

THE STRAITS TIMES
Asian Insider

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ASIA'S 30 UNDER



Despite a difficult year, people have invariably stood out as bright spots. 30 go-getters and game-changers in Asia, with a gamut of achievements under their belt, are outshining their peers.

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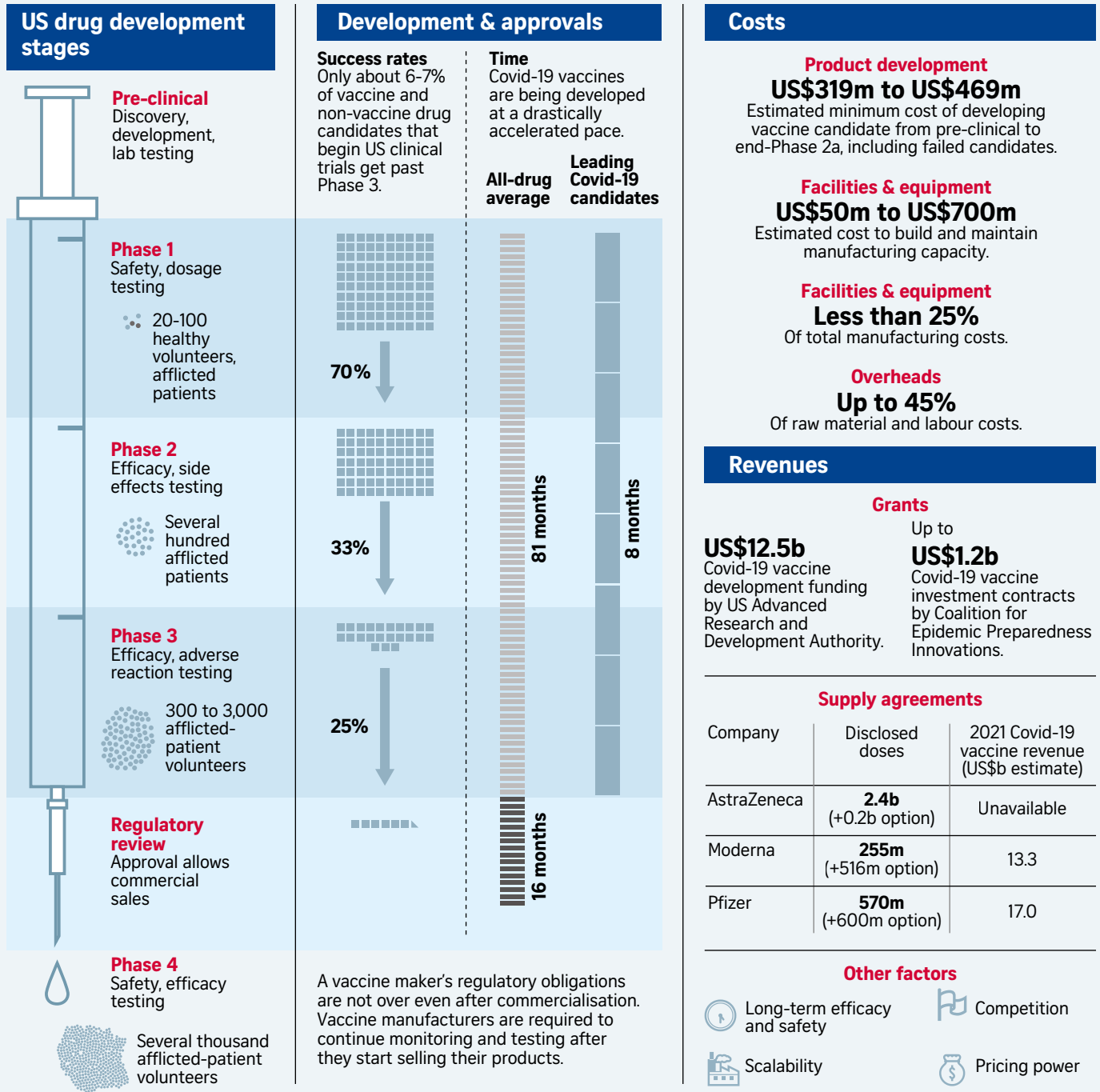


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The business of vaccines

Vaccine development is usually an expensive, multi-year odyssey with a high risk of failure. But unprecedented demand and funding could boost returns for successful makers of Covid-19 candidates.



