

HOW THE US DOES FORESIGHT



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The United States' difficulty in accepting multipolarity

by

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INTRODUCTION

The United States is a highly polarised society. Over the past decade, any consensus about how it views itself or its future has broken down despite the country having well-grounded capabilities on foresight which could help steer it towards a united vision and the steps needed to realise its desired future. It is unclear whether the Biden administration can project a vision that appeals to most Americans, binding together a nation deeply split in its view of America and its role in the world. At the tactical level, foresight tools and mechanisms remain in use throughout the bureaucracy even if they have not been able to reconcile contrasting societal perspectives. 2016 was a dramatic turning point in which the US Intelligence Community – the leading foresight practitioner in the US government – fell out of favour with the president and many of his senior advisors. Biden's vision for the country embraces diversity and renewed US leadership in the world. Biden's Secretary of State Antony Blinken talks about humility and confidence being "the flip sides of America's leadership coin",¹ repudiating Trump's America First stance.

Summary

- › Current US foresight mechanisms emerged in the 1990s with the *Global Trends* series. In the aftermath of 9/11, foresight became a critical tool for informing policymaking. Scenarios became more and more elaborated and included foreign experts' views.
- › Foresight then made its way into agencies' planning operations, in particular in the Pentagon as foresight analysis allowed it to justify expenditure on weaponry. The National Security Strategy presents the White House's vision of national security.
- › From 2004, the *Global Trends* series highlighted the challenges faced by the United States and Europe in a now multipolar world. The idea of a relative decline of the US and the West has been rejected by the US foreign policy elite. This refusal to accept a multipolar world was exacerbated during the Trump administration.
- › Strategic foresight has gained prominence and greater popularity in the US bureaucracy but, so far, attempts to fully incorporate foresight into its decision-making process have failed.

DEEPLY ROOTED FORESIGHT TRADITIONS

Before Trump's election to the presidency, a government process had evolved, especially after 9/11, that valued foresight as a critical tool for informing policymaking. 9/11 was a psychological blow to an America waking up to the downsides of globalisation. In the years following, much was written about 'black swans' and 'low likelihood, high impact' events. There was a popularisation of the methodological tools connected with scenario planning and renewed interest in probing the factors shaping the future. In the government and business world, understanding risk became a priority for staying ahead of the next crisis.

During the first term of the George W. Bush administration, most of the focus was on the 'War on Terror', but in the second term an effort began to understand the broader global changes such as the 'Rise of the Rest'. This was the period in which 'strategic partnerships' were extended by Washington to the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) or new rising powers with the hope of integrating them into the Western order. Suddenly, there was recognition that globalisation had not just empowered terrorists but transformed the whole international landscape.

The *Global Trends* series² became in the mid-1990s the chief US government vehicle for thinking 15-to-20 years into the future. In the first decade after the end of the Cold War, a group of far-sighted National Intelligence Council (NIC) officials thought the Intelligence Community was not focused enough on the drivers of change – especially globalisation. The *Global Trends* series started as an effort to close the gap between outside experts and the US government's internal thinking. Initially, the large Delphic effort focused on US-based experts and their reflections on everything from demography to the global economy, changes in warfare and international relations. The synthesis of expert views became then the core of *Global Trends 2015* which was published in 2000 and subtitled "Dialogue with Non-Government Experts." The Delphic methodology remained a foundation for all the editions, although the range of experts was greatly expanded to include foreign experts with potentially clashing views to those at home.

Along the way, more and more energy was invested in thinking about alternative scenarios. The *Global Trends 2020* volume has stories, for example, about the domestic breakdown of Pax Americana and the emergence of the Caliphate in the Middle East which one commentator has described as "eerily prescient."³ *Global Trends 2030* also engaged in quantitative

modelling to bring home the likely economic impacts from the different scenarios.⁴

BROADER ROLE OF GLOBAL TRENDS IN THE BUREAUCRACY

Besides being briefed to the incoming administration, the *Global Trends* series was important because it helped informed individual agencies' planning operations. The Pentagon, for example, had its Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) which the US Congress had mandated in 1997. The requirement for a QDR – which exists today under the name of National Defence Strategy (NDS) – was enacted partly to force the Pentagon to think more long term. In general, the military has a record of being the best consumer of foresight products, spurred by having to plan for what weapons may be needed decades down the road. To call on Congress to fund any big-ticket weaponry, which often takes years to build, the Pentagon needs to make the case that it will be needed in the 2030s or beyond. To make that argument, defence planners turn to the Intelligence Community to help them. There is little doubt that the

desire for a justification is driven by budgetary motivations. However, increased demand for foresight has been the result, and long-range perspectives have become embedded in Department of Defense culture. Additionally, 'scenarios' have made their way into Pentagon thinking and

have become a core concept in the QDR/NDS, where multiple scenarios are played out.

