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Malaysia-Singapore Connectivity: Increased Rail, Road and Sea Links

By Mushahid Ali

Synopsis

Malaysia and Singapore are set to enter a new era of connectivity and cooperation with the agreement to build a high speed rail link between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Together with regional-level joint projects, it will give both countries greater stakes in each other's progress.

Commentary

THE ANNOUNCEMENT by the leaders of Malaysia and Singapore this week of increased rail, road and sea links between the two countries in the next seven years heralds a new era of enhanced connectivity and closer cooperation between the two ASEAN members. Prime Ministers Najib Tun Razak and Lee Hsien Loong described the proposed High Speed Rail (HSR) link between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore as a strategic development in bilateral relations that will dramatically improve the connectivity between Malaysia and Singapore. It also presages a region-wide initiative to increase physical connectivity among ASEAN member countries.

A Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) for Iskandar Malaysia has been tasked to look into details and modalities of the HSR link, targeted for completion by 2020. Recognising the wider ramifications of the rail link, they said it will usher in a new era of strong growth, prosperity and opportunities for both countries, besides facilitating seamless travel between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore that will enhance business linkages and bring the peoples of Malaysia and Singapore closer together. Ultimately, they added, this project will give both countries greater stakes in each other's prosperity and success.

Game-changer

Beyond the economic benefits the HSR has potential for strengthening people to people relations and changing the way they look at each other. PM Lee is confident that it will be a real game-changer in bilateral ties, bringing the two cities into one urban configuration, similar to that between London and Paris and cutting the commute between them to 90 minutes.

Though a high speed rail link between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur was mooted some 15 years ago as part of the Singapore-Kunming railway, that failed to take off as it was premature. This time, PM Najib is confident that it will be realised and completed by 2020, with continuity assured whatever the complexion of the governments in both countries.

The two prime ministers announced the HSR link after their annual retreat in Singapore on 18-19 February 2013, the fourth in as many years. It signifies the vast improvement in bilateral relations during the period, marked by resolution of the Points of Agreement on Malayan Railway land in Singapore, the return of PUB waterworks in Johor on termination of the 1961 water agreement and culminating in the 2011 agreement on joint development of projects in Singapore and Iskandar Malaysia. It was then that PM Najib proposed the HSR link.

Besides the HSR link, the leaders also agreed to strengthen connectivity through the Rapid Transit System Link between Woodlands and Johor Bahru, for which the first phase of a joint engineering study is near completion. The JMC will also study measures to address traffic congestion issues on the Causeway as well as the feasibility of a third road link between the two countries in the longer term.

For sea connectivity, the two PMs took note that new CIQ facilities at the Puteri Harbour in the Iskandar Malaysia zone will be set up this year. Ferry services will be operating between Puteri Harbour and Singapore, subject to the regulator's evaluation of the services. The JMC will continue to explore further links to improve connectivity between both countries.

The new connectivity initiatives follow the launch of joint developments by the state-owned corporations Khazanah Nasional and Temasek Holdings in Iskandar Malaysia and Singapore. The strategic projects reflect a high degree of trust and complementarity between the two countries, the prime ministers said. They witnessed the unveiling of the Marina One and DUO projects in downtown Singapore and the Urban and Resort Wellness projects in Medini. Recognising that a dynamic and successful Iskandar Malaysia would benefit both Malaysia and Singapore, they agreed to intensify existing cooperation and explore new ways to leverage on the complementarities between Singapore and Iskandar Malaysia. An Industrial Cooperation Work Group set up by the JMC will develop the details.

Cooperation on environmental issues

The Malaysian and Singapore leaders highlighted closer cooperation between their agencies on environmental issues with transboundary and navigational implications. They agreed to continue cooperating on such issues by adopting best practices for addressing areas of environmental concern and taking appropriate mitigation measures.

On a bilateral level, they acknowledged the importance of ensuring reliable water supply from the Johor River as provided under the 1962 Water Agreement and encouraged the Singapore and Johor water authorities to continue their excellent working relationship.

The prime ministers noted with satisfaction that both sides had resolved to expand the 700 MHz digital dividend radio frequencies. The expanded frequencies are expected to be made available after the period of conversion from analogue to digital broadcasting, taking into account regional spectrum coordination arrangements.

In regard to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) judgment on Pedra Branca, Middle Rocks and South Ledge, the leaders welcomed the successful completion of the joint survey works in and around Pedra Branca and Middle Rocks and agreed that the next step would be to move into the delimitation of maritime boundaries.

ASEAN integration goals

As Malaysia and Singapore are core members of ASEAN the two prime ministers underscored the importance of ASEAN unity to enhance its central role in the region's evolving architecture. They expressed confidence in ASEAN's progress towards its 2015 ASEAN Community building goals and looked forward to advancing ASEAN integration and maintaining regional stability in the year ahead.

The rail, road and sea connectivity projects between Malaysia and Singapore will set a good example for the development of similar linkages among ASEAN member countries and enhance regional cohesion.

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