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Warren Fernandez
Editor-in-Chief, The Straits Times & SPH's English, Malay and Tamil Media (EMTM) Group

Shefali Rekhi
Asian Insider Editor

Peter Williams
Production & Design Editor

Eugene Leow
AI Video Supervising Editor

Dominic Nathan
Managing Editor (EMTM)

ADVERTISING

Maureen Wee
Head of Advertising Sales
weekfm@sph.com.sg

Helen Lee
Head of Advertising, Product Development and Innovation
helenlee@sph.com.sg

EDITORIAL DESK

Ronald Kow
Sub-editor, The Straits Times

Dominique Nelson
Journalist, The Straits Times

DESIGN

Marlone Rubio
Executive Artist

Anil Kumar
Graphic Artist

Gareth Chung
Senior Executive Artist

CIRCULATION

Eric Ng
Head, Circulation Marketing

Tommy Ong
Senior Manager (Circulation)

REACH OUT TO US:

Circulation & subscription:
Louis Koh
Senior Executive
louiskoh@sph.com.sg

WE WELCOME YOUR FEEDBACK AND VIEWS

Letters can be sent to
stasianinsider@sph.com.sg

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ASIA'S 30

From scientists to ballet dancers, 30 go-getters are making waves in Asia. Some are big names, while others are striving to make their mark. But they share one thing in common – the drive to make lives better.



1 Adamas Belva Syah Devara, 30
Entrepreneur, Indonesia

Helping children shape their future begins with quality education – this was Mr Adamas Belva Syah Devara's vision when he co-founded Ruangguru, an online marketplace connecting private tutors with students, while he was pursuing a master's degree at Harvard Kennedy School in 2014.

Today, the education technology company appeals to its users with animated learning videos and visual aids, and is able to recognise a user's weaknesses and recommend suitable learning materials.

With a registry of 300,000 tutors, its Web and mobile platforms are now used by millions of people in Indonesia.

Mr Belva's knack for innovation was recognised by Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who appointed him a special adviser last year to help explore out-of-the-box ways to advance the country.

Mr Belva was given Harvard Kennedy School's Digital Innovation Award this year in recognition of his contributions to the community.



2 Andy Tay Kah Ping, 30
Scientist, Singapore

When he was seven, Assistant Professor Andy Tay was already asking questions such as "Why do tigers have stripes?" when he visited the zoo. When his parents failed to give him the answers, the curious boy would look them up in encyclopaedias.

He is now in the field of cancer research, pursuing answers to chronic healthcare problems like cancer and pain.

His research is motivated by his parents – his mother is a breast cancer survivor, while his father, who used to work as a construction worker and is now a taxi driver, suffers from lower back pain.

Hoping to create a real-world impact and one day help his loved ones and many other families, Prof Tay focuses on developing nanomaterials to engineer immune cells for treating cancer.

An assistant professor at the National University of Singapore, he was the only Singaporean selected in the Class of 2020 World Economic Forum Young Scientists for his cutting-edge research.



3 Annabelle Kwok, 27
AI poster girl, Singapore

By the age of 25, Ms Annabelle Kwok had two successful artificial intelligence (AI) companies under her belt.

In 2016, she co-founded SmartCow, which makes industrial grade hardware for AI processing.

She had started the company to sell off excess components she had bought to build a processor board for herself while making robots.

In 2017, she went on to found NeuralBay. The start-up specialises in vision analytics, using AI to recognise humans, objects and text.

Ms Kwok, a mathematics graduate, believes that AI should be accessible and affordable to those who need it.

She sold NeuralBay in January last year, and is now heading the regional AI, data and analytics team at Prudential, looking after 13 Asian markets, including China and India.

Beyond AI, she has many interests: circus tricks, film-making, hardware hacking, mixed martial arts and windsurfing.

UNDER 30

LEE CHOO KIONG
Assistant Foreign Editor

CLARA CHONG
CLEMENT YONG



4 **Carvey Ehren, 27**
Student/inventor, Philippines

Mr Carvey Ehren Maigue, who is from Rizal, a Philippine province named after national hero Jose Rizal, knew at age 13 that engineering was his calling.

His science teacher had shown the class a movie with a scene depicting engineers at work, and said to him: "I hope some day you will be someone like that."

The message stuck in his mind. In November, Mr Maigue took home the James Dyson Award's inaugural global sustainability prize. His invention, the AuREUS system, uses a material derived from rotting fruits and vegetables to absorb ultraviolet light from the sun and convert it to electricity.

