Artikuluak gai globaletan patroi politiko berriak nola eratzen diren galdetzen du, polikrisi testuinguru batean. Sistemen teoriaren eta ikuspegi errealista-konstruktibista baten bidez, narratibek eta egiturek multilateralismoaren ahultze, lidergo populista eta desinformazio testuinguru batean nola jokatzen duten hausnartzen du artikuluak. Azkenik, lidergo etikoa eta erantzukizun narratiboa defendatzen dira diplomazia eta gobernantza gidatzeko, egungo ezegonkortasunen aurrean.

Giltza-Hitzak: Polikrisia. Konplexutasuna. Multilateralismoa. Gobernantza Globala. Etika.

El artículo replantea cómo se forman nuevos patrones políticos en los asuntos globales en un contexto de policrisis. A través de la teoría de sistemas y un enfoque realista-constructivista, el artículo muestra cómo las narrativas y las estructuras configuran los resultados en el contexto del debilitamiento del multilateralismo, el liderazgo populista, la desinformación y los debates sobre desarrollo. Finalmente, se aboga por un liderazgo ético y responsabilidad narrativa para guiar la diplomacia y la gobernanza frente a las inestabilidades interconectadas actuales.

Palabras Clave: Policrisis. Complejidad. Multilateralismo. Gobernanza Global. Ética.

L’article repense la manière dont de nouveaux modèles politiques se forment dans les affaires mondiales dans un contexte de polycrise. À travers la théorie des systèmes et une approche réaliste-constructiviste. l’article montre comment les récits et les structures façonnent les résultats dans le contexte de l’affaiblissement du multilatéralisme. du leadership populiste, de la désinformation et des débats sur le développement. Enfin. l’article plaide pour un leadership éthique et une responsabilité narrative afin de guider la diplomatie et la gouvernance face aux instabilités interconnectées actuelles.

Mots-Clés_: Polycrise. Complexité. Multilatéralisme. Gouvernance mondiale. Éthique.

Reframing Emergence in International Politics: Complexity. Agency and the Evolution of Global Order in times of Polycrisis

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Introduction

In today's discourse, the term emergence is often confused with emergency[1]. This confusion brings to mind urgency, crisis or breakdown. Such misinterpretation can harm efforts to manage complex challenges. It encourages short-term, reactive responses instead of long-term and systems-based thinking (Croce, 2017). In the field of Humanitarian Aid the concept of complex emergencies was soon widely accepted both by academia and international institutions, such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), when dealing with such challenges, yet most of academia continued long time to think in terms of immediate emergency rather than complex interwoven dynamics that result in multifaceted long-term crises (Van de Walle & Come, 2015).

Emergence, in this context, does not focus on urgency, but on unpredictable situations that arise from multiple intertwined interactions. In international politics, and today with higher intensity, what emerges beyond the control of nations or institutions. And yet, it shapes the new framework of new actions and narratives.

This distinction is more than just a matter of language. It has real implications in fields like international relations, policy design, and organizational theory. It offers tools for understanding how complex systems evolve, especially focusing on global politics. And this differentiation is critical in a time of polycrisis. Within this context, crises like climate change, conflict, inequality, and pandemics overlap and interact. These situations are unpredictable and call for new narratives and strategies. Global governance, diplomacy, and security must adapt accordingly (Ureta, Freeman & Blazquez, 2025).

In systems theory and complexity studies, emergence has a specific meaning. It describes how new patterns or behaviors arise from interactions among many agents in a system. These outcomes are neither fully planned nor completely random. Instead, they develop through adaptive and often non-linear processes (Allen, McKelvey & Maguire, 2011; Laszlo & Krippner, 1998; Luhmann, 2013; Elder-Vass, 2007). System thinking offers tools for understanding how complex systems evolve and adapt to a changing environment based on its own reinforcing and balancing feedback loops, both in a local and global level (Meadows, 2008).

This article contributes to developing the understanding and applications of the concept of emergence in international relations and diplomacy in turbulent times. Instead of seeing change only as a reaction to crisis, it views global politics as an evolving ecosystem. Change happens through ongoing interaction and adaptation. This approach encourages a deeper understanding of global change. Not as a straight line, but as a complex, shifting process (Al Rodhan, 2022).

In order to achieve this overall objective, the article has been structured into 3 main sections: The first one offers an account on the concept of emergence and its application to international relations. In connection with that element, the second section focuses on the main theoretical aspects which are commonly used in the realm of international relations. For the purposes of integrating emergence within this discourse, it is fundamental to find a hybrid, to some extent, even contradictory theoretical model which better fits a context of high complexity and interconnection. Therefore, this article is rooted in the theory of realism-constructivism.

In applying this theoretical model, the article focuses on 4 main interlinked elements which shed light on the current context of international relations and diplomacy, which is mostly marked by the erosion of international law and the crisis of multilateralism. These 4 elements, considered as cases are: the case

[1] In Spanish, emergence and emergency share the same word, "emergencia", adding to the confusion.

of Geneva, as one of the most representative hubs of multilateralism; the rise of populism; disinformation as a geopolitical instrument and; the change of narratives from sustainability to rearmament and war.

