

Sir, did you say Strategy? Our answer: foresight!

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Devant la commission Défense de la Chambre, le nouveau chef de la Défense, l'amiral Hofman – poursuivant en cela l'idée de son prédécesseur, le général Comperol – a rappelé la nécessité de disposer d'une stratégie nationale de défense et de sécurité intégrant d'autres acteurs comme les Affaires étrangères, des experts du monde économique ou encore du secteur énergétique dans une approche intégrée. Afin d'établir cette stratégie, la Défense va initier une analyse prospective intitulée Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA) sur un horizon de 5 ans¹. Sollicitée afin de dispenser les connaissances nécessaires à sa réalisation, la chaire de World Politics de l'École royale militaire expose dans le présent article les fondements d'une telle démarche.

¹ Lire aussi – lees ook: “Vous avez dit Stratégie ? Une rencontre avec le général-major Boucké, sous-chef d'état-major Stratégie de la Défense”, in Revue militaire belge – Belgisch militair tijdschrift, Ed. 19.

De leden van de commissie Defensie van de Kamer werden door de nieuwe Chef Defensie, Admiraal Hofman – die in dit verband het idee van zijn voorganger, Generaal Compagnol, voortzet – aan de noodzaak herinnerd van een nationale defensie- en veiligheidsstrategie die andere actoren integreert zoals Buitenlandse Zaken, deskundigen uit de economische wereld of de energiesector in een geïntegreerde aanpak. Om deze strategie tot stand te brengen zal Defensie een prospectieve analyse starten onder de naam Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA), met een horizon van 5 jaar¹. De Leerstoel World Politics van de Koninklijke Militaire School is gevraagd de kennis te leveren die nodig is voor de realisatie ervan en zet in dit artikel de academische grondslagen van een dergelijke aanpak uiteen.

In the field of international relations, examples of events that have shaped our world are numerous... The stock market crisis of 1929, the oil shocks of the seventies, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, 9/11 in 2001, the real estate bubble of 2008... or the current coronavirus pandemic, to name only the most high-profile ones! You might say that all these events are not closely linked to international relations in the strict sense of the word. But the fact is that in a globalised world and following the integrated approaches advocated for years now, whether they are called holistic approach² or comprehensive approach³, the interconnections recent example was given in May 2020 when the 73rd World Health Assembly in Geneva was debating to invite Taiwan to join again the World Health Organization (WHO), from which it was excluded in favour of China in 1971. “*Why on earth are we talking about Taiwan at this time?*” It is because this country, even if it is not recognised by the People’s Republic of China, has built a

² A holistic approach refers to the analysis of a system as a whole rather than just its parts (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/holistic>).

³ According to NATO, the notion of “Comprehensive approach” has three objectives: First, to improve the coherent application of the Alliance’s own crisis management instruments, including its military and political planning procedures. Second, to improve the Alliance’s practical cooperation at all levels with partners, the United Nations and other relevant international organisations, governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), contractors, business partners and local actors in the planning and conduct of operations. Finally, to strengthen the Alliance’s ability to support stabilisation and reconstruction efforts in all phases of a conflict, in concert with other actors (<https://www.handbook.cimic-coe.org/1.introduction/1.1.nato-and-a-comprehensive-approach/>).

solid reputation⁴ in foresight analysis. Being part of its strategic culture⁵, it has certainly enabled it to approach this pandemic in an edifying way, to the point of even being cited as an example by the WHO⁶ and its peers, whether or not China – the country where this virus originated from – likes it or not....

Other countries also have a reputation in this domain. Singapore and Finland apply foresight to the highest level to avoid strategic surprises and to build their own future, safe from unpleasant strategic surprises.

All the above-mentioned unpleasant events have one thing in common: the inherent ability to generate a strategic surprise for international actors. They did not only challenge the values and interests of the actors, but also the rules of a system described as VUCA, “*volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous*”, in the best case, or as BANI, “*Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear and Incomprehensible*” at worst, as mentioned by Wendy Schultz, the renowned futurist and director of *Infinite future*⁷.

And it is indeed under such conditions that organisations with a forward-looking entity will make the difference with those that are strategically blind and do not possess this essential ability to anticipate future scenarios, however unlikely they may be. This is not about predicting the future, in which case we would go to the local bookstore to play the lottery and win the jackpot. No, it is a matter of combining the elements of the past, which reflects our “DNA” based on tangible facts, with the emerging trends, which are intrinsically hypothetical, in order to formulate scenarios of the future and identify their implications. This ability is obviously linked to our most beautiful asset, which makes human beings so unique: the brain. Neuroscience has proven that our brains are superbly designed, through the process of natural selection, to take care of the future.

