

More questions than answers on high-speed rail

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On Feb 23 at a joint press conference in Singapore, the Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and his Singaporean counterpart Lee Hsien Loong announced that the two neighbours had agreed to build a high speed rail (HSR) link to connect the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur with Singapore.

Both premiers called the rail link a game changer and declared, "it will usher in a new era of strong growth, prosperity, and opportunities for both countries.

"Ultimately, this project will give both countries greater stakes in each other's prosperity and success," a joint statement read. But will it?

The HSR will reduce the 350km journey that can take up to eight hours on a regular train or up to five hours by bus or car to a mere hour and a half.

Some even say that it will be even quicker than flying, if additional time factors such as check in, security screenings and baggage claim are added to the actual 45-minute flight.

The implementation, however, is not so simple.

This is not the first time such a high speed rail link idea has been mooted. In 2006, YTL Corp first broached the idea of a rail project being undertaken to the tune of RM8 billion. The proposal was shelved because of the high price tag.

It was mooted again in 2009, but deemed unnecessary because it was determined the North-South Highway could adequately handle the traffic.

There were also suggestions that the government did not want to jeopardise a lucrative air route for Malaysia Airlines.

Why the timing is now right to undertake such a massive project is more than a little unclear. Suddenly, it would seem that the rail link is not only doable but is a necessity that we cannot do without.

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