

“Ten Questions with Thomas P.M. Barnett”

Mark Safranski

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Dr. Barnett is the author of the newly released [Great Powers: America and the World after Bush](#).

1. Fareed Zakaria recently wrote in *Newsweek* that America is in need of a new grand strategy. What is “grand strategy” and why is it vital that America have the right one?

First, as suggested by Fareed’s understandable lament, grand strategy is at least a vision of where you want to go next. That is something America is clearly lacking right now and probably will continue to lack across Obama’s first couple of years. The new administration is likely to be consumed—navigation-wise—by the economic crisis and the inevitable drawdown on Iraq and redirect to Afghanistan/Pakistan.

Ideally, grand strategy is a vision of your preferred future world in terms of its rough structure and governing dynamics (this is how power is distributed and these are the goals that most people/nations are working toward). That future world vision, to be attractive to your own citizens, needs to be one in which your way of life is significantly advantaged, otherwise you won’t attract any popular will for the required effort/sacrifice. That’s the image. The action, then, is directing all available dimensions of your nation’s power toward that goal. Americans tend to think that political-military stuff leads the way (i.e., make ‘em democracies, fight the bad guys), but it’s really the softer stuff that historically proves more profound—namely, the attractiveness of our social rule-sets (the sheer individual freedom to pursue your definition of happiness) and the empowering nature of our entrepreneurial economics (build that better mousetrap and you’re Bill Gates).

What I try to do in *Great Powers* is give the reader a deep contextualization of where we are in history. I want to make clear to the reader that this globalization is of our making—the result of a conscious grand strategy that I can trace back to at least Teddy Roosevelt’s dream of making the world more hospitable to America’s need to simply be all that it can be. That somewhat undifferentiated vision got sharper with Wilson, after WWI. The vision became reality with

FDR, after WWII, when he set in motion the international liberal trade order that begets the West and, in turn, the globalization we enjoy today. That model of states uniting and economies integrating and defense shifting to security and a uniquely competitive religious landscape was built here—first—in these United States, the planet’s original multinational political and economic and security union. With Deng’s decision to marketize China, creating a critical mass for globalization in the early 1980s, we’ve since seen that model spread like wildfire around the planet, reformatting traditional societies in a dynamic right out of Marx’s *Das Kapital*. In short, our revolutionary vision for ourselves has now become our intentional revolutionary vision for the planet. This made-in-America, globalization—love it but you can’t leave it—now encompasses everybody save the “bottom billion.”

To me, that’s an amazing grand strategic trajectory that we’ve already accomplished, effectively killing great power war in the process. I want Americans to know their history and take pride in this stunning accomplishment. I want them to realize where we stand now—on the verge of creating the world’s first truly global middle class. And I want them to understand that we’re effectively the one union on the planet that can either keep things cool or blow them up over the next decade or so, depending on how we respond to this, the first truly global recession in the first truly globalized economy in human history.

So the book’s really about navigation, which is the essence of grand strategy, and I designed it to be an intellectual journey akin to John Boyd’s OODA loop: I want you, the reader, to *observe* where we are now in history (post-Bush), then *orient* yourself in America’s long-standing grand strategic arc (our American System-cum-globalization), then *decide* on a series of strategic realignments (economic, diplomatic, security, technological, social) I think we need to make as a nation in the days ahead, and finally *act* by doing what you can to bring it about.

I think everybody in this super-empowered age needs their own foreign policy, I just want my “300”-million, that is—all paddling in the same direction, because if we don’t move faster than the current, we are simply moved by the current.

And that’s not who we are.

2. We have a new administration and a world undergoing an economic crisis and geopolitical uncertainty. You have previously declared that “Disconnectedness defines the danger”. Is “disconnection” in the Gap still the primary global danger for the Obama administration?

