The Fabulous Future?

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The purpose of this brief chapter is to offer thoughts about what the world of international affairs will look like in twenty-five years. This has been tried before with mixed results, at best. Predictions about what’s in store for us seem to fail most often in one of two ways: they project current trends as continuing apace, producing, after a quarter century of evolution, an entirely new landscape which, in fact, never emerges; or they predict little change, based upon the apparent weight of current conditions, a welcome or regrettable stability to the international scene, which proves to be unimaginative in the wake of surprising, singular developments of major importance. Recognizing that philosophers have spent a good bit of time contemplating the implications of free will and determinism, it still seems as though we should be better at predicting the future, if we truly understood the present and how we got here.

Aside from being humbled by the task, then, what does this observation suggest about what would be most useful to include in this chapter, to speculate about, recognizing how inaccurate a picture is likely to emerge? Perhaps the best that can be done is to first identify qualities of the current landscape that we expect to continue essentially unchanged,
then trends that we expect to continue, and to so change the scene in important, predictable ways, and finally those “black swans” that we know are out there and would have a hugely disruptive impact on the picture in the next twenty-five years, if they were actually to cross our path.

While we are at it, though, we should also be mindful of what sorts of developments it would pay us to know of in advance. Bad things, for example, we might want to try to prevent or mitigate, or, considering the consequences, figure out ways to adapt to, if they are in fact inevitable. Knowing some of the characteristics of our situation in 2040 now could also create opportunities to take advantage of developments, not just guard against negative ones. So the plan is to note what is likely to stay the same in international politics, what we should expect to change slowly, what might really surprise us, and finally where our country is likely to fit into the picture that emerges. Clearly we may be humbled by the task, but we are not discouraged.

The System

The most fundamental, defining feature of the international system is that it is ungoverned. In twenty-five years, it will still be so. Called by some theorists a “self-help system” and by others a “state of nature,” a large number of mostly sovereign states will make up the international system in 2040, and they will have to look after their own security to ensure their survival.¹ Virtually all states will continue to acquire weapons to defend themselves and their interests from other states, and they will declare that they do so for self-defense. Since the first duty of the state will always be to provide for the security of its citizens, all this armament, increasingly sophisticated and lethal in so many hands, will continue to “make sense.” This, again, as long as there is no world government with an armed police force to provide security, which there will not be during the first half of the twenty-first century.

One may ask, if the use of force is going to continue to be one option states will be free to elect to achieve their goals, should we expect efforts at arms control, disarmament, and peaceful resolution of conflicts to inevitably fail? The answer is, of course, no. But the availability of the option to resort to military force will remain the key conditioning factor in any effort aimed at the resolution of disputes through negotiation or
at achieving agreed limits on the development, deployment, or use of the weapons of warfare.

This realist, or even structural realist, view of the world will be seen by many as atavistic and not at all sensitive to trends in globalization, democratization, and the increasingly important role of nonstate actors, multinational corporations, and international institutions. Add here the emerging class of superwealthy global plutocrats—influential, even powerful in political and commercial areas but patriots of no nation in particular. Critics are more likely to see the international system in 2040 defined by these relatively recent trends and not the actions of governments driven by the classic security dilemma. The middle ground between these divergent views of what will matter in the future is reached by recognizing that, in general, only in matters of vital interest to governments should resort to military force be expected, and therefore it should not be a common occurrence.

Indeed, many of the interactions between people around the world will not involve governments at all, and when they do, government’s role may be limited to regulating and facilitating. And when the state’s interests are involved, the most salient measure of a government’s ability to achieve its objectives may be in what has been called its “soft power” assets. But that said, when the stakes are critical for a government, and the dispute sharp, it will be hard power, not soft, that antagonists will be measuring.

Warfare

Figuring out exactly how technology will impact the conduct of military operations when war does occur is no less challenging and arguably a lot more important than predictions in other areas of human endeavor. Anyone who has participated in war games with the American military lately will have been struck by at least two phenomena that will plausibly persist for decades to come.

