



Envisioning Potential Futures

Participant Guide

What's the purpose of this exercise?

The purpose of this exercise is to give you practice in strategic foresight – anticipating how situations may evolve into the future.

Specifically, you will practice:

- Expanding your thinking beyond the present and/or near-term future.
- Considering the long-term implications of current assumptions, decisions, and courses of action.
- Thinking backward in time as a way to better anticipate how the situation may evolve into the future.
- Thinking holistically and about multiple factors and their interactions as a way to anticipate potential second- and third-order effects.

Why is this skillset important?

Strategic foresight is the ability to anticipate potential futures. Strategic foresight involves thinking across time – i.e., considering current and historical circumstances and envisioning potential future environments based on attention to military, economic, socio-cultural, technological, and political trends and interactions.

Thinking in time and envisioning potential futures is essential for strategic thinking. It supports our ability to conceptualize possible strategies and initiatives we might pursue to shape how a current situation evolves into the future. This, in turn, allows us to set priorities and effectively allocate resources.

Tips

You can enhance your ability to think into the future by:

- ✓ Thinking twice as far backward in time as you want to think forward (e.g., back 10 years to think forward 5). This will help you understand trends, trajectories, gaps and discontinuities, and the impacts of time.
- ✓ Consider not only futures that are probable (i.e., likely) but also futures that are *possible*.
- ✓ Recognize that what matters most in the present, and what mattered in the past is related to, but may not always be the major driver of future events.
- ✓ Consult a wide variety of sources (e.g., people of diverse backgrounds, diverse publications) to gather information about current events, patterns, and trends in a range of areas (e.g., politics, economics, technology, social issues).
- ✓ Consider the perspectives of the sources you are using, and how those perspectives might contribute to the information provided and the conclusions drawn.



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Why is strategic foresight challenging?

Strategic foresight is challenging for a number of reasons. For example:

- Army leaders may find they are constantly dealing with immediate problems. Focusing heavily on the present and near-term future can leave limited opportunity to think about the long-term future.
- The ability to anticipate potential future scenarios requires that we think holistically and consider multiple factors – such as political, military, environmental, economic, socio-cultural, religious, technological, and other factors – and how they might interact to affect future events. Though we have a framework to help us consider multiple factors (PMESEII-PT), it is often a challenge to “break the silos” and make connections across those factors.
- We tend to be overly-optimistic in our predictions about future situations, particularly when we have personal involvement in those situations.
- We tend to refer to a limited number of information and personal sources to identify patterns and trends. This narrow focus can lead us to miss important trends and form incorrect interpretations.

Tips

- ✓ Recognize that whatever you come up with, you are likely to be off-base. The point is not to figure out the right answer, but to appreciate a given situation more fully so you can effectively consider how it might evolve into the future.
- ✓ Assess not only what is currently occurring, but also imagine “wild cards” or disruptions that could dramatically change the course of events.
- ✓ As with any skill, practice and reflection will enhance your ability to think forward in time in order to envision potential future states.

Contents of Participant Guide

This Participant Guide contains a set of questions and prompts for your reference during the skill-building exercise. Your instructor will direct you to the relevant sections during specific points in the exercise.

As you work through the exercise, keep in mind that the questions in this exercise are not intended to be completed like a worksheet where you read a question, write your answer, and go on to the next question. Instead, they are here to prompt your thinking as you work through the exercise activities. Feel free to use the white space to jot notes, ideas, and sketches as you progress through the exercise.



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Pre-Exercise Reflection

Instructions: Today we are going to work on foresight skills. Before we get to the exercise, take a few minutes to think and reflect on the following questions. After we think about them individually, we will discuss them as a group.

1. For many of us, it is difficult to think beyond the present or near-term future, to consider long-term implications of our decisions, and to anticipate future circumstances. Take a moment to consider what is involved in visualizing how a current situation or problem may change over time. What about the activity seems straightforward? What is difficult?
2. Are some problems or situations easier to play forward in time than others? What accounts for those differences?
3. What makes it difficult to anticipate second- or third-order effects of today's decisions and actions?



USE THE SPACE BELOW TO JOT DOWN YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS.



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Developing an Understanding

Instructions: Take approximately 25-30 minutes and work independently. After reading through the scenario you were given, read through the rest of this sheet and then develop two things:

1. A description of your understanding of the current situation or problem described in the scenario (in bullet points or paragraph form).
2. A rough sketch that depicts your view of the situation. Your sketch might include stakeholders, key factors, and relations among them, and any other features of the situation that strike you as important.

