

Meaning in an Era of Transformation and Uncertainty

From the Crisis of Understanding to the Engineering of Strategic Significance

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Abstract

In an era defined by accelerating transformation and irreducible uncertainty, the decisive strategic challenge confronting states, institutions, and communities is no longer informational but interpretive. We possess unprecedented capacities for data collection, predictive modelling, and technical analysis—yet the gap between knowledge and understanding continues to widen, leaving actors equipped with sophisticated tools yet deprived of coherent direction. This paper addresses that paradox by reconceptualising meaning not as a philosophical abstraction or cultural epiphenomenon, but as a distinct, under-theorised, and operationally critical strategic resource.

The paper employs a qualitative, comparative methodology, analysing five heterogeneous cases selected through a "most different" logic: Finland's geopolitical narrative of resilient sovereignty, Singapore's engineered national meaning framework, Nokia's semantic collapse versus IBM's adaptive continuity, divergent COVID-19 policy responses, and Gaza's community resilience under existential siege. Across these radically distinct domains, a consistent pattern emerges: actors possessing coherent, actively maintained strategic meaning demonstrate superior capacity to absorb shock, sustain decision coherence under uncertainty, and maintain directional continuity amid environmental turbulence. Conversely, actors experiencing semantic erosion—regardless of technical capability or resource endowment—succumb to decision paralysis, policy incoherence, and the slow dissolution of institutional legitimacy. Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024)

The paper's primary contribution is the translation of these findings into an actionable practitioner framework that bridges the persistent gap between sensemaking theory and strategic practice, Dummett (1975). We conclude by examining the sovereignty dimension of meaning: in an era of interpretive contestation, the capacity to produce one's own semantic frameworks—rather than consume those manufactured by others—has become a condition of strategic autonomy. To recover the capacity for strategic meaning-making is therefore to reclaim the capacity for strategic direction itself. In an age that has mastered the measurement of everything, survival belongs to those who can still give meaning to where they are going and why. Horwich (1998).

Keywords: Meaning, Strategic Meaning, Sensemaking, Uncertainty, Strategic Intelligence, Future Foresight, Survival, Resilience, Narrative, Inspiration Economy

1.0 Introduction

In an era defined by accelerating transformation, proliferating uncertainty, and the fragmentation of shared understanding, the most urgent strategic challenge confronting states, institutions, and societies is no longer merely informational but interpretive, Buheji et al, (2020). We possess more data, more sophisticated analytical tools, and more predictive algorithms than any generation in human history. Yet paradoxically, our capacity to comprehend the meaning of unfolding events, to distinguish signal from noise, and to forge coherent direction from the torrent of change has never been more precarious. The gap between what we know and what we understand is widening precisely as the stakes of misreading reality grow more consequential. Greimas et. al (1989).

This paper addresses that gap. It proceeds from a deceptively simple but increasingly unavoidable proposition: that meaning—the cognitive and symbolic framework through which events become intelligible, decisions become defensible, and collective action becomes possible—has emerged as a distinct and under-theorised strategic resource, Al-Sanoussi (2026a). In domains ranging from national security and institutional adaptation to community resilience under existential threat, the capacity to construct, sustain, and strategically deploy meaning now decisively differentiates those who merely survive disruption from those who navigate it with continuity of purpose and coherence of action. Buheji (2025), Buheji and Ahmed (2022)

Our inquiry is motivated by three convergent observations. First, that the contemporary crisis of meaning is not a peripheral cultural symptom or philosophical abstraction, but a structural condition produced by the uneven rhythms of technological, economic, and political change, Buheji (2026). As Koselleck (2004) diagnosed, the space of experience and the horizon of expectation have decoupled to an unprecedented degree, leaving actors suspended in a present that cannot be adequately explained by the past nor confidently projected into the future. Second, that traditional managerial logics—predicated on prediction, control, and linear planning—are fundamentally ill-equipped for environments characterised by deep, irreducible uncertainty (Scoones & Stirling, 2020; Van Asselt, 2005). And third, that while the sensemaking tradition (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005) and constructivist approaches in social theory (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Wendt, 1999) have established the foundational insight that reality is socially constructed through shared meaning, these literatures have not been systematically translated into actionable strategic frameworks for practitioners operating under conditions of extreme volatility. Weick et al. (2005), Greimas et al. (1989).

This paper seeks to fill that gap. It does so by advancing three interconnected arguments. First, we argue that meaning has undergone a fundamental shift in its strategic status: from an implicit background condition of action to an explicit object of strategic engineering. In an era when inherited narratives have lost their taken-for-granted authority, and the pace of events outstrips the production of stable interpretation, meaning can no longer be passively inherited or imported—it must be deliberately manufactured, maintained, and defended. Second, we argue that the capacity for strategic meaning-making operates through identifiable mechanisms—anchoring, legitimation, coordination, and temporal bridging—that can be systematically cultivated rather than left to intuition or circumstance. Third, we argue that these mechanisms can be distilled into a repeatable, accessible practice: the Strategic Meaning Cycle, a four-stage framework for curating signals, constructing narratives, articulating commitments, and sustaining legitimacy through revision and adaptation.

Our methodology is qualitative, comparative, and explicitly designed for accessibility and practical translation. We proceed through four analytical movements: conceptual foundation-building through synthesis of sensemaking theory, constructivist international relations, and philosophical semantics; comparative case analysis using a "most different" logic across state, corporate, policy, and community contexts; causal mechanism tracing to identify how meaning produces strategic effects; and framework synthesis that distils findings into actionable practitioner guidance, Noble (1952), Grice (1957), Dummett (1975). The cases examined—Finland's geopolitical narrative, Singapore's engineered national meaning, Nokia's semantic

collapse versus IBM's adaptive continuity, divergent COVID-19 policy responses, and Gaza's community resilience under siege—are deliberately heterogeneous to test the robustness of our claims across radically different domains. Lewis (1943), Al-Sanoussi (2025b), Buheji and Mushimiyimana (2024), Buheji (2020b).

