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## **FOCUS: Singaporean thinker urges Japan to act as bridge between West and Asia**

By Siti Rahil

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Kishore Mahbubani, a Singaporean academic who has written prolifically on the rise of Asia, has urged Japan to act as a bridge between the West and the region, and adjust to a new world in which Western domination is ending.

Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, said in a recent interview with Kyodo News that Japan has an important role to play in an era of waning Western supremacy and a resurgent Asia, and should assume greater political leadership and pursue a more assertive foreign policy.

"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 behaving like a "Tonto to the American Lone Ranger" but rather 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 books such 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, 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 the recent attempt by the United States to give more attention to Asia, but stressed that bigger 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 reevaluation 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. However, he lamented that "American intellectuals are still caught in a time warp."

As a member of the Group of Eight industrial powers, Japan is in an advantageous position to bridge the gap between Asia and the West, but this would necessitate a shift in mentality.

"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 to pursue a look-West policy during the Meiji Restoration in the 19th century, "more than 150 years have passed 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.

In Southeast Asia, Japan needs to be more proactive in engaging the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, he said.

"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 how Japan had lagged behind China in courting ASEAN for a free-trade pact. "You see, while Japan was sleeping, China was cultivating ASEAN," he said.

Japan's past history of military occupation of parts of Southeast Asia during World War II should not be seen as an obstacle, he said. "I believe history can pose a problem as well as an opportunity" he said, urging both sides to focus on the future and not on the past.

Mahbubani, who has often spoken of the last 200 years of Western domination of world history as a major "historical aberration," said the end of that domination is being accelerated by the United States and Europe's lack of competence in managing their economies.

"All historical aberrations come to a natural end but the natural end is happening faster because of the incompetence of the European management of the economy and the incompetence of the American management of its economy," he said.

He also said that he does not believe that a greater American presence in the region would spark a confrontation between the United States and 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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