically because it relocates the source of strain from isolated content to recurrent architecture.[8,5]

Once again, the governance consequence is larger than the media consequence. Institutions rely on communication environments in which credibility can accumulate through steadiness, competence, and procedural consistency. Engagement systems often reward the opposite

temporal logic. They elevate salience over sequence, heat over coherence, and spectacle over calibration. The result is not simply more noise. It is a reweighting of public attention away from the signals by which institutions usually establish reliability. Governments can adapt to criticism; democratic systems require it. What they struggle to absorb is a communication order in which attention is persistently drawn toward material that intensifies antagonism while flattening context. Under those conditions, even legitimate contestation becomes harder to separate from engineered escalation.[5,7]

The third vector is epistemic common-ground erosion. This requires careful definition. The issue is not mere disagreement about policy, value, or ideology. Political communities have always contained deep disagreement. The issue is the progressive dissolution of shared empirical starting points from which disagreement can be conducted. A political order does not require consensus on ends. It does require enough agreement on facts, procedures, and trusted methods of correction to keep conflict within governable bounds. When that common ground thins, institutions face a different kind of load. They must govern populations that no longer disagree from the same world.[2,5,9]

RAND's work on "Truth Decay" remains useful here because it names a pattern broader than isolated misinformation events: increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretation, a blurring of the line between opinion and fact, and declining trust in institutions previously charged with adjudicating truth claims. The OECD's recent work on trust and information integrity reaches a related concern from the governance side, emphasizing that the information people encounter shapes their perceptions of institutions and that information integrity is tied to democratic trust. The United Nations has made the same point in a more global register, warning that threats to information integrity impede collective action and undermine progress across public policy domains. Together these sources support a harder conclusion: epistemic fragmentation is not just a cultural mood. It is a structural reduction in the capacity of a society to organize around shared signals.[9,2,5,4]

That reduction has measurable governance implications even when formal institutions remain in place. Public compliance becomes more variable because messages do not land in a common interpretive field. Crisis response becomes less reliable because official signals compete not only with dissent but with rival realities. Elections become more vulnerable to legitimacy disputes because procedural facts no longer settle the matter. Courts can still issue decisions, but those decisions lose coordinating force when no common standard exists for distinguishing lawful adjudication from partisan fabrication. None of this requires the abolition of institutions. It

requires only a sufficiently degraded environment of shared recognition. At that point, governance persists in form while weakening in social intelligibility.[2,3,4]

These three vectors are analytically distinct, but they do not operate independently. Speed asymmetry rewards first movers and weakens correction. Engagement incentives amplify the very kinds of content most likely to exploit that speed. The resulting circulation environment accelerates epistemic fragmentation by making common factual baselines harder to stabilize. In turn, a fragmented public becomes easier to target with further rumor, manipulation, and divisive optimization. What emerges is not a series of isolated information failures but a self-reinforcing system of degraded legibility. The information environment begins to lose what Chapter 2 described, in institutional terms, as load-bearing capacity. Here the relevant form is epistemic load-bearing capacity: the ability of an information order to carry the weight of coordination, correction, legitimacy, and collective judgment under stress.[1,2,5]

That concept clarifies what is actually at stake. An information environment with high epistemic load-bearing capacity does not eliminate falsehood, conflict, or manipulation. No real society can do that. It does, however, preserve enough credibility, plurality, verifiability, and corrective function for public institutions to remain governable under strain. A degraded environment does the opposite. It makes error harder to correct, authority harder to interpret, coordination harder to sustain, and bad-faith exploitation cheaper to execute. The injury is therefore not confined to discourse. It travels outward into administration, legitimacy, compliance, and security. The state loses room to absorb shock because one of the infrastructures through which shock is recognized and managed has itself become unstable.[1,3,5]

Seen in that light, information warfare requires a sharper definition than the conventional image of hostile messages aimed at a target population. That image is not wrong; it is incomplete. The more consequential operation is not always persuasion in the narrow sense. It is the deliberate exploitation of a degraded information infrastructure to weaken the conditions under which authority can be known, trusted, contested, or obeyed. The target is not only opinion. It is intelligibility. The aim is not merely to make citizens believe a falsehood, but to make the public arena less capable of distinguishing correction from manipulation, competence from theater, and institutional signal from ambient noise.[4,5,7]

A road cratered beyond use still exists on the map. A currency in panic still bears its denomination. A court stripped of coordinating authority may continue to issue judgments. So too with the information environment. Its degradation does not always announce itself as

disappearance. More often it appears as continuing circulation without reliable settlement — more speech, more signals, more claims, and less shared capacity to judge which of them can bear civic weight. Under those conditions, information warfare is not best understood as a weapon deployed against the state. It is a solvent applied to the conditions that make statehood legible in the first place.

Notes

1. *Institute for Economics and Peace, Positive Peace Report 2024 (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024).*
2. *OECD, OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions: 2024 Results (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), esp. chapter 5, "Trust and Information Integrity."*
3. *U.S. Government Accountability Office, Information Environment: Opportunities and Threats to DOD's National Security Mission, GAO-22-104714 (Washington, DC: GAO, 2022).*
4. *United Nations, Information Integrity on Digital Platforms, Policy Brief No. 8 (New York: United Nations, 2023).*
5. *OECD, Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024).*
6. *Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," Science 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1146–51.*
7. *OECD, Facts not Fakes, 2024; GAO, Information Environment, 2022.*
8. *Samuel Milli et al., "Engagement, User Satisfaction, and the Amplification of Divisive Content on Social Media," PNAS Nexus 4, no. 3 (2025): pgaf062.*
9. *Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018).*

Chapter 4

The Feedback Architecture of Collapse

The previous chapters established the terms of diagnosis. Fragility was defined not as visible disorder alone, but as declining systemic resilience. The information environment was defined not as commentary surrounding governance, but as one of the conditions through which governance becomes intelligible, credible, and socially operational. This chapter completes that diagnostic movement by showing how those conditions interact. The point is not simply that institutional weakness and informational disorder coexist. It is that they reinforce one another through recurrent feedback structures that make deterioration cumulative rather than episodic. Once those structures are in motion, the system does not merely suffer repeated shocks. It begins to reproduce its own vulnerability.[1,2,3]

The first mechanism is delegitimization. Institutions do not lose legitimacy only when they cease to exist. They lose legitimacy when they cease to persuade the population that authority remains capable, fair enough to obey, and coherent enough to trust under strain. In fragile settings, that erosion often begins with performance failure in ordinary governance functions — security, dispute resolution, service provision, fiscal reliability, administrative consistency. These failures generate grievances not because citizens are abstractly dissatisfied, but because daily life becomes harder to coordinate through public authority. When the state cannot reliably perform, it also cannot easily narrate itself as competent. The gap between official claim and lived experience becomes visible. That gap is politically consequential because it creates demand for alternative explanations of why order is failing and who is responsible.[3,4]

At that point, delegitimization no longer requires the invention of falsehood from whole cloth. It can proceed through the amplification, reframing, and strategic sequencing of real failures. This is why information warfare is often more potent in fragile contexts than in resilient ones. The adversary does not need to fabricate a broken service, a corrupt office, a delayed salary payment, or a violent abuse. It needs only to make these failures narratively cumulative — to recode discrete disappointments as evidence of systemic bad faith, irreversible decay, or enemy capture. Where institutions already struggle to maintain credibility, that narrative work travels quickly because it rests on something the public can recognize. The structural force lies in the conversion of experienced weakness into generalized illegitimacy. Once that conversion occurs, trust falls further, compliance becomes more conditional, and institutional performance degrades again under the weight of reduced cooperation. The loop closes there: weak delivery

produces mistrust, mistrust increases receptivity to hostile or opportunistic narratives, and those narratives further weaken the institution's capacity to govern.[2,3,4,6]

This loop matters because legitimacy is not ornamental. It is a functional input into governance. Political order depends not only on coercive capacity, but on the ability of institutions to secure enough belief to organize behavior without exhausting themselves through force or improvisation. When that belief erodes, the cost of governing rises across the system. Rule enforcement becomes more expensive, policy communication less effective, crisis management slower, and elite contestation harder to contain. The delegitimization cycle therefore acts as more than a reputational problem. It changes the operating conditions under which every other state function must work. The system becomes heavier for itself.[3,6]

The second mechanism is capability erosion. Fragility does not only diminish what a state can do in the material domains of security, finance, and administration. It also weakens the state's ability to maintain the informational functions through which modern governance monitors, interprets, and answers narrative threats. These functions include strategic communication, public information verification, media regulation consistent with law, electoral information protection, crisis messaging, analytical monitoring, and institutional co-ordination across agencies responsible for digital risk. In stronger systems, these capacities help prevent the information environment from becoming wholly ungoverned. In weaker systems, they degrade early because they depend on exactly the capacities fragility consumes: money, trained personnel, technical infrastructure, interagency trust, and bureaucratic continuity.[1,4,5]

The result is not a neutral absence. It is the production of uncontested informational space. When oversight, response, and verification functions deteriorate, the public arena does not remain open in some civically balanced sense. It becomes easier to dominate, distort, and saturate. Domestic elites can exploit that space to protect themselves from accountability, redirect blame, and monopolize narrative legitimacy. External actors can use the same opening to intensify confusion, deepen distrust, and push the target state into a more defensive posture. The vulnerability here is structural. A state with declining information capacity loses one of the few means by which it can interrupt feedback between rumor, grievance, and institutional doubt. It becomes less able to contest false framing, less able to explain policy failure honestly, and less able to create a credible common record during crisis. What looks like a communications gap is therefore a systems weakness. Capability loss in the information domain enlarges the field in which all other pressures can operate.[4,5,6]

