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The Hague Strategic
Foresight Forum Talks

Are the West's Golden Years Over?

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China and Russia currently have more appealing future narratives than Europe and America. But this doesn't have to remain so. A guide to self-preservation.

The global commentary seems united on one point: the golden years of the "West" are over. Its political idea, democracy, no longer appeals; its vision of a peaceful world community has shattered in Ukraine; its capitalist economic system is blamed for climate change; and its shrinking, aging population lacks both innovation and the will to shape the future. Unlike the 1990s, when American political scientist Francis Fukuyama predicted *The End of History* and the eternal success of the Western model, the future now belongs not to us but to Russia's resolve, China's long-term vision, and Africa's youth. Donald Trump's re-election only reinforces this perception. No wonder most Europeans view the future with gloom.

But it doesn't have to be this way, as this narrative is just one of many possible stories about the future. And in the end, that's all it is—a story, one we choose to believe is feasible. So, what does it take to weave a different one? Essentially, three things: a fundamental understanding of historical processes, a realistic sense of agency, and a clear vision of alternatives. A dash of optimism doesn't hurt either.

Understanding the historical processes that shape the future

Until the 18th century, history was mostly seen as a random sequence of events. With the Enlightenment arrived the idea that humanity did not just have the capacity to progress, but thinkers like Hegel were even sure to see evidence for this being the pre-destined journey we were on. Marx, and Fukuyama took this idea further, being convinced that they could derive general statements about the future from the past. They knew where things were heading based on where we had been. International relations theory is largely based on this idea, frequently attempting to predict the rise and fall of the "West" through history. The first bestseller in the study of societal collapse was Oswald Spengler's 1918 work *The Decline of the West*. This was followed by Hans Kohn's *Is the Liberal West in Decline?* (1957), Donald Wallace White's *The American Century: The Rise and Decline of the United States as a World Power* (1996), and Niall Ferguson's *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2011). On this side of the Atlantic, proponents of this narrative include Vladimir Putin (since about 2012) and German author Thilo Sarrazin (*Germany Abolishes Itself*). Clearly, predicting decline has been in vogue for over 100 years.

The problem with such prophetic readings of history isn't just their questionable understanding of rise and fall (more on this later) but also that they are treated as fact when they are merely future hypotheses. Hypotheses organize thoughts, create a basis for discussion, and offer a sense of security, but they are not the same as strategic foresight, which is a constructive engagement with the future and how to get there.

This means neither Fukuyama nor Putin is correct; there simply is no "theory of the future" that conveniently tells us what's coming. While this may sound heretical to political science circles, historical processes are so complex and unpredictable that they can only be understood in hindsight, not foresight, just as Kierkegaard said. The liberating takeaway: the future, as envisioned by Kant and early Enlightenment thinkers, is an open space for human creation. Recognizing this means letting go of deterministic forecasts of decline and focusing on something more critical: alternative futures.

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The abandoned future

To enable alternative futures, it's crucial to imagine what they look like and, importantly, how to achieve them. Currently, this vision is lacking in most Western countries. Election slogans often promise a return to the past rather than a leap into the future. At best, tomorrow is promised to look the same as today. Yet the less the future is embraced as a positive concept for change, the more people fear being at its mercy. This, in turn, makes parties attractive that offer the future in the guise of the past—safe because it's familiar. What we are witnessing at the ballot box is not a rightward shift but an epidemic of future anxiety. A Bertelsmann Foundation study found that voters of Germany's AfD, the Left, France's Rassemblement National, La France Insoumise, and Donald Trump are particularly anxious about the future, and they vote for people exuding confidence that it can be tackled. The reason is less about optimism being uplifting and more about its implicit suggestion of agency. This aligns with the “Stockdale Paradox” in future studies: the blending of honest realism with the belief that a situation can be mastered.

And a realistic look at the West's agency shows it is very much intact. No perceived decline is irreversible, despite being fueled by a flood of doom literature. Historical examples prove this: Britain after 1840 and the U.S. after 1890. Their success lay in recognizing problems early and undertaking necessary reforms with widespread societal support—from businesses to activists to ordinary citizens. Over the 100 years since Spengler declared the West's demise, the number of free countries has risen from 15 to 84, showing that while democracy might not have conquered the whole world, it is a model that remains the most popular in surveys worldwide (with 22% approval in Russia being a notable exception). When Western states commit to a policy – be it deterring the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the reduction of child mortality, the creation of the world's largest single market, or the extension of human life span, not to mention breakthroughs in technology and science – they do achieve historical things. But for the time being, political parties from all sides of the spectrum are leaving the future as a possible better place to China – which has a clear vision for 2049 – or Russia, who propose for it to look like the past. The West's future narrative is dominated by the power of now, the desire for things to remain exactly as they are. No wonder they generate little energy for change.

Developing a New, Attractive Future Narrative

The West can develop a new future narrative that is more compelling than current alternatives, and it has to or it will be outdone by those that propose anything but the present. Having a vision increases commitment, innovation, unlocks potential and helps in times of duress. It streamlines resources, generates influence, and increases preparedness and resilience. It also helps generate words that counter the collapse rhetoric of doomsayers, speaking of “decline,” “shrinking,” and “the end,” without realizing they're convincing themselves that nothing can be done—a phenomenon future studies call the “Cassandra Complex,” or paralysis after too much bad news.

But the key is understanding that the defining feature of the future is its novelty — it must be different. This is why grand theories fail: they extrapolate the future from what is already known, overlooking the potential for innovation. A new future must inevitably break with the past. Citizens and political parties alike must achieve this break to complete

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problem awareness. The world of yesterday isn't coming back—but that's not necessarily bad, as the future holds much promise. By 2030, an Alzheimer's vaccine may exist. While limiting warming to 1.5 degrees may no longer be feasible, 2 degrees still is. NATO and the EU are adapting to new security architectures and are unlikely to collapse—in fact, the opposite is more likely. Advances in AI and modern technology will transform how we live, work, travel, and think. Neither nuclear war nor conflict over Taiwan is inevitable; that's why we have tools like deterrence and diplomacy. None of this will be handed to us; as Hegelian dialectics teach, it must be fought for. If we are in conflict today, it is because history is once again entering a new phase. This may not be the end of history, but it doesn't mean the Western model is finished. But to start and craft a new future, there is no better time than now. After all, it is not in times of peace that vision is developed, but in time of crisis.

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