⁴ Chan S & Clark C. (1992/2005), *Flexibility, Foresight and Fortuna in Taiwan's Development*, Routledge.

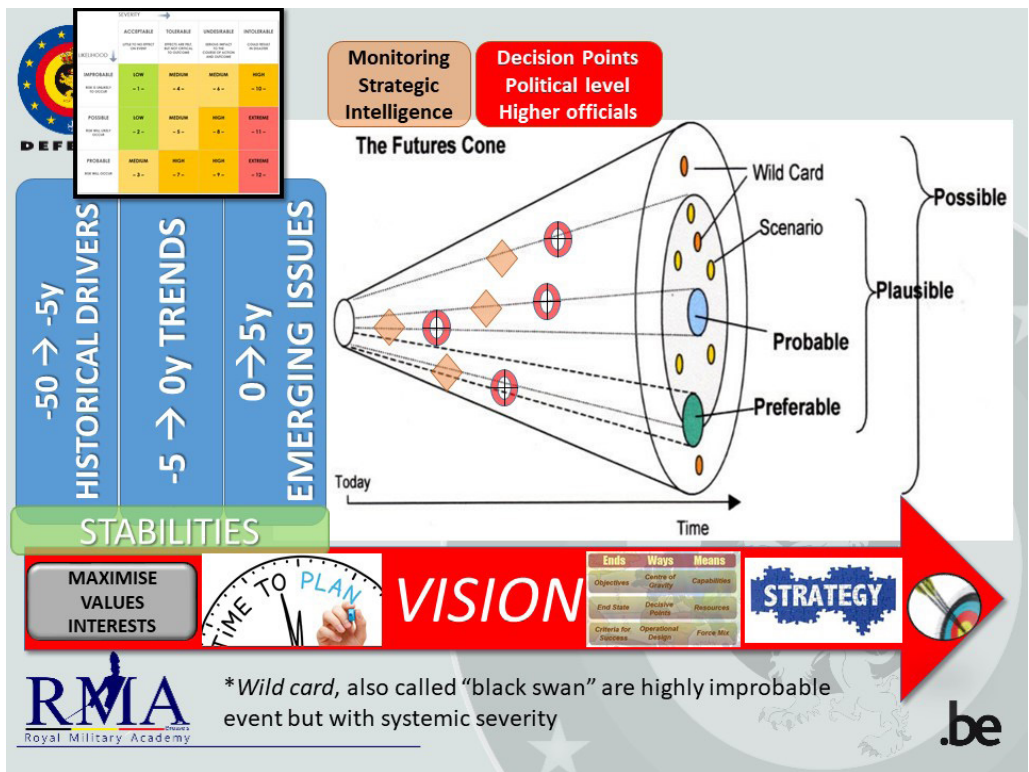
⁵ The Foresight International Education Center (<http://www.fiec.com.tw/en/about-foresight.html>).

⁶ WHO praises Taiwan on Covid-19, but no change on participation issue, FOCUS TAIWAN CAN English News, April 2020 (<https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202004180008>).

⁷ Mentioned by Dr Wendy SCHULTZ, Director Infinite Futures, during a webinar “*What's next? Strategic anticipation and the Covid-19 Crisis*” organised by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP – <https://www.gcsp.ch/>). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PsfuqfQgpI>

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Some parts of the brain consciously and voluntarily think about it, others are pushed to do so, whether we want to worry about the future or not. According to a theory that comes from psychology and neurology, the “*dual process theory*”, our brain looks into the future and makes decisions in two ways⁸. Daniel Kahnemann described both processes in his book *Thinking fast and slow*⁹. The first “intuitive” method, also called “system 1”-thinking, is rather unconscious and is mainly based on our emotions, but it is very fast, much faster than the second method. This process in the first way of thinking is automatic, like the drills that the military is so fond of, and is used for daily decisions. Of course, it may entail mistakes.



⁸ Olivier Houdé, *Le Raisonnement* (Chapitre II - Les théories du double système : système 1 (intuitif) et système 2 (logique)), Que sais-je ?, Presses Universitaires de France, 2014.

⁹ Daniel Kahnemann, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 2011.

However, this is normal because our brain wants to save energy and thinking requires energy. Nonetheless, we need to have “system 1” thinking to survive. As a caveman when we were fighting wild animals and as a homo sapiens in the 21st century when we are driving our car in heavy traffic.

