What Are Scenarios?

Scenario methodologies provide a means to generate thought, think creatively, challenge participant's assumptions, and provide an effective framework for dialogue among a diverse group of stakeholders. In a word, scenarios are tools. Scenarios are tools to examine a number of different - highly probable - futures to better understand the driving forces of today, and develop the means to work towards preferred futures. Specifically, scenarios have several characteristics that make them very powerful for shaping foreign policy:

Scenarios are decision focused. Successful scenarios begin and end with clarifying the decisions and actions the participants must make if they are to successfully deal with an uncertain future. One common misconception of scenarios is that they are prescient, path dependent predictions of the future. On the contrary, scenarios are used to order our thoughts amid uncertainty, build common ground among differing perspectives, and think rationally about our options - but they should never divert attention away from the decision itself.

Scenarios are imaginative. As scenarios are about an unpredictable future, they require us to suspend belief for a moment. This allows, even encourages, participants to think more audaciously, to challenge their assumptions, create new contexts for existing decisions, and seek out new and creative ways to tackle decisions. At their core, scenarios are about learning. In examining a decision within the context of a number of different futures, scenarios impel us to reconsider our assumptions, challenge conventional wisdom, and think creatively about options. Scenarios force analysts who are paid to say, "I know" to take the necessary step of realizing that "I don't know." Hubris forever stands in the way of informed and imaginative thought.

Scenarios are logical. The scenario process is also logical, formal, and disciplined in its use of information and analysis. The creativity and imagination inspired by scenarios can only be as effective as it is based in sound reality. The process requires participants to challenge each other's thoughts, perceptions, and mind-sets. Scenarios provide a crucible to challenge our own ideas within a simulated future.

Lastly, scenario methodologies provide a common language for participants to communicate complex events and decisions (during and after the scenario exercise)

(Courtesy of the Global Business Network ™)