

Beibu Bay a good eco-city prospect

Gu Xiaosong & Li Mingjiang

The Straits Times, 6 January 2009

Having successfully built the Suzhou Industrial Park in east China, Singapore decided in late 2007 to make another major investment in China, this time in the north.

The Tianjin eco-city, which will eventually cover more than 30 sq km, is a milestone project. Initiated by the Chinese and Singapore governments, the joint effort aims to turn marshy tracts of non-arable land into a model town with a green natural environment and a resource-efficient lifestyle. The city is expected to be completed in about 10 years.

When it is, Singapore will have brought to fruition two major projects in China, one in the east and the other in the north. Now seems an opportune moment for the Republic to think about how it can involve itself further in China. Another Singapore-China eco-city in the Beibu Bay area is an option worth considering.

Beibu Bay is part of the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, bordered by Vietnam in the south-west and the Gulf of Tonkin in the south. In January last year, the central Chinese government officially approved the Development Scheme of the Guangxi Beibu Gulf Economic Area. Comprising four cities, the zone will take up 42,500 sq km of land - about one-fourth of the region - with a population of about 12.5 million people

The Chinese government aims to make the zone the country's next engine of growth in its coastal regions, the first three being the Pearl River and Yangtze River deltas, and the Bohai Sea Rim in the north. The policy paper on the zone's development explicitly pointed out that the Beibu Gulf area, strategically located as it is between China and South-east Asia, could boost economic ties with Asean countries. This suggests that Beijing sees the zone as a means of further integrating the Chinese and Asean economies.

Environmental protection is high on the agenda in the development as the Beibu Bay is one of the few areas along China's extensive coast that have not been badly polluted. Any investment from abroad that would help preserve its environment would be welcomed by the Chinese government.

The local Guangxi government is also aware that environmental protection and the efficient use of resources, especially of energy, are vital to sustainable development. In recent years, the Beibu Bay area has accelerated its pace of industrialisation and urbanisation, creating a need for skills and technology that can ensure high eco-standards. As a garden city, Singapore has rich and valuable experience in maintaining high ecological standards in urban areas.

But what can the economic zone offer Singapore? The Republic has shown itself to be highly aware of the growing importance of the China market and the opportunities it can provide neighbouring countries. With the central government viewing the Beibu Gulf area as a growth engine to lead and facilitate the economic development of China's vast middle and western regions, the zone is likely to generate business opportunities in decades to come.

The Beibu Gulf region is only about three hours' flying time from Singapore, making it one of the closest places in China from the Republic. It has seasons but its summers and winters are relatively short, and the temperature does not usually fall below 6 deg C in winter. If an eco-city is built in the area, South-east Asians, including Singaporeans, may find it a

comfortable holiday or retirement spot.

According to some estimates, it will cost less to build an eco-city in the Beibu Bay area than in North China, because the subtropical climate makes issues such as water supply less of a problem. These estimates put the price tag of an eco-city in South China at half of what it would cost in North China, though the figure may even be less than that.

When plans were being drawn up for the Beibu Gulf economic area, some Chinese and Asean experts proposed that Guangxi build a financial centre to service neighbouring provinces and support economic integration between China and nearby Asean countries. Singapore can play a significant role here, given its financial expertise. Creating such a hub will help consolidate Singapore's position as a financial centre.

The Singapore-China eco-city programme in Tianjin should be a model that is replicable. Another such joint project in the Beibu Bay area is therefore not inconceivable. If an eco-city is built there, it could become a model for other places in South China and perhaps even for other Asean countries.

Gu Xiaosong is vice-president of the Guangxi Academy of Social Sciences and Li Mingjiang is an assistant professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU.