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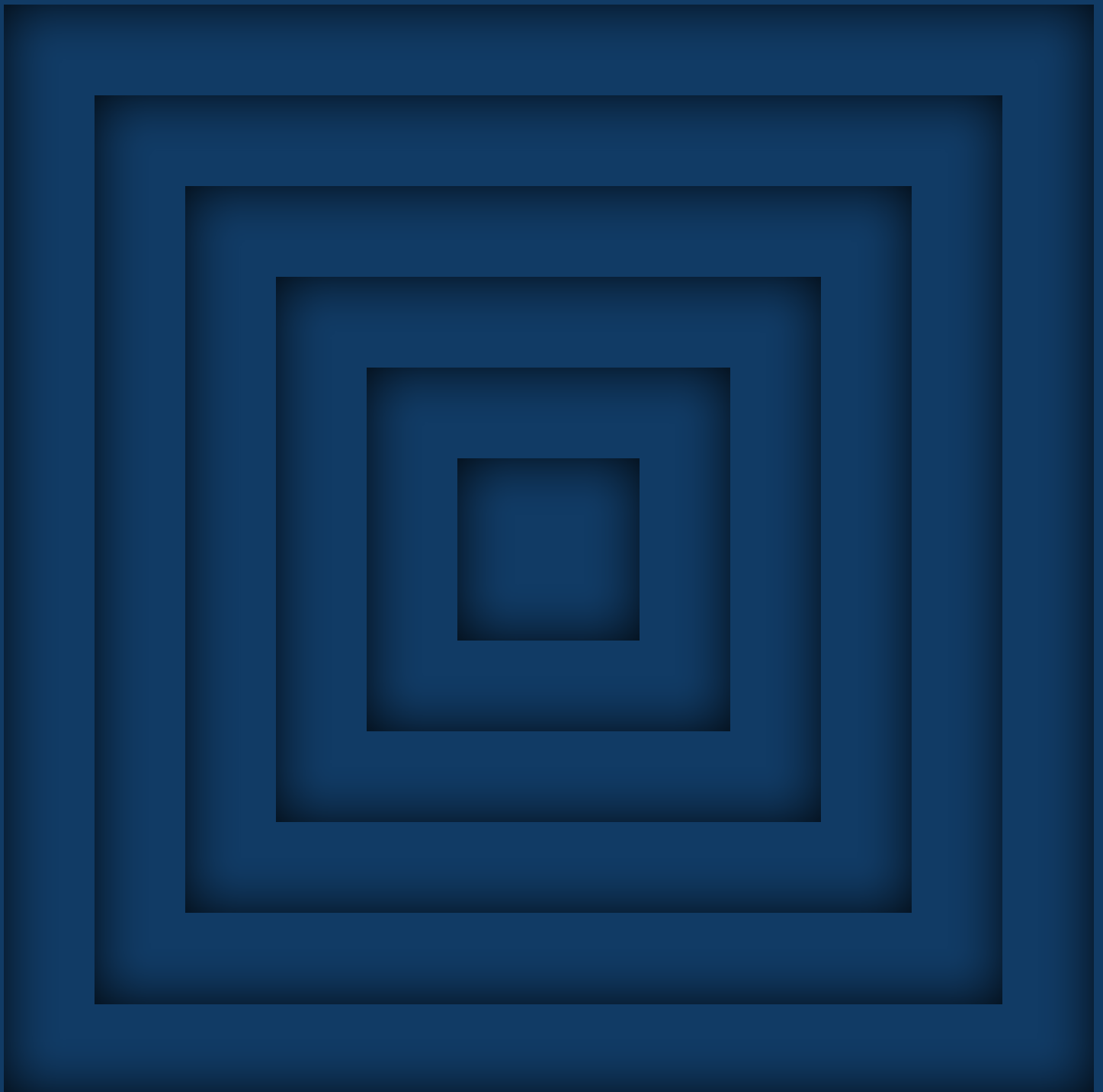
The Hague Strategic
Foresight Forum Talks

Navigating Tomorrow

Global Perspectives on Future Security Trends

Pieter-Jan Vandoren

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1. Introduction

In the first The Hague Strategic Foresight Forum Talk a group of transatlantic foresight experts set out to establish a baseline in foresight and share their views on future drivers and trends in international security. The similarity of their observations hinted towards a Western bias through which the future was perceived, raising the question whether transatlantic perspectives can accurately grasp the full spectrum of global dynamics.

