

# THE LANGUAGE OF UNCERTAINTY: THE ROLE OF THE ACRONYMS VUCA, BANI, TUNA AND RUPT IN DESCRIBING THE CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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*In recent decades, the world has undergone rapid and profound transformations driven by factors such as globalization, technological development, economic and health crises, as well as geopolitical conflicts. To better understand and communicate the complexity of today's global environment, experts in leadership, business, and international relations have turned to the use of conceptual acronyms such as VUCA, BANI, TUNA and RUPT. These frameworks synthesize the dominant features of contemporary reality-volatility, uncertainty, fragility, polarization, systemic tensions-and offer a useful interpretative lens for analyzing the international context. In a constantly changing world, where the boundaries between security and risk are increasingly blurred, these acronyms not only describe the state of the world but also highlight the need for the rapid adaptation of governance, leadership, and global cooperation strategies. This article aims to analyze the meaning and applicability of these concepts in understanding the current geopolitical environment.*

**Key words:** acronym, VUCA, TUNA, BANI, RUPT, geopolitics

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical context of the 21st century is defined by a series of profound, accelerated, and often unexpected transformations that challenge classical models of analysis and forecasting. Phenomena such as asymmetric globalization, the rise of new power centers, hybrid conflicts, climate crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the proliferation of disinformation and new disruptive technologies (artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, biotechnology) shape an international environment marked by instability, ambiguity, and systemic uncertainty. In this context, traditional concepts of order, sovereignty, and security are becoming increasingly difficult to apply unequivocally. Thus, the need for synthetic and dynamic conceptual tools, capable of quickly capturing the changing nature of global realities, has led to the emergence and consolidation of analytical acronyms such as VUCA, BANI, TUNA, and RUPT. In this regard, the acronyms VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity), TUNA (Turbulence, Uncertainty, Novelty, Ambiguity), BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible), and RUPT (Rapid, Unpredictable, Paradoxical, Tangled) have established themselves as essential tools in the analysis of the global environment. These conceptual formulas

facilitate the understanding of rapid changes, systemic instabilities, and emerging phenomena that influence international relations, global security, and governance strategies.

The acronym VUCA, initially introduced in the American military environment after the Cold War and later adopted in leadership and strategic analysis, reflects a world characterized by growing volatility and ambiguity (Chakraborty). TUNA, derived from VUCA, emphasizes novelty and turbulence, focusing on sudden transformations driven by technology, pandemics, or hybrid conflicts. BANI adds a psychosocial perspective, portraying a fragile, anxious, and hard-to-understand world, while RUPT highlights the accelerated pace and paradoxical nature of global events.

The use of these acronyms in current geopolitical analysis is not merely a semantic exercise but a methodological necessity. They provide adaptable interpretive frameworks that are useful in risk assessment, policy formulation, and decision-making in an international environment characterized by systemic uncertainty. Therefore, their role is crucial in understanding and managing the geopolitical challenges of the 21st century, marked by strategic rivalries, climate instability, asymmetric conflicts, and unprecedented technological transformations (Cascio, 2025).

All these acronyms provide useful conceptual frameworks for understanding the current international environment and for supporting decision-making processes under conditions of extreme uncertainty. They are not merely rhetorical formulas but true cognitive matrices that facilitate strategic analysis, risk anticipation, and the formulation of adaptable policies. In a context where the global order is in transition and the rules of the geopolitical game are being rewritten, these tools become essential for both state and non-state actors. Therefore, their study and application in contemporary geopolitical analysis represent a fundamental undertaking for understanding the complexity and dynamism of today's world.

## 2. METODOLOGY

The study *“The Language of Uncertainty: The Role of the Acronyms VUCA, BANI, TUNA and RUPT in Describing the Contemporary Geopolitical Context”* is interdisciplinary in nature, situated at the intersection of international relations, geopolitics, security studies, and discourse analysis (Smith, 2019). The research employs a qualitative analytical-interpretative approach aimed at examining how these acronyms conceptualize uncertainty and complexity within the contemporary

geopolitical environment, as well as their role in shaping analytical discourse on global transformations. The research is predominantly qualitative, complemented by descriptive quantitative elements. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth investigation of the meanings and interpretations associated with the acronyms VUCA, BANI, TUNA, and RUPT in the specialized literature and in contemporary geopolitical analysis (Matejova & Shesterinina, 2023). At the same time, quantitative elements are used to highlight the frequency and contextual usage of these concepts across different types of academic and analytical sources.

