

## Strategic foresight for multilateral policy: challenges, opportunities and success factor

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# SWP Comment

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## Strategic Foresight for Multilateral Policy

Challenges, Opportunities and Success Factors

Lars Brozus

Increasingly, states are openly and assertively pursuing their national interests in international politics. The US, for instance, is revoking important international agreements on disarmament, trade and climate change. Other countries with a claim to global power, such as China and Russia, are pursuing an aggressive territorial policy. The withdrawal of the UK from the European Union (EU) would mean the loss of an important partner, undermining its ability to implement a strategic and self-confident course of action at the international level. This is all the more worrying since any erosion of the rules-based international order requires a forward-looking and effective policy for shaping the future. Every time a binding international agreement is called into question or revoked, the threshold for uncoordinated unilateral action is lowered. Unexpected crises and conflicts might therefore occur more frequently in the future. Consequently, governments wanting to promote multilateralism should invest in joint strategic foresight. A multiperspective approach appears to be promising for identifying situations in which coordinated action with like-minded partners offers opportunities to proactively shape international affairs.

In response to the declining support for a rules-based international order, Germany, France and more than fifty other governments presented an “Alliance for Multilateralism” at this year’s UN General Assembly. The aim of the Alliance is to promote cooperation among its members in various policy areas. This cooperation is likely to be all the more fruitful and future-oriented if the partners succeed in bringing their different views, interests and preferences closer together with a view to tackling key challenges for the international community. Joint strategic foresight can support this

convergence and could be tested within the framework of the Alliance.

### Tasks and Functions of Strategic Foresight

The goal of strategic foresight is to alert political decision-makers at an early stage to possible events and developments for which options for action should be available in good time. It is effective when emerging crises and opportunities are recognised at a stage when there is still



sufficient time to take action which is likely to lead to success.

Conceptually, the task is to identify events and developments that could become relevant for international politics. In addition, decision-makers are made aware of options for action with which they can seize opportunities and respond to emerging crises. Strategic foresight thus serves two functions: analysis and prescription.

At the analytical level, a distinction can be made between forecasts and foresight. The former is aimed at anticipating specific events that could have an impact on international politics. These include unexpected changes of government or sudden military escalations in strategically important countries or regions, but also unannounced defaults by debtors that are considered too big to fail.

Foresight, on the other hand, tries to track down longer-term trends. In addition, it analyses what interdependencies these trends could have across policy areas. This applies, for example, to technological innovations (e.g. cyberattacks as an unconventional military means or the role of social media manipulation in election campaigns). Equally important is choosing and monitoring indicators that signal the stability of a country or region, e.g. economic and demographic development, public satisfaction with political institutions, the extent of social inequality or changes in environmental conditions. Knowledge of the subject matter and country expertise are both included in the analysis.

In prescriptive terms, the task is to draw conclusions for policy-making from the analytical findings. Firstly, the focus is on the question of what governments and parliaments should prepare for in the future and what resources and skills are needed to deal successfully with rather long-term challenges. Secondly, ideas and proposals are developed as to where and how decision-makers can intervene in the short term in order to seize on emerging opportunities or avoid crises.

## The Politics of Strategic Foresight

Strategic foresight in international affairs has traditionally been a sovereign task that is performed within the framework of the nation-state. A look at the national level shows that most countries are a long way from a “whole of government” approach. As a rule, silo approaches dominate, which have their background in the different tasks and orientations of the responsible ministries, but also in different organisational cultures. As a result, the analysis may typically contain “blind spots”.

In Germany, the Federal Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*, AA), the Federal Ministry of Defence (*Bundesministerium der Verteidigung*, BMVg) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (*Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung*, BMZ) are primarily concerned with international affairs. In the Federal Government’s 2017 Guidelines, “Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace”, the three ministries agreed to improve coordination efforts with a view to identifying crises and conflicts at an early stage. They are therefore aware that it is problematic to practice strategic foresight in parallel and not in cooperation.

Occasional initiatives by parliamentarians indicate that the Bundestag also wants to make its foreign, development and security policy work more strategic and forward-looking. For example, information on possible and plausible strategic challenges could be provided on a regular basis at committee level. Expert hearings are also conceivable. The political measures taken by the Federal Government to deal with such strategic challenges could be debated in plenary sessions. However, the priority for the Bundestag is to recognise crises and conflicts early on.

The situation is similar for Germany’s most important international partners, such as the United Kingdom, France and the United States. Often, interinstitutional relations between the various government agencies that practice foresight are more competitive than cooperative. This also

applies to intergovernmental cooperation. Some governments occasionally develop joint foresight activities, for example, when German and French planning staff in their respective foreign ministries collaborate, though this rarely happens systematically. International and supranational actors such as the EU, NATO and the UN also have departments that work with foresight in mind. However, like many other actors, they focus their attention primarily on anticipating crises and conflicts.