To me, it’s an overarching goal at all times and certainly a measure of progress for any interventions—as in, Did we leave the place more connected than we found it? But I see disconnectedness more as an enduring condition or characteristic marker of danger than the primary danger itself in any one period. What I like policymakers to consider is the system as a whole, and not get wrapped around the axle with just today’s preeminent scenarios. For example, today isn’t captured by a laundry list of al Qaeda, Pakistan, Iran, North Korea, etc. That’s a to-do list, alright, but that’s not a grand strategic appreciation of the system right now, one that’s undergoing magnificent and overwhelming positive change through globalization’s advance, even as that advance inevitably creates tumult.

To do grand strategy correctly, in my mind, you're constantly calculating the downstream system effects of any choices you make regarding your day-to-day to-do list, accepting your "losses" with equanimity and your "wins" with an urgency to keep up the positive momentum. So when I look at the world right now, I worry most about America's reaction to the economic crisis, because the rest of the planet will take such strong cues from our behavior ("Is it time to go super-protectionistic?" "Ramp up defense spending out of fear?" etc.). That's why Obama's calm demeanor and systems-thinking approach is so welcome right now. His focus on the American middle class is a great signal, because it says to other nations, "This is what needs protecting right now." The rich want protection from the poor and the poor want protection from their circumstances, but it's the middle that wants protection from the future—as in, "we've got a decent life and we aim to keep it." Keep your middle happy and your country is stable. Increasingly, the same is true about the planet with the emerging global middle class. That's why this crisis can be so precedent-setting in tone.

As for geopolitical uncertainty, I just don't see that much. We know where China and Russia and India and Brazil need to go and thus where they're headed. No mystery surrounding the EU or Japan, either. We're definitely managing a complex transition from weak connectivity to far more profound connectivity in both the Middle East and—if you're paying attention—Central Asia, and yeah, there will be bad actors galore in this frontier-integration process, but we have to look at that with a practiced eye—as in, we've done this before in our history and we know how to optimize our tools. So, in sum, all the big pieces are pretty clear. At this point, we're working the weeds, and we should keep that reality in mind.

So again, I would say the big thing Obama needs to concentrate on right now isn't any global war, but America's reaction to the economic crisis. This is a global economic and trade system of our creating, so our signaling matters most. Get that right and the other realignments I advocate in the book will come about naturally with time.

3. You are the author of a groundbreaking, bestselling book, *The Pentagon's New Map* that had a significant impact on how the Defense Department conceptualized post-Cold war security environments. You followed PNM with a more prescriptive work, *Blueprint for Action*. What kind of a book is *Great Powers: America and the World after Bush*?

It's a book that's mostly about creating strategic self-awareness for America and Americans. I think we've lost the grand strategy skill set because it's been so long since we have had to conceptualize the world coherently—really since the end of the Second World War. Nowadays, the closest thing we have to real grand strategists are op-ed columnists, but they simply don't suffice.

You can say we were confronted with such a need for self-awareness after the Cold War's end, but it just didn't happen. Somewhat naturally, relief overtook our sense of responsibility. We wanted a break and so we damn well took one. As I argued in *New Map*, we simply cruised through that decade with a lot of assumptions about how the system was strong enough to manage itself largely through economics. We didn't appreciate that globalization's rapid

advance and aggressive reformatting of traditional societies would create a significant but largely different security workload from that of the Cold War.

But our difficulties in Iraq (and soon in Afghanistan/Pakistan) triggered a profound rethink within our military that was long-delayed. Since—unfortunately—grand strategic thinking tends to be jumpstarted more by defense issues than economic ones, we're finally getting to that reconceptualization of the world that we should have pursued two decades ago. I suppose it's only natural—heck, probably healthy—that we encounter a profound economic crisis at the same time.

So again, *Great Powers* is about contextualizing the world in a deep sense and connecting Americans to the grand strategic arc that has long animated our interactions with the world. We lost our self-awareness on that subject and, now need it desperately again. That's why sites like *Small Wars Journal* are so crucial: this isn't some knowledge that can be passed down from the mountain top by Moses; this is a dialogue that must occur throughout our political and security establishments.

4. In *Great Powers*, you delve deeply into American history. What lessons did you find in our nation's past that the diplomat overseas, the Army colonel in Afghanistan or the U.S. Aid worker in Africa should know to navigate their mission today?

