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Making Foresight Count

Success Factors for Futures Analysis in Foreign and Security Policy

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If you only read one page...

1 While various governments and organizations are investing in foresight capabilities, there is limited research and knowledge on what makes foresight for foreign and security policymaking effective.

2 A variety of foresight methods serve different purposes, from helping to predict the future as accurately as possible to planning for fundamental uncertainty. Matching the right combination of methods and processes to the specific institutional context and goals can be a challenge.

3 Our analysis of three futures analysis projects in Australia, Switzerland and the European Union shows that demand-orientation and relevance in the eyes of decision-makers are critical for success. Without buy-in from decision-makers, results produced by even the most sophisticated methods will likely not have an impact.

4 Futures analysis and early warning systems need to balance proximity to and embeddedness in policy processes with the function of foresight as a "critical friend" that challenges biases and provides added value.

5 When policy priorities shift and methods advance, those who conduct futures analysis need flexibility to adjust. Even reframing the contribution of existing methods can help sustain their impact.

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Introduction

Predicting and preparing for the future is difficult, and issues of war and peace are no exception. Yet governments and international organizations around the globe are trying to leverage foresight methods – from forecasting to scenario-building – to anticipate the future or plan for uncertain times.

These endeavors show that using futures analysis to add value to analyses and decision-making is no trivial task[1]. In many places, there is still considerable confusion about the different aims of foresight – and these can range from predicting the future to planning for fundamental uncertainty and shaping what is to come. Many decision-makers find it hard to determine which methods can help achieve which goals and how to best integrate them into their respective institutions and work processes.

In this paper, we analyze three different future-oriented analysis efforts in the sphere of foreign and security policy: the **Australian National Security Futures Hub**, **Swisspeace's FAST early warning system**[2], and the **European Union's Conflict Early Warning System**. The goal is to provide inspiration and guidance for anyone who wonders how different types of futures analysis could help improve their analytical, decision-making and policy processes, and how to implement them successfully.

All three analyzed projects were designed to support the public sector in analysis and decision-making with regards to security and foreign policy issues. Beyond this commonality, they apply different combinations of methods and fulfill different functions in their respective institution[3]. In the following pages, we discuss them in detail and identify success factors and obstacles to effective foresight in this policy domain. With this, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the various ways in which foresight methods can effectively support foreign and security policy in different contexts.

Table 1: Overview of Projects[4]

	Australian National Security College Futures Hub	Swisspeace FAST ("Frühanalyse von Spannungen und Tatsachenermittlung")	European Union Conflict Early Warning System
Duration	Since 2017	1998-2009	Since 2012
Primary Objectives	Connecting and supporting futures analysis across government, capacity building and networking	Early warning for developments relevant to foreign, security and development policy	Early detection and analysis of crisis developments relevant to the EU's engagement abroad
Methods	Strategic foresight, scenarios, gaming, participatory workshops tailored to individual projects	Statistical forecasts of conflict developments, qualitative country and regional analyses, local analysis networks	Statistical forecasting of conflict risks outside the EU, intelligence assessments, horizon scanning, qualitative analyses, fact-finding missions
Processes	Rotating seconded government employees, trainings, networking formats, consulting on government projects	Regular analysis cycle to identify and assess at-risk situations for donor governments, adapted to priorities	Regular analysis cycle to assess conflict risks abroad for EU institutions, periodically adapted to needs
Institutional Setting	A mix of government secondees and outside experts based at the Australian National University's National Security College who consult government and network internationally (mostly external)	Experts based at Swisspeace and external consultants, supplying analyses to several funding donor governments (external)	European External Action Service staff cooperating with researchers at the EU Joint Research Center and EU Commission directorates and services (internal)

Brief Foresight Glossary

Foresight is a broad category of approaches to better understand current expectations of what may come – i.e. the future or a range of possible futures. It is an umbrella term for a variety of future-oriented analyses and anticipatory methods that often involve more than the mere prediction of a single future[5].

Forecasting approaches seek to predict the future as accurately as possible and to reduce uncertainty as much as possible. The closer a forecast is to the future reality, the better (in terms of accuracy and precision) it is. Put in less formal language, forecasts are predictions about tomorrow given information we have about what has happened in the past and up until today[6]. They can be algorithmic 'predictions about unrealized outcomes given model estimates from realized data'[7] or expert forecasts based on human judgement. Algorithmic forecasts tend to be more useful for the near future when high quality data is available and theoretical assumptions about the relationships between phenomena in a prediction model are available[8].

Pluralist foresight – the basis of methods like **scenario planning** – assumes that there is no single, knowable, predictable, or static future since events and actions keep making the future[9]. It rests on the assumption that it is impossible to predict most social phenomena – which are the result of complex interactions – with sufficient certainty and precision to be useful. That is why pluralist foresight approaches work with multiple alternative scenarios to arrive at a more complete understanding of the wide range of plausible futures for which an institution may need to prepare. Various methods from a vast toolbox of pluralist foresight are often designed to counteract psychological, social and institutional biases.

Strategic foresight means strategic planning informed by structured futures analysis. The goal is to plan ahead in a more robust manner and for a range of plausible futures, and to ensure strategic goals can still be achieved as best as possible[10].

Early Warning Systems are systems that use future-oriented analysis methods to detect early signals of possible or likely developments and incidents in the future and produce alerts, for example about potentially escalating violence and wars or other types of political instability[11].

Depending on the goals that drive the use of foresight in an institutional context, various methodological approaches and tools can be applied in combination to support analysis, decision-making and policy design processes[12].