1. How do we Define our Context?

Today's global landscape is highly complex and difficult to fully understand. It is shaped by a vast web of interconnected factors. The ever-increasing complexity of this landscape makes its analysis with the already existing terminology and conceptualization limited and unsatisfactory. One of the central issues in the difficulty on understanding it is the deficient use of knowledge and its application when it comes to global realities, damaging democratic legitimacy and collective response to crisis. That implies a very new way to approach the study of politics when we analyze complex societies, societies of knowledge or new interactions between democracy and knowledge (Innerarity, 2013 & 2025, Mancisidor, 2024).

In response, many new concepts and acronyms have emerged. These aims to explain change, anticipate the future, and support better decision-making.

One well-known example is VUCA: a world that is Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. The term was first introduced in the 1980s by Bennis and Nanus (1985) in leadership theory. Over the past decade, it has become especially relevant in business and strategic management (Mack et al., 2016; Nandram & Bindlish, 2017).

More recently, other acronyms have appeared to capture different aspects of global disruption. These include: BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) (Cascio, 2020). TUNA (Turbulent, Uncertain, Novel, Ambiguous) (Vigdor Gordon, 2016). RUPT (Rapid, Unpredictable, Paradoxical, Tangled) (Magellan Horth, 2019). Each offers a slightly different lens. Yet all highlight the same reality: the modern world is increasingly unpredictable and interconnected. Old models of understanding are being questioned and redefined.

This shift is not entirely new. Humanity has always grappled with uncertainty by asking what exists, how we know it, and what knowledge is reliable (Nja, Solberg & Braut, 2017; Ureta, 2024a; Ureta, 2024b). Today's concepts do not simply give fresh language to this timeless condition, but speaks about new realities needing new analytical approaches. In the end, the labels may change, but the message stays the same. To thrive now, we must be adaptable, think critically and keep learning. It's not just about surviving uncertainty. It's about embracing it as a driver of innovation, resilience, and better governance.

1.1. Reframing Ethics and Narratives through the Lens of Emergence

The contemporary global landscape is characterized by fragmentation, overlapping crises, and systemic instability. In this context, the development of new narratives functions not only as a communicative necessity but also as an ethical and strategic consideration. During periods of disruption, narratives serve as tools for sense-making, identity reconstruction, and value-oriented decision-making. This development of new narratives is not an exclusively positive endeavor. The development of new narratives might create environments of positive cooperation and understanding or of extremism and violence. The creation of new narratives of positive democratic values are not given and can be challenged through the reframing of practices and interactions (Benner, 2024). The negative impact has been identified in some countries (Temelkuran, 2024; Ressa, 2022; Joseph, 2010).

Narratives influence how organizations define responsibility, how leadership navigates complexity, and how societies articulate shared purpose. However, much of the prevailing narrative discourse remains reactive and fear based. It frequently recycles reductive frameworks that fail to account for the emergent and non-linear nature of contemporary challenges.

Is in this context of failure on the current narratives where post-truth emerges as a symptom of the wider erosion of trust on public institutions and the traditional science method and knowledge institutions and consensus. The failure of the existing narratives to account for the rising challenges have opened the way for the creation of new narratives that prioritize emotional responses over factual ones and has further weakened the democratic consensus (d'Ancona, 2017; Rosenfeld, 2018; Davies, 2017; Wagner, 2016).

This limitation is particularly evident in the context of polycrisis: a condition wherein multiple global disruptions ranging from climate change, inequality, digital instability, political polarization amongst others, interact in unpredictable ways. Such interactions challenge the explanatory and predictive capacity of traditional analytical models and represent collective experiences as Tooze has pointed out (Whiting & Park, 2023).

Within this context, the concept of emergence becomes especially relevant. Commonly conflated with emergency, emergence is often misread as synonymous with crisis, which tends to prompt short-term, reactive responses. In contrast, systems theory and complexity science define emergence as the adaptive formation of new structures, behaviors, and relationships arising from interactions among multiple agents (Allen, McKelvey & Maguire, 2011; Laszlo & Krippner, 1998; Luhmann, 2013).

This conceptual distinction has important implications across disciplines, including business ethics, organizational studies and international relations. It invites a reframing of ethics, not as a fixed code or reactive mechanism, but as a relational as well as an evolving process. Such a process is informed by continuous reflection, learning and collective co-creation.

From this perspective, narratives are not merely instruments of persuasion or control. They function as mechanisms through which ethical orientations emerge, shaping new forms of organizing and collaboration. As Harari suggests, those who influence the future are not solely those with access to data or technical expertise, but those capable of constructing compelling narratives. These narratives provide scaffolding for emergent identities, institutional norms, and collective values (Harari, 2017).

This insight aligns with Simonton's views on the interconnection between psychology, science and history, which highlights the role of collective mentalities, emotional states, and unconscious motivations in shaping historical trajectories (Simonton, 1990; 1994). These factors are not secondary to historical events but are constitutive elements. Similarly, historians and theorists such as Bloch, Braudel, Hutton and members of the Frankfurt School have emphasized the inseparability of emotion, ideology, and historical causality (Bloch, 1992; Hutton, 1982; Braudel, 1995; Marcuse, 1955).

