

# When Zelenskyy met Trump

The events of 28 February 2025  
as seen from a systems perspective

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This document examines the highly disturbing events surrounding the events that took place at the Washington White House on Friday 28 February 2025 when US President Donald Trump met Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of the Ukraine.

The intended purpose of the meeting was for the two Presidents to agree an approach to achieving peace in the three-year-old war between the Ukraine and Russia.

But - as the world watched, with, for the most part, increasing horror - that's not what happened.

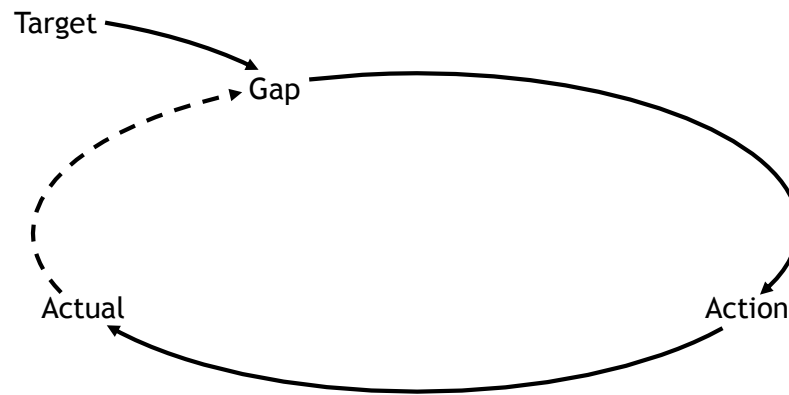
This document, written two days later on Sunday 2 March, presents the author's analysis of what happened, using 'systems thinking'.

The events continue to evolve, and so the 'story' is complete.  
But there is much that can still be learnt.

This document presents only the author's opinions.

A 'balancing loop' is one of the two fundamental 'building blocks' of systems thinking\*, and comprises a closed feedback loop including an odd number (1, 3, 5...) of 'negative' causal links.

One of the simplest forms of balancing loop is that associated with a 'target' or 'goal', as in this causal loop diagram:



For a given 'target', the behaviour over time of the system represented by this diagram is for 'action' to be taken to bring the 'actual' into equality with the 'target', at which point no further 'action' is taken, with the system remaining stable. Such a system is 'goal-seeking'.

If, however, the person who sets the target is different from the person who takes the action, the system is more complex, and comprises two balancing loops, as discussed in this document.

\*If systems thinking is unfamiliar, please see pages 24 to 27.

# ‘*Target setters*’ and ‘*action takers*’

A common situation is one in which a ‘*target setter*’ has an objective, but is not in a position to take the necessary action for that objective to be reached. Rather, that action is taken by an ‘*action taker*’.

Why, though, should the ‘*action taker*’ do what the ‘*target setter*’ wants?

Fundamentally, this is all about how the ‘*target setter*’ designs and implements suitable incentives to encourage the ‘*action taker*’, willingly, to ‘do the right thing’ - or penalties if the ‘*action taker*’ is either inactive or inclined to do the ‘wrong thing’.

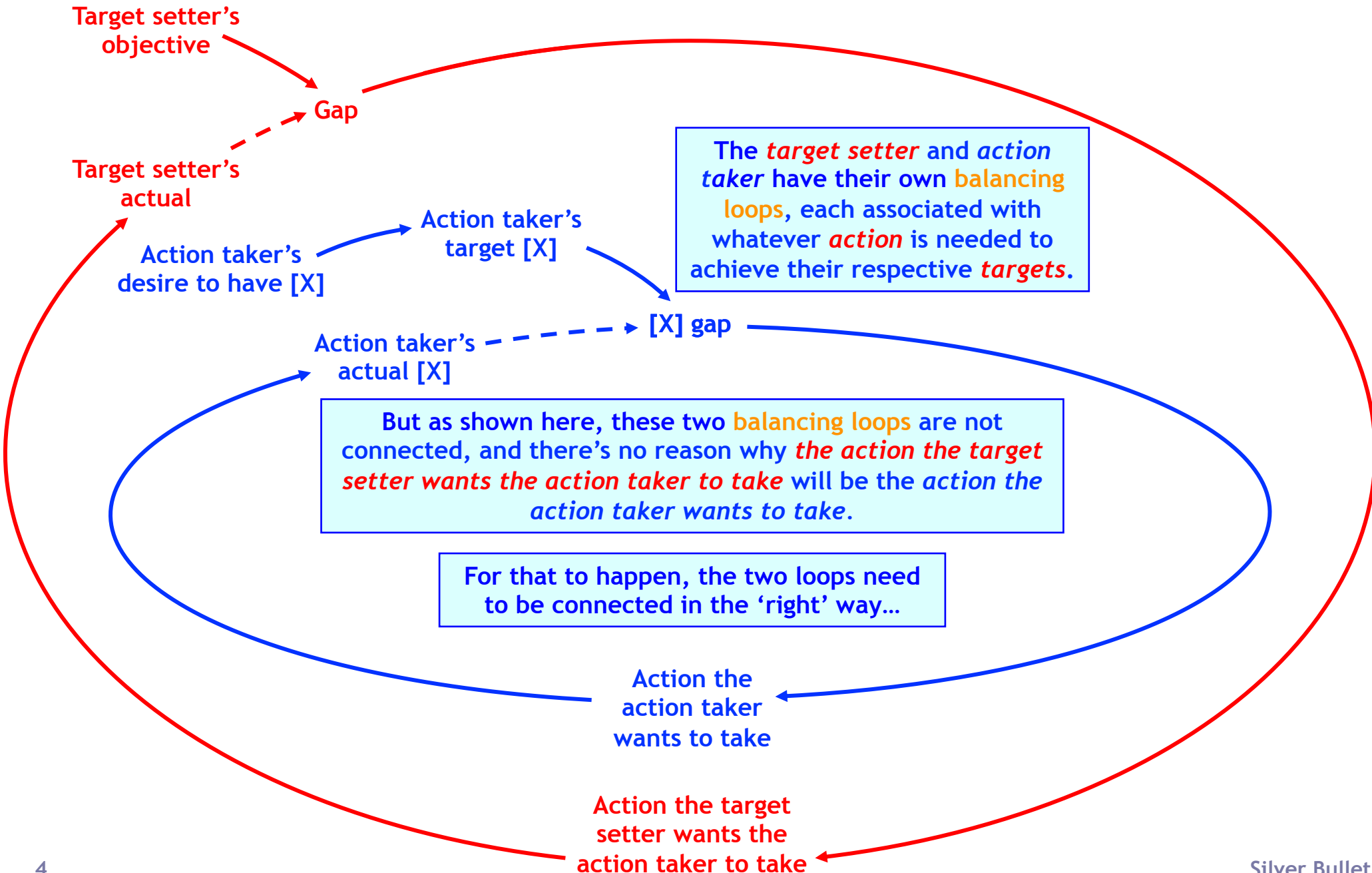
The most common example of this is employment, whereby the employer, who is the ‘*target setter*’ and wants certain things done, offers the incentive of payment - wages, a salary or a fee - to the worker, the ‘*action taker*’ to do what the employer needs.

