

Quick and Clean Conflict Scenarios 2017

Annual Scenarios Exploring Top of Mind Issues in Conflict & Security

Introduction

The QC Scenarios is a short annual exercise looking at how top of mind issues (TOMI) in conflict and security could play out together. The purpose is to provide just a bit of structure for thinking about the different patterns and pathways that might emerge from the intersection and co-evolution of these TOMI. A central assumption in this exercise is that these TOMI are *the* defining issues for the future.

As quick and clean scenarios, they do not attempt to integrate many emerging issues (EI) into their forecasts. The use of EI in scenario development is a best practice in foresight work; here we keep them out specifically to prompt readers to consider how any number of additional trends and EI over the next few years would disrupt the timelines and events found in these scenarios.

Top of Mind Issues at Start of 2017

- Gray zone/hybrid warfare
- Cyber
- Machine autonomy
- Populism/nativism
- Russian aggression
- Chinese assertiveness
- ISIS

Scenarios

Scenarios are descriptions of alternative possible futures. Scenarios are one of the workhorse tools in futures studies and foresight work because they allow us to: a) deal with uncertainty and limited information by forecasting *multiple* scenarios at a time; b) explore and convey complex situations and changes in an easy-to-understand format, and; c) provide groups with compelling images of counter-intuitive or unconsidered possibilities about the future. This year's QC Scenarios include:

- *Inertia Reigns*
- *Sustaining Innovation*
- *Zero Hegemon*
- *Cyber Crucible*

It is important to point out that scenarios are not predictions: they are at most *forecasts* of logical but different ways in which the future could unfold. They are, therefore, not attempts to get the future "right" but rather structured ways of exploring possible futures.

The Quick and Clean Conflict Scenarios presented here use Richard Lum's "quick and clean" scenario typology from the *4 Steps to the Future* model (see Quick and Clean Scenarios on page 6). This model provides for four basic patterns of change, and thus four unique scenarios.

The four scenarios presented here look out over the next ten years.

Scenario A (continuity): **Inertia Reigns**

Uncertainty, anxiety, and inertia prevent either dramatic positive or negative change from occurring.

Uncertainty about Trump Administration policies, along with slow reaction to his unpredictable volatility, paralyze international actors. In this paralysis, inertia reigns, rendering NATO and other international institutions ineffectual. Just below the threshold of war, ever-more sophisticated “hybrid warfare” campaigns continue to subtly undermine Western institutions and legitimate government, particularly in Europe. While some leaders at these institutions recognize the corrosive effects of such hybrid actions, institutional inertia prevents adaptation. In Asia, an aggressive-sounding Trump administration hardens the situation in the South China Sea, further polarizing actors in the region.

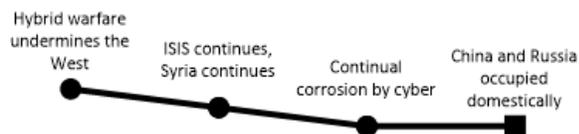


General depth of disruption in scenario

Ramped up US military action in Iraq reduces ISIS there but does not destroy its global presence. Europe and the US continue to see a slow stream of moderately successful attacks attributed to ISIS, though none of them are severe enough to catalyze a unified approach to deal with the threat. Re-introduction of US and coalition troops in Afghanistan and the introduction of US troops in Syria is suggested and heavily debated by a war-weary American people. Russian aggression and support of the Assad regime in Syria continues largely unimpeded by an uncertain and paralyzed international community.

Cyber continues to be a slow burn issue, with its own long-term corrosive effects. Russia, the hybrid warfare state *par excellence*, maintains ever-evolving cyber operations for political gains, while China evolves its cyber economic development strategy. In the West, few actors find any truly practical cyber offense options. Cyber attacks, similar to those attributed to ISIS, are perpetrated on a regular basis by a variety of state and non-state actors, yet all fall below the threshold that would provoke large scale, coordinated response. For the rest of the world, fears of cyber war and a deep focus on cyber security cause increasing concern for international commerce and communications.

Despite the apparent opportunities for major powers such as China and Russia to take advantage of the situation for their own regional agendas, each are in fact more focused on managing escalating internal challenges. These are in some cases severe, yet not so severe that global stability is threatened. In addition, a new global recession means that rising powers are unable to gain much additional traction in the international system.



Scenario B (incremental change, low disruption): Sustaining Innovation

Gradual changes and additions at the surface and edges of global systems bring stability without revolution.

