

Introduction

The Alternative to the Neoliberal System of Globalisation and Militarism

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Helmi Sharawy has directed the Arab and African Research Centre (AARC) in Cairo since its creation in 1987. Under his energetic guidance, the AARC has become in Egypt, the Middle East and Africa, generally a partner that cannot be ignored in any serious cultural or political debate concerning the challenges that confront the peoples of all of these regions.

Despite the stringent administrative tasks imposed by his directorship of the AARC, Helmi has never failed to bring his own personal contributions into such debates. The collection of contributions chosen for this publication in English is clear evidence of the wide range of subjects he has covered. Such contributions entail a critical reading of the relations between the Arab and African worlds in the past and present; the expression of the cultural dimensions of their liberation struggle; the role of civil society in their current struggles; and the perspectives that such struggles open for a possible renaissance.

As a foreword to Helmi Sharawy's book, I chose to add my contribution to the debates he has raised with the following discussion of the alternative to the neoliberal system of globalisation, militarism and imperialism today, and the hegemonic offensive of the United States.

The Alternative: Social Progress, Democratisation and Negotiated Interdependence

What people need today, as well as yesterday, are society-wide projects (national and/or regional) articulated to regulated and negotiated globalised structures (while assuring a relative complementarity between them), which would simultaneously permit advances in three directions:

- a) Social Progress: This demands that economic progress (innovation, advances in productivity, the eventual expansion of the market) be necessarily accompanied by social benefits for all (by guaranteeing employment, social integration, reduction in inequalities, etc.).
- b) The democratisation of society in all dimensions, understood as a never-ending process and not as a blueprint, needs to be defined once and for all. Democratisation demands that its reach is felt in social and economic spheres, and not restricted to just the political sphere.
- c) The affirmation of society-wide economic and social development, and the building of forms of globalisation that offer this possibility. It needs to be understood that the unavoidable auto-centric character of development does not exclude either the opening (on condition that it remains controlled) or the participation in globalisation (inter-dependence). However, it conceives of these as needing to be formulated in terms that would permit the reduction – not the accentuation – of the inequalities of wealth and power between nations and regions.

The alternative that we are defining by advances in three directions demands that all the three progress in parallel. The experiences of modern history, which were founded on the absolute priority of national independence, whether accompanied by social progress, or even sacrificing it, but always without democratisation, continually demonstrate their inability to go beyond the rapidly attained historical limits. As a complementary counterpoint, contemporary democracy projects, which have accepted the sacrifice of social progress and autonomy in globalised interdependence, have not contributed to reinforcing the emancipatory potential of democracy, but have, instead, eroded it – even to discredit and finally delegitimise it. If, as the predominant neoliberal discourse pretends, submitting to the demands of the market presents no other alternative and if this idea would by itself produce social progress (which is not true), why bother voting? Elected governments become superfluous decorations, since ‘change’ (a succession of different heads that all do the same thing) is substituted for alternative choices by which democracy is defined. The reaffirmation of politics and the culture of citizenship define the very possibility of a necessary alternative to democratic decadence.

It is therefore necessary to advance in the three dimensions of the alternative, each one connected to the other. Less can mean more: developing step-by-step strategies which allow for the consolidation of progress – even ones that are so modest that they can be achieved immediately – to go even further while minimising the risk of failure, going off-course or moving backwards.

Making this step-by-step strategy concrete means taking into account the evolution of science and technology and the acceleration of the revolutions it has brought on (and this in all its dimensions – new riches, potential destructive forces brought on by these revolutions, transformations in the organisation of the workplace and social structures, etc.). However, in order to do it, we would need not to submit, in the vain hope that these revolutions would have the magic ability to resolve by themselves the challenges of social progress and democratisation. It is the opposite in integrating the new in a controlled social dynamic that we can exploit their eventual emancipatory potential.

The social project abusively qualified as liberal (and in its extreme form – neoliberal) is founded on the sacrifice of social progress to the unilateral demands of the short-term profits of dominant segments of capital (the transnational capital of the 500 or 5,000 largest transnational companies). Through this unilateral submission of workers, human beings and nations to the logic of the market is expressed, without a doubt, the permanent utopia of capital (according to which all aspects of life need to adapt to the demands of profit-making), in many ways an infantile utopia, without any scientific or ethical base. It is through this submission that social progress and democracy have been emptied of any reality.

