

Planning in Geopolitical Uncertainty

Insight paper by Harmattan Risk

June 2025

Having done some recent work on geopolitical risk, partly around US tariffs and US-China trade friction, with a breather there is a chance to catch some of the ideas that came out of it. The organisations in question had a number of concerns, but cross-cutting all of them was the sheer uncertainty of this period in geopolitical evolution. Uncertainty makes it hard to know if plans and initiatives will stand the test of time, or become exposed to geopolitical forces that ultimately obviate or undermine them. Organisations do not know if they should hunker down and wait out change or do something / do anything to somehow keep pace with change. How to balance strategic consistency with flexibility is another challenge. Keeping our options open can mean not committing to anything significant, while overcommitment can result in vulnerability.

Uncertainty is not just hype or a buzzword. Driven by political and exogenous forces, it is a tangible phenomenon. Plus it is here to stay, and that means that no particular level of uncertainty will become normal – change is accelerating in fits and starts, and patterns of change keep shifting. Thus, organisations need to be able to make sense of uncertainty, plan within it, and in general become a lot more comfortable with it.

This paper will catch some of the main ideas from our recent focus on geopolitical uncertainty. We begin by explaining what uncertainty is and why it's become so acute. Then we consider how organisations can make sense of it and plan within it.

Managing uncertainty has received considerable scholarly and professional attention. This paper cannot do much of it justice. This is only based on some recent work, and hopefully provides a digestible and practical, if very top level, perspective.

A brief introduction to uncertainty in the current global context

Here's a story. For many years there were two giants standing on a big box. The things in the box slipped out sometimes, and created their own little sideshows, but for the most part the weight of the giants, and fear about them clashing, kept the lid more or less shut and its occupants relatively quiescent. Then one of the giants got tired and stepped down (while keeping hold of its arsenal), and the other one kept one foot on the box but became increasingly distracted now that it could finally

take its eyes off its opponent. Forces in the box came out and began to explore, making their own way in the world. Around the same time, something started to enable these forces to communicate and share ideas and in some cases mutual dislike. The Internet greased the wheels of change, and these once suppressed forces, and the old giants themselves, began to evolve ever more rapidly. Technology continually shrank the world, cramping these things and putting them into direct contact – when one twitched or sneezed, others felt it, and soon there was an ever more dense web of causal links shaping new patterns in the socio-political world.

One day an organisation decided it had to see into the future so it could decide between a few choices. It peered ahead, but all it could see was a haze or fog. It got up close and had a look, and the fog was really made of up of vibrating inter-causal links, pulling connected forces into shifting forms. It seemed impossible to untangle this ball of string. The organisation could not see ahead, and instead of making a confident choice it was paralysed, knowing it needed to do something but fearing that it would do the wrong thing, and leave itself exposed to forces that could hurt it.

In summary, uncertainty in our context is an outcome of complexity, and specifically dynamic complexity. A complex machine sitting in a warehouse might be hard to understand, but if we get up close and take our time we can make sense of it. A big ball of thin floss floating in a turbulent sea is another matter. Even if we could ever map its shape, as soon as we do the picture we have is history.

That, in a very small nutshell, is what uncertainty means and why it's become increasingly acute in the last couple of decades. It's the bane of a thorough planner who doesn't like loose ends and ambiguity, and it's a challenge for anyone who doesn't just survive moment to moment.

Making sense of, and planning within, uncertainty

During the recent work mentioned earlier, we developed outlooks, then things changed and seemed to obviate some or even all of them. Then we'd try again, and again a new plot twist was introduced, in some cases even changing the whole context. In the issues we were looking at, things seemed to be changing weekly for a while. So why bother with outlooks or projections if things are happening week by week? That question approaches the crux of that matter. The answer lies in another question: can you get from A to distant B looking only one step ahead? You'd have to be extraordinarily lucky. So we need to account for near-term volatility while keeping an eye on the future. And it would be better to do this in the same thinking, or we'd always be seeing two separate pictures, kind of like using a microscope with one eye and a telescope with the other.

We can imagine a mountaineering team trying to reach a high summit (in organisational terms that would be whatever definition of success or mission fulfilment fits a given entity's context). The mountain is unstable, with cracks in glaciers opening up, seracs collapsing, rockfalls and avalanches, and variable wind and storm patterns roaming across different mountain faces. We can even throw in a tribe of man-eating yetis lurking and stalking.

