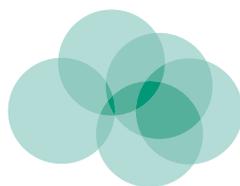# Envisioning the World of the Future

Three scenarios of global power balance in the post-COVID-19 world in 2030

Results of a Foresight workshop during the Global Diplomacy Lab prE-Summit

Global Diplomacy Lab

Global Diplomacy Lab

The Global Diplomacy Lab (GDL) is a vibrant platform for exploring creative and more inclusive approaches to diplomacy. By connecting unusual partners and fostering dialogue among different networks, the GDL experiments with new ideas to create inclusive policies and develop impact-oriented responses to global challenges.

The over 200 GDL members took this approach online, in the form of a virtual prE-Summit, in May 2020 when the five-year celebratory Summit had to be postponed due to COVID-19.

A group of 15 GDL members used the opportunity to experiment with the Foresight methodology, exploring what global power balances might look like in the year 2030.

www.global-diplomacy-lab.org

Global Power Balances in the Post-COVID-19 World in 2030

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically reminded us of the fragile and unpredictable nature of the international system. How can we possibly know what the future of diplomacy will look like? How can we anticipate and deal with the uncertainty of global power dynamics?

With these questions in mind, a group of 15 Global Diplomacy Lab members embarked on a methodical thought experiment: in a five-day Foresight scenario workshop, they developed three possible – and at the same time very different – future scenarios of global power balance in 2030.

In summarising these three scenarios, this paper aims to inspire governmental and non-governmental actors to better anticipate possible changes in global power balances and to find responses to new and unpredictable international constellations.

What is the Foresight methodology about?

Foresight is not about becoming a fortune teller. It is much more about creating an understanding for the future as a room of infinite possibilities.

Being a data-driven, systematic methodology, it focuses on identifying and analysing factors that can influence the future by using them to draw up plausible scenarios. Foresight is thus a tool, for leaders and decision-makers among others, to better anticipate how the future might look and how to respond to various scenarios that may emerge.

What do you mean by "global power balance"?

The term global power balance refers to the role and importance that different actors have worldwide. Ultimately, the global power balance reaches equilibrium when the power of any given actor is sufficient to discourage or prevent another actor from imposing its will on or interfering with the interests of another.

Scenarios: A Systematic Approach for Foresight

Scenarios are thought experiments about possible futures in complex environments. They illustrate alternative future developments, make them imaginable and help create strategies that are resilient to uncertainty. In the field of international relations and diplomacy, scenario development can be used as a tool for strategy design and long-term planning.

"**We have a built-in tendency not to see the future for what it really is. Scenarios help us to systematically prepare strategies for an uncertain future of global power balances and diplomacy.**"
DR JOHANNES GABRIEL
Foresight Intelligence

Using diversity to break free from narrow views

The three scenarios of power balance in 2030 emerged through cooperation among participants from a wide range of geographical and professional backgrounds. These included an organisational development consultant from Zimbabwe, a civil affairs officer from Ghana, a civil society activist from India, a researcher from Romania, a UNDP consultant from Mexico, a political representative from Afghanistan to the EU, and a Luxembourg diplomat based in Turkey. They all engaged with one another to share their experiences and opinions related to present and future power balances.

Due to their diverse experiences and perspectives, participants had to systematically review their own thinking. What are the implications of migration regulation from a Western, African or Eastern European perspective? How do you perceive non-conventional security threats in 2030 from an Indian or Canadian perspective? Participants were able to break free from instinctively biased and one-sided views as they proceeded to systematically review their own thinking and perspectives in the interdisciplinary and intercultural group, supporting each other in integrated thinking.

Downscaling multiple futures to three scenarios: How to gain clarity in light of multiple possible futures?

