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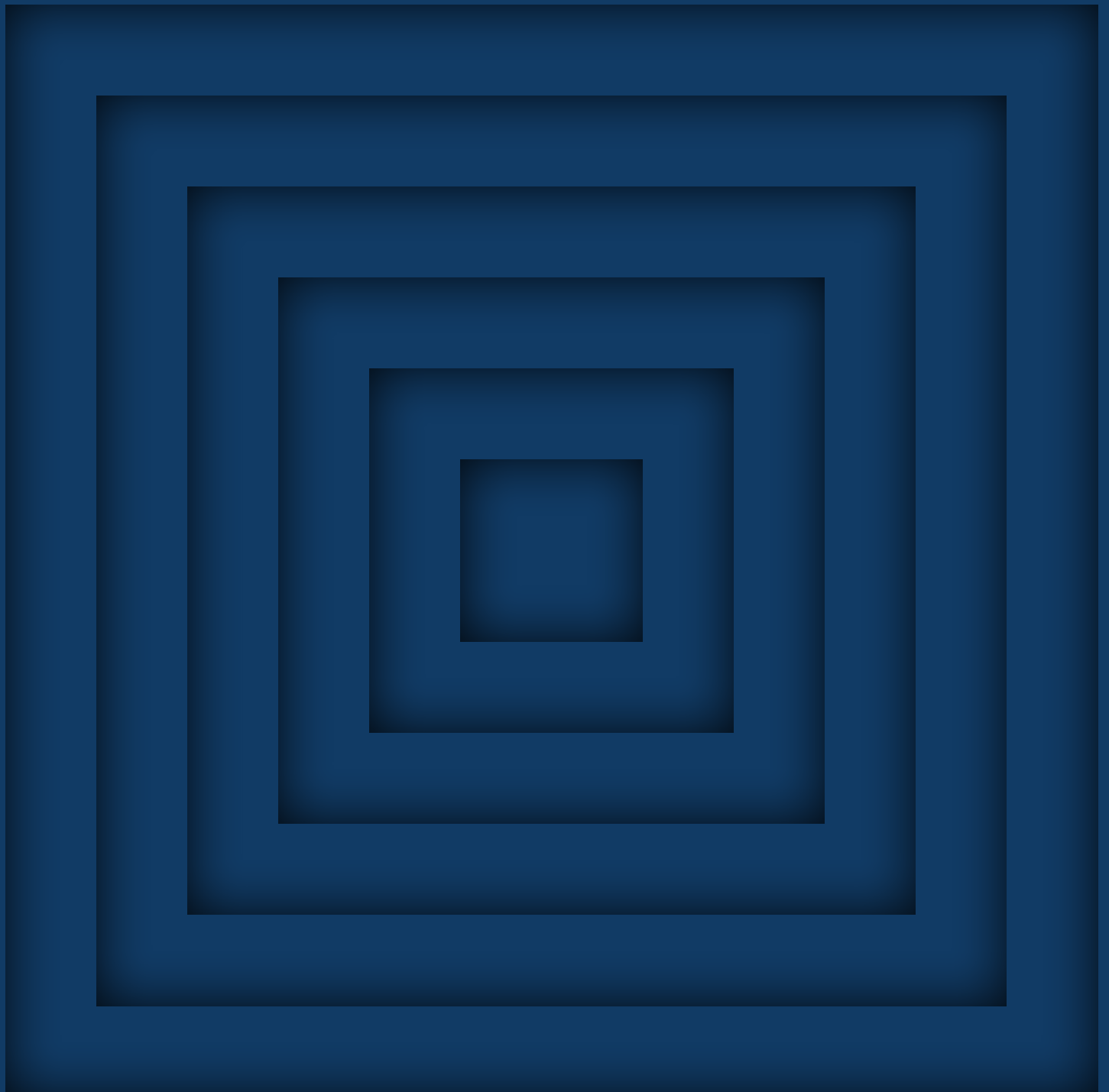
The Hague Strategic
Foresight Forum Talks

Navigating Tomorrow

Transatlantic Outlooks on the Future Security
Landscape and its Implications for the Netherlands

Pieter-Jan Vandoren

September 2024





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1. Introduction

The energy transition, climate change, artificial intelligence, great-power competition between the United States and China, and large-scale war on the European continent. These challenges are currently at the centre of attention for policymakers in Europe and the Netherlands, but their buildup has been years in the making.

