

Business

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BEIJING: People walk inside the new Beijing Daxing International Airport during its first day of operation. —AFP

Beijing opens new massive, glitzy airport 'An extension of the phenomenal growth of the aviation market in China'

BEIJING: A futuristic airport that resembles a giant starfish opened in Beijing Wednesday, as China unveils another massive infrastructure project just days before it celebrates 70 years of Communist Party rule. Located 46 kilometers south of Tiananmen Square, Beijing Daxing International Airport will operate at full capacity in 2040, with eight runways and the potential to receive 100 million passengers per year.

The airport was opened by President Xi Jinping, but had an immediate hitch when its maiden commercial flight — an A380 super-jumbo heading to the southern city of Guangzhou — was delayed by nearly 30 minutes. State broadcaster CCTV, which offered a live coverage of the first flight, offered no explanation for the delay. Beijing Daxing — with the airport code PKX — is seen as an embodiment of the “Chinese dream” Xi has offered his fellow citizens.

Teething problems

Both foreign and domestic carriers have plans to move their operations to the new airport, and British Airways, Cathay Pacific and Finnair have already announced new routes to tap into the potential of the modern aviation hub. “Switching airports can be a complex decision for airlines,” said aviation analyst John Strickland. “Airlines would prefer to see a new airport open and overcome teething problems before moving services from another well tried and tested airport.”

The SkyTeam alliance — which includes Delta, Air France and Dutch airline KLM — was also expected to move, along with local partners Eastern Airlines and China Southern Airlines. But when contacted by AFP last week, Delta and Air France said the decision whether to move airports had not yet been made. The third largest Chinese airline, Air China, is expected to keep flying

the bulk of its flights from Beijing Capital International Airport.

Soaring growth

At 700,000 square meters — about the size of 100 football pitches — the new structure will be one of the world’s largest airport terminals. The building was designed by Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid, who died in 2016. Inside, it stands out for its flowing, curved lines and use of natural light that filters down to the lowest levels of the building through openings on the roof.

Underneath the terminal is a train station and metro line that will allow travelers to reach the city centre in 20 minutes. The project cost 120 billion yuan (\$17.5 billion), or 400 billion yuan if rail and road links are included. At full capacity, Daxing would be the world’s largest single terminal in terms of traveler capacity, according to its design-

ers. Atlanta airport in the United States — the world’s busiest airport — can receive more than 100 million passengers, but across two terminals.

The current Beijing Capital International Airport — the world’s second largest — is already overflowing, with just over 100 million passengers annually. “Daxing is an extension of the phenomenal growth of the aviation market in China,” said Shukor Yusof, head of Malaysia-based aviation consultancy Endau Analytics. Air transport is booming in China as living standards increase along with peoples’ desire to travel. It is expected to surpass the US to become the world’s biggest aviation market by the mid-2020s, according to the International Air Transport Association. By 2037 the country will have 1.6 billion plane journeys each year — a billion more than in 2017, the organization estimates. —AFP