TONY TYLER: ASIA'S AVIATION INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGE

News / Airports / Routes

By 2034, 7.3 billion airline passengers globally are expected to take to the skies. That is more than double the 3.5 billion passengers that will travel by air in 2015.

Building the **infrastructure** to meet this growing demand for people and businesses to connect by air is a global challenge. But the pressure is most intense in the fast growing Asia-Pacific region, where airports and skies will need to be able to handle 2.5 billion more passengers than they do today.

The center of gravity for global aviation is moving east. By 2030, the **Asia**-Pacific region will have surpassed both North America and Europe in terms of passenger numbers. And by 2034, one in every five air travelers will be traveling to, from, or within China.

The industry's growth holds big economic promise. We are already seeing it today. The industry supports over 24 million jobs across the Asia-Pacific region, with a total economic impact exceeding $500 billion. Every new traveler brings an economic opportunity and any curb on growth because of infrastructure constraints is a lost opportunity.

All the region's aviation infrastructure will come under increasing demand as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' single aviation market policy comes to fruition. Every market that has liberalized has seen an economic boost as people's needs for connectivity were fulfilled.

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There is no reason to believe that the ASEAN experience will be any different. And the biggest economic benefits will accrue to those that are most prepared.

Forward-thinking policies to free up airlines to pursue business where demand exists are only part of the path to success. Cost-efficient infrastructure must be available to accommodate demand. And, of course, the fiscal regime must support business growth. Ill-conceived taxes will quickly short-circuit the benefits of healthy, connected and growing economies for governments, consumers and businesses alike.

Historically, the Asia-Pacific region has shown leadership on infrastructure. It is home to several of the world's best and biggest airports. The Asian travel experience is certainly among the most pleasant in the world. But it will not stay that way without continuous hard work, strategic investment and regional cooperation.

Singapore, Hong Kong and Seoul are legendary for great passenger experiences. But there are some regional bottlenecks to sort out. For example, you would be hard-pressed to find anybody singing the praises of the airports in Jakarta or Manila and comments on Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport are as likely to be about its crowded corridors as about its great shopping experience.

Asia's increasingly crowded skies also need attention. Some $3 billion is being invested across the region to improve air traffic capacity and management. The Seamless Asian Sky project will be key to getting the most out of these ambitious spending plans. Depending on how you define "Asia-Pacific", there are up to 41 air navigation service providers, mostly nationally based. Many journeys require airlines to fly through airspace managed by multiple providers. The Seamless Asian Sky project has the common-sense aim of using joined-up thinking to make it as safe and efficient as possible to fly across the region and into adjacent airspace as well.

There is one market in Asia that towers above all others in scale. Nearly 70,000 flights a week operate to, from or within mainland China. That is about 10% of the global total. Although much progress has been made to improve the efficiency of China's air traffic management, flight delays in China are still a major issue. The cost of the frustration to both passengers and airlines is real in terms of lost productivity.

Without compromising on safety, urgent solutions for China delays are both needed and possible. Much more capacity could be made available through better sharing of airspace between civilian and military operations and by opening domestic routes to international operations. Flexibility and predictability would also help. In the first instance that means giving airlines more options to plan their flight routes in light of prevailing weather and traffic conditions. If that is combined with "flow management" techniques, there would be a further efficiency dividend from greater predictability.

This will be a big undertaking and we will not have a solution overnight. But I am confident that with the continued and concerted focus on efficiency, it will not be too long before the bottlenecks in China's airspace are freed up.

In the meantime, the question that all governments in the region should be considering is how to link their economies to each other even more efficiently through aviation. There is no off-the-shelf solution, but there are some strategies which have been proven effective.

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The first is for governments to understand the importance of air connectivity built on global standards and to include it as a priority in their economic strategies. This is happening in some parts of the Asia-Pacific region, but this is not universal.

A second strategy is to work in partnership. The better the understanding between governments and industry, the more effective infrastructure investments will be. This will help ensure that infrastructure capacity is able to meet growing demand. And it will help to build up cutting edge global-standard processes that deliver both efficiency and convenience.

