

Florence Gaub: Scenario – The Future Is at Stake

- A book to make foreign policy concrete and vivid: crisis hotspots, options for action, consequences
- The NATO thinker provides an innovative introduction to the world of international power and military logic
- For readers of Herfried Münkler and Carlo Masala



The political future of the world seems wide open – what does it hold for us?

The future seems more frightening than it did just a few years ago. What it will look like doesn't depend solely on Russia and the US, but on a large number of players. By taking stock of what we actually know, what we don't know, and above all, what options for action are available, we retrieve the feeling that we too have a role to play in our future.

Florence Gaub invites readers to make their own foreign policy decisions: Instead of merely being spectators of more or less plausible scenarios, readers can follow different decision-making paths. The book provides insights into possible decision-making processes and imparts a sense of self-determination.



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224 pages
September 2023

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Florence Gaub
Scenario – The Future Is at Stake
ca. 496 pages
November 2025

Genre: Current Affairs, Politics / Economics, Non-Fiction



Florence Gaub:

Scenario – The Future Is at Stake

(OT: Szenario – Die Zukunft steht auf dem Spiel)

Sample Translation by Gesche Ipsen

Foreword

‘The future is whatever you make it.’ This isn’t a quote from a philosopher, politician or tech entrepreneur, but Doc Brown’s parting shot in *Back to the Future III*. The *Back to the Future* movies may have been aimed at a teenage audience, but their message is still valid today, no matter your age: the future is not the consequence of the mystical interplay of inscrutable mechanisms, but the reproducible result of specific developments and decisions.

It may seem obvious to us now; but for a long time, we didn’t know for sure whether the future was already written, or, rather, something we could shape. Even today, I often meet people who consider themselves not so much active players in their own future as mere spectators. This is borne out by polls: 72% of Germans think that success in life is chiefly down to forces outside our control; while just 36% of US respondents agree.¹ And just 25% of Germans believe that hard work can help you climb the social ladder – in Sweden, the figure is 70%.²

When it comes to global politics, too, there’s a latent fatalism. Whether the topic is Russia, China, the US, AI or climate change, feeling overwhelmed has given way to general resignation. I frequently hear people say that there’s nothing we can do, that NATO / the EU / the West / democracy / humanity are facing imminent demise. Yet although narratives of decline seem very much of our time, they’re nothing new. They regularly crop up in history at times when humans feel overwhelmed. The details may differ – these days it’s CO₂ emissions, back then it was CFCs; today it’s Trump, back then it was Abraham Lincoln; today it’s AI, once upon a time it was the dangers of electricity – but our attitude has always been the same: there’s nothing to be done, you can’t stop the future. However, the good news is that ultimately, someone has always managed to do something about it: closed the hole in the ozone layer, saved the transatlantic relationship, regulated new technology, averted or ended wars.

After all, what shapes the future is not defeatism but decisions and actions. Including in global politics. This becomes especially clear when we look at political forecasts, which are published every few years with much fanfare, usually under sensational and fear-inducing titles such as *Armageddon and the Coming War With Russia* (Jerry Falwell, 1980), *The Coming War with Japan* (George Friedman and Meredith LeBard, 1991), *The Coming Anarchy* (Robert Kaplan, 2000), *Clash of Civilisations* (Samuel Huntington, 1996) or – the first in the series – *The Decline of the West* (Oswald Spengler, 1918). Their authors confidently present the future as if it were a country they’ve travelled around in and know like the back of their hand, and much as the reader may worry about what’s to come, what they should really be doing is gape in awe at the author’s far-sightedness. Which, in the end, turns out to be no such thing: the promised wars with the Soviet Union and Japan haven’t transpired; the African continent hasn’t torn itself apart; and although conflicts are, now as

¹ Catherine Rampell, ‘Fatalism and the American dream’, *The New York Times*, 23 November 2011, <https://archive.nytimes.com/economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/fatalism-and-the-american-dream/>

² *Welt*, ‘Generation Mutlos’, 27 November 2011, https://www.welt.de/print/welt_kompakt/article111533665/Generation-Mutlos.html

then, a common phenomenon, they can't be neatly labelled a 'clash of civilisations'. Such sweeping claims about global politics for the most part largely miss the mark – only no one cares enough to reassess them.