Comparing Foresight Applications and Success Factors

There are few analyses of what makes foresight in foreign and security policy effective. This is particularly the case for algorithmic forecasting. Research on the effectiveness of this approach is missing, despite the overall considerable investment in data and predictive models that aim to forecast phenomena like conflict and political stability. The academic literature on conflict and instability forecasting mostly focuses on improving and comparing the performance of predictive models instead of centering their value for policy and decision-making[13]. While the gap between conflict early warning and response is well documented, notable research on the effectiveness of warning does not address quantitative warnings[14].

In contrast, scenario-based, pluralist foresight is a rather applied discipline with a long tradition of method experts working in international organizations and some pioneering governments. Accordingly, experts and organizations have summarized success factors for government foresight across different policy fields[15]. From the available literature, the following success factors can be distilled[16]:

1. The need to ensure sustainable demand that generates legitimacy and counterbalances immediate daily pressures[17];
2. Capacity in the form of expertise, training and fit-for-purpose institutions (i.e., a dedicated foresight unit and strong networks);
3. Embeddedness in higher-level decision-making;
4. Regular feedback to improve and respond to obstacles and evolving opportunities;
5. The need to preserve the challenge function of foresight, including by ensuring diverse perspectives and multidisciplinary teams;
6. A context-specific set-up, as foresight efforts reflect the social, institutional and political environments of each country and cannot be replicated;
7. Meeting policymakers where they are – i.e., gauging their current needs and capacities – and generating buy-in from policymakers;
8. Applying diverse methodologies;
9. Consistently investing in innovation.

For our own analysis, we took a bottom-up and inductive approach to identifying the success factors and challenges of the three projects we analyzed. We then compared our findings with the above-listed success factors from the literature. The results are grouped into three areas, which stand out as determining factors of success: (1) positioning, demand and relevance; (2) embeddedness in decision-making structures versus independence and a challenging function; as well as (3) the ability to innovate with evolving priorities. **Table 2** summarizes these findings. In the following sections, we describe each project's origin, goals and scope as well as the methodology and distill success factors and challenges before summarizing and discussing our overall findings and lessons for foresight in foreign and security policy practice.

Table 2: Comparison of Success Factors and Challenges

	Futures Hub, Australian National Security College (since 2017)	"Frühanalyse von Spannungen und Tatsachenermittlung (FAST)", Swisspeace (1998-2008)	European Union Conflict Early Warning System (since 2012)
Positioning, Demand, Relevance	✓ Relevance through flexible responses to ad-hoc demands, combining internal government and external expertise ✓ Contributing to government-wide public sector reform efforts ✗ Frequent staff rotation; difficulty attracting funding for permanent staff	✓ Overlap with donor's political priorities until 2005 ✗ Inability to generate buy-in from donors and sustain funding, especially post-2005	✓ Strong positioning as contribution to strategic priorities (EU Global Strategy, foreign policy)
Embeddedness vs. Independence; Challenge Function	✓ Balances embeddedness and independence; serves as central government network node; strong (inter-)national expert network	✓ Lacked embeddedness and buy-in; outputs of limited utility to decision-makers	✓ Multi-method and multi-actor process generates legitimacy and buy-in ✓ Successful cooperation between science and policymaking ✗ Limited political action following results; limited demand from outside the EEAS
Ability to Innovate	✓ Flexibility in choice of methods and products helps stay relevant; adaptive	✓ Innovative methods; high-quality outputs and adaptivity to some challenges ✗ Limited ability to innovate to meet evolving donor needs	✓ Elaborate multi-method analysis process with periodic adjustments to overcome challenges

✓ Succes factors ✗ Challenges

Detailed Findings

Australian National Security Futures Hub

The Australian Futures Hub is located at the National Security College (NSC) – a collaboration by the Australian National University and the Australian federal government[18]. The college was established in 2010 and the Futures Hub was introduced in 2017. In contrast to FAST and the EU EWS, the Hub does not provide a steady pipeline of analyses for a specific policy process. Instead, it serves as a capacity-building center and node in a wider ecosystem of government foresight. Moreover, it connects stakeholders within Australia and internationally and provides training, facilitation and analysis work at the request of various government agencies, leveraging a multi-disciplinary and multi-sector approach to foresight that sets its activities apart from traditional policymaking[19].

Origins, Goals and Scope

The Hub was set up as part of the Australian National Security College. The college's activities are grouped into three areas: academic, professional development and policy analysis – with the Hub belonging to the latter[20]. The aim in establishing the Hub was to create a space free from the daily business of the government agencies, which did not find the required time to engage in depth with futures analysis[21]. The Hub's founders have an interest in making its research useful to the respective government agencies' work[22]. Its set-up was inspired by the United Kingdom's Development, Concepts and Doctrines Center (DCDC) and Singapore's Centre of Strategic Futures. Notable differences to the DCDC, however, include that the Australian Hub has a broader focus beyond defense-related topics, is part of a university instead of directly situated in the government, and that the UK DCDC hosts temporary international experts from other organizations on its team. Other inspiration for the Hub's work comes from Finland's foresight ecosystem and Policy Horizons Canada [23].

The Hub's main activities fall into two areas: (1) teaching analytical techniques to people in the public sector – including a futures intro strategy course – and (2) developing or assisting in the development of bespoke products for various parts of the Australian government[24]. The Hub also serves as the central node in a broader government foresight network and works closely with ministries' foresight teams, linking the government to academia and following a whole-of-government approach to futures analysis[25]. The Hub usually receives requests from government agencies to support them with individual projects or products, or it serves as an informal sounding board for government officials[26]. While conducting independent research, it also channels the work of government-specific foresight capabilities (e.g., those of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade or the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources) in the Australian Strategic Futures Network [27].

