

### The Use of Games in Strategic Foresight: a Warning from the Future

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# DGAP POLICY BRIEF

## The Use of Games in Strategic Foresight

### A Warning from the Future



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After a decade of crisis, the EU now routinely uses futures methods to anticipate the unexpected. Its aim is to address its blind spots. This paper details our experience of designing a foresight exercise to help EU diplomats face up to one of the most ingrained types of blind spot: a taboo issue. But our experience showed instead the dangers of such exercises. Far from needing encouragement to address a taboo, our target audience wanted an excuse to do so, reflecting a shift to a more “geopolitical EU.”

- Strategic foresight exercises are designed to help participants recognize their cognitive biases. But the more policymakers adopt them as routine, the more they use them to reinforce their existing aims. Simply: they learn to manipulate outcomes.
- To prevent cheating, experts introduced adversarial elements, where colleagues paired off against one another. Competition was meant to inject new thinking into policy and break up bureaucratic hierarchies. In fact, these too reinforced old biases.
- Table-top exercises (TTXs) are now the go-to tool, adopted by the EU: rather than competing, participants play as a single team. Collaboration encourages the kind of “risky-shifty” behavior which policymakers need in order to drop old shibboleths..
- Table-top exercises (TTXs) are now the go-to tool, adopted by the EU: rather than competing, participants play as a single team. Collaboration encourages the kind of “risky-shifty” behavior which policymakers need in order to drop old shibboleths.

During the Second World War, the Japanese imperial government charged its newly-established Institute of Total War Studies (ITWS) with the task of conducting wargames. Again and again, participants played out the Japanese naval strategy against the United States. And everywhere from Pearl Harbor to Midway, these wargames ended in Japanese victory. But when the two sides actually faced off in the Pacific in June 1942, the result was a resounding defeat for Japan that changed the whole course of the war. How could the ITWS have gotten it so wrong?

The answer is simple: the participants had cheated. Whenever their wargames failed to produce the desired outcome, the ITWS simply re-floated their battleships and ran the exercise again.<sup>1</sup> They treated this as part of the process, seeking to perfect outcomes through practice. But today's strategic foresight experts, with the benefit of foresight, recognize a common phenomenon among officials and policymakers here: cognitive bias and mental blind spots. What the participants were really doing was cherry-picking the results, finding reasons to maintain their current course and assumptions, oblivious of the fact that these were propelling them toward defeat. An exercise designed to broaden the mind served to close it. By taking these matters from the real world into a safe space with low stakes, the Japanese cheated their way to defeat.

Today, those early wargames have given way to far more sophisticated foresight practices like trend impact analysis and horizon scanning.<sup>2</sup> And the goal has been precisely to help policymakers face up to their unconscious biases and uncover institutionalized blind spots.<sup>3</sup> Participatory techniques such as "devil's advocacy" and "dialectical inquiry" serve to introduce dissenting ideas into policymaking.<sup>4</sup> But strategic foresight experts have found that sophisticated modern policymakers fall into the same trap that bedeviled old-fashioned, hierarchical institu-

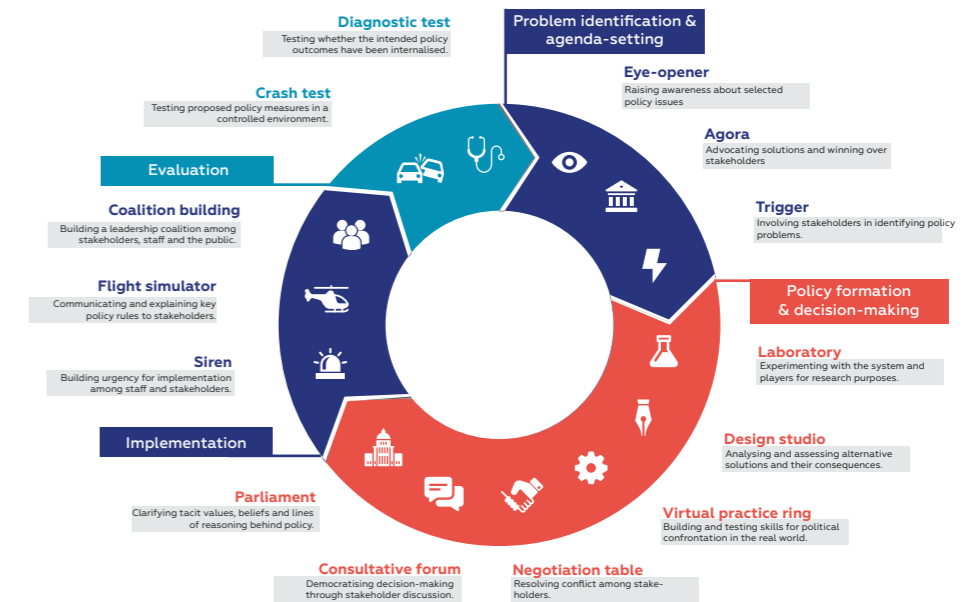
tions like the mid-century Japanese navy: they learn to use foresight to reinforce positions and fight for budgets, with more speculative activities reduced to box-ticking exercises.