The reason they miss the mark is simple: the future is messy. It's the result of trends, of incontrovertible physical realities, of decisions taken by a ridiculous number of people, of small and big events and phenomena that no one saw coming. And because everything in the world is interconnected and part of a huge, complex, unwieldy system, a fluttering butterfly can trigger a tornado, and a frustrated greengrocer in a small town in Tunisia can cause the downfall of five Arab dictators. Claiming that you know what's coming is as misguided as the Babylonians' horoscopes of old.

The only way to make sense of the mess is scenario planning, that is, thinking through chains of events and domino effects in every direction, from the probable to the improbable, from the desirable to the catastrophic. And that's exactly why this book isn't yet another definitive outline of future global politics, but an invitation to you, the reader, to consider which actions and decisions will bring about what kind of future.

I have taken the concept from the Choose Your Own Adventure series, created in 1976 by US lawyer and ex-navy officer Edward Packard with his publication of *The Adventures of You on Sugar Cane Island*. Unlike other stories, these interactive books allow the reader to choose what happens: at the end of every section, you decide what to do next. (Packard, a father of three, got the idea from constantly having to come up with new bedtime stories.) These books were a huge commercial success, and inadvertently turned something that futurologists had been doing since the Second World War into a form of entertainment: scenario planning.

The term 'scenario' is particularly fitting, given that it comes from the Commedia dell'arte – a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian form of improv theatre, where the *scenario* was the piece of paper hung on the back of the stage, which listed the basic elements of the scene to be played out – entrances and exits, developments, characters, etc. – so that the actors had something to work with.

In modern futurology, scenario planning is also a kind of improvisation: the point is not to describe and define everything down to the last detail, but to have a rough idea of the main lines and interconnections and then play around with them. The result is threefold: firstly, we reduce the seemingly endless number of possibilities to a few; secondly, it makes us more aware of our scope of action; thirdly, we create memories of the future – so if one of our scenarios actually happens, we'll be able to react more quickly, because it's already in our repertoire. No matter how pessimistic they look, then, scenarios show us what we are capable of and ultimately make us more optimistic, reduce the likelihood of unpleasant surprises and give us a greater feeling of control.

On the pages that follow, the future is in your hands. You won't be operating in a vacuum, and you aren't a character in some kind of sci-fi series – reality will limit what you can and can't do in all manner of ways, from scientific discoveries to the actions of other players, which you can't control or influence.

I've laid the groundwork for you: I have researched the major trends that will scaffold our future up to the year 2033, and listed their sources. Embedded in these are equally major unknowns, both good and bad, which it is your task to unearth. You are neither Wonder Woman nor Superman, but as an ordinary human being you're nevertheless endowed with one superpower: you can think ahead, picture the future – and shape it.

This book is largely inspired by real-life experiences, both mine and my friends' and acquaintances', while I have taken many of the things that are yet to happen from studies that show them to be either probable or at least very much possible – I have provided the sources for all those too. There are also a few fictional elements, particularly the cast of characters. They are (almost) all my invention, except, obviously, people who are in the public eye.

WELCOME TO THE FUTURE.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to make decisions that shape the future. What will await you in 2033?

WHO ARE YOU?

You are a behind-the-scenes player in global politics. You don't make the decisions, but advise those who do. You have no executive powers, no troops, no fleet of satellites. What you do have are models, data, experience and a feeling for dynamics: you recognise connections and relationships before they are officially labelled as such, you ask questions that no one else asks, you interrogate supposed truths and assumptions, and explain what is going on to both politicians and the public at large. Your tool is the scenario, your lever the question 'What if...?' You dig deep to uncover root causes instead of analysing yesterday's headlines. Your biggest challenge isn't predicting the future, but to frame it in such a way that others can find their way around in it, and on that basis make the right decision – before it's too late.

