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Dr Mahathir tells Asian countries to work together

Baidura Ahmad in Hong Kong

ASIAN countries, divided by geography, ideologies and economic capabilities, must come together to take their places as equals in the global community of nations, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said last night.

"Much of the energy and the spirit which had driven Asia in the second half of the 20th century has dissipated. No Genghis Khan, Akhbar the Great, no Mongol or Turkish hordes are likely to appear on the scene," he said at a dinner held in his honour.

And to put to rest the fears of the West that Asia aimed to take over the world, he said:

"Any idea about Asia dominating the world in the 21st century should be discarded. It is not feasible and it will merely serve to antagonise the rest of the world, in particular the European nations on both sides of the Atlantic. Neither should any Asian nation harbour ideas of dominating Asia."

Instead, he urged Asia, which today "is in total disarray", to take pride in its values and cultures and the countries' different ways of managing their problems.

"The more developed nations of Asia should invest in and help the less developed. An Asian Monetary Fund would be useful."

Dr Mahathir was addressing a dinner organised by the Asia Society Hong Kong Centre.

The New York-based organisation is considered America's leading institution dedicated to fostering understanding of Asia and communication between Americans and Asians.

In his speech, Agenda for a New Asia, he spoke at length on Asia's diversity and weaknesses, particularly in the wake of the regional financial crisis.

Offering his views on the matter as "someone who knew something of Asia's past and present situation", he said, "... as to the future of the continent, my guess is as good as anyone else's."

While agreeing that everyone should be concerned over human rights, the environment, etc, he added that no one from within or outside Asia should appoint himself or his country as the policeman responsible for ensuring everyone "behaves".

As for Asians who think that Western ways are the cure-all for Asian maladies, Dr Mahathir pointed out that communism and socialism, which were conceptualised by the West, had retarded the development of many countries in Asia and Africa.

"There is no reason why we should believe that what is being propagated by the West now - liberal democracy, free markets, borderless world etc - will be any better in the long run.

"We must not blindly accept Western ways, ideologies and values without waiting for them to be tested extensively in the West."

In the booming mid-90s or pre-crisis days, the West could not stop the challenge posed by many East Asian tiger economies in their quest to dominate the world through their wealth and technological know-how.

The opportunity to stop the 21st century from becoming the Asian Century, however, came during the economic crisis.

"Again, I would stress there was no conspiracy. The attacks against the East Asian economies were not orchestrated. It is most likely that rogue

currency traders just saw an opportunity to make a pile for themselves.

"Be that as it may, the fact is that their attacks soon left most of the East Asian tigers in a state of unprecedented economic turmoil and sudden poverty.

"From being economic threats to the West, they suddenly found themselves totally dependent on the West for their recovery."

Undermined governments, distressed businesses and collapsed stock markets all contributed to an Asia that no longer talked about dominating the world economically.

"Asians cannot come together the way Europeans can come together. Asia must accept it is a divided continent. Accepting this, it must plan its future as separate sub-continent, growing according to its special comparative advantages and at different paces."

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