

Review Essay

Future Imperfect

Sara Robinson

The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century

George Friedman. New York: Doubleday, 2008. \$25.95. 272 pp.

Global Catastrophes and Trends: The Next Fifty Years

Vaclav Smil. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. £19.95/\$29.95. 320 pp.

What Next? Surviving the Twenty-first Century

Chris Patten. London: Allen Lane, 2008. £20.00. 510 pp.

One of the perennial problems faced by the professional futures field over the past generation has been a persistent inability to keep the neighbours from borrowing the tools of our trade. Not that we're not willing to share (far from it) but, as so often happens, they're often used for purposes not intended, and then returned in disreputable condition.

Complicating this is the fact that the futures toolbox is a motley one, scavenged from every conceivable discipline and included on the basis of what can (more or less) be induced to work, at least on occasion. The instruments are many and varied; the only attribute they share is that they're all fairly cumbersome and blunt. In the hands of a futurist, computer modelling, Delphi surveys, two-by-two analysis, geopolitical analysis, causal layered analysis, trend analysis, scenario development, strategic planning, social-

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factors research, expert forecasting and a variety of other techniques are used to winnow down the large universe of possible futures into a smaller, more workable range of plausible futures that suggest useful courses of action. Because these techniques lack precision (this is, after all, the vast unknowable future we're talking about), and every one of them is plagued with inherent limitations, futurists prefer to use them in broad combination, checking and re-checking one against another to balance out the serious weaknesses that inevitably result when any one is forced to stand on its own.

Unfortunately, business, military and government clients are always on the lookout for the ultimate crystal ball, the one sure-fire easy-to-use forecasting technique that will deliver reliable you-can-bet-the-farm-on-it results. This misbegotten quest leads them to seize on a tool here, a tool there, banging on each one for a while until the built-in problems with it become evident. The string of disappointments with this one-technique-solves-all approach stretches back decades. But the lesson that no single futures technique should ever be trusted as a stand-alone solution still hasn't been learned, and forecasts based on single-technique analysis are still hot items in the marketplace of ideas.

These limitations are too evident in George Friedman's *The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century*. The author is the founder of the private intelligence consultancy Stratfor, and a popular foreign-policy and defence forecaster. In his newest book, he straightforwardly analyses the interrelationships that govern the world's geopolitical system, and uses historical behaviour and current strategic imperatives to develop a forecast for the rest of the century.

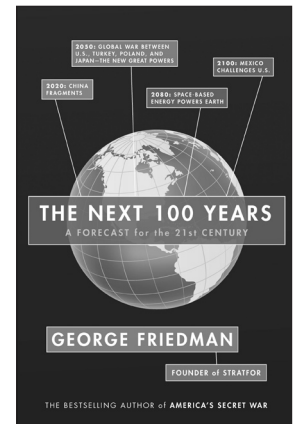
There is only one scenario in this book: no mucking around with the usual range of best case, worst case, most likely case, plus one or two scenarios involving wild cards that is considered best practice among scenario writers. Friedman justifies this by arguing that the future is a chess game. A novice player who doesn't understand the board sees a vast number of options, but an experienced player knows that the number of actual routes to victory is very small, and that there is no point bothering with the alternatives. For those familiar with the world chessboard, the number of likely futures is actually very limited and predictable. In Friedman's able hands,

geopolitical systems analysis is a pretty good tool, as far as it goes, which unfortunately isn't nearly as far as he tries to push it.

The first third of the book lays out the map, starting with the strategic imperatives of the United States as they have stood for most of the past century. These include dominating North America, eliminating threats to the United States in the western hemisphere, controlling all maritime approaches to the country, the continued domination of the world's oceans, and disrupting the rise of any regional power that could successfully challenge US naval hegemony. Most US military interventions in the past century were aimed at achieving one of these goals, and Friedman believes this pattern will persist through much of the next century, with the battlegrounds shifting somewhat as the United States attempts to extend its maritime dominance into space by mid century.

Moving on to assess the imperatives and future moves of other major powers, Friedman casts a spotlight on a rising Turkey, which he believes will restore a twenty-first-century Ottoman Empire as the power of the Saudi oil barons wanes; an ascendant Japan, built on resources and labour from economic colonies on the Chinese mainland; and, by the end of the century, a strong and prosperous Mexico that may be capable of re-taking the American Southwest. By the middle of the book, the scenario begins to take on a science-fiction unreality that even Friedman finds bemusing (space war with Japan in 2060!).

It is tempting to console him with Dator's Law (first coined by Jim Dator, founder of the University of Hawaii's futures-research centre): 'any useful statement about the future should at first appear to be ridiculous'. But there is a distinction between scenarios that seem ridiculous because they directly and usefully challenge our deeply held faith in the current paradigm, and those that seem ridiculous precisely because they are built on some of the more rickety assumptions that undergird the current paradigm. Friedman's scenario is built on several unquestioned assumptions that a more comprehensive style of futures work might have uncovered and addressed.



