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Asian Insider

MCI(P) 053/04/2020 August 2020 INDEPENDENT • INSIDER • INSIGHTS ON ASIA

US-CHINA RELATIONS

HEADING FOR A
DEAD END?

Tit-for-tat moves, ideological battles, trade and tech wars, espionage – an end to the bitter battle seems more and more puzzling



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Vaccine trials show promise

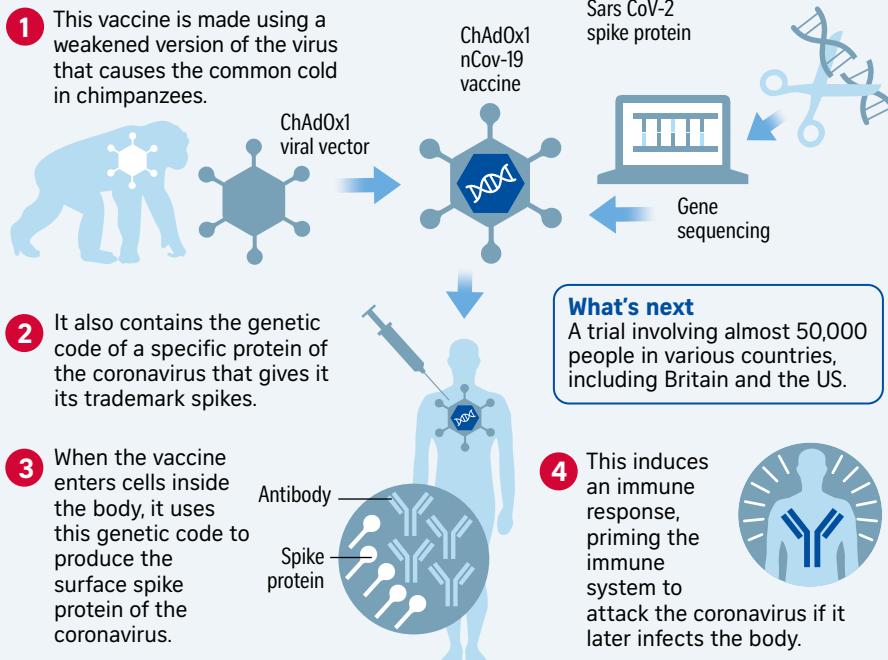
Three front runners in the Covid-19 vaccine race have shown they can trigger immune responses which help the body fight the virus. The results offer hope, but more trials on more people need to be done to make sure they will really work.

THE THREE VACCINES

ChAdOx1-S (Now at Phase III)

Developer: **University of Oxford and pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca**

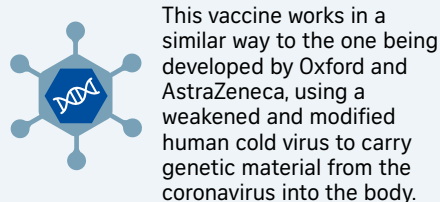
Type of vaccine: **Non-replicating viral vector**



Adenovirus Type 5 Vector (Now at Phase II)

Developer: **China vaccine company CanSino Biologics and Beijing Institute of Biotechnology**

Type of vaccine: **Non-replicating viral vector**



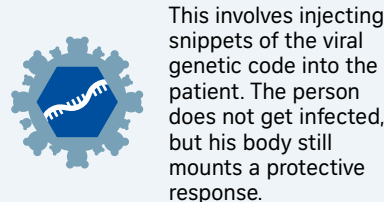
What's next

It has already been approved for use by the Chinese military, and a large international trial is being planned.

LNP-mRNAs (Now at Phase I/II)

Developer: **Germany's BioNTech, China's Fosun Pharma and Pfizer of the US**

Type of vaccine: **RNA**



What's next

The paper on the Pfizer study is currently undergoing scientific peer review.

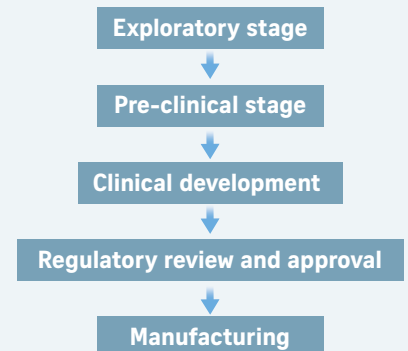
SO FAR

- The vaccines appear safe, with no dangerous side effects.
- They stimulate the body to mount a protective response, through the production of immune system soldiers that can help the body fight off invaders. These include neutralising antibodies, which disable the virus; binding antibodies that bind to the virus, flagging it or the infected cell for attack; and T-cells, which kill virus-infected cells.



The latest findings from the three trials relate to preliminary results from Phase I and II of the clinical development process.

THE DEVELOPMENT CYCLE OF A VACCINE TYPICALLY HAS MULTIPLE PHASES:



NUMBER OF COVID-19 VACCINES BEING TESTED AT EACH PHASE

- 140 PRE-CLINICAL TRIALS**
Before testing is done on people.
- 10 PHASE I***
Small groups of people receive the trial vaccine to test if it is safe, if there are side effects and the immune response it provokes.
- 10 PHASE II***
The clinical study is expanded and could include those most at risk of the disease.
- 3 PHASE III***
The vaccine is given to thousands of people to monitor on a much larger scale if it works and is safe.

NOTE: *Phases of clinical development

Sources: WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION, UNITED STATES CENTRES FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, BBC, CNN TEXT: AUDREY TAN STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

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Published by
The Straits Times, Singapore
Press Holdings (SPH)

Printed by
Times Printers Private Limited

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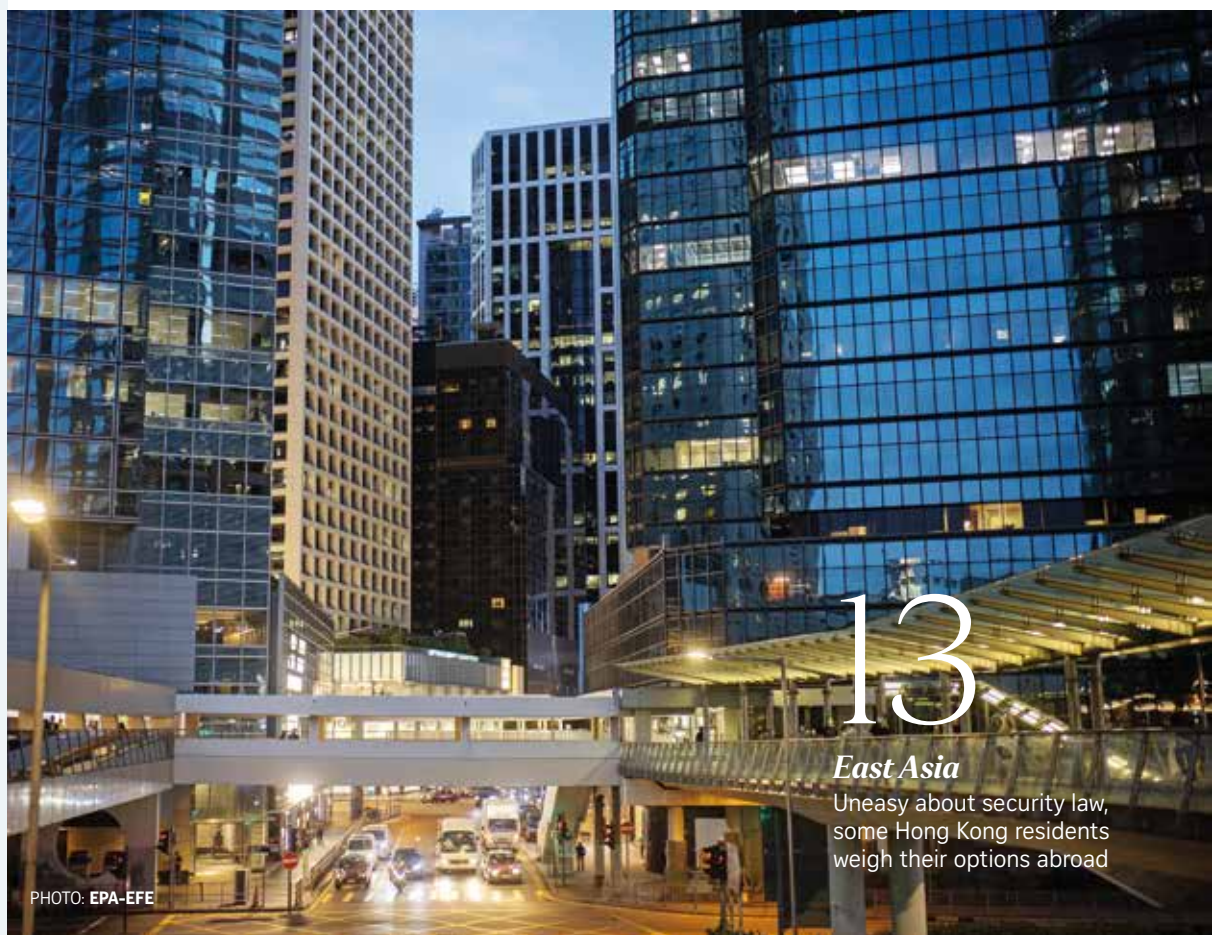


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Trading blows, pointing fingers – for now



ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

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China has matched recent US broadsides with tempered tit-for-tat moves while planning for more trouble ahead, even after the Nov 3 US presidential election

ANOTHER WEEK, ANOTHER FRESH ROUND OF China bashing from the Trump administration. This time, it came as an unprecedented move to shut a Chinese consulate in Houston, where shocked diplomats accused of committing serious espionage quickly got to work burning classified documents before they left the building after a 72-hour deadline.

True to the Chinese principle of reciprocity, Beijing returned the “favour” by closing the United States diplomatic mission in Chengdu, similarly giving the Americans three days to get out.

If political pundits are right in labelling this latest

provocation by Washington as an electoral move to get President Donald Trump another four years in the White House, the next 100 days could leave all concerned breathless as to what might follow. What’s more, things could get worse as the Nov 3 election draws nearer while Mr Trump’s current dismal poll ratings fail to improve.

There appears to be similar expectations in Beijing, which has greeted the barrage of bans, sanctions, expulsions, arrests and searing rhetoric from Washington with equally tough words, but relative restraint in actions as it awaits the outcome of the White House race.

“I’m not sure how the Chinese would react depending on who’s the winner. But in its estimation, if Trump does win a second presidency, I think China expects that Trump will hold back some of these measures and recalibrate America’s approach to China,” says Dr Hoo Tiang Boon, who studies US-China relations at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

The fact that this year’s election season has coincided with a pandemic that originated in China

and is costing Mr Trump at the national polls against rival Joe Biden also makes for a convincing argument that the US leader is punishing Beijing while deflecting attention from his poor handling of the outbreak.

So far, China's response to the US' broadsides has been tempered tit-for-tat moves, such as choosing to target the Chengdu US consulate instead of the larger missions in Hong Kong, Shanghai or Guangzhou.

That said, if the Americans are using the Chengdu base to collect data on the sensitive western regions of Xinjiang and Tibet, then Beijing's calculus could also have factored in its desire to undermine such efforts.

CONCILIATION NOT CONFRONTATION

It was only three weeks ago that Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged the US to come to the table, holding out an olive branch and the promise of dialogue on anything the US so chooses. Outlining ways to mend their frayed ties, Mr Wang said both sides have much to offer each other and called for "more objective and cool-headed perceptions about China, and a more rational and pragmatic China policy".

A day after, his American counterpart, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, snubbed him with the US' strongest remarks on the South China Sea yet, by calling China's maritime claims "completely unlawful".

Mr Trump followed up a day later by signing into law the Hong Kong Autonomy Act that mandates sanctions against officials who impose the special administrative region's new national security law, and stripping the city of its special trading status.

There have been a host of other punitive actions: visa restrictions on party officials over transgressions in Xinjiang and Tibet, sanctions on companies for their connection to Xinjiang's forced labour programmes, and charging Chinese hackers for allegedly stealing American trade secrets and intellectual property.

The US authorities also arrested four Chinese researchers – including a woman who had sought refuge at the Chinese consulate in San Francisco – for not declaring their affiliation with the People's Liberation Army on their visa applications.

While it is obvious China hawks have the upper hand in Washington and have pretty much dropped the veil of not being out to contain the East Asia giant, it is less clear how much sway America hawks have within the opaque Chinese leadership. Or, how much of a split there is within the Chinese Communist Party on how to deal with an increasingly combative US that views China as an existential threat.

The Chinese are acutely aware that even if a new or returning president brings down the heat after the November election, a bipartisan effort will continue to come after China on everything from trade and tech to human rights.

HOPE FOR THE BEST, PREPARE FOR THE WORST

President Xi Jinping has been preparing the country for this eventuality, emphasising on several occasions

in recent months the importance of pursuing a new development strategy of "domestic circulation" and moving away from export-led growth.

In a meeting with some of China's top tech bosses, he urged them to be patriotic, to innovate and also to harness the strengths of their country's formidable domestic market in the face of rising protectionism, a battered global economy and other nations moving to correct over-reliance on China.

This domestic circulation system will require China to ramp up work on smoothening its industrial supply chains across the country, particularly in the less-developed western region.

While this pivot to boosting domestic consumption is not new, it has taken on urgency in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis and US threats of decoupling.

After 40 years of reform and opening up that have transformed the poverty-stricken nation into the world's second-largest economy, it has now found itself looking inwards once more.

President Xi certainly has no desire to draw the bamboo curtains again. Globalisation has been a godsend to China, allowing it to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and create a middle class of 400 million.

The Chinese have travelled, studied, lived in world cities and tasted the fruits of such global connectedness. If China becomes, whether of its own doing, alienated or isolated from the world, the Communist Party could well have to deal with millions of unhappy Chinese.

So, while its wolf warrior diplomats and strident state media continue to chew up the US and other Western liberal democracies when anti-China actions are taken, conciliatory messaging still has a part to play. Or at least, China hopes.

REGIME CHANGE

Yet, it is facing a hostility from the world's mightiest country that seems bent on fixing it – one never seen in five decades of engagement.

Mr Pompeo signalled an antagonistic new China policy that pitted the free world – and the Chinese people – against the Communist Party.

In a speech interpreted as calling for regime change, Mr Pompeo warned: "If we don't act now, ultimately the CCP will erode our freedoms and subvert the rules-based order that our societies have worked so hard to build. If we bend the knee now, our children's children may be at the mercy of the Chinese Communist Party, whose actions are the primary challenge today in the free world." The US has been making a conscious effort to frame its demonisation of China as targeting the party, and not the people.

News in mid-July that the authorities were considering banning Communist Party members and their families from the US was met with ridicule, with the Chinese Foreign Ministry calling it "pathetic".

The party has 92 million members, among them billionaires and farmers. With this blanket ban, the US could be shunning more than 300 million people.

If the strategy is to turn the Chinese against its own

While it is obvious China hawks have the upper hand in Washington and have pretty much dropped the veil of not being out to contain the East Asia giant, it is less clear how much sway America hawks have within the opaque Chinese leadership.

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The US and China have huge contradictions in this respect, and it is probably difficult to reconcile. The US sees an increasingly fierce collision of ideologies, but for China, this ideological issue is not up for discussion. Maintaining its existing ideology is without question China's highest political principle. And there is no room to discuss this domestically either.



DR ZHAO TONG,
Carnegie-Tsinghua
Centre for Global Policy
in Beijing

government and bring about a regime change, there is no evidence right now to suggest that will succeed.

On the contrary, recent provocative moves by the US have had the opposite effect in China. When the US shut the Houston consulate, scores of Chinese netizens went on social media calling for their leaders to reciprocate with a similar shutdown of a US mission. While Mr Trump was once popular among ordinary and reform-minded Chinese, he is now seen as having gone off his rocker – a portrayal perpetuated by state media outlets like the hawkish Global Times, which lately has been relishing in calling Mr Trump and his coterie “crazy” and “mad”.

And then there's the coronavirus pandemic and the propaganda play by the Chinese media to contrast China's tough but effective handling of the outbreak with the runaway infection numbers in the US.

A recent report published by the China Data Lab at the University of California San Diego showed that in three of its most recent surveys of 1,000 urban residents in China, trust in central and local governments and support of the Chinese political system saw “remarkable growth”, while favourable opinion of the US dipped.

The surveys showed trust in the central government, on a scale of 1 to 10, increased steadily from 8.23 in June last year, to 8.65 in February this year, and to 8.87 in May.

Views on the US went the other way, dropping from 5.77 in June last year, to 4.77 in May this year.

IDEOLOGICAL WAR

With the US now waging an ideological war against China, the future looks grim for this relationship.

“The US and China have huge contradictions in this respect, and it is probably difficult to reconcile,” said Dr Zhao Tong from the Carnegie-Tsinghua Centre for Global Policy in Beijing. “The US sees an increasingly fierce collision of ideologies, but for China, this ideological issue is not up for discussion. Maintaining its existing ideology is without question China's highest political principle. And there is no room to discuss this domestically either.”

The worry is that both sides will grow increasingly hostile in this stand-off, leading to these two major world powers unable to understand each other while continuing to engage in fierce economic, technology and military competition, said Dr Zhao.

Much has been said about a new Cold War but the comparison fails in many ways, not least because the contest then was between two opposing powers who were mostly agreed on the rules of the game, but with the Soviet Union being far too weak economically to champion its values.

Mr Xi's China is far stronger than the Gorbachev-era Soviet Union and is unlikely to give up what it has achieved, either economically, technologically or in global leadership. Even a Biden presidency will find it impossible to return to the Obama playbook after the changes under the Trump administration.

Basically, there is no playbook for this evolving great power struggle for supremacy. And that is perhaps the most fearful thing. **ST**

From ping-pong diplomacy to new era of hardball



Being tough on China is part of Mr Trump's re-election strategy

JULY 2020 WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY BE remembered as the month the US-China relationship went into a steep nosedive.

Under President Donald Trump, the United States' pushback against China, long telegraphed by Mr Trump from the early days of his 2016 campaign, has only gathered momentum.

Part of the reason for the depth and momentum is that the US has been trying to catch up with the extent of what it perceives as the China threat. This meant turning around decades of rosy optimism dating back to then President Richard Nixon's breakthrough visit to China in February 1972, and China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001.

To do this, the US has adopted a “whole of government” approach, reviewing ties with China across the spectrum.

One thing it takes issue with is a lack of reciprocity – China, while taking advantage of the US' open market and open society, does not offer the same openness to the US or others.

Another is malign activity. At a briefing for journalists, a senior US official said, in the context of a Chinese national who had concealed her links with the People's Liberation Army and taken refuge in China's consulate in San Francisco: “We have about 2,000 active counter-intelligence investigations tied to China and we open a new case about every 10 hours.”

Certainly, when Mr Nixon went to China in 1972 and shook hands with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, it seemed a good idea at the time. It was “the week that changed the world”, he said then.

But it changed the world in a way the US did not anticipate.

Forty-eight years later, at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Orange County,

California, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a major speech: "I grew up and served my time in the army during the Cold War. And if there is one thing I learnt, communists almost always lie."

It was a strong speech that in many ways channelled the language of the Cold War, capping a series of speeches by top US officials in a month that will certainly be seen as marking the death of so-called ping pong diplomacy and a new era of hardball.

And there are inherent risks, especially in heavily militarised and trafficked zones like the South China Sea, where the US navy has stepped up freedom of navigation operations which bring it into close proximity with China's navy.

Mr Pompeo's remarks came as American diplomats in Chengdu were packing their bags after Beijing closed the US consulate there in retaliation for the closure by the US of China's consulate in Houston.

One question that arises is the significance of domestic politics as a factor for Mr Trump, in the current full-court assault on China from across the US government.

The assault is not only from the US administration. Congress has, in rare bipartisan consensus, been passing a stream of Bills targeting Chinese officials and firms linked to China's actions in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the South China Sea.

A second question is whether and, if so, how, US policy may change if Mr Trump loses the election and presumptive Democratic Party nominee Joe Biden is America's next president.

The short answer is that the style will be different, but the substance and direction will remain the same. In the current environment, Mr Biden cannot afford not to be tough on China.

But a Biden administration, according to reports citing his advisers, will likely engage more warmly with allies, returning to a global, multilateral approach as opposed to the Trump administration's more apparently unilateral America First doctrine.

It would for instance return the US to the Paris Agreement on climate change, and likely to the WTO as well.

Certainly, being tough on China is part of Mr

Trump's re-election strategy as it was in 2016 when he was seeking the presidency, but with an even sharper edge now that he has two interlinked problems – the economy he was counting on remains in the doldrums and the coronavirus pandemic is still rampant. That leaves blaming China as his strongest card.

"Trump is contrasting a tough-as-nails approach to China with Biden's squishy and less-defined policy," said Dr Patrick Cronin, Asia-Pacific Security Chair at the Hudson Institute.


"Many Biden advisers and Democrats in Congress can agree with the majority of the administration's responses to Beijing's total competition, but they can never appear more hard line," Dr Cronin told The Straits Times.

Ms Yun Sun, senior fellow and director of the China programme at the Stimson Centre in Washington, told ST: "There is a bipartisan consensus on China being a threat. In that sense, I think the style and radicalness of Biden's policy will be different, but the central theme that China is a problem will remain."