On the 23rd of September 2024, HCSS hosted a second Forum, titled Global Perspectives on Future Security Trends, to introduce wider perspectives on emerging trends in international security, and engage non-Western experts on the baseline set by their transatlantic counterparts.

It became clear that key elements of the transatlantic baseline were viewed differently by our second group of experts. Critical reflections on the efficacy of capitalism alongside liberal democracy as a guiding structure for developing countries, essentially the foundation of the transatlantic worldview, reflected a fundamental disparity in perceptions between our first and second group of experts.

Futures exist in the minds of policy-makers and are determined by perceptions shaped by political, social, and economic factors. The observed divergence in global perceptions served as an indicator of larger discrepancies. As one of the speakers summarised: *“How you view the future depends on where you are.”* The Western baseline established in the first event appeared to be incomplete and reflective of a quite homogeneous, consensus view of the future amongst foresight practitioners.

This summary of the second Forum represents the perceptions of non-Western experts and attendees as expressed during the Forum, on several key elements featuring in the Western baseline, including models of cooperation and competition, the role of democracy, and the relationship between multipolarity and multilateralism. It also offers their analysis of the key drivers underpinning future security drivers, this time from an African, Latin American, and UN perspective. It concludes with a set of key takeaways and conclusions offered by the participants.

2. A fractured baseline

This second group of futurists contested the transatlantic worldview founded on a military-centric, democratic capitalist model of thinking.

Global security is analysed in a much broader sense outside the Euro-Atlantic world. A shift from hard security towards 'softer' topics such as economic security, regional development aid, and the role of capital flows took centre stage, marking a shift from the first Forum.

2.1. Addressing inequality as a pathway to cooperation

Growing inequality, it was argued, lies at the heart of rising global tensions. By creating different classes of the haves and the have-nots, it gradually erodes the pillars that support the international system. Aggravating this growing division is climate change, disproportionately impacting those with limited funds for adaptation and thereby fuelling the flames of populist leaders on both sides of the division. Whereas populists in poor countries use anger to express discontent over the lack of opportunities, populists in rich countries fearmonger that migration will take those opportunities away.

A revised push for global development could serve as a relief valve for these pressures. As growth is a function of labour, capital and technological innovation, investments and financial aid to less-developed countries that are rich in labour, without strings attached such as high interest rates and "structural adjustments", could provide a win-win for all parties involved, given the coming demographic-driven labour shortages in the Global North.

Our panel observed that the risk-avoiding behaviour of Global North countries could paradoxically introduce even more risks. One of the participants posed the question whether rules and regulations, putting constraints on loans to developing countries in combination with high interest rates, really preserve long-term stability. The participant warned that the desire for short-term financial stability could very well jeopardize long-term global stability because persistent inequality evokes anger and fear.

2.2. Cooperation as a pathway to development

The panellists agreed that greater and more equitable development cannot be pursued in the context of great-power competition. They rejected the idea of 'picking sides' in current conflicts as they saw no benefit in becoming a pawn in a geopolitical chess game. Instead, they pleaded for more understanding between different worldviews, labelling the Western

"We do not have a dog in the fight in the Russia-Ukraine war"

efforts to prevent China from achieving great power status as futile and detrimental to global development.

The West, with all its economic power, will have to assume a leading role in reducing the tensions of global rivalry, it was argued. Technologically advanced and rich in capital, the US and its allies have the position and power to build pathways to a more prosperous and stable global future. Cooperation instead of competition would allow capital-deprived countries to flourish economically, even providing novel markets for the West and thereby creating win-win situations.

