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The India that can say 'No!'

Jeff Ooi

IN 1991, Japanese writer Shintaro Ishihara's book titled 'The Japan That Can Say No: Why Japan Will Be First Among Equals' was translated into English. Discarding conventional Japanese protocol and diplomacy, he berated the world for misreading his country.

Ishihara especially condemned America's racist policies. He forcefully contended that the atomic bomb was not used on Germany because Germans were white, and Japanese were yellow. He asserted that nations colonised by Japan have been far more successful after World War II than those colonised by the United States. He stated that Japanese computer technology was second to none, and that it should be used as a negotiating tool to enable Japan build its own defence forces. Those were very disturbing views when I first read the book.

Reading in retrospect, this book seems dated, and history may not have accommodated all the author's views. There is but one salient point in his argument where he said Japan should rightfully rise as the most influential power dealing with Asian nations. In reality, his advocacy for trade liberalisation and his critique of domestic economic policy fell on deaf ears in Japan. His country continued on its decade-long recession. Times have changed. China and India are now Japan's major competitors in terms of the sphere of influence in the region.

I revisited this book as a recent incident set me thinking further: Has India come of age, and today, has it equalled Japan to say no to terms and conditions it dislikes? We should now be wiser as much has been said about the procedural lapses involving our law enforcement authorities when they checked on the immigration and employment documents of a group of Indian IT professionals who work here. Immediate response from the diplomats and mass media in India has been daunting. I believe with a high-level investigation ordered by the Deputy Prime Minister now concluded, positive steps would be taken to smoothen the ruffled feathers through diplomatic channels, and impaired relations repaired. However, there are several questions which linger on many lips: Do India's IT personnel matter to us as a factor in realising our Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) goals? Would India have reacted differently had it not commanded that capacity to say no the Ishihara way? This is besides the fact that India is the world's biggest democracy, and now a member of the Nuclear Power Club.

Another hard fact is that a vast part of America's Silicon Valley was built on the IT skills of its people. In relation, many are aware that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad co-authored a book with Ishihara in 1994: The Voice of Asia. This was what Dr Mahathir commented when he touched on China, Japan and India on regional challenges (page 126):

'No discussion of the prospects for Asia can overlook the changes taking place in India... Indians are an open people... They are also tremendously able at business, and many have been educated in the West... If India opens up the economy, the combination of world-class expertise, a huge population, low labour costs, and an industrious workforce will make it an economic giant in the twenty-first century.'

I believe much of Dr Mahathir's observation about India some 10 years ago, especially on ICT development, has seen astounding truth today. Last October, he led a 25-member high-level delegation to Andhra Pradesh, paying working visits to its Hi-Tech City, the International Institute of

Information Technology (IIIT), Infosys and Satyam's technology centre at Bahadurpally.

During the Hyderabad leg of his visit, Dr Mahathir extended his welcome to Indian IT professionals to Malaysia, and in particular to the MSC, with a view to boosting Malaysia's IT development as Malaysia faced shortages of skilled IT professionals, such as those in software engineering. Obviously, to leverage the huge talent pool in the software sector in India is a good option to fast-track our ICT agenda.

Recently, Indian President A P J Abdul Kalam described IT as India's 'trump card'. He called for networking of talents to make India a superpower in the field of information technology. Kalam may sound gung-ho, but he touched on a hard fact in that, today, India's IT industry has earned the trust of 260 out of the Fortune 500 companies as its clients.

That's clear enough for us to wake up to the fact that we have peers in India that can now say 'No' to the world.