Dr James Carafano, vice-president of the Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at the conservative Heritage Foundation, said: "Both (political parties) really share the goal of taming Chinese malicious and destabilising activity by pushing back. The goal is to either mitigate the threat or press China till it backs off."

The "five eyes" – an intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Britain and the US – will be increasingly important, Dr Carafano added.

The flurry of speeches and measures targeting China reflects the current mood in Washington, said Dr Robert Manning, resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Centre for Strategy and Security.

He said: "The political campaign is kind of baked into this... Biden obviously has to play tough for the campaign. But I think if Biden wins... unless we have reason to believe the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) is going to go away, however bad we think China is, we have to deal with them, we have to build some framework for competitive coexistence, and I think that's what the next administration will do." 

People ask whether and, if so, how, US policy may change if Mr Trump loses the November presidential election and presumptive Democratic Party nominee Joe Biden (left) is America's next president. PHOTO: AFP

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Don't miss



Asia doesn't need an October surprise

Ravi Velloor

<https://str.sg/JsMq>



Is America in decline?

Joseph Chinyong Liow

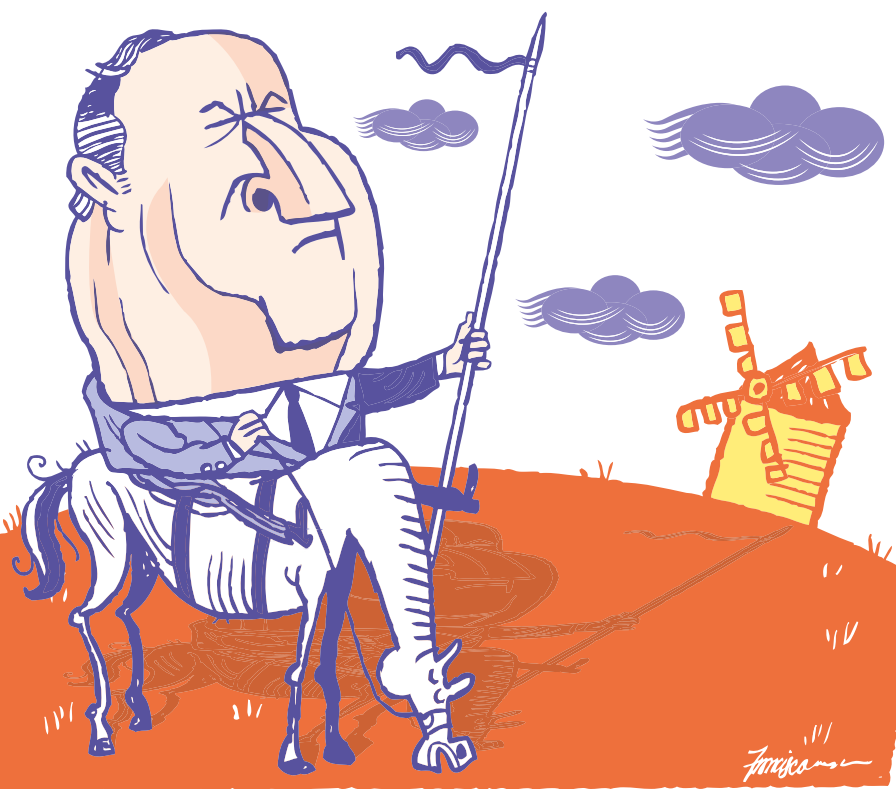
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ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

Pompeo's quixotic quest for a G-10 against China

The US Secretary of State's call for an alliance of democracies suffers from fundamental problems

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IN HIS LATEST BROADSIDE AGAINST CHINA, United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has called for the creation of a "new alliance of democracies" to fight what he claimed are Beijing's malign activities around the world.

"Maybe it's time for a new grouping of like-minded nations, a new alliance of democracies," he said. "If the free world does not change, communist China will surely change us. We can't return to the past practices because they're comfortable or because they're convenient," he told an audience of senior diplomats and politicians just before the weekend.

Mr Pompeo chose the location for his speech with great care: He delivered his remarks outside the Californian ancestral home of president Richard Nixon, the leader who, half a century ago, launched America's historic opening to China, thereby helping to create the world we inhabit today.

Mr Pompeo's intent was unmistakable: to signal that Mr Nixon's form of engagement with China is now largely over, and that a new phase, dominated by confrontation, is about to begin.

Yet despite the careful choreography and efforts by the US State Department to promote the speech for weeks in advance as a major departure in American foreign policy, much of what Mr Pompeo had to say was curiously low-key and not particularly profound.

The argument that the US is engaged in a competition with China which involves both ideology and other, more traditional, instruments of power has been heard before.

Still, the suggestion that the US should encourage the creation of a new alliance of democracies was significant, not only because it represented one of the very few concrete proposals in a speech which was otherwise largely devoid of practical initiatives, but also because Mr Pompeo raised the "democracy alliance" proposal during conversations with British MPs on a trip to London.

Nor is he alone in pushing this concept, for a veritable army of academics – many of whom will not be seen dead in the company of the Trump administration – is also advocating the establishment of such a new "alliance".

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

There are, however, two fundamental snags in this entire discussion.

First, despite all the current diplomatic noise, nobody agrees on what this group of democracies should do. Second, far from making the world a safer place, the creation of such an organisation is only likely to accelerate the decline of international institutions and worsen international tensions.

Curiously, who should decide whether a country is considered a democracy worthy of inclusion in this future alliance and how extensive this alliance should be are not matters which seem to preoccupy any of those who currently push for this idea.

Politicians in Washington and European capitals toying with this concept, as well as all the academics and think-tankers who write erudite articles about it, seem to assume the answers to both questions are so self-evident that they don't need discussing.

The most frequent "model" is that of the creation of a so-called G-10, a grouping which will include the existing Group of Seven (G-7) association of most industrialised states – Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States – plus Australia, India and South Korea.

Why this should be the selection criterion is not explained. Nor is anyone bothering to inquire whether some of the countries which are being cited as potential members in this new alliance are interested in accepting such an idea. The discussion on the topic is conducted as though the countries concerned are all willing and ready, and all that is needed is for someone to pluck up the courage by making the first move.

The reality is that the discussion is so superficial because there is no consensus on what the purpose of such an alliance is, so its proponents remain content to ignore thorny questions about its structure.

ARGUMENTS FOR A NEW ALLIANCE

For politicians such as Mr Pompeo, the purpose of creating an "alliance of democracies" is straightforward: It would be there to augment the United States' leverage over China, prevent China from playing divide-and-rule games against the West in general,

as well as to manage trade with Beijing on the basis of carrot-and-stick approaches. That means that the newly created alliance has got to be small enough to be coherent, but extensive enough to be powerful by including the most significant Western economies.

For European politicians who support the idea of the so-called G-10, the objective of creating such an entity is, however, quite different: to restate and strengthen their relationship with the US.

These Europeans argue that the US cannot be expected to continue defending Europe if the Europeans, in turn, are not prepared to contribute to the management of the security question which preoccupies the US most, namely China. The creation of a G-10 could address this problem in the way that Nato – the US-led military alliance in Europe – cannot since Nato's own treaty explicitly confines its areas of operations to Europe and North America alone. So, creating a new structure meets this new need.

It is no accident that many European adherents to the G-10 idea are to be found in Britain, which has left the European Union and is in search of a purpose.

"Britain's role as a bridge between the democracies is far from over," write local analysts Erik Brattberg and Ben Judah; by engaging the other G-7 members on the G-10 idea, the British will help usher "a grand strategy for the democracies that will work to keep China in check, India close, and the United States steady in the turbulent years to come."

And then, there are senior academics such as international affairs professor John Ikenberry at Princeton University, who support the creation of a G-10 not necessarily as a bulwark against China, but as a mechanism for rescuing the international liberal order of today from total disintegration.

Writing in the current issue of Foreign Affairs magazine – the handbook of the US foreign policy establishment – he suggests that "the United States could work with its G-7 partners to expand that group's activities and membership, adding countries such as Australia and South Korea."

According to Professor Ikenberry, the new body could become "a sort of steering committee of the world's 10 leading democracies that would guide the return to multilateralism and rebuild a global order that protects liberal principles. The leaders of this new group could begin by forging a set of common rules and norms for a restructured trading system. They could also establish an agenda for relaunching global cooperation on climate change and confer about preparing for the next viral pandemic."

In short, the G-10 may fix all the world's current problems. Only that it will not.

DIVISION AND DIFFERENCES

First, it is rather curious that none other than the Trump administration, which has done so much to ridicule and dismiss the role and importance of international institutions, should now be advocating the creation of a new cooperative structure in which – if this is to work – the US would have to compromise with other nations, precisely what President Donald

Trump finds most objectionable.

Second, there is absolutely no appetite in either Germany or France to support such an institution. The Germans have problems shouldering their responsibilities for Europe's defences, let alone take on global security responsibilities of the kind a G-10 membership would entail. And the French have an automatic aversion to anything proposed or led by the US; running Europe in equidistance to the US is what the French like.

What's more, none of the countries which may be involved in such an enterprise agrees on what needs to be done about China. All see China as a growing security challenge. But some – such as South Korea – need Chinese benign cooperation for their immediate national security, while others – such as the Europeans – can afford to take a more relaxed view of security questions, but are much more interested in matters of trade and transfer of technology.

And then, there are other fundamental historic disparities. South Korea and Japan cooperating on China? Yes, on a confidential basis over matters such as intelligence information, but not in public, and not over broader foreign policy questions.

More significantly, what happens to countries not included in the G-10 is as important as what happens to those who are part of this putative organisation.

Would medium-sized European countries be happy to go along with what the larger Europeans are suggesting? Would Asean be happy to take advice – not to speak of instructions – from an organisation which, inevitably, will come to be regarded as a "directorate of the world"?

Far from strengthening the international fabric of cooperation as Prof Ikenberry hopes, the creation of a G-10 is far more likely to help in its breakdown.

LIKELY CHINESE REACTION

And far from putting relations with China on a more predictable footing, the emergence of an "alliance of democracies" will persuade leaders in Beijing that they are facing a prolonged challenge of containment, and invite more, rather than less, confrontation.

In short, far from being an idea whose time has come, the "alliance of democracies" is an idea whose time may never arrive, at least not in any shape currently being debated.

So, given all these considerations, why should we waste any time even talking about it?

Because as flawed as it may be, the concept of an alliance of democracies will live on and will remain with us for many years to come, as a vague aspiration, a supposed answer to the world's most pressing problems, a sort of foreign policy equivalent to the race for the vaccine to the coronavirus.

If President Trump surprises all opinion pollsters and wins a second term in office in November, one can be sure that the G-10 concept will return with a vengeance.

But if Mr Joe Biden clinches the presidency, he too will be searching for a new global structure to connect between like-minded nations, to deal with China. 

All see China as a growing security challenge. But some – such as South Korea – need Chinese benign cooperation for their immediate national security, while others – such as the Europeans – can afford to take a more relaxed view of security questions, but are much more interested in matters of trade and transfer of technology.

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THE SPY WHO GOT CAUGHT

Making of a Chinese agent

HE WAS AN AMBITIOUS STUDENT. BUT NEVER did he imagine he would end up as a Chinese spy.

The case of Yeo Jun Wei, also known as Dickson Yeo, who went from a PhD student at Singapore's prestigious Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) to being arrested in the US last November for trying to get confidential information from a US officer working at the Pentagon, has sent shock waves through diplomatic and foreign policy circles.

Yeo's case comes amid worsening US-China relations and accusations that Beijing runs espionage and trade-secret theft operations in the US high on the list of Washington's grievances.

His admission in a court in Washington on July 24, where he pleaded guilty to acting under the direction of Chinese intelligence officials to obtain sensitive information from Americans, came around the same time as a US crackdown on spying activities at the behest of China.

Days after his confession, the episode continues to stoke much debate on hidden espionage activities, the extent of Yeo's network, the information he sourced and the role it could play in further unravelling ties between the world's two leading economies.

"The Chinese government uses an array of duplicity to obtain sensitive information from unsuspecting Americans," said Assistant Attorney-General for National Security John Demers.

"Yeo was central to one such scheme, using career networking sites and a false consulting firm to lure Americans who might be of interest to the Chinese government. This is yet another example of the Chinese government's exploitation of the openness of American society," he added.

Court documents said that he used his political consultancy in the United States as a front to collect information for Chinese intelligence, targeting American military and government employees with security clearances on professional networking social media sites. Yeo would pay them to write reports which he said were meant for clients in Asia, but which were in reality sent to the Chinese government without the writers' knowledge.

Yeo faces a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison and will be sentenced on Oct 9.

But how did things take such a drastic turn for the Singaporean?

CHARISSA YONG

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FROM A STUDENT TO AN AGENT

Yeo studied at Singapore's National Junior College from 1998 to 1999 and then went on to secure a Bachelor of Arts in mass communication and media studies from Oklahoma City University.

He proceeded to do a Master of Arts in South-east Asian studies at the National University of Singapore from 2009 to 2011, before heading to the International University of Japan in Niigata for a Master of Arts in international relations.

In 2015, he enrolled for a PhD at the LKYSPP in Singapore. He was recruited when, as a PhD student in the LKYSPP, he went on a trip to Beijing to give a presentation on South-east Asia politics, court documents showed.

ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO





Dickson Yeo used fake consultancy as a front to collect information for Chinese intelligence.
PHOTO: DICKSON YEO/FACEBOOK

After the presentation, he was approached and recruited by individuals who said they represented China-based think-tanks and offered him money in exchange for political reports and information.

Yeo came to understand that at least four of them were Chinese intelligence operatives, one of whom eventually asked him to sign a contract with China's People's Liberation Army.

Although Yeo refused to sign the contract, he continued to work for the Chinese operatives.

They told him that they wanted non-public information which they called "scuttlebutt", a slang term for rumours and gossip.

Their assignments focused on South-east Asia at first, but over time, shifted to focus on the US.

Over the next few years, Yeo met his Chinese handlers as many as 25 times in various locations across China.

Whenever he travelled to China for these meetings, he was regularly taken out of the Customs queue and brought to a separate office for admission into the country, said the court documents.

When he brought this up with one of the operatives, he was told that they wanted to conceal his identity when he travelled into China.

In a "statement of facts" submitted to the court in Washington, and signed by Yeo, he admitted he was fully aware he was working for Chinese intelligence, meeting agents dozens of times and being given special treatment when he travelled to China.

He was asked to get non-public information about the US Commerce Department, artificial intelligence and the US-China trade war, and to create a fake consulting firm in 2018.

After he contacted some potential targets, the website began to suggest additional potential contacts. Yeo found the website's algorithm "relentless", checking almost every day to review the fresh batches of potential contacts. He told US law enforcement officers it felt "almost like an addiction", said the court papers.

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Yeo did as he was told, using the same name as a prominent US consulting firm that conducts public and government relations. His LinkedIn profile page lists the company as Resolute Consulting.

He received over 400 resumes, mostly from US military and government personnel with security clearances, and passed resumes of interest to a Chinese intelligence operative.

Yeo eventually moved to Washington DC from January to July 2019, where he attended multiple events at think-tanks to network and recruit more people to write reports. During his time in the US, he also listed himself as a doctoral fellow "working on the foreign policy of smaller strategic states in light of US-China competition" at the George Washington University in Washington.

FROM RECRUITED TO RECRUITER

Yeo's modus operandi was to trawl a professional networking website for people with resumes and job descriptions suggesting they could have access to the sensitive information the Chinese wanted. After he contacted some possible targets, the website suggested more potential contacts.

Yeo found the website's algorithm "relentless", checking almost every day to review the fresh batches of potential contacts.

He told US law enforcement officers it felt "almost like an addiction", said the court papers.

He looked for susceptible individuals who were vulnerable to recruitment, and tried to avoid detection by American authorities, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's counter-intelligence assistant director Alan Kohler Jr said in a statement.

The Chinese handlers taught him to ask if his targets were dissatisfied with work, had financial troubles or had children to support, for instance.

In one case, Yeo recruited a civilian worker in the US Air Force on the F-35B fighter jet programme, who confided his financial troubles to him, and got information about the geopolitical implications of Japan buying the F-35 aircraft from the US.

In another case, Yeo built a good rapport with an officer in the US army who had sent his resume to him in response to his fake job listings.

The officer said he was traumatised by his military tours in Afghanistan, and wrote a report for Yeo on how the withdrawal of US troops from

Court documents said that he (Dickson Yeo) used his political consultancy in the United States as a front to collect information for Chinese intelligence, targeting American military and government employees with security clearances on professional networking social media sites.



Afghanistan would impact China.

A third case involved a State Department employee, who wrote a report about an unnamed individual who was at the time a member of the US Cabinet. The State Department employee told Yeo he feared that his retirement pension would be jeopardised if officials found out that he provided information to Yeo.

Yeo paid up to US\$2,000 (S\$2,750) each for the reports, and was given a bank card by his Chinese handlers to pay for the reports, according to the court documents. He was careful about his communications with the Chinese operatives, and was instructed not to take his phone and notebooks when travelling to the US. He was also told not to communicate with them when in the US for fear that the US government would intercept their messages.

When outside the US, he communicated with his Chinese handlers through the Chinese messaging application WeChat, and was told to use multiple phones and to change his WeChat account every time he did so. He was arrested when he returned to the US last November to try to get a US Army officer working at the Pentagon to provide more confidential information.

LKYSPP's dean, Professor Danny Quah, in an e-mail to faculty and students, said Yeo had applied for and was granted leave of absence from the school's PhD programme.

"This incident is specific to Mr Yeo as an individual. No faculty or other students at our school are known to be involved," he wrote. Yeo's candidature has been terminated and he is no longer a student with the school, said the LKYSPP.

Yeo's time at the LKYSPP overlapped with that of one of its former professors, Huang Jing, who

was expelled from Singapore in 2017 "for being a Chinese agent of influence", retired diplomat Bilahari Kausikan said in a Facebook post. "It is not unreasonable to assume he was recruited or at least talent spotted by the MSS (China's Ministry of State Security) there," Mr Kausikan said. In another post, Mr Kausikan said that Mr Huang was Yeo's PhD supervisor until 2017 when the professor was expelled.

RESPONSE FROM CHINA

China, however, has refuted allegations that it recruited Mr Yeo as a spy, and instead accused the US of having reached "a state of extreme suspicion."

"But what I want to say is this. In a bid to smear China, US law enforcement has repeatedly made accusations about Chinese espionage activities," said foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin.

Responding to questions from The Straits Times at a daily briefing, Mr Wang said, "We ask the US to stop this, and to stop using the issue of espionage to continue smearing China."

This is yet another notch in the downward spiral of diplomatic relations between both countries.

Both sides have levelled accusations of spying against the other, and ordered the closure of consulates in tit-for-tat moves.

The Ministry of Home Affairs in Singapore said on July 26 that investigations into Yeo's case have not revealed any direct threat to Singapore's security and Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan also said that the country is extending consular assistance to him. "He's a Singapore citizen. Our duty is to provide consular assistance to him, according to his needs," said Dr Balakrishnan. **ST**

— Additional reporting by Elizabeth Law in Beijing and Charmaine Ng in Singapore

FROM STUDENT TO SPY

2015

Dickson Yeo, who is enrolled as a PhD student at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, travels to Beijing to give a presentation on South-east Asia politics. He gets recruited by Chinese intelligence operatives.

2015

Yeo uses a professional networking website to contact and recruit a civilian working with the US Air Force on the F-35 fighter jet programme. The civilian writes a report for Yeo and gives him information on the geopolitical implications of Japan purchasing F-35 aircraft from the US.

2018

Yeo creates a fake consulting company to harvest resumes from US military and government employees with access to sensitive information.

2018 to 2019

Yeo recruits a US State Department employee and pays him to write a report about an unnamed member of the US Cabinet.

Jan to July 2019

He moves to Washington DC to network with people and try to recruit them. His LinkedIn profile lists him as a doctoral fellow at the George Washington University during this time.

Nov 2019

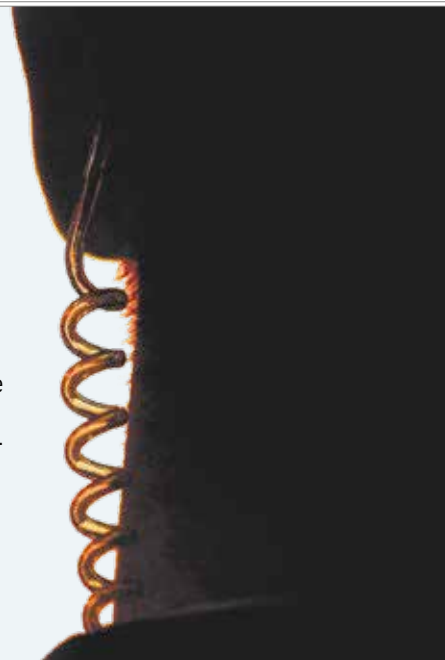
Yeo returns to the US to ask a US Army officer working at the Pentagon to provide classified information. He is stopped and arrested after landing at the airport.