Preparing for such future challenges is always difficult, since 'the future', does not exist. Futures are created by the perceptions of those making policy today. Therefore, engaging in conversation with other producers or consumers of foresight exercises is valuable, as it can augment collective understanding of certain trends and actors, thereby informing thinking about the future. Further, as choices are made the possible number of futures becomes more restricted as alternative paths are closed off.

Aside from the billions of possible futures floating around in the minds of people all over the world, there are also 'dominant futures'. These are the result of capstone exercises from a select group of elite organisations specialised in foresight, which translate the perceptions of their experts into a single document, thereby establishing 'a baseline' in foresight, often-times for elected political leaders. Finding areas of agreement, possible disagreement, and exploring mutual blind spots are important areas for the community of foresight experts to engage in.

Given the number of ongoing efforts across the transatlantic community to look into the future, it is useful to critically appraise their foundational assumptions. On the 3rd of July 2024, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies invited experts from across the transatlantic community, specifically the US National Intelligence Council, NATO Allied Command Transformation, and the EU Institute for Security Studies to do just that and exchange views on future security trends in the transatlantic community and their implications for the Netherlands and Europe.

2. Establishing a baseline in foresight

A sound understanding of the present is fundamental in crafting valuable foresight. Indeed, mental models of the future are not even cognitively possible without an understanding of the present and the recent past. Grasping the dynamics of the structural drivers listed above, such as climate change, is then a necessary first step in looking at how trends will continue to unfold into the future.

Drivers of change and shocks to the global system

Agreement was reached that long-term structural changes, such as technological and demographic drivers, remain fundamental. Beyond these, there were three additional drivers identified which are developing more immediately. The first is the emerging multipolarity of the international system and the competition that it has unleashed on the global stage. The second is climate change, relentlessly impacting people all over the world and shaping industry through the energy transition. The third is continuous technological innovation and the enormous speed of change in the world resulting from its subsequent implementation.

In addition to these three drivers, unexpected shocks to the global system can significantly impact the future, thereby adding an additional layer of complexity. While drivers remain a meaningful factor in the future, shocks can emerge and disappear in a couple of years, while making a lasting impact on our society. Examples of these shocks are the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Given these trends, drivers, and shocks one can understand the difficulty of establishing a baseline in foresight, having to contemplate the numerous what-ifs when building the accompanying scenarios. Nevertheless, through the chaos of a global order in transition, experts have been able to identify the following trends that may become decisive in the world of tomorrow.

Technology and the need for new governance models

The diffusion of technological innovation and the increased speed of connectivity is a long-running trend that touches others. This in turn has not only increased the speed of change but also its depth and breadth, profoundly impacting all levels of human interaction, from the international system down to the individual and across geographic areas. It has also changed state-society relations, in that how citizens engage with the state is now heavily mediated through technology, whether in day-to-day travel or more complex social credit systems.

These changes require a certain adaptability that not all actors possess, with governments especially struggling to adapt to new challenges and meet the expectations of their population. This has led to increased public discontent, dissatisfaction with the government and erosion of trust in the authorities.

These elements form part of a broader political trend where the current models of how societies are governed, including democracies, are being questioned. Democratic stagnation in advanced democracies is putting pressure on basic rights such as voting access and worsening polarisation as governments struggle to implement policies. While no clear answer has emerged on the governing style that is best at dealing with these rapid changes, the frustration and pressure building up on these systems means that environments, previously considered stable, might unexpectedly destabilise, thereby further adding to the complexity.

The democratisation of influence and the diffusion of power

The distribution of technology and knowledge has strongly empowered individuals and groups. The increased 'actorness' resulting from their newfound capabilities to understand and wield new technologies has allowed groups to become greater factors of importance in international security by rivalling the capabilities of state security forces.

Even companies, with their ability to adapt quicker to changes than states, now become the providers of essential services to states. The increased commercialisation of the security environment, where many functions normally provided by the armed forces have been privatised, has grown into Elon Musk's Starlink as an example of offering essential satellite services to governments that were previously provided by state space and intelligence agencies.

