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HORIZON INSIGHTS



Climate Delay: The recent evolution of disinformation narratives on Climate Change

Digital media mentoring for migrant youth: A case study in Belgium and Germany

The AI-Terrorism Nexus: AI-Enabled Improvised Drones

Book Review: T. V. Paul, The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi.



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Table of Contents

Foreword	04
CLIMATE DELAY: The Recent Evolution of Disinformation Narratives on Climate Change	05
By Adina Tiittula	
Digital Media Mentoring for Migrant Youth: A Case Study in Belgium and Germany	24
By Annika Niesen, Fatih Yilmaz	
The AI—Terrorism Nexus: AI-Enabled Improvised Drones	36
By Furkan Akar, Onur Sultan	
Book Review: T.V. Paul, <i>The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi</i>	52
By Ayhan Eker	

Foreword

Dear Reader,

We are pleased to present this new issue of Horizon Insights, which examines how contemporary security challenges are increasingly shaped by information, technology, social resilience, and the politics of recognition.

This edition opens with an analysis of climate delay as the evolving face of climate disinformation. Moving beyond outright denial, the article shows how delay narratives undermine climate action by delegitimising solutions, redirecting responsibility, and deepening political confusion. It reminds us that climate disinformation is not only an environmental problem, but also a challenge to democratic cohesion and international governance.

Our second contribution turns to digital media mentoring for migrant youth in Belgium and Germany. In a media environment marked by disinformation, polarisation, and algorithmic pressure, the article highlights the importance of linking media literacy with democratic participation. It offers a practical and replicable model for empowering young people with migration backgrounds to engage critically and confidently in public discourse.

The third article addresses the growing nexus between artificial intelligence, terrorism, and improvised drones. Through recent case studies, it explores how non-state actors are adapting commercially available technologies for surveillance, targeting, and potentially autonomous attacks. The findings underline an urgent need for preparedness, regulation, and innovation in counter-drone strategies.

Finally, this issue includes a review of T. V. Paul's *The Unfinished Quest*, a sober examination of India's long pursuit of major power status. The review situates India's rise within broader debates on recognition, capability, and the limits of strategic ambition.

Together, these contributions invite reflection on a central question: how can societies remain resilient when truth, technology, inclusion, and power are all being contested at once?

We wish you a thought-provoking read.

Sincerely yours,

Beyond the Horizon ISSG

Climate Delay: The Recent Evolution of Disinformation Narratives

By Adina Tiittula¹

Abstract:

'Climate denial' is the most recognised form of climate disinformation, however, this is changing as 'climate delay' has become the most repeated and pervasive form of climate-related disinformation today. Climate denial and climate delay share the same objective of undermining climate action. However, rather than an outright rejection of climate science, climate delay narratives aim to achieve this through delegitimising climate solutions, policies and activists, and creating overall disunity and confusion around climate science. This article examines how climate delay is portrayed across individual, corporate, and political levels. These three levels are illustrated using a multiple case study methodology, giving specific examples on how delay narratives are seen online, and how they are shaped and motivated by different actors on the three levels. The article argues that beyond climate change, climate delay narratives as a form of disinformation is also broader threat to political cohesion and international governance, and addressing it therefore requires a comprehensive a multi-level strategy.

Keywords:

Climate Change · Climate Delay · Climate Denial · Disinformation Narratives · Public Consensus · Greenwashing · Doomism · Redirecting Responsibility

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| 1 Introduction

While statistics from public opinion polls range from 72% in the US (Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2024) to 90% in the EU (European Social Survey, 2018), it is clear that the overwhelming majority of the global population believes that climate change is caused by human activity from fossil fuel emissions (Ritchie, 2024). The UNDP global climate survey shows 89% of people wanting to see more climate action from their national governments (The People's Climate Vote, 2024). In the EU, 77% of people “agree that the cost of damage caused by climate change outweighs the cost of transitioning to a climate-neutral economy, while 88% support greater investment in renewables and energy efficiency” (European Commission, 2025).

So why does it seem like climate science, policies, and discourses are so contested?

This article aims to provide clarification to the complex world of climate change discourse and contribute to existing literature on climate-related disinformation and narratives. This article therefore attempts to answer the question: How do ‘climate delay’ narratives circulate online, and what motivates the spread of these narratives on individual, corporate and political levels?

This article contributes to existing literature on climate disinformation discourses by demonstrating how climate delay narratives operate in practice simultaneously on 3 levels. This article argues that the narrative shift from outright denial of climate science towards more ambiguous and emotional appeals seen in the narratives of delay is a purposeful and active effort motivated by financial interests. This is reflected on individual, corporate and political levels, where climate delay narratives often do not have an argument that can be easily identified or debunked with statistics and factual explanations. This makes them harder to address on social media platforms, and within policy debates.

First, this article will outline the historical trends in climate discourses until current day, moving from denial of climate science by large fossil fuel companies starting in the 1950's, to a more complex framework of climate delay, the main climate related disinformation narrative seen today. Today, climate delay narratives make up 70% of all current misinformation related to climate change seen on YouTube (Centre for Countering Digital Hate, 2025 p.13). Then, section 2 will explore climate delay in more detail, using a multiple case study methodology. This will be done by approaching climate delay from three different levels: (1)

individual, (2) corporate, and (3) political. In each level, a detailed explanation and concrete case studies will be explored. These specific cases are chosen due to them reflecting the most influential and persistent delay narratives seen today, illustrating the prevalence and difficulty of countering these delay rhetorics on multiple levels of society.

| 2 Background

2.1 Scientific (and Public) Consensus

Over 99.9% of peer-reviewed scientific papers agree that climate change is caused by human activity (Lynas et al., 2021). This scientific consensus is also reflected by the public, which overwhelmingly trusts in climate science, and supports active efforts to combat climate change. Public opinion polling from the UN's Peoples' Climate Vote shows that "even in the world's biggest producers of fossil fuels, the majority of people support a quick transition away from coal, oil and gas". However, this is not enough, as public sentiment on climate policy suffers from a two-fold "perception gap".

Firstly, the gap between high levels of knowledge about climate change as an important issue, and the lack of real action taken towards climate mitigation. This is a well-researched phenomenon, called the 'green-action gap', 'awareness-action inconsistency,' 'psychological climate paradox,' 'values-action gap' and many other terms (Hochachka, 2024). This perception gap is fed by a narrative of climate delay called 'redirecting responsibility' which will be explored further in part 2 of this article.

The second perception gap is that government and overall public sentiment assumes that a large chunk of the population does not agree on climate change, but they do (Ritchie, 2024). Most people support climate action, and across the 125-country study by Andre et al. (2024), 69% of people said they would be willing to give 1% of their income to tackle climate change. However, we tend to underestimate how much others care and are ready to act towards climate mitigation. When the same participants in the study were asked if they think others in their country would say "yes" to giving away 1% of their income, the average was just 43%. This underestimation of others was seen in every single country. This same trend is seen across most political issues: people tend to agree on political issues more than they think they do. However, "affective climate polarisation", (along with affective polarisation in other areas) is of growing concern in democratic societies (Bar-On et al., 2024). 'Affective polarisation' refers to a social group dynamic where individuals feel emotionally warm and tied to their own ingroup, while feeling hostile

in-opposition to the out-group. Here, polarisation is less about disagreement on specific issue-areas, and more tied to identity formation (Huddart et al., 2025b).

These perception gaps follow the same pattern seen in the polarisation of other political topics and issue areas, led by media coverage, active disinformation campaigns, and amplification of extreme viewpoints online. Public attitudes on climate change and political action are highly influenced by the public and private discourses that individuals encounter on a daily basis (Abdulaal et al., 2025). As previous literature shows, emotions and support for climate policies cannot be separated. Durnova et al. (2025) outline the concept of 'political emotions' as showing the complex embeddedness of emotions, power relations, political debates, social order, values, and overall polarisation as linked to climate support. Therefore, by actively exploiting these perception gaps, delay narratives create an overestimated impression of public disagreement on climate science and policies. This builds political inertia and belief in the impossibility of climate action on each of the 3 levels.

2.2 From 'Climate Denial' to 'Climate Delay'

By the 1960's, scientists were beginning to grow a strong consensus on the evidence linking fossil fuel usage and climate change. Fossil fuel companies initiated the undermining of this consensus through climate denial, mainly using explicit campaigning and advertising (Pecka, 2021).

“
Public attitudes on climate change and political action are highly influenced by the public and private discourses that individuals encounter on a daily basis... emotions and support for climate policies cannot be separated.

Climate denial is the rejection of the scientific consensus that human activity is disrupting our climate. In response to increasing convergence in both the scientific and public acknowledgement of climate change as a real and pressing global issue, opposition to active policy which targets climate change has moved from outright climate denial to climate delay. Scientific consensus, and the public's awareness that there is a scientific consensus on climate related issues is extremely important, because this makes them more likely to support

climate mitigating initiatives on a political level. “Consequently, a key strategy of the climate denial movement has been to cast doubt on the scientific consensus” (Farmer, G.T & Cook, J., p.248). Denial used to be the most common narrative of climate misinformation, but its frequency online has “dropped from 65% of all claims in 2018 to just 30% of claims in 2023” (Centre for Countering Digital Hate, 2025, p.6).

Climate delay (also called the ‘new denial’) does not explicitly deny the existence of climate change as a human caused phenomenon but aims to delay climate action and the passing of climate mitigation policies. Lamb et al. (2020) categorise climate delay into four strategies used to discredit climate science and climate solutions: (1) redirecting responsibility (2) pushing non-transformative solutions that avoid structural change (3) emphasizing the negative aspects of climate policies, and (4) surrendering to climate change.