July 24, 2020

Yeo pleads guilty to one charge of acting within the US as an illegal agent of a foreign power.

Oct 9, 2020

Yeo's sentencing hearing is scheduled.





East Asia

Uneasy about security law, some Hong Kong residents weigh their options abroad

Investors are seeking to diversify their assets and buy second homes further from Beijing's reach but it is still too early to tell if Hong Kong will see a net capital outflow.

SEATED IN A FASHIONABLY DIM CAFE IN Bangkok's historic Charoen Krung district, Hong Kong social media influencer Roger Wu prepares to launch into his latest topic: Is Thailand a suitable place for you to relocate to?

"Some friends say, 'I now feel like moving elsewhere, like Thailand'. But I want to ask: 'How many times have you been to Thailand? Do you really understand Thailand?'" he addresses his YouTube fans in rapid-fire Cantonese.

"They say 'we holidayed here twice'. That's like asking a woman to marry you after you met her twice!"

The video, uploaded on July 16, has drawn over 39,000 views.

"I spoke about this topic because more and more people were asking me about it," Mr Wu tells The Straits Times. "I did this video so that I didn't need to explain the same thing 10 or 20 times a day."

Mr Wu, who runs the website thailandfans.com from his base in Bangkok, is Hong Kongers' go-to for tips on the Kingdom.

Lately, he's been getting more queries from people wanting to buy property in Thailand.

While he shies away from drawing any conclusions about this growing interest, observers link it partly to the unease about Hong Kong's new security law, which scholars say will erode the territory's judicial independence and demolish freedom of assembly and speech.

Hong Kong residents who expressed support for last year's street protests have started scrubbing their social media accounts to avoid running afoul of the sweeping law, which criminalises subversion and collusion with foreign forces.

Investors are seeking to diversify their assets

Hong Kong residents have started scrubbing social media accounts to avoid running afoul of a law which criminalises subversion and collusion with foreign forces.

PHOTO: EPA-EFE

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There are indeed people who are worried about the situation and thinking of not so much selling everything but maybe diversifying some of their portfolio away from Hong Kong.



– GARY NG, Natixis bank economist

Bangkok-based Hong Kong social media influencer Roger Wu has been getting more queries from people wanting to buy property in Thailand.

ST PHOTO: TAN HUI YEE

and buy second homes further from Beijing's reach.

"There are indeed people who are worried about the situation and thinking of not so much selling everything but maybe diversifying some of their portfolio away from Hong Kong," Natixis bank economist Gary Ng told ST.

Adding that these people may relocate as well, he said: "In such uncertain times, it's hard to avoid any geopolitical risk. Of course there is (risk) in Hong Kong, but it exists elsewhere as well."

The United States, for example, removed Hong Kong's preferential trade status in July and plans to sanction entities that have eroded the territory's autonomy. This has drawn threats of retaliation from Beijing that may eventually embroil the region in a proxy race for dominance.

READY TO UP STAKES

It is still too early to tell if Hong Kong will see a net capital outflow. The growing presence of mainland Chinese banks in Hong Kong, for example, gives the territory some financial ballast, says Mr Ng.

For now, Hong Kong residents are weighing their options. One of them is Malaysia's long-stay scheme for foreign citizens willing to park at least RM150,000 (\$49,000) in the country. Called the "Malaysia My Second Home" (MM2H) programme, it is popular with people from China, Hong Kong and South Korea.

Aubella, the largest agency for the scheme, has received applications from almost 2,000 families in Hong Kong since January last year. In 2018, it received just 200.

"There are internal factors and push factors for the clients which make them make them decide faster," says Aubella founder Vincent Fong.

Thailand has a similar scheme which allows foreign citizens to live in the Kingdom for five to 20 years if they pay a one-time fee upwards of 500,000 baht (\$22,000).

As of June, there were more than 10,000 of these "Thailand Elite Card" holders.

According to Henley & Partners, its global concessionaire, applications from Hong Kong from January to March quadrupled over the same period last year.



Meanwhile, the overseas property scene in Hong Kong is buzzing. In June, there were 152 overseas property exhibitions there, mostly featuring homes in Britain, Malaysia, Australia, Thailand, says Mr Eli McGeever, a vice-president at Soho property app.

In the latter half of last year, as anti-government protests warmed interest in overseas property, Hong Kong buyers zeroed in on Malaysia, he said.

"Malaysia received extremely strong interest – it went months with at least 10 exhibitions every weekend and some exhibitions had thousands of RSVPs. The MM2H was a strong drawcard, as it offered a relatively cheap, easy and close by Plan B," he told ST.

This year, the spotlight shifted to British properties because London dangled the possibility of citizenship for some three million Hong Kong residents, he said.

Singapore properties, in contrast, receive little interest from Hong Kong buyers because the 20 per cent additional buyer's stamp duty that applies to foreigners make them unappealing, said Mr Nicholas Mak, head of research and consultancy at ERA Realty.

THE FINANCIAL HUB UPSHOT

It may take months to see the full impact of Hong Kong's new security law. Singapore, often quoted as a rival financial hub, has yet to see significant inflow of funds from Hong Kong.

"From Singapore's perspective, we'd rather see a successful Hong Kong. It's better to compete with a strong, strong financial centre, because that means growth and opportunities in the whole region are good," said Monetary Authority of Singapore managing director Ravi Menon.

Other aspiring financial hubs are eyeing Hong Kong's wealth and talent.

Discussions have begun in Japan's Parliament to fast-track visas for Hong Kong financial talent. Ruling Liberal Democratic Party politician Satsuki Katayama, who chairs a panel on foreign talent, said in June the kind of talent who have made Hong Kong a regional hub "are precisely the kind of high-level talent our country desires and is working to bring in."

But Japan, bogged down by high taxes and limited English use, is unattractive to expatriates.

The government of South Korea's Busan city announced on June 16, its ambition to become the next Asian financial hub, saying it will work with companies housed at the Busan International Finance Centre to approach financial firms planning to exit Hong Kong.

The authorities plan to hold online meetings with Hong Kong-based firms, as well as visit them and conduct roadshows once travel restrictions are lifted.

But South Korea is similarly hobbled by its high corporate tax of 25 per cent and long work week. **ST**

– Additional reporting by Chang May Choon, Walter Sim, Aw Cheng Wei

A harbour for Hong Kong in the storm

DAYS AFTER A SWEEPING LEADERSHIP RESHUFFLE of China's ruling Communist Party in November 2002, then Premier Zhu Rongji set foot in Hong Kong to reassure the city that the next generation of Chinese leaders will not leave it out to dry.

Describing the former British colony as "a bright pearl with great hope and prospects", Mr Zhu told a welcoming banquet: "If Hong Kong were ruined in our hands, we would become sinners of the nation. This will not happen."

Hong Kong's return to China had then barely passed the five-year mark. A year after that, the Chinese leadership had to bail it out after billionaire investor George Soros unleashed a speculative attack against the Hong Kong dollar and stock market.

Mr Zhu retired in March 2003. About four months later, the new Chinese leadership was startled when about 500,000 Hong Kong residents took to the streets to protest against an anti-secession Bill, which was later withdrawn.

Since then, under both presidents Hu Jintao and now Xi Jinping, China has introduced various policies to support the territory. These include easing curbs on individual Chinese tourists visiting Hong Kong and inking an agreement that offers the territory preferential access to the Chinese market. China launched its first offshore yuan trading centre in Hong Kong in 2004, the Shanghai-Hong Kong Stock Connect in 2014 and the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Stock Connect in 2016.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE?

The big question now is whether Beijing can prevent Hong Kong from becoming collateral damage in its increasingly fraught relationship with Washington.

In retaliation for China's decision to impose a controversial national security law on Hong Kong, US President Donald Trump issued an executive order ending the city's preferential trade and other privileges. He also signed into law the Hong Kong Autonomy Act, which authorises sanctions against officials seen as infringing on the city's autonomy – and, crucially, any banks that do business with them.

While the Trump administration portrays the move as punishment for Beijing's breaching of promised freedoms for Hong Kongers, Beijing considers Washington as one of the black hands behind the violent protests in the city last year, and the national security law as a necessary measure to restore safety and stability.

Certainly, the descent into anarchy in the past year has cost Hong Kong dearly. Two people have died and more than 2,600 injured as of last December. Property damage was estimated at more



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

than HK\$3 billion (\$534 million). The city has also witnessed a surge of anti-China sentiments.

CHINA'S PLAN

Beijing's tough response to the unrest – among other things, the crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces are punishable by a maximum of life in prison – have had Western politicians and pundits predicting doom for Hong Kong. They warn that the city will lose its allure as a vibrant global financial centre with Beijing's tightening grip over the city.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the security law was a "death knell" for the territory while Mr Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong, accused Beijing of setting out to "destroy" the city with its new powers.

But communist party insiders and some Chinese and foreign pundits say predictions of Hong Kong's demise are premature. The current Chinese leadership, they argue, will pull out all the stops to prevent Hong Kong's slide towards irrelevance. The array of measures include integrating the city with the Greater Bay Area, listing more Chinese companies there, having Chinese state-owned enterprises expand their foothold in the financial hub and boosting tourism.

"The national security law will not by itself spell the demise of Hong Kong," Mr Jim Stent, author of China's Banking Transformation, said in an interview. "China will continue to economically draw Hong Kong into the Greater Bay Area."

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China-bound cars ride on the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge near Zhuhai, China. About US\$20 billion was spent to construct the 55-km bridge-tunnel system – the world's longest sea crossing.
PHOTO: EPA-EFE

But communist party insiders and some Chinese and foreign pundits say predictions of Hong Kong's demise are premature. The current Chinese leadership, they argue, will pull out all the stops to prevent Hong Kong's slide towards irrelevance.



Home to about 68 million people, the Greater Bay Area is an economic powerhouse with a combined gross domestic product of about US\$1.5 trillion (\$2.1 trillion). Hong Kong's financial and service industries would be able to access the mega economic zone around the Pearl River Delta, which includes nine cities in China's southern province of Guangdong and nearby Hong Kong and Macau.

Physically, the integration is being aided by the construction of a 142-km high speed rail connecting Hong Kong and mainland China. About US\$20 billion was spent to construct the 55-km Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau bridge-tunnel system – the world's longest sea crossing.

Mr Stent, an American who served for 12 years as an independent director on the boards of China's Minsheng and Everbright banks, is optimistic that Hong Kong will weather the latest troubles. Ironically, the parlous state of US-China relations may help the city. "Hong Kong will remain important to China as its principal location for raising foreign currency through loans or equity placements as it will increasingly be difficult for Chinese companies to list in New York," he explained.

"I believe that Hong Kong will remain an international financial centre. Probably some IT companies and journalists will relocate elsewhere, but the major multinational financial institutions and all the lawyers, accountants and brokerage analysts will stay put. After all, where would they go?" said Mr Stent, who also served on the boards of banks in Thailand, Myanmar and Mongolia.

While a wholesale decampment is not expected there will likely be attrition. In the case of commercial arbitration, for instance, jittery companies fearful of Hong Kong's loss of impartiality may scout around for alternative sites, such as Singapore.

The resilience of the Hong Kong dollar and stock markets during the protests suggest that it is too early to announce a death verdict for the city.

Hong Kong companies can also jump on the Belt and Road Initiative bandwagon – President

Xi's ambitious brainchild that aims to revive ancient land and sea trade routes linking China with the rest of Asia, Europe and Africa through infrastructure projects funded by Chinese banks.

Mr Raymond Reed Baker, managing director of the Hong Kong-based consultancy, One World International Group, has said that in the worst-case scenario, "if the central government did not push tourism, logistics and IPOs, Hong Kong's economy would rapidly decline".

The loss of US trade preferences may sound frightening, but it is not fatal as Hong Kong has largely shifted from manufacturing to services. However, the loss of its special status accorded by the US would dent Hong Kong's attractiveness as a re-exporting hub for US-bound exports, hurting in the process, the city's port and logistics businesses.

Hong Kong's exports to the United States last year were around US\$39 billion or HK\$304 billion (just over 7 per cent of the total). Re-exports accounted for 98 per cent of total Hong Kong exports, according to a Forbes report.

GAME IS NOT OVER

China's resolve to defend Hong Kong is not in doubt. If only for reasons of "face", it cannot be seen to buckle or abandon the territory in the face of Western sanctions, not especially after all the weight attached to the former British colony's return to the motherland.

"Who will be the biggest winner if Hong Kong fails? Who will be the happiest? It's not China," said a Hong Kong political commentator who writes under the pseudonym Lan Jiang. Likening Hong Kong to one of China's 10 fingers, Mr Lan said: "If Hong Kong fails, the pain would be like a severed finger."

What is unclear at this point is how useful the Greater Bay Area and other plans are to stanch the bleeding for Hong Kong. Implementation is key and these supports could themselves be battered in the face of concerted action by hawks in the US, Britain, Australia and Canada.

In a survey conducted by the American Chamber of Commerce in early July, about 83 per cent of Hong Kong-based US companies that responded said they were "very" or "moderately" concerned about the sweeping national security law. But only 5 per cent of the 183 respondents said they were considering moving capital, assets or business out of Hong Kong in the short term.

"It's the ambiguity that is making people worried... about the rule of law, and whether that will actually continue to exist," Ms Tara Joseph, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong, told CNBC.

For the moment, like the glimmering waters in Victoria Harbour at night, all appears calm in Hong Kong from a distance, but look closer and you'll see that the surface is continually being agitated, shifting and splintering with each wave and backwash. **SI**



Singapore GE 2020

Start of a new normal?

The question that arises is whether 61.2 per cent or thereabouts will become the new normal for the PAP's vote share in future, as the opposition entrenches itself?

A GENERAL ELECTION CALLED AMID A PANDEMIC and as a recession looms would normally be expected to result in a flight to safety and a surge in vote share for the ruling party. But the outcome of GE2020 held on July 10 confounded that.

A significant vote swing of 8.7 percentage points against the People's Action Party (PAP) took its overall vote share to 61.2 per cent.

In the five-member Aljunied group representation constituency (GRC) held by the Workers' Party (WP), the PAP's vote share sank further and it lost a second GRC, the four-member Sengkang, to the WP, which saw a record 10 MPs elected.

The ruling party's share of the national vote came as a surprise to many activists and observers.

Some called it the worst-ever election result – with 10 elected opposition MPs – that had to be regarded as a disaster for the Government, as well as its fourth-generation leadership that has been playing a greater role in running the country and the election campaign.

A closer look at the swing and vote share nationwide going back to the 1970s suggests that GE2020 marks a return to the norm of the mid-1980s and 1990s, when the PAP got 61-65 per cent of the votes.

There was a swing back to this norm in GE2011, which some analysts described as the start of a “new normal” vote range for the PAP.

GE2015 upended that with the PAP winning nearly 70 per cent.

Does GE2020 mark a return to the norm of the low- to mid-60s range, or might it be the start of a “new normal” where the PAP's vote share isn't a given and could even go below 60 per cent?

SHARP SWINGS IN THE PAST

The 8.7 percentage point swing is not the most significant dip in the PAP's 61 years in power. GE1972 saw a 16.3-point drop to 70.4 per cent.

The PAP managed to reverse the slide, getting 74.1 per cent (1976) and 77.7 per cent (1980).

President Halimah Yacob, flanked by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon (second from right), with Cabinet members who were sworn in at the Istana on July 27.

ST PHOTO: **DESMOND WEE**

ZAKIR HUSSAIN

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Does GE2020 mark a return to the norm of the low- to mid-60s range, or might it be the start of a “new normal” where the PAP’s vote share isn’t a given and could even go below 60 per cent?

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However, the roll-out of one controversial policy after another – from steps to favour graduate mothers to a report that proposed raising the retirement age from 55 to 60, then 65 and consequently pushing back the age when people could withdraw their retirement savings in the Central Provident Fund – caused significant disquiet.

These contributed to a 12.8 percentage point drop in the PAP’s vote share in GE1984 to 64.8 per cent. For the first time since independence, the PAP lost two seats to the opposition.

The disappointment on the faces of many PAP leaders – used to clean sweeps – was palpable.

THAT TWO-THIRDS CEILING

The stage for a 61.2 per cent vote share was set 36 years ago. GE1984 marked the start of a new trend where the PAP would struggle to get more than two-thirds of all valid votes cast.

GE1988 (63.2 per cent) and GE1991 (61) saw further slides in the PAP’s vote share. In GE1997, the PAP increased its vote share to 65 per cent, partly a nod to second prime minister Goh Chok Tong’s more consultative style of governance.

OUTLIERS IN THE 2000s

GE2001, called in the wake of the Sept 11 terror attacks in the United States and in the middle of a global recession, saw a flight to safety, with voters giving the PAP 75.3 per cent of the votes.

In GE2015, the 69.9 per cent vote share was pinned down to the SG50 celebrations, and the death of founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.

GE2006 was the first time in four elections that the PAP was not returned to power on Nomination Day, with 47 out of 84 seats contested. The PAP’s vote share was 66.6 per cent, a downward swing of 8.7 percentage points – the same swing from GE2015 to GE2020.

In GE2011, a cocktail of grievances, including issues over housing, transport and immigration, saw the PAP get its lowest share of the popular vote since independence – 60.1 per cent – and the loss of Aljunied GRC to the WP.

A DISTINCT GROUNDSWELL

The PAP’s vote share in GE2020 – 61.2 per cent – is a whisker higher than GE1991’s, making it the third lowest to date.

Some would argue that the PAP has done well in retaining its vote share of at least 60 per cent for 36 years, despite a much stronger opposition, a more questioning electorate, and a more challenging global environment.

A further slide of 8.7 percentage points in the next election could see the loss of four more GRCs and three more SMCs – and a total of 32 opposition MPs in Parliament, enough to deny the PAP the two-thirds majority required to amend the Constitution.

GE2020: Key figures

Here’s a snapshot of how the PAP and the opposition did.

CLOSEST FIGHTS

SMCs	Winner (% of votes)
Bukit Panjang PAP v SDP	PAP (53.73)
Bukit Batok PAP v SDP	PAP (54.8)
Marymount PAP v PSP	PAP (55.04)

GRCs	Winner (% of votes)
West Coast PAP v PSP	PAP (51.68)
Sengkang PAP v WP	WP (52.12)
East Coast PAP v WP	PAP (53.39)

BIGGEST WINS FOR THE PAP

SMCs	% of votes
Radin Mas PAP v RP	74.01
Mountbatten PAP v PV	73.82
MacPherson PAP v PPP	71.74

GRCs	% of votes
Jurong PAP v RDU	74.61
Ang Mo Kio PAP v RP	71.91
Sembawang PAP v NSP	67.29

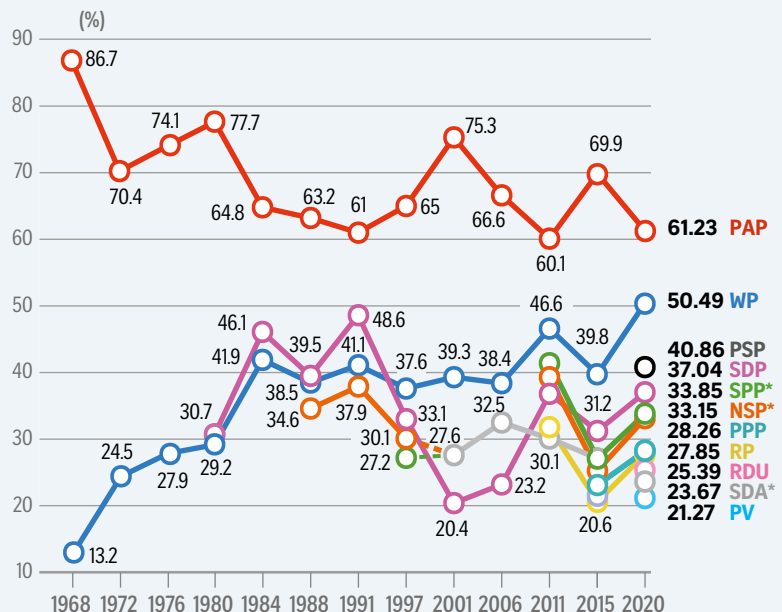
TOP WINS FOR OPPOSITION

	% of votes
Hougang SMC WP	(61.21)
Aljunied GRC WP	(59.95)
Sengkang GRC WP	(52.12)

NCMP POSTS

NCMP seats will be taken up by candidates Hazel Poa and Leong Mun Wai in the PSP team who contested in West Coast GRC

HOW THE PARTIES FARED IN PREVIOUS GES



NOTE: *The Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) was formed in 2001. National Solidarity Party (NSP) and Singapore People's Party (SPP) contested under the SDA banner in 2001 and 2006. NSP left the alliance in 2007, while SPP left in 2011. NSP first contested the elections in 1988, and Singapore Democratic Party first contested in 1980. The Reform Party (RP) was formed in 2009. Figures refer to the parties' share of the votes in the constituencies they contested.

STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

TOUGHER CONTESTS AHEAD

A look at the closest contests in GE2020 suggests that core support for the PAP in various constituencies has been on the decline, and may continue on this trajectory.

The swing voters in the middle – many of whom tend to be younger but include middle-aged voters – were critical in the WP's winning Sengkang GRC, holding on to Aljunied GRC and Hougang by stronger margins.

