

● Asia's struggle to vaccinate millions ● Xi's priorities ● Muhyiddin's gamble

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BIDEN'S FOREIGN AGENDA

A BIG SHIFT?



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Covid-19 vaccines: Types, routes & effectiveness

WITH OVER 102 MILLION INFECTIONS and more than two million deaths globally, much attention is now focused on the vaccines in the works. Of the 237 vaccines in development, 64 are in various phases of clinical testing. 22 are currently in phase 3 of clinical trials, with 18 still in phase 1, which include testing the vaccine in a small number of healthy people.

There are four main types of Covid-19 vaccines in the works. Most of these vaccines work by “showing” the immune system an important part of a virus and “training” it to recognise and remember the pathogen without exposing the patient to the risk of disease. However, the mRNA (or Nucleic-acid) vaccines, like the Covid-19 ones by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, differ from traditional vaccines in that they contain only fragments of the virus’ genetic material, instead of the whole virus.

The vaccine being co-developed by Duke-NUS Medical School and American pharmaceutical company Arcturus Therapeutics vaccine is also a mRNA type, with human trials currently under way. These vaccines do not require manipulating the actual virus, and are safer and quicker to produce.

Meanwhile, Sinovac’s vaccine is an inactivated virus vaccine, meaning that the viruses can no longer replicate, even though their proteins, including the spike protein, remained intact.

Another type of vaccine, the viral-vector vaccine, makes use of a common virus, called adenovirus, to transport a small fragment of Sars-CoV-2 gene into cells. Such viral vectors are weakened so that they pose little risk of causing illness compared with a natural infection.

Among the vaccines, Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna’s vaccines currently hold the highest efficacy of 95 per cent and 94.1 per cent respectively. Astra-Zeneca’s vaccine lags behind with an average of 70 per cent efficacy. In comparison, the efficacy of the vaccine for seasonal flu varies from 19 per cent to 60 per cent. **ST**

Different routes to a Covid-19 vaccine

How the leading contenders in the race to establish effective inoculation against the Sars-CoV-2 virus have approached the task

How vaccines work

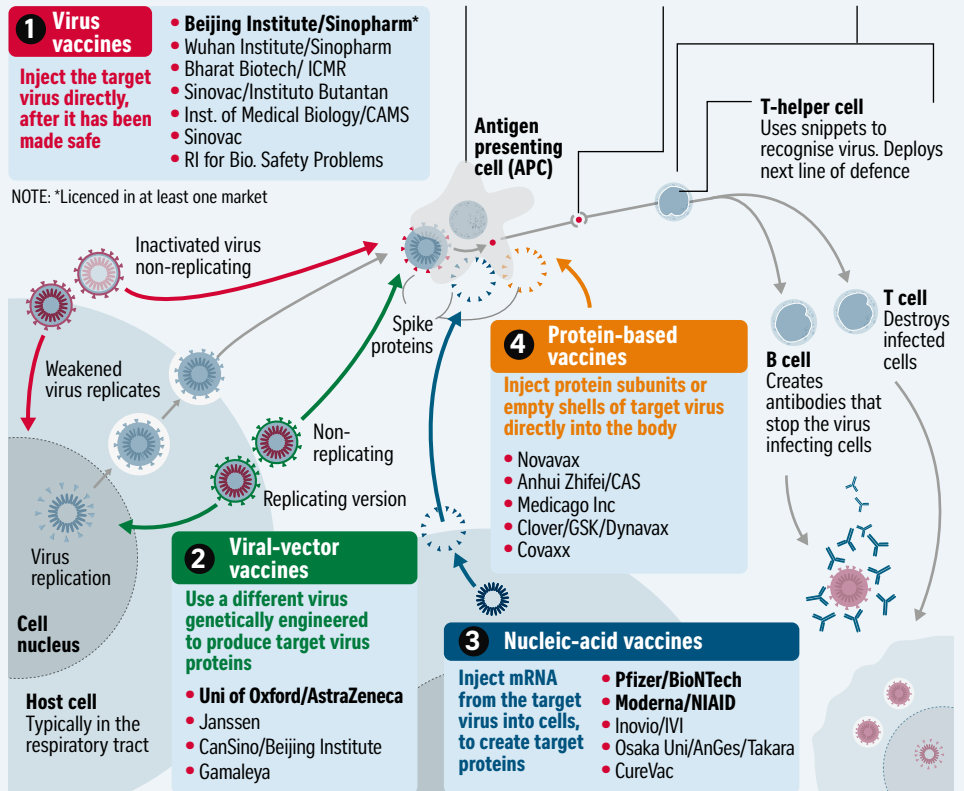
• Vaccines are all designed to safely trigger the body’s natural immune response to Sars-CoV-2

• There are four main approaches towards developing a vaccine against the virus

• All methods rely on APC to initiate the immune response

• APC identifies peptides, snippets of virus protein

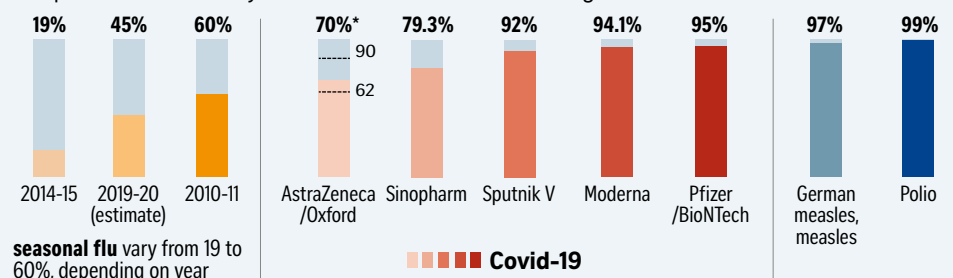
• Immune cells will then be enabled to recognise and neutralise the virus



Phase 3 or licenced candidates being tracked by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Vaccine effectiveness

Comparison of commonly used vaccines with those used against Covid-19



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16

Eye on vaccines

Asia's struggle to vaccinate millions

4 *Cover Story*

US set to remain tough on China, here to stay in Asia

Engaging China, North Korea among Biden's top Asia goals

Biden's key team for Asia

Asia's hopes from Biden

10 *Opinion*

Can Asia help Biden?

13 *China Watch*

Xi's priorities in 2021: Economy and Covid-19

Can domestic consumption drive growth in China?

24 *Regional hotspots*

Beijing thinks US is flirting with possibility of Taiwan rejoining UN

China's mega dam project seen as looming threat in India

30 *Country Report*

Will Suga still be Japan's PM at the end of this year?

Why India is in an uproar over WhatsApp chats



contents



PHOTO: INFORMATION MINISTRY MALAYSIA

27

South-east Asia Watch

Malaysia PM Muhyiddin's future rides on bringing Covid-19 under control

35 *Investment Watch*
Tech investors flock to Indonesia's titans in shift away from start-ups

37 *Business Watch*
Jack Ma reappears but Ant's troubles far from over

38 *Business Trends*
China's electric vehicle market gains speed
Hot wheels landing in 2021



42 *Power Play*
In tussle for influence, US and China may have to woo another Duterte

44 *People*
Peking University 'prodigy' is rising political star

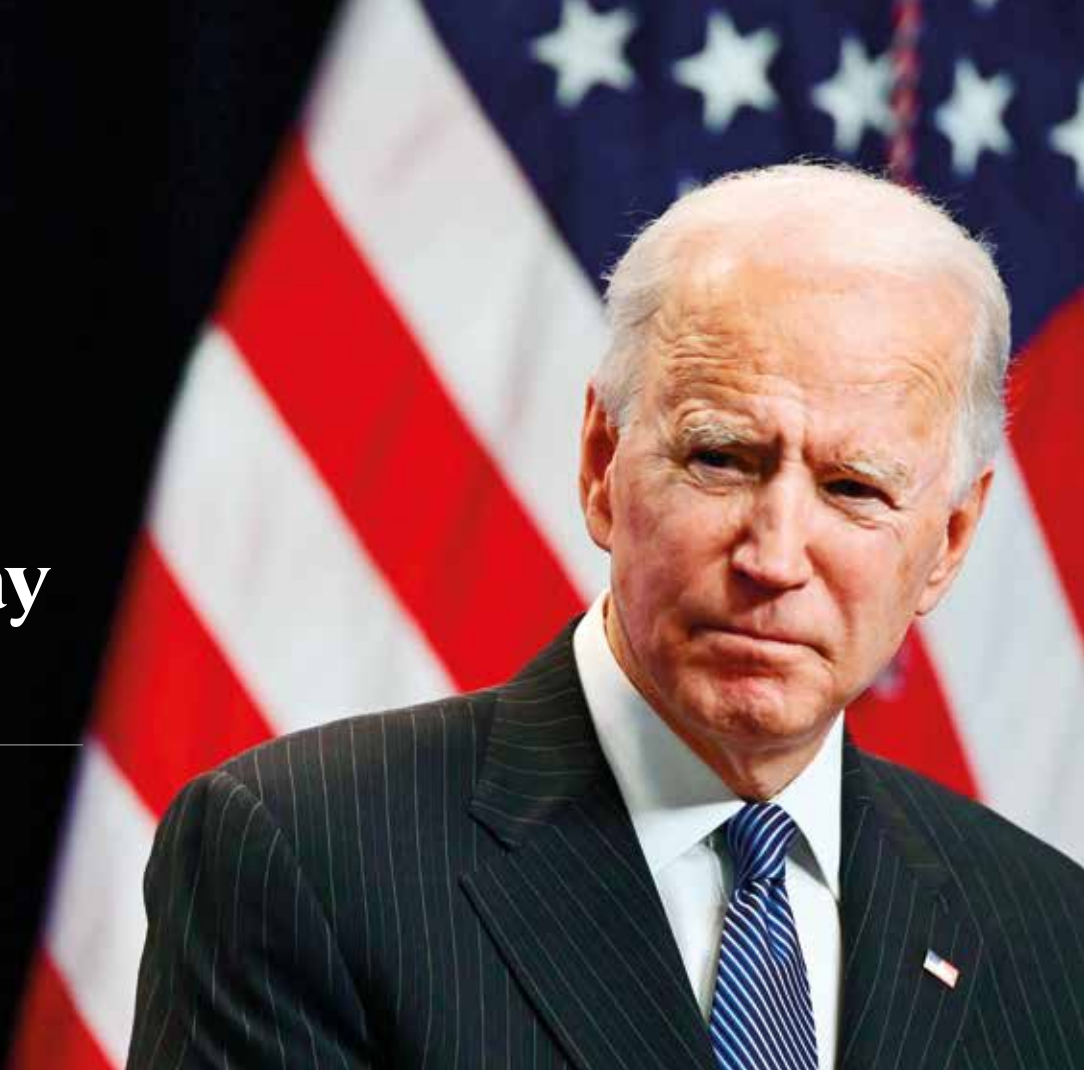
47 *Entertainment*
Will Japan's entertainment industry see a renaissance?

50 *Life: Books*
10 books to read in 2021

52 *Big Picture*
New virus restrictions threaten Hong Kong's last true junk: The Dukling

US set to remain tough on China, here to stay in Asia

Asia is keenly tracking newly inaugurated American President Joe Biden's foreign policy for the region



US President Joe Biden seen before signing an Executive Order in the South Court Auditorium at the White House on Jan 25 in Washington, DC.
PHOTO: AFP

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AS PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN'S CABINET GETS TO work, the signals on foreign policy are clear enough: the United States is here to stay in Asia and does not expect any change of heart on China – the competition that overshadows all other issues in Asia.

Mr Biden's promise in his inaugural address that the US would repair its alliances and re-engage with the world and the forceful statements on China by key members of his Cabinet during their confirmation hearings have raised questions about which aspects of Trump-era policies the new administration will roll back or retain.

Dr Daniel Russel, vice-president for international security and diplomacy at the Asia Society Policy Institute, said: "President Biden is somebody who genuinely believes that America's steady engagement, its presence in the Asia-Pacific, has stabilised the region, that it's created economic opportunities and that it's fostered good governance."

He added: "And he, I think, like the countries in the region, also doesn't want to see a Chinese sphere of influence by default because the United States has backed away. So I anticipate a fairly activist and engaged approach to Asia more broadly, but in South-east Asia as well."

At his confirmation hearing, incoming Secretary

of State Antony Blinken told a Senate panel that China under President Xi Jinping had "become more assertive, making clear that it seeks to become the leading country in the world".

In the high-stakes competition to shape the norms and standards that other countries ascribe to, America has an obligation to ensure its model carries the day, said Mr Blinken.

When asked about Taiwan, he said the US would like Taiwan to play a greater role internationally, and asserted that the US was committed to "making sure that Taiwan has the ability to defend itself against aggression".

Yet, while it is an adversarial relationship, there are still areas where cooperation is in China's and the US' mutual interest, he noted.

And the plan to deal with China involves strengthening America at home; working with allies instead of denigrating them; leading in international institutions instead of ceding space to China; standing against human rights abuses in Xinjiang and democracy erosion in Hong Kong; and investing in America's military.

NO LOVE FOR CHINA

Much is inherited from the Trump administration. "President Trump was right in taking a tougher

approach to China,” Mr Blinken said at his Senate hearing.

But, he added, the US should have acted sooner as “democracy was being trampled” in Hong Kong, making a reference to a tough national security law enacted by Beijing last year.

The Trump administration adopted over 200 unilateral actions on China in the last year, said Dr Scott Kennedy, senior adviser and trustee chair in Chinese business and economics at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, in a discussion on Thursday.

“Congress has no love lost for China,” he added.

“Over 380 pieces of legislation about China were introduced in the (last) Congress.”

The Biden administration is unlikely to walk away from those.

Dr Satu Limaye, director of the East-West Center in Washington, told The Straits Times: “I cannot right now see any major Trump initiative regarding China and Asia being repealed.”

“They are unlikely to move immediately to take state-owned enterprises off the entities list and unlikely to immediately remove heavy constraints on Chinese investment.

“A whole new set of baselines was created, and I don’t see any prospect of them being repealed.”

Dr Russel agreed that while America First and the “impulsive and erratic foreign policy” of the previous administration are gone, Mr Biden wants to show America’s partners that presidential transitions do not mean 180-degree policy turns.

“He’s got no interest in volatility. It doesn’t serve our interests or the region’s,” Dr Russel said.

The approach to North Korea, for instance, will be measured and built in concert with allies such as Japan, South Korea and, to a degree where possible, China.

There will be no summitry without substance.

“Joe Biden is somebody who cut his teeth during the Cold War in dealings with tough-minded, authoritarian, Marxist-Leninist Eastern-bloc systems,” Dr Russel said.

“He has no illusions.”

The new administration also has a deep bench of Asia experts.

Chief among them is Dr Kurt Campbell, who as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs was the architect of then President Barack Obama’s “pivot to Asia.”

He is back as Indo-Pacific coordinator at the National Security Council.

INDO-PACIFIC LEGACY

The term “Indo-Pacific” is another Trump legacy – and it is clearly not being changed. The older term was Asia-Pacific; Indo-Pacific draws India more firmly into the geopolitical zone.

“In terms of South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, the emphasis on India to do more, to be a stronger partner, will continue,” said Dr Aparna

Pande, director of the Hudson Institute’s Initiative on the Future of India.

“Kurt Campbell believes that, Blinken believes that, (National Security Adviser) Jake Sullivan believes that, senior director for South Asia Sumona Guha believes that. There isn’t anybody who doesn’t believe that.”

Manila-based political scientist Richard Heydarian told The Straits Times it was clear from ongoing Senate confirmation hearings that “the best way forward is continuation of the Trump administration’s tough ‘strategy’ on China but with major tactical changes.”

“In this sense, the Biden administration can be the best thing that ever happened to Asia, especially to South-east Asian nations, which have fretted over either the lack of decisiveness and wherewithal during the Obama administration or strategic finesse and multilateral sensibilities under the Trump administration.”

REBUILD AT HOME TO BE STRONG ABROAD

One priority for the Biden administration, though, is to rebuild America’s strength at home.

Battered by the coronavirus, its economy wrecked and its politics dangerously divided, the US is seen as weak.

There is clear intent to get the pandemic under control, build back the economy and leverage America’s strengths – in science and innovation, for instance – in order to present a credible face abroad. Foreign policy must make sense to American voters, Mr Biden has said.

At her confirmation hearing, Treasury Secretary nominee Janet Yellen said: “President Biden has been clear that he will not sign any new free trade agreements before the US makes major investments in American workers and our infrastructure. Our economic recovery at home must be our top priority.

“We will review (US) tariffs on China and consult with our allies and will not be making changes until we do both of these things.”

And the Biden administration will use its “full array of tools to counter China’s abusive economic practices and hold Beijing accountable”, she said. **ST**

In this sense, the Biden administration can be the best thing that ever happened to Asia, especially to South-east Asian nations, which have fretted over either the lack of decisiveness and wherewithal during the Obama administration or strategic finesse and multilateral sensibilities under the Trump administration.

”

A screen showing a CCTV state media news cast of the inauguration of US President Joe Biden, at a shopping centre in Beijing, China on Jan 21.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Biden shows his mettle at inauguration

JOE BIDEN HAS CERTAINLY RISEN TO THE occasion. The 78-year-old statesman, seasoned by his many years as senator and vice-president although prone to gaffes, had just a couple of years ago seemed destined for a dignified retirement. But on Jan 20, his mettle was on full display.

His forthright 21-minute inaugural speech at the Capitol, stressing unity, tolerance and humility, drew praise from across the political spectrum.

Importantly, the occasion itself, full of rousing rhetoric and performances, including Lady Gaga singing the national anthem and 22-year-old African American poet Amanda Gorman's inspirational recitation, also restored the order and ritual of the democratic process, and faith in the founding ideals

of the United States.

And at least for a majority of Americans who voted for him, it restored hope as President Biden took over the wheel.

No less important was the symbolism of the swearing-in of Vice-President Kamala Harris, the first woman and first person of colour (she is of Indian-Jamaican heritage) to be in the second-highest office in the land.

President Biden and Vice-President Harris collectively have several decades of experience in navigating both Congress and the White House.

The US is a global superpower, so what happens at the Capitol in Washington matters.

There will be no honeymoon for President Biden; the rubber will hit the

road very quickly. His slew of executive orders already undoes some Trump policies, and will invite blowback.

He is inheriting multiple crises. But even just steadying the ship is appreciated at this time, when more than 440,000 Americans are dead from the coronavirus, the economy is a wreck, and political divisions have become so toxic that they put the democratic process itself at risk.

But President Biden's forthright tone on Jan 20 acknowledged the challenges. "We will need all our strength to persevere through this dark winter," he said. "We are entering what may well be the toughest and deadliest period of the virus. We must set aside the politics and finally face this pandemic as one nation." **ST**

— Nirmal Ghosh

Engaging China, North Korea among Biden's top Asia goals



Shipping containers next to gantry cranes at the Yangshan Deepwater Port in Shanghai, China. Mr Biden will want to break down barriers to free trade that penalise US goods and services. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

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UNITED STATES PRESIDENT-ELECT JOE BIDEN views his mission abroad as one of restoring America's leadership of the world, and has vowed to mend Washington's ties with its allies.

But this comes amid a nadir in America's global reputation, and with partners sceptical that Washington will be able to commit as much as it promises.

Countries in Asia will also have memories of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" strategy of shifting America's focus away from the Middle East towards Asia, one which had mixed results.

Still, Asia will occupy a large part of the Biden administration's attention in the next four years, given America's strategic competition with an increasingly stronger China.

Here is a look at Mr Biden's top priorities in Asia.

1 BUILD AN ALLIANCE TO COUNTER CHINA

"China represents a special challenge," Mr Biden acknowledged in a commentary that laid out his foreign policy vision, published in the Foreign Affairs magazine last March before he won the election in November.

He envisions roping in allies and partners into a "coalition of democracies" to counter Beijing's abusive economic practices and human rights violations, reasoning that together they will have more economic and diplomatic clout.

Australia, India, Japan and South Korea get special mention but regional watchers note that Mr Biden is likely to be pragmatic and work with more than only liberal democracies.

The Biden administration is likely to speak out



against Beijing's human rights violations in Xinjiang and crackdown of activists in Hong Kong, as well as its increasingly assertive behaviour in Taiwan and the South China Sea.

But at the same time, the US will seek to work together with Beijing on issues where their interests converge, said Mr Biden. These areas include climate change, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and global health security.

2 BREAK DOWN TRADE BARRIERS

Mr Biden will want to break down barriers to free trade that penalise US goods and services, while resisting the "America First" protectionist impulses of his predecessor Donald Trump.

"Countries will trade with or without the United States. The question is, who writes the rules that govern trade?" he wrote in Foreign Affairs.

"The United States, not China, should be leading that effort."

He has vowed to "get tough with China", particularly over its unfair trade practices. His assessment, backed by a bipartisan consensus in Congress, is that China needs to be stopped from stealing American intellectual property and technology, and using subsidies to help its state-owned enterprises eventually dominate the technologies and industries of the future.

Mr Biden will have to assess whether to continue some of Mr Trump's trade policies, such as his tariffs on Chinese goods and the blacklisting of certain Chinese companies on American stock exchanges.

But rejoining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Mr Trump left, will not be high on Mr Biden's list of priorities in Asia.

3 WORK TOWARDS DENUCLEARISING NORTH KOREA

Mr Biden has promised to work on arms control and cites North Korea as a target of his denuclearisation efforts.

The Council on Foreign Relations think-tank has listed North Korea as a likely conflict to watch this year, stating that the country's further development of nuclear weapons or ballistic missile testing could heighten military tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Mr Biden said he would empower American negotiators and "jump-start a sustained, coordinated campaign with our allies and others, including China, to advance our shared objective of a denuclearised North Korea."