Delay narratives often rely on vague claims and attacks on climate policies, science and activists, and draw upon people’s already existing fears and distrust of political institutions. This paper therefore argues that the shift from climate denial to climate delay is not merely a narrative pattern but is actively harming climate mitigation efforts. This is because climate delay introduces ambiguity and emotional appeals that are difficult to counter by facts and rational argumentation. This makes climate delay as a tactic aimed at inhibiting climate action much more effective and dangerous. In section 2, strategies of delay will be shown in more detail, by giving concrete examples of how climate delay narratives are spread on individual, corporate and political levels.

| 3 Levels of Climate Delay

In this section, climate delay will be outlined using the 3 levels. This separation of individual, corporate and political spheres acts as a guiding framework that offers a clear explanation of the different actors at play in the spread and shaping of climate discourses. While these levels are distinct from each other in their extent of influence and incentives, it is important to note that these layers are still interactive and influenced by each other.

The individual level refers to the public, and how consumption of online content influences individual perceptions of climate change and mental health. The corporate level includes all private actors who financially benefit from climate delay narratives and therefore have an incentive to share disinformation online through advertising and campaigning strategies. And lastly, the political level refers to political parties and

political figures that shape climate discourses through a top-down method. These can be seen in political campaigns, public statements, and setting of policy agenda, which are often highly reported in the news and social media.

An example of a common narrative of climate delay is redirecting responsibility, and this can be used to illustrate the relevance of the 3 levels. Redirecting responsibility can be done in a passive manner, where blame is not placed upon another actor, but simply by minimising their own responsibility. However, this can also be done with a more active and even aggressive approach, seen in tactics such as 'scapegoating', which involves transferring responsibility onto a vulnerable group. In this case, migrants, developing nations, or ordinary citizens are made to bear the responsibility of high emissions from large multinational companies or national and international governments. On an individual level, this tactic can lead to internalisation of climate responsibility, leading to climate anxiety, 'doomism' and disengagement. On a corporate level, responsibility for reducing pollution is placed upon individuals -through initiatives such as calculating your carbon footprint- and other high global polluters. On a political level on the other hand, responsibility is redirected away from national government regulation or oversight, avoiding public distaste on the perceived costly nature of climate policy.

3.1 Individual Level

On an individual level, climate delay narratives limit meaningful action towards climate mitigation through provoking feelings of paralysis and helplessness that are difficult to address in a constructive or straightforward manner. For the public, climate delay has an impact which "suppresses constructive public participation in climate discourse, deepens cynicism, and impairs long-term democratic engagement with climate transitions" (European Digital Media Observatory, 2025, p.48). Individual consumption of climate disinformation in the form of delay narratives is commonly seen through the lenses of despair and hopelessness. These are reflected in what Lamb et al. (2020) call the narratives of doomism and 'change is impossible'. Doomism refers an approach to climate change where climate disaster believed to already be happening, and that this cannot be reversed, leading to the conclusion that the only rational response is to give up. Change is impossible is a similarly pessimistic viewpoint, where policy progress is seen as never being able to occur due to the unpopularity and infeasibility of climate regulations, leading to again the same conclusion: why even try? While a sense of urgency on climate related issues might seem like a motivating

force for action, it can also lead to climate anxiety, apathy, and inaction, when no solution is given. This form delay narrative is particularly hard to counter, as it is most common among those who support climate policy as a high priority, and view climate change as an existential threat. Effective climate communication requires pairing urgency with agency, as "the result of this view is essentially identical to the result of climate scepticism: doomism produces inaction." (p.2). When a narrative describing urgency of, and potential harm coming from lack of climate actions does not include a potential for feasible human action, this leads to increased feelings of doomism (Johnstone & Stickles, 2024).

Social media messages and news reporting can significantly influence the way individuals view climate change. From a study by the Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD, 2022) 55%-85% of the survey sample believed at least one climate change misinformation statement. Specific news sites that spread climate change disinformation online have a high influence on consumer viewpoints regarding this issue. "While 50% of regular Die Welt consumers believe that significant numbers of scientists disagree about climate change, only 36% of the German public do" (p.67). Climate disinformation online is reported on an EU-wide scale as well. The European Commission led Eurobarometer shows that 52% survey respondents believe that "traditional media fail to provide clear information, and 49% report difficulty identifying reliable content on social media" (European Commission, 2025). Analysis of climate disinformation narratives in Germany, France, and the Netherlands, show climate disinformation campaigns implementing localized adaptations taking to account specific domestic contexts. This makes them harder to counter through an international or even EU wide approach (European Digital Media Observatory, 2025, p.46).

3.2 Corporate Level

On the corporate level, climate delay narratives deliberately aim to block climate mitigation efforts that would harm the interests of the corporate actors through a variety of strategies, including narrative reframing and misleading advertising. The motivation behind spreading delay narratives online and in traditional media is largely financial, both indirectly and directly.

Large companies that rely on fossil fuels usage are economically incentivised to delay climate action, regulations and the green transition that would directly hurt their business model. "This incentivizes them to spread disinformation and cast as much doubt as possible on whether or not our climate is truly changing and if humans are responsible" (Wilder,

2024). Economically motivated climate delay actions can be seen in three areas: corporate funding (businesses fund online disinformation campaigns), political influence (lobby politicians through donations, affecting policies and voting on climate issues), and 'greenwashing' (advertising campaigns and misleading marketing tactics that overstate environmentally friendly or sustainability practices) (Wilder, 2024).

Dating back to the 1950's, fossil fuel lobby and the tobacco industry have shared the same disinformation playbook, using strategies to block regulations, minimise corporate responsibility, and undermine scientific consensus (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2018). The role of fossil fuel companies in manufacturing uncertainty in climate science and creating an illusion of climate denial being much more popular than it is among the general public is largely understated. ExxonMobil, for example, has done accurate predictions of climate change patterns compatible with other similar studies by scientific associations. Despite knowing the severity of lack of climate action, Exxon overemphasized uncertainties and downplayed results of their climate models. "The company's public statements about climate science contradicted its own scientific data" (Supran et al., 2023, p.2).

3.2.1 Case 1: Fossil Fuel Industry: British Petroleum

When it comes to re-directing responsibility of climate mitigation to an individual level, the narrative of "individualism" is used. This diverts blame from the macro (corporate and political levels) to micro the level. While this tactic refers to the role of the individual, it is used by corporation to frame climate change as being tied to personal consumer choices, rather than corporate action.

Academics William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel created the concept and equation for the 'Ecological Footprint' in the early 90's for calculating resource usage of individuals, cities, businesses or countries. In 2000, British Petroleum (BP) started a "\$200 million public relations ad campaign to rebrand BP as an environmentally friendly company that was moving "beyond petroleum" by investing in renewable energy sources" (Clayton, 2023). BP used the 'Ecological Footprint' blueprint for their 2004 advertising campaign, while focusing solely on individual consumers who were prompted to calculate their own carbon footprint. BP's carbon footprint calculator was extremely popular, with searches for this term on Google going from almost zero to being "near the top of the Google Trends scale" (Clayton, 2023).

These carbon calculators are a clear example of climate delay focusing on redirecting responsibility. Here, climate change is framed as the responsibility of individual consumers, and creates an illusion of climate mitigating efforts, while structural causes and corporate actions are the main source of emissions. This way corporate actors are protected from top-down regulations and public pressure, while globally, the "Top Twenty companies have collectively contributed 493 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide and methane chiefly from the combustion of their products, equivalent to 35% of all fossil fuel and cement emissions worldwide since 1965" (Climate Accountability Institute, 2020).



Figure 1: Tweet/X post from BP advertising their carbon footprint calculator.

3.2.2 Case 2: Social Media Industry/Business Model

Online mis- and disinformation is a serious issue to scientific and public consensus on climate change. The purpose of climate disinformation campaigns is not to simply convince people that climate change is a hoax (climate denial), but to confuse and polarise public opinion, making popular support for climate action less uniform and coordinated. Social media algorithms promote inflammatory and polarising content, making extreme viewpoints seem more popular than they are among the public.

Treen et al. (2020), explain the amplifying effect of misinformation and polarizing content on social media:

“Misinformation is then repeated and amplified through the “influencers echo chamber” of people in positions of power such as the media, politicians, and prominent bloggers, from where it reaches a wider audience... Once misinformation exists online, its reach can be amplified and echoed through sharing and repetition behaviours of online social media users.” (p.5)

Storani et al. (2025) find that unreliable sources of climate change information online have a lower volume of content but still have a significantly higher engagement rate compared to reliable sources. It therefore logically follows that social media influencers have a clear, yet indirect financial incentive to spread polarising narratives to increase engagement rates.

3.3.3 Case 3: Greenwashing

Greenwashing refers to the practice of giving a false impression of the environmental impact or benefits of a product, which can mislead consumers. This is mainly associated with in fast fashion brands using generic environmental claims such as ‘environmentally friendly, natural’, ‘biodegradable’, ‘climate neutral’ or ‘eco’, and using sustainability labels that are not based on approved certification schemes by public authorities. However, greenwashing can be seen in almost all sectors.

In 2021, a Dutch Advertising Code Committee ruled that Shell can’t use ‘carbon neutral’ in their advertisements, as this is a misleading claim that constitutes as greenwashing. However, the same claims were made later with term ‘CO2 compensation’. This was judged again as “an absolute claim for which Shell can’t show enough scientific evidence”. This back and forth in the courts shows that as a multinational oil and gas giant, Shell has the means to challenge and go around rules and regulations, with most national jurisdictions not bothering with challenging such claims (World Without Fossil Ads, 2022).



Figure 2: Shell advertising using misleading term 'carbon-neutral.'

Shell advertises to its customers that they can buy into Shells' carbon offsetting scheme with an extra fee when buying petrol and diesel products. The advertisement implies that this extra fee will be used by Shell to 'offset' the carbon emissions coming from the use of the fuel, through green initiatives such as tree planting. However, this advertising is misleading, as the amount of offsetting that is actually done by Shell is minimal compared to the emissions coming from the use of petroleum or diesel cars (Euractiv, 2022). This way, Shell is overclaiming their environmentally friendly practices, and misleading customers, while redirecting its own responsibility to the consumer.

