



## BEYOND COOPETITION: STRATEGIC CHOICES IN THE POST-COOPETITION PHASE

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### Abstract

*This paper provides a comprehensive theoretical review of the coopetition paradigm and explores the strategic trajectories that unfold once cooperative engagements reach their maturity or dissolution phase. Building upon the seminal frameworks of Lado et al. (1997), Bengtsson & Kock (2000), and Gnyawali & Park (2009; 2011), we critically examine the mechanisms that enable firms to simultaneously cooperate and compete, and the paradoxes that structure these relationships. We then propose five theoretical scenarios representing possible strategic pathways in the post-coopetition phase. These scenarios are conceptualized as relational transitions shaped by institutional change, learning capabilities, and dynamic capabilities. This study contributes to the theoretical expansion of coopetition research by positioning the post-coopetition phase as a distinct analytical stage within the inter-organizational lifecycle.*

*Keywords: Coopetition, strategic alliances, post-coopetition, paradox theory, inter-organizational strategy*

## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected and volatile global environment, firms are compelled to seek new strategic postures that transcend traditional dichotomies of competition and cooperation. The phenomenon of coopetition, defined as the simultaneous pursuit of cooperative and competitive interactions between rival firms, has gained substantial attention in the fields of strategic management, innovation studies, and organizational theory. Initially developed in the 1990s through the foundational work of Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996), the concept has since been applied across various sectors, including technology, healthcare, manufacturing, and defence, highlighting its versatility as a relational strategy.

### Research Context

The theoretical evolution of coopetition reflects a paradigm shift in how firms navigate complex interdependencies, access external resources, and manage innovation under conditions of uncertainty. Rather than viewing cooperation and competition as mutually exclusive logics, recent studies emphasize the paradoxical nature of inter-firm relations (Chen, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2011). As a result, coopetition is now recognized not only as a strategic response to environmental complexity, but also as a source of both value creation and organizational tension.

However, while a rich body of literature has explored the antecedents, mechanisms, and internal dynamics of coopetition, much less attention has been paid to what happens *after* coopetition. The aftermath of cooperative engagements—whether they dissolve, evolve, or deepen—remains an under-explored domain, leaving critical gaps in both theoretical understanding and managerial guidance.

### Problem Statement

Existing models of coopetition, such as those proposed by Lado et al. (1997), Bengtsson and Kock (2000), and Gnyawali and Park (2009; 2011), have significantly advanced our understanding of how and why coopetition emerges. Yet, these models often assume coopetition as a static or bounded phenomenon, with limited conceptual tools to explain its transformation over time or its strategic aftermath. In the absence of robust theorization on the post-coopetition phase, managers are left without frameworks to navigate critical decisions such as re-engagement, disengagement, escalation, or transformation of these complex relationships.

## Research Question

This article addresses the following core research question: What are the strategic trajectories that may emerge after coopetition, and how can existing theoretical models inform our understanding of these post-coopetitive scenarios?

## Objectives of the study

To respond to this question, the present article has three primary objectives:

1. To synthesize the foundational and contemporary literature on coopetition, including its definitions, characteristics, and main theoretical models.
2. To identify and articulate the strategic possibilities and pathways that organizations may pursue once a coopetitive engagement concludes or transforms.
3. To propose an integrative framework for theorizing post-coopetition scenarios, drawing on multi-level and paradox-based perspectives.

## Purpose and contribution

From a theoretical standpoint, this literature review contributes to the expansion of coopetition theory beyond its current scope by conceptualizing the *post-coopetition phase* as a meaningful and analytically rich domain. By reframing coopetition as part of a broader relational lifecycle, this study seeks to bridge a critical gap in the literature.

From a managerial perspective, the article offers strategic insight for firms engaged in or exiting coopetitive relationships. It helps decision-makers anticipate and plan for relational transitions, manage tensions, and leverage past engagements for future advantage.

In sum, this work lays the groundwork for a more processual, dynamic, and future-oriented approach to coopetition, one that recognizes not only the simultaneous logics of competition and cooperation but also the strategic choices and organizational learning that emerge *after* coopetition.

## THE DEFINITION OF COOPETITION

The term "coopetition" was popularized by Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996), who defined it as a strategic behavior whereby firms cooperate and compete simultaneously within the same value network. This paradoxical interaction challenges the conventional view of firm relationships as either cooperative or competitive, proposing instead a dual structure of interaction.

Later refinements of the concept provided more precise definitions. Bengtsson and Kock (2000) defined coopetition as a dyadic and paradoxical relationship where two firms cooperate

in some activities and compete in others. This view introduces key dimensions such as the level of interaction (dyadic or network), the nature of the relationship (horizontal or vertical), and the division of cooperative and competitive behaviors across different activities rather than products or markets.

