

## News analysis

# All eyes on Tokyo after Yokohama IR pullout upends Japan's plans

A bid by capital city to host an integrated resort could be a game changer



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In Tokyo

With newly elected Yokohama Mayor Takeharu Yamanaka having halted his city's bid to host one of Japan's first three integrated resorts (IRs), attention has now turned to what Tokyo might do.

Yokohama, a city of 3.7 million people just half an hour by train from central Tokyo, was seen as the regional "representative". Its fervent interest in hosting an IR meant that Tokyo, the bustling capital of 14 million people, had stayed coy about its plans.

But murmurs are emerging among metropolitan officials that the capital city, having incurred massive bills for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, can benefit from the windfall of hosting an IR. The waterside district of Odaiba has been floated as a potential site.

Japan passed laws in 2018 to allow up to three IRs – mega-complexes with casinos, hotels, shopping malls, entertainment facilities and exhibition spaces.

The official government application process to host IRs will be held from next month to April next year.

On his first day in office on Monday, Dr Yamanaka, an anti-casino campaigner, vowed to expedite the paperwork to formalise Yokohama's withdrawal. He scrapped a scheduled meeting on Thursday to choose the IR operator, with Genting Singapore and Macau's Melco Resorts and Entertainment in the running.

What this means is that the remaining three contenders are all in western Japan. Osaka is supporting a consortium led by Las Vegas' MGM Resorts International. Wakayama has selected a subsidiary of Canada's Clairvest Group, while Nagasaki is working with Casinos Austria.

Mr Daniel Cheng, a hospitality and gaming professional, described the three contenders as "imperfect".

"Japan IRs were touted to put Singapore IRs to shame but look where they are now," he told The Straits Times.

Citing the likes of Sands, Wynn and Caesars, he added: "Ideally, each and every IR in Japan would have a top-tier casino brand if they had done it the right way."

Mr Cheng, who formerly held senior management positions with Hard Rock International and the Genting Group, wondered if Japan might award IRs to fewer than three locations to pave the way for Tokyo's entry – or even shift the deadlines altogether to allow Tokyo time to put together a bid.

Mr Brendan Bussmann, director of government affairs at Las Vegas gaming and hospitality consultancy Global Market Advisors, concurred that an entry by Tokyo will be a "game changer".

"It is hard to believe that the largest metropolitan area in the country would not have a site for an IR and even be a part of the process," he said.

"Tokyo remains one of the strongest cases for MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions), tourism and investment into an economy that needs a boost."

He doubted that Japan would shift the deadlines, as this would potentially jeopardise plans for the first IRs to open their doors by around 2027, but agreed that the country might award IR contracts to fewer than three sites.

The remaining prefectures present some additional challenges, with two sites in close proximity to each other, Mr Bussmann said. He was



Spain's Susana Rodriguez (right), with guide Sara Loehr, competing on Aug 28 in the women's triathlon category PTVI during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. Tokyo, having incurred massive bills for the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, could benefit from hosting an integrated resort. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

referring to Osaka and Wakayama, which border each other.

"This challenges the hub-and-spoke philosophy of the IR movement to reach out into other parts of the country to generate additional tourism," he said.

Mr Cheng, meanwhile, observed that the host selection process "has less to do with the published criteria than achieving political ends".

"An all-metropolitan IRs scenario negates the 'economic rejuvenation' spin angle," he said, noting that the IRs are also intended to drive tourism traffic to off-the-beaten-path areas and promote rural revitalisation.

Lawmakers have been divided on the ideal three host locations, though Mr Cheng sees Japan leaning towards a "two-plus-one permutation".

Previously, this could have meant Osaka and Yokohama as the major metropolitan sites and Tomakomai city in Hokkaido as the regional site. But Hokkaido last year withdrew its long-held interest in building an IR.

Nagasaki, on the south-west island of Kyushu, might fill in for Hokkaido, but now that Yokohama has also pulled out, Mr Cheng sees Tokyo as possibly stepping in.

"Tokyo is always on the table so long as a deal can be struck with (Governor Yuriko) Koike, but she won't entertain this while Covid-19 is rampant," he said.

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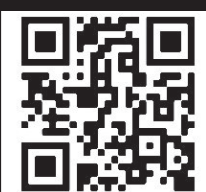
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