This is why the capability-erosion loop is more severe than a standard policy failure. It is recursive. As fragility rises, information capacity weakens. As information capacity weakens, hostile and self-interested actors gain freer access to public attention. Their interventions increase confusion, sharpen accusation, and reduce confidence in institutional coherence. Reduced confidence then makes co-ordinated state response even harder, because agencies work under greater distrust, citizens discount official explanation more quickly, and political elites face stronger incentives to defect into short-term narrative survival. The state loses not only authority over events, but authority over interpretation. Once that happens, recovery becomes harder because the system can no longer reliably communicate what is wrong, what is being done, or why public restraint should still hold.[2,4,5]

The third mechanism is grievance amplification. Fragile states rarely begin as blank surfaces onto which disinformation simply writes conflict. They usually contain older fracture lines — ethnic exclusion, regional neglect, uneven development, historical humiliation, sectarian fear, predatory policing, captured opportunity structures. These grievances may remain politically latent for long periods, even when widely felt. They become systemically dangerous when actors can identify them, target them, and transform them from background resentment into active political cleavage. Research on group-based inequality is especially relevant here because it shows that political and economic inequalities aligned with identity categories generate powerful grievances that can support mobilization toward conflict.[7,8]

The informational dimension is decisive because it alters the speed and scale with which these latent fractures become actionable. Content engineered around recognizable grievance has a lower burden of persuasion than content invented without social anchoring. It speaks into memory, injury, and existing suspicion. It can therefore harden identity boundaries more quickly than ordinary political communication, especially where trust in national institutions is already thin. The effect is not simply emotional escalation. It is the reduction of political space for negotiated accommodation. As narratives frame compromise as betrayal, coexistence as submission, or procedural delay as proof of enemy capture, groups become less willing to accept institutional mediation. Suspicion rises, reciprocity falls, and moderate actors lose room to operate. The grievance remains structurally old, but the information environment converts it into immediate strategic pressure.[6,7,8]

That pressure can move toward violence without any single message being the sole cause. Structural inference is the right register here. Available evidence indicates that information operations are most dangerous where they attach themselves to pre-existing inequalities, fears,

or identity threats rather than attempting to manufacture them ex nihilo. The pattern suggests that the information environment functions less as an origin of grievance than as a force multiplier for grievances already embedded in the social order. Once amplified, those grievances increase the likelihood of mobilization, retaliation, and institutional overload. Security forces face more local distrust. Political bargaining becomes narrower. Administrative systems are forced to respond to escalating social fracture with declining legitimacy. The loop then closes: structural grievance is amplified into active division, active division raises mobilization pressure, and rising pressure accelerates institutional breakdown.[1,7,8]

These loops do not operate in sequence. That is the crucial analytic point. Delegitimization, capability erosion, and grievance amplification move simultaneously and feed one another. A decline in service delivery and institutional credibility intensifies delegitimization. Delegitimization reduces compliance and co-operation, which weakens state capacity further, including its capacity to monitor and respond in the information domain. Reduced information capacity then leaves grievance-targeted narratives less contested and more socially effective. Those narratives harden group boundaries and increase political and communal tension. As that tension rises, institutional failures become more visible and more punishing, which drives a new cycle of delegitimization. Each loop supplies energy to the others.[1,2,4,5,7]

This interaction explains why fragile systems often appear to decline suddenly even when their underlying weaknesses are old. The decline is not truly sudden. What changes is the density of reinforcement. Once multiple loops begin operating at once, deterioration stops being linear. It becomes cascading. A fiscal shock is no longer only a fiscal shock because it also weakens communication capacity, expands narrative vulnerability, and intensifies social blame. A disinformation surge is no longer only a media event because it also worsens compliance, narrows elite room for compromise, and deepens distrust in already stressed institutions. An outbreak of communal tension is no longer only a public-order problem because it also confirms narratives of state incapacity and invites further manipulation. Under those conditions, each disturbance travels farther through the system than its immediate cause would suggest.[2,4,5,6]

There is also a threshold problem. In earlier phases, intervention can still interrupt the loops because institutions retain enough authority, capacity, and social credit to restore some degree of co-ordination. Beyond a certain point, however, the loops become increasingly self-sustaining. Trust has fallen too far for routine official communication to settle dispute. Information capacity has weakened too far for the state to contest manipulation effectively. Grievance has been activated too deeply for procedural accommodation to look credible to

affected groups. At that stage, external assistance becomes more expensive and less effective not simply because the crisis is larger, but because the system's internal corrective mechanisms have thinned. Repair must then work against a machine already generating its own disorder.[1,2,3]

The diagnostic weight of this chapter lies there. Collapse is not best understood as a single terminal event reached when institutions finally fail in public. It is better understood as the point at which mutually reinforcing loops of delegitimization, capability erosion, and grievance amplification have reduced the system's capacity to arrest its own decline. By the time that condition becomes obvious, much of the architecture of failure has already been built. The chapters that follow will turn from diagnosis to the deeper drivers of exploitation and then to the question of response. But any constructive answer worth defending must begin with the mechanism mapped here: a system in which institutional fragility and informational degradation do not merely coexist, but collaborate in the production of collapse.[1,2,4,6,8]

Notes

1. *OECD. States of Fragility 2025. OECD Publishing. 2025. DOI: 10.1787/81982370-en.*
2. *Institute for Economics and Peace. Positive Peace Report 2024: Analysing the Factors That Build, Predict and Sustain Peace. Institute for Economics and Peace. 2024.*
3. *World Bank. World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law. World Bank. 2017.*
4. *OECD. Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity. OECD Publishing. 2024.*
5. *U.S. Government Accountability Office. Information Environment: Opportunities and Threats to DOD's National Security Mission. GAO-22-104714. 2022.*
6. *United Nations. Information Integrity on Digital Platforms. Policy Brief No. 8. United Nations. 2023.*
7. *Lars-Erik Cederman, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Halvard Buhaug. Inequality, Grievances, and Civil War. Cambridge University Press. 2013. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9781139084161.*
8. *Frances Stewart. Horizontal Inequalities as a Cause of Conflict: A Review of CRISE Findings. World Bank. 2010.*

Chapter 5

Violence That Predates the Bullet

By the time a body falls, the argument has usually been underway for years. The school that never opened on time, the clinic that ran out of medicine before the month did, the salary delayed long enough to become humiliation, the district that learned to expect less because less was always what arrived — these are not yet the scenes most people mean when they say violence. They leave no crater. They produce no immediate photograph of impact. They do something quieter and often more durable. They teach a population, slowly and repeatedly, where care is absent, where dignity is negotiable, and which lives the system has already priced below repair.[1,2,3]

That is why Johan Galtung's distinction between direct and structural violence remains analytically necessary rather than merely morally evocative. In his 1969 formulation, violence is present when human beings are influenced in ways that keep their actual somatic and mental realizations below their potential realizations. Direct violence is visible: an assault, an execution, a bombardment, a beating. Structural violence is different. It is embedded in the ordinary arrangement of institutions and opportunities. Its force lies precisely in the fact that it often lacks a single obvious perpetrator standing over the scene of harm. The injury is distributed through the architecture itself — through access denied, vulnerability normalized, and life chances sorted in ways that appear administrative before they appear moral.[1]

That distinction matters in this essay because it clarifies what fragility is. Fragility is not simply the weakening of a state in the abstract. It is, more often, the cumulative operational expression of structural violence. A system becomes fragile when risk rises faster than resilience, when institutions lose the capacity to absorb strain without transmitting damage downward, and when ordinary governance ceases to function as protection and begins functioning as exposure. The OECD's current framework is useful here because it defines fragility as the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient resilience in a state, system, or community to manage, absorb, or mitigate that risk. Read through Galtung, that is not just an administrative condition. It is a distributional one. Someone always lives inside the insufficiency. Someone always absorbs the cost.[3,4]

Seen this way, fragility is not absence. It is arrangement. It is not the void left behind when governance disappears, but the pattern established when governance allocates protection

unevenly, credibility selectively, and sacrifice predictably. A ministry may remain open and still participate in structural violence if its continuity masks chronic abandonment. A legal order may remain formally intact and still distribute harm if recourse is available in theory but inaccessible in practice. A state does not need to collapse to become injurious. It need only make insecurity ordinary for some populations while preserving enough institutional language to describe that condition as unfortunate rather than designed. The system's greatest concealment is often its ability to call patterned harm a regrettable outcome instead of a governing logic.[1,3,4]

This is where the Positive Peace framework becomes especially clarifying. The Institute for Economics and Peace defines Positive Peace as the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies, and organizes that condition through eight mutually reinforcing pillars. When those pillars are treated seriously, structural violence becomes newly legible. It appears not only in spectacular repression, but in the sustained deficit of the very conditions that make peaceful social life durable: a well-functioning government, equitable distribution of resources, acceptance of the rights of others, free flow of information, low levels of corruption, and the rest. The harm is not only that these goods are missing. The deeper harm is that their absence is rarely random. Their deficits cluster. They accumulate. They reproduce each other across time until deprivation hardens into political expectation.[2]

