The Use of Games in Strategic Foresight

A Warning from the Future

After a decade of crisis, the EU now routinely uses futures methods to anticipate the unexpected. Its aim is to address its blind spots. This paper details our experience of designing a foresight exercise to help EU diplomats face up to one of the most ingrained types of blind spot: a taboo issue. But our experience showed instead the dangers of such exercises. Far from needing encouragement to address a taboo, our target audience wanted an excuse to do so, reflecting a shift to a more “geopolitical EU.”

- Strategic foresight exercises are designed to help participants recognize their cognitive biases. But the more policymakers adopt them as routine, the more they use them to reinforce their existing aims. Simply: they learn to manipulate outcomes.

- To prevent cheating, experts introduced adversarial elements, where colleagues paired off against one another. Competition was meant to inject new thinking into policy and break up bureaucratic hierarchies. In fact, these too reinforced old biases.

- Table-top exercises (TTXs) are now the go-to tool, adopted by the EU: rather than competing, participants play as a single team. Collaboration encourages the kind of “risky-shifty” behavior which policymakers need in order to drop old shibboleths.

- Table-top exercises (TTXs) are now the go-to tool, adopted by the EU: rather than competing, participants play as a single team. Collaboration encourages the kind of “risky-shifty” behavior which policymakers need in order to drop old shibboleths.
During the Second World War, the Japanese imperial government charged its newly-established Institute of Total War Studies (ITWS) with the task of conducting wargames. Again and again, participants played out the Japanese naval strategy against the American Navy in the Pacific, resulting in a resounding defeat for Japan that changed the whole course of the war. How could the ITWS have gotten it so wrong?

The answer is simple: the participants had cheated. Whenever their wargames failed to produce the desired outcome, the ITWS simply re-flotted their bathtubs and ran the exercise again. They treated this as part of the process, seeking to perfect outcomes through practice. But today’s strategic foresight experts, with the benefit of foresight, recognize a common phenomenon among officials and policymakers here: cognitive bias and mental blind spots. What the participants were really doing was cherry-picking the results, finding reasons to maintain their current positions and obsessions, of the fact that these were propelling them toward disaster. An exercise designed to broaden the mind served to close it by taking these matters from the real world into a safe space with low stakes, the Japanese cheated their way to defeat.

Today, those early wargames have given way to far more sophisticated foresight practices like trend impact analysis and horizon scanning. And the goal has been precisely to help policymakers face up to the unconscious biases and uncover institutionalized blind spots. Participatory techniques such as “devil’s advocacy” and “dialectical inquiry” serve to introduce dissenting ideas into policymaking. But strategic foresight experts have found that sophisticated modern policymakers fall into the same trap that bedeviled old-fashioned, hierarchical institutions like the mid-century Japanese navy: they learn to use foresight to reinforce positions and fight for budgets, with more speculative activities reduced to box-ticking exercises.

So what’s next for foresight methodology? Foresight experts now believe that the best way to help policymakers overcome cognitive restraints is a simple one: to help them play. Where other foresight methodologies such as scenario-building aim simply to open policymakers’ eyes to a range of possible futures, games go a step further, actively engaging them in joint strategy-building and problem-solving. Within the spontaneous and unguarded context of a game, people are more open to exploring risky ideas that deviate from norms and hierarchies. This has not gone unnoticed by the EU, having invested in highly sophisticated foresight techniques only to have seen them hijacked by bureaucratic politics, the EU has turned to gaming — and not sophisticated electronic gaming systems like TTXs — as a tabletop game.

Tabletop exercises (TTXs) differ from adversarial policymaking techniques like Red Teaming (which involves dividing participants into two teams — red and blue — with the blue team playing a defensive role, while the members of the red team act as hostile outsiders, probing their institutional weakness), Red Teaming uses competition as a way to inject new thinking into policy, testing contingency plans by pitting participants against each other. It can be effective at revealing biases, but experience shows it can also strengthen preconceived ideas about how the hostile outsiders operate. In TTXs, participants collaborate. This may seem a poor way to counter groupthink. But because they share the same goal, players actually tend to be more receptive to new ideas: A team of players is likely to engage in so-called “risky-shifty behavior” — taking chances and collectively facing up to weaknesses that institutions have tacitly agreed to ignore.