Much government policy-making is about incentives and penalties - incentives such as tax breaks and grants to encourage investment in activities deemed as priorities; penalties such as fines for actions deemed misdemeanours, such as speeding, where the government objective is to minimise traffic accidents and injuries.

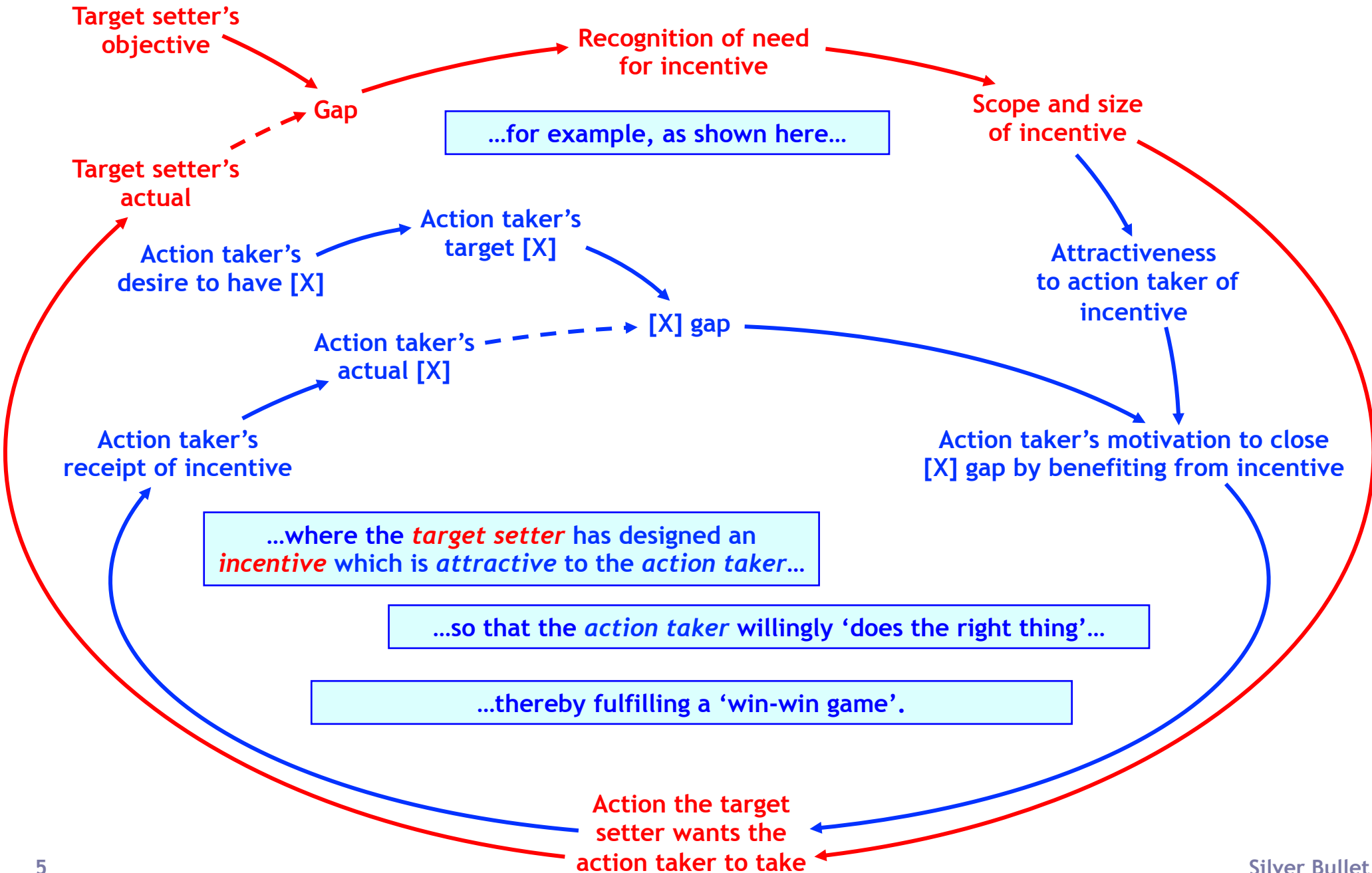
A third example is what can happen when a parent says to a teenager “tidy your room”. The ‘*target setter*’, the parent, has the objective of a tidy room; the ‘*action taker*’, the teenager, might have other objectives, such as staying asleep in bed. What incentive, or indeed penalty, can the ‘*target setter*’ invoke to encourage the ‘*action taker*’ to ‘do the right thing’?

And this is, of course, what “nudge theory” is all about.

