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Challenges after Trump's tour in Asia

Dr. Mohamed Makram Belaawi

During his Asian tour, U.S. President Donald Trump made a very interesting proposal in Hanoi by presenting himself to Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang as a mediator between China and Vietnam for the settlement of the two countries' conflict on the South China Sea. The over-self-confident U.S. president addressed Quang saying, "If I can be a mediator or arbitrator, let me know, for I am a good mediator." The interesting thing in this offer is that the Americans seem to see themselves as a force of 'good' in the region, while many Asians look at them as an occupying force that inherited colonialism and established highly militarized bases. They justify their existence in the region through claims of protecting maritime navigation and the rights of weak states, which is either a separation from reality or an attempt to falsify it by force and sometimes by slippery methods.

Although the Chinese relationship with Vietnam has been poisoned, and reached its lowest level in the 1970s following the war between the two countries – where China occupied large areas of Vietnam and withdrew later – the Chinese realize that there are many common interests between the two countries. In addition to being neighbors, the two countries have a common ideology of 'communism', represented by two ruling 'communist' parties in both. As for the Vietnamese, although they benefit from the U.S. investment in their country, but Vietnam had been under direct U.S. occupation, and they are not expected to forget this fact and accept the Americans as mediators with their neighbors.

Now, after decades of Chinese attempts to curtail the American role in the region and its reiteration that differences in the region can be resolved through direct



negotiations among its countries, Trump's proposal for mediation seems very strange. Immediately, the Chinese government responded to Trump's message. On the following Sunday, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Vietnam, met with Nguyen Phu Trong, the secretary general of the communist party of Vietnam, and signed an agreement to solve the outstanding problems between the two countries.

Trump wants to show that he is capable of achieving what previous U.S. presidents and administrations were not able to achieve. So, he has cancelled all agreements with Asian countries and started negotiations for reaching new bilateral agreements between his country and Asian countries, re-drawing the United States' relationship with Asia. Trump has also suspended all U.S. incentives provided to Asians - which had been aimed at drawing them away from China. The U.S. president has also adopted a policy of inciting Asian countries to engage in 'useless' military confrontations with each other.

The rhetoric of Trump during his Asian tour could not hide the American intentions towards Asia. Contrary to the common term 'Asia-Pacific' used to describe the Southeast Asia - which had also been used by former U.S. presidents - Trump described it as the 'Indo-Pacific', implicating India, China's arch-enemy, in his Asian equation. Trump wants to establish a "democratic coalition", including: the United States, Australia, Japan and India that are classified from the American perspective as 'democratic countries' which believe in elections and the idea of the circulation of power. On the other hand, the same countries are classified from the perspective of Asian left-wing Asian regimes as a 'right-wing coalition' for including conservative right-wing governments. Perhaps this is another form of the 'cold war' that prevailed in the mid-twentieth century between the West, led by the United States and the left-wing countries led by the Soviet Union.



In light of the U.S. faltering strategy in Asia, China seems to be winning several rounds, albeit small, at the expense of the U.S. downturn. Elsewhere in the continent, China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' - which is aimed at strengthening China's trade network with the world through what has been known as the Silk Road - was moving ahead increasingly. On the eve of the U.S. President's Asian tour on October 30, 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Georgia Giorgi Margvelashvili launched the 826-kilometer-long 'Baku-Tbilisi-Kars' railway line, including 105 kilometers that have recently been built. This railway line is expected to transport one million passengers and 5 million tons of cargo annually. It connects China with Europe via Kazakhstan, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey without passing through Russia. The 'Baku-Tbilisi-Kars' railway line will boost the economic growth of these countries as well as China's trade with Europe. However, the U.S. president has cancelled the trans-Pacific trade agreement linking his country with the East Asian countries, pushing these countries away from the United States into China's arms. Contrary to Trump's escalation policy towards North Korea and his threats to launch a devastating war against Pyong Yang, which will largely affect its neighbors, regional countries believe that such war is a useless and futile war, and favor a diplomatic option through peaceful means. In fact, only China can play this role. So, the solution for this crisis is in the hands of China, the only force that can determine the fate of the region through its North Korean ally. This means that the countries of the region must work to satisfy China and convince it to control the behavior of its ally, which does not only ignore the American threats completely, but it also believes that its weapons arsenal protects him from meeting a similar fate to that of Gaddafi of Libya and Saddam Hussein of Iraq, who died following a U.S. military intervention in their countries.



China is showing immunity to the U.S. strategy of attrition over the course of days, even if the United States relied on Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and other neighbors like Vietnam and the Philippines. The U.S. has attempted to implicate China in disputes with its neighbors for impeding its economic growth, and for justifying U.S. permanent military presence in the region under the pretext of protecting regional countries from the Chinese threat. However, developments have not been in favor of the United States: the Philippines has elected a left-wing figure as president, Rodrigo Duterte, who headed to China for settling the two countries' differences regarding the South China Sea, ignoring the International Court of Arbitration's verdict in favor of the Philippines against China, preferring Chinese aid, especially in the field of infrastructure, to the court ruling that is useless on the ground.

Taiwan has long been absent from news bulletins so as not to infuriate China which has many cards that it may use if the issue of 'Taiwan' was raised – considering Taiwan an integral part of the Chinese soil. As for South Korea, it seeks good and permanent relations with China to protect itself from its northern neighbor, North Korea, as China is the only country that can curb the North Korean flood. This is also the case with Japan. As for Vietnam, we have already indicated that relations between the two countries are improving rapidly, especially after the visit of the Chinese President to Vietnam, where he signed an agreement to resolve the dispute on the South China Sea.

In light of this complicated equation, China's northern neighbour, the largest country on the planet and heir to the empire of the former Soviet Union – Russia – is aware of the growing importance of the region. The Russians are aware that economic vitality has begun to move from Western Europe to the Asia-Pacific region and they want their share of the pie. Russia is also very interested in strengthening its influence in the

region to develop Siberia, which suffers from Russia's chronic problem of absence of warm ports which could enable it to link with the world easily.

Today, Russia enjoys a good relationship with China; both countries are partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and Russia is a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative'. Also, China's special relationship with North Korea could allow Russia to extend gas and railway lines to South Korea; and if China could persuade the Koreans of solving their bilateral problems, Russia would be able to reach the warm ports of the south of the Korean peninsula.

So the Chinese strategy is steady and calm in the region, while the U.S. is counting on the right-wing governments in India and Japan. What is new here is the Indian role, as Japan is an old ally of America which seeks to strengthen India and increase its presence in regional issues in the face of the increasing Chinese influence. Thus, we should understand the growing rapprochement between the governments of India and Japan and their quest to establish transport and trade lines to meet the Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative'. As soon as Chinese President Xi Jinping announced his ambitious initiative in 2013, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced his vision for a corresponding project at the meeting of the African Development Bank held in the state of Gujarat, India. In 2016, Modi and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reached a joint agreement for a project called the 'Asia-Africa Growth Corridor' (AAGC) among other projects on the Indian decision-making table.

The question now is: Can the Americans change this complicated situation in Asia or will the American strategy remain hesitant?