The first is the continuing importance of traditional elements of military strategy, such as logistics; mobility; lethality of weaponry; achieving air superiority; control of the seas; stable deterrence at the strategic level; flexibility and resilience in command, control, and communication; maintaining awareness of events at the tactical and operational levels of
engagement; and the availability of intelligence from a variety of sources on the political and military activity of an adversary, usefully analyzed to support decision making. This has been true for centuries of modern warfare and will certainly remain so for the foreseeable future.

The second phenomenon is the way new technology, at critical moments, may create unexpected opportunities and vulnerabilities, particularly for adversaries who lack all the traditional assets that are desirable in large, protracted engagements. Think particularly about cyber and space warfare. Indeed, we have been thinking about both for decades, but we have not truly integrated that thinking into our planning, partly for bureaucratic reasons and partly because they present moving targets, hard to take account of. What is most disturbing about these technologies, as compared to other innovations, such as stealth and perhaps drones, for example, which create marginal and often temporary advantages, is that so much else in traditional military strategy depends on space and cyber assets performing as expected. And if governments decide to protect these assets by deterrence rather than genuine defense, as they appear to be doing by default, they then risk “hardwiring” dramatic escalation into their planning, particularly against an adversary whose own planning is asymmetrically focused on attacking those assets. Another way to capture this situation is to appreciate, first, the relative weakness of an adversary who, in the midst of a conflict, has no choice but to attack America’s connective tissue; and second, the unwise decision on our part to promise crippling retaliation if so attacked, rather than to mount a defense. In other words, we are planning for disastrous escalation. This is not good.

Turning briefly to the causes of war, we should expect that the traditional sources of conflict between nations—that is, territorial acquisition, religious and cultural differences sharpened by historical antagonisms, and desire for regional dominance, among other causes—will still provoke armed conflict. We should add, however, that a new, intensified competition for resources may lead to war as population growth adds to demand and the effects of climate change reduce supply. Freshwater is often identified as a likely resource over which people may fight in the future, but others, from food to minerals to energy, may push nations into conflicts as well.

Finally, if we were to live through the next twenty-five years without a war between India and Pakistan, we would be fortunate indeed. There
are other regions where “war is always possible,” such as the Middle East, Northeast Asia, or even between China and the United States, but South Asia is different. In political and military terms, there is greater risk because of unique conditions. The history of Hindu–Muslim hostility, the circumstances of the creation of Pakistan, multiple wars, territorial loss, intermittent military engagements, significant terrorist incidents, and the simmering status of Kashmir set an unstable scene. With the Pakistani view of India as presenting a mortal threat to its existence, and an asymmetrical conventional force imbalance favoring India, Pakistan’s growing nuclear weapons capability makes not just war but nuclear war plausible. For many who witnessed the evolution of NATO nuclear strategy in the 1950s, intended to counter the Warsaw Pact’s perceived conventional advantage by the first use of “tactical nuclear weapons,” Pakistan’s declaratory policy today is eerily familiar and scary. The way out of this frame is through a change in the Pakistani view of India from its greatest threat to its best chance for economic development. But as long as the Pakistani military remain the dominant political force in that country, there will be little incentive to change the national narrative. This is a space to watch.

Power and Condition

We are inevitably attracted to two kinds of generalizations about the distribution of power in the international system: those that predict the decline of the United States and those that describe the latest rising power. In the past, these predictions have been more wrong than right. By most measures, the United States is still the greatest world power, and neither Japan nor Iran has risen as many expected some decades ago. That said, the United States is, in fact, declining, relative to a clearly rising China. If one were interested in the distribution of power in the future, beyond the question of who occupies the number one position, a simple characterization might be that Asia—from India to the Republic of Korea, to include China and Japan—will come to have more of the world’s wealth and productive capacity than Europe and North America combined. That will be a change. Sub-Saharan Africa, portions of South Asia, and Latin America will continue to claim the world’s poorest citizens, though their absolute level of poverty should not be as
bad in the future as it has been in the past. Decades of effort in private sector investment as well as development assistance from governments, international organizations, and regional development banks aimed at improving infrastructure, health, and educational outcomes will continue to make a difference.