This is all about frontier integration. Globalization is like America's rapid and aggressive push Westward across the 19th century: a lot of the same bad actors and a lot of the same tools applied. So don't be surprised when the Pinkertons show up, or when the covered wagons are attacked, or when the Injuns head to the Badlands for sanctuary. Thus, the goals of our frontline players are fairly straightforward: create the baseline security to allow the connectivity to grow. Focus on social trust and institutions as much as possible, but co-opt existing structures whenever and wherever you can. It doesn't have to be perfect and it sure as hell doesn't have to measure up to America's mature standards. This is a frontier setting within globalization—treat it as such. The good news is, the settlers are already there, with more uncredentialed wealth than we realize (see Hernando DeSoto), if you respect their existing rule-sets and realize they will change only when the locals see the need themselves, so no instant rule-set packages applied by outsiders, please. Finally, acknowledge that with growing connectivity with the outside world, you will see more nationalism, more ethnic tensions, and more religious identity. These are all natural reactions, and not signs of your failure, so patience is the key.

5. In Chapter 6, you discuss the evolution of the new *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* in detail and favorably cite such figures as Gen. Wallace, Gen. Mattis, Sarah Sewall and John Nagl. I know that you have been following the ongoing debate over COIN between Col. Nagl and Col. Gian Gentile. How important is this debate and where do you stand?

The debate is crucial because, unless we get off this additive mindset by which we *add* terrorists on top of regional rogues and then *add* that mess on top of “near-peer competitors” and then *add* that mess to undue fears of nuclear proliferation, we will underserve the market that most needs our attention right now—subnational violence. Globalization is simply remapping a lot of fake states out there, so we need to get good at dealing with failed states and insurgencies. When we

do, the world will invariably present fewer and fewer locations where transnational terrorists and global insurgents can find sanctuary. The inevitable re-mapped world will be far more easily integrated into the global economy, meeting the needs of the rising great powers of our age. If we manage that process badly, though, eventually those rising great powers will be forced to make those interventions on their own. If that happens it will likely trigger competitive rivalries that will serve nobody's long-term purposes.

Inside our own military, you want a shift of resources to the small wars world (SysAdmin duties, I call them) away from our big-war Leviathan force, because the more that history forces that mis-equipped big-war force to engage in such activities, the weaker that force becomes and the more it invites rivalry from other great powers. So I argue that a shift to a small-wars focus (not totally, of course, but suitably given the current and future workload staring us in the face) is actually what *saves* the Leviathan instead of “ruining” it, as some claim.

I want that Leviathan to stay strong and maintain a high barrier to entry to the marketplace called great-power war. I see the current environment, and the workload presented, as endangering this unique asset. Thus, the need to switch sufficient resources to the small-wars crowd. But this notion of keeping our powder dry and playing down our participation in globalization's advance and the many small-war situations it engenders . . . that, to me, is a dangerously self-fulfilling prophecy—as in, if you want great-power war, then go ahead and ignore your current SysAdmin duties.

So no, it's not some binary choice but a reasoned balancing that today says, “favor the small-wars crowd. Give them what they need to do the job.

6. How does COIN doctrine fit in with your key vision of separating elements of national power into “Leviathan” and “System Administration” and the present reality of what you call “The privatization of American foreign policy”?

Very well. What's crucial about the COIN doctrine is that it returns our attention to the people as opposed to the enemy per se; it helps us keep our eye on the prize. “Draining the swamp” isn't about killing terrorists but filling in that space with political stability and economic opportunity, because jobs are your only exit strategy. So clearly, the new COIN doctrine provides a lot of institutional cover for a host of skill-sets that have been historically devalued by the Leviathan force.

The COIN debate also indicates the growing influence of a generation of officers who have spent their entire careers engaging in more SysAdmin-style duty—the post-Cold War generation now reaching their second and third and fourth stars in the personages of Petraeus and Mattis. This is natural and good, as institutionally threatening as it may seem to the big-war military-industrial complex.

