

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT: ANTICIPATION AND CAPACITY TO ACT

It is becoming difficult to anticipate, analyze, and interpret future trends and developments due to increasing complexity in the international environment. At the same time, states have a growing need to prepare against diffuse risks and threats and to exploit potential future opportunities. The concept of strategic foresight may be useful for preserving and enhancing strategic decisionmaking and the capacity to act in a world that is becoming globalized and unpredictable.



Strategic action, as a forward-looking policy that calculates opportunities and threats, is part of the state's core tasks. However, the anticipation, analysis, and interpretation of future developments constitute major challenges today. International relations are becoming more complex, particularly due to globalization. Identifying clear-cut trends is further complicated by the multiplicity of actors, by the growing interdependence between policy fields, and by the broadening and increasingly diffuse threat spectrum.

Often, it is near-impossible to identify the correlation of causes and effects and the interaction of political and economic decisions within and across national boundaries. For instance, it is becoming more and more difficult to maintain a clear demarcation between security policy, economic policy, and energy policy. Accordingly, there

is often no longer a political consensus on the core risks and threats and the corresponding allocation of limited resources. Planning and implementing future-oriented policy is further impeded by an ongoing, accelerating, and deep-seated social transformation.

This increasing insecurity with regard to fundamental future development trajectories and trends, and the lead time associated with them, simultaneously promotes the desire to prepare against unknown threats and to shape the future actively in order to be able to exploit the resulting opportunities. Strategies and means for consolidating a future-oriented holistic view and for improving the strategic decisionmaking capabilities and actionability of states have thus gained importance. An interesting approach in this respect is the concept of strategic

foresight, which has been tested in several states over the past years.

“Gouverner, c’est prévoir”

The concept of strategic foresight was originally developed for companies, but has nowadays also taken root in politics and the public administration. It is intended to empower decision-makers to consciously expand the boundaries of their own perception with regard to future challenges. It is designed as a way of gaining a more comprehensive analysis of what the future may look like and to display the results of such an analysis in a broad array of alternative future scenarios. This is a good way to hone strategic thinking and to expand conceptions as to available political courses of action.

The process of generating strategic foresight is usually structured into three phases. Initially, the focus is on gaining information as to topics, trends, developments, or events that may be relevant for a country or an organization. Methods such as horizon scanning or strategic early warning are geared towards observing the environment as comprehensively as possible. They are designed to contribute to early warning about important developments in order to avoid strategic surprise and to give decision-makers sufficient time to introduce suitable countermeasures.

In a second phase, the collected and processed information must be interpreted and the effects of various possible versions of the future elaborated. Concrete topics of particular interest are selected and

**Strategic foresight:
Selected methods**

- ☞ **Horizon scanning**
- ☞ **Strategic early warning**
- ☞ **STEEP technique**
- ☞ **Trend analysis**
- ☞ **Scenario technique**

investigated in depth in order to generate a realistic picture as to the outcomes of potential future events. In the third phase, finally, various options for action are developed. These are based on scenarios that are often diverse and point in various directions in order to account for the imponderable nature of the future. A double strategy is pursued by taking precautions against a wide range of developments, while on the other hand, measures are taken to realize a desirable scenario.

In the first instance, the contribution of strategic foresight to future-oriented policymaking consists of gathering information on trends and developments and processing it into concrete products such as reports, analyses, scans, or scenarios. Experiences gathered so far in applying strategic foresight to politics show, however, that the decisive added value is frequently to be found not so much in concrete products, but rather in participation in the foresight process as such. The joint development and implementation of such a process can give rise to new social networks, trigger changes in thinking, improve the coordination of preferences among stakeholders, and thus help to bring forth new ideas and visions. In other words: Strategic foresight can enhance a government's strategic decisionmaking capabilities, its capacity to act, and its ability to respond, and may thus ease the planning, development, and implementation of political agendas.

