

## The Difficulty of Anticipating Global Challenges: The Lessons of COVID-19

*Lars Brozus, Deputy Head of the Americas Research Division, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Germany)*

“Why didn’t we see it coming?” is frequently asked in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. The question has considerable merit in light of the many surprising global challenges in the last decade. Half a dozen major unanticipated developments shocked the world:

- The eurozone crisis in 2010 set off huge cuts to the social security systems of several European countries, pushing them into austerity and alienating parts of the population from the idea of supranational integration.
- The popular revolts in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 unseated several authoritarian rulers but also triggered protracted civil wars with antagonistic outside interventions in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, exposing the dominance of national interests over international peacemaking efforts.
- Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its enduring support for insurgents in eastern Ukraine intensified mistrust between NATO and Russia, leading to Russia’s suspension from the Group of Eight and damaging cooperation on a number of global issues.
- The climax of the refugee and migration crisis in the summer of 2015 was followed by a rise of mostly right-wing populism in many parts of Europe that champions nation-oriented chauvinistic policy ideas and is deeply suspicious of the liberal international order.
- The UK’s Brexit decision in 2016 polarized the country and was won by the “take back control” supporters, accelerating the use of nationalism as a viable political strategy while weakening the EU.
- The election of U.S. President Donald J. Trump in 2016, who ran on a platform of economic nationalism and anti-globalism, subverted international regimes such as the Paris Agreement and international institutions such as the United Nations.

Policymakers in particular fear situations in which they need to react to fast-moving events and decide on policies without knowing the effects—with one exception: they will be blamed if things go wrong. Turning inward to a national level and away from global cooperation appears to be the default reaction. Failure to anticipate and prepare for relevant international events contributes to the weakening of the principles and institutions of global governance.

There are several reasons for this failure. Analysts could be placing too much emphasis on linear conceptions of political developments in their everyday work, discounting the possibility of momentous surprises. It could also be a matter of priorities. Often there exists an official document or a paper from a research institute published years ago on a future situation-turned-reality

that was not given enough attention at the time. The global spread of a virus has been a frequent scenario in governmental risk assessments.

All of these elements are part of the answer, but the core issue is the discrepancy between policy prescriptions based on the analysis of expected developments—particularly risks—on the one hand, and the logic of everyday policymaking on the other. Although analysts can get better at anticipating future events, policymakers will still need to decide where to set national priorities in regard to preventing risks. Transcending shortsighted national approaches and developing collective strategic empathy could help mitigate this discrepancy, contributing to effective global governance.

### *ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE*

Foresight is supposed to make policymakers aware of important future developments for which policy options should be available beforehand. The analytical task is to identify developments that could become relevant for national and global affairs. These range from the political consequences of innovations in technology (such as social media and election manipulation or drones and military strategy) to constantly monitoring relevant governance indicators (such as economic development, environmental conditions, or the spread of diseases). Interpreting what these developments and indicators signal is the basis of policy recommendations that explain what actions should be taken to avoid a looming crisis or manage an expected risk.

Many national governments, such as Germany, have recently invested in early warning capabilities. However, it is far from certain that fewer surprises will automatically result. After all, the track record of previous peeks into the future is not especially impressive. Notorious examples include widely circulated predictions in the 1960s and 1970s about imminent resource scarcity because of overpopulation, which reportedly threatened the existence of humankind. Previous estimates of economic development have had to be regularly corrected. Environmental and climate research, too, has repeatedly revised its assumptions about the future in recent decades. Further, although it was no secret that public dissatisfaction with corruption, mismanagement, and state repression in the Middle East and North Africa increased significantly in the 2000s, the popular uprisings in almost every country between Morocco in the West and Yemen in the East surprised many experts. The history of predictions is plagued by false positives and false negatives.

This does not mean that prediction cannot be improved, as [Philip Tetlock's work](#) on forecast accuracy demonstrates. But it does explain why policymakers are often skeptical of policy prescriptions based on analysts' outlook on the future. To be sure, unlike forecasts, foresight is not intended to predict concrete events but rather to draw attention to potentially relevant developments. Policymakers' assumptions that more foresight will result in fewer surprises are therefore somewhat misguided. However, they will still be disappointed if the forewarning they expect—perhaps in return for investing in early warning—is not issued.

*PRESCRIPTIVE POLICY VERSUS EVERYDAY POLICYMAKING*

But even if accuracy could increase dramatically, the conflict between policy prescriptions and the logic of everyday policymaking would remain. In addition to analytically well-founded advice, policymaking is influenced by numerous other factors. Ideological convictions or expectations regarding the effects of certain policies on the economy or on public opinion, plus a host of other interests, all play a role. That such considerations influence decisions is hardly avoidable and not necessarily illegitimate. However, it limits the importance of future-oriented policy recommendations that seem essential from an analyst's point of view.

The inertia of governments to prepare adequately for predicted risks such as a pandemic can therefore not always be attributed to ignorance. A critical impediment is the logic of the policymaking process. In general, everyday politics is dominated not by considering hypothetical futures but by the interplay of consolidated interests, political competitiveness, and more urgent matters on the daily agenda. It is notoriously difficult to build political majorities for costly and far-reaching measures such as protection against a pandemic that might occur only in ten, twenty, or thirty years. Any administration needs to be convinced that it can rely on future political support to carry out such projects. Organizing the necessary majorities for massive state intervention becomes easier only in a readily perceived crisis situation. As long as a challenge is just presumed, but not yet fully visible, adequate preparation is rare. The COVID-19 pandemic on the one hand and climate change on the other exemplify the difference.

*POLITICIZATION, MULTI-PERSPECTIVITY, AND COLLECTIVE STRATEGIC EMPATHY*

Motivating policymakers to pay attention to foresight and risk assessment requires more than additional facts or sophisticated expertise. Integrating their perceptions and interests into the process might increase ownership and political relevance. However, too little attention may be left for relevant risks and events beyond the political horizon if policymaker concerns dominate. In addition, it is tempting in a competitive political environment to question the neutrality of analysis and policy recommendations. In everyday politics, this happens frequently. Experts for parliamentary hearings or commissions of inquiry are rarely selected without party-based political considerations. Politicization thus risks compromising analytical impartiality.

Therefore, although politicization needs to be contained to protect the integrity of recommendations, care should be taken to preserve their political relevance. In this respect, multi-perspectivity could be a useful tool. In forecast tournaments, teams with a high degree of diversity tend to outperform control groups. These teams successfully navigate the deceptive waters of groupthink. Policymakers should find it much more difficult to discount predictive advice that in terms of accuracy consistently scores above average.

Traditionally, foresight has been a sovereign task of the nation-state. Systematic multilateral cooperation is rare. Given the dominance of national perspectives, future analysis typically includes blind spots. Cooperation with partners from different regions and varied cultural heritage helps broaden and enhance the awareness of relevant international and global developments. To increase the diversity of perspectives, nonstate actors could also be included in the analysis. Often they are an important additional source of information. Of course, the conflicts on which thematic and geographical issues focus would not simply vanish. However, a multilateral process could support shared understanding of the various worldviews, interests and preferences, thereby fostering multi-perspectivity and collective strategic empathy: seeing the world—and possible challenges it might face—through the eyes of others. This approach could be tested within the framework of the [Alliance for Multilateralism](#). Experimenting with and practicing cooperative foresight would be an important contribution to making global governance more risk sensitive and ultimately effective.