

2020 MISMAPPING



MATTHEW SPARKE, Professor i
samfunnsgeografi og internasjonale
studier, University of Washington,
Seattle



Question: what do the Shell oil company, the Norway 2030 project and the CIA's long range planning unit all share in common? Answer: future scenarios modeling! However, in contrast to the oil company's business concerns, and quite distinct from the Norwegian Ministry for Labour and Government planning initiative of 1998, the American National Intelligence Council's (NIC) recent attempt at imagining the future in 2020 adopts a much more global and grandiose outlook on the future.

Publicized in early 2005 and still available online www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_2020_project.html, this scenarios based effort at official American futurism is entitled *Mapping the Global Future*. At its core the report outlines four separate scenarios of the future in 2020, each one dramatized with the sort of inventiveness and playful fantasy more normally found in science fiction writing. The purposes of the report though are far from playful, and, as a serious intervention in US geostrategic planning, they tell us a great deal about the ways in which official American fears about future insecurity are linked to equally imaginative hopes about what will supposedly bring security: namely free market globalization.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and the Bush Administration's manipulation of fear to justify attacking Iraq, most critical geopolitical analysis has been focused on the unfounded fear-mongering in Washington. However, the 2020 report reminds us that we also need to address the ongoing power of Washington Consensus hope-mongering too – especially the power of groundless hopes about free market globalization to generate utopian visions of a world made rich and peaceful through what is depicted as a form of geoeconomic incorporation. The critical implications of the contrasts between 'geopolitics' and 'geoeconomics' bear closer scrutiny in terms of how they create mental maps of international relations, but the main point is that together they also create a dangerous double vision, a double vision that in turn is brought into the open by the official futurism of the 2020 report.

For the NIC the goal of *Mapping the Global Future* was not to predict a particular future by selecting a single 'most likely' scenario. Instead the declared aim of the report was to enable

the 'intelligence experts' involved to anticipate multiple possible trajectories and therefore multiple possible strategic planning needs. Produced in the wake of CIA chief George Tenet's embarrassing support for the case of Saddam Hussein having Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), another underlying purpose of the report seems also to have been to envision a new era when US intelligence gathering might no longer be commandeered by the single-minded zeal of a White House already dead-set on a singular future vision.

Tellingly, however, the future fantasies for 2020 that are played out in the report remain haunted by the same tortured mix of fear and hope that animated the Bush administration's own deadly fantasies about Iraq. On the one side, of course, there were all the much magnified fears: fears about chemical weapons, fears about links between Hussein and Al Qaida, fears about mushroom clouds and fears – although these were less loudly proclaimed – about the implications of Iraqi oil being priced in Euros. For war-critics around the world it has been the manipulation of these fears by the Bush Administration and the associated cooption of a sense of American vulnerability after 9/11 that has been the locus of contestation and dissent.

On the other side, though, it is important to remember that there were also many hopes too: hopes about Americans being greeted with flowers in Baghdad, hopes for Iraqi oil coming quickly on stream as a denationalized, or, at least, Majors-manipulable antidote to OPEC price controls, and, underpinning this whole benign war scenario, the wider and grander vision of the 2002 US National Security Strategy in which freedom throughout the Middle East was envisioned as spreading unassisted as soon as America freed-up the hidden hand of the free market in states such as Iraq.

Thus while the production of the fears was and remains classic enemy-constructing *geopolitics* – targeting Iraq by remixing the Cold War trope of an Evil Empire with the even older idea of an Axis of Evil – the upbeat economic vision of an expanding level playing field is better understood in terms of the newly ascendant geoeconomic mental map – a political re-visioning of global spaces underpinned by the post-Cold War popular-