4 CONVINCE ASIAN ALLIES AND PARTNERS THAT THIS TIME IS DIFFERENT

American Enterprise Institute research fellow Zack Cooper said most American allies and partners are excited for the new administration, giving Mr Biden an opportunity to shift the momentum in Asia.

But the fact that much of Mr Biden's likely team developed and executed the pivot to Asia under the Obama administration is both a blessing and a curse, Dr Cooper wrote in a commentary for the Sydney-based Lowy Institute.

"It is a blessing because these officials know better than anyone what worked and what did not during the pivot. It is a curse because Asian observers will be quick to raise comparisons with past experiences.

"Differentiating Biden's approach to Asia will therefore be critical if his team is to draw on the pivot without being circumscribed by it," he wrote. [ST](#)

US President Donald Trump gesturing as he meets North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un at the start of their historic US-North Korea summit in Singapore on June 12, 2018.

PHOTO: AFP

Biden's key team for Asia

PHOTOS: AFP, REUTERS,
BLOOMBERG



Kamala Harris

Vice-President

America's first woman vice-president, the 56 year old is also California's first black attorney-general and the first woman of South Asian heritage elected to the US Senate. Although she has relatively little experience when it comes to foreign policy, vice-presidents can and have wielded influence over foreign affairs, particularly if they are tasked to oversee specific issues and relationships.



Anthony Blinken

Secretary of State

Veteran diplomat Anthony Blinken is known for his belief in the US' alliances, which are seen as Washington's unique advantage, first against the old Soviet Union and now against a more aggressive China. Once former president Bill Clinton's chief foreign policy speech writer, Mr Blinken went on to be deputy national security adviser and deputy secretary of state in the Obama administration.



Janet Yellen

Treasury secretary

The former Federal Reserve Chair and seasoned banker is one of the most senior Cabinet officials. After leading the central bank during the arduous climb back from the global financial crisis, all eyes will be on how the 74 year old helps steer the US economy through a resurgent pandemic.

READ MORE ONLINE

Asia's hopes from Biden



Security guards seen in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Washington's remarks on human rights abuses in Xinjiang continues to irk China. PHOTO: REUTERS

Beijing has long wish list that Biden will find difficult to fulfil

Sensing a "new window of hope", China has a long wish list for newly minted US President Joe Biden, writes China Bureau Chief Tan Dawn Wei. Beijing hopes Mr Biden will scrap tariffs on billions of dollars of Chinese exports to the United States; reverse sanctions on Hong Kong and Chinese officials for railroading the national security law in the territory and rescind a travel ban on China's power elite, among other issues.

<https://str.sg/JzvN>



Lloyd Austin

Defence Secretary

Retired general Lloyd Austin headed the US Central Command under President Barack Obama from 2013 to 2016 and oversaw the withdrawal of 150,000 American troops from Iraq. He is the first African American to head the Defence Department, in line with Mr Biden's goal to bring greater diversity to his Cabinet.



Jake Sullivan

National Security Adviser

Incoming National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan is an Obama-era foreign policy aide who has spoken out against Beijing's trade war with Canberra and arrest of Hong Kong activists. Mr Sullivan was a key player in the secret negotiations that ultimately led to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, and has called for a return to diplomacy with Tehran.



John Kerry

Climate czar

Former United States senator and secretary of state John Kerry previously helped steer the negotiation of the Paris Agreement and locked down commitments from nearly 200 nations to begin to reverse the dangerous warming of the planet. He has been advocating for action on climate change since he attended the first Rio Earth Summit in 1992, where the framework of United Nations climate talks was formed.



Kurt Campbell

Indo-Pacific czar

The top US diplomat for Asia under Democratic president Barack Obama and secretary of state Hillary Clinton, Kurt Campbell is considered an architect of their "pivot to Asia" strategy, a vaunted but so far still limited rebalancing of resources to the region. Apart from advising Mr Biden's Democratic campaign, he is also the co-founder of the Centre for a New American Security think-tank.



India's Border Security Force soldiers at a checkpoint along a highway leading to the disputed Ladakh region, on June 17, 2020. PHOTO: REUTERS

Delhi sees continuity in ties

Changes in Washington have left New Delhi reassured about its relationship with the United States, writes India Bureau Chief Nirmala Ganapathy. Still, some issues could crop up with New Delhi keen to maintain its neutrality and not come under any kind of pressure, although clashes with China last year could have a bearing on the evolving nature of ties.

<https://str.sg/JKZf>



Then US vice-president Joe Biden and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sharing a light moment during a press conference at the Istana during Mr Biden's visit in 2013. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

For Singaporeans, Biden presidency a relief even as some regret Trump's exit

The signing of executive orders on climate change and public health is good news for Singapore, experts tell journalist Justin Ong. There are hopes for a return of America's leadership on global challenges that will contribute to overall stability in the region and a bigger role in regional economic and trade matters.

<https://str.sg/JzvW>



People watching a television news programme reporting on the US presidential election showing images of US President-elect Joe Biden and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, in Seoul on Nov 9. PHOTO: AFP

Seoul eager to rebuild ties but challenges remain

South Korea is keen to rebuild ties with Washington after four tumultuous years under former US president Donald Trump, who dismissed Seoul as a defence “free rider” and demanded a fivefold increase in military cost sharing, writes South Korea Correspondent Chang May Choon. Seoul is also concerned about the challenges that remain with regard to North Korea and Japan.

<https://str.sg/JzvG>

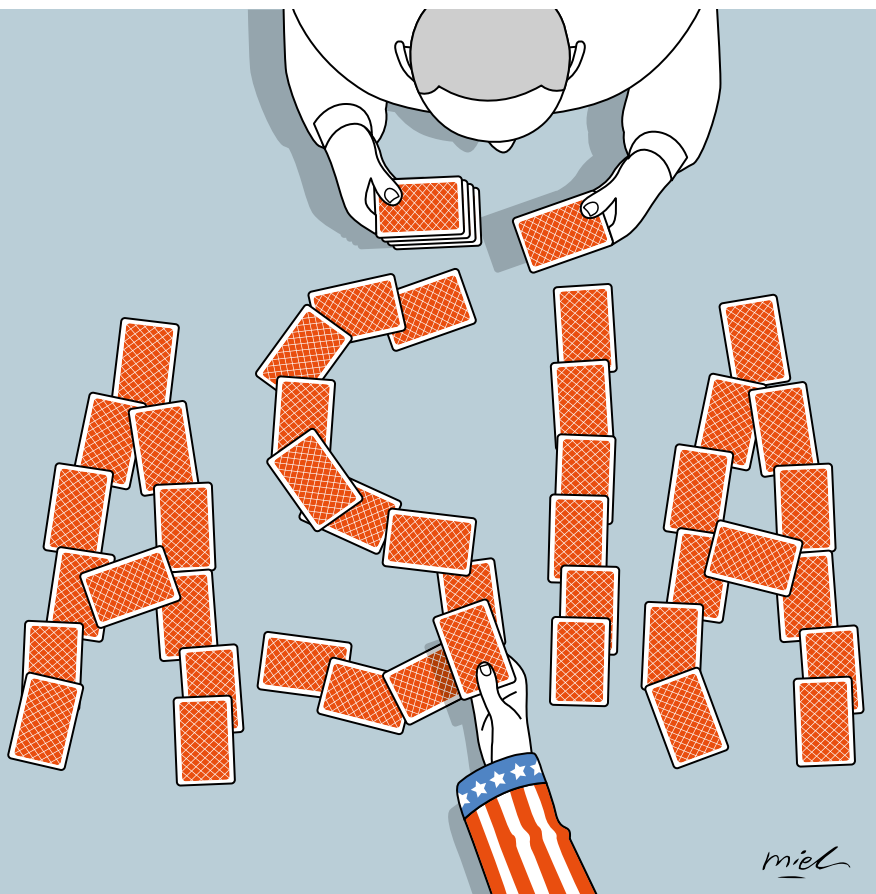
Tokyo pragmatic about US return to international order

Japan too is hoping for a smoother ride under Mr Biden, after four years of Mr Donald Trump, who ripped up conventional foreign policy playbooks and assailed even long-time ally Japan for not spending enough on trade and defence, writes Japan Correspondent Walter Sim. But there is also quiet recognition that Mr Biden’s domestic constraints could mean a relative decline of US power and commitment towards international society.

<https://str.sg/Jzvf>



An employee of Japanese traditional doll company Kyugetsu displaying wooden battledores or “hagoita”, decorated with images of former US president Donald Trump, US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in Tokyo on Dec 3. PHOTO: AFP



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Opinion

Can Asia help Biden?

A strong, self-confident America is needed to resume its leadership role. Asia has a role to play – if the US is prepared to listen

KISHORE MAHBUBANI

For The Straits Times



“ASK NOT WHAT AMERICA CAN DO FOR YOU! Ask rather what you can do for America.” If US President Joe Biden were in a position to send a sincere and honest message to the rest of the world in his recent inaugural address, these are the words he should have used – echoing the famous words of John F. Kennedy, exactly 60 years ago, when he said: “Ask not what your country can do for you –

ask what you can do for your country.”

Instead, because American presidents are prisoners of American political tradition, President Biden had to say: “We can make America, once again, the leading force for good in the world.”

The sad reality is that the United States can no longer provide the world with unquestioned leadership.

American leadership has benefited the world: The multilateral rules and institutions it generated after World War II have prevented World War III; the open markets of America helped the East Asian tigers and China to succeed; the US Navy enabled freedom of navigation. But all this strong global leadership required a strong, self-confident America, one that Kennedy’s stirring rhetoric could rouse 60 years ago.

Sadly, Mr Donald Trump has left a broken, deeply divided America that has neither the spirit nor the will to lead the world. Any illusions that a strong, self-confident America would bounce back after Mr Biden’s election were wiped out on Jan 6, when the world saw an unruly mob storm the US Capitol, in part because of the implicit encouragement of Mr Trump himself.

This is why Dr Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, America’s most prestigious foreign policy think-tank, tweeted that day: “No one in the world is likely to see, respect, fear, or depend on us in the same way again. If the post-American era has a start date, it is almost certainly today.”

British journalist Martin Wolf is equally pessimistic. As he wrote in the Financial Times: “The US republic has survived the test of Trump. But it still needs to be saved from death.”

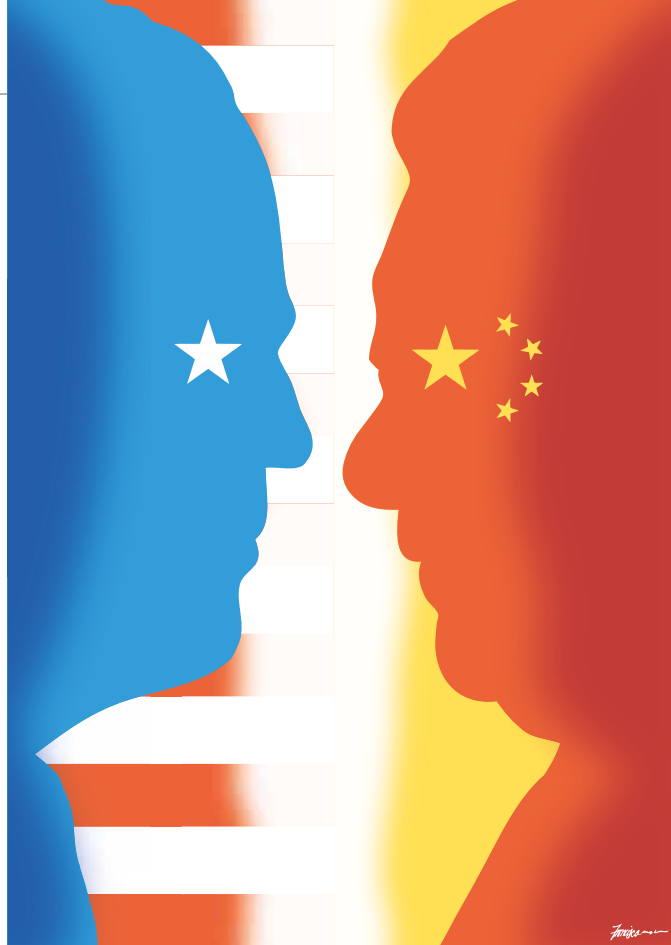
The big question that the rest of the world, including Asia, faces with President Biden’s inauguration, is whether it is in the world’s (or Asia’s) interest to see America continue to decline and weaken, or if we should instead help America to recover.

The answer is obviously the latter: The world is better off with a strong, self-confident America. Yet, Asia (or the world) can help America only if it believes that it needs help. Sheer pride will make it difficult for Americans to accept that they need help, even though thoughtful Americans, like political scientist Francis Fukuyama, acknowledge that America has some serious internal healing to do.

Dr Fukuyama said that the US is “divided, internally preoccupied, and contradicting its own democratic ideals.”

America’s internal problems are deep and structural. As I document in *Has China Won?*, they range from the deeply plutocratic political system that has become entrenched to the “sea of despair” that has emerged among the white working classes, who sadly and unwisely supported Mr Trump in their anger.

No magic wand can wave away all these deep structural problems. There is no question that President Biden is doing the right things to help America get back on the road. He has announced the following measures in the first 100 days of his term: a US\$1.9 trillion (\$2.5 trillion) coronavirus relief package, 100 million vaccine doses, a US\$15-an-hour minimum wage increase, extending a



ST ILLUSTRATION:
MANNY FRANCISCO

pause on student loan payments, and extending nationwide restrictions on eviction. Let’s hope that these internal healing measures work.

Equally important, President Biden should avoid painful and demanding external commitments. The wisest thing that he could do to help both America and the world heal from the Covid-19 rampage is to press the pause button on the US-China geopolitical contest. It would be sheer common sense to do this.

Unfortunately, given the toxic anti-China mood in America, his hands are tied. If he is seen to be soft on China, he will be excoriated. Thus, publicly, he must appear to be tough on China.

Surprisingly, President Biden said nothing about China in his inaugural speech. However, his Cabinet appointees – including Dr Janet Yellen for treasury secretary, Mr Antony Blinken for secretary of state and Ms Avril Haines for director of national intelligence – have criticised China strongly in their Senate confirmation hearings.

Ms Haines said: “China is a challenge to our security, to our prosperity, to our values across a range of issues, and I do support an aggressive stance, in a sense, to deal with the challenge that we’re facing.”

Yet, even though the logical and sensible pause button is out of Mr Biden’s reach, he can still rebalance the US-China contest.

If former president Barack Obama opted for 60 per cent cooperation and 40 per cent competition with China, while Mr Trump essentially went for 90 per cent competition and 10 per cent cooperation,

Mr Biden needs political cover. Asean can provide political cover by collectively calling on both China and the US to first focus on working together to solve common and pressing problems like Covid-19 and climate change.

”

President Biden can at least go for 60 per cent competition and 40 per cent cooperation.

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

Yet, President Biden cannot achieve this rebalancing on his own. He needs the help of Asia. All this provides Asean (including Singapore) with a golden opportunity.

To win political support for a more rational China policy, Mr Biden needs political cover. Asean can provide political cover by collectively calling on both China and the US to first focus on working together to solve common and pressing problems like Covid-19 and climate change.

The most sensible thing Mr Biden could do is to send his senior diplomats to East Asia on a “listening” mission.

Indeed, all good diplomacy begins with listening and understanding. Here, there is no question what President Biden’s diplomats will hear from South-east Asians: They want a strong American presence in South-east Asia, but they also do not want to be forced to choose between America and China.

The former Indonesian ambassador to the US, Dr Dino Patti Djalal, put it well when he said: “Today, South-east Asians want to get along with the US and China, but they also want the US and China to get along, at least in their region. Is that too much to ask?”

He added: “We don’t want to be duped into an anti-China campaign.” Fortunately, President Biden has chosen as his Asian “czar” Mr Kurt Campbell, a seasoned and experienced diplomat. During the Covid-19 lockdown period, he and I partnered together in a debate organised by

Intelligence Squared US to argue in favour of a motion, “Coronavirus will reshape the world order in China’s favour”.

In the debate, he said: “We expect a country to provide domestic capacity and demonstrate competence in terms of dealing with the pandemic. No one would argue that the US has been able to do anything of the kind. It’s been a tragedy to see the incompetence with which the US has dealt with the issue.

“We would expect that the leading nation would be able to provide support in terms of PPE (personal protective equipment) and equipment. We’ve seen nothing of the sort from the US.

“What we see in contrast is China, even though this is where the virus originated; since that time they’ve been reaching out, providing equipment and support to a variety of countries around the world.”

He added: “After the coronavirus has swept the planet, it is undeniable that China has taken advantage of the situation, has moved forward and everyone sees that America has been missing in action.”

CHANGING PRIORITIES

Mr Campbell is also a good listener. If he came to South-east Asia, he would hear another clear message on the priorities of Asean.

All countries have to prioritise politics, economics and security in their international affairs. America tends to prioritise the security dimension the most, followed by politics and economics. China prioritises economics, followed by politics and security. There is no question that the priorities of Asean are closer to those of China than America.

Given the social and economic travails of the US, and the “sea of despair” faced by its working classes, it would now be in America’s self-interest to also put economics ahead of security.

Unwisely, America has spent over US\$5 trillion fighting futile post-9/11 wars. If this US\$5 trillion had been spent on the bottom 50 per cent of American society, each citizen in this group would have received a cheque for US\$30,000. This is a very significant amount, especially since 60 per cent of Americans do not have access to US\$400 in case of an emergency.

In short, contrary to the conventional wisdom in Washington, which is strongly in favour of accelerating the geopolitical contest against China, it would be wiser for America to at least press the pause button on this contest and focus on getting both the American and global economies back on track.

Asean (and Singapore) has a golden opportunity to help Mr Biden by providing him with the necessary political cover to pursue a more sensible approach in US-China relations. By doing this, Asean will also repay America a major debt. Without American support and backing, Asean could not have been successfully launched in 1967. Now it is Asean’s turn to help America successfully relaunch itself. [ST](#)

*The writer is a distinguished fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, and the author of *Has The West Lost It?* and *Has China Won?**

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Kurt Campbell & Rush Doshi

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Tommy Koh

As a new US president takes charge, the journey onwards will be radically different in parts, but it will also have to navigate paths carved out by the Trump administration

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PHOTO: REUTERS



Chinese President Xi Jinping shakes hands with US President Joe Biden (left) inside the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Dec 4, 2013. Mr Biden has indicated he wants to engage and work with China while Beijing has repeatedly called for dialogue. PHOTO: REUTERS

China Watch

Xi's priorities in 2021: Economy and Covid-19

Rivalry with US may soften but year no less taxing amid fear and suspicion against China

WITHOUT DOUBT, 2020 WAS THE MOST challenging year for President Xi Jinping since he took over the top job in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the military in 2012.

He steered the country through its worst health crisis in recent history and grappled with an economy hit hard by the global Covid-19 pandemic, as well as a bruising trade and technology war with the United States that is not about to end.

It was also a year in which he weathered intense scrutiny and brickbats on the international stage – from unhappiness over the pandemic and criticism over alleged human rights abuses in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, to a nasty border clash with India and an acrimonious spat with Australia.

The suspension of the world's biggest initial public offering and a spate of bond defaults by state-owned enterprises further battered the country's

international image.

China could console itself, however, because it effectively contained the coronavirus and ended rural poverty last year.

This year will be no less taxing.

The plethora of problems that China faced last year will not go away any time soon, particularly the growing chorus of fear, suspicion and resentment against it.

When the biggest political event of the year rolls around in July – the CCP's centenary – congratulations will not be forthcoming from countries antagonistic towards it.

While the outgoing Trump administration has targeted the Communist Party and even agitated for regime change, it remains to be seen how the incoming Biden administration will treat a political entity with an ideology anathema to the US.

President-elect Joe Biden has indicated he wants to engage and work with China while Beijing has repeatedly called for dialogue.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently said that "a new window of hope is opening."

A Communist Party insider told The Straits

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China's V-shaped recovery

Year on year percent change of Gross Domestic Product since 2005



Source: NATIONAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS OF CHINA, REUTERS

Times, speaking on condition of anonymity: "It was tantamount to an olive branch."

China has said it is willing to share data and lunar samples obtained by its Chang'e 5 probe with the

global scientific community, including the US, in another goodwill gesture.

"But we are not overly optimistic," the insider said. To China's dismay, Mr Biden has also vowed to form an alliance of democracies which China views as another attempt to contain its rise.

China reached an investment agreement with the European Union that would give European companies greater access to the Chinese market.

Communist Party sources and analysts say Beijing pulled out all the stops to court the EU for a deal in a bid to prevent the group's 27 members from ganging up with the US.

Neither is China letting up on the military front.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies associate research fellow James Char, a China scholar, said: "Although the US-China rivalry will likely soften somewhat after Joe Biden assumes power, Beijing will continue to be wary of Washington as it pushes ahead with enhancing its military capabilities to challenge US supremacy in the western Pacific.

"China's military strategists will focus much of their attention on the US as they adopt a long-term rivalry with Washington and this will continue to

Can domestic consumption drive growth in China?

The question that remains is whether positive economic growth can continue into the year

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CHINA'S ECONOMY STEAMED TO A SOLID ENDING last year, beating most estimates to end its final quarter with 6.5 per cent growth.

In spite of the low full-year figure – the economy grew only 2.3 per cent last year, the lowest in four decades – it is still the only major economy in the world that avoided a contraction last year amid the Covid-19 pandemic, with analysts and economists cautiously optimistic that such growth can continue.