While Singapore's opposition party landscape is fragmented, three main players are expected to continue getting support from voters – the WP, Progress Singapore Party (PSP) led by former PAP MP Dr Tan Cheng Bock and SDP.

The question that arises is whether 61.2 per cent or thereabouts will become the new normal for the PAP's vote share in future, as the opposition entrenches itself?

Could GE2025 see a slide below 60 per cent, and to the mid-50s after that?



Much depends on whether the PAP can win the hearts and minds of voters all over again, the way it did in the early decades of Singapore's post-independence history.

PAP activists have said that they start preparing for the next election right after the previous one.

As opposition party activists do the same, closer contests are expected to be more common at the next election. [ST](#)

Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and the rest of the Cabinet after being sworn in at Parliament House on July 27. PHOTO: MCI

Vote sends signal of a desire for change – but not in any hurry

The PAP needs to re-examine some previous assumptions on issues such as leadership, young voters and race

GE2020 WAS A GOOD RESULT FOR SINGAPORE. It showed a sophisticated and mature electorate which returned the ruling party to power but with a clear message that it had issues with some of its policies and style of government.

Voters had an equally strong point to make to the opposition: We hear you about not giving the Government a blank cheque but you have to work very hard to prove that you are up to the task.

It was a hard slog for many of the opposition parties and their candidates as it has always been in battling the People's Action Party. GE2020 showed it still is but that it is possible to make some headway.

The key to the opposition's success? It is exactly the same as the PAP's: Sound leadership at the top with a clear plan on how to grow and strengthen the party.

The Workers' Party, with Mr Pritam Singh helming it for the first time, made several key moves that proved decisive. It focused on its stomping ground in the east, with fewer candidates than in the last general election with a younger line-up than the other parties and campaigned single-mindedly to deny the PAP a clean sweep.

It could have gone seriously wrong for the party forced to field fresh faces in Aljunied GRC with the retirement of its former chief Low Thia Khiang,

and with Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's surprise move to East Coast GRC.

But the WP did not allow these to disrupt its campaign plan and messaging. Sticking close to the script required firm leadership at the top and discipline from party members on the ground.

These two qualities were evident too in how it handled the controversy over Ms Raeesah Khan's Facebook postings, nipping the problem in the bud quickly and unambiguously.

The Progress Singapore Party (PSP), which performed creditably as a new party despite not winning a single seat, would do well to follow the WP's example if it wants to be as successful.

It was a good result for Singapore because no one knows how the political landscape will change with a younger electorate who want a greater say in how the country is run: Will it be a gradual and stable transition to a more pluralistic polity or a precipitous change to an uncertain future?

With the WP winning just one more GRC and the other parties returning empty-handed, Singaporeans voted for slow and steady change.

That's a resounding vote for a stable Singapore. Will it always be like this? It depends on how the ruling party deals with several issues which GE2020 highlighted.

There are three. First, and most important, is the ongoing transition to the 4G leadership. This GE was meant to be a political test of their readiness to take over. If the PAP had scored an overwhelming win similar to what it achieved in 2015, it would have proclaimed the transition a success and proceeded as planned.

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People's Action Party and Workers' Party (WP) election campaign posters for East Coast GRC. With the WP winning just one more GRC and the other parties returning empty-handed, Singaporeans voted for slow and steady change.
ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Another old slogan that needs overhauling: That the PAP needs a strong mandate to govern. Most people would agree with this, but how strong it needs to be will be different between a young voter compared with a 60-year-old baby boomer. The party needs a more sophisticated and nuanced approach, especially in a new social media environment where you have to respond quickly to feedback and changing circumstances.



How will the party assess leadership succession now, faced with a nationwide 8.7 percentage point swing against it? I believe it should review its decision, and not just because of GE2020.

The selection of DPM Heng to succeed PM Lee Hsien Loong was made by his 4G colleagues prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

But the world has changed since and the challenges that Singapore faces now, and for some time to come, have become more severe and uncertain. Will the new circumstances require a different leader to rally and mobilise the people?

The ruling party should review the issue and obtain a fresh mandate from its members. Indeed, many observers pointed out correctly that PM Lee, in his national broadcast on June 7, had hinted that he and his 3G colleagues might stay on longer than planned to see Singapore through the crisis. If the timing of the handover changes, should there also be a change of leader?

It might well be that when they do review the matter, Mr Heng will again be reaffirmed by his colleagues as the top choice. This will be a good outcome for the party because it is the least unsettling and he would benefit from the reconfirmation. But if the party decides differently, it has to move quickly to make the change.

In making this call, I am not suggesting that Mr Heng's claim to the leadership has been damaged by his team's performance in East Coast GRC where it met a WP team.

In fact, the swing against the PAP there was seven percentage points, lower than the national average of nearly nine points. Other PAP leaders such as Mr Chan Chun Sing saw a sharper 14 percentage point swing at his Tanjong Pagar GRC, against a PSP team.

Several other 4G leaders also saw drops of several points in the share of votes for the PAP slates they led, and, generally, the fall was much sharper where they were up against strong opponents from the WP or PSP.

I am more concerned about how much the world has changed, and, therefore, it is important to re-examine all the previous assumptions, including on leadership.

The second major issue that GE2020 highlighted is an equally critical one: How to win over younger voters. About 55 per cent of Singaporeans are under 45, and, in constituencies such as Sengkang, they make up 60 per cent of voters.

One key to being relevant is obviously to field candidates in sync with voters, and the WP's winning slate in Sengkang demonstrates this reality.

To be fair to the PAP, it too has done likewise with younger candidates. But it is only half the story. Equally important is your position and policy on issues that matter to the young. This is a large question affecting many areas and I will cite just one: Race.

Every survey has shown that young Singaporeans have a more liberal and enlightened attitude towards race and are more accepting of people of different races. They are less likely to agree, for example, with the ruling party's stand that Singapore is not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister.

When the PAP continues to hold this line, the young hear the message loud and clear: You are not listening to me.

In contrast, the WP is led by an Indian, and so is the chairman of the Singapore Democratic Party. Should it surprise anyone if opposition parties appear to young voters as more appealing and less constrained by dated thinking?

Another old slogan that needs overhauling: That the PAP needs a strong mandate to govern. Most people would agree with this, but how strong it needs to be will be different between a young voter compared with a 60-year-old baby boomer.

The party needs a more sophisticated and nuanced approach, especially in a new social media environment where you have to respond quickly to feedback and changing circumstances.

Is the PAP nimble and flexible enough to make these changes? This is not about policy, but about mindset and governing style, which brings me to my third point.

The PAP has not changed its fundamental approach, which is top down and technocratic. Over the past few years, it has made several unpopular decisions that reinforce this perception, including the reserved presidency, the impending increase in the goods and services tax, new laws on fake news, and its uncompromising stance on critics and dissenters.

It used to be said that the Government was not afraid to make unpopular decisions because voters will judge it over a five-year period, especially over whether it has delivered the good life.

Two things have happened to change this equation. First, the good life is no longer as assured as it was in the earlier years when near double-digit economic growth was normal.

Now, 3 per cent is considered outstanding. Second, the electorate, especially the young, no longer view such a paternalistic approach as tough love. More likely, it is seen as being high-handed and out of touch.

In effect, they want a PAP-lite, minus the hard edges that are part of the party's DNA. Can it evolve into such a party and will the change be good for Singapore? That is one of the defining questions of GE2020. [S](#)

The writer is also senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.



Scientists from the NEA have been testing sewage samples at foreign worker dormitories for the presence of viral material, which could reveal the level of Covid-19 spread in the dormitories. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Special Report

Hunt for a Covid-19 remedy

Novel approaches for a novel coronavirus

From testing wastewater to the quest for a vaccine, Singapore taps its best scientists

CLAD IN OVERALLS AND EQUIPPED WITH N95 masks and face shields, a trio of scientists huddled over a manhole outside a foreign worker dormitory. They warned the media gathered around them: "Stay at least 2m away."

When they were satisfied that we were far away enough to avoid being spattered by any stray droplets, they prised open the lid, and lowered a tube into the depths of the sewers.

They hit a few buttons on an auto-sampling machine, and minutes later, they hit pay dirt – literally.

The scientists from the National Environment Agency's (NEA) Environmental Health Institute were demonstrating how sewage samples for a pilot wastewater surveillance programme are collected.

The samples, which are screened in a laboratory for the presence of viral material, could reveal the level of Covid-19 spread in the dormitory.

Associate Professor Ng Lee Ching, director of the Environmental Health Institute, explains: "If viral material is detected in the wastewater of some dormitories where there is no known transmission,

additional swab tests for workers (there) may be arranged to identify cases for medical care and isolation."

This sewage surveillance programme is one of a slew of novel strategies that the Republic has implemented in the six months since the first Covid-19 case was reported here on Jan 23.

Human trials for a Singapore-developed vaccine will commence soon, and researchers here are studying not just the virus, but also how the human body responds to it – by scrutinising the blood of recovered patients for clues on how the invading pathogen can be fought.

Here's a look at the engagement of the best scientific minds in battling and researching the coronavirus – a foe which is still not fully understood. Says Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID): "The point is that the system needs to be flexible and scalable to cope with novel viruses that may appear in different shapes and sizes."

ON THE LOOKOUT

Testing is a key enabler in the Government's overall efforts to fight Covid-19, says a Ministry of Health (MOH) spokesman.

This is because the speedy identification of infected patients will allow them to be quickly isolated, breaking the chain of transmission.

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Science and Environment Correspondent



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Scientists from the National Environment Agency's (NEA) Environmental Health Institute demonstrate how sewage samples for a pilot wastewater surveillance programme are collected. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

With the eventual goal of doing 40,000 tests a day, there are ongoing efforts to make this more efficient. Singapore has conducted about 177,000 swabs per million population as of July 13, the highest rate among Asean nations, according to global statistics site Worldometer.

”

Traditionally, testing is done by collecting swabs from patients and running them through a procedure known as polymerase chain reaction (PCR), which detects the presence of viral genetic material in a sample.

Such tests are still the “gold standard” for testing, says MOH.

With the eventual goal of doing 40,000 tests a day, there are ongoing efforts to make this more efficient. Singapore has conducted about 177,000 swabs per million population as of July 13, the highest rate among Asean nations, according to global statistics site Worldometer.

“To allow more individuals to be analysed in one test, we also conduct pooled PCR testing,” says the MOH spokesman. Such pooled tests involve combining swabs of up to five individuals into one laboratory test.

Where a pooled test is positive, the individuals would be retested individually to identify infections.

“Pooled testing is an effective strategy where the prevalence of infection is likely to be low,” says the MOH spokesman.

But other novel strategies, such as wastewater surveillance, are also being piloted to complement – not replace – existing testing methods.

Says NEA’s Prof Ng: “For dormitories in the programme with no detected Covid-19 cases, a zero reading for the viral genetic material in the wastewater provides the added assurance that they remain free from infection and allows workers to leave for work.”

During the demonstration of how sewage samples were taken, I smelled nothing foul through the N95 mask despite the open manhole nearby.

But the murky, brown liquid collected by the auto-sampling machine was a reminder that testing can involve working in dirty conditions.

Scientifically, there were also challenges to overcome.

As Associate Professor Janelle Thompson, a principal investigator at the Nanyang Technological University’s (NTU) Singapore Centre for Environmental Life Sciences Engineering, points out: The concentration of the viral genome per litre of wastewater can be about 10,000 times less concentrated than the levels measured in human sputum (phlegm) in the first two weeks of infection.

Says Prof Thompson: “This means that methods are needed to concentrate the viral particles before recovery of the RNA (genetic material of the virus) or protein signatures used for quantification.”

Prof Thompson’s research centre had, together with other partners, provided scientific input for the methodology used to sample and test wastewater for Covid-19.

The potential of testing wastewater as an early warning system for Covid-19 was not realised in a Eureka moment.

It was derived from a strong scientific basis.

For instance, there have been a number of scientific papers that point to the presence of the virus in stool samples. This indicates that infected individuals, including those with mild or no symptoms, could shed the virus in their stool.

And then in March, Dutch researchers went one step further.

They did studies to show the correlation between the increasing circulation of the virus in the population and an increased viral load into the sewer system.

Singapore did its own tests on wastewater at water reclamation plants, which collect wastewater from all across the island, and found a similar correlation.

As of March 9, when there were 160 Covid-19 cases in Singapore, the level of viral genetic material in the wastewater was undetectable.

But in late March, when there was an increase in cases detected in foreign workers’ dormitories, levels of the viral genetic material became detectable.

A high of 1,426 new coronavirus cases was reported on April 20, most of them being foreign workers living in dormitories.

For most of July, the number of new daily cases was less than 400.

Says NEA’s Prof Ng: “Currently, we have observed a decline in the virus signals in the water reclamation plants, and this data supports the declining numbers in reported cases and improvement of the overall Covid-19 situation in Singapore.”

THE ROAD TO A CURE

The number of new daily cases in Singapore may have fallen, but life has not fully returned to pre-Covid days.

There are visual reminders of this everywhere. Face masks, once emblematic of those working in healthcare, have become fashion accessories that come in various prints and colours. Large, boisterous gatherings at restaurants have dwindled to mandated groups of up to five.

The authorities say this is the way life will be – at least until a vaccine is found. There have been encouraging developments on this front.

On July 20, the global fight against Covid-19 received a boost, with the release of encouraging findings from human trials of three coronavirus vaccines.

The results showed that the vaccines being tested did not cause any dangerous side effects, and that

they could coax a protective response from the human body.

The findings were from the early phases of clinical trials for vaccines being developed by Oxford University and multinational drugmaker AstraZeneca, CanSino Biologics and China's military research unit, and German biotech company BioNTech and US drugmaker Pfizer.

One such trial will soon also be held in Singapore. As part of a Phase I/II trial, 108 healthy individuals will receive a dose of a vaccine jointly developed by Singapore's Duke-NUS Medical School and United States pharmaceutical company Arcturus Therapeutics.

This puts the Lunar-Cov19 vaccine with 24 other candidate vaccines around the world that are currently undergoing clinical evaluation.

But experts have pointed out that while published results from early-stage trials are encouraging, much more work is still needed to plug remaining gaps in knowledge before a vaccine can be made commercially available. Estimates for this range from 12 to 18 months.

Associate Professor David Lye, a senior consultant and director at the NCID's infectious disease research and training office, notes that the key determinant of effectiveness of a Covid-19 vaccine lies in Phase III randomised trials, which have yet to start.

Clinical development is a three-phase process, says the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention on its website.

In Phase I, small groups of people receive the trial vaccine, and this is expanded in Phase II to include people who have characteristics, such as age and physical health, similar to those for whom the new vaccine is intended. In Phase III, the vaccine is given to thousands of people and tested for efficacy and safety.

Six months since the first Covid-19 case was reported in Singapore, there is still no crystal ball for the future, says NCID's Prof Leo.

"We are all charging ahead in an uncertain and rapidly evolving era, and while we aim to do our best, our best is to also rely on regional and global efforts," she says, adding that many factors could influence how the pandemic will turn out in next six months and beyond.

But she adds: "I would like to urge all in Singapore that we keep in tune with the evolution and be part of the evolution, prepare to change the way we socialise and interact with one another, and play each individual part to protect self and family and the wider community."

It will be challenging, even painful, she says, adding: "Microbes and human are alike - we strive to survive."

The Health Ministry says there are lessons to be learnt from countries experiencing a resurgence of cases after a general resumption of activities.

"Continued vigilance and adherence to safe management measures on everyone's part remain important to reduce the spread of infection," says the MOH spokesman.

"Until a vaccine is found, we will have to get used to a new normal, adjusting our routines to live and work safely despite this global pandemic." **ST**

How coronavirus affects the body from top to toe

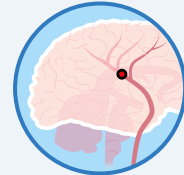
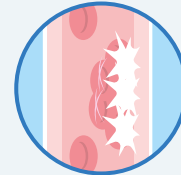
Fever

Body temperature rises to try and incapacitate heat-sensitive viruses when the hypothalamus receives signals from immune cells.

Hypothalamus

Blood clots and strokes

An accumulation of blood platelets and proteins plugs broken blood vessels (below). Once healed, these clots dissolve. If an excessive immune response to Covid-19 causes abnormal clotting, blood vessels in the brain may be blocked, triggering a stroke (below). Symptoms depend on the region affected.



Coughing

Reflex reaction expels air rapidly from the lungs to clear irritants from airways.

Shortness of breath

As the virus reduces lung capacity, breathing becomes difficult.

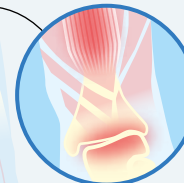
Lungs
Kidneys
Stomach
Intestines

Muscle and joint pain

Viral inflammation in joints and muscles (left) can cause pain and stiffness.

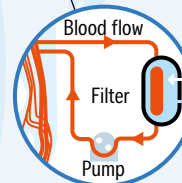
Post-viral fatigue

Infections often lead to long-term fatigue and weakness.



Kidneys

These organs filter the blood, balancing chemicals and removing waste and excess water as urine. If they fail, blood can be circulated through a dialysis machine (left), an artificial filter replicating kidney function.



Intestinal (enteric) symptoms

Inflammation is a complex immune response intended to carry disease-fighting molecules to the site of infection and carry away debris. Excessive intestinal inflammation can cause:

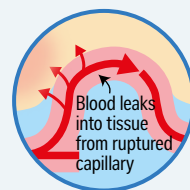
Vomiting

Reflex contraction of diaphragm and abdominal muscles empties the stomach contents via the mouth, ridding the body of toxins.

Diarrhoea

Unable to absorb fluid, the intestine's bowel movements become watery.

Abdominal pain



Rashes, skin lesions and 'Covid toes'

When the smallest blood vessels, capillaries, become inflamed, leakage causes spots and rashes on the skin. The effect is similar to chilblains (left), which form on fingers and toes when capillaries contract in the cold then expand rapidly as they warm up - rupturing and causing irritation and swelling as blood leaks out.

Source: THE FINANCIAL TIMES STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Trials for three Covid-19 vaccines show promise but much more work still needed, say experts

AUDREY TAN

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All three studies – two were published in medical journal The Lancet, while the Pfizer study was published as a pre-print pending peer review – found that the vaccine candidates could stimulate the body to produce immune system “soldiers”. These soldiers, such as antibodies or T-cells, help the body fight off invading pathogens.



ST ILLUSTRATION:
CHNG CHOON HIONG

Gaps in knowledge remain before a vaccine can be made commercially available, say experts.

THE GLOBAL FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 RECEIVED a boost on July 20 with the release of encouraging findings from human trials of three coronavirus vaccines, including a closely watched one being developed by Oxford University.

The results showed that the vaccines being tested did not cause any dangerous side effects, and that they could coax a protective response from the human body.

But experts said that while the results were encouraging, much more work is still needed to plug remaining gaps in knowledge before a vaccine can be made commercially available.

Speaking at a media conference, Dr Michael Ryan, executive director of the World Health Organisation’s health emergencies programme, noted that the findings were from trials in their early stages and the data is very new.

“We now need to move into larger-scale, real-world trials,” he said. “But it is good to see more data, and more products moving into this very important phase of vaccine discovery, and we congratulate our colleagues for the progress they have made.”

The latest findings were from early phases of clinical trials for vaccines being developed by Oxford University and multinational drugmaker AstraZeneca; CanSino Biologics and China’s military research unit; and German biotech company BioNTech and US drugmaker Pfizer.

All three studies – two were published in medical journal The Lancet, while the Pfizer study was published as a pre-print pending peer review – found that the vaccine candidates could stimulate the body to produce immune system “soldiers”.

These soldiers, such as antibodies or T-cells, help the body fight off invading pathogens.

Professor Stephen Evans from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, noted that for the Oxford trial, the immune responses measured in the blood, and the absence of serious harms indicate there is a possibility of an effective vaccine against Covid-19.

The Oxford vaccine had prompted an antibody and a T-cell response – both of which may be important in the protection against Covid-19.

However, Prof Evans also noted that there were some gaps.

“It does not yet show that the disease is reduced or prevented, and this will not be easy to show until Phase III trials have been completed in settings where the (virus) is circulating at a high rate and people are getting clinical and severe disease,” Prof Evans was quoted as saying in a CNN report.

Clinical development is a three-phase process, said the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention on its website.

In Phase I, small groups of people receive the trial vaccine, and this is expanded in Phase II to include people who have characteristics, such as age and physical health, similar to those for whom the new vaccine is intended.

In Phase III, the vaccine is given to thousands of people and tested for efficacy and safety.

In an update, AstraZeneca said late-stage Phase II/III trials are currently under way in Britain, Brazil and South Africa and are due to start in the United States.

“Trials will determine how well the vaccine will protect from the Covid-19 disease and measure safety and immune responses in different age ranges and at various doses,” the company noted.

The findings from the three trials follow the publication of the results of Moderna’s vaccine trial, which showed similarly promising early results.



Moderna's vaccine is similar to the Pfizer one in that it also uses a messenger RNA platform.