We're in a time where old models and rules and norms are not quite applicable or sufficient for the challenges we're facing

Obviously, there is no Houthi DARPA, to develop the new long-range missile technologies but at the same time, they now possess enough capacity in capabilities to efficiently service it, which was unimaginable over 10 years ago.

From the top of the moon to the bottom of the ocean

The competitiveness inherent to a multipolar system, combined with the increased number of actors and new technological capabilities has created the possibility that the global commons will serve as the newest frontier of competition. Fewer and fewer states are economically or financially dependent on a single hegemon, namely the US.

Climate change, resource scarcity and the desire to reduce strategic dependencies force states to race into the unregulated global commons in attempts to obtain the minerals and materials required for their prosperity. This in turn may drastically increase the scale of the competition, though no longer remaining on land but going from the surface of the moon to the bottom of the sea, including the atmosphere in between, to achieve strategic advantages vis-a-vis one another.

The persistence of hybrid conflict

Part of geopolitical competition in the technologically advanced, multipolar world order is the concept of hybrid warfare, which consists of state-sponsored attacks below the threshold of open conflict in an attempt to destabilise opponents. Hybrid attacks, being most effective against highly connected, open societies are therefore often used to target countries within the European Union. In an attempt to defend these countries an overview was made of the channels through which these threats could emerge with no less than 13 domains identified.

Ranging from the cyber domain to the public domain and everything in between, discussants considered that a 14th domain is missing, the emotional domain. With polarization trending upward within societies, the role of emotions and how these can be manipulated against citizens will remain important. It was stressed in the event that many of the disinformation campaigns associated with hybrid conflict actually originate from within states and are conducted by national officials and campaigns. The discussants considered the particular vulnerabilities of populations to emotional appeals in highly polarised contexts. The development and protection of this 14th domain therefore deserves more importance and building resilience in this domain will become of great importance in the near future.

Hybrid conflict, such as it is, was highlighted not only as a concern but also, slightly provocatively, as an opportunity. Against the backdrop of ruthless geopolitical competition for resources, constantly pitting states against each other, participants discussed that hybrid conflict also offers off-ramp opportunities and allows for competition to remain below the threshold of force. It was seen as adding options for both escalating and de-escalating tensions between states, thereby allowing for more granularity in responses.

Towards fragmentation and confrontation – a shared baseline

What does the baseline above tell us about the future security environment? Is it going to be dominated by fragmentation and confrontation or are there signs that we will reach a balance and go towards a more peaceful world characterised by cooperation? What is perhaps most interesting is that this baseline was universally recognised with little disagreement. This pessimistic baseline is nearly universally shared amongst transatlantic experts.

The discussion led to the prediction that the current drivers tilt the scales towards more conflict rather than less. It seems that there will be more capable players having to divide a dwindling amount of resources, in times of ever-increasing distrust. Great power states are choosing policies that are making this more likely.

There are silver linings as well, the increased levels of actorness for instance reflect a sign of greater global prosperity. The increasing levels of connectivity seemingly polarizing our societies also empower pro-democracy movements and constant intercultural interactions. Taking into account both the negative and positive aspects of trends, drivers, and shocks is a key step towards improving foresight predictions that skew overwhelmingly pessimistic.

3. Key takeaways for practitioners

One of the things I've noticed, though, is we're all circling around the same topics. There's not that much diversity in our products. (...) I worry about the convergence. And I want to make sure that we are challenging ourselves intellectually and in those products.

The discussions also aimed to take a critical view of the processes that guide foresight and to share insights on how to improve thinking about emerging trends and their relation to policy. It was of particular interest, or perhaps concern, that the baseline was similar across efforts and that there may be blind spots that are being missed as a result of a transatlantic consensus. This itself stimulated the further discussion detailed below.

Beware of groupthink

The ability to exchange views between producers and consumers of foresight reports is important as it allows for a better understanding of several actors and factors, potentially leading to novel perceptions of the future, augmented by the insights of other experts.

However, it was considered that the most critical part of the foresight report, being the assumptions that form the basis of the scenarios in the final reports, are not explicitly mentioned or shared with other experts. This means that very rarely these assumptions are critically reviewed by other experts, thereby risking unchallenged biases and neglecting non-dominant perspectives.

