

Will Changi run out of runway?

With limited room for expansion, Changi needs to come up with a new strategy



EYE ON SINGAPORE

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FOR more than three decades, Changi Airport has welcomed all airlines and aircraft, from the Airbus 380 super-jumbo to the turbo prop.

The aim was simple: encourage more traffic.

When Asian budget carriers started to proliferate a decade ago, for example, the airport responded by opening a purpose-built Budget Terminal with few frills, to suit their needs.

In future, however, the challenge will be very different. Expansion is still possible for now. But eventually, the airport will not be able to accommodate all the airlines that want to use it, and strategic choices will have to be made.

In 2017, when Changi Airport opens Terminal 4, it will run out of space for further expansion. But demand for Changi's services is likely to continue growing. In recognition of this, a 1,000ha piece of land – about three-quarters the size of the current airport premises – has been set aside for the construction of a fifth terminal (T5) together with its related infrastructure and facilities.

More difficult to construct than previous terminals, T5 is also likely to be Changi's last mega facility. T5 is slated for completion in the middle of the next decade.

The difficulty arises from the fact that the proposed plot is separated from the existing airport by the Changi Coast Road.

Linking a terminal located there with Changi's existing facilities will not be easy.

Should the Changi Coast Road be removed or diverted? If removed, what will be the impact on traffic on alternative routes like Nicoll Drive and Telok Paku Road? Can the road be moved underground so aircraft can move above? Will this compromise security?

Given the distance between the existing and future facilities – more than 2km – moving people

and cargo quickly and efficiently will also be an issue.

Limit to expansion

ACCORDING to Assistant Professor Terence Fan of the Singapore Management University's Lee Kong Chian School of Business, "the challenge is more complicated than designing Changi from scratch more than 30 years ago because of the existing terminals, runways and buildings around the airport".

In March last year, the Transport Ministry announced the establishment of a 10-member multi-agency committee led by Minister of State Josephine Teo, to chart the airport's future growth.

The team is assessing, among other issues, the detailed time-plan for T5. It is also considering when Changi will need a third runway. Such a runway already exists on land earmarked for the airport's future development. Currently used by the military, the intention is for the runway to be lengthened and used for both commercial and military flights.

Beyond that, however, there is little possibility of further expansion. Unlike countries such as China and India, as well as those in the Middle East, it is unlikely Singapore will have much more airport land beyond the 1,000ha plot. Its already congested airspace will also not allow more expansion.

Rapid growth has already produced operational constraints.

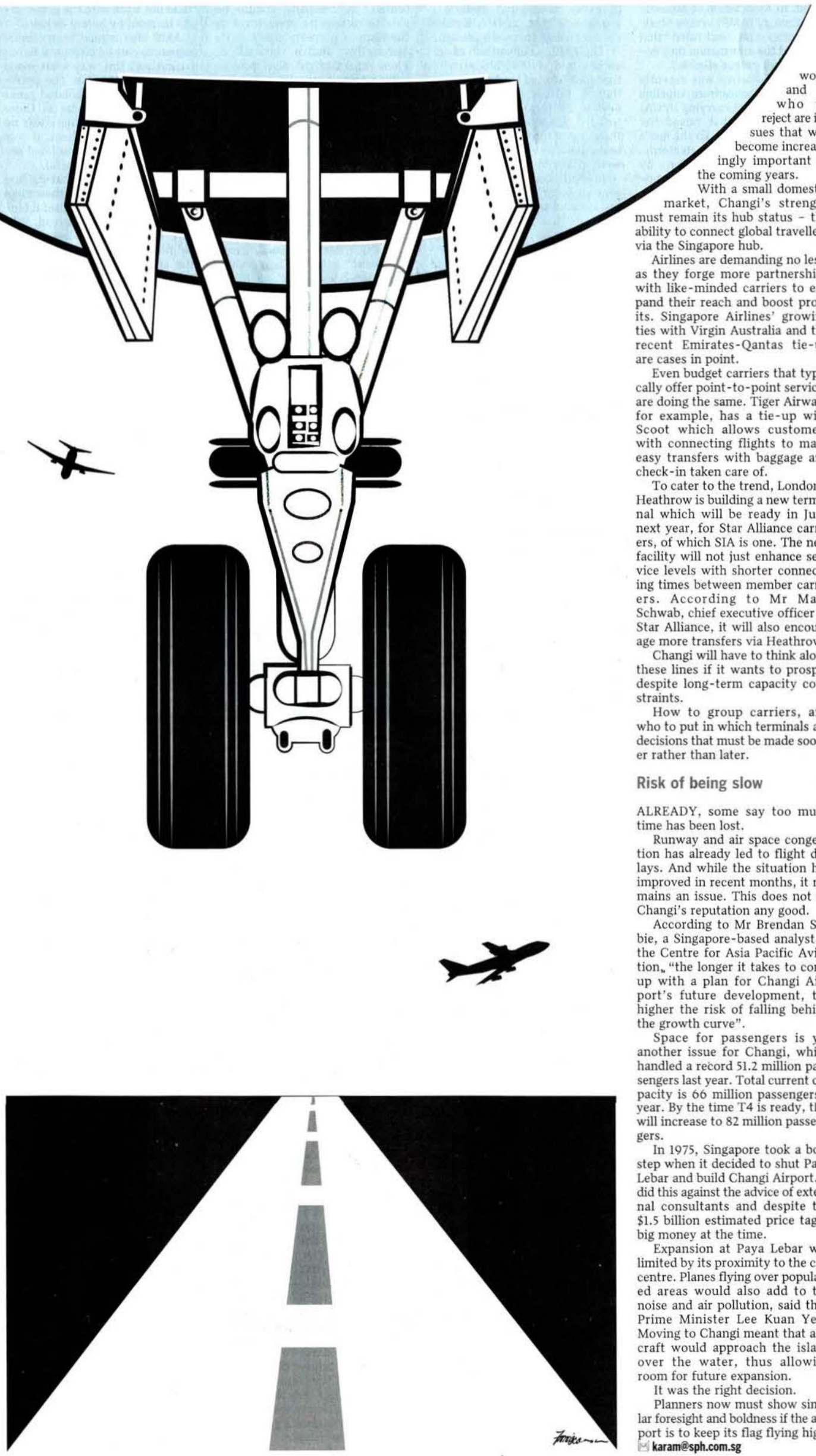
To deal with congestion during peak hours, airlines like Firefly and Berjaya Air that operate turbo prop planes have recently been told they will not get any new prime-time take-off slots.