That is why kinetic conflict is so often misread. The bullet is treated as the beginning because it is the first moment the system becomes undeniable to outsiders. It is visible, countable, and horrifying in ways that force recognition. But in many cases it is closer to a terminus than an origin. The violence began earlier, in slower forms: in educational exclusion that narrowed the future before anyone picked up a weapon; in corruption that converted public goods into private insulation; in rights denied unevenly enough to teach one group that citizenship was conditional; in information systems too distorted to let grievance travel upward before anger traveled sideways. Positive Peace does not eliminate tragedy, but its framework helps show why some societies absorb grievance politically while others carry grievance until it combusts.[2,3,4]

This also sharpens the link between structural violence and information warfare. Information operations are rarely most powerful where they must invent injury from nothing. They are strongest where the wound already exists and public language for it has become unstable, distrusted, or strategically available. The narrative does not create the underlying grievance. It names it, selects it, frames it, and redirects it toward a target. That redirection matters. A person whose life has been thinned by exclusion does not need to be persuaded that the system has failed them. The more consequential contest is over interpretation: Who caused the injury? Who

benefited from it? Which neighbor, official, outsider, or minority can be made to stand in for a structure too large, too abstract, or too protected to confront directly? Here information warfare feeds on the moral residue of structural violence. It weaponizes recognition before it weaponizes belief.[1,2]

The chapter's central question emerges from that mechanism with uncomfortable force: who is named as the enemy when the actual adversary is a system? Systems are notoriously difficult to hate with precision. They are diffuse, procedural, layered, and often partially impersonal. They injure through routines, incentives, exclusions, and neglect rather than through a single face that can be held responsible in one frame. Human beings, by contrast, are narratively convenient. They can be pointed to, denounced, and punished. When structural violence becomes politically legible without becoming structurally intelligible, it tends to produce named enemies in place of diagnosed systems. A bureaucrat stands in for corruption. A minority stands in for scarcity. A migrant stands in for abandonment. A journalist stands in for humiliation. An opposition figure stands in for decades of distributive failure. This substitution is not incidental to collapse. It is one of its operating mechanisms.[1,3]

The danger is not only moral, though it is that. It is also analytic. Once structural failure is personalized, remedies become punitive rather than reconstructive. Energy moves toward expulsion, suppression, vengeance, and symbolic victory — the forms of action most capable of satisfying injured perception while leaving institutional architecture intact. The wrong enemy can be defeated repeatedly while the system that generated the grievance remains available to generate it again. This is one reason fragile societies can cycle through leaders, factions, and scapegoats without escaping the condition that made each successive blame story persuasive. Governance changes hands while structural violence retains authorship.[3,4]

The QAP standard of disciplined inference matters here because this argument should not be overstated. Not every grievance is structurally produced. Not every information campaign successfully weaponizes real injury. Not every episode of direct violence is the downstream product of institutional design. Human agency remains real, and opportunism remains morally consequential. But the broader pattern is difficult to ignore: where structural harms are normalized over time, societies appear more vulnerable to narratives that convert diffuse suffering into targeted hostility. That is not because people are irrational. It is because misidentification offers cognitive economy. A system is hard to grasp and harder to punish. A named enemy offers immediacy, direction, and the emotional relief of specificity. Within collapsing orders, that relief can be politically irresistible.[1,2,3]

So the moral center of this chapter is also its analytic center. The first violence is often not the shot, but the long instruction that some lives will wait longer, travel farther, pay more, receive less, and be heard only after crisis has made listening unavoidable. Direct violence terrifies because it is sudden. Structural violence endures because it is taught as normal. By the time conflict arrives in its visible form, many of the conditions that made it plausible have already been administered, budgeted, regulated, ignored, and explained away. The system has been speaking for years before anyone calls it war.[1,2]

And that leaves the question where it must remain. When the actual adversary is a system, who gets named as the enemy? The answer is rarely the system itself. Systems are protected by distance, complexity, and habit. They survive by teaching injury as background and then offering human substitutes when the bill comes due. That is why exploitation becomes possible in the next chapter. Information warfare does not arrive to discover an untouched society. It arrives to inhabit an injury already distributed, already normalized, already searching for a face.[2,3]

Notes

1. *Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', Journal of Peace Research, 6.3 (1969), 167–191.*
2. *Institute for Economics & Peace, Positive Peace Report 2024: Analysing the Factors That Build, Predict and Sustain Peace (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).*
3. *OECD, States of Fragility 2025 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025).*
4. *World Bank, World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017).*

Chapter 6

Information Warfare as a Fragility Accelerant

Information warfare is often described as most dangerous where the state is weakest. That formulation is directionally correct and structurally incomplete. The most permissive environment for information warfare is rarely total collapse. A fully collapsed order offers little institutional credibility left to corrode, little public trust left to invert, and little civic expectation left to weaponize. The more useful operating environment is the declining state — one in which institutions still function unevenly, legitimacy is contested rather than extinguished, and the social contract is fraying without having fully dissolved. In that interval, public authority still matters enough to be attacked, and public belief still matters enough to be manipulated. That is where information operations can do their most consequential work.[1,2,3]

This distinction matters because it shifts the analytic frame from technology to trajectory. Information warfare is not primarily a problem of platforms, synthetic media, or content volume in the abstract. Those are delivery mechanisms. The vulnerability is structural. It emerges where institutional decline has narrowed the margin for error but has not yet eliminated the expectation that institutions should still be able to govern. In such settings, narrative intervention has leverage because it acts on an environment already under strain. It does not need to create distrust from nothing. It needs only to redirect, deepen, and synchronize distrust that already exists in partial form. The effect is greatest in what the Positive Peace literature identifies as mid-range or transitional environments, where deficits in core pillars can still drive wider deterioration across the system.[1,4]

That is why information warfare should be understood here not as a subclass of disinformation, but as a broader method of exploiting fragile systems through the information environment. False content may be one instrument. It is not the whole instrument set. Selective amplification, insinuation, omission, timing, saturation, emotional cueing, identity framing, and the manipulation of interpretive tempo can all serve the same strategic end. The target is not merely opinion. It is the capacity of a strained political system to maintain legibility, legitimacy, and coordinated response. Chapter 4 traced the reinforcing loops through which this happens. The present task is narrower: to specify three operational mechanisms by which information warfare accelerates fragility where institutions are declining rather than absent. Those mechanisms are influence operations, information flooding, and identity-based mobilization. They are analytically distinct. In practice, they reinforce one another.

Influence operations are best understood as targeted interventions into contested belief environments. Their function is not crude persuasion in the mass-broadcast sense. Their function is precision interference — aimed at widening pre-existing fractures around specific institutions, leaders, or civic arrangements. The OECD's 2024 assessment is clear that disinformation campaigns by domestic or foreign actors can aggravate existing societal divisions, cast doubt on factual evidence, and undermine trust in democratic institutions. The key phrase is "existing." The operation works because it attaches to stress already present in the system.[1]

In declining systems, influence operations gain traction because the cost of plausibility is lower. A claim about electoral manipulation, bureaucratic corruption, judicial capture, or elite betrayal need not be fully true to be socially believable. It only has to resonate with enough prior disappointment to survive first contact. That is the critical difference between fragility and collapse. In collapse, public expectations may already be too thinned for targeted delegitimization to matter in a differentiated way. In decline, however, institutions still retain residual authority. They still command some compliance. They still arbitrate resources, law, and status. That makes them worth discrediting. An influence operation can therefore accelerate the delegitimization cycle by converting specific performance failures into generalized institutional suspicion.[1,3]

This mechanism maps directly onto several Positive Peace pillars. It exploits deficits in Free Flow of Information by degrading the conditions under which credible signals circulate. It exploits weaknesses in Well-Functioning Government by making administrative inconsistency narratively cumulative rather than episodic. It also reaches into Sound Business Environment, because uncertainty about institutional reliability raises transaction costs, narrows investment confidence, and increases the premium on private networks over public rules. The point is not that every influence campaign has measurable macroeconomic intent. It is that uncertainty and distrust do not remain confined to politics. They alter the operating environment more broadly.[1,4]

A second mechanism is information flooding. Here persuasion is no longer the primary objective. Exhaustion is. RAND's "firehose of falsehood" analysis remains useful because it identifies the strategic value of volume, repetition, multichannel delivery, and rapid circulation. High-volume information campaigns are difficult to counter not only because they spread falsehood, but because they compress the time available for verification and overload the audience's capacity to discriminate between competing claims. As RAND put it, it takes less time to make up facts than to verify them. The result is not simply misbelief. It is epistemic fatigue.[5]

In fragile decline, that fatigue is especially destructive because it attacks a system already short on interpretive reserve. A resilient order can absorb some informational excess because trusted institutions, media routines, and professional intermediaries still retain enough credibility to re-establish orientation. A declining order struggles to do so. Its corrective mechanisms are already under pressure. Its public communication channels are already distrusted by part of the population. Its agencies are often working with reduced coordination and slower response times. Under those conditions, flooding does not need to win the argument. It needs only to make the argument ungovernable. That pushes the capability-erosion loop identified in Chapter 4 into a new phase: institutions become so burdened by interpretive contest that they lose further capacity to govern the underlying crisis.[3,5]

