



STRATFOR VS. REALITY (1995-2025). DILEMMAS IN GLOBAL FORECASTING

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*"And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many."
Matthew 24 11 (KJV)*

*"If you're right 99 per cent of the time, you're not making really interesting calls."
G. Friedman, 2005*

Abstract

Our analysis ascertains the particularities of international relations forecasting. This particular type of forecasting peruses especially complex subjects, conjoined with political, economic and military overtones. The particularities of this domain lie in the multitude of variables employed, as well as in the rather unparagoned contexts placed under the theoretical microscope. Despite the methodological difficulties characteristic for this area of expertise, international relations global forecasting products are immensely appreciated in the market. As a result, several companies have succeeded in creating powerful brands - Stratfor is an instance of this. But do the Stratfor Decade Forecasts survive the test of time? And, if inadvertences occur, which are the culprits? The case study we propose aims to examine these very issues.

Keywords: global forecasting, Stratfor, international relations methodology, geoeconomics

JEL Classification: F50, F51, F60

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The Specifics of International Relations Forecasting

Forecasting is clearly one of the most popular products resulting from the pragmatic inference of international relations and its related disciplines. More than other social or humanities disciplines, both the theory of international relations and its practical applications show a conspicuous methodological deficit that stems from a certain volatility of the object itself. The rift between topic debates and methodological debates in international relations can be explained if we consider that it manages a large number of variables, as well as inferences from highly convoluted, if not unique, facts. The empirical aspects regarding methodology – most significantly those regarding data collection – are lagging behind the inter-paradigm debate. This shows why international relations describe rather than explain, as well as seem to be more proficient in case studies than in formulating typologies. Looking at both academic literature and media analysis, we see that international relations have more than once proven their capacity to explain events post factum, but rarely have they foreseen a chain of causes and effects. The question we propose is the following: how valid can hypothetical causal relations be if they can only produce a post factum analysis?

Let us ponder of the following idea: why does the fascination for the "geopolitical" prophecies of Nostradamus still persist? Probably because they have not yet been verified. And, if that were to happen, it would still be difficult to understand what has happened and, consequently, if the prophecy was indeed accurate. Forecasting represents a causal "prophecy", identified on the basis of a scientific exercise. Paradoxically, the keystone of forecasting is not the output, but the input - a more comprehensive argument for this is made by one of the co-authors of this paper (Cristea, 2012: 138-141). In the field of international relations, one can only see if a forecast was good when it becomes reality; also, we must stress on the fact that analysis is dependent on data available at the date of forecast inception, thus making the prediction dependent on the hypothesis or hypothetical scenario it stems from. We repeat, this is not theoretically dissimilar to other social or humanities disciplines that work with such products, subject only to the sometimes excessively multi-paradigmatic specific of the field of the international relations domain - and, to reiterate, under the agency of a high number of variables, rather relaxed causal relations and a somewhat inadvertent perception of "data" (Lamont, 2015: 96-113).

This abbreviated intro into the problematic of international relations forecasting cannot fail to address one other important element – beyond the academic sector and institutional analysis (be that civil or military) there is a critical area of specialized products such as consultancy reports for the private market and media-related studies. But are these two last areas beneficial to the professionalism and pragmatism of IR analysis and forecasting? Or do they in fact oversimplify them, subjecting the products to PR rules instead of scientific rigor? A now classic methodological issue is how different types of expertise may be evolved structures of common knowledge posing as scientific knowledge (Chelcea, 2007: 30-66).

International relations define a discipline inside which we tend to be concerned more on catastrophes than on normality; although comfortable, a tedious "end of history" international system would lack the prerequisites to inspire motivation, at least in the context of this particular discipline. The mere idea of forecasting goes hand in hand with that of policy (not *politics*), or planning. Reciprocal contagion has led to economic management and strategic planning developing the idea of forecasting as basis for strategizing and crisis management in the past decades; in the instances when evolution is irregular, "black swans" (Taleb, 2007) and, implicitly, crisis, appear.