To conduct this research, a set of methodological tools was employed. The methods of analysis and deduction facilitated a documentary analysis and a review of the relevant scholarly literature. The use of these methods enabled the examination of academic publications, articles published in journals of international relations and geopolitics, reports produced by international organizations, as well as analyses developed by research institutes and think tanks specializing in strategic studies (Gray, 2004). The literature review aims to identify the origin and conceptual evolution of the acronyms VUCA, BANI, TUNA, and RUPT, as well as the domains in which they are used to explain the dynamics of the global environment (O'Malley, 2019).

The comparative method enabled a systematic examination of the four conceptual models-VUCA, BANI, TUNA, and RUPT-through a comparison of their defining components and the ways in which each framework describes the characteristics of the contemporary global environment. The comparative analysis sought to identify conceptual differences among these models, as well as potential complementary elements that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of geopolitical uncertainty.

With regard to the limitations of the study, these are primarily related to the relatively recent emergence of the analyzed concepts, particularly BANI, TUNA, and RUPT, which results in a more limited number of established academic sources. In addition, the use of these acronyms may vary depending on the disciplinary field or the analytical context in which they are applied. Given the fact that the scientific literature still lacks comprehensive studies dedicated specifically to the conceptual analysis of VUCA, BANI, TUNA, and RUPT, the webographic method was also employed. This approach enabled the examination of the subject both theoretically and practically through the use of sources available on relevant online platforms, contributing to a broader and more up-to-date understanding of the issue under investigation.

By combining qualitative and comparative methods, this research seeks to provide a coherent analysis of how these concepts contribute to describing and interpreting uncertainty and complexity within the contemporary geopolitical environment (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). In this way, the adopted methodology highlights the role of conceptual language in structuring the discourse on transformations within the international system and on the challenges faced by global actors in the current global context.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In the context of today's geopolitical climate, marked by conventional and hybrid armed conflicts, climate crises, digital transformations, and the reconfiguration of international alliances, the need arises for flexible, synthetic, and adaptable analytical tools, where uncertainty and change are the norms rather than exceptions. In this regard, the analysis of the acronyms VUCA, BANI, TUNA, and RUPT has established itself as a useful conceptual benchmark, providing a grammar of uncertainty and a cognitive framework for understanding the increasingly unpredictable international environment. Thus, the acronyms VUCA, BANI, TUNA, and RUPT offer not only a symbolic vocabulary but also a theoretical framework

suited to the new realities of the international arena.

Thus, for a better understanding of new phenomena, it becomes necessary to analyze the meaning of each of these acronyms. In this context, the acronym VUCA—derived from English: *volatility*, *uncertainty*, *complexity*, and *ambiguity*—emerges more prominently as a tool for assessing the current international environment. The notion of VUCA was initially formulated in the American military sphere to describe the new strategic conditions of the post–Cold War era, capturing the global landscape that followed the Cold War, one characterized by increasing multilateralism, instability, unpredictability, intricate interdependencies, and ambiguous dynamics (Chakraborty).

Coined in the late 1990s, the acronym gained broader visibility after the September 11, 2001 attacks, and was subsequently transferred from military vocabulary into business and organizational management. Today, the concept has been taken up and applied in various fields of strategic analysis, including political science and international relations studies, providing an explanatory framework for the instability of the contemporary international system (Kok, Van den Heuvel; 2019).

The defining dimensions of the VUCA paradigm are:

**Volatility** expresses the pace and magnitude of changes, often sudden, in international structures and relations. Volatility manifests itself through rapid and unpredictable shifts in international structures and relationships. In a world characterized by volatility, global events such as armed conflicts, economic crises, and pandemics can produce major fluctuations in the balance of power. A relevant example of volatility is the fluctuation in oil prices, often triggered by geopolitical instability, as seen in the aftermath of conflicts in the Middle East and trade wars. The COVID-19 pandemic was another manifestation of volatility, with profound economic and social impacts. It led to massive business closures, rapid changes in public policies, and a chaotic, uncoordinated global response to a previously unknown public health threat. The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022 represents yet another example of major volatility, fundamentally altering global politics, prompting economic sanctions, and generating strategic realignments. These unpredictable shifts affected not only regional security but also the stability of global financial markets and reshaped international political alignments. In this context, volatility becomes a significant challenge for states that must navigate through economic and political uncertainties (Chiratcu, 2020)