By 2014, Bengtsson and Kock extended their definition to cover multilateral and multidimensional relationships, recognizing the diversity of actors and contexts involved in modern coopetition. The field has also been enriched by contributions from Gnyawali and Park (2011), who emphasized the simultaneous value creation and value appropriation efforts embedded in coopetitive strategies.

## **THE CHARACTERISTICS OF COOPETITION STRATEGY**

### **A dual strategic logic**

Coopetition inherently involves a simultaneous pursuit of cooperation and competition. This duality is rooted in contradictory logics: competition aims for self-maximization (neoclassical economics), while cooperation seeks joint value creation (organizational sociology). This dichotomy gives coopetition its paradoxical nature, as highlighted by Chen (2008) and Czakon et al. (2020).

### **Paradoxical and complex interaction**

The paradoxical dimension makes coopetition counterintuitive and difficult to manage. As Cameron and Quinn (1988) suggest, paradoxes involve simultaneous contradictions that cannot be easily resolved. Coopetition creates tensions that are structural (embedded in the relationship) and dynamic (evolving over time), often across organizational levels—inter-organizational (De Rond & Bouchikhi, 2004), intra-organizational (Luo et al., 2006), and inter-individual (Tsai, 2002).

### **A Source of strategic value**

Coopetition enables organizations to leverage complementary resources and shared capabilities, thus facilitating innovation, market expansion, and cost reduction. Several empirical studies confirm the positive impact of coopetition on firm performance (Ritala, 2012; Czakon, 2009; Mariani, 2007). However, the same structure that creates value also generates risks - opportunism, knowledge leakage, and misaligned goals (Walley, 2007; Fernandez et al., 2014, 2018).

## THEORETICAL MODELS OF COOPETITION

### The syncretic model (Lado et al., 1997)

This model integrates competitive and cooperative orientations into a strategic behavior matrix. The key idea is that firms can pursue "syncretic rent-seeking" by combining high levels of both competition and cooperation. Firms that do so are theorized to achieve superior long-term performance.

Strengths:

- Offers a behavioral typology of firm strategies.
- Explains coopetition as an intentional strategic orientation.

Limitations:

- Focuses primarily on firm-level strategy, neglecting network and individual-level drivers.
- Lacks dynamic or processual elements (i.e., how firms move between strategic states).
- Overlooks interpersonal and cognitive dimensions.

### The network model (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000)

This model emphasizes the structural conditions for coopetition, especially resource dependencies and positional strength within the industry. The authors identify four interaction types: competition, cooperation, coexistence, and coopetition, depending on the firm's market position and need for external resources.

Strengths:

- Introduces the idea of coopetition as network positioning.
- Recognizes coopetition as an emergent rather than designed phenomenon.

Limitations:

- Lacks a dynamic framework for understanding transitions over time.
- Treats relationships as dyadic, ignoring the complexity of ecosystems and multilateral arrangements.
- Underplays the role of cognition, trust, and interpersonal relationships.

### The integrative model (Gnyawali & Park, 2009, 2011)

This multi-level model proposes that coopetition is shaped by:

- Industry-level factors: product lifecycle, R&D intensity.
- Dyadic-level factors: strategic alignment and technological complementarity.
- Firm-level factors: strategic proactivity and perceived vulnerability.

Strengths:

- Recognizes the multilevel and dynamic nature of coopetition.
- Considers strategic intent and inter-firm trust as important variables.
- Applicable to SMEs and high-tech sectors.

Limitations:

- Tailored mainly for SMEs; less attention to large firms or public actors.
- Still underdeveloped in theorizing what happens after coopetition ends

## **STRATEGIC POSSIBILITIES AFTER COOPETITION**

The post-coopetition phase marks a moment of strategic reconfiguration where relational, cognitive, and institutional dynamics are renegotiated. Contrary to the traditional view of coopetition as a discrete episode, this stage should be viewed as a *continuum of strategic transformation*, where firms reassess past engagements, adapt learned capabilities, and redefine their position within broader ecosystems.

This phase embodies three intertwined processes: relational learning, strategic repositioning, and institutional adaptation.

We identify five archetypal trajectories, each grounded in distinct theoretical logics and offering implications for both strategy and governance.

### **Scenario 1: Recursive Coopetition (re-engagement under new conditions)**

Firms re-enter a coopetitive relationship after a phase of disengagement, typically triggered by environmental change (e.g., technological disruption, regulatory shifts) or strategic realignment. Theoretical anchor: *Dynamic paradox management* (Smith & Lewis, 2011) and *temporal ambidexterity* (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

Strategic implications:

- Re-engagement requires institutional memory and trust reconstruction mechanisms.
- Firms can design “coopetition protocols” (formal rules of engagement) to mitigate opportunism.
- Learning from prior episodes allows higher-level routines for tension management (Ben Amara & Bahri, 2024).

