

Time to Get Real: A Critique of Global Trends 2030—Alternative Worlds

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Abstract

The article acknowledges some of the strengths of the NIC report such as its use of scenarios. It also critiques it on grounds that include failing to learn from feedback on the 2005 report, over-optimism on several fronts—especially IT, giving less weight than required to issues like global warming, overlooking the profound implications of the U.S.-led “trajectory of development,” and, in particular, its failure to recognize global limits. The report demonstrates a typical American preoccupation with technology and empirical surfaces

Keywords

GT 2030 critique, global warming, global limits, U.S. complicity in climate change

Introduction

In his invitation to comment on this new National Intelligence Council (NIC) report, Michael Marien suggests respondents evaluate its main features: four “megatrends,” six “game-changers,” eight “black swans” (or “wild cards”), and four “alternative world” scenarios. He also asks if anything else is missing or poorly done. Briefly, many of these items make a lot of sense while some do not. For example, I think that to characterize “individual empowerment” as if it were a “megatrend” is not justified by the evidence. In the light of current revelations about the secrecy and extent of government surveillance of civil populations, one could just as easily argue that the widespread *loss* of this capability is well under way. I also have concerns about two of the six “game changers.” First, as I will suggest below, the “governance gap” is a generality projected outward upon the wider world. It overlooks the very same “gap” at home in the United States with a deadlocked congress and a mode of governance that, for example, cannot govern (e.g., bring itself to deliver a credible policy on gun

control despite an outrage such as the Sandy Hook massacre of innocents). Second, with the possible exception of cyber warfare, the “impact of new technologies” is seen as overwhelmingly positive. This is a naive view that, again, makes at least as much sense if the assumptions underlying it are reversed.

The “game-changers” provided represent a small selection from a far wider set of “wild card” possibilities, and I will comment on some of them below. Finally, the four scenarios are not without value even though I find one of them barely credible. That is, the notion that in a “non-state world” the most powerful actors within the global system would work together for the mutual benefit of humankind. With the notable exception of people such as Bill Gates, I had thought that most of them were busy building casinos and unsustainable megacities, indulging in obscene levels of

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hyper-consumption and basically ripping up the joint faster than it can repair itself. (Let us not even mention the full cost of China's growth aspirations.) To think otherwise seems to me to be like asking the poachers to suddenly transform into gamekeepers. The system simply doesn't work that way. To think it does requires that we ignore or forget the nature of the interests, values and track records of these same elites (Kemph 2008). And this, I think, provides a clue to understanding the ambiguous nature of this report.

At one level, the report draws attention to a raft of issues and concerns that do, indeed, need to be addressed in a sustained and serious way. The near future is certainly unstable and challenging. At another level, however, it provides further evidence of a subtle but pervasive and long-standing institutional failure. How can this be stated with confidence? Several years ago, I was commissioned to review the previous NIC report for the U.K. journal *Futures* (Slaughter 2005). As I read the new report, I was struck by how little had changed. In its favor, I noted some conceptual improvements, there was welcome evidence of more feedback from beyond the United States, and parts of it were broad ranging and provocative. The use of scenarios, in particular, adds value. Overall, however, what I see in the new report is evidence of the same conceptual limitations and paradigm blindness.

In the earlier critique, I pointed out what I saw as some of the key gaps and omissions. They included that

- "Environmental issues are mentioned but seriously downplayed,"
- "High technology . . . is seen mainly positively, as helping to provide solutions," and
- I also noted "the avoidance of any sense of U.S. complicity in undermining 'global peace and security.'" (p. 1190)

While showing some of the incremental improvements noted earlier, the new report clearly demonstrates these very same blind spots. Nor could I find any evidence that it has responded to any of the recommendations put forward earlier. Why should it? Well, obviously

not because I wrote them, rather because *any* critical analysis published in *Futures* has a measure of credibility and should at least be considered. But, as Marien points out in his own summation of the new report, there's little or no evidence that the NIC has drawn explicitly on any real futures expertise. Some of the tools have been picked up and competently deployed, but depth insight is notably missing.

The following points were included in my 2005 suggestions for future work:

- Recognize the limitations of standard "empirical" work,
- Include critical and integral tools in the next iteration,
- Look beyond stereotypical U.S. interests and "givens," and
- Move beyond the over-representation . . . of terrorism . . . and pay serious attention to other, self-generated risks and dysfunctions. (p. 1191)

There is insufficient space to discuss all these concerns here. Instead I want to draw attention to what I regard as two major framing defects in the report. One concerns the crisis of modernity itself, the other the largely unacknowledged role of the United States in creating the global emergency (or "megacrisis") while attempting to evade any real responsibility for the consequences.