There are currently more than 150 vaccine candidates being studied worldwide.

At a separate press conference, Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of Singapore's National Centre for Infectious Diseases, noted that most vaccines can take seven to 15 years to become

commercially available, depending on the pathogen.

"For Covid-19, people are looking at 12 to 18 months, so this is still a space that we are watching very closely," she said then.

"But there are a lot of international collaborations and efforts being put in to see whether we can see an effective, usable, deployable vaccine for the human race around the world." **ST**

Vaccine not a panacea for Covid-19, experts caution

AS OPTIMISM RISES OVER THE PROMISE OF Covid-19 vaccines, experts have warned that even the best vaccine will be no panacea alone and must be combined with effective treatments, as well as individual responsibility, to reduce the spread of the virus.

Professor Ooi Eng Eong, deputy director of Duke-NUS' emerging infectious diseases programme, one of three experts at a Straits Times Covid-19 webinar on July 23, said: "At the end of the day, the control of Covid isn't going to rely on vaccines, it isn't going to rely on drugs, it isn't going to rely on measures like social distancing alone.

"It's probably a combination of everything that we can throw at this virus."

Attracting over 1,000 participants, the 1½-hour session focused on lessons learnt in six months of Covid-19 in Singapore and how these would shape the way forward in tackling the viral disease.

Singapore, with more than 50,000 cases and 27 deaths, is in the midst of a cautious reopening as the spread appears to be under control.

Globally, the pandemic is still in full force, with around 17 million people infected, and more than 660,000 dead, lending urgency in the race for a solution.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases expert at the National University Hospital, said there has been a lot of hype recently about positive developments in vaccine research.

With 130 candidates, of which 24 are in clinical trial stages, Prof Fisher said it is economically lucrative for companies to share positive news about their work.

But the truth is that there will not be a commercially viable vaccine this year, and when one does become available, there will not immediately be enough for everyone, he warned. It is also unlikely that any vaccine would fully protect everyone.

Prof Ooi, who leads a team working on a vaccine, said he would be satisfied if it was 50 to 75 per cent effective. A 50 per cent efficacy means only half of the people vaccinated are actually protected, and the rest could still become infected. Still, it would

offer a sufficient level of protection, he said.

"Even a natural infection would not give you 100 per cent protection from a second infection," he noted.

Vaccines generally work better in young healthy people, and less well in those who are older or have underlying medical conditions, but this may be good enough.

Prof Ooi said: "If the young people are solidly immune, they would not pass the virus on to older people, even if (older people) are not immune or not vaccinated."

Prof Fisher said having a vaccine does not spell the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. "Even after the vaccine comes, we're still going to have cases. We're still going to have little clusters. It'll just be a lot easier to manage with the vaccine."

It is also important to be able to treat patients, so most do not get severely ill or die, the panel noted.

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said the economic impact of the pandemic would be harder on some segments of the population.

He said: "There will be some sectors that are being forcefully kept shut to allow the rest of the economy to function as per normal.

"How do you explain this to people: that you have to lose your job so this other group of people can continue working and earning a living? Countries will have to put in place the necessary safeguards to maintain social cohesion." **ST**

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Straits Times' senior health correspondent Salma Khalik moderating a webinar on July 23 that featured Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases expert at the National University Hospital; Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health; and Professor Ooi Eng Eong, deputy director of Duke-NUS Medical School's emerging infectious diseases programme. **ST PHOTO**



Watch the webinar here: <https://str.sg/webinar>

From print to screen, ink to multimedia

Staying true to its mission from Day 1

Born on July 15, 1845, The Straits Times has gone from being a daily print newspaper to being available anytime online, on mobile phones, tablets, social media, video platforms and radio as well. But in whatever way the news is presented, one thing remains unchanged – ST's commitment to the community it serves.



WARREN FERNANDEZ

Editor-in-Chief



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JUST AS SINGAPORE WAS AN ACCIDENTAL nation, the newspaper you are holding in your hands is likely to have been born quite by chance.

The story goes that some 175 years ago, an Armenian merchant bought a printing press as a favour to a business associate who was facing hard times. He planned to use it to publish books for the growing Armenian community in Singapore.

By some chance or circumstance, the Armenian businessman, Catchik Moses, came across a young 29 year-old Englishman, Robert Carr Woods, who had just come to Singapore from British-ruled Bombay, and was in search of a job.

"Woods was always a persuasive salesman, full of ambitious schemes and smooth talk, with a brash confidence in his own abilities. Moses had a printing press needing a purpose, and Woods needed a job," writes the British historian Mary Turnbull in her history of this newspaper, titled *Dateline Singapore*.

"He obviously convinced Moses that he could make an English-language paper into a commercial success."

So, on the morning of July 15, 1845, the first

edition of The Straits Times (which then included the Singapore Journal of Commerce within it) – hit the streets.

Published from No. 7 Commercial Square – where Raffles Place now stands – it was a weekly paper of just eight pages, printed with a new type and on what was described as "fine English paper."

"Good morning to you kind reader!" the young editor declared in his first edition, which is likely to have had a print run of only a few dozen copies. "We proceed to declare our sentiments while we aver the honourableness of our intentions."

In such grandiose terms, he continued with pledges to uphold the integrity of national institutions, while "laying bare to the eye whatever abuses spring up or exist", and also safeguarding the rights of the governed against the "innovations or misrule of the governing."

On its front page of this first edition, The Straits Times proclaimed boldly that it expected to enjoy a wide circulation, especially among the business community.

It added that the “principles on which the publication will be conducted are those that will ever identify The Straits Times with the general interests of the Settlement.”

That was the ST’s mission, and ambition, as set out by its first editor, on the front page of its first edition – to report and interpret the news from around the region and wider world, to help further the general interests of the community it sought to serve.

Some things don’t change. This remains the mission that successive generations of ST editors and journalists have sought to uphold, right through to now, 175 years on.

In anticipation of this anniversary, I have been re-reading Turnbull’s very engaging account of the story of this newspaper, the journalists behind it.

One thing that struck me was how the role of the ST has remained largely unchanged through the years, and how successive generations of journalists in the ST newsroom have seen the work that they do as a public service, “ever identified with the general interests” of the community in Singapore they served.

Over the years, ST has changed hands several times. Catchik Moses later sold the title to Carr Woods. He in turn would become more interested in politics and a legal career, passing the paper on to a company in 1860.

ST’s printing plant and assets would be auctioned off in 1900 to become a private limited company. That would go public in 1950, when a Straits Times Trust was set up to safeguard the paper’s editorial integrity, even as its shares were listed.

But, while the form of the company has changed over the years, its mission stayed the same.

And although ST was neither the first newspaper in Singapore – that was the Singapore Chronicle, which first appeared in 1824 and was published for 14 years until 1837 – nor the one thought to have the most promising prospects, ST managed to see off multiple waves of competition from other titles, that came and went, as well as the many changes in technology.

GROWING ITS REACH

In its first few decades, ST was fortunate to have been led by several capable journalists and men of vision, such as Scotsman Arnot Reid, who was appointed in 1888, as its first professional editor at the age of 25.

His ambition was to build up the ST into the leading paper in the Far East, and he worked tirelessly to raise the professionalism and reputation of the paper.

“Reid insisted that a newspaper’s function was to report the news, not to tell the governor how to run the administration,” notes Ms Turnbull.

One of his most illustrious successors was Alexander William Still, who would edit the paper for 18 years from 1908 to 1926, during which time it earned the moniker “Thunderer of the East”, after

the original Thunderer, the Times of London, for its sharp and insightful commentaries.

“His concept of a newspaper’s role to exercise responsible influence on government and society for the benefit of the country as a whole raised The Straits Times to a status which it had never enjoyed before,” notes Turnbull.

Indeed, over the years, ST would play a growing role in the life of the Singapore community. During World War I, for example, the paper sponsored a war fund, which raised \$6 million for the effort.

Then, responding to the hardships that many of its readers faced in the Great Depression, ST provided free advertising space for those desperately seeking employment.

In the aftermath of World War II, a panic broke out after news spread that the British military authorities planned to replace the Japanese “banana” money that was in use, causing a run on shops and a soaring black market.

The ST tackled the issue squarely, devoting the entire front page to it, under the headline “Singapore’s Currency Upheaval”. While criticising official bungling in the roll-out of the plan, it nonetheless spelt out in detail how the authorities intended for the new currency to reach the people. That helped ease the panic.

“The incident underlined that a responsible independent newspaper could be more useful to the authorities than an official news sheet,” notes Turnbull.

NOT JUST FOR ‘TUAN’

One of the key turning points for the ST took place in the 1930s, when facing strong competition from the Malay Tribune, the ST management decided to cut its cover price to 5 cents. This would make it accessible to the working man, rather than being mainly for the “tuans” in society, as Turnbull puts it.

“The effect was instantaneous,” she adds, with the paper’s circulation nearly doubling to 15,000 in 1939, fending off the challenge from the Tribune.

This move, however, would change the “character, aims and ambitions” of the ST.

“The newspaper was not vulnerable from quality competition, because the market for a quality paper was limited and remained so. The challenge came from popular appeal, and henceforth The Straits Times had to maintain a delicate balancing act, between keeping up its quality and making the paper a lively read.”

That seminal move would turn the ST into the mass market broadsheet that most Singapore readers know today.

This delicate balancing act between quality and popular fare would remain as the paper grew its reach over the years, with circulations rising as the population rose and became more educated, in line with Singapore’s progress over the post independence years.

Other similarly complex balances had to be struck, as Turnbull notes, such as between the

But the great impetus for change is likely to come from technology involving competition from multimedia, which could mean that any restrictions on the foreign press will become irrelevant. Indeed this poses the threat that newspapers themselves will become irrelevant, or at least no longer the chief source of news.



— BRITISH HISTORIAN MARY TURNBULL, in her history of The Straits Times, titled *Dateline Singapore*

digital shift, hitting all newsrooms hard.

A recent review of the impact of the pandemic on the industry by the World Editors Forum (WEF), which I lead, found that many newsrooms were reeling from plunges in advertising revenues, of up to 80 per cent, as well as drops in takings from events, conferences, e-commerce and other revenue generating projects as well.

Some, alas, will not survive this crisis. Yet, ironically, the pandemic – and the proliferation of fake news along with it – has also shown the vital importance of professional newsrooms, with experienced and authoritative correspondents, trusted by readers and newsmakers alike, to communicate complex issues in a credible and compelling way.

In the light of a potentially existential challenge, media groups have responded by seeking out other sources of revenues wherever they could find it, as the WEF review found.

Some have turned to wealthy billionaires for support, but this has a clear downside of putting the considerable power of the press in a few, not always benign, hands.

Others have sought to draw more revenues from readers through subscriptions and memberships, as this newspaper is doing. A few big players have made progress with this, but many smaller, local ones will struggle to do so.

States have also stepped in with grants, wage support schemes and advertising revenues to help newsrooms survive.

Then there are those which are seeking to become public trusts, which has the advantage of allowing

the newsroom to focus on its core public service mission, with support from the community, to continue to playing this vital role.

Some media analysts have warned of the risks of a rise of “news deserts” – whole communities unserved or under-served by any newsroom reporting on them – or an emerging “news divide”. This could see a paying elite audience, small and well-served by quality titles, set apart from a broader public that relies on online publishers or social media players that seek to monetise Web traffic, going for sensational, attention grabbing headlines, but with neither the means, nor the interest, to delve deeper in to any public issues.

The upshot of this is sobering. As Oxford University’s Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism director Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen lamented to the Financial Times in a recent report, “a lot of communities will lose their local source of news, and a lot of stories will not be covered because there will not be anyone to cover them.”

Put simply, news organisations with a public service mission have played a critical role in the proper functioning of democratic societies over the years.

They will survive only if the communities they serve value them enough to forge the necessary economic and social underpinnings necessary to ensure that they do. **ST**

The author is also President of the World Editors Forum, a global network of editors, under the World Association of News Publishers.

More chapters to be written in story of Singapore, and ST, says PM Lee

<https://str.sg/JsD2>



ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

LESLIE FONG, 71

ST Editor (1987-2002)

(My belief that ST should be a platform for meaningful, informed and

rational conversation with itself) should remain a worthwhile goal for the ST today, all the more so because of the preponderance and cacophony of fake news, half-truths, echo chambers and all manner of abuses of the online media.



HAN FOOK KWANG, 67

ST Editor (2002-2012)

The biggest challenge for any editor of the

ST is covering the Government because it has very strong views about the role of newspapers in Singapore. Sometimes we get criticised for not covering them enough while critics say we report the Government too much. When both sides complain I think we get it about right.



PATRICK DANIEL, 65

SPH Editor-in-Chief, English/Malay/Tamil Media Group (2007 to 2016)

The days when ST enjoyed profit margins above 30 per cent are gone

– savaged by the technology platforms which have sucked up the bulk of advertising revenues. I’m convinced that newspapers have to find a new ownership model to survive – either be owned by a billionaire or convert to a public trust. I much prefer the latter, and predict ST will go that way and live to celebrate its 200th anniversary.



RAVI VELLOOR
Associate Editor



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Plugged in & punching above our weight...

We straddle the world

ST continues to strengthen its reach overseas with correspondents in more than a dozen locations giving a local perspective to global issues

IN MARCH LAST YEAR, THE FOREIGN PRESS Centre Japan (FPCJ) organised a symposium on A Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Moderated by a senior commentator for Nikkei and including a Law professor from Keio University, the journalists on the panel were veteran New York Times security and diplomatic writer Steven Lee Myers who is currently the paper's Beijing bureau chief, Gideon Rachman, chief foreign affairs commentator for The Financial Times, and myself.

That the FPCJ thought it important to include The Straits Times in the discussion underscored the recognition the newspaper has gained in the past quarter-century for its authoritative coverage and commentary of the shifting geopolitical landscape and domestic transitions of the Asia Pacific region.

Much of it stems from the vision of Mr Cheong Yip Seng, who was Editor-in-Chief of this paper for a full two decades until retirement in December, 2006. His approach was endorsed and enhanced by the two editors who succeeded him in that position, Patrick Daniel, and current editor-in-chief Warren Fernandez. Last year, Mr Fernandez was elected President of the World Editors Forum – clear recognition of the paper's standing among the tallest masts in journalism.

In 1981, the ST had just one overseas correspondent and he was based in Bangkok. By 1992, it had a network of overseas correspondents, contributors and home staff totalling 48. Since 2012, when Warren took over as editor, the foreign desk strength, which had grown to 66, has been tightened to 48, then further to 40. This was achieved by shedding support staff in order to support a constellation of experienced writers. While the HQ operations was tightened, the number of correspondents in the field grew to 30.

A further flow of news through Asian eyes comes from ST's participation in the Asia News Network, an exchange agreement of more than 20 Asian newspapers.

"It was a shame that we were looking at our region largely through foreign eyes," Mr Cheong

wrote in *OB Markers*, a book recounting his Straits Times journey, as he explained his decision to invest in content rather than through Western wire agencies alone. "From the corporate angle, using foreign agency copy was cost-effective. But it shortchanged our readers, and did not strengthen the paper for the long haul."

Although handed what essentially was a comfortable monopoly in a growing economy – the freesheet Today did not show up until the turn of the century and SPH owned 40 per cent of it in any case – Mr Cheong had realised early on that while commodity news can win you eyeballs and page views, it was the quality editorial that lends a newspaper the gravitas to command an advertising premium.

These days, the ST footprint spans every important Asean capital, the top four Asian economies – China, Japan, India and South Korea – as well as correspondents in Washington and London – reporting and interpreting events and trends to an audience of educated, travelling and investing Asians as well as outsiders interested in the region. And the task of producing the most authoritative coverage of the Asian region and the global flows that feed into it falls on a mix of talent that include people sent from headquarters and local hires.

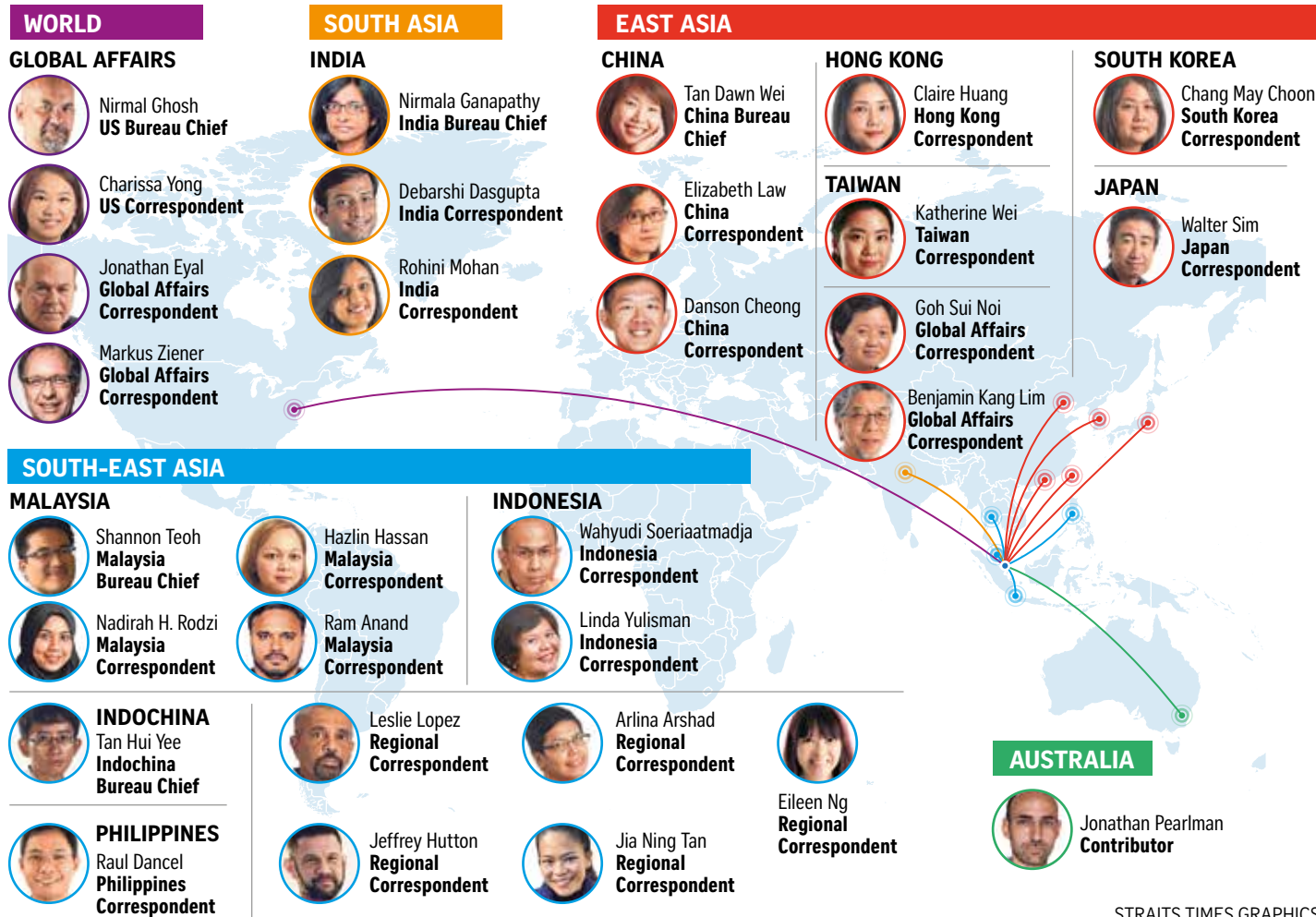
They also come from varied backgrounds; Dawn Tan, China bureau chief, Walter Sim in Japan and Chang May Choon in South Korea are Singaporeans who speak and read the local language comfortably. On the other hand, Indonesia Correspondent Wahyudi Soeriatmaadja, who usually is the first to be tipped off to any major breaking news in his sprawling nation, is a Jakarta native who came to ST from Bloomberg News.

That overseas presence is backed by headquarters staff, many with deep subject interests such as environment, or China.

Last September, Warren named the Foreign Desk's David Fogarty to be the paper's first Climate Change Editor, a title that has since begun to show up at many news platforms, including David's former employer, Reuters. Goh Sui Noi, whose China commentaries are well-followed, draws on experience gained from postings in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China. Connie Er, assistant foreign editor, spent three months in China in 1998 working with Beijing Review and went back four years later to spend three months in Peking University studying global public policy.

The paper also made a significant talent acquisition last year when it hired the North-east

ST Global Correspondents



STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Asia expert Benjamin Kang Lim. A former Beijing bureau chief for Reuters, Ben shot to global fame in 2007 for accurately naming Xi Jinping, then on nobody's radar, as among two likely next-generation candidates to be elected to the powerful Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party by the 17th Party Plenum. Until then, party plenums only tended to project a single next generation leader and all eyes had been on Li Keqiang.

A Filipino, the 61-year-old Ben has spent 43 years in Taipei and Beijing. Along with US bureau chief Nirmal Ghosh and global affairs writer Jonathan Eyal, who works at a think-tank in London, he is part of a team of highly experienced writers interpreting Asia for the world.