Both theory and practice in international relations employ alternative scenarios. This method can be as good as any other, provided we understand that it does not produce data, but rather enforces classifications and clarifications of available information. Scenarios have the disadvantage of isolating paths in deceptively stable parallel structures, theoretically linear and incorruptible. As such, in many instances scenarios become victims of their own subjectivity and prejudice, samples of mere common knowledge. While they could harness the experience of strategists and analysts, even in the instances of positive results it is hard to believe that the trail could be replicated – as well as the resulting outcome – if the need for it would occur. Generally, scenarios deal in the possible more than in the reasonable or the probable. Although we are often presented with the idea of probable scenarios, probability itself is more of a closer possibility, therefore a product of common knowledge – integrating variable levels of professional experience. Rigorously put, probability distinguishes a mathematical measure and is therefore difficult to apply practically in a field as methodologically challenged as the one in question.

We should not forget that one of the founding theoretical “duels” of international relations in the beginning of the 90’ was that between the paradigm of clashing civilizations (multipolar and competitive vision regarding the system after the Cold War) (Huntington, 1997) and that of the end of history (liberally optimistic) (Fukuyama, 1992). The high degree of uncertainty – we include here the theories regarding the configuration of the international system – has led to a proliferation of a highly futurological scientific literature after the 1990s (McRae, 1994; Emmott, 2003; D. Friedman, 2008; G. Friedman, 2009; Franklin & Andrews, 2012; Randers, 2012, etc.). Uncertainty also defined attempts to understand the world in the context of global changes and developments after 1990: the 90s were laden with global crisis regarding the new configuration of the political and media systems, the 2000 millennia commenced with 9/11 and a global war against terrorism and consequent developments; past years exhibit consecutive relocations of geopolitical and geo-economics power plays, as well as serve to prove that military security in its traditional essence had been neglected in the past quarter century by most European states.

International relations theory has in fact always retained a special relationship with the idea of forecasting. If we look at how the discipline is structured on paradigmatic ideologies, each with its own vision of the system, as well as at the behaviour of stakeholders and principles governing the field, we can see how it generates a potent framework for forecasting and building assumptions regarding trends in both geopolitics and economy.

The Sorcerer's Laboratory. Implications for Our Analysis

It should be a truth universally acknowledged that strategic intelligence analysis and associated forecasting attempts cannot be precise. Political systems and forecast variables are difficult to encompass in a mere overview, as the data employed is both complex and extensive, spanning over various geographical areas, political systems and variables. The most prestigious products in this area avoid publicising their methodology, which we can only presume is one respectful of the methodological canons of scientific knowledge. In the absence of methodological transparency – and knowledge of the economic impact of such forecasts – what can we ultimately conclude regarding their end results?

Probably one of the better known products of international strategic and intelligence forecasting have been offered by Stratfor in the past years. Led by George Friedman (relevant volumes include Friedman, 2009, 2011, 2015) until approximately three years ago,

this company has produced a series of ten-year international forecasts, calibrated every five years in order to correct certain aspects by addressing the real-time evolution of events. We will therefore refer to the 1995-2005, 2000-2010, 2005-2015, 2010-2020, 2015-2025 Stratfor Decade Forecasts.

In short, what we propose in the following pages is to audit the forecasts comprised in the abovementioned decade reports. In order to better portray our findings, we will present relevant quotes from these reports – so that the reader will have a direct path towards the anticipative analysis in question. What remains from the analysis products which have started so many debates at their publication? Are the short and middle term analytical “prophecies” valid? If not, what discourse techniques did the Stratfor analysts employ in order to back-track or turn their faults into justifiable mistakes?

Does Friedman’s Crystal Ball Work? The Stratfor Decade Forecast Reports

Although Stratfor defines itself as a “private global intelligence company” employing several former CIA analysts, its reputation among a number of policy and international relations experts is poor, some going to the length of saying that “*Stratfor is just The Economist a week later and several hundred times more expensive*” (Max Fisher, 2012). We invite the following question: are Stratfor predictions really forecasts? Or are they actually bullet points depicting Stratfor’s perspective regarding optimal USA international behaviour? Predictions such as Russia, China and the European Union breaking apart as the United States either maintain their supremacy or grow even stronger – “*the world’s only superpower – the only power able to project its forces globally*” - seem to constitute the baseline of most (if not all) Stratfor *Decade Forecasts*, unsupported by facts, history, or proper methodological scenario building. More so, other predictions they offer tend to be rather general in scope – for example, “*prosperity and instability will go hand in hand*” -, leaving a lot to be desired in terms of geopolitical perspective. Another fail of Stratfor, which we can also extrapolate as a fail of Friedman, is the lack of comment on climate change – elements such as droughts and the disappearing of natural resources have become a big issue and conclude in both internal and international conflict.