On a global scale, this submission can only reproduce and deepen the inequalities between nations and regions, especially considering the new structures that conform to the demands of capital which has reached a new level of development. This means that monopolies (sometimes known as comparative advantages), which benefit from the oligopolies of the dominant centres (the 'triad': the United States, Europe and Japan), are no longer simply about industry. They are also about other forms of economic, social and political control: the control of technology, reinforced by abusive practices of industrial and intellectual property, the access to the planet's natural resources, the ability to influence opinions by controlling information, the extreme centralization of the means to intervene financially, and the select few who have access to weapons of mass destruction, etc.

Market economics and political power of the state, including the military, are today, as they have always been, inseparable. Faced with this unity that has been put in place by capital and transnational oligopolies and the political powers at their service, how then do we build people-centred counter-strategies which, over and above 'resistance', can actually advance the alternative defined here? This is the real challenge.

Combining the Expansion of Social Movements and the Rebuilding of the Political Citizen

There is no modern society that is stuck in an absolute immutable stage. In this sense, the existence of social movements, visible or not, clearly organised or working under wraps, crystallised around a program of objectives defined in political or ideological terms or misguided by the discourses of politicians' politics, united or fragmented, is not new.

What is new and characterised by the present movement is that social movements – or 'civil society', to use the current fashionable term – are fragmented, and they disregard politics, ideologies, etc. This is simultaneously the cause, but rather more the product, of the erosion of social battles and politics in the recent period of contemporary history (after World War II) and, because of this, the weakening of their efficiency and therefore their credibility and legitimacy. This erosion therefore has happened within a fundamental disequilibrium, with dominant capital taking advantage of this vacuum, and submitting people and societies to the exclusive logic of its demands, to proclaim the eternity of its reign, to pretend that it is rational and even beneficial (the end of history, etc.), that is to say, the permanent utopia of capitalism. This manifests itself through absurdities such as 'there is no alternative', or in the imagination of a social movement that has the ability to transform the world without defining its targets and plans.

Social movements – in plural – exist and are reinforcing their presence and their actions everywhere throughout the world. It is not even necessary to give examples: classes, class struggles, democracy movements, women's rights, rights of nations, peasants and environmentalists, are just some of their expressions. The transformation of the world by the crystallisation of the alternative can take place only by active involvement in these movements. However, it also demands that such movements know how to progressively go from the defensive to the offensive, from fragmentation to convergence in diversity, in order to become decisive players in inventive and efficient projects to build political strategies aimed at citizens.

Recognising the weaknesses in the present movement is neither to denigrate it, nor to take a nostalgic glance at a past that is over, but to choose to act to reinforce its emancipatory potential. The people's adversary is oligarchic and globalised capital and dominant imperialism, the totality of political powers which, for the moment, are totally at its service, that is to say the governments of the triad (since both the right and the left share the same penchant for 'liberalism'), most notably the United States (in which the established Republican

and Democratic parties share the same vision of their hegemonic role) and those of the ruling classes throughout the South. This adversary deploys an economic, political, ideological and military strategy that uses all of the institutions set up to service it (OECD, the World Bank, IMF, WTO, NATO, etc.). It has its centres of 'thought' and its meeting places (Davos in particular, but also universities with their conventional economics departments). They control the fashions and they decide the catchwords and discourses that they impose: 'democracy' or 'human rights' (understood as a manipulative term), 'war against poverty', 'the erasing of nations' and the parallel promotion of 'communities', the war against 'terrorism', etc. The majority of the movements and the activists that lead them are, up until now, always one step behind, answering belatedly – well, or not so well – to their pieces of the strategy or discourse. We must liberate ourselves from these reflexive and defensive positions, taking our turn and substituting our discourses, our strategies, our objectives, and our language. We have a long way to go.

We will only be able to move in this direction if we are able to systematically analyse the adversary's strategy in its global dimensions and its local and segmented expressions. These strategies are a long way from being a monolithic bloc. They are interspersed with contradictions that we need to analyse, get to know, identify and isolate. We need to propose counter-strategies that can take advantage of these contradictions.

