

## **Is merger the answer?**

**Participants debate what Singapore must do to make it as a global city**

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SINGAPORE - While his first proposal - calling for an end to retirement - drew laughter, his second suggestion on how Singapore can survive as a global city received mixed responses.

Mr Nizam Idris, UBS executive director and head of Asia emerging markets strategy, said Singapore could negotiate "a one federation, two systems" arrangement with Malaysia, similar to Hong Kong and China's current arrangement. The history of global cities on their own, such as Babylon, are viewed "unfavourably", he noted.

Mr Nizam was among those at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual flagship conference who discussed whether there was a bright horizon for the Republic as a global city.

The topic, said Ambassador-at-large Ong Keng Yong, was a "strategic concern" due to the "possibility of a Singapore by-pass".

"The aeroplane today can bring people from Australia all the way to Europe in one straight flight. Very soon, if we're not careful, no one will stop in Singapore. No one will need to be in Singapore," he said.

Singapore Institute of Management chief executive Lee Kwok Cheong said the Republic could remain a global city by focusing on the aspirational, rather than the practical. Instead of building physical icons, for example, the integrated resorts, he suggested Singapore produce its "iconic heroes" in areas such as business and culture.

National University of Singapore geography professor Henry Yeung, meanwhile, suggested Singapore could aspire to be thought leaders in various fields.

But it was Mr Nizam's federation poser which drew the most responses from the 900-strong audience.

Mr VK Rajan, a senior consultant at Chesterton Suntec International, said the proposal had failed previously.

"Singapore playing a subordinate role? I'm not so sure," said Mr Rajan.

Another participant, a social studies teacher, said youth who grew up in a different context - after Singapore's brief merger with Malaysia between 1963 and 1965 - may not accept the idea.

But Mr Nizam said economies globally are moving toward European Union-like groupings. While the Association of South East Asian Nations is working on closer economic integration, Singapore and Malaysia have "the closest cultural as well as economic objectives", he said.

For every Chinese national working here, there are three Malaysians here, Mr Nizam noted. "It's definitely hard to imagine this 20 years ago. In 30 years' time, I'd like to think this is the kind of direction leaders may look at."

Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh felt, however, that "merger with Malaysia is not an option".

National borders will become less important for cities in the future, he said. For example, if physical space is lacking, countries could work together to start industrial parks.

"In this new world, geography and distance will become irrelevant. And our size is not a question," he said.