

# Mind the Gap



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**T**homas P.M. Barnett has given well over a thousand presentations worldwide. Barrett is a well known defence expert whose career trajectory has run from Harvard University to the US Naval War College, and from being just another Soviet Union specialist to the general strategic futures explorer in the Bush Administration. Of late, he has been a hard-hitting speaker at conferences organized by the government and NGOs in the Netherlands – a country that has just started to reflect on its own ‘strategic futures’ for the armed forces.

Barnett’s presentation, called ‘The Pentagon’s New Map’, is a bristling, music-larded, one-hour slide show based on his bestsellers *The Pentagon’s New Map* and *Blueprint for Action*. A blueprint indeed. Barnett explains how to understand the world, the US mission to manage that job, and its implications for all policies we used to call ‘external’. Barnett is also senior managing director of a company called Enterra Solutions, a platform for pushing ‘new rules sets in the military and market for boosting “smart connectivity”’.

Globalization is not a universal phenomenon encompassing all of the world’s 192 countries. It is an American project, started after the Second World War, which unfortunately happened to split the world into two parts. These are called the Core, to which two-thirds of the world belongs and the rest probably wants to, and the Gap, which makes up the other third. Don’t think in post-Marxist terms of a world divided into ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, with the haves doing well only by suppressing and exploiting the have-nots. It is about connectedness.

Two-thirds of the world is connected and the rest is not. The disconnected part defines the danger. Rather than threatening the Core with its destructive power, the Gap causes fear by its disruptive outside acts. The mission of the Core (read: the US) is to meet the threat by making the Gap connected. How? By an external policy mix of flows: by exporting security, letting investment money flow into the Gap, and somehow sustaining the global flows of people and energy that cross the line between the Core and the Gap. You call that policy mix ‘system administration’, which essentially deals with the disconnected in order to protect the connected, and thereby the world itself. This is a job

requiring ‘functional unilateralism’, if only for the sheer power and resources that the US has at its disposal, which are nowhere near matched by Europe or any of the BRICs – Brazil, Russia, India and China, and other emerging powers. The US mission is to lead the Core and do the classic fighting, a necessary evil that requires a Leviathan force, which can hardly be generated by anyone but the US, with the help, possibly, of some nasty Anglo-oriented allies. But not the Netherlands, which in Barnett’s blueprint seems to be a mere assistant system administrator.

Barnett’s presentations to government officials and foreign policy elites take his audiences by surprise. Speaking in staccato sentences, articulated in contrasting styles, using black-and-white jargon, separating international politics into easy sets of problems and solutions, his anti-academic approach offers some refreshing thoughts that run counter to conventional wisdom.

First, Barnett challenges the academic legacy of the 1990s that defined globalization as a truly global process, presuming a global security agenda.

Second, he amends and indeed relaxes the famous democratic peace thesis. In order to get Gap countries connected, we need minimum rules set upon them, not democracy *per se*. China and Russia are already inside the Core, but are far from democratic countries.

Third, connectivity implies that ‘dependency’ is not a bad thing. Are we vulnerable to Middle East oil supply cuts, and must we aim at energy independence? Not at all – it is better to have a relationship that integrates these countries into the system than to have them isolated by making ourselves oil-independent.

For all its confidence in America’s natural leadership, the Barnett blueprint of course also has its Achilles’ heel. Will the Core countries show unity in defending the advantages, the security benefits and the prosperity that connectedness has brought them? In the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Asian scholar Kishore Mahbubani replies with a reproachful ‘no’. He writes: ‘There is a fundamental flaw in the West’s strategic thinking. In all its analyses of global challenges, the West assumes that it is the source of the solutions to the world’s key problems’. The article’s conclusion hardly provides more support to the Barnett blueprint: ‘(u)nfortunately, the West has gone from being the world’s primary problem solver to being its single biggest liability’. Whether we like it or not, a voice like Mahbubani’s is not an unrepresentative one in the Asian world, and cannot be ignored. ■

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