Three scenarios represent only a very limited section of possible futures of how the world might be ruled ten years from now. Yet this small number of scenarios provides orientation and a basis for starting a discussion on the possible implications for the future of diplomacy.
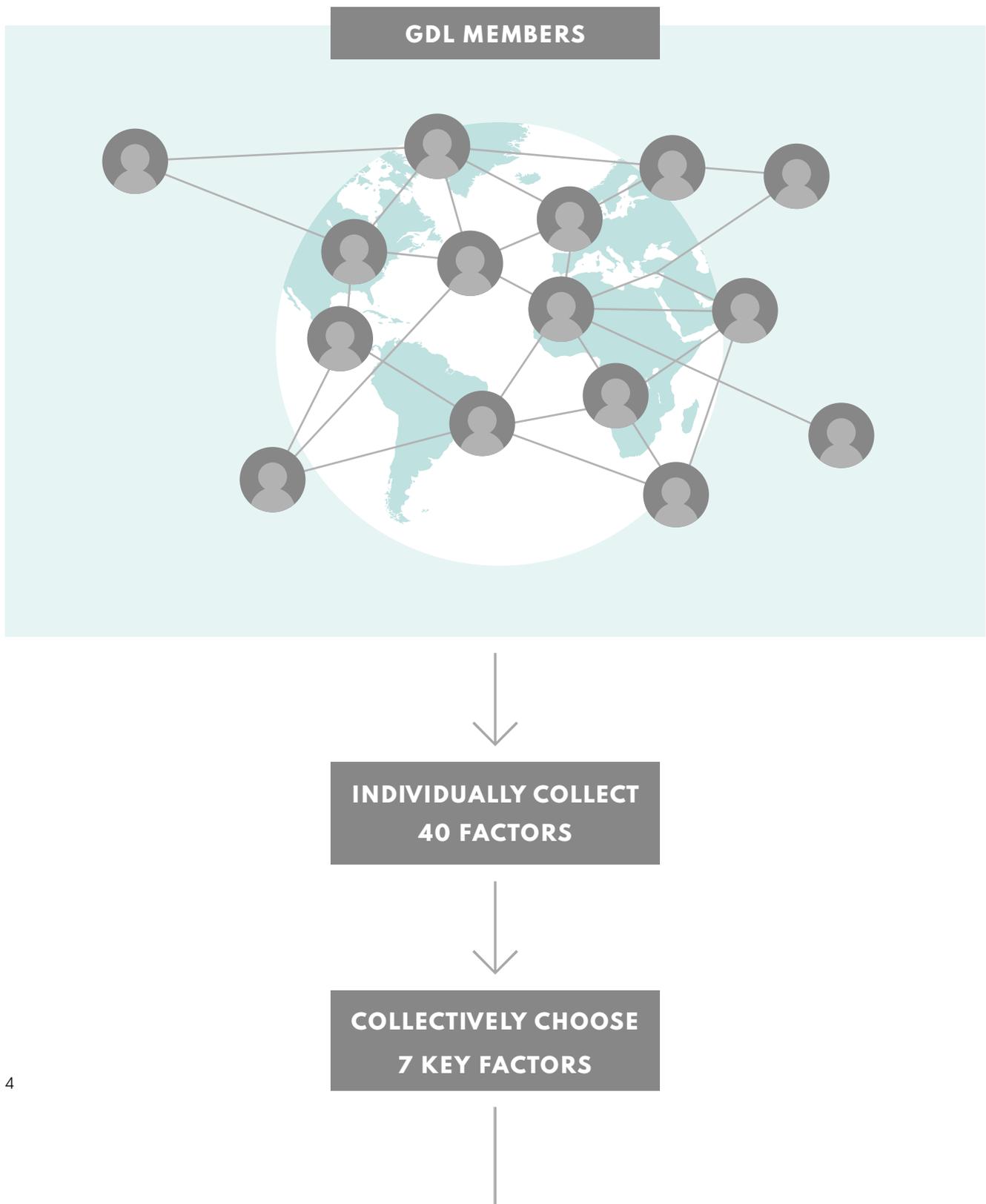
To systematically develop the scenarios, the group members started out by individually collecting key factors that influence, and at the same time cause uncertainty regarding, future global power balances.

