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Mahathir: Japan can influence U.S. policy

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This is the third installment of a series of interviews with former East Asian leaders by The Yomiuri Shimbun ahead of the East Asia Senior Leaders' Forum in Fukuoka on March 31.

This installment features excerpts of interview comments made by Mohamad Mahathir, who was Malaysian prime minister for 22 years from 1981. Mahathir is known for his "Look East" policy that sought to replicate the development of Japan and South Korea. Mahathir will participate in the forum through a video message.

[The formation of an East Asian Community] can be realized...but the participation of China, Japan and South Korea is very important. I don't think that America should be included. It isn't because we want to confront



Mohamad Mahathir

America, but America tends to dominate any organization, and tends to insist that its own ideas must be accepted. Why do I oppose the participation of Australia and New Zealand? East Asia is not just East Asia geographically—it is also culturally East Asian. The Australians and the New Zealanders are basically Eurocentric and Euro-cultured. They do not fit with the kind of culture that is found in East Asia.

East Asia must come together as I said; this thing was proposed 15 years ago. Even at the time there was a need for East Asia to come together to provide a balancing force. We were at that stage just approaching the World Trade Organization and all the ideas of what the World Trade Organization should be like came from the West; obviously it is in order to benefit them. If we want to balance that, we need inputs from others parts of the world.

And East Asia can give good input into the concept and the function of the World Trade Organization. Now it is even more important because of the emergence of China as a great trading nation and India is coming up. We need to make sure that there is no attempt made to contain, as once they did, communist China. We have to accept a China and India that is booming. So we need to sit down and talk and then of course how would East Asia relate to the rest of the world, to the Eurocentric world. That is very important.

Sooner or later, [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations becoming a single

community] is bound to happen. Now that we are almost 40 years old, this is a very strong grouping of developing countries. But because they are grouped, they have become quite influential, if not powerful, and the relationship of countries in Southeast Asia is very important for stability. Because Southeast Asia is at the crossroads between East and West, between Europe and East Asia, between East Asia and West Asia, Central Asia. Southeast Asia is the route that ships go through and stability of this area is very important. As you know, we have two main passageway routes—the Straits of Malacca and Lombok Strait—and if it is not stable, trade will be affected.

[Creating a common currency for trading inside the region], can be done now if you want to because it is not difficult. It is a question of reaching an agreement, and trade will be enhanced.

I think we have to talk to [North Korea]. I think the North Koreans know that they cannot fight, they cannot fight with Japan, they cannot fight with China, they cannot use their nuclear weapon. But they are a poor country, and you have to talk to them and help them also, to overcome their poverty. If you push a person into a corner, he will fight back. If he has no weapons, he will bite you.

We are thinking about the usefulness of working together. If we talk about Japan as a regional power and as a leader in East Asia, then that is not acceptable. We also don't think it is China that should assume the leadership of East Asia. What we need to do is for everybody to think of the common good—that is better. Japan's closeness to America, of course it worries some, when you begin to support things that the Americans do. But if Japan could use its influence on America, to make America understand the problem of East Asia, that would be good, that is the role for Japan.

America wants to station the 7th Fleet here, they asked Malaysia to support it, they asked other countries to support it. It is confrontational, it is a threat—you are showing that you think China is an enemy. When you think China is an enemy, China thinks you are the enemy, then of course there is a risk and China will have to strengthen itself. [The United States] is always identifying enemies and it wants to be aggressive, that frightens a lot of people. And Japan, as a friend of America, should be telling America, "Look, this is not the right way."

—Interview conducted by Yomiuri Shimbun Asian Editor Tetsuya Tsuruhara and Yomiuri Shimbun Singapore Correspondent Yoshio Hanada

