

REPORT

The Future of Global Power through a Nonstate Lens

On November 17th, 2021, Prescient invited experts and audience members to participate in a unique foresight activity to explore plausible geopolitical futures in which power is distributed among diverse actors, including corporations, transnational NGOs and individual citizens.

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Background

The nature of power is changing, altering the state-led international order and creating new challenges and opportunities.

How can leaders and citizens think clearly about the best way to shape a new order if everyone keeps describing reality through the lens of the old one?

It has been a decade since the eminent statesman Brent Scowcroft (1925-2020) declared that “the nature of power is being transformed” in ways that undermine the international order of sovereign states.⁽¹⁾ In the last ten years, signs of this transformation have repeatedly emerged.

Individuals are finding myriad ways to use newly accessible technologies to assert their economic and political will and disrupt traditional institutions. Nonprofits play quasi-governmental roles by developing regulatory regimes in corporate social responsibility.

Corporate leaders, once reticent about the power of the private sector, are beginning to acknowledge their political influence. Indra Nooyi, the former CEO of PepsiCo, recently told a *Financial Times* interviewer that, “We have market capitalisations bigger than many countries of the world ... We can

make change happen without having to go through political systems.”⁽²⁾

The power of technology platform firms, such as Facebook, Google and Alibaba, is now so outsized that there are calls to treat them like states, and to subject them to democratic accountability.⁽³⁾

The Policy Sandbox offered an opportunity to bring voices representing these different institutions together to explore the challenges and opportunities of a new era of geopolitical power.

We asked three renowned experts to share their views on power through a nonstate lens in a panel presentation...

New forms of power

Three renowned experts shared insights about geopolitical power from the perspective of different nonstate actors

Experts:

Dr. Alexis Wichowski, Deputy Chief Technology Officer for Innovation, City of New York. Author, [*The Information Trade*](#)

Carmen Medina, Internationally recognized expert on intelligence analysis, strategic thinking, diversity of thought & public sector innovation. Author, [*Rebels at Work: A Handbook for Leading Change from Within*](#)

Dr. Mila Rosenthal, Director, Climate Justice Research & Advocacy, Sustainable Partners, Inc.



Alexis Wichowski: Global Technology Firms

“We’re going to see in the next ten to twenty years, different assertions of global power that are tied to the fact that big tech companies have not only an international presence, not only these massive economies, but the fact that all governments of the world, and all economies in the world are using their tools and services, which they could, as we saw on January 6, simply turn off if they decided to”



Carmen Medina: Citizen Power

“I look at people in government, the elites, and I go, you’ve been making decisions for 30 or 40 years? And what have you gotten us? You’ve gotten us basically nothing. It used to be back in the ’90s or so that I thought maybe I, you know, I was one of the few people who thought this. Now all of a sudden this internet came along. And now I realize that there are millions of Americans who believe the same way I do, and that we figured out that that we are not powerless in this equation... [Y]ou also have this possibility that the internet can allow us to do things at scale that previously only the government could do.”

New forms of power (continued)

Three renowned experts shared insights from the perspective of different non-state actors of how global power looks to them

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Dr. Mila Rosenthal, Director, Climate Justice Research & Advocacy, Sustainable Partners, Inc.



Mila Rosenthal: Human Rights Advocacy/Non-Governmental Organizations

“I should say, first of all, that from the point of view of a global human rights organization, you feel pretty powerless, right? But you keep trying with the tools you have. I think everyone here knows that a lot of those tools are about public awareness. How do you engage the people who are feeling far from the decisions of governments and elites?”

And what are the possible avenues that you have to put pressure on those on those decision makers? That outreach is on public platforms. And the flip side is the way that those platforms have been used for organizing violence, and have had this really negative impact... they've also been the tools that have been allowed lots of people to organize together to push for positive change. So there's an irony there, in [social media platforms] being one of our one of our main tools, we also have strength, to the extent there is media that reaches people.”

