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The World in 2030 Won't Look Anything Like You Think

By Joshua Foust

...But that doesn't mean thinking isn't still important. What to make of the intelligence community's effort to forecast global events



Military vehicles line up during a parade in Pyongyang, North Korea on April 15, 2012. In 1997, analysts predicted the country would not last until 2010. (Reuters)

In 1997, the U.S. intelligence outfit charged with long-term strategic thinking made some [startling predictions](#): by 2010, North Korea would be transformed into a normal state and tensions on the peninsula would be eliminated; the western world would see unending 2-percent growth in personal income; and precision weapons would make conflicts smaller and less costly.

None of those things happened. North Korea remains [mostly unchanged](#) today -- except for its nuclear program, which perhaps poses more of a threat than ever. Not only did the 2008 financial crisis stall most economic growth in the Western world, but personal incomes have largely [stagnated](#) as well. Finally, while precision weapons did make the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan less costly in some

respects, neither war could be considered small. Few would argue those were examples of a new, high-tech way of fighting.

The U.S. National Intelligence Council's (NIC) report is supposed to help leaders understand how the world is changing. But its style of analysis has gotten a great deal wrong. So it's with some skepticism that we should regard the latest [release](#) of the NIC's forecasting report, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (GT2030).

Unlike previous reports, the GT2030 report tries to account for predictions made in previous versions. What it doesn't do is grapple with the serious flaws in its overall approach. While some of this year's predictions are worthwhile, the report fails to account for how badly this same process has served previous reports.

The Global Trends reports tend to be two-sided. They offer specific, big claims that are almost always wrong on the one hand, while smaller, more vague observations about how the world is slowly changing tend to be more accurate on the other. In this sense, NIC predictions read like a Fareed Zakaria book: the really interesting parts that matter never turn out to make sense, while the very obvious things are written about so broadly they can't help but be right.

This year, GT2030 predicts that "Asia," defined broadly, will surpass the combined economic and military might of the Europe and the United States. If the rise of a multipolar world doesn't seem very new, that's because it was the thesis of Zakaria's most recent book, *The Post-American World*, written in 2008. In it, Zakaria predicted that the U.S. would experience a relative decline as other countries, particularly those in East Asia, catch up.

That the United States will be "first among equals" in the future isn't a terribly fresh prediction for NIC to make, but it does have the virtue of being likely. Similarly, the claim that the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) are not unified by ideology and are focused on their regional power bases is also likely to be true.

The report does have an important role to play, though. In being published by the NIC, it enjoys immediate credibility among policymakers and politicians -- the ones responsible for making important decisions about the planet's future. The broad trends GT2030 identifies are happening right now, and it is vitally important our leaders understand those trends and try to adapt to them. When GT2030 writes, for example, about conflicts over access to water and the challenges posed by climate change, it's not exactly breaking new ground -- but those are both critical issues that leaders need to understand.

But ultimately, what do these sorts of reports accomplish? The NIC is hardly the only group that publishes studies about future trends. There is an entire industry devoted to futures studies: their acolytes, called futurists, give PowerPoint presentations and write books about how the world will change in the future. I used to work for one: Alvin Toffler, who wrote a groundbreaking book in 1970 called *Future Shock*. His book, four decades after the fact, remains a fascinating artifact: his description of "information overload" (a term he invented) rings especially true in an age of Twitter and Facebook, but his description of cities running out of oxygen, and disposable clothing made of paper, sounds a bit silly.

Futures studies work best when they're vague and build upon current trends to their logical (and often extreme) conclusion. Along the way, they usually play into their intended audience's hopes and fears: economic collapse, infinite growth for the middle class, Malthusian predictions of food crashes, and a belief in the fundamental knowability of what is to come.

At the same time, any specific prediction in these texts will almost invariably be wrong. And that limits how useful they can ever be beyond a limited scope of activity. It is rare to see government officials or even corporate executives making long-term plans based on a vision of the future laid out in these studies. You just won't hear someone saying, "We should do this because of GT2030."

That doesn't mean this sort of study is useless. The GT2030 report is important for how it's changing the process and trying to encourage adaptive thinking about the future. It helps leaders understand not just the current trends (which can change on a moment's notice, in the way the 2008 recession undid all the previous predictions of forever-growth), but also how to be flexible enough to adapt to rapid change.

Leaders should look at reports like GT2030 and think about how they can evolve current institutions to be more adaptable and flexible in the future. It seems odd to think that the decentralized world GT2030 describes is going to be met with institutions that were designed in the 1940s.

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