But even there, check out Lockheed-Martin's purchase of Pacific Architects and Engineers, locating it within its newly configured profit-engine known as Information Systems and Global Services. That's LockMart recognizing that its future will be more about infrastructure

development in emerging markets than merely servicing the Leviathan's platform needs. So, it's not that hard to attract the private sector to this party.

Finally, and I spend a lot of time describing this in the book, check out my own company's economic development work in Kurdish Iraq, where we're pioneering a "connect-up" model of rapidly onboarding the Kurdistan economy to the global economic grid. What we see in a COIN is the military's realization—hell, *desire*—for some clear delineation of where its responsibilities end and where the private sector's begins. Unless the military reaches out in that manner, it ends up being stuck with the quagmire that should logically be transformed into a "virgin market." So being bold on this point actually plays to the military's conservative ambitions—i.e., it wants to know when it gets to go home.

7. President Obama is being lobbied by many factions in the national security community to make their agendas, ranging from nuclear disarmament, to engaging Iran to "surging" in Afghanistan, the centerpiece of his administration's new approach to foreign policy. What should their top three priorities be?

His fundamental goal should be to effectively socialize every critical issue (the day-to-day line-up of which is always hard to predict) with the rising great powers of the age—meaning, China, India, Russia, Brazil and the next tier below (e.g., Turkey, Iran). Anything that smacks of America trying to have its cake and eat it too will simply meet up with the obstructionism of these players. Also, we've got to stop pretending that getting NATO on board constitutes a great-power quorum. So, in sum, I'm more concerned with accommodating the rise of these great powers than I am with dealing with any one crisis du jour.

Having said that, I think Afghanistan/Pakistan takes clear priority for Obama given his campaign promises, so my only advice there is follow your instincts to regionalize the solution-set as much as possible. Get Russian troops in there. Get Chinese troops in there. Get Indian troops in there so New Delhi feels like it's doing something proactive after Mumbai, otherwise you might end up with a diversionary war in Kashmir. Do not pretend that there is a 100% American solution because there isn't one. Many others will have to share in and thus shape any perceived "victory"—just like in Iraq.

On Iran, I think Obama needs to simply dial down our fixation on Iranian nukes. Iran with nukes is not the end of the world. We know how to deal with revolutionary powers who talk big; we did it before with the USSR and the PRC. The Shia bomb isn't a new animal, so please, let's avoid having our entire foreign policy held hostage to its threat. Instead, simply extend our nuclear umbrella to Israel and let Tehran know in no uncertain terms that if they make the slightest move in that direction—either directly or through proxies—that we will liquidate them completely and there'll be no Iran on the far side of that stupid move, meaning we will strike pre-emptively on the side of caution. We should be very clear here: America can and will do this. We've done in the past and we got away with it and we can do it all over again and get away with it in the same manner. Iran wants to be in the "big boy" club? Well . . . that's the rule-set they'll encounter.

Finally, as for nuclear disarmament, that's just nonsense. Nukes are good. They killed great-power war. Going to zero is plain stupid. It'd make the first idiot dictator with a bomb the equivalent of the one-eyed man in the land of the blind. I see no reason whatsoever to go down that naïve and utopian path. That stuff is just peddled by old men who feel guilty about the past. Let them pass on in peace, but please, don't endanger this world and its future by placating such foolishness.

8. In Chapter 7, you describe the “search for deterrence 2.0”. Why are you ultimately optimistic about the ability of the military and national security community to handle the threat posed by non-state actors, networks of transnational terrorists and “Global Guerillas”?

The complexity of this world is not some accident. It was built with enough resilience to move us all collectively ahead. The defects of design and operation are many, and they're constantly being exposed through neglect and stupidity and mistakes and accidents and sheer growth strain. Yes, bad actors can play a similar role, but I've not seen anything in history to prove they're capable of a dominant, history-shaping role. Indeed, when we give them that power through our knee-jerk responses to their acts, we simply elevate them unduly and cause more trouble for ourselves than their initial attacks create.