How exactly the shift to Asia is experienced in the West, and how dramatic it is, is yet to be determined. If India and China can sustain both solid, if not phenomenal, growth rates and a high degree of political stability—the second depending a great deal on the first—the picture is bright. The situation in the West is different, where innovation and growth need to be spurred and economies energized. Government effectiveness rather than stability is the issue, but no obvious solutions appear on the horizon.

However power is distributed in 2040, three trends likely to be important to the quality of life for large numbers of citizens in coming decades are urbanization, aging populations, and advances in information technology. By 2040, per the United Nations Population Division, 86 percent of the American population and 60 percent of the world’s population will live in cities. That’s about six billion people, or twice today’s urban population. The magnitude of the implications that are expected to follow from such concentration is understood to be significant, but there is quite a difference in view over the “sign”; that is, whether the implications will be positive or negative for the earth’s inhabitants. Virtually every aspect of life will be impacted—our security, privacy, access to food, health care, jobs, transportation, energy, environment, and recreation. Indeed, they will all be “driven” by the phenomena of urbanization. That said, the integrated study of the process has only just begun.

And if the first thing one notices about the world in twenty-five years is that its citizens live in the cities, the second thing is likely to be that so many people will be old. We are already aware of the impact on economies and questions of intergenerational equity arising from demographic change in developed countries, but the greatest stress will be felt in the less-developed world, where the population will grow old before it becomes well off and the burden of supporting the old will be felt by the young in disproportionate ways. As one study of aging put it, we will be seeing more walkers than strollers. Those societies whose governments fail to plan for the consequences in their tax, welfare, and health systems,
for starters, will have only painful options from which to choose in dealing with the consequences.

A third piece of the picture we will see emerge in a couple of decades will follow from continued technological advance in the collection, transmission, and analysis of information. There will be dramatic change in the global availability of what we now consider “news,” in commercially useful data and communication, in access to personal interactions of all kinds, and in that which facilitates governance. Much of this we will appreciate because it will make life easier and more entertaining and make business and government more efficient and potentially more responsive. The international and the domestic context will continue to merge, and we will have the opportunity to appreciate developments anywhere in the world as local to us. But privacy in our actions and communication, as we had come to know it until the beginning of the twenty-first century, will be gone. This is a trend to watch and to manage.

Finally, with somewhat less enthusiasm than we might have expected to accompany this prediction only a few years ago, it seems entirely likely that the “wave of democracy” will continue to wash over the shores of more and more countries in the coming years. The level of enthusiasm one has for the growing numbers of democracies in the world, following the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of so many command economies run by authoritarian governments, depends greatly on one’s expectations. If having relatively “free” elections is considered the essential indicator of democracy, without as much concern for freedom of expression, rule of law, and respect for individual rights, then the trend is entirely positive. If, on the other hand, the expectation is that liberal democracy is spreading as a durable phenomenon, along with responsive, effective governance in the best interest of citizens, and that some version of a “democratic peace” will follow, to mean conflict resolution without resort to force, then one might be quite disappointed. The current situation in Russia, the recent experience with the Arab Spring, and the uneven course of events in Latin America and Africa come to mind. In short, a cautious view would have us acknowledge the positive aspects of the disappearance of communism as a coherent, political-economic model competing with a democratic, market-oriented system of government. But, it would also have us not be so quick to exclude backsliding and shortfalls in the outcomes for citizens internally, and nations externally,
of the democratic trends. The landscape in these terms in 2040 will probably not look dramatically different from the way it looks today.

Black Swans

To refer to black swan events at all rigorously is to identify a truly surprising event, with major impact, that may seem easily explained only after its occurrence. The impact or consequences may be bad or good, as long as they are in some sense significant. Almost by definition, then, making a list of genuine black swan events that have not yet occurred should not be possible. Undeterred, I offer here three such events that could occur over the next twenty-five years.

