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**Foresight and its application
in ministries of foreign affairs***Javier Ignacio Santander**

Summary: Based on previous research regarding foresight capabilities of ministries of foreign affairs¹, this work focuses on the modern concept of foresight and of its application to foreign relations. Specifically, it aims to provide a summary of similarities observed in the way in which foreign affairs ministries have developed foresight capacity.

Introduction

Any country today aspiring to identify opportunities and advert possible dangers sufficiently in advance needs the capacity to penetrate through a convoluted present and attempt to construct a vision, vague as it may be, of the future. This is specially true for government agencies in charge of foreign policy, more exposed and therefore more sensible to the risks of operating in an unstable world, under a global order that shows signs of fatigue.

Foresight², understood as the attempt to apprehend the medium and long term using rigorous methods, offers an appropriate tool in this regard (BARROSO 2014). In the words of Gaston Berger, founder of French foresight studies:

“Sur une route bien connue, le conducteur d’une charrette qui se déplace au pas, la nuit, n’a besoin, pour éclairer sa route, que d’une mauvaise lanterne. Par contre, l’automobile qui parcourt à vive allure une région inconnue doit être munie de phares puissants. Rouler vite sans rien voir serait proprement une folie.”³

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The field of international relations imposes limitations to the use of foresight methodologies conceived in other domains. The notion of objectives, for example, common in military planning, is not automatically applicable to international affairs, where relevant factors are out of the control of any singular actor (MORGAN).

From an inductive point of view, the complexity of attempting a complete and detailed matrix of crossed interactions and influences in world politics humbles any serious attempt to comprehend the totality of the present reality, much less possible future realities (SCOBILIC y TETLOCK 2020), at least using current technologies.

However, the applicability of foresight to international relations does not seem to be in doubt (GONZÁLEZ URESTI 2015). Moreover, foresight has been recognized as a useful and even necessary activity in this field. It has already been pointed that “the urgency of planning in our age of international flux and danger needs no argument” (MORGAN).

Modern foresight

A methodological innovation: futures

Anticipation, or the search to avoid risks and

take advantage of opportunities, is an ancient human activity that has only recently aspired to transcend the empirical domain (DAHAN 2020).

Future exploration received a renewed impulse in the second half of the 20th century, giving rise to what can be considered the modern concept of foresight. It is during this time that the ambition to transform the future into an object of science seems to have taken significant steps, thanks to the development of new tools and technological advances (DANIEL 2011).

This impulse arose initially from a methodological innovation: to abandon the idea of one unique future and, in its place, to work on the basis of a multiplicity of possible evolutions and futures (*futuribles*). Each of these paths giving way to different scenarios, built of challenges and opportunities that deserve their own consideration.

The development of the method of scenarios had such a profound impact on how the future dimension was approached that it became the describing feature of foresight. Thus, despite the numerous definitions offered by the academic literature on the subject, Hughes de Jouvenel's pragmatic formula remains sufficient: foresight is the exploration

of possible futures that are gestating in the present, in order to identify the ones that are desired as well as the means to reach them (DE JOUVENEL 2004).

By applying this methodological novelty, the future stopped being presented as something predetermined by natural or divine forces and, therefore, outside the transformative reach of analytical rigour. The process of parceling the future into a series of possible scenarios reduced it to a size that is approachable⁴.

Also, this multiplicity of scenarios implies the possibility of measuring them according to common variables and, therefore, of comparing them on the basis of their relation to a certain external value. In this regard, scenarios may be evaluated according on their desirability, taking into account the interests or objectives of the subject undertaking the analysis⁵.

Geographical expansion

It is in the United States Air Force that the mentioned innovation seems to have first appeared, where the scenario method was applied to a government research and development project aimed at analyzing the possible implications of coming technological advances in the field of armed conflict⁶.

From the United States, this practice expanded to the rest of the world, used in public, private and academic domains and applied to different fields. The introduction of foresight in France deserves special mention, since it is where Gaston Berger actually gave the discipline its modern name: prospective (DANIEL 2011).