For those with less frequent contact with the field of international relations, Stratfor may seem like a mercenary boutique of CIA. This could not be further from the truth. The company has methodological issues concerning credibility and seems to lack a scenario-building strategy, preferring to repeat around four general ideas every 5 years and cold-reading foreign policy by means of inductive reasoning. This is dismally true in all accounts, be it if we were to point at their track record predictions analysis of their short-term forecasting. Stratfor forecasts on the United States seem to go around the perpetual idea of global supremacy, thus raising questions regarding domestic proficiency – most known employees are known to have started as foreign area officers.

We will further discuss the five reports, as well as highlight and explore the problematic issues identified.

1995-2005

This report is defined by two somewhat contradictory prophecies, that of “a period of unprecedented global economic prosperity and growth”, as well as “a period of increasing fragmentation and tension in the international system”. The idea of the United States growing power and supremacy emerges from this report and will consequently be re-issued in all

following ones. Other region-based forecasts include Germany being unable to create a Monetary Union, Japan turning from social instability to turning into a major player in the Western Pacific, USA eventually seeking to contain Japan, India embarking on a journey towards economic growth surge and Russia trying to retrieve its lost portions and China disintegrating in the early part of the 1995-2005 decade.

The 1995-2005 period is one *Foreign Affairs* at one time dubbed as "America – The lonely superpower". This geostrategic loneliness, enhanced by the disruption of the bipolar system, brings about a treacherous liberal perspective on the world and the United States find themselves rival-less. Despite 80s popular beliefs and social prognosis, Japan fails to become the main antagonist. As we all know, China does not only fail to disintegrate in the 1995-2005 decade, but actually shows significant economic growth, paving the way towards a continuous middle-term surge.

"The European Union's enjoyment of this period will be limited somewhat by Germany's on-going digestive problems—absorbing the old East Germany—and an inability to create a Monetary Union. As the EMU frays, European integration in general will be questioned. The great reversal of 1997 will resonate through the next decade." (1995-2005 Report).

We find many faults and curtailments in this prognosis. Firstly, not only does the EU not disappear, but it thrives and grows exponentially. Secondly, China does not disband, but becomes a lead actor. Thirdly, and most poignant, the prognosis regarding Islam is almost entirely missed. There is no real choice between Moscow and the Asia-Pacific region – the Russian courtship of the Arabs was only a reality between the 60s and the 80s, and Friedman's methodology tends to find its footing in history more than in geopolitical prognosis – which may be why he sometimes blurs the line between past and present in order to get a point across.

The report essentially misses the main subject of the following 15 years: international terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism – ingredients everything from 9/11 to what we now know as the Islamic State revolve around. This is anomalous, as international terrorism – especially in the Middle East – constitutes a topic which has been debated for a great number of years. While we cannot find fault in Stratfor not anticipating 9/11, we can state that the evolution scenario of the terrorist phenomena and its impact on United States domination for the decade to come is completely off-course. Meanwhile, not only does China not disappear, but the Communist Party is still in power, former-known Yugoslavia is at war between 1993 and 2001, and the projections on states such as Somalia, Myanmar or Rwanda fail to meet reality.

"We expect Russian power to emerge, but over the next decade, it will be focused on retrieving lost portions of its empire. Until that takes place, no Eurasian hegemony can be threatened." (1995-2005 Report).

Predictions on Russia come closer, although that in itself is not necessarily augural. Interestingly enough, although Russia had major issues in 1995, its dissolution is not inferred (as one would expect, considering the habitual Stratfor dialectic); as the country stabilizes around 2000-2001, we must debate whether this is a direct consequence of Putin coming to power or simply a predictable systemic effect. We will argue that, at least for the past couple of decades, Russia has been focusing on internal reform much more than on expansion. More so, after years of cohabiting with oligarchs, it has gradually disposed of them – at least in the sense of national and international media exposure. Legitimate issues only arise as late as 2013 – in connection to Ukraine – with a brief episode around 2008-2009 in Georgia; major events not predicted in the report include the Arab Spring, Ukrainian efforts to join

NATO, Kiev protests as Russophiles won the elections after the orange regime of Yushchenko and Tymoshenko disbanded, the Euromaidan, Crimea and the new cold war.