What's more, foreign coverage, once seen as an adjunct to the home news pages, gets prime position in print – the World section is positioned just after Top Stories in the newspaper's layout. Little wonder that in 2009, when the inaugural Journalist of the

Year for SPH's English Malay Newspaper Division was announced, it went to ST's Nirmal Ghosh, who was based in Thailand at the time. The same year, another foreign desk hand, Kuala Lumpur-based Leslie Lopez won Story of the Year for his scoop on a Jemaah Islamiah man with links to the Sept 11 attacks winning freedom.

SCOOP ARTIST

Journalists live to break news and Lopez has had more than a few, including the stunning scoop in May 2009 of the Singaporean terror suspect Mas Selamat's capture in Malaysia. Two years ago, his insider account of the political manoeuvrings before the Malaysian King invited Dr Mahathir Mohamad to form a Cabinet was among the top-read stories of the year. The 57-year-old Lopez's insights into politics are enhanced by having been a business correspondent in Jakarta and Manila for SPH publications and the Asian Wall Street Journal.

It was a shame that we were looking at our region largely through foreign eyes. From the corporate angle, using foreign agency copy was cost-effective. But it shortchanged our readers, and did not strengthen the paper for the long haul.

”

— CHEONG YIP SENG
Former Editor-in-Chief

Like at every news organisation, ST correspondents abroad have had their forgettable moments as well. One of the most dire was suffered by the Hong Kong-based China specialist Ching Cheong, who was jailed for three years by Chinese authorities between 2005 and 2008.

While he was charged with spying for Taiwan – charges he robustly denied – many thought he had paid a price for being too accurate in his predictions of the new line-up of Chinese leaders. ST editors stood by him throughout his ordeal.

Meanwhile, US bureau chief Ghosh, a committed environmentalist, epitomises the modern ST foreign correspondent. After Warren Fernandez began transforming ST into a true multimedia operation, Ghosh was one of the early adopters. Today, from his Washington DC perch he does a weekly video feature Asian Insider, drawing upon his experience gained over postings in Manila, New Delhi and Thailand. Like him, it is commonplace for ST correspondents to be now doing their own video, taking pictures – and appearing on radio shows.

NOT POLITICS ALONE

There was a time when the Political desk was thought to be the surefire springboard for a swift ascend to the top of ST’s editorial ladder. While stints on PolDesk, as it is called, is no doubt a bonus, the newspaper’s leadership has found it useful to rotate promising staffers through Foreign as well.

As the top news outlet serving a nation hugely dependent on the outside world – trade, for instance, is three times Singapore’s GDP—it could not have been otherwise. Warren distinguished himself as foreign editor before moving up as deputy editor, then returning as editor after a stint at Royal Dutch Shell, Plc, gaining valuable insights into business.

Today’s next generation bench of newsroom leaders, which include News Editor Zakir Hussain, Foreign Editor Jeremy Au Yong and Enterprise Editor Li Xueying, all pack overseas and foreign desk experience, in addition to stints in PolDesk.

Zakir’s mature grasp of Indonesian politics, Jeremy’s elegant reportage of American affairs and Xueying’s 360-degree coverage of Hong Kong – often balancing it with difficult pregnancies – hugely embellished ST’s coverage before they were pulled back to strengthen the headquarters team.

So did Peh Shing Huei, who has since left the newspaper to start a private venture. Indeed, Peh got a fine book out of his stint in Beijing, *When The Party Ends*, and he has gone on to write well-received biographies of Philip Yeo and Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong.

The critical-but-never-cynical approach to news is what continues to distinguish ST’s overseas reporting from that of some of its global peers. ST overseas correspondents are taught to separate news from comment, and to minimise value judgments.

Much of it no doubt stems from the island’s own

approach to the world – friend of all, enemy to none and a nation that stands for an open, inclusive approach to regional affairs. **ST**

Ravi Velloor was formerly foreign editor and ST’s South Asia bureau chief.

Jemaah Islamiah’s reign of terror, 2001 onwards

Soon after the 9/11 attacks, the uneasiness of a terror network existing in Singapore, and the region, became public in early 2002 when officials revealed that 15 terror suspects had been arrested here.

Therein began a chase to identify and nab others involved, bust bomb plots and assassination attempts and work with countries in the region to quash the militant network Jemaah Islamiah (JI).

It was found that JI had links to the Al-Qaeda network behind the 9/11 attacks. Suspects had planned attacks on US and Israeli embassies in Singapore. Videos were found of a JI plot to attack the Yishun MRT station. Amid the hunt, that lasted several years, the leader of a group of Singapore JI members Mas Selamat Kastari, who had plotted to hijack a plane in Bangkok and crash it into Changi Airport, escaped from the Whitley detention centre. On May 8, 2009, The Straits Times broke the news that the fugitive had been captured in Johor. **ST**



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World Watch

China's secret deal with Iran

Experts say that the deal merely fleshes out the 2016 agreement, and should be viewed as Teheran floating a trial balloon

AGAINST A BACKDROP OF WORSENING BILATERAL relations with the United States, a purported secret deal between China and Iran involving some US\$400 billion (\$554 billion) of Chinese investments in the Islamic Republic over 25 years, took place.

The deal sparked concerns that it could recalibrate geopolitics and pose a potential strategic challenge to the US but analysts say this is essentially the fleshing out of a prior agreement from 2016, and should be viewed as Teheran floating a trial balloon.

Details of a purported final draft of a strategic agreement – ranging from infrastructure development and military cooperation to oil trade – were leaked to the press in July. The draft detailed over 100 projects in Iran, including airports, high-speed rails and subways, with China setting up three free trade zones across the country and continuing to purchase Iranian crude.

This sparked furious debate in Iran, with critics accusing the government of secretly selling out the

country to China. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who had negotiated the deal in Beijing last year, faced fierce questioning in Parliament.

Extensively covered in the Iranian press, it was met with near silence in China.

As the Trump administration continues with its maximum pressure campaign against Iran, while engaged in hostilities on multiple fronts with China, it would appear that Washington has pushed Teheran towards Beijing.

But the reality is far more complex than that, said former Chinese ambassador to Iran Hua Liming, noting China's lack of acknowledgement about the draft.

"This is something that has been stirred up by the Iranians and turned into a political problem," Mr Hua told The Straits Times, adding that the unfair trade deals suggested by critics "go against the spirit of Chinese diplomacy."

"In a way, it's also the Iranian government trying to gauge public reaction to a deal before trying to fine-tune it."

During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Iran in 2016, both sides agreed to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which was put on the back burner until the middle of last year when the Iranian economy started to feel the effects of renewed sanctions after the US pulled out of a 2015 nuclear agreement.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani accompanying Chinese President Xi Jinping during a welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace in Teheran in 2016.

PHOTO: EPA-EFE

ELIZABETH LAW
China Correspondent



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Iranian-Americans protesting in front of the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles against China's bypassing of US sanctions in doing business with Iran.
PHOTO: AFP

The draft that appeared in July is simply a more detailed version of what had previously been agreed, said Mr Jacopo Scita, an Al-Sabah doctoral fellow at Durham University. Both sides have suggested more negotiations are needed before it is ready and even then, it would have to be tabled in Iran's Parliament.

Yet even then, the document lacks concrete figures and actual deadlines, he added.

"From the Iranian perspective, it's a good opportunity to send a message to the US saying "you

try to isolate us, but we can resist your sanctions' and also 'we have a sort of partner in the form of China, who is willing to cut a long-term deal," Mr Scita said.

Still, domestic critics have pointed to previous Chinese investment projects that have left states in Africa and Asia indebted and beholden to Beijing, with one of the most vocal being former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Dr Alessandro Arduino of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore said: "The relationship between China and Iran is not in a vacuum. There's always the US in it and one always has to look at it in terms of a triangular relationship."

But with China still trying to recover from the impact of the coronavirus outbreak while at odds with the US on diplomatic and economic fronts, there appears to be little more to gain for Beijing, which is one of Iran's remaining trade partners.

"Essentially, it's not going to be a game-changer; while it might shift (Iran) to look towards Asia rather than Europe, all parties, especially China, will still be very careful because they don't want to incur the wrath of the US," he added. **S**

India's involvement in Iran railway project shrouded in uncertainty

NIRMALA GANAPATHY

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In New Delhi



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AS IRAN MOVES TO FINALISE A MULTI-MILLION-dollar trade and military agreement with China, one of its key infrastructure projects involving India appears to have run into problems.

Teheran has had to deny Indian media reports that it ousted India from the railway project connecting Chabahar Port to Iran's border with Afghanistan.

Since 2003, India has been involved in the development of Chabahar Port, which gives it access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Pakistan has been reluctant to give India access to Afghanistan through its territory.

India's involvement in the railway project became uncertain after Teheran started work on it early in July on its own.

There is also little clarity on whether the railway project is exempt from United States sanctions, imposed on Iran because of its nuclear programme.

India and Iran have long civilisational and traditional ties which have been under strain amid years of US pressure on New Delhi to cut back on its exposure to Iran.

US sanctions have made it difficult for India to maintain trade ties with Iran or move fast on the crucial Chabahar Port Project.

Indian analysts say that Iran is blowing hot and cold on the railway project to strengthen its hand

in negotiations.

"India is reasonably well positioned because at the end of the day, the one country that has delivered in Iran despite all the problems is India. It (Chabahar) is operational. It is a remarkable achievement. India can't make the port operational to a point that it becomes a hub. That will only happen if Iran becomes a global actor and more tankers and foreign companies come to the port," noted Professor Harsh V. Pant from the Observer Research Foundation think tank in New Delhi.

"There is a lot of consternation (in India with what has happened) with the railway line. If you look at the evolution of Chabahar, Iran has said it is open to everyone else, even Pakistan. They (Iran) have always used it (Chabahar) as a leverage."

Teheran has continued to feel that India has not done as much as it can and has often complained of New Delhi succumbing to pressure from Washington.

Meanwhile, New Delhi is monitoring Iran's growing links with China.

"Iran is a beleaguered country," noted former diplomat Talmiz Ahmad.

"If you were Iran, you would look around for partners and friends. China is a very important partner for them. Iran needs investments and technology and defence support," he added. **S**



Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin succeeded in replacing the Speaker with a majority of just two votes in the 222-member legislature.
PHOTO: REUTERS

Country Report

Muhyiddin's slim win shows pressing need for stronger mandate

Experts say that the deal merely fleshes out the 2016 agreement, and should be viewed as Teheran floating a trial balloon

PRIME MINISTER MUHYIDDIN YASSIN HAS finally put to rest doubts over the legitimacy of his government by winning a vote in Parliament on July 13, but the victory confirmed his slim majority and showed the need for fresh polls to establish a concrete mandate.

Tan Sri Ariff Yusof, elected as Speaker after the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition's shock win at the May 2018 polls, was removed by a majority of just two votes in Malaysia's 222-member legislature. But his replacement, Datuk Azhar Harun, may not preside over Parliament for long given how the fledgling Perikatan Nasional (PN) pact toiled to get its way.

Not only was Mr Ariff removed by a narrow 111 to 109 scoreline, but Mr Azhar and a new deputy speaker also were installed without MPs voting on the matter – the official line being that they were elected unopposed as no alternative was proposed.

The PH-led opposition predictably cried foul. Their claim that a 14-day notice is required to name a candidate to fill such vacancies was dismissed.

Amid continued uproar from the opposition bench, the Muhyiddin administration moved to adjourn the sitting for the day despite minutes earlier proposing changes to the Committee of Selection, which appoints members of other parliamentary panels.

The need for such machinations for PN to get things done in Parliament only crystallises the fact that snap elections are needed, especially given how the opposition can block government business if there are just four absentees from the ruling bench.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Maximus Ongkili was absent owing to health reasons, and with no clear end to the coronavirus pandemic in sight, it is conceivable that several PN

SHANNON TEOH

Malaysia Bureau Chief



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lawmakers could be simultaneously incapacitated in the future.

This means practically the entire Cabinet will have to shift its focus from administrative duties to ensuring the safe passage of government Bills when Parliament is in session. Crucial measures to facilitate policies to counter the fallout of the Covid-19 outbreak – including RM45 billion (S\$14.7 billion) in stimulus spending – need to be approved during the current sitting which continues to the end of August, while Budget 2021 is due to be tabled in November.

“His first parliamentary victory is a very significant milestone and one that gives Muhyiddin a bit more credibility, but he remains in a fairly precarious position with such a wafer-thin majority. This increases the likelihood of snap polls, unless the government ranks are quickly bolstered with defections,” political risk consultancy Eurasia

Group’s Asia director Peter Mumford told The Straits Times.

But since being sworn in as Premier on March 1 after defecting from PH with about 40 other MPs, Tan Sri Muhyiddin has expended most of his resources defending his majority, rather than increasing it. In fact, the May 18 sitting to hear the King’s annual opening speech saw 114 representatives lined up in the government benches, but the results on July 13 show PN has just 113 MPs, one more than the minimum 112 needed to form a majority.

ST reported in June that Mr Muhyiddin has already been rallying his Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia to gear up to face the ballot box, with internal polls indicating Malaysians largely approve of his government’s handling of the coronavirus crisis.

Since then, parties allied to him have pressed for

Japan hits out at China in annual defence review

Tokyo accuses Beijing of pushing territorial claims and spreading virus disinformation

JAPAN HAS ACCUSED CHINA OF UNILATERALLY pushing its territorial claims in the region and of spreading disinformation and propaganda in the Covid-19 fight.

Tokyo vowed to “strengthen its defence capability at speeds that are fundamentally different from the past” in its annual defence review, issued on July 14, which also discussed perennial security threats, such as North Korea and emergent risks in cyber and space warfare. The harshest language in the 597-page report was reserved for China, which the report said had “relentlessly continued unilateral attempts to change the status quo by coercion” over a disputed group of islets in the East China Sea that Japan calls the Senkakus. China calls them the Diaoyus.

It also accused Beijing of “moving forward with militarisation, as well as expanding and intensifying its activities in the maritime and aerial domains” of the South China Sea to “create a fait accompli”.

The pointed criticism followed similar rhetoric in Washington on July 13. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea as a “campaign of bullying” to assert influence in a waterway where US\$3 trillion (S\$4.2 trillion) of global trade passes through each year.

Meanwhile, at a regular press briefing in Beijing,



Japan should be pushing for a more robust Quad, with clearly defined aims, as well as a free and open Indo-Pacific strategy, where the ‘strategy’ is emphasised – rather than it being just a mere ‘vision’.



– TOSH MINOHARA,
Kobe University security expert

WALTER SIM

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In Tokyo



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Parliament to be dissolved sooner rather than later, especially with the opposition still at loggerheads over who should lead them if they manage to regain power.

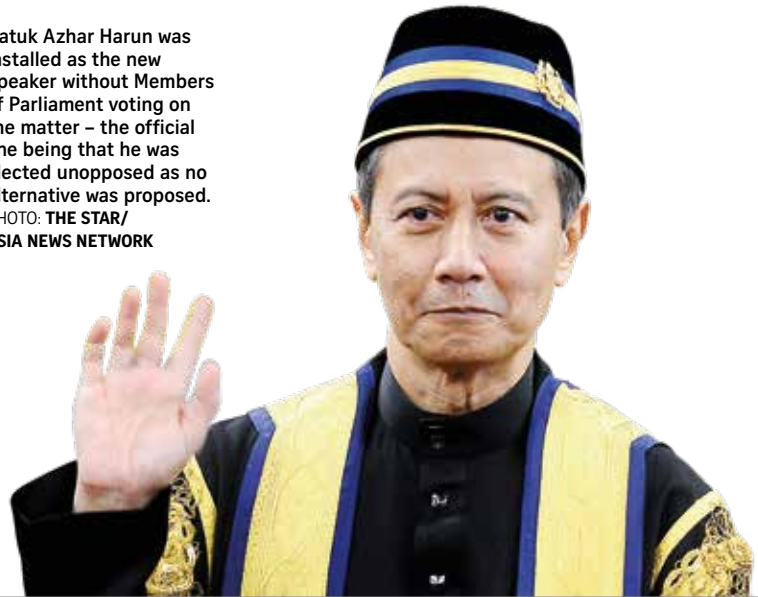
Umno, the largest member of PN, has in the past week backed the Premier to continue leading after an election, but attached a caveat that this stance is “for now.”

Meanwhile, Parti Islam SeMalaysia youth chief Khairil Nizam said the thin margin of victory in the Speaker vote “is a strong signal to ensure the strengthening of government must be carried out by surrendering back the mandate to choose to the public... as soon as possible”

But official sources say Mr Muhyiddin is preparing to launch at least one more stimulus plan – the fifth by Malaysia since February – to bolster an economy that is set to contract this year, with unemployment already at a three-decade high. **ST**

Datuk Azhar Harun was installed as the new Speaker without Members of Parliament voting on the matter – the official line being that he was elected unopposed as no alternative was proposed.

PHOTO: THE STAR/
ASIA NEWS NETWORK



Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian hit back at Japan's report, saying it was “full of prejudice and false information against China.”

“It strives to incite and disinform against China, painting China as a threat,” Mr Zhao said, adding that Beijing has launched stern representations to Tokyo.

“As a responsible major country, China is committed to peaceful development and regional diplomacy in that we treat our neighbours with kindness and as partners. We pursue a defence policy that is defensive in nature. We are a builder and contributor to world peace, stability, and

A Japanese ship Koyo Maru sails around three tiny islands in the East China Sea, called Senkaku in Japanese and Diaoyu in Chinese.

PHOTO: KYODO NEWS

prosperity,” he said.

Among Japan's key defence projects in the fiscal year ending next March is the construction of two destroyers, a submarine and a mine-sweeping vessel, as well as the purchase of three patrol aircraft and seven patrol helicopters.

These projects are among planned spending that will push the defence budget up by 1.2 per cent to 5.07 trillion yen (\$65.8 billion), though this is still a quarter that of China's, which Tokyo asserts has been “sustained without transparency over more than 30 years.”

Japan's White Paper also pointed the finger at China for trying to spread propaganda and disinformation amid growing uncertainty and confusion as it provides aid to nations fighting Covid-19.

A Japanese Defence Ministry official, speaking to reporters, cited claims including that the coronavirus was brought to China by the US and that Chinese herbal remedies were effective against it.

“The Covid-19 pandemic may expose and intensify strategic competition among countries intending to create international and regional orders more preferable to themselves and to expand their influence,” the report said. “We need to closely watch such moves with great concern as security issues.”

Reacting to the report, Kobe University security expert Tosh Minohara told The Straits Times that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, comprising the US, Japan, Australia and India, has to be more coordinated as Beijing and Moscow grow closer. He said: “Japan should be pushing for a more robust Quad, with clearly defined aims, as well as a free and open Indo-Pacific strategy, where the ‘strategy’ is emphasised – rather than it being just a mere ‘vision.’” **ST**

Beijing launches independent Mars mission

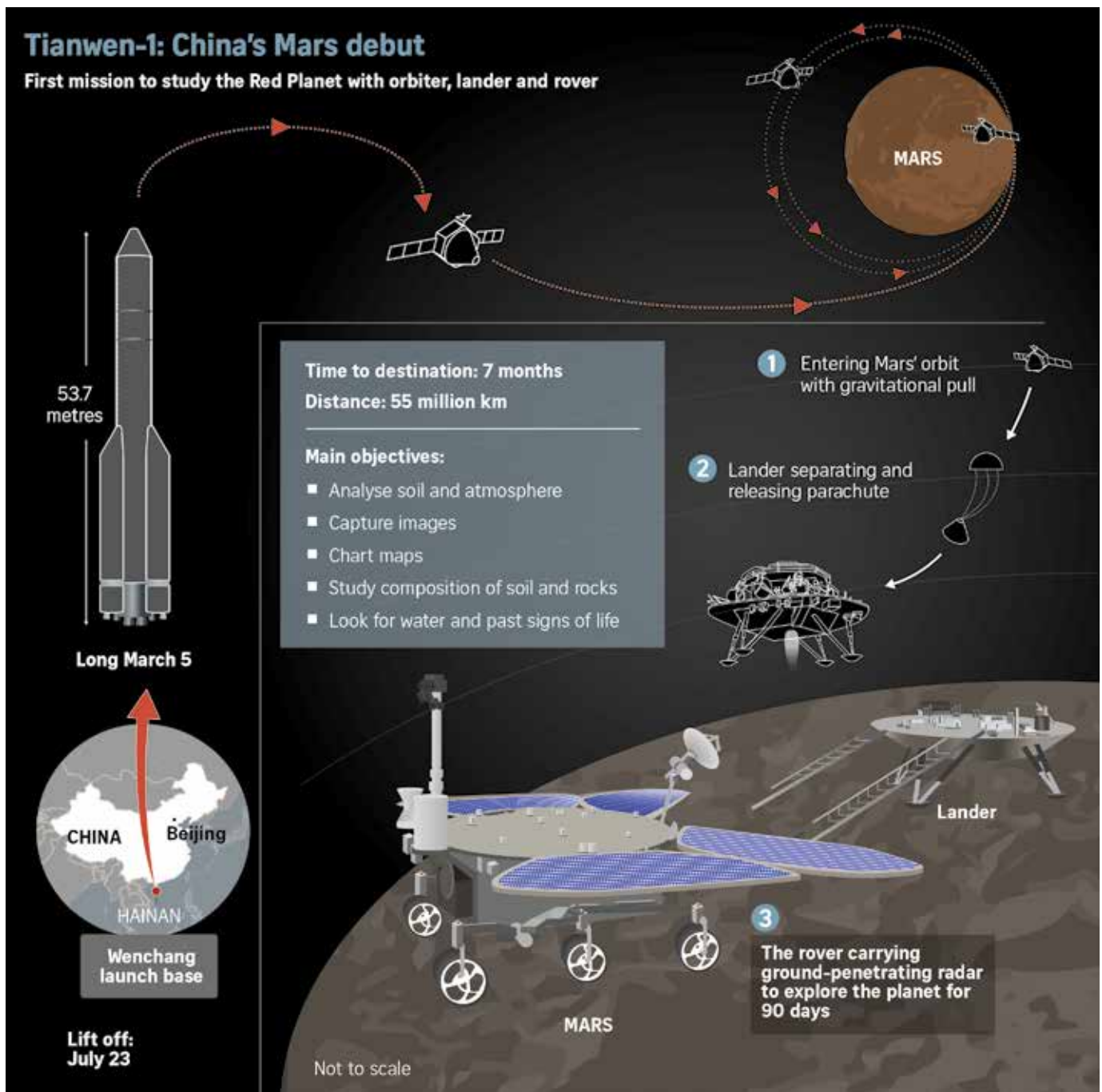
If successful, the inaugural Mars mission will make China the first country to orbit, land and deploy a rover.



