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ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF FORECASTING IN PRACTICAL GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract: Practical geopolitics is identified as a real or declarative applied activity. It is characterized by a high degree of institutional commitment and subjectivism, presented in the form of political expediency.

In practical geopolitics, forecasting is carried out in the depths of the so-called “analytical centres” or “think tanks,” claiming to shorten the distance between academic works and policies, providing intellectual products that reach the general public faster and that are more accessible to incumbent politicians who are “too busy” to engage in more thorough analyses. However, their conceptual results rather tend to crowd out fundamental research, because the latter influence decision-makers in the long-term perspective and make a significant contribution to the construction of the cognitive structures on which the leadership relies when determining its foreign policy approaches.

Keywords: practical geopolitics; expert forecasts; think tanks; futurology.

Forecasting, Foresight, and Prediction

Modern forecasting inherits the core of the methodological apparatus of the classical scientific foresight. It is *ahistorical* in essence, the product/result of which is a prediction based on scientific knowledge, “universal laws” and ideas about the regular relationships between phenomena that are well substantiated, empirically verified, and practically feasible.

Calculation remains the main tool in making forecasts. It has been transformed into a complex system of algorithmic calculations and modelling, which enables it to work with a large amount of data and variations in parameter values in real-time mode. This makes it impossible to trace the long-term historical trends and the regular patterns that affect the development and the transformations of the world system. As compensation, efforts are directed towards improving the mathematical processing of information. However, algorithms cannot explain the multiple “random events” – a situation known as the “phenomenon of indeterminacy.”

Indeterminacy excludes regularities and causality; it is indeterministic and leads to *unpredictability*. The latter creates an atmosphere of uncertainty, disequilibrium/instability, asymmetry, chaos, which finds expression in attempts to embrace the change, to control it and to direct it. On the one hand, this stimulates the refinement of the forecasting technique in order to timely “detect” surprises, to track hidden causal relationships and to control variables, so that their meaning can be predictable. On the other hand, unethical practices are resorted to, ranging from anticipatory actions in preparation for the unforeseen to direct intervention in the future pursuit of a deviation, attempts to block emerging trends and to construct the upcoming, in the process of which the objective, research beginning (descriptive) is shifted in favour of the volitional (normative) principle. But with the prevalence of the latter, the goals,

plans and decisions in general often turn out to be voluntary, subjective, and arbitrary, which increases the risk of non-optimality and failure of the political decisions made.

However, not every prediction is scientific; it may not use a certain methodological toolkit. Forecasts on the development of the future need an **integral** vision of the situation. Today, the “outdated” largely intuitive thinking of great philosophers, macro-historians and sociologists¹ is often more effective than the accurate prognostic studies of narrow specialists. They are also not considered “scientifically” sound.

Prediction can be categorical and accurate, but it can also be conditional and variable. Many hypotheses about the upcoming are based on certain regular patterns that “drive” the historical process (technology, demography, civilizational codes, ecology). In this case, they are rather *foresights*, the results of which do not necessarily claim to be highly accurate and are of a probabilistic, alternative nature. The identification of the driving forces of history is not tantamount to determinism. This is an attempt to resolve the contradictions of the present that hinder a better future.

Paul Kennedy (1987) notes that even the very recent past is history. It is true that nothing said about the future can be certain, but adherence to false assumptions can distort even the most conscientious forecast. He himself offers a “reasoned assumption” about how the current trends of changes in the world economy and strategy will manifest themselves, but with no guarantee that all (or some) of this will occur (p. 17).

A forecast is understood as a “probabilistic scientifically based judgment about the prospects and possible states of a particular phenomenon in the future and/or about the alternative ways and timing for their implementation” (Bestuzhev-Lada et al. 1982, 7–8). Specifically, forecasting is an activity based on scientific knowledge and regulated by scientific principles. The latter correspond to the goals, namely the most accurate in time and space, qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the future state of the phenomenon under study. Often (especially in English-language literature), the concepts of prediction and forecast are used interchangeably, and indeed, it is difficult to maintain their constant distinction. But in the concept of K. Popper, it is the prediction that brings theory into conflict with experience (respectively, the criteria for scientific validity). In his view, “... historicism is a bad method.” “There can be no scientific theory of historical development, which could serve as a basis for historical prediction” (Popper 1957)². Such theories are not regarded as a reliable tool of explanation, because they do not allow for the possibility of empirical refutation.