2000-2010

Barnum and "rainbow" statement constructions such as "We remain optimistic about an Arab-Israeli peace, so long as it is understood that this peace will be about as friendly as is normally the case in the region (...)" are employed frequently in the report. The whole international system is said to revolve around the US – that both seems to maintain its position of military, economic and political power and is said to be the only agent capable of addressing and recalibrating the disequilibrium present since the fall of the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding, structural issues such as the aging population liquidating capital holdings when reaching retirement age and a severe labour shortage announce problems for the US later in the decade.

"As the year 2000 approaches, two overwhelming forces are shaping the international system. The first is the process of coalition-building in which weaker powers seek to gain leverage against the overwhelming power of the United States by joining together in loose coalitions with complex motives. The second process, economic de-synchronization, erodes the power authority of the international organizations used by the United States and its coalition during the Cold War and the interregnum." (2000-2010 Report).

The 2000-2010 report tends to come closer to history as far as the United States goes, but misses the general context: the counter-terrorism war that gives it free reign in Iraq and Afghanistan. It also lacks perspective regarding the impact 9/11 had on Russia and China, who decide not to interfere in the United States army going into Afghanistan.

"De-synchronization will undermine the integrated global economic system, replacing it with regional economic groupings. This will be particularly visible in Asia and in the former Soviet Union as well as Europe. (...) Except for a few countries with relatively healthy banking systems, Asia will not recover during this decade. (...) Russia, essentially cut off from Western capital and unable to compete in Western markets, will be forced by circumstances to regain the components of the former Soviet Union. It will seek to cooperate with China to block U.S. interference in the reconstruction process." (2000-2010 Report).

Although Russia does place itself on a path of alteration and loss of democracy in the light of the new millennia – basically in the Putin age – the strive to obtain internal order and a detachment from Western capitalism is not properly captured in the report. More so, the analysis fails to predict major trends regarding Russia, as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) ends off being less of a successful economic project and more of a forced project. Global economy does not disband, as stated in the report, but is so absolute that the 2008 USA recession ends up affecting the overall system. Adding to this, the major recession point is in 2008, not at the beginning of the decade, and is defined by a purely speculative mechanism, not economic growth – in truth, the Asian continent itself tends to be misrepresented, as we could not state that Asia was significantly more distressed by the crisis than the USA or various European states.

"We remain pessimistic about the long-term prospects of a united Europe." (2000-2010 Report).

The European Union seems to grow more successful inversely to the pessimistic Stratfor prognosis, overcoming the 2009-2013 crisis without disappearing. Although this is not to say that it could not fail – or that everyone is satisfied with how it's going – the EU appears to thrive exactly when Stratfor deems it irreparable.

"Latin America is beginning to experience a division into two parts. There are growing signs of instability in the northern tier, running from Panama and Ecuador to Venezuela. While the rest of the continent remains stable, deterioration of the northern tier can spread and destabilize the continent. The central question is whether Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez will be able to maintain a reformist strategy or whether the process will get away from him and turn into revolution. If so, the revival of the left in Latin America, colliding with the technocrats who manage ministries and governments, could create a volatile political situation." (2000-2010 Report).

Hugo Chavez is one of the issues the report gets it right, as he starts as a populist reformer and dies as dictator of a bankrupt country.

2005-2015

From a demographic standpoint, while Europe and Asia are said to be unable to shape demography, the USA can apparently do so "at will", having already planned for worst-case scenarios and factored every outcome; both rapid and disruptive economic boosts would occur close to 2015 as the baby-boomers retire, while for Japan this is said to happen starting 2005. More Barnum statements appear, such as in the paragraph depicting the issue of East Asia and the two Koreas: "Both Koreas seek a strong, independent Korea, and (...) the two are working closer together to achieve this (...) Over the next decade, this cooperation will become more apparent, though ideology will still present a barrier (...)". The secret to any Barnum-type statement is, in the end, the very idea of proposing a seemingly dichotomist scenario without actually building an ideological asymmetry: any idea presented as such can never be dismissed, as it simultaneously comprises all possible scenarios. Regarding Russia, while past report forecasts have not yet materialized, they are effortlessly pushed towards the new decade – or even later - "Stratfor believes our forecast from five years ago will come true, if not by 2010 then by 2015 (...) The turning point could come soon, or it could be years away".