So what's next for foresight methodology? Foresight experts now believe that the best way to help policymakers overcome cognitive restraints is a simple one: to help them play. Where other foresight methodologies such as scenario-building aim simply to open policymakers' eyes to a range of possible futures, games go a step further, actively engaging them in joint strategy-building and problem-solving. Within the spontaneous and unguarded context of a game, people are more open to exploring risky ideas that deviate from norms and hierarchies.<sup>5</sup> This has not gone unnoticed by the EU. Having invested in highly sophisticated foresight techniques only to have seen them hijacked by bureaucratic politics,<sup>6</sup> the EU has turned to gaming – and not sophisticated electronic gaming, but exercises like the Scenario Exploration System (SES), a tabletop game.<sup>7</sup>

## AS EUROPE'S SITUATION WORSENS, ITS POLICYMAKERS...PLAY

Tabletop exercises (TTXs) differ from adversarial policymaking techniques like "Red Teaming" (which involves dividing participants into two teams – red and blue – with the blue team playing a defensive role, while the members of the red team act as hostile outsiders, probing their institutional weaknesses). Red Teaming uses competition as a way to inject new thinking into policy, testing contingency plans by pitting participants against each other. It can be effective at revealing biases, but experience shows it can also strengthen preconceived ideas about how the hostile outsiders operate. In TTXs, participants collaborate. This may seem a poor way to counter groupthink. But because they share the same goal,

## 1 – FOURTEEN USES FOR TABLETOP EXERCISES ACROSS THE FOUR STAGES OF THE POLICY CYCLE



Adapted from Gandziarowska-Ziotecka and Stasiak, 2019

players actually tend to be more receptive to new ideas;<sup>8</sup> A team of players is likely to engage in so-called "risky-shifty behavior" – taking chances and collectively facing up to weaknesses that institutions have tacitly agreed to ignore.<sup>9</sup>

The utility of TTXs is clear: they offer a stress-free way of carrying out stress tests for the EU's strategies and contingency plans,<sup>10</sup> helping test policies and procedures, clarify roles and responsibilities, promote inter-agency cooperation and coordination, and open up a collaborative space for identifying opportunities for improvement.<sup>11</sup> The most basic TTXs involve a single scenario, presented to the participants at the outset. But governments most often use TTXs to pose iterative crisis situations – envi-

ronmental disasters,<sup>12</sup> cyberattacks,<sup>13</sup> pandemics<sup>14</sup> and even invasions.<sup>15</sup> Participants cumulatively work through the dilemmas raised.

But limiting the use of TTXs to these kinds of crisis simulations would reinforce the idea that business-as-usual thinking should be challenged only exceptionally. And revisiting taboos and settled old assumptions is something the EU feels it needs to do as the rules-based international order crumbles.<sup>16</sup> So instead, the EU increasingly uses TTXs in day-to-day policymaking. That, after all, is where traditional hierarchies and silos become embedded. The EU uses TTXs to support all four stages of the policy cycle, namely: (1) problem identification and agenda-setting; (2) policy formation and decisionmaking; (3) im-

1 Albert Świdziński, "A Brief History of Wargaming," *Strategy & Future* (August 2019), p. 5.

2 Trend impact analysis involves extrapolating historical data into the future, while horizon scanning focuses on identifying potential future opportunities and threats. See: Iana Dreyer and Gerald Stang, "Foresight in governments – practices and trends around the world," *EUISS Yearbook of European Security*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (Paris, 2013), pp. 7–32.

3 Examples of common biases include the tendency of individuals to favor a single perspective on an issue (framing bias), to be overconfident in their ability to make predictions (overconfidence bias), and to judge probability based on the ease with which they can recall or imagine similar instances (the availability heuristic). See: Elna Schirmeister, Anne-Louise Göhring, and Philine Warnke, "Psychological biases and heuristics in the context of foresight and scenario processes," *Futures Foresight Science* 2, no. 2 (2020), pp. 1–18; Ronald Bradfield, "Cognitive Barriers in the Scenario Development Process," *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 10, no. 2 (April 2008), pp. 198–215.

4 Fred Lunenburg, "Devil's Advocacy and Dialectical Inquiry: Antidotes to Groupthink," *International Journal of Scholarly Academic Intellectual Diversity* 14, no. 1 (2012), pp. 1–9.

5 Leon de Caluwé, Jac Geurts, and Wouter Jan Kleinlugtenbelt, "Gaming Research in Policy and Organization: An Assessment From the Netherlands," *Simulation and Gaming* 43, no. 5 (2012), pp. 600–626.

6 Jan Techau, "In the Crisis, It's Therapy before Strategy," *Boulevard Extérieur* (February 2013): <<https://www.boulevard-exterieur.com/in-the-crisis-it-s-therapy-before-strategy.html>> (accessed April 4, 2021); Richard Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion?" *International Security* 25, no. 2, (Fall 2000) pp. 5–50.

7 Laurent Bontoux, John Sweeney, Aaron Rosa et al., "A Game for All Seasons: Lessons and Learnings from the JRC's Scenario Exploration System," *World Futures Review* 12, no. 1 (2020) pp. 81–103.

8 Leon de Caluwé et al., "Gaming Research in Policy and Organization: An Assessment From the Netherlands," p. 613.

9 Ibid. pp. 607–608, 613.

10 Daniel Fiott, "Stress Tests: An insight into crisis scenarios, simulations and exercises," *EUISS Brief* 9, European Union Institute for Security Studies (September, 2019): <<https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/stress-tests>> (accessed April 4, 2021).

11 "Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program," *US Department of Homeland Security* (2020): <<https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Homeland-Security-Exercise-and-Evaluation-Program-Doctrine-2020-Revision-2-2-25.pdf>> (accessed April 4, 2021) p. V.

12 Kurt Fredrickson, "Recap of 2020 Spill of National Significance executive seminar," *Coast Guard Maritime Commons* (October 21, 2020): <<https://mariners.coastguard.blog/2020/10/21/recap-of-2020-spill-of-national-significance-executive-seminar>> (accessed April 4, 2021).

13 Robin Emmott, "Cyber alert: EU ministers test responses in first computer war game," *Reuters* (September 7 2017): <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-defence-cyber/cyber-alert-eu-ministers-test-responses-in-first-computer-war-game-idUSKCN1BIOHR>> (accessed April 4, 2021).

14 Karen Wood and Stanley Supinski, "Pandemic Influenza Tabletop Exercises: A Primer for the Classroom and Beyond," *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* 5, no. 1 (August 2008), pp. 1–21.

15 "Polish Army Defeat in simulated war. Exercises show defeat in five days" [in Polish] *Onet* (February 1, 2021): <<https://www.onet.pl/informacje/onetwiadomosci/porazka-polskiej-armii-w-symulowanej-wojnie-cwiczenia-wykazaly-kleske-w-piec-dni/pmh647s,79cfc278>> (accessed April 4, 2021).