**Uncertainty** reflects the difficulty of anticipating global developments, the lack of clear information, and the absence of easily predictable trends (Bennett, Lemoine 2014). In the context of international relations, uncertainty can seriously affect the decision-making process, generating a climate of insecurity that may hinder coordinated actions between states. A significant example is the relationship between the United States and China, which continues to be marked by uncertainty due to trade tensions, the dispute over Taiwan's status, and technological competition. In this context, trade conflicts and rivalries for technological dominance have created a climate of uncertainty with the potential to destabilize global economic and political relations. NATO's enlargement has also brought a significant degree of uncertainty, especially following the accession of Finland and Sweden in 2023 and 2024. Although these countries applied for membership, the reactions of certain member states, such as Turkey, have raised questions regarding the future of NATO's expansion and the stability of the alliance.

**Complexity** in the field of international relations refers to the multiple interdependencies and the growing number of actors involved, each with their own interests and distinct influences on global events (Raja, 2021). This makes the analysis

and resolution of international issues a major challenge. The global energy crisis, caused by the war in Ukraine and the economic sanctions imposed on Russia, is a clear example of complexity, with major implications for energy prices, national economies, and global energy security. Climate change and environmental protection are also complex domains where economic, energy, and environmental interests must be balanced. International negotiations on climate change, exemplified by the Paris Agreement, illustrate the complexity of this issue. Different states have varying priorities and capacities to contribute to addressing the climate crisis, which complicates the negotiation process due to diverging interests. Moreover, non-state behaviors such as cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns have added another layer of complexity to international relations. Cyberattacks like those orchestrated by Russia in Ukraine or by China in the Pacific region are clear examples of geopolitical and strategic complexity (Krawczyńska-Zaucha).

**Ambiguity** refers to the ambivalence of norms and symbols used in international discourse, the lack of consensus in defining key concepts (such as security, sovereignty, humanitarian intervention), and the difficulty of clearly interpreting the geopolitical intentions of global actors (Kirk).

For example, strategic alliances such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are difficult to classify – are they economic, political, or even strategic? Conflicts in the Middle East, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, have complex historical, religious, and geopolitical roots, and their resolution seems impossible due to this ambiguity. Similarly, the issue of Taiwan’s status remains a subject of intense geopolitical ambiguity, as China considers it part of its territory, while the United States and its allies indirectly support its independence. In addition, cyber threats such as ransomware attacks or global disinformation campaigns introduce another layer of ambiguity, since there is no international consensus on identifying attackers or combating them. Likewise, the use of artificial intelligence and autonomous drones in modern warfare raises ethical and legal questions, given the absence of an international framework for their regulation.

Thus, VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) describes global socioeconomic conditions as being characterized by instability, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Each of these features of a changing world can, on its own, significantly affect various aspects of successful organizational leadership, including management, forecasting,

and planning (Zamani, Ait, 20220).

Analyzing the VUCA concept, it is worth noting that former U.S. Army Chief of Staff, General George W. Casey Jr., was an active promoter of this idea. After his retirement in 2011, he began teaching courses on leadership in VUCA environments at Cornell University. Speaking at the National Press Club in Washington in 2018, he characterized his time in Iraq as a kind of “leadership laboratory” within a VUCA context. In his speeches, General Casey emphasizes that effective leaders must develop vision, courage, and character to navigate a VUCA environment. He provides examples from his experience in Iraq, highlighting how he managed volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity in conflict situations ( Leading in a VUCA). George W. Casey Jr. has also published articles such as “Leading in a VUCA World” in *Fortune* magazine, where he highlighted the lessons learned from leadership in Iraq and their relevance for strategic leadership. In addition, Casey developed an online course entitled “Leading in a VUCA World: Developing and Communicating Vision and Strategy”, in which he provides insights into how leaders can identify and mitigate the impact of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity within their organizations (Salun, Zaslavska, 2024).

