

Creed of an American Grand Strategist

I am a great power. And so can you!



by Thomas P M Barnett

America today must dramatically realign its own post-9/11 trajectory with that of the world at large - a world undergoing deep transformation amidst great structural uncertainty. This realignment will require a new understanding of the world and America's role in its evolution. Such an understanding is found in the realm of strategic thinking known as grand strategy.

Every functioning state pursues some form of grand strategy, either purposeful or accidental. Sometimes leaders will seek to sell a national strategy to the public, hoping to garner popular support. Other times they will keep it secret, because they can or because they must. In ages past, one leader might encompass this whole process. In today's modern government, the norm is for hundreds and even thousands of key people to be involved, for change to be incremental and spread over years, and for significant disjuncture to occur only with shifts in top political leadership.

So when I speak of affecting significant and lasting change in America's grand strategy, or its systematic approach to shaping this age of globalization, understand that I target not merely one administration or one party or one generation of leaders, but my nation's sense of historical purpose - its political soul. America's grand strategy must reflect its complex internal make-up as a people, but likewise its magnificent impact upon the world as its most successful multinational political and economic union. It must at once incorporate America's imagined identity (we are the most synthetic of the world's political creatures) and the world's emerging ambitions, which we have enabled through our stewardship of global affairs. This challenge properly met, we bequeath unto our children a most wonderful world. Abandoned, we condemn them to a fate of dead-ended dreams and open-ended conflicts.

The modern grand strategist therefore aims to forge a lasting chain from analysis synthesized to vision spread to values embedded to leadership executed. A grand strategy is not an "elevator speech." It cannot be slipped in like a password. Its why must be inculcated in younger minds so that, when they become older hands, these leaders know which levers of power to pull - and when.

Grand strategy is like imagining the chess game from start to finish, except that, in today's world of rapidly spreading globalization, it's never quite clear how many players are involved at any one moment or which pieces they actually control. That may make it seem like there are no rules, but that means it's important to make explicit our definition of the rules and realize that playing consists largely of making our rule set seem attractive to others, regardless of how the game unfolds. This game-within-the-game resembles the highly iterative process of generating our own grand strategy. As Parag Khanna argues in his book, *The Second World*, the line distinguishing geopolitics (the relationship between power and space) and globalization (the global economy's expanding connectivity) has been effectively erased. Therefore, my grand strategy—regardless of content—is mostly about trying to shape every other state's grand strategy more than they shape mine. What was once highly hierarchical is now far more peer-to-peer in dynamics, thanks to globalization's stunning advance. Still, while all great powers have grand strategies, some matter more than others.

After two decades of engaging the US national security establishment as a grand strategist, these are my articles of faith:

To be plausible, grand strategic vision must combine a clear-eyed view of today's reality with a broad capture of the dominant trends shaping the near-term environment. It cannot posit sharp detours, much less U-turns, in history's advance. This river's course is set even as our journey upon it remains fraught with both promise and peril. Thus the vision does not seek to change human nature, which got us to this point quite nicely, but to placate it, thereby ensuring the portability of its strategic concepts (the dos and don'ts) among minds from different backgrounds, cultures and ages. No new human is required, just a solid fit between today's inexhaustible ingenuity and tomorrow's finite possibilities. So check your social Darwinism at the door, for all must gain admittance to this kingdom.

Grand strategic analysis starts with security, which is always 100 percent of your problem until it's reasonably achieved. Then it's at most about 10 percent of your ultimate solution. Scaling Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" involves far more than reaching that first rung. In any given conflict, if job creation is your only realistic exit strategy, then winning hearts and minds is an ephemeral victory at best. The grand strategist prefers stomachs and wallets any day. Humans are social creatures. They seek connectivity with one another across every possible avenue, leveraging each new technology to ends always self-fulfilling and sometimes self-destructive. This eternal search for new forms of connectivity defines globalization's ceaseless advance throughout human history.

To remain realistic in this age of emerging hyper-connectivity, grand strategy must begin with the premise that security challenges will grow exponentially as a result of technology's advance - the more connections, the more potential failure points. But to admit that challenge is not to surrender to its implied "chaos," a judgment frequently employed by security experts to curtail serious exploration of grand strategy. All too often, they prefer to focus on contingency planning in a complex, "uncontrollable" world. Grand strategy purposefully aspires to be proactive, not merely protecting itself from failure, but exploiting avenues of success as they reveal themselves. Grand strategy is not a hypothesis but diagnosis combined with prescription.

Grand strategy is not clairvoyance; it does not seek to predict future events, but rather to contextualize them in a confident worldview. The goal is an opportunistic outlook that welcomes the churn of global events for the new, alternative pathways presented ("I hadn't considered going that way up to now!"), eschewing the fatalism encouraged by mass media commentary ("These events have - yet again - cast grave doubts upon the possibility of achieving ..."). The unforeseen need not be the unexploited. In times of crisis, people naturally hesitate in choosing between what is right and what is easy, hence grand strategy must inculcate among its decision-makers a sense of confidence toward bargain-seeking behavior, both in terms of buying low (every crisis generates bargains in some form) and settling fast (i.e., cutting losses quickly). To employ a poker analogy, the grand strategist favors no chip - save his last. While the ultimate goal is always to increase his pot of earnings, the proximate goal in any hand is to gain admittance to the next round of play.