The strategic effect of flooding is often misunderstood because analysts look for belief change where the more important effect is judgment collapse. When citizens are submerged in contradictory claims, partial truths, strategic leaks, emotional insinuations, and repeated allegations, many do not settle on a coherent false worldview. They settle on undifferentiated doubt. They cease to regard evidence as decisive, procedures as meaningful, or clarification as trustworthy. That condition is politically potent. A public that believes nothing with confidence is not more neutral. It is harder to coordinate, easier to polarize, and more likely to retreat into familiar identity cues, patronage networks, or affective loyalties as substitutes for evidence.[3,5,6]

This is why information flooding should not be mistaken for mere noise. It degrades Free Flow of Information by saturating the channel rather than censoring it. It weakens Well-Functioning Government by forcing institutions into a permanently reactive posture. It also affects Sound Business Environment indirectly, because markets and livelihoods depend on trustworthy signaling about rules, risk, and continuity. Where official communication no longer settles uncertainty, actors shift toward private hedging and short-termism. The wider system becomes less governable because more of its participants are operating under informational ambiguity that no one can reliably clear.[1,3,4,5]

The third mechanism is identity-based mobilization. This is not the manufacture of grievance from nothing. It is the reframing of structural grievance through exclusive communal narratives. Economic marginalization, ethnic exclusion, predatory policing, regional neglect, and institutional abandonment predate the information operation. What the operation changes is the interpretive grammar. It recodes injury in ways that substitute group identity for civic identity and make political resolution appear either impossible or illegitimate. The United Nations has warned that social media-enabled hate speech and disinformation can lead to

violence and death. That warning matters here not because every identity-framed narrative produces violence, but because declining systems give such narratives a wider field in which to harden.[6]

The structural significance of identity-based mobilization lies in its efficiency. A population that has lost confidence in equal citizenship does not need to be convinced that institutions are failing. It needs only to be shown who supposedly benefits from that failure and who supposedly belongs outside the circle of protection. Once grievance is routed through communal identity, compromise becomes harder because concession now appears as betrayal of the group rather than adjustment within a shared polity. That sharply intensifies the grievance-amplification dynamic from Chapter 4. Narratives no longer merely describe inequality or exclusion. They assign it to named civic enemies and thereby narrow the space for institutional mediation.[1,6]

This mechanism bears directly on Acceptance of the Rights of Others. Where that pillar is weak, identity entrepreneurs have a lower threshold to cross. They do not need to abolish pluralism; they need only to render it morally suspect. The same mechanism also feeds back into Well-Functioning Government, because institutions asked to govern amid hardened communal suspicion lose room to act with legitimacy. Routine administrative decisions begin to be read as partisan allocations of dignity and harm. Free Flow of Information also suffers, since the circulation environment becomes more reward-driven for grievance-confirming content and less capable of sustaining cross-group trust. Even Sound Business Environment is affected when identity-based mobilization raises uncertainty, disrupts local cooperation, and increases the risk premium attached to everyday exchange.[4,6]

None of these mechanisms should be externalized too quickly. The external-threat frame is attractive because it simplifies blame and preserves the fiction that the system was otherwise sound. But the same operational logics are available to domestic actors: political entrepreneurs seeking office, incumbents seeking insulation, armed factions seeking leverage, economic actors protecting rents, and social movements radicalizing around exclusionary frames. The OECD explicitly notes that domestic or foreign actors may spread disinformation. The distinction matters tactically but not structurally. The system is accelerated toward fragility by whichever actor can most effectively exploit the gap between institutional performance and public trust.[1]

It follows that these three mechanisms are not sequential stages. Influence operations can run continuously against particular institutions. Information flooding can operate as ambient condition rather than discrete campaign. Identity-based mobilization can intensify episodically

during elections, security crises, or fiscal stress while remaining latent at other times. Their interaction is what matters most. Influence operations weaken institutional credibility. Flooding makes corrective authority harder to establish. Identity mobilization then offers emotionally coherent alternatives to a public exhausted by ambiguity. Each mechanism supplies energy to the others across different timescales.[1,3,5,6]

This also clarifies why information warfare is less decisive in total collapse than in decline. Where state authority has fully disintegrated, information operations may still matter for battlefield signaling, external perception, or local coercive control. But the broad civic leverage is smaller because the shared institutional center has already thinned beyond easy manipulation. Declining systems are different. They still contain enough center to contest. They still contain enough trust to poison. They still contain enough procedural expectation to make procedural doubt politically useful. Information warfare is therefore most destructive not in the void, but in the unstable middle — where order remains present enough to be strategically eroded and absent enough to be plausibly condemned.[2,3,4]

The consequence is sobering. If the operating environment of information warfare is institutional decline, then the response cannot be reduced to content removal, platform moderation, or counter-messaging alone. Those measures may still have tactical value. They do not alter the underlying vulnerability. A system whose legitimacy, information integrity, and civic reciprocity are already thinning will continue to generate openings faster than technical defenses can close them.[1,4,6]

That is the bridge to the constructive half of this essay. Once information warfare is understood as a fragility accelerant rather than a stand-alone media threat, defense begins to look insufficient as a governing concept. The problem is not only hostile content. It is the structural condition that makes hostile intervention scalable. The next chapter therefore turns where this diagnosis now points: toward resilience not as messaging discipline, but as institutional, civic, and informational reconstruction under strain.

Notes

1. *OECD, Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024).*
2. *Institute for Economics & Peace, Positive Peace Report 2024: Analysing the Factors That Build, Predict and Sustain Peace (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).*
3. *U.S. Government Accountability Office, Information Environment: Opportunities and Threats to DOD's National Security Mission, GAO-22-104714 (Washington, DC: GAO, 2022).*
4. *Institute for Economics & Peace, Positive Peace Report and related Positive Peace materials (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).*
5. *Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).*

6. *United Nations, Information Integrity on Digital Platforms, Policy Brief No. 8 (New York: United Nations, 2023).*

Chapter 7

Positive Peace as a Systems Response

Positive Peace is best understood here not as an aspirational vocabulary for post-conflict repair, but as a systems architecture for resilience under stress. Its analytical value lies in shifting attention away from visible crisis and toward the underlying conditions that determine whether a political order can absorb shocks without converting them into self-reinforcing decline. In that sense, Positive Peace is not an alternative to the fragility framework developed earlier in this essay. It is the counter-architecture to it. Where fragility names a system losing its ability to distribute stress without multiplying damage, Positive Peace identifies the structural conditions that allow a system to metabolize pressure without defaulting to delegitimization, capability erosion, and grievance amplification. The Institute for Economics & Peace defines Positive Peace as the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies, and presents it as a systems-based framework rather than a simple moral ideal.[1]

That distinction matters because collapse is rarely the product of a single institutional failure or a single information shock. It is more often the product of a system that has lost enough internal redundancy, legitimacy, and corrective capacity that disturbance begins to circulate faster than repair. Positive Peace matters precisely because its pillars are not isolated goods. The IEP treats them as mutually reinforcing factors that together shape resilience and the long-run capacity of societies to sustain peace.[1,2]

A well-functioning government is the most obvious pillar, but its relevance is often misunderstood. The issue is not administrative elegance. It is whether institutions can convert authority into predictable, credible, and adaptive action under stress. In feedback terms, this pillar primarily interrupts the delegitimization cycle. A government that can deliver basic functions consistently, explain failure honestly, and correct error without paralysis reduces the gap between official claim and lived experience. That gap was identified earlier as the opening through which hostile narratives, opportunistic elites, and ambient distrust become cumulative. The World Bank's World Development Report 2017 argues that effective governance depends on the ability of actors to commit, coordinate, and cooperate, especially under conditions marked by power asymmetries and contested interests.[4]

The same pillar also bears directly on capability erosion. Governments that function well do not simply execute policy more effectively. They preserve coordination across agencies, maintain

continuity in crisis response, and sustain the informational capacities required to monitor, verify, and communicate under pressure. Once that capacity thins, institutions are pushed into a reactive posture, expending energy on reputational survival rather than systemic adaptation. The point is straightforward: well-functioning government is not merely an outcome of resilience. It is one of the mechanisms by which resilience reproduces itself.[1]

A sound business environment may appear secondary in a chapter concerned with fragility and information warfare. It is not. Economically, this pillar concerns the degree to which a society permits productive coordination through predictable rules rather than arbitrary extraction, informal coercion, or insider privilege. Systemically, it interrupts both capability erosion and grievance amplification. Where economic life depends on opaque discretion, corruption, patronage, or factional access, uncertainty becomes chronic. That uncertainty does not remain in the market domain. It travels into public trust, opportunity structures, and social comparison. The result is not merely inefficiency. It is a widening sense that formal rules are either selective or performative.[1]

That perception matters because grievance rarely intensifies through deprivation alone. It intensifies when deprivation appears patterned, protected, and politically unreachable. A sound business environment reduces that patterning by widening lawful opportunity and lowering the degree to which survival depends on corrupt mediation. It also strengthens the state's fiscal and administrative base, which in turn supports the institutional capacities necessary to resist informational saturation and elite manipulation. Its absence, by contrast, widens the field in which suspicion hardens into structural resentment.[1]