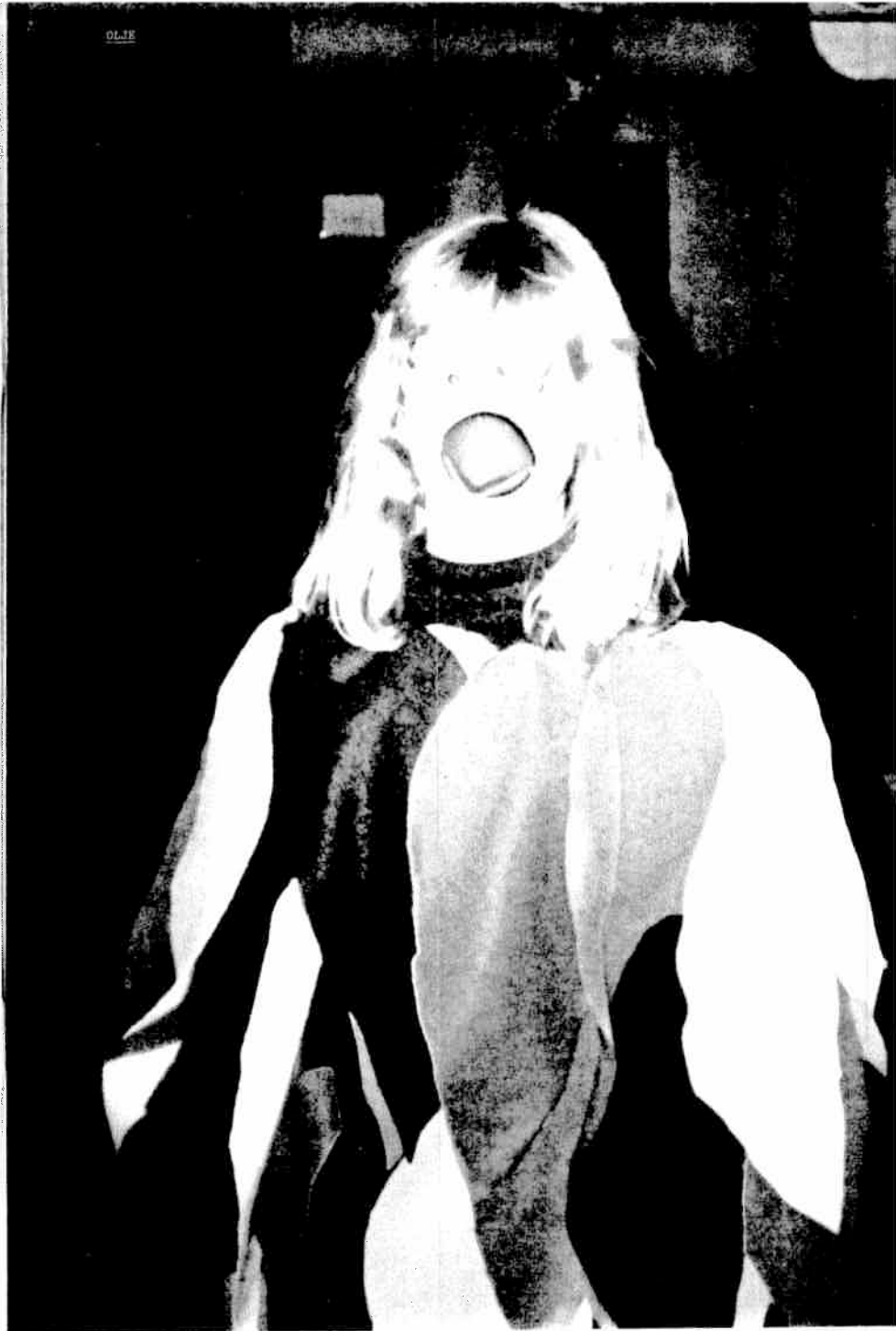
ity of the big Globalization storyline and associated visions of a looming flat world order. Just as much as the geopolitical fears about a nuclear-equipped and Al Qaida-interlinked Iraq, these geoeconomic fantasies about the leveling effects of the free-market's hidden hand also played a powerful role in leading America into disaster. The combined result was a blinding double-vision, a confusion of groundless fear and unwarranted hope that made the unending death and destruction on the ground in Iraq inevitable. For the same reason, we should now continue to ask whether so-called American Intelligence will ever gain the capacity to develop a 2020 vision that escapes the strange concatenation of 'hidden-hand' happy talk and ongoing angst about Al Qaida and WMD. In this respect, *Mapping the Global Future* does not map a single promising scenario. Instead, it merely makes the combination and manipulation of geopolitical fear and geoeconomic hope all the more obvious to see.

BACK TO THE FUTURE OF FICTION-BASED REALITY

Drawing on the business-based 'future scenarios' modeling developed by Goldman Sachs, the RAND corporation, and Toffler Associates, as well as Shell, the report outlines, justifies and, most imaginatively, dramatizes four scenarios to envision possible world scenes that the US national security apparatus will likely be facing in 2020.

Two of the scenarios, which are referred to in the report as 'Davos World' and '*Pax Americana*', are presented as hopeful utopias, while the other two, 'The New Caliphate' and 'Spiral of Fear', are put forward as plausible but fear-filled dystopias. All four visions play on popular ideas and phobias that circulate in mainstream US news magazines.