The Long March 5 Y-4 rocket took off from Wenchang Space Launch Centre in Hainan on July 23, 2020.
PHOTO: **REUTERS**

Tianwen-1: China's Mars debut

First mission to study the Red Planet with orbiter, lander and rover



GRAPHICS: AFP

CHINA LAUNCHED AN UNMANNED PROBE TO Mars on July 23 in its first independent mission to another planet, a bid for global leadership in space and a display of its technological prowess and ambition.

China's largest carrier rocket, the Long March 5 Y-4, blasted off with the probe at 12.41pm from Wenchang Space Launch Centre on the southern island of Hainan.

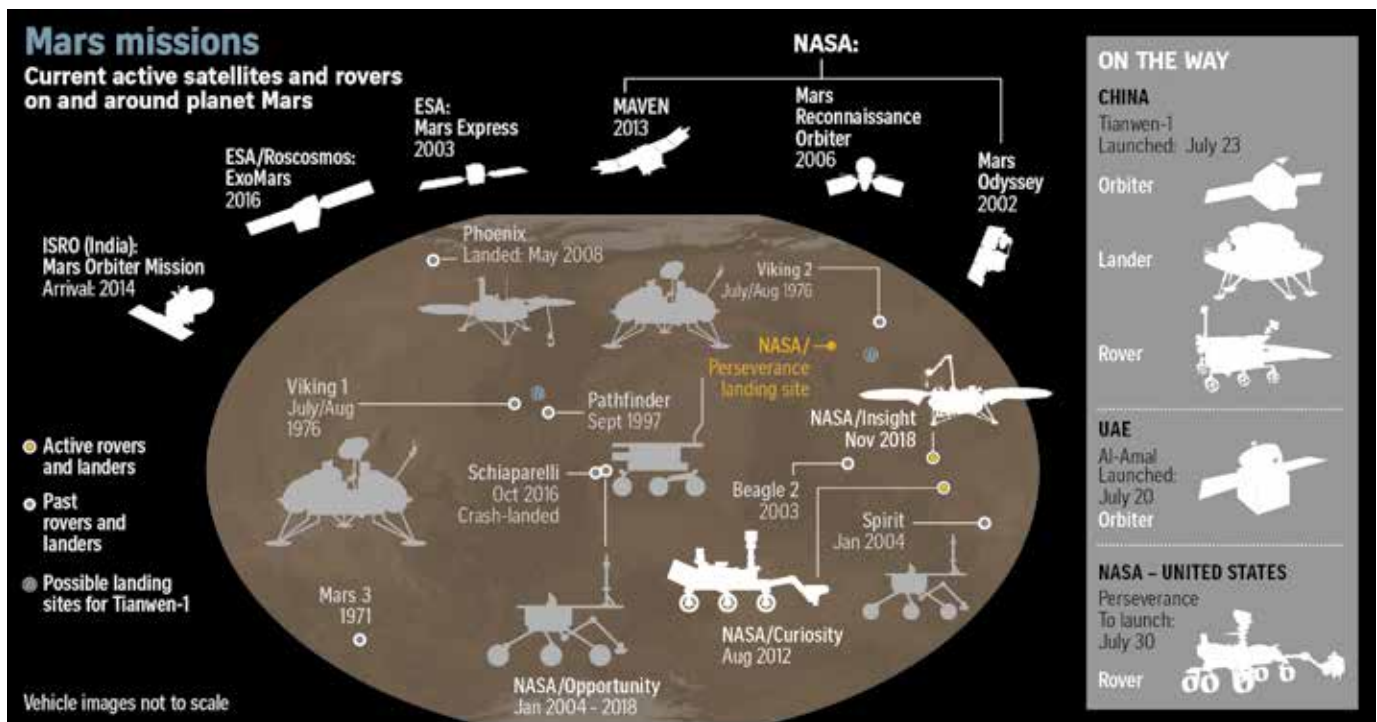
The probe is expected to reach Mars in February, where it will attempt to deploy a rover to explore

the planet for 90 days.

If successful, the Tianwen-1, or "Questions to Heaven", which is the name of a poem written two millennia ago, will make China the first country to orbit, land and deploy a rover in its inaugural mission.

There will be challenges ahead as the craft nears Mars, Mr Liu Tongjie, spokesman for the mission, told reporters ahead of the launch.

"When arriving in the vicinity of Mars, it is very critical to decelerate," he said. "If the deceleration



GRAPHICS: AFP

process is not right, or if flight precision is not sufficient, the probe would not be captured by Mars," he said, referring to gravity on Mars taking the craft down to the surface.

Mr Liu said the probe would orbit Mars for about 2½ months and look for an opportunity to enter its atmosphere and make a soft landing. "Entering, deceleration and landing (EDL) is a very difficult (process). We believe China's EDL process can still be successful, and the spacecraft can land safely," he said.

Eight spacecraft - American, European and Indian - are either orbiting Mars or on its surface with other missions under way or planned.

The United Arab Emirates launched a mission to Mars on July 20, an orbiter that will study the planet's atmosphere.

The United States has plans to send a probe in the coming months that will deploy a rover called Perseverance, the biggest, heaviest, most advanced vehicle sent to the Red Planet by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa).

China's probe will carry several scientific instruments to observe the planet's atmosphere and surface, searching for signs of water and ice.

China previously made a Mars bid in 2011 with Russia, but the Russian spacecraft carrying the probe failed to exit the Earth's orbit and disintegrated over the Pacific Ocean.

A fourth planned launch for Mars, the EU-Russian ExoMars, was postponed for two years due to the coronavirus pandemic and technical issues. **ST**

- REUTERS



The rocket carrying China's Tianwen-1 Mars rover is seen after liftoff in Wenchang, China. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

New devices & technologies to fight Covid-19

Tech wearables for early Covid-19 detection

Local medical technology start-up Respiree aims to deploy respiratory bio-markers to predict worsening conditions in Covid-19 patients in isolation rooms.

USING WEARABLES FOR COVID-19 CONTACT tracing has been in the news, with 10,000 seniors here given the first batch of the TraceTogether tokens in July.

However, researchers and technology companies around the world, including those in Singapore, are finding another related application for wearables, or wearable technology devices – monitor and detect Covid-19, including at an early stage before its symptoms surface.

Finland-based smart ring maker Oura grabbed headlines in June when the National Basketball Association (NBA) in the United States said it would provide NBA players and staff with Oura's smart rings for the restart of the season on July 30. Researchers from the West Virginia University Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute said in April that the Oura ring has been successful in recognising Covid-19 symptoms up to three days in advance with 90 per cent accuracy.

Fitness wearables firms Garmin and Fitbit recently announced efforts to harness the data collected by their smartwatches and fitness trackers to detect Covid-19. Meanwhile, the efforts in Singapore have so far been focused on in-house instead of off-the-shelf wearables.

Local medical technology start-up Respiree, a spinoff from the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star), has been working with the National University Hospital (NUH) and National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (NUS Medicine) since March to develop predictive models using respiratory rate and breathing variability, to detect clinical deterioration in patients suffering from acute respiratory failure and pneumonia. The aim: To deploy respiratory bio-markers to predict worsening conditions in Covid-19 patients in isolation rooms.

For the hospital trials, the Respiree solution uses two wearables, one attached to the chest and the other clipped over a finger, to measure vital parameters such as respiratory rate, breathing pattern variability and pulse oximetry or blood oxygen level. The data from patients in isolated rooms are sent wirelessly to a unified dashboard in real-time every five minutes.

NUS Medicine associate professor Lee Pyng, who is also a senior consultant in NUH's respiratory and critical care medicine division, says the algorithms that detect clinical deterioration incorporate depth of breathing – which is not a parameter the hospital

Wearables allow round-the-clock data collection, giving researchers a window into one's health and habits. PHOTO: RESPIREE

TREVOR TAN

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Local medical technology start-up Respiree's wearable is being used to detect symptoms of Covid-19. PHOTO: RESPIREE

Dr Gurpreet Singh, founder of Respiree and senior research fellow at A*Star's Singapore Bioimaging Consortium, adds that nurses can now monitor patient vitals without needing to enter isolated rooms, thus mitigating their risk of infection and saving on personal protective gear.



routinely measures – as well as respiratory rate to improve the sensitivity of detection. She says that in this instance, manual monitoring of respiratory and pulse rates “is not accurate” as healthcare workers take measurements every four hours compared with the wearables’ continuous measurement.

She says the ability to identify Covid-19 patients at risk of clinical deterioration ahead of time will aid physicians in the correct siting of care for these patients, such as intensive care or high dependency units for closer monitoring, as well as the administration of therapies in a timely fashion, which can save lives.

Dr Gurpreet Singh, founder of Respiree and senior research fellow at A*Star's Singapore Bioimaging Consortium, adds that nurses can now monitor patient vitals without needing to enter isolated rooms, thus mitigating their risk of infection and saving on personal protective gear.

Respiree has received approval from the Health Sciences Authority for the use of its devices in Singapore, and is in the process of securing approval from the US Food and Drug Administration to commercialise its product globally.

Local smart wearables firm KaHa is also using in-house wearables, in the form of wrist bands, to monitor patients remotely and continuously, without the need for a caregiver to be in close contact.

The solution uses machine learning algorithms that process large and continuous data sets such as body temperature, heart rate, blood pressure, sleep levels and blood oxygen levels (SpO2), says KaHa's founder and CEO Pawan Gandhi.

KaHa's wrist bands can be used pre- and post-hospitalisation to provide vital health data outside of hospital premises for preventive care. The company's wearables and solutions have been deployed for back-to-work and back-to-school initiatives in Switzerland, the US, India and Singapore, says Mr Gandhi.

IMPACT OF CONSUMER WEARABLES

While bespoke wearables can be important tools to detect Covid-19, it might be off-the-shelf wearables that could make a larger impact on a broad scale.

Ms Aliyah Farouk, medical device analyst at data analytics and consulting firm GlobalData, says data collected from such wearable devices can be used to detect early signs of Covid-19 cases.

Mr Kenneth Liew, associate research director at research firm IDC Asia Pacific, says the key advantage of using consumer-grade wearables is that it is easier to get mass adoption.

Fitbit announced in April its collaboration with Scripps Research Translational Institute and Stanford Medicine in using Fitbit data to help detect, track and contain infectious diseases like Covid-19.

Dr Eric Topol, director and founder of Scripps

Research Translational Institute, said in a statement that “from our previously published work, we know that data collected from consumer wearables can significantly improve the prediction of influenza-like illness”.

The Stanford Healthcare Innovation Lab launched its Covid-19 wearables study in April to establish whether data collected from wearables, including those from Apple, Samsung, Fitbit, Oura and Garmin, can be used to predict the onset of an infectious disease such as Covid-19 before the actual symptoms start. The study is currently looking for volunteers in the US.

In June, Garmin announced that it is partnering PhysioQ, a non-profit organisation, to provide data for Covid-19 research. Garmin smartwatch users worldwide can choose to share their tracked health statistics, such as heart rate and SpO2, with PhysioQ's app called Neo, which will help researchers identify trends helpful in the larger fight against Covid-19.

Data from PhysioQ has been used by researchers in top US medical institutions including Harvard University, Berkeley University, Boston University, McGill University and Massachusetts General Hospital Research Institute.

Dr Andrew Ahn, assistant professor of Medicine and Radiology at Harvard Medical School, says: “Many diseases, not just Covid-19, are asymptomatic, especially in the beginning stages. This would mean potential patients don't know they have the disease or the precursor to the disease. However, wearable metrics can help to find many of these issues.”

Dr Ahn adds that the research on Covid-19 is currently concentrated on hospitalised patients and little is known about cases outside of the hospital. “There may also be unfortunate cases where individuals suffer an untimely death due to Covid-19 without ever reaching a hospital. As a result, data collected in hospitals is controlled and usually cleaner, but also skewed,” he says.

On the other hand, wearables allow round-the-clock data collection, giving researchers a window into one's health and habits, he says.

However, access and cost will be issues in using consumer wearables in fighting Covid-19.

“The geriatric population, the group most affected by Covid-19, are typically less experienced with technology. Furthermore, the high cost of some wearables devices may deter consumers from purchasing,” says Ms Farouk.

Another concern is privacy. “Since wearables often collect data using cloud storage systems, they can be vulnerable to cyber attack,” she warns.

Public relations associate Tabitha Ong, 25, who uses a Garmin smartwatch, believes the advantages outweigh the concerns.

“Honestly, there is a part of me that is worried about what my data will be used for and if it will be safe. But if contributing my data will help in Covid-19 research and the greater good, I don't see why I should not contribute,” she says. **ST**

Touchless tech gets a boost

Japan Inc is poised to ride the wave of anxiety over touching surfaces as hygiene concerns fuel demand for touch-less technology.

Among the new technology that has been rolled out is what are branded as "elevators of enhanced public hygiene" by lift maker Fujitec. The model comes with an optional add-on contactless panel feature that taps infrared sensor technology to detect a user's destination floor when they hover their hands over the dashboard.

IT services conglomerate Fujitsu, meanwhile, conducted a three-month field trial of a contactless, multi-biometric authentication and payment system.

Registered customers make payments using palm-vein authentication and facial recognition technology and weight sensors to identify the products that are taken. Payment is automatic when customers leave.

Another firm with ongoing field trials is NEC, which installed security gates that do not require people to remove their masks or sunglasses. Artificial intelligence is used to reference the exposed part of a face against a database of registered images.

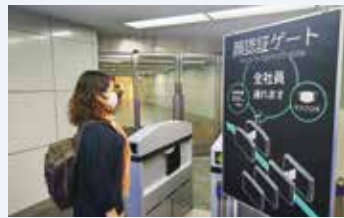


PHOTO: NEC

— Walter Sim, Japan Correspondent

Singapore creates reusable face shields for front liners

Singaporean defence technology body Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA) has created a new face shield for personnel on the front lines of the fight against the coronavirus.

Called FaceProtect+, the face shield is adjustable and reusable, and protects users and the people they interact with against accidental fluid splashes and droplets, the agency said.

The FaceProtect+ has a wider, longer and thicker visor as compared with commercial off-the-shelf versions and can be washed with soap and water after each use and subsequently reused.

The team at DSTA developed the first 3D printed prototype of the face shield in one week and produced the first batch in another four. This included "soliciting users' input, modifying the design and working with the manufacturer to finalise the tooling set up and material selection".



PHOTO: TEMASEK FOUNDATION

— Fabian Koh, Journalist

NUS scientists create foldable tent device to reduce virus exposure to medical staff

Researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) have invented a foldable tent-like device that acts as a physical shield against the virus while they perform medical procedures that generate droplets and aerosols.

The droplet- and aerosol-reducing tent (Dart), is a clear plastic tent measuring about 51cm by 40cm at its base and 55cm high. It is placed around a patient's head, and has four access ports where disposable sleeves can be attached for staff to reach in and safely perform medical procedures.

Constructed of polycarbonate panels and 3D-printed nylon joints, the device can be decontaminated for reuse by alcohol or steam sterilisation, or other methods used in hospitals. It weighs 3kg and can be folded flat for portability and easy storage.

Dart's research team has sent 25 prototypes for testing in various departments and hospitals. It will be commercialised after being refined based on feedback from the hospitals.

— Shabana Begum, Journalist



PHOTO: NUS

Self-check temperature kiosks being rolled out for commuters

Contactless kiosks that allow users to take their own temperature within two seconds are being rolled out at busy bus interchanges and MRT stations in Singapore.

Users stand in front of the kiosk and a thermal sensor detects the heat signature from their foreheads to provide a reading accurate to plus or minus 0.3 deg C. A green light indicates no fever, while an orange light will flash if the system detects elevated temperatures.

The machines have been deployed at five locations and will be available at 70 locations by the third quarter of this year. They will be there for up to a year.

The kiosks are a joint initiative by the MCCY, the Land Transport Authority and the Defence Science and Technology Agency, and were developed in collaboration with Singapore-based engineering company Hope Technik.

— Jessie Lim, Journalist



ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Demand spikes for UV sanitisers to clean phones

Many people in Singapore have been buying UV box sanitisers since the Covid-19 outbreak, to clean their carry-along items harbouring viruses and germs.

These pencil case-like gadgets come from a wide array of lesser-known electronic brands. A search on the website of online retailers Lazada and Shopee yielded products with brands such as Momax and Lexuma.



PHOTO: MOMAX

The local distributor of Lexuma's UV sanitisers, iMercury, says it used to sell at most 30 units a month here. In March, sales rocketed by more than five times compared with that in February.

While there seems to have been no definitive studies so far on the effectiveness of UV light itself as a germicide against Sars-CoV-2, Associate Professor Richard Sugrue from the School of Biological Sciences in Nanyang Technological University notes that UV light, in particular UV-C light, disrupts the DNA of germs and viruses, thereby killing them or rendering them inactive.

— Trevor Tan, Deputy Tech Editor



Najib Razak arriving at the Kuala Lumpur High Court, on July 28.
PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

People

Najib gets 12 years' jail, fine over graft case linked to 1MDB

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MALAYSIA'S FORMER PRIME MINISTER NAJIB Razak has been found guilty of corruption and sentenced to 12 years in jail and fined RM210 million (S\$68 million) in the first of five trials he faces relating to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) graft scandal.

Observers said that the verdict could severely dent Najib's hopes of staging a political comeback if a snap election were to be called soon.

On July 28, High Court judge Mohd Nazlan Mohd Ghazali found Najib, 67, guilty of every single charge, including abuse of power, and multiple counts of criminal breach of trust and money laundering for illegally receiving RM42 million from SRC International, a former subsidiary of 1MDB.

The sentences ranged between 10 years for each money laundering and criminal breach of trust charge and 12 years for abuse of power. Since they will run concurrently, it means Najib is required to serve up to a total of 12 years in prison.

The former prime minister remains free as he was granted a stay of execution pending his appeal against the verdict.

He agreed to post RM1 million bail and is required to report to the police twice a month.

Justice Mohd Nazlan, in his two-hour long judgment, dismissed Najib's claim that the RM42 million in his bank account was a donation from the Saudi Arabian royal family.

Najib, who spoke in court during the mitigation hearing, had claimed: "I did not demand the RM42 million, I did not plan for it, it was never offered to me... (there is) no evidence to say so."

Najib retains his parliamentary seat in Pekan, Pahang, pending the appeal, but he will not be able to contest a general election while the guilty verdict stands.

Meanwhile, Najib can remain as a Member of Parliament until the appeal process is exhausted, said Speaker of Parliament Azhar Azizan Harun.

Najib faces another 35 counts of corruption, abuse of power and money laundering in four other court cases relating to his role in the multibillion-dollar scandal involving 1MDB, the state fund he co-founded in 2009.

The charges were instituted under former ruling coalition Pakatan Harapan, after its shock win against Najib's Umno party in the May 2018 general election.

The United States authorities claim over US\$4.5 billion (S\$6.2 billion) was embezzled from 1MDB. [ST](#)

Thai PM Prayut faces high-stakes Cabinet reshuffle after resignations

THAILAND'S MUCH ANTICIPATED CABINET reshuffle began in a messy fashion on July 16 with the government's economic team quitting while Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha was away on a provincial trip.

Those who resigned were finance minister Uttama Savanayana, energy minister Sontirat Sontijirawong, higher education, science, research and innovation minister Suvit Maesincee and deputy secretary-general to the prime minister for political affairs Kobsak Pootrakool.

They left with about as little fanfare as when they first joined the Cabinet controlled by the previous military government.

In parting remarks to the press, Dr Uttama confirmed reports that the group's mentor, deputy prime minister and economic czar Somkid Jatusripitak, had also resigned.