His core assumption is that war drives human history, and geopolitics drives war. While Friedman occasionally supports his arguments with data on economics, population shifts and technology development, none of these are the central change driver in his model. They are all subordinated to the geopolitical context. The future is shaped by the actions of militaries and governments, and every other human activity moves within that framework. This is a valid and interesting argument on which to build a scenario. But good futures work recognises that a system as complex as global politics is powerfully influenced by a great many other change drivers, too; that's why one scenario based on one overriding assumption (no matter how valid) is never enough to give an accurate or useful picture of the possibilities.

The most important driver missing from Friedman's analysis (which he acknowledges on the second-to-last page) is environmental change, particularly climate change. Friedman's faith in the predictive power of geopolitical analysis is rooted in the fact that it is dealing with one of the few global systems that has been relatively stable through the centuries. There are some things – oceans, deserts, mountains and the locations of major resource supplies, for example – that just don't change, no matter whose empire is ascendant at the moment. And there are not many forces in the world capable of re-arranging these facts in ways that might matter. But we are now facing a storm of known environmental threats that, taken together, do pack considerable potential to alter the geopolitical chessboard in the century ahead. Rather than dodging the question, Friedman could have turned his considerable mastery of the board to examining the ways these shifts might disrupt the global balance of power in the coming century. The result would have been a far more useful, serious and interesting book.

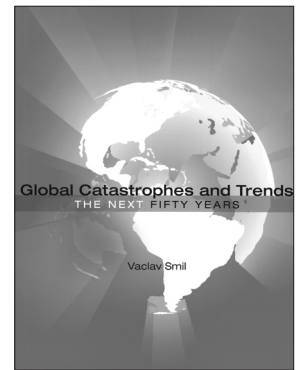
Friedman's exclusive focus on geopolitics and his failure to engage environmental change as a driver are both symptoms of the core flaw of expert forecasting in general. People within any domain eventually develop a strongly held set of shared assumptions about the nature of reality and how the future happens. Effective futures work involves making a fresh-eyed critique of the most cherished assumptions, and questioning the ones that are actively blinding that culture to serious threats. Nobody likes having their worldview challenged, but that is a futurist's job: to open clients' minds

to other possibilities, and help them seriously consider how they might respond to events outside their expected range of futures.

The problem, of course, is that futurists who operate in the same domain for a long time risk falling into that same rut. They eventually lose their ability to see, or their willingness to challenge, the deep worldview-level assumptions of that domain. Friedman's book flatters the biases of his clients, who are mostly centred in the global military-industrial complex. Instead of surveying potential challenges to their current reality (such as environmental or energy issues that are politically unpopular with his client base), he offers a reassuring fable that promises there will be plenty of work for everybody in the war business in the century ahead. What starts out as a thought-provoking analysis of the imperatives of power ends up as a whimsical work of speculative fiction. There is more to futures than this.

Two other recent books being marketed as examinations of the century that awaits us are far more modest in both their scope and their claims. Vaclav Smil's *Global Catastrophes and Trends: The Next Fifty Years* opens with a biting critique of scenario-based techniques, pointing out that storytelling (no matter how well informed) is no substitute for good, solid, far-ranging trend analysis. The problem, according to Smil, is that scenarios don't do much to correct the human penchant for miscalculating the odds. We always overestimate some threats, and grossly underestimate others. Rather than dreaming up what-if stories, we should be taking stock of the actual probabilities, projecting current trends and looking out for discontinuities if we want an accurate, actionable picture of the future.

Of course, this is the single-tool fallacy at work again. The truth is that projecting trends and reckoning the probability of discontinuities can deliver bankable results (after all, the entire insurance industry is built on the predictive strength of these techniques). But, just like systems analysis (or any other tool), there are things it misses. The only future described by a trend line is the most likely future and, as Herman Kahn observed five decades ago, one thing we know for sure is that 'the most likely future isn't'.



Knowing this, many futurists will rely on both systems and trend analysis (among other things) to plot most-likely outcomes in the near and medium term. But, at the same time, they also look out beyond the narrow path described by the trends to look for best-case and worst-case scenarios, plus other potentially high-impact discontinuities of unknown likelihood – the events Nassim Nicholas Taleb calls ‘black swans’.

Furthermore, as you move out in time, there always comes a place where the ability to make credible trend projections just runs out. Beyond that horizon, well-informed what-if stories are the best anyone can offer, and having a few scenarios to work off of is almost always better than having no sense of the future at all.

So Smil avoids what-if stories. The resulting book is a catalogue of contemporary worries about the future that omnivorously hoovers up a vast and eclectic collection of statistics, facts and observations, compiling them into a fantastically informative primer for anyone trying to understand the actual characteristics and proportions of the *global problematique*. If you’ve been up nights worrying about asteroids hitting the earth, Smil’s analysis of the actual odds will let you get back to sleep. His assessment of our likely vulnerabilities in a global pandemic, on the other hand, may give you a whole new set of reasons to stay awake.

