

Haneda hubbub, Narita rallies

By Geoff Tudor, in Tokyo

Out of the blue last October, Japan's new transport minister, Seiji Maehara, announced that in future he would promote Tokyo's Haneda airport as Japan's major 24-hour international hub airport. This effectively triggered a huge shift in the long established separation policy of airport functions in metropolitan Tokyo, namely Haneda for domestic flights and Narita for international operations.

Maehara's statement, following a conference of top Asia-Pacific civil aviation officials, sent a shockwave through the aviation and political communities in Japan and could result in a scenario that the new minister had possibly not envisaged – intensifying competition between Haneda and Narita for both international and domestic business – an incongruity as both airports are under Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) control in one form or another.

The new policy statement was a complete surprise not only to his cabinet colleagues, but to also to bewildered MLIT bureaucrats who had no prior knowledge of their new master's intentions.

As Haneda is much closer (15 km) to central Tokyo than distant Narita (70 km), the statement was welcomed by business leaders and residents in the capital. But members of the



All Nippon Airways planes packed into Haneda Airport. From October, with the opening of a fourth runway the downtown airport will have 110,000 new slots, of which 60,000 will be for international services

communities near Narita were taken aback.

After making his announcement minister Maehara clarified his stance. What he really meant, he said, was the operations of the two airports serving metropolitan Tokyo and the surrounding Kanto region, where more than 40 million Japanese live and work, would be "coordinated and integrated." The government (or MLIT) did not intend to shift the emphasis from Narita to Haneda, but that it intends to treat and use the two airports as one Metropolitan airport in an integral manner.

Accordingly, Narita International Airport Corporation (NAA) has publicly stated that it does not see the situation as one of competition, but that the two airports should complement each other to accommodate growing traffic in the greater capital area. But perhaps Maehara's true intention lies

somewhere beyond that.

It's a fact that there is no true hub function at Tokyo's two international airports, thanks to the separation policy. The concept of user-friendliness was absent from the planning when a second airport for Tokyo was conceived. This is a situation that has long irritated air travellers in Japan, especially those from regional cities who have to fly to Haneda then take a bus or train to Narita.

In minister Maehara's explanations, he has emphasized the huge slot increase at Haneda from October this year when the new fourth runway is commissioned.

A total of 110,000 new slots will be available, of which some 60,000 will be allocated to international scheduled flights, according to Maehara.

And from March, Narita's slots will increase from the present 200,000 (of which about

20,000 are for domestic flights) to 220,000.

These two developments will make a tremendous contribution to international air service expansion in the Tokyo metropolitan area, adding a combined additional international slot total at the two airports of around 80,000 and bringing the annual international slot total in the metropolitan area to around 260,000 an almost 45% increase, according to Ryuhei Maeda, director-general of the Japan Civil Aviation Bureau.

After his first announcement, there has been a steady stream of announcements from minister Maehara about developments and intentions at Haneda, which have had an impact on development and intentions at Narita.

It had been established under previous government policy that scheduled international flights would be restored to Haneda after the 2010 expansion, but limited to Northeast Asia, i.e. Korea and China. But now the new government has negotiated flights from Haneda to Europe and is planning to include services to the U.S., following the recent agreement, in principle, of Japan-US "Open Skies".

The domestic-international separation policy was decided decades ago when plans for a new airport to relieve congested Haneda were first mooted. The new airport would be for international flights. Domestic

flights would be based at Haneda.

The selection of the Narita site was strongly opposed by local farmers and residents and opposition was often violent. When it opened in 1978 there was only one runway and prior to opening the government agreed to a curfew and to limits on flights per hour and per day.

Continuing opposition caused delays in creating a second runway that did not open until 2002 – and was then 320 metres short of its planned 2,500 metre length. That runway has now been extended to its full length, making the slot allocation increase possible from next month.

Strong opposition continued for many years at Narita, but after a breakthrough in airport-community relations in

the early 1990s, the communities around Narita have increasingly come to realize that the local economy depends on the airport. Nine local governments are represented on a special body, the 'Conference of Four Parties on Narita Airport' – the other three bodies being the MLIT,

communities are beginning to feel let down and left out.

Last year, on Christmas Day, the 'Conference of Four Parties' basically approved MLIT's proposed operational changes to increase the number of annual landing and take-off slots to 300,000 by 2014. So

parallel landings and take-offs, which will boost hourly runway capacity. Now the 'Conference of Four Parties' is focusing on shortening the hours of curfew, which, if it can add an operational hour to each end of the curfew, would solve most of Narita's operational problems.

The question of striking a balance between the two airports remains a difficult issue. Up to now, the understanding had been that post expansion Haneda would offer short-haul international flights and the long-haul operations would remain at Narita. But now this idea seems to be fundamentally changing too, along with the separation policy. The implications for Tokyo's airports, the airlines and the consumer need careful consideration. Now is the time. ■

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Chiba Prefectural government and Narita International Airport Corporation (NAA), which discusses issues of mutual interest..

It came as little surprise that following minister Maehara's pronouncements on turning Haneda into Japan's primary gateway airport, the Narita

speedy a move would have been inconceivable 10 years ago, but it shows the former opponents have now turned into supporters and are alarmed that Haneda might take away business from their communities.

Other developments in the works awaiting MLIT approval are simultaneous

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