Those who argue that nonstate actors rule perceive the absolute decline of the nation-state. Countering them are the Orwellian dystopians who see all this new technology and complexity creating means by which the state rules all. Both of these visions are extreme and unhelpful, except to remind us where the boundaries lie.. The truth continues to be found in the middle. But because we're living through an age of great frontier-integration, the nonstate actors seem more prominent than usual. But the “wild West,” as we once found, only stays wild for so long. With global warming coming on fast, the interdependency quotient on this planet will skyrocket. Our collective response to that emerging reality will swamp any threat posed by “global guerillas” and the like, so please, no hysterics on that score.

9. The strategic implications of a rising China has figured prominently in your writings and *Great Powers* is no exception. Why is China today more like Teddy Roosevelt's America to our Great Britain and not like the Kaiser's Germany?

China, if one looks closely enough, is trying to replicate our economic model of big firms surrounded by a sea of entrepreneurial firms. Yes, over the next two decades China's pursuit of that path will create growing popular demand for a more pluralistic system, and in the “Communist” Party's response to those demands, there is always the danger that it will retreat in more firm authoritarianism, but that doesn't equate to a Kaiserian Germany segueing into Nazi-style aggression. We simply don't have that system of globalization today as Europe did back then with colonialization. We also have the crystal ball effect of nuclear weapons.

But more to the point, China's never—across its thousands of years—displayed any real ambition for empire beyond its historical borders, and if you check out the emerging middle class in China, there's simply no stomach for it. Not too many parents over there are looking to send

off their one child to die in some great power war that self-destructively eliminates its most important economic bond to the outside world—access to America’s markets and technology. So the simplest explanation of why China won’t be Kaiserian Germany or Nazi Germany is that we’ve already infected its society with the sort of consumerism and middle-class ambition that makes that path simply inconceivable to a populace with a reasonably clear sense of what’s possible in terms of great-power conquest in this world. They want ahead alright. They’re just not stupid enough to believe that’s how it’ll work. Check out China’s rising, forty-something sixth-generation of leaders on this question if you think I’m being naïve. Most were educated here in the States, and they’re a sharp bunch who recognize the 21st century as being anything but some rote rerun of the 19th.

10. In *Great Powers*, you have articulated a strategic realignment of not just American policy or force structure but the global system itself. Where are we headed and why should we embrace the future you describe?

We’re headed to a world of great regional unions modeled—in no small part—on these United States. That future won’t be an Americanization of the world by any stretch, because I see local needs shaping local outcomes just like they did here.

Over the next two decades, the game-changing element will be the rise of a global middle class. Our grand strategy must consist in accommodating and encouraging that middle class’s rise, plus shaping its emerging ideology. Get that right and everything else falls in place in terms of our collective responses to resource constraints, global warming and the like. Plus, it creates the political landscape necessary to handle all of the coming technological advances in biology, which will be socially challenging in the extreme (redefining the world’s religions, for example). Why embrace this future? It’s essentially one of our creating, meaning it will be the one we feel most comfortable living within and prospering. But more to the point: absent our leadership this global system could easily devolve back toward the same self-destructive rivalries that have destroyed other, lesser versions of globalization in the past.

Our children simply deserve better than that from us.

In conclusion, is there anything you would like to say directly to *Small Wars Journal* readers?

I will close by saying that a lot of the heavy lifting in the years ahead, to execute any grand strategy, is going to be done by the people in the *SWJ* community. There is a lot of work to do, some of it dangerous work done which will be continue to be done by the American military. I want it to be done well, done smart, done right, so that all of that work and sacrifice makes the world a better place.

I hope the people who read *SWJ* will read my book, and I hope they will find the ideas in it useful. And I look forward to hearing their ideas, based on their knowledge and experience, in response.

Mark Safranski is a contributing author to [Threats in the Age of Obama](#) and was the editor of [The John Boyd Roundtable: Debating Science Strategy and War](#), published by Nimble Books. He is the founder of [Zenpundit.com](#) and is a contributing writer for Pajamas Media. Safranski can also be found blogging at [Chicagoboyz.net](#), [CTLab](#) and [Progressive Historians](#).

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