

Opinion letter
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Aviation more secure, with more to achieve

Singapore: On Sept 11, 2001, anyone associated with aviation knew that the industry would never be the same. What we did not know was how resilient the industry would be in the aftermath of the tragedy or the direction in which it would change.

A decade after the event, there can be no doubt about aviation's resilience. By 2004, revenues and traffic surpassed 2000 levels. And by 2006, aviation had returned to profitability - albeit with a weak 1.1 per cent margin. In the interim, airlines dealt with the Sars epidemic, additional attempted terrorist attacks, wars and rising oil prices.

It took three years to recover the US\$22 billion (S\$26.5 billion) revenue drop (6.7 per cent) between 2000 and 2001. When the global financial crisis struck in 2008, 2009 revenues fell by 14 per cent (US\$82 billion) to US\$482 billion. This was largely recovered in the following year when industry revenues rose to US\$554 billion and airlines posted a US\$18 billion profit. Clearly the restructuring of the decade has left airlines leaner and more resilient in the face of crisis.

Over the decade, the dimensions of global aviation have also changed. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) expects airline revenues of US\$598 billion this year - nearly twice the US\$307 billion of 2001. Airlines are also expected to carry 2.8 billion passengers and 48 million tonnes of cargo. That's a billion more people flying and 16 million more tonnes of cargo than in 2001.

While it is difficult to isolate the impact of the events of 2001, we can say that they were a part of a chain of events that cost the industry three years of growth. The 2008 global financial crisis cost another two years of growth.

The legacy of 9/11 is felt most in airport security. Aviation is more secure today than in 2001. But this has come at a great price in terms of passenger convenience and industry costs. As we move forward, there are five major lessons in security over the last decade:

Governments must coordinate the development and deployment of security measures to ensure harmonised global standards and eliminate overlapping and redundant requirements among nations.

Governments are obliged to foot the bill for security threats, which are national challenges, in the same manner as they would do in any other sector. Airlines and their passengers currently pay a security bill that had ballooned to US\$7.4 billion by last year.

Passengers should, and do, play an important role in helping keep air travel safe. Vigilance and cooperation with the authorities are crucial.

Governments need to embrace a risk-based approach to security screening.

We must accept that there is no such thing as 100 per cent risk-free security. Governments must focus on the probable and not all that is possible and avoid policies driven by knee-jerk reactions.

A good place to start is by removing the hassle that comes between check-in and boarding at many airports. The building blocks to do a better job exist. The vision for IATA's Checkpoint of the Future is for passengers to be able to get from curb to gate in a seamless and convenient process. For this, we need a risk-based approach to security, powered by the enormous amount of data that we can, and do, collect on travellers. Combined with this will be technology that will allow most passengers to simply stroll through a checkpoint that can detect metal and harmful substances without stopping, stripping or unpacking.

Parts of this vision could be realised with technology that exists today. Others are in development with a three- to seven-year horizon. The important thing is to keep focused on evolving the 40-year-old concept of today's airport checkpoint into one that is more convenient, more effective and that can handle the ever-increasing volume of people who want and need to fly.

Finally, as we commemorate the tragedy of 9/11, the thoughts and prayers of the industry are with the families of the victims - passengers, crew and bystanders. Our best tribute to their memories is a resilient aviation industry. Aviation is a force for good and an instrument of peace that promotes trade, spreads wealth and facilitates understanding among the peoples and cultures of our world.

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