For safety reasons, smaller planes need more separation time and distance from bigger aircraft during take-off and landing. Such flights therefore reduce runway capacity. Other airlines like AirAsia and Tiger Airways have also experienced problems getting the flight times they want.

When Runway 3 opens, new capacity will be added. But in time, the higher ceiling will be hit too. Ditto for T5.

Choosing who to woo

CHANGI therefore will not be able to accommodate all the airlines that want to use it. Who to



woo and who to reject are issues that will become increasingly important in the coming years.

With a small domestic market, Changi's strength must remain its hub status – the ability to connect global travellers via the Singapore hub.

Airlines are demanding no less, as they forge more partnerships with like-minded carriers to expand their reach and boost profits. Singapore Airlines' growing ties with Virgin Australia and the recent Emirates-Qantas tie-up are cases in point.

Even budget carriers that typically offer point-to-point services are doing the same. Tiger Airways for example, has a tie-up with Scoot which allows customers with connecting flights to make easy transfers with baggage and check-in taken care of.

To cater to the trend, London's Heathrow is building a new terminal which will be ready in June next year, for Star Alliance carriers, of which SIA is one. The new facility will not just enhance service levels with shorter connecting times between member carriers. According to Mr Mark Schwab, chief executive officer of Star Alliance, it will also encourage more transfers via Heathrow.

Changi will have to think along these lines if it wants to prosper despite long-term capacity constraints.

How to group carriers, and who to put in which terminals are decisions that must be made sooner rather than later.

Risk of being slow

ALREADY, some say too much time has been lost.

Runway and air space congestion has already led to flight delays. And while the situation has improved in recent months, it remains an issue. This does not do Changi's reputation any good.

According to Mr Brendan Sobie, a Singapore-based analyst at the Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation, "the longer it takes to come up with a plan for Changi Airport's future development, the higher the risk of falling behind the growth curve".

Space for passengers is yet another issue for Changi, which handled a record 51.2 million passengers last year. Total current capacity is 66 million passengers a year. By the time T4 is ready, this will increase to 82 million passengers.

In 1975, Singapore took a bold step when it decided to shut Paya Lebar and build Changi Airport. It did this against the advice of external consultants and despite the \$1.5 billion estimated price tag – big money at the time.

Expansion at Paya Lebar was limited by its proximity to the city centre. Planes flying over populated areas would also add to the noise and air pollution, said then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Moving to Changi meant that aircraft would approach the island over the water, thus allowing room for future expansion.

It was the right decision.

Planners now must show similar foresight and boldness if the airport is to keep its flag flying high.

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