3.3 Political Level

On the political level, climate delay narratives aim at redirecting political responsibility for climate change and avoiding public pushback from costly policy action. Despite private fossil fuel companies being the main source of critique and concern in the process of combatting climate change, the largest fossil fuel extractor firms and emitters globally are state owned enterprises. In 2023, the top 5 state-owned fossil fuel enterprises globally were Saudi Aramco, Coal India, CHN Energy, National Iranian Oil Co., and Jinneng Group. These 5 alone were responsible for 17.6% of global fossil CO₂ emissions, while the top 5 investor-owned companies contributed 5.1% of global fossil CO₂ emissions (InfluenceMap, 2023). This interlink of the state and fossil fuels both economically and politically makes international consensus and policy initiatives extremely challenging. Despite European countries being more open to the green transition than the global average, the political influence of fossil fuels

cannot be ignored, with many EU states still reliant on them. This has a clear limiting effect on climate mitigating efforts on a political level.

There is a clear increased relevance of climate change in the European political arena. “Since the late 1980s, the European Union has played a prominent role in the international arena to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, particularly through the research and ambitious policy emission reduction targets of several frontrunner EU countries” (Biesbroek et al. 2010, p.440). This relevance has only increased, evident in the European Climate Law aiming for climate neutrality by 2025, (European Climate Law, n.d.), the Emissions Trading System (ETS) introducing a cap-and-trade system on emissions (European Commission, n.d.), and many other initiatives, not to mention the highly contested energy supply debate, which is far too complicated to get into within the scope of this article.

There are two potential responses by political parties aiming to oppose the increased importance of climate change in modern EU politics. These responses are climate denial and climate delay. While these two approaches to this issue hold opposite views on the existence of climate change, they share a common goal, this being to uphold the current way of political, social and economic organisation, and blocking climate action.

Yazar et al., (2022) explain that opposition to climate mitigating policies often goes hand in hand with the level of reliance of a region on carbon-intensive sectors. These regions are economically dependent on industries with high carbon emissions, and thus the population is more likely to oppose and fear the green transition and climate-mitigation strategies. This is because climate policies are seen to lead to unemployment in these sectors, through carbon taxes on carbon heavy industries, and diversion of subsidies to other ‘greener’ technologies. This opposition is mainly reflected by political parties and is increasingly based on narratives of delay rather than denial.

3.3.1 Case 4: Finns party (Perussuomalaiset) Electoral Campaign Using High Petrol Prices

Finnish member of Parliament Mauri Peltokangas stars in a [2021 campaign advisement video](#) for the Finns Party. The video shows him driving a car down a dark road in a forest, and going to fill up his tank on his petrol car. The translated voice over of the video is:

"In Finland, you have to use a car. You can't get everywhere by bike, and there are no trams in rural areas. Fuel prices are rising like a climate change curve. Where can ordinary people find an extra hundred euros a month for their fuel bill? In what reality does our government live in? Regional elections are coming up. Support Finnish purchasing power and vote out those who raise gasoline prices."

This advertisement draws on a few common climate delay tactics. (1) It suggests that reason behind rising gasoline prices in Finland is due to the greed of those in power, potentially implying that they have a financial interest in pushing for the green transition, and/or the green transition would only benefit those in power. (2) It implies that petrol cars are inherent to a Finnish way of life (nationalist appeals to tradition). (3) It appeals to emotions and previous distrust of elite/government. (4) It suggests that high prices of car usage and energy can only be solved by the protection of fossil fuels. (5) It implies that the green transition/climate mitigating regulations are the sole cause of the high cost of living.

Petrol cars are generally seen as more reliable and cheaper than electric vehicles, just as energy derived from fossil fuels is compared to renewable energy. Renewable energy is a topic that is source of constant misinformation, being framed as too expensive, too unreliable, too unachievable. Renewables are already being used as the main source of energy in multiple countries. Iceland relies almost exclusively on geothermal energy for its heating (REN21, 2022). Renewable energy sources are not considerably more expensive, can even be less expensive compared to fossil fuels, and the price of renewable energy will only decrease in the future due to technological efficiency (Roser, 2020). It is also estimated that investment in renewable energy creates more jobs than investment in fossil fuels (World Economic Forum, 2021).

The Green transition is aiming for a gradual transition towards more sustainable economic models and aims to help the most vulnerable groups and industries in this transition (e.g. EU's 'Just Transition Mechanism'). This EU wide transition aims for a comprehensive transition, where no region is left behind. Additionally, a key point to consider is that while net zero might be difficult to achieve, the cost of inaction is still much higher than the cost of action. Not addressing climate change will lead to worse economic outcomes on the long term (Newkeen, 2024).

This narrative of increased energy prices being tied to the green transition is clearly false, and ignores its main proponent, this being the Russian invasion of Ukraine. EU has historically been reliant on oil and gas imports,

particularly from Russia. 90% of its gas supply in 2024 was imported from outside the EU (Strategic Perspectives, 2024). While less than desired, the share of Russian gas imports has reduced been drastically reduced from 45% in 2021 to just 19% in 2024 (European Commission, 2025). With the EU's security being so highly tied to the faith of Ukraine, it is clear that the green transition is not only about climate resilience, but also a geo-political response aimed at de-coupling European energy systems through diversification and de-risking.

3.3.2 Case 5: French National Rally as a Political Party Example:

Another way climate delay discourses can be seen today is by political parties simply not addressing climate change at all, or avoiding direct support of climate mitigation policies, especially through involvement in international organisations and treaties. For example, the French political party Rassemblement National (RN) tends to avoid direct statements on climate change and uses alternative language by referring to climate mitigation strategies as “environmental stewardship”, a concept based on conservation and preservation. This is seen in the 2022 ‘ecology’ manifesto program of the RN only using the word ‘climate change’ 2 times in the whole text. This is a form a strategic avoidance, where politically unpopular climate mitigation policies are left unaddressed, as carbon taxes and regulations are especially contested by the supporters of right-wing parties, with nationalism and nativism being the strongest predictors with opposition to climate policy (Kulin & Sevä, 2024).

English translation of a segment from the National Front's 2022 “ECOLOGY” manifesto program:

“France is one of the five countries with the least degraded environment, and no French city is among the 500 most polluted cities in the world (IQ Air ranking – 2020 World Air Quality Summary)! Why punish the French? It is not up to the French to pay for the mistakes of others! The urgent need is to break with an environmentalism that has been hijacked by climate terrorism, which is endangering the planet, national independence, and, even more so, the French people's standard of living. The coming energy crisis and the looming food crisis are directly linked to the counterproductive terms of the “Green Deal” imposed by the European Union. We will free the French people from these unreasonable commitments. We will follow the French path to achieve the objectives of the Paris Agreement. We will withdraw from the Green Deal and the administrative hell it imposes on small businesses under the

name of “taxonomy” in favour of a strategic autonomy plan based on sustainable development.”

Here, the tactic of redirecting responsibility is explicitly stated, stating that “It is not up to the French to pay for the mistakes of others!”. This aims to divert attention away from domestic polluters by targeting foreign high polluters. From this point of view, any climate action taken by France is unfair and ineffective, as other countries are lagging so far behind France in sustainability practices.

This segment is also a clear case of a delay narrative that ‘emphasises the downsides’ of climate policies and the green transition, suggesting that French working people and businesses will be harmed by EU-level and global climate policies, drawing upon pre-existing popular disdain of the UN, EU and the perceived hypocrisy of globalism and international treaties. Marine Le Pen, the leader of the RN, repeatedly uses nationalistic language, and critiques international climate action, by saying “when you are a patriot, you are an environmentalist; when you are a globalist, you cannot be an environmentalist” (Bivar, 2022, p.618).

| 4 Conclusion

It should be clear by now that climate delay narratives and climate change related disinformation hinders social and political unity and public consensus on climate action. This has a significant effect on the extent to which climate policy and regulations can be passed on national and international levels (AI4Debunk, 2025). However, the impact of climate delay narratives goes beyond climate action and influences the cohesion and operation of international politics at large.

The World Economic Forum “Global Risks Report” collects responses from over 900 experts worldwide on their insights on global risks. In the 2025 report, environmental risks are placed as the main long-term global threat. Mis- and disinformation hold the top

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The prevalence of climate delay narratives is not only a problem of science and climate change communication, but is interconnected with broader challenges to social wellbeing, multilateral organisations and democratic governance.

position for short term global risks. The reasoning behind this is that when trust in national governments and international co-operation is undermined through online disinformation efforts, this has negative effects for the operation of our globalised social, economic and political systems. The increased relevance of AI technologies enabling the creation, spread and amplification of misleading content online is also referenced as a key concern (World Economic Forum, 2025). As climate change and disinformation are deeply interrelated issues, this contributes to the polarisation socially and politically that hinders the ability of international organisations to operate seamlessly. Just look at the state of international trade, where divisions are marked by Trumps tariff wars, WTO appellate body paralysis, post-Brexit EU-UK relations, EU de-coupling strategies among other conflicts fuelling and reinforced by increased polarisation on national and international levels. Taken together, this shows that the prevalence of climate delay narratives is not only a problem of science and climate change communication, but is interconnected with broader challenges to social wellbeing, multilateral organisations and democratic governance.

As outlined in this article, climate delay has replaced climate denial as the main type of climate disinformation seen online. This narrative is highly harmful to climate action, hard to counter, and is seen on individual, corporate, and political levels. These 3 levels reinforce each other, since corporate backed disinformation campaigns and misleading advertising, as well as high-level political rhetoric influence individual perceptions on climate change. Further, individual voter choices and public pressure can incentivise the passing of tighter policy regulations and alter corporate policy direction. Addressing climate delay narratives is extremely important, but it urgently requires a strategy that incorporates a complex mixture of strengthening overall information resilience, social media regulations, democratic trust, and international cooperation on individual, corporate, and political levels.