Besides the QDR, the National Security Strategy (NSS) – also a legal requirement for the White House which Congress mandated in 1986 as part of the Goldwater-Nichols reform of the military – deals with the future and is a prime vehicle for administrations to project a vision for the country. The White House's National Security Council, which drafts the NSS, typically relies on the *Global Trends* works and other long-range analysis conducted by the Intelligence Community to explain what measures the nation must undertake to prepare for the future. A comparison of the various NSSs issued since 2000 by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama show different tendencies – the more hawkish tone of the Bush administration after the 9/11 attacks contrasting with Obama's focus on domestic priorities. But they all saw the US as the 'indispensable actor' on the world stage, leading a community of nations to establish a rules-based

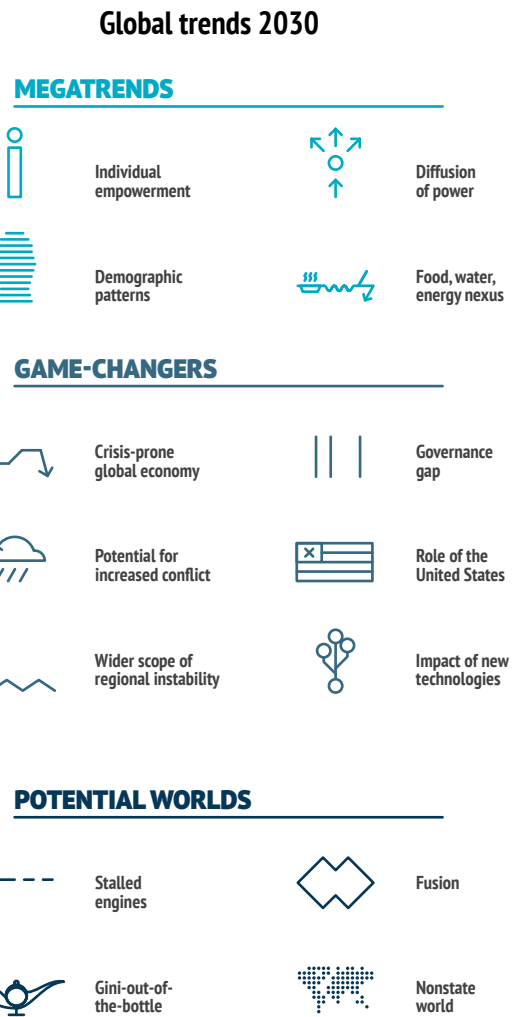
liberal order. The 2017 Trump administration's NSS broke with this tradition, seeing a dog-eat-dog world in which the US had been for too long exploited by other countries.

THE AGE OF IDEOLOGY

From 2004, the *Global Trends* series saw a world in which there was more change than continuity and the 'End of History' was nowhere near in sight. The United States and Europe faced increasing challenges managing a now multipolar world where not all the great powers subscribed to traditional Western values. The *Global Trends* editions talked openly of a United States and a West in relative decline. If there was a dissonance between the vision projected by the NSS and foresight publications, it was on this score. While the Obama administration sought to avoid a public discussion on US decline, it made a conscious decision to pull back from involvement in Syria, which triggered widespread criticism by the US foreign policy elite. Much of that elite was also unprepared to accept the *Global Trends'* characterisations of a beleaguered United States in relative decline.

From 2004, the *Global Trends* series warned that America's European allies faced many of the same problems highlighted as undermining the US's position in the world, including slowing growth, internal divisions and lack of consensus on a way forward on EU integration. *Global Trends 2030* talked about Europe having been a critical security provider, ensuring, for example, Central Europe's integration into the 'West' after the end of the Cold War.⁵ Such a role remained important given Europe's position, surrounded by an arc of instability from Russia to the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, but Washington was less certain about Europe being able to play an effective role dealing with it given the problems at home. In 2004, the European Commission objected to the depiction of a faltering Europe in *Global Trends 2020*, despite the consensus of most European experts consulted.