What unites these otherwise disparate cases is a common pattern: wherever coherent strategic meaning is present and actively maintained, actors demonstrate superior capacity to absorb shock, sustain decision coherence under uncertainty, and maintain directional continuity amid environmental turbulence, Osgood (1952), Buheji (2019b). Where it is absent or eroded, even resource-rich, technically sophisticated actors succumb to decision paralysis, policy incoherence, and the slow collapse of institutional legitimacy. Meaning, in this sense, is not an intellectual luxury or moral appendage to strategy—it is the precondition for strategy itself. Weick et al. (2005), Buheji et al. (2020)

The paper concludes by confronting the sovereignty dimension of meaning. In a world where narratives contend before resources and interpretation increasingly mediates the exercise of power, the capacity to produce one's own semantic frameworks—rather than consume those manufactured by others—has become a question of strategic autonomy, Al-Sanoussi (2025a), Buheji (2025). States and institutions that cannot engineer meaning are condemned to operate within maps they did not draw, toward destinations they did not choose. This is not merely a cognitive disadvantage but a structural subordination. To recover the capacity for strategic meaning-making is therefore to reclaim the capacity for strategic direction itself. Al-Sanoussi (2026a), Buheji (2019b)

This introduction has framed the problem. Part Two reviews the interdisciplinary literature on meaning, sensemaking, and strategic uncertainty, establishing the conceptual foundations for our framework. Part Three details our comparative methodology and case selection logic. Part Four presents the case analyses and traces the recurrent mechanisms through which meaning produces strategic effects. Part Five synthesises these findings into the proposed Strategic Meaning Cycle. Part Six concludes by examining the implications of our argument for strategic intelligence, institutional design, and the sovereignty of meaning in an age of interpretive contestation. Al-Sanoussi, (2025a).

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to Meaning

Meaning is the cognitive and emotional framework through which humans render events intelligible, actions worthwhile, and suffering bearable. It is the bridge between fact and significance, transforming raw data into direction, isolated events into coherent narrative, and individual effort into collective purpose. Meaning is not a passive interpretation imposed after the fact, but an active construction that precedes and enables decision itself—it answers not merely "what happened?" but "what matters?" and "what now?" Without it, information overwhelms rather than guides, choices become indistinguishable, and the future collapses into an endless, undifferentiated present. With it, chaos becomes context, uncertainty becomes possibility, and survival becomes something worth pursuing. Horwich (1998), Buheji and Ahmed (2022), Buheji et al. (2020)

Thus, meaning is not a luxury or an afterthought—it is the invisible architecture of human survival and collective action. Across scales and centuries, the pattern is identical: meaning is what makes suffering legible, decisions possible when data fails, and scattered individuals into people moving together through time. When meaning is present, humans achieve the impossible; when it is absent, they fail at the routine. This is not philosophy—it is the precondition for strategy, resilience, and survival itself. Osgood (1952), Buheji (2019a)

2.2 When Meaning Becomes a Matter of Survival

The transformations witnessed by the contemporary world are no longer comprehensible through traditional sectoral approaches that separate economy, politics, technology, and culture. These transformations have not been limited to reshaping balances of power, modes of production, or tools of action, but have extended to what

is deeper than that: the framework through which we understand reality and assign it its significance (Al-Sanousi, 2025).

We are not only living through an acceleration of events, but an acceleration in the shattering of meanings. Events no longer wait for their interpretation to be complete before being overtaken by other events, and the symbolic systems that used to frame collective understanding—from grand narratives, interpretative models, and normative frameworks—have become incapable of keeping pace with the intensity and sharpness of change. Thus, we have moved from a world where disturbance was the exception to a world where instability is the rule, and uncertainty is the permanent context. Horwich (1998), Greenberg and Litman (1997).

In this landscape, the central question facing actors—states, institutions, intellectual elites—is no longer: What is happening? Because what is happening has become visible, measured, and indexed by data. Rather, the deeper and more pressing question has become: What does what is happening mean? That is: How do we incorporate the event into a comprehensible narrative? How do we link it to a past that can be recalled, and to a future that can be imagined? Buheji (2025)

This shift from the question of facts to the question of meaning is not merely a linguistic or philosophical shift, but a distinctly strategic one, Greenberg and Litman (1997). For when events lose their meaning, decisions lose their legitimacy, policies turn into improvised crisis management, and institutions lose their ability to guide collective action. Here, the danger is not in being wrong, but in being lost; that is, in the absence of a framework that makes the error itself correctable. Lewis (1943).

From this perspective, meaning becomes not an intellectual luxury, nor a moral appendage to politics or management, but a precondition for rational action. This is what Karl Weick expressed when he considered that actors do not act based on reality as it is, but based on the meaning they make of it; and that the collapse of this meaning often precedes the collapse of the decision itself (Weick, 1995).

Jerome Bruner (1990) in his cognitive analysis of human behaviour, emphasises that humans do not deal with reality as a series of separate objective facts, but through interpretative narratives that give these facts meaning and internal coherence. In this sense, we are living through a qualitative transition from the logic of management—based on control, linear planning, and relative prediction—to the logic of strategic intelligence, where meaning becomes a tool for foresight, a compass for direction, and a mechanism for cohesion in an environment that cannot be fully controlled. In a world that changes faster than it can be explained, it is not those who possess the best tools alone who survive, but those who possess the most capable narrative for giving meaning to change itself. And here, precisely, meaning transforms from a matter of interpretation to a matter of survival. Noble (1952).

2.3 A World Without the Ability of Sensemaking

The excessive speed of change in the contemporary world produces a condition that can be described as an increasing disconnect between the event and its significance. Events are no longer perceived within their temporal or symbolic context, but are consumed as successive, separate, and transient facts. And when these facts accumulate at a pace higher than the ability of individuals and institutions to frame and interpret them, the world loses its comprehensibility not due to a lack of information, but due to an informational flood that is not amenable to ordering or semantic integration.