In a structured process, the group collectively chose seven key factors out of more than forty. These lay the groundwork for the three final scenarios. As you can see on the next page.
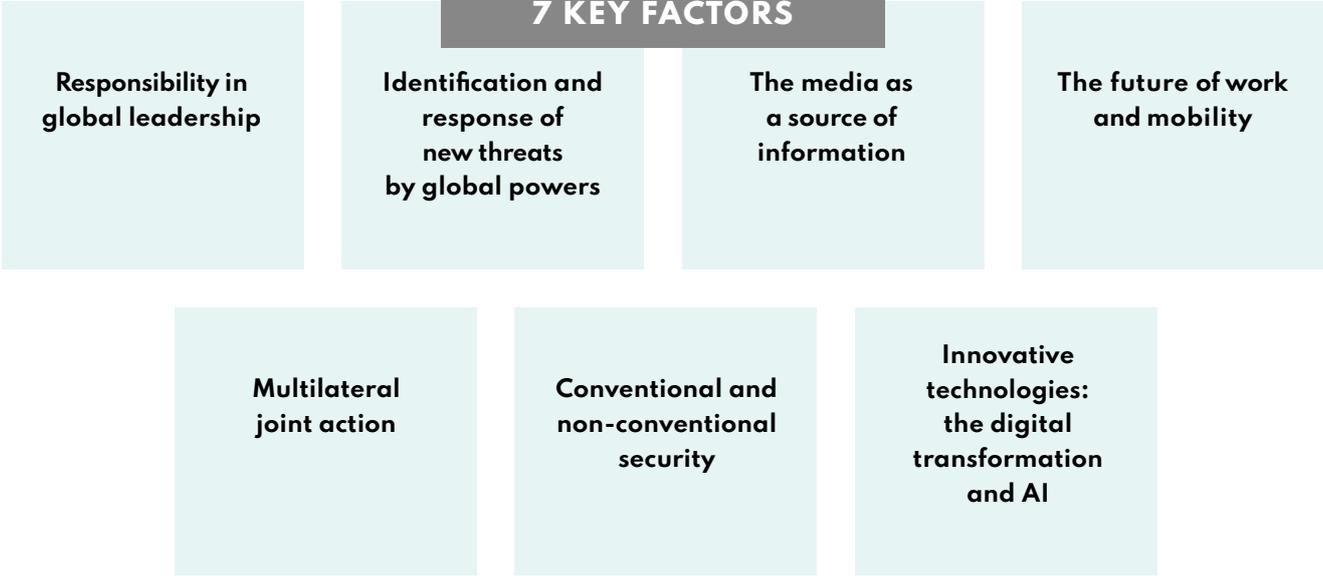