But Smil also understands the limits of his tools, and generally avoids trying to draw any specific conclusions from them. The Islamic world is too large and complex for anyone to say what it will do. Climate change has too many moving parts, many of them operating within very wide tolerances, for anyone to really know how fast and how far the predicted changes will go. His explanations of these systems is thorough, knowledgeable and clear; but in the end, he is a scientist reporting on what the science shows, and the task of drawing conclusions from the data is left up to the reader.

The third book, *What Next? Surviving the Twenty-first Century*, is marketed as a book about the future, but it is really a survey of recent history, and an assessment of our current condition. This is useful (a first step in any futures inquiry is to figure out where you are right now, and how you got there) but hardly prescriptive. Still, it is hard to imagine a more knowledgeable or

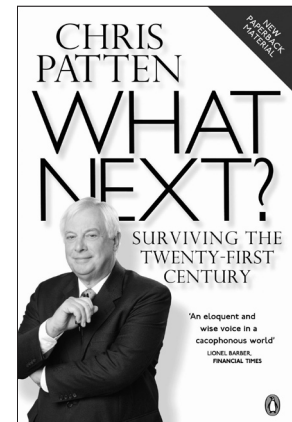
engaging tour guide to assorted global challenges than British statesman Chris Patten.

Patten has been at the table for some of the most important international events of the late twentieth century, including serving as the last British governor of Hong Kong and chairing the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland. His vast international experience gives his book a generous breadth of perspective that is too rare in books on geopolitics, most of which are written from an American point of view.

The value of *What Next?* is that it dares address unmappable, non-quantifiable issues that Friedman and Smil do not touch, including the threat posed by failed states and disintegrating economies; the role of the illegal drug trade in the world financial order; the destabilising effects of global greed, rampant inequality and incipient authoritarianism; and the historical events that set the stage for the coming conflicts over water. Friedman and Smil are content to describe the problems. Patten has actually had to deal with them, which gives his critique a pragmatism and humanity lacking in the other two books, and which is absolutely essential to the task of choosing the right response and making good policy around it.

Patten is compassionate, thoughtful and often wryly funny; his book may not answer your questions about the future, but you will come away with considerable wisdom about the situations we're facing at present.

Despite their differences in approach and conclusions, the three authors achieve a measure of consensus on several topics. All, for example, agree that reports of the demise of the United States are greatly exaggerated, and that America will continue to dominate the world for at least another generation or two. Friedman thinks it will prevail as long as it dominates the world's oceans, a situation that could extend to the end of the century and beyond. Smil sees a very gradual retreat over the course of the first half of the century, as the nation is slowly weakened by debt and an unchecked tide of immigrants from the south. Patten offers no forecasts, but is particularly impressed with the durability of American soft power. As long as



the United States remains true to its ideals, he argues (with a pointed aside about the need for the country to deal frankly, and soon, with the torture issue), the world will continue to accept and seek out its leadership.

On the other hand, all three authors share serious reservations about China. Friedman, taking a long view, points out that there has always been a sharp political divide between the coast, where the country's population and economic life are concentrated, and the rural inland areas, where its food is grown. For a variety of reasons related to the current economic expansion (which all three agree is unsustainable for more than another decade or so) and the burden the one-child policy is putting on rural men (who must care for ageing parents alone, often without a wife), this historical split may be due to open once again.

Smil, who has lived in China and written several books on it, elaborates much further on China's demographic anomalies, which leave it dangerously overstocked with young men and the elderly. He also describes the country's growing deficits in water, arable land and 'the power of ideas' (the innovative capacity that will help the Chinese solve these problems). Patten, who also has extensive knowledge of the country, agrees with Smil, pointing out that the post-Mao Chinese leadership is operating without any kind of coherent ideology to guide either foreign or domestic policy. He is the only one of the three who discusses the global implications of China's strong presence in Africa, or its distressing penchant for doing business with the world's most horrifying regimes, such as Sudan. At the same time, the Chinese are tolerating levels of inequality at home that are unsustainable in an industrialised country, which could in time lead to the kind of unrest Friedman forecasts.

All three also agree that terrorism is, by and large, a relatively weak driver in world affairs. Friedman and Patten agree that the real danger lies in overreacting, which only magnifies the damage; Friedman further notes that the United States is prone to overreaction because it is an adolescent nation in both age and temperament, and thus tends to act first and think later. Smil offers data showing that truly effective terrorist attacks are impossibly difficult to pull off. Many are attempted, but precious few succeed, and the vast majority of the ones that do have only very local effects. Patten observes that

the three overriding motivations for terrorism are 'revenge, renown and reaction', and argues that the best way to put a stop to it is to minimise the degree to which these goals are achieved.

Each of these books has a place in a comprehensive futures library, because each of them provides a solid example of at least one aspect of the futuring task. At the same time, none of them offer the kind of comprehensive analysis that is the current professional standard for futures work. Like futures tools themselves, no one of these books can be taken as a stand-alone answer.

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