The utility of TTXs is clear: they offer a stress-free way of carrying out stress tests for the EU’s strategies and contingency plans, helping test policies and procedures, clarify roles and responsibilities, promote inter-agency cooperation and coordination, and open up a collaborative space for identifying opportunities for innovation. The most basic TTXs involve a single scenario, presented to the participants at the outset. But governments most often use TTXs to pose iterative crisis situations — environmental disasters, cyberattacks, pandemics and even invasions. Participants cumulatively work through the dilemmas raised.

But limiting the use of TTXs to these kinds of crisis simulations would reinforce the idea that business-as-usual thinking should be challenged only exceptionally. And revisiting taboos and settled old assumptions is something the EU feels it needs to do as the rules-based international order crumbles. So instead, the EU increasingly uses TTXs in day-to-day policymaking. That, after all, is where traditional hierarchies and silos become embedded. The EU uses TTXs to support all four stages of the policy cycle, namely: (1) problem identification and agenda-setting; (2) policy formulation and decision-making; (3) implementation and evaluation; and (4) monitoring and learning.
In 2020, we developed a tabletop exercise based around the needs of EU foreign policymakers working with ‘difficult’ partners in Eastern Europe and Africa – states that don’t always adhere to the EU’s own normative agenda, but where the EU has no choice but to engage. A TTX seemed like precisely the right tool: the strand of EU policy was frozen at that pivotal stage between evaluation and agenda-setting – frozen for the simple reason that it had hit a brick wall. The impasse was seemingly down to a problem with institutional hierarchies, as officials in Brussels were said to reject an (over) change in their policy trajectory, while those out in the field were apparently pushing for what they saw as pragmatic progress. Above all, there was a tabo that was blocking progress, and a TTX – with its appeal to “risky-shifty” thinking – could provide a safe space for policymakers to experiment.18

So what was the impasse and what was the taboo? It was about whether the EU should engage with governments that had criminal ties. The EU’s dilemma around the second wave of the 2015 to 2016 Schengen crisis as it sought to tackle the networks of migrants, criminals, and terrorists that were edging ever closer to its borders. The taboo was to successfully pursue its interests, the EU found it needed to work with governments that were actively colluding with these very same criminals – Ankara, say, or the powerful centers of power in Libya. Under the title “A Wicked Problem: How to Cooperate with Collusive States?”, the exercise has just been published by the Egmont Institute for Security Studies, an agency of the EU.19 And, given the current ubiquity of such exercises in Brussels, we wanted to record the experience.

We began work at a time when the EU had become reliant on the ring of states surrounding it – many of which were entangled in relationships with smugglers, traffickers, and other criminal groups – as actors. This went against the grain for the EU, and its traditional understanding of itself as a “normative power” prompted it to crack down on what it saw as a clear-cut examples of corruption, kleptocracy, and state capture. But a more driven approach pressed it to engage. This played out initially in Libya, a country with no central government, where the EU informally relied on a deal which its member state Italy had reportedly made with miltias.20 But, increasingly, it found itself formalizing cooperation with governments closer to home that were more willing to accept links to criminal gangs and even terrorist networks.21

Things came to a head during the coronavirus crisis, when governments in the neighborhood pointed out that their criminal collusion was not always a bad thing. There was growing critique of European norms for lecturing developing countries while relying on them to do the dirty work.22 Governments across the neighborhood found that they could only support their populations by resorting to criminal collusion – for instance, accepting the help of criminal groups to access or distribute vaccines.23 Some, following Russia’s lead, had begun to openly use links to criminal groups as a legitimate part of national strategy.24 How should the EU navigate this tricky field? This was fertile ground for a TTX.

Our TTX consisted of a sequence of six collaborative scenario exercises (see Figure 2) designed to help policymakers collectively consider one big taboo: the idea that, under certain conditions, state collusion with criminals can have positive outcomes for developing states and their societies, and so help the EU to structure and explain its engagement better. We built these scenarios on the basis of historical analysis and future trends, and created plausible narratives about how those states that collude with criminals spur their own development, and even set themselves on a path toward economic and political liberalism. Our assessment was that EU diplomats had failed to consider this possibility because they had – as is so often the case – framed the dilemma as an issue of “values versus interests” and split along realist/idealist lines.

