Buy-American Policy Would Ruin U.S.-Japan Trade

By Sam Jumaneen

Tokusaku Kuriyama, 60, Japan's ambassador-designate to Washington, predicted Monday that U.S.-Japanese relations were in for a "troubled period of mutual adjustment" and warned that "our whole relationship is going to be in serious trouble" if a "Buy American" campaign against Japanese products becomes widespread.

In an interview with selected correspondents here, Kuriyama also declared that "mutual criticism and recriminations" that have soured the two nations' relations recently "are based on outdated and insufficient information about each other," including "half-truths."

"The highly resented export, that has lately completed a 37-year career at the pinnacle of the Japanese professional diplomatic corps -- in the post of vice minister of foreign affairs -- said that both government and public awareness of rapid change and growing interdependence in the United States and Japan must catch up with reality. "Otherwise, we are heading for more trouble," he said.

Until the 1980s, he said, Tokyo-Washington ties represented a "one-sided relationship in which Japan was dependent upon the United States in all aspects -- political, security, economic and others."

But with Japan's rapid economic rise and the emergence of a "multipolar world in which the United States could no longer play the kind of dominant role it used to play," Japan and America now find themselves "in need of each other," he said. "Both political leaders and the public in general in both countries have found it difficult to adjust themselves to the change that has taken place in the relationship itself."

That is the main cause of friction," he said.

Called out of semi-retirement, Kuriyama, who advocates that Japan adopt its "small-country mentality" to develop what he calls "an unassuming diplomacy of a superpower that doesn't look like a superpower," will leave mid-March to assume his post in Washington.

Building a true U.S.-Japanese "global partnership" joined by Europe is the "challenge of the 1990s," he said. "If we fail to work together, the world will suffer. Others will get hurt too."

Kuriyama said that he did not view recent moves to promote a "Buy American" campaign in the United States as "representative of the sentiment of the American people."

But he added that, if the campaign spurs "widespread discriminatory practices" against Japanese goods, "it is obvious that our whole relationship is going to be in serious trouble."

Like some of his countrymen, Kuriyama found fault with the way the U.S. economy operates. Americans over-consume, do not save enough, are making insufficient investments in industry, must reduce their federal budget deficit, and need to improve competitiveness in some industries, he said. He has expressed that viewpoint -- one, he said, that is shared "by a wide range of people in the United States" -- before in speeches and articles.

But unlike his companions -- including Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa -- who have condemned such things as the American work ethic, Kuriyama complained that Japan often concentrates on cut--
cut features and fails to see the whole picture.

"It is a fact that American competitiveness in international markets has relatively declined ... It is one of many issues that Americans have to address ... But it's a big mistake ... to lose sight of the fact that there are many areas in which Americans are much more competitive than Japan."