It also puts the world's second-largest economy on track to lead global economic growth, with most other countries, including the United States, still grappling with the pandemic.

But the stunning economic recovery going from a historic contraction to growth has come at a cost.

Chinese businesses took a huge battering in the first quarter last year as the authorities put most of the country under lockdown in a bid to control the virus, shutting businesses and factories, bringing production to a screeching halt. The measures – then described as draconian – have since paid off, with the Chinese economy able to return to work en masse by April, jump-starting the recovery.



Employees working on a truck assembly line at a vehicle manufacturing factory in Weifang, in eastern China's Shandong province on Dec 15, 2020. PHOTO: AFP

Much of the growth was driven by a huge wave of exports, ranging from medical supplies to consumer electronics, as the rest of the world underwent lockdowns. According to export data released, China exported 224 billion masks between March and December, or 36 masks for every person outside the country.

But while export figures have made headlines, domestic consumption is still struggling to catch up.

In a bid to reduce reliance on foreign markets and technology, Chinese policymakers have introduced a "dual circulation" strategy, essentially driving economic growth through both international trade, as well as domestic production, distribution and consumption.

be the case in 2021.”

But whether China mends fences with Australia, Canada, India and Sweden will hinge in part on American goodwill reciprocity, although Beijing is unlikely to back down over its “core interests”, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet and the South China Sea.

ECONOMY

As China continues to manage its external challenges, growing the economy will be one of Mr Xi’s top priorities this year.

The Chinese economy roared back in the second and third quarters last year, posting 3.2 per cent and 4.9 per cent growth respectively, after slumping 6.8 per cent in the first quarter because of the pandemic.

The World Bank has forecast China’s gross domestic product growth at 2 per cent for last year, “boosted by government spending, strong exports and a low rate of new Covid-19 infections since March, but checked by slow domestic consumption.”

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) put the figure at 1.9 per cent.

The World Bank forecast China’s GDP growth this year at 7.9 per cent, compared with the IMF’s

8.2 per cent.

Economists say domestic demand will have room to grow this year, as consumers look to spend excess savings accumulated since last year, and as confidence over the country’s Covid-19 containment is reinforced.

On Dec 26, the Commerce Ministry set out its key agenda for the new year: to push up domestic demand, clear hurdles to building a system of internal production and distribution, and eventually create a strong domestic market.

COVID-19 CONTROL

Keeping Covid-19 in check will also remain a priority for President Xi and his personal prestige, given the CCP centenary in July.

“He would definitely want to ensure stability reigns in the run-up to that anniversary,” said Mr Char.

“On the global stage, we can also expect him to continue to push through the country’s vaccine diplomacy and present China as a cooperative global partner in the fight against Covid-19, especially during the Apec (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit come February,” he said. [ST](#)

China’s military strategists will focus much of their attention on the US as they adopt a long-term rivalry with Washington and this will continue to be the case in 2021.

”

Consumption spending per capita fell 4 per cent last year, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) released yesterday.

“It is necessary to improve the consumption ability of residents, improve consumption policy and environment, and cultivate more consumption growth drivers,” said NBS chief Ning Jizhe at a press conference announcing the figures, adding that there is “relatively large room” to increase how much consumption will contribute to economic growth.

Yet, for many, the instability of the global situation has led to more conservative spending – a pattern that began in the early days of the pandemic.

Mr Zhang Juzheng, who runs a business importing speciality food from Europe, said he has been dealt a body blow by the reduced flights and shipments between China and Europe. “The cost of bringing in things like biscuits and chocolates has gone up at least twice, and that’s if they don’t get held up at Customs for extra checks because (the authorities) are worried about spreading Covid-19 from the packaging,” he told The Straits Times.

“And given that we don’t know when this will end, even if I have extra money, I’d rather keep it for a rainy day or for my business... I’ll feel uneasy if I spent it on other things.”

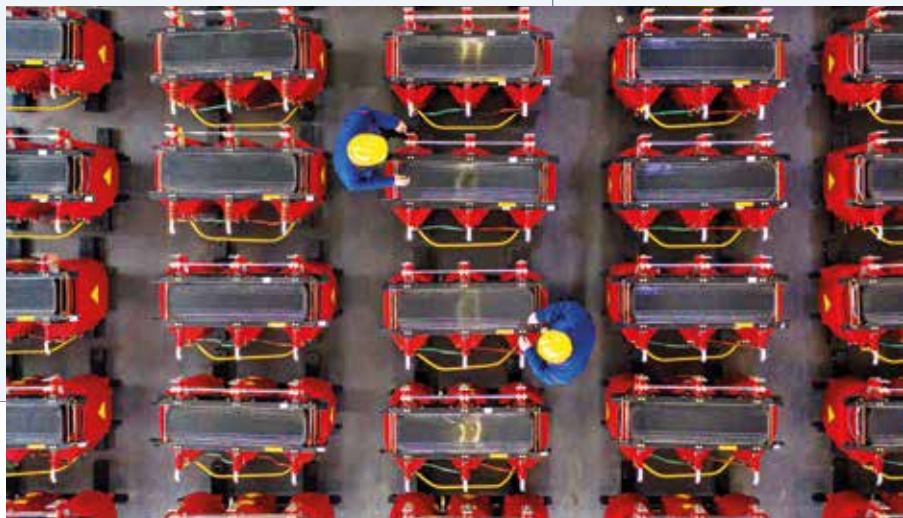
Concerns also remain over a resurgence in coronavirus cases, which has led to the authorities discouraging travel and large gatherings during the Chinese New Year holidays, traditionally a huge driver in consumption as people travel home, buy holiday gifts and even go on holidays.

With companies urging workers not to return home and travel restrictions re-implemented in major cities like Beijing, it is likely the holidays this year will be a muted affair.

Given the above factors, the question that remains is whether positive economic growth – especially one driven by domestic consumption – can continue into the year. Some economists are already predicting an 8.2 per cent expansion this year, figures unseen since a decade ago when the country posted 9.6 per cent growth in 2011.

In principle, this is possible, wrote Dr Alicia Garcia Herrero, chief economist for Asia-Pacific at Natixis, in a research note. “Still, this is dependent on the government’s commitment to bring Covid-19 under control as the roll-out of the vaccine may not offer universal coverage of the population by the end of 2021,” she said. [ST](#)

Employees working on a dry-type transformer production line at an electrical production factory in China. Much of its growth was driven by a huge wave of exports, ranging from medical supplies to consumer electronics, as the rest of the world underwent lockdowns. PHOTO: AFP



Asia's struggle to vaccinate millions

With the health of millions at stake and much still unknown about Covid-19, governments and health workers have been doubling efforts to secure vaccines and inoculate as many people as possible



A medical worker preparing to inoculate a woman with a Covid-19 coronavirus vaccine at a hospital in Amritsar.
PHOTO: AFP

India grapples with jab hesitancy

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AFTER 12 DAYS OF WORRYING, A SENIOR RESIDENT in a Shivamogga government hospital got his Covid-19 vaccine jab on Jan 27.

"I'm not sure it will work, but since my colleagues (who also got the jab) did not have any side effects, I thought okay, let me get it too," he said.

India hopes to inoculate 300 million people against Covid-19 by August. It started with health workers on Jan 16, but many registered doctors and nurses did not turn up for the free shot.

All health workers quoted here requested anonymity since the Indian Home Ministry has ordered strict action against anyone "creating

unwarranted doubts" about the Covid-19 vaccines.

But, across the country, medical circles are abuzz with discussions on how to evade the jab, or which of the two approved vaccines is better.

The Indian government authorised two vaccines on Jan 3: AstraZeneca-Oxford University's Covishield; and Covaxin, an indigenous shot developed by Bharat Biotech International.

Covaxin has been approved for restricted emergency use, although its efficacy trial is not complete. It is being rolled out "on clinical trial mode." Those getting Covaxin have to sign a form consenting to be treated as trial volunteers.

If they refuse, they get no Covid-19 vaccine at all. “This is discriminatory,” said the Karnataka Association of Resident Doctors in a Jan 18 letter to the state Health Ministry. “Before receiving Covaxin, we have been made to (sign) an undertaking stating that the clinical efficacy of Covaxin is yet to be established. The undertaking and the discrepancies in the distribution of the vaccine sound very suspicious.”

Only about 55 per cent of registered healthcare professionals turned up in Karnataka.

New Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, the states with the largest number of health professionals, also saw less than half turn up.

A doctor from Hassan, one of the six districts in Karnataka that have been allotted Covaxin, said that in the first week, only a handful turned up for vaccination in their centre. The other 237 centres are offering Covishield.

“I didn’t go when it was my turn. I’d like to see data that proves the vaccine’s efficacy first,” said the Hassan doctor. He wanted the option to get Covishield.

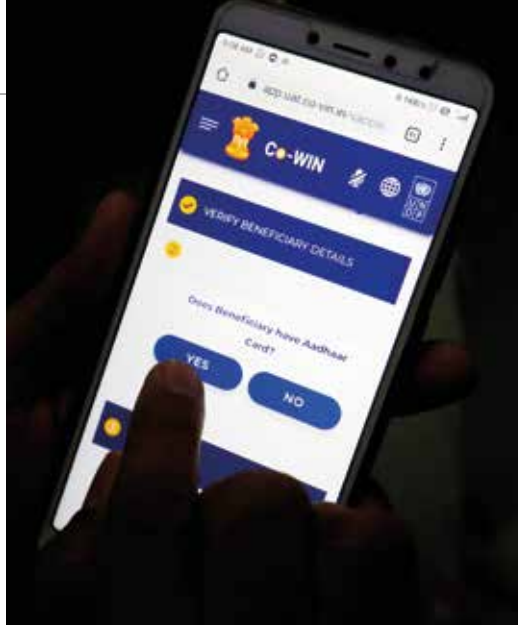
Turnout, however, is slowly improving in the second week of vaccination.

The Shivamogga doctor said: “A Lancet article on Covaxin and the fact that the 60 people who took the vaccine didn’t have any side effects convinced me.”

He was referring to a Jan 21 article in medical journal Lancet citing the results of Covaxin’s phase one clinical trial. The safety trial shows that the inactivated Sars-CoV-2 virus is safe and triggered “enhanced immune responses” in the volunteers.

The state health authorities are citing the study to coax those reluctant to get the jab. But some experts warn that only a phase three trial – as yet unfinished for Covaxin – can prove that it works.

“Immunogenicity is indicative that the vaccine would work, but it won’t say to what extent. It does not predict efficacy. That has to be tested in as close to a population setting as possible,” said Dr Shahid



A healthcare worker entering data into the Covid Vaccine Intelligence Network (CoWIN) app, during a trial run of Covid-19 vaccine delivery systems in Gandhinagar, India, on Dec 29. PHOTO: REUTERS

Jameel, a Delhi-based virologist.

Centres administering Covishield, on the other hand, have had no-shows over fears of side effects and adverse events.

Nine health workers who received Covishield died between one and five days after the shot, with all deaths ascribed to cardiovascular problems or “brain stroke” India’s drug regulator said the deaths were unconnected to the vaccine.

“Because of the uncertainty over the deaths of people who got Covishield, me and my husband sought out and signed up for Covaxin,” said Dr Shanthi Ravindranath, secretary of Chennai’s Doctors’ Association for Social Equality.

But she empathised with many of her friends who wavered.

“When approvals are given in a hurried manner... it’s normal for questions to arise in anyone’s minds,” she said. [ST](#)

Across the country, doctor and health circles are abuzz with discussions on how to evade the jab or which of the two approved vaccines is better.



India’s, China’s Covid-19 vaccinations to stretch to late 2022: Study

COVID-19 VACCINATION PROGRAMMES IN INDIA and China will stretch until late 2022 due to the sheer size of their population, and more than 85 poor countries will not have widespread access to vaccines before 2023, a study said.

While rapid development of vaccines has raised hopes for an end to the year-long pandemic, concerns over unequal distribution have also mounted due to production problems and large bilateral deals between wealthy countries and drug makers.

“Most developing countries will not have widespread access to the shots before 2023 at

the earliest,” Ms Agathe Demarais, director of the Economist Intelligence Unit, the research division of the Economist Group, said in its study.

“Some of these countries – particularly poorer ones with a young demographic profile – may well lose the motivation to distribute vaccines, especially if the disease has spread widely or if the associated costs prove too high.”

While many Asian countries will have broad access to vaccines by late 2022, most countries in Africa are unlikely to get widespread vaccination coverage until early 2023, the study said.

– REUTERS

Indonesia's Covid-19 vaccine drive an uphill task

Only time will tell if Indonesia's strategy works, with indicators such as a reduction in the number of cases as well as less utilisation of healthcare resources over time.



Indonesian President Joko Widodo receiving a shot of the coronavirus disease vaccine at the Merdeka Palace in Jakarta, Indonesia on Jan 13.
PHOTO: REUTERS

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"SAFE AND HALAL", THE WORDS SCREAMED from a red backdrop as Indonesian President Joko Widodo settled into a chair in front of it and rolled up his sleeve to receive his first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine.

Cameras rolled live, and soon enough, photos and footage of the iconic moment began making the rounds on social media and news websites.

The message was more likely meant to calm nerves in the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation of 270 million people, with many questioning if the vaccine was safe to use and permissible under Islam.

With over a million cases and 29,000 deaths – and counting – the vaccine developed by Chinese drugmaker Sinovac Biotech appears the best bet to keep the health crisis under control. And the government is sparing no effort to convince Indonesians to get vaccinated even though BPOM, the country's food and drug monitoring agency, rated the vaccine's efficacy at just 65.3 per cent.

Mr Joko led by example, becoming the first to be inoculated.

The Indonesian Ulema Council, the top Muslim clerical body, also issued a religious edict deeming the vaccine as halal, or permissible.

At the launch of the mass vaccination programme on Jan 13, ministers, clerics, celebrities and even a

vegetable seller were roped in for the publicity drive.

The government has set an ambitious target of getting 181.5 million people, or around 70 per cent of the population, vaccinated in 15 months, or by March 2022, to achieve herd immunity.

Some medical experts, however, expressed doubts about the timeline.

Dr Dicky Budiman, an epidemiologist at Griffith University in Australia, believes 1½ years to three years would be a more realistic timeline, considering the various challenges related to the country's large population, sprawling geography, relatively weak infrastructure and human resources as well as "vaccine hesitancy."

"Some people refuse to receive the vaccine, some doubt the vaccine's efficacy and safety, and some will wait until there is a very clear and strong message from the government about the benefits and risks of the vaccine," he told The Straits Times.

"Herd immunity is a long way to go, it needs to be supported by conditions to control the pandemic" which include continued testing and contact tracing, isolating and quarantining those exposed to the virus, he added.

But Dr Asok Kurup, who chairs the Academy of Medicine's Chapter of Infectious Disease Physicians in Singapore, said Indonesia's target is not implausible.

"It's not far-fetched; Israel is achieving fantastic targets," he said, citing the country which has vaccinated two million of its nine million population as at Jan 14. However, he was quick to note that "infrastructure and logistics are a lot different in Indonesia compared with Israel."

"It's not a silver bullet... and all other public health measures continue to be imperative," he added.

Dr Kurup said vaccination offers another layer of protection. "Even though the Sinovac data on efficacy is still unclear, some protection as opposed to nothing merits use," he said.

Only time will tell if Indonesia's strategy works, with indicators such as a reduction in the number of cases as well as less utilisation of healthcare resources over time.

Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin on Jan 21 told a business forum that the President wanted the vaccination drive completed even earlier, within 12 months.

While the government might be perceived by some as rushing through the programme, he stressed that vaccination was just one of the ways to deal with the pandemic, and that other health measures such as testing, isolating and strengthening the public healthcare system would continue.

"Vaccination is to protect not only ourselves, but also our families, neighbours, countrymen and all of humanity," the minister said. [ST](#)





Geopolitics, domestic sentiment shape Indochina's Covid-19 vaccine race

THAILAND LOOKED LIKE IT WAS AHEAD IN the regional scramble for a coronavirus vaccine in October when it announced that a local firm would manufacture the OxfordAstraZeneca vaccine for domestic use and distribution to nearby countries.

But with a locally produced vaccine months away while local transmissions grew over the new year, Thailand sought to boost its initial reservation of 26 million doses. It ordered 35 million more, and supplemented that with two million doses of the vaccine from China's Sinovac Biotech. The first batches of British- and Chinese-made vaccines are expected to arrive in February.

Neighbouring Cambodia levelled up with some help from close ally China, which pledged to gift it one million doses of the vaccine. According to local media, the first 300,000 doses from China's Sinopharm are also expected to arrive.

But it was Myanmar that took the eventual lead. New Delhi sent it 1.5 million free doses of the Indian-manufactured OxfordAstraZeneca vaccine last Friday, as part of its Vaccine Maitri (friendship) Initiative.

With millions of dollars at stake and much still to be learnt about Covid-19, the regional race to acquire enough vaccines has been coloured by geopolitics and shaped by domestic sentiment.

Bangkok, after making public its plan to use China-made vaccines, found itself on the back foot when locals questioned their efficacy. Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha had to personally reassure people that only vaccines proved safe would get the green light.

Thailand's vaccine efforts are now also embroiled in the polarising debate about royal wealth and privilege raised by young street protesters last year. This was after opposition figure Thanathorn Juangroonruangkit alleged that the deal between AstraZeneca and its chosen local manufacturer Siam Bioscience – owned by King Maha Vajiralongkorn – lacked transparency.

The Thai government promptly lodged lese majeste complaints against Mr Thanathorn, making some

wonder whether discussion about a central plank of Thailand's vaccine strategy was now a no-go zone.

Over in Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen, after vowing to use only vaccines approved by the World Health Organisation, backtracked by saying Cambodia could not afford to wait. He declared he would be first in line for the Chinese vaccine by the state-owned Sinopharm.

Dr Chheang Vannarith, president of Phnom Penh-based think-tank Asian Vision Institute, says China's vaccine donation was a reflection of solid Sino-Cambodia ties.

"China is here to stay in Cambodia and I don't think any other major powers can challenge that status quo," he told The Straits Times.

Even so, Mr Hun Sen was careful to hedge his bets, requesting vaccine donations via India's ambassador to Cambodia.

It was the Serum Institute of India, the world's largest vaccine maker, that Myanmar eventually turned to when it placed an order for 30 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. Like many other countries, Myanmar was in discussion with multiple sources for vaccines, "yet it is also careful not to upset its big neighbour to the east", says Ms Khin Khin Kyaw Kyee, a Chinawatcher at the Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar.

There were initial fears India would take months to export vaccines while the country embarked on its own massive domestic inoculation drive. But New Delhi assuaged some concern in the week of Jan 17 by sending free vaccines to nearby countries like Bangladesh, Maldives and Myanmar.

India's donation to Myanmar came about a week after visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi pledged to give Naypyitaw 300,000 doses of the Chinese vaccine, giving the impression New Delhi was pushing back against Beijing's vaccine diplomacy.

Mr Sihasak Phuangketkeow, a former permanent secretary at Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said: "This is a kind of competition that doesn't hurt because there is a need, as long as the vaccine has

Health workers preparing to disinfect the shrimp market area of Samut Sakhon, South of Bangkok, Thailand on Jan 25.
PHOTO: EPA-EFE

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The Thai government promptly lodged lese majeste complaints against Mr Thanathorn, making some wonder whether discussion about a central plank of Thailand's vaccine strategy was now a no-go zone.



real efficacy and the country is in some position to determine what kind of vaccines it wants.”

Mr Sihasak says Asean should coordinate the purchase of vaccines through its recently endorsed Covid-19 fund to help the neediest members and act as a clearing house for information about vaccinations to help regional borders reopen.

Amid the regional frenzy over vaccines, Vietnam stands as the odd one out. Having successfully contained two waves of infections with lockdowns, quarantines and aggressive contact tracing, it has

ordered 30 million doses from AstraZeneca, but appears in no hurry to secure more for its 97 million population. It had earlier said that rushing to buy vaccines could be financially risky.

Vaccination, after all, is merely one part of the equation that can help reopen borders and rehabilitate economies devastated by the pandemic, say analysts.

Even as the region prepares to start mass vaccinations against the wily virus, the finish line remains unclear. [ST](#)

Over 22 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines administered in China

CHINA HAS ADMINISTERED OVER 22.8 MILLION doses of Covid-19 vaccines across the country (by Jan 27), the health authorities said—with more than a million people vaccinated in the Beijing alone.

As its vaccination drive gathers steam, Beijing is feeling the pressure to inoculate as many people as possible from Covid-19, ahead of the Chinese New Year holidays.

State media has gone on a promotional blitz, urging people to get the free vaccines, and assuring them that they are safe and effective.

Thousands of vaccination centres have been set up across the country. People aged 18 to 59, from nine priority groups—including healthcare and government workers, and essential personnel like public transport workers—can receive their shots for free at the centres.

China began vaccinating those at high risk of infection as early as July last year, and expanded the programme to include the current targeted groups in the middle of December.

In Beijing, more than 240 vaccination centres have been set up, where a total of between 100,000 and 150,000 are vaccinated each day, the city's health authorities said.

At one vaccination site—an art museum in the south of the city—people were seen trickling in and out for their jabs yesterday, as healthcare workers in protective gear took down their details and gave them directions.

Across China, from rural villages to glitzy mega cities, the same scene plays out—people are briefed on the vaccination and sign a consent form before they are jabbed.

There is then a 30-minute observation period before those vaccinated can leave, and they return a few weeks later for a second dose.

The whole process takes about an hour. The immediate goal now is to vaccinate some 50 million people before the annual Chinese New Year travel rush, known as chunyun.