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2 – FIVE SCENARIOS OF CRIME-STATE COLLUSION TO ACHIEVE DEVELOPMENTAL GOALS

In designing a TTX which would help both camps – realists and idealists – explore a way to come together to pursue both naked interests and higher values,25 we tried to follow good design practice and avoid “halo or horns” thinking, which neglects the middle ground.26 We designed five scenarios that would help participants identify “positive” forms of collusion, each one imagining circumstances in which a partner state might resort to collaboration in a bid to improve its governance capacity. Taken together, the scenarios draw on an alternative model of state-building, one in which crime (rather than the market economy and development policy) is a driving force.27 And so they make a distinction between collusion (potentially beneficial to state-building) and corruption (a subcategory of collusion that instead weakens the state).

We began the design process without any clear idea of the final structure of the TTX. EU policymakers in Brussels had framed the policy dilemma in terms of fighting crime, terrorism, and migration, and it took time to realize that the real issue was one of state relations and whether these might be a positive thing. We then extrapolated weak signals from six world regions that were related to this central theme, working each into a separate scenario. The scenarios were played out in states with different levels of development, different histories of colonialism, and different present-day relationships with the EU. But they shared the same essential characteristics: the idea that collusion could, in fact, have a positive state-building effect.

In order to coax the players of the TTX into risky-shifty behavior, we set the scenario in the future, and we fictionalized the real-world case-countries. But we also ensured that the scenarios remained plausible from a present-day perspective, allowing participants to think about the future right in the middle of the EU and its partners to this point. We sought to achieve realism by creating an immersive narrative that mixed desirable and undesirable elements and al-

20 Patrick Hodder and Peter Stroozas, “Breaking the link but not the barrier: The externalisation of EU migration control through orchestrating in the Center for the Study of European Public Policy (2005); DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2005.10862144.
25 “The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the world and the EU’s market economy and development policy) is a driving force. And so they make a distinction between collusion (potentially beneficial to state-building) and corruption (a subcategory of collusion that instead weakens the state). We then extrapolated weak signals from six world regions that were related to this central theme, working each into a separate scenario. The scenarios were played out in states with different levels of development, different histories of colonialism, and different present-day relationships with the EU. But they shared the same essential characteristics: the idea that collusion could, in fact, have a positive state-building effect.

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3 – THREE PILLARS OF A SUCCESSFUL TABLETOP EXERCISE

Pillar 1: Scenario
- Create distance from the present.
- Create narratives, metaphors and images. Include a mix of desirable and undesirable events.
- Engage with undesired developments.

Pillar 2: Pre-exercise
- Reflect on dominant assumptions about the future.
- Reflect on surprises and mistakes in the past.
- Sensitize participants to common types of cognitive bias.
- Invite participants with a wide range of expertise and beliefs.

Pillar 3: Exercise
- Create a playful, explorative mode of thinking (thought experiment).
- Encourage participants to express divergent opinions.

Source: Adapted in Part from Schirmeister et al., 2020

loved participants ample scope to engage with them. We also presented the scenarios as a thought exercise rather than a simulation in order to encourage a more playful, explorative mode of thinking. 28

WHAT IF ... NOT?

Readers of the publication will note that it includes a sequence of only five scenarios (as well as an initial scene-wetting scenario). Our TTX originally included a sixth and final scenario, but this could not be included due to the understandable judgment of the publishers that it was a needless provocation for our target audience and was likely to reverse any progress made in facing up to taboos. This final chapter, which we produce online below (see also Figure 4), focuses on crime-state relations in the EU itself and was designed as a way to complete the thought process in two important ways. Rather than simply asking “what if the EU does not act?” but rather “What does it mean if the EU fails to challenge the assumptions that lie behind inaction?” or “What if the EU continues to pontificate its values while covertly engaging in collusion?”