At the time of writing, the Hub has two staff members, who are employed by the Australian National University at the National Security College, and it tries to secure funding for permanent staff at the college[28]. The rest of the team, including the current Chief Futures Officer, are Australian government employees (both from the federal and regional governments) who rotate in and out of the Hub and stay there for an average of one to two years. The overall size of the team has doubled in the past years and the Hub sees itself as

a center of excellence within a network of about 300 people in the Australian government as well as an international network[29]. The Hub also maintains a Futures Council, a group of international "individuals with outstanding expertise in the fields of futures, foresighting, intelligence analysis and/or national security strategic planning."[30]

Methods

The Hub's main activities are aimed at fostering collaboration with a broad range of actors within the Australian government and beyond. It focuses on designing collaborative workshops that are underpinned by foresight methods, connecting longer-term futures thinking with decisions government needs to be thinking about already today[31]. Activities also include "linking foresighting efforts across Australia through regular collaborative workshops and networking events, connecting agencies to world-leading futures research and foresight teams, working collaboratively with agencies to support and facilitate internal futures analysis and capacity building, and ... publishing regular reports with a futures focus on specific national security issues."[32]

The published analyses on the Hub's website are mostly op-ed-style pieces focusing on the Indo-Pacific region which include future scenarios or recommendations for the Australian government but do not entail a pronounced methodological futures component. They are mostly authored by external academic experts and non-residents also affiliated with institutions outside of Australia[33]. Podcast episodes by the Hub published through the NSC's National Security Podcast discuss national security issues of the future.

In general, the Hub's method toolbox is based on qualitative, scenario-based foresight and strategic foresight methodologies, as well as on structured analysis techniques according to practical public sector and policy needs[34]. Its topics span a variety of policy areas, but national security topics feature prominently, in addition to adjacent areas like foreign trade (and its security implications) and climate action. Even though the Hub is located at the National Security College, seconded public sector experts come from a range of policy domains and government levels, which is in line with Australia's comprehensive understanding of security as a whole-of-government task[35]. The Futures Hub offers a variety of different resources and methods for to Australian government officials (see Figure 1)[36].

Figure 1: Methods at the Australian National Security Futures Hub[37]

Policy options forums designed to elicit insights on long-term policy challenges via deep and contested discussions amongst practitioners, academics and other experts in a trusted environment.
Scanning workshops bringing together experts to work through a range of trends and signals to determine what they may mean for policy.
Scenario development delivering bespoke, plausible future scenarios against which agencies and departments can test their policies and plans.
Games and other structured futures activities to stimulate creative thinking.
Specialized consulting using Hub resources of futures thinking and methodologies ("We share our knowledge and experience to help build futures best practices across government.")
Facilitation of reports or research leveraging access to academic community to assist agencies connect with the people who can best address research gaps.

Success Factors and Challenges

High degree of embeddedness and relevance through rotating public sector staff: Having government employees from both the federal and local governments rotating in and out of the Hub every one to two years allows the work of the Hub to be very hands-on, practically oriented and relevant. At the same time, it also enables the Hub to feed its work into government operations when people rotate back into regular public sector positions – thus ensuring a high degree of embeddedness[38].

High turnover rate and difficulty sustaining funding for permanent staff: Securing funding for permanent staff at the Hub has reportedly been difficult, which is why the core team remains small. This, and the high turnover rate for seconded government employees, hampers the Hub's ability to develop sustainable structures and capacities in the long run. To improve this, the Hub is currently developing an evaluation project to assess its impact and room for improvement[39].

Balance between independence and responding to policy demands: Experts at the Hub feel like it helps them that they are part of a university but also understand the government well. This gives them enough independence from day-to-day government operations and priorities to do foresight work and retain its challenge function, but it also ensures they know how to do foresight in a way that is relevant and helpful for the public sector. The Hubs activities still reportedly align with government priorities[40]. For example, participants in the Hub's foresight courses get to bring challenges from their own current work and to directly apply practical analytical methods to those relevant problems. In addition, there are courses targeted toward different levels including senior and mid-level leadership. Through its embeddedness – particularly with continuous feedback, improvement and demand-orientation – the Hub has managed to establish a sustainable stream of demand[41] for its services.

Bottom-up effort at the right time and positioning as a central node and capacity-builder: Retrospectively, experts noted that there was no big political push at the time of the Futures Hub's creation. Rather, the establishment of the National Security College presented an opportunity for dedicated individuals who believed in the value of future-oriented analysis in what was more a 'bottom-up' effort. Around the same time as the Hub was established, however, foresight efforts in Australia also took off in other institutions and the Hub established itself as a central node and capacity-building center for foresight at a time when futures analysis gained traction[42].

A strong national and international network: The Hub's current activities in relation with different ministries' dedicated foresight teams show that the Hub contributes to but also benefits from a strong network of government foresight, which has grown over the past ten years. With its Futures Council – a group of international individuals with strong foresight and strategic planning methods expertise – as well as its strong links to partners at leading government foresight initiatives in Canada, Finland, Singapore, the UK, and the US, the Hub can draw from expertise in both methods and the institutionalization of foresight. It has consistently invested in maintaining an active network, for example by organizing a futures day ahead of Australia's national security conference and undertaking joint projects[43]. Eventually, the Hub also relies on this strong network because it has struggled to sustainably fund its core team.

Strong problem awareness and contribution to wider government reform efforts: Building foresight capacity is a national priority in Australia. Hub experts acknowledged that the Australian public sector sometimes lacks sufficient long-term thinking and is marked by

a culture of focusing on immediate priorities, which was also highlighted, for example, for the German government by a Fraunhofer study on institutionalizing strategic foresight[44]. At the same time, actors also have a strong awareness that short-term thinking is a continued problem[45]. Australia's ongoing public sector reform acknowledges that "futures and strategic foresight capability is needed to broaden the use of futures analysis to inform policy and decision-making"[46] across the public sector. A current project on foresight capacity building under this reform involves the Hub as a developer of toolkits to support this cultural change process[47].

