



By: *Harvey Morris*

UK defence study sets out a range of possibilities for an uncertain world



The year is 2055.

Russia has long since won its war in Ukraine. China is now the world's undisputed economic superpower. In partnership with Eurasian allies, it exercises global political and military dominance after a US retreat from international institutions that marked America's decline.

That is the scenario, or at least one of them, spelled out in the UK defence ministry's latest [Global Strategic Trends](#), an occasional exercise in assessing the challenges of a changing world for the benefit of British and allied decision-makers.

Chinese supremacy is not the only potential outcome foreseen in an almost 500-page document that wisely hedges its bets on what the world will actually look like in 30 years' time.

The seventh edition of the GST comes at a time when the global future looks more unpredictable than at any time since the first was published in 2003.

A series of global shocks

As the document outlines, a series of global shocks, from the pandemic to the spread of disinformation and from war in Europe to the threat of widening conflict in the Middle East, have contributed to a new era of uncertainty.

The authors are less focussed on predicting an inevitable future than they are on determining the factors that might contribute to a variety of outcomes, depending on the actions of governments, non-state actors and individuals.

They identify the main global drivers of change, from inter-state competition to demographic pressures, technological advances and climate change. Rising inequality will meanwhile put "increasing pressure on state and international governance structures and capacity".

As to where that leads us, readers are left to

take their pick. The document sets out five hypothetical pathways along which the world might progress/regress of which an era of Chinese hegemony is just one.

Things might get worse before they get better

Things might get worse before they get better. The worsening impact of climate change might spur a new wave of activism. Coupled with that, threats as varied as the expansion of organised crime, the proliferation of advanced weaponry, even another lethal pandemic, might encourage states to work together for the common good.

Or perhaps emerging conflicts will drive nations further apart, as competition for influence and resources encourages protectionism and nationalism and the world enters an era of deglobalisation.

Or, in the face of rising uncertainty and discontent, cash-strapped states and multinational institutions might simply unravel as commercial interests, tech billionaires and private armies increasingly assume the functions of government.

Alternatively, things might remain pretty much as they are. The EU and NATO will survive, possibly adding new members, while the US would continue to be closely involved with the UN and other multinational institutions, while maintaining the supremacy of the dollar. Non-aligned states would resist the advances of authoritarian powers.

A sobering reminder

As much as serving as a guide to strategic planners, the latest GST is a sobering reminder that no set of circumstances or trends automatically lead to an inevitable outcome.

Looking back to a little over 30 years ago, some in the West were proclaiming [the end of history](#) and the triumph of liberal democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Who, at that hubristic time, could have accurately predicted what would almost immediately follow, let alone what the world would look like today? And yet the seeds of the future were there, from the rise of Islamic fundamentalism to the launch of the World Wide Web.



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The challenge of predicting the future is that, while actions have consequences, they are not always the ones that were foreseen. That has not prevented futurologists and other assorted soothsayers from confidently telling us what will come next.

They range from the self-interested tech bros who confidently assert the inevitability of the singularity, in which humans are destined to become part machine, to the pessimists who predict that, whatever humanity does to salvage the planet, it is still headed for an earlier grave.

Such fortune-telling is a growth industry in a connected world in which many are clearly more comfortable believing that an evil cabal is in charge than they are in acknowledging that chaos reigns.

Predicting the future is impossible

The findings of the UK defence ministry's paper are of a different order. It was an enterprise that gathered the academic input of a wide range of institutions as well as the participation of government and military

officials from across the world, over 10,000 individuals in all.

The only inevitability that it refers to is that "There is a huge degree of uncertainty in what is described, and some of this analysis may, at first glance, seem contradictory - simply because it illustrates possible alternative future pathways rather than a single version of the future."

Full-scale conflict with worldwide ramifications is now considered plausible

What it does conclude is that geopolitical tensions have increased significantly across economic, diplomatic and security fronts in the past five years. "Full-scale conflict with worldwide ramifications is now considered plausible," it acknowledges. "The current international order is also seeing a growth in the influence of a range of state and non-state actors and an increasing diffusion of power."

In an expression of hope rather than foresight, it suggests that in 30 years' time, humanity might have exploited its many strengths and opportunities to create a more equitable and sustainable future.

But perhaps its most important insight is that: "The outputs of this programme are based on the premise that predicting the future is impossible."