

## Appendix 2

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### WILD CARDS

Wild cards are normally defined as low-probability, but high-impact events. They are used to discuss future events which are unlikely to happen, but if they do, the repercussions will be dramatic. They cannot be ruled out of any futuristic study, but the analyst and the reader must bear in mind that we are talking about low-probability events — a bit like thinking the unthinkable. Typical wild cards from the past would have been, prior to 1979, China's change into a market economy; or prior to the 11 September attacks, a coordinated terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the White House, and the U.S. Congress.

Currently some of the global wild cards floating around are enumerated in *The Futurist* issue of spring 2009.<sup>1</sup>

- Spiritual paradigm shift sweeps the world, sponsored by the use of the Internet and the growing complexity of connections and dependency.
- Science is wrong: it is rapid cooling, not global warming, that is the biggest manifestation of climate change. New scientific evidence suggests that the major terrestrial driver of global climate patterns may be wind over the oceans. If the world faces cooling, instead of global warming, not only would a whole string of high profile policies have to be rethought, but confidence in science would fall dramatically, altering societal structures.
- New energy discovery comparable to the control of fire — for example, what is labelled zero point energy (ZPE) with the Casimir Effect. According to a recent article in the science journal *Nature*,<sup>2</sup> this experiment has set the stage for a revolution in energy that will rival the discovery of fire.

- Cloned humans threaten everything, calling into question ethics and politics.
- Intelligent alien life confirmed, confronting humanity with possibly the biggest question ever.
- The possibility of a food crisis — which is less of a wild card as the omens of food shortage are already visible and about 800 million people are living under the threat of famine or close to such a condition.<sup>3</sup>
- A catastrophic weather event rivalling or surpassing Hurricane Katrina.
- A dramatic political shift to the far left in U.S. politics. Alternatively, a massive shift to the right.
- Political upheaval in China.
- A worldwide backlash against fundamentalist religions.
- Widespread illness and death from tainted food (either accidental or deliberate).
- A surprisingly rapid economic recovery — when the experts tell us that the United States may be mired in recession for many months, perhaps years.
- The disabling of the Internet.
- A disruptive new business model on the scale of the Web when it emerged in the mid-1990s.
- The incapacitation of President Obama, through scandal, illness, or assassination.
- Markets imploding and Western capitalism collapsing.

These are examples only to give a general idea of what a wild card is and how the debate among futurists tackles this notion. Some of the above mentioned examples are genuinely wild cards also in the perception of ordinary people, for example, alien life; others are debated within relatively well-known territories of scientific disciplines, for example, cloned humans. The major contribution of futurists will often be to lift the discussion out of a purely scientific, one-sector analysis, and open it up for a discussion on the consequences of a societal and political nature. For a futurist a possible revelation of alien life may, in the first place, be more about its consequences for our own thinking, philosophy, religious beliefs, behaviour, etc., than about finding out what it means for pure science. The consequence for the mindset and mentality weighs more than pure scientific reasoning. If, for example, global warming proves to be the wrong theory, and mankind is faced with global cooling instead, a whole number of consequences for science arises, but it is even more interesting to note that this will probably mean a total loss of credibility for the global establishment for having led humanity into

one of the largest ever projects, ranging from infrastructure to the price of electricity for the ordinary consumer.

For our purpose we exclude wild cards such as natural catastrophes and pandemics, that is, we limit ourselves to, let us call it, man-made wild cards and classify them in two groups: wild cards which would help Asia in its future development (such as China's turnaround in 1978–79) and wild cards with deep negative consequences (such as 11 September).

### **Positive Wild Cards**

A technological breakthrough in the energy field would do wonders for Asia. Examples are coal liquefaction, biofuel on the basis of waste from agriculture, solar power. There are probably more possibilities, but for a wild card to affect development in the short term, it must not need large investments in infrastructure. A more long-term, positive wild card is the ZPE mentioned above.

### **Negative Wild Cards**

A shift in foreign policy in China that replaces the present policy with a much more assertive stance prompting the United States to mobilize Japan, Australia, and Taiwan in an effort to “keep China in its place”, with obvious disruptive repercussions on Asia.

Some kind of breakdown in relations between populations and the political system in heavily populated countries such as China, India, and Indonesia, triggering not only social unrest, but a genuine loss of power for the political system and landing the country in a state of non-government.

A turnaround in policies in Africa or Latin America or the Middle East making them inward looking, and not interested in joining the global economy, thus choking off exports of raw materials.

Rising sea levels because of global warming resulting in dramatic social consequences for several hundred millions of people living in Bangladesh and in major Asian cities such as Jakarta, Bangkok, and Ho Chi Minh City. Just think of fifty or a hundred million people from Bangladesh seeking a new home if their home disappears into the sea.

China and India are often compared and in many ways that makes sense. For our purpose the pertinent observation is that they face similar problems: the need for high growth, inequality, rising pollution, raw materials from abroad, big megacities, governments striving to exercise control over regions/provinces, and a genuine fear of social unrest.

China may be better placed to weather the problems because many of these problems have been on the agenda in China for some time. China's population is expected to fall, not rise; manufacturing has been under way for many years, providing some clue on how to handle pollution, job creation, training, the movement of labour from the rural districts. The nationwide problems are more likely to be tackled in China than in India because the government in China, despite visible difficulties, is more in control of the provinces than is the government in India. Industrialization demands infrastructure and China has taken that route.

India is going to face all these challenges, of which the most delicate are industrialization, job creation, moving people from rural districts to cities, and growing pollution. India is, so to speak, hitting this point of the curve later and is at a point less promising and with less helpful conditions than was the case for China.

This is not to say that India cannot make it or that China has made it. The point is that when we look at the future of Asia in the next twenty-five years, India is the country facing the most acute and difficult problems and with the biggest question mark over its potential to solve them. To our mind this is wild card number one.

## Notes

- 1 *The Futurist* (May–June 2009): 18–24, with articles by John L. Petersen, John Rockefeller, Brian Pomeroy, Marc Blasband, and Steve Malerich.
- 2 “Measured Long-Range Impulsive Casimir-Lifshitz Forces”, *Nature* 457, 8 January 2009 <<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v457/n7226/full/nature07610.html>>.
- 3 <[http://paperdreamer.files.wordpress.com/2008/04/world\\_hunger\\_map.jpg](http://paperdreamer.files.wordpress.com/2008/04/world_hunger_map.jpg)>.