*You don't work for a single country. You work for **the future as such**. And now it's your turn.*

Section 1: Crunch Time

Brussels – 21 March 2030, 8.38 p.m.

You're on the Metro, on your way to work, and catching up with the news on your mobile. There's some mention of Sunday's Russian presidential elections – 77-year-old Vladimir Putin has been re-elected for another six-year term – but the headlines are dominated by China's imminent lunar mission. People are worried that Beijing is taking unnecessary risks to reach Earth's satellite ahead of the US mission, planned for August 2030. China's rocket launch has already been delayed twice, and is now scheduled for next week. The media are vying for our attention with articles that draw parallels with the 1960s and talk about a 'second space race', and features about which country has the nattier space suits. US president Andy Beshear, a Democrat from Kentucky who has been in post for just over a year, is visiting the Kennedy Space Center in Florida today, presumably to signal his support to the US crew as the rest of the world's eyes are on the Wenchang launch site in Hainan province.³ There are also reports of minor skirmishes along the Russian–Ukrainian armistice line, but nothing too serious.

As you push your way through the crowd and exit the station, your mobile rings. It's a Norwegian number. It's Erik Solberg, nice guy, stationed at NATO's Joint Warfare Centre in Stavanger – a training centre, not an operational HQ. 'Have you heard? A Norwegian research vessel has collided with something. The RV *Framtid*. East of Spitsbergen, over towards Franz Josef Land, close to Russian waters.' Spitsbergen is a group of 400 islands in the Arctic, demilitarised since a 1920 treaty; it belongs to Norway, but is used by lots of countries as a research base, including Germany, China and, occasionally, Russia.

'Has the ship sunk? Is the crew OK?' you ask.

'It's listing heavily and close to capsizing, but all fifty-odd crew have managed to get off.'

'Any footage?'

'Hardly any, you know how blind we are up there. I'll send you what we have via a secure network.'

³ Oren Oppenheim, Luke Barr, and Beatrice Peterson, 'Who's running for president in 2028 and who's not?', ABC News, 5 May 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/beshear-raimondo-gabbard-door-open-running-president-2028/story?id=121413217>

'How about theories?' you ask.

He sighs. 'I've heard all sorts, from drone attacks to a cyber attack on the onboard computer, from an unmanned sub to a torpedo hit. All we do know is that for some reason they lost control of the *Framtid* and now it's listing. It doesn't look like an act of war, but something definitely doesn't look right.'

Spitsbergen has for a while now been part of your geopolitical scenarios – while others have focused on the Baltic, Greenland and Kaliningrad, you believe that the Arctic is both strategically and operationally more important to Russia, and will only become more so. The melting of the polar ice caps thanks to climate change has had several consequences for Russia: for one thing, it no longer feels like its northern reaches are as safe as they once were under their thick ice layer. That's why, back in 2022 the government introduced strict regulation that made it harder for non-Russian ships to access the Northern Sea Route (NSR).⁴ But it is also a question of money: Russian forecasters expect that by 2050, the country's Arctic oil wells will be able to compete with those in the Persian Gulf; and that global trade routes, especially between China and Europe, will move north from the Suez Canal to shorten voyages by ten days.⁵ In the past five years alone, the NSR has widened considerably due to rising temperatures in the Arctic, and annual sea cargo volumes passing through the strait have risen 500%, from 34 million tons to 150 million tons. Russian experts believe that before long the route will be entirely ice-free and navigable all year round. The region thus has significant strategic value for Russia.

Ten minutes later, you're sitting at your desk watching satellite images flickering across your screen: a Norwegian vessel, dented bow, shallow icy waters. The images have come from a satellite that was never intended to be used for news-gathering or military purposes, and there isn't enough here to draw concrete conclusions about what happened.