As you develop your understanding and sketch, it is important that you think about the range of factors that could be at play. Below is a set of factors that are often part of complex problems. Use this set of factors to help you think about the nature of the problems depicted in the scenario.

You will likely recognize the factors listed below as those represented in the PMESII-PT framework. However, do not be limited by that framework or the factors listed here. Take care to consider not only the factors in isolation; consider their relationships and interactions as well.

The situational understanding and sketch you develop over the next 30 minutes is going to serve as a foundation for the remainder of the exercise. You will be briefing this understanding to each other later on in the exercise.

Potential Factors to Consider		
• Social	• Military	• Infrastructure
• Cultural	• Religion	• Physical Environment
• Economic	• Technological	• Time
• Political	• Informational	• Key Stakeholders
• Persons of Influence		



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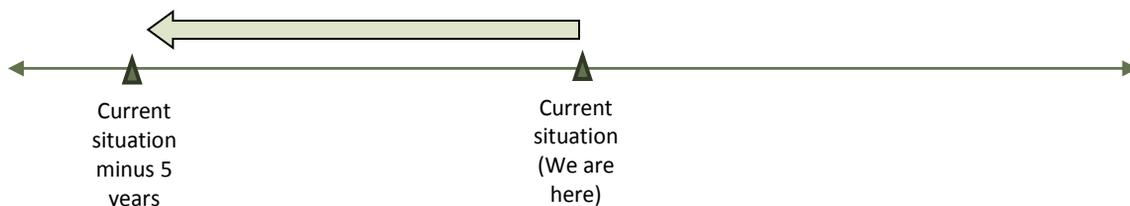


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Timeline Part 1

Instructions: Based on your current understanding of the situation (considered in Step 1), think *back* in time by five years. In other words, take that current situation and “rewind it” by five years. What did the situation look like at that point in time? Refer back to the previous section of this guide to ensure you are considering multiple factors as you think about what the situation looked like five years ago.



Describe this set of conditions and relationships, using both words and sketches.

Note: It is likely that you do not have all the information you need or want to do this activity. That is okay. In fact, it is representative of what often happens in the operational environment. The point of this exercise is to practice thinking in time, rather than to get the “right answer.” To address the lack of information and help you move forward, you may want to jot down the top three to five questions to which you would like answers. Then, construct answers to those questions, and note your assumptions. Use those assumptions as a basis for moving forward with the activity.



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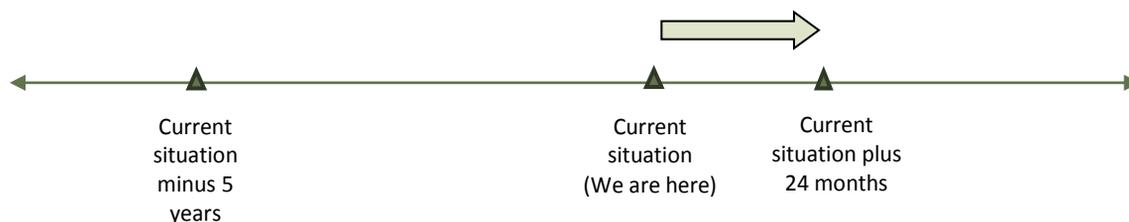
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Timeline Part 2

Instructions: Assume again that we are in the present. Now, run the scenario *forward* in time and consider what the situation might look like two years out from the present. Refer to the previous section of this guide to ensure you are considering multiple factors as you work this through.

Note: When trying to come up with future scenarios, you may find you have a lot of questions. It may help to jot down the questions you have, note your assumptions, and then move forward based on those assumptions.



You are going to generate two different future scenarios:

1. First, think about a future scenario that is *probable* (i.e., *highly likely*). Jot down a few notes describing that scenario.



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Timeline Part 2 (cont'd)

2. Now, think about a future scenario that is possible. Write a brief description of the possible future situation. You can also sketch it if that helps you depict the situation. Later in this exercise, you will be presenting your possible future scenario to one another.



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Mid-Exercise Reflection

Instructions: Now that you have developed a probable and a possible future scenario, work on your own to consider and jot down some notes on the following questions:

1. What assumptions did you make in developing the two future scenarios?
2. It is likely that you focused on some factors more than others. Which ones did you focus on, and why those more than others?
3. What do you see as the most significant factors that might influence each of the future scenarios? Are they the same for the two scenarios? If not, how are they different?
4. What effect did thinking *back* in time have on thinking *forward* in time? Was it helpful? Why or why not?
5. What was easier for you to think about – a *possible* future scenario, or *probable* (likely) scenario? Why? How was it different?