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Digital Media Mentoring for Migrant Youth: A Case Study in Belgium and Germany²

By Annika Niesen³, Fatih Yilmaz⁴

Abstract:

Media literacy is one of the most significant skills in today's media-centric world. In the overload of information online and offline, the challenges of knowing what is true and false and participating in public discourse are rapidly increasing. Especially adolescents and young adults find themselves navigating their own social media as well as how they receive and perceive news in a democratic society. This challenge is even stronger for young adults with migration background in EU. Digital media mentoring for migrant youth therefore offers a structured approach to address these challenges and help them manage their own democratic and civic participation and tackling their part as informed and active citizens in the European Union.

Keywords:

Media Mentoring · Migration Youth · Digital Literacy · Democratic Participation · European Union

| 1 Introduction

In today's increasingly digital and interconnected world, individuals – especially young people – must navigate an overload of information online and offline. This includes the difficulty of accessing accurate and reliable information, exposure to manipulated content such as dis- and misinformation, and the lack of critical thinking and media literacy skills. Especially with social media becoming the primary news source of young adults, navigating these complex barriers directly impact civic participation in democratic society. Media literacy and democratic literacy are therefore inextricably linked and cannot be taught separately from each other (Berger & Unzicker, 2024, p.8). Another priority must be the

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political participation of minority groups, especially young migrants, who face multiple barriers: limited access to formal democratic participation such as voting, vulnerability to disinformation, and targeted attacks and hate speech on the internet (Laaninen & Bol, 2025, p.4).

“**Media literacy and democratic literacy are therefore inextricably linked and cannot be taught separately from each other.**”

The EU in a Nutshell project was developed in the scope of small-scale partnerships in youth programmes, funded by Erasmus+. The project addressed the growing challenges young adults face in today's media-centric world. With a

special focus on young adults with migration background in Germany and Belgium, it addressed the challenges of young adults' civic engagement when integrating not only into a new country, but also the European Union with its unique history and structure. The aim was to equip participants with tools critically evaluate digital content, understand democratic mechanisms in the EU, and become active and responsible participants in democratic life. In order to achieve this, EU in a Nutshell implemented a digital mentoring programme with media-related mentors and experts. Participants were not only taught to create their own original content, but also to use media platforms critically, express civic values, and contribute meaningfully to public discourse. This article reflects the challenges and lessons learned of the project and discusses the potential of this digital mentoring approach for future media mentoring initiatives for media literacy and democratic engagement among migrant youth.

| 2 Background

Young adults spend an average of 3-5 hours per day on their smartphones, primarily engaging through social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (Höppner, 2025; Weiser et al, 2025, p.11). Despite being labelled “media-savvy” and “digital natives”, they face diverse challenges in today's media-centric world (Dutch Media Literacy Network, 2023). Familiarity with technology and social media platforms does not equate media literacy, especially amid the rapid rise of AI (Anlar & Luís Fernandes 2025). Media literacy relates to the ability to access, analyse and evaluate online information as well as communication (Wendt et al, 2023, p.2). The recent shift in media-related science from a technological and skill-based

perspective to a broader understanding now also includes the role of social participation. This approach considers social media as a form of social integration and a person's inclusion greatly dependant on personal and situational factors (Wendt et al, 2023, p.2).

A 2024 Eurostat youth survey found that over 76% of respondents believed to have encountered disinformation in the past week, while about 71% of young citizens felt confident to recognize it (Laaninen & Bol, 2025, p.4; Trindade Pereira & Can Yilmaz, 2025). Yet, 55% of young adults in Flanders admitted to occasionally believing a message that is later proved to be false, and German youth under 29 showed especially susceptible to foreign disinformation (Dutch Media Literacy Network, 2023; Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, 2025). Therefore, overestimation of skills to identify misleading information plays a significant part in actual media and digital literacy among youth, making them vulnerable targets (Dutch Media Literacy Network, 2023, p.24; Anlar & Luís Fernandes, 2025; Laaninen & Bol, 2025, p.4).

Media literacy and democratic literacy are more effective when taught together – integrated across all subjects, age groups, and learning environments – to empower citizens to navigate and engage critically with information (Berger & Unzicker, 2024, p.8). This becomes especially important as social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and X are not only becoming the primary source of news consumption, but also for political participation among youth (De□elan, 2023, p. 19; Laaninen & Bol, 2025, p. 2; Dutch Media Literacy Network, 2023, p. 21). In addition, there has been a significant rise in political interest and engagement within the group of 18–24-year-old (Weiser et al, 2025, p.9; bpb, 2025). This reflects a structural shift in political communication and dissemination of political content, allowing politicians to reach younger audiences directly through their feeds and algorithms (Jost et al, 2025). However, this shift introduces significant challenges for content regulations. The lack of editorial overview and control on published content, allowing misinformation, emotional rhetoric, and polarizing narratives to spread unchecked. This is seen especially exploited by far-right politicians and influencers, using strong emotional language and decontextualized information and visual material to influence political opinion (Realfonzo, 2025; Weister et al, 2025, pp.10-13). Especially TikTok has been subject to repeated criticism for prioritizing emotionally strong and provocative content through its algorithmic design (Weiser et al, 2025, p.11).

For first-generation migrants, these challenges become even more complex: in addition to the media in their country of origin, they also have

to navigate the media landscape in their country of residence. Moreover, they are often excluded from formal democratic participation such as elections, although being directly affected by political decisions (bpb, 2025). This leaves social media as their primary channel for political expression and engagement, even though these channels are increasingly unregulated and subject to hate speech. With migration being one of the main topics addressed in election campaigns (Jost et al, 2025, p.12), they often find themselves caught in the centre of disinformation campaigns portraying them as an existential threat to society and the economy. Additional challenges arise when facing democratic structures and processes of not only Germany or Belgium, but also the EU. Its complex, multi-level decision-making system creates distance to younger generations, impacting political participation, especially among those with fewer resources or a migration background, even though it is of great importance to them and directly affects them (Laaninen & Bol, 2025, p.4).

Considering these systemic challenges—from the algorithmic amplification of disinformation to structural exclusion from formal political participation—equipping young people with migrant backgrounds with media literacy and civic engagement skills is not only beneficial, but essential. Traditional political education often fails to address the realities of digitally driven political communication, leaving young people vulnerable to manipulation and disengagement. This includes not only teaching them to recognize false content but also providing them with tools to create content on their, overall improving their ability to actively participate in political discourse online, and coordinating different platforms.

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The EU in a Nutshell project ought to address these challenges by developing a digital mentoring programme for migrant youth. The mentoring approach was chosen to promote trust, personalized learning, and sustained engagement, which are crucial factors for young people who need to navigate complex digital and political landscapes. The following

section describes the implementation of the intercultural program in Belgium and Germany, including its structure, instruments, and

adaptation to local needs, which were compiled in a publicly available handbook at the end of the project to serve as a basis for future initiatives.

| 3 Implementation of the Media Mentoring Programme

The program started with a co-creation workshop, where media experts and youth organizations came together to share experiences and ideas related to media-oriented youth work. Based on the results of this workshop, a 16-session media mentoring program was designed and developed with the aim of improving the target group's skills in content creation, critical thinking, and democratic engagement, while emphasizing democratic values and raising awareness of democratic mechanisms and EU processes.

Media professionals acted as experts and mentors, while young adults (18-25y.) with migrant background participated as mentees. Participants were recruited through direct contact with youth organizations and universities in the program areas, as well as through existing networks. The sessions took place either online, in person or in a hybrid format, with participants from Germany and Belgium coming together online.

Each session was divided into two parts: an expert-led lecture introducing key concepts, followed by a practical implementation phase in which mentees – guided by media experts and mentors – applied their newly acquired knowledge by creating their own social media posts and videos. It provided them with background information of today's media landscapes, hands-on training with content creation tools including AI-powered platforms and valuable insights into the work of media institutions. They then implemented their knowledge by creating social media posts and videos, applying theoretical knowledge with practical exercise. This format encouraged lively exchange within the intercultural peer group and resulted in individual content outputs developed by the mentees themselves.

In addition to the core sessions, the program included two visits to media institutions in both Germany and Belgium, as well as a final visit to an EU institution in Brussels, where all mentors and mentees came together shortly before the end of the program. As a result, a handbook was published to support future youth organizations with detailed instructions on session structure and project implementation.

| 4 Results and Lessons Learned

Piloting for the first time in 2025, the programme got off to strong start with establishing a media mentoring programme for the target group in Germany and Belgium. The initial co-creation workshop connected the project organisers with media experts and youth organisations, resulting in a shared understanding of the target group and their needs in a media mentoring programme. The diversity of the group of mentees from different educational, cultural and national backgrounds further strengthened the programme and allowed for a broad spectrum of media practices as well as perspectives being discussed along the process. Throughout the project, certain areas of success and improvement were identified:

4.1 Strengths of the mentoring approach

The mentoring approach showed significant advantages in reaching the participants and providing them with a comfortable learning environment in which they received individual support for their own media learnings. This was particularly effective in balancing different levels of prior knowledge and enhancing the participants' critical engagement.

Starting the project with a small number of hybrid and in-person introductory sessions set the foundation for deeper understanding of the development of media and today's media landscape and the participants' use of social media channels. This also created a broader picture of the mentees' skills, providing valuable insights for the organisers and mentors for tracking participants' progress and skill-development throughout the programme. Overall, the mentoring approach proved valuable for this type of program. However, it could be further improved by promoting closer relationships between mentors and mentees and by setting up individual sessions as needed.

Lessons learned: Mentoring formats are particularly effective in ongoing media education programs with a diverse target group.

4.2 Intercultural peer learning

The setting of bringing together young adults from diverse cultural, linguistic, and academical backgrounds proved to be one of the valuable aspects of the programme. In the first sessions, participants mapped their personal social media landscapes, including preferred platforms, content formats and engagement habits. This exercise served as both an icebreaker and an opportunity for mentors to overview participants' social media usage. Throughout the implementation phase, the diversity and

individuality of the participant group was present in their discussions and content creation outputs. The group learning was strengthened during in-person sessions in Germany and Belgium but also showed great strength during online group discussions. The intercultural dynamic further fostered lively exchanges about media practices, content creation and online engagement, which culminated during the institution visits in Brussels shortly before the end of the programme. This allowed all participants to come together and share practical insights and experiences through group tasks.