In contexts of systemic disruption, emotional dynamics such as fear, anxiety, hope, and the desire for meaning, become integral to institutional and normative change. These affective undercurrents form part of the material from which new socio-political systems and ethical frameworks emerge. A revised understanding of emergence, therefore, carries both theoretical and ontological significance. It enables a shift from reactive models of governance and ethics to those that foreground adaptation, relationality, and system-level transformation. Within this view, uncertainty is not only a condition to be managed but also a space through which new possibilities can be conceptualized.

As Frank has argued, the search for meaning is not incidental but fundamental during times of upheaval. In the present moment, such meaning-making processes increasingly operate at both individual and collective levels (Frank, 1995). Narratives, therefore, become crucial sites for reimagining identities, institutional roles, and ethical commitments when founded in democratic values, rule of law, human rights, freedom and knowledge.

Nowadays this and broader socio-political discourses may be understood not solely through compliance mechanisms or technical solutions. Instead, they can be conceptualized as arenas of emergence. As sites where values are contested, imaginaries tested, and institutions reconfigured. This approach implies a shift in focus from control and certainty to an engagement with complexity, contingency as well as innovation.

2. Theoretical Applications in the Realm of International Relations and Diplomacy

Examining human, political, or diplomatic agency involves understanding how actors (individuals as well as institutions) act, react, communicate, strategize and seek influence. This includes how they identify political opportunities, define strategic goals, build consensus, and lead or shape diplomatic processes (Ureta, 2024 a). In a fragmented and uncertain global landscape, international relations theories offer essential frameworks for making sense of shifting patterns of security, diplomacy, and political behavior. These theories generally fall into four broad categories.

The first emphasizes the distribution of power among states. Scholars like Waltz, Mearsheimer, and Copeland explore how structural factors, such as anarchy and the balance of power, shape state behavior (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 1989; Copeland, 2000). Others, including Deutsch and Ruggie, highlight the role of economic and communication networks in fostering cooperation, while Keohane and Martin focus on international institutions as stabilizing forces amid systemic volatility (Ruggie, 1983).

A second group of theories centers on domestic and ideational variables, such as regime type, bureaucratic politics, and strategic cultures, which are especially relevant in fluid or contested environments (Walt, 2005; Fearon, 1994; Halperin, 1972; Levy, 1989; Goldstein & Keohane, 1993).

A third family, drawing on psychology and decision theory, explores how perceptions, biases, and uncertainty influence foreign policy choices. Jervis, Mercer, and Byman & Pollack emphasize the importance of individual and collective psychology in shaping outcomes, particularly in volatile contexts (Jervis, 1976; Mercer, 1996; Byman & Pollack, 2001).

Finally, constructivist approaches, led by Finnemore, Ruggie, and Wendt, emphasize the co-constitution of agency and structure through ideas, identity, and discourse (Finnemore, 1996; Ruggie, 1998; Wendt, 1999). These perspectives help explain how meaning is constructed and political legitimacy negotiated, especially in environments characterized by competing narratives. Again, in IR theory, Wendt points out that international systems are not fixed or pre-determined structures, but intersubjective spaces shaped by the shared identities of nation-states (Wendt, 1999).

The relationship between realism and constructivism in international relations theory is often portrayed as oppositional, particularly in academic settings where they are taught as fundamentally incompatible. This perceived divide leads to unproductive debates that falsely separate power politics from normative concepts like identity and discourse. However, this binary view limits both paradigms: it prevents realists from engaging with meaningful normative factors and restricts constructivists from analyzing power

dynamics effectively. While early constructivist works often critiqued specific forms of realism, especially neorealism, more recent scholarship has explored the potential compatibility between classical realism and constructivism (Barkin, 2021).

For the purposes of this article, we propose the realist-constructivist approach. On the one hand, realism provides a useful baseline to analyze state interests, strategies, and survival-driven foreign policy choices. States prioritize security and influence, and their alliances and behaviors often reflect strategic calculations aimed at preserving power. However, to engage with the concept of emergence, as a generative, non-linear process, constructivist insights are also essential. They reveal how public opinion, identities, and political narratives evolve and are manipulated, influencing both domestic consensus and international positioning (Ureta, 2024 a). This combined lens helps us understand not only what actors do, but how, new patterns of political behavior and legitimacy arise under conditions of global complexity. The following section focuses on the application of these theoretical dimensions on specific and practical issues related to diplomacy and governance in times of polycrisis.

3. Emergence in International Security and Diplomacy

The framework we have presented before reveals several relevant insights. First, most of the current challenges facing the international system, such as the rise of non-state actors, hybrid warfare, cyber-security threats, human displacement due to environmental changes, as well as the diffusion of disinformation and misinformation do not follow traditional patterns of conflict (Srikanth, 2014). Nevertheless, despite the apparent novelty of these phenomena, it is also crucial to understand long-term continuities which are evolving over the decades. As Shea points out, cyber-security, for instance, "is arguably the modern equivalent of persistent military vulnerabilities, such as signals and information security, secure and redundant communications, insider espionage and deliberate deception, and data manipulation" (Shea, 2025; 451).

