

Decoupling Deliberate Strategy from Emergent Adaptation: A Reconceptualization of Dynamic Capability Orchestration Under Polycrisis Conditions

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Abstract. Contemporary strategic management theory has long operated under the assumption that deliberate planning and emergent adaptation constitute a productive tension within organizational design. This article critically re-examines that premise by analyzing dynamic capability orchestration across 214 multinational enterprises operating under compounded macroeconomic and geopolitical disruptions between 2020 and 2024. Employing a mixed-methods design combining structural equation modeling with longitudinal case analysis, we demonstrate that under polycrisis conditions, the deliberate–emergent dichotomy systematically undermines resource reconfiguration efficiency. Our findings reveal that firms achieving superior resilience-adjusted performance indices adopted a third strategic mode—catalytic repositioning—that transcends conventional ambidexterity frameworks. Theoretical contributions include a revised microfoundational taxonomy of managerial cognition and a recalibrated orchestration model applicable to volatile, uncertainty-dominant competitive landscapes.

Keywords: dynamic capabilities, polycrisis strategic management, deliberate versus emergent strategy, resource orchestration, catalytic repositioning, organizational resilience, ambidexterity theory, microfoundations of strategy, multinational enterprise adaptation

Introduction

The foundational architecture of strategic management scholarship rests substantially upon the deliberate–emergent dichotomy first systematized by Mintzberg and Waters (1985), subsequently elaborated through the resource-based view, and most recently extended by dynamic capabilities theory (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). For nearly four decades, this conceptual scaffolding has shaped how scholars and practitioners alike understand the relationship between top-management intent and the adaptive behavior of organizations operating within competitive environments. Yet the macroeconomic and geopolitical turbulence that has defined the period from 2020 to the present—encompassing the COVID-19 pandemic, global supply chain fragmentation, accelerating climate-related disruptions, and the resurgence of interstate conflict—has exposed critical inadequacies in frameworks predicated on conditions of bounded uncertainty and relative market stability. The concept of polycrisis, formalized in systemic risk literature and increasingly adopted within international political economy, describes the simultaneous occurrence of multiple interdependent crises whose aggregate impact substantially exceeds the sum of their individual components (Lawrence et al., 2022; Tooze, 2022). For strategic management, polycrisis constitutes more than an environmental severity variable; it represents a qualitative shift in the ontological conditions under which strategy formation and execution occur. In such environments, the deliberate planning cycle—characterized by formal goal articulation, resource allocation routines, and performance benchmarking—loses its predictive and coordinative authority. Concurrently, purely emergent adaptation, while organizationally agile, fails to generate the coherent identity signals necessary for stakeholder alignment and sustained competitive positioning. This theoretical rupture demands a systematic reconceptualization of dynamic capability orchestration. Existing ambidexterity models, including structural, contextual, and sequential variants, provide partial responses but retain an implicit commitment to the deliberate–emergent polarity as an organizing principle (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013; Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). We argue that this commitment constitutes an epistemological constraint that limits both theoretical development and managerial prescription. Drawing upon microfoundational perspectives on managerial cognition (Felin & Foss, 2005; Teece, 2012) and on empirical evidence from 214 multinational enterprises across six high-volatility industry sectors, this paper introduces the construct of catalytic repositioning—a strategic mode characterized by iterative coherence-building through distributed sensing, cross-functional recombination, and stakeholder-mediated legitimacy recalibration. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical lineage of deliberate and emergent strategy models and identifies their microfoundational limitations under polycrisis conditions. Section 3 presents our research design, detailing the mixed-

methods architecture, sampling criteria, and analytical procedures. Section 4 reports structural equation modeling results alongside longitudinal case evidence from focal enterprises in the pharmaceutical, semiconductor, and financial services sectors. Section 5 develops the catalytic repositioning construct and positions it within a revised orchestration taxonomy. Section 6 discusses implications for both strategic management theory and executive decision-making practice, with attention to governance structures and board-level cognition. Section 7 concludes with limitations and a future research agenda targeting institutional-level moderators of polycrisis response capacity.

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