"The events of Sept. 11, 2001 — which we did not forecast — nevertheless fit with our general forecast that the United States will remain generally aloof from international entanglements, unless they affect the Persian Gulf and the region surrounding it. That will be — and has been — the primary cause of American intervention. It has resulted in the fulfilment of a second forecast. (...) Far more important — and the single most important fact about the United States — is its institutionalized capacity to absorb immigrants. Unlike Europe or Asia, the United States is capable of relatively seamlessly absorbing migration at virtually any social level, from impoverished Central American immigrants to highly skilled professionals. As a result, it can shape whatever demographic order, within a matter of years, it requires." (2005-2015 Report).

Despite having missed 9/11 in the past reports, Stratfor holds its conclusion that the United States is the most powerful country in the world. Immigration starts its ascension towards the top of the agenda, although its illustration fails to represent a true image of years to come: that this new Mexico – USA immigration does not constitute a melting pot any more, and is fragmenting society as the Mexicans only come for work, not in order to be integrated or absorbed into the community – the volume *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (Huntington, 2004) showcases an interesting overview on this issue. We cannot touch on this subject without connecting it with the Trumps 2016 proposals regarding immigration during the campaign, or his 2017 decisions as President.

"On the whole, Stratfor's long-term East Asian forecasts have been right on the money. However, we have always been bearish on China — not for ideological reasons but for

structural ones — and our forecasts, which we believe remain fundamentally accurate, have not matched the bullish view that others give to the Chinese economy and national status. Our view of China's future is in stark contrast with the positive outlooks we see coming from investment houses and others. (...) This rush of foreign investment and interest in China has masked the Chinese economy's underlying weaknesses and given the government tools to maintain control. But it will not last. Already there is dissent forming in the international community, and the need for quicker profits — or any profits — is driving companies and investors to look elsewhere. Rising interest rates and the perception of strong market fundamentals are bringing investments to the United States.” (2005-2015 Report).

As far as China goes, the mistrust is still apparent – while the Chinese modus operandi may not be viable, 20 years have passed (1995-2015) since they have projected its failure but the country is still growing stronger. Consequently, we may ask ourselves whether Stratfor will consider its predictions true whenever China eventually fails as a project – will that happen in another 20 years? Will it happen tomorrow? As we look at both the field and history of geopolitical forecasting, we learn that the failure of China has been predicted for the past 700 years, that of the West for 200 and that the Roman Empire took roughly 600 to disappear – the field of international relations seems unable to correctly measure the true importance of events and operates with conventions.

”Stratfor believes our forecast from five years ago will come true, if not by 2010 then by 2015. We base this belief on objective reasons, such as the hard geopolitical realities Russia has faced for hundreds of years. Pro-Western governments' content with supporting roles in a U.S.-dominated world might come and go, but Russia and its inevitable geopolitical challenges remain. We believe Russia is at the beginning of a reversal that will take it on an anti-U.S. course. The turning point could come soon, or it could be years away. Russia's deepening systemic crisis and a fierce and continuous struggle between nationalist forces and pro-Western, Washington-supported factions will make for a very painful reversal of indeterminable length and depth.” (2005-2015 Report).

Prophecies on Russia seem to stand, although specific timelines are still missing – will the country disband under the pressure of Poland and Turkey, as proposed in *The Next 100 Years* (Friedman, 2009)? Or will it become great again in a decade? Although the field of international relations has changed since Russia has become an “enemy of the West”, we cannot be confident on the long-term implications.

”Three key elements will drive Middle Eastern geopolitics in the coming decade: continuing domestic and regional political upheaval in the Muslim world, the United States' status as a superpower and the demand for energy (oil). What the region will look like in the next 10 years will depend on the way current situations develop — most notably, the outcome of the U.S.-jihadist war and the state of technology with respect to fuel and energy.” (2005-2015 Report).

This particular report comes closer to the inter-religious wars in the Muslim world, but fails to touch on the Islamic State phenomenon, or of how some individuals belonging to Muslim minorities in the European Union practice terrorism (as seen in the past years in countries such as France, United Kingdom or Belgium).

”In previous decade forecasts, Stratfor correctly said that a hoped-for Franco-German-Russian axis would fail, since every other state in Europe has either been at war with or occupied by France, Germany or Russia multiple times. (...) The EU began sliding into chaos in 2004. Even if the EU does not yet recognize that its experiment in political cohesion is a failure, when the bloc looks back to when it all started to unravel, it will point to 2004. (...) The EU probably will officially collapse as a political union by 2015. Political disagreement

will persist to the point that one of its major countries — either France or Germany, in all likelihood — will leave the Union. The departure of either of those states would mean the EU's most ardent backers have given up on the idea of getting 25 countries to unify, and it is unlikely the remaining countries would be strong enough to keep the EU going." (2005-2015 Report).