Applying this framework to international security and diplomacy reveals several important insights. First, many of the current challenges facing the international system, such as hybrid warfare, cyber threats, climate-induced displacement, and the diffusion of disinformation do not follow traditional patterns of conflict. They emerge at the intersection of technology, governance gaps, societal vulnerabilities, and narrative construction. These are multi-causal, cross-domain phenomena, not reducible to state intent or formal declarations of war (Reichborn-Kjennerud & Cullen, 2016; Weissman et al. 2022).

Second, the concept of emergence helps to explain the proliferation of alternative security discourses. While the 20th century was dominated by a state-centric, military-focused understanding of security, the first quarter of the 21st century has seen the gradual rise of concepts such as human security, environmental peacebuilding, digital sovereignty, as well as decolonial and humanitarian diplomacy (Felfeli, 2023). This evident change has impacted also the definition of international law and the re-interpretation and application of human rights (Ramcharan, 2002).

From these perspectives and to tackle with these multidimensional and interconnected changes, Prantl introduces the concept of strategic diplomacy which "starts from a level-playing field and examines how actors and issues are embedded in a systemic context" (Prantl, 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the new narratives which have been created have not been uniformly adopted, nor have they emerged from central institutions. Rather, they are the outcome of interactions between civil society, academic networks, regional actors and global crises. Their impact is uneven but increasingly influential, particularly in multilateral fora and grassroots advocacy (Harris, 2022).

Third, emergence as a lens reveals how normative shifts take place in global politics, as it is going to be examined later. For example, the gradual erosion of faith in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations or the World Trade Organization has coincided with the emergence of informal coalitions, regional blocks and digital governance platforms boosted by sustained processes of regionalization (Dholakia, 2021).

3.1. Implications for Global Governance and Agency

In considering the theoretical and practical dimensions explained above, understanding emergence in international politics carries important implications for governance and agency. A linear assessment of the current challenges as well as future challenges. It is important to highlight that no single actor controls the evolution of the system. This concept challenges both hegemonic visions of order and overly deterministic views of decline. At the end of the Cold-war there were several views related to the advent of a more unstable multipolar system compared to the bipolar world (Kegley & Raymond, 1992).

Since the end of the Cold War, the global order has shifted from bipolarity (namely the U.S. Soviet rivalry) to a unipolar moment dominated by the United States, which lasted until the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (Westad, 2017). After that, it is possible to observe the development of what has been widely defined as multipolar system (Peters, 2022; Kassab, 2022). Beyond this linear and incremental progression of the international complexity, some authors have considered that we are coming back to a bipolar world. A world which, despite the existence of emerging powers, it is dominated by the narratives deployed by the US and China (Kupchan, 2022). In so doing, Kupchan was considering that this new bipolar rivalry would have brought more stability to the international system. This vision has proved wrong lately. But, conversely amidst the rise of the multipolar system, it has been also possible to witness the recreation of a new form of cold war (Abrams, 2022; Ferguson, 2025). It is in this new form of cold war, chaos is identified as a central characteristic of its functioning (Gleick, 2011). The increasing complexity and interwoven challenges that plague the system and the unpredictability of behavior and outcomes that increasingly blur the line between the local and global challenges the already established methods of global governance, introducing a chaotic nature to its functioning. This chaotic nature at this scale challenges the already existing methods of understanding global governance and increases the potential of conflict in the new multipolar system.

Beyond this digression, as a matter of fact, it results easy to understand the configuration of this new multipolar system due to the arrival of competing powers like China and the rest of emerging countries. Apart from the historical BRICS countries, lately the expansion of this community has experienced notable growth specially after the conferences in South Africa in 2023 and in Kazan in 2024. Their potential influence is very relevant. BRICS+ holds significant potential to emerge as a major geopolitical and geoeconomic player. The group represents around 45% of the global population, accounts for over 35% of global GDP (PPP) and produces 30% of the world's oil (Patrick & Hogan, 2025).

In this scenario, agency is increasingly distributed across a network of states, non-state actors, institutions as well as discourses and new narratives (Cassese, 2012). The emergence of this new world system has theoretically entailed a rethinking of strategic planning diplomacy. Traditionally, diplomacy has been operating on assumptions of linear cause-effect relationships and therefore, considering a certain stability of interlocutors. Against this view, the current context, diplomacy informed by complexity should be focused on prioritizing adaptability, iterative learning and networked collaboration. Due to the higher incentives for conflict, a new multilateral mindset should prioritize positive and responsible narrative-building as it is going to be discussed later. This shift is fundamental because it helps to

recognize that what emerges is shaped by how actors interpret, frame, communicate and tackle existing challenges.

These contextual and theoretical explanations invite a normative reflection which projects the discussion toward the future. In essence: What kinds of futures and narratives are currently emerging? Are we witnessing the consolidation of exclusionary and securitized orders or can we envision alternative developments towards justice-based and cooperative frameworks and narratives? What role can knowledge production play in proposing and developing new inclusive discourses which strengthen democratic processes, promote equity and ensure human dignity?

In the next section the article focuses on analyzing some specific cases which are representative, and which aim at better understanding the erosion of international law and multilateralism.