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Small Group Discussion

Instructions: After each person presents his/her *possible* future scenario to the small group, consider and discuss the following.

You all started in the same place, with the same scenario.

1. In what ways is the possible future you envisioned similar to others in your group? In what ways is it different?
2. Consider and discuss how and why you came to different places with your scenarios. For example:
 - What do you see as the most significant factors that might influence the future scenarios? Why?
 - Were the factors you considered different from those considered by others in this group? How so?
 - What assumptions did you make in developing the two future scenarios? How were those assumptions different from the assumptions of others in this group?
 - What might account for the different factors you considered compared to others in your group? Or for the different assumptions you made?
 - What might account for the factors and assumptions that members of the group had in common?
3. Now that you have discussed your considerations with others in your group, have you detected any blind spots you might have had when envisioning your possible future scenario(s)? What are they? How might you avoid those blind spots in the future?



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Group Debrief and Reflection

Instructions: Take a few minutes to consider and make some notes on the following questions. Then discuss your responses as a group.

1. What was particularly challenging about thinking into the future? What helped you to think into the future?
2. Consider the differences you identified between the “probable” and the “possible” futures. How might it be helpful to consider both when thinking forward in time?
3. How did creating a sketch help you think about a future scenario, if at all? How did seeing sketches that others created help you understand the future they had envisioned?
4. What were the major factors that influenced your predictions about future events? Why those factors and not others – i.e., what made them particularly important?
5. Were there certain factors you considered as you developed an understanding of this particular current situation that did not seem relevant for anticipating the future? What are they, and what made those factors less relevant for considering potential future conditions? Now that you have seen and heard what others in the group came up with, has your view of what is and is not relevant changed?
6. What did you notice about the types of futures you and others envisioned? Were there common themes? For example, were the envisioned futures generally positive/desirable for the U.S.? Did they have more of a negative slant? What might account for that?
7. What do you see as the advantages and drawbacks to envisioning desirable vs. undesirable futures?
8. Did any of your classmates’ insights in this exercise strike you as particularly effective or innovative? Which ones? How so?
9. Based on your experience in this exercise, what do you see as your strengths and/or weaknesses in anticipating potential futures?
10. What might you take from this exercise to apply in your work?



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Shaping the Future

Instructions: We have received direction from higher command that this [posted] future scenario is in the U.S.'s best interest. You are responsible for shaping the future in a way that enables us to realize this envisioned future situation.

Please consider the following questions and write some brief notes in response.

After this activity, you will be presenting your responses and recommended actions to others in your small group.

1. What can the U.S. do to maximize the likelihood that the current situation will evolve towards this desired future scenario? What courses of actions should the U.S. take to increase the probability of this future scenario?
2. What effect will those actions have? How do you expect the present situation to change based on the actions you would take? Why?
3. What actions should the U.S. *avoid* taking that might minimize the likelihood of achieving this desired future scenario? In what ways would those actions reduce the likelihood of the desired future scenario?



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Ripple Effects

Instructions: After you have presented your recommended actions for shaping the future to your small group, consider each person's ideas and discuss the following:

1. What second- and third-order effects (both intended and unintended) might these courses of action have?
2. What second- or third-order effects (both intended and unintended) might these courses of action have on [fill in the blank]?

Example topics for "fill in the blank" include:

- The country's economy
- Stability of the country's borders and neighboring countries
- Stability of the region
- Security of allied forces
- The political climate of the region
- Social relations among various groups
- Allies' view of the U.S.
- Stability of the country's government
- The country's political leadership



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Shaping Debrief

Instructions: After developing and presenting your ideas for how to shape the future, consider the following questions and jot down some notes. Then discuss your responses as a group.

1. What assumptions did you make when developing your recommended course of action (COA)?
2. How might you test or verify those assumptions?
3. In this exercise, you were not held accountable for the accuracy of future circumstances that you envisioned, nor for the ideas you developed for shaping the future. However, when you use strategic foresight in real-world operational contexts, you likely will be held accountable. How might the expectation of accountability influence how you approach this activity in real operational settings?
4. Consider your initial understanding of the situation. How has your view of it changed based on this exercise?



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