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EVENT: The future of Asia and the role of Japan challenges of the 21st century to youth

VENUE: Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan

DATE: 27 March 1997

TIME:

As one of Japan's oldest universities Waseda University has a glorious record. It has left an indelible mark on the pages of the educational and nation-building history of Japan. Your achievements fulfilled the vision of your founder, Shigenobu Okuma.

Waseda University can take pride that it has played a big part in helping to produce the good citizens who helped to form the backbone of modern Japan. I understand your Alumni numbers nearly half a million. May I take this opportunity to congratulate you for your fine achievements. As we prepare for the next millennium may I wish you greater success.

I welcome the opportunity to have this encounter of the minds with you here today because I think you are a very special audience. You may not have thought about it but you are indeed ~ very special group of people for at least two reasons.

First, you actually represent the children of post-Second World War Japan or the new Japan- a democratic, responsible and prosperous Japan that blossomed under a Peace Constitution. By and large, you have emerged as the primary and principal beneficiaries of this new found national creed and prosperity of Japan.

Second, apart from the fact that as students of Waseda University, you are the creme de la creme among the children of a prosperous post-war Japan, you are also among the most fortunate youths of the century because you are going to be an important element in the bridge and the link between this century and the next. You represent both the present and the future. You are Japan's hope and aspiration for the coming millennium.

It is in this context that our gathering here today takes on a very special meaning. My aim is very modest. I would like to invite you to join me in taking a close look at some of the major changes currently sweeping Asia and the world. In a shrunken and increasingly borderless world we cannot of course look at Asia in isolation.

I submit that it is important for us to come to terms with the emerging Asia. Perhaps more so for Japan for reasons I do not have to elaborate here. We all have to try to understand not only the dimensions and the dynamics of change that are going on all around us but also their less tangible, but equally significant, underlying causes and implications.

Japan is generally regarded as a success story. Very few people will disagree with that although some may have their own views on what actually constitute success. Fundamentally, it was the emergence of Japan as an economic superpower in the post Second World War era that has inspired

admiration and initiated the economic revolution among many East Asian nations, a revolution that has changed almost completely the character of this region, and projected it into prominence in the world's economic equation.

Emerging from the Pacific War with a devastated country and economy, Japan has become today one of the few countries in the world that is truly powerful economically, becoming a creditor nation very early during its emergence as an economic powerhouse. I am told unemployment has been for a long time almost a non-issue in this country. Other developed nations may be prosperous but have almost never been able to achieve full employment. Despite some recent recurring economic ills, its per capita income is still one of the highest in the world. And perhaps even more important it is one of the most peaceful and pleasant countries to live in.

Some people attribute Japan's miraculous economic feat to its unique culture. Their basic argument is that the Japanese have been successful simply because they are Japanese and that on account of the uniqueness of the Japanese culture, there are many things about the Japanese which simply cannot be learnt or emulated.

I beg to disagree. Japanese culture may have played a role. But really there is nothing that cannot be learnt, including elements of a country's culture. Malaysia has always been very much impressed with the Japanese achievements and over a decade ago we set out to seriously learn certain aspects of your culture. Hence the Look East Policy. Now 13 years later the policy has proven beneficial to Malaysia, and incidentally, it has benefited Japan as well.

It is simply indefensible to hold that certain skills and knowledge are the exclusive monopoly of certain nations. I am not anti-European, but the myth of exclusivity in certain skills was invented by Europeans in the heyday of their imperialism. We, the colonised people, actually believed at one time that there was no way we could acquire these skills. But Japan and the Japanese have shown that the claim was false. Anyone can acquire any knowledge or skills provided he is prepared to pursue these doggedly. And our Look-East Policy has proven that even Japanese ethics and work culture can be learnt without of course making us any less Malaysian.