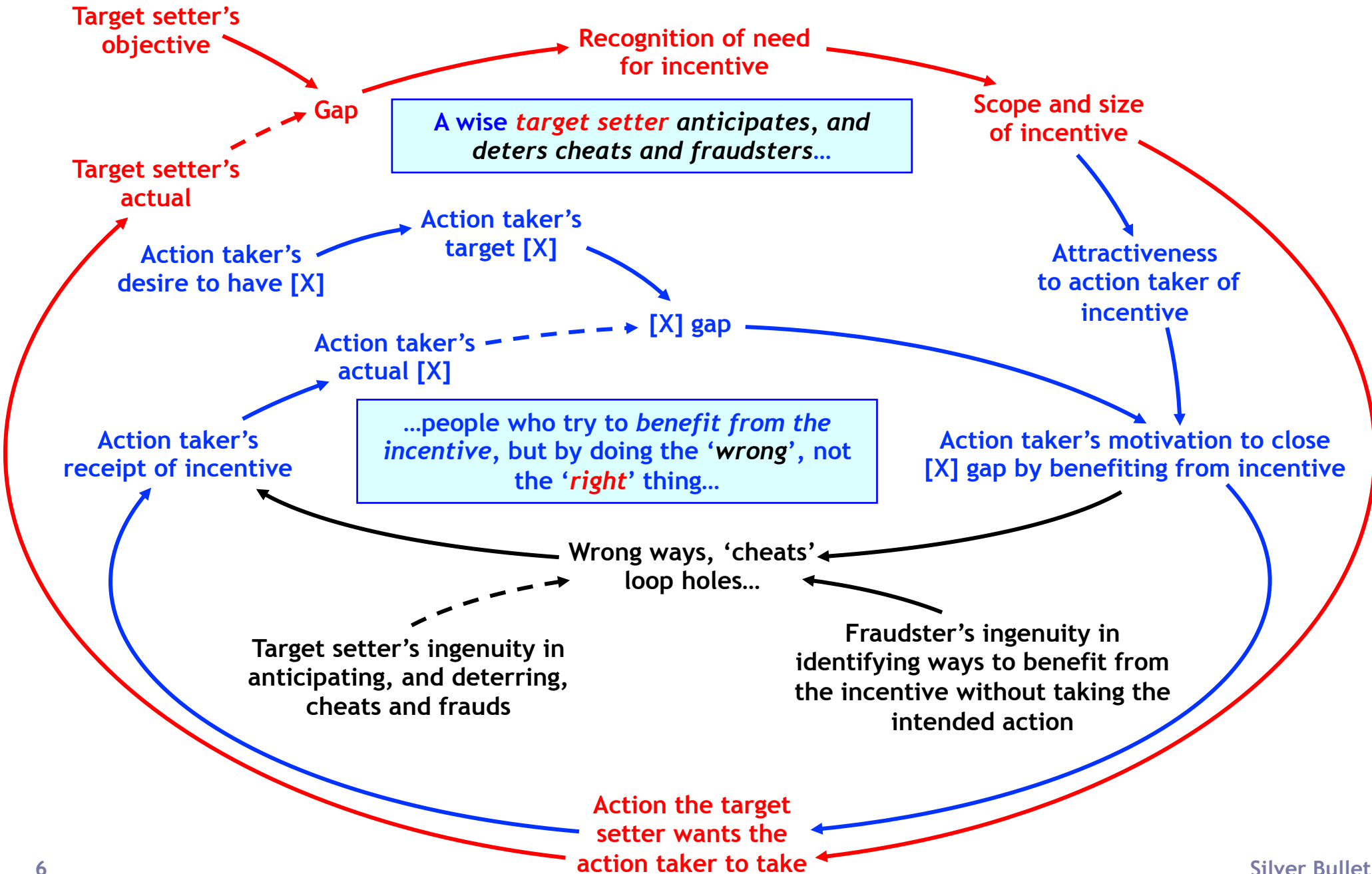
# Two separate balancing loops...



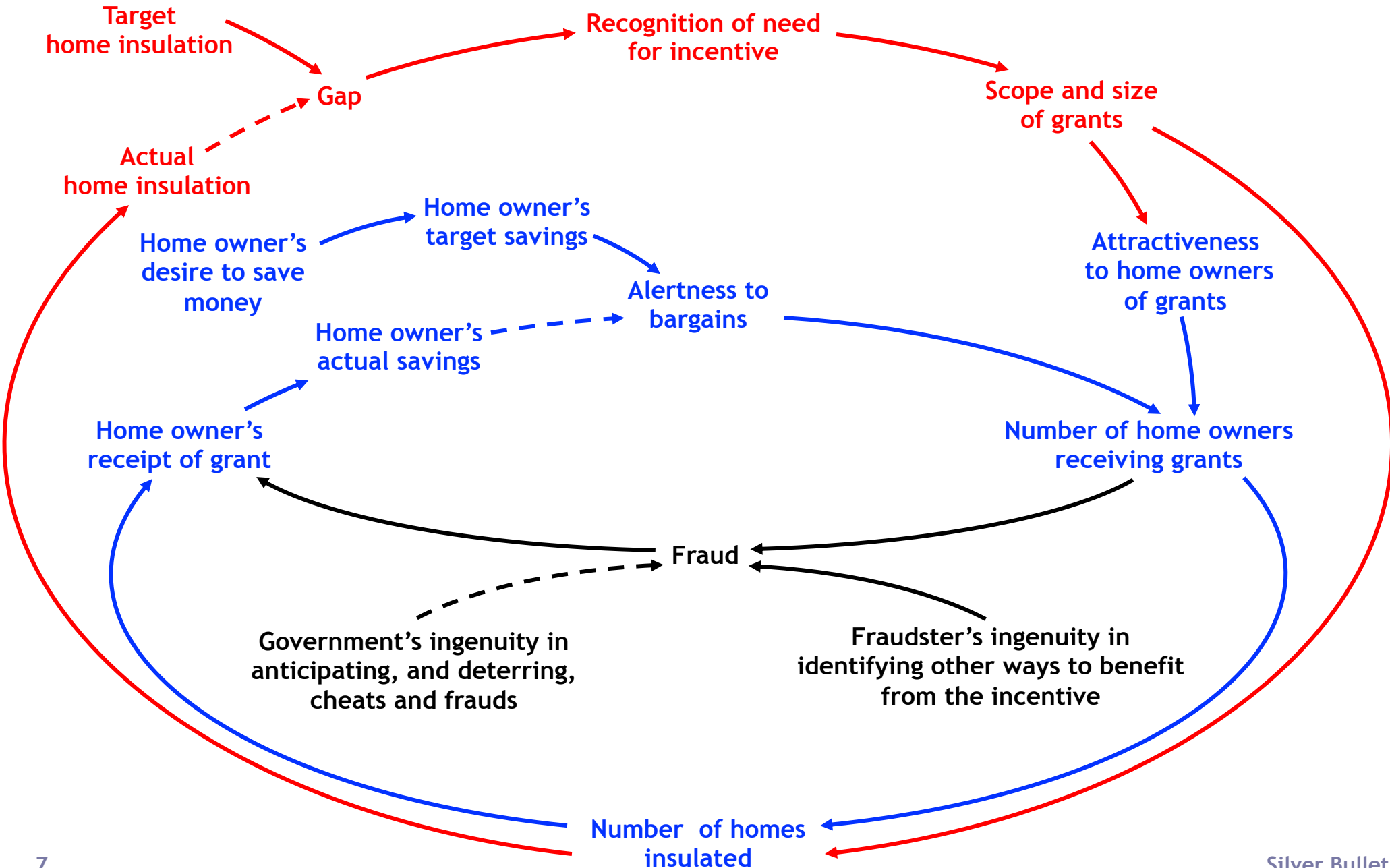
## ...and two connected balancing loops...