Grand strategy encourages realistic thinking about risk by comprehensively cataloguing the nation's full complement of resources. The government may present both face and fist to the world outside, but it hardly reflects the country's full instrumentality. This vast reservoir lies with the people and their collective ingenuity, which may or may not find adequate expression in the national economy, depending on the amount of economic freedom allowed therein. Americans tend to be overly impressed by authoritarian regimes, believing they represent the most formidable packaging of national will and skill. Of course, the opposite is true, especially in this age of expansive globalization; the

many and the unleashed will always trump the few and the constrained. When we forget that, we find ourselves battling stubborn insurgencies of all sorts: among youth, across cyberspace, in postwar contingencies. Life finds a way of connecting ambition to resources within even the most controlled populations.

Grand strategic thinking always keeps the government's role in proper perspective. Because of our Cold War experience, during which the fantastic dangers of global nuclear war shaped our popular sense of the US government's global responsibilities, Americans invest far too much emotion in our government's diplomatic interactions with the world and ascribe far too much power to our military's ability to shape events. We are too proud of our victories and too stunned by our defeats, making us a sort of manic-depressive superpower that alternates between overestimating its strengths and exaggerating its weaknesses. By taking a long view of history, grand strategy encourages some much-needed humility regarding America's place and power in the world. By understanding that hard power merely enables soft power by removing what the global community may judge - from time to time - to be intolerable barriers (e.g., extreme disconnectedness forced upon populations by dictators, dislocating disasters, continuing civil strife, or the general absence of political stability), we begin to understand the US military's subordinate role: globalization's bodyguard, but hardly its keeper. Globalization comes with rules but not a ruler.

The emerging global rule set is always under adjustment - more so during crisis. The only constant rule is that rules are constantly changing. The grand strategist tracks these evolutions across various sectors primarily for the purpose of gap analysis. These gaps are only incrementally revealed under normal circumstances, and conflicts can exacerbate them to the point of severe system crisis, which globalization - in its sum expression of connectivity, rules, alliances and mutual understanding - is getting better at processing. The grand strategist is therefore interested more in direction than degree of change, and he recognizes that politics lags dramatically behind economics and that security lags dramatically behind connectivity. His work is primarily concerned with keeping those gaps from growing too large by filling them in with new rule sets distinctly favorable to his vision, defined across the levels of system, state and individual (from Kenneth Waltz).

The grand strategist resists the demands of narrow thinkers to declare some collection of states or developmental model or industry paradigm as currently transcendent. Such choices are required only among the narrowest of minds (or the most savvy editors) out of fear that their arguments (or publications) won't find purchase unless some clear niche can be canonically fenced off. To wit, a joke: *What do you call a grand strategist who promotes a new grand strategy every few weeks? A newspaper columnist.* When pundits drown out strategists, the end of reason is truly near. So grand strategists do not entertain, much less succumb to, single-point-failure doomsaying, because system-wide thinking adheres to the horizontal view, not the vertical drill-down of experts who say, "I don't know anything about the rest of all that, I just know that my [insert favorite apocalyptic scenario here] makes your entire vision impossible!" Systematic thinking about the future means you're not "for" or "against" issues like peak oil or global warming or water scarcity, you just accept the dynamics implied and rank them accordingly. A holistic approach must be the grand strategist's calling card, leaving fear-mongers to the corners into which their need for binary, zero-sum outcomes ("A is up, so B must be down") paints them. The grand strategist welcomes such analysis as he welcomes all such data points. He simply refuses the accompanying Kool-Aid.

And so, the grand strategist is neither surprised nor dismayed when the awesome force of globalization's tectonic shifts elicits vociferous or even violent friction from locals, for these are the essential drivers of conflict in our age. Success is not about avoiding any violence, but effectively processing the anger behind all violence. We live in a time of pervasive and persistent revolutions. Hardly able to prevent all eggs from cracking, the grand strategist wants only to make sure that the resulting omelets are not thoroughly wasted. In today's super-empowered environment, anybody can play cook. Fight that inevitability and you'll be taking on all-comers in never-ending conflict.

America's grand strategists should calculate applications of hard power with the emotional detachment that comes with knowing that history is on our side. More than two centuries ago, the original anti-imperialist league of 13 colonies birthed the American System (Henry Clay's term) of states uniting and economies integrating in collective security. Once the European version of "glo-colonialization" self-destructed in a massive civil war (1914-1945), our American system was successfully projected onto the global landscape, yielding an international liberal trade order first known as the West and now known simply as globalization. It is the first global "empire" in human history that both enriches and empowers its alleged "subjects," and Dr Frankenstein's monster, a truly world-spanning middle class, will inevitably emerge as the 21st century's most awesome social force. Capturing that majority's ideological "flag" constitutes the primary task of all grand strategy in the years and decades ahead.

Today's grand strategist is "present at the creation" of some new world, the anticipation of which gets him out of bed each morning, ready to do battle yet again - room by room. His victories are not measured in battles won nor crises averted, but in minds shaped and leadership revealed.

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