Mr Maigue, who has had to put his studies on hold from time to time in the past because of financial problems, told The Straits Times that he hopes he can inspire others as "it is possible that the next inventor, designer, artist or leader could emerge from among them."



5 **Faye Simanjuntak, 18**
Human rights activist, Indonesia

Many people shy away from the cruel realities of child exploitation, sexual abuse and trafficking.

But not Ms Faye Simanjuntak, who co-founded a non-governmental organisation with her mother for the protection of vulnerable children when she was just 11.

Today, Rumah Faye, meaning "Faye's house", runs community programmes aimed at providing skills needed to protect children from trafficking, exploitation and abuse.

It also operates a safe house in Batam for survivors of human trafficking, and provides legal aid and financial assistance.

Ms Simanjuntak said the safe house has assisted in the recovery of 109 girls and taken care of eight babies and children under age five between September 2016 and last November.

There are plans to build another one in 2024. Last year, Ms Simanjuntak has also been recognised by Forbes Indonesia on its honour roll of under-30 Asians.



6 **Grace Chia, 30**
CEO and co-founder of BeeX Autonomous Systems, Singapore

BeeX builds the world's most powerful underwater vehicles that pack superior "intellect" and physical propulsion into a compact size.

Its chief executive officer Grace Chia believes engineering can make underwater inspection work safer and more environmentally friendly.

BeeX uses marine robots to inspect port infrastructure, ship hulls, floating solar farms, and underwater foundations of offshore oil and gas jackets and wind turbines. Divers hence do not have to be put at risk for such work.

The underwater craft allow autonomous surface vessels to recharge without returning to port. Operators intervene from shore only when necessary.

Ms Chia's work involves building prototypes that are reliable and scalable.

BeeX was the first Singaporean team to ever compete in a global autonomous marine robotics competition held annually in the United States.



7 Han Hyun-min, 19
Model, South Korea

Nigerian-Korean Han Hyun-min is the first Korean model of African descent to walk the catwalk in South Korea.

Born and raised in Seoul, he was often mistaken for a foreigner and shunned even though he speaks only Korean.

He revealed that as a child, he wished he was invisible as he struggled in school, enduring bullying and prejudice owing to his skin colour.

But he found solace in fashion, taking part in modelling auditions and posting photos of himself on Instagram until he was spotted by a modelling agency when he was 14.

He once said in an interview that being a model helped build his confidence tremendously, and he hoped to become a role model for multiracial children.

In 2017, Time magazine picked him as one of its 30 most influential teenagers.



8 Heidy Quah, 26
Refugee rights activist, Malaysia

Ms Heidy Quah was just 18 when she co-founded Refuge For The Refugees (RFTR), a non-profit group that helps refugees in Malaysia.

This was following a brief teaching stint at a Myanmar refugee school in Kuala Lumpur that opened her eyes to the refugees' plight.

When she heard that the school would be closing because of a lack of funding, Ms Quah sprang into action.

She and a fellow volunteer went door to door selling homemade cookies and appealed for help on social media. That experience set her on the path of social activism.

Today, RFTR has evolved from a fund-raising project to supporting dozens of refugee schools, two halfway homes and a social business school in Malaysia and Myanmar.

In 2017, Ms Quah received the Queen's Young Leaders Award from Britain's Queen Elizabeth herself for her work.



9 Janelle Lee, 27
Co-founder and chief product officer of bantu, Singapore

Ms Janelle Lee is passionate about human behaviour, technology and social good. An avid volunteer, she started social tech start-up bantu in 2018, with the goal of designing easy-to-use technology to help non-profit groups in Singapore digitalise.

Till date, bantu's cloud software has served hundreds of organisations ranging from social services to arts groups to family service centres – including Samaritans of Singapore and Thye Hua Kwan Moral Charities.

In 2019, bantu won \$50,000 as the Social Enterprise Start-Up of the Year under the President's Challenge for leveraging technology to collate and analyse volunteer data – an innovation that has improved the engagement and retention of volunteers.

Ms Lee's friends describe her as fearless, compassionate and dedicated.

10 Joey Alexander, 17
Musician, Indonesia

The Bali-born pianist was thrust into the limelight in 2016 when he became the youngest musician to be nominated for a Grammy Award in the jazz category.

Today, the prodigy, who taught himself to play at the age of six, has recorded six studio albums and notched up three Grammy nominations.

He has shared the stage with jazz greats such as Wynton Marsalis and Brad Mehldau, and performed for former US

presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton.