After admitting their failure regarding predicting the fate of the European Union and its currency, Stratfor concludes again that the Union will have fallen by 2015. The fall of the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis is also given as an example of valuable prediction, although we may construe it as a moot point: in the end, predicting something that could never happen to never happen is redundant, albeit technically accurate – this seems to be one of the major trends in Stratfor prognosis.

2010-2020

The 2010-2020 report states that the foremost element of change is a demographical one, and that its effects can be disjointed into two divisions: financial and immigration-related. The European Union is said to undergo severe strain, thus making inter-European relations turn difficult. In the Middle East section we find out that the jihadist-US war, although isn't eliminated, subsides. Economic progress is projected for Latin America, particularly in Brazil and Mexico. This leads to a problematic situation for the US as, the traditional concerns regarding the Islamic world and Russia take a back-seat to a fairly unstable Mexico which will "compete with the rest of the world for Washington's attention".

"We continue to maintain the essential forecasts made in 2005. The U.S.-jihadist war is in the process of winding down. It will not go away, but where in 2005 it defined the dynamic of the global system, it is no longer doing so. China has not yet faced its Japan-style crisis but we continue to forecast that it will — and before 2015. There were many things we failed to anticipate in our forecasts, but we remain comfortable that we captured the essentials. (...) Our 2005 forecast derived from the dynamic we laid out in 2000. Of the specifics there, our Russian and American forecasts have taken place, our forecast on the U.S.-jihadist war is in the process of being fulfilled, and we stand behind our China forecast with five years to run." (2010-2020 Report).

The United States vs. jihadists' war is far from becoming moot. In truth, this period marks the very beginning of the Islamic State, the most gruesome terrorist agent in our history. Certainly, we couldn't have expected Stratfor to have guessed either the surprising manifestation of the Islamic State, nor the amplification of this phenomenon at certain points - consequence of the lack of reaction manifested by many important stakeholders. What is clear though is that both ISIS and its resulting developments (such as the Charlie Hebdo episode, or the mass migration from Syria to the EU) marked a new era for global terrorism, one tantamount to that preceding 9/11 - and in a significantly more arduous international climate, both economically and politically.

"Europe will continue focusing inward because of demographic issues and the difficulties involved in constructing European institutions, both of which will cause intra-state tensions. (...) A deep tension will emerge in Europe between the elite — who will see foreign pools of labour in terms of the value they bring to the economy, and whose daily contact with the immigrants will be minimal — and the broader population. The general citizenry will experience the cultural tensions with the immigrants and see the large pool of labour flowing into the country suppressing wages. This dynamic will be particularly sharp in the core states of France, Germany and Italy." (2010-2020 Report).

This report is mostly accurate if we look at the predictions regarding Europe, West demographic issues attracting immigrants, populism and nationalism in the central EU states; unfortunately, context is yet again missed: immigration is facilitated by demographic issues and search for wellbeing, but is provoked by the Arab Spring, fail of Libya, Syria and the Islamic State. Another problem that fails to be correctly presented is the economic crisis of the European Union – and how we survived it.

“Russia’s demographic problems have yet to hugely affect its ability to project power. (...) Russia will spend the 2010s seeking to secure itself before the demographic decline really hits. It will do this by trying to move from raw commodity exports to process commodity exports, moving up the value chain to fortify its economy while its demographics still allow it. Russia will also seek to reintegrate the former Soviet republics into some coherent entity in order to delay its demographic problems expand its market and above all reabsorb some territorial buffers.” (2010-2020 Report).

Russia, presented so far as an aggressive state (correctly so), suddenly falls due to demographic issues – these don’t appear overnight and are not explained accordingly. This appearance is contradictory as, all things considered, possibilities are scarce and incongruous by themselves. We find either a Russia decaying due to absolutely objective systemic causes and with a 90s style international performance, or one provoking the West and reinstating itself as a global military power. Even in this last scenario, but the country still seems to be eventually impaired by the same systemic causes. But does Russia truly become a threat for the West in this more plausible scenario - even on a medium term? And, if not, as Stratfor seemingly seems to think, what relevance does this aggressive geopolitical re-positioning have in the greater scope of forecasting?