GDL prE-Summit 2020:
"so happy to come together"
by GDL member Julie August
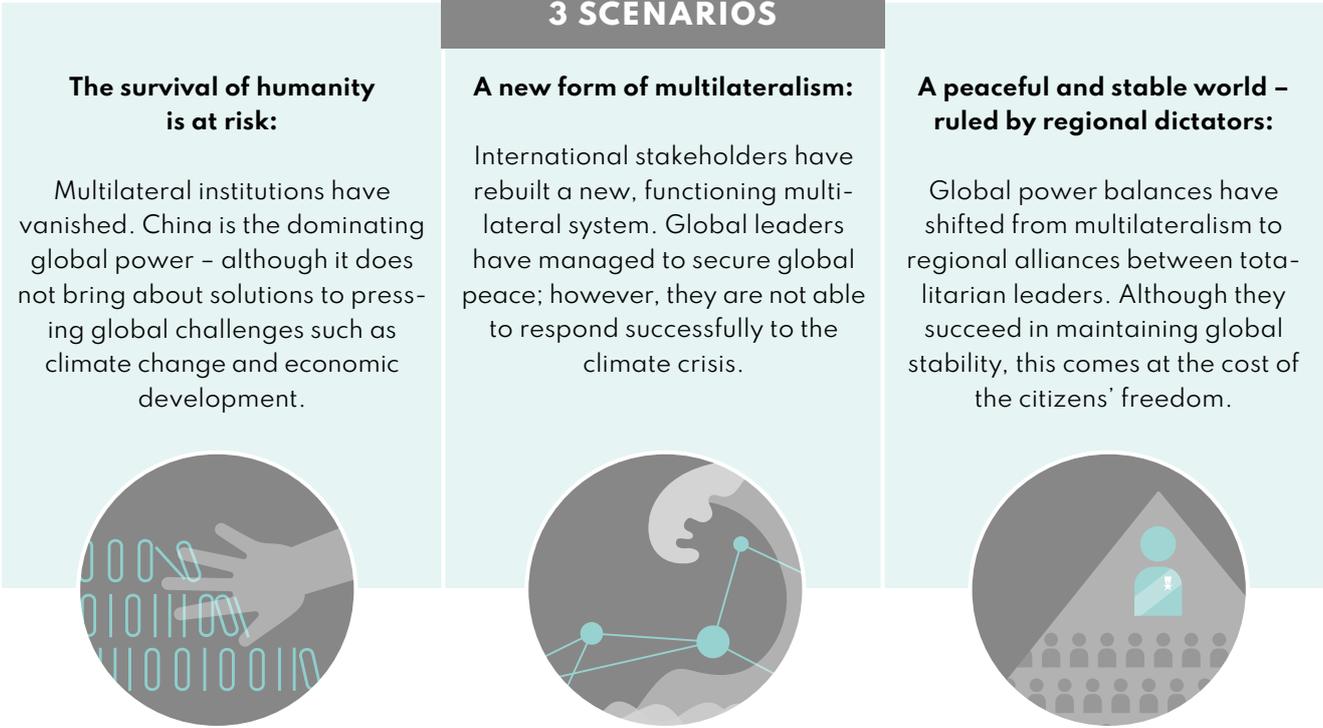
Downscaling multiple futures to three scenarios

INDIVIDUALLY COLLECT
40 FACTORS

COLLECTIVELY CHOOSE
7 KEY FACTORS

Responsibility in global leadership

Identification and response of new threats by global powers

The media as a source of information

The future of work and mobility

Multilateral joint action

Conventional and non-conventional security

Innovative technologies: the digital transformation and AI

Based on the seven key factors, the group members envisioned three very different worlds in 2030, each with its own opportunities and challenges:

3 SCENARIOS

The survival of humanity is at risk:

Multilateral institutions have vanished. China is the dominating global power – although it does not bring about solutions to pressing global challenges such as climate change and economic development.

A new form of multilateralism:

International stakeholders have rebuilt a new, functioning multilateral system. Global leaders have managed to secure global peace; however, they are not able to respond successfully to the climate crisis.

A peaceful and stable world – ruled by regional dictators:

Global power balances have shifted from multilateralism to regional alliances between totalitarian leaders. Although they succeed in maintaining global stability, this comes at the cost of the citizens' freedom.

The survival of humanity is at risk

compiled by **VIRGINIE ARSLAN**
Diplomat

China dominates the world

After 2020, China progressively emerged as the one dominating power in the world because of two major developments. First, China benefited from a robust digital infrastructure and was for this reason much more advanced economically compared to other countries. Then, in 2023, the USA left NATO and EU partners were unable to form alternatives. In 2025, Germany left the G7. In the meantime, China rapidly strengthened its defence sector and surpassed the US. By 2030, all multilateral institutions have disappeared.

A highly digitised world and freedom of the media

In 2025, China saw an opportunity in the advancement and control of accelerated global digital transformation and decided to deploy open-source artificial intelligence widely throughout the world. China thus initiated a tremendous technological leap that benefitted nations and citizens worldwide. Since 2020, independent media has grown stronger over the years, providing citizens transparent and reliable information, and offering them the space to express critical opinions.

