

Forecasts from ‘The Next 100 Years’: Al-Qaida and China

by George Friedman - June 20, 2023

“The Next 100 Years” is the first book I wrote that was intended to be a serious forecasting book. Others followed, but this perfected my method to the extent that it could be perfected. It contains many forecasts I am proud of and many I regret. Such is life. Written over the course of a few years, it was published in 2009, so it is about 15 years old and can now begin to be judged. The hardest part was determining how long it would take an event to occur, but the things I thought would happen by this time have, for the most part, taken place. I want to use this book and the others that followed to build the foundation for my next forecasts, which will have at least a 25-year horizon. As the cliché goes, the future is rooted in the past.

I wrote my first forecasting books without anyone being aware or even interested. I want to lay out the next set of forecasts in front of you, my readers, both to demonstrate that there is a method at work and to show you what it is. Criticism early in the process is the most useful. I will also savor agreement and praise. For now, I will select predictions from the different methods of forecasting I use. Some are long past and some still in the future.

I’ve realized this can’t be dealt with in one article about each book. My goal is to select two or three forecasts a week and lay out the method I used to get them right or, alas, how I screwed the pooch. I will discuss my good calls and my bad ones – the truth is the truth, and there is much to learn from errors. I will include forecasts on nation-states, non-state forces and the development of social and cultural mores. I will first state the forecast as simply as possible and then explain my reasoning for making the forecasts. I welcome discussion or comments. I will try to respond to them all, although the number of readers has made this obligation difficult to honor. The explanation will seem terse, but my intention here is to give you a sense of how forecasting is done. Later, if desired, I will go deeper, although reading the whole should be done only by those of you without other lives.

9/11 and the Threat From al-Qaida

My first forecast concerned what would happen in the war against jihadists. This section was written circa 2005, not many years after Sept. 11, 2001, in an atmosphere of fear and anger in our nation. My forecast was that the ability of al-Qaida to strike the United States was rapidly declining.

Remember that this is not a forecast about the Muslim world but about jihadists, al-Qaida and attacks like 9/11.

At the time, the conviction that the jihadists would strike again ran high. I examined how the 9/11 attack occurred and found three elements. First, there were secure bases for recruiting and training al-Qaida operatives. Second, the operatives were inserted into the U.S. without detection. And finally, they were covertly trained by Americans in flying aircraft, which are by nature explosives.

The forecast required an understanding of U.S. capabilities and actions. The former required little inside knowledge, and the latter merely the obvious U.S. imperative to block future attacks. 9/11 worked extremely well as a one-time action. Replication was more difficult. U.S. intelligence identified and penetrated the recruitment facilities to the extent that jihadists could no longer be certain of an operative's loyalty. Second, visitors who had traveled to certain countries were barred from entry to the U.S. or detained. Finally, training facilities for pilots were put under extreme control. For my work, I had simply to have a minimal understanding of American capabilities and the organization of the jihadists. It was obvious that the U.S. had to act, and it acted to disrupt the jihadists. Islamic countries, for the most part, became reluctant to provide bases for training jihadists.

Therefore, I concluded that there would be neither a repeat of this attack nor any other successful attack involving large numbers of people. The key to this forecast was to look at the technical aspects of the 9/11 plot, consider U.S. counterterrorism capabilities, and draw the conclusion that a 9/11-type event would not take place.

China's Economic Rise

The second forecast was a comprehensive, long-term forecast for which I provided no dates. It was written in 2004 and focused on economic forces.

China was clearly entering a period of dramatic growth. I expected that this growth would result in substantial social and political problems, domestic and foreign. Foreign powers would resist China's growth, and internal inequality would create stresses. Beijing was doing everything in its power to keep various parts of China happy. The weak spot of China is the interior, the poorest part of the country. The leadership is trying to ship resources to the interior without generating resistance from the coastal regions. I forecast that this would lead to an economic slowdown driven by resistance to Chinese exports and undercapitalization of the coast. There are structural limits to Chinese growth.

I deliberately did not include dates. China had started growing rapidly, and how long it would grow depended on the global economy and internal stability. I couldn't predict this. However, given the early excitement about China's growth, I felt it worthwhile to point out that China, as an exporting country, could not grow fast enough or long enough to match the United States.

The method I used to reach this conclusion was to model the emergence and decline of other export-dependent economies under pressure to grow.

The first was the United States, which, after the Civil War, found its economy shattered and domestic demand limited. Existing manufacturers shifted to exporting around 1890. By 1910, the U.S. was producing and exporting about 50 percent of the world's industrial goods. World War I shattered Europe's economies, crippled U.S. exports and led to the Great Depression around 1929-30, 40 years after the U.S. had begun to grow.

Something similar happened to Japan. Shattered by the end of World War II, it turned to the export market, particularly the U.S., with great success in the 1950s. By the late 1970s, the U.S. started an economic downturn that eventually slashed Japanese exports and, by the 1980s, created what was called the Lost Decade. By 1990, Japanese banks were reeling and its economic miracle was over. This occurred 40 years after the start of the Japanese exporting miracle.

China was another example of an export-dependent economy, hostage to the ability and willingness of other countries to import. I avoided assuming it would follow the 40-year cycle, as I had only two prior examples, did not understand the time cycle and wrote it off as coincidence. Now with a third example, I still don't understand it but can't deny it. China's economic rise began in the 1980s, and now 40 years later in the 2020s, it is facing a similar economic slowdown to Japan.

After the Great Depression and World War II, the United States went on to great economic success, as did Japan following its economic failure. The failure of the Chinese economic model means a great deal of pain but in no way ends Chinese history. This of course depends on how the Chinese public responds to economic malfunction. That is a forecast to come.

Author: George Friedman

[Read more from this author on geopoliticalfutures.com](https://geopoliticalfutures.com)