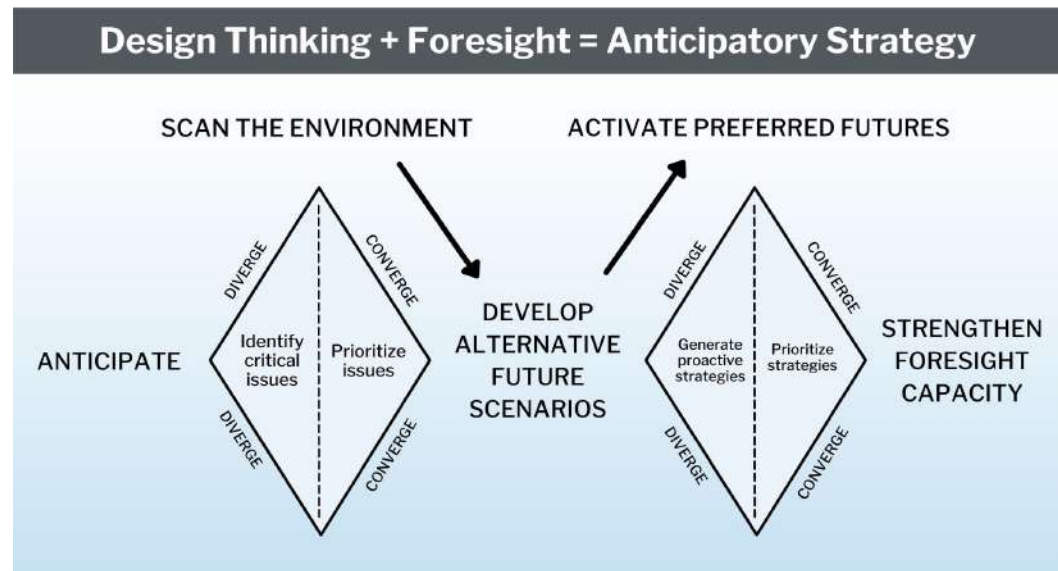
Collaborative Futures Exercise: Design the future

After hearing from the experts, 30+ participants from around the world explored how a global tech firm, a human rights NGO and citizen groups might respond to a plausible future crisis scenario set in Texas called “Border Crisis 2030: Temperatures and Tensions Soar.”

After learning the details of the scenario, participants were divided into three groups: Human Rights Group Leaders, a group of Concerned Citizens, and a locally headquartered Technology Firm Executive of a locally headquartered firm.

Each group was asked: How do you address this crisis and prevent the next? If you knew this was coming in nine years, what would you change about your strategic planning priorities today?

We used foresight and design thinking to generate new ideas.



Participatory Foresight Framework

Collaborative Futures Exercise: Capturing Insights

1. Setup of the Activity/Scenario

Team Brainstorming - Border Crisis 2030: Tensions and Temperatures Soar

The Brief

It's August 2030 in Texas, and in the hottest summer on record, home air conditioning units are cranked up to "high." 300,000 migrants from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have crossed the U.S. border seeking asylum. Ironically, standards of living in Central America have been rising. But this rise has strained food production, creating food insecurity, civil unrest and violence, prompting many to leave home and make the northward trek.

When migrants arrive at the border, they encounter U.S. government drones equipped with biometric monitoring, making it easier to intercept them efficiently. However, U.S. systems also suffer from poor cybersecurity. Hacktivists are releasing captured drone footage on social media, creating public outrage. Influencers from around the world call for cutting business ties with surveillance tech companies based in Texas.

Meanwhile, on top of the heat, Texas is facing its worst fire season in history. Tensions are high as companies furlough workers, and power grids begin to fail. Conspiracy theorists spread a rumor that while Texans die of heat exposure, migrants live in air-conditioned luxury hotels while awaiting custody adjudication.

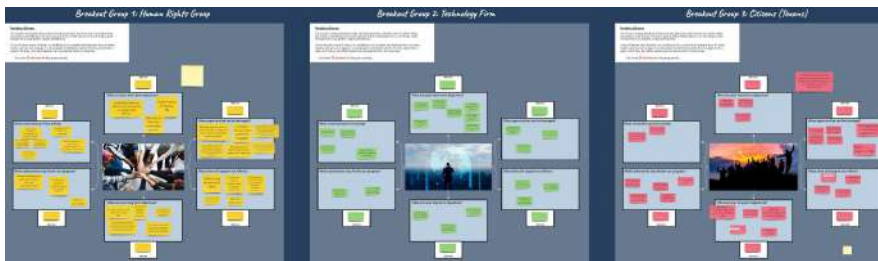
On a sweltering Thursday evening, outraged citizens follow the call to gather in the border town of McAllen to "deal with" the thousands of migrants who have ended up there—and to bring firearms.