The second logical method, or “system 2” thinking, is based on a more critical reflection, on the examination of the facts. It is being done in a much more conscious manner. It will be used for complex decisions that require effort. Above all, it will be more reliable. Both systems play a role in our thinking and decisions.

One of the consequences, according to Kahnemann, is that we often replace the original, difficult question with a simpler one that we can answer. An example of question substitution: instead of answering the question “*This woman is running for political office. How far will she go?*” we will replace it by “*Does her appearance match my idea what a political winner looks like?*”, a question which is easier to answer as it does not require time and energy for a thoughtful answer. Switching between system 2 and 1.

WYSIATI or “*What You See Is All There Is*” is another consequence of our thinking system. We often draw conclusions based on very limited evidence or from our own limited experience, which of course helps to use system 1, but which also allows, for example, polarisation in politics and society. How a message is communicated also plays a role. We often rely on system 1 and are scared when a doctor says that we have a 10% chance that an operation will be fatal. If we get the message that an operation has a 90% success rate, we already feel much better. Kahnemann states that we rely too often on our gut feeling and too little on the facts, which makes a correct assessment even more difficult. Once again, “system 1”-thinking seems to prevail too often.

Neurology has also shown that the neural structures used by our brain to remember the past are often summoned when our brain tries to imagine the future. It follows that our knowledge and experience, what we know and have learned, as well as our global vision of the world will have a decisive influence on our ability to anticipate or forecast the future. Partly this will also be due to “system 1”-thinking because, in a way, we save energy again and nothing is simpler when the future looks like the past because then there is no surprise.

Therefore, foresight must be a rational study, based on established historical facts, but also on our ability to interconnect elements for which the degree of certainty is not (yet) established. This requires “system 2” thinking. And a lot of creativity. It can be about our future as individuals, about the future of an organisation, the future of one or more states, or even the world’s future. The idea is to be able to distinguish long-term trends beyond the events we can notice on a daily basis. One or more realistic scenarios must then be generated from these trends.¹⁰

There are plenty of classic examples of people and organisations who were wrong and who misjudged notable trends and new developments. Some of these examples are afterwards became a laughing stock. “*This telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication*” was the finding in an internal memo by Western Union in 1876. “*The horse is here to stay, but the automobile is only a novelty, a fad*” is the advice given to future shareholders of the Ford Company at the beginning of the 20th century.

Finally, in his book *The Image of the Future* (1973), futurist Fred Polak states that a very detailed picture of the future will encourage us to go further and make this potential future a reality. It becomes a desired or envisioned future. However, we must ensure that this vision of the future is the result of critical reflection based on established facts, otherwise our vision of the future will be biased and flawed and might open the way to all kinds of extremism.

However, if there is really no thought for the future, it can be disastrous for the company. Eastman Kodak’s firm belief that digital photography had no future is the best-known example. Nevertheless, innovative companies can also be completely wrong. In 1998, Nokia was the best-selling mobile phone manufacturer in the world. In 2007, half of all smartphones in the world were Nokia. As of 2010, the company was no longer able to stand up to the competition because of a lack of innovation and a number of faulty decisions. In a few years, they lost more than ninety percent of their market value and in 2013 Microsoft acquired them.

However, how can we avoid these strategic surprises or at least minimise their harmful consequences by preparing as well as possible? Many of the great minds of this world have formalised the discipline of “*foresight*”, or “*prospective*” into an analytical process

¹⁰ DEMARET, *De invloed van kunstmatige intelligentie op de geopolitiek*, 2020.

that should guide us through the complexity of the dimensions addressed but should, at the same time, remain understandable to be grasped by the human being.

Two schools of thought have theorised this discipline. On the one hand, we find the Anglo-Saxon school of “*foresight*” under the impetus of RAND Corporation from the 1950s onwards, notably to develop doctrines for the use of nuclear deterrence¹¹. On the other hand, we find the French school of “*prospective*” under the impulse of Gaston Berger¹². The Anglo-Saxon school is characterised by an expert approach, whereas the French-style prospective is more participatory by advocating the involvement of the public in the analyses.

Different analysis models have been developed and allow foresight studies to be carried out. These include Wendy Schultz, who speaks of five key activities where different methods can be combined, or R.K Lum with his “*4 steps to the future*”, a process consisting of four steps that should make it possible to compare different scenarios. Within this process, there are many choices. Rafael Popper has represented most of the methods or tools in a visual way, as illustrated on the figure below¹³.