Faced with this urgent need, the movement seems to be still quite weak. Because it has not yet acknowledged the importance of this thinking and the need to draw the conclusion of the necessity for united action, the movement remains fragmented, defensive, and soft in its discourse and propositions (which its adversary knows and takes advantage of). We must therefore advance to levels that make the crystallisation of popular forces' counter-strategies possible, in their global vision and interdependence, and in their segmented and local expression. It is only when the principles of the alternative are defined and consistent that they take shape in programmes and actions that are rich in diversity and convergence in their impact on society. This is when the movement will become a transforming force in history.

The opponent makes sure that our progress is difficult, not only by physical interventions when necessary (police violence, backward democratic steps, support to renewed fascist currents, and wars) but also by soothing propositions, so that the movement remains apolitical, 'soft' and one step behind. The 'movementist' ideology contributes to this, since it rejects precisely, and on principle, what we are proposing: the convergence through diversity of

a reconstruction of citizen politics. In these conditions, the movements and the organisational forms that support them (specifically the NGOs, which are now often considered to be the exclusive manifestation of civil society) must be examined critically. Do they adhere to the perspective of the construction of alternatives? Or are they the system's management technique for its real ambitions – using them as 'anti-alternative' instruments?

Only the rebuilding of citizen politics will allow the movement to acquire the scope that calls into question the disequilibria operating in favour of capital. Only this rebuilding will allow for the emergence of new social equilibriums and politics that constrain capital to adjust to demands that do not come out of its exclusive logic – forcing people to adapt to the demands of capital as opposed to forcing capital to adapt to the demands of people.

Our call is addressed to everyone – including ourselves – who find themselves involved in various actions and meetings around the World Social Forum (Porto Alegre) and in national and regional forums. The World Forum for Alternatives will act as a catalyst – with and among others – for the elaboration of popular, efficient and credible counter-strategies.

The propositions that follow are just propositions – that some may evaluate as erroneous, extreme or provocative. However, in my opinion, they are worth discussing.

The Collective Imperialism of the Triad, the Hegemonic Offensive of the United States and the Militarisation of Globalisation

First Thesis

The global system is not post-imperialist – it is imperialist. It shares several fundamental and permanent characteristics with other previous imperialist systems which always commanded the expansion of global capitalism. It offers to the people on the periphery (the South, to use the current terms – three-quarters of the world population) no chance to 'catch up' and share, for better or for worse, the advantages of the level of material consumption reserved for the majority of the people in the centres. It only produces, and reproduces, the deepening of the North/South gap.

Nevertheless, imperialism has, in many ways, entered into a new phase of its expansion. This has a direct relationship with transformations in capitalism and capital: technological revolution, transformation of the workplace, globalised financial domination, etc. These relationships are the subject of serious research and animated debates. However, once again, the overall tone

is directed by the economic obsession of some and the genteel 'soft' politics of others. This happens up to the point where the system is often presented as offering a chance to all those who want to take it. This highlights the weakness of the movement and the efficiency of the dominant discourse.

I must insist on another new dimension of imperialism. Imperialism, which was always referred to in the plural, since permanent and violent, economic and political conflict between the various imperialist centres was always at the forefront of history, is now referred to in the singular. It has become the collective imperialism of the triad.

The facts clearly illustrate the reality of the collective character of this new state of imperialism. In all the global economy's managing institutions, Europe and Japan are never singled out for positions that are different from those of the United States, whether it be in the World Bank, the IMF, or the WTO (we remember the demands imposed in Doha in 2001 on the WTO by the European envoy Pascal Lamy, on the Third World as being even more severe than those of the United States).

What are the reasons behind this common vision of the triad? Up to what point is the solidarity that they display defining a new stable step in imperialist globalisation? And where can we find the eventual contradictions within the triad?

It has been the custom to explain this solidarity by political reasons: the common concern about the Soviet Union and communism. However, the disappearance of this threat did not end this northern common front. Indeed, Europe and Japan are no longer dependent on the United States, as they used to be immediately after World War II. Having become serious rivals, one could have expected that their conflicts would have destroyed the triad. However, by agreeing on the same globalised neoliberal project, they, in fact, did exactly the opposite. I am therefore strongly tempted to explain this choice by the new demands of capital accumulation by the dominant oligopolies. They have attained a level of growth that has never before been seen. The sheer size of the oligopolies (the large trans-nationals that have their anchors in the states of the triad) has meant they need – for their own reproduction – access to a global open market. For some, this new fact means that an authentic transnational capital, and therefore a transnational bourgeoisie, is in the making. This question clearly merits more profound research. For others (including myself), this extreme conclusion is not needed, since the common interests in managing the global marketplace are strong enough to be at the root of transnational capital's solidarity.