16 Zaki Laidi, "Can Europe Learn to Play Power Politics?" *Centre for European Reform* (November 2019): <<https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/essay/2019/can-europe-learn-play-power-politics>> (accessed April 4, 2021).

plementation; and (4) evaluation.<sup>17</sup> TTXs will likely have most impact at the end of one policy cycle and beginning of the next, in the phase between evaluation (4) and agenda-setting (1).

## THE AUTHORS' EXPERIENCE WITH TTX DESIGN

In 2020, we developed a tabletop exercise based around the needs of EU foreign policymakers working with “difficult” partners in Eastern Europe and Africa – states that don’t always adhere to the EU’s own normative agenda, but where the EU has no choice but to engage. A TTX seemed like precisely the right tool: the strand of EU policy was frozen at that pivotal stage between evaluation and agenda-setting – frozen for the simple reason that it had hit a brick wall. The impasse was seemingly down to a problem with institutional hierarchies, as officials in Brussels were said to reject an (overt) change in their policy trajectory, while those out in the field were apparently pushing for what they saw as pragmatic change. Above all, a taboo was blocking progress, and a TTX – with its appeal to “risky-shifty” thinking – could provide a safe space for policymakers to experiment.<sup>18</sup>

So what was the impasse and what was the taboo? It was about whether the EU should engage with governments that had criminal ties. The EU’s dilemma arose in the wake of the 2015 to 2016 Schengen crisis as it sought to tackle the networks of migrants, criminals, and terrorists that were edging ever closer to its borders. The taboo was that to successfully pursue its interests, the EU found it needed to work with governments that were actively collud-

ing with these very same criminals – Ankara, say, or the various power centers in Libya. Under the title “A Wicked Problem: How to Cooperate with Collusive States?”, the exercise has just been published by the EU Institute for Security Studies, an agency of the EU.<sup>19</sup> And, given the current ubiquity of such exercises in Brussels, we wanted to record the experience.

We began work at a time when the EU had become reliant on the ring of states surrounding it – many of which were entangled in relationships with smugglers, traffickers, and other criminal groups – to act as buffers. This went against the grain for the EU, and its traditional understanding of itself as a “normative power” prompted it to crack down on what it saw as clear-cut examples of corruption, kleptocracy, and state capture. But a more interest-led approach pressed it to engage. This played out initially in Libya, a country with no central government, where the EU informally relied on a deal which its member state Italy had reportedly made with militias.<sup>20</sup> But, increasingly, it found itself formalizing cooperation with governments closer to home that had overt links to criminal gangs and even terrorist networks.<sup>21</sup>

Things came to a head during the coronavirus crisis, when governments in the neighborhood pointed out that their criminal collusion was not always a bad thing. There was growing critique of Europeans for lecturing developing countries while relying on them to do the dirty work.<sup>22</sup> Governments across the neighborhood found that they could only support their populations by resorting to criminal collusion – for instance, accepting the help of criminal groups to access or distribute vaccines.<sup>23</sup> Some, following Russia’s lead, had begun to openly use links to

17 Jagoda Gandziarowska-Ziotecka and Dorota Stasiak, “Simulation and Gaming for Policy Advice,” *Handbuch Politikberatung* [Policy Advice Manual], eds. S Falk, M. Glaab, A. Rommele, H. Schober, and M. Thunnert (Wiesbaden, 2019), pp. 563–582.

18 Leon de Caluwé et al., “Gaming Research in Policy and Organization: An Assessment From the Netherlands,” p. 611.

19 Roderick Parkes and Mark McQuay, “Wicked Problem: How to cooperate with collusive states?,” *Chaillot Paper 65*, European Union Institute of Security Studies (March 2021): <<https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/wicked-problem>> (accessed April 4, 2021).

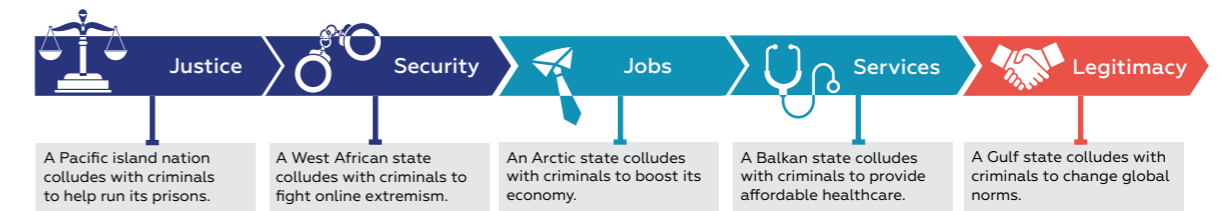
20 Patrick Müller and Peter Slominski, “Breaking the legal link but not the law? The externalization of EU migration control through orchestration in the Central Mediterranean,” *Journal of European Public Policy* (2020), DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2020.1751243.

21 Various examples can be found in the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. See, among others: “Milo Djukanovic: 2015 Person of the Year in Organized Crime and Corruption,” *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project* (2015): <<https://www.occrp.org/en/poy/2015/>> (accessed April 4, 2021); Sasa Dragojlo, “In Serbia, State’s Ties to Crime Become Hard to Miss,” *Balkan Insight* (February 16, 2021): <<https://balkaninsight.com/2021/02/16/in-serbia-states-ties-to-crime-become-hard-to-miss/>> (accessed April 4, 2021); Ryan Gingeras, “Is Turkey Turning into a Mafia State? The Case of Reza Zarrab and the Rise in Organized Crime,” *Foreign Affairs* (November 30, 2017): <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2017-11-30/turkey-turning-mafia-state>> (accessed April 4, 2021).

22 “Develop as We Say, Not as We Did,” Interview with Ha-Joon Chang, Berkeley Review of Latin American Studies (April 7, 2008): <<https://clas.berkeley.edu/research/development-develop-we-say-not-we-did>> (accessed April 4, 2021); Ottorino Cappelli, “Pre-Modern State-Building in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24, no. 4 (2008), pp. 531–72.