Examples: Singapore and the UK

At the state level, strategic foresight has long remained limited to individual issues, with a focus on science and technology. In recent years, however, some states have begun to apply the concept across multiple policy fields and ministerial portfolios (see table). The experiences made in Singapore and the UK in this regard are prime examples of such broader approaches.

Around the turn of the millennium, Singapore was surprised by a number of events that constituted threats to national

security. The attempted attacks by the radical Islamist group Gema'ah Islamiyah on the embassies of the US, the UK, and Israel that were discovered in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, as well as the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in 2003, showed the government that its conventional strategies and methods for anticipation and early warning were no longer sufficient precautions against strategic surprise. The government reacted by conducting a comprehensive review of all structures, processes, and means for protecting national security. This resulted in a new security strategy published in July 2004, which was based on a networked and coordinated approach for coping with new security policy challenges.

One key measure in this context was the creation of a new unit for identifying and assessing risk at an early stage. This "Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning" system is directly subordinate to the Prime Minister's Office. It is designed to promote cooperation within the administration, to produce better analytical results, and to identify exogenous shocks as early as possible. At its heart is an internet-based information system linked to more than 20 government agencies. This system bundles all potentially relevant data and information, presents it in the shape of web services, and supports users by means of innovative applications in searching for information as well as analyzing and visualizing data. This platform for information exchange is intended to be developed into a core instrument for Singapore's strategic planning.

In the UK, strategic foresight has enjoyed widespread acceptance for a long time. The roots of this concept in national policy can be traced back to the 1960s, when early identification of technological trends was introduced as a way of enhancing the lagging innovative force of the British industry. Since the beginning of the 21st cen-

tury, this approach has increasingly been expanded to include social, ecological, and other aspects. As part of this strategic realignment, a "Horizon Scanning Centre" was established in 2004 and integrated into the foresight program directed by the chief scientific adviser to the UK government.

Today, this program is centered on two core activities: First of all, a so-called "Sigma Scan" created a cross-sectoral information basis for all foresight activities. To date, information from more than 2,000 sources including academia, the economy, think-tanks, governments, NGOs, blogs, the media, culture, etc. has been processed for this scan, supplemented by interviews with more than 300 analysts and experts. The results have been published in more than 270 so-called "Issue Papers" that are publicly available on the internet. They identify possible future trends for the next 50 years and explore the possible effects for British policymaking.

The second area of activity consists of so-called foresight projects. Over a given period, these projects aim to identify three or four core challenges for the future of the UK and to have them analyzed comprehensively by high-ranking decision-makers and a large number of (academic) experts over a period of 18 to 24 months. The goal is to present the state of research in a comprehensible fashion and to make concrete policy recommendations. In order to ensure that the results are directly introduced into government policy, each of these projects is overseen personally by a minister. These officials are responsible for subsequently implementing the action plan elaborated by the project. The strategic scan as well as the foresight projects serve as the basis that allows the foresight program to support decision-makers in formulating problems and shaping courses of action efficiently and to serve as a means of strategic policy design.

Strategic foresight in selected countries		
	Website	Current documents
France	☞ www.strategie.gouv.fr	☞ «France 2025: Diagnostic Stratégique» (2009)
UK	☞ www.foresight.gov.uk	☞ 271 issue papers produced by «Sigma Scan»
Netherlands	☞ www.horizonscan.nl	☞ «Horizon Scan Report 2007» (2008)
Singapore	☞ http://rahs.org.sg	☞ «Thinking About the Future: Strategic Thinking and RAHS» (2008)

Options for implementing strategic foresight in Switzerland			
	Project approach	Institutional approach	Topical approach
Target	Identification of future trends in federal policy; testing usefulness and acceptance	Center of competence for methodological and organizational support of strategic foresight at the federal level	Identifying, assessing, and processing trends and developments in the field of security policy
Focus	All policy fields	All policy fields	Security policy
Possible products	Broad strategic scan; scenarios for federal policy	Conveying methodological competence	Platform for collection and dissemination of information
	Building an expert network; public relations work		
Inspiration	Netherlands	UK	Singapore