Equitable distribution of resources is even more directly tied to grievance amplification. This pillar is not reducible to equality in the abstract. Its importance lies in whether public goods, opportunity, and protection are distributed in ways that prevent whole populations from learning that hardship is being allocated along stable lines. Once exclusion becomes predictable, it ceases to be experienced as misfortune and begins to be experienced as political meaning. That is the point at which structural violence becomes narratively combustible. Information operations do not need to invent grievance under such conditions. They need only to direct it.[1]

This pillar therefore functions as a brake on the conversion of latent discontent into active cleavage. Where resources are distributed with sufficient fairness, grievance still exists, but it is less easily framed as evidence that the system itself is organized around selective abandonment. Where distribution is grossly unequal, every shock becomes narratively interpretable through

prior injury. The system then loses one of its key shock absorbers. Disturbance is no longer processed as a problem to solve within a shared order. It is processed as confirmation that the order was never shared to begin with.[1]

Acceptance of the rights of others addresses a different part of the feedback architecture. This pillar interrupts grievance amplification at the level of civic interpretation. Its importance lies in whether difference can remain politically negotiable rather than morally threatening. Earlier chapters argued that fragile systems become especially vulnerable when structural injury is reinterpreted through named enemies rather than diagnosed systems. That conversion is far easier where the rights and standing of out-groups are already weakly internalized. If pluralism is thin, grievance entrepreneurs do not need to persuade citizens that exclusion is justified. They need only to identify the group to which exclusion should now be applied.[1]

In systems terms, this pillar protects against the narrowing of civic identity into factional identity. It preserves the possibility that institutions can still mediate conflict without being immediately coded as instruments of communal betrayal. Its absence has the opposite effect. Routine administrative acts are reinterpreted as zero-sum allocations of dignity and harm. Information warfare gains efficiency because identity-framed narratives encounter fewer normative barriers. The system becomes easier to segment, easier to polarize, and harder to govern through shared procedures.[1]

Good relations with neighbors operates across both domestic and external registers. In the domestic sense, it concerns the degree to which communities can sustain interaction without translating difference into persistent threat perception. In the interstate sense, it concerns the external environment in which a fragile state attempts to preserve room for adaptation. Both dimensions matter because fragility is rarely self-contained. The OECD's 2025 fragility framework explicitly treats fragility as multidimensional and tied to both risk exposure and resilience deficits across political, security, societal, economic, environmental, and human domains.[5]

Mapped against the feedback architecture, this pillar limits grievance amplification by reducing the ambient salience of enemy imagery. It also constrains delegitimization by decreasing the number of external and internal fault lines through which institutional failure can be recoded as betrayal. Where relations are adversarial, every shock is easier to weaponize. Every ambiguity becomes more dangerous. The absence of this pillar therefore expands the number of vectors through which information warfare can intensify fragility.[1]

Free flow of information is perhaps the most obvious bridge between Positive Peace and the essay's earlier argument, but it must be handled with precision. This pillar does not mean unbounded circulation detached from questions of integrity, verifiability, and corrective function. It concerns whether information can move through society in ways that preserve accountability, expose abuse, permit error correction, and maintain a minimally shared factual environment. The OECD's 2024 trust survey ties information integrity directly to public trust, while the OECD's broader work on disinformation argues for governance responses that strengthen information integrity rather than treating the issue as content moderation alone.[1,6]

That directly interrupts all three collapse loops. It interrupts delegitimization by allowing institutions to earn credibility through transparency rather than demand it through assertion. It interrupts capability erosion by preserving the feedback channels through which institutions detect failure early enough to adapt. And it interrupts grievance amplification by reducing the space in which rumor, saturation, and strategic distortion can monopolize interpretation. Its absence is especially dangerous because degraded information systems do not simply conceal truth. They disable collective correction. Once that happens, public authority becomes harder to read, not only harder to trust.[6]

High levels of human capital are often discussed in developmental language, but their relevance here is structural. Human capital is not only education or technical skill. It is the distributed cognitive and social capacity a society can draw upon to interpret complexity, sustain institutions, and recover from error. Systems with high human capital possess more adaptive range. They can staff competent administrations, support independent analysis, maintain professional intermediaries, and resist simplistic identity narratives with greater durability. That matters directly for capability erosion. A system cannot preserve institutional coherence if it lacks the human depth to staff, repair, and renew itself under strain.[1]

This pillar also matters for the information environment. Populations with stronger educational and civic capacities are not immune to manipulation, but they are less dependent on crude shortcuts for making sense of public life. The burden of plausibility is higher. Corrective mechanisms are more likely to exist outside the state as well as within it. The absence of this pillar narrows interpretive capacity and widens dependence on affect, rumor, patronage, and factional cues. Under those conditions, both fragility and information warfare scale more easily.[1]

Low levels of corruption complete the architecture because corruption is not merely a moral defect or an administrative inefficiency. It is a cross-system solvent. It weakens well-functioning

government, distorts resource distribution, narrows economic access, degrades trust, and contaminates information credibility. In feedback terms, corruption energizes all three collapse loops at once. It deepens delegitimization because citizens repeatedly encounter evidence that formal rules are selectively overridden. It accelerates capability erosion because public resources are diverted away from competence and toward private insulation. And it intensifies grievance amplification because exclusion becomes not only material but visibly rigged.[1]

This is why anti-corruption cannot be treated as a narrow reform agenda appended to a broader resilience strategy. In the systems frame, corruption is a multiplier variable. Its presence reduces the reliability of every other pillar. Its reduction increases the load-bearing capacity of all of them. That is precisely the kind of interaction that makes Positive Peace more than a checklist.[1,3]

Taken together, the eight pillars form a countervailing feedback system. Their analytical significance lies not in their individual desirability, but in their mutual reinforcement. IEP's Positive Peace work explicitly presents the pillars as a system whose elements interact, while its systems-thinking material argues that social outcomes emerge from relationships and feedback rather than single-variable causes. Well-functioning government without free flow of information drifts toward opacity. Free flow of information without acceptance of the rights of others becomes more easily weaponized through exclusionary narratives. Equitable distribution without low corruption decays into symbolic promise. Human capital without a sound business environment risks extraction rather than resilience. The system holds when these conditions reinforce one another strongly enough to keep shocks from cascading across domains.[1,3]

That is the core claim of this chapter: Positive Peace is not an inventory of good outcomes. It is the structural architecture through which a political order generates resilience as a self-reinforcing property. Where the architecture is sufficiently intact, shocks remain shocks. They do not automatically become collapse pathways. Where it is thin, the system defaults toward the feedback loops mapped earlier in this essay. Delegitimization accelerates because government performance cannot defend itself. Capability erodes because institutions lack human, fiscal, and informational depth. Grievance amplifies because exclusion and distrust provide ready narrative material. The question is therefore not whether Positive Peace is morally attractive. The question is whether a system possesses enough of its architecture to resist recursive decline.[1]

That brings the argument to its methodological consequence. If Positive Peace is a countervailing feedback system, then resilience cannot be assessed only by visible calm or the

temporary absence of violence. It must be assessed by the condition of the pillars before failure becomes public. The OECD's fragility framework and IEP's Positive Peace work both push analysis upstream in this way: one by focusing on risk and resilience across multiple dimensions, the other by identifying the structural conditions associated with peaceful and resilient societies. Any serious response must therefore develop ways of seeing weakening pillars early enough to matter.[1-5]

Notes

1. *Institute for Economics & Peace, Positive Peace Report 2024: Analysing the Factors That Build, Predict and Sustain Peace (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).*
2. *Institute for Economics & Peace, 'Positive Peace Report', Institute for Economics & Peace.*
3. *Institute for Economics & Peace, Positive Peace and Systems Thinking (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).*
4. *World Bank, World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017).*
5. *OECD, States of Fragility 2025 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025).*
6. *OECD, OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions: 2024 Results (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), especially the material on trust and information integrity*.

Chapter 8

Structured Analysis as Epistemological Resistance

The crisis at the center of this essay is not only a crisis of security. It is a crisis of judgment. Information warfare becomes strategically potent not simply when falsehood circulates, but when the standards by which claims are weighed begin to fail. At that point, the contest is no longer limited to narrative advantage. It reaches the conditions under which institutions, publics, and decision-makers distinguish signal from noise, evidence from insinuation, and uncertainty from manipulation. The struggle is therefore epistemological before it is operational. Who controls the guns matters. Who controls the credibility of claims matters earlier.[1,2,3]

This reframing clarifies why delegitimization cycles are so difficult to arrest once they begin. Institutions do not lose authority only because they perform badly. They also lose authority when their claims can no longer be evaluated within a shared evidentiary frame. Disinformation and information flooding exploit that condition by corroding the standards of assessment themselves. The objective is often less to persuade than to disable proportionate judgment. A public submerged in adversarial narratives, strategic ambiguity, and interpretive saturation does not need to accept one coherent falsehood. It only needs to lose confidence that disciplined evaluation is still possible. That is enough to weaken trust, slow correction, and make institutional response appear either partisan or arbitrary.[1,2]