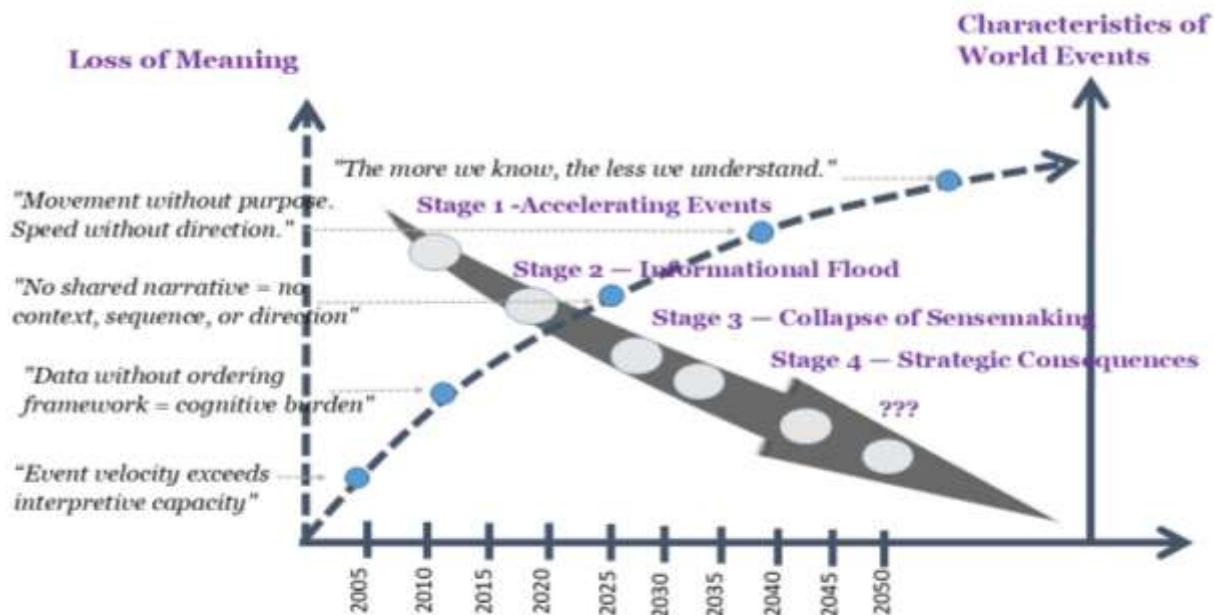
This flood does not enrich understanding; it weakens it. For information, when not incorporated into a coherent interpretative framework, turns from a tool of clarification into a factor of confusion. Here lies the central paradox of our age: the more we know, the less we understand. This is because knowledge, when separated from meaning, loses its ability to guide, and turns into a cognitive burden that complicates the decision-making process instead of supporting it.

In this context, Karl Weick offers a crucial analysis when he shows that the failure of organizations and our case even communities often results not from a lack of data or weakness in technical analysis, but from the collapse of sensemaking processes; that is, from the inability to link events to a shared narrative that gives them context, sequence, and direction (Weick, 1995). When these processes disintegrate, the event becomes without a stable interpretation, and the decision becomes a circumstantial reaction, not a conscious strategic choice. Thus, Weick et al. (2005) believe that the properties of sensemaking are grounded in identity construction, retrospective, and enactive of the environment. Explicitly using these properties can structure a specific prescription.

Thus, missing sensemaking can be a crisis, as diagnosed by Weick (1995), finds its macro-level parallel in the constructivist tradition of International Relations (Wendt, 1999). If structures are not merely material but *intersubjective*—composed of shared ideas, norms, and understandings—then the erosion of these shared meanings represents a structural shift in the international environment itself. The challenge, therefore, is not just to interpret a pre-existing world, but to participate in the ongoing construction of the social and strategic reality within which action is possible.

In the absence of meaning that leads to sensemaking, public policies transform from an expression of a long-term vision into daily crisis management, where the logic of rapid response prevails at the expense of structural thinking, Greenberg and Litman. (1997). Instead of decisions being measured by their ability to guide the future, they are measured by their ability to absorb the immediate shock. Here, not only is vision lost, but the strategic compass that allows distinguishing what is urgent from what is important, and what is tactical from what is fateful, is also lost. Figure (3) visually diagnoses how information overload without interpretive frameworks leads to strategic paralysis.

Figure (1) The Sensemaking Collapse Cycle



2.4 The Crisis of a Fast World Without a Meaning (without a Compass)

The crisis of meaning, in this framework, is not a cognitive crisis in the traditional sense, i.e., not resulting from ignorance or a lack of analysis, but rather a crisis of strategic direction. It affects the world players' ability to:

- Determine priorities in an environment saturated with contradictory signals,
- Maintain the internal consistency of decisions over time,

- And link present action to a conceivable future horizon.

When this ability is absent, the actor—no matter what tools and resources they possess—is pulled into the logic of momentary adaptation, not into the logic of strategic construction. In this case, the danger is not in error or failure, but in a gradual slide towards losing direction; that is, moving constantly without knowing where to and why. Bruner (1990).

Hence, the crisis of meaning manifests as one of the most dangerous strategic challenges in a fast world without a compass, because it strikes at the core of the relationship between knowledge and action, between understanding and decision, and turns power into movement without purpose, and speed into momentum without vision. Al-Sanoussi (2026b-under publication), Buheji and Ahmed (2022)

2.5 Meaning as a Mechanism for Adapting to Strategic Uncertainty

Alexander Wendt (1999) mentioned that "Anarchy is what states make of it." This means that actors act on the meaning they construct, not on an objective reality. Contemporary strategic experiences show that the decisive difference between failure and resilience lies not in the accuracy of prediction, but in the ability of actors to produce meaning that guides action in an uncertain environment. For when the future becomes uncontrollable, meaning transforms into a leadership tool. To clarify how meaning transforms from mere interpretation into a practical tool for strategic adaptation, we review some applied examples at the level of states, institutions, and major crises.

One can see clearly how the availability of strategic meaning saves countries from 'Decision Paralysis'. Take, for example, the experience of Finland in its historical relationship with Russia, which presents a clear model of the power of strategic meaning. The Finnish state did not build its security strategy on the illusion of certainty or on military superiority alone, but on a coherent strategic narrative known as resilient sovereignty. Al-Sanoussi (2025a)

This narrative, which blends caution, preparedness, and non-provocation, enabled Finland for decades to coexist with a geopolitical environment of high uncertainty, without losing its strategic direction. And when the decision to join NATO came, it was not a strategic reversal, but a shift in means within a constant and defined meaning, preserving the consistency of vision and policy.

Beyond Finland, several other nations provide profound examples of how strategic meaning has been deliberately engineered and deployed as a mechanism for navigating existential uncertainty. Meaning is used here not as an interpretive lens but an active governance instrument, one that transforms geographic vulnerability, historical trauma, or demographic fragility into coherent national purpose and adaptive capacity.