Ms Li Yaqian, who received a first dose earlier this month at a hospital in east Beijing, said she had some initial reservations about potential side effects.

“But in the end, I chose to take a big-picture perspective and get the shot. I’m choosing to believe in the science and my country’s capabilities. After all, so much has been invested in these vaccines,” said the 27-year-old Chinese physician.

While three vaccines—two by state-owned firm Sinopharm and one by Sinovac—have been approved for emergency use, only one of the Sinopharm vaccines has been given conditional approval for general public use.

Reservations like those held by Ms Li are not uncommon. China's vaccine industry has suffered from quality issues in the past.

Doubts over the efficacy of some of China's Covid-19 vaccines have also emerged after clinical trial results from Brazil showed that Sinovac's vaccine barely met the 50 per cent efficacy threshold for regulatory approval.

Even so, the health authorities are taking pains to urge people to get inoculated. State media has also run reports assuring the public that the Chinese jabs are effective, and highlighting that world leaders have taken them.

China's need to vaccinate is urgent. Dr Jin Dong-Yan, a virology professor at the University of Hong Kong, said the outbreaks in the northern provinces of Hebei, Heilongjiang, Liaoning and Shaanxi are a clear warning. [ST](#)

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People filling out forms before receiving a dose of a coronavirus disease vaccine at a vaccination site, during a government-organised visit, in Shanghai, China, on Jan 19.
PHOTO: REUTERS



Qatar peace deal and the lessons for Asia

One takeaway – the use of brute force can backfire in the face of smarts

JANUARY'S RELEASE FROM AN INDONESIAN prison of the Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, while the Arab world celebrated the peace deal that lifted the Saudi Arabia-led blockade on Qatar, serves to remind us of the linkages that connect us to the Western part of Asia, otherwise known as the Middle East.

Bashir, 82 years old, is of Yemeni descent and he functioned as spiritual leader to the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) network that orchestrated the Bali bombing of 2002 that killed more than 200 people, including 88 Australians.

JI, which took eight years of sustained counter-terrorism efforts before it was considered to be quelled to a satisfactory degree in South-east Asia, was itself inspired by Al Qaeda whose rise is linked to the blood-soaked siege of Mecca's Grand Mosque in November, 1979. Given the various nationalities that participated in that siege it is also considered to be the first operation by the phenomenon we came to know as global jihad.

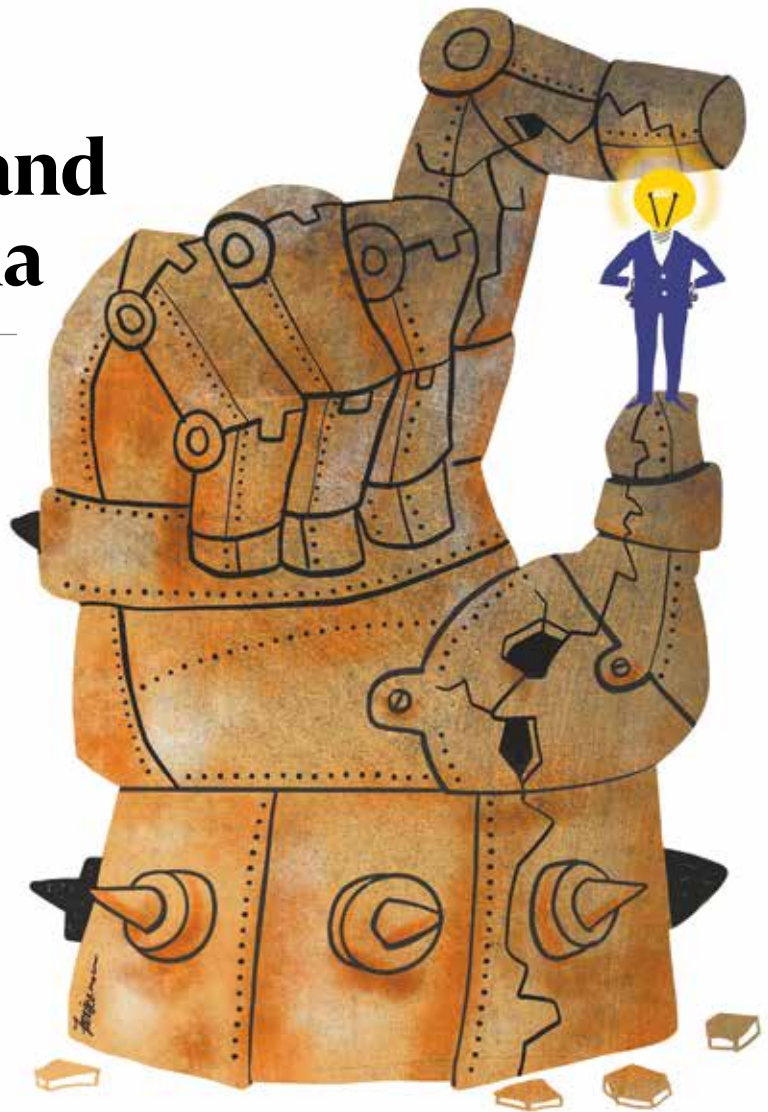
The siege of Mecca was led by a firebrand Saudi who preached that the Saudi royal family had become a willing tool of America, and sought a return to the glory of puritanical Islam. Although most participants in the coup were swiftly put to death, the Saudi royals' ensuing compromise with the Wahhabi clerics in order to maintain their legitimacy and rule would have repercussions around the globe.

Like it or not, what happens in West Asia does not stay in West Asia. This is why the peace deal announced on the sidelines of the Gulf Cooperation Council meeting in Saudi Arabia has salience for the rest of Asia.

Qataris are cheering the restoration of ties with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt after the blockade imposed in 2017 by the quartet was lifted.

The embrace in the desert between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, de facto ruler of the regional hegemon, and Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani was no doubt a moment for the cameras. It also is a development that has several more angles to it than a simple Bedouin dispute.

For one thing, it underscores just how quickly things can change when key players in a region feel they are poised to get special attention from Washington, favourable or, in this case, unfavourable.



SUBTLE POWER SHIFTS

It also masks some subtle power shifts; Qatar has shown even the smallest states do not need to yield to unequal treatment from a larger, powerful neighbour as long as they have the wits, hedging options and, needless to say, strategic patience for the landscape to clear up.

The United Arab Emirates, thanks in part to the brilliant strategic minds of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and his Minister of State for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash, has manoeuvred itself into pole position in the Gulf over the past year; it is out of the war in Yemen, which it prosecuted alongside Saudi Arabia to take on Iran-backed Houthi rebels, has normalised ties with Israel, toned down its stridency on Iran, and is poised to be the first Arab nation likely to get the top of the line F-35 stealth fighter from the US.

The close ties between the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and his younger Saudi counterpart is thought to have led the Saudis to make their latest, unsuccessful bid to bring Qatar to heel four years ago. However, while the Emirati got out of the mess in time, his mentee – some now would say

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Journalists watching a screen showing Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman welcoming Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani upon his arrival to attend the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) 41st Summit, at the media centre in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia on Jan 5.
PHOTO: REUTERS

former protege – has some catching up to do both in extricating himself from the Yemeni quagmire and the tricky gambit of normalising his own state to state ties with Israel, no matter what the ongoing private contacts between them may be.

It is noteworthy that Abu Dhabi's Prince Mohammed, Bahrain's King Hamad and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi all chose to stay away from the fence-mending summit, sending stand-ins to watch the show of good faith, including the Saudi prince chaperoning Qatar's Ruler Sheikh Tamim around in his SUV.

The UAE, for instance, sent Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister. Sheikh Mohammed, who is Dubai's Ruler, keeps a wary eye on the Saudi crown prince's efforts to win more global companies to base their regional operations out of Riyadh and away from his own glittering city, the Gulf's premier hub.

ALL SET FOR BIDEN

As Mr Joe Biden, a staunch supporter of Israel, takes office, the US has its allies in the region in line. The GCC deal on Qatar removes a stone from the shoes of US allies and partners further afield as well; Japan, South Korea and India account for 75 per cent of Qatar's liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports.

Militarily, the US already has hundreds of fourth generation fighters with Gulf and Arab forces it can call upon for network-centric, command and control operational capabilities. The F-35, so far only sold to Israel, will add to that heft.

At a time when his nation's own energy self-sufficiency is assured, the new American leader is free to focus attention and energy on Iran. The Qatar deal helps in this because Doha has had a strong, working relationship with Teheran and now needs less use of its airspace for the use of Qatar Airways, a factor that will no doubt help Mr Biden pressure Iran as he negotiates to revive the nuclear agreement that Mr Donald Trump had tossed out.

For the rest of Asia what all this means is that he has more executive time to focus on America's No. 1 strategic challenge, China.

With both houses of Congress now in Democratic control – the split Senate will see Vice-President Kamala Harris possibly needing to exercise her casting vote frequently – Mr Biden's domestic headache is reduced somewhat. Speedy appointments of ambassadors to Asia also are guaranteed; certainly, it is unlikely that key nations

Qatar: 3 years of crisis in the Gulf

Saudi Arabia and Qatar begin reconciliation after a 3-year rupture in diplomatic relations

January 4, 2021

The day before GCC summit, Saudi Arabia reopens its air space and borders to Qatar more than 3 years after severing diplomatic relations

Dec 30

Official invitation by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Salman to Emir of Qatar to attend Gulf Cooperation Council summit on Jan 5

July 14

International Court of Justice rules in favour of Qatar on the air blockade against Doha by Gulf states and Egypt. Qatar Airways demands US\$5 billion in damages

June 16

World Trade Organisation rules in favour of Qatar in its dispute with Saudi Arabia over beIN sports

June 5-6, 2017

Saudi Arabia and allies sever diplomatic relations with Qatar and impose economic measures, including a "blockade"

June 22

A list of 13 demands submitted to Qatar which it rejects as unrealistic

April 10, 2018

After a meeting, US president Donald Trump describes Qatar Emir as "his friend"

June 27

Qatar accuses UAE of "human rights violations" in the International Court of Justice

Oct 1

Cable TV channel beIN denounces a "mass pirating" of its sports programs, blamed on Saudi Arabia

May 30 - 31

Qatar participates in two summits of Gulf countries and the Arab League in Mecca but rejects their conclusions

Feb 2020

Qatari foreign affairs minister declares talks between Doha and Riyadh as "suspended"



Source: AFP STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

will be neglected for the duration of a presidential term, as happened under Donald Trump.

South-east Asia should be ready for what is to come. Should Mr Biden retain the Trump administration's plan to have an Indian Ocean fleet, or to try set up an alliance of democracies – the Quadrilateral Dialogue grouping the US, Japan, Australia and India is a starting point – the US attention that some Asian analysts prayed for might show up sooner rather than later.

SMALL STATES LESSON

That aside, the deal in the desert over Qatar holds important lessons for South-east Asia. At the end of the day, its tussle with Saudi Arabia was a classic one of a small state resisting attempts to be shown its place in the neighbourhood by the bigger power.

Indeed, the current Emir's father, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, had organised the successful 1995 coup against his father precisely because he considered his father too beholden to the Saudis.

Since then, Qatari wealth and power has only grown as the emirate emerged as the world's largest gas supplier. Saudis did try to reverse the coup, unsuccessfully, taking help from some of the very forces that also backed its 2017 blockade. Qatar's ties to Turkey and Iran were developed as a triangulation attempt to keep the Saudi at bay.

Saudi pressure didn't work because Qataris had the smarts; for instance, once almost entirely dependent on Saudi Arabia, the only nation with which it has a land border, and the UAE, for its milk supplies it built up an entire dairy industry from scratch in short time.

By 2022, it expects to have more than a thousand farms, covering an area of 18,200 hectares that would use hydroponics as well as other technology that aids cultivation with less water and soil. The UAE paid a price when Qataris cut their dependence on Jebel Ali and built their own first class port and free trade zones.

In the aftermath of the 2017 sanctions, Turkey, ruled by a regime that has close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood which is so despised by both Saudi and Emirati elite, has only seen its influence grow with Qatar. It sent troops to Qatar within weeks of the Saudi blockade to give a form of physical protection to the country and Iran opened its air space to Qatar Airways, earning useful foreign exchange in the process for its sanctions-hit economy.

It is not clear what Qatar surrendered to clinch the deal; as much as it looks the victor in the tangle there surely must have been compromises made.

For a while, it has been said that Doha had been using Jewish lobby groups in the US to pressure the White House to lean on Prince Mohammed bin Salman. It also is possible that it has gone some way to assuage the UAE's hub aspirations by agreeing to hold some of the 2022 Football World Cup matches in the Emirates, thus turning the games into more of an "Arab World Cup" than just a Qatari-hosted one.

It may even have some surprises in store vis-a-

vis Israel, which it has not officially recognised but whose commercial office it has hosted in Doha for a quarter century.

Although everyone is polite around Saudi Arabia, the Arab world knows that the Saudis over-reached. By going all out against Qatar it had very few cards left in its hand when it became obvious that the Qataris proved more durable than Riyadh had sized them up to be. Think of it as something akin to Deng Xiaoping's efforts to "teach a lesson" to Vietnam in 1979. [ST](#)

Qatar sovereign wealth fund plans Asia push to diversify from Europe, US

Qatar's sovereign wealth fund is looking east for deals in an effort to diversify an investment portfolio heavily weighted toward North America and Europe.

Asia "has been very much on our radar screen," Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said in an interview with Bloomberg TV.

Sheikh Mohammed is also chairman of the Qatar Investment Authority, which manages about US\$300 billion (\$\$399 billion) of assets and ranks as the world's 11th-largest wealth fund, according to the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute.

"It's not only from a growth perspective, but also from a diversification perspective," he said, pointing to substantial investments in Europe over the past decade. "Asia didn't take the fair portion of the investments," although North American deals will remain a priority.

QIA's chairman declined to identify specific targets, mentioning only a list of locations such as India, Malaysia, Singapore and China.

"We've been doing a lot of investments in the last couple years in China, and they've been doing very well," he said.

The wealth fund holds stakes in some of the world's top companies including London Stock Exchange Group, Volkswagen and Glencore.

— BLOOMBERG

READ MORE ONLINE

Qatar: Lessons from how a small state survived a big blockade

<https://str.sg/JDBd>

Jonathan Eyal



Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani is also chairman of the Qatar Investment Authority. PHOTO: REUTERS



PHOTO: AFP

Beijing thinks US is flirting with possibility of Taiwan rejoining UN



Even though Ms Kelly Craft's visit was abruptly cancelled at the last minute, the Chinese government remains on guard. PHOTO: REUTERS

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US envoy to UN axed Taiwan visit but still met its President virtually

CHINA'S RESPONSE WAS PREDICTABLE – A strong rebuke – when US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the United States was sending its UN ambassador on a visit to Taiwan, then followed that up by lifting restrictions on its officials' interactions with the self-ruled island.

From Beijing's prism, Washington was flirting with the distinct possibility of Taipei rejoining the United Nations. Why send ambassador Kelly Craft otherwise? It would have been the first such trip since 1968.

Beijing took the China seat in the world body in 1971, ousting Taipei, which still styles itself as the Republic of China after the Kuomintang lost the civil war to the communists on the mainland and fled to the island in 1949.

The Kuomintang has since lost its iron grip on Taiwan and the current ruling Democratic Progressive Party espouses independence for the island but has not formally done so lest it invites a Chinese military response.

"US support for Taiwan to rejoin the UN is our red line," a Communist Party insider, who requested anonymity as the topic was deemed politically sensitive, told *The Straits Times*.

If the US were to simultaneously establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan, Beijing would sever ties with Washington, said two party sources, including the insider. And China would be in a "state of war" with Taiwan.

Washington switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing under a "one China" principle in 1979 but has maintained informal, unofficial relations with Taiwan since then.

Even though Ms Craft's visit, which was scheduled for late January, was abruptly cancelled at the last minute, the Chinese government remains on guard and is closely watching if the US is allowing Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen or another Taiwanese politician to attend President-elect Joe Biden's virtual inauguration.

That would be a barometer of things to come.

But the Trump administration's scrapping of decades-old curbs on interaction between American and Taiwanese officials has not yet drawn any action from the Chinese government, despite threats by the foreign ministry of a "counter-attack".

State media, too, has warned of consequences, with the hawkish *Global Times'* editor-in-chief Hu Xijin saying there was now a "precious window of opportunity for mainland China to teach a heavy lesson to the 'Taiwan independence' forces".

A *Xinhua* commentary accused Mr Pompeo of trying to cross Beijing's red line on national sovereignty and warned that "political clowns will be punished for what they have done to harm China's core interests".

Despite being livid with Washington for trying to change the diplomatic status quo, the insiders said Beijing would not overreact.

"The US dug a pit but we will not jump into it," said one of them. China is cautiously optimistic Mr Biden will not be as unpredictable as Mr Trump, who plunged bilateral relations between the giants to their lowest ebb since the normalisation of ties.

Nevertheless, Mr Pompeo's announcement gives the new Biden administration leverage in future negotiations with China, which would want Washington to toe the "one China" line.

China-Taiwan military spending

2019 data according to SIPRI*

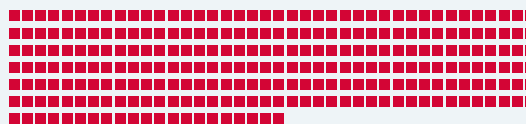
a = total US\$, billions b = % of GDP c = % change from 2018

CHINA

a 261

b 1.9

c 5.1



TAIWAN

10.4

1.7

0.5



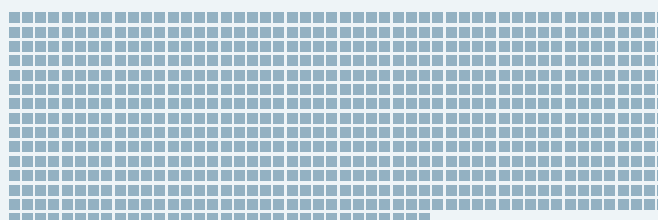
While Taiwan's military is small in comparison with China, the US remains a staunch ally of Taipei

UNITED STATES

732

3.4

5.3



NOTE: *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Source: AFP STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

And while politicians and pundits in the US have objected to the timing of the lifting of these guidelines – just days before the new president was sworn in – there is little resistance to whether the deed should be done.

For a few years now, a bipartisan coalition in Congress has been pressing for these restrictions – put in place after the US dropped Taiwan diplomatically – to be rescinded given that the island has moved from being under authoritarian rule to a democracy.

The guidelines placed restrictions on whom US officials could meet from Taiwan, and where the meetings could be held.

“These were put in place largely to smooth the US-China relationship when Washington and Beijing established formal ties. This came at a time when Taiwan was still a dictatorship, which it is no longer. These restrictions were already reportedly quietly loosening since the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, just that there was less public prominence given to these developments,” said political scientist Chong Ja Ian of the National University of Singapore.

“Notably, the response from Biden’s office carries no rebuke or effort to reject Pompeo’s announcement, only a restatement of the broad parameters of longstanding US policy and law towards Taiwan – which Pompeo’s announcement does not contradict,” noted Prof Chong.

A Biden transition official had reiterated the President’s commitment to the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which governs US-Taiwan relations, and also its one-China policy.

“Once in office, he will continue to support a peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues consistent with the wishes and best interests of the people of Taiwan,” the official was quoted as saying by the Financial Times. “He has long said that American support for Taiwan must remain strong, principled and bipartisan, and he plans to work to ensure that.”

Despite her trip being cancelled because of a travel ban ahead of Mr Biden’s transition, Ms Craft went ahead to meet President Tsai, albeit virtually.

“We discussed the many ways Taiwan is a model for the world, as demonstrated by its success in fighting Covid-19 and all that Taiwan has to offer in the fields of health, technology and cutting-edge science,” Ms Craft tweeted. She expressed regret that Taiwan was not able to share its experiences at UN meetings as China had blocked it from participating.

“I made clear to President Tsai that the US stands with Taiwan and always will, as friends and partners, standing shoulder to shoulder as pillars of democracy.”

The Chinese foreign ministry did not take well to this, saying that the UN is composed of sovereign states. “The participation of China’s Taiwan region in international organisations, including the activities of the World Health Organisation, must be handled in accordance with the ‘one China’ principle,” spokesman Zhao Lijian said. [ST](#)

A widening rift between China & Taiwan

Jan 24

After eight Chinese bomber planes and four fighter jets flew into Taiwan’s defence zone on Jan 23, between mainland Taiwan and the Taiwan-controlled Pratas Islands in the South China Sea, a further 15 flew into the same air space.

Jan 20

Taiwan’s de facto ambassador in Washington, Ms Hsiao Bi-khim, attends Mr Biden’s swearing in, the first time with an official invitation. In a video message on her Twitter account, she said she was honoured to be there representing Taiwan’s government and people.

Jan 18

Chinese ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying warns that US officials who have engaged in “nasty behaviour” over Chinese-claimed Taiwan will face sanctions.

Jan 13

A planned visit to Taiwan by US Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft gets cancelled. Ms Craft had been due to visit Taiwan from Jan 13 to Jan 15, prompting China to warn that Washington was playing with fire.

Jan 11

China’s state-run media called for retaliation after former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo lifted restrictions on contacts between US officials and their Taiwanese counterparts. That day, Taiwan also rolled out a newly redesigned passport, aiming to avoid confusion with China amid the pandemic.

Source: REUTERS, AFP



The Yarlung Tsangpo dam, which received approval last November, is to be built by Power Construction Corp of China and is reportedly less than 50km from the Indian border. PHOTO: AFP

China's mega dam project seen as looming threat in India

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Bangladesh, which is downriver from both India and China, could potentially also pay the price for any water hostilities between the two giants and construction of dams on the river.