In Austin protestors energized by the call to put biotechnology firms out of business have gathered at the perimeter of one company with large defense contracts.

Trouble is clearly brewing. As a human rights group leader / Texas-based company executive / civil servant of Texas, how do you address this crisis and prevent the next? If you knew this was coming in nine years, what would you change about your strategic planning priorities today?



2. Diverge - Small Group Brainstorming

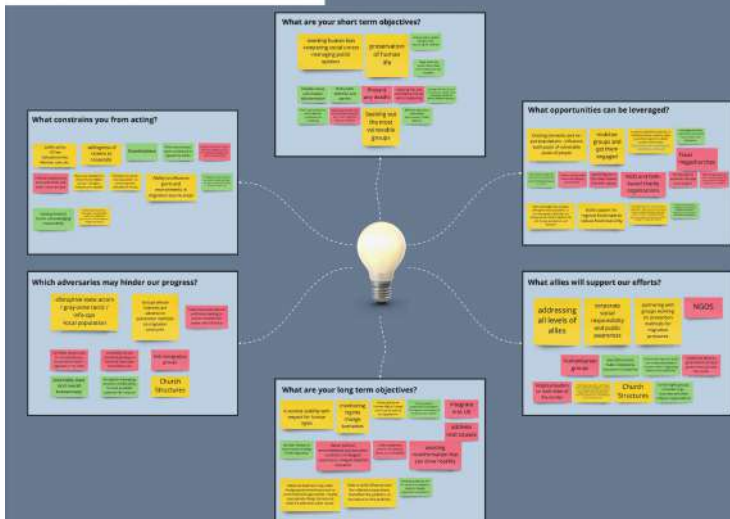


3. Converge - Debrief & Discussion

Group Activity Debrief

Instructions

Our facilitators have combined the feedback from all three teams, so now it is time to engage in a discussion to determine where there is alignment or gaps in thinking, and what lessons can be learned from this exercise.



After providing attendees a detailed and visual scenario, three breakout groups were formed; a Human Rights Group, a Large Tech Firm, and a Citizens Group. Following the small group brainstorming, the information was aggregated at the plenary level and the entire group debriefed and discussed the results. In less than 60 minutes, many new insights were generated..

Takeaways: Using Design Principles to Explore & Shape the Future

Concluding Insights

Complex emerging issues, in which there are many stakeholders, points of view, and entangled sub-issues, benefit from participatory analysis using a design-centered approach that helps diverse stakeholders develop convergent strategies to the future.



The design focused approach enabled the group to uncover **key insights about the future of geopolitical power:**

- (1) Communication through technology platforms plays a pivotal role for all stakeholders seeking power, and requires sustained focus to create new global norms
- (2) States are extremely unlikely to reclaim their decision-making power and will benefit by developing mechanisms for a multi-stakeholder world
- (3) Opportunities to create networks of allies on behalf of positive outcomes abound, but mechanisms to do so are insufficient

Would you like to develop strategic insights for your industry?

Prescient Sandboxes can help you anticipate complex emerging challenges

Develop a customized Policy Sandbox. We apply the Policy Sandbox approach to help organizations anticipate and address complex, multi-stakeholder challenges. Each engagement is uniquely tailored to your organization, stakeholder needs and tech-needs.

Attend a Foresight Sandbox. Our unique Foresight Sandbox program trains mid- and senior-level professionals to apply and share foresight frameworks within their organizations

Contact us to discuss a customized Sandbox at Amy@Prescient2050.com or +1.202.573.8313

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Organizations that attend the Foresight Sandbox

activate your future

The strange gift of crisis is that it offers an opportunity to look at events through a new lens. During the season of transformation, smart organizations will use that lens to gain insight into what happened. When the external environment changes, how can old ways of doing business transform to meet them?

Amy Zalman [The Globalist](#) April 2020

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