First, China may disintegrate as a national state rather than rise to become the world’s preeminent power. The centrifugal forces that would pull China apart would be driven by a dramatic drop in the rate of growth of its economy. In the absence of any ideological or religious bonds or an external threat to provoke an impulse to binding nationalism, together with the burden of a dramatically aging population, the willingness of the people to accept centralized, authoritarian government may evaporate. This would leave a decentralized political entity that would be a good deal less than the sum of its parts. The basic assumption here is that China as a nation is substantially more fragile than most analysts believe. Of course, the Chinese government could be expected to respond with economic and political moves to mitigate the impact of any destabilizing activity before irresistible momentum could build. Interestingly, such action could include manufacturing an incident or set of incidents with the United States or Japan to create a threat intended to stimulate a nationalism that would otherwise have remained dormant. War might be chosen over internal instability. More likely, of course, China will remain whole and continue its rise, with the key question becoming whether the United States and China can accommodate each other’s interests in the Asia-Pacific region, embracing competition while avoiding conflict.

A second black swan event would be the simultaneous detonation of ten-kiloton nuclear explosions in, say, four American cities—notionally New York, Washington, Chicago, and Houston. While nuclear terrorism has been called the number one external threat to the nation’s security by presidents and candidates for that office since 2001, many obvious steps
that could be taken to reduce the risk of a terrorist attack have not been taken. This is because such an attack is generally regarded as having a very low probability of occurrence, as well as catastrophic consequences. The argument here, however, is that large amounts of plutonium are maintained both in weapons stockpiles and in active energy programs, and that highly enriched uranium continues to be produced. Moreover, the prospects for secret transfer of such fissile material by a rogue state, or leakage from a state with an advanced but not perfectly secured energy sector, are real. Over decades, then, such transfer or leakage could easily provide a terrorist group with the necessary fissile material to overcome the single greatest obstacle to making an improvised nuclear explosive device.

Perhaps even more interesting, though, is the proposition that the probability that four American cities will be destroyed one morning is not much less than that only one city would be struck. If this were to happen, roughly a million Americans would die relatively promptly from blast, fire, and radiation following the detonations. And attacking multiple cities is something terrorists like to do to terrorize a nation. It becomes a plausible scenario because the quantity of fissile material needed to produce a yield a bit less than Hiroshima-size is so small as compared to the amount that may be accessible to terrorists. In other words, the number of cities attacked may not be sensitive to the amount of fissile material required for each weapon. If this most horrendous of events should occur in the coming decades, it would appear, after the fact, as having been “overdetermined,” with hardly anyone being surprised, except possibly by the number of targets and the fact that it had not happened sooner: a true black swan event.

It is worth noting here that in the world of catastrophic events of low probability but high consequence, certain biological events could dwarf even the multiple nuclear terrorist attacks in terms of casualties. A repeat of the flulike pandemic that occurred one hundred years ago comes to mind, as does the release of an engineered, highly communicable, and lethal virus for which no vaccine was available. But more thought has gone into planning for, mitigating, and preventing such events so that they seem less like true black swans than does the nuclear terrorist scenario.

The third event that could surprise us would be the resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. This would not be the same as the outbreak
of peace in the Middle East. It would be an acceptance by most Palestinian factions of the resolution of the three principal issues—the status of Jerusalem, the right of return of refugees, and a territorial settlement on the West Bank—that have for so long been claimed to be the basis for the hostility of Arabs to the state of Israel and the rejection of its right to exist.

There have been moments when this outcome seemed to be at hand, perhaps most notably in September 2000, when failure was snatched from the jaws of success. It is plausible that so long as efforts continue, those representing Palestinians in Gaza and on the West Bank will come together with an Israeli leader who has the essential domestic support to reach a durable agreement. Many observers would see such a historic breakthrough in the seemingly never-ending “peace process” as fundamentally changing the face of Middle Eastern politics forever. It would not. The unwillingness of the fabled Arab “street” to reverse its view of Israel’s legitimacy should not be underestimated, nor should the continuation of division among the Arab states of the Gulf and the Levant, between Arabs and Persians, between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Peace between major factions of the Palestinians and Israel would be a surprising and welcome development, but it would fall far short of “changing everything” in the Middle East.