## Beware cheats and fraudsters!!!



# An example - government incentives for home insulation





## Zelenskyy and Trump, 28 February 2025

On Friday 28 February, Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, met US President Donald Trump at the White House.

The meeting had been trailed as one in which the two Presidents would agree an approach to achieving peace in the three-year old war between the Ukraine and Russia.

But that's not what happened.

In front of the world's news reporters and television cameras, the two Presidents clashed, and the meeting ended not just in disagreement, but in an atmosphere of mutual distrust and antagonism.

This is a tragic example of the failure of a **target setter** (Donald Trump) to identify an appropriate incentive attractive to the **action taker** (Volodymyr Zelenskyy).

Rather, from the Ukraine's standpoint, this seemed to be blackmail - blackmail that Volodymyr Zelenskyy rejected.

# What Donald Trump wants

Trump's requirement  
for Ukraine's minerals

Minerals  
gap

Degree of aggression of  
Trump's negotiating position

Trump's threat to  
withdraw US support

Trump's actual access  
to Ukraine's minerals

In so far as it is possible to understand what *Donald Trump* wants, the list is likely to include pandering to his vanity, being seen as a great leader, deserving of the Nobel Peace Prize, and gaining access to the *Ukraine's mineral resources* at a low cost to the United States.

The analysis presented here focuses solely on *Donald Trump's access to the Ukraine's mineral resources* - resources that *Donald Trump* recognises that he cannot just take. Rather, he needs the *Ukraine to agree to a trade deal*...

...which, in systems thinking terms, positions *Donald Trump* as the *target setter* (the target being *access to Ukraine's minerals*), and *Volodymyr Zelenskyy* as the *action taker* (the action being his *willingness to sign the trade deal*).

To 'encourage' *Volodymyr Zelenskyy* to do this, *Donald Trump's* chosen 'incentive' was to *threaten to withdraw US political and military support*, presumably in the expectation that *Volodymyr Zelenskyy* would be so fearful of the possible consequences that he would *sign the deal*, however reluctantly.

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
sign minerals trade deal

# What Volodymyr Zelenskyy wants

*Volodymyr Zelenskyy* wants long-term *sovereignty and security* for the Ukraine, including the return of the Crimea, and the land in Eastern Ukraine, that has been occupied by Russia.

Given the now long-standing state of war between the Ukraine and Russia, *Zelenskyy* sees this as being achieved primarily by *success on the battlefield*.



# Two unconnected balancing loops

Trump's requirement  
for Ukraine's minerals

Minerals  
gap

Degree of aggression of  
Trump's negotiating position

Trump's threat to  
withdraw US support

Trump's actual access  
to Ukraine's minerals

The two **balancing loops**, the red one  
representing *Donald Trump's* objectives,  
and the blue one, *Volodymyr Zelenskyy's*,  
as superposed here, are not linked...

Ukraine's requirement  
for military support

Intensity  
of war

Ukraine's military  
capability

Zelenskyy's need for  
sovereignty and security

...and so the next page will show how  
*Trump* sought to link them...

Ukraine's actual  
sovereignty

Pressure on Russia  
to return occupied  
territory

Ukraine's  
battlefield success

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
sign minerals trade deal

# Trump's intention

Trump's requirement  
for Ukraine's minerals

Minerals  
gap

Degree of aggression of  
Trump's negotiating position

Trump's threat to  
withdraw US support

For narrative, see page 13

Trump's actual access  
to Ukraine's minerals

Ukraine's requirement  
for military support

Ukraine's military  
capability

Intensity  
of war

Zelenskyy's need for  
sovereignty and security

Ukraine's actual  
sovereignty

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
accept 'peace' at any price

Zelenskyy's fear that  
war cannot be won

Pressure on Russia  
to return occupied  
territory

Ukraine's  
battlefield success

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
sign minerals trade deal

# Narrative to page 12

*Donald Trump's threat to withdraw US support diminishes Ukraine's military capability...*

*...thereby increasing Zelenskyy's fear that the war cannot be won.*

*Trump's hope, presumably, is that this fear will force Zelenskyy to accept 'peace', or rather a cessation of fighting, even if that implies that Russia does not return the territories currently occupied (or takes more territory, or demands reparations), that there are no guarantees of future security, and that Trump gains whatever access to Ukraine's minerals he wishes.*

In systems thinking terms, the intent of *Trump's threat to withdraw US support* is to force Zelenskyy to abandon his objective of restoring Ukraine's *sovereignty and security*, and to accept the *actual sovereignty and security* as exists at this time. This 'closes' Zelenskyy's *balancing loop*, not by raising the *actual* to meet the *target*, but by lowering the *target* towards the current *actual*.

Trump's *balancing loop* is closed too, for he gets *access to Ukraine's minerals*, as well as promoting the story that 'he brought about peace'.

But is this mutual 'closure' the result of willing negotiation?  
Or 'blackmail'?

# What 'win-win' might have looked like

Trump's requirement  
for Ukraine's minerals

Minerals  
gap

Had *Trump* offered to *guarantee*  
*Ukraine's future sovereignty*  
*and security*, the position would  
have looked like this...

