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Japan should just stick to doing things its way

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MANY, developed and developing countries, looked to Japan for lessons and its secret for success. Malaysia was no different. Japan had emerged from the world's first nuclear wasteland to be the world's second largest economy.

It had shown the world that there is another way to progress and development. That the Western practices and policies are not the only solutions. But increasingly Tokyo seems to be abandoning its policies and emulating the West.

Westernisation is being seen as being synonymous with modernisation. But this is not really the case. It can spell disaster.

Adjustment takes time and while the colour of one's hair can be changed in a matter of hours, if not minutes, as Japanese youth have discovered, the adoption of unfamiliar business practices takes time and it can and does lead to disruptions.

Thus the "disaster that you face now is of your own making". Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told the Japanese last week that "just as your post-war recovery was through your own way, you can recover now by your own way".

Tokyo must work at its problems and show commitment rather than seeking political solutions to economic problems that do not work.

At the same time Japan must resort to policies best suited to the domestic environment.

Japan pulled itself out of the devastation of war, and in the subsequent years grew and prospered, transforming itself into an industrial and technological powerhouse.

It emerged from the war as the world's second most powerful economy in the world, after the US.

Japanese self-made industrialists like Akio Morita showed the world that the Japanese who were referred to as "those little yellow people" could lead the world, compete with the best and win.

Japan dominated with a variety of goods and appliances the world depended upon. In fact, the daily dependence on Japanese goods is best illustrated by Steven Schlossstein in his book entitled Trade War.

He writes: "Soothed out of the depths of sleep by your Sony Slumber-Magic clock radio, you pad into the kitchen and switch on the Sanyo coffee machine, which automatically grinds the beans, brews the coffee, and keeps it hot until you're ready to drink.

"Then you toss a few orange quarters into the Panasonic food processor and tap an electronic touchplate that instantly commands the machine to make juice. Or maybe you have a Cuisinart. It doesn't matter, it's also Made in Japan.

"You glance at your Seiko quartz wristwatch. Got to get moving or else the traffic will be unbearable...

"Your Honda starts instantly. It should. Its quality is unsurpassable. You back out of the garage and head downtown. As you wait for an opening onto the freeway, you watch the cars stream by.

"Datsun, Chevy, Mustang, Peugeot, Toyota, BMW, Buick, Chrysler, Mazda.

"And then it hits you.

"One out of every five cars is Japanese".

Indeed home life, work and play was made much easier thanks to Japan and its goods. And the quality was taken for granted.

Japanese quality was accepted and admired even in the US as it carried the seal of approval of an American - Mr Demning.

Japan's success had attracted tremendous interest with almost all business schools offering it as a case study. Many were interested in understanding the reasons for Japan's emergence and success. Japan had done it in its own way.

Japan's business strategy differed from those in the West. For instance the Japanese went for market share through high volumes and low margins. The developed countries of the West went for high margins and were mainly focused on the markets of developed countries and not those of developing countries.

The Japanese work ethics, loyalty, life-long employment also played a part in the emergence of the Japanese economy and its development. In addition, the close co-operation between the public and private sectors or Japan Inc helped contribute to its economic success.

But this is changing, and changing fast to the detriment of the Japanese culture and way of life. The younger Japanese are beginning to emulate the West.

Not only are individuals following the West even in the business world many of the old, time-tested practices that have benefited the Japanese are being discarded in favour of practices imported from the developed West.

It has become a follower rather than a leader. It appears to be bowing to the wishes of others, rather than looking to what is best for itself, its economy and people.

Japan as a major economic powerhouse has a responsibility not only to its own citizens but to those in the region and indeed the world.

It must play its rightful role as an economic leader. As one of the biggest donors of foreign aid to developing countries, Japan's role in international affairs - political, economic and social - is insignificant.

Its low profile seems to be deliberate. It cannot continue to "punch below its weight". It cannot continue to look over its shoulders to see what the US would say or do. It cannot continue to fear the US. "It must lead and not be led."

It is time as Dr Mahathir, writing in the Japanese newspaper Mainichi, had said for Japan to discard its feeling of guilt for its "aggression during the Pacific War".

As Dr Mahathir stressed "In the interest of Japan, in the interest of East Asia and indeed in the interest of the world, we need a politically stable and economically healthy Japan".

It can repeat its post-war "economic miracle" if Japan puts its mind to it.