

The Politics of Uncertainty: How Fear Shapes the New Normal

Nabib Bin Zahid¹



Source: Startups Magazine²

Introduction

Fear has become the defining currency of modern politics. From pandemics to economic shocks to great-power rivalry, uncertainty now operates less as a temporary disruption and more as a permanent governing condition. States, parties, and non-state actors increasingly weaponize anxiety — not by fabricating threats outright, but by amplifying the ambiguity around them. The result is a political landscape where the absence of clarity becomes a strategic asset, shaping public behavior, legitimizing expanded state authority, and redrawing the boundaries of what societies accept as “normal.”

In this new environment, fear is no longer just an emotional reaction; it is a tool of power, a mechanism of control, and a catalyst that reconfigures institutions, narratives, and global alignments. Understanding how uncertainty is manufactured, managed, and manipulated is essential to decoding the politics of the present moment and the world that is quietly emerging from it.

¹ Nabib Bin Zahid is a Research Assistant at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). He has completed his B.S.S in International Relations from the University of Rajshahi.

² <https://startupsmagazine.co.uk/article-why-embracing-uncertainty-new-normal>

The Architecture of Uncertainty: Anxiety manufactured by systems

Uncertainty in contemporary politics is not accidental; it is systematically produced. As Ulrich Bech argued in his seminal work on the *Risk society*, modern governance increasingly revolves around managing manufactured risks rather than preventing known dangers³. These risks, whether related to security, technology, health, or the economy, are often abstract, future-oriented which makes them uniquely effective at generating sustained public anxiety.

One of the core mechanisms of this architecture is strategic ambiguity. States deliberately obscure thresholds, intentions, and red lines to maximize flexibility and deterrence. While ambiguity has long been a feature of international politics, its expansion across cyber operations, hybrid warfare and emerging technologies has intensified uncertainty as a permanent condition rather than a situational tactic. As Schelling noted, uncertainty can be more coercive than clarity because it forces adversaries and populations alike to imagine worst-case outcomes⁴.

Second pillar is information volatility. The fragmentation of the media ecosystem has eroded authoritative narrative, by replacing them with competing interpretations and constant crisis framing. Research on information disorder shows that uncertainty thrives not necessarily on falsehoods, but on contradiction, overload and speed⁵. Governments and political actors exploit this volatility by selectively releasing information, delaying clarification or allowing speculation to circulate unchecked, a process that amplifies fear without requiring overt manipulation.



Source: *The American Conservative*⁶

Last but not least, institutional drift deepens anxiety. International organizations, multilateral regimes, and domestic institutions increasingly struggle to provide credible reassurance in

³ Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage Publications.

⁴ Schelling, T. C. (1960). *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁵ Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

⁶ <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/the-virtues-of-strategic-ambiguity/>

moments of crisis. As Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde argue in securitization theory, when institutions fail to handle perceived threats through normal political process, issues are reframed as existential dangers requiring exceptional measures⁷. This shift normalizes emergency politics and reinforces the public perception that instability is unavoidable.

Altogether, these dynamics create a self-reinforcing system: uncertainty generates fear, fear legitimizes extraordinary authority, and extraordinary authority further entrenches uncertainty. Anxiety, in this sense, is not merely a social condition, rather it is an engineered outcome of contemporary political system.

Fear as Governance: anxiety converting into power

Fear does not function merely as a societal reaction to uncertainty but as a governing mechanism actively leveraged by political authorities. When anxiety becomes widespread and persistent, it alters the relationship between the state and society, lowering resistance to exceptional measures and expanding the scope of executive power. As political theorists have long noted, fear narrows the space for deliberation and shift public demand away from accountability toward protection⁸.

This dynamic is the most visible through the process of securitization, whereby political leaders frame issues as existential threats requiring urgent and extraordinary responses. Once an issue is successfully securitized, normal political procedures are suspended in favor of emergency logics, often with broad public consent⁴. Under conditions of heightened uncertainty, this move becomes easier: ambiguity amplifies perceived danger, while fear accelerates acceptance. The threat need not be immediate or clearly defined - its plausibility is sufficient.

Historically, fear-based governance has been associated with moments of war or crisis. What distinguishes the contemporary era is its permanence. Counterterrorism frameworks, migration governance, public health emergencies, and digital security regimes increasingly operate under open-ended threat horizons. Scholars of emergency politics warn that when exceptional measures lack clear termination points, they risk becoming normalized features of governance rather than temporary deviations⁹.

⁷ Buzan, B., Wæver, O., & de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

⁸ Robin, Corey. 2004. *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



*Source: The Conversation*¹⁰

Fear also serves an important disciplinary function. By emphasizing unpredictability, whether of violence, economic collapse, or external interference - states encourage compliance through anticipation rather than coercion. Citizens modify behavior not because of direct repression, but because uncertainty reshapes what they perceive as rational or safe. As Foucault's work on governmentality suggests, power is most effective when individuals internalize risk management as a personal responsibility rather than a political question¹¹.