Another concept similar to VUCA, used to describe the instability present on the international stage, is BANI. The acronym BANI (*Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible*) was proposed by the American anthropologist and futurist Jamais Cascio in 2020, as an evolution of the VUCA model (Tshetshe, 2025). Cascio introduced this concept to more accurately describe the challenges we face today, portraying the modern world as brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible. Jamais Cascio has developed several works on the future of human evolution, education in the information age, and emerging technologies (Grabmeier, 2020). If J. Cascio claims authorship of the BANI acronym, the German scholar S. Grabmeier, author of “Impact Business Design,” popularized the concept in 2020. This concept was triggered by the various crises facing our world, such as climate, pandemic, inequality, and global instability, among others. Thus, analyzing the impact of these phenomena on international relations, Grabmeier argued that existing concepts, such as VUCA, were no longer adequate for characterizing a constantly changing world. According to Grabmeier’s view, there was a need for a new concept, namely BANI. Represented by its acronym, BANI encompasses the defining features

of our contemporary world and constitutes the logical continuation of VUCA. It serves as a conceptual tool for articulating the unique characteristics of our modern environment, taking into account its complexities, uncertainties, and rapid transformations (Grabmeier, 2020). This framework was specifically developed to capture and address the defining characteristics of our contemporary world. It provides a structured approach for understanding the complexities arising from the mix of complexity, uncertainty, rapid change, and ambiguity. By breaking the framework down into its four constituent elements, it offers a detailed understanding of how these challenges manifest. BANI can be seen as an adjustment or a reality check, designed to dispel four illusions in humanity’s current perceptions of the world. We live in an age of chaos, an era that intensely, almost violently, rejects structure. This is not mere instability, but a reality that seems to actively resist efforts to comprehend what is happening on the international stage. The BANI model, Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible, helps describe scenarios that are now more frequent, where the notions of volatility or complexity alone cannot explain unfolding realities. Such contexts go beyond mere instability, displaying chaotic

features with consequences that are not simply difficult to forecast but often impossible to anticipate. Thus, BANI provides a way to better frame the current state of the world and respond to it. Some of the changes we see in our politics, environment, society, and technologies are familiar, stressful in their own way, perhaps, but of a kind we have seen before and with which we have dealt (Cascio, 2025).

The definition of BANI, represented by its acronym, encompasses the essential characteristics of our contemporary world (Salun, Zaslavska, 2024).

*B (Brittle)*. Modern systems and organizations often prove fragile, highly vulnerable to sudden disruptions such as crises or disasters. Stability today does not guarantee stability tomorrow, since a single shock can overturn established patterns. Businesses, in particular, struggle to maintain operations and manage people effectively in this fragile climate, where constant change amplifies their difficulties.

*A (Anxious)*. Anxiety has become a defining feature of contemporary life, and it also shapes professional environments. This heightened sense of unease produces urgency and insecurity that can undermine both personal judgment and institutional choices. Leaders are therefore tasked with fostering a supportive

environment that reduces stress and strengthens confidence, enabling individuals to stay engaged and productive.

*N (Nonlinear)*. Current events frequently unfold in disproportionate and unpredictable ways. This lack of clear cause-and-effect relationships complicates organizational planning and decision-making. While setting measurable goals remains essential, equal emphasis must be placed on monitoring outcomes and adjusting strategies as circumstances evolve. Resilience today depends more on adaptability and flexibility than on rigid planning.

*I (Incomprehensible)*. As global events often defy logic and coherence, individuals and institutions increasingly confront situations that resist straightforward explanation. This produces feelings of uncertainty and limited control, highlighting the insufficiency of existing knowledge to account for every phenomenon. In practice, decisions must rely not only on available evidence but also on intuition and judgment, yet even well-informed choices always carry inherent risks (Grabmeier).

In analyzing the role of acronyms such as VUCA, BANI, and RUPT in describing the contemporary geopolitical context, attention should also be paid to the acronym TUNA, which is sometimes used instead of VUCA to characterize today's

world. TUNA was introduced by Professor Rafael Ramirez and Dr. Angela Wilkinson within the *Oxford Scenarios Programme (OSP)*, an executive education initiative of the University of Oxford. Although more recent, TUNA complements and extends the VUCA paradigm. Designed to reflect the digital era, this acronym emphasizes:

- a) **T (Turbulence)** – the frequency and impact of sudden crises (e.g., Russia’s invasion of Ukraine);
- b) **U (Uncertainty)** – the absence of precedent and predictability;
- c) **N (Novelty)** – disruptive innovation and new threats (cyberwarfare, deepfakes, AI);
- d) **A (Ambiguity)** – the multiple meanings of international events or policies (Ramirez, Wilkinson).