...with *Zelenskyy* being able to achieve  
his objectives by *signing Trump's deal*...

Willingness of US to guarantee Ukraine's  
sovereignty and security, and to force  
Russia to return occupied territory

Trump's actual access  
to Ukraine's minerals

Ukraine's requirement  
for military support

Intensity  
of war

*Zelenskyy's* need for  
sovereignty and security

Ukraine's military  
capability

...as shown by the  
simultaneous closure of  
both **balancing loops**...

...without the need for further  
fighting on the battlefield.

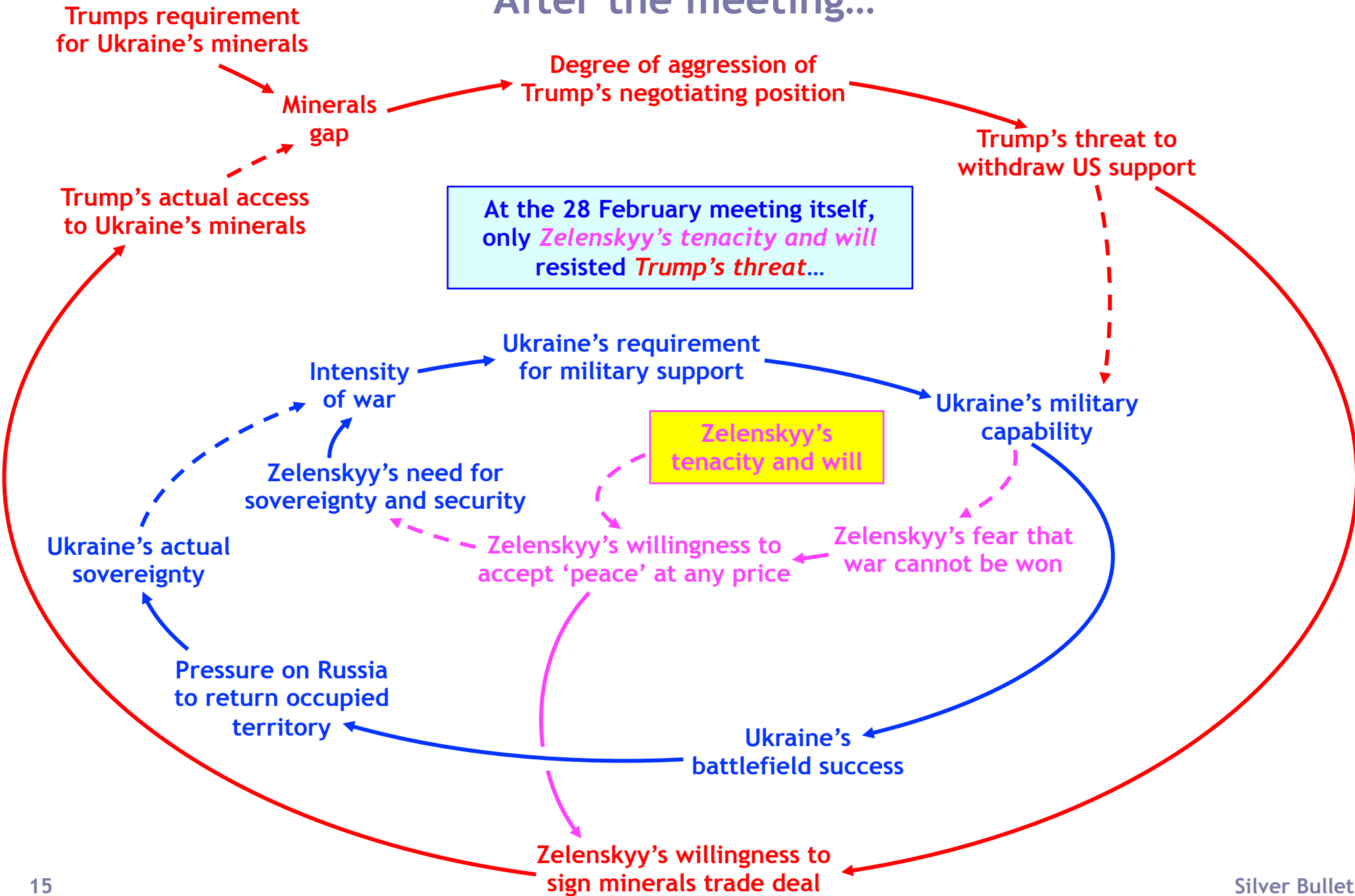
But that's not what happened.  
Rather, the position after the meeting is  
represented on the next page...

Pressure on Russia  
to return occupied  
territory

*Zelenskyy's* willingness to  
sign minerals trade deal

Ukraine's actual  
sovereignty

# After the meeting...





# Does Ukraine need the US?

Trump's requirement  
for Ukraine's minerals

Minerals  
gap

Degree of aggression of  
Trump's negotiating position

Zelenskyy can counter  
*Trump's threat* by receiving  
appropriate *support from  
elsewhere, such as the EU...*

Trump's threat to  
withdraw US support

Europe's resolve

Willingness, and ability,  
of Europe to provide  
the required support

Incentive on Ukraine  
to seek further support  
from Europe

Trump's actual access  
to Ukraine's minerals

Ukraine's requirement  
for military support

Ukraine's military  
capability

...but for this  
to happen,  
*the EU must  
be willing to  
provide the  
required  
support...*

Intensity  
of war

Zelenskyy's need for  
sovereignty and security

Zelenskyy's  
tenacity and will

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
accept 'peace' at any price

Zelenskyy's fear that  
war cannot be won

Ukraine's actual  
sovereignty

Pressure on Russia  
to return occupied  
territory

Ukraine's  
battlefield success

...and *be able  
to do so.*

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
sign minerals trade deal

# Timing is key

Trump's requirement  
for Ukraine's minerals

Minerals  
gap

Degree of aggression of  
Trump's negotiating position

Europe's resolve

Trump's threat to  
withdraw US support

Willingness, and ability,  
of Europe to provide  
the required support

Incentive on Ukraine  
to seek further support  
from Europe

Trump's actual access  
to Ukraine's minerals

But if *support from the EU*  
isn't delivered in time...