2.3. Development as a pathway to democracy

'Development' one attendee mentioned, 'should take priority over democracy,' although fundamental human rights need to be protected in this process. The current zeal with which the West is pushing countries to become liberal democracies seems to be backfiring as low-income democracies in Africa tend to be less stable than low-income autocracies in Asia. A potential explanation is the need for low-income countries to build state capacity and structures and stable governance which stronger, centralised regimes can provide more easily. Further, the liberalising goal of democracy promotion often serves capital over citizens in the Global South, with reforms often benefiting foreign investment over state-led investment into public goods, it was argued.

Historically, Western countries tended to be autocracies as well, in some cases presiding over large, illiberal empires. Only after reaching a certain level of wealth did they transition into democracies themselves. Expecting low-income countries to make this transformation in a few years in very different historical circumstances seems unrealistic, and tying development aid to their progress towards it, unproductive. A longer-term perspective should be utilised in working with the Global South, focusing first on inclusive development, as a basis for the transition to liberal democracy.

2.4. Multipolarity as a pathway to 'real' multilateralism

Views on multipolarity differed significantly between the first and second event. While panelists from the first event, representing the transatlantic view, saw multipolarity as a threat to Western-dominated multilateralism, the second panelists saw multipolarity as an opportunity for 'real', i.e. equitable multilateralism. They argued that the current multilateral order felt more like an oligopoly ran by a club of powerful countries. True multipolarity, they reasoned, would force powerful countries to include the preferences of countries whose voices previously went unheard, thereby more accurately representing the world and hence progressing towards 'real' multilateralism.

The United Nations (UN) was seen as a prime example of this multilateral oligopoly. Dominated by five countries that have veto rights in the Security Council, it provides an avenue to ignore the voices of other countries, forcing countries to work outside of the framework of the UN. Reform of the Security Council, our panel argued, should be on top of the agenda to save the legitimacy of the United Nations.

“Democracy is not a panacea to your problems”

“The current system does not work, it is built by the West, for the West”

3. Drivers

Within the context of the above dynamics, the panel highlighted the following three drivers shaping emerging security trends: technological innovation, climate change, and demography.

3.1. Technological innovation: liberating or oppressing?

“AI is going to benefit the rich and penalize the poor”

Technology has enabled mankind to achieve both wonderful and terrifying feats. This duality was reflected in the panel, where it was hailed as the biggest hope for reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) while also being criticised for perpetuating inequality. Consensus was reached, however, that the growing gap between regulation and technological innovation handed disproportionate power to those controlling the newest technologies, for example through technologically advanced militaries being able to dominate weaker populations through force.

An argument was further made that technology widens the division between rich and poor. Massive amounts of capital investment for the latest labour-reducing technology might benefit Western states, but it also decreases the demographic dividend of some developing countries, as technology will have drifted away from labour-intensive solutions. In developed countries the tech industry creates a small class of ultra-rich individuals whose inventions subsequently divide their societies to its core, pitting people and groups against each other while fuelling anger and populist policies.

“The future is already here, it is just unevenly distributed”

International regulation seems unable to follow the latest technological developments or its unequal outcomes. The panel attributed this to two dynamics. First, different levels of development mean different priorities. While the utilization of AI in the military domain can be a pressing matter for a highly developed country, dozens of less-developed countries prefer other topics. Others see the lack of regulation as an opportunity to experiment and would perceive increased regulation as an adverse outcome. Second, the ever-increasing size of cyberspace, inherently borderless, leads to a patchwork of regulatory measures and no action. This is problematic as organised crime groups increasingly use the largely unregulated cyberspace for international communication and coordination, thereby growing stronger in force and causing worldwide disruption.

3.2. Climate change: Threatening current or future prosperity?

Climate change will have global ramifications and cause severe sociopolitical instability. Large swaths of land will become uninhabitable, leading to massive migration streams to the relatively safer North. Extreme weather events will become more routine, violently disrupting societies and incurring massive human and economic costs. The remaining pristine environmental places will increase dramatically in value, thereby attracting the attention of criminal organisations, such as in the Amazon rainforest.