In today’s world, the concept of the TUNA environment highlights the importance of adaptability and flexibility in navigating our complex surroundings. The framework has been adopted in both business and academic contexts to describe the intricacy of the current environment. For example, in his article “*Radical Leadership in Radical Times*,” Georgiy Michailov discusses the transition from VUCA to TUNA and examines how leaders can operate effectively under these conditions (Michailov).

Over the years, various terms such as dynamic, fast, disruptive, turbulent, dangerous, and unpredictable have been employed to describe the difficulties we face in understanding and managing today’s world. Another acronym related to uncertainty and change, but open to multiple interpretations, is RUPT. The acronym RUPT was introduced by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) to describe the challenges leaders face in the current environment, characterized by:

- a) **R (Rapid)** – the acceleration of decisions and crises;
- b) **U (Unpredictable)** – the random nature of many geopolitical events;
- c) **P (Paradoxical)** – the coexistence of opposing trends (e.g., isolationism and globalization);
- d) **T (Tangled)** – networks of interdependence that are nearly impossible to decouple (energy, security, climate).

In the modern global landscape, the term “RUPT world” refers to an environment in which change is a constant and essential feature of the surrounding context. This change is driven by factors such as rapid progress and unpredictable external influences.

For a better understanding of the meanings of the concepts **VUCA, BANI, TUNA, and RUPT**, we will schematically present the main

characteristics of each model and how they describe the contemporary environment, marked by rapid changes, uncertainty, and global interconnectedness. These concepts are frequently used in fields such as management, economics, education, and strategic environment analysis, as they provide useful theoretical frameworks for understanding the complexity of the modern world. Therefore, a comparative analysis of these four models offers a clearer perspective on how the challenges of today’s global environment can be understood and managed. The comparative table presented summarizes the main differences and similarities between these concepts.

**4. CONCLUSIONS**

The analysis of the acronyms VUCA, TUNA, BANI, and RUPT highlights the complexity, instability, and unprecedented challenges of the contemporary world. Each of these concepts provides a distinct lens through which the current geopolitical environment can be understood – from the volatility and uncertainty characteristic of the post-Cold War era, to emotional fragility, social polarization, and accelerated technological transformations. The world we live in can no longer be approached with rigid solutions or unilateral perspectives; it requires constant adaptability, systemic thinking, and empathetic, anticipatory

**Table 1** Differences and similarities between concepts

Model	Meaning of the Acronym	Main Characteristics	What It Describes	Examples of Situations	Skills Needed to Cope
VUCA	Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity	Rapid changes, lack of clear information, complicated systems	The unstable modern world of economics and geopolitics	economic crises, sudden political changes	adaptive leadership, strategic planning, analytical thinking
BANI	Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible	Systems break easily, people feel stress and anxiety, effects are unpredictable	The hyperconnected digital world	technological breakdowns, viral spread of information	resilience, empathy, flexibility, systems thinking
TUNA	Turbulent, Uncertain, Novel, Ambiguous	Constant change and appearance of completely new situations	Innovative and fast-evolving environments	emergence of AI, disruptive technologies	creativity, continuous learning, rapid adaptation
RUPT	Rapid, Unpredictable, Paradoxical, Tangled	Very fast change, contradictions, interconnected problems	The current world with multiple overlapping crises	pandemics, energy crises, geopolitical conflicts	critical thinking, collaboration, fast decision-making

**Source:** Based on research conducted by the authors

leadership. The discussed acronyms are not merely descriptive tools but also warning signals regarding the need to reconceptualize geopolitical, economic, and social strategies. In conclusion, understanding these conceptual frameworks represents an essential step for effectively navigating an uncertain present and an unpredictable future.

Each acronym captures a distinct facet of today's environment: from the volatility and complexity highlighted by VUCA, to the anxiety and nonlinearity described by BANI, to the paradoxical and unpredictable nature of RUPT, and the innovative and turbulent character of TUNA. The complementarity of these frameworks provides a solid foundation for developing flexible strategic thinking, capable of responding effectively to emerging challenges. All these conceptual frameworks are not exclusive but complementary. They offer distinct yet convergent perspectives on a world in continuous transformation.

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