However, it is incorrect to interpret practice as a criterion of the truth, only as purely empirical experience of today. A broader understanding of practice includes, first of all, the **socio-historical practice** of the development of human society as a whole. The issue concerning the truth of the prediction cannot be limited to the momentary practical verification, but it must be associated with the real trends in the development of human society. At the same time, the prediction itself often turns out to be a full-fledged result of scientific research *long before* the possibility of its absolute verification. Moreover, despite the continuous improvement of the methodology of forecasting, the latter is not universal and omnipotent; therefore, it is not able to replace the much broader concept of foresight.

The very peculiarities of developing a forecast impose fundamental restrictions with regard to the possibilities of forecasting both in terms of the time range (the period is limited to the next few decades) and in relation to the range of research objects (not all phenomena are amenable to predictive estimates).

One of the prominent philosophers who laid the foundations of scientific forecasting, RAND Corporation Fellow Nicholas Rescher (1988, 1993), acknowledged in this context that “the restrictions of

¹ E.g. Wallerstein, I. (2001). *The end of the world as we know it: Social science for the twenty-first century*. Minnesota Press; Wallerstein, I. (1995). *After liberalism*. The New Press; Arrighi, G. (1994). *The long twentieth century: Money, power and the origins of our times*. Verso; Arrighi, G. (2007). *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the twenty-first century*. Verso; Turchin, P. (2007). *War and peace and war: The rise and fall of empires*. Plume; Turchin, P. (2016). *Ages of discord: A structural-demographic analysis of American history*. Beresta Books; Giddens, A. (2014). *Turbulent and mighty continent. What future for Europe?* Polity; et al.

² Extracted from https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.190774/2015.190774.The-Poverty-Of-Historicism_djvu.txt, 17.03.2023.

our experience limit our science.” Considering science a “system” (which is not in harmony with empiricism³), he argues that there are “barriers” separating it from other human activities (1988, 10). Science is limited both by internal systematic (linguistic, structural, cognitive, practical-methodological, and value) problems and by the frameworks external to the system – the environment (natural, social, or artificial). All this, according to him, has a strong impact on forecasting, since the future we are trying to foresee (especially the distant one) is open, evolving and dynamic, posing more and more new questions to which science is not prepared to give an answer (Rescher 1993).

Another counterthesis in the field of ahistoricism comes from the long cycle theorists: “Many of our contemporaries refuse to recognize the reality of the past, persistently opposing with arguments against the objectivity of historical knowledge; they accuse the theories of determinism, mysticism and insist on the unpredictability of the future. In my view, the future is uncertain, but no one is unlimited in their ‘free will,’ because all human beings are partially limited by the physical forces and the choices of other human beings” (Goldstein 1988, 349). This remark by Joshua Goldstein is directed against the “creators” of the upcoming who rely on the fact that it is a continuation of the present and/or the recent past, and that it is subject to modelling, construction, and privatization.

Both forecasting and foresight are not just limited to the attempts of making guesses on the details of what is forthcoming in the future. The forecaster proceeds from the dialectical determination of the phenomena of the future, with the awareness of the fact that it is necessary to make its way through randomness, that a probabilistic approach is needed, taking into account a wide range of possible options. The probabilistic description of what is possible or desirable is a forecast. A directive decision on how to achieve them is a plan. Planning must precede forecasting in order for the decision to be justified and effective.

Expert Forecasts in Practical Geopolitics

The most important methods of scientific substantiation of predictions – description (analysis), explanation (diagnosis) and prediction (or forecast), constitute the three main functions of each scientific discipline. In the mid-20th century, with its own thematic and professional field, prognostic activity acquired an autonomous significance both within the framework of the respective sciences (as a distinguished part thereof) and independently of them. In parallel, futurology developed, then a conglomerate of studies was born, united under the name of “futures studies” (studies of multidimensional futures), which differed from forecasting with its metascientific nature and normativism. Their orientation is not so much towards the accurate description of what is upcoming, but towards the consideration of its various possibilities/options.