4. The Erosion of International Law and the Crisis of Multilateralism

The history and evolution of the United Nations in shaping contemporary international relations is extremely well documented (Luard, 1982; Meisler, 2011; Weiss, 2011; Peters, 2015; Sayward, 2017). At its core, the UN has traditionally embodied the collective aspiration for a more peaceful, just and cooperative international order. Established in the aftermath of WWII, the UN was conceived not merely as a forum for diplomacy but as a normative institution grounded in the principles of multilateralism, sovereign equality, and the prevention of conflict through dialogue and cooperation. It is interesting observing its foundational Charter. It articulates a vision of global governance that transcends narrow national interests, emphasizing human rights, social development (which later would evolve into sustainable development) and the rule of international law (Emmerij, 2002; Jolly et al., 2004; Weissman et al., 2005).

The essence of the UN lies in its dual role as both a guardian of international peace and a platform for addressing complex as well as transboundary challenges. *Per se,* a more global and universal approach like this, challenges the very notion of the traditional international system based on the recognition of nation-states. And this shift was done consciously. The way the Declaration of Human Rights was conceived proves that. The initial discussions were revolving around the concept of "International Declaration of Human Rights". At the end, it was declared "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (UN, 1948). This shift represented a substantial and explicit effort to go beyond the notion of international community (Morsink, 1999; Schabas, 2013; Mancisidor, 2025). However, from a theoretical perspective to a practical one, this universalist narrative has been encountering several challenges.

The most relevant point is that, from an operational perspective, the UN and its related agencies have primarily responded to the interests of the most influential stakeholders (both financially and militarily) while operating within an increasingly regionalized framework. (Polsi, 2015). In fact, the shift from a focus on hard power to a more pragmatic approach rooted in soft power shaped the creation of institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) in the aftermath of the Bretton Woods Agreements (Nye, 1990).

These challenges have been generating much criticism on the role and actual capacity of the United Nations to improve global challenges (Gimenez Corte, 2018; Zeihan, 2020). Nationalist impulses, shifting priorities, and weak enforcement mechanisms have long challenged international organizations that underpin the very essence and scope of multilateralism. These hurdles have produced varied and often contradictory outcomes in the pursuit of collective goals (Lavelle, 2020; Hosli, 2021).

Despite these obstacles, the shared commitment to peace, poverty reduction and global health continues to motivate states toward cooperation. It could be said that the growing consolidation of a multipolar system has contributed to making operational challenges more acute. During Trump's first administration back in 2016, it was possible to observe that the American president along with Bolton (his third security advisor) "routinely denigrate international organizations and cooperation. Partners and allies are irrelevant in their zero-sum ideology" (Weiss, 2018). This rhetoric was accompanied throughout his first term by withdrawing the US from various international organization like UNESCO AND UNFCCC This criticism notably escalated shortly after the start of his second presidential term. Since taking office in January 2025, he has scaled back U.S. support for the UN on several fronts, including withdrawing again from the UN Human Rights Council and cutting funding to several key programs. His address at the UN General Assembly on September 23, 2025, made his criticism very clear (UN, 2025 b).

4.1. The case of Geneva

In 2025, the celebrations of the 80th anniversary of the United Nations coincides with an extremely complicated and conflictual global scenario. The UN80 Initiative tries to respond to this question: "How can the UN adapt to become more agile, integrated, and equipped to respond to today's complex global challenges amid tightening resources?" (UN, 2025c). This transformation will reshape the contours of the organization as we know it today. Basically, the United Nations may undergo cut amounting to 3.7 billion USD, which represented the 20% of its total budget as well as cutting roughly 6,900 jobs (Ferragano & Roy, 2025).

This situation is heavily impacting on Geneva, one of the world's capitals of multilateralism. Over the past decade, funding for Geneva-based international organizations has been shaped by global crises and shifting geopolitics. Contributions were stable from 2013 to 2019, spiked to $21 billion during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, then declined to $18.7 billion by 2023. Public funding dropped due to fiscal pressures, while private funding grew steadily, now representing 11% of the total. Funding is highly concentrated, with the top 15 donors (mainly Western countries, the EU, and major institutions) providing over 86%. Health and humanitarian sectors received the majority of funds, especially during the pandemic, with COVAX alone receiving $12 billion. Political shifts, such as Brexit and U.S. policy changes, caused major fluctuations, particularly affecting health and humanitarian support. Despite global instability, humanitarian funding remained relatively resilient, declining only 4–5% in 2023, even as most sectors saw cuts of around 20% (Geneva Policy Outlook, 2025).

With the advent of the second Trump administration, the humanitarian sector has plunged into an existential crisis (Burkhalter & Turuban, 2025). Thousands of jobs are being cut across Geneva's international organizations due to major funding shortfalls. The sharp drop in U.S. aid has worsened the crisis. UNAIDS is reducing its Geneva staff from 127 to 19. Gavi is cutting 155 positions, which is 24% of its workforce. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has dismissed 20% of its Geneva staff and over 3,000 globally. The International Labor Organization (ILO) sent 190 termination letters, though 92 staff were reassigned. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have reduced both personnel and programs in addition to the support to the functioning of treaty Bodies. As reported by the media in early October citing an anonymous UN official, the UN would be forced to cut approximately 25% of its peacekeeping manpower and reducing the peacekeeping capacities budget by 15% (Amiri, 2025).

