

**Political Science 972: International Conflict**  
**Discussion Questions for Week 10**  
**Forecasting: Theory**

1. Assess the relative importance of strategic surprise and deception (situations where an opponent has gone to extraordinary rather than routine measures to conceal a future action) in the overall issue of political forecasting. In particular assess the extent to which this is possible and the extent to which it is rare but very important (i.e. the events most likely to be concealed are those which are most important). To what extent is the issue even relevant to complex political events (for example the Iraqi insurgency, the history of the Taliban in Afghanistan, or the collapse of the Soviet Union) as distinct from specific state decisions (e.g. Iraq's decision to invade Kuwait or India's to conduct nuclear tests)? To what extent does the ability to conduct a surprise depend on the actor who is being surprised?—that is, surprise is only possible when an actor is missing or misinterpreting information due to cognitive biases?
2. Evaluate the relative merits of open-source vs. classified information for the use in strategic forecasting (that is, predictions about political behavior with a lead time greater than 6 months). How (if at all) has this situation changed during the post-WWII period. Where does it stand today? Also consider the various arguments that have been made as to why open-source information (and analysis) is not more widely used.
3. Evaluation the role of theory (generally defined, not just formal academic theories) in forecasting (and, obviously, intelligence analysis). In particular, look at the role of theory with respect to:
  - a. Filtering of relevant information
  - b. Identification of likely outcomes
  - c. “Abduction” of missing information
  - d. Figuring out possible causal linkages or “process tracing”

Compare and contrast the ways in which theory assists and impedes analysis. Also relate this to Tetlock's distinction between “theory driven” and “fact driven” analysis.

4. Without getting into excessive technical detail, evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of technical forecasting (any model that is largely implemented using a formal structure; usually a computer these day) versus human “intuition and understanding.” As with everything else, how has this situation changed during the post-WWII period (‘not at all’ is not an option), and how does it seem to be changing at the moment?

[Possibly relevant quote from Princeton political scientist Larry Bartels: “Over the past three decades, computing power has about doubled every 18 months. Human intelligence has stayed about the same. This has led to some curious substitution effects.”]

5. How do the problems of political forecasting change when one moves from the problem of “what is” to “what will be”? Are the information and information-processing requirements of the two sufficiently different that one might have separate techniques (and data requirements) for doing these, or are they pretty much the same thing.

6. Agree or disagree: It is impossible to have policy without prediction—every policy is a “feed-forward” problem that assumes that actions taken today will have (at least probabilistically) certain outcome in an oftentimes distant future. [Corollary: for most decision-makers, the forecasting models that they use are implicit rather than explicit.]

Closely related proposition (this is coming in part from Gaddis): There is relatively little difference between pre-constructivist qualitative and quantitative theorists in this regard.

Provocative proposition: Constructivism does not contain a consistent mode of generating predictions, and consequently is destined to remain of purely academic interest.

Less provocative but still interesting proposition: Politics is not possible without a fairly high degree of predictability at some—quite possibly “intuitive”—level. Far from being unpredictable, politics is in fact boringly regular most of the time, but we only pay attention to the departures from regularity.

7. Evaluate the problems of false positives versus false negatives, from the perspective of both the analyst and the policy-maker. To what extent are discussions of political forecasting even explicitly aware of these problems?
8. Consider the factors that Betts thinks make “intelligence failures inevitable”: which are these would be most easy (if that is the correct word...) to correct and which are most difficult? In particular look at the advantages/disadvantages of “Team A/B” and “devil’s advocate” exercises.
9. Consider the following characterization of a situation: “It was explainable but not predictable.” That is, *after the fact*, one can figure out a set of causal linkages that “caused” an event, but these are not predictable. Under what circumstances (if any) do such things occur?
10. Andrew Lo, an MIT economist, provided a candid definition of “physics envy” in *The Economist*:  
“We would love to have 3 laws that explain 99% of economic behavior. Instead we have 99 laws that explain maybe 3% of economic behavior.”<sup>1</sup>  
This assessment is probably unduly pessimistic—at the micro-economic level at least, I would guess that simple laws such as supply-and-demand explain far more than 3% of behavior—but nonetheless instructive. Where does political behavior fit in this framework?
11. What are the qualitative methods that are typically used in political forecasting? To what extent are these used systematically? Are we doing anything Aristotle would not have recognized? Do contemporary political science methods have anything intelligent to add here?

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<sup>1</sup> *Economist*, 363, 8273 (18 May 2002) “Survey of International Finance” pg. 17

12. Assess the role of counterfactuals—“what ifs”—in political discourse, and in particular on the analysis of international conflict. To what extent are these an actual analytical tool as distinct from a means of justifying a prediction that was simply wrong.
13. “History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”<sup>2</sup> Comment. Also compare to Tetlock’s observation “History is a terrible teacher.”
14. Evaluate the information and analytical requirements of the following types of forecasting problems
  - **Structural:**  
predict the cases (countries or regions) most likely to experience conflict
  - **Dynamic:**  
predict a probability of conflict breaking out at a known point in the future
  - **Counter-factual:**  
predict how the change in some policy (e.g introduction of aid or peacekeepers) will affect the likelihood or magnitude of conflict

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<sup>2</sup> attributed, with a fair amount of plausibility, to a comment Mark Twain made on the lecture circuit  
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