



# Taking the Long View in a Time of Great Uncertainty

## “That Will Never Happen” — The Power of Scenario Planning

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Since the first column of Taking the Long View in late 2010,<sup>1</sup> I have discussed the power of scenario planning to help leaders visualize improbable future worlds, rehearse the events that might lead up to those worlds, and postulate what actions might be taken to either influence the path to those future worlds, or at least to better prepare for them.

In those discussions I have employed some common terms used in scenario planning to capture the imagination of readers, such as “what ifs,”<sup>2</sup> “critical uncertainties,”<sup>3</sup> “wild cards,”<sup>4</sup> “strategic inflection points,”<sup>5</sup> “discontinuities,”<sup>6</sup> “event timelines,”<sup>7</sup> “bumps in the road,”<sup>8</sup> and “nightmare scenarios.”<sup>9</sup> These terms have helped to create the strategic engagement necessary for organizations, including the INMM, to look “outside the box” as events unfold, such as the nuclear tests by North Korea; the Fukushima nuclear accident; the Arab Spring; the military action by Russia in the Crimea; the Iranian “nuclear deal” — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA); and the continuing struggles against terrorism in the Middle



East. All of these events have had an impact on the Institute, its mission and its membership.

Such was the setting when the results of the U.S. Presidential election greeted the world in the early morning hours of November 9, 2016. Although the “conventional wisdom” had predicted a win for Secretary Hillary Clin-

ton, and many people openly avowed that a Trump victory “would never happen,” nonetheless, headlines, like the one shown here from the *Albuquerque Journal* that Wednesday morning, were common across the world.

Many drew the analogy to similar occurrence only four months earlier with the “Brexit” vote in Great Britain to withdraw from the European Union

*This column is intended to serve as a forum to present and discuss current strategic issues impacting the Institute of Nuclear Materials Management in the furtherance of its mission. The views expressed by the author are not necessarily endorsed by the Institute, but are intended to stimulate and encourage JNMM readers to actively participate in strategic discussions. Please provide your thoughts and ideas to the Institute’s leadership on these and other issues of importance. With your feedback we hope to create an environment of open dialogue, addressing the critical uncertainties that lie ahead for the world, and identify the possible paths to the future based on those uncertainties that can be influenced by the Institute. Jack Jekowski can be contacted at [jjekowski@aol.com](mailto:jjekowski@aol.com).*



(EU) — reflecting a changing political view of both countries' electorate. However, even with the Brexit vote so recent in people's memories, the concept of "that will never happen" with respect to a possible Trump victory seemed to prevail.<sup>10</sup>

These two events have driven "soul-searching" by many to try to understand the societal and geopolitical dynamism of today's global environment. Most notably, is a recently published letter by Dr. Stephen Hawking titled, "*This is the most dangerous time for our planet*,"<sup>11</sup> that examines these two remarkable events from the perspective of the "elites." Other post-election analyses spoke of the "Winds of Change," depicting the one significant characteristic of these events as "uncertainty."<sup>12</sup>

I had listed the outcome of the U.S. Presidential election as a **critical uncertainty** in previous columns,<sup>13</sup> particularly in light of the dichotomy of positions taken by the two major candidates in areas of interest to the INMM, including positions on the nuclear stockpile modernization programs, relationships with Russia, and perspectives on nonproliferation and nuclear technologies. As the ensuing weeks since the election have unfolded, the positions of President-elect Trump in the nuclear arena have taken on heightened interest as the many uncertainties in the world today must now be viewed from a very different perspective.

### "That Will Never Happen" — The Power of Scenario Planning

Since my first experience facilitating a large scenario planning activity twenty years ago for senior leadership at a major M&O contractor in the U.S. Nuclear Security Enterprise, I have been struck by how hard it is for individuals who are "in-

tegrated" into the system to "go outside the box" and speculate on improbable (but not impossible) futures. It is a difficult thing to do when you are responsible for multi-million dollar programs with high national security consequence and tight schedules, where daily "fires" must be put out: to suspend your belief system and speculate on "what might be." Since those early years of scenario planning, the statement "that will never happen" has become a bellwether in virtually every major scenario planning activity I have facilitated, creating an opportunity to open rich and challenging discussions with leadership teams to stretch their imagination and build robust strategies that would better prepare the organization for an uncertain future, particularly one which seemed improbable at first.