Futurology is represented by both serious humanitarian research and semi-scientific (publicistic and popularizing) and quasi-scientific developments that do not meet the requirements of scientific validity (according to Popper). Although the goal of forecasting is not so much to explain fundamental processes as to create means that allow the description of upcoming events, it is cognitive in nature, and its pragmatic orientation does not change its science-centric nature. What brings it closer to futurology is the inclusion of expert panels (Delphi), but the latter is done by scientific collectives in search of invariant content. Expert opinions are repeatedly processed in order to overcome subjectivism and to achieve objectivity through intersubjectivity.

In practical geopolitics, however, futurology becomes an area of expert knowledge, a variety of publicistic activities on the one hand, and of advisory and expert ones on the other hand. “Expert” forecasts partly reflect the present and partly construct the future. The latter rests on the actual state of development of the human society and on the extrapolation of a range of characteristics into the future, but without scientific and intersubjective justification. While forecasting is based on fundamental scientific

³ He creates a “system of (Kantian) pragmatic idealism” open to some important elements of realism. Based on rationality as something limited, Rescher proposes a holistic approach in which the role of values is fundamental. “Within limitations, one must view perfect rationality as an idealization.” (Rescher, N. (1988). *Rationality: A philosophical inquiry into the nature and the rationale of reason* (p. 10). UK: Oxford University Press).

achievements, it takes the form of problem-oriented research requiring a multidisciplinary approach and has more fundamental than applied value.

Many of the expert geopolitical forecasts usually come out in parallel with different strategies or cross them, and, in essence, they constitute “a form of analysis designed for a predetermined political agenda” (Venier 2010).⁴ Typical in this respect are the works of Brzezinski, who himself titles his writings as “plans” and “strategies,” and his vision for the future as a “strategic” one (Brzezinski 2012). The goals are clearly stated in the title⁵, which in itself classifies his “forecasts” as normative. R. Kaplan, J. Friedman et al., experts and collaborators at the Pentagon, follow his (strategic⁶) approach, identifying the “Flashpoints of the 21st century,”⁷ the “dangerous Flashpoints in Europe.”⁸ They project “buffer countries” and “zones of fractures,”⁹ “justifying the latter with a “democracy deficit,” “ineffective” economic policies pursued by “disloyal” governments in “unfriendly” countries, or by “geography, which is a decisive factor determining the destiny of each nation.” Some of them, however, agree with the existence of regular patterns in the historical development and even turn to the works of F. Braudel, who “helps us to realize and understand the restrictions of our own capabilities... and to influence the outcome of events within these restrictions” (Kaplan 2012, 184–185). Others reject regularities and understand them as an ontological “givenness.” Still, others rely on the “technology for projecting the upcoming, which consists in predicting the past,” and “base on the postulates that the future is a continuation of the present” (Dannigen, Bey 2014, 21–22, 28).

The majority of these “forecasts” are written within the framework of various think tanks, whose authors often either hold senior management positions, or are the creators of some of them themselves. In the words of R. Haass, think tanks “fill a critical void between the academic world, on the one hand, and the realm of government, on the other,” with the aim of “influencing the formation of American foreign policy.” (Haas 2002)¹⁰

They are developed using general scientific methods, such as scenarios, Delphi, etc., created by post-1945 defence researchers, whose methodology and studies “continue to shape the way we undertake to analyse the defence policy and the deterrence, decades later.” Haass’s argument is that “the theoretical and methodological debates are remote and unrelated to the real political dilemmas,” confronted on a daily basis by the policymakers who are “too busy” to engage in more in-depth analysis. Therefore, the main contribution of think tanks is in “filling the void between ideas and actions” (Haas 2002).

According to many scientists, however, their creative results rather tend to crowd out fundamental research (Urrutia 2013, 210), because the latter influence decision-makers in the long-term perspective and make a significant contribution to the construction of cognitive structures on which the leadership relies when determining its foreign policy approaches (Ish-Shalom 2006).¹¹

The differences between these forecasts are minimal (depending on the interests of their guarantors¹²). Schlesinger, for example, points out that, in the 1980s, the Reagan administration encouraged

⁴ Extracted from <https://espacepolitique.revues.org/1714>, 17.03.2023.

⁵ “Eurasia is a prize for America”; “America conducts Eurasia”; “control over the entire Eurasian continent”... (Brzezinski, Z. (1997). *The grand chessboard: American primacy and its geostrategic imperatives* (pp. 132, 143). New York: Basic Books).