Swisspeace FAST

The Swiss non-governmental research institute Swisspeace, tasked by the Swiss agency for development and cooperation (or Direktion für Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit, short DEZA), created the early warning system FAST – "Frühanalyse von Spannungen und Tatsachenermittlung"[48] in 1998[49]. FAST quickly became one of the leading EWS due to its at the time innovative methodological approaches[50] and the high-quality output it produced[51]. Nevertheless, FAST was terminated in April 2008[52] due to a lack of funding. The literature names several different causes for this financing gap but mainly implies that the lack of integration of Swisspeace's FAST into the relevant government agencies' policy- and decision-making process meant that a gulf between early warning and early action remained. In other words: the analyses FAST provided for decision-makers were not used effectively[53].

Origins, Goals and Scope

In the late 1990s, the world was shaken by large-scale political violence in Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia and grappled with the lack of foresight that might have predicted and stopped these mass atrocities. Following the UN-level Agenda 21 resolution on sustainable development, the Swiss Federal Council (Bundesrat) created the "Leitbild Nord-Süd," which outlined Swiss action in north-south relations and demanded the use of strategic foresight and conflict prevention measures to create a sustainable Swiss foreign policy (based on a 'primacy of prevention' principle). Swisspeace was then tasked by the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Eidgenössisches Department für Auswärtige Angelegeheiten, short EDA), to conceptualize an early warning system which would monitor world regions relevant to Swiss foreign policy. Within the ministry, especially DEZA and the so-called Politische Abteilung II – the subdivision within the ministry with a regional focus on Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Latin America – were involved[54].

Swisspeace's initial task included creating a pilot project to analyze the costs and technical as well as organizational difficulties which an EWS might face. This pilot project started on July 1, 1996 and ended in January 1997. Swisspeace briefed the administration in April 1997 and was subsequently tasked with establishing FAST's operations, as the pilot project proposed. Its main clients would be DEZA and several other government departments, but the team was open to share its analyses with other actors such as states and NGOs[55].

FAST was explicitly intended to bridge early warning and early action[56]. It was conceptualized to be especially applicable to the work of political decision-makers within the Swiss foreign and development ministries and its outputs were fine-tuned to the individual need of each new client[57]. At the same time, FAST was deliberatelyestablished outside of the ministries and within an NGO and with multi-national funding, in order "to set the early warning

mechanism in motion as free as possible from sovereignty dilemmas, internal administrative considerations and political blockages."[58] From the beginning, the Swiss government set the condition that FAST should be co-funded by other countries and not become a unilateral Swiss enterprise[59].

During its period of operations, FAST monitored regional crisis development and issued country- and region-specific reports to its clients. Once a year, FAST provided comprehensive country risk profiles and every second month issued the Fast Updates, which were short assessments of risk developments in the monitored region or country [60]. FAST thus covered short- and long-term developments to assist decision-makers in their efforts to "balance short-term objectives with long-term strategies."[61] By 2008, FAST had covered 25 countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America and had other governmental donors next to Switzerland, namely Austria, Canada and Sweden [62].

FAST's selection of focus countries followed the priorities of the donor countries – for example, it included all priority countries of Swiss development cooperation at the time[63]. In their Country Risk Profiles, FAST analysts provided case scenarios as well as policy options, which included strategy and implementation recommendations, key-actor analyses, as well as extensive background information. An exemplary country analysis (on Kazakhstan) with relevant factors and variables can be found below (Figure 2). FAST Updates kept track of the development of factors impacting the possibility of violent conflict in the monitored country[64].

Figure 2: FAST Analytical Framework for Kazakhstan, 2007[65]

Root Causes

Historical
- Soviet legacy (massive socio-economic and demographic change, environmental pollution)
- Eurasian tradition of statehood

Political / Institutional
- Authoritarian political culture as a perpetuating pattern of hierarchical clan structures
- Lack of western democratic traditions leading to a lack of public control on state activities

Societal / Socio-Demographic
- Language cleavage between Kazakh speakers and non-Kazakh speakers
- Concentration of the Russian minority in the northern regions and major cities
- Social disintegration linked to modernization during Soviet times (break-down of one-company towns)
- Ideological vacuum after the end of the Soviet Union
- Negative impact of clan structure on nation building and national cohesion

Security
- Long land border which is difficult to control
- Fragile states on its southern borders

Economic
- Economic inequalities between different regions and social groups due to structural differences
- Limited access to world markets (land-locked position) and to regional markets with neighboring countries (trade barriers imposed by Uzbekistan)

International
- Rivalry about regional hegemony with Uzbekistan
- Competition between different countries for access to Kazakh resources (esp. Russia, the USA and China)

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Proximate Causes

Political / Governance
- Continuing behavioral patterns from (pre-)Soviet times, such as autocratic regime behavior, widespread corruption, clientelism
- Heavy-handed strategy on dealing with Islamic extremists
- Unequal governmental support for different regions and disadvantaged social strata

Security
- Intention to gain military leadership in the region
- Unresolved cross-border problems esp. with the southern neighbors (border demarcation, illegal migration, smuggling)

Societal / Socio-Demographic
- High uneployment rate (esp. among the youth)
- Privatization of social infrastructure (hospitals, schools, universities) increasing disadvantages of the poor

Ecological
- Ecological pollution from Soviet times (e.g. polygon at Semey, shrinking of the Aral Sea)
- Health problems resulting from these ecological problems
- Forced resettlements and voluntary migration due to pullution

Economic
- Growing disparities between rich and poor, sometimes overlapping with ethnic cleavages
- Increasing labor force immigration from Central Asian neighbors

International
- Border disputes with Uzbekistan (demarcation problems, travel and trade restrictions)
- Seasonal problems with regional water distribution