The contradictions that could have destroyed the triad, or at least weakened its collective strength, do not lie in the divergent interests of the dominant segments of capital. Their origin should be found elsewhere, since if capital and states are inseparable concepts and realities, the triad – and even its European segment – are still constituted in singular political states. The state cannot be reduced to its functions as a service provider for dominant capital. Affected by all the contradictions that characterise society – class conflicts, different aspects of the political culture of the people in question, the diversity of national ‘collective’ interests, and the geo-political expressions of their defence – the state is a distinct player of capital. And what will this complex dynamic bring about? Will it lead to submission to the immediate and exclusive interests of dominant capital? Or will it bring about other combinations that regulate the demands of the reproduction of capital and those that manifest themselves in other fields?

In the first hypothesis, with the lack of an integrated common political institution for the triad states, the United States, as the ‘commander-in-chief’, will be asked to fill the place of this ‘global’ state, indispensable for the ‘good governance’ of globalised capitalism. Also, the partners in the triad will accept the consequences. However, in this case, I would argue that the ‘European project’ would be devoid of content, reduced to – in the best case – the European segment of collective imperialism, or – in the worst case – the European section of the American hegemonic project. For the moment, the ripples that we hear from time to time are due to the political and military management of globalisation, not its economic and social management. In other words, certain European powers would prefer a collective political management of the global system, while others accept unaided management by the United States.

On the other hand, in the second hypothesis (that is to say if the European people manage to impose on dominant capital the terms of a new historic compromise which define the content of European states and the European Union), Europe could hope to be an autonomous player. In other words, the option (and the battles) for a ‘social Europe’ (that is to say if power was not simply about being at the immediate and exclusive service of dominant capital) is inseparable from a ‘non-American’ Europe. And this can only happen if Europe distances itself from the management of collective imperialism by which the interests of dominant capital defines itself. In one sentence: Europe will be on the ‘Left’ (with the understanding that this definition means taking into consideration the social interests of European peoples and innovations in North/South relations which will bring about a real post-imperialist evolution).

Second Thesis

The hegemonic strategy of the United States is based on the collective character of the new imperialism and profits from the insufficiencies and weaknesses of the anti-neoliberal social and political movements.

This strategy, barely recognised by the pro-American defenders is, in the dominant discourse, the object of two 'soft' propositions, not quite real but operational, from the point of view of our opponent. The first is that this hegemony belongs to a 'gentle' leadership, sometimes known as 'benign hegemony' by the democratic fraction of the American establishment. Through this mix of false naivety and real hypocrisy, this discourse pretends that the United States only acts in the interests of the peoples who are associated with the triad, motivated by the same 'democratic' sentiments, and even the interests of the rest of the world, to whom globalisation offers the chance of development, reinforced by the benefits of democracy that American power promotes everywhere, as we know. The second is that, in all domains, the United States benefits from the enormous advantages – whether they be economic, scientific, political, military or cultural – that legitimise their hegemony. In fact, American hegemony works from logic, and a system that has little to do with the discourse it develops.

The objectives of this hegemony have been proclaimed, and adhered to, in innumerable proclamations by the US leaders (unfortunately, little read by its victims). After the fall of the USSR – their only potential military adversary – the US establishment estimated that it had a period of about 20 years to put into place its global hegemony and reduce to nothing the possibilities of its potential rivals. Not that they were necessarily capable of an alternative hegemony, just capable of affirming their autonomy in a global system that would be non-hegemonic – in my language, a multi-centric system. These rivals are of course Europe (we no longer hear of a Japanese hegemony!), but also Russia and, most of all, China. The latter is the principal designated adversary that Washington may have to envision destroying (militarily) if it continues to persist in its development and a certain independent will. Other rivals have also been noted, in fact, all southern countries that may develop a resistance to the exigencies of globalised neoliberalism – India or Brazil, Iran or South Africa.