Over the course of the five scenarios that had come before, we had helped participants recognize that three positive liberal developmental dynamics were potentially at play in crisis-state relations:

1. Marginal sections of society turn to crime in order to supplement a weak state or to push back against an overbearing one.
2. The state uses collusion to advance through three stages of state-building: centralizing the power of coercion, the extraction of capital, and, finally, claims to legitimacy.
3. The same logic of raison d’état that leads states to collude with criminals to boost their own capabilities in turn leads them to crack down on them once they have usurped their powers.

Example, which try to calculate the economic disadvantages if the EU does not take (costly) action. Approaching the same question through a TTX allows for something deeper. The question is not simply “What if the EU does not act?” but rather “What does it mean if the EU fails to challenge the assumptions that lie behind inaction?” or “What if the EU continues to pontificate its values while covertly engaging in collusion?”

What lesson can we draw from our experience of designing this scenario exercise? We found that a playful and collaborative TTX guided by a far-sighted designer can be a formidable tool for expanding policymakers’ perspectives and challenging implicit assumptions; but it can also be a dangerous one when used in a high-pressure environment. TTXs are based on the premise that effective strategy-making is feasible, and all that stands in the way are policymakers’ cognitive and administrative limitations. But our concern is that policymakers do not need coaxing into facing up to taboos and may instrumentalize a TTX as an excuse to go much further than its designers intended. At present, the EU is under huge pressure to face up to a hostile new international environment – one in which a growing pool of states are ready to deal with criminal partners. In order to secure its interests, the EU appears ready to face up to taboos and engage in a form of realpolitik. The kind of “risky-shifty” behavior encouraged by TTXs may provide the environment for a new power politics to emerge.

The publishers chose to omit the final scenario of our TTX on the grounds that EU policymakers might be perturbed by the thought of the EU itself directly resorting to collusion, and this kind of provocative scenario would set back progress made. This was a judgment call that we, of course, accepted. But when we discussed the full TTX to policymakers both in Brussels and out in the field, they said that what they really wanted was for a think tank to confront them with some hard truths in this way. Far from being troubled by the scenarios, they appeared to enjoy the TTX’s breaking of taboos. If this experience is anything to go by, foresight specialists would do well to consider the eventuality that policymakers might be less hidebound than they are often portrayed. What if, for example, policymakers are ready to deal with criminal partners instead of being an excuse to go much further than its designers intended? A seemingly playful tool, meant to gently coax policymakers into facing up to taboos, the TTX risks being instrumentalized as a way to break them.

In July 2001, Johns Hopkins University ran a simulation designed to stress test the United States’ response in the seemingly unlikely event of a terrorist attack on American soil using biological weapons. The simulation’s dire warning about US crisis response capabilities went largely unheeded, but under the extreme pressure of the fallout from the September 11 attacks, policymakers seized upon the exercise to justify breaking a taboo. Citing the scenario as an example of “the devastation Iraq could wreak on our country with a biological attack,” the administration of US President George W. Bush launched a “preemptive strike” against its imagined perpetrator. 29 Participants had broken taboos in the comfort of a simulation exercise and were prepped to do it in real life.

Our own TTX was initially conceived with a similar aim. It looked to embolden EU policymakers to challenge the taboos that prevented them from openly engaging with states with criminal ties. It was expected that by exploring the implications of a failure to critically re-examine these taboos, the final exercise would spur policymakers into action. But actually, the effect would have been somewhat different. By casting the EU itself as a criminal state, the exercise would instead have made policymakers more reflective about the implications of taking action towards states that find themselves in a similar position. This would have been a good corrective given that we had underestimated their desire to break taboos.
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Our aim in this final, unpublished scenario was to highlight the blind spots in the EU’s thinking about crime-state relations, in particular its own susceptibility to rely on criminals to boost its governance capabilities.

The final scenario builds on the fact that the EU is a nascent state-building project in itself and showed how it may co-opt criminal actors into boosting its own governance capabilities. This pattern highlighted the potential—witnessed historically in Europe and currently abroad—for collusion to be used strategically, with states following a logic of raison d’État.