Lessons learned: The diversity among participants not only enriched the learning environments but also proved essential to the programme's success. The intercultural exchange throughout the program, both in person and online, provided valuable insights into individual habits in dealing with social media and at the same time promoted joint learning among young adults from different backgrounds, all of whom faced the same challenge of integrating into the structures of the EU.

4.3 Recruiting mentors and mentees

One of the main challenges the project faced was recruiting both mentors and mentees within the short period of four weeks between the co-creation workshop and official start of the programme. This left only limited time for reaching out to networks and gathering media-experts/mentors and the mentee target group of young adults with migration background aged 18-25. Furthermore, the programme included an in-person session and preparation for the mentor-role which was implemented by another preparatory meeting just one week prior the programme implementation beginning. This required early commitment of the experts and mentors, evoking difficulties regarding their availability and flexible participation. This short preparation phase increased organisational pressure and overall reduced the pool of candidates who were able to commit on short notice.

Lessons learned: With the programme structure already being developed in large parts during the pilot implementation, future programmes should plan for a recruitment phase of at least 6-10 weeks immediately after the co-creation workshop. This way, targeted outreach to youth organisations, universities and media networks with a clear communication of scheduling and time commitment to both mentors and mentees can be ensured, improving the overall arrangement of programme settings to expert and mentee availability. This can improve recruitment outcomes and support long-term participation of mentees.

4.4 Timing and scheduling of sessions

The short recruitment phase led to another challenge once implementation had started: coordinating session schedules with participants' availability. As many mentees were enrolled in university programs or balancing additional responsibilities, regular attendance proved difficult for some. Despite setting up the sessions for late afternoon/ early evening, some participants dropped out after several sessions due to availability issues. This was further complicated by the trans-national approach. Different academical calendars in Germany and Belgium proved to be obstacles for planning the final project and EU institution visits.

To address this challenge and support participants who were unable to attend, online sessions were recorded and to YouTube. This allowed participants to access the material at any time and contact mentors directly with any left open questions.

Lessons learned: Apart from longer recruitment phases, further projects could circumvent these challenges by planning a more compact set of sessions and offering longer block seminars on specific topics. This could reduce the overall number of meetings while maintaining content depth and aligning better with participant's time constraints.

4.5 Participant engagement and content creation

Throughout the project, the participants in-session discussions and active participation were particularly positively noticeable and led to lively intercultural exchange of their media habits, behaviours and experiences across different national and cultural contexts. Their homework tasks showed big improvements throughout the course and mirrored not only their active engagement within the course implementation, but also their increasing skill-development regarding their own content creation.

An increasing engagement was also noticeable after the visits of media institutions. Feedback of the participants underlined these visits as beneficial hands-on learning experience of broadcasting and looking behind the scenes of radio and television processes. The guided visits to the European Parliament proved to be especially crucial for the mentees' understanding of EU structures and decision-making processes, which was deeply reflected in their final projects. By connecting media literacy with democracy-related topic, the visit provided tangible context of today's media landscape.

Lessons learned: The combination of online lectures with practical implementation and experiential learning is key to ensuring active participant engagement.

4.6 Limitations in programme structure

Despite the overall positive feedback, certain areas for structural improvement became apparent. While individual sessions were perceived as valuable learning, the content did not always build consistently from one session to the next. This can mainly be explained with the large variety of experts and mentors leading a lecture, which occasionally resulted in the repetition of themes and therefore coherence in the learning progress. In contrast, sessions led by the same expert were perceived to be particularly coherent and effective.

Lesson learned: Topic and tool related sessions should be led by the same expert to ensure a structured learning enhancement and avoid repetition and incoherence of themes. A smaller number of experts is therefore advisable.

| 5 Conclusions

With social media platforms becoming the primary news source of young people – alongside an overwhelming rise in the spread of disinformation – and political engagement of young adults increasingly unfolding online it is no longer enough to teach media literacy isolated from civic education. Media literacy and democratic literacy must be addressed and taught together. This becomes even more significant looking at minority groups such as migrant youth, who are often in the centre of online hate while being excluded from formal political participation.

The importance of supporting the target group was addressed in a pilot programme of media and EU mentoring for migrant youth, EU in a Nutshell. This paper demonstrated that structured, expert-led mentoring can empower migrant youth to critically engage in democratic processes via own content creation.

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Participants were not only provided with tools to develop critical thinking skills and navigating through digital information spaces but also gained confidence within their own presence on social media and contributing meaningfully to public discourse. Furthermore, the programme offered space for peer learning and cross-cultural exchange, while learning about EU structures.

Based on the pilot experience, three key areas for improvement were identified:

- Strengthening interaction between mentors and mentees to deepen trust and ensure personalized support.
- Reducing the number of mentors to ensure clearer coordination and consistent content structure.
- Offering more group sessions in Germany and Belgium to strengthen cohesion within the groups and improve learning outcomes.

Additionally, restructuring the programme into fewer but more intensive sessions—such as half-day block seminars—could shorten the overall duration while allowing deeper engagement with key topics and adaptation to participants' schedules.

The EU in a Nutshell pilot project provides a replicable, adjustable framework for equipping marginalized young people with the tools they need to critically navigate and help shape the digital landscape. With its published handbook for youth organisations and taking into account the experiences and opportunities for improvement outlined above, it can serve as a blueprint for inclusive, sustainable democratic education across the EU and particularly for minority groups – so that no young voice goes unheard in the digital age.

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The AI-Terrorism Nexus: AI-Enabled Improvised Drones⁵

By Furkan Akar⁶, Onur Sultan⁷

| 1 Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative technology with the capacity to replicate human cognitive functions such as learning, reasoning, and decision-making. Its subfields—machine learning (ML), natural language processing (NLP), computer vision, and robotics—have driven significant advancements across various industries, enhancing automation, precision, and large-scale data analysis (Maslej et al., 2024). While AI has contributed positively to fields such as healthcare, finance, and logistics, its potential for misuse is increasingly recognized, particularly in the domain of security threats and terrorism. The dual-use nature of AI is a growing concern. While AI-driven technologies can enhance economic growth, scientific discovery, and law enforcement capabilities, they can also be exploited for malicious purposes. AI has been leveraged to enable cyberattacks, autonomous weapons, deepfake propaganda, and illicit surveillance (U.S. Department of State ISAB, 2023). The accessibility of open-source AI models, commercial APIs, and low-cost hardware lowers the barriers for non-state actors, including terrorist organizations, to adopt and integrate these technologies into their operations. As AI continues to evolve, particularly with advancements in generative models, quantum computing, and autonomous systems, the risk of AI misuse by terrorist actors demands urgent attention from policymakers and security experts (Maslej et al., 2024; U.S. Department of State ISAB, 2023).

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Terrorist and violent extremist groups are rapidly adopting unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and incorporating artificial intelligence (AI)-related technologies to enhance their capabilities. Early on, groups like ISIS showed that even off-the-shelf drones could be used for reconnaissance and crude bombings (Warrick, 2017). Today, modern small drones come equipped with elementary AI features (such as vision-based tracking or autopilot), and experts warn that adversaries will exploit more advanced AI as it becomes available (Ware, 2019). A 2024 UN report foresaw terrorists using autonomous vehicles to deliver explosives, swarming drones for “rapid, coordinated attacks”, and AI expanding the pool of actors able to carry out such attacks (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, n.d.). Indeed, the U.S. FBI director in 2018 already called drones an “imminent” terrorist threat to American cities, and the Department of Homeland Security warned that terrorists were applying battlefield drone experience to “new technologies and tactics” (U.S. Senate, 2017). In practice, documented cases over the past 3–5 years show UAVs being adapted for vision-assisted navigation, automated target recognition, and other AI-driven functions by non-state actors. Below, we examine five notable cases highlighting the actors, AI capabilities used, purpose and outcomes, and an assessment of confidence in the reporting. An insight box from practitioners follows, before concluding with overarching trends and remaining gaps in countermeasures.

| 2 Case Study 1: Syrian Rebel “Drone Swarm” on Russian Bases (Jan 2018)

2.1 Actor & Attribution

An unidentified Islamist rebel faction in Syria (likely operating in Idlib/Latakia) was blamed for a coordinated drone attack on Russia’s Khmeimim Air Base and Tartus naval facility on January 5–6, 2018. Russian officials implied the rebels received external technical aid given the drones’ sophistication (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2018), but no definitive state sponsor was confirmed. (Confidence: High – The event is well-documented by Russia’s Ministry of Defense and independent analyses (Waters, 2018), though the exact rebel group remains unverified.)

2.2 AI-Related Tech

Pre-programmed autonomous navigation was a key feature of this attack. The rebels launched a swarm of 13 improvised fixed-wing drones carrying small explosive bomblets (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2018). Each drone was equipped with a GPS-based autopilot; notably, wreckage analysis showed GPS antennae and no onboard cameras (Waters, 2018). This indicates the drones flew a pre-set route to target – a level of automation allowing beyond-line-of-sight strikes without real-time control. They also maintained altitude and levelling via onboard sensors (Ware, 2019). While not “AI” in the machine-learning sense, this demonstrates a primitive autonomous capability (“fire-and-forget” programming). Russian reports stated the drones navigated from about 50–100 km away using satellite guidance (Madrigal, 2018), a range impossible to manage via manual radio control alone.

2.3 Purpose and Tactics

The attack’s goal was to bombard Russian military assets. Photographic evidence shows each drone carried up to 10 small improvised submunitions under its wings (Waters, 2018). The swarm approached the airbase from multiple directions at low altitude, likely to evade radar and overwhelm defences simultaneously. This coordinated autonomous tactic was unprecedented from a non-state group, effectively a rudimentary drone swarm. Russian air defences responded with short-range anti-air missiles and electronic countermeasures – reportedly shooting down 7 drones and hacking control of 6. Russian analysts noted the engineering “could only [have come] from a country possessing high-tech satellite navigation and remote control” support, highlighting the leap in insurgent capability (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2018).

