

PROSPECTS OF JAPAN-US RELATIONS
INTERVIEW WITH INTELLECTUALS (3RD IN SERIES)
INTERVIEW WITH KISHORE MAHBUBANI
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"STRONG JAPAN-US RELATIONS IS THE BASIC PREMISE OF ASIA'S STABILITY"

Nikkei: There has been growing disharmony between the US and Japan.

Mahbubani: This is a development that is strongly watched by Asian countries. Strong ties between the US and Japan contribute to Asia's stability. Japan is trying to redefine its foreign policy towards the US but there are expectations for Japan to build stronger bilateral relations with the US. No country wants to see the collapse of this bilateral relationship.

Singapore has consistently stressed the importance of the US' presence in Asia's security. I think this is a view that is shared by all Southeast Asian countries at the moment. Deterioration of US-Japan bilateral relations will disrupt the balance of power in Asia, as well as harm the stable environment. This is obvious if we look back at history,

Nikkei: Is China's emergence a concern?

Mahbubani: Although China has a territorial dispute in the South China Sea, I do not think China will act carelessly. In terms of both politics and economics, Southeast Asia is considered an essential region, and China will not take reckless actions which might destroy its relations with this region.

Nevertheless, the world is in the midst of dramatic geopolitical changes. US-China, Japan-China, China-India, and other power relations are undergoing change. We need to closely monitor these changes and adapt to the new environment.

Nikkei: How do you view the Futenma Air Base relocation issue?

Mahbubani: As a democratic country, Japan needs to listen to the voice of Okinawa. Nevertheless, I would like to stress the importance of cooperation between Japan and the US from the military standpoint. For example, when it comes to securing the sea-lanes in Southeast Asia, the cooperation of both the US and Japan is beneficial to the region.

Nikkei: How do you view the Hatoyama government's policy towards the US?

Mahbubani: I am not pessimistic about the differences between Japan and the US. Between countries, there will always be a divergence of views. By emphasizing its own position, Japan can actually build stronger relations with the US. It is like how children build up strong ties with their parents by asserting themselves repeatedly as they grow up. The US also needs to understand that Japan's dependence on the US would not last forever.

From the geopolitical standpoint, both Japan and the US share the benefits of the security alliance. This is obvious. Japan should make its decisions based on its own analysis, instead of deriving its conclusions amidst a dependent relationship with the US. Japan will not gain the trust of the international community if it continues to do the latter.

Nikkei: Are you saying that Japan should be more assertive?

Mahbubani: Thus far, Japan did not have its own unique diplomatic policies, and in problems such as Afghanistan and Iraq, it was striking that Japan had followed the US. Japan should demonstrate its originality. For example, towards the problem of the military dictatorship in Myanmar. Amidst the imposition of sanctions by western countries, Japan can insist on taking its own approach.

Nikkei: PM Hatoyama is calling for an East Asian community.

Mahbubani: The East Asia Summit, consisting of 16 countries, including ASEAN, Japan, China, and India, should be skilfully utilized. To build up a community, frameworks that include China and India are necessary. As a start, the Summit process could be strengthened and the US could then be involved as one possible approach.