The French intellectual environment seems to have been particularly ripe for the spread of foresight studies. This was surely at least partly facilitated by the precedent of a General Planning Commission, that was already producing medium to long term plans on French economic development since 1946⁷. It is also entirely possible that foresight was seen as a tool for France to recover a vision of her future after the experiences suffered during World War II. This said, it is in France where foresight acquired a new source of development. Under the impulse of intellectuals such as Gaston Berger and Bertrand de Jouvenel, among others, foresight studies received valuable conceptual scaffolding as well as a growing number of spaces facilitating exchanges and experimentation on applied foresight.

In several countries of Latin America, foresight introduces itself in the 70s

(CORDEIRO 2016).

In Argentina, foresight application was at first driven by the public sector, although its focus was on identifying nascent technologies in strategic sectors of the economy, such as metallurgy.

Application to international relations

The field of international relations is also affected by this dynamic and it is possible to observe a gradual increase in its approach towards rigorous methodologies offered by foresight (GONZÁLEZ URESTI 2015), without prejudice to the limitations imposed by the particularities of the field in question.

In the public sector, this period also sees the creation within ministries of foreign affairs of the first units specifically dedicated to applying foresight methods to foreign policy (SCOBLIC y TETLOCK 2020). The first of its kind was the Policy Planning Staff of the United States' State Department. Established in 1947, this unit's purpose was to provide the then Secretary George Marshall with foresight analysis comparable to those which were being developed in the Department of Defense.

Several countries followed this example by establishing similar units in their respective

ministries of foreign affairs, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, Russia, France, India, among others. Argentina's Ministry of Foreign Relations is in this group of nations, having established its own foresight unit in 2010 the Centro de Estudios de Política Internacional [Center for Studies on International Policy], functioning directly under the Deputy Minister's office.

A frequent foresight unit

As part of a wider research project undertaken between 2020 and 2021 (SANTANDER 2021), ministries of foreign affairs were surveyed on the existence of foresight units⁸. These foresight units were then categorized using a set of variables measuring the degree to which they are integrated to the decision making process⁹, the range of activities they engage in in addition to foresight¹⁰ as well as some aspects concerning their internal functioning¹¹.

On the basis of the findings of the cited research it is possible to formulate an example of a frequent foresight unit, by consolidating observations on the most frequent levels of each variable that was measured¹²:

1. The unit's specific dedication to foresight

analysis constitutes its distinctive trait inside the ministry.

Frequency: *100 % of all cases.*

2. The unit is integrated into the decision making process by reporting directly to the Minister, the cabinet or to an intermediate office.

Frequency: *80 % of all cases.*

3. In addition to foresight, the unit develops other activities. More frequently, the unit coordinates certain aspects of foreign policy, develops links with the academic sector and maintains regular exchanges with counterparts in other countries.

Frequency: *50 % of all cases engage in at least one of these activities and 23 % of cases do so in all three of them.*

4. The unit defines its work agenda with a certain degree of autonomy. At the same time, it must respond to specific requirements that it may receive from the ministry's authorities.

Frequency: *80 % of 10 cases.*

5. Regarding internal functioning, the unit may or not choose to codify or set in writing its own working methods.

Frequency: *60 % does not engage in this type of codification while 40 % does so, from a total of*

10 cases.

6. The unit's work is supported by a mixed team, composed of career diplomats as well as experts.

Frequency: *77 % of a total of 13 cases.*

7. The internal dissemination of the unit's foresight analysis are restricted to high level authorities and certain departments.

Frequency: *70 % of a total of 10 cases.*

8. There are regular interactions between the foresight unit and other departments concerned with topics the unit might be approaching.

Frequency: *91 % of a total of 11 cases.*

9. When defining the object of a future analysis, the unit is not restrained to a particular field but instead tends to adopt an across-the-board approach.

