

Japan told to be 'Asia's bridge to West'

By SITI RAHIL
Kyodo

SINGAPORE — Kishore Mahbubani, a prominent Singaporean academic, has urged Japan to display greater leadership on the world stage and act as a bridge between Asia and the West, as in his view the global order has started to shift.

In the current era, the West's supremacy is waning while Asia is enjoying a resurgence, Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, claimed in a recent interview.

Japan has a crucial role to play as the global power structure readjusts and should assume greater political leadership and pursue a more assertive foreign policy, said Mahbubani, who has written prolifically on the rise of Asia.

"Japan has been sleeping for too long. . . . I want Japan to wake up and play a constructive role. It's important for Japan to realize we are entering a new era of world history and the era of Western domination is over," he said.

Mahbubani reiterated his long-held view that Japan should stop playing "Tonto to America's Lone Ranger," a remark suggesting that Tokyo should end what he perceives as its subservience to Washington, and instead act as "a partner of America and educate America on the new realities of Asia."

The 63-year-old former diplomat has been named one of the "Top 100 Global Thinkers" by Foreign Policy magazine, and has authored such books as "Can Asians Think?" and, more recently, "The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East."

"The U.S. is no longer an exceptional country, (and) its power relative to the rest of the world is going to go down, so it's got to learn to behave like a normal country, learn to make compromises," he said.

Mahbubani welcomed Washington's recent move to place greater emphasis on Asia, but stressed that more fundamental changes are needed. "It's good that the U.S. has rediscovered Asia, but at the same time this is only half a

step. The U.S. needs to do a much more fundamental re-evaluation of its foreign policy," he said.

"The best thing the U.S. can do is to accept the return of Asia and work with its friends in Asia," he said. "(But) American intellectuals are still caught in a time warp."

As a member of the Group of Eight major industrialized nations, Japan is in a perfect position to act as a bridge between Asia and the West, but Tokyo will first have to shift its world view, he said.

"For Japan to play the role of a bridge requires a new mindset among Japanese intellectuals, where they have got to stop being passive and start having a more active foreign policy," he said.

Mahbubani said that while it was appropriate for Japan's foreign policy to focus on the West during the Meiji Era (1868-1912), "(About) 150 years have passed (since the era started) and now the time has come for Japan to have a new slogan, to be a bridge between Asia and the West."

"That requires Japanese intellectuals to stop trying so hard to be the most Western country in Asia. It should be the most Western country in Asia and the most Asian country in the West," he said, adding Japan also needs to be more proactive in Asia by engaging the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

"Japan has got tremendous potential. But what Japan needs to do is have a much more serious long-term relationship with ASEAN," he said.

He noted that Japan lagged behind China in pursuing a free-trade pact with the ASEAN bloc. "You see, while Japan was sleeping, China was cultivating ASEAN," he said.

Also, Japan's past military aggression and occupation of parts of Southeast Asia during the 20th century should not be seen as an obstacle, he argued.

"I believe history can pose a problem as well as an opportunity," he said, urging both ASEAN member states and Japan to adopt a future-oriented stance.

Mahbubani, who has often described the last 200 years of Western domination as a major "historical aberration," said the end of its supremacy is being accelerated by the economic woes in the United States and the sovereign debt crisis many European nations are struggling with.

"All historical aberrations come to a natural end, but the natural end is

happening faster because of the incompetence of European (countries') management of their economies and the incompetence of the U.S. in managing its economy," he said.

He also rejected claims that a greater U.S. presence in the region would spark a confrontation with China. "I'm actually optimistic that in this new world order, countries will not compete through an arms race (but) through economic competition," he said.

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