Fears over impact on water flow downriver; Beijing seen as getting leverage amid tensions

COULD WATER BE THE NEXT SOURCE OF TENSION between India and China? India for long has been worried about China building dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo River, which flows into India where it is called the Brahmaputra, and then into Bangladesh.

Now, these worries have intensified at a time when India and China are engaged in the worst border row in more than 40 years, with Beijing announcing plans for a mega dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo.

The dam, which received approval last November, is to be built by Power Construction Corp of China and is reportedly less than 50km from the Indian border, giving rise to fears that it could impact water flow. It is expected to generate up to 60 gigawatts of power, with the Global Times reporting that it will be three times bigger than the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River.

Strategic affairs experts in New Delhi believe it will give China leverage, adding to existing worries over growing Chinese assertiveness. "China is seeking to do against India what it has done in the Mekong Basin – build a series of giant dams upstream that re-engineer transboundary flows, arming Beijing with significant leverage," said Dr Brahma Chellaney, professor of strategic studies at the New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research and author of *Water: Asia's New Battleground*.

"Just the way its Mekong dams are causing recurrent drought and environmental degradation in downstream countries, its planned Brahmaputra mega project will wreak havoc in north-eastern India and Bangladesh."

There have been media reports that India could build a 10-gigawatt hydropower project in Arunachal Pradesh state to create a storage capacity as a response to the Chinese dam.

China has been accused of disrupting water flows on the Mekong River, but has denied its activities are causing issues for countries such as Thailand.

The Chinese Embassy in New Delhi has denied that the latest dam project would have any impact on water flow, noting that Beijing has always taken "a responsible attitude towards the development and utilisation of cross-border rivers".

It added in the statement last month that any project will be scientifically planned and demonstrated, taking into account the full downstream impact.

The dam project approval comes at a particularly low point in China-India ties. Tensions have flared after soldiers on both sides were killed in a violent clash in Galwan Valley in the Ladakh region last June. Since then, disagreements have broken out on other points of the border with talks stuck in a deadlock so far.

New Delhi has said Beijing is aware of its concerns and that India has conveyed its position on several occasions and been assured that water will not be diverted.

The two countries do not have a water-sharing agreement for the river, but have a deal to share hydrological data so that India is better prepared during the flood months. But the data-sharing has not always been regular.

In Arunachal Pradesh, where the river enters India, the news of the construction so close to the border has triggered worries. The Indian state is claimed by China as part of its territory.

"One thing is siltation that is taking place and is having a very bad impact on downstream areas of Arunachal, West Bengal and Bangladesh," said Mr Ninong Ering, a member of the Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly.

In 2017, the river turned muddy with sediment in the Arunachal stretch and beyond, raising concerns about dam activities in China, which denied the situation was due to anything it had done.

"People are tense, particularly in the Tuting area (where the river enters India)," Mr Ering said. Still, it is not just India that is set to be affected if the upcoming dam impacts water flow.

Bangladesh, which is downriver from both India and China, could potentially also pay the price for any water hostilities between the two giants and construction of dams on the river.

"Even Bangladesh has its own concern. The ideal situation would be that China with its technological prowess and financial resources is able to use hydropower and Brahmaputra to improve the prosperity index of all the people who are living off the river including in India and Bangladesh," noted retired naval commodore C. Uday Bhaskar, director of the Society for Policy Studies, an independent think-tank.

"In some areas, there could be joint efforts, trilateral hydrological sharing of data so that it doesn't become a bilateral issue. Such a policy would improve the image and soft power of China."

But he added that after Ladakh and Galwan, the trust index (between India and China) is further eroded. "There is a natural concern about the dam and what they are doing," he said. **ST**



Southeast Asia watch

Malaysia PM Muhyiddin's future rides on bringing Covid-19 under control

Malaysian PM needs to show results to justify calling for seven-month state of emergency

MALAYSIA'S EIGHTH PRIME MINISTER, TAN Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, will likely have his tenure – mostly marked by a battered economy and political turmoil – defined entirely by his management of the Covid-19 pandemic, analysts say.

He needs to show results from the most drastic step yet of his premiership – a seven-month state of emergency declaration announced last week – before snap polls expected later this year, they say.

Mr Muhyiddin, who assumed power after leading a defection from the previous ruling Pakatan Harapan coalition, has seen his razor-thin majority in Parliament evaporate in recent months as several MPs withdrew their backing for him. He has the support of 109 MPs in the 222-seat Lower House of Parliament. Two seats are currently vacant after their occupants died.

An emergency declaration on Jan 11 by the King, Sultan Abdullah Ahmad Shah, at Mr Muhyiddin's request to help manage the country's worsening pandemic suspended Parliament for seven months until August. This effectively allows Mr Muhyiddin to remain in power while leading Malaysia's first-ever minority government.

He has given a commitment that snap polls will be called later this year when the pandemic is under control, and the report card on his management of the situation, no doubt, will be what his 10-month-old Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition will bring to the battle in the 15th general election.

"It is a make-or-break situation for Muhyiddin. He has to win the battle to be able to ride on that momentum for snap polls, and to justify calling for the state of emergency," said Mr Shazwan Mustafa Kamal, a senior associate with political and policy risk consultancy Vriens & Partners.

He said Mr Muhyiddin did enjoy "a degree of confidence and support" when the Covid-19 infection curve flattened following a near-total lockdown that the Prime Minister imposed just two weeks after assuming office in March last year.

Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin waving to Covid-19 patients at the Quarantine and Treatment Centre for low risk Covid-19 patients in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on Jan 19.

PHOTO: INFORMATION MINISTRY MALAYSIA

RAM ANAND

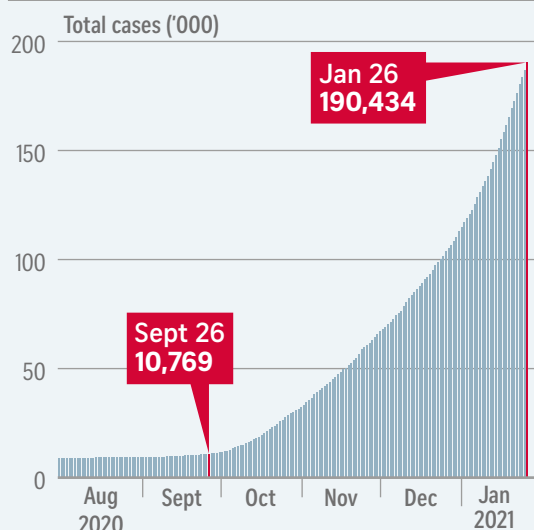
Malaysia Correspondent



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Malaysia's latest Covid-19 surge

The sudden increase in cases started after political campaigners returned to Peninsular Malaysia from Sabah following the Sept 26 state election.



Sources: THE STAR/ASIA NEWS NETWORK,
MALAYSIA'S MINISTRY OF HEALTH
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

"But since then, political machinations which resulted in the Sabah elections, perceptions of politicians flouting SOPs and concerns that the government is not executing a well-thought-out long-term strategy for Covid-19 (such as) delays in vaccine arrival have given rise to criticism against Muhyiddin," Mr Shazwan told The Straits Times.

The current third wave of infections began in September last year following the Sabah state legislative election, which was called after the PN attempted, unsuccessfully, to form a new government in the east Malaysian state via defections.

PN eventually won the polls but, within weeks, much of Malaysia started coming under partial restrictions again as the virus spread nationwide. This was largely because politicians and voters had travelled to the state even though it was in the grip of a Covid-19 outbreak.

Mr Muhyiddin's government has reintroduced the movement control order (MCO) in all but one of the 13 states to curb the spread of Covid-19. But a week into the measure – a slightly more relaxed version compared with the one last year – infection numbers are not improving.

The country registered 4,008 new cases, the second-highest, a week after the new restrictions kicked in. The number of active cases has moved past 42,000, straining the already overwhelmed public health system. The number of people who died has crossed 700.

Mr Muhyiddin has found himself in a predicament ahead of the snap polls that he has promised. He has until August, when the current emergency declaration expires, to bring the pandemic under control. But his efforts may worsen the already-battered economy, with shutdowns under the MCO estimated to cost RM600 million (\$S196.7 million) a day. [S](#)

Umno emerges as main casualty of Malaysia's emergency



A clutch of ongoing corruption cases against several of its top leaders, including Umno party president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, threatens to force a major shake-up in the party leadership.

PHOTO: BERNAMA

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UMNO, UNTIL RECENTLY THE MOST INFLUENTIAL partner in Malaysia's shaky Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, is slowly emerging as the major casualty following Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's move to suspend Parliament and declare a national state of emergency.

Now, party officials and former leaders fear that the latest challenges facing Umno, already racked by conflicting agendas among party warlords, factional infighting and a failure to repair its graft-tarred image, could push it into a breakup that it may never recover from.

A clutch of ongoing corruption cases against several of its top leaders, including party president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, threatens to force a major shake-up in the party leadership and trigger a scramble for control in the coming months.

Several analysts are also predicting that party leaders could, in the coming days, break away to form fresh alliances, including throwing their support behind opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. This could significantly reshape the dynamics of Malaysia's unsettled political landscape.

Umno had, in the weeks leading to the emergency declaration on Jan 12, threatened to upend PN by pulling its support and triggering snap elections. The state of emergency, which prevents elections from being held, effectively nullified that threat.

But the prospect of Umno rejuvenating itself is remote, according to several veteran party leaders, who have had ringside seats to witnessing the party's political atrophy over the last two decades.

The Umno-led Barisan Nasional coalition government was booted out of power in the 2018 elections, over widespread public anger at the

rampant corruption in government and the debacle over the global money laundering scandal at state-owned 1MDB.

The Pakatan Harapan (PH) government that swept into power in the historic election initiated criminal cases against numerous Umno leaders, including former premier and party president Najib Razak.

But the progress of many of the state's legal battles against the previous Umno government ministers and party leaders that led state-owned entities over corruption stumbled last March after the PH government collapsed due to internal bickering.

A minority breakaway faction led by Tan Sri Muhyiddin formed a new alliance with Umno and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) to stage a power grab under the new PN coalition.

But the new government has been far from stable, largely because of deep divisions in Umno and Mr Muhyiddin's strategy of pitting these factions against each other by rewarding certain leaders with ministerial positions and plum appointments to government-linked entities.

That, in turn, has brought simmering tensions in Umno to the surface in recent weeks, with party leaders clashing publicly on how to proceed with their alliance with Mr Muhyiddin's Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia.

While Umno leaders with Cabinet positions remain steadfast in their pact with Bersatu, factions led by former premier Najib and Umno president Zahid fear that Mr Muhyiddin's main aim is to weaken the party and undermine its prestige among the country's dominant ethnic Malay community.

Political analysts insist that it was this growing sentiment that pushed Mr Muhyiddin to seek a declaration for a national state of emergency from Malaysia's King and head off the fall of his government with Umno's elected Members of Parliament withdrawing their support for the PN coalition.

Umno sources aligned to factions led by Najib and Zahid noted that the political drama is far from over and that more elected MPs from the party could publicly declare their intention to break away from PN and throw their support behind the PH coalition.

Already two senior Umno politicians have publicly declared their breakaway from PN and the party sources noted that Datuk Seri Tajuddin Abdul Rahman, the elected MP from Perak and a powerful party warlord, is expected to lead a small group to declare their opposition to Mr Muhyiddin in the coming days. **ST**

READ ONLINE

Will Anwar Ibrahim finally get his break?

<https://str.sg/JzNv>



An artist's impression of the Bandar Malaysia High Speed Rail (HSR) station in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the first station for the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore HSR. PHOTO: EDELMAN

How Covid-19 killed the KL-Singapore project

MALAYSIA'S DECISION TO CANCEL THE HIGH-speed rail (HSR) project with Singapore was a painful one, say analysts, but a necessary move to shore up its domestic economy against the more immediate onslaught of the coronavirus pandemic.

The 350km link between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore costing an estimated RM60 billion (\$19.7 billion) to RM80 billion would have slashed travel times between the countries, ramped up trade and boosted tourism when completed in 2031. Towns situated at key stops along the line in Malaysia had been expecting to welcome millions of ringgit in development and investment.

The project, agreed to in 2013 and signed on in 2016, was temporarily shelved in 2018 by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, citing the high debt – over RM1 trillion – left behind by the previous Najib Razak administration, which had initially pursued the rail link with Singapore.

The deadline to proceed was shunted further from May to December 2020, as both countries reeled from the coronavirus outbreak. But while Singapore could dip into its reserves to weather the downturn, Malaysia has had to borrow to fund stimulus packages that are expected to push the fiscal deficit to 6 per cent last year and 5.4 per cent this year.

The recession caused by shutdowns aimed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus is set to see Malaysia's economy contract by 3.5 per cent to 5.5 per cent last year. Kuala Lumpur had hoped to achieve a fiscal balance by 2023, a goal it has since abandoned.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Mustapa Mohamed said the project was terminated after the two countries failed to agree on changes proposed by Malaysia in the light of the global outbreak.

"More importantly, the proposed changes to the project structure would have allowed us to leverage the HSR project to accelerate Malaysia's economic recovery post the Covid-19 pandemic, by bringing forward the start of the construction phase by almost two years. This would have provided a much-needed boost to our construction sector and its supporting ecosystem," said Datuk Seri Mustapa, who is in charge of the Economic Planning Unit that oversees mega projects like the HSR.

Official sources told ST that Malaysia's wish to accelerate the project's construction phase by two years implied removing the need for international tenders, and ensuring that the RM60 billion or more it was ploughing in from public coffers would be mostly reaped by local contractors. **ST**

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PM Yoshihide Suga's Cabinet approval ratings have taken a drastically steep plunge of as many as 30 percentage points. He now faces an uphill battle to win back public trust. PHOTO: REUTERS

Country Report

Will Suga still be Japan's PM at the end of this year?

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The PM faces a battle to win back public trust after slow Covid-19 response, political scandals

IS THE WRITING ALREADY ON THE WALL FOR Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga after only four months in office?

Analysts seem to think so. In what is a crucial election year for Japan, the 72-year-old's Cabinet approval ratings have taken a drastically steep plunge of as many as 30 percentage points.

He now faces an uphill battle to win back public trust, lost primarily due to indecision on measures to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic, but also because of various political scandals.

Disapproval now exceeds support for Mr Suga's administration in eight media surveys, with a Lower House election due by October.

His leadership will also be put to the test when the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) votes for its president for a three-year term in September – a

vote he may lose if there is no quick turnaround in public support.

A quick replacement of Mr Suga, however, would mean a repeat of history, where a period of political stability is followed by a revolving door of prime ministers.

Until Mr Shinzo Abe took office in 2012, there had been six prime ministers in as many years, after Mr Junichiro Koizumi stepped down following five years in power from 2001 to 2006.

Prior to that, there were 10 PMs in the 14-year period between 1987 and 2001, after Mr Yasuhiro Nakasone led from 1982 to 1987.

And even before that, there were five PMs in the 10 years from 1972 to 1982 after Mr Eisaku Sato – Mr Abe's grand-uncle – stepped down after eight years in power.

Mr Suga has quickly fallen out of favour with the general public, polling third as their choice for prime minister in a media survey last week, behind Minister for Administrative and Regulatory Reform Taro Kono, and former defence chief Shigeru Ishiba.

"If Mr Suga fails to regain popularity by the election, the outlook for him still being prime

minister at the end of 2021 is quite bleak,” Dr Sota Kato, a research director at The Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research think-tank, told The Straits Times.

“As it is now, he needs kamikaze (divine winds) to blow in his favour on two fronts. First, Covid-19 vaccines have a dramatic effect and the economy makes a V-shaped recovery. Second, the Olympics he is insisting on can be successfully held, causing a feel-good effect.”

Sophia University political scientist Koichi Nakano said Mr Suga faces the risk of being ousted if the LDP is not confident of its election chances, noting that one key bellwether is a series of by-elections to be held on April 25.

While Japan’s fractured opposition means that the LDP is not in imminent danger of losing power outright, the party may be jittery over its chances of keeping its two-thirds majority in the Lower Chamber.

Mr Suga was elected as LDP president last September, but only to serve out the remaining year of Mr Abe’s tenure after the latter’s resignation over a stress-induced flare-up of a chronic illness.

Mr Suga took office to much fanfare, as the son of strawberry farmers born in rural Akita prefecture and a rare case of a non-hereditary politician who rose to the pinnacle of politics.

The eight-term MP for a district of Kanagawa prefecture that includes the city of Yokohama had served as Mr Abe’s top government spokesman – but is now ironically mocked for his lack of charisma, inability to deviate from script, and his critical errors even when reading off prepared statements.

He has misstated “Asean” as “Argentina” on a trip to Vietnam, and “Fukuoka” as “Shizuoka”, when announcing the addition of the prefecture to a list of areas under a Covid-19 state of emergency.

Mr Suga is also plagued by a series of political

scandals, including:

- The Science Council of Japan saga in which he blocked the appointment of six scholars who had previously been critical of Mr Abe.

- Mr Abe’s cherry blossom party scandal in which taxpayers’ money was used to heavily subsidise a dinner gathering he held for his voters on the eve of the party. Mr Abe and Mr Suga were found to have made false statements to the Diet.

- The indictment of former farm minister Takamori Yoshikawa, a close ally of Mr Suga, for receiving five million yen (\$64,000) in bribes from an egg producer.

- The sentencing of Upper House lawmaker Anri Kawai to 16 months in jail for vote-buying in the 2019 election. Mr Suga and Mr Abe had lobbied for her election.

On top of these are the “confused signals” on the Covid-19 pandemic, with University of Tokyo political scientist Yu Uchiyama pointing to Mr Suga’s attendance at a fancy steak party in Ginza last month as the biggest betrayal of public trust.

There were seven people at the gathering – which was above the government recommended cap of five people. This, experts say, exemplified the gulf between the elite, who are not bound by the very rules they set, and common folk.

Mr Suga is also seen as being reactive, rather than seizing the initiative, in his responses to Covid-19. These include his insistence on continuing with the Go To Travel domestic tourism campaign, and that a state of emergency was not necessary, until the public tide had shifted.

“The public came to see Mr Suga as a prime minister who is unable to take the initiative,” Dr Kato says. “He needs to be more accountable, and pray for the divine winds to blow.” [ST](#)

As it is now, he needs kamikaze (divine winds) to blow in his favour on two fronts. First, Covid-19 vaccines have a dramatic effect and the economy makes a V-shaped recovery. Second, the Olympics he is insisting on can be successfully held, causing a feel-good effect.

”

Why India is in an uproar over WhatsApp chats

Messaging service takes flak as series of past domestic leaks comes to light

AS WHATSAPP MESSAGES GO, IT SEEMED innocuous enough.

“On Pakistan, the government is confident of striking in a way that people will be elated. Exact words used.” Except that the message was apparently sent by an Indian television anchor three days before Indian warplanes targeted militants in northern Pakistan in February 2019.

The air strike became bragging rights for Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his 2019 general election campaign, which his Bharatiya Janata Party won handily.

The message emerged in January from a transcript of the WhatsApp chats between Mr Arnab Goswami, a hawkish pro-government news anchor, and the then head of the country’s TV ratings agency, Mr Partho Dasgupta.

Now, Indian opposition politicians are asking how Mr Goswami seemed to have prior knowledge of a national security secret.

“How did a ‘For Your Eyes Only’ decision find its way to the government-supporting journalist?” tweeted Mr P. Chidambaram, a former home minister. Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan has said the messages “reveal the unholy nexus between the Modi government and Indian media that led to a dangerous military adventurism to win an election.”

The WhatsApp messages are included in a charge sheet the Mumbai police have filed as part of an

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Supporters of India's main opposition Congress party holding placards with pictures of Arnab Goswami, one of India's top TV news anchors, at a protest in Mumbai. PHOTO: REUTERS

investigation into TV ratings fraud.

Mr Goswami had long claimed that Republic TV and Republic Bharat, his fiercely right-leaning channels in English and Hindi respectively, were India's most popular channels.

But the network now stands accused of rigging the ratings system by bribing people to watch, boosting ratings and attracting advertisers.

The chat transcript, whose details Mr Goswami has not denied, suggests that he enjoys unusual access to the central government.

He appears to have advance knowledge of crucial government decisions, fields requests to the Prime Minister's Office and promises to influence the telecom policy regulator.

The transcript comes at an awkward time for Facebook-owned WhatsApp, which is unexpectedly grappling with growing privacy concerns in India.

Ironically, Republic TV had enthusiastically splashed WhatsApp messages for months last year around the suicide of a Bollywood actor, suggesting that his girlfriend had murdered him.

Mr Goswami had claimed that the non-stop

All eyes on leadership changes in Vietnam

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While results of the upcoming conclave will be the product of months of negotiations, there may still be last-minute surprises

IN THIS PANDEMIC-BATTERED ENVIRONMENT, few countries are approaching a major leadership transition amid conditions as rosy as Vietnam's.

With domestic coronavirus infections largely under control, its economy is expected to outpace the region at 6.7 per cent growth this year.

A recently sealed free trade agreement with Europe makes the country even more attractive as a harbour for investors fleeing the trade war between China and the United States.

Meanwhile, a high-profile anti-corruption drive has sidelined potential opposition and improved public opinion of the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam.

But now, all eyes are on the changes afoot in the party. Its National Congress, due Jan 25 to Feb 2, is a five-yearly affair that sets the country's socio-economic direction and anoints its top politicians, including the most powerful quartet – party general secretary, prime minister, president and chairman of the National Assembly.