2.4 Outcome & Impact

The drones were neutralized before causing casualties or damage on base (McDermott, 2018). However, the psychological and strategic impact was significant. It was the first known terrorist/insurgent use of a drone swarm in combat, foreshadowing more advanced attacks. The incident forced enhancements in Russian base defences and underscored how readily available components (GPS navigation, hobbyist flight controllers) can be weaponized (Waters, 2018; Ware, 2019). (Confidence in outcome details: High – Russian authorities and media confirmed no damage, and independent investigators like Bellingcat verified the drones’ design and automation features (Waters, 2018).)

| 3 Case Study 2: Attempted Assassination of Venezuela's President (Aug 2018)

3.1 Actor & Attribution

On August 4, 2018, two explosive-laden drones were used in an attempt to kill Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro during a military parade in Caracas (Daniels & Zúñiga, 2018). A little-known group called “Soldiers of Franela” claimed responsibility on social media, saying it flew the drones toward the President’s podium (Soldados de Franelas, 2018). Maduro’s government accused domestic opposition militants (and alleged Colombian backers) of organizing the plot (BBC News Mundo, 2018). Several arrests were made of ex-soldiers and others, though independent verification of the perpetrators is limited. (Confidence: High on occurrence – widely reported by BBC, The Guardian, etc. (Daniels & Zúñiga, 2018). Moderate on actor attribution – the responsible cell’s identity remains somewhat murky beyond their own claim and government allegations.)

3.2 AI-Related Tech

The attackers repurposed commercial DJI drones (hexacopter models) carrying about 1 kg of C4 plastic explosive each (Clarke, 2018). These drones featured built-in flight stabilization and “ActiveTrack” style visual targeting common to DJI platforms – essentially rudimentary AI allowing the drone to lock onto a GPS waypoint or operator-designated target. However, there is no evidence of independent computer vision targeting in this case; the drones were likely flown by human pilots using remote controls, with possibly some onboard autopilot assistance to maintain course/altitude. One drone detonated in mid-air near the parade (injuring 7 National Guard soldiers) and the other crashed after being shot by security forces (Waters, 2018). While the drones did not employ advanced autonomy, the incident underscored how consumer UAVs can be converted into guided kamikaze weapons. The drones in question had programmable flight modes – e.g. waypoints navigation – which the attackers may have used to direct them toward the stage before final manual control. This adaptability is effectively a low-grade AI navigation capability inherent in modern commercial drones.

3.3 Purpose and Tactics

The plot aimed to assassinate a head of state in a public setting – a high-profile terror objective (Cenciotti, 2018). The attackers' tactic was to fly the two drones from different angles toward the President speaking outdoors, hoping at least one would evade security and explode overhead. According to a tweeted manifesto, the plan was to “overfly 2 drones loaded with C4 to the presidential platform”. Presidential guard snipers managed to shoot them down before they reached Maduro (Soldados de Franelas, 2018). The attempt demonstrated a new form of aerial IED: unlike a suicide bomber, the perpetrators could strike from a distance. The drones' built-in GPS stabilization allowed relatively precise positioning of the explosives. One device exploded about 100m away, scattering the crowd and injuring guards (Waters, 2018). The other was neutralized and fell to the ground. The operational impact was thus limited – Maduro was unharmed – but the attack caused panic and showed that non-state actors could directly target high-level officials with drone-borne bombs. This was arguably the first known drone assassination attempt on a head of state, foreshadowing future threats (Clarke, 2018).

3.4 Outcome & Operational Impact

The attempt failed to harm Maduro, but it had significant repercussions. Security forces in Venezuela and globally have since re-evaluated counter-drone measures for VIP protection. The incident “ushered in a foreboding new era – terrorism by unmanned aircraft,” analysts noted (Clarke, 2018). It revealed gaps in existing defenses: the drones got alarmingly close to the President (within tens of meters) before being neutralized. This showcases how difficult drones are to defend against in urban settings, as even a crude attack required quick, lucky interdiction. (Confidence: High – Multiple credible sources (CNN, Guardian, RAND) document the drones, explosives, and injuries (Daniels & Zúñiga, 2018; Clarke, 2018). The exact control method is less documented, but given known DJI capabilities, the described usage is technically plausible.)

| 4 Case Study 3: Houthi Drone Swarm Attack on Saudi Oil Facilities (Sep 2019)

4.1 Actor & Attribution

In September 2019, Yemen's Houthi rebels (Ansar Allah), an Iranian-aligned militant group, launched a coordinated drone and cruise missile attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities. The Houthis publicly claimed responsibility, stating that 10 weaponized UAVs were deployed (Associated Press, 2019). U.S. and Saudi officials, however, assessed that Iran likely supplied the technology or even launched some drones from Iranian or Iraqi territory. Regardless, the operation is attributed to Houthi forces as the non-state actor using the drones (Friedman, 2019). (Confidence: High – The strikes and damage are confirmed by Saudi authorities and international media (Associated Press, 2019). Attribution is moderately disputed (Houthi vs. Iran), but Houthi involvement is credible given their drone program.)

4.2 AI-Related Tech

This attack showcased long-range autonomous navigation and coordinated targeting. The drones (identified later as Iranian-made UAVs in Houthi possession, sometimes called "UAV-X") flew up to 900 km with pre-programmed waypoints to precisely hit the oil processing plants. They likely used advanced onboard guidance: inertial navigation augmented by GPS, and terrain-following algorithms to evade radar – features approaching AI-driven flight. Notably, investigators indicated the Houthi UAV-X had an estimated 1,500 km range and sophisticated guidance systems (Associated Press, 2019). While these drones did not autonomously distinguish targets in real-time (they were pre-set to fixed site coordinates), the precision and semi-autonomy qualify as AI-related (Conflict Armament Research, n.d.). Additionally, the swarm coordination – multiple drones arriving near-simultaneously from different directions – suggests a level of algorithmic timing and possibly communication between the drones or a central controller (though details remain classified). In earlier Houthi attacks, drones were used as loitering munitions to disable Saudi Patriot air defence radar by autonomously homing into the radar signal. That indicates a form of onboard sensor-based target recognition (anti-radiation homing), which is a narrow AI capability. Overall, the 2019 oil attack demonstrated that a non-state group could field semi-autonomous cruise-drones with strategic reach (Voskuil et al., 2020).

4.3 Purpose and Impact

The purpose was a strategic strike to cripple Saudi economic infrastructure – effectively using drones as “smart” cruise missiles. Ten drones (and several missiles) struck the Abqaiq oil processing plant (world’s largest) and Khurais field. The outcome was devastating: up to 5 million barrels per day of Saudi oil output – nearly half the country’s production – was disrupted (Voskuijl et al., 2020). Fires raged at the facilities, though no deaths were reported. The operational impact was global; oil prices briefly spiked and it highlighted the vulnerability of critical infrastructure to drone swarms. Technically, the drones’ success in penetrating hundreds of kilometres into Saudi airspace undetected and hitting precise points on machinery underscores the effectiveness of autonomous flight and targeting in terrorist hands. Saudi and U.S. investigators noted the drones flew at low altitudes and exploit blind spots – tactics enabled by pre-programmed route optimization (an algorithmic function) and possibly real-time terrain sensing. Confidence: High. The scale of damage and details of the drones were extensively analysed by experts and UN panels (United Nations, 2022). While some specifics of the AI tech are inferred (the Houthis/Iran have not publicly disclosed guidance software), the consensus is that advanced navigation tech was used.

4.4 Toolchains or Software

Open-source intelligence suggested the Houthis benefitted from Iranian technology – essentially military-grade drone autopilots likely derived from cruise missile programs. The drones may have used STM32-based flight controllers running autonomous waypoint software, or even Iranian proprietary guidance systems. In concept, this is analogous to a terrorist group using an open-source UAV autopilot like ArduPilot loaded with a target GPS coordinate – except the range and accuracy here were much greater, implying state-of-the-art integration (Orion Policy Institute, 2025). This case thus blurs the line between state-supplied AI weaponry and non-state use; it remains a seminal example of what quasi-autonomous drones can do in asymmetric warfare.

| 5 Case Study 4: Autonomous “Killer Drone” in Libya (Spring 2020)

5.1 Actor & Attribution

In the spring 2020 battles of Libya’s civil war, forces of the U.N.-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) – with Turkish military support – deployed STM Kargu-2 quadcopter drones against fighters of the Libyan National Army (LNA, loyal to Gen. Haftar) (Nasu, 2021). This was noted in a March 2021 UN Panel of Experts report, which implied these Turkish-made drones were used in autonomous mode to hunt retreating LNA personnel (United Nations, 2021). The LNA fighters can be considered violent non-state actors themselves, but in this context, they were the targets; the GNA (a state actor) employed the drones. However, the incident is included here because it marks the first recorded use of an AI-driven lethal autonomous weapon against human targets – a capability that could be acquired by extremists in the near future. (Confidence: High – The UN report explicitly documents the Kargu-2’s deployment. Moderate on casualties – it’s not confirmed if any fighters were killed by the drone autonomously (Nasu, 2021).)

5.2 AI-Related Tech

The Kargu-2 is an advanced loitering munition drone equipped with on-board machine vision algorithms. According to its manufacturer, it uses “machine learning algorithms embedded on the platform” for autonomous operation (STM, n.d.). The Kargu-2 can conduct real-time image processing to classify and track human targets, and then independently engage with an explosive charge. In Libya, Kargu-2 units were reportedly set to a “fire, forget and find” mode – meaning once launched, they required no data link or human input to locate and attack targets. This effectively makes them hunter-killer drones: the AI picks out a human target (e.g. recognizing an enemy combatant by imagery) and detonates near them. The drone is designed as an anti-personnel weapon and can distinguish human shapes; it allegedly can identify uniformed fighters or weapon-carrying individuals via trained object recognition models (Nasu, 2021). In the 2020 incident, a Kargu-2 autonomously targeted a group of Haftar’s soldiers as they fled, according to the UN report’s description (United Nations, 2021). If confirmed, this would be the first AI-driven autonomous attack on people in the field. The Kargu’s autonomy raises legal/ethical issues precisely because its AI must make life-or-death decisions (who is a legitimate target) without human oversight.