Frequency: *100 % of all cases.*

Conclusions

While the issues briefly mentioned above could certainly be further expanded, the present work, it is hoped, can sufficiently sustain a few but not less significant conclusions:

Applicable and useful

The establishment and functioning of units dedicated to foresight analysis within ministries of foreign affairs proves in a practical manner that a number of countries consider foresight to be applicable to international relations. The allocation of resources to these types of units can be further interpreted as a recognition that the development of foresight capabilities is something worth pursuing, or simply useful.

Similarities in implementations

The study of these foresight units reveals how countries that aspire to develop these capacities have focused their efforts in this regard. It is of special interest to note that the introduction of foresight capabilities into foreign policy seems to have followed a relatively homogeneous path, given the similarities that foresight units inside ministries of foreign affairs present across a wide range of countries.

Study potential

Taking into account previous observations, further study of foresight units might offer insights into the reasons for these similarities as well as provide access to successful experiences from a growing number of countries that

decided to integrate foresight into the formulation and execution of foreign policy.

Annex

Chart 1:

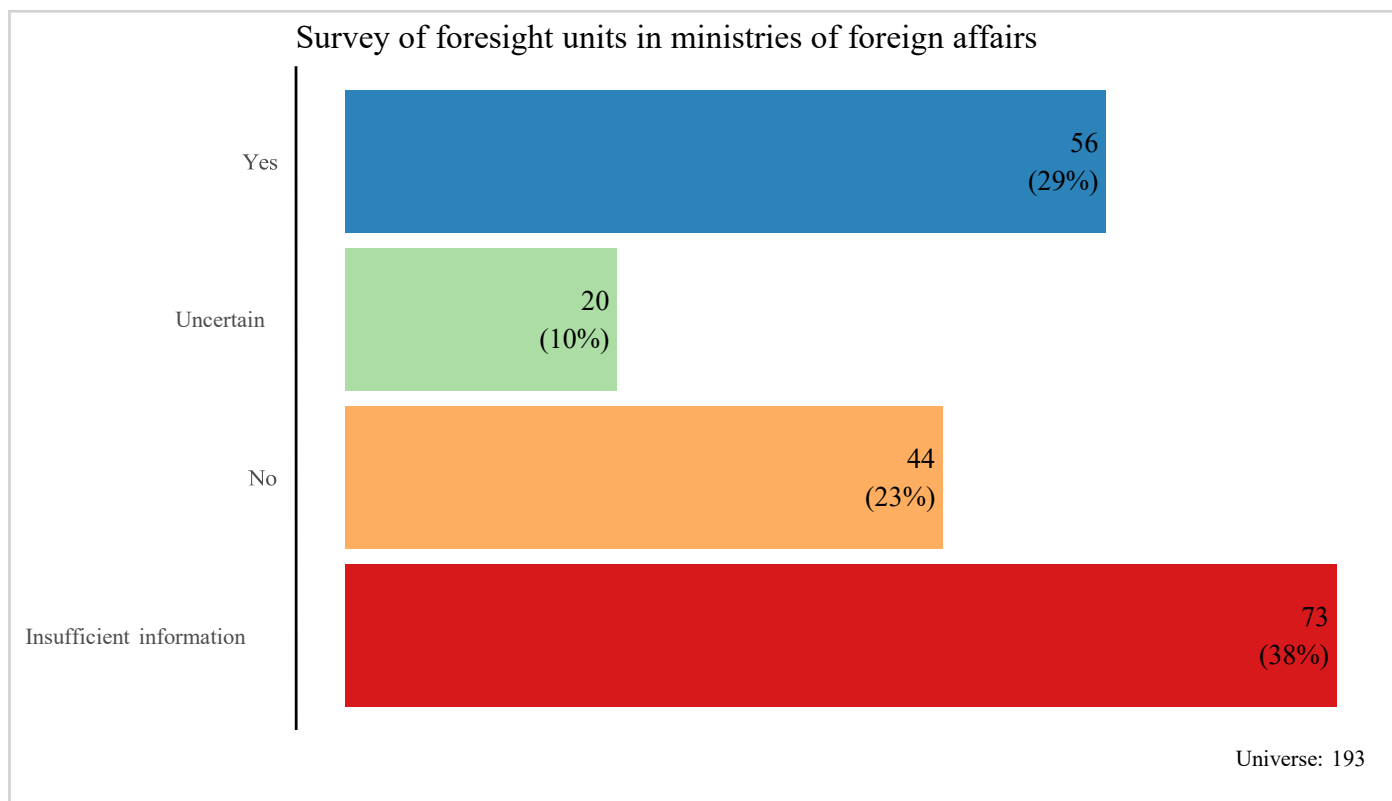


Chart 2:

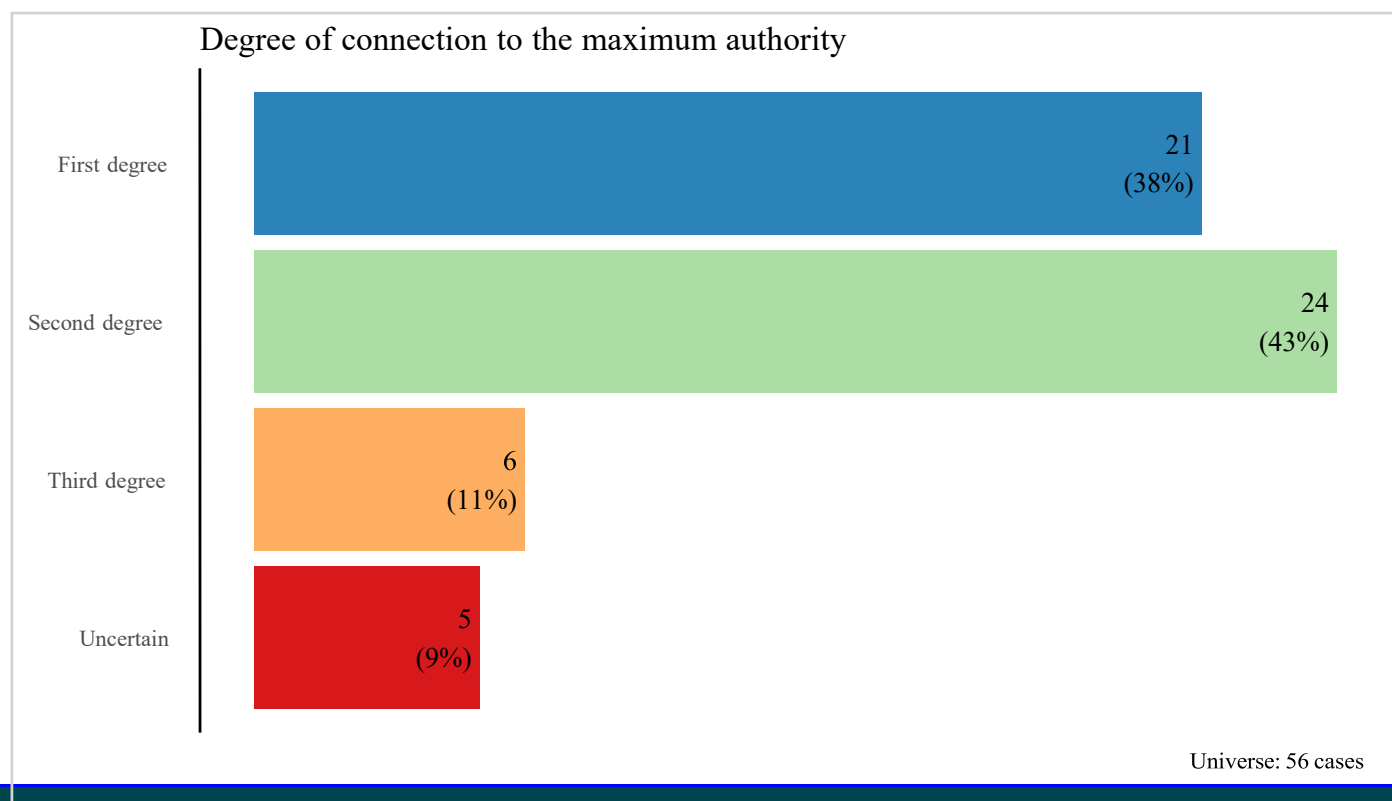


Chart 3:

