

**Michael F. Oppenheimer.** *Pivotal Countries, Alternate Futures: Using Scenarios to Manage American Strategy.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 272 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-939710-5.



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Kurt Vonnegut once quipped, “[The] one thing no cabinet ever had, was a Secretary of the Future.”[1] Indeed, American leaders are so preoccupied with putting out fires and preserving their own careers that they are rarely capable of thinking in the long term. In *Pivotal Countries, Alternate Futures*, Michael F. Oppenheimer seeks to improve foreign policymaking by helping policy makers conceptualize plausible outcomes of current policies that are barely considered or outright ignored. He claims that if policy makers were more aware of futures that deviated from conventional wisdom, leaders would also be able to anticipate changes to the status quo quicker, and thus, prepare the US government for future challenges more effectively.

The author has a point. One needs to go no further than the debacle in Iraq and Syria. If the George W. Bush administration had known that the removal of Saddam Hussein and the de-Ba’athification of Iraq would give rise to ISIS, would it have changed course? I would like to believe so. There is no way, however, for a policy

maker to know with certainty what lies ahead. In fact, this is not Oppenheimer’s claim. Instead, he avers that decision makers who consider alternate futures, i.e., plausible scenarios that are not the dominant story of the future, make better foreign policy. Thus, the question to ask is: If the Bush administration had considered the possibility that the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath would give rise to ISIS, would it have reconsidered its war agenda?

In his book, Oppenheimer draws on his experience as a scenario planner and private-sector consultant to develop a methodology for developing a scenario construction process. By producing these alternate futures, he endeavors to “improve observation of a rapidly changing and complex reality, and to encourage early recognition of and reaction to emerging trends that may shift the ground under current policies” (p. 94). It is unclear, however, who the intended audience of Oppenheimer’s book is. This is because, at first glance, the book is a guide to scenario construction. Unfortunately, policy makers are not in the

business of scenario construction; a National Security Council staffer does not have the time or incentive to participate in a three-day retreat with academics. However, intelligence analysts do have the time, and they might be the readers the author intends to reach.

Intelligence analysts are constrained by institutional prerogatives and procedures that make imagining alternate futures difficult or impossible. One might consider Graham Allison's Models II and III to see how the bureaucracy is unable to be as open-minded as Oppenheimer suggests it should be.[2] Oppenheimer gives scant attention to this issue in a comment on the National Intelligence Council; I would have liked to see him expand upon this point (p. 112). Another possible audience for *Pivotal Countries* is the vast consulting sector that supports the US government, although it would seem that professionals in that industry are the most likely to already be versed in scenario planning.

The goal of *Pivotal Countries* is to teach the reader how to construct alternate scenarios that "are designed as plausible (not necessarily probable) narratives describing how very different futures could emerge from current circumstances, with markedly different consequences for US interests and policies" (p. 5). Interspersed between instructions are examples, partial and full, of scenarios that the author developed with the help of his staff at New York University. The author shares analyses of Russia, China, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, which are among the most interesting parts of the volume.

The layout of the book is fairly straightforward. Oppenheimer opens with his rationale for the book. The first two chapters highlight recent fiascoes and strategic miscalculations in US foreign policy and suggest that more creative thinking about the future would have helped decision makers avoid these missteps. After sharing a few scenarios, the author uses the third chapter to flesh out the benefits of imagining different fu-

tures. This part of the book is the most relevant to scholarship on foreign policy decision making. The latter two chapters, which constitute the majority of the book and its most useful elements, walk the reader through the scenario-building process.

There are multiple reasons to read Oppenheimer's book. Foremost among these is that little has been written on alternate scenarios in the broader literature on foreign policy decision making. For those who study the topic, the author provides a different take on the practical problems that policy makers face. Indeed, Oppenheimer is correct when he states that today's leaders need to be more imaginative. Doing so would help them anticipate future problems, identify emerging trends earlier, and mitigate the ill effects that exogenous shocks have on strategic calculations. In this sense alone, *Pivotal Countries* is a useful addition to a reading list devoted to foreign policy decision making.

Academics are unlikely to find the detailed process of scenario construction useful. Those who work in think tanks, the intelligence community, and the private sector are among those who have the most to gain by reading this book. On the other hand, many of the people in these fields have already been exposed to lesser versions of Oppenheimer's process already. This raises the question as to why decision makers do not consider alternate futures more often—a cognate issue that Oppenheimer fails to address in his book.

A rebuke to Oppenheimer's claim that alternate futures will cure the ills of bad decision-making is that it takes more than thinking about the future to make a good decision. In fact, the obstacles to considering alternate futures include more than simply the absence of Oppenheimer's method. Decision makers are cognitively limited; they are constrained by political context; they are subject to groupthink; their personalities might discourage open-mindedness; and they have incentives to think in the short term at the cost of

the future. In other words, there are many established theories and models that can explain why a foreign-policy maker would be unable to consider alternate futures, even if the latter were laid out right in front of them. On this point, Oppenheimer would have been well served to engage with some of the classic literature on foreign policy decision making, including Alexander George's work on multiple advocacy and management styles, although the literature goes far beyond it.[3]

*Pivotal Countries, Alternate Futures* will appeal to readers who are interested in foreign policy decision making and, to a lesser extent, those interested in the current debates about US grand strategy. The book does not pay enough attention to the underlying psychological and sociological factors that make alternate scenarios necessary in the first place, however. The first two-thirds of the book miss this opportunity at the cost of constantly rearticulating the book's main point. A pioneering book on a less-discussed topic does not have to be perfect, however. It merely needs to bring attention to a problem and raise useful questions. In his book, Robert Oppenheimer does this in spades.

#### Notes

[1]. David Brancaccio, "Interview with Kurt Vonnegut," *NOW on PBS*, October 7, 2005, [http://www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcript-NOW140\\_full.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcript-NOW140_full.html).

[2]. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, rev. ed. (New York: Longman, 1999).

[3]. Alexander L. George, "The Case for Multiple Advocacy," *American Political Science Review* 66, no. 3 (1972): 751-85; Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decision-making in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980).

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