Traditionally, the posts are spread among politicians from different geographical regions to promote national unity.

While results of the upcoming conclave will be the product of months of negotiations, there may still be last-minute surprises.

The biggest question is, who will succeed 76-year-old general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong? Or will the party waive the 65-year age and two-term limits to allow him to stay on?

Mr Trong first assumed the post in 2011 and then won a second term in 2016, beating back a challenge by then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, who was soon afterwards sidelined.

In 2018, when then President Tran Dai Quang died, Mr Trong assumed primacy as both president and general secretary.

Key contenders for the general secretary post have similarly breached the age limit. They include current Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, 66, National Assembly chairman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, 66, and Mr Tran Quoc Vuong, 67, who spearheaded the party's anti-graft crackdown.

Other possible choices for the top four positions are Mr Pham Minh Chinh, 62, leader of the party's Central Organisation Committee, and Deputy Prime Minister Vuong Dinh Hue, 63.

Technically, Politburo members over the age of 65 are supposed to retire, but exceptions have been made in the past.

"We are at the juncture where half of the remaining Politburo members are over 65 years old – the threshold of the age limit. It's time for a generational change," says Dr Huong Le Thu, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

coverage of the death, and the use of leaked chats for overblown stories of alleged drug use among beloved Bollywood stars like Deepika Padukone, had propelled his channel to the top of the now-disputed ratings.

Around that time, WhatsApp users may have been forgiven for feeling vulnerable. All it seemed to take for their personal messages to become public was a policeman getting access to one's chat backups.

To be clear, Mr Goswami's purported chats and the Bollywood chats were not linked to any privacy breach from WhatsApp, which continues to encrypt messages and calls. The police said they accessed the messages from Mr Dasgupta's phone.

But the leaked chats have already embarrassed Facebook, which is betting big on India.

In this context, WhatsApp's announcement earlier of an update to the company's privacy policy spooked users further, prompting a mini exodus to other messaging apps such as the privacy-focused Signal.

With more than 400 million users, India is WhatsApp's biggest market. The company

scurried to regain ground, publishing full-front-page advertisements in leading newspapers that screamed "WhatsApp respects and protects your privacy." It eventually postponed the update.

The proposed changes were among matters on the agenda as an Indian parliamentary panel met on Jan 21.

India is where Facebook hopes to get its next billion users, and it happens to be a country with no data protection law yet. In contrast, the European Union's strong data protection policies mean that WhatsApp cannot share user data with Facebook there.

The Indian government has not quite been a champion of privacy. In 2017, for instance, it argued before the Supreme Court that privacy was not a fundamental right under the Constitution. (The court disagreed.)

For now, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has asked WhatsApp to withdraw the proposed changes to its privacy policy. There is no doubt this is not the end of it. Keep checking those notifications. [S](#)

The transcript comes at an awkward time for Facebook-owned WhatsApp, which is unexpectedly grappling with growing privacy concerns in India.



While exceptions can be made for overage candidates, they are done very selectively – and to add to the collective strength of the chosen leaders.

"It really depends on the constellation," she tells The Straits Times. "It's not just about who – whether the general secretary or prime minister – gets the exception. It's a constellation of top key positions that will decide."

Mr Trong's sweeping war on graft has felled dozens of senior officials, including Politburo members and former and current ministers and generals. Many of them were cronies and allies of former prime minister Dung.

Meanwhile, the state has kept up pressure against dissidents, most recently jailing prominent journalist Pham Chi Dung this month for "making and disseminating propaganda against the state."

The next prime minister will have his hands full steering the country through the very challenging post-Covid-19 environment, says Dr Huong. He would have to "harness the potential consequences of the US-China trade war, which makes Vietnam an attractive market, and also harness the early recovery from Covid-19."

Other looming challenges include managing the devastating impact of climate change on the Mekong Delta, the rice bowl of Vietnam, as well as grappling with an increasingly hawkish China over their competing claims in the South China Sea.

Vietnam will also have to restructure its economy to make the most of the free trade agreements with Europe and the 14 other countries in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership bloc that it signed on to last year.

But Vietnam is on firm footing. Under the

premiership of Mr Phuc, the government has managed to lower public debt, increase foreign currency reserves and create a more conducive environment for start-ups, notes Dr Le Thai Ha, director of research at Fulbright School of Public Policy and Management.

Many analysts expect the next crop of leaders to continue Mr Trong's war on graft, to shore up the party's reputation in eyes of the youthful 97 million population.

But the anti-corruption campaign has also slowed decisions on the economic front by making some officials fear the legal consequences of their initiatives, noted ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute fellow Le Hong Hiep in a recent paper.

Beyond that, its longer-term effect on the ground remains unclear.

Having punished its bigwigs for financial excesses, the party would now need to prove it represented lasting change, rather than a fleeting purge. [S](#)

Vietnam's President and Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong (left) and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (right) at the 37th Asean summit in November. PHOTO: AFP



Indonesia outlaws controversial Islamist group FPI

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The public has long called for the disbandment of the FPI through petitions, citing the division in society it has caused and religious related violence, among other reasons.



Messaging service takes flak as series of past domestic leaks comes to light

THE INDONESIAN GOVERNMENT HAS OUTLAWED the hardline Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) group notorious for its raids on bars and hotels during the Ramadan fasting month and attacks on entertainment venues.

Indonesia's chief security minister Mahfud MD said in December that the controversial group has been officially outlawed with immediate effect.

The Coordinating Political, Legal and Security Minister said in a live-streamed news conference: "The government has banned FPI activities and will halt any activities held by FPI because it no longer has legal standing both as a mass organisation and a regular organisation.

"If an organisation acts on behalf of FPI, it must be considered as non-existent and rejected due to the absence of the legal standing starting from today."

The FPI has been automatically disbanded after its permit expired on June 20 last year but it has continued to carry out violent acts and other controversial activities.

Apart from its so-called "sweeping operations" against bars, brothels and entertainment venues, FPI members have also carried out violent assaults against minorities, such as Ahmadiyahs and Christians. Though controversial, the group and

its leader Rizieq Shihab are influential among conservative Muslims in Indonesia.

Newly appointed Deputy Law and Human Rights Minister Edward Omar Sharif Hiariej yesterday called on the public not to get involved in any FPI activities and the use of its attributes and symbols.

Mr Edward noted that 35 FPI members and former members had been involved in terrorism, of whom 29 were found guilty of committing the crime. Apart from them, another 206 had carried out other criminal actions, and 100 of them were punished, he added.

A senior government official said this month that former members of the disbanded Muslim hardline group Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) in West Java are being wooed to join the FPI, and attend army-like training for young recruits to become paramilitary troops.

The HTI, which called for strict Islamic laws in Indonesia and wanted to unify all Muslims into a caliphate, was outlawed in mid-2017.

FPI leader Rizieq, 55, returned to Indonesia last month after spending more than three years in Saudi Arabia in self-exile, with thousands of his supporters thronging Indonesia's main airport in Tangerang, Banten province, to welcome him on his return.

Police in December killed six of his bodyguards as they followed Rizieq in a vehicle convoy. Police said these men illegally possessed firearms and tried to attack the officers outside Jakarta on Dec 7.

Rizieq left for Saudi Arabia in 2017 after the authorities started investigations into his insult of Indonesia's secular state ideology, Pancasila, and breaching pornography laws, after a purported steamy exchange with a supporter that included naked images of a woman circulated online. Both investigations were dropped a year later.

The public has long called for the disbandment of the FPI through petitions, citing the division in society it has caused and religious related violence, among other reasons.

One petition in May last year was signed by more than 400,000 people requesting the Home Ministry not to extend the permit of the organisation, which expired on June 20 last year.

The FPI was founded in 1998 after the fall of Indonesia's 32-year dictatorship under Suharto.

In 2016, the firebrand preacher Rizieq led a massive sectarian movement against then Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok.

Ahok, a Chinese-Christian politician, lost in the 2017 gubernatorial election against Dr Anies Baswedan, the current Jakarta governor, and was later convicted of blasphemy against Islam, resulting in a two-year jail term. [ST](#)



Muslim cleric Rizieq Shihab (centre), leader of the Indonesian organisation FPI (Islamic Defenders Front), gesturing to supporters as he arrives to inaugurate a mosque in Bogor on Nov 13. PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: REUTERS

Led by Gojek's US\$1.7 billion haul so far this year, the sector's ride-hailers, online lenders, e-commerce sites and other businesses raked in US\$4.3 billion in financing during the nine months to September.



Investment Watch

Tech investors flock to Indonesia's titans in shift away from start-ups

They turn cautious even as financing for sector in first 9 months doubles total for 2019

FOR MR ADRIAN GUNADI, CHIEF EXECUTIVE and co-founder of fintech company Investree, the pandemic has brought opportunity from adversity.

Since Investree was founded in 2015, it has more or less pioneered online lending against receivables to businesses that are too small for commercial banks to bother with.

That would be most companies in Indonesia, and Investree will notch up US\$200 million (\$266 million) in loans this year. By comparison, the firm shored up less than US\$490 million in the last five years.

And despite Indonesia slipping into its first recession since the late 1990s, Investree's defaults are running at 1.2 per cent – about half the rate of the commercial banks.

It expects to be profitable at the end of next year – only a few months behind its pre-pandemic target.

So it is not really surprising that it secured financing, alongside ride-hailing giant Gojek, as the pandemic took hold in March – albeit a much lower amount. Investree wrapped up US\$23.5 million in

financing from Japan's MUFG bank and Indonesia's BRI Venture. Gojek had US\$1.2 billion.

"We've made leaps and bounds," Mr Gunadi told The Straits Times over a videoconferencing call.

"We see others doing consumer finance and lending. We started with invoice financing. That helped us deepen our expertise and our capability."

In a tough year, Investree was among a shrinking pool of companies that managed to break through with investors – other than "unicorns" like Tokopedia and Gojek.

That was a good thing because 2020 has turned out to be a record year for Indonesia's tech sector.

Led by Gojek's US\$1.7 billion haul so far this year, the sector's ride-hailers, online lenders, e-commerce sites and other businesses raked in US\$4.3 billion in financing during the nine months to September. That is already more than double last year's tally, according to data from management consultancy Kearney.

In October, Google and Singapore's Temasek ploughed a combined US\$350 million into Tokopedia. The e-commerce giant, thought to be worth as much as US\$10 billion, said it has hired banks Morgan Stanley and Citigroup to help it go public.

In December, Microsoft coughed up US\$100 million for a piece of Tokopedia's rival Bukalapak.

Unicorns are taking a bigger share of the pie as some investors hedge their bets by shying away

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from start-ups, said Mr Sanath Balasubramanyam of Kearney.

"Investors are definitely bullish about Indonesia but they're cautious," he said. "More investment is going to the stable giants."

Start-ups risk being elbowed out as investors shelve their search for frothy valuations in favour of concrete business plans, he said.

Said Mr Rama Mamuaya, founder and chief executive of start-up news site Dailysocial.id: "Before the pandemic, it was all about the valuation game: How can this start-up's valuation double in the next round?"

Venture capital flowing to non-unicorns levelled off this year. After trebling between 2018 and 2019 to more than US\$900 million, it slipped to US\$880 million this year, according to Dailysocial.id data.

"Now, VCs (venture capitalists) put more weight on building a sustainable business, regardless of the capital injection. Financial fundamentals are now a


good thing to pay attention to," said Mr Mamuaya.

Investree, which tends to handle loans in the tens of thousands of dollars, is homing in on government suppliers and merchants with a steady track record.

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, it has latched on to government acquisition websites targeting financing to medical suppliers and logistics companies.

On e-commerce platforms like Bukalapak's, they limit offers of financing to merchants with at least six months of sales. Bukalapak automatically deducts repayments from lender receipts on behalf of Investree, helping to keep deadbeat borrowers to a minimum.

Investree expects regulatory approval early next year for joint ventures in the Philippines and Thailand – its first forays abroad. The firm also expects rapid growth after that and – who knows? – maybe becoming a unicorn itself.

"We should be at warp speed when we get our licences," said Mr Gunadi. 



Data on Indonesia's e-commerce tracking website iprice.co.id shows that the average number of monthly visits on Shopee in the July-September period last year was 96.53 million, 11.54 million more than Tokopedia's.

ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

Singapore's Sea plans to buy another small lender in Indonesia

SINGAPORE TECHNOLOGY START-UP SEA IS planning to buy another small bank in Indonesia, after news broke that it has acquired Bank Kesejahteraan Ekonomi, a small institution founded by Indonesian Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto's father.

The two banks will be merged into a digital bank that can be used by customers on Sea's e-commerce marketplace subsidiary Shopee, allowing for a seamless experience and, perhaps, easier access to loans for merchants, a source involved in the planned deal told The Straits Times.

ST understands that Sea is eyeing a publicly listed bank traded on the Indonesia Stock Exchange.

Shopee recently overtook closest rival Tokopedia as Indonesia's largest e-commerce marketplace in terms of transaction value.

Sea's e-wallet subsidiary ShopeePay is also competing with Gojek's GoPay and Grab's payment arm Ovo in Indonesia.

Data on Indonesia's e-commerce tracking website iprice.co.id shows that the average number of monthly visits on Shopee in the July-September period last year was 96.53 million, 11.54 million more than Tokopedia's.

In the same 2019 period, Tokopedia led with 65.95 million visits, trailed by Shopee at 55.96 million.

The latest survey on Indonesia's five largest e-wallet companies by Paris-based market research firm Ipsos Group revealed that 34 per cent of the users made payment via Shopee last October, about 28 per cent via Ovo, 17 per cent via GoPay, 14 per cent via Dana, and 7 per cent via LinkAja.

Indonesia's financial market watchdog OJK looks set to issue the country's first digital banking regulations this year.


This would make South-east Asia's largest economy a battleground for Gojek, Grab as well as conventional banks such as Jakarta-based Bank BTPN – majority-owned by Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corp, which has Jenius as its digital banking business division – and rival Jakarta-based Bank Central Asia, which recently acquired small-sized Bank Royal and renamed it Bank Digital BCA.

Like in other countries, digital banks in Indonesia will allow customers to open accounts, and will also accept deposits and issue debt and credit cards. All banking services will be online.

Digital banking will be a game changer in Indonesia – the world's largest archipelago and fourth-most populous country – as its banking penetration is still low.

Fifty-two per cent of Indonesian adults, or 95 million people, do not have a bank account, according to the World Bank. But smartphone penetration in the country has reached 70 per cent to 80 per cent.

Sea's acquisition of Bank Kesejahteraan Ekonomi, founded by economist-turned-bureaucrat Soemitro Djojohadikoesoemo, who died in 2001, followed rival Gojek's US\$160 million (S\$213 million) outlay to increase its stake in Jakarta-based Bank Jago to 22.16 per cent last month.

Among other options that Sea may look into closely, he added, are publicly listed Bank Bumi Arta and Bank Capital Indonesia. 

Jack Ma reappears but Ant's troubles far from over

EMERGING AFTER MONTHS OF MYSTERIOUSLY disappearing, Alibaba and Ant co-founder Jack Ma seems to be slowly coming back into the public eye.

China's most recognisable entrepreneur addressed scores of teachers in an online conference on Jan 20, as part of an annual event the billionaire hosts to recognise the achievements of rural educators.

In the 50-second video, Mr Ma, dressed in a navy pullover, spoke directly to the camera from a room with grey marble walls and a striped carpet.

Tianmu News, a news portal under Zhejiang Online, a government-backed news website, reported the meeting where Mr Ma met 100 rural teachers.

The brief appearance was enough for investors, who had been waiting months to catch a glimpse, spurring the biggest stock rally in six months for Alibaba Group Holding.

The stock rose as much as 11 per cent in Hong Kong, before closing up 8.5 per cent at HK\$265 (S\$45.34) to add the equivalent of about US\$48.7 billion (S\$64.6 billion) to Alibaba's market value. Alibaba Health Information Technology, which is controlled by Alibaba, surged 17 per cent.

While much about the future of China's most famous businessman remains unclear, analysts said that the video was a sign that worst-case scenarios – such as jail time for Mr Ma or a government takeover of his companies – are probably now off the table.

Mr Ma incurred the wrath of Chinese authorities after likening Chinese banks to “pawn shops”, where collateral and guarantees are the hard currencies, at a high-profile financial forum in Shanghai.

Shortly after, Chinese regulators torpedoed Ant's US\$35 billion (S\$46.5 billion) initial public offering, tightened fintech regulations, then ordered an overhaul of Ant and launched a separate antitrust probe into Alibaba – all in a span of days.

Since then, Beijing has cracked the whip on Chinese tech giants with the country unveiling draft regulations that would establish a framework for curbing anti-competitive behaviour in November last year.

While his reappearance may be a sign that Mr Ma's companies may have reached a deal with the government to settle their antitrust issues, analysts remain sceptical on the future of Ant.

According to new estimates from Bloomberg Intelligence, Jack Ma's fintech giant may be worth less than 700 billion yuan (S\$143

billion) under new measures proposed by China to curb market concentration in its online payments market.

This could reduce the value of Ant's Alipay service by half, according to senior analyst Francis Chan.

The revised estimate for Ant is a far cry from valuations that ran as high as US\$320 billion before the company was forced to scrap its record initial public offering in November.

Alipay, with about one billion users, controls 55 per cent of the mobile payments market. A break-up could reduce its 600 billion yuan valuation in half, Mr Chan said, adding it's questionable whether Ant can relaunch its IPO this year.

Zhang Fushen, senior analyst at Shanghai PD Fortune Asset Management, says that while Alibaba is not out of the doghouse, it is at least clear that the current anti-monopoly drive is not about punishing Jack Ma.

“We're not in a hurry to add Alibaba shares yet because the regulation hammer will still fall on these firms. By now it's evident that the incident – and questions regarding his whereabouts – is inconsequential to Alibaba's business operations.”

Source: REUTERS, BLOOMBERG, CAIXIN GLOBAL

A video recording of a livestream of Mr Jack Ma, co-founder of Alibaba Group Holding Ltd, addressing teachers at an annual event he hosts to recognize rural educators, on Jan 20. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG





Business Trends

China's electric vehicle market gains speed

Chinese electric carmaker Nio's flagship electric ET7 saloon.
PHOTO: NIO

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Country on track to be world's largest market for privately owned electric cars

WHEN LOOKING TO BUY A NEW CAR IN LATE 2019, project engineer Miao Haidong was faced with a perennial Beijing problem: getting it registered for a licence plate.

Looking to control its vehicle population, China's capital city has for years implemented a lottery system of sorts, with potential car owners balloting for a limited number of licences.

The only way around it – with more drivers now willing to take this route – is to buy an electric car, which is exempt from this restriction.

A combination of government policies, rising income levels and proliferation of electric vehicle

(EV) technology has meant that the world's biggest car market is also on track to become the largest one for privately owned electric cars. It is already the world's largest market for electric vehicles, largely because of public transportation like buses and taxis.

Last year, sales of new energy vehicles, which include fully electric as well as hybrid cars, grew by 10.9 per cent over the year before, translating to some 1.37 million vehicles sold, said the state-linked China Association of Automobile Manufacturers.

Beijing is pushing for new energy vehicles to comprise 20 per cent of car sales by 2025, and has been rolling out a series of incentives to encourage purchases, including extending tax exemptions for EVs by two years.

EVs are also exempted from restrictions that bar certain number plates from taking to the roads on certain days, another attempt to ease Beijing's urban congestion.

For Mr Miao, who works in Beijing, it was an easy choice: He paid about 140,000 yuan (\$28,700) for an electric sport utility vehicle (SUV) by local carmaker WM Motor.

"There are actually more charging stations than you imagine once you start looking out for them," he said. "My range of movement also hasn't been that affected because in the summer, I even managed to drive home to Shandong."

Having to stop twice and charge the vehicle added about an hour and a half to his usual seven-hour drive, but he said this was an inconvenience worth putting up with.

The market leader in China for EVs is American firm Tesla, which entered the country as a niche product in 2018, but increased its hold after getting the green light to build a massive factory in Shanghai in 2019.

At first pricing its cars at nearly 500,000 yuan, putting them in the luxury vehicle bracket, the firm has since reduced the cost of its China-made vehicles.

The locally made Model Y SUV will retail for 339,900 yuan, the firm announced earlier this month.

"The attractive pricing for the Model Y, on top of EVs' exemption from licence plate restrictions in large Chinese cities, is likely to divert some customers from traditional luxury brands' small and large-sized SUVs, and lead to more price competition in the premium segment," ratings agency Fitch said in a research note.

While it is likely that vehicle sales would be restricted by the plant's production capacity – it can build only 250,000 units a year, or about 1.2 per cent of China's overall passenger vehicle capacity – this is likely to be quickly resolved within the first two quarters of this year by the factory increasing its capacity.

The firm produced about 150,000 cars in China last year.

Meanwhile, investors have been pouring cash into Chinese EV manufacturers like Tesla challengers Nio and XPeng, which are listed in China as well as in the United States.

The increase in investments comes as the country's industry and information technology agency forecast that digital services and products slated for China's EV industry could reach one trillion yuan a year, though it stopped short of committing to a timeline.

But as the Chinese EV market speeds ahead, there remains one potential challenge: supplies of semiconductor chips necessary to run the cars.


Chips have been in short supply as carmakers compete with the consumer electronics industry as more people have been buying personal electronic devices during the pandemic.

"Clearly there is very high demand for electric vehicles, but we are seeing a lot of the Chinese makers put out more conservative estimates of the number of vehicles they put out simply because they know there's a limit to the number of chips they have access to," said transport analyst Tu Le of Sino Auto Insights.