The team has binoculars and gets weather reports. They can see an obvious route to the summit and from a distance it looks clear. They start heading along the route and set up Camp 1 about 1000 meters higher up. From there, they can see the next leg better. It is now clear that an old rockfall actually creates a dangerous bottleneck. The latest weather report also says that this particular face could become stormy in a few days. The teams checks their map and scans ahead with binoculars. They now know, from direct experience, that things can be very different once you get up close or as time passes, so instead of looking for just one alternative to the original route, they look for a few. Two of them can be accessed from a small plateau to the east, one of them from a slope to the west. They decide to head east to have more options, and set up Camp 2.

At Camp 2 the latest weather report indicates that a storm *could be* coming, and if it did then one of the two eastern routes would be problematic. But using binoculars from Camp 2, they can now see that the potentially weather-affected route is less challenging. So the team decides to split up and take each route. They set off the next day, and Sub-Team A moves along its route (with easier terrain) and sets up Camp 3-A. Sub-Team B moves along its route, and finds that a section of the terrain is somewhat worse than expected: it's covered in broken shale which constantly shifts underfoot. It's not impassable but it's difficult. They set up Camp 3-B somewhat lower down from Camp 3-A.

The next day, the potential storm that could have affected Sub-Team A's route actually rolls in. It's too dangerous to use the route, and the summit window doesn't allow for much time to wait out the storm. They move to Camp 3-B and the team reunites before carefully proceeding through the slippery shale field. As they are about to set up Camp 4, they can now see something that had been too obscure to see before. There's a cave up the slope and hunched at the entrance are two beefy yetis, evidently guarding their family's abode. The team looks at their map and uses their binoculars, and plans a way ahead that skirts a ridge which should obscure them from the yetis' view. The next day they start off.

Midway to their intended Camp 5 site, an avalanche happens up ahead and blocks the route. But by now they have a much better view of the terrain leading up to the summit. There is a way from where they are right now to the summit. It looks doable if conditions are good but otherwise quite risky. They can also see from their elevated perspective that there is a route from their old Camp 4

that actually swings around further east, far to the side of the yeti cave and then up a ridge. Weather reports don't have anything to say about either section of the mountain, but the team knows that the weather can be very capricious.

They have a choice to make. One route avoids the unnerving prospect of passing near the yeti cave again but the terrain would be dangerous if the weather changed. The other means hoping that the yetis really didn't see them the first time they crossed nearby (they have no idea how good yetis' eyes are) but the terrain is safer. They could split the team, but the final summit leg will be a grind and it would be better if they were together to help each other. The team makes a bet. They bet that the yetis didn't see them the first time, and that they could get back down to Camp 4 and head onto the safer route without being attacked. Additionally, it occurs to them that if the yetis did see them the first time and are lying in wait, they might be deterred from attacking a bigger group more capable of defending itself. So the bet looks even relatively better, though still not by much.

They creep back to the ridge that sheltered them from the yetis' view, and using the cover of dusk make it onto the chosen summit route, where they set up their final camp. The next day they make it to the top. In our context the descent doesn't make much sense (rather, they'd climb another summit to get even further along in the pursuit of their objectives) so we'll leave it there for that mountaineering team.

The following year another team tried. It was led by a gung ho person whose enthusiasm infected the team, already comprised of very action-driven personalities. They took one look at the principal route from the mountain's base and collectively said, "We'll attack it or die trying". And they died.

The next year yet another team gave it a shot. They didn't want to make the mistake of their immediate predecessors, so they hedged their bets and sent up four different sub-teams, each using a different route. Only one sub-team made it to the top, in other words only a couple of people from the whole team. And one of them was killed by a yeti just after setting foot on the summit because for a yeti merely two people is no deterrence at all.

Summary

The first team kept their eye on the big picture and destination, updated their mental map of the best route and the challenges that lay before them as time brought them closer to an emerging reality, and made calculated bets, i.e. they intelligently took risks. The next team went blindly into the fog, committing all assets in one direction. The last team split their efforts so much that they could hardly claim a success, and they had little collective strength on any one route.

We'll leave it to readers to translate this into something more sophisticated, or to put it into process or method terms. Whatever way it's put, though, Informed common sense is an aspect of it, as well as treating any given concept of the future as a hypothesis to be tested and revised as a situation clarifies with time and proximity, or discarded when it no longer fits what seems to be taking shape. Organisations will need to do this explicitly for a while, but, over time, sense- and decision-making in uncertainty becomes more natural, and hence uncertainty itself becomes more normal and less daunting.

Copyright: Harmattan Risk 2025