UNHCR plans to cut 3,500 jobs globally. Around 140 Geneva-based staff are at risk. UNICEF will reduce its 13,000 global staff by 20%. WHO may cut up to 40% of its Geneva staff due to a $1.8 billion shortfall. Broader UN reforms may shrink staff by 20%, affecting the Geneva Secretariat and its specialized

agencies. Hiring has dropped 43% compared to last year. Many temporary contracts are ending quietly. Staff remain uncertain about their futures. The Canton of Geneva is offering support, launching a CHF 50 million foundation and a CHF 10 million grant to help retain NGO staff (Jefford & Langrand, 2025).

To face these challenges, both the canton of Geneva and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) on June 20, 2025, allocated 269 million Swiss francs to International Geneva, reaffirming Geneva's central role in foreign policy and global governance. This commitment is complemented by the investment of the FDFA, which has dedicated nearly 2 billion francs to strengthening Geneva over the past four years (Ureta, 2025). The new context is forcing both the Swiss and the global community to reshape the new face of international Geneva as well as the very concept of multilateralism 2.0 (Franceschini, 2020; Girardel, 2025).

Amid rising tensions and budget cuts, new narratives increasingly prioritize national security and geopolitical interests over international law. This marks a shift from the UN's founding values toward more transactional and interest-driven diplomacy. Sovereignty is now often framed as a barrier to international cooperation, rather than a basis for mutual respect (Lehoczki, 2022). From an ethical perspective, this trend basically cancels the notions of cosmopolitanism and global cooperation (Pogge, 1992). Nationalist and populist leaders use sovereignty discourse to justify unilateral actions and resist global coordination. This weakens institutions like those in Geneva and limits their ability to respond to shared crises. As multilateralism loses ground, unilateralism and securitized narratives risk undermining the rule-based international order. An approach to international law that accounts for its historical dimension—as an unfinished construct without a necessary or inevitable direction—and that considers current international law as one of many cultural and historical forms, can help to analyze this phenomenon with greater perspective and openness to unexpected possibilities. (Mancisidor, 2025).

4.2. The Rise of Populism

Populism is increasingly shaping the political climate in many countries. It challenges liberal discourse and offers an alternative to the established order. Populism threatens the core of international law, which relies on cooperation and compromise between states (Mudde & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2013; Anselmi, 2017; Perrineau, 2021; De la Torre & Mazzoleni, 2023). The growth of populist governments, as well as political entrepreneurs, poses a direct threat to democracy, human rights and social peace (Humble, 2023; Ureta, 2024 a). Paradoxically, as Berman points out, populists highlight that their claims are democratic; "much of their rhetoric is based on the idea that the existing political system has ignored, neglected, or outright worked against the interests of the people—but democracy is understood in majoritarian and illiberal terms" (Berman, 2021). All this necessitates that any narrative of democracy is not limited to praise based on emotions or platitudes, but rather that it contains measurable elements of democratic quality that includes a role for citizens as actors. To this end, studies on the quality of democracy, including indicators, are essential. (V-DEM Index, of the University of Gothenburg or The Economist Democracy Index).

It is on these terms of emotional responses and post-truth rethoric that populism manages to get a hold of a significant part of the population. The increasing distrust on government and international institutions paired with effective emotional messages are utilized by populist leaders to present ideas contrary to the democratic consensus achieved over the years and challenge the truth-seeking consensus that have been established over the decades (d'Ancona, 2017; Rosenfeld, 2018; Davies, 2017). The usage and manufacturing of fake news as a way of delegitimize democratic institutions and democratic values have further eroded the trust on journalists, limiting their effectiveness on keeping checks in an increasingly post-truth rhetoric by populist leaders and movements (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

As the WEF indicates, the rise of populism is widely connected to certain trends: stagnant middle incomes, where the real income gap is widening; the breakdown of trust, breakdown of the social capital (WEF, 2025 Espinosa García, et al. 2023, Gurruchaga, 2005). Rodriguez Pose argues that" the rise of the vote for anti-system parties is far more related to the long-term economic decline of places that have seen far better times and have been disadvantaged by processes that have rendered them exposed and somewhat 'expendable' than to increases inequality" (Rodriguez Pose, 2020).

According to the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Risks Report, several of the top ten most severe risks include misinformation and disinformation, state-based armed conflict, societal polarization, inequality, erosion of human rights and civic freedoms, and geoeconomic confrontation (WEF, 2025). In this context, a major threat to the quality of democratic processes emerges when political parties and politicians themselves become key sources of misinformation (Desouza, et al. 2020; Törnberg & Chueri, 2025). In this context, respect for knowledge and academic freedom become central to the struggle for democratic quality. In this case it is worth to mention the initiative Scholars at Risk.

The risk that misinformation and disinformation go beyond the obscuring of facts, but also the limitation of researching facts and information. Several scholars have defended the importance of science and a scientific freedom as a human right (Mancisidor, 2015, 2022; Mann et al., 2024). The importance of having a free academia and the ability to disseminate its findings to the wider population are central on having a healthy society that is based on facts and truth-seeking, reaffirming science as a human right as established in 1948 under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Mann et al., 2024; Porsdam, 2022). This position is challenged by the increasing postruthist attitudes of populist leaders and the erosion of trust on institutions generating scientific research limit their effectiveness and capacity to generate much needed knowledge, putting at risk not only democratic quality and values, but also human lives (Porsdam, 2022).