23 “Covid-19 Vaccines And Corruption Risks: Preventing Corruption In The Manufacture, Allocation, and Distribution Of Vaccines,” *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* (Vienna, January 2021): <[https://www.unodc.org/documents/Advocacy-Section/20-07643\\_Vaccines\\_CorruptionA4\\_approv2.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/Advocacy-Section/20-07643_Vaccines_CorruptionA4_approv2.pdf)> (accessed April 4, 2021); Stefano Betti, “COVID-19 vaccine race: the black market opportunity,” *International Institute for Security Studies* (February 12, 2021): <<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/02/covid-19-vaccines-black-market>> (accessed April 4, 2021); Clive Williams, “Covid-19 vaccines hit the black market,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute* (February 22, 2021): <<https://www.aspi.org.au/covid-19-vaccines-hit-the-black-market/>> (accessed April 4, 2021); Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Beware the criminal threat to the fight against COVID-19,” *Brookings Institute* (December 18, 2020): <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/18/beware-the-criminal-threat-to-the-fight-against-covid-19/>> (accessed April 4, 2021).

## 2 – FIVE SCENARIOS OF CRIME-STATE COLLUSION TO ACHIEVE DEVELOPMENTAL GOALS



criminal groups as a legitimate part of national strategy.<sup>24</sup> How should the EU navigate this tricky field? This was fertile ground for a TTX.

Our TTX consisted of a sequence of six collaborative scenario exercises (see Figure 2) designed to help policymakers collectively consider one big taboo: the idea that, under certain conditions, state collusion with criminals can have positive outcomes for developing states and their societies, and so help the EU to structure and explain its engagement better. We built these scenarios on the basis of historical analysis and future trends, and created plausible narratives about how those states that collude with criminals spur their own development, and even set themselves on a path toward economic and political liberalism. Our assessment was that EU diplomats had failed to consider this eventuality because they had – as is so often the case – framed the dilemma as an issue of “values versus interests” and split along realist/idealist lines.

## HOW TO DESIGN A TTX

In designing a TTX which would help both camps – realists and idealists – explore a way to come together to pursue both naked interests and higher values,<sup>25</sup> we tried to follow good design practice and avoid “halo or horns” thinking, which neglects the middle ground.<sup>26</sup> We designed five scenarios that would help participants identify “positive” forms of collusion, each one imagining circumstances in which a partner state might resort to collusion in a

bid to improve its governance capacity. Taken together, the scenarios draw on an alternative model of state-building, one in which crime (rather than the market economy and development policy) is a driving force.<sup>27</sup> And so they make a distinction between collusion (potentially beneficial to state-building) and corruption (a subcategory of collusion that instead weakens the state).

We began the design process without any clear idea of the final structure of the TTX. EU policymakers in Brussels had framed the policy dilemma in terms of fighting crime, terrorism, and migration, and it took time to realize that the real issue was one of crime-state relations and whether these might be a positive thing. We then extrapolated weak signals from six world regions that were related to this central theme, working each into a separate scenario. The scenarios were played out in states with different levels of development, different histories of colonialism, and different present-day relationships with the EU. But they shared the same essential characteristic: the idea that collusion could, in fact, have a positive state-building effect.

In order to coax the players of the TTX into risky-shifty behavior, we set the scenario in the future, and we fictionalized the real-world case-countries. But we also ensured that the scenarios remained plausible from a present-day perspective, allowing participants to think about the path that might lead the EU and its partners to this point. We sought to achieve realism by creating an immersive narrative that mixed desirable and undesirable elements and al-

24 Mark Galeotti, “Crimintern: How the Kremlin uses Russia’s criminal networks in Europe,” *European Council on Foreign Relations* (April 18, 2017): <[https://ecfr.eu/publication/crimintern\\_how\\_the\\_kremlin\\_uses\\_russias\\_criminal\\_networks\\_in\\_europe/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/crimintern_how_the_kremlin_uses_russias_criminal_networks_in_europe/)> (accessed April 4, 2021).

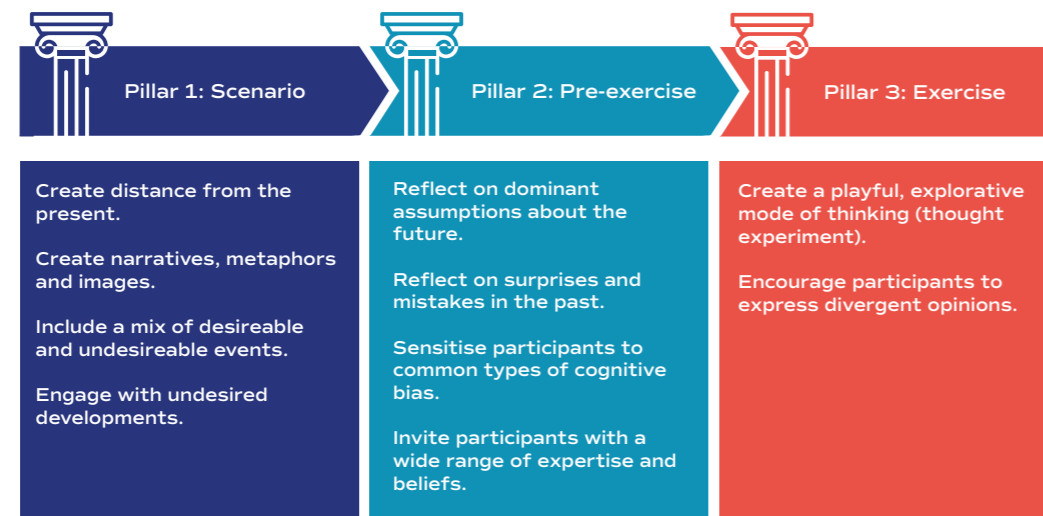
25 On this fusion of interest and values: Sven Biscop, “The EU Global Strategy: Realpolitik with European Characteristics,” *Egmont Institute* (June 29, 2016): <<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/eu-global-strategy/>> (accessed April 4, 2021).