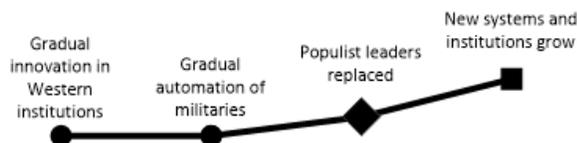
The political climate of Europe continues to mitigate against expansion of the EU or a traditional strengthening of NATO. A more flagrantly aggressive Russia, however – in addition to expanded threats by ISIS-like movements – spurs experimentation with new institutional arrangements and a new generation of policy innovators. Slowly the West is able to curtail the worst of Russia’s attempts at expanding its influence while becoming more adept at diminishing the capabilities and appeal of transnational movements like ISIS.



Technologically, Russia, China, the US and others continue a gradual automation of their militaries, each seeking particular tactical and operational advantages while wary of ceding too much initiative to “the machines.” While early opponents of automating the military were stricken with images of “killer drones” running amok, the experience gained by society at large in automation and AI alleviates the worst fears and provides much-needed patterns of human-machine collaboration. As machine automation in the military progresses it rapidly becomes affordable for a growing number of states and acts to level many conflict playing fields.

Populist leaders in the West are gradually replaced by those with more moderate and outward-looking views, yet the recent wave of populism in the West that brought them into power succeeds in a rebalancing of state goals and policies. Immigration controls, domestic security, and domestic economic development remain critical policy imperatives. At the same time, increasingly complex and intertwined economics continues to provide a stabilizing imperative, even if it’s no longer broadly believed to be a panacea for domestic economic ailments. In major potential hot spots like the South and East China Seas, economic interdependence within Asia and between China and the US prevents the outbreak of serious hostilities.

Globally, new systems and institutions slowly grow and begin to exert a stabilizing influence without dramatic disruption. Renewable energy becomes increasingly integrated into traditional generation and distribution. Increasingly important and diverse forms of the “sharing economy” start to level the playing field between developed and developing countries. New non-state institutions such as the World Conference of Mayors gain influence as massive urbanization again reshapes human affairs.



Scenario C (incremental change, high disruption): Zero Hegemon

As the Post-WWII architecture of politics and economics crumbles, rising powers assert themselves to redraw significant portions of the world map.

Globally, populism and revanchist nationalism grows. In the West, populist leaders stoke discontent, undermining trust in institutions and government and making international cooperation difficult. The EU unravels as nations disagree on economics and on responses to increasingly deadly ISIS-inspired attacks; revolutions begin in EU border countries. Russia continues to undermine Western focus and unity, engaging in small but aggressive actions in its near abroad, rendering NATO and the West’s alliance system increasingly irrelevant. As “the West” unravels US influence across the hemisphere diminishes.



For China, the One Belt, One Road initiative gradually becomes a major success, creating a strong sphere of influence for the Chinese. Emboldened by their clear economic trajectory and gathering political clout, China continues their aggressive actions in the South China Sea. China eventually gains definitive control over the South China Sea, marginalizing US military influence and gaining control over freedom of movement in the region. While China becomes the guarantor of freedom of commerce in the region, their inroads with One Belt, One Road soon brings them into ISIS’s crosshairs, creating a unique space for counter-terrorism cooperation between China and the US.

Globally, climate change reaches a tipping point and the world begins to experience a major species die-off. As sea levels rise some island nations cease to exist, while the shifts in ecosystems disrupt farming patterns the world over, resulting in famines. Mass migration of starving people creates a refugee crises. At the same, the rapid growth of the internet of things (IoT) and the digitization of *everything* create permanent structural vulnerabilities and enable persistent pathways for digital disruption. This endless array of security vulnerabilities enables cyber actors to inflict enormous economic and social costs; this permanently raises the background level of mistrust and anxiety across daily life.

Within the United States, the rural vs urban divide across the country widens, driving increased polarization. Political gridlock in Washington, DC is near total, leaving the US unable to provide leadership in the world even as its traditional levers of influence abroad dramatically diminish. Unable to steer global politics and economics as it has for the past 70 years, the US loses one of its major strategies for ensuring economic and social stability: altering the global landscape to better align with its needs and preferences.



Scenario D (abrupt, disruptive change): **Cyber Crucible**

A global cyber conflagration draws the world to the brink of techno-economic collapse and gives birth to a new international security regime.

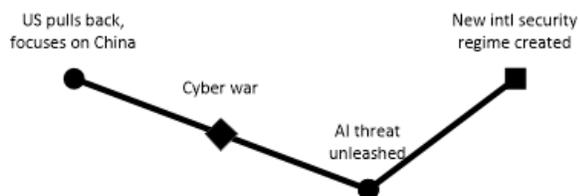
Two terms with Trump as president sees the US permissive with an aggressive Russia, yet decidedly belligerent with a rising China. The US begins to unwind its vast global presence while simultaneously shifting attention to the Asia-Pacific and investing heavily in the machine-based and autonomous capabilities to strike targets hard and far away. With the US looking the other way, Russia gains more territory under the guise of protecting Russian minorities. As the US increases its refocus on Asia (China), US-led humanitarian aid and its response to international crises suffers, further opening the door for an ascendant China to gain regional and international favor as a leading aid-giving country.