Although these models differ in their nomenclature as well as in the number of steps to be taken, they all share certain commonalities, such as the identification of elements from the past, contemporary trends and emerging elements which, combined together, should make it possible to describe possible visualisations of the future, 10, 15 or even 20 years from now.

At this point, it is necessary to focus on an important decision in the discipline. The analysis can be limited to an *exploratory analysis*, as decided by the sponsoring entity, in which case it identifies possible futures and deduces the impacts, for example in the form of risks and threats. Alternatively, the sponsor can decide to conduct a *normative analysis* in order to create “*his preferred vision of the future*”. In this logic, the sponsor

¹¹ *A Brief History of RAND* (<https://www.rand.org/about/history/a-brief-history-of-rand.html>).

¹² Philippe Durance (éd.), *De la prospective, Textes fondamentaux de la prospective française 1955-1966*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007.

¹³ Popper, R. (2008) “Foresight Methodology”, in Georghiou, L., Cassingena, J., Keenan, M., Miles, I., and Popper, R. (eds.), *The Handbook of Technology Foresight*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 44-88.

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wants to build his own future, without ignoring other possibilities, in order to make the strategic decisions that will allow him and his organisation to achieve the determined objectives and vision. It is clear that such a multi year analysis will present obstacles that will require the organisation to be “tele-guided” through the multiple possibilities that are available.



© BE Défence - based on Popper's foresight diamond ¹³

Within this framework, the most creative and certainly the “sexiest” step for science fiction screenwriters is the writing of scripts. While this is an important step, it is not mandatory! Nevertheless, it often remains a very useful tool for convincing the target audience of the merits of the discipline and allows the visualisation of the consequences of the association of different trends. Thus, the scenario is a really powerful communication tool when it is necessary to influence “decision makers” who have to make strategic choices.

In this context, some decision makers might be tempted to outsource this approach by using prospective analyses carried out by other entities or rely on the analysis of others such as international organisations, supranational and/or multilateral entities or private bodies. In the contemporary neo-liberal context, this would probably be a logical choice of pure efficiency. In our humble opinion, the rule of subcontracting is irrelevant. As we put it in French, “One is never better served than by oneself”; only the persons who know a population’s sensibilities and culture can set up the most efficient scenarios. In addition, this adage is even truer when it comes to the security of its own population, a crucial function of any sovereign state.

This does not mean that the exercises and reports of international organisations are of no use. However, the diversity of these organisations, such as NATO or the EU, is so great that Member States could not copy the result without any critical reflection. A number of Member States have already carried out this exercise at their level. The Netherlands has its “verkenningen”¹⁴, Finland has a vigorous report on a range of strategic themes during every legislature, and Germany, France and Canada have thought about the future at national level. It is striking that a lot of foresight is acquired at regional and local level and in different domains. Indeed: although the main trends have become global, and thus prevalent in Belgium – a small country and the third most globalised one, according to the KOF Indicator¹⁵ in 2020 –, we recommend keeping the analysis *in situ* because only those who know the in-house “DNA” will be able to develop possible future scenarios and the preferred vision of the sponsoring entity. A proper analysis remains the monopoly and the guarantee of intellectual independence of the entity that plebiscites it, namely the state. Why? Because the state is and will always be the only one responsible for the security of its population on the territory in the Westphalian conception. Moreover, the recent economic crisis of 2008 on the one hand and the current pandemic on the other hand have demonstrated the relevance of having a strong and resilient state. The state and the state alone is able to impose the measures necessary to deal with emergencies. It is important to remind it at a time where some people advocate a minimum of state intervention and therefore a minimum of resources for the state. The recent saga of the stocks of masks stored in a military barracks but destroyed to allow the reallocation of the infrastructure for other functions to another Belgian “federal public service” (FPS)¹⁶ due to lack of space has also caused a lot of discussions and upheaval.¹⁷

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIWXCXIQZUr8>

¹⁵ <https://kof.ethz.ch/en/forecasts-and-indicators/indicators/kof-globalisation-index.html>

¹⁶ Service Public Fédéral (SPF) / Federale Overheidsdienst (FOD).

¹⁷ The Epoch Time, Belgique : la réserve stratégique de masques a été incinérée pour faire de la place aux migrants, 8 April 2020 (<https://fr.theepochtimes.com/belgique-reserve-strategique-de-masques-a-ete-incineree-faire-de-place-aux-migrants-1323054.html>).