Davos World is a reference to the World Economic Forum currently based in Davos, Switzerland, but it functions in the NIC report as a dramatic symbol representing all the institutions and ideologies surrounding the project of free-market globalization. *Pax Americana* symbolizes in turn all the ongoing interests in the US in an 'exceptional' self-image of the country as the ultimate power-broker and peace-maker in a world system centered on Washington (rather than ancient Rome).



The New Caliphate plays out an orientalist bad dream in which the descendants of Osama bin Laden are imagined as making terrorizing progress towards the reestablishment of rule by caliphs across the Middle East and beyond. And finally, with perhaps their most dramatic flourish of all, the NIC's vision of a *Spiral of Fear* plays out Hollywood style fears of WMD circulating in a world defined increasingly by illicit arms trading and the militarization of everyday life.

For the intelligence analysts themselves one of the advantages of picturing the scenarios so dramatically seems to be that the fictional devices allow them to name certain sorts of ideological interests and forces without getting bogged down in too much technical jargon or political science posturing. This has always been one of the touted advantages of scenarios modelling advertised by corporate promoters such as Shell's former futurist Ged Davis. For intelligent citizens, by contrast, perhaps the more telling aspect of the approach is the way in which its very inventiveness indicates the degree to which so-called intelligence experts appear to be running away from the disappointments and embarrassments of a real world that refuses to go along with the plans of the Bush administration.

Dramatic as they may be, though, the analyses in the 2020 report are not quite as groundless as the claims about WMD, terror ties and free trade possibilities that were made in relation to Iraq. Indeed, numerous data, tables, charts, and graphs are presented to back up the empirical claims about everything from global growth trajectories, to oil consumption tendencies, to the spread of different religious practices, to even worldwide patterns of disease development. Moreover, while it reveals the striking dependency of the national security analysts on corporate practices, the authors of the report also go to some considerable lengths to be transparent about their research and projection methodologies. Much more could also be said about their usefully frank arguments about the economics of global migration. But its the return of haunting geoeconomic hopes and geopolitical fears in the report's four futuristic scenarios that demands most attention.

All four scenarios are dramatized in the form of fictional communications: two invented letters, an imag-

ined diary entry, and a text-message cell-phone exchange. The result is a kind of high-tech sci-fi epistolary novel which is presented in its online PDF version with artsy graphics designed to make the invented writings and messages appear more plausible and real. From the start the report is keen to underline that the scenarios are still meant to be fictional, and indeed, it may even be argued that the aestheticized work of dramatization is designed specifically to remind readers that each scenario needs to be read more in the way of science fiction - as a creative exploration of possible trends and trajectories - rather than as providing a clear-cut scientized prediction. The connections in this respect with risk management and the performance of culture in corporate calculations are obvious. But again it is the haunting presence of spectral hopes and fears that most demands attention.

SETTING THE SCENARIOS OF HOPE

The *Davos World* scenario, introduced in the form of a letter from the head of the World Economic Forum to a former US federal reserve chairman, "provides," in the language of the report, "an illustration of how robust economic growth, led by China and India, over the next 15 years could reshape the globalization process—giving it a more non-Western face and transforming the political playing field as well" (NIC, 2005: 16). Reflecting the rise of China in particular, the letter is written on quasi-official World Economic Forum notepad which with its Chinese gate decoration indicates that the elite gathering of neoliberal leaders has moved to Beijing from Davos, Switzerland. Moreover, the attention to increasing Asian influence in the global economy allows a certain mixture of geoeconomic fears (about outsourcing, and the loss of US competitiveness) to be mixed in with ongoing geopolitical worries (especially over Taiwan). But in the end the mega-trend of globalization overcomes all resistance, bringing with it the economic but also politically appealing conclusion that China's ascendancy will take the pressure off America as the target of anti-globalization discontent.

Concerned to acknowledge that American hegemony may nevertheless be still required (and thus somehow legitimate) in 2020, the authors next

introduce the second scenario of Pax Americana. This, we are told, "takes a look at how US predominance may survive the radical changes to the global political landscape and serve to fashion a new and inclusive global order" (NIC, 2005: 16). Again this is a broadly optimistic story in tone. It is told this time in the form of a private diary entry of the UN secretary general, who like the American president in the scenario, is playfully presented by the security strategists as being a woman in 2020. Despite these dramaturgical gestures - which combine, it must be noted, with a more substantive acknowledgement elsewhere in the report of ongoing challenges to women's equality (38 - 39) - the metaphors employed to describe the difficulties that lie ahead for American leaders under Pax Americana remain macho, with lots of talk about heavy lifting and the need for the US to assert leadership both as a geopolitical peacemaker in Asia and as a geoeconomic mediator between an economically more powerful Asia and the rest of the world.