Asia, freed from the aforementioned myths will grow and develop in the coming years, in the coming century. Certainly East Asia, i.e. North East and South East Asia will grow very fast. Japan is likely to stay ahead but the so-called dragons and tigers will not be far behind. Short of a nuclear war exploding, there can be no stopping the emergence of East Asia as an economic powerhouse of the same stature as the European Union or NAFTA in the 21st Century. But what all these portend for the future of Asia and indeed of the world will depend on our understanding and perceptions of the various alternatives presented to us and the role we choose to play.

Due to sheer size alone China must become a major economic power in the region. We are being urged to fear this but the combined size and wealth of the other North East Asian countries together with the South East Asian countries can easily balance that of China. Certainly in economic terms China will not be as big as the rest of East Asia. An antagonistic stand towards China by the rest will not be necessary. It will actually be counter-productive. Instead cooperation between all the countries of East Asia including China, not in a military or even economic terms, but in promoting justice and equitability world wide, in arguing on behalf of weak nations, would create the kind of understanding which will diminish the

possibility of conflicts and confrontations in East Asia. And by extension, it would contribute towards building a peaceful and more equitable world.

Some will probably think that a strong cooperative Asia will want to dominate the world. Already some are talking of the 21st Century as the Asian Century. But a strong Asia cannot dominate the world in the sense the Europeans on both sides of the Atlantic dominated the world for well over four centuries. The concept of domination and hegemony in the old sense, is out-dated and silly. It is unfortunate, however, that the Europeans are still clinging to this idea and postulating all kinds of possible hegemonic threats by Asia. Having lost their globe-girdling colonies, the Europeans now want to continue their dominance through dictating the terms of trade, the systems of Government and the whole value system of the world including human rights and environmental protection. They are still at it because no one seems capable or willing to counter them. The Asians, the only people capable of balancing European influence, are divided and unwilling to play a meaningful role in world affairs.

But, if Asians particularly of East Asia have a better sense of responsibility, they will undertake the task. Asia cannot dominate the world. There cannot be an Asian century. But a more cohesive Asia can provide the balance which will contribute towards the creation of a more equitable world.

Asians as much as Europeans have been guilty of cruel wars in the past. Millions have died because of the ambitious wars of conquest by Asians. The Seljuk and the Ottoman Turks and the Mongols swept over Central Asia and then Europe, killing millions and devastating towns and cities. Arab armies reached beyond the Pyrenees into France. In recent times Japan too set out on such an adventure, enamoured by the European concept of imperialism.

There is no doubt that they would have continued to occupy and rule these territories that they conquered. But there is a slight difference between Asian conquerors and their European counterparts.

Europeans colonised and dominated the people they conquered. They remain apart even when their subjects embraced their religion and culture. Asian conquerors, on the other hand, tended to be assimilated by their subject people. Thus the Turks embraced Islam, the religion of the Arabs they subjugated and ruled. The Mongols became Muslims in Muslim countries and Buddhists in China. There was no clear and permanent line between the conquerors and the conquered. They do not impose their faith or their system or their values on the subject people. Indeed they identify with the subject people and eventually seek to free themselves together with the local inhabitants from the rule of their own kind. There were no colonies of the conquering Turks, Arabs or Mongols.

How relevant is this to the problem of balancing the influence of the West in the 21st Century? Not very much perhaps. But the fact is that there was a time when Asians played a significant role in shaping the cultures, religions and politics of the world. If they could do that before, they should be able to do the same again, not through wars of course but through balancing the pressures of the Europeans. But can they succeed in doing this? Again, I would like to say that they can if they have the courage

of their conviction and the will to try. The problem is that at the moment the Asians are passive, fragmented and timidly defensive. If they continue to be as they are now, then the role of Asians in the next century will not be any different from their present role. And in that case they deserve to be dominated by the Europeans in an inequitable and an unjust world.

I would like to stress again that playing a balancing role is not the same as trying to dominate. I am not suggesting that Asians should forcibly confront the Europeans in an attempt to make them less prone to using arm-twisting methods to impose their will and their perception of things global. No one has a monopoly of wisdom, not the Asians, not the Europeans. But Europeans have been wrong many more times in the immediate past. They can be wrong again in their evangelizing today. Let us examine their record.