1. The underlying structural crisis of modernity

This is obviously not a simple subject. But any attempt to deal with "global trends to 2030" must deal with this as a structurally framing reality if it is to be taken seriously. The following factors, in particular, need to be recognised much more clearly and fully represented in any such forward-looking analysis.

- A clear understanding of the human, cultural, economic and ecological implications of sponsoring modes of global development that take us (the global community) a long way beyond any safe or reasonable global limits.
- The failure to comprehend climate change, global warming and related

anthropogenic impacts not as “black swans,” “critical uncertainties,” and the like but as *fundamental determinants* of all our futures from now on.

- A similar comment applies to energy. The current resurgence of oil and gas within the United States is stimulating a diversionary false optimism but is strictly short term and temporary. If used well, that is, to achieve a full transition to renewables, the current resurgence could have positive implications. But, given the cultural background, and the relevant driving forces within it, it is likely to be squandered. The Jevons effect (greater availability of a resource and lower prices leading to increased demand, and hence more rapid depletion) is being widely ignored.
 - The role of technology within modernity has been powerfully conditioned by the well-established U.S. tendency to see it in unrealistically optimistic terms. The report replicates a widespread failure to grasp how fully IT is undermining people, social structures, wealth distribution, and so on. That is, the drawbacks of IT—as currently applied—appear set to exceed the benefits by far more than is currently realised (Lanier 2013).
2. America’s primary responsibility for, and complicity in, driving trends and processes throughout the world with clearly deleterious effects that, arguably, are closing down human and cultural options.

This mode of critique can easily be misinterpreted as simple “anti-Americanism.” But, as I’ve pointed out before, this is simply not the case (Slaughter 2008). The main point of critique is the pursuit of depth understanding, without which futures work of any stripe becomes irredeemably problematic. Of the many issues that could be cited, consider the following:

- The rise and “success” of Friedman and the Chicago School’s “rationalist

economics” that have eroded “social capital” nearly everywhere and, at the same time, facilitated huge increases in corporate wealth and power.

- The squandering of oil (the premium but short-lived form of fossil energy) over two or three generations in a frenzy of mass consumption. (See below.)
- The failure of the United States to uphold and maintain proper legal, financial and political standards. For example, repealing the Glass–Steagall Act that had earlier been specifically intended to keep High Street/Wall Street and speculative banking separate.
- More specifically, the failure of systems of governance and the evisceration of oversight that permitted the creation of financial derivatives, credit swaps, and the like, hence avoidance of responsibility for the GFC and its global impacts. (As far as I know, few or no Wall Street “high flyers” have been prosecuted thus far, rather, banking oligarchs have been “bailed out” and rewarded with public funds.)
- The long-standing and determined promotion (and in some cases imposition) of destructive and unsustainable lifestyles, extreme forms of empty consumerism and unsustainable, asymmetric patterns of trade and development (Perkins 2004).
- Neglecting specific, clear and public signals of change. For example, President Carter’s addresses to the nation in April 1977 and July 1979 (Carter 1977, 1979).
- Failure to develop the necessary organisational infrastructure to support high-quality foresight work in the public interest; also the related failure to bring effective foresight into governance, policy-making and (especially) higher education.

If the report had included credible references to such key “mega-issues,” it would have had to dig more deeply into American

reality and, in so doing, could have acquired greater credibility and interpretive power. I will now comment in a little more detail on some of the other aspects of the report.

“Megatrends” and “Game Changers”

Some twenty years ago, I published a detailed analysis of the then immensely popular topic of “megatrends” that had been so successfully promoted by Naisbitt and then by others (Naisbitt 1982; Naisbitt & Aburdene 1990; Slaughter 1993). In essence, I suggested that one could not credibly claim to have detected a “megatrend” without giving some account, however brief, of the framing capacities, perceptual “filters” and cultural sources of the modes of valuation employed. I was not trying to be “academic” or “deep” here but, rather, suggesting that the then widespread habit of foregrounding empirical surfaces, and, at the same time, overlooking their human and symbolic sources, vitiated any ensuing account of “what was going on.” Two decades later, the 2012 NIC report shows the very same underlying bias. Were this otherwise then “individual empowerment” would not be seen as a significant trend. To adopt such a view seems to me to require an almost Pollyanna-ish belief both in the viability of indefinitely expanding the global economy and in the positive uses of technology outweighing the negative ones. In the light of recent work by other credible observers of the global scene, I find this kind of assertion perverse. In my own work on what I think of as the “global emergency,” I simply do not share this optimism. The human and civilizational outlook is far more risky, far more challenging, than the authors of this report have allowed themselves to believe (Slaughter 2010).