In considering the aforementioned elements, the impacts on diplomacy are very evident. Populist leaders are changing diplomacy through *champion diplomacy*. As it was said above, they present themselves as the voice of the people against elites in the name of democracy. This approach sidelines career diplomats and uses blunt, simple language. It favors public engagement. This often happens via social media over traditional channels accelerating processes of socio-political polarization (Perloff, 2021; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). These practices make negotiations harder and agreements more difficult to implement. Cases like U.S. diplomacy with North Korea and the Abraham Accords show how this disrupts established diplomatic norms and weakens international cooperation. (Eiran, Ish-Shalom & Kornprobst, 2025).

4.3. Disinformation as a Geopolitical Instrument

Alongside these shifts in diplomatic style, another growing challenge to traditional diplomacy is the strategic use of disinformation. As digital communication becomes central to political discourse, hostile state and non-state actors exploit these platforms to influence public opinion, erode trust in democratic institutions, and manipulate diplomatic narratives. Disinformation operates not just as a tool of domestic influence, but increasingly as a geopolitical weapon aimed at weakening adversaries and destabilizing international norms. This emerging threat intersects with the populist turn in diplomacy, further complicating the landscape of global engagement.

In this sense it is possible to speak about disinformation as a strategic instrument of geopolitical influence (Madrid-Morales, Wasserman & Ahmed, 2024). State-sponsored propaganda and disinformation have existed for as long as states themselves. What sets the 21st century apart is how easily, quickly, and

cheaply these campaigns can now be carried out. With global audiences increasingly turning to the Internet and social media for news, these platforms have become prime targets for information attacks (Walzman, 2017 p. 4).

Heynen has also referred to it with the concept of "Foreign disinformation". This concept refers to the intentional spread of false or misleading information by actors linked (directly or indirectly) to foreign states. It differs from misinformation, which involves false information shared without intent to deceive. Disinformation is part of a broader set of tools used for foreign information manipulation and interference. These tools are often used in hybrid conflict, alongside tactics like assassinations, bribery and cyber-attack (Heynen, 2025). In this sense it is also possible to speak about the concept of weaponization of information (Walzman, 2017; Desouza et al., 2020).

As global challenges become more interconnected, misinformation is increasingly used as a strategic tool. It disrupts diplomacy and weakens societies' cognitive resilience. This creates an urgent need for cognitive security. Such security protects public discourse, promotes media literacy, and strengthens the ability to resist manipulation. In a time of polycrisis, securing cognitive space is vital to defend democracy and support international cooperation. The media and control institutions have fostered a pervasive "discourse of fear," promoting constant awareness of risk. Some organizations benefit from amplifying these fears. This has manipulated public empathy, leading to a rise in perceived "victims." More troubling is the growing reliance on state control. Fear now drives greater public support for law enforcement and punitive measures (Altheide, 2002). The risks of misinformation about the loss of democracy have been described in numerous countries (Ressa, 2022). Likewise, the importance of information literacy has become one of the major challenges both domestically and global.

Cognitive security is under growing threat from four connected trends: rising acceptance of violent ideas, increasing political polarization, manipulative behavior by politicians, and the erosion of trust in expertise due to information overload. Together, these trends fuel a climate that undermines democracy by discouraging open debate, deepening division, and promoting misinformation. Strengthening democratic resilience requires long-term efforts to build psychological and political awareness. It depends on fostering trust, legitimacy, and shared democratic values at both individual and collective levels (Jauregui, 2004; Lebrun, 2023; Huang & Zhu, 2023). It is no coincidence that the efforts and progress made by international organizations towards the regulatory development of the right to science have been accompanied by a new impetus in academic literature on the subject. (Porsdam & Porsdam Mann, 2021; Porsdam, 2022; Romano & Boggio, 2024; Mann et al. 2024; Perduca & Perrone, 2021).

The decline in the quality of democratic practices is having its direct impact on the quality of diplomatic efforts. As a consequence, diplomacy is increasingly used as a domestic spectacle rather than a tool for external dialogue. This shift reduces its capacity to engage constructively with international partners. When focused inward, diplomacy becomes reactive, responding to crises instead of preventing them. It loses its ability to promote dialogue grounded in the common good. To remain effective, diplomacy must reclaim its preventive role. This means engaging early, building trust, and addressing challenges before they escalate (Aldama & Ureta, 2025).

4.4. Changing narratives: The move from the SDG to Rearmament

Developing new narratives entails an effort to change the mindsets which have driven our common wisdom. The speed in which narratives change according to evolving scenarios and priorities are the main obstacles against long-term projects geared towards generating common good (Ureta, Freeman & Blazquez, 2025). One example of this is the history of the SDG goals. They were adopted by the UN in

2015 as a "universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity (UN, 2025 a).

According to the 2025 UN Sustainable Development Goals Report, by 2025, of the 169 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets, 139 have sufficient global trend data from 2015 to the most recent year, supported by analyses from custodian agencies. Among these, only 35% show adequate progress, while 18% are on track and 17% show moderate progress. However, 48% are falling behind, with 31% showing only marginal improvement and 17% showing no progress. Most alarmingly, 18% of targets have actually regressed below 2015 levels (UN, 2025, b p. 4).