Examining the scene of a crime using technology is proving just as difficult as IRL. Of course, you can combine sonar data, seismic waves, satellite imagery and military activity patterns to reconstruct the sequence of events – but even then the quality isn't always good enough, leaving significant gaps and too many plausible interpretations. In any case, that kind of thing isn't your job, but that of your colleagues in intelligence. But you already know that whatever they'll get will be flimsy – no Western ally has a sufficiently dense intelligence network up there in the far north. In short, you're certain they won't be able to ascertain what really happened to *Framtid*.

Of course, the incident hasn't happened in a vacuum: the 'cold' end to the war in Ukraine hasn't ended tensions in the region: Russia has been rearming for years, and some argue that it's just a question of time before war breaks out again. Meanwhile, the war isn't truly over. Yes, there have been repeated attempts at a comprehensive peace treaty, but all have failed. Instead, the two sides have settled into a long-term ceasefire-with-occasional-skirmishes. This is not an unusual phenomenon in international relations, where many countries have existed under such conditions for years, including North and South Korea, the two halves of Cyprus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Israel and Syria – to name but a few. But an official peace treaty naturally gives you a greater sense of security. These currently stable conditions have allowed Russia to reduce its troops in Ukraine to 80,000 – 50% less than at the peak of the war, but enough to hold the line.⁶

Most commentators think the Baltic will be Russia's next target, but you are convinced that the next war will start elsewhere – and that it won't be fought the way most people

⁴ Andrew Monaghan, 'What if ... Russia harasses NATO in the High North?', in *What if ...? 12 Dragon King Scenarios for 2028*, Florence Gaub (ed.), NATO Defense College, January 2024, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/download/what-if-12-dragon-king-scenarios-for-2028-2/>

⁵ Andrey Todorov, 'New Russian law on northern sea route navigation: gathering Arctic storm or tempest in a teapot?', 9 March 2023, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/new-russian-law-northern-sea-route-navigation-gathering-arctic-storm-or-tempest-teapot>

⁶ Pavel Luzin, 'A real mobilization to follow Putin's bogus election?', 19 March 2024, CEPA, <https://cepa.org/article/a-real-mobilization-to-follow-putins-bogus-election/>

expect: not with tanks, but with boats, submarines and perhaps even satellites. For a while now, you have looked on as Russia's Northern Fleet has been integrated into the Leningrad Military District that borders NATO's northern flank, and watched Russia build up its military presence in the European Arctic. This is where the country's nuclear subs – whose rockets can hit targets 9,000 miles away in western Europe – are at their busiest.⁷ But Russia is not scheduled to complete modernising and arming its navy until 2035, meaning that it is currently unprepared for war in the Arctic.⁸

Does the Spitsbergen incident signal the start of conflict with Russia, or was it merely an accident? All you know is that a Norwegian vessel is listing close to Russian waters – but not why.

Your Options

◆ 'The Direct Route – Talks in Moscow'

You travel to Russia to attend the Moscow Security Forum, where you meet experts from think tanks, academics and military veterans to discuss the situation. Your goal: take advantage of having all these experts in one place, recognise conversational cues and find out what everyone is thinking – beyond official narratives

● Risk Factors: Your visit is noted, and could be exploited. Media or politicians could present your trip as 'ingratiating'

➔ Continue to **Section 2: Between the Lines**

◆ 'Go to Ground Zero – Next Stop Tromsø'

You decide to make a quick trip to Norway, more specifically to Tromsø, in the far north of the country. Your goal: talk to the coastguard, research stations and local authorities to find out how the events are interpreted on the ground, away from diplomatic channels. You're also interested in the general atmosphere: are people avoiding the topic or discussing it?

● Risk Factors: You're regarded as an uninvited guest, which could ruffle feathers rather than create trust

➔ Continue to **Section 3 – Frozen Echo Chamber**

◆ 'Beijing Connection – The Missing Player'

China, which has a research station on Spitsbergen, is the big unknown in the equation. Discreetly making contact with Chinese scientists may give you a different perspective on things

● Risk Factors: Trilateral conflict instead of bilateral tensions – your actions could complicate the situation

➔ Continue to **Section 4 – The Dragon Looks North**

Section 3 – Frozen Echo Chamber

Tromsø Airport – 10 June 2030, 4.20 p.m.