This is the point at which Structured Analytic Techniques become more than professional tradecraft. Properly understood, they are formalized cognitive procedures developed to reduce analytic error, discipline inference, and preserve proportionality between evidence and conclusion under conditions of uncertainty. Heuer and Pherson present them as structured methods that help analysts organize information, challenge assumptions, generate alternatives, test competing explanations, and improve the quality of judgment. Their utility lies not in mechanical certainty, but in procedural discipline. Analysis of Competing Hypotheses, Key Assumptions Checks, Structured Brainstorming, Red Team Analysis, and Indicators and Warnings all share the same underlying commitment: judgment should be auditable, assumptions should be exposed, and inference should be made visible enough to challenge.[4]

That commitment responds directly to the problem Heuer identified earlier in Psychology of Intelligence Analysis. His core argument was not that analysts lack intelligence or access to information. It was that human cognition predictably misprocesses incomplete and ambiguous

information. Perception is selective. Interpretation is shaped by prior beliefs. Ambiguity is often resolved too quickly. Confidence can outrun evidentiary support. In other words, analytic failure is not only a failure of collection. It is also a failure of disciplined reasoning under cognitive constraint. Structured techniques were developed in part as a response to that reality. They do not eliminate bias. They externalize thinking enough to make bias harder to smuggle into conclusions unnoticed.[5,4]

That is their professional meaning. The more original claim of this chapter is that their significance extends beyond the intelligence community. Structured analytic habits are also a model for civic epistemology. By civic epistemology I mean the shared standards through which a political community evaluates claims, assigns credibility, and makes collective judgments about what is happening and what should be done. Democratic systems cannot function on sincerity alone. They require procedures for testing assertion, comparing explanations, identifying assumptions, and calibrating confidence. When those procedures thin, the epistemic commons begins to degrade. Claims no longer compete mainly on evidentiary strength. They compete on volume, emotional resonance, tribal fit, and narrative speed.

Information warfare is especially dangerous in precisely that environment. Its deeper effect is often not the installation of one grand lie. It is the corrosion of the evaluative architecture by which truth claims are sorted at all. Influence operations exploit prior distrust. Flooding overwhelms the capacity for verification. Identity-framed narratives reduce evidentiary judgment to group loyalty. Under those conditions, SATs matter because they preserve method where consensus has broken down. They offer a procedural anchor inside an adversarial information space. A structured analytic method does not require prior agreement on every political value. It requires only a willingness to expose assumptions, compare alternatives, and show why one judgment is better supported than another. That is a modest demand. It is also one of the few still available when the informational environment has become contested.[1,2,4,5]

Seen this way, SATs are a form of epistemological resistance. Resistance, here, does not mean rhetorical defiance. It means refusing to let contested environments dictate the terms of judgment. Analysis of Competing Hypotheses is a useful example. Its importance lies not merely in listing possibilities, but in forcing the analyst to evaluate evidence against multiple explanations rather than unconsciously building around a favored one. A Key Assumptions Check performs a related function upstream by surfacing the propositions on which a judgment quietly depends. Red Team Analysis tests whether a conclusion survives adversarial scrutiny. Indicators and Warnings disciplines attention over time by identifying observable developments

that would support or weaken an assessment. None of these methods guarantees correctness. What they do provide is a transparent way to keep inference proportional when pressure encourages haste, narrative capture, or premature closure.[4]

That procedural transparency has direct relevance to the feedback architecture mapped earlier in the essay. First, SATs can interrupt delegitimization cycles. They do so not by manufacturing trust, but by making the evidentiary basis of institutional claims more explicit and therefore more challengeable in disciplined form. In low-trust environments, opacity is combustible. Assertions issued without visible reasoning are easily coded as propaganda, spin, or elite insulation. Structured analysis cannot compel belief, but it can narrow the distance between judgment and justification. That matters because legitimacy is strengthened when decisions can be contested on visible grounds rather than only accepted or rejected as factional performance.[2,4]

Second, SATs can slow capability-erosion loops. Fragile institutions are often forced to make consequential decisions under uncertainty while operating in environments saturated by rumor, public pressure, and strategic manipulation. In such settings, panic-driven decision-making is itself a systems risk. Structured methods provide a disciplined alternative to reactive cognition. They create procedures for considering alternatives, identifying what is known and unknown, and linking present evidence to future indicators. That is not a substitute for capacity in the broader administrative sense. But it is a way of preserving decision quality when capacity is already under stress. A system that retains methods for reasoned assessment under uncertainty is less likely to become wholly captive to the loudest narrative in the room.[4,5]

Third, SATs can reduce grievance-amplification dynamics, though only within limits. Information operations often succeed by collapsing the distinction between structural causes and narratively convenient enemies. Structured analysis does not remove grievance, and it does not settle political disputes over distribution, identity, or justice. What it can do is force a more disciplined separation between causal explanation and mobilizing story. A structured approach asks what evidence actually supports the claim that a given group, actor, or event explains the harm at issue. It also asks what alternative explanations remain viable. That discipline matters because fragile societies are especially vulnerable to misidentification. When systemic injury is personalized too quickly, analysis becomes punitive rather than diagnostic. SATs help resist that slide by keeping causal reasoning open longer than grievance narratives typically permit.[3,4]

The institutional implications follow from this. If epistemic capacity is part of resilience, then the deployment of structured analytic methodology should not be confined to intelligence

agencies. Governance institutions that manage elections, crises, health emergencies, corruption investigations, and public communications all operate under uncertainty and all face pressure from contested information environments. Civil society organizations that document abuse, track conflict risk, and mediate local tensions face the same problem in different form. Journalism, too, has an obvious stake here. Not because reporters should become intelligence analysts, but because the public value of journalism depends on transparent standards for weighing claims, testing sources, and communicating uncertainty without surrendering judgment. The common thread is not technocracy. It is procedural integrity under adversarial conditions.[2,4]

This does not mean SATs are a politics. They are not. They do not resolve value conflicts, determine legitimate ends, or replace democratic deliberation. A structured method can clarify what is better supported; it cannot tell a society what it ought to value once evidence is in view. That limit matters. Without it, the language of analytic rigor becomes an alibi for technocratic overreach. The argument here is narrower and stronger: structured reasoning improves the quality of collective judgment, but it does not abolish disagreement. Democracies still need politics. They simply need politics operating on a more disciplined evidentiary floor than information warfare would prefer.[1,2,4]

There is also a harder limit. SATs require time, training, and institutional support. They assume enough organizational stability for procedures to be taught, practiced, and sustained. Those are precisely the resources fragile states and degraded information environments tend to lose first. The methodological answer therefore arrives under structural constraint. One cannot easily build epistemic resilience in the middle of full epistemic breakdown. The capacity to reason clearly about collapse is itself a form of infrastructure, and like other infrastructures it is most difficult to construct once the system is already under severe strain.[4,5]

That is why this chapter should not be read as optimistic closure. Structured analysis is not an antidote that dissolves information warfare on contact. It is a disciplined way of preserving judgment where judgment is under attack. Its importance is therefore both practical and diagnostic. Practical, because institutions and publics need procedures that keep evidence and inference in proportion when the information environment becomes adversarial. Diagnostic, because a society that can no longer sustain such procedures is already losing more than informational order. It is losing one of the preconditions for self-government. The warning follows directly: epistemic capacity must be built before the conditions for building it are gone.[1,2,4,5]

Notes

1. *OECD, Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024).*

2. *OECD, OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions: 2024 Results (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024).*

3. *Institute for Economics & Peace, Positive Peace Report 2024: Analysing the Factors That Build, Predict and Sustain Peace (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).*

4. *Randolph H. Pherson and Richards J. Heuer Jr., Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis, 3rd edn (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2019).*

5. *Richards J. Heuer Jr., Psychology of Intelligence Analysis (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999).*

Chapter 9

Toward Resilient Systems: A Framework for Convergent Crises

The preceding chapters argued that fragility and information warfare are not separate problems converging by accident. They are reciprocal degradations within the same system. Institutional weakness lowers the threshold for narrative manipulation; narrative manipulation, once established, increases the burden under which institutions must govern. The result is not a sequence of isolated failures but a pattern of reinforcement. Delegitimization narrows public trust. Capability erosion reduces institutional range. Grievance amplification hardens injury into political cleavage. Once these loops begin to feed one another, disturbance travels farther than its immediate cause would predict. The OECD's recent work on disinformation and trust, together with the OECD fragility framework and the IEP's Positive Peace research, all support treating these as linked governance and resilience problems rather than isolated media events.[1,3]

A constructive response must therefore begin with a refusal of simplification. It is not enough to defend institutions while ignoring the information environment through which institutions are interpreted. It is not enough to improve media resilience while leaving structural exclusion intact. It is not enough to teach better analytic habits in systems that still reward opacity, corruption, and selective abandonment. Convergent crises require convergent repair. Not because every intervention must occur at once in programmatic terms, but because the system will otherwise route around partial correction. Gains made in one domain will be consumed by deterioration in another. That conclusion follows directly from the systems-based logic of Positive Peace and from the OECD's insistence that responses to disinformation require whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches tied to information integrity and democratic trust.[1,2]

The first requirement is structural. Fragility is not repaired at the level of messaging. It is repaired, where repair is possible, by altering the conditions that make recurrent mistrust plausible in the first place. The Positive Peace framework remains useful here because it directs attention to the underlying architecture of resilience rather than to the spectacle of crisis. A well-functioning government, equitable distribution of resources, free flow of information, acceptance of the rights of others, low levels of corruption, human capital, a sound business environment, and good relations with neighbors are not parallel aspirations. They are interdependent supports. Their absence produces more than low institutional quality. It

produces a system in which shocks cannot be absorbed without widening distrust and narrowing coordination. The IEP explicitly presents the eight pillars as mutually reinforcing factors that build, predict, and sustain peaceful and resilient societies.[3]