26 Schirmeister et al., “Psychological biases and heuristics in the context of foresight and scenario processes,” p. 13.

27 Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in *Bringing the State Back In*, eds. P. Evans, D. Rueschmeyer, and T. Skocpol (Cambridge: 1985); Renate Bridenthal, “The Hidden History of Crime, Corruption, and States: An Introduction,” *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 3 (2012): <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41678899>> (accessed April 2, 2021) pp. 575–581.



### 3 – THREE PILLARS OF A SUCCESSFUL TABLETOP EXERCISE



Source: Adapted in Part from Schirmeister et al., 2020

lowed participants ample scope to engage with them. We also presented the scenarios as a thought exercise rather than a simulation in order to encourage a more playful, explorative mode of thinking.<sup>28</sup>

#### WHAT IF ... NOT?

Readers of the publication will note that it includes a sequence of only five scenarios (as well as an initial scene-wetting scenario). Our TTX originally included a sixth and final scenario, but this could not be included due to the understandable judgment of the publishers that it was a needless provocation for our target audience and was likely to reverse any progress made in facing up to taboos. This final chapter, which we produce online below (see also Figure 4), focuses on crime-state relations in the EU itself and was designed as a way to complete the thought process in two important ways. Rather than simply asking “what if...?” the final scenario asked “what if... not?”

According to TTX best practice, the final step in the thought process should be the counterfactual. Once players have considered (to their own satisfaction) the implications of action, they should next consider inaction. In the EU this is often done in actuarial terms – in the EU’s “cost of non-Europe” reports, for

example, which try to calculate the economic disadvantages if the EU does not take (costly) action. Approaching the same question through a TTX allows for something deeper. The question is not simply “What if the EU does not act?” but rather “What does it mean if the EU fails to challenge the assumptions that lie behind inaction?” or “What if the EU continues to pontificate its values while covertly engaging in collusion?”

Over the course of the five scenarios that had come before, we had helped participants recognize that three positive liberal developmental dynamics were potentially at play in crime-state relations:

1. Marginal sections of society turn to crime in order to supplement a weak state or to push back against an overbearing one.
2. The state uses collusion to advance through three stages of state-building: centralizing the power of coercion, the extraction of capital, and, finally, claims to legitimacy.
3. The same logic of *raison d'état* that leads states to collude with criminals to boost their own capabilities in turn leads them to crack down on them once they have usurped their powers.

All three dynamics were extrapolated, in part at least, from Europe’s own historical development. As such, it was important for participants in the TTX to consider the idea that liberal European states were themselves built on crime. Our aim was to challenge not only the explicit idea that criminal collusion and liberal state-building are somehow incompatible but also the implicit assumption that modern-day Europe is somehow immune to the pressure to engage in “collusive state-building” that is felt by today’s developing states. After all, European integration remains a nascent state-building project in itself, and the final scenario imagined how the EU, too, could fall into a collusive relationship with criminals, given that the EU is under concerted pressure to boost its governance capabilities. The EU’s tacit reliance upon militias in Libya and kleptocrats in the Balkans to supplement its own security capabilities falls into this pattern of behavior.

#### A WARNING FROM THE FUTURE – OR FROM THE PAST?

What lesson can we draw from our experience of designing this scenario exercise? We found that a playful and collaborative TTX guided by a far-sighted designer can be a formidable tool for expanding policymakers’ perspectives and challenging implicit assumptions; but it can also be a dangerous one when used in a high-pressure environment. TTXs are based on the premise that effective strategy-making is feasible, and all that stands in the way are policymakers’ cognitive and administrative limitations. But our concern is that policymakers do not need coaxing into facing up to taboos and may instrumentalize a TTX as an excuse to go much further than its designers intended. At present, the EU is under huge pressure to face up to a hostile new international environment – one in which a growing pool of states are ready to deal with criminal partners. In order to secure its interests, the EU appears ready to face up to taboos and engage in a form of *realpolitik*. The kind of “risky-shifty” behavior encouraged by TTXs may provide the environment for a new power politics to emerge.

The publishers chose to omit the final scenario of our TTX on the grounds that EU policymakers might be perturbed by the thought of the EU itself directly resorting to collusion, and this kind of provocative

scenario would set back progress made. This was a judgment call that we, of course, accepted. But when we discussed the full TTX to policymakers both in Brussels and out in the field, they said that what they really wanted was for a think tank to confront them with some hard truths in this way. Far from being troubled by the scenarios, they appeared to enjoy the TTX’s breaking of taboos. If this experience is anything to go by, foresight specialists would do well to consider the eventuality that policymakers might be less hidebound than they are often portrayed. What if, far from being tied down by cognitive blind spots, they in fact want an excuse to break taboos? A seemingly playful tool, meant to gently coax policymakers into facing up to taboos, the TTX risks being instrumentalized as a way to break them.

In July 2001, Johns Hopkins University ran a simulation designed to stress test the United States’ response in the seemingly unlikely event of a terrorist attack on American soil using biological weapons. The simulation’s dire warning about US crisis response capabilities went largely unheeded, but under the extreme pressure of the fallout from the September 11 attacks, policymakers seized upon the exercise to justify breaking a taboo. Citing the scenario as an example of “the devastation Iraq could wreak on our country with a biological attack,” the administration of US President George W. Bush launched a “preemptive strike” against its imagined perpetrator.<sup>29</sup> Participants had broken taboos in the comfort of a simulation exercise and were prepped to do it in real life.

Our own TTX was initially conceived with a similar aim. It looked to embolden EU policymakers to challenge the taboos that prevented them from openly engaging with states with criminal ties. It was expected that by exploring the implications of a failure to critically re-examine these taboos, the final exercise would spur policymakers into action. But actually, the effect would have been somewhat different. By casting the EU itself as a criminal state, the exercise would instead have made policymakers more reflective about the implications of taking action towards states that find themselves in a similar position. This would have been a good corrective given that we had underestimated their desire to break taboos.