When the 20th century dawned, the Europeans were at the height of their world dominance. Almost every European power including European Russia boasted of huge globe-girdling empires. They saw nothing wrong in their colonising and subjecting non-Europeans to their rule. Indeed, they invented the myth of the White Man's Burden to justify their oppressive imperialism.

But in the end they had to admit that they were wrong, that the natives had their own civilizations and the right to be free of European norms and overlordship.

Having tacitly admitted that they had been wrong about the White Man's Burden, they then created the Cold War as a sequel to the World War II they won. World War II had been touted by them as the war to end all wars. But apparently it only resulted in a prolonged Cold War because of ideological differences. The ideologies concerned were all of European origins and both sides, the Western Europeans and the Eastern Europeans preached these ideologies as the only correct ideologies which the whole world must embrace.

In the end, after much tension, costly preparations for war, proxy wars and assorted confrontations, it was admitted that the Socialist ideology of Western Europe and the Communist ideology of Eastern Europe were wrong. It was, however, claimed that the liberal democracy and free market capitalism of the West had triumphed and been adjudged the right set of systems. Now the whole world must accept these systems.

Their value systems too were proven wrong repeatedly. They denied voting rights for women at first but later accorded them the right as well as other rights undreamt of. They decided that workers and their unions could do no wrong but today they have half-reversed their liberalism, limiting some of the rights of their own workers. Again they have tacitly admitted that they have been wrong.

But despite being so often wrong in so many of their ideas, they are absolutely convinced that their brand of liberal democracy is absolutely right. No other system would therefore be tolerated by them. Every country must now practise liberal democracy. If they don't, then economic sanctions and even military threat will be directed at them. That such methods are rather undemocratic does not worry the Europeans one bit. When promoting their cause everything is justified.

Now we all believe that there is no better system of Government than democracy. But democracy is interpreted differently by different people. Indeed the authoritarian rulers of Communist countries were fond of describing their countries as democratic republics. The Eastern Europeans are as inconsistent as the Western Europeans. They have now largely discarded their democratic republics, considering them not democratic at all. In other words they have admitted they were wrong about their brand of democracy. Is it not possible that since the Europeans both East and West have been wrong so many times, that their liberal democracy too would be proven wrong eventually? Is it not possible that our Asia interpretation of democracy may be proven right.?

In the field of international trade we are told that the only right system is free, unrestricted commerce between all countries of whatever level of economic development. The playing field must be level even if the players are not evenly matched. This is just and this is right. Already in the WTO they are pressing for the opening up of all markets to their huge powerful companies. Being small and weak is no excuse for protecting domestic business. They, the powerful European economies, will open their markets to the tiny companies from the poor countries in order to demonstrate how fair they are.

Everyone must accept liberal democracy and the absolutely free market because the Europeans say they are just and fair. But if they have been so often wrong before could they not be wrong also regarding their interpretation of free trade? Could it not be possible that others, including the small Asian trading countries, be right in their objections?

But divided and uncoordinated, the emerging economies of Asia have so far been unable to effectively have a say in the political and economic affairs of their own countries and certainly not in the world. We are going along with the dominant European views regardless of their mistakes in the past and the possibility of their making a mistake again now. If in the end all their systems, political and economic, are proven wrong, then obviously we will all have to pay a price. It could be a very heavy price. Already the Western thinkers are predicting clashes of civilizations. The pressures on China and South East Asian countries are causing bitterness as they obstruct the growth and development of these countries. The carping criticisms of human rights records and environmental pollution or destruction and the linking of these with trade will be much resented. Tensions will rise, threats will be hurled and unpleasant incidents will colour the relations between East and West. One day someone might do something stupid and economic pursuits will be replaced with political and even military confrontations.

All these may seem rather pessimistic. But all these things can happen. They can happen because the only people who can do something to stop it will not act. And the only people are the Asians, the countries of Asia. specifically East Asia.