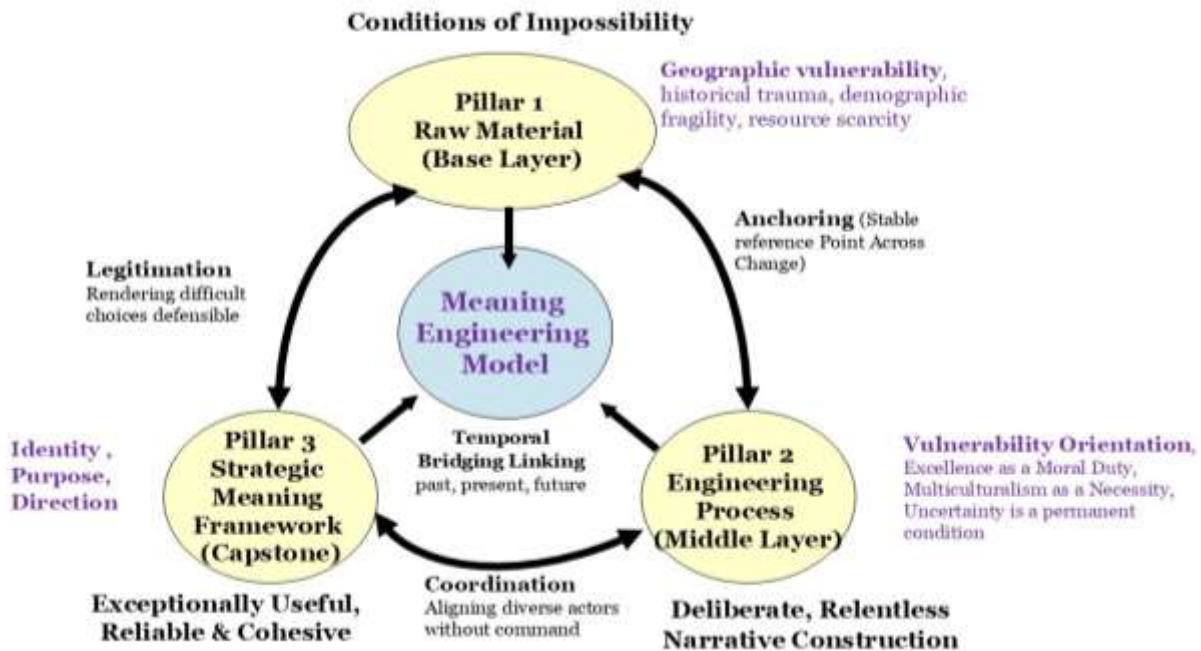
No modern state illustrates the strategic engineering of meaning more explicitly than Singapore. Forced into independence in 1965—expelled from Malaysia with no hinterland, no natural resources, and a multi-ethnic population crowded into a tiny island—Singapore faced what its first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, called "a future of uncertainty and trouble." The country's survival was not probable; it was, by any objective measure, improbable. What transformed this existential vulnerability into extraordinary resilience was not geography, not resources, and not initial economic endowment. It was the deliberate, relentless construction of 'a national meaning framework' that continues to guide policy and public consciousness six decades later. Buheji (2018)

Singapore's strategic meaning can be distilled into a single, continuously reinforced narrative: the tiny island with no resources, surrounded by larger neighbours, has put a meaning for their continued existence depends entirely on our ability to be exceptionally useful, exceptionally reliable, and exceptionally cohesive. Complacency for Singaporean does not mean risk, but death. Buheji (2020a)

This meaning framework was operationalised through several interlocking mechanisms where vulnerability became a permanent orientation, excellence became a moral duty, and multiracialism became an existential necessity. This meaning framework enabled Singapore to make decisions that would have been politically impossible elsewhere: compulsory military service for every male citizen, forced savings through the Central Provident Fund, aggressive investment in English-language education at the expense of mother tongues, and deep economic integration with potential adversaries. Each policy was contested, but the meaning framework rendered contestable only the means, never the end. When Lee Kuan Yew explained, "We have no alternative," this was not rhetorical evasion but the logical expression of a deeply internalized national meaning.

Singapore's meaning framework explicitly incorporates uncertainty as a permanent condition. Unlike nations that promise citizens security, Singapore promises only the opportunity to earn security through collective effort. This is not demoralising but liberating—it inoculates the polity against the shock of inevitable crises because a crisis is not a deviation from expectation but a confirmation of it. Figure (2) illustrates how states and institutions deliberately construct and operationalise meaning as a governance instrument.

Figure (2) The Strategic Meaning Engineering Model



3.0 Methodology

This collective research defines "meaning" in a specific, action-oriented, and resilience-focused way. It is not primarily a philosophical or semantic abstraction, but a strategic, functional, psychological, and socio-economic resource for navigating complexity, adversity, and transformation. Buheji (2018)

This paper proceeds through three simple analytical movements. First, it diagnoses the crisis of 'meaning' by mapping its symptoms and tracing them to a common root. Second, it 'demonstrates' the strategic stakes of this crisis through diverse comparative cases that show meaning as the difference between resilience and collapse. Third, it 'prescribes' a practical framework by extracting patterns from successful actors and distilling them into a repeatable cycle.

The entire methodology is qualitative, interpretive, and designed for accessibility. It asks clear questions, answers them with visible evidence, and translates insight into action. It is based on a transparent chain of

reasoning from problem to solution. Thus, the qualitative methodology synthesises how ‘meaning’ is conceptualised across different sectors or parts of life, specifically in uncertain times. The paper investigates and applies meaning as an adaptive and proactive engine (not just interpretation). The researchers investigate how the "why" drives sustainable development beyond mere financial, political and socioeconomic metrics. The "meaning of existence" and "creating legacies" are framed not as existential musings. Buheji (2020a)

The dynamic, constructive process of the method focus to confront uncertainty, trauma, or complexity and constructing a framework of significance (reasons, purposes, redefined concepts like hardiness) that makes endurance possible and action worthwhile. The method focuses on the application of the proposed framework as a form of capital to inspire economic activity, design better lives, and build resilient social systems through Strategic Meaning Analysis (SMA). This interpretive methodology is grounded in comparative case analysis and conceptual synthesis. The approach is deliberately non-mathematical and accessible, prioritising depth of understanding over technical complexity. Noble (1952), Buheji (2021)

Thus, the methodology used in this work can be described in four stages.

Stage 1: Conceptual Foundation Building

The paper first establishes a working definition of "strategic meaning" through a synthesis of existing literature. It is a stage that targets to answer "What do we mean by meaning?" This involves drawing on sensemaking theory (Weick), constructivist IR (Wendt), and philosophical semantics (Putnam, Grice) to distinguish meaning from mere information or communication. This synthesis is distilled into a clear, operational definition. The strategic meaning is the narrative framework that enables coherent action under uncertainty by linking identity, context, and purpose across time.

