

The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century by George Friedman. Published by Stratfor
Reviewed by David James
As the founder of Stratfor George Friedman is perhaps better placed to write this book than anyone else. In The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century Friedman attempts to do what the legions of oracles and soothsayers down the ages have attempted - to predict the future. In doing so he is ultimately, of course, destined to fail (albeit most of us won't be around to point and laugh). Nevertheless, he describes a useful summation of the historical context to the world today, how this inevitably describes the future to some degree in so far as the various powers only have so many moves they can make, and goes on to make some bold predictions about the forthcoming century.

The narrative of the book runs broadly thus. Countries are pre-disposed to and therefore will continue to pursue their (broadly) historical national interest. War continues to be an immutable constituent of human history. The wars of the future will be fought along increasingly technology-heavy, people-lite lines. Some of the issues that we consider to be central to human existence (particularly population growth and global warming) in the early 21st century will come to be viewed as transient parts of an ever changing historical landscape.

The validity of Friedman's predictions necessarily rests on a presumption of who the dominant powers of the 21st Century will be. If you imagine looking forward 100 years from 1900 its easy to understand the difficulties in trying to predict the players of the next century. Friedman categorises the major powers of 2010 as follows. American pre-dominance, both economically and militarily continues for the next 100 years. Both China and Russia are riven apart by a combination of internal (economic and historical) tension, and declining populations. India and to a lesser extent Brazil both fail to get sufficient economic traction to become significant on the world stage. Europe becomes the "busted flush" that it threatens to do today with only Germany emerging with any semblance of power on a global level. The surprises don't end there as Friedman goes on to postulate that the world will coalesce around five major blocks - the US, Poland, Japan, Turkey and later Mexico. Hard to believe, but perhaps no more crazy than the predominance of the US looking forward to today from the year 1900.

It is easy to criticise the book for its US-centricity (a point Friedman acknowledges, and he is far from short-sighted about several aspects of the country's immaturity) but I am willing to forgive that as part of the necessity for focus. Indeed it would be another book in itself discussing only that central premise. It is harder to escape the feeling that, in part at least, the books reads like a call to all hail the almighty US of A. Particularly towards the end as the book ventures further and further from the world of today, it does occasionally slip into a US takes on an all-star World tale, with a predictable outcome. Whether the US can continue to be the sufficiently dominant on all fronts in the future I think is stretching the point a little for the domestic audience the book was no doubt intended for.

I was also left wondering whether Friedman was too willing to dismiss China (and to a lesser degree India). He concludes that China is effectively one big Ponzi scheme that will come crashing down, and thereafter good old fashioned internal strife exacerbated by ethnic division and income disparity will cause it to become inward looking, dominated by Japan, and peripheral on the World stage. Given China is already the world's second largest economy, with the world's largest population, this feels a little too easy. India barely gets a look in.

For all his star gazing, Friedman fails to explore much beyond "conventional" warfare - by which I mean blowing things up using explosives of some description. He posits that these would be delivered by hypersonic unmanned aircraft/missiles and directed from space. He may be right of course, but I wonder if the warfare of the late 21st century isn't more likely to be

significantly more non-lethal. Why kill the enemy if you can render them impotent through cyber-warfare for example? (As some may already have discovered to their cost) A nuclear missile is nothing more than a lump of metal with some uranium inside if you can't get it off the ground and start a chain reaction after all. Will social issues such as the rising underclass, in the US and UK particularly, vote out the hand that feeds them over time and undermine the essence of what makes the US the country it has become? In the final reckoning whilst it is easy to pick fault with specific aspects of the book, it is more difficult to argue with some of the wider trends that Friedman identifies - for example the rising power of Turkey and Mexico in particular. What the book manages to do very well is put to bed ideas of an ever rising population (widely supported by the UN and other studies) and the consequent problems it would create. Similarly, the US is so far ahead of other nations that it is difficult to envisage it being overtaken either economically or militarily in the next 50 years. The US is not an economy which stands still. It is resilient, innovative, and is less likely to suffer from the population shrinkage that will unquestionably afflict Europe, Russia and Japan particularly. The one question that I was left pondering was "will countries continue to go to war with one another?". I'm not sure I have the answer, and perhaps Friedman is indeed correct that fighting is an inalienable part of the human condition.