The objectives are therefore to vassalise the allies in the triad, to make them incapable of effective global initiatives, and to destroy the 'large countries', always by nature too big (the United States being the only one with the right to be so). Further objectives are to dismantle Russia after the USSR,

dismantle China, India, even Brazil, taking advantage of the weaknesses of each country's power systems; manipulate the former states of the USSR, and provoke the centrifugal forces in the Russian federation; support the Muslims of Xinjiang and the Tibetan monks; feed the conflict with the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent; and intervene in the Amazon (Plan Colombia), etc.

In this strategic perspective, the United States decided that their first strike would be in the region that extends from the Balkans to central Asia, and traverses the Middle East and the Gulf. Why this region for the first American wars of the 21st century? Not because the region could shelter serious enemies, but exactly the opposite, because it is the soft under-belly of the global system, made up of societies that, for different reasons, right now are incapable of responding to aggression with even a minimum amount of efficiency. The strategy was to strike the weakest to begin a long series of wars – a clear and banal military strategy – just as Hitler started by attacking Czechoslovakia, while his ambitions went above and beyond this to the United Kingdom, France and Russia.

Conquering the region also presents other advantages. A major producer of oil and gas, exclusive control by the United States would make Europe seriously dependent, reducing any eventual manoeuvrability. Additionally, the installation of American bases at the heart of Eurasia will facilitate the wars of the future, against China, Russia and others. The unconditional support of Israeli expansion is logical within this perspective, Israel being a *de facto* permanent military base at Washington's service.

The decision to militarise the management of the global system was not taken just by the team of Bush Jr. It has been the rallying call of the ruling classes of the United States since the fall of the USSR; Democrats and Republicans only differ on their choice of language. Moreover, contrary to what they would like naïve opinion holders to believe, this option is meant to mitigate the insufficiencies of the American economy, in which the competitiveness of all the segments of the productive system have continually deteriorated, as witnessed by the trade deficit that characterizes it. By imposing themselves not as the 'natural leader' via its economic advantages, but as the military dictator of the world order, the United States is creating conditions that force its vassalised allies (Europe and Japan), similar to others, to shoulder their deficit. The United States has become a parasitic society that cannot maintain its level of consumption and waste without impoverishing the rest of the world.

Third Thesis

The present time is one of extreme gravity. In this sense, comparisons with the 1930s are mostly justifiable. Like Hitler, the President of the United States has decided to replace the law with brutal military force, thereby erasing all the conquests that democracy's victory over Fascism has permitted, condemning the United Nations to the same lamentable fate as the League of Nations. Alas, the comparisons can continue. Fabrication and choosing minor adversaries to lay the groundwork for major confrontations and systematic lying: the dominant classes of the allies act like Chamberlain and Daladier with Hitler. They cede to, and even sometimes contribute to, legitimising American wars in the eyes of those they are deceiving.

The movement has to understand that, faced with its opponent's coherent and criminal strategy, no counter-strategy can be effective if it does not have the battle against American wars as the principal axis of its action. Today, what are the discourses on poverty or human rights worth, when compared to what is in store for people in a far worse future, which will be imposed by military violence? These wars, still 'small' (despite the gigantic material and human destruction of their victims), do not constitute 'a problem among others', but are the harbinger of the enemy's strategy.

Elements for a Popular Counter-strategy

The aforementioned reflections – if they make sense – can only lead to one conclusion: the principal axis of actions to come can only be about the organisation of actions against 'American wars' and the construction of a large front, composed of all the forces that could be in opposition. In this spirit, I will offer three propositions:

First Proposition: A priority in Europe for the reconstruction of a citizens' politics, capable of bringing about the converging of the demands of the movements that remain terribly fragmented.

The construction of this political force and the gathering of the subject that could compose it is conditional on the success of the movements in their social and protest demands, that is to say, the ability to restore a real Left compatible with European integration which would give a social dimension to the aforementioned project. Equally, this is the condition for the Left to separate itself from the pro-imperialist Right, which accepts the alignment with the United States' imperialist strategies. In other words, there will never be a 'social Europe' if there is no simultaneous engagement toward 'another

politics' vis-à-vis the rest of the world, which would involve a real post-imperialist transition.

