



Holding China to its pledge of peace

PRESIDENT Xi Jinping's pledge that China would use peaceful means to resolve territorial disputes had barely registered with rival claimants when news came that Beijing was building defence infrastructure on a disputed reef. The latter brought home all too clearly another crucial point that Mr Xi made in his speech to the Australian Parliament last week. He said "the Chinese people will firmly uphold the core interests of China's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity". Implicit in China's words and actions is that while it will try to resolve the disputes peacefully, it is not abjuring the assertion of its claims over contested areas with force, if necessary.

The reef in question is Fiery Cross,

part of the Spratly islands which are claimed wholly or in part by China, Taiwan, Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines. It is being reclaimed by the Chinese to a size big enough to accommodate an airstrip, as reported last week. In addition, a harbour is being dug there that appears big enough for tankers and naval warships. Manila has protested against the construction and Washington has also called on the Chinese to stop the project. That has merely drawn a retort from a Chinese general that the building will continue because it is "justifiable". So much for peace via consultation and negotiation.

This is not an encouraging sign after two years of forcefulness – unilaterally

declaring an Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea, effectively seizing control of the Scarborough Shoal after a stand-off there with Philippine forces, and placing an oil rig in contested waters. Thus, international observers might well wonder if the Chinese are really ready to soften their stance on territorial issues.

At The Straits Times global outlook forum last week, veteran diplomat Kishore Mahbubani disclosed that he had been asked by the Chinese to give a talk on "the mistakes that China had made" and that there is a debate in China on the kind of great power it should be. Such introspection is necessary if Beijing is to avoid negating efforts to win over oth-

ers on the economic front. Mr Xi spoke about an "Asia-Pacific dream" of shared development and prosperity at this month's Apec summit. At the same meetings, China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, started the Silk Road Fund and pushed for the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific.

It doesn't take much to see that such worthy aspirations will always be at odds with gunboat diplomacy. China's leaders ought to acknowledge the counter-productivity of such a dual approach and lend credence to Mr Xi's pledge by giving precedence to consultation. A good start would be to play an active role to conclude a binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

The new Sustainable Singapore Blueprint has made it a priority for Singapore to have fewer cars on the road for a

more liveable environment. Better transport alternatives and increased car-sharing are proposed. But will they work?

A car-lite Singapore: How to get there?



EYE ON SINGAPORE

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A NEW sustainable blueprint to guide Singapore's development over the next 15 years was launched earlier this month, to create a better home, a better environment and a better future. That better future, however, includes curtailing the dream of many Singaporeans – owning a car.

One priority of the ambitious \$1.5 billion Sustainable Singapore Blueprint 2015 is reducing the number of private cars on the roads. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained: "We have to rely less on cars on the road, because we can't keep building roads; more roads for more cars."

Roads already make up 12 per cent of land use, compared to housing at 14 per cent. Fewer vehicles would also reduce land needed for carparks, and improve the quality of life. Air quality, for example, would be better, with fewer polluting emissions from the tailpipes of private cars.

PM Lee said the Government would aim for a "car-lite" Singapore by providing more transport options, such as an expanded MRT network, buses and bicycle paths.

But experts said infrastructure gaps need to be plugged, and, in a country where the car is king, laws and attitudes towards them changed. More is also needed to help people move seamlessly from one form of transport to another more easily.

Beefing up alternatives

LAST year, about 63 per cent of trips during peak hours were by public transport such as buses and trains.

Minister for National Development Khaw Boon Wan recently said that cycling makes up 1 to 2 per cent of transport.

The Government wants public transport to make up 75 per cent of peak-hour trips by 2030, and

has outlined plans to achieve this. From the year 2012 to 2016, it will have added 800 buses to the fleet – a 20 per cent increase – and from last year to 2030 it will have expanded the rail network from 178km to 360km.

It will build an island-wide cycling path network of more than 700km by 2030, including both park connectors and cycling paths in Housing Board towns.

It is also conducting a year-long study to shed light on why and how Singaporeans walk, and what would encourage them to do so more often.

The Economic Development Board and Land Transport Authority (LTA) plan to co-lead a project involving the pooled sharing of electric cars.

While the agencies would say only that the project is in the planning stages, The Straits Times understands the Government had considered rolling out up to 1,000 electric cars under such a scheme as recently as two years ago.

The LTA has said "car sharing can help those who need to use a car for a few hours or over a weekend, and allow convenient access to it without people having to own or maintain one".

The authority will pilot a bicycle-sharing scheme next year, possibly in the city centre and Jurong Lake District.

But transport experts said the devil is in the details. When three Straits Times reporters rode 180km over three days last October to test cycling paths for commuting, they found snags that could dissuade users.