### **The Added Value of a Multilateral Approach**

Contrary to the practice of most foresight-oriented institutions, there is nothing to say that strategic foresight cannot also indicate situations that herald a desirable outcome. A multilateral approach seems particularly suitable for detecting opportunities early on. Cooperation with partners from different regions and cultures is particularly helpful in this respect because it can broaden and, at the same time, sharpen their view of global events and developments. This can help reduce the “blind spots” that occur with the conventional approaches: Firstly, the analysts’ inability to perceive events and developments that are beyond their imagination, which is shaped by their specific individual and collective background experiences and, secondly, the prioritisation of crises and conflicts in most foresight activities. Joint strategic foresight can expand the perception of weak signals among the noise of international affairs. It may also correct the fixation on negatively connoted events and developments. Decision-makers can then be better sensitised to unexpected opportunities for action.

Systematic cooperation between various partners brings different perspectives together. This does not mean there will not be any conflicting interests, however, understanding the views, interests and preferences of others actually occurs during the process, if the partners can agree on which thematic and geographical challenges

to focus. Different perspectives thus complement each other to form multiperspectivity. This approach could be tested within the framework of the “Alliance for Multilateralism”. If the approach proves successful, one could consider how joint strategic foresight could be institutionalised across countries, for example in situation rooms. An additional goal would be to practice a cooperative process of policy-making and implementation. From an operational point of view, this facilitates rapid action in decision-making situations – an important prerequisite for effective multilateralism.

In the reality of international politics, crises and opportunities often go hand in hand. A good example is the Arab Spring in 2010/11. Mass protests were being held in practically the entire Middle East and North Africa. In Tunisia, Egypt and Libya they led to the replacement of those in power, while, in Syria, a civil war began that continues to this day. The popular uprisings were caused by deep dissatisfaction with living conditions in the region, which were marked by corruption, lack of prospects and state repression. For all the violence they resulted in (and in some cases still occurs today), they also offered an opportunity for regional transformation. It quickly became clear, however, that this would only be possible with massive external support – but no such plans were in place. As a result, the international response was essentially one of crisis management.

Nevertheless, it is possible to learn from history: a common strategic vision might have allowed the EU, in particular, to develop ideas at an early stage as to what measures it could take to bring about political, social and economic transformation in a more targeted and effective manner. Conflicts between the states involved in the foresight process over goals and measures would have been addressed early on and would have placed less of a burden on making decisions in a situation of ultimate uncertainty.

However, even with a multiperspective approach it will not be possible to anticipate every revolutionary situation or emerg-

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ing opportunity for progressive transformation. The scientific evaluation of forecasting tournaments, on the other hand, shows that multiperspective teams perform better than more homogeneous reference groups. The “Good Judgment Project”, launched in 2011, was aimed at answering questions about the occurrence of hypothetical events on the international level. In this five-year competition with more than 3,000 participants, laypersons achieved a greater degree of accuracy than experts or professional analysts – even though the latter had access to information that was not publicly available.

## Diversity and Transparency as Success Factors

Multiperspectivity does seem to pay off and would be a key requirement for cross-nationally organised strategic foresight. In order for it to succeed, care must be taken to ensure that the analysis teams are not homogeneous, but rather represent a high degree of diversity. Key selection factors can be age, gender, ethnic, cultural and religious background as well as cognitive styles and political attitudes.

In order to increase the diversity of perspectives, insights from non-state actors could be included in the analysis – often an important additional source of information. However, “shrinking spaces” and state repression are not only a massive problem for civil society in increasing numbers of countries, but also for research activities. Field research under authoritarian conditions is becoming far riskier for scholars and their local sources; as a result reliable information on relevant developments is becoming more scarce. Governments wishing to pursue joint strategic foresight should therefore work to ensure that scientific research can take place under secure conditions.

More quantitative data on global events and developments is available today than

ever before. This makes it easier to build database-driven models for strategic forecasting that enable us to conduct complex and detailed analyses of countries and regions. At the same time, the opportunities for manipulating data and information have grown immensely. And these are not only exploited by authoritarian regimes. Within the framework of a joint strategic foresight, however, all the actors involved must be able to rely on the data not being unduly manipulated. Of course, trust between the partners is essential for exchanging sensitive information.

Transparency is also important to convince decision-makers to implement policies grounded in recommendations that are based on analyses of the future. Greater transparency could be achieved by introducing competitive elements and accountability to strategic foresight. The positive experience from forecasting competitions could help in this respect.

The partners participating in the joint strategic foresight should organise such a forecast competition transnationally; this would make the objective comparatively easy to achieve: greater diversity and multiperspectivity with a view to recognising relevant events at an early stage. This could be a first step on the way to further joint foresight activities.

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