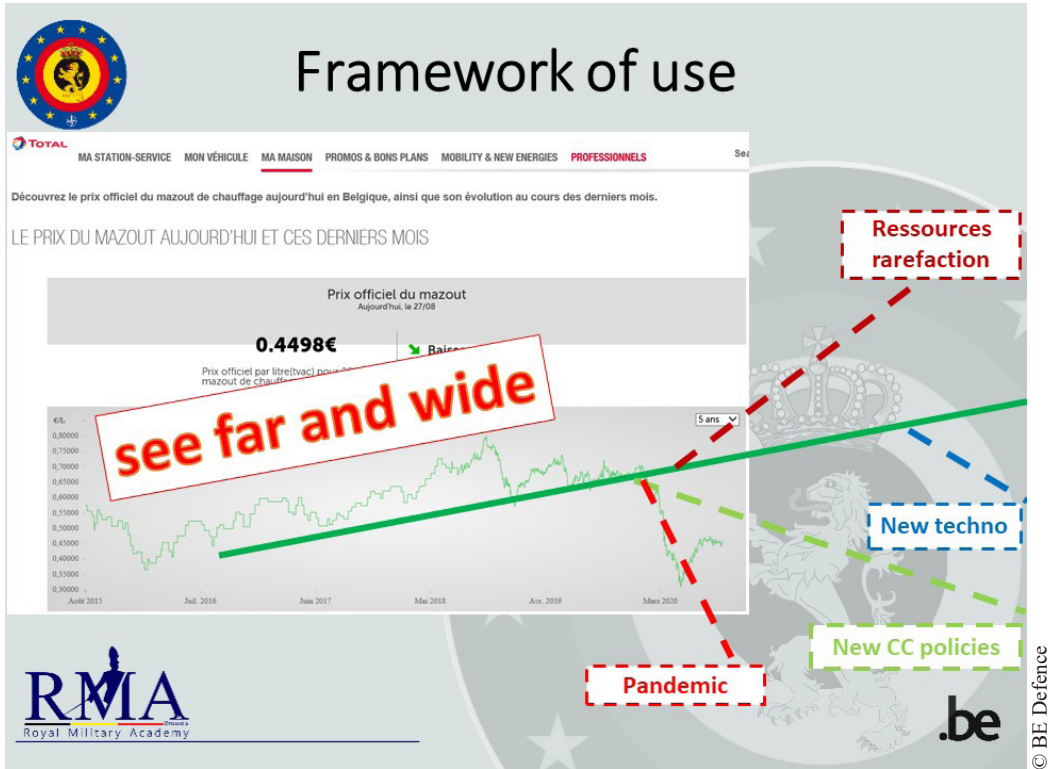
However, *in situ* does not mean that you have to work in a covert and secret way. On the contrary, the more open your analysis is, the more it takes into consideration the different dimensions of the problem, and the more relevant and credible it will be for the sponsor. Moreover, these are two inherent characteristics of foresight analyses, seeing *far* and seeing *wide*. There is no point in making a foresight analysis with a horizon of one or two years. In such a case, the essence of this type of analysis would be lost. For example, in the economic field, the Belgian Planning Bureau¹⁸ prepares, among other things, 6-month economic projections based on equations by extrapolating the figures, without omitting its long-term economic analyses (5 years). However, an interdisciplinary foresight analysis over the next 10 or 15 years will rather have to deal with, for example, the impact of climate change or the consequences of a technological revolution in energy on our economic model without providing figures. The consequence is that it is necessary to think broadly, i.e. to take into account the many dimensions of a problem by calling on as many experts from different branches as possible to grasp all its facets and analyse it through different prisms. For example, not without reason, the United Nations has evolved from the concept of security, in the military sense of the term, to the much broader concept of “*human security*”, which requires the advice of scientists in many different fields.

What about our Department of Defence (DOD)?

In concrete terms, the Chief of Defence (CHOD) and his Assistant Chief of Staff Strategy (ACOS Strat), aware of the need to be able to anticipate future developments in order to respond to them with the appropriate tools, have laid the foundations for the necessary analysis. The recent interview of Major General BOUCKE, ACOS Strat, published in this review, testifies to this will. However, in these times of budget cuts, you may ask, why would we engage in such an analysis? Beyond the environment described in the introduction of this article, it is essential to provide our senior leadership with a performant tool for decision-making in the face of uncertainty, especially when engaging a department of 24,000 men and women and expensive major equipment in inherently dangerous situations. This tool will also allow the organisation to argue and justify the different decisions that are taken to the political leaders and to the public opinion.