⁶ “The strategy is to prevent an alliance between Europe and Russia...” (Friedman, J. (2011). *The next decade* (p. 155). S. NSM Media).

⁷ Данниген, Дж., Бей, О. (2014). *Горячие точки XXI века*. М.: Эксмо. // Dannigen, Dzh., Bey, O. (2014). *Goryachiye tochki XXI veka*. М.: Eksmo.

⁸ Friedman, D. (2015). *Flashpoints: The emerging crisis in Europe*. London: Scribe.

⁹ ... Central Europe is a “zone of fraction,” torn between “oceanic interests” and the “central Eurasian part” with its continental vector. The same applies specifically to Germany, in whose division (of East and West) “there is nothing artificial.” (Kaplan, R. (2012). *The revenge of geography: What the map tells us about coming conflicts and the battle against fate* (pp. 118–119). New York: Random House).

¹⁰ Extracted from <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/p/rem/15506.htm>, 17.03.2023.

¹¹ Extracted from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1354066106069324>, 17.03.2023.

¹² E.g. many foresights of the RAND Corporation are commissioned and funded by the US National Intelligence Council (NIC) to provide information of a different nature. (See the Global Technology Revolution

scientists to sell the results of their government-funded defence research for the purpose of their personal enrichment. Even intelligence began to serve private interests rather than national ones (Schlesinger 1999, 36–37). Again, in addition to intellectual support for foreign policy actions, it is about the market.¹³

The experts are either current or former politicians, or connected in one way or another with the authorities. Their work is dominated by the “strategic goal-setting,” based on certain ideas about the desired socio-economic, political, and geopolitical results¹⁴. Leading among them is the normative beginning, where goals are set at first and then the questions that a forecast must answer are how to achieve the desired, and “how the US and their allies must respond to challenges” (Kaplan 2012, 17). The analytical and descriptive part is necessary to the extent that it serves as a public argumentation for the forthcoming geostrategic actions.

It is important to emphasize that the main function of think tanks is not to conduct traditional fundamental and applied research (although such research is not absent there either), but to establish a connection between knowledge and power, between science and technology on the one hand, and the development of policies in broader areas on the other hand. They are primarily concerned with disseminating new knowledge rather than creating it. This, according to P. Dickson (1971), is their essential difference from traditional science and research work. The best common criteria for their distinction are their scale and scope of activity, as well as the people (and institutions) they serve. “Even though the Centre for Cancer Research or the Astronomical Observatory are scientific research organizations, neither is a “think tank.” While a group that is developing political, economic, etc. forecasts commissioned by the government; a group of scientists that is united in a scientific collective in order to study the future of technology and democracy – all this is a “think tank” (Dickson 1971, 40–45). The interests of scientists are focused on specific issues of substance, they have little contact with politics, their motivation is related to their theoretical contribution to a given discipline and not to the political influence and its benefits (Su 2016, p. 180).

In recent decades, think tanks have been leading in the formation of ideological foundations of the foreign policy of individual countries, as well as in the regulation, management, and modification of global political processes. Also, they act both as intermediaries between the state authorities and the interest groups, and as subjects that give rise to political reality. The scope of practical application of the chaos theory, for example, “is associated with a large-scale expansion of the activities of institutions such as the United States Information Agency, the National Endowment for Democracy, and educational exchange programmes in the private sector. These programmes are at the heart of America’s aggressive national security strategy” (Mann 1992, 66).

The boom in the development of the expert community began in the period of the 1970s – 1990s, when privately funded analytical institutes started to take an active position in relations with government departments, performing non-specific functions, such as propaganda and lobbying for foreign policy decisions (“expert lobbying”). Expert lobbying intensifies competition between think tanks, providing analytical support for alternative policy strategies at the same time. Under these conditions, the influence of experts on policy-making lies in the fact that the information they provide directs the balance of power in favour of one of them.¹⁵

2020, In-Depth Analyses, 2006, where it is stated that the research is for the purpose of the NIC report “Mapping the Global Future, 2020.” http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2006/RAND_TR303.pdf, p. iii)

¹³ The system of analytical centres is a set of competing organizations, each of which strives to provide the most objective and qualitative information needed and commissioned by government, public and business structures, TNCs, and NGOs. Each of these centres seeks to dominate the information market, and its information services are conditioned by the needs of the political forces it is associated with.