THE FINAL SCENARIO: EUROPE AND THE COST OF EXCEPTIONALISM

The first round of the exercise begins with an introductory text that gives participants a snapshot of the future in which the scenario takes place. This text sets the tone for the exercise, consciously creating a playful and unexpected narrative to draw participants outside of their comfort zone and encourage creative thinking. Once the scenario has been presented, participants are given a number of short discussion prompts and are invited to imagine how this future may have come about. This type of inductive reasoning challenges participants to stretch their imagination and consider eventualities they might otherwise have ruled out.

The TTX designed for this scenario was divided into four rounds, each one based around an immersive narrative. At the end of each round, the group of participants was given 15 minutes in which to discuss a set of questions posed by the moderator. We chose to present the scenario here via an interactive online tool designed to guide participants through the exercise. This also has the advantage that it increases the replicability of the exercise, allowing groups of participants to access and use it remotely.

Round 1: Setting the Scene

The second round of discussion is designed to demonstrate to participants that continuity, not only change, can lead to unexpected outcomes. It does so by providing examples of well-intentioned policies that draw on the EU’s current policy approach, projecting this approach forward into an imagined future where they yield negative outcomes. This highlights to participants that the future is malleable rather than fixed and challenges them to use creative thinking to imagine innovative solutions.

In this section, we link the scenario back to the EU’s experiences. It does so by providing examples of well-intentioned policies that draw on the EU’s current policy approach, projecting this approach forward into an imagined future where they yield negative outcomes. This helps challenge policymakers’ tendency to afford greater significance to signals that reinforce their existing assumptions about the future or which replicate patterns with which they are familiar. Participants are also asked to think of ways in which the EU could have acted differently. This primes them to begin thinking deductively about the potential outcomes of different policy approaches.

Round 2: How We Got Here

In this section, our key aim is to highlight that the EU is not immune to crime-state relations.

Round 3: The Tipping Point

In the third round of the exercise, participants are invited to discuss the plausibility of these described in the text. The aim is to sensitize them to weak signals in the present which are often overlooked or dismissed by policymakers. This helps challenge policymakers’ tendency to afford greater significance to signals that reinforce their existing assumptions about the future or which replicate patterns with which they are familiar. Participants are also asked to think of ways in which the EU could have acted differently. This primes them to begin thinking deductively about the potential outcomes of different policy approaches.

In this section, we link the scenario back to the EU’s failure to understand crime-state relations. Brussels has not understood that society uses crime to fill in for deficits in EU governance or push back against it where it is overbearing, and that it is incumbent on the EU’s own sense of raison d’État to expel criminal elements as soon as it has absorbed their capabilities.

Round 4: Drawing Conclusions

A full interactive version of the exercise can be accessed on the DGAP website here. The text is also reproduced in an annex below.

In this section, we examine how the EU fell into collusive relationships with criminal groups. We show how the EU might use its ties to criminals—armed militias and kleptocrats in its neighborhood—to strengthen its capacity to govern.
APPENDIX – TTX: EUROPE AND THE COST OF EXCEPTIONALISM

ROUND 1 - SETTING THE SCENE

The US president takes to the stage at her private ranch in Wyoming to give her speech to the A5 Summit. There is a sense of levity in the air as White House staffers joke Stetson on the other leaders - Australian, British, Indian and Nigerian. The high spirits dissipate as the president begins to speak. She describes a global ‘Ring of V Ice’, operating primari- ly in Latin America and West Africa. The Anglophone Five (A5) is launching SATO, the South Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and it expects West Africa and Latin America to finance it. In Latin America, the im- age of the ‘cinco amigos’ becomes a source of hu- mour, but the region’s leaders are rattled. Mexico decries the return of ‘frontier justice’ in Washington. ‘The Colombian foreign minister goes even further, describing the A5 as a ‘protection racket’. The UK and America, he says, are not new to this game.’ But, until now, the other Anglophone powers had been much more circumspect.

As the A5 piles pressure on West Africa and Latin America, China sees an opportunity to make diplo- matic capital. In contrast to the A5’s bullish rhetoric, Beijing takes a less heavy-handed approach. China volunteers to deploy law enforcement officers across West Africa, Latin America and the Atlantic: these experts will broker cooperation across the region, and their presence will ‘prevent Anglophone expan- sionism’. Its officers will apply Chinese law only to expatriates, and they are not offering access to social control technology. (China has long since realised the limitations of its domestic brand of high-tech au- thoritarianism, especially in parts of the world that it does not fully comprehend.) But Chinese officers should be given preferential access to market intelli- gence, social databases, transport infrastructure and other networks. The China of 2035 is truly a land of contrasts: at once oriental and orientalist, draconian and serpentine.