Chinese and Taiwanese chips still "don't quite make the mark", he told The Straits Times, and carmakers are reluctant to replace US- or European-made models in case of operational difficulties.

And it appears that Chinese consumers are still attracted to foreign brands, even when cheaper local options are available.

"Of course now that Tesla has come up with a new model, and at a more affordable price, I'm looking to upgrade my car at some point," said Mr Miao with a laugh.

"At least we know this is technology that has been tested and is successful worldwide." 

1.37m

Sales of new energy vehicles – which include fully electric as well as hybrid cars – in China last year, according to the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers.

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Tesla Inc CEO Elon Musk dances on stage during a delivery event for Tesla China-made Model 3 cars in Shanghai.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

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Hot wheels landing in 2021

THERE WILL BE AN AVALANCHE OF NEW launches in Singapore this year as carmakers make up for time lost during pandemic-induced lockdowns.

Not surprisingly, there will be more battery-powered offerings, with more electric vehicle incentives kicking in this year. New brands may even join the fray.

Those who do not live in landed homes or near a public charging point can take comfort that combustion-engined choices remain plentiful.

Since there is no Singapore Motorshow this year because of Covid-19, The Straits Times rounds up the new models expected to land on our shores in the year ahead.



The Audi RS e-tron GT prototype. PHOTO: AUDI AG

1 AUDI

The Ingolstadt marque will launch the second-generation e-tron as well as a Sportback variant of the electric crossover in the first half of the year.

There will also be an update of the R8 Spyder, along with the debut of the new RS7 Sportback.

In the second half of the year, expect updates of the Q2 and Q5, as well as sporty variants of the e-tron.

The new Q5 Sportback and sizzling e-tron GT electric sports car are also due.



The Citroen DS 9. PHOTO: DS

4 CITROEN

The C4 hatch has been transformed into a crossover – a genre which buyers in Singapore and elsewhere cannot get enough of.

Measuring just over 4.9m long, the DS9 faces off against cars like the Mercedes-Benz E-class and BMW 5-series. But with its fastback design, it is probably more targeted at the Audi A7 Sportback.

Powertrains include a 1.6-litre turbo paired with an electric motor.



The BMW M3 Competition Sedan. PHOTO: BMW

2 BMW

The M3 Competition Sedan and M4 Competition Coupe will heat up the tarmac here in the first quarter of the year, followed by the 4-series Convertible.

In the third quarter, the electric iX3 – first China-made BMW to be imported – will debut.

And in the fourth quarter, new Beemers will include the 4-series Gran Coupe, M4 Convertible and the 2-series coupe. The star attraction will be the iX, an electric SUV the size of the X5, which was originally due only next year (2022).



Honda Jazz PHOTO: HONDA

5 HONDA

The new Jazz hatch, which will be available as an innovative hybrid, will arrive in the first half of the year, along with the facelifted Odyssey MPV.

In the second half, the new Civic saloon and HR-V compact crossover are likely to appear.



The BYD e6. PHOTO: BYD

3 BYD

Finally, a new e6 to replace the dated and sluggish model seen mostly as a taxi in a now-defunct operator.

The new model is sleeker, slightly smaller, significantly lighter and boasts a new high-density "Blade" battery which supposedly gives it a range of up to 500km.

But there is still no word when the Song Max MPV will arrive.



The i30 Hatchback. PHOTO: KOMOCO MOTORS

6 HYUNDAI

The first half of the year will see the arrival of the i30 Hatchback, i30 Wagon and Palisade, a large multi-seat crossover that rivals sister brand Kia's Sorento.

In the second half, the new Santa Fe and Tucson will tempt SUV fans.



The Jaguar F-Type. PHOTO: JAGUAR

7 JAGUAR

The new F-Type will reassure driving enthusiasts that the days of two-door combustion-engined sportscars are not quite over yet.



The Mercedes-Benz EQC. PHOTO: DAIMLER AG

10 MERCEDES-BENZ

Talking about electric, Mercedes' battery debut will be in the form of the new EQC – a compact crossover with two motors to give it oomph and dynamism.

In the same size segment, the new C-class saloon is also due. And for towkays, the latest S-class limousine with lots of digital toys will dazzle (hopefully).



The Subaru BRZ. PHOTO: SUBARU

13 SUBARU

Forget about the Forester Ultimate Customised Kit Special edition already.

In the second quarter of the year, Subaru will have an all-new Outback. The rugged wagon, available as a premium 2.5i-Touring variant, promises improved handling and stability as well as better fuel efficiency and power.

In the fourth quarter, we will see the new BRZ, the second iteration of a sporty coupe developed by Subaru and Toyota. Endowed with an even lower centre of gravity than the first BRZ (supposedly on par with some supercars), it promises improved handling.



The Land Rover Defender 90. PHOTO: LAND ROVER

8 LAND ROVER

The Defender 90 – a three-door and sportier-looking variant of the new-age go-anywhere SUV – will debut in the first quarter of the year. This could be the first three-door passenger car from the British marque in recent years.



The Peugeot 508 Fastback. PHOTO: PEUGEOT

11 PEUGEOT

The 508 Fastback will be the first new executive saloon from Peugeot in a long time.

At first glance, it looks like a winner, too, especially when it shares the same quality, refinement and driveability as stablemates such as the 3008 and 5008.

The year will also see the arrival of the 208 hatchback.



The Toyota GR Yaris. PHOTO: TOYOTA

14 TOYOTA

The most intriguing new car must be the GR Yaris – possibly the first proper hot hatch from Toyota. Boasting a 1.6-litre three-cylinder turbo driving a rear-biased all-wheel-drive chassis, the pocket rocket has in excess of 250hp to make a party out of every commute.

Borneo Motors has been given a very limited lot of 20 units, at around \$189,000 a pop.

Those who want a bigger car can look forward to the new Harrier, which will also be available as a hybrid.



The Lexus UX 300e. PHOTO: LEXUS

9 LEXUS

A convertible version of the award-winning LC coupe lands in the first half of the year, so whip out your bandana and shades.

In the second half, the new NX midi crossover will arrive, along with Lexus' first electric model – the UX 300e.



The Skoda Kamiq. PHOTO: SKODA

12 SKODA

The Scala subcompact hatch is Skoda's take on the Volkswagen Polo. And like all Skoda cars, it has a big boot (467 litres) for its size.

The Kamiq may seem like yet another compact crossover but like all Skodas, it offers good value. It is said to have "state-of-the-art assistance and infotainment systems, a generous amount of space and numerous clever features".



The Volkswagen Golf R. PHOTO: VOLKSWAGEN

15 VOLKSWAGEN

The eighth-generation Golf will arrive two years after it was launched internationally. The iconic hatch is now digitalised, connected and intuitive to operate.

It will be accompanied by the iconic Golf GTI, which will have 245hp; and Golf R, the top-of-the-line all-wheel-drive giant slayer with 320hp and a drifting mode. [ST](#)



Power Play

ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

In tussle for influence, US and China may have to woo another Duterte

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As attention turns to who will succeed President Rodrigo Duterte, polls show his daughter is leading the race

WITH PRESIDENT RODRIGO DUTERTE ENTERING his lame-duck year in office, the fate of a key military pact between the Philippines and the United States will be up to whoever succeeds him in May next year.

This pact, known as the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), was signed in 1998. It gives legal cover to thousands of US troops who are rotated in the Philippines for military exercises and humanitarian assistance operations.

Mr Duterte threatened in January last year to repeal it over a US decision to deny entry to a political ally. Six months later, with a coronavirus pandemic raging and the Philippine economy tanking, he walked back that decision.

In December, the President threatened again to scrap the VFA if the Americans failed to deliver for him 20 million doses of a vaccine against Covid-19.

In any case, the VFA's fate will soon be out of Mr Duterte's hands. Going by recent polls of leading contenders to succeed him, the next president will be another Duterte: his daughter Sara Duterte-Carpio, the current mayor of Davao City.

If she succeeds him, she will be the one who will determine if the VFA stays and, in the process, shape for years to come Manila's relations between the two rivals – the US and China.

A DIPLOMATIC RESET

A new leader in the Malacanang Palace in itself changes the dynamics in the tussle for influence between the two big powers for regional dominance. For the US, a new government offers the chance to reset ties with a critical ally that nosedived under Mr Duterte.

The big question is: Will Ms Duterte-Carpio follow in her father's footsteps? To be sure, Mr Duterte's shadow will

continue to loom large even after he steps down, but, so far, she does not seem to share his deep personal disdain for Americans.

Ms Duterte-Carpio has also not shown as much enthusiasm as her father towards China. She acknowledges China's substantial contributions, especially to Davao. But she is also not too quick to dismiss concerns over the proliferation of Chinese-run online gaming firms in the Philippines that have led to a huge influx of Chinese into the country, the national security threat posed by Chinese firms with contracts with Philippine telcos, or China's claims to nearly all of the South China Sea.

AN ENIGMA

Unlike her father, who says exactly what is on his mind, Ms Duterte-Carpio, 42, is difficult to read. Professing disinterest in the presidency, she demanded that pollsters remove her name from future surveys just after a national poll by Pulse Asia Research was released on Dec 31. The poll showed her ahead of a number of candidates.

Ms Duterte-Carpio rarely talks about global issues, preferring instead to immerse herself in the parochial politics of Davao. She did make a foray once outside her fiefdom to help her father retain control of Congress, but – mission accomplished – she just as abruptly retreated back to Davao.

She is as mercurial, blunt, brash and colourful as her father. She once punched a sheriff on national TV four times in the face for ignoring her plea to spare a squatter colony from demolition.

With her husband Manases Carpio, a lawyer, she named her children Sharky, 10, Stingray, six, and Stonefish, two.

NOT HER FATHER'S DAUGHTER

But she is also unlike her father in some important ways, openly disagreeing with him and some of his policies, and sought to temper his verbal excesses.

Ms Duterte-Carpio also does not suffer fools

lightly, even if these fools are close, powerful friends of her father. In 2018, she teamed up with key power brokers in Congress to oust then Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez, one of Mr Duterte's most powerful enforcers whom she derisively called an "insecure slob" and a "fat sleaze."

In October last year, she was pivotal in taking down another Speaker, Mr Alan Cayetano, her father's running mate in the 2016 election.

NOT KINGMAKER BUT QUEEN

Few people doubt that, next only to her father, Ms Duterte-Carpio is the Philippines' most powerful politician. It is not just because she is Mr Duterte's daughter – she is a political force on her own.

In the 2019 mid-term elections, she successfully steered a loose coalition of seven political parties allied with her father to a landslide victory in the closely watched Senate race. Not a single opposition candidate won a seat in the Senate.

That mighty coalition is expected to, again, come together once Mr Duterte officially anoints Ms Duterte-Carpio as his successor. Not even boxing champ Manny Pacquiao or former senator Ferdinand Marcos Jr, who want to run for president, are expected to stand in her way.

The Pulse Asia poll showed that 26 per cent of Filipino adults would support Ms Duterte-Carpio, followed by Mr Marcos and Senator Grace Poe, both at 14 per cent, Manila Mayor Isko Moreno (12 per cent) and Mr Pacquiao (10 per cent).

Unless she decides to stay in Davao or a tragedy befalls her, Ms Duterte-Carpio is, for now, the president-in-waiting. "She's not just a kingmaker, she wants to be the queen, too," political analyst Ramon Casiple from the Institute for Political and Electoral Reform told news site reportr.world.

CHINA'S PLAY

China has been doing what it does best: pouring money to further buoy Davao's economy. Top Chinese communist party officials running the industrial powerhouses of Chongqing, Guangxi, Fujian and Hainan have made a beeline to work out investment, trade, infrastructure and tourism agreements with Ms Duterte-Carpio.

China is a major buyer of Davao's main exports: coconuts and tuna. In pre-pandemic 2019, some two million Chinese tourists visited Davao City.

In December last year, Beijing agreed to provide a US\$60 million (S\$80 million) loan to build a four-lane, 477m-long bridge over a river in Davao. China also has pledged to bankroll a US\$478 million expressway and a US\$689 million railway.

These have certainly earned brownie points for Beijing with Ms Duterte-Carpio, and may even be enough to convince her to continue setting aside the 2016 international tribunal ruling in favour of Manila after it challenged Beijing's South China Sea claims.

If she becomes president, she will have to deal with far more than the affairs of a city of 1.6 million. In charge of a nation of more than 100 million, the job includes securing the country's borders, from both domestic terrorists and external threats.



Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte and his daughter looking at pictures of Jewish Holocaust victims at the Hall of Names on Sept 3, 2018. PHOTO: AFP

THE U.S. ADVANTAGE

This is where the Americans hold the advantage, one that it can press to ensure key defence pacts like the VFA will remain in place.

The Philippines and the US are still joined at the hip when it comes to defence. Besides the VFA, the Philippines has two other security pacts with the US: the Mutual Defence Treaty and the Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement.

The treaty, in effect since 1951, requires the US to come to the Philippines' aid in the event of an invasion. The agreement, signed in 2014, allows the extended stay of US forces and authorises them to build and maintain barracks and warehouses as well as store defence equipment and weapons inside five designated Philippine military camps.

Ms Duterte-Carpio is also not as hostile towards the Americans as her father, who has vowed never to set foot on US soil. She was in Washington in January last year for a leadership programme sponsored by the US State Department. During that visit, she had a photo of herself taken at the Jefferson Memorial that she later posted on Instagram. Her caption for that photo offers a peek into her thinking.

"I am not a puppet of anyone," she said. "I am all Filipino. I have German-American ancestry. I am in love with Japan. I salute China. I adore Singapore. I am fascinated by Korea. I look forward to Taiwan.

"I am Indonesia and Malaysia's BFF. I long for the UAE and Qatar. I respect Iran. I miss Turkey. I want to go back to Israel. I bloody like the UK. So, get off my back." Compared with her father's pungent tirades against America, those should be comforting words for the US.

WILD CARD

There is a wild card in this scenario: Vice-President Robredo, the leader of the opposition party. If she is elected president, she is expected to bring relations between the Philippines and the US back to where it was when Mr Benigno Aquino was president.

That means a hard pivot back to the US, and a dismantling of Mr Duterte's pro-China policies. That also means Manila will press hard the case it won on the South China Sea to check what she sees as China's territorial overreach.

Luckily for Beijing, she is bringing up the rear in presidential surveys, pulling in just 8 per cent in the latest Pulse Asia poll. But her allies and some analysts say it is still too early to make a call. **ST**

Unless she decides to stay in Davao or a tragedy befalls her, Ms Duterte-Carpio is, for now, the president-in-waiting.

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Peking University ‘prodigy’ is rising political star

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Dr Li's recent appointment is part of a reshuffle ahead of the party's 20th congress in late 2022

ONE NAME STOOD OUT AS THE CHINESE Communist Party (CCP) announced a series of personnel changes in recent months in preparation for next year's all-important party congress.

Dr Li Shulei, 57, a member of President Xi Jinping's inner circle, was in December appointed executive vice-president of the Central Party School, an indication that the CCP was laying the foundation for him to move up the leadership ladder.

The elite institution, where future leaders are groomed, was recently in the news after one of its professors, Cai Xia, was expelled from the CCP for being critical of Mr Xi's leadership.

Dr Li is a rising political star who is likely to be further promoted in the coming years and is the man to watch, two party insiders told The Straits Times. At the party school, he succeeds He Yiting, 69, who reached retirement age.

Dr Li, who will run the day-to-day operations of the party school which trains up-and-coming officials, already holds a position equivalent to a Cabinet minister as he was previously a deputy secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection – the party's top anti-graft watchdog – and a deputy director of the government's top anti-corruption agency, the National Supervisory Commission.

In March 2017, he was given the additional task of heading a small group to bring home “foxes”, or corrupt officials who have fled abroad.

“All officials who attend the party school (henceforth) will be Li Shulei's students, giving him political clout that cannot be underestimated,” one of the party insiders told The Straits Times, requesting anonymity. Teachers are revered in China, which has resurrected Confucianism in recent decades.

Dr Li earned the moniker “Peking University prodigy” when he was admitted to the prestigious university as a library management major at the age of 14 in 1978. He was 24 when he obtained his PhD in Chinese literature from the same university.

His recent appointment is part of a reshuffle ahead



Dr Li earned the moniker “Peking University prodigy” when he was admitted to the prestigious university as a library management major at the age of 14 in 1978. PHOTO: AFP

of the party's 20th congress in the autumn of 2022 when President Xi, who is both party and military chief, is expected to further consolidate power.

The twice-a-decade National Congress is where China's top leaders are elected and the country's policy goals are set. While his future political career path is far from certain, sources said there are a few possibilities.

He could become president of the party school at next year's 20th congress, succeeding Chen Xi, currently aged 67, the sources said. It is unclear if Dr Li would take Mr Chen's other position as head of the party's powerful organisation department, which nominates officials for promotion.

The department did not respond to a request for comment.

With a background in fighting corruption, Dr Li could also become the government's top graft-buster as director of the National Supervisory Commission, replacing Yang Xiaodu, now 67, during a government reshuffle after the party conclave, the sources said.

Either position – the government's top anti-corruption official or the party school president – would land Dr Li a seat in the party's 25-member decision-making Politburo in 2022, the sources said.

Both Mr Chen and Mr Yang are due to retire from the Politburo, ranked one notch below the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee – the apex of power in China – at the 20th conclave.

“Li Shulei is a flexible chess piece. He can be put in one of several positions,” one of the sources said. **ST**

Indonesia's new religious minister leads with a moderate voice

INDONESIAN PRESIDENT JOKO WIDODO'S QUEST for a charismatic and moderate religious affairs minister may have finally come to a successful end with the appointment of Muslim cleric Yaqut Cholil Qoumas.

On Christmas Eve, just a day after the 45-year-old was sworn in into the Cabinet in a major reshuffle, he made a rousing speech filled with warmth and humanity, wishing Christians Merry Christmas and mentioning Jesus Christ by name.

"This Christmas, we should understand the meaning of the birth of Jesus Christ through reflection, through doing good, living simply, showing concern for the weak and loving one another," he said.

The same day, the minister also vowed to protect the Shi'ite and Ahmadiyah minority sects which have for years faced persecution for their beliefs deemed contrary to mainstream Islam.

"I don't want members of Shi'ite and Ahmadiyah to be displaced from their homes because of their beliefs. They are citizens (whose rights) must be protected," he said as quoted by the Jakarta Post.

Analysts say Mr Yaqut's messages of inclusivity and peace were timely, in the light of deadly attacks on Christians in November – including a beheading



– by suspected terrorists as Indonesia grapples with growing Islamic militancy.

The new minister, a former chief of Ansor, the youth wing of the country's largest Islamic mass organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), has indicated a more equal treatment of religious communities and a bold rejection of extremists with him in charge.

Prominent Muslim intellectual Zuhairi Misrawi said Mr Yaqut has displayed some traits of Indonesia's late president Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur, a reformist Muslim scholar and a staunch defender of human rights.

"He's aligned with Gus Dur's philosophy. When he deliberates on policies, he will ensure everyone stands equal before the law. There won't be any arrogant groups trying to oppress the minorities," he told The Straits Times.

"It will be a breath of fresh air for the future of Indonesia. We will stay plural, tolerant and peaceful and show that brotherhood is a necessity in the eyes of the state and the religion," Dr Zuhairi added. **ST**

– Arlina Arshad, Regional Correspondent

Indonesia's current religious affairs minister Yaqut Cholil Qoumas (left) handing a placard to US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in Jakarta last October. PHOTO: AFP

Asia's richest man – Zhong Shanshan



NOW, AFTER AN IMPROBABLE CAREER SPANNING JOURNALISM, mushroom farming and healthcare, Mr Zhong Shanshan has become Asia's richest person, eclipsing India's Mukesh Ambani and a group of Chinese tech titans including Jack Ma.

Mr Zhong's net worth has surged US\$70.9 billion (S\$93.8 billion) last year to US\$77.8 billion, making him the 11th-richest person on the planet, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index. It's one of the fastest accumulations of wealth in history, and all the more remarkable considering that until last year he was little known outside of China.

Mr Zhong, 66, isn't involved in politics and his business interests aren't entwined with other rich families such as the property tycoons, which is why he's known locally as the "Lone Wolf."

He owes his success to two unrelated fields. He took Covid-19 vaccine maker Beijing Wantai Biological Pharmacy Enterprise Co public in April, then months later Nongfu Spring Co, a maker of bottled water, became one of Hong Kong's hottest listings. Nongfu shares have jumped 155 per cent since their debut, and Wantai's are up more than 2,000 per cent. **ST**

– BLOOMBERG

Mr Zhong's net worth has surged US\$70.9 billion (S\$93.8 billion) last year to US\$77.8 billion, making him the 11th-richest person on the planet. PHOTO: CHINA DAILY

Japan taps Taro Kono as Covid-19 vaccine minister

THE OUTSPOKEN REFORMER NAMED BY JAPANESE Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga to lead a massive vaccine rollout has pledged to work quickly on inoculations as the country nears approval of Pfizer Inc's shot for the coronavirus.

Mr Taro Kono, a former defence minister, told a news conference on Jan 19 he will do everything he can to get as many people as possible inoculated when Japan looks to start vaccinations in late February.

He is facing a public more sceptical of vaccines than in many nations and is charged with leading a campaign set to be a defining moment for Mr Suga, whose support has fallen hard owing to what many see as mistakes in virus management.

Mr Kono has been seen as a potential rival to Mr Suga as premier. When Mr Suga became prime minister in September, he named Mr Kono to an administrative reform post in his Cabinet rather than one of the traditional high-profile jobs, initially raising suspicions he was trying to sideline a potential rival.