While criticism of core assumptions is limited, the large number of internal actors involved with the reports often leads to bland or watered-down assumptions with which everyone can agree. One expert remarked that despite the increasing number of foresight reports being produced, each end up with similar conclusions. This is particularly the case amongst transatlantic experts, who seemingly share very similar core assumptions and make similar predictions.

Doom rules the day

Not only was it agreed that the reports contained many similarities, but it was also revealed that all of their outlooks were bleak. So bleak in fact that it was inconceivable for some that there even would be a reason to be optimistic about the future.

This was in stark contrast with other places in the world, where foresight reports were considered to be more optimistic, begging the question, what assumptions are being made in other places in the world that allow them to arrive at these positive outlooks? Does this imply that the assumptions made by the transatlantic community are wrong? Returning to core

assumptions, it would be difficult to imagine that the Atlantic world's relative economic and political decline might be a positive for others in the world.

An answer was that because the Atlantic world has lived in a prolonged era of peace and prosperity, our baseline had become so high that the current war raging on the European continent severely impacted our perception of potential futures. It could be the case however, that since North Americans and Europeans are so closely involved in the conflict, the impact of this event could be overestimated and perhaps assumptions should be critically reevaluated by opening discussions with foresight experts from outside the transatlantic community.

Dealing with confusion

The rise of discontinuities in society and the world as a whole poses an additional challenge to foresight. Drivers such as technological advancements, multipolarity, and climate change are creating so much simultaneous change that analysts have difficulty sifting through the mass of information.

Confusion muddles the way humans process information, perceive trends, and make assumptions. Confusion as a result of information overflow negatively affects the identification of a trend or an actor, thereby seriously decreasing the quality of the foresight and the potential futures. Importantly, confusing causes and effects can negatively impact information to policymakers.

This leads to the paradoxical situation where the demand for clarity in foresight is rising while simultaneously more difficult to conduct. It was noted that this will necessitate more investment in foresight capabilities, while simultaneously being more critical of the reports that are being published and require scrutinising their findings with outsider perspectives.

Addressing blind spots

It was agreed that the knowledge of internal dynamics was largely missing, a blind spot that had not been considered yet, but that should be included in future reports. After all, how can global developments be framed without a grounding in domestic contexts? Indeed, it is often a structural block when it comes to including domestic issues in foresight efforts, as intelligence offices have no remit to study such issues or reach conclusions.

Relatedly, an additional blind spot, or rather a tension, was found in that it is difficult to conduct foresight focused on external affairs when one's government is actively working to shape that same environment. It is analytically difficult to factor in such efforts as it can run the risk of passing judgment on policy, an effort government foresight strongly avoids. The analytical challenge then is that causes and effects can be lost within this blind spot, leading to spurious conclusions.

We were explicitly asked to create a positive foresight, but it's very difficult, if none of our actual foresight group or community wants to play the positive scenario.

Key Takeaways

The goals for this first The Hague Strategic Foresight Forum Talk were to establish a baseline in foresight amongst transatlantic experts and to have an in-depth discussion on similarities, differences and blind spots. The following two takeaways stand out:

First, the forum participants agreed on the fact that the future will be characterised by pervasive competition worsened by technological drivers. Driven by the multipolarity of the international system, enabled by technological advancements and intensified by climate change, states and non-state actors will be pitted against each other in an attempt to remain afloat in a rapidly changing environment. Despite a few silver linings, the majority of emerging trends confirmed this dynamic, giving the forum the impression that states choosing a major kinetic conflict is more rather than less likely.

Second, with the value of foresight clear to all, the participants agreed that the foresight process needs to be further improved. An important improvement would be to disclose the key assumptions being made in these foresight reports, allowing these to be critically reevaluated and challenged by other producers and consumers of reports, thereby potentially leading to novel insights. In addition, the involvement of various institutions, countries, or actors in producing these reports often results in assumptions that everyone can agree to, leading to bland conclusions that risk becoming outdated quickly. Foresight and policymakers are better served by challenging assumptions rather than by creating consensus views of the future.

I think sometimes we underestimate just how quickly the world can change. And I think that makes it even more important for us to do this kind of foresight work, and to be bolder with the types of scenarios that we're going to build.



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