Japan's U.S. alliance hamstringing its Asia leader potential?

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LONDON -- Japan's resurgence as an economic power will depend largely on how far it can integrate itself with the rest of Asia. But is Tokyo really committed to that goal?

This theme was discussed by panelists in the Feb. 25 symposium at Chatham House in London as they debated Japan's role in Asia and the international community.

Noriko Hama, a professor of international economics at Doshisha University Business School, said the only way for Japan to be revived is by "Asianizing" itself.

News photo

Noriko Hama (right) speaks to the audience while her fellow panelists -- Chris Hughes (second from right) and Axel Berkofsky (second from left) -- and Yoshiji Nogami, senior visiting fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs who chaired the session -- listen.
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When you are asked if Britain is or should be part of Europe politically, economically or culturally, you may have difficulty answering the question, but if the question posed is whether Japan is or should be part of Asia, the answer to both should be a definite yes, Hama said.

"Japan definitely is, or at least definitely needs to be, a part of Asia. I think a Japanese resurgence can never happen, not least in the economic sense but also from a broader context, unless and until Japan can really become an 'organic' part of Asia," the professor said.

And if Japan eventually succeeds in reviving itself, Hama said, the nation has an important role to play not just for Asia but the rest of the world, by bringing a "better balance to this highly unbalanced, highly unhinged global economy that we see today, where pretty much everyone depends on the deficit spending of the Americans for demand creation and to keep their economies turning."

Such a role, she added, can only be fulfilled by Japan at the moment because China, despite its dynamics, is "still not a well-balanced

economy" and is still "a very great risk, as well as (being) an opportunity, to the global state of affairs."

But Chris Hughes, a senior research fellow and deputy director of the Center for the Study of Globalization and Regionalization at the University of Warwick, said he is instead pessimistic, noting Japan is in fact "de-Asianizing" as it prioritizes its bilateral ties with the U.S.

"I think it is actually losing some very important opportunities to play a greater role in the East Asia region," Hughes told the audience.

After the end of the Cold War, Hughes said, there was greater enthusiasm on the part of Japan to organize East Asia, to experiment with multilateralism, and even to be a potential leader of East Asia.

A series of initiatives and proposals made in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis for greater regional stability, including the Chiang Mai Initiative, was "both overt and veiled challenges to U.S. dominance" in international financial institutions covering the region and an attempt to promote bilateral and multilateral approaches to East Asian cooperation, he said.

Hughes also cited Japan's decision to enter the ASEAN+3 forum of dialogue and participation in U.N.-led peacekeeping missions in Cambodia and East Timor as signs in this direction.

"However, I think Japan's regionalist and multilateralist project in East Asia has largely stalled, or has even gone into reverse gear" after the 1997 Asian crisis and especially following the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, he said.

In the economic sphere, Japan has begun to pursue bilateral free-trade agreements with nations in East Asia that, he said, are "essentially preferential trading agreements" that would enable Japan to protect vested interests at home and would not lead to multilateralism as explained by Japanese policymakers.

And regarding security, Japan has increasingly bound itself to a strengthened alliance with the U.S., as seen in the dispatch of Self-Defense Forces elements to the Indian Ocean to support the U.S.-led operation in Afghanistan and to Iraq to help rebuild the nation following the U.S.-led war, as well as its decision to purchase the U.S.-developed ballistic missile defense system, he pointed out.

"A strengthened U.S.-Japan alliance is really incompatible with and undercuts the prospects for multilateral security in East Asia," Hughes reckoned.

"What we are seeing is a real energy of Japan's security policy going to the U.S.-led multilateral coalition of the willing," he said. "I think the kind of precedents that Japan is setting in the dispatch of the SDF to Iraq and Afghanistan are going to become precedents which will then come back to the East Asian region. And so we are going to see Japan taking part in more multilateral security in the region, but it will be U.S.-led multilateral security for U.S.-led interests, and it will not be working on

East Asian-inspired norms and practices."

Japan, Hughes went on, is turning away from the postwar "Yoshida Doctrine" trajectory of "trying to use the East Asia region as a means to not only engage the U.S. and to constrain it but also to counterbalance the U.S. if necessary."

"Japan . . . is not working to support multilateralism in the current age of U.S. unilateralism and bilateralism, but is actually further facilitating that," he noted.

Axel Berkofsky, research fellow at the European Institute for Asian Studies in Brussels, noted that the dispatch of SDF troops to Iraq and support for the operation in Afghanistan do not reflect any fundamental redefining of Japan's security policy.

But the issue should be seen in the context of a gradual change in Japan's security policy, he said. "Japan is using this participation in the war against terrorism as a justification to boost its military profile, to boost its profile within the U.S.-Japan alliance, and to push a couple of security issues on its own policy agenda, such as the constitutional revision."

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