The panel saw climate change not as a nuisance but as an existential threat. Having to migrate to other places as your country becomes uninhabitable causes you to not only lose part of your property but also your identity. Countries could functionally cease to exist, leading to instability in those areas as well as the wider region. This has already begun to impact smaller island states.

Whereas developed countries often calculate the value of current infrastructure at risk, developing countries tend to look at the future prosperity that might be lost. On the cusp of reaping their demographic dividends, these countries face the risk of climate change snatching away this advantage by displacing populations. Bereft of the financial power to invest in adaptation and political power to convince others to limit their pollution, they feel that their dividend is being stolen by others' unwillingness to adapt.

3.3. Demographic change: opportunity or threat?

Depending on who you ask, demographic change is either a threat or an opportunity. Most developed countries, having urbanized at a certain pace, are demographically stagnating or declining. In a desperate attempt to retain their historical economic power, they are pressuring their societies to squeeze out the same value with fewer jobs, investing massive amounts of capital in labour-saving technologies. This, according to a participant, has also led to a surge in reactionary politics seeking to promote ethnic homogeneity. Less developed countries, eager to maximize their demographic dividend, are urgently seeking capital from the West to enhance their productivity, as they anticipate a large influx of working-age people into their labour forces.

Demographic changes also seem to be a driving force behind power transitions. Dwarfing the populations of all or most members of the Security Council, non-aligned countries such as India and Indonesia are on their way to playing a more powerful role on the global stage. This pressure reinvigorates calls for further UN reform, to create a truly representative world order.

4. Key Takeaways

“Our problems will eventually become your problems.”

The panel concluded with three major takeaways. First, softer security aspects are crucial to understanding the course of global security trends. Barely touched upon in the first transatlantic Forum, topics such as inequality, economic development and fair representation took centre stage, highlighting the difference in priorities. This shift reflects the relative position of global actors, with one wanting to protect what it has by focusing on hard security measures, and others aspiring to reach the same level by focusing on soft security elements, such as development.

Second, most drivers seem to push people from developing to developed countries. Demographic trends, climate change and technological innovation will make developed countries dependent on more labour as their populations decline, while developing countries, rich in labour, become increasingly uninhabitable from climate change. Without significant capital investments from the West, this confluence of drivers will force numerous people from their country in an attempt to find a better life.

Third, despite power shifts, the West still holds the key to global prosperity. Its enormous supply of capital means that it can help other countries realise their potential. According to the participants, it should decouple development aid from demands of liberal democratic reform. It took rich Western countries centuries to achieve their current stability, all with the economic benefits of extractive empires, yet they expect less developed countries to achieve it in decades. Tying development aid to progress made on this front could leave both parties frustrated.

5. Conclusion

While the West wants the world to be 'safe', the rest of the world wants it to be 'fair', with security being an outcome of equality. This leads to different perceptions of emerging security trends. The cautiously optimistic outlook of non-Western countries on topics such as multipolarity was a refreshing touch after doom and gloom dominated the transatlantic discourse. Embraced by non-Western panellists as a means to achieve greater representation in the global system, Western experts saw it as a potential security risk.

Multipolarity is likely to come about, although the West can still decide in what form. It can resist, pleads for UN reform until disillusioned countries will pull the plug, leading to a form of multipolarity with a vengeance. Or, so the participants argued, it can allow reform to take place, paving the way for a more equitable and peaceful version of multipolarity to emerge.

Despite their critique, the West is still seen as an example by many in the developing world. Especially the European model of embedded liberal democracy with social welfare institutions is highly regarded. However, its lack of actorness in the current great power competition between the United States and China means that several participants see it more as a swing state bound to tip one way or the other, than a confident actor able to chart its way forward in partnership with other regions in the world. This final observation provides food for thought, demonstrating the attractiveness of Europe and its potential as a normative power, whilst also highlighting the dilemma at its core: is it going to be a player in, or a playground for, great power competition?

“Europe’s lack of actorness in the current great power competition, reduces it to a swing state, bound to tip one way or another.”



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