

20/01/2001

Japan must lead new Asia

THE call to Japan to assume a leadership role in Asia is not new though circumstances in East Asia and the new world order might have changed a little. What has not changed substantially is that the world's second largest economy is still dithering in its response years after the call was first made in the 90s.

Then the Southeast Asian economies were more prosperous, their good fortune built up beginning in the late Eighties. However they floundered three years ago, because of the financial crisis. The Japanese bubble burst more than a decade ago and the country has been mired in the throes of a recession. Through it all, Japan's procrastination in leading Asia to greater heights is as abysmally stark as ever.

We are not saying this capital-surplus country, also the most technologically advanced in Asia, has not helped its neighbours. It has. It extended technical co-operation and aid as well as pumped funds into portfolio and direct investments. At the Asean Summit in December 1998, Japan offered US\$5 billion to help revitalise stricken Asian economies. But there is much more that Japan can do if it were not so mummified by its conformity and its subservience to the United States.

Arguably, Asia is strategically and economically important to the US, and the world acknowledges the supremacy of the United States as the sole superpower as well as its economic clout. There is much we have learnt from the West but there is also a lot more that we have to sieve and leave behind if it does not suit our needs. Japan and its East Asian neighbours are a force to be reckoned with by virtue of their vast population and natural and manpower resources.

Japan has a lot going for it if it can only muster its political will to take charge and lead the way. Its people possess good work ethic and its technological prowess and immense capabilities enable it to stand in good stead. The country should not sell itself short or marginalise its role, given the advantages it has.

Conformity and consensus-building can only go on for so long. Its economy has been in the doldrums for more than 10 long years. Is it going to wait another 10 years before it makes its choice to take charge and change for the better? The opportune time is now, for more Japanese initiatives in Asia especially in addressing economic issues.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in Osaka on Thursday, it is by co-operating with each other, trading, investing, transferring technologies and actually carrying out voluntary services on a massive scale that we can transform East Asia into a region of wealthy nations where there will be no poverty. Mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual gains will not benefit Asia alone but will extend to the world as well. While both Japan and the US want Asia to remain open to US exports, they should not be less tolerant of potential "new Japans" emerging.

In a world where "perfect systems" have been seen to crumble and where great empires and civilisations of yore have suffered similar fates, Japan has to ask itself whether it believes the present international economic system is fair to the socially vulnerable. And, is Japan sensitive enough to the new Asia? If it is not, Japan should assert itself and lead Asia to a new future where it has a stake as well.

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