An 11km stretch that people who live in Ang Mo Kio and Bishan can use to go to work at the Upper Paya Lebar Road factories, for example, had six overhead bridges, three of which did not have ramps. People have to haul their bikes up and down the stairs.

Some park connectors were actually existing pavements, which meant cyclists and pedestrians had to jostle for space.

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy transport researcher Paul Barter said the cycling network needs to be not just comprehensive but also enjoyable and seamless so people can ride almost anywhere efficiently.

"You want people to be able to travel at speeds that let them cover 7km to 8km in half an hour. But



it also has to be safe enough for your 10-year-old child," said the adjunct associate professor.

More car-sharing spaces needed

INDUSTRY players added that major infrastructure gaps need to be plugged.

Take the car-sharing scheme. There are three private car-sharing providers, which offer a fleet of vehicles that can be rented for just an hour or longer. Together, they have more than 10,000 members, but only around 300 cars and 100 locations – mostly at HDB carparks – for pick-ups and drop-offs.

Senior Minister of State for Transport Josephine Teo said in March that every car added to a well-organised car-sharing scheme could take the place of 15 private vehicles.

But Car-sharing Association of Singapore president Lai Meng said a critical mass of cars and car-sharing parking spaces is needed to make it viable.

Industry players said 3,000 parking spaces would be a good start, since that would mean about 30 to 40 spaces per constituency.

Currently, the Housing Board has set aside only a tenth of that – about 300 car-sharing parking spaces – in 105 HDB carparks island-wide.

It is working with LTA and car-sharing firms to identify more locations and has promised that every town will have some spaces.

Infrastructure, such as power sockets at the parking spaces and charging stations across the island, will also be needed if electric cars are to be used.

Mr Lai noted another problem: The existing spaces are typically on the HDB multi-storey carparks' higher levels, where people may not know they exist.

He said there should be signs alerting residents to shared cars at the street level and also designated parking spaces at lower levels.

LKY School's Dr Barter said parking spaces should also be set aside on streets, so that people in areas such as River Valley, the Bukit Timah corridor and Marina South – which are not near HDB estates – can car-share.

He added that the authorities could encourage more peer-to-peer car-sharing – where individuals rent out cars to each other – by relaxing renting rules. Currently, private cars can be rented out only on weekends and public holidays.

But most people need their cars on weekends for, say, family outings, whereas many vehicles are idling in carparks during the week when the owners are at work, he said.

Currently, there is one company that offers such peer-to-peer sharing. It has more than 11,000 registered users and nearly 1,600 car-owners prepared to share their vehicles.

Some experts, however, questioned whether any car-sharing scheme would take cars off roads here, as only people without cars

would use such a scheme.

They said car-sharing would at most forestall some people from buying cars, and it could even backfire if it gives people a taste of driving and the desire to own a car.

National University of Singapore transport researcher Lee Der Horng said that to actually take cars off the roads, the Government could curtail the number of certificates of entitlement given out, but it would have to be certain that alternative transport modes are convenient and reliable.

Carpooling, where people going to the same destination share a car, is another option.

Towards a more seamless journey

EVEN as infrastructure issues are worked out, more can also be done to help commuters mix and match transport options to achieve the ideal journey.

Dr Barter advocates a "super-mobility" mobile app that would allow commuters to set parameters such as location and destination, and how much time they have to travel.

The app would give options using different transport modes, including taxis, bike and car-sharing, public transport and even walking. People could pay for the various options using just the app.

"If commuters can see how easy it is to get around with all of the options, and they are confident there are good options, then

fewer will feel the need to buy a car," he said.

Germany, for example, has an app called Mo that allows subscribers to rent bicycles, cargo-bicycles, electric bicycles and cars, and use public transport.

The system even rewards those who choose more eco-friendly transport modes: Using mostly bicycles and renting a car become cheaper.

But one challenge is to change Singaporeans' view of cars as status symbols.

In an article for The Straits Times in February, on how to make Singapore more "car-less", dean of the LKY School Kishore Mahbubani noted that in Tokyo and New York, company managing directors, senior bankers and lawyers take public transport.

In Singapore, however, even middle-level executives working in Raffles Place drive to work.

Mrs Teo also noted in March that 38 per cent of households owned a car a decade ago, but this is now 45 per cent. If it hits 60 per cent, the Government will have to find parking space for another 150,000 cars.

"There is a limit to how many more cars we can have," she said.

For Singapore to truly become a car-lite nation, a high quality, reliable public transport system has to be supplemented by access to taxis, car-sharing and bicycles. But Singaporeans themselves will also have to take the first step – sometimes literally – to achieving that vision.

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