Positive Intervening Factors

Decreasing the likelihood of conflict
- Relative stability of the political system
- Economic growth as a distracting factor from the authoritarian political behavior
- Restraining societal factors (e.g. Islam, clan and family structure)
- Continuing foreign assistance (NGO, IO) for the emerging civil society
- Attempts to improve the country's vision in the West
- Balanced foreign policy approach

Impact on

Likelihood of armed conflict

Negative Intervening Factors

Increasing the likelihood of conflict
- Concentration of power in one person
- Increasing power struggles within the political leadership
- Further repression of opposition and extremist religious groups
- Deepening social cleaveges of society
- Continuing cross-border disputes (e.g. over water)
- Destabilization of neighboring countries leading to a potential high influx of migrants into Kazakhstan

Methods

While it was operational, FAST was praised for integrating qualitative and quantitative methods into innovative new approaches to early warning. Arguably, many of FAST's features – using geo-coded event data next to structural data and combining them with qualitative analyses as well as local information – are still state-of-the-art from today's perspective and mirror the efforts of current leading conflict warning projects such as the EU Conflict Early Warning System (see next section) and ViEWS at Uppsala University[66]. FAST even explored the potential of regional instead of country-level analyses to overcome analytical biases and reported on cooperative events as a counterbalance to conflictual events, which reportedly increased the accuracy of its assessments[67].

The FAST Country Risk Profiles and FAST Updates were informed by four main sources: annual field investigations; an ongoing exchange with a global expert network; daily constant monitoring; and weekly event data analysis. FAST sent reports covering assessments for the coming six months to its funders every eight weeks. Regional reports were written by four to five experts including at least one local country expert. The daily monitoring was conducted qualitatively and quantitatively by using Local Information Networks (LINs) and the Virtual Research Associates' IDEA (Integrated Data for Events Analysis) data analysis technique[68]. The latter is an automated coding method which was developed by an association of analysts at Harvard University[69]. It utilized the Reuters news service and categorized the news data into a set of factors (including, for example, cooperation between domestic or international actors or conflict-carrying capacity)[70]. Additional quantitative data was taken from the University of Maryland's Global Event Data System (GEDS), which had collected news-based information regarding conflicts since the 1970s. By the time of its launch, FAST could thus access a 20-year data pool[71]. The quantitative FAST component was directly inspired by the work of the Political Instability Task Force (PITF), a CIA-funded cooperation between academia and government in the US[72]. However, there were also significant downsides to the quantitative data collection process via Reuters, such as reporting bias, the fact that news items were only available in English, a lack of provincial- and district-level news, and that news was collected by country, which did not allow for regional analyses[73].

To circumvent the issues in the quantitative data process, several qualitative supplementary means of data collection were implemented. FAST analysts kept up to date with academic developments and findings in their respective fields through loosely organized expert networks and travelled to their monitored region once a year to conduct a fact-finding mission. According to Krummenacher et al.[74], the most innovative, useful and unique means of knowledge production within FAST were the Local Information Networks (LINs). These were local monitoring bureaus which were headed by a research analyst who was a native resident of the respective country. This person was then tasked with the set-up of a research group of field monitors accessed relevant open-source information and reported on relevant events and developments in the target country on a daily basis[75]. The research analyst would compile weekly briefings for headquarters, which assigned numerical values to the conflict indicators they identified. This enabled FAST to track trends in the region[76]. These findings were made available to donors as the format FAST Reporter but hardly ever utilized in their raw form as donors preferred to wait for the corresponding analysis in the form of FAST Updates[77]. The LINs helped circumvent issues which arose from the quantitative data collection process, such as the lack of regional and provincial-level information, language gaps and reporting biases. The LINs were reported to be cost- and work-intensive to maintain, with considerable effort going into training and quality control of the information provided to headquarters by FAST core staff[78].

In 2006, the total number of FAST employees was 160[79]. Twenty of them were employed at the Swiss headquarters[80]. FAST's total operating income between 2005 and 2007 varied between over a million Euros and 960.000 Euros[81]. Before the funding deficits of 2005, the income was roughly twice as much[82].These sums were generated through inconsistent funding, which was usually allocated on an annual basis[83].

In 2006, an independent evaluation report found that desk officers in government who engaged with FAST products did not use them for active decision-making but rather as background reading. Its authors found that donors wished for more country coverage as well as more easily accessible reports with less graphs and statistics. The report also warned that should FAST not recover from its 50 percent funding deficit, the quality of the products would start to deteriorate as country analysts started monitoring up to six countries instead of the intended two to three due to layoffs. Eventually, the report stated that FAST would have to reform its marketing and product strategy and implement training on how to use FAST products in policymaking in order to receive the relevant funding to maintain its quality and relevance[84].

Success Factors and Challenges

Timing and goals aligned with political priorities but were also critically dependent on them: Following a UN-level agenda and Swiss national priority for prevention, FAST was designed to help prevent large-scale violence of the kind seen in Africa and the Balkans in the 1990s. In its methodological development, the FAST team responded to donors' needs, for example, by establishing the Local Informant Networks in the policy priority countries. At the same time, a change in several funding governments, including the Swiss government, eventually led to prevention being less of a priority, which FAST experts cite as one reason the project lost funding[85]. Under the new administrations, funding was reallocated and prevention became less of a focus[86], which lead to FAST losing nearly 50 percent of its funding in 2005. FAST never recovered from this funding deficit[87] and even the fact that it received funding from multiple governments did not secure a sustainable funding basis.