2015-2025

This forecast maintains a discourse professing the Jihadist-US war subsiding and a European Union’s institutions downfall. As is the first decade report, Russia is said to strive to reintroduce former Soviet republics into its territory. Other predictions include Germany going through an economic downfall, Turkey emerging as a major regional power, a growing Turkish-Iranian competition, China maintaining economic stability, as well as the US continuing to represent the major economic, political and military power.

“We predicted China’s weakness too early, but we saw that weakness when others were seeing the emergence of an economy larger than that of the United States. (...) China’s economy, like the economies of Japan and other East Asian states before it, will reduce its rate of growth dramatically in order to calibrate growth with the rate of return on capital and to bring its financial system into balance. To do this, it will have to deal with the resulting social and political tensions.” (2015-2025 Report).

Stratfor is still expecting their prediction of China falling, despite current international events. The Islamic State is still misrepresented – although Europe is indeed scared of the terrorist threat and the Islamic State is due to disappear at some point, the length of its impact cannot be neglected.

“The diversity of systems and demographics that is Europe will put the European Union’s institutions under severe strain. We suspect the institutions will survive. We doubt that they will work very effectively. (...) The European Union will be unable to solve its fundamental problem, which is not the Eurozone, but the free trade zone. (...) What will define Europe in the next decade is the re-emergence of the nation-state as the primary political vehicle of the continent. Indeed the number of nation-states will likely increase as various movements

favouring secession, or the dissolution of states into constituent parts, increase their power. This will be particularly noticeable during the next few years, as economic and political pressures intensify amid Europe's crisis." (2015-2025 Report)

The European Union is – at last – destined to survive, although Stratfor doesn't place much trust in its future actions. We tend to disagree on this point: the federal option is not an option, so that the current freedom of circulation, single currency, common market and freedom of work is relatively sufficient for it to continue to thrive. We find no mention of Brexit (which technically happened during the last couple of reports), another major international relations event completely disenfranchised by the analysis.

End remarks

"And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars"

Luke 21 25 – KJV

So what can we truly conclude after an exhaustive evaluation of Stratfor grand decade reports? Similarly to the forecasts we interpreted, our analysis is tributary to the glass hypothesis: what is more important in the end – the empty half, or one that is full? Are we therefore more surprised by what they predicted or by their mistakes? Naturally, critics stress on the sometimes resounding failures of Stratfor predictions – this is not done necessarily in bad faith, but must be juxtaposed to Stratfor's claim to deliver *forecasts*. On the whole, the most conspicuous mistakes in their ten-year forecast are not necessarily perturbing – the world of international relations is extremely dynamic, not functioning as an engineered, relatively closed, systemic and clearly-marked causality mechanism, but inhabited by actors and stakeholders portraying different typologies of agency. As such, any prognosis could be valid in the context of a certain hypothesis. The substantial failure of Stratfor forecasting lies not in how events historically developed, but in that major events have not been anticipated at all – and exactly those are the ones reformulating international relations and the international system itself (international terrorism at the beginning of 2000, the failure of democracy in areas such as the Middle East or Northern Africa in the past twenty years, the Islamic State phenomena, etc.).

Every time a variable or scope of the hypothesis changes, so does its associated scenario. Into itself, the mere method of scenario-building, highly courted in intelligence analysis, international relations and crisis communication, is sadly not based on compelling scientific methodology. In truth, this is only supposed to be a method to cover all possible scenarios, so that the decision-maker, finding himself before one of them – and having the ability to recognize that – will have a prepared set of optimal answers and solutions.

Stratfor forecasts are close-fisted, even cryptic, when it comes to their methodology. Also, historicism seems to be an essential ingredient for Stratfor „mathematics”, fact only made more obvious by a certain oversimplifications employed. No one expects Stratfor experts to guess the future, of course, and we accept that such products have a commercial, mediatic and strategic value. Most times though, Stratfor correctly intuits linear historical paths (such as that of the US), is obstinate in continuously repeating the same scenarios until they finally take place (the repositioning of Russia as enemy of the West) and regularly postpones disasters portrayed as minor signals (such as the fall of the European Union and China) – for Stratfor analysts it doesn't appear to be fundamentally paramount if their predictions will happen now or in the next 100 years.

This can be easily explained by the fact that signals are hard to read in the absence of adequate methodology and conceptualizations.

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