Ukraine's requirement  
for military support

Ukraine's military  
capability

Intensity  
of war

Zelenskyy's need for  
sovereignty and security

Zelenskyy's  
tenacity and will

Ukraine's actual  
sovereignty

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
accept 'peace' at any price

Zelenskyy's fear that  
war cannot be won

...Zelenskyy  
might be  
forced to  
concede.

Zelenskyy's realisation  
that the war is lost

Pressure on Russia  
to return occupied  
territory

Ukraine's  
battlefield success

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
sign minerals trade deal

# Might Trump back down?

Trump's requirement  
for Ukraine's minerals

Minerals  
gap

Degree of aggression of  
Trump's negotiating position

For narrative, see page 19

Europe's resolve

Willingness, and ability,  
of Europe to provide  
the required support

Incentive on Ukraine  
to seek further support  
from Europe

Trump's threat to  
withdraw US support

Trump's actual access  
to Ukraine's minerals

Ukraine's requirement  
for military support

Intensity  
of war

Ukraine's military  
capability

Zelenskyy's  
tenacity and will

Trump's realisation  
he is not  
getting his way  
with Zelenskyy

Zelenskyy's need for  
sovereignty and security

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
accept 'peace' at any price

Zelenskyy's fear that  
war cannot be won

Putin's  
intransigence

Zelenskyy's realisation  
that the war is lost

Ukraine's actual  
sovereignty

Pressure on Russia  
to return occupied  
territory

Ukraine's  
battlefield success

Trump's  
pressure on Putin  
to concede

Trump's  
arrogance

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
sign minerals trade deal

# Narrative to page 18

If *Zelenskyy is very tenacious*, he will strongly resist *Trump's 'blackmail'*, and will refuse to *agree a minerals deal* in the absence of binding *guarantees of sovereignty and security*.

Sooner or later, *Trump will realise that he is not getting his own way*, which might lead to one of perhaps two substantially different outcomes.

The first is for *Trump to back down on his threat to withdraw US support*, perhaps as far as to result in the 'win-win game' depicted on page 14.

But for that to happen, *Putin has to agree, and probably make some concessions too* - all of which won't happen of *Putin's own accord*, but might happen if *Trump applies suitably strong pressure*.

*Trump, however, is hugely arrogant, and Putin may well be intransigent.*  
These are both significant factors preventing all this from happening.

# A very bad outcome indeed

Trump's requirement  
for Ukraine's minerals

Degree of aggression of  
Trump's negotiating position

For narrative, see page 21

Minerals  
gap

Europe's resolve

Trump's threat to  
withdraw US support

Trump's actual access  
to Ukraine's minerals

Likelihood  
of US deal  
with Putin

Willingness, and ability,  
of Europe to provide  
the required support

Incentive on Ukraine  
to seek further support  
from Europe

Trump's  
duplicity

Intensity  
of war

Ukraine's requirement  
for military support

Ukraine's military  
capability

Zelenskyy's  
tenacity and will

Trump's realisation  
he is not  
getting his way  
with Zelenskyy

Ukraine's actual  
sovereignty

Zelenskyy's need for  
sovereignty and security

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
accept 'peace' at any price

Zelenskyy's fear that  
war cannot be won

Putin's  
intransigence

Zelenskyy's realisation  
that the war is lost

Pressure on Russia  
to return occupied  
territory

Putin's  
belligerence

Ukraine's  
battlefield success

Trump's  
pressure on Putin  
to concede

Trump's  
arrogance

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
sign minerals trade deal

# Narrative to page 20

But there is a further possibility, a possibility driven by *Zelenskyy's tenacity* and *Trump's frustration in not getting his own way...*

...for there is another means by which *Trump can achieve his objective of getting access to Ukraine's minerals...*

...and that's by *agreeing a deal with Putin whereby Trump withdraws all support from Ukraine* - and possibly goes even further by giving active support to *Putin...*

...with the possible result that this might increase *Putin's belligerence*, causing *the Ukraine to suffer significant losses in the battlefield*, so *forcing Zelenskyy's to sue for peace* on terms dictated by *Putin*.

Those terms are likely, from *Zelenskyy's point-of-view*, to be most onerous, possibly requiring some, if not much, of Ukraine's territory to be acquired by Russia.

And if that newly occupied territory is *rich in minerals*, then *Putin* might make these available to *Trump* at a highly favourable price, this being the quid-pro-quo for *Trump's duplicity* forsaking *Zelenskyy*.

All of which adds to the imperative that *Europe gives Zelenskyy all the support the Ukraine needs*.

# How will it all end?

Trump's requirement  
for Ukraine's minerals

Degree of aggression of  
Trump's negotiating position

For narrative, see page 23

Minerals  
gap

Europe's resolve

Trump's threat to  
withdraw US support

Trump's actual access  
to Ukraine's minerals

Willingness, and ability,  
of Europe to provide  
the required support

Incentive on Ukraine  
to seek further support  
from Europe

Likelihood  
of US deal  
with Putin

Trump's  
duplicity

Ukraine's requirement  
for military support

Intensity  
of war

Ukraine's military  
capability

Zelenskyy's  
tenacity and will

Trump's realisation  
he is not  
getting his way  
with Zelenskyy

Zelenskyy's need for  
sovereignty and security

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
accept 'peace' at any price

Zelenskyy's fear that  
war cannot be won

Ukraine's actual  
sovereignty

Putin's  
intransigence

Zelenskyy's realisation  
that the war is lost

Pressure on Russia  
to return occupied  
territory

Putin's  
belligerence

Ukraine's  
battlefield success

Trump's  
pressure on Putin  
to concede

Trump's  
arrogance

Zelenskyy's willingness to  
sign minerals trade deal

# Narrative to page 22

At the time of writing this - Wednesday 19 March 2025 - there is much talking among the key players, *Zelenskyy*, *Trump*, *Putin* and *Europe*.

But the fighting continues.

Overall, the situation is as depicted on page 22, which depicts a complex, highly interconnected *system*...

...but a *system* with an intelligible structure...

...and one driven by relatively few, but highly significant, *input dangles* - *input dangles* that will ultimately determine the outcome.