Methodologically sound and sophisticated approach, but limited buy-in from and link to decision-makers: From today's perspective, FAST was well ahead of its time: it was the first publicly known and large-scale project that combined event data analysis with qualitative assessments and in-country monitoring networks. FAST's legacy is still present in current early warning projects around the world, including the EU Conflict Early Warning System (see next section). Shortcomings of FAST's various methodological elements were analyzed, documented and discussed extensively[88]. The literature does not imply major issues in the day-to-day operations or with the analytical outputs; on the contrary, both FAST's methodological work as well as its products were and are continuously praised[89]. The evaluation of the project by a Berlin-based firm issued in comprehensive input regarding the funding model, which could not be rectified before FAST eventually closed down two years after the report had been submitted to DEZA and FAST in April 2009[90]. The issue that eventually led to FAST's discontinuation thus was a lack of institutionalization which had been chosen to guarantee its independence[91]. According to one expert, senior management at the Swiss EDA never participated in FAST briefings[92].

FAST experts reported that key Swiss government staff responsible for prevention were skeptical about the value of quantitative analyses from the beginning and did not change their minds over time. To the contrary, staff at the Swiss foreign office EDA ran a qualitative analysis process (called MERS) that was almost seen as an internal competition to FAST and consistently argued for in-house capacity instead of the extensive external FAST project[93].

The biggest issue with the early warning system was reportedly that it could not effectively motivate decision-makers to move toward prevention[94]. The gap between early warning and early action could not be bridged. A lack of institutional access to the ministries and a general unwillingness by high-ranking individuals to act upon the information about dangers and opportunities which FAST outlined was also a challenge[95]. The idea to situate FAST outside of the ministries to keep intact its independence thus led to a general structural lack of accountability to use FAST data on the governmental side[96], which eventually led to the discontinuation of the early warning system.

Overall, the evidence suggests that key decision-makers were not convinced by the tool's added value in light of its costs. According to a FAST expert, FAST should have been upgraded from a project to an established, sustainably funded program, which did not happen[97].

European Union Conflict Early Warning System

The EU Conflict Early Warning System (EWS) at the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission was established in 2012 to support the EU's foreign policy objectives as outlined in Council Conclusions on Conflict Prevention and later the EU's Global Strategy[98]. As of early 2024, the EU EWS conducts annual risk assessments in non-EU countries to identify structural factors that may lead to violent conflict, utilizing various data sources including publicly available structural country-level data, intelligence assessments, qualitative assessments, and data from on-the-ground missions in countries at risk[99]. In addition, the process foresees adaptations across EEAS and EU Commission policy domains like development, security, trade, and humanitarian action to support prevention efforts[100]. Despite being praised for being one of the few full-spectrum, multi-method public sector conflict early warning systems for prevention, the EWS faces challenges such as a struggle to include more state-of-the-art event data and to ensuring adjustments in policy and political action based on the system's assessments[101].

Origins, Goals and Scope

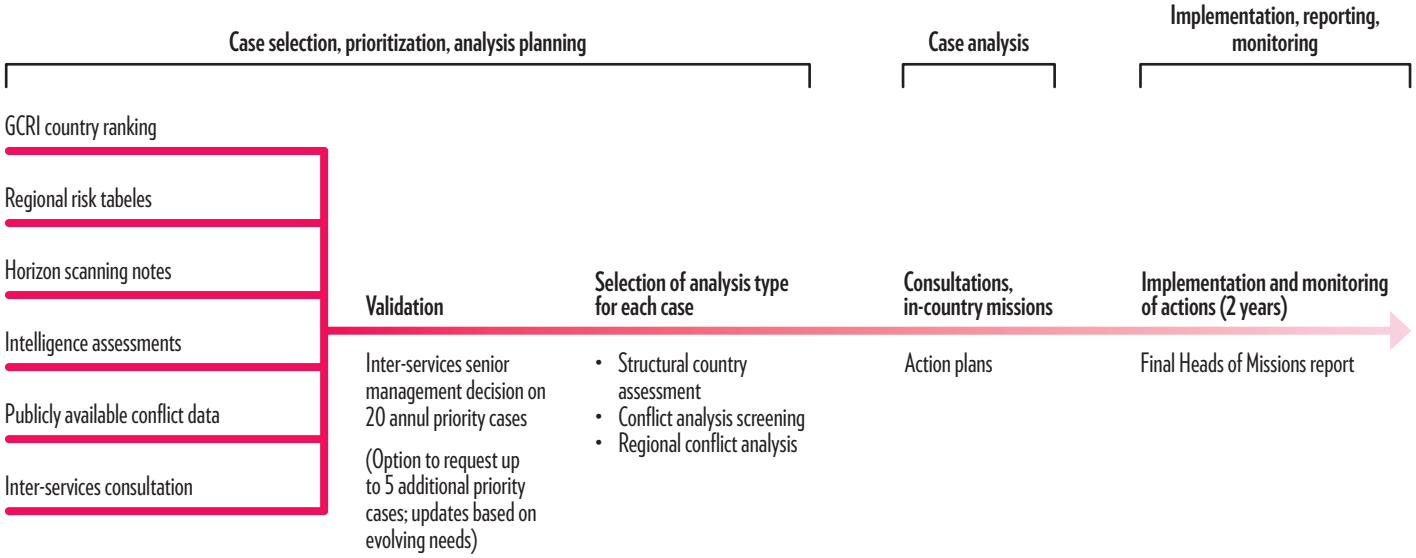
Based on the EU Global Strategy, the key guiding document for the Union's foreign policy, the EU EWS is geared to inform policymakers across various domains at the EEAS and EU Commission to support prevention as one of the main EU foreign policy goals[102]. The EU EWS helps the EU seize conflict prevention and peacebuilding opportunities in non-EU countries through a yearly assessment of risks in target countries. It has been refined and improved over the years in the light of challenges and evolving priorities, with its recent reform being implemented since September 2023[103].

At its core, the EU EWS is a period risk assessment process to identify countries that are (1) at risk of violent conflict and where (2) the EU has an interest and potential leverage for prevention. Based on a range of different assessment and analysis methods (see details in the next section), staff at the EEAS engage in an annual prioritization exercise of country cases to identify priority countries for an in-depth conflict risk analysis and policy tools review process that takes about two years until completion and involves staff across the EEAS and Commission in various policy fields[104].