War everywhere and climate disaster

The economy has not recovered after the COVID-19 crisis of 2020. By the end of the 2020s the largest world economies have collapsed. Armed conflicts between citizens due to job scarcity escalated in 2027, and other internal civil conflicts emerged at the end of the 2020s. The second half of the 2020s was an environmental disaster. In 2026, global water levels rose one meter over the previous year and, in 2028, there was an increase in the death of islands in the Pacific. In 2029, scientists declared that photosynthesis challenges and the death of 97% of pollinators were at the origin of food shortages. In 2030, we observe food shortages everywhere and for the first time in centuries we see negative population growth.

The world is close to full collapse in 2030 – but there is hope of survival

Many threats exist in 2030. The world is dominated by one power and international bodies have dissolved, which means that multilateralism is not an option anymore for solving global and local problems, such as wars and climate change. Besides, global warming can further deepen food insecurity and local tensions.

But all hope is not lost. Firstly, it is possible to capitalise on the free media and the capacity of citizens to take action and become drivers of change. Secondly, opportunities exist to generate economic growth. On the one side, economies could be rebuilt on the existing digital/tech infrastructures. On the other side, concentrated pockets of highly skilled workers could help reconstruct cities and infrastructures. Thirdly, some stakeholders might be interested in collaborating to rebuild multilateral organisations and develop new forms of representation and diplomacy.

A new form of multilateralism

compiled by ANNEGRET WARTH
Educational Scientist

The return of responsible leadership and multilateralism

In this scenario, multilateral institutions emerge stronger from the COVID-19 crisis, and the worldwide tendency to authoritarian leaders of the 2010s and early 2020s is reversed. In 2020, Trump lost the presidential election in the US and the new president re-enters multilateral institutions like the WHO. In the mid-2020s the demise of the global strongmen Putin, Erdogan and Bolsonaro continues.

Central determinants of this scenario are wise and responsible leaders who collaborate and think sustainably. The new global leaders are responsible in their discourses, actions and decisions, their interventions are based on the needs of citizens/communities and they realise co-designed solutions.

The world in 2030 is shaped by a constructive international system with multiple and decentralised seats of power. In 2020, an EU-funded initiative finds a COVID-19 cure. Through this, the world overcomes the pandemic and the global economy starts to grow again. In 2023, the UN unveils a new multilateral structure that is capable of preventing and solving international security challenges. The multilateral institutions adopt strong positions on international challenges and display bold leadership and response: By 2028, the UN has ended the last civil wars and resolved the Syria crisis.

Accelerated development of new technologies and a trend to strong public-private partnerships

The decade after COVID-19 is marked by large investments in technologies and the emergence of new forms of work that empower people. Remote work stays the new norm after the pandemic. By the mid-2020s new technologies allow for the increased hiring of essential workers – e.g. nurses, doctors, firefighters and teachers. This leads to stronger economic development and rising GDPs all over the world.

As the pandemic accelerated digitalisation, Africa becomes a hot spot of AI industries and China relocates the data mining sector to African countries in 2024. In 2027, the digital global giants Google, Amazon and Alibaba enter into an unprecedented partnership. The new monopoly ends decentralised tech development. At the same time, it creates new employment opportunities. 2030 marks the year when SpaceX, Roscosmos, CNSA and Airbus give a final green light to the historic evacuation of earth to a human settlement on Mars.

**Global peace and rising GDPs –
in contrast to unsolved challenges in terms
of climate change, domestic inequalities
and cybercrime**

The new multilateralism has led to global
peace, and international public-private
cooperation has resulted in rising GDPs.
Although the system is successfully coping
with traditional security threats such as war,
it is not able to collectively respond to trans-
national and cross-border threats like climate
change. Therefore, sea levels rise by 5 cm
and the Maldives are the first island nation
to be irreversibly flooded in 2026. Climate
change and monopolised tech giants also
lead to greater social inequalities. While
global peace prevails, more and more popu-
lations lose access to social and financial
resources, which leads to domestic instabilities,
boosting terrorism and cybercrime in cities
all over the globe.