SETTING THE SCENARIOS OF FEAR

With the third scenario the tone of the report abruptly changes from utopian to dystopian. Entering with a letter from a fictional grandson of Osama, Sa'id Muhammad Bin Ladin, written in "In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful," comes a fearful future presented as *A New Caliphate*. The letter recounts the "struggles of the Caliph in trying to wrest control from traditional regimes and the conflict and confusion which ensue both within the Muslim world and outside between Muslims and the United States, Europe, Russia and China" (83). Here all the orientalist codes lead not surprisingly to geopolitical fears of increased instability and terrorism, but there remains a geoeconomic sensitivity, it seems, to the linking and leveling possibilities of globalization too. "Muslims in regions benefiting from globalization," reads one of the 'lessons learned' at the end of the scenario, "may be torn between the idea of a spiritual Caliphate and the material advantages of a globalized world." In these sorts of gestures the report's authors quickly seem to put aside all their careful comments about the contradictions of globalization, and return to their big hopes about geoeconomic incorporation.



However, in the fourth scenario the contradictions are allowed to return with a vengeance in the unremittingly bleak dystopia of the so-called *Cycle of Fear*. This scenario is dramatized by the text messages exchanged between two arms dealers. One, we are told, is ideologically committed to leveling the playing field and ensuring the Muslim world has its share of WMD, while the other is strictly for hire. Neither knows for sure who is at the end of his chain—a government client or terrorist front. As the scenario progresses, the *cycle of fear* originating with WMD-laden terrorist attacks has gotten out of hand—to the benefit of the arms dealers, who appear to be engaged in lucrative deals. However, fear begets fear. The draconian measures increasingly implemented by governments to stem proliferation and guard against terrorism also have the arms dealers beginning to run scared. In all of this, globalization may be the real victim (104).

In a sense then, the fourth scenario depicts the end of the great globalization mega-trend, the end of the end of history, and the final destruction of the level playing field vision by increasingly securitized nation-states. And yet, of course, even here we find that the fearful geopolitics is being played out according to a certain economic script, with at least one of the text-messaging arms dealers committing himself to “leveling the playing field” of access to WMD.

The Cycle of Fear scenario, is a fitting fictional finale to where the double-vision of geopolitics and geoeconomics can lead: a dead end. For the NIC, the lesson to be learned from all this is that the legal capitalist business of globalization must be kept on track at all costs. What is not learnt at all, it seems, are the dangers and limits of a market utopianism that leads to geoeconomic fantasies of future capitalist incorporation while denying the damage done by prior rounds of capitalist connection in the colonial past and neocolonial present. Moreover what is missed in this scenario, as in all the others, is the way in which scenarios planning more generally takes the report's authors away from the work of actually developing real intelligence about what is happening on the ground. This seems an especially sad irony if one of their hopes had been to move beyond the CIA's complicity in making the case for war in Iraq.

Of course, building scenarios need not always serve the interests of those who want to obscure facts, deny connections and promote fantasies and war. Johan Galtung's International Peace Research Initiative and the Oslo conference of the World Futures Studies Federation in 1968, pointed in a very different direction towards a very different 2020. It inspired experiments like the World Orders Models Project to think outside the box of the nation-state as a container for democratic rights and justice. And it gave rise to visions of alternative more just and more humane global futures that have continued to be imagined in recent years in venues such as the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Yet there is no 'Porto Alegre World' scenario in the NIC's outlook for 2020. For a corporate pioneer of scenarios modelling such as Shell this is assuredly a good thing. Although it makes for green PR, it would be terribly demoralizing for big oil companies to have to think about futures 'beyond petroleum'. And in this respect, the NIC only offers comfort and consolation. "An expanding global economy," it affirms, "will increase demand for many raw materials, such as oil. Total energy consumed probably will rise by about 50 percent in the next two decades compared to a 34 percent expansion from 1980-2000."

No doubt there are also other more specific consolations for the Norwegian oil industry in the NIC's parallel points about the risks attending new oil production in other regions such as the Caspian Sea, Venezuela, and West Africa. In this scenarios world, after all, the geopolitical insecurity of oil production globally merely points to the geoeconomic opportunity of oil production (and profits) locally. Further away from Norway's own oil fields, the scenarios of the NIC may merely vindicate more 'opportunity in insecurity' investments by Norwegian oil firms – including notably DNO, the first foreign company to begin pumping crude in Iraq in 35 years. But for another Norway, the Norway that pioneered peace scenarios, such strange blends of fear and hope will be no consolation or vindication at all. Other futures are surely still possible, and we need to start imagining them soon!