With the election of President Trump and his espousal of 'America First', there was a rejection by his administration of the very concept of 'globalism' and growing global interdependence. Trump sought to turn the clock back to a time when the US was economically self-sufficient and US sovereignty was protected. He saw international relations in terms of bilateral ties, giving the United States the edge in negotiating with those less powerful. Multilateral institutions – despite their origins as part of the US redesign of the international system after World War II – were despised for undermining US independence and freedom of action. In the past three years, the Trump administration has abrogated US participation in an ever-lengthening list



Data: National Intelligence Council

of international agreements, exiting most recently from the World Health Organization, a decision which Biden is currently reversing. In all of this, there was a rejection of expert advice – not just from the foresight community but more broadly. The Intelligence Community was roundly criticised and dismissed by President Trump. Most recently, because he refused to listen to the warnings of an impending pandemic, the country was left unprepared for the devastating effects. *Global Trends 2025 and 2030* plus the intelligence briefings that Trump received daily (known as the President's Daily Brief) predicted the human cost and economic damage that pandemics leave in their wake.⁶

In the recent presidential election, Democrats and some moderate Republicans have rejected the 'America First' xenophobia and crude nationalism but have not devoted much time to understanding the global trends radically changing the United States' place in the world. Any serious talk of US relative decline and what that means remains taboo except when levelled as a campaign charge against the other side. Much of mainstream foreign policy thinking still sees the US as the only power with the authority (and right) to set the rules for the whole international system. Multipolarity

remains an unfathomable concept for much of the US foreign policy elite, and US primacy is seen as the only way to protect US national interests. Hence the widespread support for the Trump administration's attacks on China despite the potential damage to long-term US economic interests and growing risk of conflict.

FORESIGHT MACHINERY REMAINS IN USE

The NIC was written into law with the 2004 National Intelligence Reform Act.⁷ Its mandate has always been to help the president, his cabinet and senior advisers understand the future course of developments in priority domains such as non-proliferation, China, Russia, terrorism, etc. In the years since the Intelligence Community reform, the NIC's role in helping policy-makers devise policies has only increased, particularly at the tactical level. As has happened for the past two decades, a *Global Trends* edition – subtitled “Paradox of Power” – was published to coincide with the advent of the Trump administration in 2016, and there have been plans to provide another for the incoming Biden administration. The Pentagon continues to pump out the National Defence Strategy. Other agencies throughout the US government have adopted the QDR as a model for staging periodic strategy reviews and employ foresight tools – horizon scanning, scenarios – to map out a way forward for themselves. Less than two months after taking office, the Biden administration has issued an ‘interim’ National Security Strategic Guidance⁸ in preparation for a future full-scale National Security Strategy, which will guide its policy choices in addition to informing the general public about Biden's vision for the United States.

Despite this solid bedrock, the US government has never been able to move up the ladder and fully incorporate foresight into its decision-making process. It is unclear if that will ever happen. In 2012, Leon Fuerth, who had been the deputy national security advisor in the Clinton presidency, produced a path-breaking proposal for marrying foresight with the decision-making process.⁹ Time on the president's schedule would be routinely set aside for long-range planning using foresight from the Intelligence Community and outside experts. A cell within the National Security Council would be responsible for not just gathering the best intelligence but also exploiting outside sources on long-range domestic and international developments. The new White House unit would look back and analyse why past policies did not work to solve the problems they were meant to resolve. Fuerth expounded a view that today's policy dilemmas were different from those in the twentieth or nineteenth centuries. Current problems were ‘wicked’ ones that could not be easily

solved. Instead of ignoring why former policies did not solve the problem, the cell would oversee a continual learning process and the US government over time would be better able to gauge how to defuse crises and prevent future ones from happening.

Fuerth reportedly attempted to get the Obama administration to adopt his ideas but without success. In the Trump era, with its contempt for expertise, there was little possibility of Fuerth's ideas seeing the light of day. Fuerth's plan would require presidential leadership to establish. Only a couple of presidents – Eisenhower and Reagan – in the post-World War II era have undertaken such reforms. President Eisenhower instituted the “Project Solarium an interagency strategic planning exercise to draft and debate alternative Cold War strategies.”¹⁰ Similarly, Reagan, in early 1982, “directed a highly classified interagency strategic planning effort that guided the administration's policy throughout its two terms.”¹¹

It is clear that impactful strategic planning at the highest reaches of government has been more the exception than the rule even if the practice of strategic foresight has widened and gained greater popularity in the US bureaucracy.

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