28 Schirmeister et al., “Psychological biases and heuristics in the context of foresight and scenario processes,” p. 15.

29 US Senate Committee on Armed Services, US Policy on Iraq, HRG-107-840 (September 2002): <<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-107shrg84837/html/CHRG-107shrg84837.htm>> (accessed May 5, 2021).

## THE FINAL SCENARIO: EUROPE AND THE COST OF EXCEPTIONALISM

Our aim in this final, unpublished scenario was to highlight the blind spots in the EU's thinking about crime-state relations, in particular its own susceptibility to rely on criminals to boost its governance capabilities.

The final scenario builds on the fact that the EU is a nascent state-building project in itself and showed how it may co-opt criminal actors into boosting its own governance capabilities. This pattern highlighted the potential – witnessed historically in Europe and currently abroad – for collusion to be used strategically, with states following a logic of *raison d'état*

and narrative. At the end of each round, the group of participants was given 15 minutes in which to discuss a set of questions posed by the moderator. We chose to present the scenario here via an interactive online tool designed to guide participants through the exercise. This also has the advantage that it increases the replicability of the exercise, allowing groups of participants to access and use it remotely.

### Round 1: Setting the Scene

The first round of the exercise begins with an introductory text that gives participants a snapshot of the



Source: DGAP & McQuay eLearning, 2021

in order to achieve developmental goals. In the scenario, we imagine the same dynamics at play within the EU. The scenario is meant to demonstrate how, if the EU fails to understand the connection between crime and development or assumes that it is simply immune to this pressure to collude with criminals for purposes of state-building, it will be unable to correct its own behavior.

The TTX designed for this scenario was divided into four rounds, each one based around an immer-

future in which the scenario takes place. This text sets the tone for the exercise, consciously creating a playful and unexpected narrative to draw participants outside of their comfort zone and encourage creative thinking. Once the scenario has been presented, participants are given a number of short discussion prompts and are invited to imagine how this future may have come about. This type of inductive reasoning challenges participants to stretch their imagination and consider eventualities they might otherwise have ruled out.

In this section, our key aim is to highlight that the EU is not immune to crime-state relations.

### Round 2: How We Got Here

The second round of discussion is designed to demonstrate to participants that continuity, not only change, can lead to unexpected outcomes. It does so by providing examples of well-intentioned policies that draw on the EU's current policy approach, projecting this approach forward into an imagined future where they yield negative outcomes. This challenges the tendency of policymakers to imagine the status quo as a "neutral" or even inherently positive course of action and to limit themselves to the kind of "business-as-usual" thinking which allows blind spots to emerge.

In this section, we examine how the EU fell into collusive relationships with criminal groups. We show how the EU might use its ties to criminals – armed militias and kleptocrats in its neighborhood – to strengthen its capacity to govern.

### Round 3: The Tipping Point

In the third round of the exercise, participants are invited to discuss the plausibility of these described in the text. The aim is to sensitize them to weak signals in the present which are often overlooked or dismissed by policymakers. This helps challenge policymakers' tendency to afford greater significance to signals that reinforce their existing assumptions about the future or which replicate patterns with which they are familiar. Participants are also asked to think of ways in which the EU could have acted differently. This primes them to begin thinking deductively about the potential outcomes of different policy approaches.

In this section, we link the scenario back to the EU's failure to understand crime-state relations. Brussels has not understood that society uses crime to fill in for deficits in EU governance or push back against it where it is overbearing, and that it is incumbent on the EU's own sense of *raison d'état* to expel criminal elements as soon as it has absorbed their capabilities.

### Round 4: Drawing Conclusions

The fourth round resolves the scenario and invites participants to draw conclusions about the lessons that can be learned from it. Here, participants are challenged to move from inductive to deductive thinking, taking this alternative future as a starting point and working forward to achieve a desired outcome. This highlights to participants that the future is malleable rather than fixed and challenges them to use creative thinking to imagine innovative solutions.

In this final section, we highlight the ways in which the EU could wean itself off crime-state relations. We invite participants to think of examples from other parts of the world that have already been through this process and highlight that the EU is – after all – not so different to them.

A full interactive version of the exercise can be accessed on the DGAP website [here](#). The text is also reproduced in an annex below.

## APPENDIX – TTX: EUROPE AND THE COST OF EXCEPTIONALISM

### ROUND 1 - SETTING THE SCENE

The US president takes to the stage at her private ranch in Wyoming to give her speech to the A5 Summit. There is a sense of levity in the air as White House staffers foist Stetsons on the other leaders – Australian, British, Indian and Nigerian. The high spirits dissipate as the president begins to speak. She describes a global ‘Ring of Vice’, operating primarily out of Latin America and West Africa. The Anglophone Five (A5) is launching SATO, the South Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and it expects West Africa and Latin America to finance it. In Latin America, the image of the ‘cinco amigos’ becomes a source of humour, but the region’s leaders are rattled. Mexico decries the return of ‘frontier justice’ in Washington. The Colombian foreign minister goes even further, describing the A5 as a ‘protection racket’. The UK and America, he says, are not new to this game.<sup>1</sup> But, until now, the other Anglophone powers had been much more circumspect.

As the A5 piles pressure on West Africa and Latin America, China sees an opportunity to make diplomatic capital. In contrast to the A5’s bullish rhetoric, Beijing takes a less heavy-handed approach. China volunteers to deploy law enforcement officers across West Africa, Latin America and the Atlantic: these experts will broker cooperation across the region, and their presence will ‘prevent Anglophone expansionism’. Its officers will apply Chinese law only to expatriates, and they are not offering access to social control technology. (China has long since realised the limitations of its domestic brand of high-tech authoritarianism, especially in parts of the world that it does not fully comprehend.) But Chinese officers should be given preferential access to market intelligence, social databases, transport infrastructure and other networks. The China of 2035 is truly a land of contrasts: at once oriental and orientalist, draconian and serpentine.