One *input dangle* is *Trump's requirement for the Ukraine's minerals*. As noted on page 9, this is not *Trump's* only objective, but it is probably an important one.

The other *input dangles* are *Trump's arrogance*, *Trump's duplicity*, *Putin's intransigence*, *Europe's resolve* and *Zelenskyy's tenacity and will*.

Which of these will overcome the others?



# The systems perspective

The ‘systems perspective’ facilitates our exploration of complex systems, both as regards enriching our understanding of existing systems, as well as informing our ability to design effective new ones.

The central feature of the systems perspective is the willingness - or rather the obligation - to take a ‘whole system view, to examine the entire system regardless of organisational, geographical or temporal boundaries. For only by examining systems holistically can we successfully anticipate, and so avoid:

- ‘quick fixes that backfire’
- ‘unintended consequences’
- **designing a system that merely shifts the problem from ‘here’ to ‘there’.**

Furthermore, the systems perspective enables us to describe the structure of a system with great clarity, so helping us to communicate the essence of the system to others. This can be of enormous value in helping others to see how the system works, how they can work within it, and how best to intervene in the system wisely - three essential components in building their willingness to accept reality, and to agree on policies and actions for change.

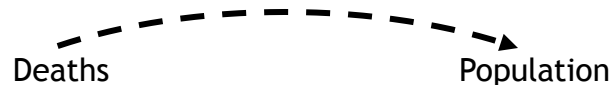
# The language of systems

Pages 25, 26 and 27 are for those unfamiliar with the tools and techniques associated with the systems perspective. Very briefly...

- A **'system'** is a **'community of connected entities'**, where the emphasis is on the connectedness between the entities, rather than on the entities themselves.
- **Systems show 'emergent behaviour'** - properties that exist at the level of the system, rather than at the level of the individual entities from which the system is composed. An example is the system "I went to the bank", in which the 'entities' are words in the English language, connected together to form the 'system' of a sentence. The meaning of the sentence is a property of the sentence as a whole - a meaning which cannot be inferred however hard we study any individual entity, such as the single word 'went'. The existence of emergent properties implies that systems must be studied as a whole.
- A powerful way of describing the structure of a system is by means of **'causal loop diagrams'** or **'influence diagrams'**. These diagrams show 'chains of causality', which capture our belief that a given 'cause' drives a given 'effect'. This causal relationship is shown by connecting the 'cause' to the 'effect' with a link, represented by an arrow.
- If an increase in a 'cause' drives an increase in the corresponding 'effect', the link is known as a **direct link**, as indicated by a solid arrow (some sources associate the head of the arrow with a + sign, or the letter S, representing 'same', since the variables at the head and the tail of the link move in the same direction).



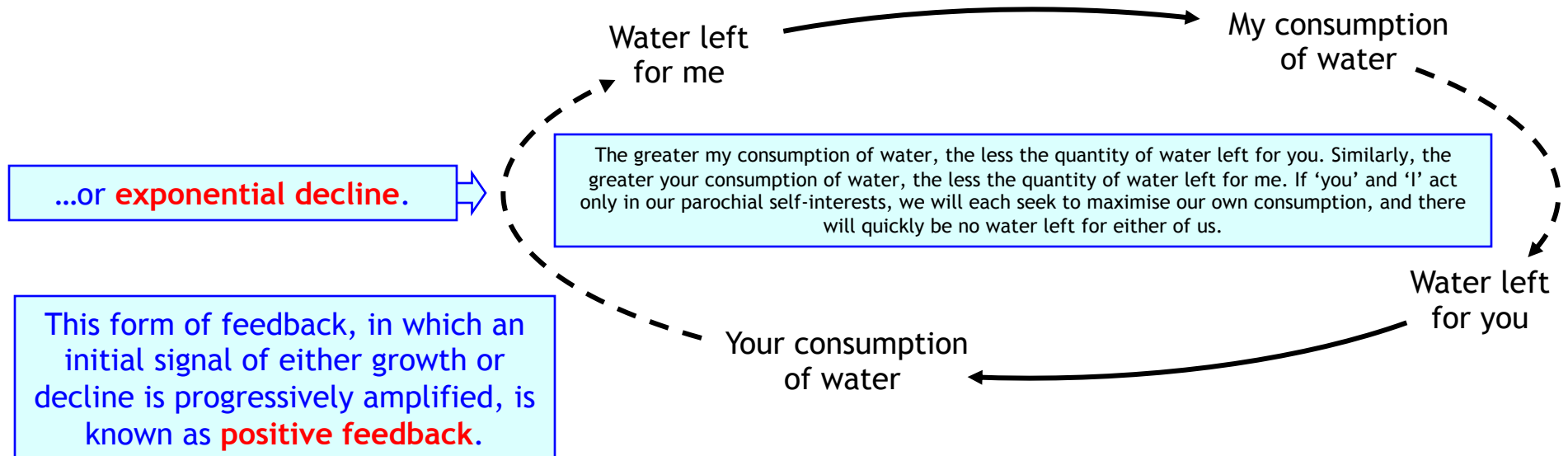
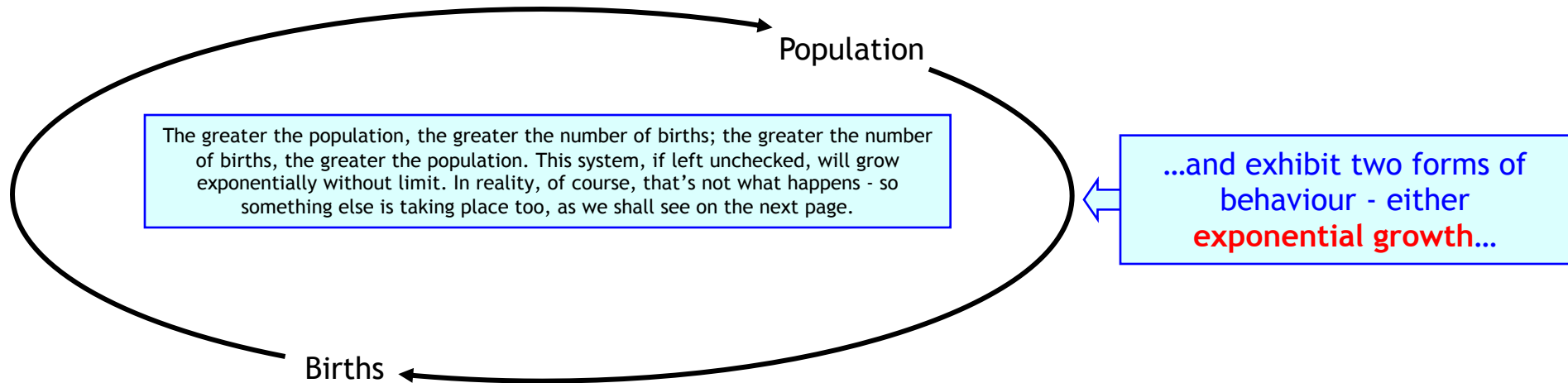
- If an increase in a 'cause' drives a decrease in the corresponding 'effect', the link is known as an **inverse link**, as indicated by a dashed arrow (some sources associate the head of the arrow with a - sign, or the letter O, representing 'opposite', since the variables at the head and the tail of the link move in opposite directions).