5.3 Purpose and Outcome

The immediate purpose for GNA forces was to neutralize enemy combatants with minimal risk to their own side. Strategically, employing an autonomous drone can terrorize opponents – knowing an unerring robot may chase them down. In this case, the Kargu-2 “hunted down” at least one group of LNA fighters who were in retreat, “effectively using its AI to locate and attack” (Nasu, 2021). The UN report did not confirm if the drone caused fatalities, but it strongly implies the drones engaged targets without human permission (United Nations, 2021). The mere deployment had an operational impact: it demonstrated a new capability on the battlefield. One could imagine a scenario where fighters are pinned down by autonomous drones overhead, sowing fear and confusion. For the broader world, this incident was a wake-up call that the “killer robots” debate is no longer theoretical. (Confidence: High on the drone’s capabilities – well documented by the manufacturer and UN (United Nations, 2021; STM, n.d.). Low on exact outcome – media sources speculate one fighter may have been wounded or killed, but official confirmation is absent. Still, the capability was proven in deployment.)

5.4 Toolchains & Software

The Kargu-2’s AI likely uses a trained convolutional neural network for human recognition, running on an onboard processor. This isn’t a jury-rigged terrorist conversion; it’s a military-grade platform. However, it shows what machine-learning target recognition can achieve. A worry is that as such technology proliferates, extremist groups might copy it – for instance, by using open-source image recognition (like YOLO object detection (Diwan et al., 2023)) on hobby drones with attached explosives. The Kargu-2 incident thus provides a blueprint that non-state actors could aspire to if they obtain or imitate such drones.

| 6 Case Study 5: Tech-Adapted Insurgents in West Africa (2020—2023)

Non-state jihadist groups in West Africa – notably Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Lake Chad region and Al-Shabaab in Somalia – have increasingly integrated drones for intelligence and are experimenting with autonomous features. While these cases involve insurgents in active conflicts (and some state support in the shadows), they illustrate the spread of drone/AI know-how to relatively low-resourced actors. (Confidence: High – documented by U.N. counter-terrorism reports (Figueiredo, 2024) and on-the-ground military intelligence. Specific details come from security reports with visual evidence, lending credibility.)

Key developments include:

6.1 ISWAP's "Smart" Mortar Attacks (Nigeria, 2021-22)

ISWAP, a splinter of Boko Haram, has used commercial quadcopter drones for battlefield surveillance and fire support. In early 2022, ISWAP fighters attacked a Nigerian military base, coordinating their mortar fire with a drone's live video feed. The drone enabled real-time adjustment ("spotting") of the mortar aim, dramatically increasing precision and lethality. This essentially is AI-assisted targeting – albeit with humans in the loop – where the drone's camera (possibly aided by object recognition software to spot targets or impact strikes) guided indirect fire onto troops. Such integration was once the purview of advanced state militaries; ISWAP's adeptness shows the diffusion of tactical UAV skills. Outcome: The joint base was hit with accurate mortar bombs; exact casualties unknown, but the defenders were forced to retreat. (Confidence: High – video evidence and a UN Security Council report corroborate this incident.) (Figueiredo, 2024)

6.2 Weaponization Trials – Toward Autonomous Strikes

Both ISWAP and Al-Shabaab have reportedly begun testing drones as attack platforms, not just for reconnaissance. In 2022, security forces intercepted IS manuals on using UAVs for targeted attacks. ISWAP is "assessing payload capacity, endurance and range" of their drones to deliver explosives. Likewise, Al-Shabaab has initiated experimental trials with small quadcopters armed with charges in Somalia. Although as of 2023 neither group is confirmed to have executed a successful armed drone strike, these trials indicate a near-future intent to deploy autonomously guided bombs. One can imagine them using a drone to drop grenades (a tactic already used manually in Syria, Iraq and by other

militants) but eventually automating the release based on visual identification of targets. Outcome: No recorded successful strike yet; however, the capability gap is closing. (Confidence: Moderate – based on confiscated documents and intelligence reports. The information comes from counter-terrorism units and may not reveal full operational status.) (Figueiredo, 2024)

6.3 Open-Source Tools & External Aid

These African insurgents benefit from global jihadist networks. For instance, ISWAP received technical guidance from ISIS central on drone assembly: in one case, they shared a photo of a captured DJI Phantom drone with ISIS experts abroad and got instructions on how to repurpose it. This reflects a knowledge transfer pipeline. Technologically, they rely on readily available tools – e.g., DJI drones (which have autopilot modes and vision sensors), GoPro cameras, maybe even simple object recognition software running on laptops to analyze footage. There is also evidence ISWAP and others are interested in generative AI for propaganda (e.g., deepfake videos), though that's beyond the UAV scope (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, n.d.). The tactical edge they gain is clear: better scouting, psychological impact (knowing the enemy has “eyes in the sky”), and soon, possibly autonomous lethal attacks. Confidence: High on usage of COTS (commercial off-the-shelf) drones for ISR – multiple battlefield reports note sightings of jihadist drones. Moderate on the success of weaponization – it's in progress and likely to yield results in coming engagements, but documentation is partial (Figueiredo, 2024).

Overall, the West Africa cases show violent extremist actors embracing drone tech step-by-step: first for surveillance, then for coordinating attacks, and next for delivering explosives. They may not have full AI autonomy yet, but they are leveraging features like drone vision and autopilots to amplify their operations. This trend is geographically spreading to other conflict zones as well, from Mozambique (where ISIS-linked militants use drones to pick targets in offensives) (Figueiredo, 2024) to Myanmar (where anti-government rebels improvised drone bombers) (Waters, 2022). The barrier to entry for basic drone-based AI (e.g. object following, GPS waypoints) is low, and these groups are proving adept at crossing it.

| 7 Practitioner Insight – Detecting and Defeating AI-Driven Drones

Practitioner perspectives collected for this deliverable help contextualise the case studies discussed in Sections 4.1–4.5. Across law enforcement, intelligence, and defence circles, the message is consistent: AI-assisted drones represent an imminent and evolving threat that adapts faster than traditional defences can keep pace (Ware, 2019). Officials stress that extremist groups learn quickly from each other (Archambault & Veilleux-Lepage, n.d.), and that innovations seen in one theatre—such as the Syrian drone swarms or the Houthis’ use of waypoint navigation against oil infrastructure—are rapidly shared and repeated elsewhere. This accelerates the diffusion of tactics beyond what most counter-UAS systems were originally designed to confront.

“**AI-assisted drones represent an imminent and evolving threat that adapts faster than traditional defences can keep pace.**”

A recurring theme is the difficulty of detection. Small commercial UAVs used in cases such as Venezuela or ISWAP operations are easy to fly but hard to spot. They blend into legitimate drone traffic, fly low, and can follow pre-programmed routes with minimal electronic signature. Several practitioners warned that in an environment where delivery drones become common, it will be almost impossible to discern whether a platform is conducting benign logistics or hostile reconnaissance (Clarke, 2018). Existing radar and airspace monitoring systems were never designed to track dozens of small, slow-moving objects, leaving exploitable blind spots.

When it comes to swarms, the assessment is even starker. The Syrian case showed that even crude, GPS-guided fixed-wing drones can cause disruption when launched in numbers. Practitioners agree that while one or two drones can usually be jammed or intercepted, beyond a certain threshold defence becomes “virtually impossible.” Once dozens of drones are inbound from multiple directions, at least some will break through. This raises the prospect of coordinated mass-casualty attacks that could overwhelm even advanced militaries (Berthier, 2023).

Practitioners also emphasise the AI vs. AI dynamic. Many current terrorist-linked drones, such as those documented in Africa, still rely on GPS or FPV

links and can be neutralised by jamming (Nasu, 2021). However, once groups integrate on-board autonomy—vision-assisted navigation or link-independent autopilot—traditional jamming becomes less effective. This is pushing security services toward “anti-drone AI”: systems that can autonomously detect, track, and intercept rogue UAVs, either with interceptor drones or directed-energy weapons. Law enforcement sources argue that investment in such defences must be accelerated, and that training, doctrine, and legal frameworks need to catch up before—not after—a major AI-augmented drone attack occurs (Clarke, 2018).

Finally, ethical and legal hurdles remain a serious concern. Rules of engagement were built for human-operated threats, not autonomous ones. Practitioners highlight dilemmas such as: if an AI-driven drone is about to strike in an urban area, what use-of-force protocols apply? Initiatives like remote ID for civilian drones may help with baseline control, but terrorists will simply bypass them (Pledger, 2021). International discussions on banning lethal autonomous weapons continue, yet few expect rogue actors to comply. Several security services have therefore begun training against worst-case scenarios, including swarms of semi-autonomous “slaughterbots.” As one police drone commander summarised, “We have to assume it’s a matter of when, not if, we face an AI-augmented drone attack.”

| 8 Conclusion

In reviewing these cases, several clear trends emerge. First, the barrier for extremist groups to obtain drone technology with basic AI capabilities (autopilot, vision tracking) is extremely low and getting lower. ISIS and



The intersection of terrorism and AI-enabled UAVs is no longer theoretical – it’s here.

others proved even hobby drones can be deadly; today’s drones are far more advanced and accessible. Terrorists have shown strong intent and ability to innovate, repurposing new tools in creative ways. This innovative drive, combined with cheap tech, means we are seeing a diffusion of semi-autonomous weapon capacity to non-state actors.

Second, there’s a progression in capability: initial use for ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance), then for simple attacks (manual remote-controlled bombs), now moving into semi- or fully autonomous targeting.