Their departures leave a big void. If projections here come true, Thailand's economy is expected to



Those who resigned were finance minister Uttama Savanayana, energy minister Sontirat Sontijirawong, higher education, science, research and innovation minister Suvit Maesincee and deputy secretary-general to the prime minister for political affairs Kobsak Pootrakool. PHOTO: REUTERS

contract by 8.1 per cent for the year and lose some 10 million jobs. While this is an opportunity for Mr Prayut to revamp his administration, a misstep could lead to disaster, say analysts.

On one level, the resignations could not have come at a worse time. Bangkok is grappling with a crisis of confidence after lapses in Covid-19 control measures triggered panic about renewed community transmission.

A shake-up in the Cabinet would allow Mr Prayut to show that he is doing something about the crisis, said Mr Stithorn Thananithichot, a political scientist at King Prajadhipok Institute. "If he doesn't drop Somkid, how can he say he is responding to the New Normal?" he told The Straits Times.

But he added that the premier would need to act fast to restore confidence. "The people need to know what exactly the government wants to do to deal with the crisis, and who will take care of it, rather than whether now is the time for a reshuffle," he said. **ST**



Thai Premier Prayut Chan-o-cha needs to restore confidence, experts say. PHOTO: ROYAL THAI GOVERNMENT

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The controversial death of Seoul mayor Park Won-soon

TEARS WELLED UP IN MS YI BONG-MI'S EYES as she stood in line in front of the Seoul city hall, among hundreds of others who turned up on July 11 afternoon to pay respects to the late mayor Park Won-soon at a memorial altar.

Some were seen getting on their knees to give a big bow to the well-liked man who made history as

the longest-serving mayor of Seoul.

During his term, Mr Park promoted gender equality, introduced better welfare schemes and built more green spaces for people to enjoy.

The 64-year-old also put Seoul on the world map, the city winning international accolades such as the 2018 Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize for the city's innovative urban regeneration projects.

People had widely expected him to run for president next in 2022. Mr Park's daughter reported him missing on the evening of July 9, prompting a massive search involving more than 700 officers from the police and fire department. A police dog found his body in the woods of Mount Bugak in northern Seoul early the next day.

It appeared that he had ended his own life. The police are still investigating the exact cause of death, but have ruled out foul play.

Mr Park left a handwritten farewell note saying he was sorry and asking for his ashes to be scattered at his parent's grave.

His death came as a major shock, in the wake of reports that a secretary had filed a sexual harassment report against him the day before he went missing.

The case would be closed upon his death, in accordance with the law. However, there are also calls online for the sexual harassment case against Mr Park to be reopened so that justice can be served. **ST**

Mourners visiting a memorial for the late Seoul mayor Park Won-soon at the Seoul National University hospital in Seoul.

PHOTO: SEOUL CITY GOVERNMENT

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Ms Yuriko Koike prevailed over 21 challengers.
PHOTO: AFP



Tokyo's first woman governor Yuriko Koike wins big in re-election

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TOKYO GOVERNOR YURIKO KOIKE WAS RETURNED to a second term in office on July 5 with heavy bipartisan support across gender and age groups in a thrashing for her 21 contenders.

The 67-year-old, who is Tokyo's first female leader, clinched more than 3.5 million votes with 95 per cent of the votes counted. This was 4.3 times the 820,000 votes that her nearest challenger, lawyer Kenji Utsunomiya, 73, managed.

Placing third was Reiwa Shinsengumi opposition party leader Taro Yamamoto, 45, who described Ms Koike as the "insurmountably steep Mount Yuriko."

"I cannot feel completely happy (with this victory) as Tokyo is in the middle of a pandemic," Ms Koike, formerly defence and environment minister,

told a televised news conference.

She stressed that the recent resurgence in cases was due to more aggressive testing in nightlife districts. About 70 per cent of the recently infected are in their 20s or 30s with mild or no symptoms, and were either employees or visitors at nightlife entertainment districts, including Shinjuku and Ikebukuro.

Still, Ms Koike has urged Tokyo residents to avoid unnecessary travel to other prefectures after cases linked to the city were found in Fukushima and Tottori.

Ms Koike also stopped short of guaranteeing that the Olympic and Paralympic Games, which have been postponed to next year, will go ahead. But she said she will iron out the best way forward with stakeholders, including the International Olympic Committee.

The election to choose who leads Tokyo, a sprawling metropolis of 14 million residents and an economy the size of Indonesia's, was Japan's largest since the Covid-19 outbreak.

Voter turnout was 55 per cent, down 4.73 percentage points from the last poll in 2016. About 15 per cent cast their ballots ahead of polling day, as they were urged, to avoid congested stations.

Ms Koike, who broke from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2016, ran as an independent and won despite a spotty track record with critics pointing to how she has mixed results despite being adept at creating catchy slogans.

In her new term, Ms Koike wants to create a Tokyo version of the United States' Centres for Disease Control, and grow Tokyo's status as a financial hub. [ST](#)

Migrant worker finds stardom rapping about the plight of India's poor

Mr Duleswar Tandi directed his disillusionment and anger into writing a hip hop song. PHOTO: DULESWAR TANDI

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A COUNTRYWIDE LOCKDOWN WHICH LASTED for more than two months from its imposition on March 25 has been merciless on millions of India's migrant workers. But it is amid the despair that Mr Duleswar Tandi found his voice – and the elusive fame he had coveted.

The 27-year-old Tandi returned home to Odisha's Borda village ahead of the lockdown, giving up his job as a table cleaner at a restaurant in Raipur, the capital of the neighbouring state of Chhattisgarh.

Back home, Mr Tandi soon became angry and dejected at the turn of events that forced the poor like him to give up their livelihoods and fend for themselves. With little to do in his village, the chemistry graduate directed his disillusionment and anger into writing a hip hop song.

His searing lyrics excoriated India's widening

income inequality as well as the indifference to the plight of the poor. Mr Tandi uploaded a video of himself performing his song on his Facebook page on April 21 and went to bed with little idea about what was to ensue.

His phone did not stop buzzing the next morning. "I got so many calls from friends telling me my song had gone viral," he told The Straits Times.

Wider national fame followed this month when the People's Archive of Rural India, a website dedicated to news and features from India's hinterland, tweeted a video of him singing his most popular song.

Available on his YouTube channel *Rapper Dule Rocker*, his songs are sung mostly in Kalahandia and Hindi. They have become especially popular with youngsters looking for outlets to vent their anger. [ST](#)





Travel

Experience the world – in cosy, virtual tours

Meet rescued mini horses and try laughter yoga, among the many online escapes offered by global travel companies amid Covid-19

IT IS NOT THE END OF THE WORLD FOR TRAVEL lovers deprived of an escape to elsewhere during the pandemic.

Perhaps you are an urban explorer, nature lover or foodie? A profusion of new virtual experiences in every genre now lies at the end of an Internet connection.

These streamlined private tours of an hour or so are devised to keep globetrotters on the go while tour guides keep their jobs.

Ms Sara Cooke, director of communications for Vancouver-based ToursByLocals, says: "A virtual tour is a reminder that we can still have a shared experience with people around the world, even while we're confined to home."

"You can 'travel to Normandy' with people you love and miss."

Though there are limits to immersiveness on a virtual jaunt, online wandering is a fresh stream of revenue and will possibly remain a post-pandemic trend.

Global travel companies Airbnb, Viator, ToursByLocals, Withlocals and even Japan's indie Craft Tabby are among players who pivoted to these online offerings around April or May.

Since Airbnb launched its Online Experiences in April, bookings in Singapore have grown almost sevenfold, with food and drink the most popular category here and globally. About 600 experiences have debuted on the platform.

Viator's online Jack The Ripper Murder Mystery tour takes visitors back to the Victorian-era London of 1888. PHOTO: VIATOR

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Travel Editor



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to the nine different apartments that have this amazing building.

Travel booking platform Klook launched Klook Home, which creates home-based experiences such as virtual tours of Barcelona's Casa Batlló designed by surrealist architect Antoni Gaudí.

PHOTO: LEE SIEW HUA

For people for whom finances, or perhaps health and mobility are a challenge, a virtual tour can give them a window into a different culture and a chance to spend time making a connection with a place that it's not possible for them to travel to.

”

– **MS SARA COOKE**, director of communications for Vancouver-based ToursByLocals

Ms Anna Belousova (right) shows virtual tourists how to make cottage-cheese pancakes from a family recipe. PHOTO: COURTESY OF ANNA BELOUSOVA

The trend is fed by the unabated desire to travel – safely. Multi-currency wallet platform YouTrip, which recently surveyed 6,000 Singaporeans in its Travel Intent Survey, found that seven in 10 still desire to travel this year.

Forty per cent are willing to visit Covid-19 hot spots next year – compared with 15 per cent this year – a hopeful signal of the gradual recovery of travel.

Meanwhile, TripAdvisor found that more than two-thirds of travellers are already thinking of where they want to travel to next.

And, while cities were previously popular, the TripAdvisor study found that off-the-beaten-track destinations will be favoured after all this is over.

But even if islands or blissfully remote places become the post-coronavirus default, cities are certainly safe for virtual travellers right now.

Indeed, California-based Viator's top five online tours are all set in cities, except for Tuscany. Its Jack The Ripper Murder Mystery tour, for instance, takes visitors back to the Victorian-era London of 1888.

Choices are increasing and themes encompass animals, art, baking, cocktails, dance, family, movies, social impact, wellness and more.

Take Airbnb, for example, which lets animal enthusiasts meet rescued mini horses that are therapy animals in the United States.

What about street art in Buenos Aires or Delhi? Or cultivate optimism with an American Olympian and try laughter yoga in Portugal.

In July, the company started a collection of online culinary experiences that include four from Singapore. One new host is chef Malcolm Lee of Michelin-starred Peranakan restaurant Candlenut.

Real tours are multi-sensory and immersive, so guides who lead virtual tours have to work harder and more creatively.

Mr Lee Xian Jie, 30, a partner in Craft Tabby, which specialises in hidden Kyoto sights, says: “Both guide and participant are peering through a small window to the other's world, so it is a real challenge to break down that barrier.”

He says the key is to pay close attention to the faces of participants “so that any quizzical look or flash of interest in the eyes” gets a response.

For a flower-hunting experience, he can tell when guests want to peer closely at a flower for longer or seem interested in how the flower has influenced haiku poets.

To heighten the immersive factor, guides may use music, quizzes and a moving dashcam. Guests can opt to cook alongside their guides on the other side of the screen, because ingredient lists can be sent ahead of time for Arabic coffee, for instance.

Offline or online, the most successful guides have engaging personalities and research fully.

Mr Parin Mehta, director (Asia-Pacific) of Airbnb Experiences, says: “Guests interact with dynamic hosts who share their passions and provide unique insider access to local cultures and activities. These are real people making real connections in real time.”

Companies also book experiences. “The interactive nature of the Online Experiences, conducted from home, meets a real need for companies looking to build rapport and collaboration in remote teams.”

The lower fee is also appealing – apart from not paying airfare.

Ms Cooke of ToursByLocals says: “Rates are much lower than in-person private tours. The tours run on average from US\$40 (\$\$56) to US\$75 total for typically up to six users, and usually run 1½ hours. A typical private tour would be three hours and cost closer to US\$300.”

Online experiences are shorter – to steer clear of video-conferencing fatigue. Tours are often 45 to 90 minutes, except for longer cooking classes.

For Russophile Fen Chia, 36, virtual travel ticks many boxes. She tuned in for a Russian breakfast pancake class in a dacha, or countryside summer house. She is curious about dacha culture and it was her first glimpse of one.

“Virtual tours are particularly valuable for experiences which are not easily available to the casual traveller, even during normal circumstances,” the tech-sector publicist says.

“A cooking class set in a dacha is one example. I would be equally interested in a virtual visit to a





In May, Egypt's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities made available a virtual tour of the tomb of Meresankh III, in a bid to satisfy the wanderlust of those stuck at home.
PHOTO: EGYPT'S MINISTRY OF TOURISM AND ANTIQUITIES

Soviet-era sanatorium in the Caucasus or one of the hard-to-access Russian republics.

"All it takes is a good Internet connection, video-camera and command of English on the part of the host."

Although many paid virtual tours were forged in a sombre time, they may become a significant trend even when it is safe to venture out again.

Travel companies have noticed positive reviews. Going virtual can be a teaser for a future trip or a time to plan dream itineraries with a local expert. It can even be an add-on after a trip.

Ms Cooke from ToursByLocals says: "For people for whom finances, or perhaps health and mobility are a challenge, a virtual tour can give them a window into a different culture and a chance to spend time making a connection with a place that it's not possible for them to travel to."

Virtual reality – the tech-enabled sibling of virtual tours – can significantly transform how people travel.

The National Geographic magazine reported: "Virtual reality may even expand travel opportunities in years to come, as researchers focus their work on experiences that are expensive, dangerous, rare or even impossible in the real world."

"Bucket-list items such as whale-watching or seeing the Sistine Chapel could become accessible to everyone, with all the thrills, but very few of the environmental impacts."

Already, some guides like Russian Anna Belousova, 30, are expanding their online portfolio. From March, she began to craft experiences focused on the Red Square, Moscow space exploration and cooking.

Next, she is thinking about the trendy Red October art cluster, Depo Food Mall, and the hidden streets and lanes downtown.


She reflects: "My virtual tours and online cooking classes help me greatly to get a sense of professional purpose during these dark times, to have a source of income and to get such vital motivation that I can tackle the day, since I've always been such a workaholic in a positive way – tour guiding is my passion and joy." 



PHOTO: THE CHINA GUIDE

Virtual journeys to connect with nature from the comfort of your sofa

The idea of escaping into the great outdoors has fresh appeal for travel lovers now, after weeks of staying home to ride out the pandemic. Here are some virtual journeys to explore in the region.

CLIMB THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA

You will not clock your daily 10,000 steps by virtually visiting the Great Wall of China, but it is still a fun experience. Beijing-based travel agency The China Guide has posted 360-degree snapshots of several sections of the Great Wall, specially for online tourists to appreciate the timeless monument during the Covid-19 period. The photos show the man-made wonder in different seasons.

Go to: Great Wall of China guide
<https://str.sg/JeyY>

ADMIRE CHERRY BLOSSOMS IN JAPAN

You thought you would see the pretty pink blossoms in Japan, or at least at Gardens by the Bay. Well, try watching videos of Japan's Chiba prefecture instead on YouTube. The videos give a sweet introduction to the prefecture, which encompasses the eastern outskirts of Tokyo and the Boso Peninsula. The flower-laden trees, clear blue skies and peaceful Japanese streets are a breath of fresh air for the homebound.

Go to: Movie "CHIBA Yours truly, from Japan"
<https://str.sg/JeyQ>

PHOTO: CHIBA PREFECTURE





Lifestyle

In a virtual unveiling of its next-generation gaming console PlayStation 5, Sony also announced the sequel to the hit 2018 Marvel Spider-Man action adventure game called Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales.

PHOTO: INSOMNIAC GAMES

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Gaming trade shows waiting to spring back

In view of the Covid-19 pandemic, most gaming trade shows are going digital, but many industry players and fans say nothing beats the excitement of a physical event

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC WHICH HAS KEPT people in their homes has been a boost for video gaming, but it has also put the brakes on video gaming trade shows globally.

The world's most influential video gaming trade show, the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), was to have been held from June 9 in Los Angeles. But for the first time in the show's 26-year history, it was cancelled.

Last year, the show drew 66,100 attendees, over

200 exhibitors and bigwigs of the video gaming industry, such as Microsoft, Activision, Nintendo, Nvidia, Sega, Square Enix, Ubisoft and Bandai Namco.

It joins a multitude of video gaming trade shows that have been cancelled or postponed. They include Gamescom, Games Developer Conference and Tokyo Game Show, which are among the major video gaming shows.

The inaugural Gamescom Asia, which is supposed to take place in Singapore in October, has been postponed to the same month next year.

In place of physical events, game developers and publishers have turned to digital events.

One prominent digital event is the inaugural Summer Game Fest. Organised by veteran gaming journalist and broadcaster Geoff Keighley, it collates details and timings of the digital events of participating vendors under one roof.

Its line-up of events started in May and runs to August. Participating developers and publishers

include 2K Games, Activision and Bandai Namco. Sony and Microsoft are also on the list.

A Microsoft spokesman says: "In the light of the challenges presented by Covid-19, we are adjusting our event calendar and strategy. For the remainder of 2020, we are embracing the opportunity to experiment with new platforms to provide our partners, customers and developers the highest quality, digital-first experiences."

While digital events will be the norm this year and have been gaining momentum in recent years, a number of game developers, publishers, event organisers and fans told The Straits Times they still prefer physical events to digital ones.

Mr Ronnie Tan, managing director of gumi Asia, a subsidiary of Japanese game developer Gumi Inc, says: "In a physical game trade show, attendees will be focused on what is happening within the venue. This means the information communicated will have a lasting impression."

The resulting word-of-mouth publicity has helped further the reach of gumi Asia's games, he adds.

Mr Quentin Staes-Polet, Epic Games' general manager of South-east Asia and India, says traditional game shows allow for physical interaction, on-site showcases and in-person demonstrations, which will always be richer in terms of human connection.

But he feels that both physical and digital events are relevant.

"(Digital events) have demonstrated stunning audio-visual capabilities and the possibility of creating immersive, hyper-connected and interactive

virtual worlds beyond just the gaming industry. Concerts, movie premieres and conferences may never be the same again," he says.

Mr Alexander Champlin, a senior e-sports analysts at market intelligence firm Niko Partners, says video gaming trade shows are opportunities for companies to build excitement around new titles and products and for gamers and the media to try them out.

Companies also use such shows to research industry trends and test their latest products on die-hard fans.

Ms Elicia Lee, managing director of gaming marketing and events firm Eliphant and founder of the GameStart Asia gaming convention in Singapore, says a key part of attending such gaming trade shows is the networking, which is hard to bring online.

With digital events, there is a lot less opportunity for "serendipity", she says.

Mr Aaron Yip, editor of local video game website GameAxis, who has attended E3 15 times, says: "I definitely prefer the face-to-face experience during these gaming trade shows. For example, I would not be able to try the game demo and chat with the developer or publisher at the same time."

He adds that being able to walk around the show floor and discovering surprises, such as a game demo that looks unique which he did not know about, is something digital events cannot replicate.

"Games still need to be experienced in person, for informed first looks and impressions to be delivered to the readers," he says, adding that a digital event could only work for a game reveal. [S1](#)

(Digital events) have demonstrated stunning audio-visual capabilities and the possibility of creating immersive, hyper-connected and interactive virtual worlds beyond just the gaming industry. Concerts, movie premieres and conferences may never be the same again.

”

– MR QUENTIN STAES-POLET, Epic Games' general manager of South-east Asia and India

Video games to watch out for in 2020

Here are the 10 video games (in no particular order) being released this year:

1 MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN: MILES MORALES

Platforms: PS5
Release date: Late 2020



2 GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

Platform: PS4
Release date: July 17, 2020

3 WASTELAND 3

Platforms: PC, PS4 and Xbox One
Release date: Aug 28, 2020



4 CYBERPUNK 2077

Platforms: PC, PS4, Stadia and Xbox One
Release date: Sept 17, 2020



5 MARVEL'S AVENGERS

Platforms: PC, PS4, Stadia and Xbox One
Release date: Sept 4, 2020

6 WATCH DOGS LEGION

Platforms: PC, PS4, PS5, Stadia, Xbox One and Xbox Series X
Release date: Late 2020



7 HALO INFINITE

Platform: PC, Xbox One and Xbox Series X
Release date: Late 2020

8 BALDUR'S GATE 3

Platforms: PC and Stadia
Release date: Sometime in 2020



9 ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

Platforms: PC, PS4, PS5, Stadia, Xbox One and Xbox Series X
Release date: Late 2020



10 F1 2020

Platforms: PC, PS4, Stadia and Xbox One
Release date: July 10, 2020



Big Picture

PHOTO: AFP

China turns to night markets to revive economy and bring jobs back

COVERING AN AREA OF 60,000 SQM, THE XINGSHUN International Night Market (seen above) is reputed to be the largest night market in Asia.

Located in Shenyang city, the market currently has some 700 tenants and creates around 3,000 jobs, reports Xinhua.

Across China, night markets and street stands are springing to life again and have been encouraged to revive the economy.

On June 2, the Jinan municipal government announced measures to foster the growth of night markets and small proprietor businesses, reported China Banking News. On the same day, the Nanning municipal government issued the "Guidance Opinions on Properly Performing Services Work for Road-occupying Business, Street Markets and Itinerant Vendors".

At least 27 local governments have unveiled policies to spur the growth of street-vendor economies within their respective jurisdictions.

Beijing remains on alert, however, after dozens of new coronavirus cases emerged from the Xinfadi Wholesale Market, the city's largest wholesale food market, in June.

The outbreak last December in the central city of Wuhan also started in a market that sold seafood and wildlife, among other things.

Experts believe the low temperature and high humidity environment there could be the reason for the latest outbreak, which infected more than 320 people.

On the upside, things are looking up in Wuhan, as its well-known night market on Baocheng Road has resumed its usual bustle, with citizens patronising stalls that stretch over 1.5km. [ST](#)

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