The Asia-Pacific region has great potential. A strategic policy approach and true partnerships are the way to ensure the region derives the full benefits of expected traffic growth.

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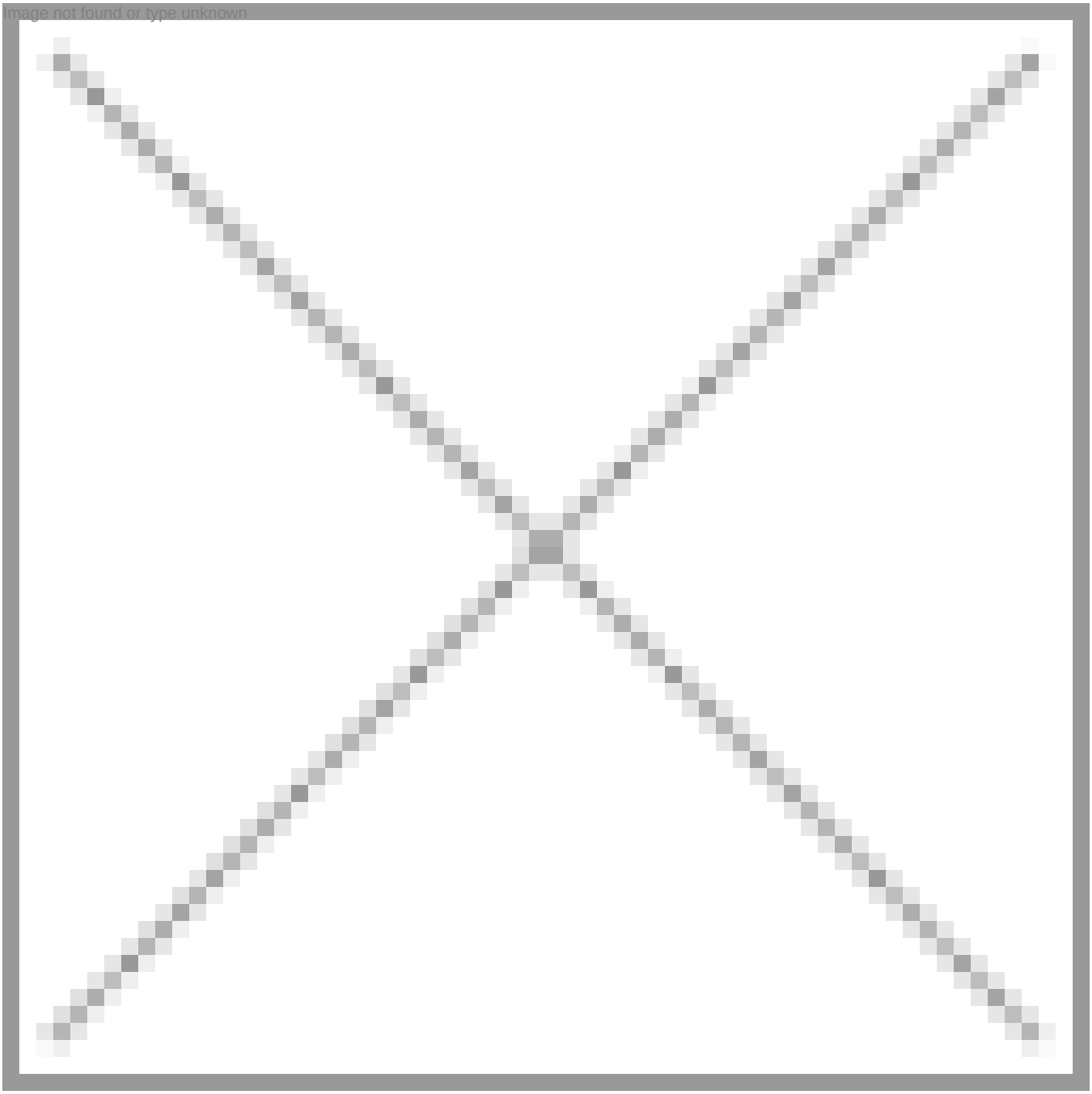

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