Source: Beat Habegger, *Horizon Scanning in Government: Concept, Country Experiences, and Models for Switzerland* (Center for Security Studies, Feb. 2009)

As far as strategic foresight is concerned, both of these projects have shortcomings: They are excessively slanted towards the administrative side and hardly ever make use of the strategies and methods of the foresight approach. Furthermore, it is unclear whether and to what extent the results are actually incorporated into political processes and the work of the administration. Experiences made to date also show that establishing a comprehensive perspective in a government and public administration that tends towards compartmentalization is a major challenge. A number of possible models for testing and later institutionalizing strategic foresight in the Swiss federal administration may be considered (see table). However, the debate over how to realign policy development at the federal level towards a more long-term and more strategic approach has only just begun.

Success factors

Strategic foresight is a multifaceted and flexible concept that can be adapted to the requirements of an organization and to the specific political or cultural features of a state. According to the experiences made to date, its success – which is often difficult to measure – is based on four essential factors: First of all, it requires an information hub that facilitates a holistic view of future threats and risks, brings together multiple government offices, and thus integrates the compartmentalized knowledge of the public administration. Second, in the contemporary dynamic environment, the knowledge accumulated by corporations, think-tanks, academia, and civil society must be utilized and integrated into the foresight process. The comprehensive incorporation of experts both within and outside of the administration ensures topical and methodological know-how as well as an in-depth understanding of political procedures.

Third, the foresight process must be rigorous and based upon reliable and credible sources. Otherwise, the results would constantly be challenged, and it would not be feasible to derive generally acknowledged policy recommendations. Fourth, the process requires sufficient intellectual freedom to permit creativity and bold new ideas and visions to emerge. Strategic foresight is specifically designed to challenge conventional thinking and stimulate innovation. This means that the support of political decision-makers is indispensable, which is why the British model of individual ministerial responsibility seems worth emulating.

The importance for Switzerland

In Switzerland, several federal authorities monitor trends and developments in their various areas of political responsibility. However, these activities are distributed across the entire public administration; they are rarely coordinated at the strategic level, which diminishes the Federal Council's capability to act. Therefore, it seems advisable to consider steps towards developing a strategic foresight approach.

Two existing projects could provide a valuable foundation for doing so. On the one hand, the Federal Office for Civil Protection administers the "Risiken Schweiz" project, which registers and assesses all risks that might threaten the population and the basis of its livelihood (cf. CSS Analysis no. 30). In the framework of this project, an interdepartmental working group is currently elaborating a comprehensive risk catalog as well as standardized baseline scenarios that are ultimately to result in a nation-wide vulnerability analysis.

The second project is the federal administration's forward planning staff, which comes under the authority of the Federal Chancellery. This staff, which includes representatives of around 30 federal offices, produces a quadrennial report on possible trends and developments in federal policymaking. This report serves as an important source for the Federal Council in its planning for the legislative period, and is used by the federal administration as a documentation and reference work.

The federal administration's forward planning staff and the "Risiken Schweiz" project, as well as the various activities in the area of "Open Source Intelligence" (cf. CSS Analysis no. 32), could constitute suitable entry points for starting a limited trial project in Switzerland. In the Netherlands, such a process was successfully introduced in 2006/07; efforts are now underway to anchor the concept of strategic foresight within the government and the public administration. A similar approach in Switzerland would initially require an effort to explain the concept and potential of strategic foresight both within and outside of the federal administration. Open and continuous exchange of information is required in order to win the support of key decision-makers in the government, in parliament, and in the administration. Only if the benefits are apparent will it be possible to establish a foresight process and to ensure that its insights are incorporated into the policymaking process.

- Author: Beat Habegger habegger@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
- Responsible editor: Daniel Möckli analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
- Translated from German: Christopher Findlay
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