As an example, in late 1997 and early 1998, the research we were conducting demonstrated a possible path to the future that would have India testing a nuclear weapon, with a posited follow-on of a Pakistani test, mirroring the early days of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. When that future path was first presented to leadership, one senior leader scoffed, and said quite sternly "Well, that will never happen, we don't need to waste our time even talking about it." We did rehearse that future path, however, in our strategic discussions. When India tested multiple devices in May 1998, followed shortly after by Pakistan, although some shock initially rippled through the leadership team, the discussion was "What did we say that we would do if this were to happen?" and the team, comforted somewhat by having had those discussions, addressed the implications of that scenario with respect to its organizational and business strategies.

Other examples include discussions with an Agency prior to the start of the Iraq War and the formation of a new Federal Department focused on national security — both of which prompted leadership to be better prepared for when those events occurred, despite initially being characterized as "never happening."

### Fast Forward to 2016

In February 2016, I was huddled in a group of high-level federal staff, think-tank strategists, lawyers, and scientists at an evening meeting in the heart of Washington, DC. The discussion was focused very seriously on the most likely event of another Continuing Resolution (CR) for FY2017 in light of the Presidential election, with an impasse between Congress and the White House until a new Administration and Congress were in place. No one dared to mention either candidate by name, so as the conversations wound down with a more-or-less comforting agreement that we have all gone through CRs in the past, I interjected — "imagine how all of that will change when Trump becomes President." After a long and painful moment of silence, a powerful DC lawyer looked at me from across the circle and said, "We will never let that happen." Thus began my research at that moment in time that this *could be* a future path with which to challenge leadership outside of the box, and to monitor as events unfolded.

### The New U.S. Administration — Facing a Multitude of "That Will Never Happen" Scenarios

As this column goes to press, President-elect Trump is in the process of choosing cabinet and other high-ranking officials for his administration, as well as formulating policies that, although aligned with



campaign rhetoric, are appearing to be influenced by input from subject matter experts. It will be some time before we can piece together the implications of this new world on the INMM and the work of its membership. However, we can speculate, using published early policy documents<sup>14</sup> and the previous lists published in this column of critical uncertainties, of what “might be” under this new leadership. Here is a short list of “that will never happen” futures that should be stimulating our discussions:

- The dissolution of the Iran Deal — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.
- Fundamental changes to the U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Policies including moving from a Triad to a Diad, and moving civilian control of nuclear weapons (DOE/NNSA) to the U.S. Department of Defense.
- The potential for proliferation of nuclear-weapon possessing states in Asia,<sup>15</sup> the Middle East,<sup>16</sup> and even within the European community.<sup>17</sup>
- Weakening of NATO and the rise of Russia as a global power.
- A new Cold War with China amid territorial claims in the East and South China Seas as Asian-Pacific alliances change.

In reviewing these perspectives, it is important to set aside your own biases and beliefs, and if you find yourself saying, “well, that will never happen,” jot it down and later ask yourself, “what would it mean to our work (or the work of the Institute) if it really did happen.” Rehearsing improbable future events in this context can raise confidence in addressing uncertainties, and may, in fact, lay the groundwork for actions that could be taken to influence that future in a more positive direction.

In keeping with the spirit of agreements reached back in 2013 at the 54<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting,<sup>18</sup> discussions of these issues should be framed in the context of what the Institute can do to positively impact the future through its technical and policy expertise:

- **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the Iranian nuclear program.** Since the very beginning of his campaign, President-elect Trump has said that he would “dismantle” the JCPOA as “one of the worst deals” this country had ever negotiated. However, in recent reports it appears that many individuals have weighed in on the significance of this once-in-a-lifetime, multi-lateral, diplomatic accomplishment, and may be swaying the new administration’s perspective.<sup>19</sup> Most significantly, 28 European leaders on November 14, 2016, issued a statement confirming their “resolute commitment” to the deal.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, the current speculation is that the new Administration will re-examine the construct of the agreement, which will continue to strain relationships not only with Iran, but potentially with other parties to the agreement. It is interesting to note that in President-elect Trump’s “100-Day Plan” there is no mention of the JCPOA or Iran.<sup>21</sup> Another wild card in this scenario is the emerging economic benefits that may accrue to the U.S. as a result of eliminating sanctions, not the least of which is the granting of licenses by the U.S. Treasury to allow the sale of U.S. commercial aircraft to Iran, although recent actions by the U.S. House of Representatives to block the licenses passed on party

lines as this article went to press.