The plane from Brussels to Tromsø is flying over a tapestry of greens and blues, interrupted by rugged mountains and still partially frozen fjords. Here, snow covers the mountains even in June, but noticeably less so than it used to. The news is playing on the seat-back screens:

⁷ *Marine Insight*, 'Russia expands Arctic submarine fleet with new nuclear-powered vessels', 27 March 2025, <https://www.marineinsight.com/shipping-news/russia-expands-arctic-submarine-fleet-with-new-nuclear-powered-vessels/#:~:text=By%202030%2C%20Russia%20plans%20to,to%2016%20Bulava%20ballistic%20missiles>

⁸ *Tass*, 'Russia to allocate over \$98 bln for naval development in next 10 years – Putin', 11 April 2025, <https://tass.com/defense/1942373>

China is celebrating two months since its moon landing – the first manned landing since Apollo 17. Images of China's flag on the moon feel historical, but once again, plenty of conspiracy theorists think it's all a con.

Tromsø is a tiny speck of light in the vast Arctic landscape – the nearly 80,000 inhabitants of this city at the end of the world call Tromsø the 'Gateway to the Arctic'. As you climb off the plane, you're surprised by how mild the air is: 12°C is unusually warm for mid-June. One of your fellow passengers turns to his wife and says, 'It used to be more like 8°C this time of year.' The sun is high in the sky – in June, it never sets.

As expected, no one is there to welcome you at the airport. The Norwegian authorities responded to your inquiries with chilly politeness, saying they would only discuss scientific matters, and further details would need to be clarified 'bilaterally'.

Clarion Hotel the Edge – 7.30 p.m.

Your waterside hotel is a modern glass-fronted building with a view of the harbour. World Cup fever has taken over the lobby, with numerous screens showing today's matches. Brazil are 2–0 against South Korea. During dinner in the hotel bar, you start chatting to the barman – a young guy called Jonas, a marine biology graduate, who moved to Tromsø 'for love'. 'You're here because of the *Framtid*, aren't you?' he asks while he pours you a beer, keeping one eye on the football match. You're surprised by his directness. 'No one's discussing it much,' he says, 'but everyone knows about it. Nothing stays secret for long in a place like this. The crew was here for three days before they were flown to Oslo. They stayed at the Scandic.' Jonas lowers his voice and ignores the cheers as someone scores a goal: 'My uncle works for the coastguard. He was one of the first on the scene.' He looks around, but the bar is half-empty and everyone else is staring at the TV. 'There've been rumours... Like that the equipment on board wasn't just for marine research. Sonar kit that looked more military than anything. As for the crew, half of them weren't even scientists.'

'What do you mean?'

'They were marine technicians. Comms specialists. Guys you don't normally find on research vessels.' He re-polishes the already polished tumbler in his hand. 'There was also that weird thing with the computers cutting out just before it happened. As if someone made the ship blind.' You make a mental note of this last titbit, the rest you dismiss as idle gossip.

As expected, your country's intelligence service has come up empty-handed. They have no idea what the ship collided with.

University Centre for Arctic Research (UiT) – 11 June 2030, 9 a.m.

In the modern glass-and-wood UiT building, you go straight to the office of Dr Ingrid Haugen, head of marine research. Despite her friendly greeting, you immediately sense that her guard is up. On the wall is a small TV screen showing the World Cup highlights. 'Don't get me wrong,' she says, pouring a cup of coffee, 'we value international cooperation. But the last few weeks have been... difficult.' She shows you a map of the area around Spitsbergen. 'Our colleagues on the *Framtid* were apparently collecting routine data – sea water temperature, plankton dispersal, thickness of the ice.'

'Why "apparently"?''

Dr Haugen hesitates for a moment. 'Look, I don't want to say the wrong thing. But the equipment they had on board was unusual for a normal research trip.' She lowers her voice: 'Underwater communications systems, high-end sonar, sensors to detect... let's call them "maritime anomalies".' She points at her screen. 'Since the incident, our Russian colleagues have stopped replying to emails. We've spent years building a relationship with them, and it's evaporated overnight.'