Stage 2: Comparative Case Analysis

The paper tests and illustrates this framework through a structured comparison of diverse cases. Thus, this second stage answers “whether meaning actually matters across different domains?” Cases are selected using a "most different" logic: if meaning proves decisive across radically different contexts, its strategic importance is robustly demonstrated.

Table (1) Review and Compare the Cases and their Meaning Dimension

| Case | Type | Key Dimension |
|-------------------------------|-----------|---|
| 1-Finland-Russia relations | State | Strategic narrative enabling resilience under geopolitical uncertainty |
| 2-Nokia vs. IBM | Corporate | Institutional meaning as a precondition for adaptation or a cause of collapse |
| 3-COVID-19 national responses | Policy | Framing crisis as a determinant of policy coherence and public trust |
| 4-Gaza population under siege | Community | Meaning as a survival infrastructure under existential threat |

Each case is analysed through three lenses:

1. Presence/absence of coherent strategic meaning
2. Relationship between meaning and decision quality
3. Outcomes: resilience, adaptation, or collapse

Stage 3: Identification of Causal Mechanisms

Rather than merely asserting that meaning matters, this stage traces how meaning produces strategic effects. Therefore, this stage aims to answer "How does meaning produce strategic effects?" Drawing on process-tracing logic, the paper identifies four recurrent mechanisms evident across the cases:

1. Anchoring: Meaning provides a stable reference point that prevents decision paralysis when circumstances change.
2. Legitimation: Meaning renders difficult choices defensible, sustaining consent and commitment.
3. Coordination: Shared meaning aligns diverse actors without requiring constant communication or command.
4. Temporal bridging: Meaning connects past identity, present action, and future horizon, enabling sacrifice today for reward tomorrow.

Stage 4: Framework Synthesis and Practical Translation

The final stage distils the findings into a simple, actionable framework for practitioners. In this fourth stage, the methodology investigates "what should actors actually do?" This framework, the Strategic Meaning Cycle, translates the theoretical and case insights into four iterative practices:

1. Signal Curation: Distinguishing meaningful signals from ambient noise.
2. Narrative Construction: Forging a coherent story linking identity, challenge, and direction.
3. Commitment Articulation: Translating narrative into clear strategic choices.
4. Legitimation and Revision: Sustaining meaning through feedback, adaptation, and defence against competing narratives.

4.0 Application & Analysis

4.1 Meaning as a Condition for Institutional Resilience or Collapse

Berger and Luckmann (2016) were among the earliest to link how institutional and subjective realities are built and maintained through shared meanings. In the institutional domain, one can take the example of Nokia. The company crisis in the face of the digital transformation offers a clear lesson on the importance of strategic meaning. The company's failure was not due to a lack of technical knowledge—Nokia possessed one of the best research and development laboratories in the world—but to the collapse of its internal narrative of meaning.

Nokia, at one point, could no longer determine its true position, i.e., whether it is a phone company, a technology platform, or a comprehensive player in the technology sector. This semantic ambiguity preceded the strategic collapse of Nokia, and when meaning was absent, decisions became contradictory, and adaptation became slow, despite an abundance of resources and technical capabilities.

In contrast, the experience of IBM presents an opposite model. The company repeatedly redefined itself—from manufacturing hardware, to providing services, then to integrated knowledge solutions—without losing its core identity, because the institutional meaning, embodied in solving complex problems for organisations, remained constant, while the tools and means changed.

Here, it becomes clear that meaning is not an intellectual luxury, but is what preserves the institution's consistency and perpetuates its ability to adapt to rapid transformations.

4.2 Meaning as a Tool for Resilience in Moments of Testing and Major Crises

Major crises show how meaning transforms into a strategic lever for decision and action. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a significant disparity in the ability of states to adapt, not due to a lack of scientific information or resources, but due to the difference in the narratives that give meaning to events. Buheji (2020b)

States that dealt with the pandemic as merely a health crisis or a technical problem faced prolonged confusion in policies, delayed decisive decisions, leading to short-term and sometimes urgent responses, without a clear vision for the future. Buheji et al. (2020) mentioned how even the overuse of ventilators made the total fatality of certain developed countries, such as the USA and UK, much higher than many other less developed countries.

In contrast, there are certain developing countries that were relatively successful—such as Germany in the first phase, and New Zealand—which framed the crisis within a clear and coherent narrative:

- Protecting human life as a sovereign priority,
- Social trust as a tool for managing policies,
- Solidarity and accountability as fundamental elements of public security.

This meaningful framework enabled these states to make difficult and effective decisions—closing borders, restricting gatherings, pumping massive financial resources—while maintaining the legitimacy and continuity of the decision, despite the absence of complete certainty at the beginning of the crisis.

Here is manifested what Nassim Taleb emphasised (Antifragile, 2012): resilience is not built on the ability to predict accurately, but on possessing a strong narrative that allows absorption and adaptation to shocks that would lead to a higher status of anti-fragility.

Therefore, Buheji and Migdad (2025) emphasised that this depth of meaning differentiates the mothers of Gaza and their capacity to build an anti-fragile generation. In this sense, strategic meaning becomes a tool for transforming uncertainty into a space of possibilities, and a means for maintaining direction despite fluctuating conditions, not merely an interpretation of events after they occur.

4.3 From Meaning to Strategic Intelligence

These examples, when viewed together, show that meaning is not a discourse parallel to action nor an interpretative shell added to it after the fact, but is a precondition for strategic action itself. For states and institutions that possess a clear and coherent strategic meaning, do not stop at the moment of shock, nor are they paralysed by uncertainty, nor do they change their direction with every emergent event or circumstantial pressure.

On the contrary, these entities transform uncertainty into a space for testing and learning, and change into an opportunity for strategic repositioning without losing identity or direction. They do not seek to restore a lost certainty, but to build a continuous capacity for action within an unstable environment.

In this context, the production of meaning becomes one of the central functions of strategic intelligence. Not because it dispels ambiguity or eliminates uncertainty, but because it allows action within it without collapse, and gives the decision its continuity, the choice its legitimacy, and the direction its coherence over time.

For strategic intelligence, in its essence, is not reduced to the ability to accurately predict what will happen, but is fundamentally embodied in building a meaningful framework capable of accommodating what may happen, whatever its course. Without this framework, tools lose their ability to guide, and strategies—no matter how high their degree of technical complexity—turn into intermittent responses lacking consistency and continuity. Buheji (2021)

Therefore, uncertainty is not managed by accumulating tools alone, nor by inflating models, but by constructing a semantic framework capable of containing the shock, framing the decision, and maintaining direction amidst disturbance. And when this framework is absent, strategies do not fail because they are wrong in their calculations, but because they lack a unifying meaning that gives them cohesion and legitimacy.