These developments are antithetical to Brussels – but the EU is caught off guard. On the way back from the summit, the Nigerian president makes an unexpected stop in London and, in a joint statement with the UK prime minister, describes the EU as ‘the

north-eastern loop of the Ring of Vice’. As Brussels aggressively refutes the claim as a bid to denigrate it, EU policing experts urge caution. For a decade now, Europol has been warning that the EU risks becoming a net exporter of criminal services, counterfeit goods and irregular migrants. Brussels needs to wake up to the reality that crime has become a lucrative European export. Cartels that spent decades smuggling cocaine into Europe now smuggle low-cost chemicals out. They transport them to the sprawling urban slums of West Africa, where popup labs transform them into powerful stimulants. These are then shipped to mature markets in Latin America, where white collar workers consume them to outrun the onset of automation. The EU finds itself squeezed between the A5 and China. Latin American and West African states seem keen to accept Chinese help, if only to keep the A5 at bay. Is Europe willing to do the same?

#### DISCUSSION

This is the first of four discussion rounds. Each round will take between fifteen and thirty minutes and will be followed by a short feedback session.

For each discussion round, you will be asked to break into groups of 3-5 participants to discuss some of the issues raised in the scenario. In this round you will have fifteen minutes once the timer has been activated.

You should spend roughly five minutes discussing each of the following questions:

- Does this scenario seem plausible to you?
- How could the situation described in the scenario have come about?
- Can you think of any present-day trends or weak signals that might point towards such a future?

1. Mark Caputo and Natasha Korecki, “NATO Is Not a Protection Racket”: Biden Test-Drives New Trump Attack,” *Politico*, May 12, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/12/05/nato-joe-biden-trump-076529>; Yicheng Zhang, “The Empire Strikes Back: Post-Brexit Britain’s Return to East of Suez,” *SIPA Journal of International Affairs*, February 8, 2019, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/empire-strikes-back-post-brexit-britains-return-east-suez>.

### ROUND 2 - HOW WE GOT HERE

Over the last decade, policing, prosecutorial and investigative services have all thinned out. This is not the product of Europe’s economic downturn, but modernisation: a decade of ‘smart’ governance has taken its toll. In 2025, the EU launched its ‘Security Union v. 2.0’.<sup>2</sup> Europol, the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency, and the EU Agency for Criminal Justice cooperation were strengthened in order to allow member states to streamline their national services. Centralisation was extended to the EU’s various security databases, and the new EU-Bureau for Automated Research Technology began mining them for data.<sup>3</sup> Automation and strategy-making were prioritised over training and recruitment.

This created vulnerabilities: the centralisation of Europe’s law enforcement capabilities exposed it to infiltration. As their ‘brightest and best’ went to work for EU agencies, member states began to recruit law enforcement officers abroad, prompting disgruntled countries of origin to withhold relevant vetting information. Corrosive elements entered the police from the ground up, and the top-heavy EU system became vulnerable to disinformation.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the EU embraced ‘modular enlargement’, offering its eastern neighbours full participation in selected EU policy fields, including justice and home affairs. States such as Armenia and Belarus, with unresolved ties to the Russian mafia-elite, joined the EU’s crime-fighting networks. They encouraged the EU to set up new money-making schemes, including ‘Schengen permits’ for foreign travellers and import-export businesses. Imperceptibly, the EU had come to rely on criminals to fight crime.

Europe’s leaders were blind to its internal crisis in law and order because they were fixated on an outside threat: irregular migration. A 2030 Pew poll showed that ‘as many as 38% of sub-Saharan Africans would like to move abroad’. This made headlines in Europe. But few newspapers noted the real story: only a tiny percentage actually wanted to go to Europe. When asked to rank their preferred destinations, they placed Nigeria and South Africa high

er than anywhere across the Mediterranean. Indeed, the percentage of the global population migrating to Europe actually shrank as other parts of the world became more prosperous. If absolute numbers of migrants remained high it was only because the global population itself was growing.<sup>5</sup> Focused on the stream of people coming in, and dependent on various militia-backed governments in Africa to hold back more, Europe’s leaders overlooked the flood of crime leaking out.

#### DISCUSSION

Break into groups of 3-5 participants. At least one group member should have been in a different group for the previous round.

Once the timer has been activated, you will have fifteen minutes to discuss the following questions:

- How plausible are the policies described in this text?
- What potential blind spots does the scenario reveal in the EU’s thinking?

2 The European Commission’s current ‘Security Union’ project aims to link up the EU’s disparate law enforcement databases: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/security-union-2017-jun-29\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/security-union-2017-jun-29_en).

3 EU-BART is the successor to today’s EU-LISA (the European agency for the operational management of large-scale IT systems). At present, EU-LISA is largely prohibited from mining the databases under its management.

4 Roderick Parkes, “Healthy Boundaries: Remedies for Europe’s Cross-Border Disorder,” *Chailot Paper* no. 152, EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris, May 2019, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_152\\_Borders.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_152_Borders.pdf)

5 The overall percentage of the world’s population that migrates has remained remarkably stable since the 1950s. If the absolute numbers of people moving has increased, it is largely because the total world population has increased; there are simply more people. See: “World Migration in Figures. A Joint Contribution by UN-DESA and the OECD to the United Nations High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development”, October 3-4, 2013, <https://www.oecd.org/els/mig/World-Migration-in-Figures.pdf>.



## ROUND 3 - THE TIPPING POINT

Europol had recognised that the EU's capabilities were shrinking and identified shifts like the continent's ageing population as the root: the pool of eager young European trainees had been shrinking, making recruitment to law enforcement agencies harder. Worse: governments had expected demographic ageing to drive crime rates down.<sup>6</sup> But the elderly failed to act their age. A series of pandemics throughout the early 2020s had led governments to cut spending on care for the elderly. The result: the 'grey crime wave'. Elderly Europeans had no qualms about buying counterfeit medicines and face masks woven from nanomaterials in sweatshops; senior civil servants offered services at special rates for their age cohort and charged youngsters a little more. A gulf emerged between young and old, and the only commonality was that both cohorts turned to crime. The elderly used crime to supplement welfare, younger generations for jobs and economic foundations.