The United States in the World of 2040

It is now commonplace for experts in American foreign policy to characterize the threats from within our country as having a greater likelihood of damaging the nation’s security than threats from abroad. This reflects a recognition, broadly shared, that the American political system is dysfunctional, lacking the basic capacity for compromise that is essential for effective governance, and that the nation’s competitive position in economic and political terms has suffered and will continue to decline unless remedies can be found. First references are usually to budget and fiscal issues, which have become chronic problems in the absence of the necessary political consensus for resolution. Just below the surface of these policy disputes lie fundamental differences in the country over the proper role of government and how best to protect the individual while advancing the common good. Then the hyperconcentration of wealth
and income, together with loss of economic and social mobility across generations, has undercut the presumption of fairness and equality of opportunity, historically so important to the American narrative. And finally, the intensity and anger manifest in political debate have been magnified by media that thrive on the polarization and rhetorical extremes of their daily product.

The electorate has been driven to new levels of cynicism, compounded by ignorance, creating little opportunity to persuade through evidence but an irresistible audience for “bumper sticker” arguments. At the same time, there is ample reason for cynics to thrive in light of the role that money has come to play in elections and the policies made by those who prevailed at the polls thanks to our primary system and gerrymandered districts, as well as to the largesse of the most wealthy few in American society.

In short, the first observation to make about the place of the United States in the world of 2040 is that, absent a serious adjustment in important elements of our political system that somehow provides new incentives for government at all levels to act in the best interests of the Republic, the country will increasingly become far less desirable in terms of social justice and quality of life in the eyes of its own citizens and not much of an example for the rest of the world.

That said, if we were to consider the power of the United States, judged primarily in military terms, twenty-five years hence, we would find our country still uniquely capable of projecting force with great lethality and impressive precision virtually anyplace on earth. This will be the result of the continued enthusiasm of the U.S. Congress to fund the development and deployment of the most technologically advanced weapon systems in the world and, by and large, the popularity of such systems with the American people. In short, we may fall way behind many countries in social and economic opportunity, quality of public education, basic infrastructure, competitiveness, and productivity but, ironically, maintain our position as the world's number one military power.

This leads to the inevitable next question of just what the American people will be prepared to do with that power in twenty-five years. Following more than a decade of war, will the U.S. enthusiasm wane for finding vital interests far from our shores, or humanitarian interests anywhere as being any of “our business,” if intervention involves significant cost in lives or treasure?
There is a connection, certainly, between perceived economic capacity for intervention and the political will to intervene, but too much should not be made of the nation’s economy as limiting its capacity to act, as the determining factor in any embrace of isolation. Much more important will be the psychological impact of the economy; the nation’s perceived economic health; and the openness of its people to rhetoric from political leaders that resonates with Americans’ values, sense of responsibility for others, and place in the world, as well as their fundamental optimism that what we do can make a difference. Belief in American exceptionalism can motivate truly regrettable policies, but it can also be the base from which the United States can prudently intervene, ideally in coalition with others, to discourage aggression and stop atrocities.

All in all, we have painted a picture with significant risk along with some opportunities to mitigate harmful developments and promote positive outcomes. We can influence that picture by the policies we adopt or fail to embrace. Realism about the choices ahead will help us toward better outcomes; cynicism will not. Credible leadership will be in demand at home and abroad, but particularly at home. More than anything else, the United States needs an interested and informed citizenry, responsive and effective governance, and a sophisticated and subtle appreciation in its leadership of the risks and opportunities open to the nation.

Notes

1. The phrase “state of nature” has deep roots and differing meanings in the writings of several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political philosophers, but here we mean what Hobbes meant in applying it to the character of relations between independent nation-states, where only the laws of nature apply. “Self-help,” in this context, is a term used as a defining characteristic of the international political system, and a tenet of twentieth-century international relations theory, which leaves each nation-state on its own to find the means to survive. The relevance is that, according to some classical and modern political theory, the essential anarchy of the international system guarantees the permanent possibility of armed conflict between nation-states. The best discussion of this point is still found in Kenneth N. Waltz’s enduring work, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), first published in 1959.

2. The term “soft power” has come to mean a way of influencing the behavior of nations that depends upon co-opting and attracting them to a desired
position, rather than moving them to it by coercion or inducement. See Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

3. The MacArthur Foundation’s “Research Network on an Aging Society” asks us “to imagine a society with many more seniors with walkers than youngsters in strollers.”