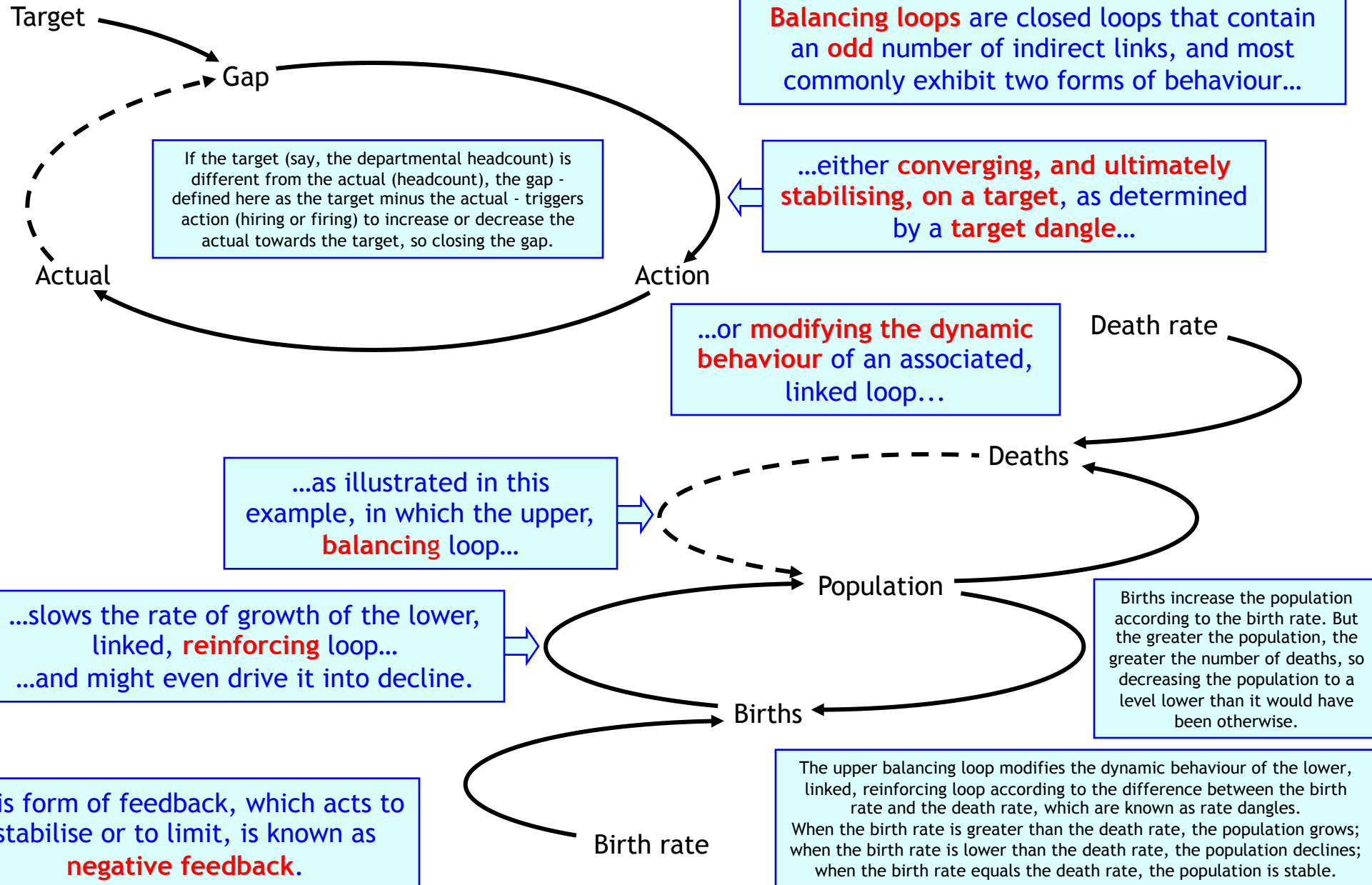
- Chains of causality usually form closed loops known as feedback loops; 'open-loop systems', chains of causality that do not form closed loops, are very rare, and are usually indicative of the likelihood that the description of the system under study is as yet incomplete. **Feedback loops are of two, and only two, fundamental types: reinforcing loops (see page 26) and balancing loops (see page 27).** Dynamically, a reinforcing loop exhibits either exponential growth or decline; a balancing loop either oscillates, stabilises on a target, or modifies the dynamic behaviour of an associated, linked loop - for example, by slowing the growth of a linked reinforcing loop.
- **Real systems are (often complex) networks of interconnecting reinforcing and balancing loops** (see, for example, page 22). Despite this complexity, great insight into the behaviour of a system as a whole can be deduced from the structure of its reinforcing and balancing components.

# Reinforcing loops

**Reinforcing loops** are closed loops that contain an **even** number of inverse links (zero is an even number)...



# Balancing loops



Idea generation,  
evaluation and  
development

Making innovation  
happen

# Silver Bullet

Strategy development  
and scenario planning

The Silver Bullet Machine Manufacturing Company Limited

## Building ultimate competitive advantage

Building  
high-performing  
teams

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