

The mix-and-match city

Why mega cities will be the norm and where Singapore's edge is

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IF the futurists have read the cards right, come 2030, the New World Order will be one dominated by a few elite mega-cities, rather than by nations.

And Singapore, judging by the Government's policies and pronouncements, wants to be in that select group, mixing with the likes of London and New York at the pinnacle nodes of global cities.

Deutsche Bank's chief economist, Mr Sanjeev Sanyal, believes that Singapore, more than any other Asian city, has what it takes to achieve this "worthy ambition". After all, once a "human cluster" has been assembled in the form of a mega-city, it will become very difficult to "throw off" such a structure. He pointed to London, which has "bad weather, bad infrastructure, terrorist strikes" — yet still well-regarded as a global city.

Speaking at the Singapore Perspectives 2008 seminar organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on Friday, Mr Sanyal said there is room for just one or two global cities in each region.

The model of a global city, he said, "plays to some of Singapore's best strengths". They include good governance, a cosmopolitan environment and well-developed infrastructures and amenities.

Take the integrated resorts, for instance. "If you really want to gamble, this is not the place. You will still go to Macau. But it's the mix and match that really matters. Again, this is an area that Singapore does very well."

But while the payoffs for being a global city are spectacular, there will also be thorny issues for Singapore to navigate: The lack of a hinterland; congestion; social tensions caused by an influx of immigrants and the "biggest risk of over-building".

Said Mr Sanyal: "In the process of creating a more attractive city, you keep building but the problem is that it actually pushes people out. It's much better to have one really lively, swinging bar than have half-a-dozen half-empty ones. So, it's optimal to build just right, or maybe short of just right."

During the Q&A session, Singapore Institute of International Affairs chairman Simon Tay asked if Singapore under such a "global city" model would be a "home or hotel".

Adding that it was a "tricky balance", Mr Sanyal said: "Eventually, all

great global cities are part-home and part-hotel because of the nature of how global citizens live. The problem is if you want to create a sense of community, you need a rooted population."

Apart from a "Formula 1 Singapore" going all out to achieve "high octane growth" as a global city, IPS' senior research fellow Dr Gillian Koh painted the other possible scenario where Singapore taps on the hinterland of Asia for resources.

And even in the latter scenario, Singapore needs to create an affiliation — or a "mind share" — among its people.

Said Dr Koh: "If we are unable to coalesce and work together and project ourselves as a community, we will be lost in the rise of China and India."

While Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew was confident that Singapore could vie against other prominent Asia-Pacific cities such as Sydney, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong to be the top regional city, he was "not sure if we can compete with New York or London".

"Sydney is too far away. Tokyo is too Japanese. Shanghai is still too Chinese. Shanghai will try very hard to be cosmopolitan but I do not believe they can produce a cosmopolitan climate we have here," said Mr Lee, who was asked for his views in a subsequent dialogue at the seminar.

But rather than going it alone, Mr Lee told reporters on the sidelines that he wants Malaysian leaders to know that Singapore is ready to work with them to grow together.

He added that Malaysia should view Singapore in the spirit of cooperation and acceptance instead of competition and antipathy.