That point matters because policy response often privileges the most visible failure. A state under narrative assault is encouraged to improve strategic communication. A society facing polarization is urged toward media literacy. A government confronting disinformation is pressed to regulate platforms more tightly. None of these responses is necessarily wrong. Each may be necessary. But where structural deficits remain severe, each is likely to underperform. Information disorder becomes most politically dangerous when public institutions have already lost enough credibility that corrective signals arrive weakened. The OECD's trust research links information integrity to institutional trust, while the World Bank's governance framework stresses that effective policy depends on the ability of actors to commit, coordinate, and cooperate under unequal and contested conditions.[1,2,4]

For that reason, the deepest layer of intervention concerns the restoration of load-bearing legitimacy. This is not an argument for ideal institutional form. It is an argument about threshold conditions. Systems can survive imperfection. They struggle to survive patterned inequity, extractive corruption, selective protection, and chronic administrative unreliability once those conditions become socially legible. Structural repair therefore means reducing the gap between formal order and lived experience. It means narrowing the distance between what institutions claim to provide and what populations repeatedly encounter. In practice, that points toward cleaner rule application, more equitable access to public goods, stronger administrative continuity, higher informational transparency, and a reduction in the forms of exclusion that teach communities that the state is present mainly as hierarchy or delay. These themes are consistent with the World Bank's emphasis on governance as the process through which state and non-state actors interact to design and implement policy, and with the IEP's treatment of resilience as an emergent systems property rather than a single institutional feature.[3,4]

This should not be overstated. Structural repair is slow, politically contested, and rarely available in pure form. It is also vulnerable to capture by the very elites who benefit from selective order. But the analytic claim remains sound. A society cannot reliably inoculate itself against information warfare while preserving the structural grievances on which manipulation feeds. Disinformation campaigns are most consequential when they aggravate existing divisions, cast doubt on factual evidence, and undermine trust in democratic institutions, which is exactly

how the OECD describes the problem. Repair, at this level, is therefore less about optimism than about removing cheap narrative material from the environment.[1]

Yet structural work alone will not suffice. Even systems with comparatively stronger institutional foundations can suffer serious degradation in the information domain. Digital circulation has altered the tempo, scale, and incentives of public interpretation. Falsehood and insinuation often move faster than verification; engagement systems reward conflict-rich content; repetition and saturation can erode common factual ground without requiring a single universally believed lie. The OECD and other institutions treat these as features of the contemporary information integrity problem rather than as incidental pathologies. A serious resilience framework must therefore include a second layer of intervention directed specifically at the conditions under which claims circulate, gain credibility, and shape collective judgment.[1]

The purpose of this second layer is not to restore a fictive information purity. No political order has ever possessed that. The purpose is narrower and more defensible: to increase the epistemic carrying capacity of the public environment. A resilient information ecosystem does not eliminate manipulation. It preserves enough verifiability, plurality, accountability, and corrective function that manipulation cannot easily become the dominant logic of public interpretation. That requires more than fact-checking as aftercare. It requires institutions capable of transparent communication, independent media with sufficient reach and credibility, regulatory arrangements proportionate to platform power, and forms of public education that improve not only media literacy but judgment under uncertainty. The OECD's information-integrity work supports precisely this broader governance approach.[1]

Media literacy is often invoked too lightly. It cannot be treated as a generic civic virtue detached from social context. Populations do not misread information only because they lack technical skill. They also do so because trust is thin, time is scarce, institutions are distrusted, and identity cues offer quicker orientation than evidentiary review. Still, literacy matters when understood more precisely. It can improve the public's capacity to recognize manipulation tactics, assess source credibility, distinguish reporting from performance, and tolerate uncertainty without defaulting to cynicism. The OECD's trust survey explicitly links critical-thinking capacity and evidence-based policies to stronger information integrity.[2]

That same calibration must be reflected institutionally. Governments that confront information warfare by collapsing into opacity, censorship without due process, or self-protective narrative control may win tactical breathing room while deepening the structural problem. The aim

cannot be information dominance in the blunt sense. It must be information integrity under lawful constraint. That means improving public communication capacity without confusing communication with propaganda. It means building regulatory competence that can address platform incentives, coordination failures, and transparency gaps without eroding the rights that make public trust recoverable. The OECD's recommendations point toward this balance: stronger governance responses, transparency, and coordination, rather than a simplistic remove-the-content model.[1]

This second layer matters because the information environment is not merely expressive. It is infrastructural. It carries part of the weight by which authority becomes legible and contestation remains governable. Where that infrastructure degrades, even capable institutions must work under heavier interpretive load. Crisis response becomes more difficult. Elections become more destructively contestable. Public trust becomes more conditional. The OECD's work on trust and information integrity supports this understanding directly, and the IEP's systems framing helps explain why information integrity should be treated as part of resilience rather than as a secondary communications problem.[1,2]

Even so, structural repair and information ecosystem strengthening together remain incomplete without a third layer. Institutions require methods for reasoning under pressure. Civil society requires procedures for resisting narrative capture without merely substituting one loyalty frame for another. Public authority requires ways to make judgments that remain proportionate to evidence even when the surrounding environment rewards haste, certainty, and factional simplification. That is the opening for analytic capacity as a resilience variable. This chapter is synthesizing an inference from the previous analytical chapters: if convergent crises damage judgment as well as governance and information integrity, then resilience must include procedural capacities for disciplined assessment. That inference is consistent with the governance and systems literature cited earlier in the manuscript.[3]

The previous chapter argued that structured analytic discipline functions as a form of epistemological resistance. Its wider significance becomes clearer here. Convergent crises do not damage only institutions and information channels. They damage judgment. Delegitimization advances when claims cannot be evaluated within visible evidentiary standards. Capability erosion worsens when institutions make reactive decisions under narrative pressure. Grievance amplification intensifies when causal explanation collapses into convenient enemy selection. Under those conditions, analytic methodology is not a technical accessory. It is part of the machinery by which a system preserves proportion between evidence, interpretation, and action.

This is an interpretive synthesis, but it sits squarely within the manuscript's established framework of fragility, trust, governance, and systems resilience.[1]

This does not mean every ministry, newsroom, or civic organization must become an intelligence cell. The claim is more modest and more practical. Institutions that operate under uncertainty should develop explicit habits of structured reasoning. They should surface assumptions rather than bury them. They should compare plausible explanations before settling on one. They should identify indicators that would strengthen or weaken current assessments. They should expose key judgments to adversarial review. These are not elite rituals. They are ways of preventing pressure from becoming epistemic surrender. Here again, the point is inferential rather than directly quoted from a single source, but it follows from the governance logic that policy success depends on coordination, credible commitment, and adaptive capacity, and from the OECD's insistence on evidence-based responses to information disorder.[1]

The institutional spread of such methods matters for two reasons. First, it improves the quality of internal decision-making. Systems under stress are especially prone to cognitive shortcuts: they fix on the most emotionally available explanation, overread limited evidence, and defend early judgments as identity commitments rather than provisional assessments. Structured methods do not remove these tendencies, but they make them harder to conceal inside official reasoning. Second, they improve the public defensibility of judgment. In low-trust settings, conclusions offered without visible method are easily treated as manipulation. Transparent reasoning will not compel agreement, but it can increase the distance between disciplined analysis and mere assertion. That distinction becomes politically significant when public confidence is already thin. The OECD's trust findings make the importance of evidence use and integrity especially clear.[1,2]

Civil society belongs inside this third layer as well. So does journalism. So do local mediation structures, electoral observers, and research institutions. The resilience problem is not solved when the state reasons more carefully while the wider public sphere remains methodologically vulnerable. Analytic capacity is distributed or it is brittle. A society able to preserve islands of disciplined judgment outside formal government has more corrective depth than one in which every interpretive function depends on institutions already under suspicion. This is one reason human capital matters so much in the Positive Peace architecture. Education, professional competence, and civic reasoning are not downstream developmental benefits. They are part of the system's ability to resist simplification when simplification becomes politically weaponized.[3]

At this stage, the framework can be named clearly. Resilience against convergent crises requires work across three connected layers: structural repair, information ecosystem strengthening, and analytic capacity investment. The logic is cumulative. Structural repair reduces the stock of legitimate grievance and distrust on which manipulation feeds. Information ecosystem strengthening raises the cost of distortion and preserves the corrective channels through which public judgment can recover. Analytic capacity investment improves the quality of interpretation inside institutions and across civic space, making the system less prone to panic, scapegoating, and evidentiary collapse. Each layer supports the others. Each also depends on the others for durability. This three-layer framework is the synthetic conclusion of the book's preceding evidence base.[1,3]

Their interdependence is the most important point. Structural reform without epistemic and informational strengthening may leave a society improving materially while still vulnerable to interpretive sabotage. Information reform without structural repair may produce better moderation and better literacy in a public that still has good reason to distrust institutions. Analytic investment without either may produce pockets of excellent reasoning inside systems whose wider incentives still reward opacity and exclusion. Partial gains matter. They should not be dismissed. But a framework for convergent crises must acknowledge that isolated improvements can be consumed by unresolved weaknesses elsewhere in the system. The IEP's systems approach and the OECD's integrated treatment of disinformation and trust both support this emphasis on interdependence.[1,3]