After its most recent update in September 2023 (see Figure 3 below), the process can be roughly grouped into a phase of 'early warning' or assessment, which includes the case selection, prioritization and planning of analyses, followed by in-depth analyses that include in-country missions, and an implementation, reporting and monitoring period to track adjustments of EU action in the respective countries[105].

The result of the initial early warning or assessment phase is a ranking of the top 20 countries that are considered most at risk, after which EEAS and EU Commission senior management select up to ten priority countries for follow-up analyses. In this prioritization exercise, leadership considers EU interests and potential leverage. EU member states are then informed via the EU Council Political and Security Committee (PSC)[106]. Since the recent update, leadership can additionally request up to five more priority countries if circumstances and risks change within the two-year period[107]. This update reflects a desire to make the EWS more responsive to evolving situations and unforeseen escalations[108].

Figure 3: Main Steps in EU Conflict Early Warning System[109]



In step two of the process, EWS staff engage in in-depth analysis, which eventually leads to a form of preventative action. The best type of analysis for each case is identified according to the following logic: a Structural Country Assessment (SCA) is suitable for countries with a risk of violent conflict within the next four years; Conflict Analysis Screenings (CAS) are used for countries currently involved in violent conflict; and Regional Conflict Analyses (RCA) address transnational threats and spillovers. If developments lead to a de-escalation of the situation, cases can also be demoted from the priority roster[110].

During the implementation and monitoring stage, the EU maintains missions in the target countries and reassesses the ongoing implementation of preventative activities. While the case-selection and analysis processes are sophisticated, the EU lacks effectiveness during the implementation stage. Early preventive action does not always follow early warning[111].

Methods

The EU EWS uses assessments from different sources and is often referenced as a system that successfully integrates forecasting sources such as public information, intelligence data, and data from fact-finding missions based in the target countries[112]. The Global Country Risk Index (GCRI), the statistical forecasting tool developed and maintained by the EU'S Joint Research Center, assesses the risk of violent conflict at the country level up to one to four years ahead, based on mostly structural variables but also on conflict history, and results in a ranking of countries according to risk[113]. The model uses data dating back to 1991 to predict outbreaks of violence [114], but it cannot account for recent events and developments[115]. An event data-based forecasting model is currently in development at the JRC but not yet in use at the EEAS[116].

The GCRI results are complemented with intelligence assessments from the EU's Intelligence and Situation Center. To better account for dynamic, short-term developments, the EEAS has also introduced a qualitative horizon scanning process which assesses the risk for violence in the coming six months. The horizon scanning process is informed by in-house media monitoring and analysts are frequently briefed by EU conflict experts. This step was added to ensure assessments with a shorter time horizon than the GCRI's one to four years[117].

In addition to the quantitative and intelligence analyses, the system also places an emphasis on integrating qualitative assessments of in-house geographical departments and information from other agencies across the EU Commission. For this purpose, the EEAS has developed so-called Regional Risk Tables to structure qualitative assessments[118]. If a case is selected as a priority, information from EU delegations in the respective country (if present) and discussions with EU staff on the ground play an important role in assessing risks, and so does finding entry points to address risks with adjusted programming[119]. According to involved experts, the statistical element has helped challenge conventional thinking inside the institution whenever the results contradict preconceived notions or political priorities. It has also helped structure and harmonize the qualitative and expert judgement-based analyses in order to make them more comparable to the statistical results[120].

Success Factors and Challenges

Strong positioning as contributing to a strategic policy priority: The EU Global Strategy received much attention at the time of its release and it strongly emphasizes conflict prevention as the Union's key foreign policy goal. The EU EWS was clearly designed as a contribution to this ambitious goal, and it was able to build on prior efforts in the field, including Swisspeace's FAST.

Multi-method and multi-stakeholder assessments that generate buy-in: The EU Early Warning system is firmly embedded in the EEAS and EU Commission. The various steps of the system, which have evolved over the past decade, incorporate a range of different methodologies and stakeholders in the prioritization and analysis of cases. The early-stage political prioritization exercise makes sure that results follow the political priorities of EU leadership while the qualitative assessments ensure participation from EU Commission and EEAS staff, which generates buy-in from stakeholders that are eventually required to participate in the process and act upon its results. This is especially true for divisions within the EEAS, whereas buy-in from other parts of the EU Commission is not always given[121].

Regular readjustments to match priorities, instruments and analytical steps: The EWS' analytical steps are regularly reassessed, and the system has been evaluated and adjusted in the past to improve it and respond to evolving priorities[122]. Adjustments like the added horizon scanning activity reflect the fact that the EEAS demanded analyses with a shorter time horizon because these are more useful for diplomatic engagement than long-term structural adjustment of programs, which is useful for longer-term development cooperation that tackles structural risk factors. As mentioned, the EWS is often praised for the efficient integration of different methodologies and its high-quality output [123]. Cooperation between researchers at the EU JRC and the core EWS team has been close, for example, when it comes to the ongoing process of developing a new forecasting model which is not yet in use. On the other hand, the EWS has been criticized for not incorporating, for example, foresight techniques or more state-of-the-art forecasting models that are based on event data[124]. To what extent the September 2023 update helped to improve the system will only become clear in the coming years, after several EWS cycles according to the new process.

Policy uptake remains the weak spot: So far, policy uptake – in the form of preventive action that is driven and informed by the extensive analyses – has remained the system's weak spot, as involved experts have admitted[125]. Processes to monitor the extent to which various parts of the EEAS and EU Commission (including the EU's delegations abroad) actually implement the recommendations that emerge from an EWS cycle are weak. Moreover, there is no enforcement and few incentives exist to ensure compliance[126]. The recent EWS update did not come with any changes to improve this.