So far Asia has refused to do anything in concert. They worry the Europeans on both sides of the Atlantic may not like it. At all cost they must not annoy the Europeans. Even if the Europeans are obviously wrong they should not be angered by telling them they could be wrong.

I submit that this is the wrong way to ensure a peaceful and glorious 21st Century. Asia must speak up if the countries of Asia want to enjoy peace and prosperity in the next century. Asia must be willing to confront the Europeans across the table now if it wants to avoid confronting them in other arenas later.

During the Cold War there were two blocs. Each bloc had to be careful and considerate of the needs of small countries in order to gain their support, even if the support was only moral in nature. The end of the Cold War has resulted in an unbalanced domination of the victor over the whole world. The sole dominant power has already demonstrated a tendency to be very heavy handed when dealing with other countries, particularly those not of the European bloc.

The only way to lighten this heavy-handedness is to create a counterbalance. Asia can provide that counterbalance. We are not talking about a balance of terror, a balance in terms of military might. That is wasteful and unproductive. The Asians can prevail simply by arguing their case together to counter the tendency of the Europeans to impose their systems and their will on the world.

As has been pointed out the Europeans have been wrong again and again. We must convince the Europeans that they could be wrong again now -- about their ideology, their political systems and their economic creed. We have to do it now before their overbearing ways lead to bitterness and tensions and worse.

The future of Asia will be largely determined by Asians. If Asia decides to accept continued European domination of the world, then a rapidly inequitable and oppressive atmosphere will build up which must in the end be damaging to Asia if not to the whole world. But if Asia decides to play a meaningful role in world affairs, to counter and correct wrong attitudes and the international policies of the Europeans, then there will be hope for a more just world, a more equitable world, a world in which the weak and the strong can coexist in peace and prosperity. Again I would like to stress that I don't mean military confrontation. All that is needed now is for the Asians to push their own arguments in the light of their own experience, past and present. It can do a lot of good. It cannot do much harm.

The role of Japan is obvious. It is by far the most advanced nation of Asia. It is well-placed to lead as the first among equals. It should play its rightful role in world affairs. It should set a good example for Asia by taking up the issues of concern to Asian countries. It should cease to consider itself a western developed nation in the East. Japan has the credibility to lead, not towards Asian domination in an Asian Century, but towards a more equitable world community in the Century of the World which is dawning upon us.

As for the youths, the challenge for them the 21st century is to try to throw off the baggage of history. The youths of the 21st century must think of themselves as true citizens of the world. They must forget colour and creed and notions of superiority or inferiority. They must think of equality not in terms of material wealth alone but in being all members of the same human race. The borderless world in which they will live must not only be in terms of information. It must be borderless in the true sense of removing the distinctions due to unequal wealth and unequal power, colour

and creed and intolerance between religions. Above all, the youths of the 21st century must not allow the Western wish for a clash ~of civilizations to occur.

The youths of the 21 st century must fully understand that the world is round. No country is truly East or West except relative to each other

Japan is a western country in so far as the US is concerned. And by the same token the US is an Eastern country. We all have as much right to call ourselves Eastern or Western people with n~o implied connotation about being different, inferior or superior.

The youths of the 21 st Century must reorientate themselves to a world which has not only shrunken but will no longer be divided between East and West. And they will have to regard the whole Earth as their planet and country, the object of their ultimate loyalty. National traditions and cultures they must retain but all traditions and cultures of all countries are of equal importance and worthy of being respected by all. There should be only one world civilization although some traditions, standards and perceptions must be allowed to differ. All should be accepted as universal, unless we all agree they are totally unacceptable.

The Information Age has dawned upon us and with it comes a borderless world in which no nation can be an island. We all belong to the same world, fed by the same information and accepting ever more uniform values and culture. Eventually, there will evolve a world civilization to which everyone will belong. The challenge for the youths of the 21 st Century is how to adjust to this century of the world while retaining some of the diversity of race and creed which will make the world continue to be interesting. For Asian youths, their understanding of the shape and the dynamics of the 21 st century will determine the role that they will play and the Asia that will emerge.

FILE NAME: SP2703