A peaceful and stable world – ruled by regional dictators

compiled by **VIRGINIE ARSLAN**
Diplomat

The era of autocrats

The world in 2030 is dominated by authoritarian leaders. In the 2020s, because of the pandemic, people felt the world was unsafe; they felt more vulnerable and started looking for easy solutions and strong statesmen to protect them. For this reason, illiberal leaders came to power in most countries during the general elections that followed the COVID-19 crisis. International power balances are structured in a multipolar manner: The strongest and more autocratic leaders managed to progressively impose their rules on their citizenry and to expand their influence to smaller and less powerful countries located in the same geographic region.

Planned economies, no UN and less freedoms in exchange for a safer world

A combination of state control over the economy, societies and global affairs helped combat major security threats. First of all, autocrats managed to form regional alliances that succeed in maintaining stability and peace in the world. The UN system thus became irrelevant and has been dissolved.

Secondly, there was a fast shift to planned economies. As a matter of fact, from 2025 onwards, autocracies started allocating resources in a very authoritarian way to combat major threats such as climate change. For instance, China and Germany sent 50,000 workers to reforest the Amazon rainforest. South Africa and Argentina are assigning citizens to work on boats for several months in an effort to clean the seas. Numerous similar programmes have been implemented since then to save the environment.

Rebellions led to tighter state control over the population and the suppression of all freedoms

As citizens were forced into labour programmes, many people took to the streets and revolted against state control in 2026. States took quick measures in order to stop them. The fiercest political opponents were sent to prison without due process or a fair trial, as fundamental human rights are now ignored by authoritarian leaders. In 2027 and 2028, global powers suspended media freedom and dissolved civil society organisations. In 2030, fundamental freedoms do not exist and individuals are forced to serve autocratic leaders.

After the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, international mobility was suspended for the majority of citizens. After a partial lifting of the restrictions in 2021, a second wave of the pandemic led to further bans on free movement: People cannot travel anymore, unless authorised to do so by their country.

This configuration of power balances bears the risk that one dominant superpower may emerge and rule the planet in the future

This scenario shows that a world order with regional authoritarian leaders can work efficiently and save the planet from major global threats, such as global warming. Regional cooperation between totalitarian regimes can bring positive results because autocrats tend to have a long-term planning horizon and the capacity to adopt radical measures and act swiftly without being hampered by opposition.

But this model also involves risks. First of all, if such regimes adopt a series of wrong decisions, there is no mechanism to counter negative trends. Second, power calls for more power. Regional powers might become rivals and try to destabilise each other. Such attempts and trends could lead to a darker world in which conflicts emerge and one superpower prevails in the end.

What now?

While the future might be scary to think about, envisioning different future scenarios is essential for dealing with uncertainty on an institutional, state or even global level. As the future remains a black box, with such a vast number of possible outcomes, it is probable that none of these three scenarios will ever become reality. However, they are a way to spark discussions. Not least, they convey a sense that we can still shape the year 2030.

The Global Diplomacy Lab wants to continue exploring use of the Foresight methodology, together with its members and partners.

" **We need more of this!** "
STEFAN CIBIAN
Făgăraş Research Institute,
Romania

" **The three scenarios lay
a great foundation for
in-depth discussions.
I am looking forward to
exploring the implications
for future diplomacy with
my international colleagues.** "
ANNEGRET WARTH
Educational Scientist, Germany

" **It is important to think
about the future in such
a way that one day it will
have a past – and that it
is always open.** "
SIMON HARTMANN
Political Advisor, Germany

" **Now, I will no longer
think linearly when asked
'What can happen?'** "
EDNA MARTINEZ
**Co-founder of Proactivo Sostenible,
Mexico**

> **"You have to work backwards if you want to work on the future. Make your plan from that desired reality to where you are today, going back, step by step. And believe that the future is already there, waiting for you."**
>
> **CRISTINA GALLEGOS**
> **CEO Skylarx, Romania/USA**

> **"Apart from the methodology, I have actually learned a lot about conflict management that I will be able to apply."**
>
> **GAURAV SHARMA**
> **Advisor for Artificial Intelligence, India**

The Global Diplomacy Lab is supported by