

## ORIGINAL ARTICLES

**Andrew Krepinevich (2009). 7 Deadly Scenarios. New York: Bantam Books. 334 pages**

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### ABSTRACT

The *7 Deadly Scenarios* book is about future events that threaten United States and the world security. The book identifies drivers of change that shape the futures landscape with a series of outcomes that reflect the plausible futures. However, the scenarios are flawed with the same old scene, theatre, actors and storyline of previous wars and conflicts. As such readers are directed towards conventional forecasting instead of stimulating thinking towards the future uncertainties. Nevertheless, the book has given the essence of why it is vital for scenario thinking to be used as a strategic planning tool.

**Key words:** Uncertainties; Future Thinking; Scenario Planning; Strategic Planning; Drivers of Change.

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### Introduction

The *7 Deadly Scenarios* book is about future war scenarios with seven plausible stories highlighting the changing nature of war in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The scenarios setting are of future events that threaten United States and the world security. Besides the scenarios, principally the book promotes the value of strategic planning to address future security challenges with scenario planning. The author goes at length to explain that the purpose of scenario planning is not to pinpoint future events but to highlight the forces that push the future in different directions. The essence of scenario planning through the future scenarios is about making those forces visible, so that if when it does happen, the planner and decision makers would at least recognise these indicators of the future.

The scenarios range from the collapse of Pakistan, a loose and stolen nuclear, deadly flu pandemic, Israel and Hamas with Iran backing, China civil unrest, Islamist group infiltration to cyber attacks affecting global economy. The central theme of the scenarios is that the future that is unfolding is uncertain and the author emphasises the need to take uncertainties into account in strategic planning and decision making. The author warns again 'business as usual' syndrome and the importance of recognising or picking up early indicators.

The author is Executive Director of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. A graduate of West Point with 21 years of military service, Ph.D. from Harvard University and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

#### Strengths:

The book provides an introductory chapter highlighting the importance of scenario-based planning with intention to expand the executives and planners beyond conventional planning and familiar challenges. The book promotes scenario-based planning and its benefits. In particular to understand how to see the future rather than what to think or do. Such scenarios can be used to help policy makers to see how the future might unfold. As such prompt the decision-makers to devote time and resources to address them and facilitate better decision making in an uncertain world (Schoemaker, 1995; Heijden *et al.*, 2002).

The book identifies drivers of change in the international system, the principle forces at work that will shape the world environment, their interaction and resulting trends. The scenarios actually assessed their impact on the United States and world security environment. Hence, a storyline of the futures landscape with a series of outcomes that reflect the plausible futures.

The actors in the scenarios highlights that future adversaries will not only be states, but also a wide variety of terrorist groups, transnational criminal organisations and other non-state actors that forms non-traditional threat. In context of securitisation, the future that states face is a composite threat from different set of enemies. Readily available technology will enable adversaries, states and non state actors alike, to mount an attack in unexpected ways using mix of military and non-military means and a blend of conventional and irregular warfare (Collins, 2007).

The author makes reference to the Second Gulf war as an irregular war, 'a long hard slog' to stress upon implications of business as usual mentality and warn about the military being prone to assume the next war to be an updated version of the last war. Scenario planning can be a powerful tool to abandon previously fixed ideas (Heijden *et al.*, 2002).

Despite the value of scenario-based planning, the author mentions the tussle between Pentagon and the military to highlight that the following challenge is still in managing change within an organisation. Organisation change is required to embrace this future thinking in planning (Senge, 1990). The obstacles to change lie elsewhere, particularly in large organisations straddle with existing ways of doing business.

#### *Weaknesses:*

The future scenarios settings set around year 2012 to 2016 are not far enough into the future or even to explore the nature war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As such, the essence of the future and scenario planning would not be appreciated by the readers as the book storylines are all too familiar. The scenarios should be to highlight the unthinkable and plausible uncertainties, so as to facilitate ability to recognise signals from the future as well as to facilitate 'out of the box' thinking (Schoemaker, 1995; Heijden *et al.*, 2002).

Although the author did caution about the military being prone to assume the next war will be an updated version of the last war. The book is rather half history and half future. Although the author promotes scenario planning but it is flawed with the same old scene, theatre, actors and storyline. The scenarios in the book seem to be more of an updated version of previous war and conflicts with the narrated events backup by historical events.

The scenarios have been set based on earlier historical events with plentiful of footnotes, perhaps to validate the story line. The chains of events are almost expected as the historical event use to set the scene or justify the narrated event that follows in scenario. Such approach by the author tends to frame readers mindset based on the history and lesson learnt, thus actually directing towards conventional forecasting and planning (Heijden *et al.*, 2002). Thus, in fact clouds the actual intent to stimulate thinking towards the future uncertainties.

The title of the book is not catchy and without attractive theme that enable readers to capture the essence of the scenarios or future (Heijden *et al.*, 2002). Scenario should be one with a theme that captures the essence of the storyline to become an organisation conversation amongst executives (Senge, 1990; Heijden *et al.*, 2002).

The storylines are rather lengthy and monotonous; each examines a familiar concern with the same good and bad actors of contemporary world. In a way almost the setting that blinded scholars and practitioners in the past from seeing the fall of Berlin Wall, end of Cold War, and 9/11 (Baylis *et al.*, 2007). A good scenario should have a title or theme that enables a quick reflection of the storyline, that in turn enable those planners and decision makers to recognise the faint signal emanating from the futures, thus highlighting the potential eventuality that might follows (Heijden *et al.*, 2002).

The author did admit the need to keep the number of scenario 'more than a few but fewer than 10'. However, the number and length of the scenario are too much for planners and security makers to comprehend, let alone to grasp the value of thinking about the future through scenario planning. In the future studies, for practical reasons the recommended number of scenarios are three to four (Schoemaker, 1995; Heijden *et al.*, 2002).

#### *Discussion:*

The same old story means the same old strategic planning and course of action. In this case, state centric security plan and strategies seem going to still dominate United States policy process. Being a status quo world power, the author in a way has made deterrence and compellence the most salient features of United States future defence policy (Collins, 2007).

Perhaps due to the author service in the military and Pentagon, the scenarios are from a realist perspective as the storyline extrapolate from past historical events that indicate the low change potential that the author could have believes. The scenarios theme centred on security issues to protect the United States from enemies

both foreign and domestic. That relies primarily on the balance of power and deterrence to keep the international system intact and as nonthreatening as possible. The whole scenarios are consistent with the realist principle, as the course of actions eluded towards preserving predominance and the status quo so as to shape future world that advances United States interest (Collins, 2007).

*Conclusion:*

Overall, the '7 Deadly Scenarios' is a good book with a lot of details on historical events. This book gives unique plausible scenarios with realist insight into the future, although much of it resembles the contemporary world. The future scenarios range from a scenario of organised setting dictated by economic and political driving forces, to evolutionary setting driven by technology and a chaotic social scenario. The book offers the planning map of the future with scenario planning as a strategic planning tool. A significant highlight is that, besides globalisation there are other drivers of change and uncertainty, such as demographic change, climate change, pandemics, terrorism, scarcity of natural resources and others. The author captures the essence of why it is vital for scenario thinking to be cultivated as a natural part of an organisations analytical culture and to become an accepted aspect of ongoing executive or corporate dialogue. However, the storyline that features more of present day scenario, with familiar 'fog of war' and built on the basis of the past thus confirming the challenges of strategic planning and security in addressing the future.

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