4.4 The Loss of Meaning as a Structural Symptom of Major Transformations

In moments of deep historical transformation, the world does not move at a single rhythm. Technology advances faster than the ethical frameworks capable of framing it, the global economy changes at a pace exceeding the political regulatory capacity for control, while public policies transform before a collective consciousness capable of comprehending their significance is formed.

This imbalance in rhythms does not merely produce a temporal gap, but produces a confusion in meaning: actions without narrative, decisions without horizon, and changes without a convincing explanation.

Reinhart Koselleck, in his profound analysis of historical time, points out that late modernity is characterized by an unprecedented acceleration of the gap between the space of experience (the historical stock of understanding) and the horizon of expectation (conceptions of the future), such that the future becomes heavier than the past, and faster than the tools for its interpretation (Koselleck, 2004).

And when this gap widens to the point where the past is no longer able to explain what is coming, nor the future conceivable within familiar frameworks, the present loses its meaning as an intermediate moment capable of being understood.

4.5 A Suspended Present Without a Narrative

In this context, the present transforms into something like a suspended time that can not be read as an extension of a prior experience, nor is it lived as a step towards a comprehensible future, but as a permanent state of emergency, managed by tools, not by vision. This explains why many contemporary policies—especially in moments of crisis—appear technical, procedural, and reactive, but lack unifying meaning. The state manages, but does not explain; intervenes, but does not narrate; and acts, but does not convince.

From here, the loss of meaning does not become merely a side effect of transformation, nor a psychological result of collective anxiety, but one of the structural symptoms of the major transformations themselves. For when change precedes understanding, the symbolic legitimacy of institutions erodes, populism inflates as a simplified narrative alternative, and strategic thinking is replaced by reactions. In such contexts, the greatest danger is not the error in the decision, but the decision without meaning—a decision that does not know its location in time, nor its purpose in the general path.

4.6 From the Crisis of Time to the Crisis of Strategic Intelligence

Here, Koselleck's analysis intersects with the literature on strategic intelligence, which is not limited to foresight of the future, but is fundamentally based on re-linking the present to a comprehensible temporal narrative. It is an attempt to re-engineer the relationship between experience and expectation, between what we know and what we await, and between what we do now and why we do it. And when this task fails, foresight becomes a technical exercise without spirit, and strategy turns into the management of permanent tension, not into the crafting of direction.

5.0 Proposing A New Meaning Framework

In this proposed framework, meaning plays a crucial function as the symbolic bridge that allows crossing the gap between a past that is no longer sufficient and a future that has not yet crystallised. Without this bridge, change becomes a burden, not a project, uncertainty becomes a threat, not a possibility, and time itself becomes a source of strategic anxiety.

In this sense, the battle in the time of major transformations is not only a battle of tools or policies, but a battle of producing meaning capable of keeping pace with speed without collapsing. When change precedes understanding, societies do not fail because they changed, but because they did not produce the meaning that makes change livable and actionable. Hence, investing in meaning becomes not an intellectual luxury, but a condition for strategic survival in a world that changes faster than we understand it. However, the realisation of the centrality of meaning in this proposed framework is not complete unless we move from diagnosing the temporal crisis to the question of managing uncertainty itself: how do we act when tools alone are not enough?

The framework compensates for the tremendous gap in the strategic decision-making development despite the development in quantitative analysis tools, foresight models, predictive algorithms, and artificial intelligence;

in its essence, a human acts before being a technical process. For tools—no matter how complex—operate within pre-existing semantic frameworks, and do not possess in themselves the ability to determine the goal or the hierarchy of priorities. They answer the question of what can be done, but they fail to answer the question of what should be done, and why now.

In this sense, this framework shows that tools do not produce the decision, but feed it; and they do not create direction, but illuminate some of its possible paths. As for the choice of the path itself, it remains dependent on a semantic framework that controls the reading, frames the action, and grants legitimacy to the decision.

In this framework, we propose a decision as a narrative, not as an equation. In the absence of these narratives data loses its ability to persuade, models turn into probabilities without guidance, and the decision becomes closer to a technical response than to a conscious strategic choice. And here lies the real danger: when tools inflate in the absence of meaning, rationality does not increase, but the illusion of it intensifies.

In contexts of high uncertainty, this framework warns against over-reliance on foresight models that tend to substitute the clear meaning. The authors emphasise that both the literature and the experience show that foresight, when separated from a critical semantic framework, transforms from a reading of the possible into a projection of prior desires and preferences. In such a case, the framework warns that models would then produce a "desired" future, not a "probable" one. They would reproduce the present in the form of numbers, instead of revealing its limits and contradictions. Here, the foresight does not fail technically, but semantically, because it lacks the fundamental question about purpose, meaning, and direction.

Contrary to the prevalent conception, the framework shows that meaning does not oppose rationality, nor stand in confrontation with it, but constitutes its deep condition. Strategic rationality does not mean choosing the optimal solution only in terms of calculation, but choosing what is consistent with the actor's identity, and what preserves the coherence of the collective narrative; besides, what can be defended ethically and politically over time. In this sense, meaning reintroduces the human and temporal dimension into the decision, and prevents its reduction to an isolated calculative moment detached from context. Figure (3) provides the actionable practitioner framework, which represents this paper's central prescriptive contribution

Figure (3) Illustrate A ‘Strategic Meaning Cycle’ for those Serious about Action



6.0 Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 From the Intelligence of Tools to the Intelligence of Meaning

This paper argues that true strategic intelligence does not lie in possessing more tools, but in the ability to pose the right questions before building models, and in the ability to interpret outputs within a clear semantic horizon, and transform knowledge into a long-term commitment, not a circumstantial reaction. Therefore, the paper sees the necessity of this framework, to have most advanced tools turn into what can be called blind techniques that can see possibilities, but do not know which one is worth pursuing.

6.2 From Consuming Meaning to Manufacturing It in Uncertain Times

In a time of uncertainty, the problem is not a lack of information, but the absence of the meaning that gives it direction. And when meaning is restored as a compass for action, the decision does not lose its accuracy, but gains its legitimacy, continuity, and capacity for resilience.