The 2018–2020 period was a turning point – from the swarm in Syria to the AI “hunter-killer” in Libya – showing that what was once the domain of state militaries (swarm coordination, AI vision) is now appearing in asymmetric warfare. The Libyan Kargu-2 episode, albeit by a state-aligned force, demonstrates the arrival of lethal autonomous weapons in conflict. Notably, terrorists have not yet been confirmed to possess a true autonomous killer drone themselves, but they are certainly aspiring to it. For example, the experimentation by ISWAP and Al-Shabaab suggests they aim to weaponize drones in a more automated fashion soon. The 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, where drones were used (manually) to drop bombs on guard posts, is another reminder that tactics spread quickly to any theatre. Future terrorist drone attacks might incorporate AI for facial recognition or target selection – scenarios that were once science fiction (“slaughterbots”) but now technically feasible.

On the defensive side, gaps and challenges are stark. Most critically, counter-UAV measures have struggled to keep pace. Current C-UAS systems can jam or shoot down a lone drone, but are ill-prepared for swarms or autonomous attackers. As cited above, experts concede that a sufficiently large swarm could saturate any existing defence. There is also a detection gap for small drones: many critical sites (power plants, stadiums, etc.) lack dedicated drone radar or sensors. Law enforcement has begun addressing this – for instance, testing acoustic detectors and RF scanners around events – but coverage is far from comprehensive. Terrorists can exploit this by launching from blind spots or programming drones to approach along undefended vectors. Legally and policy-wise, gaps remain in how to manage the proliferation of AI in drones. International law does not yet specifically regulate non-state use of autonomous drones (there are UN debates, but no binding treaties on “killer robots” as of 2025). Domestically, many countries are only now updating laws to empower police and militaries to interdict rogue drones (previously, shooting down a drone might violate civil aviation laws). Information-sharing is another gap – while military intelligence is aware of incidents like those above, the public and even many frontline police units have limited awareness or training regarding drone threats. This could delay response when an attack occurs. Positive steps are underway (e.g., the US and EU developing frameworks for drone detection around airports and major events, and DARPA-like programs exploring AI-driven drone defences), but these are nascent.

In summary, the intersection of terrorism and AI-enabled UAVs is no longer theoretical – it’s here. Cases from the last five years show a trajectory from crude adaptations to genuinely autonomous functions in

violent actors' hands. We observe higher precision, longer range, and greater automation in each successive incident. If current trends continue, the next 3–5 years could see, for example, a lone-wolf terrorist launching a drone that uses facial recognition to find a specific victim, or a swarm of mini-drones programmed to attack a crowd based on predefined criteria. As one analysis noted, “AI will expand the set of actors capable of carrying out attacks...and the set of plausible targets”, removing many former constraints (Ware, 2019).

Key gaps that need addressing include developing reliable drone detection and neutralization systems (especially against swarms or autonomous logic), tightening controls on the export of AI-capable drone tech, and improving international cooperation to track and stop drone component smuggling. There is also a need for robust emergency response plans for drone incidents – including public communication strategies to mitigate the terror effect (the psychological “horror” that ISIS lauded when it first used drones). Right now, terrorists hold a bit of an advantage: as a NATO Joint Air Power study put it, commercial drones are truly becoming “the poor man’s air force,” giving small actors a chance to inflict outsized damage (Berthier, 2023). The global security community is in a race to close this gap. The documented cases in this report serve as both warnings and lessons – illustrating what has happened and what could be around the corner if preparedness does not improve.

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Book Review:

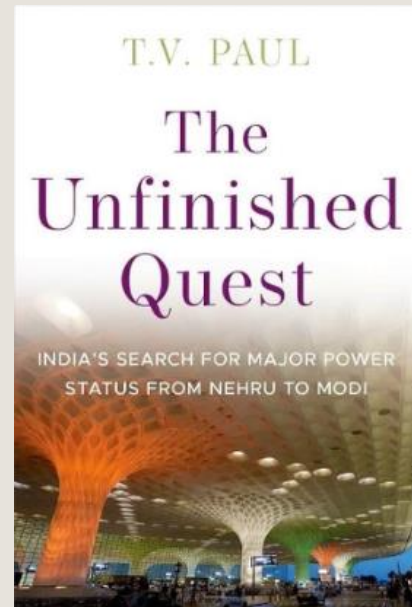
***The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi* by Thazha Varkey Paul**

Oxford University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780197669990.

By Ayhan Eker⁸

In *The Unfinished Quest*, T. V. Paul offers an ambitious and analytically sharp account of India's long pursuit of major power status. Rather than treating Indian foreign policy primarily through the familiar lenses of security, regional rivalry, or great-power alignment, Paul places the idea of international status at the centre of the story. His central claim is that India's external behaviour since independence cannot be understood solely as a search for security or prosperity; it is equally, and often more deeply, a search for recognition. India has sought not merely to become stronger, but to be acknowledged as a leading power, and Paul argues that this aspiration has shaped its diplomacy from Nehru to Modi.

Paul's core intervention is to conceptualize India's rise as an "unfinished" status project. The country, he argues, possesses many of the markers of a major power—demographic scale, civilizational depth, growing economic weight, military capability, and geopolitical centrality in the Indo-Pacific—yet still lacks full institutionalized recognition by its peers. That gap between capability and recognition is the book's animating tension. India has moved from aspirational to rising power, but remains, in Paul's formulation, an "almost great power": close enough to make the claim plausible, but still blocked by both external constraints and domestic shortcomings.



One of the book's greatest strengths is the breadth of its framework. Paul organizes the analysis around hard power, soft power, relations with great

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powers and neighbours, state capacity, and the future of India's status trajectory, giving the study both conceptual coherence and historical sweep. This structure allows him to show that India's quest has never



Recognition is earned through more than scale, sentiment, or strategic flattery from other powers.

depended on one register alone. Nehru initially leaned on diplomacy, anti-colonial solidarity, and moral leadership; later governments turned more explicitly toward nuclear capability, economic reform, and strategic partnerships; and under Modi, status politics became even more visibly entangled with domestic political legitimization.

Paul is persuasive in showing continuity across these shifts: different governments used different instruments, but the underlying desire for elevated international rank persisted.

The book is particularly compelling when it explains India's rivalry with China not just as a border dispute or power competition, but as a struggle over relative status in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Paul argues that Sino-Indian tensions express a deeper conflict over recognition, hierarchy, and legitimacy. China does not treat India as an equal, while Indian elites increasingly insist on parity. That is a strong analytical move, because it clarifies why the rivalry has proven so combustible even when material asymmetries remain large. It also helps explain why India's position as a "swing state" in the Indo-Pacific carries symbolic weight far beyond standard balance-of-power logic.

Even more striking is Paul's refusal to write a triumphalist narrative. The argument of the book is not that India's rise is inevitable, still less that symbolic recognition will arrive simply because India desires it. On the contrary, Paul's most forceful claim is that India's quest has been constrained by failures of internal development. He argues bluntly that the country's weak record in inclusive human development, public goods provision, and social equality has undermined its ability to convert aggregate size into durable status. That point is the book's most important corrective to grandiose rhetoric about India's ascent. Paul insists that major power status in the twenty-first century cannot rest on military ambition and civilizational pride alone; it must also be grounded in state capacity, social development, and a developmental model that others recognize as consequential and credible.

This is where the book is strongest, and also most uncomfortable in a productive way. Paul is unsparing about the gap between India's elite aspirations and its social realities. He points to educational underinvestment, persistent inequality, weak health outcomes, and the limited diffusion of opportunity across caste, class, gender, and regional lines. His argument is not decorative; it cuts directly against the inflated strategic discourse that often surrounds India's emergence. A state that wants major power recognition while neglecting mass human development, Paul suggests, is not merely incomplete but structurally handicapped. That is a serious claim, and it gives the book analytical bite.

The book also contributes to broader international relations theory by foregrounding status as a socio-psychological category rather than a mere byproduct of material growth. Paul defines status as collective international recognition based on valued material and non-material attributes, and he shows how this recognition is mediated through institutions, diplomatic treatment, and peer acknowledgment. That move is valuable because it explains why material growth alone does not settle the question of rank. States can become stronger without being fully accepted, and that mismatch can itself become a source of frustration, competition, and revisionist pressure.

That said, the book is not without weaknesses. At times, Paul's framework risks making "status" do too much explanatory work. The category is illuminating, but it can also become elastic: security competition, domestic legitimation, symbolic politics, institutional exclusion, and civilizational memory are all folded into it. The analysis is at its best when Paul ties status claims to concrete institutional and developmental obstacles; it is less convincing when status begins to look like a master key for nearly every strategic decision. There is a danger here of over-integration: not every Indian foreign policy move is best explained as status-seeking, and at points the concept threatens to blur important distinctions between recognition, power, and prestige.

Some readers may also find that the normative thrust of the book occasionally outpaces its explanatory restraint. Paul is clearly right to argue that inclusive development is essential to India's long-term standing. But the book sometimes slips from analysis into prescription, and the line between diagnosing the causes of India's incomplete rise and advocating a particular developmental path can become thin. That is not a fatal flaw, but it does mean the work is not purely diagnostic. It is also an argument about what India ought to become if it wants the rank it seeks.

Still, these reservations do not diminish the book's significance. *The Unfinished Quest* is a serious, wide-ranging, and conceptually ambitious study that adds real value to debates on India's rise and on status in international politics more broadly. Its most important achievement is that it strips away comforting illusions. Paul does not deny India's remarkable progress, nor does he dismiss its claim to a larger global role. But he does insist that recognition is earned through more than scale, sentiment, or strategic flattery from other powers. That insistence gives the book its force.

In sum, T. V. Paul has written a major contribution to the study of Indian foreign policy and international hierarchy. *The Unfinished Quest* is not a celebration of India's rise, and it is better for that. It is a sober argument that India's ambition is real, its progress substantial, and its limitations severe. Anyone interested in how rising powers seek recognition—and why that recognition so often remains partial—should read it.



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