At the international level, fear-based governance feeds into competitive signaling among states. Governments justify military spending, surveillance expansion, and alliance commitments by invoking uncertain futures rather than concrete adversaries. This future-oriented fear creates political insulation: policies cannot easily be falsified because the threat they address has not yet materialized. As a result, accountability weakens, while precaution becomes an unquestioned virtue¹². Moreover, fear does not destabilize governance; it stabilizes authority. By sustaining a climate of uncertainty, states preserve maneuvering space, suppress dissent, and recalibrate citizen expectations. Anxiety becomes politically productive, not despite its corrosive effects on trust and participation, but precisely because of them.

The Geopolitics of Fear: Rival Powers exploiting Ambiguity

In contemporary international politics, fear has become a strategic instrument not only for domestic governance but also for external influence. Rival powers increasingly seek advantage not through decisive confrontation, but through managed ambiguity - actions calibrated to

¹⁰ <https://theconversation.com/hope-and-fear-surround-emerging-technologies-but-all-of-us-must-contribute-to-stronger-governance-96122>

¹¹ Foucault, Michel. 2007. *Security, Territory, Population*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹² Aradau, Claudia, and Rens van Munster. 2011. *Politics of Catastrophe: Genealogies of the Unknown*. London: Routledge.

unsettle adversaries without triggering open conflict. This approach reflects a shift from deterrence based on clear threats to coercion rooted in psychological destabilization¹³.



Source: AEI¹⁴

Hybrid warfare illustrates this logic most clearly. Cyber intrusions, disinformation campaigns, election interference, and economic coercion rarely aim for immediate tactical victories. Instead, their strategic value lies in cultivating doubt—about institutional resilience, social cohesion, and the reliability of alliances. As scholars of gray-zone conflict note, these actions thrive precisely because they blur the boundary between war and peace, complicating attribution and response¹⁵. Fear signaling plays a central role in great-power competition. States deliberately project unpredictability to inflate perceptions of risk, forcing rivals into defensive postures that are costly and politically destabilizing. Nuclear posturing, ambiguous military exercises, and conflicting diplomatic messages are not designed to clarify intentions, but to keep adversaries guessing. As Jervis argues, misperception under conditions of uncertainty can be as strategically consequential as actual capability imbalances⁹.

This dynamic is particularly visible in the erosion of trust within the international system. Arms control regimes, confidence-building measures, and multilateral institutions depend on shared expectations and transparency. When fear and uncertainty dominate, states become reluctant to disclose information or bind themselves to rules that may constrain future flexibility. The result is a security dilemma intensified not by aggression, but by suspicion¹⁶.

¹³ Jervis, Robert. 1976. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹⁴ <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/countering-aggression-in-the-gray-zone/>

¹⁵ Mazarr, Michael J. 2015. *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press.

¹⁶ Herz, John H. 1950. "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma." *World Politics* 2 (2): 157–180.

Moreover, fear-based geopolitics disproportionately affects middle and smaller powers. Lacking the resources to shape uncertainty, these states are forced to absorb it, often over-securitizing their policies to hedge against worst-case scenarios. This contributes to regional arms races, alliance volatility, and policy overreaction, reinforcing instability even in the absence of direct threats¹⁷.

Ultimately, the geopolitics of fear transforms international order from a rule-based system into an anticipatory one. States act not on what adversaries have done, but on what they might do. While this may reduce the likelihood of outright war in the short term, it entrenches a global environment of chronic tension - one in which peace exists less as a shared condition than as a fragile pause sustained by mutual anxiety.

The Market of Anxiety: Profitability of Fear

Fear does not circulate solely through political institutions; it is increasingly embedded in market logics. Uncertainty generates demand, and in contemporary political economies, anxiety has become a monetizable resource. Security technologies, risk analytics, surveillance systems, and crisis-management industries thrive on the perception that threats are omnipresent and evolving. As scholars of political economy argue, insecurity is no longer merely a condition markets respond to—it is a condition markets actively reproduce¹⁸.

The expansion of the global security industry illustrates this dynamic. From biometric identification to predictive policing and cybersecurity services, firms sell not protection from known dangers, but preparedness for undefined futures. These technologies promise control over uncertainty while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that risk is unavoidable and permanent. As Zuboff notes, surveillance-based business models thrive on behavioral prediction, turning fear into a driver of continuous data extraction and governance by anticipation¹⁹.