¹⁴ Especially indicative in this direction are the forecasts of the agencies Stratfor and Geopolitical Futures, set up by D. Friedman. See e.g. Stratfor Decade Forecast 2015–2025: “It is unlikely that the Russian Federation will survive in its current form.” <https://archive.vn/XJYYI>; Coronavirus. Collected Works: Medical, Economic and Geopolitical Impacts (2018). Geopolitical Futures.

¹⁵ E.g. founders of PNAC (Project “New American Century”) held senior positions in the Bush administration. The project merges the ambitions of the Reagan administration with those of the Bush one.

It is no less important that expert geopolitical forecasts also serve as a tool for “soft pressure” – their goal is to provoke the so-called “network effect,” which allows certain information to be disseminated according to the “snowball rule.” The other goal is purely commercial. Producing clear and concise analytical materials that deliver unambiguous conclusions is aimed at keeping the attention of politicians and at convincing them in the ideas provided by the think tanks, in exchange for a corresponding fee.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

In practical geopolitics, forecasting is based on the principle of rational knowability and rational political action, but they are often irrational, as it is seen today. The capabilities of a country change relatively slowly and depend primarily on its material resources, which in turn determines its capabilities in the field of armaments, and hence its foreign policy behaviour. In that sense, they are (to a certain extent) predictable; therefore, forecasting has some success in this area. But with intentions, the situation is completely different. The latter can only be assumed but not forecasted. In this sense, “capabilities” refer to the category of “uncertainty of the future”, while “intentions” refer to the “unpredictability in principle.” Reducing the degree of indeterminacy largely depends on the prognostic methodology, on the adequacy of the tasks set, and on the selection of initial data. So far, unpredictability depends on the actions of the human factor. These actions require sophisticated comprehensive approaches, allowing to understand the motives, the regular patterns in behaviour, the group and individual characteristics, the mentality, and the qualitative characteristics of decision-makers in an opposing or allied country – tasks that even artificial intelligence cannot handle!¹⁷

Forecasting (in general) with such an emphasis on rationality runs the risk of being unpromising, precisely when political events are moving towards large-scale military conflict and when human actions are difficult to predict. In this regard, the development of the Ukrainian crisis is indicative, in which events (at least for now) are unfolding in complete contradiction to the forecasts and strategies¹⁸ developed before it began.

The exception is Europe, which is “destined” to relive the events of World War II. However, the reaction of the non-Western world¹⁹ was not foreseen (not even taken into account) in expert forecasts.

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¹⁶ E.g. the conservative “Heritage Foundation” has been a leader in lobbying for the development of the American missile defense system for three decades. The analytical materials they prepared were widely used by the Reagan administration and by Republican parties prioritizing military programmes. Accordingly, they fund the development of these materials (See “Military tropism” and the role of TT in (Urrutia 2013)). The role of think tanks in the definition and application of defence policies and strategies. *Journal of the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, 2, pp. 5, 12–13, 23, 203–236).

¹⁷ See e.g. Jungwirth, D., & Haluza, D. (2023). Forecasting geopolitical conflicts using GPT-3 AI: Reality-check one year into the 2022 Ukraine war. Preprints 2023; doi: 10.20944/preprints202302.0065.v1, <https://www.preprints.org/manuscript/202302.0065/v1>

¹⁸ See Overextending and unbalancing Russia. (2019). RAND: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/RB10000/RB10014/RAND_RB10014.pdf; Global trends 2030: Alternative worlds. (2012). <https://globaltrends2030.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/global-trends-2030-november2012.pdf>; Decade forecast: 2015–2025. (2015). Stratfor: <https://www.stratfor.com/forecast/decade-forecast-2015-2025>; European Union in the world 2025: Scenarios for EU relations with its neighbours and strategic partners 2025 (2016). https://www.dahrendorf-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Dahrendorf_Analysis_European-Union-in-the-World-2025.pdf

¹⁹ See ECFR (2023): United West, divided from the rest: Global public opinion one year into Russia’s war on Ukraine. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/united-west-divided-from-the-rest-global-public-opinion-one-year-into-russias-war-on-ukraine/>

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