There are alternatives to this view, and they should be noted. One alternative places primary emphasis on deterrence and defensive information operations. Another privileges state-building in the narrower administrative sense. A third treats social resilience chiefly as a matter of civic culture and local trust. Each captures something real. None is sufficient on its own. A purely defensive information posture risks treating symptoms while leaving structural grievance available for repeated exploitation. Administrative strengthening without information integrity and analytic discipline can produce more efficient institutions that are still distrusted, captured, or narratively outmaneuvered. Civic trust without institutional reform may improve local coping while leaving larger structures of exclusion intact. The convergent nature of the crisis is what limits the sufficiency of single-domain response. This is again a synthetic judgment, but it is well supported by the multi-dimensional frameworks used by the OECD, IEP, and World Bank.[1,4]

The argument here is therefore methodological before it is programmatic. Resilience should be understood as a system property generated through linked improvements in structural fairness,

informational integrity, and judgment capacity. That formulation avoids two familiar errors. It avoids the illusion that one decisive reform can neutralize recursively linked failures. And it avoids the equal and opposite illusion that because the problem is systemic, no practical framework is possible. A framework is possible. It is simply more demanding than the search for a single instrument.[3]

That demand has institutional consequences. It requires governments to think beyond immediate regime stability. It requires civil society to treat epistemic discipline as part of democratic defense rather than as a specialist concern. It requires analysts to see that the quality of reasoning inside institutions is not separable from the wider conditions under which publics are asked to trust, contest, or endure them. Most of all, it requires a different diagnostic patience. Systems rarely announce the exact moment when strain becomes recursive. By the time they do, room for correction has already narrowed. The upstream orientation of both the fragility and Positive Peace frameworks is what makes that patience necessary.[3,5]

This chapter does not offer a program because programs belong to conditions, capacities, and political contexts that vary too widely for clean transfer. It offers an approach. The approach is to intervene where convergent crises actually reproduce themselves: in the structure of governance, in the architecture of the information environment, and in the procedures by which claims are judged under stress. Anything narrower may still help. It is unlikely to hold.[1]

The remaining question is quieter and harder. Even where such an approach is understood, clarity does not arrive without cost. Systems organized around opacity, selective advantage, and narrative convenience do not yield easily to disciplined seeing. Institutions often resist the very transparency they need. Publics exhausted by manipulation may come to prefer certainty to accuracy. Analysts themselves are not exempt from the pressures they describe. That is where the essay must now turn: from the architecture of response to the burden of maintaining clarity in environments structured to corrode it.

Notes

1. *OECD, Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024).*
2. *OECD, OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions: 2024 Results (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), especially the sections on trust and information integrity.*
3. *Institute for Economics & Peace, Positive Peace Report 2024: Analysing the Factors That Build, Predict and Sustain Peace (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).*
4. *World Bank, World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017).*
5. *OECD, States of Fragility 2025 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025).*

Chapter 10

What Clarity Costs

The first loss in a collapsing system is not always territory, nor law, nor even trust in its most visible form. Often it is proportion. Things stop appearing at their true scale. A rumor arrives dressed as revelation. A bureaucratic failure is dismissed as temporary when it is structural, or narrated as total ruin when it is still reversible. Grievance, long administered in slow and ordinary ways, becomes newly visible only when it acquires a body count. Institutions continue in outline after much of their load-bearing capacity has thinned. Information continues to circulate after much of its corrective function has gone. The system remains legible enough to reassure and illegible enough to mislead. That is part of the danger. Collapse is rarely announced in language equal to itself.

This essay began from the claim that state fragility and information warfare are not separate crises merely colliding in the same political weather. They are reciprocal failures within one system. One degrades the institutions through which authority is exercised. The other degrades the informational conditions through which authority is recognized, contested, and believed. Taken together, they produce a world in which disorder does not need to arrive dramatically in order to deepen. It can advance through ordinary delay, through repeated distortion, through the narrowing of what a public can still verify, and through the steady instruction that some failures are normal enough to live inside.

To see that clearly is not comforting. Clarity is often spoken of as though it were relief — as though naming the structure of a problem somehow reduces its weight. Sometimes it does. More often, in systems like these, it does the opposite. It removes the small mercies of simplification. It becomes harder to tell a clean story about bad actors and innocent institutions, or about broken institutions and innocent narratives. The analyst loses the luxury of pretending that propaganda alone produced the fracture, or that governance alone can repair it. The institution loses the luxury of treating information disorder as external noise rather than as a condition partly produced by its own opacity, inconsistency, or abandonment. The public loses the luxury of imagining that what is being defended is only territory, procedure, or speech in isolation, rather than the fragile architecture by which shared reality remains governable at all.

That is one cost of clarity: it denies innocence more broadly than comfort would prefer.

There is another. Systems designed around selective advantage do not welcome disciplined seeing. They absorb ambiguity when ambiguity protects power. They reward speed when speed outruns verification. They call things isolated when pattern would imply responsibility. They prefer named enemies to diagnosed structures because structures require longer repair and more honest accounting. Under such conditions, clear analysis is rarely opposed only by falsehood. It is opposed by incentive. That opposition can be institutional, when agencies narrow what may be said because acknowledgment would expose incapacity. It can be epistemic, when publics exhausted by contradiction begin to prefer certainty to evidence. It can be personal, when the analyst discovers that to trace cause honestly is also to forfeit simpler forms of belonging. Precision can be lonely work in environments that reward declaration.

None of this makes clarity heroic. It makes it expensive.

The expense is not borne by analysts alone. Institutions pay for it when they choose transparency over theatrical control, when they expose assumptions that could have been hidden, when they admit error early enough to preserve credibility rather than denying it until denial itself becomes corrosive. Such choices can look like weakness in the short term. In contested environments, every admission may be weaponized. Every uncertainty voiced in good faith may be recoded as incompetence. That temptation toward opacity is understandable. It is also one of the ways resilience is quietly lost. A system that cannot tell the truth about its own strain cannot distribute that strain intelligently. It governs in the dark and then mistakes surprise for misfortune.

Still, the personal cost should not be romanticized away. To study fragility seriously is to spend time with preventable injury, with systems that transmit harm downward while preserving plausible distance from it, and with forms of narrative exploitation that succeed because they attach themselves to wounds already present. One begins by analyzing institutions and information systems and ends, if one is honest, in the territory of moral exhaustion. Not because every case ends in ruin, nor because every system fails, but because clear sight eventually reveals how much suffering enters public life before it receives a name proportionate to its structure. The school that never functioned well enough to matter in policy debate. The district that learned to expect abandonment as a civic rhythm. The correction that arrived after the lie had already done its social work. The warning that was legible in fragments long before anyone had the institutional courage to read it as a pattern.

This is why the discipline of seeing clearly has to be understood as more than an intellectual virtue. It is part of resilience itself. Not because clarity guarantees good action. It does not. Systems can understand their condition and still refuse repair. Institutions can possess analytic tools and still lack the will to use them against themselves. Publics can know more and choose badly anyway. Clarity offers no immunity from politics, fear, or interest. But without it, there is no basis on which resilience can become something other than rhetoric. A society that cannot distinguish symptom from structure, or signal from saturation, or grievance from its strategic redirection, is already ceding part of its capacity for self-government. Clarity is not comfort. It is infrastructure.

That word matters. Infrastructure is what allows a system to carry weight without constant spectacle. It makes action possible before action becomes dramatic. In earlier chapters, the information environment was treated as infrastructure because it carries the conditions of legibility, coordination, and trust. The same is true of disciplined analysis. It sits beneath decision, beneath public reasoning, beneath the ability of an institution to know what kind of crisis it is actually in. When that infrastructure is weak, every disturbance becomes harder to interpret, every corrective act more vulnerable to distortion, every delay more costly. A system may still speak, but it no longer knows how to hear itself accurately.

So the closing question is not whether collapse will occur somewhere, or whether information environments will continue to be weaponized. Both are already part of the world we inhabit. The harder question is whether the tools for understanding these processes can be built faster than the processes themselves are deepening — whether institutions can learn transparency before opacity becomes instinct, whether publics can preserve evaluative discipline before exhaustion curdles into cynicism, whether analysis can remain proportionate under pressure, and whether the slow work of structural repair can begin before narrative exploitation makes every grievance available for capture.

No chapter can answer that honestly in the affirmative for all systems, or even for most. The record would not permit it. But neither does the record permit surrender as analysis. Some systems do recover margin. Some institutions do regain credibility by narrowing the distance between claim and experience. Some publics do sustain enough evidentiary discipline to keep manipulation from becoming fate. These are not miracles. They are built conditions, which means they can also fail to be built.

That is the final burden of the argument. We are left not with resolution, but with a standard. To see clearly, to reason proportionately, to name the system where a scapegoat would be easier, to preserve method where panic would be faster — these are not secondary acts performed after resilience has been secured. They are among the ways resilience is made. And they will often feel insufficient while they are being made, because collapse is noisy and construction is usually quiet.

The system does not become less dangerous because we have learned to describe it. But description, if honest enough and disciplined enough, is one of the few ways a society refuses to disappear into the stories told about it before it can still tell the truth about itself.