In a time of accelerated transformation and structural uncertainty, meaning is no longer a ready-made given to be imported or borrowed, but has become a strategic product to be formulated, built, and managed. For meaning, in this context, is not born automatically from the accumulation of facts, nor produced mechanically from an abundance of data, but requires a conscious capacity for framing, interpretation, and choice.

States and institutions that are content with consuming meanings produced by others—whether through ready-made narratives, imported models, or imposed interpretative frameworks—find themselves, no matter their technical or economic strength, in the position of strategic followers. They act within maps they did not draw, move according to directions they did not choose, and manage the future with tools whose meanings they do not control.

Hence, the fundamental challenge today is not only in possessing knowledge, but in possessing the conditions for producing the meaning that gives this knowledge its direction, frames the decision within a defensible narrative, and makes strategic action understandable, legitimate, and capable of continuation over time. For meaning is what transforms knowledge from a stock into a vision, and from a latent capacity into an actual commitment.

And in this profound sense, meaning no longer remains an abstract philosophical issue, nor an intellectual luxury added to policies after their formulation, but becomes a matter of sovereignty in a world where narratives contend before resources, a strategic tool in an environment where conflict is managed through interpretation as much as through force,

and a condition for survival in a world where certainty is no longer a starting point, but a rare exception.

The decisive wager in today's world does not lie in knowing more, but in understanding better, and in producing the meaning that makes this understanding capable of guiding action, and crafting the future, instead of being content with adapting to it. Here are two paragraphs incorporating the provided references to robustly support the paper's core themes of uncertainty, meaning-creation, and strategic action:

6.3 Meaning in the Contemporary Crisis of Humanity

The contemporary crisis is not merely one of complexity, but of a foundational politics of uncertainty. As Scoones and Stirling (2020) argue, uncertainty is not just an epistemic gap to be filled with better data, but a constitutive condition that shapes power, politics, and the very possibilities for transformation. This aligns with the paper's thesis that we have moved "from a world where disturbance was the exception, to a world where instability is the rule." This form of uncertainty—irreducible, multiple, and politicised—defies traditional managerial logics of prediction and control (Van Asselt, 2005). In such an environment, the quest for meaning becomes a profoundly strategic and political act, as different actors attempt to "fix" fluid interpretations to

advance particular pathways and visions of the future (Scoones, 2019). The struggle, therefore, is over whose narrative framework will prevail in giving coherence to disjointed events, making the engineering of meaning a central battlefield for legitimacy and agency.

This process of meaning-creation under uncertainty is fundamentally a social and interactive switching of codes and contexts. Godart and White (2010) conceptualise this as "switchings under uncertainty," where meanings do not pre-exist but come and become through strategic social interactions and the reconfiguration of relationships. This dynamic view complements the paper's examples of Nokia and IBM, illustrating how institutional meaning is not static but must be actively sustained and switched to remain viable. It moves beyond abstract philosophical theories of meaning (e.g., Grice, 1957; Putnam, 1975) to focus on its pragmatic, emergent generation within social networks—a process Perinbanayagam (1986) aptly calls "the meaning of uncertainty and the uncertainty of meaning." From this perspective, strategic intelligence is the capacity to navigate these switchings, to forge a coherent and actionable sense of purpose and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016) that can guide collective action when linear prediction fails. The "semantic framework" the paper posits as essential is thus this socially constructed, actively negotiated, and politically contested web of significance that allows actors to move forward despite, and through, profound uncertainty.

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The foundational argument of this paper—that meaning is a strategic construct essential for navigating profound uncertainty—finds robust theoretical grounding in the interdisciplinary scholarship on the politics of knowledge and interpretation. The work of Scoones and Stirling (2020) provides a critical lens, framing uncertainty not as a temporary deficit of information but as an inherent, persistent, and politically charged dimension of complex systems. Their analysis demonstrates that in periods of deep transformation, the inability to predict outcomes shifts the locus of power from those who claim authoritative knowledge to those who can manage, navigate, and frame uncertainty itself. This directly supports the paper's central pivot from "what is happening?" to "what does it mean?"

This constructive process of meaning-making under duress is illuminated by sociocultural models that view meaning as emergent and relational. Godart and White's (2010) concept of "switchings under uncertainty" is particularly potent. The nature of the uncertainty faced further complicates this performance. Van Asselt (2005) elucidates that uncertainty is not monolithic but a complex phenomenon with different "logics" (e.g., technical, methodological, epistemic) that demand distinct managerial strategies. A purely technical uncertainty might be addressed with more data, but the epistemic uncertainty inherent in "unknown unknowns" or deep value conflicts—the kind that defines geopolitical shocks or technological disruptions—requires a different approach altogether.

Ultimately, the quest for meaning in an uncertain world addresses a fundamental human need for coherence, purpose, and significance. Martela and Steger (2016) provide a valuable psychological framework by distinguishing three dimensions of meaning in life: coherence (the world makes sense), purpose (having directed goals), and significance (feeling one's life matters). This tripartite model maps precisely onto the strategic challenge outlined. A successful strategic narrative must provide coherence by linking past, present, and future into a comprehensible story (addressing the "shattering of meanings"). It must articulate a clear purpose that directs collective action toward a horizon (combating "movement without purpose"). Finally, it must instill a sense of significance, justifying sacrifices and sustaining morale by embedding action within a larger, valuable endeavour (preventing the erosion of legitimacy). When institutions fail to furnish these three dimensions—as seen in Nokia's identity crisis (loss of coherence and purpose) or in populist surges (offering oversimplified significance)—they succumb to strategic paralysis. Thus, the engineering of meaning is the essential process of weaving coherence, purpose, and significance into a narrative fabric strong enough to hold under the tensile stress of perpetual uncertainty.

6.5 Implication of this Work

The paper brilliantly diagnoses the problem and provides excellent examples. To make it more actionable, introduce a conceptual model for *engineering strategic meaning*. This answers the implicit reader's question: "Okay, meaning is vital. How do we build it?" Therefore, the implications of this paper are long and diversified.

6.5.1 Theoretical Implications

6.5.1.1 Rehabilitating Meaning as a Strategic Category

This paper challenges the prevailing treatment of meaning as either a philosophical abstraction or a soft cultural variable peripheral to "hard" strategic concerns. By demonstrating that meaning operates through identifiable causal mechanisms—anchoring, legitimation, coordination, temporal bridging—we establish it as a distinct analytical category on par with capabilities, interests, and institutional design. Strategic theory can no longer afford to treat interpretation as epiphenomenal; meaning is not what actors add to strategy after calculation, but what makes strategy possible at all.

