What's your take on the prospect and possibilities of China's assistance? I don’t think so. China’s engagements with our allies are very strong and increasing, and there is no way that we can hinder this kind of relationship. Not only do our allies have confidence that the US also has warm ties with the Chinese government and businesspeople. I foresee this trend will continue. Meanwhile, I don’t think US military engagements in the South China Sea or the East China Sea are going to stop China’s activities in the region. Regional states have responsibilities to their own people and in order to develop they can help, these countries can accept China’s assistance, because this is in their national interests.

GT: You said China and the US are moving closer in the nature of their foreign policy. President Trump said he is in no rush to avoid the issue of human rights and it seems he is less ideologically than his predecessors. Has the era of Sino-US ideological confrontation already gone or is it just a temporary suspension?

Mendis: I think it’s temporary. The US has been always driven by Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian visions. The country was founded with individual rights and this country must be the same with the US founding view, commerce with all nations, alliance with none. President Trump is actually putting this vision into practice. He is less interested in other countries’ human rights conditions. It seems to me, President Trump is emulating China for economic reasons and job creation that he promised to American people. I don’t see the US wants to engage in a war with China as there is no winner in this war. Both countries have their own problems. While the US has to incorporate the US economy into its infrastructure development, China needs to address its aging population, poverty and environmental issues. Both countries have pains even in peaceful times. Why do we want a war? We need to learn from history and avoid repeating mistakes.

GT: What do you think the possibility of the US being drawn into a conflict with China by its allies, for example, a clash between China and Japan, or because of Taiwan?

Mendis: Trump had a phone conversation with Tsai Ing-wen in December, but, after the Chinese government’s protest, reversed his entire Taiwan policy and clarified the adherence to the One China policy. The US had the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979 to "protect" Taiwan from any military action. The Trump administration takes advantage of the act to sell weapons to Taiwan, and this is a strategy of Trump as a businessman. Whatever he can sell, he will sell, as this is good for US companies and employment.

The US has long-lasting commitment to the Jeffersonian vision of better allies as well. Trump claimed that US allies need to shoulder more responsibilities for defense costs, as these countries have tremendously benefited from the US guaranties.

The question is whether US security guarantees would have a negative effect on China’s rise. I don’t think so. China’s engagements with our allies are very strong and increasing, and there is no way that we can hinder this kind of relationship. Not only do our allies have confidence in the US, the US also has warm ties with the Chinese government and businesspeople. I foresee this trend will continue. Meanwhile, I don’t think US military engagements in the South China Sea or the East China Sea are going to stop China’s activities in the region. Regional countries have responsibilities to their own people and in order to develop they can help, these countries can accept China’s assistance, because this is in their national interests.

GT: Can China, US overcome ‘Thucydides Trap’?

Mendis: The ancient Silk Road can be dated back to China’s Tang dynasty. It is during this period that China prospered. The Silk Road goes from Xi’an, then the Chinese capital city, to the West. Tang’s Zhang Qian is the first Chinese ambassador to explore the West. Before the Tang dynasty, there was a Chinese monk called Faxian who brought a large number of Buddhist books back to China after his Western trip. Inspired by Faxian’s books, Xuanzang, another Chinese monk during the Tang dynasty, traveled to the West and his experience became popular with the book Journey to the West. All of them were trading knowledge with the world, and this is the evolution of the Silk Road Economic Belt. Then during the Ming dynasty, Admiral Zheng He sailed to Asia, Africa and the Middle East. This is the ancient maritime Silk Road. Zheng’s voyage was not for colonial purposes, but for the respect for the Chinese culture. The Belt and Road initiative is the Chinese vision of bringing people together. Indeed, there are challenges. The previous administration of Barack Obama was reluctant to join the Belt and Road. But US allies participated in the initiative from the very beginning. Now Trump has come into office, and he is more open to this infrastructural idea. There is chemistry between Xi and Trump, and this will bring the two countries closer together in trade. By sending a delegation to the Belt and Road Forum for International Coopera- tion in May, the White House is sending a message to China that it is open to the initiative.

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