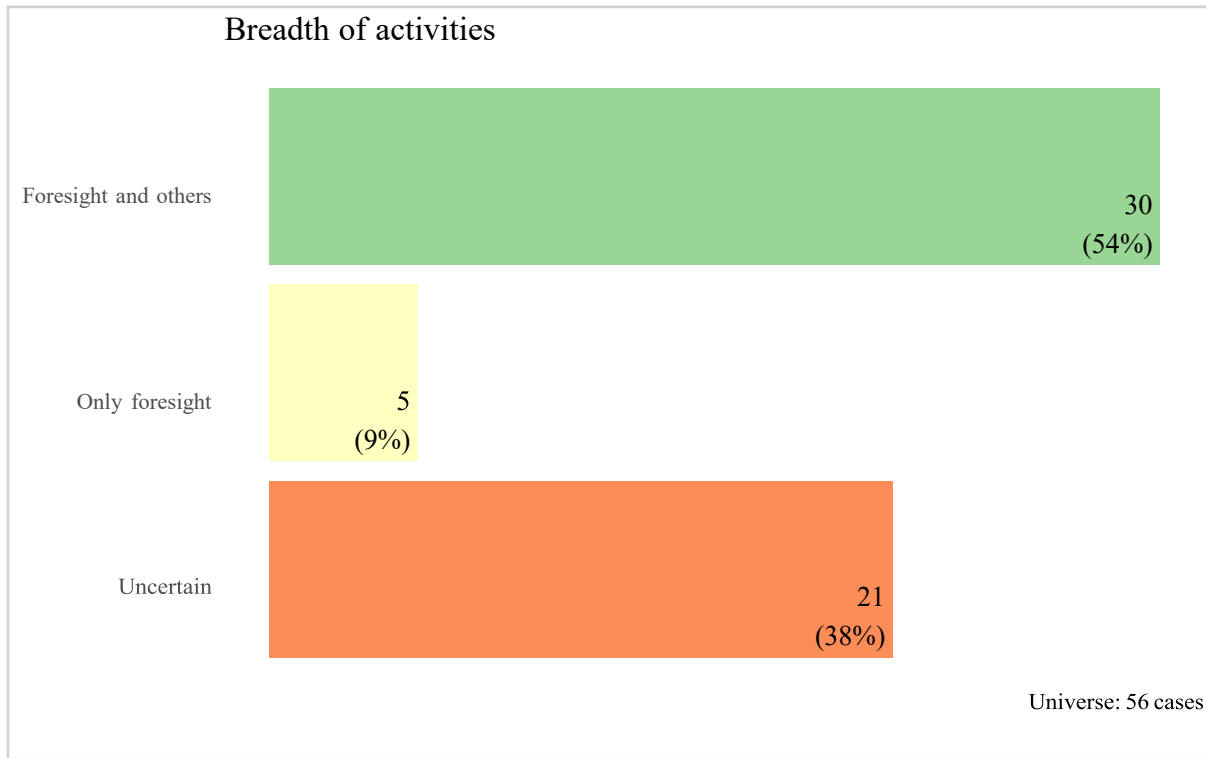


Chart 4:

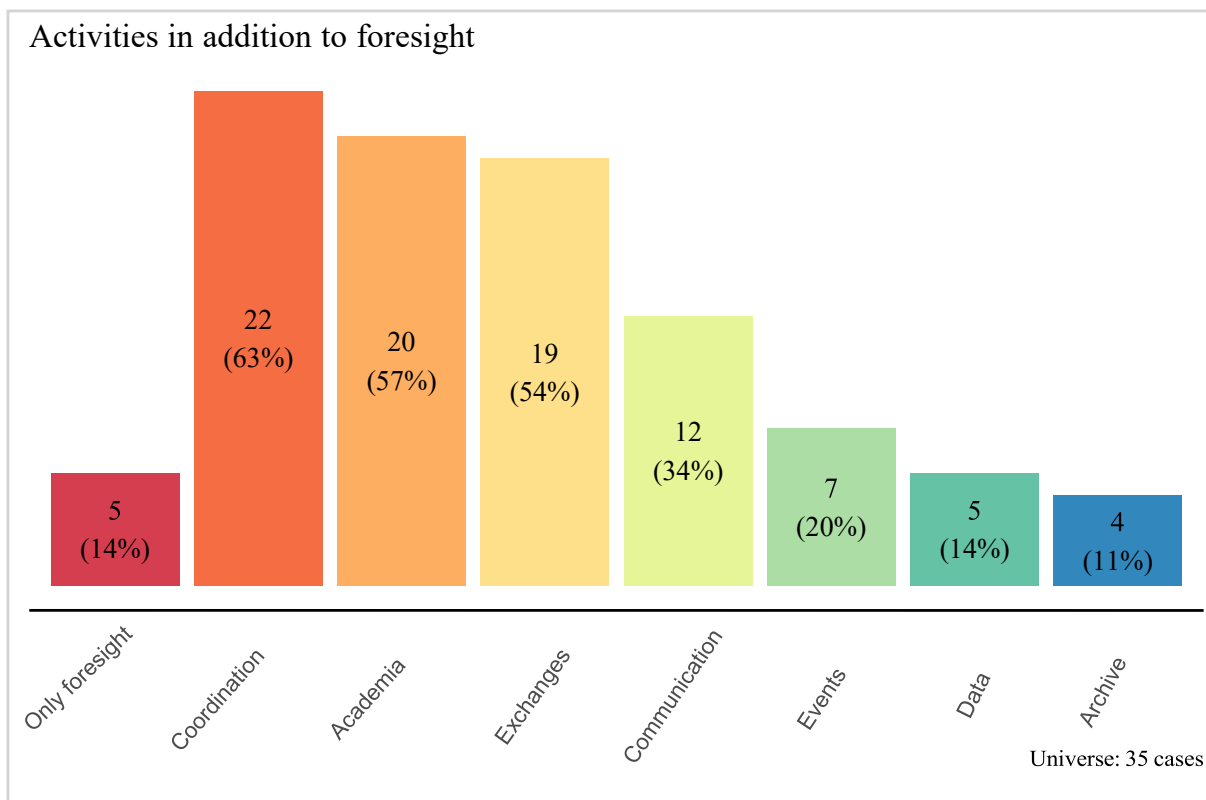
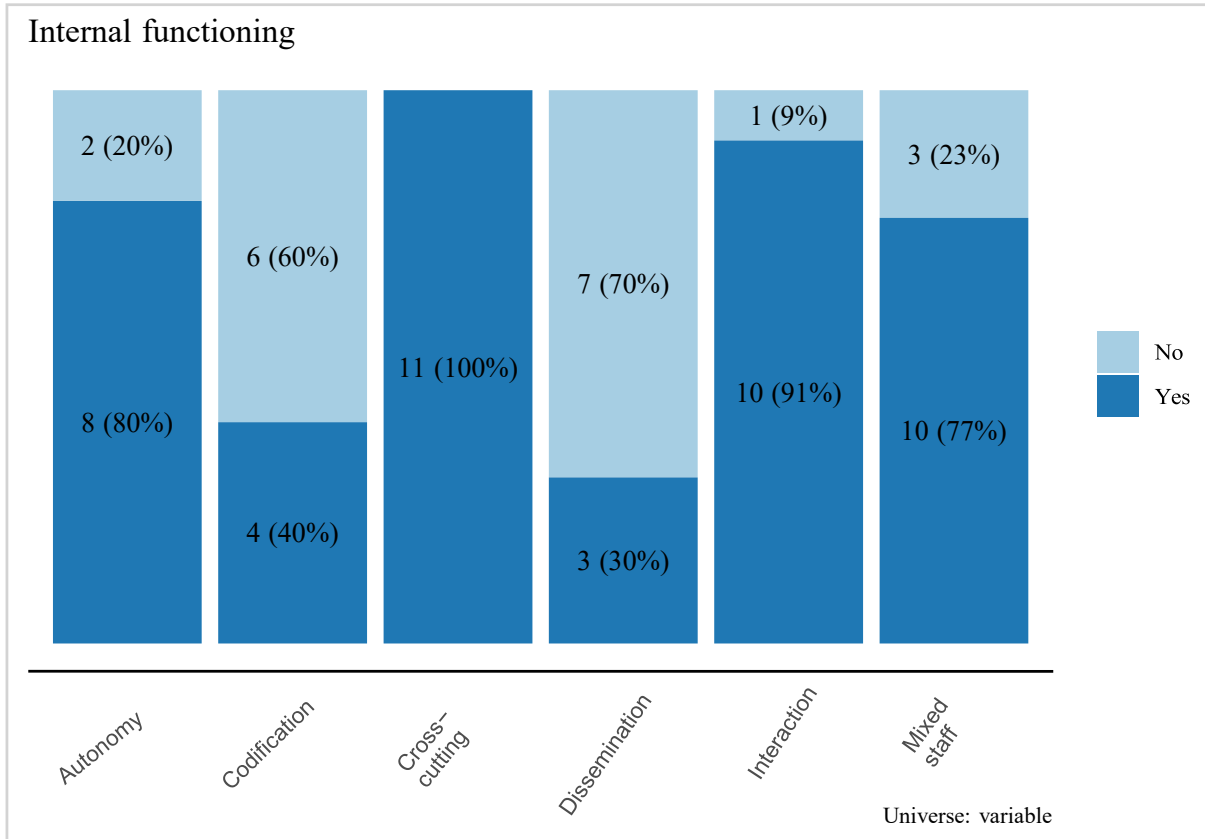