6.5.1.2 Bridging Sensemaking and Strategic Studies

While Weickian sensemaking theory has profoundly influenced organisational scholarship, its translation to strategic studies—particularly at the state and institutional level—has remained underdeveloped. This paper provides that bridge, demonstrating how micro-level processes of interpretation scale to macro-level outcomes of national resilience, institutional adaptation, and collective survival. We extend sensemaking from a descriptive account of organisational cognition to a prescriptive framework for strategic engineering.

6.5.1.3 Temporal Constitution of Strategy

Engaging Koselleck, the paper reveals that strategy is fundamentally a temporal operation: the deliberate construction of a bridge between a selectively remembered past and an intentionally imagined future. The paper thus contributes to emerging literature on the temporal dimensions of strategic agency, arguing that the capacity

to navigate accelerating gaps between experience and expectation is now a distinct form of strategic competence.

6.5.2 Methodological Implications

6.5.2.1 Legitimizing Comparative Interpretive Methodologies

In a disciplinary environment that often privileges quantitative modelling and large-N analysis, this paper demonstrates the explanatory power of structured, comparative interpretive research. By employing "most different" case logic across state, corporate, policy, and community contexts, we show that meaning-based explanations can yield robust, generalizable insights without sacrificing contextual depth. This offers a model for scholars seeking to study interpretive phenomena with rigour.

6.5.2.2 Operationalising Meaning for Empirical Research

The identification of four discrete causal mechanisms—anchoring, legitimation, coordination, and temporal bridging—provides researchers with observable indicators for tracing meaning effects across cases. This moves the study of strategic meaning from metaphorical invocation to empirical investigation, enabling future scholarship to test, refine, and contest our framework.

6.5.2.3 Practical-Strategic Implications

a) For States and National Security Establishments

The cases of Finland and Singapore demonstrate that strategic meaning is not a substitute for material capability but a force multiplier that renders limited capabilities effective. States facing asymmetric vulnerabilities can engineer meaning frameworks that transform weakness into orientation, scarcity into discipline, and permanent uncertainty into continuous preparedness. The implication is clear: investment in narrative infrastructure—national memory, foresight capacity, interpretive institutions—is no less strategic than investment in defence or technology.

Furthermore, the sovereignty dimension of meaning carries direct implications for states in peripheral or semi-peripheral positions. Those that import strategic narratives from dominant powers operate within semantic frameworks they do not control, pursuing destinations they did not choose. Strategic autonomy in the twenty-first century requires not only economic and technological sovereignty, but semantic sovereignty: the capacity to produce one's own frameworks of significance.

b) For Institutions and Corporations

Nokia's collapse and IBM's renewal offer a cautionary tale and an aspirational model. Technical excellence and resource abundance cannot compensate for semantic ambiguity. Institutions that fail to articulate—and continuously revise—a coherent answer to "who are we and what do we do?" will find their adaptation efforts fragmented and their strategic choices incoherent. The Strategic Meaning Cycle provides practitioners with a repeatable discipline for maintaining institutional coherence amid turbulent environments.

c) For Crisis Governance and Public Policy

The COVID-19 comparison reveals that meaning is not post hoc commentary on policy but a precondition for policy effectiveness. Frames are not communication strategies added after decisions are made; they are the cognitive architecture within which decisions become conceivable and defensible. Policymakers who neglect the semantic dimension of crisis governance will find technically sound measures undermined by legitimacy deficits and public incoherence. Building interpretive capacity into crisis management systems is therefore not soft politics but a hard operational necessity.

d) For Communities Under Existential Threat

The Gaza case, while developed elsewhere in the authors' work, casts into stark relief the ultimate stakes of strategic meaning. When material resources, institutional protection, and foreseeable horizons are

systematically denied, meaning becomes the residual infrastructure of survival itself. The capacity to narrate suffering as significant, to render endurance purposeful, and to transmit that orientation across generations is not cultural adornment but a distinct mode of resistance to erasure. This carries profound implications for how we understand resilience at the limits of human endurance.

6.5.2.4 Policy and Institutional Design Implications

a) Establishing Meaning-Making as a Governance Function

If meaning is a strategic resource, it requires deliberate cultivation. This implies institutional homes for interpretive capacity: strategic foresight units, national narrative commissions, public memory institutions, and semantic threat assessment functions. Currently, such capacities are fragmented across communication departments, cultural ministries, and academic institutions. The paper implies their integration as a core governance function.

b) Education in Strategic Interpretation

The capacity to construct, critique, and contest meaning is not innate; it must be cultivated. This implies profound implications for strategic education in both schools and universities. We require curricula that train practitioners not only in data analysis and modelling, but in narrative construction, interpretive contestation, and the temporal architecture of strategic choice.

c) Countering Semantic Vulnerability

If meaning can be engineered for resilience, it can also be targeted for disruption. Adversarial narrative interference, semantic saturation, and the weaponisation of interpretive ambiguity are now features of the strategic environment. States and institutions must develop semantic defence capabilities: early warning systems for narrative attack, protocols for maintaining interpretive coherence under conditions of deliberate distortion, and reserves of shared meaning that can be mobilised in crisis.

6.5.2.5 Normative and Existential Implications

a) The Human Dimension of Strategy

This paper reasserts the human against its progressive erasure by technical rationality. In an age of algorithms, predictive models, and artificial intelligence, we demonstrate that the irreducible questions—what should we do, why, and for whom?—remain inalienably human. Tools illuminate paths; they do not choose destinations. To restore meaning to the centre of strategic inquiry is to restore the human subject to the centre of strategic action.

b) Meaning as Antidote to Cynicism

The paper's diagnosis of semantic collapse carries an implicit warning. Societies that lose the capacity for shared meaning do not become more rational; they become more vulnerable to the simplifications of populism, authoritarianism, and violent certainties. The engineering of meaning is therefore not merely a strategic competence but a civic obligation. To manufacture meaning is to manufacture the conditions of democratic deliberation, institutional trust, and collective hope.

c) The Wager of the Future

The decisive wager of our time, we argue, is not whether we can know more, but whether we can understand better—and whether we can produce the meaning that makes understanding capable of guiding action. This is not a philosophical speculation but the existential precondition for crafting a future rather than merely adapting to one. The implication is both sobering and invigorating: the battle for meaning is the battle for the future itself.

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