By far the biggest inter-generational flashpoint was the question of migration and border control. Elderly Europeans imported clandestine healthcare workers rather than relying on the EU's impersonal automated system, antagonising youngsters who worried about job competition from immigrants willing to work for lower wages. Meanwhile, gangs of youths denied regular opportunities to emigrate to Asia raided Europe's museums for artefacts to 'repatriate' in return for passage out of the EU. They targeted the houses of rich elderly suburbanites in steal-to-order contracts for Russian and Chinese elites. Europe's young and old were united only in their frustration with Brussels. Over the previous five years, the EU had gradually been endowed with powers in sensitive fields such as jobs and welfare.<sup>7</sup> Critics said that the EU accrued these powers by stealth and outside the usual legitimising process of social contestation. As such, Brussels remained aloof and unresponsive to Europeans' needs and aspirations.

Soon the EU's internal problems began to spill out beyond its borders. Young Europeans learned to ex-

plot the sudden shift of wealth to cities in the Global South and East. They took advantage of new technologies (including identity shields and translation apps) to enter distant crime markets. As millions of towns across Asia and Africa came online, they provided a credulous, faceless target for Europeans.<sup>8</sup> Cryptocurrency scams targeted prosperous middle classes who were distrustful of volatile local economies and put their faith in technology.<sup>9</sup> European youths also exploited religious faith, coercing believers into unpaid tech labour and online sexual exploitation, or reeling them into supposedly 'Sharia-compliant' investment scams.<sup>10</sup> Some young Europeans went further, perpetrating a series of traceable cyberheists on Chinese and American financial institutions in the hope of attracting the attention of Washington and Beijing. Their efforts, it seems, have paid off.

### DISCUSSION

Break into groups of 3-5 participants. At least one group member should have been in a different group for the previous round.

Once the timer has been activated, you will have fifteen minutes to discuss the following questions:

- Do you think the developments at this stage of the scenario are plausible?
- What decision points could have sent the EU on a different path? What could have been done differently?

<sup>6</sup> Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson, "Age and the Explanation of Crime," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 89, no. 3 (1983), pp. 552-84.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Vandenbroucke, "Why We Need a European Social Union," *Reflets et perspectives de la vie économique*, vol. 52, nos 2-3 (2013), pp. 97-112.

<sup>8</sup> Sean Atkinson, "Psychology and the Hacker – Psychological Incident Handling," *SANS Institute*, June 20, 2015, <https://www.sans.org/reading-room/whitepapers/incident/paper/36077>

<sup>9</sup> "OneCoin Lawyer Found Guilty in 'Crypto-scam'," *BBC News*, November 21, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-50509299>.

<sup>10</sup> Erin Heil, "It Is God's Will: Exploiting Religious Beliefs as a Means of Human Trafficking," *Critical Research on Religion*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2016), pp. 48-61; Ali Ahmed, "OneCoin Scam: Pakistanis Disproportionately Affected, Lost Millions of Dollars in World's Biggest Cryptocurrency Scam," *Business Recorder*, October 30, 2019, <https://www.brecorder.com/2019/10/30/539558/onecoin-scam-pakistanis-were-disproportionately-affected-and-lost-millions-of-dollars-in-worlds-biggest-cryptocurrency-scam/>.

## ROUND 4 - THE MULTILATERAL RESPONSE

The US has successfully embraced crime, corruption and the toxic turn of globalisation, maintaining American primacy through deals with the world's venal elites. Washington affords each of the A5 states its own sphere of influence, so it falls to London to make a deal with Brussels. British diplomats privately court the EU's high officials, promising to broker their families' access to prestigious universities such as the Indian Institute for Technology in Bombay, among other perks; all they have to do is align with the A5. China's approach, meanwhile, is to reach out directly to the EU's poorest 20 million, promising development 'with local characteristics.' Often this means cutting shady deals with local mafias, militias and cartels, but Beijing has mastered the art of moral relativism. In Brussels, Chinese officials condemn the A5's imperialist attitude and promise that 'win-win cooperation' on law enforcement is the key to sparing Europe its own 'century of humiliation'.<sup>11</sup>

Dismayed by overtures from Washington and Beijing, the EU reaches out to friendly governments and relevant international organisations – the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Interpol and the International Organization for Migration. This 'troika' expresses sympathy. But then it delivers what is perhaps the final blow to Brussels' sense of its international standing. It proposes the establishment of an international mission to the EU, monitoring European governance standards. The members of the troika will operate from their former headquarters in Vienna, Lyon and Geneva. Brussels is taken aback and rejects the offer immediately. But Europe's capitals are more pragmatic. Fearing that they will be subject to economic sanctions, they strike deals with the US, China and the troika one by one. EU leaders turn on Brussels and Europol: how, they ask, could the EU permit crime to undermine 80 years of European integration?

But, in fact, it was the EU's drive against crime that did the most damage. Back in 2025, European leaders had taken a heavy-handed response to Europol's warnings that criminals were emerging as the core of the European market. Their response was to give Brussels the powers it needed to crack down. Criminals were becoming the avant-garde of European integration: they had begun to bridge Europe's cultural

and ethnic divides; had found new ways to break down the barriers that obstructed the EU's internal market; and were even opening up new opportunities abroad. The more inventive criminal gangs even became a source of pride and prestige for Europeans. And the harder Europol cracked down on criminal groups, the worse the problem became.

### DISCUSSION

Break into groups of 3-5 participants. At least one group member should have been in a different group for the previous round.

Once the timer has been activated, you will have thirty minutes to discuss the following questions:

- Following the events of the scenario, how could the EU act to recover its hold on law and order?
- How could it act to recover its international standing?
- What precedents could it draw on to help guide its recovery?

<sup>11</sup> Stawomir Sierakowski, "Europe's Age of Humiliation," *DGAP Commentary*, December 18, 2019, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/europes-age-humiliation>.



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