Black Swans and Scenarios

It is a minor point—yet significant—that the term *black swan* provides another example of culture-bound assumptions. Why? Because in Australia, the native swans are black! That aside, I agree with Marien that the wild card events listed here are inadequate. Besides

those that he mentions, I’d suggest several others, two of which can be viewed as “challenges” and three as “solutions”:

- IT systems as powerfully destructive forces, the full costs of which seem to be growing more serious and subversive year by year.
- Runaway global warming and regional ecological collapse as likely outcomes of present trends.
- The positive and catalytic effects that would ensue as a consequence of a broad general shift from short- to long-term thinking and strategy.
- General acceptance of the global emergency/“megacrisis” perspective (if only in a diminished form as a type of “insurance”).
- The powerful advantages of paying close and sustained attention to the nature of “descent pathways”—as opposed to running ever closer to an uncontrolled civilizational collapse. (See below.)

I will only comment on the last point. For a report that seeks to provide clarity about trends to 2030, the omission of “descent pathways” is a serious omission. It is simply explained, however, by two sets of factors. First is a refusal in the report to recognise global limits, to reign in economic growth and, equally, to question the use of GNP as a useful measure of economic activity. Second, as noted, there’s the unregarded nature of the context from which the report emerged. The NIC is a government bureaucracy that may be instrumentally powerful in some respects post 9/11 but is weak in others as I’ve indicated here. Its social context, values and symbolic underpinnings clearly exert a range of effects but they remain out of sight and unacknowledged. This goes a long way toward accounting for the overall banality of the report and its near-delusional optimism.

In line with George Bush’s famous assertion that “the American way of life is not negotiable,” the report demonstrates a continuing unwillingness or inability to confront the “shadow” side of America’s deeply

compromised culture and its rapidly fading global dominance and power (Bageant 2011; Luce 2012). Indeed, rather than admit this, they are again projected forward. The global economy will continue to expand. New sources of energy will increase U.S. energy independence and create a “brighter energy outlook.” A world that is dominantly urban can and will be sustainable. Global limits can be negated by the appropriate application of innovation and enterprise. New technologies will help solve global problems—we’ve heard all this before. It’s a familiar picture that actually helps to obscure the global emergency and delay effective responses.

Conclusion

Overall, the 2013 NIC report has the hallmarks of a bureaucratic exercise. It not only ignores the 2005 NIC Futures analysis but also demonstrates a lack of any real Futures/Foresight expertise. Throughout, there is a very typical focus on exteriors at the expense of a considered balance between exterior and interior (i.e., human and cultural) factors. The report has a lot in common with the 2005 effort and hence must be considered of limited value. It neither acknowledges nor challenges some of the powerful U.S. cultural and economic forces that have significantly shaped a world now facing its greatest challenges ever. This is, I think, its greatest weakness.

Perhaps the most “mega” of all the trends that I see in the world today is *the overall trajectory of development* that was developed in the United States and tenaciously exported to the rest of the world. As has been well documented in many places, this process occurred through “soft” cultural means such as Hollywood, TV, youth fashion, and the Internet. It also occurred through “hard” methods such as economic expansion and military aggression. I do not want to over-exaggerate this, but the fact remains that many of the “paths not taken” were obscured and even overlooked by the way the United States has acted and operated in the post-war period.

As one who grew up in a southern British city pockmarked by German bombs, I am well

aware of the fact that there have been times when the United States has come to the aid of civilisation and, in many respects, has attempted to be a shining example to the world. Those ideals and aspirations are not at issue here. What is at issue, however, is how the slow slide of humanity into a self-made trap—a trap from which it will now have immense difficulty in extracting itself—has been to a considerable extent a direct result of U.S. influence (Urry 2013). So, in the end, it is rather disingenuous for the NIC to produce work of the kind discussed here without drawing attention to, and taking responsibility for, U.S. complicity in creating this profound worldwide crisis. The value to be gained from acknowledging that global limits must be respected and current ways of thinking and operating changed to conform to the new realities is literally incalculable. More specifically, the salience of exploring “descent pathways” needs to be understood, resourced and integrated into public discourse (Slaughter and Floyd, forthcoming).

Peak oil and global warming are without doubt two of the once avoidable but now most intractable sources of disruption in our time. As such, they require more than the anodyne treatment provided here. It is time to “get real.” The NIC—and similar entities—need to acknowledge the uncomfortable facts I’ve attempted to outline earlier and to join with others in seeking in-depth and sustainable solutions. A final point, and one that the international Futures/Foresight community urgently needs to address—I’ll pose it as a question—“How can high-quality Futures/Foresight work in the public interest be enabled and sustained in ways that avoid the banality of government departments on the one hand and the market-led blindness of the private sector on the other?”

Now that’s a great topic for a future gathering of foresight practitioners!

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