

2019 – WHAT'S TO COME?



Concept note

25 January 2019, Brussels

There are many ways to think about the future – but some are more productive than others. Horoscopes, prophecies and ancient dream interpretations, for instance, are not exactly useful: whereas horoscopes and dreams are too vague, prophecies are too doomsday-like to give a clear idea of what can be done to shape the future. This is what foresight is really about: choice, decision and action – and not, as some repeat time and again, predicting the future and getting it wrong. It is an intellectual and creative exercise designed to help decision-makers develop and make choices, challenge long-held beliefs and/or orthodoxies, focus their resources and attention, and prevent and anticipate certain developments.

That said, events unfold at different speeds, and therefore capture the attention of decision-makers in different ways. Slow-moving developments (often called mega trends), such as climate change, rarely create a sense of urgency in day-to-day business and therefore often generate slow responses. Developments that unfold over a few years (sometimes called medium-term trends), such as technological innovation, will trigger a faster response in response in bureaucracies because their effects can be felt in daily life. Finally, very fast-unfolding events (such as conflict or a diplomatic crisis) normally elicit a fast response because they are often accompanied by an urgency to act that the other two categories of trends seem to lack – but this is an illusion.

The problem with these different speeds is that the latter category will inevitably most often capture decision-makers' time and attention, but the former two require action just as much. One of the purposes of strategic foresight is to sort through these different trend categories and assist decision-makers in the prioritisation of events, raise awareness of trends that move slowly but will have critical impact, and to think through the potential effects of action, or indeed inaction. Because this requires a certain distance to daily decision-making, strategic foresight, while conducted *for* decision-makers, is mainly done by entities that are slightly removed from the running of day-to-day business. After all, its role is precisely to challenge the assumptions of institutions, to search for and detect weak signals, to inspect the outer contours of events, and to investigate areas which do not necessarily feature in the headlines. The European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) is one of those bodies built for such an enterprise.

With this event, we aim to alert decision-makers to potential developments with significant strategic impact while they can still prepare for, or even avoid them. EUISS Analysts were asked to craft a scenario based on developments they have identified in their respective areas of expertise, focussing on those dynamics decision-makers will face in the coming year. The method we use for this is horizon-scanning. Of course, the concept is an etymological reference to a time when the skyline and one's distance to it was vital, especially for navigation at sea: it indicated the next possible safe havens, but also potential dangerous encounters with weather phenomena or hostile ships. In foresight, this information can be quantitative (data on food price or demographics, for example), but also qualitative (such as measuring discontent over a certain development among a given population). This method operates with an open mind rather than seeking to confirm a specific view: it spots changes, but also constants. By default, horizon-scanning is an ongoing and systematic monitoring and interpretation of a specific environment rather than an *ad hoc* event. This, in essence, is what EUISS Analysts do on a continuous basis.