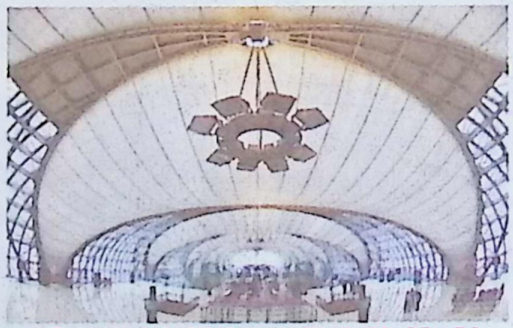
SUVARNABHUMI AIMS HIGH



When we were young, we yearned for top scores in our favourite subjects and to be top of the class. When people start their own companies, they want to get ahead of their peers. On the national scale, nations want to lead in what they are good at. Airports of Thailand's (AOT) dream to turn Suvarnabhumi Airport into the world's best large airport by 2019 falls into this category. A good airport is necessary as being the No.1 on the global tourism map means more income. Tourism is now the best economic engine for Thailand, as our trade and domestic consumption/investment drops.

But this will remain a dream without financial and non-financial investment. AOT Vice-Chairman Pongsak Semson is right in saying that the staff's language proficiency is a weakness. But improving this requires the staff's awareness that they must improve, plus financial investment for specifically designed tutorial courses.

Within Asean, Suvarnabhumi will find it hard to beat Singapore's Changi Airport. With English as its official language, Singapore has an English-speaking workforce. The flexibility of migrant workers also fills any shortages in certain areas. In Thailand, parents have to invest savings to improve their children's language proficiency, as the normal curriculum is not good enough.

International passengers often grumble about the shortage of English-speaking staff at the airport, as seen in their reviews gathered by Skytrax - an airline and airport ranking agency.

Another area that Suvarnabhumi Airport director Rawewan Netrakavesna wants to improve is the baggage transfer service. To draw more connecting flights, service time must be shortened, by May next year, from the current 75 minutes to 60 minutes. Rawewan, whose retirement comes next year, is right to focus on something she can do first, as the airport needs improvement in many areas to become No.1 in the Airports Council International's (ACI) ranking among airports annually handling over 40 million passengers.

In the passenger category, Suvarnabhumi - now at No.6 - trails behind Changi, Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Seoul Incheon Airport is currently ranked the best airport in the Asia-Pacific region, followed by Changi, Beijing, New Delhi and Hong Kong.

If No.1 remains Suvarnabhumi's objective after Rawewan's departure, her successor will have to ponder many details. Comments from passengers can be a good guide (www.airlinequality.com), but can also be biased. Passengers have complained about restrooms, shops not accepting foreign currencies, shops having their own exchange rates, lack of signage, and long distances to walk.

In the latest Skytrax ranking, Suvarnabhumi failed to achieve five stars in any category. On the contrary, Changi was awarded five stars in many categories. One was for direction signage. Inside the terminal, it won five stars for seat availability (I vote for this too, as I can find a seat whenever I want to without having to go to a restaurant or food kiosk). It also won five stars for WiFi access (although for this I veto, as I unsuccessfully spent minutes trying to access it.) Five stars also went to air temperature, something that Suvarnabhumi has received a lot of complaints about since its opening in 2006.

Changi has never stopped enhancing its competitiveness. Despite winning five stars for leisure facilities and shopping, the airport recently unveiled "Project Jewel", which will connect all five of its terminals. The car park in front of Terminal 1 will become a world-class shopping complex in a move to capture tourists' attention and boost the country's appeal as a stopover point for global travellers. The complex will offer a wide range of retail outlets as well as unique leisure attractions.

According to The Straits Times, the latest master-plan for Changi involves creating a huge new air terminal, possibly with its own subway station; building a third runway at Changi East, fed by 40 kilometres of taxiways - the length of the Pan Island Expressway from Tuas to Tampines; and diverting Changi Coast Road and a 60-metre-wide canal. The effort, cost and upheaval will be enormous, but there are good reasons for supporting this sky-high ambition.

Singapore realises that Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok have a geographic edge in linking travellers from Europe to Asia. Former Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew pointedly warned in 2004 that "Changi will be bypassed and we will lose our air-hub status" if key strategies are misguided.

That explains why the Singapore government puts Changi in its national development plan and is ready to spend on it.

And what are Thailand's strategies? Well, AOT has ambitions but all actions are now financed by its own budget. Can we expect national strategies that will support its ambitions?

— **ACHARA DEBOONME**
ANN/The Nation