Summary of Success Factors

Despite the variation in methods, processes and institutional settings of the projects we analyzed, the themes that appeared mirrored the success factors for government foresight from the literature. They can be summarized as follows (see also **Table 2**).

Positioning, Demand, Relevance

Overall, decision-makers' buy-in and the demand-orientation of analyses stand out as two related key success factors for futures analysis projects in government settings. Methodological innovation is desirable, but eventually it is the utility of outputs from the decision-maker's perspective and a good fit between methods, outputs and decision-making processes that are more important. If project outputs do not add value to existing analyses and decision-making, they risk being terminated, as the experience of FAST shows. Even though FAST was methodologically sophisticated, even ahead of its time, and managed to adapt to challenges, policymakers deemed its outputs too difficult to understand, which stifled interest and hampered uptake.

A participatory process that involves decision-makers and officials at different levels can help ensure buy-in and legitimacy, as the EU EWS multi-stakeholder process and the Australian Futures Hub's demand-oriented trainings and consultancy services show. This may imply less innovative methods – for example, the EU EWS so far does not use models based on geo-located event data since they have not yet found a good use for the results. At the same time, the case of the Australian Futures Hub shows that that investment in capacity building through networking and trainings can increase acceptance for (increasingly complex) futures analysis methods over time.

Balancing Embeddedness vs. Independence and the 'Challenge Function'

The embeddedness of a project in government institutions can facilitate demand-orientation, because proximity helps understand decision-makers' needs. At the same time, these benefits need to be weighed against the need for independence to ensure that futures analyses retain their important challenge function, namely: to question the institutional biases every organization has and to provide the diversity of viewpoints the literature on foresight and intelligence failure highlights as crucial. The involvement of outside expert, who contribute to methodological innovation, provide analyses and facilitate foresight contributes to this in all three projects we analyzed.

FAST, as the project that was least embedded into government institutions among the three examples we studied, lost funding because the link between early warning (i.e., analysis) and action (i.e., decisions) could not be established successfully. While keeping early warning "as free as possible from sovereignty dilemmas, internal administrative considerations and political blockages"[127] is important, analyses need to be considered by decision-makers – or by intermediary analysts or officers in the bureaucratic hierarchy – to add value. The EU's system, for example, combines analytical results with political prioritization by senior management. While preventive action by the EU Commission in response to early warning results could be improved, there is buy-in and participation by

decision-makers within the EEAS. This comes at the expense of a challenge function, as there is little outside input. Meanwhile, the Australian Futures Hub's independence allows it to flexibly design futures analyses with external input that add value to established government procedures, but it has struggled to sustain a demand that would allow it to fund permanent positions for outside experts in addition to the frequently rotating public sector staff.

Innovating and Framing the Contribution to Policy

While feedback and innovation are not sufficient for success, they are important. The EU EWS' process and methodologies, for example, have been adapted to evolving policy needs and in reaction to challenges, as have the Futures Hub's – also thanks to feedback loops with institutions, discussions with outside experts, and exchanges with other governments who serve as inspiration for government foresight elsewhere (e.g., in Canada, Finland or UK). FAST has – during its several years of operations – also adjusted its methods to donor priorities and analytical shortcomings, but its evaluation suggests that feedback was either lacking or did not lead to the necessary improvements.

Considering the project team's positioning and ability to innovate, it seems that people responsible for future-oriented analysis projects should also consider how they frame their contribution to a variety of different, evolving political goals and priorities to stay resilient. FAST lost funding and ended its work after ruling parties changed in several donor governments and reportedly focused on new political priorities – for example, on security sector reform (SSR) support to at-risk-countries instead of structural prevention efforts. But SSR and stabilization efforts also require future-oriented analysis[128], which are similar to FAST's local analyst networks. So, reframing its contributions to new priorities might have helped FAST sustain the project as much as an actual adaptation of its activities. The Australian Futures Hub, for example, offers its services across government policy areas and even different administrative levels (e.g., to regional governments), and it contributes to the government-wide administrative reform agenda with the same methods it also applies in its core national security consultancy activities. Framing can help build broad coalitions (i.e., buy-in) to avoid that people with competing projects actively undermine one's efforts (as reportedly happened in the case of FAST).

Conclusion

Policy decisions are always about the future, so it is important to understand how different methods, if strategically employed, can support and improve policy processes. While the use of structured futures analysis methods in the public sector is growing and some governments spend considerable resources on it, not all projects have meaningful and lasting impact. But targeted research on the effectiveness of foresight for foreign and security policy in institutional contexts is missing[129].

Our analysis of the existing literature and three projects shows how various foresight methods have been applied to support foreign and security policy in different settings. Our aim was to reveal pitfalls and key success factors, and to provide contextual examples on how those who engage in foresight can make sure that their work adds value. The most critical factors, according to our analysis of the three projects, are (1) demand-orientation to ensure relevance in the eyes of decision-makers; (2) balancing embeddedness in policy processes with the role of foresight as a 'critical friend'; and (3) the ability to redesign and reframe contributions as policy priorities shift, if needed.

Our results mirror key research results on why governments fail to engage in meaningful and effective future-oriented analysis in the first place. A lack of incentives for long-term thinking and prevention as well as cultural barriers to innovation in bureaucracies are fundamental obstacles to achieving many of the above-mentioned success factors[130]. An in-depth assessment of the practical effects of foresight would require more extensive access to end-users. In the future, it could be useful to systematically compare a greater number of decision-making applications in foreign and security policy as well as their outcomes, and to base the development of new foresight efforts on needs assessments. Insights on foresight applications in other sectors – from anticipatory humanitarian action to financial markets and business – could also help identify potential solutions that might be adaptable to the distinct challenges of futures analysis for foreign and security policy[131].

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