### **Scenario 2: Competitive dominance and strategic defection**

One partner capitalizes on coopetition to internalize key resources or capabilities and then withdraws from collaboration to consolidate competitive advantage. Theoretical anchor:

Resource-based view (Barney, 1991) and *game-theoretic defection logic* (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996).

Strategic implications:

- This trajectory highlights the thin boundary between *coopetitive learning* and *knowledge appropriation*.
- Firms should integrate governance safeguards (joint IP management, non-disclosure clauses, symmetrical monitoring) to preserve fairness.
- Post-defection, relational damage can trigger network-level ripple effects, affecting reputation and future partnerships.

### **Scenario 3: Strategic neutralization**

Some coopetitive relationships fade naturally when strategic interdependence diminishes. This occurs when environmental or organizational shifts reduce the relational value of cooperation. Theoretical anchor: Network redundancy (Burt, 1992) and *temporal fit theory* (George & Jones, 2000).

Strategic implications:

- Firms must develop *relational sensing* capabilities to detect diminishing returns in competition.
- Strategic disengagement should be planned to minimize sunk costs and preserve learning outcomes.
- Neutral exits maintain reputational capital and allow future relational options.

### **Scenario 4: Institutionalization of coopetition as a dynamic capability**

In mature ecosystems (e.g., platforms, innovation clusters), coopetition becomes an institutionalized practice rather than an exceptional event. Firms develop internal processes and cognitive frames to *routinize paradoxical management*. Theoretical anchor: Dynamic capabilities theory (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997); paradox theory (Schad et al., 2016).

Strategic implications:

- Managing coopetition transforms into a meta-capability integrating absorptive capacity, ambidexterity, and paradoxical thinking.
- Firms cultivate “coopetition managers” who orchestrate relationships at multiple levels (intra-firm, inter-firm, ecosystem).
- This trajectory reflects an evolutionary learning path, where paradox handling becomes part of organizational DNA.

### **Scenario 5: Post-coopetition collaboration beyond rivalry**

In this transformative trajectory, firms evolve from a coopetitive stance to a purely cooperative partnership, often by exiting overlapping markets or reorienting joint activities to unrelated domains. Theoretical anchor: Strategic repositioning (Porter, 1985), relational embeddedness (Uzzi, 1997), and *co-evolution theory* (Lewin & Volberda, 1999).

Strategic implications:

- The accumulated trust and relational capital are redeployed in new ventures or domains.
- Such transitions can result in hybrid organizational forms (joint ventures, consortia, meta-organizations).
- This path demonstrates how relational learning during coopetition can fuel long-term cooperative evolution.

### **TOWARD A PROCESSUAL MODEL OF POST-COOPETITION EVOLUTION**

We propose a three-stage processual model capturing how coopetition transitions into post-coopetition configurations:

1. Resolution Phase: Firms address accumulated tensions and reassess mutual benefits (drawing from paradox resolution literature).
2. Reconfiguration Phase: Strategic repositioning occurs through reallocation of resources, network restructuring, and narrative reframing of past cooperation.
3. Reinstitution Phase: New relational logics emerge : re-engagement, institutionalization, or transcendence depending on learning depth and contextual pressures.

This dynamic model invites future empirical testing through longitudinal network analysis or process tracing methodologies.

### **CONCLUSION**

The phenomenon of coopetition continues to challenge traditional strategic thinking by blending competition and cooperation into a paradoxical, dynamic interplay. As this review has shown, coopetition is not a transient arrangement but a complex strategic state with potentially enduring consequences for inter-organizational behavior and performance.

This paper has provided a comprehensive synthesis of key theoretical frameworks, especially those of Lado et al. (1997), Bengtsson and Kock (2000), and Gnyawali and Park (2009, 2011), that help explain why and how firms engage in coopetition. However, our main contribution lies in exploring the "*what comes next*": the post-coopetition phase.

By identifying and analyzing five strategic scenarios: re-coopetition, competitive dominance, neutralization, institutionalization, and post-coopetition cooperation. We propose

that post-coopetition is not a void, but a set of strategic possibilities. These pathways are influenced by factors such as:

- The level of relational trust and history between actors.
- The institutional and industry context.
- Firms' strategic learning capabilities.
- The governance structure and exit mechanisms of the initial coopetition.

In practice, firms must approach coopetition not only as a tactical response to resource constraints or market opportunities but as a strategic capability that includes anticipating future trajectories. Managing coopetition means managing not just current tensions, but also the potential evolution or dissolution of the relationship. For scholars, this study opens several research avenues:

- How can we predict the dominant scenario likely to emerge post-coopetition?
- What role do digital platforms play in shaping persistent coopetition?
- How do cultural and cognitive factors influence the transition between coopetition and other relational modes?

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