Chart 5:



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Think About the Future». Foreign Affairs, november/december 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-10-13/better-crystal-ball>.

Notes:

- (1) See SANTANDER (2021). Copies may be requested by mail to isen@cancilleria.gob.ar
- (2) The term foresight is used here as interchangeable with policy planning, a formula that seems to be more common in North American literature.
- (3) Translated quotation: On a well-known road, the driver of a cart moving slowly at night needs but a small lantern to light his way. On the other hand, a car traversing an unknown region at high speed must be equipped with powerful headlights. Driving fast without seeing anything would be madness. (BERGER 1957).
- (4) This allows for the exploration of the future and so is known as the *exploratory dimension* of foresight activities.
- (5) This is known as the *normative dimension* of foresight.
- (6) The institutionalization of said project eventually gave place to RAND Corporation, whose name derives precisely from “*research and development*”.

- (7) On the link between foresight studies in France and the Plan it is worth mentioning that two officers of the Commission were put in charge of the policy planning staff of the French ministry of foreign affairs when it was created in the 70s.
- (8) Foresight units were found in ministries of foreign affairs of at least 56 countries: Algeria, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Benin, Bhutan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Cameroon, Chile, China, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Gabon, Georgia, Germany, Greece, India, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Latvia, Macedonia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mali, Nepal, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Qatar, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda, United Kingdom and United States.
- (9) Integration was measured in degrees of connection to the maximum authority of the ministry.
- (10) Activities were grouped into the following general types: Academia, Archive, Communication, Coordination, Data, Events, Exchanges and Foresight.
- (11) Functioning aspects were measured as binary data points in the following categories: Autonomy, Codification, Cross-cutting, Dissemination, Interaction and Mixed staff.
- (12) Each of these observations can be complemented by the charts provided for in the Annex.

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