- **Global nuclear stockpile modernization programs and U.S. nuclear deterrence posture.** President-elect Trump has indicated he will support the rebuilding of the U.S. military capability, including committing to the nuclear Triad modernization program.<sup>22</sup> However, budget realities may result in some tempering of the investment, and the recent selection of General James Mattis as Secretary of Defense-designate leaves the door open for the possibility of exploring changes to the fundamental concepts of the U.S. nuclear deterrent.<sup>23</sup> The incoming administration has asked Congress for a Continuing Resolution through March 2017 to provide adequate time for it to assess the investment strategy, although that approach, in and of itself, may jeopardize some aspects of the planned modernization program.<sup>24</sup>
- **Proliferation of nuclear weapons.** In campaign interviews, Trump acknowledged the significant problem with nuclear weapons, but also said that he would not take their use “off the table” if they were needed.<sup>25</sup> On the subject of proliferation, the president-elect has indicated that it is almost inevitable that other nations will acquire them, as he indicated in a response to Anderson Cooper back in March 2016:

*COOPER: So if you said, Japan, yes, it's fine, you get nuclear weapons, South Korea, you as well, and Saudi Arabia says we want them, too?*

*TRUMP: Can I be honest with you? It's going to happen, anyway. It's going to happen anyway. It's only*



a question of time. They're going to start having them or we have to get rid of them entirely. But you have so many countries already, China, Pakistan, you have so many countries, Russia, you have so many countries right now that have them.

- **Weakening of NATO and the rise of Russia as a global power.** During the run-up to the election, Trump has raised questions of whether NATO allies are fulfilling their financial obligations, and if they are not, then they need to consider defending themselves. These statements have created tensions within the alliance and concerns about further aggression by Russia if the U.S. were to take such a line.<sup>26</sup> Most importantly are the questions that arise with respect to NATO's nuclear posture<sup>27</sup> and also the complication of the U.S. nuclear weapons that are forward-deployed at Incirlik, Turkey, amid rumors that some are being moved as a consequence of the unsuccessful coup attempt earlier this year,<sup>28</sup> to Romania.<sup>29</sup>
- **A new Cold War with China amid territorial claims in the East and South China Seas and as Asian-Pacific alliances change.** Breaking with the long-standing "one China" policy, President-elect Trump spoke directly with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen, creating objections by China.<sup>30</sup> Earlier calls with leaders in Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and the Philippines created similar concern among administration diplomats. How will these initial actions influence the current tense situation in the East and South China Seas, and the balance of power in this new global hotspot?

The use of the scenario process, where paths to the future are mapped out, during times of great uncertainty, can enhance traditional strategic planning initiatives, often stretching the mindset of management, allowing discussions of otherwise unthinkable future worlds. By pursuing discussions of events that prompt a "that will never happen" response, the actions needed today to change the future path can be rehearsed by leaders so that they can be better prepared for any eventuality.

## Endnotes

1. See "Taking the Long View in a Time of Great Uncertainty," 2010 Volume 39, No. 1, pp. 39-41.
2. Ibid.
3. See "Taking the Long View in a Time of Great Uncertainty, *Preparing for Social Chain Reactions*," 2011 Volume 39 No. 3, pp. 28-29; also "Taking the Long View in a Time of Great Uncertainty, *A World Full of Critical Uncertainties*," 2015 Volume 44, No. 1, pp. 37-39
4. Ibid.
5. See "Taking the Long View in a Time of Great Uncertainty, *A Strategic Inflection Point? – The Nuclear Crisis in Japan*," 2011 Volume 39, No. 4, pp. 23-24
6. Ibid.
7. See "Taking the Long View in a Time of Great Uncertainty, *Looking Back at a Decade of Tumult – and Looking Forward to an Uncertain Future*," 2012 Volume 40, No. 3, pp. 99-101
8. See "Taking the Long View in a Time of Great Uncertainty, *Bumps in the Road*," 2014 Volume 42, No. 2, pp. 35-37
9. See "Taking the Long View in a Time of Great Uncertainty, *Rehearsing Possible Futures*," 2016 Volume 44, No. 3, pp. 58-61
10. See, for example, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/24/why-the-brexitsnt-a-boost-for-trump/>
11. See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/01/stephen-hawking-dangerous-time-planet-inequality>
12. See "Winds of Change" and "Now What", *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, November 21-December 4, 2016, p. 22 and pp. 20-21 respectively.
13. Multiple examples exist over the past two years. As an example, see Taking the Long View in a Time of Great Uncertainty, *A World Full of Critical Uncertainties*, 2015 Volume 44, No. 1, pp. 37-39
14. See, for example, <https://www.greatagain.gov/policy/defense-national-security.html> and <https://assets.donaldjtrump.com/landings/contract/O-TRU-102316-Contractv02.pdf>
15. See "Reading into South Korea's Nuclear Debate", <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/03/18/reading-into-south-korea-s-nuclear-debate-pub-51224> and "Japan and South Korea May Soon Go Nuclear," [http://www.wsj.com/article\\_email/japan-and-south-korea-may-soon-go-nuclear-1462738914-IMyQ-jAxMTE2MTAzOTlwMjk2Wj](http://www.wsj.com/article_email/japan-and-south-korea-may-soon-go-nuclear-1462738914-IMyQ-jAxMTE2MTAzOTlwMjk2Wj)
16. See "The Saudis are ready to go nuclear," <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudi-arabia/11658338/The-Saudis-are-ready-to-go-nuclear.html>