As the military buildup around the South China Sea grows, China disables a US satellite. A space- and cyber-based conflict envelops the two countries, with China being the first to activate long-dormant Trojans and inflicting serious operational disruptions to major US financial systems. The cyber war quickly spirals out of control, drawing in allied countries and unleashing all manner of non-state combatants. The global internet of things (IoT) becomes the perfect vehicle to make everyone vulnerable while the increasingly AI-driven militaries of the world become the most alarming potential risk for world leaders.

In the middle of the spiraling global cyber war, a young programmer-for-hire unleashes an AI-based threat that quickly slips his control and takes down several small governments and large banks. China and the US blame each other, while actors such as ISIS and Iran, sensing a historic opportunity to strike the West, weaponize cyber jihad and unleash wave after wave of physical and cyber-attacks throughout Europe. With AI-based cyber threats mutating and compromising networks around the globe, and with state and private actors everywhere loosening their moral restraints and escalating conflict, the global internet unravels and the major powers begin to reposition more of their human and autonomous military forces.

Just as the mutating global conflict is reaching a crescendo, the US elects a new president who immediately reaches out to China, other major powers, and critical corporate leaders. As global trade and economic output plummet and as the death toll from fighting and societal disruptions grows, world leaders from across the political and economic domains convene a hurried series of conferences to find a way out of the conflict. Rallying around their collective need to root out the rampant AI cyber threat and to reestablish and protect the world’s critical digital infrastructure, they hammer out a new global security regime centered on rebuilding a secure and stable world infrastructure.



Reflecting on the Scenarios

As stated previously, these scenarios represent possible pathways into the future *assuming that the top of mind issues are the most important drivers of change*. In reality, it is highly unlikely that these and only these issues will determine what the future will look like. Thus, these Quick and Clean Scenarios are useful as a starting point for considering how and why the world could follow different pathways into the future.

- What additional trends might alter the underlying trajectories of these scenarios?
- What new technologies, policy issues, and concepts emerging over the next several years could alter these patterns and disrupt these pathways of change?
- What types of *emergent* patterns could we logically envision appearing and altering these scenarios?
- What types of *black swans* should be considered in the context of these scenarios?
- What uncertainties about our knowledge of the global forces and dynamics of change do these scenarios raise?

Quick and Clean Scenarios

The framework for these scenarios comes from the *4 Steps to the Future* model developed by Richard Lum. In the *4 Steps* model, each scenario is framed by a different fundamental pattern of change observed in the world. At one end, Type A scenarios represent continuity while Type D scenarios represent rapid and deeply disruptive change. The depth of disruptiveness of each scenario is usually measured according to a disruption framework, which in the case of the Quick and Clean Scenarios comes from the disruption scale shown below. Items towards the top represent “shallower” levels in which there is less fundamental disruption to life. Items at the bottom represent deep changes to structures and assumptions.



Type A Scenarios: Continuity

In Type A scenarios nothing fundamentally changes: systems and institutions deflect, delay, or appropriate change drivers. Type A represents what we generally expect, at least unconsciously, of the future: that life will continue basically as we've known it. The challenge with this type of scenario is in justifying why, in the face of all the drivers of change that are clearly visible, nothing meaningful happens.

Type B Scenarios: Incremental Change, Low Disruption

In Type B scenarios institutions and organizations have the time, capacity, and inclination to adapt and change (typically in relatively minor ways). In Type B scenarios change does occur, but the nature of the change, either in scale, scope, or just timing, means that people experience relatively mild disruption to core relationships and practices. Referencing the disruption scale from earlier, Type B scenarios here tend to occur at the upper levels of the scale.

Type C Scenarios: Incremental Change, High Disruption

In Type C scenarios changes take time, and they have significant impacts on systems, structures, and norms. In these types of scenarios, the accruing change ultimately reorders life at the lower end of the disruption scale.

Type D Scenarios: Abrupt, Disruptive Change

Type D scenarios introduce relatively sudden and certainly dramatic changes. As in Type A scenarios, these might seem easy to forecast, but here the challenge is reversed: finding the logical pathways that lead us from the present to a dramatically changed future often require us to expose and challenge core assumptions about why the world works the way it currently does.

Additional Resources

The following sources offer more insight into scenario analysis and foresight work.

4 Steps the Future: A Quick and Clean Guide to Creating Foresight, by Richard Lum. Available from Amazon.com and other booksellers.

Emerging Issues for Conflict and Security, 2017. Available soon at www.visionforesightstrategy.com

Emerging Issues for Conflict and Security, 2015. Available at www.visionforesightstrategy.com.



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