The European people can and must make the United States aware of the fragility of their position in the economic system of globalised capitalism. If they manage to impose the use of their capital surpluses for social development, instead of its current role of supporting American waste, they will simultaneously constrain the United States and force them to abandon their excessive ambitions. This strategic objective clearly does not exclude the immediate support of the courageous men and women who, at the heart of the system, are saying 'no to war'. Nevertheless, I remain sceptical about the effectiveness of the internal opposition in the United States, as long as the privileges of this parasitic society remain guaranteed. The American ruling class has managed to obtain a dominant public opinion which is sufficiently naive that the protests of the conscious minority are not able to bring down the deployment of the United States' hegemonic strategy.

Second Proposition: Encourage a rapprochement between the large Euro-Asian partners – namely Europe, Russia, China and India.

Russia, with its oil and gas reserves, offers Europe its only means to escape the American diktat, assuming that Washington is successful in its plans to have exclusive control over the Middle East. In addition, since the majority of the foreign trade and investment that Russia attracts is from Europe and not the United States, there is already favourable ground for a rapprochement between Europe and Russia, in spite of the difficulties (produced by the 'comprador' management of the Russian economy with which important fractions of the new ruling class are associated) and the manipulation of American imperialism, which brings its support to the centrifugal forces operating in Russia and other former states of the USSR. Here again, as in Europe, a favourable evolution benefiting the working class implies another foreign policy which distances itself from Washington.

The rapprochement of Russia, China and India would find its *raison d'être* in the – military – threat that these three countries will face with the eventual success of the United States' deployments in Central Asia. American diplomacy is making this rapprochement as difficult as possible by mobilising, to its benefit, the contradictions of the political visions of each of the three partners and in supporting the comprador fractions of the ruling classes. However, over and above the geo-political conflicts that make up the border questions between China and India, or Tibet and the Xinjiang, over and above Washington's manipulations that 'support' India against China

and at the same time agitate Pakistan and provoke conflicts between India's Muslims and Hindus, the strategy of the popular forces – defined at this stage by the demands of the constitution of an anti-comprador front – has to take in once again, here and elsewhere, the measure of the direct relations that comprador management (in place in Russia and India, and threatening in China) maintains with the demands of American geo-political diktats.

Third Proposition: Revive Afro-Asian people's solidarity (the spirit of Bandung) and bring back to life the 'Tricontinental'. This solidarity between peoples of the South runs today through their struggle against comprador powers that is produced and supported by 'liberal' globalisation. The themes elaborated above concerning the alternative – social progress, democratization, national autonomy – will find here their *raison d'être*.

There is little doubt that the legitimacy of these comprador powers is being questioned in many countries of the South. Nevertheless, the responses of the people of the South to the challenges they face from the new imperial system and liberalisation make it difficult to advance alternatives that are defined in terms of democratisation, social progress and the construction of a just and negotiated global inter-dependence. The disarrayed popular classes frequently find refuge in illusions that are 'fundamentalist', ethnic or religious, which are mostly manipulated by the local comprador ruling classes, and are supported by imperialism and particularly by the US. These consist of real steps back, which need lucidity and courage to fight; and today, they constitute a major obstacle to the rebuilding of solidarity between the Afro-Asian peoples (by intensifying the often criminal conflicts between Muslim and Hindus here, Hutu and Tutsi over there, etc.). The impasse that constitutes these communal regressions finds its extreme manifestation in questionable characters such as the Taliban, Bin Laden, or Saddam Hussein, who were themselves the beneficiaries of the generous support of the CIA, only to become the United States' 'Public Enemy Number One', and could, by this fact, appear to be so in the eyes of large sections of popular opinion.

The counterpoint is being drawn here from the reconstruction of national, popular and democratic alliances, such as those that brought down some dictators (Mali being a prime example), but also apartheid in South Africa, and that also brought about Lula's victory in Brazil. These advances – modest when we consider the present dominance of imperialist aggression – are nevertheless potential harbingers of the renaissance of the southern peoples' front.

In conclusion, the struggle for social justice, democracy, and a multi-centric equal international order are inseparable. The United States' establishment understands it perfectly. This is why they are moving ahead to implement their own hegemonic international order, by substituting the use of brutal military force for international law and justice. They know very well that – for them – this is the only means to impose an unjust neoliberal social order of inequality, condemning democracy, where it exists, to degradation, and making it impossible elsewhere. Resistance movements and people's struggles must understand this. They must understand that their plans for social progress have no future, if the United States' plan for military hegemony is not stopped.