¹⁸ https://www.plan.be/aboutus/institution_desc.php?lang=fr

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Thus, the foresight tool has several vocations. We think that it is important to mention first and foremost the tool's ability to enable the formulation of a shared vision for the organisation and perhaps even beyond the department. The tool also offers the possibility to anticipate the environment in which our Components (Land, Air, Navy and Medical) will have to evolve. It therefore enables capability development in all its DOTMLPFI¹⁹ aspects, especially when writing the key user requirement's (KUR). It also allows the validation of our 10 engagement scenarios (different from future scenarios) and perhaps even the development of new engagement scenarios such as a "Cyber Ops Scenario". It therefore allows us to visualise the nature of the types of engagement that Defence envisages, or...not, depending on the environmental and geopolitical

¹⁹ Doctrine, Organisation, Training, Material, Leadership, Personal, Facilities, Interoperability.

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context. In a more concrete way now, this tool even offers the possibility, for example, of considering membership of different international organisations or multilateral initiatives, the opening of Defence Attaché posts in our embassies or even posts in the Allied headquarters. Finally, the vision resulting from a forward-looking process can also guide R&D choices within the Royal Military Academy (RMA) and beyond. We can therefore speak of a process that is essential for the long-term development of our organisation.

In this effort, the ACOS Strat and his department are not alone. Indeed, since 2016, the World Politics Chair of the Royal Military Academy (RMA) has trained its lecturers in the discipline by having them participate in modules at the Geneva Centre for Security Policies (GCSP) and at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve (UCLouvain) and then teach a module in the Advanced Staff Course (AStC). Given the small size of the military world and the excellent relationship between ACOS Strat and the Chair, the Strategy Department requested the support of the Chair in order to train its staff and thus be able to apply the process for their specific needs. Nevertheless, Strategy Department staff did not wait until they were trained to use the tool. For example, as part of the process of forging a new government, ACOS Strat/Pol Div staff wrote the excellent *2019 Security Environment Review*²⁰ to enable our political and economic leaders to see all the security trends at work that will shape our world tomorrow. This was a necessary, if not useful exercise.

Let us conclude by mentioning the initiative underway within ACOS Strat to initiate this fundamental process. As a number one priority of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Strategy, Major General Boucké, as stated in the article *Vous avez dit Stratégie* (You said Strategy) of the Belgian Military Review²¹, the strategic foresight analysis (SFA) within the Strategy department is the required answer to the need of Defence in this field. Its project pilot, aware of the complexity of the project, has done everything possible to lay a sound basis for a success story, by consulting experts within Defence but also

²⁰ 2019 Security Environment Review, Defence, 2019 (http://units.mil.intra/sites/Strat/WorkspaceAcosStrat/Transversal/2_IDS/4_CCIV/2_PVS/1_Doc/Benchmarking/BEL/Security_environment_review.pdf).

²¹ Jo Coelmont and Henri Badot-Bertrand, “Vous avez dit Stratégie ? U zegt Strategie? An interview with major general Boucké, Assistant Chief of Staff Strategy”, *Revue Militaire Belge – Belgisch Militair Tijdschrift*, Edition 19, Jun 2020.

in other Federal Public Services (FPS/SPF/FOD) in order to see the availability of other departments for a project that goes beyond the limits of the “security & defence” policy. This approach meets the fundamental principles of the field of foresight that are long-term and multidisciplinary.

Resilience for an entity is not an empty word and it is not a surprise that it is currently a “buzz word”. Nevertheless, like everything else, it is developing. For an organisation such as ours, which is active in the security field and which is inherently confronted with uncertainty and risks, we must equip it with processes that allow it to face this precarious environment in order to minimise its harmful consequences. Also to exploit all its opportunities. In this perpetual struggle, we can use proven scientific methods. Whether you call it foresight, “prospective”, “voorzienendheid” or “verkenning” does not matter. What is fundamental is to capture the very essence of the tool, that is to say, the part of creativity that it offers. Indeed, actually it is not uncommon to hear a leader say “think out of the box” to develop solutions in a context of constant pressure on human, material and financial resources. Of course, we have to keep both feet on the ground because our goal is not to write the screenplay for the next Hollywood science fiction movie whose budget would probably exceed all the expectations of our General Direction Strategic Communications (DG StratCom). No, it is a question of anticipating our possible future working environment 10 or even 20 years ahead, to think about future possible and plausible risks and threats in order to acquire the adapted necessary capacities and capabilities to face them. Anyway, in good military jargon, the “What if?” scenarios...

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