Digital platforms play a central role in amplifying this economy of anxiety. Algorithms prioritize content that provokes emotional engagement, and fear consistently outperforms reassurance. Studies in political communication demonstrate that uncertainty and threat framing increase user attention, prolong exposure, and intensify polarization²⁰. While platforms rarely manufacture fear directly, their incentive structures reward its circulation, creating an ecosystem where anxiety is both normalized and accelerated.

States increasingly partner with or depend upon these market actors. Public-private collaborations in cybersecurity, border control, and intelligence blur the distinction between

¹⁷ Walt, Stephen M. 1987. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

¹⁸ Beckert, Jens. 2016. *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁹ Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. New York: PublicAffairs.

²⁰ Sunstein, Cass R. 2017. *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

national security imperatives and commercial interests. This convergence complicates accountability; when fear-driven policies generate profit, incentives to reduce uncertainty weaken. As political sociologists observe, risk governance becomes less about resolution and more about continuous management²¹.

The consequence is a feedback loop. Political uncertainty fuels market demand; market solutions institutionalize fear; institutionalized fear legitimizes further political intervention. In this system, stability is not measured by the absence of threat, but by the smooth functioning of anxiety-management infrastructures. Fear becomes economically productive precisely because it is never meant to be resolved.

Living with Fear: Social Behavior in an Age of Permanent Uncertainty

When uncertainty becomes chronic, its most profound effects emerge at the societal level. Fear reshapes not only political preferences but also everyday behavior, gradually redefining how individuals perceive risk, agency, and responsibility. Psychological research shows that prolonged exposure to uncertainty produces heightened threat sensitivity and reduces tolerance for complexity, making populations more receptive to simplified narratives and authoritative solutions²². In such environments, compliance often replaces consent. Citizens adapt by internalizing risk management as a personal obligation, adjusting conduct to anticipated dangers rather than explicit rules. This aligns with sociological analyses of late modernity, which suggest that individuals increasingly govern themselves through precaution, anticipating institutional failure rather than relying on it²³.



²¹ Power, Michael. 2007. *Organized Uncertainty: Designing a World of Risk Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²² Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

²³ Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Source: Mindful²⁴

Chronic uncertainty also corrodes collective action. When threats are perceived as diffuse and ongoing - climate instability, cyber insecurity, economic volatility - mobilization becomes difficult. Social trust declines as individuals retreat into protective identities and short-term survival strategies. As Putnam observes, sustained insecurity weakens civic engagement and erodes the social capital necessary for democratic resilience²⁵.

Importantly, fear alters political imagination. Under persistent anxiety, ambitious reform appears reckless, while continuity and control appear prudent. Studies in political behavior indicate that fear increases preference for order, hierarchy, and exclusion, even among otherwise liberal populations²⁶. This helps explain the normalization of emergency measures and the shrinking space for dissent across diverse political systems.

Over time, societies recalibrate their understanding of normality. Exceptional policies become routine; surveillance becomes reassurance; and uncertainty becomes expected rather than contested. The “new normal” is not defined by crisis itself, but by its psychological domestication. Fear ceases to shock and instead disciplines, quietly aligning social behavior with the strategic needs of governance in an uncertain world.

Conclusion

The politics of uncertainty has reshaped governance not through chaos, but through control. Fear, once understood as a destabilizing force, has become a stabilizing instrument - one that disciplines societies, expands state authority, and recalibrates international behavior without requiring permanent crisis or open conflict. In this sense, uncertainty is no longer a failure of governance; it is one of its most effective techniques.

What emerges is a global order governed less by rules than by anticipation. States act on imagined futures, markets profit from undefined risks, and societies adapt to instability as a permanent condition. This anticipatory logic narrows political imagination, privileging caution over transformation and security over solidarity. As Aradau and van Munster (2011) warn, when the future itself is securitized, politics becomes trapped in a cycle of precaution that is difficult to escape.

The danger is not that fear produces disorder, but that it produces *managed stagnation*. A world accustomed to anxiety may avoid catastrophic war, yet remain incapable of meaningful cooperation. Peace, under such conditions, is reduced to the absence of escalation rather than the

²⁴ <https://www.mindful.org/primer-living-time-fear/>

²⁵ Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

²⁶ Hetherington, Marc J., and Elizabeth Suhay. 2011. “Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans’ Support for the War on Terror.” *American Journal of Political Science* 55 (3): 546–560.

presence of trust, justice, or shared purpose. Stability is maintained, but at the cost of democratic vitality and global ambition.

Moving beyond fear-based governance does not require eliminating uncertainty—an impossible task in complex systems. It requires resisting the normalization of anxiety as a governing logic. Transparency, institutional credibility, and cooperative risk management are not idealistic aspirations; they are strategic necessities in a world where unmanaged fear increasingly substitutes for political vision.

If uncertainty defines the new normal, the critical question is no longer whether fear will shape politics, but whether politics can reclaim the future from fear.