These developments are antibithetical to Brussels – but the EU is caught off guard. On the way back from the summit, the Nigerian president makes an unex- pected stop in London and, in a joint statement with the UK prime minister, describes the EU as ‘the north-easter loop of the Ring of V Ice’. As Brussels aggressively refutes the claim as a bid to denigrate it, EU polieing experts urge caution. For a decade now, Europe has been warning that the EU risks becom- ing a net exporter of criminal services, counterfeit goods and irregular migrants. Brussels needs to wake up to the reality that crime has become a lucrative European export. Cartels that spent decades smug- ging cocaine into Europe now smuggle low-cost chemicals out. They transport them to the sprawling urban slums of West Africa, where popup labs trans- form them into powerful stimulants. These are then shipped to mature markets in Latin America, where white collar workers consume them to outrun the onset of automation. The EU finds itself squeezed between the A5 and China. Latin American and West African states seem keen to accept Chinese help, if only to keep the A5 at bay. Is Europe willing to do the same?

DISCUSSION

This is the first of four discussion rounds. Each round will take between fifteen and thirty minutes and will be followed by a short feedback session.

For each discussion round, you will be asked to break into groups of 3-5 participants to dis- cuss some of the issues raised in the scenario. In this round you will have fifteen minutes once the timer has been activated.

You should spend roughly five minutes discussing each of the following questions:

• Does this scenario seem plausible to you?
• How could the situation described in the sce- nario have come about?
• Can you think of any present-day trends or weak signals that might point towards such a future?

ROUND 2 - HOW WE GOT HERE

Over the last decade, policing, prosecutorial and in- vestigative services have all thinned out. This is not the product of Europe’s economic downturn, but modernisation: a decade of ‘smart’ governance has taken its toll. In 2025, the EU launched its ‘Securi- ty Union v. 2.0’.3 Europol, the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency, and the EU Agency for Criminal Jus- tice cooperation were strengthened in order to allow member states to streamline their national services. Centralisation was extended to the EU’s various se- curity databases, and the new EU Bureau of Auto- mated Research Technology began mining them for data. Automation and strategy-making were priori- tised over training and recruitment.

This created vulnerabilities: the centralisation of Eu- rope’s law enforcement capabilities exposed it to in- filtration. As their ‘brightest and best’ went to work for EU agencies, member states began to recruit law enforcement officers abroad, prompting disgruntled countries of origin to withhold relevant vetting in- formation. Corrosive elements entered the police from the ground up, and the top-heavy EU system became vulnerable to disinformation. At the same time, the EU embraced ‘modular enlargement’, of- fering its eastern neighbours full participation in select EU policy fields, including justice and home affairs. States such as Armenia and Belarus, with un- resolved ties to the Russian mafia-elite, joined the EU’s crime-fighting networks. They encouraged the EU to set up new money-making schemes, includ- ing ‘Schengen permits’ for foreign travellers and im- port-export businesses. Imperceptibly, the EU had come to rely on criminals to fight crime.

Europe’s leaders were blind to its internal crisis in law and order because they were fixated on an out- side threat: irregular migration. A 2030 Pew poll showed that ‘as many as 38% of sub-Saharan Afri- cans would like to move abroad’. This made headlines in Europe. But few newspapers noted the real sto- ry: only a tiny percentage actually wanted to go to Europe. When asked to rank their preferred destina- tions, they placed Nigeria and South Africa high

5. The overall percentage of the world population that migrates has remained remarkably stable since the 1950s. If the absolute numbers of people who migrate has increased it is largely because the world’s population has increased: there are simply more people. See: “World Migration Data: A Joint Contribution by UN-DESA and the OECD to the United Nations High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development,” October 3-4, 2015, https://www.oecd. org/migration/WMD-4-Figures.pdf.
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