Mr Kono said on a BS-TBS TV show before the news conference that he would be responsible for coordinating among various ministries and 1,700 local authorities that will ultimately administer the doses.

He suggested he could enlist the help of the private logistics sector, and didn't deny he might seek to involve the Self-Defence Forces or volunteers.

Japan will be one of the slowest leading economies to start inoculations and has taken a more cautious approach than the likes of the United States and Britain, which have already begun vaccinations. **ST**

— BLOOMBERG



Former defence minister Taro Kono speaks during a news conference at the Prime Minister's official residence in Tokyo, Japan on Sept 17 2020. PHOTO: EPA-EFE



Bodybuilder Gui Yuna resting backstage during the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) Beijing 2020 competition in China's capital city. PHOTO: AFP

Female bodybuilder with one leg captures hearts in China

TEARS FILLED MS GUI YUNA'S EYES AS SHE DESCRIBED LOSING her right leg in a road accident when she was seven and school bullies kicking away her crutch to make her fall.

But they would not dare do that now.

The 35-year-old is a prize-winning bodybuilder and former Paralympian whose inspirational story has gone viral in China.

Ms Gui, who competed in long jump at the 2004 Athens Paralympics, is new to bodybuilding but won the first time she competed in October.

Images of her strutting on stage in a high-heel shoe and bikini, all while leaning on her crutch, featured heavily in Chinese media and won her a sizeable online following.

With her steely determination and positive attitude, she has been feted as an inspiration in a country where people with disabilities are all too often marginalised.

"It's possible that I won first place not because of my professionalism or muscles, but because of my confidence and bravery to stand on the stage and show myself to everyone," said Ms Gui.

She spoke following an intense workout at a Shanghai gym, sessions that she posts regularly to her 200,000 followers on TikTok.

Ms Gui has almost no memory of the fateful day when she was hit by a truck on her way home from school.

But she cannot forget how, as a young child with only a stump where her right leg used to be, children at school tormented her by kicking away her crutch or yanking away her chair as she sat down.

"They called me a cripple or three-legged cat," said Ms Gui, tears welling in her eyes, even though this was nearly three decades ago. "Most of the time it was abusive language like that and sometimes physical abuse."

She added: "The first time they made me fall I cried but then I got used to it and I thought, you can bully me however you want, but I'll be fine because I have a brave heart." **ST**

— AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



Entertainment

Will Japan's entertainment industry see a renaissance?

A shift to building content that would appeal both domestically and to the world would help

I HAD KNOWN ARASHI TO BE HUGE BEFORE I moved to Japan in 2016, but not quite how huge they were. I thought they were just another teenybopper sensation and was pleasantly surprised by how the five-member group, which had their debut on Nov 3, 1999, were established mature artists in diverse areas – acting, hosting, concert management and even painting.

Until late December, they were omnipresent, with their own weekly variety show and frequent commercial appearances. An industry study in December showed all five Arashi members taking the top five spots on the list of male celebrities being used for commercials.

Their decision to go on hiatus made front-page headlines in January 2019. Leader and main vocalist Satoshi Ohno, 40, who had begun to see the group's success and endurance as a poisoned chalice, wanted to "live freely for once, without any restraints."

The others – Sho Sakurai, 38; Masaki Aiba, 38; Kazunari Ninomiya, 37; and Jun Matsumoto, 37 – saw no way Arashi could continue as a four-man outfit, and said they would each continue to pursue their individual careers.

The rise of Arashi coincided with a time when Japanese pop culture was on the ascent. Those of my generation will remember the likes of boy band SMAP (1988 to 2016), television series Great Teacher Onizuka (1998) and Boys Over Flowers (2005), as well as songs like Utada Hikaru's First Love (1999).

But Japan appears to have been dwarfed by the mainstream international successes enjoyed by its neighbour, South Korea, in recent years, despite the odd viral hit like comedian Pikotaro's PPAP (2016), short for Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen, which peaked at No. 77 on the United States' Billboard 100 singles chart.

South Korea, in comparison, saw boy band BTS top the Billboard 100 singles chart with three songs last year. There are other South Korean artists making waves in music, like Blackpink, while in film, Bong Joon-ho's Parasite (2019) swept the Best Picture and Best Director Oscars last year.

JAPAN'S HITS AND MISSES

In 2019, Parasite also won the Palme d'Or, the top

Japanese boy band Arashi, which debuted in November 1999 and recently went on a hiatus, rose to popularity at a time when Japanese pop culture was on the ascent.
PHOTO: ARASHI/TWITTER

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In music, one of Japan's largest breakthrough debuts last year was nine-member girl group NiziU which was formed and managed by South Korea's JYP Entertainment.
PHOTO: NIZIU/FACEBOOK

Japan has been pumping billions of dollars into its Cool Japan scheme to boost Japanese soft power that spans the promotion of everything from games to food, manga, anime and other forms of entertainment.



award at the Cannes Film Festival, succeeding *Shoplifters* (2018) by Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda.

Both movies deal with similar themes of poverty-stricken families trying to eke out a living, in social commentaries on the growing gulf between the haves and the have-nots in each country (though the South Korean movie is way bloodier and has a darker twist than the other).

The victories could not have been greeted more differently. *Parasite*'s wins were quickly lauded in South Korea, but *Shoplifters*' victory at Cannes was instead downplayed by then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, while critics dismissed it as "anti-Japan."

Professor Heng Yee Kuang, who studies soft-power issues at the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Public Policy, thinks it is a huge missed opportunity for Japan to fall behind primarily because of its domestic focus.

Unlike the confident, sophisticated image presented by BTS or Blackpink, the pop music industry in Japan is less slick and has arguably less international crossover appeal.

The likes of AKB48 or rivals like Nogizaka46 and Sakurazaka46 are seen as idols who thrive on "encouragement" from their fans, playing up their saccharine-sweet image for nerdy otaku, a concept that is foreign to anyone not living in Japan. While this works in Japan, Prof Heng thinks it gains far less traction abroad.

Further, Japan has been slow on the digital uptake, given the huge domestic market that has, until the Covid-19 pandemic, been wedded to CDs and television programmes.

With much of it tailored for domestic consumption, this places Japan at an obvious disadvantage in visibility when compared with South Korea, whose music is easily available on streaming platforms, as are its hit dramas, which regularly feature on the top 10 lists of most-watched programmes on Netflix in Japan.

Not that there is no demand overseas for Japanese content. Before the plug was pulled on *Terrace House* last year after the untimely suicide of professional wrestler Hana Kimura at the age of 22, the reality programme was hugely talked about in the region, including in Singapore.

Likewise, Netflix's new Japanese production – the adapted-from-manga *Alice In Borderland* – made

it into the top 10 lists in more than 40 regions and was in December renewed for a second season.

Arashi is a rare case that came to embrace digital platforms. Its 2019 documentary series, *Arashi's Diary: Voyage*, was produced by Netflix, while its singles were in November 2019 put up on Spotify.

Even so, that same year, Arashi's 64-track greatest hits compilation – *5x20 All The Best!! 1999-2019* – was the world's best-selling album. It moved 3.3 million copies – though most likely driven by domestic demand – outselling Taylor Swift's *Lover* (3.2 million) and *Map Of The Soul: Persona* by BTS (2.5 million).

WHAT NEXT?

The Covid-19 pandemic has catalysed the shift towards digital platforms, and Japan is growing aware of the need to catch up.

What would not be lost on industry players is the massive role that digital platforms played in the mega box-office success of animated film *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba The Movie: Mugen Train*.

Released on Oct 16 last year, and despite the global film industry being embattled by Covid-19 shutdowns, it raked in 32.68 billion yen (\$419 million) in December to top Japan's all-time-grossing box-office list. It toppled Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001), which had taken 253 days to chalk up 31.68 billion yen.

Demon Slayer, first published as a manga comic from 2016, was made into an animated series in 2019 and broadcast on more than 20 video streaming services, including Netflix and Hulu. The movie release also coincided with the reopening of cinemas to moviegoers, and benefited from pent-up demand.

"More people read its original manga and watched its animation on video streaming as they stayed at home longer," says Mr Minami Ichikawa, managing director of film distributor Toho, adding that this drove up interest in the film.

In music, one of Japan's largest breakthrough debuts last year was nine-member girl group NiziU. What is notable is that the outfit was not produced in Japan, but instead by South Korean agency JYP Entertainment, which has artists like boy bands 2PM and Got7 and girl groups like Twice and Itzy in its stable.

NiziU's chirpy debut single *Make You Happy* has drawn more than 200 million views on YouTube, with the dance moves going viral on TikTok.

Mr Shunsuke Fujiwara, a 33-year-old in Tokyo, told the *Nikkei* newspaper: "I was drawn into the coming-

In 2019, *Shoplifters* (2018) by Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda was succeeded by South Korean movie *Parasite* at the Cannes Film Festival. PHOTO: GOLDEN VILLAGE



of-age story of ordinary girls and their refined, high-quality performance of K-pop standards.”

Japan has been pumping billions of dollars into its Cool Japan scheme to boost Japanese soft power that spans the promotion of everything from games to food, manga, anime and other forms of entertainment.

There is definitely room for more than one global entertainment powerhouse in East Asia. Having seen how well made some Japanese productions are, I think Japan would do well to set its sights on building content that will appeal both domestically and to the world – and work on promoting them globally. **ST**

Local films do well in Taiwan as Covid-19 affects foreign productions

IN ANY OTHER YEAR, A TAIWANESE FILMGOER would rather opt for a Hollywood blockbuster over a locally produced film.

But with Covid-19 ravaging countries worldwide, last year was different. Film lovers around the world were no longer spoilt for choice.

Production of many Hollywood films halted between March and August. Movies that premiered last year grossed only about 10 per cent of 2019's box office numbers, according to film database IMDb.

But in Taiwan, where the coronavirus outbreak had been successfully handled, film directors and production companies took the opportunity to step up their game, with the government encouraging local film-makers to unleash their creativity.

In partnership with the Ministry of Culture, cinema owners and production teams last July announced a project titled Local Films Taking Off. Under the auspices of this programme, four to five Taiwanese films will hit the big screens every month until April this year.

To boost ticket sales, organisers created a rewards system offering gifts for movies watched. Moviegoers were asked to send photos of their film tickets.

“I went to see 10 Taiwanese movies... and got two glasses designed to celebrate local films,” said Ms Lin Li-wen, 31, a teacher from Tainan.

While cinemas in Taiwan were badly hit when the pandemic first hit early last year, things improved when the government gradually lifted curbs. In May, up to 100 people were allowed to share the same space indoors; a month later, social distancing measures for moviegoers were entirely lifted – they needed only to don face masks and have their temperatures taken upon entering the cinemas.

The first film to shake up the box office in Taiwan was the sequel to South Korea thriller Train To Busan, which premiered on the island in July. But the arrival of more Taiwanese films around that time also boosted ticket sales.

“(Taiwanese films are doing better since) Hollywood and other foreign films were affected by Covid-19. But many local films from diverse genres also premiered in the second half of last year, giving moviegoers more options than before,” movie director Joseph Hsu Chen-chieh told The Straits Times.

Mr Hsu directed Little Big Women – a film about

women in a three-generation Taiwanese family – which won Best Actress at the Golden Horse Awards in November. The Golden Horse Awards are viewed as the “Chinese-language Oscars.”

“What stood out last year is that about half of the directors whose films made it to the cinemas are newcomers. They presented films with themes centred on social issues, disadvantaged groups, female roles in the family,” said Mr Hsu.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, local films accounted for less than 10 per cent of films' gross earnings in Taiwan each year.

Former culture minister Cheng Li-chun, who stepped down last year, had vowed to raise the number of local films released annually until they accounted for at least 20 per cent of the box office earnings. Her quest may soon be realised.

In 2019, Taiwanese films grossed only 8.2 per cent of what all the films that premiered earned, but last year, the number rose to nearly 18 per cent as at the end of November.

Undeterred by the coronavirus, Taiwan also continued to hold a string of annual film festivals, including the Taipei Film Festival, with its 22-year-old history, and the Golden Horse Film Festival that ended with the Golden Horse Awards.

“(Having) actual film festivals last year as opposed to virtual ones also helped in terms of promoting Taiwanese films to the public,” said Taiwanese-American film-maker Yi Liu.

He is now directing Detention (2020 TV series), a Taiwanese video-game-turned-film-turned-Netflix-series. The film version of the thriller won the grand prize in the 2020 Taipei Film Festival, the first film event held in a physical venue and to admit filmgoers since the start of the Covid-19 outbreak. **ST**

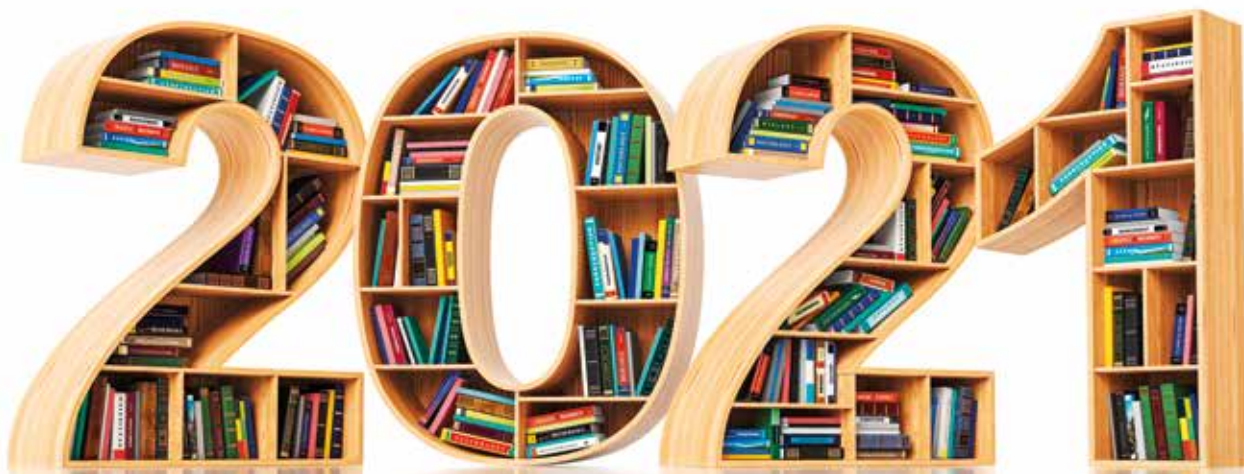


The film version of thriller Detention, a Taiwanese video-game-turned-film-turned-Netflix-series, won the grand prize in the 2020 Taipei Film Festival. PHOTO: NETFLIX

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Life: Books

10 books to read in 2021

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2020 may have left us all on a cliffhanger, but if your New Year's resolution is to be more of a page-turner, here are 10 titles to look forward to this year



1 HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER

By Bill Gates
Expected Feb 16

The Microsoft co-founder has spent a decade researching climate change and seeking the help of experts in fields from physics to political science.

In this non-fiction book, he sets out what has been touted as a wide-ranging and practical plan for how the world can work towards net-zero greenhouse gas emissions in time to avoid total environmental disaster.

3 THE COMMITTED

By Viet Thanh Nguyen
Expected March 4

The Sympathizer (2015), a tale of a conflicted Vietnamese double agent trying to make his way in America, won Nguyen the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Readers last saw the novel's unnamed narrator in a crowd of refugees at sea, headed for an uncertain future. The Committed picks up with him in 1980s Paris, still recovering from his traumatic torture in Vietnam, as he joins his close friend Bon in dealing drugs.

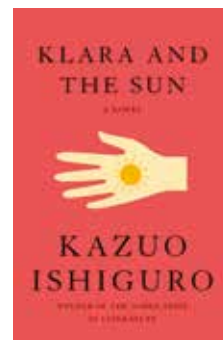
2 KLARA AND THE SUN

By Kazuo Ishiguro
Expected March 2

It has been five years since the British writer's last novel, The Buried Giant. Klara And The Sun will be Ishiguro's first book since he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2017.

The author of award-winning novels such as The Remains Of The Day (1989) and Never Let Me Go (2005), enters the realm of artificial intelligence with Klara, a solar-powered Artificial Friend who is an astute observer of human behaviour.

From her place in a store, she watches humans come and go, hoping one of them will someday choose her as a companion.



PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK, ALLEN LANE, KNOPF, SOHO PRESS, BLOOMSBURY, WILLIAM COLLINS, HARPER COLLINS

All publication dates are estimates of when they will arrive in Singapore and subject to change.

4 LURKERS

By Sandi Tan

Expected March 30

This is the first novel by the Singapore-born filmmaker since her ghostly 2012 debut, *The Black Isle*.

Tan, who won a Sundance directing award for her autobiographical Netflix documentary *Shirkers* (2018), sets the darkly comic *Lurkers* in suburban Los Angeles.

The cast of characters ranges from two precocious Korean-American sisters, whose lives are upended by a suicide, to an ageing gay horror novelist.

In a Facebook post in 2019, Tan promised: "There will be monsters, there will be ghosts, there will be blood in the snow (from a handbag face-smash)."



7 NOISE

By Daniel Kahneman,

Olivier Sibony and Cass R.

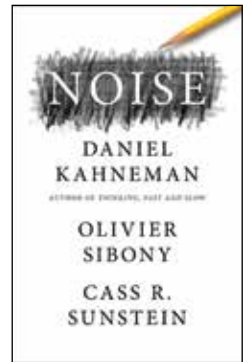
Sunstein

Expected May 18

This non-fiction book, which was reportedly pre-empted in a seven-figure deal, is powered by a trifecta of thinkers – including Israeli psychologist, economist and Nobel laureate Kahneman, who authored the multimillion-copy bestseller *Thinking, Fast And Slow* (2011).

Here, he joins forces with Harvard Law professor Sunstein – also the co-author of a bestseller, *Nudge* (2008) – and strategic thinking specialist Sibony.

Together, they aim to untangle the countless factors that impact and cloud everyday decision-making.



5 FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

By Haruki Murakami, translated by Philip Gabriel

Expected April 6

A new Murakami book always gets the literary world in a tizzy. The renowned Japanese author's last excursion into fiction was the hefty *Killing Commendatore* (2018).

This time, he presents eight short stories – all narrated, surprisingly, in the first person. Expect your usual Murakami flavours: meditations on jazz, dream-like sequences, childhood memories and so on.

The author blurs the lines between fiction and memoir in *The Yakult Swallows Poetry Collection*, an



essay on how his passions for baseball and writing intertwined in his youth.

8 THE NATURE OF MIDDLE-EARTH

By J. R. R. Tolkien

Expected June 24

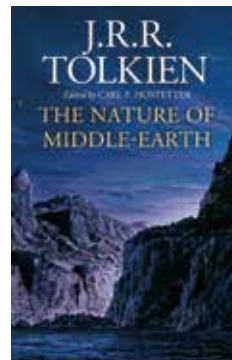
Tolkien, the author of seminal fantasy epic *The Lord Of The Rings* (1954 to 1955), died in 1973, but new material from his vast imaginary world continues to surface.

This never-before-seen collection of essays is published under the auspices of the author's estate and edited by Carl Hostetter, a Tolkienian linguistic expert.

He previously worked

with Tolkien's youngest son Christopher, who guarded his father's legacy until his own death at 95 in January last year.

The essays will examine topics such as the nature of the Valar, the deities of Tolkien's world of Arda; the geography of Gondor, a kingdom of men; and the oft-debated subject of whether dwarven women can grow beards.



6 WHEREABOUTS

By Jhumpa Lahiri

Expected May 4

American author Lahiri moved to Italy in 2011 and declared she would start writing in Italian.

Her first novel in her new language was *Dove Mi Trovo* (2019), which she has since translated into English as *Whereabouts*.

She won the Pulitzer with her debut collection of short stories, *Interpreter Of Maladies* (1999), and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for her last novel, *The Lowland* (2013). In *Whereabouts*, a woman wanders alone through a beautiful Italian city.



9 HARLEM SHUFFLE

By Colson Whitehead

Expected Sept 14

Whitehead is a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner for his hard-hitting novels of African-American history, *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and *The Nickel Boys* (2019). This time, he jumps the tracks to a new, lighter genre: crime fiction.

Set in 1960s Harlem, New York, the novel follows Ray Carney, a seemingly upstanding furniture salesman whose ne'er-do-well cousin drags him deep into a double life as a fence for the criminal underworld.

10 CHRONICLES FROM THE LAND OF THE HAPPIEST PEOPLE ON EARTH

By Wole Soyinka

Expected Sept 28

This will be the first novel in 48 years from the Nigerian literary titan since *Season Of Anomy*, his 1973 sophomore novel.

Soyinka, 86, is also a playwright, poet and political activist who in 1986 became the first black African to win the Nobel prize for literature.

His new novel, a whodunit and political satire, features murder and mayhem in contemporary Nigeria.



Big Picture

PHOTO: AFP

New virus restrictions threaten Hong Kong's last true junk: The Dukling

HONG KONG'S LAST AUTHENTIC JUNK BOAT IS struggling to stay afloat, with overseas tourists staying away from the territory.

The Dukling takes foreign visitors on scenic trips around its bays but these have dried up owing to travel restrictions, media reports said.

Its owner says it is fighting to survive and having to focus on local residents during the downturn.

"The Dukling is the icon of Hong Kong, I am

not only running a business on it, I am trying to maintain this treasurable piece of antique for Hong Kong," owner Hazen Tang told the BBC.

"We keep struggling to survive, and we will survive in this tough year," he added.

The Dukling is believed to be the last authentic junk boat left in Hong Kong's waters. Other junks are replicas. The city's tourism fell significantly last year, hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. [ST](#)

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