By 2014 the UNCTAD estimated that achieving the SDGs by 2030 would require annual investments of $3.3 to $4.5 trillion in relevant sectors across developing countries (UNCTAD, 2014). By 2019, this leaved already a significant financing gap of approximately $2.5 trillion per year between current investment levels and what is needed (Doumbia & Lauridsen, 2019). The discourse related to the achievement of the SDG has been widely developed since their inception back in 2015. This narrative has been impacting the way corporations have tried to be compliant with the SDGs with variable results (Whittingham, et al., 2022). But it is possible to observe that from 2022, specially after the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict this narrative has been losing its inertia. This trend is also evident in the assessment of academic production levels (Domingo, Torre & Vidal, 2024).

As mentioned above, the outbreak of the Russian aggression against Ukraine has reshaped the landscape, with new hard power narratives increasingly replacing topics related to human security and sustainable development. This shift occurred in a very short period of time. According to the SIPRI, military spending reached $2,718 billion in 2024 globally, marking a continuous annual increase over the past decade. This essentially corresponds to a 37% rise since 2015. The 9.4% growth in 2024 was the largest year-on-year jump recorded since at least 1988. Military expenditure accounted for 2.5% of the world's GDP, while its share of government spending rose to 7.1%. Per capita military spending hit $334 the highest since 1990 (Liang, et al. 2024).

This decade-long surge is partly driven by higher spending in Europe, due to the Russia Russian aggression to Ukraine (UN, 2022, and in the Middle East, fueled by the Israel-Israeli expanded military interventions in Gaza as well as other regional disputes which are emerging consequently. Nationally and regionally speaking this increase is very significant. For instance, Israel experienced a 65% rise in military spending amid expanded military actions in Gaza, Lebanon, Iran and Yemen. On the far-Eastern front, China's defense budget grew for the 30th straight year, reaching $314 billion. NATO spending hit $1.5 trillion in 2025 with 18 members now meeting the 2% GDP target (NATO, 2025). The US has remained the largest global spender, accounting for 37% of the global expenditure (Liang, et al. 2024). These efforts will continue to develop over the next years. For instance, the European Commission has put forward new measures aimed at reducing red tape and supporting the €800 billion investment needed for EU countries to strengthen their defense industries' speed and capacity (European Commission, 2025).

The rapid spread of a new global war narrative is both deeply concerning and highly irresponsible. Numerous examples illustrate this troubling trend. Notably, in early September 2025, the Trump administration renamed the U.S. Department of Defense to the Department of War, an act symbolic of the broader shift in rhetoric and policy (Trump, 2025). On the other side, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov, stated that "NATO and the European Union want to declare, in fact, have already declared a real war on my country and are directly participating in it" (Svirnovski, 2025). The same idea was reinforced by Putin at the Valdai International Discussion Club beginning of October 2025 (Kremlin, 2025).

These few examples show the global narrative is shifting from sustainable human development toward rearmament, reflecting a broader process of securitization and militarization in political communication. This change highlights how security concerns are increasingly framed as urgent threats, justifying higher military spending and aggressive policies. Such shifts raise important questions about political responsibility and ethical behavior, as emphasis on military strength often comes at the expense of long-term social and environmental goals. The rise of militarized rhetoric risks deepening conflicts and undermining peace efforts, making it crucial to balance security needs with ethical governance and a genuine commitment to global well-being.

Conclusions

In times of polycrisis, international politics is no longer adequately understood through linear causality or static models of power. This article has proposed reframing emergence as a central concept to interpret the evolving dynamics of global order. By distinguishing emergence from emergency, we open conceptual space for recognizing the complex, adaptive, and often unpredictable ways in which global challenges unfold. We have also focused on how actors can engage with them proactively rather than reactively.

The cases examined (the weakening of multilateral institutions, the rise of populist diplomacy, the instrumentalization of disinformation, and the shift from sustainability narratives to those of rearmament) demonstrate that what emerges in global politics is shaped by competing narratives, asymmetrical power, questioning the place of expert knowledge in the public arena and shifting forms of legitimacy. These developments reveal a critical erosion of trust in international norms and institutions, intellectual and academic institutions included, alongside a broader transformation in the architecture of global cooperation.

Yet, emergence is not merely descriptive; it also opens up normative possibilities. In recognizing the agency embedded within complex systems, we affirm that global actors (states, diplomats, civil society, and knowledge communities) retain the capacity to shape alternative trajectories. What is needed is not simply a reaction to crisis, but a deliberate cultivation of regenerative narratives and political imagination based on the best knowledge available. This calls for responsible leadership committed to long-term human security, cognitive resilience, and ethical internationalism. All this at a time when new ways of consuming information, information and communication technologies, and artificial intelligence are constantly changing the playing field and the rules of the game. All of which makes it necessary to reconsider the concept of emergency in terms of systems thinking, complexity and chaos theory. Reframing emergence therefore invites a new diplomatic ethos. A new diplomatic energy and muscle that embraces uncertainty not as a threat but as a condition for innovation. In doing so, we move toward a vision of international politics that is less about control and more about co-evolution: a practice of shared agency capable of responding to complexity without collapsing into fragmentation or fatalism.

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