A café in the city centre, 12.45 p.m.

In a small café, you meet retired captain Lars Andersen, who used to work for the Norwegian coastguard. Jonas, the barman, put you in touch with him. Andersen is in his mid-sixties, with

grey hair and weathered hands. He has spent four decades working on the Arctic coast. In the background, Japan are playing Mexico, and the other customers keep glancing up at the screen.

Andersen stirs his coffee. 'You know what annoys me most?' he says. 'That everyone's acting surprised.' He laughs bitterly. 'Tensions with Russia have been escalating for two years, not just since Spitsbergen.'

'How do you mean?'

Andersen turns serious. 'Russian subs in our waters. Used to be once a month, now almost one a week. Their spy planes are constantly challenging our air defences. And what do we do?' He pauses. 'We mobilise too. The *Framtid* wasn't the first ship with... extended capabilities.' He leans in. 'The official line – "research vessel sinks" – is bullshit. It was a reconnaissance ship in disguise. And the Russians knew it.'

'How?'

'Because they're doing it too. Russian "research vessels" have been mapping our undersea cables for years. It's a silent war, and everyone's just pretending they're doing it for science.' You don't like the way he's labelling the scientists as spies. No doubt the Russians perceive them as spies – but that doesn't necessarily mean that they were on an undercover mission.

Conversation with a soldier, 3.30 p.m.

At the harbour, you meet Sergeant Olav Eriksen from the Norwegian Marines. He's just come off shift and has been watching a World Cup match on his phone. He's in his late twenties and seems tired.

'You're asking about the ship?' He looks round. 'I can't give you an official statement. But off the record... things here are more tense than the media's been reporting.'

'How tense?'

'We've been on high alert for the past three months. Not because of any accident, but because of systematic provocations.' Eriksen points towards the horizon. 'Do you see those new radar towers? They weren't there this time last year. And patrols go out twice as often as they used to.' He gets to the point. 'The Russians have been testing us for months: violating our airspace, subs in our waters, cyber attacks on our comms – Spitsbergen was just the first to become public.'

'And your government knows about this?'

'Sure. But they can't say anything. Who wants to be the one to admit that we're practically waging a cold war, while everyone else is watching the World Cup?'

The next morning, you replay the last unsettling 48 hours. Four things strike you as interesting:

1. Secret operations: the RV *Framtid* may not have been purely a research vessel, but part of a spy mission
2. Systematic escalation: this wasn't an isolated incident, but part of a months-long spiralling escalation
3. Tacit mobilisation: Norway is essentially preparing for war, but the public is oblivious
4. Cover-up: the true extent of the crisis is deliberately kept from the media to prevent panic

Your phone vibrates. News from Oslo: 'Possible secret talks in September. Situation evolving.'

Your Options

- ◆ 'The Military Reality – Trip to Stavanger'

You head to NATO's Joint Warfare Centre in Stavanger, where your Norwegian friend works. The goal: understand the military dimension of the tensions in the Arctic. How is

NATO preparing for conflict in the region? What scenarios are they wargaming? How significant is the Spitsbergen incident from the point of view of military strategy?

● Risk Factors: Because the JWC is a training centre and not a strategic HQ, your trip may be fruitless

➔ Continue to **Section 8 – Wargames in the North**

◆ 'Secret Service Assessment – Talks in London'

You fly to London and ask for a confidential meeting with MI6 analysts and representatives from the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence

● Risk Factors: You become a secret service 'asset', and your independence as an analyst is compromised. Other countries may no longer trust you

➔ Continue to **Section 9 – Behind Closed Doors**

◆ 'Warn the Public'

You mobilise national and international media via articles and interviews

● Risk Factors: You're labelled as alarmist. Your warnings may have the effect of self-fulfilling prophecies and increase tensions

➔ Continue to **Section 10 – An Arctic Cassandra**