17. See "The Sudden German Nuke Flirtation," <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/12/06/sudden-german-uke-flirtation-pub-66366>, which describes a fringe element in the German political system that has opened this unpopular topic for public discussion.
18. See "Taking the Long View in a Time of Great Uncertainty, *Working Toward Solutions*," 2013 Volume 42, No. 1, pp. 61-63
19. See "President Trump and the Art of the Iran Nuclear Deal", <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/president-trump-and-art-iran-nuclear-deal>
20. See [http://dsms.consilium.europa.eu/952/Actions/Newsletter.aspx?messageid=8829&customerid=18886&password=enc\\_3343364144423034\\_enc](http://dsms.consilium.europa.eu/952/Actions/Newsletter.aspx?messageid=8829&customerid=18886&password=enc_3343364144423034_enc)
21. See <https://assets.donaldjtrump.com/landings/contract/O-TRU-102316-Contractv02.pdf>
22. See <http://www.exchangemonitor.com/publication/nsd/trump-administration-expected-continue-nuclear-modernization-boost-defense-spending/>
23. See "James Mattis warned that land-based nuclear missiles pose false alarm danger," <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/04/james-mattis-defense-secretary-nuclear-missiles-trump>
24. See "Trump May Be About To Derail The Pentagon's Nuclear Plans," [http://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2016/11/29/trump-transition-could-derail-pentagon-nuclear-plans/?utm\\_source=Sailthru#7ed5f8467381](http://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2016/11/29/trump-transition-could-derail-pentagon-nuclear-plans/?utm_source=Sailthru#7ed5f8467381)
25. See "9 Terrifying things Donald Trump has publicly said about nuclear weapons", <https://thinkprogress.org/9-terrifying-things-donald-trump-has-publicly-said-about-nuclear-weapons-99f6290bc32a#.7zk2q83pf>
26. See "Donald Trump Sets Conditions for Defending NATO Allies Against Attack, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html>; and "Donald Trump on NATO, Turkey's Coup Attempt and the World," <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/22/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy-interview.html>
27. See "Nuclear Deterrence and the Alliance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century," <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/nuclear-deterrence-alliance-21st-century-nato/EN/index.htm>
28. See "Turkey's Thirty-Year Coup," <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/turkeys-thirty-year-coup>
29. See "US moves nuclear weapons from Turkey to Romania", <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/us-moves-nuclear-weapons-from-turkey-to-romania/>
30. See "The Real Trouble with Trump's Taiwan Call," [http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/the-real-trouble-with-trumps-taiwan-phone-call/?utm\\_source=RealClearDefense+Morning+Recon&utm\\_campaign=5d2dff4689-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2016\\_12\\_07&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_694f73a8dc-5d2dff4689-83889689](http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/the-real-trouble-with-trumps-taiwan-phone-call/?utm_source=RealClearDefense+Morning+Recon&utm_campaign=5d2dff4689-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2016_12_07&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_694f73a8dc-5d2dff4689-83889689); and "Doing the Right Thing: The Taiwan Phone Call," [http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/12/07/doing\\_the\\_right\\_thing\\_the\\_taiwan\\_phone\\_call\\_110451.html?utm\\_source=RealClearDefense+Morning+Recon&utm\\_campaign=5d2dff4689-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2016\\_12\\_07&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_694f73a8dc-5d2dff4689-83889689](http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/12/07/doing_the_right_thing_the_taiwan_phone_call_110451.html?utm_source=RealClearDefense+Morning+Recon&utm_campaign=5d2dff4689-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2016_12_07&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_694f73a8dc-5d2dff4689-83889689)