Joey, whose passion for music was nurtured by his piano-and-guitar-playing father, told The Business Times in June that his family "always had music in the house".

He credits his parents for keeping him grounded, despite having achieved an illustrious career at a young age. "And, well, I still have homework to do," he added in the interview.





11 Juju Noda, 14
Racing driver, Japan

The daughter of former Formula One driver Hideki Noda, Juju took up kart racing at the age of three and won her first race in the beginner class the following year.

In 2016, when she was 10, she erased the Okayama F4 lap record of 1min 33.769sec in a test session, clocking a time of 1min 32.8sec.

Juju continues to burn the rubber in Europe, where she took part as a rookie in the F4 Danish Championship for junior drivers this year and won.

It looks like the teenager has put herself on the right track to achieve her childhood dream of winning the Grand Prix.

In an interview with Forbes in 2017, her father said she “has the ability to feel the limits of her race car” and that is a talent that cannot be taught. “She was born with it,” he added.



12 Kamal Singh, 20
Ballet dancer, India

He was considered a late bloomer in the ballet world, having started formal training only at 17 – more than a decade behind most professional dancers.

But, in just three years, the son of an electric rickshaw driver from Delhi was accepted by the prestigious English National Ballet School, making him one of the first Indians to be admitted.

He had little in his pocket, but managed to crowdfund his way to the London school with help from Argentine dance maestro Fernando Aguilera.

Aguilera was amazed by Singh’s flexibility when the young man first turned up at his Imperial Fernando Ballet Company, and took him under his wing.

Now based in London, Singh told The Straits Times that he is preparing for an audition that he hopes will be his ticket to becoming a lead dancer.

Confidence, he said, is key to pursuing one’s dreams, and “never think that others are better than you.”



13 Kim Na-young, 29
Webtoon artist, South Korea

The former model, who goes by the pseudonym Yaongyi, is the author and artist behind the long-running webtoon True Beauty, which boasts more than four billion views worldwide and is one of the most popular webtoons on search platform Naver.

Published since 2018, True Beauty tells the love story of a high school girl who transforms herself into the school belle with her exceptional make-up skills, and a boy with a dark past.

Kim, who is followed by 1.2 million people on Instagram, revealed herself as the author of the webtoon one year after its debut, and fans were quick to point out the physical resemblance between her and her female lead.

The webtoon has captivated legions of fans around the world, including in the United States and France.

A drama adaptation of it was released this month on South Korean prime-time television.

14 Ko Jin-young, 25
Golfer, South Korea

Currently the No.1 female golfer, Ko Jin-young is a six-time Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tour winner.

The world champion started her career as a pro golfer when she was 18 in 2013 and has since won the LPGA of Korea Tour 10 times.

Her other major championship wins include the Dinah Shore (ANA Inspiration) tournament, the Evian in France, the Founders Cup and the Women’s Canadian

Open, all coming in 2019.

She was the LPGA Rookie of the Year in 2018 and the Rolex Player of the Year in 2019.

After taking a break from the LPGA tour for almost a year because of the global pandemic, Ko returned to action in the Pelican Women’s Championship last month.





15 **Lalu Muhammad Zohri, 20**
Sprinter, Indonesia

Nicknamed “the fastest man in South-east Asia”, Lalu Muhammad Zohri is the first Indonesian to win a medal – and a gold one at that – at the IAAF World U20 Championships, doing so at the Finland edition in 2018.

In the same year, he also won gold in the 100m segment at the Asian Junior Athletics Championships in Japan, making him a national hero.

But the media frenzy over him was not just about his speed, but his sad childhood as well. He lost his parents while he was in elementary school.

Home to him and his three siblings was a small house made of wood and woven bamboo, with newspapers covering holes in the walls. He could not even afford running shoes and had to train barefoot.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who ordered the Lombok native’s house to be renovated, called him a “collective inspiration to the nation’s athletes to achieve gold”.



16 **Louise Emmanuelle Mabulo, 21**
Social Entrepreneur, Philippines

Ms Louise Emmanuelle Mabulo wears many hats. She is an award-winning chef, entrepreneur, farmer, public speaker and competitive archer.

In 2019, she was recognised as an Outstanding Youth Ambassador at the United Nations Youth Assembly.

One of her most notable achievements is The Cacao Project, which she set up in 2016 to help farmers in San Fernando in the Philippines’ Bicol region to get back on their feet after their livelihoods were destroyed by Typhoon Nina.

The project provides participants with cacao seedlings, which are climate-resilient and lucrative, and trains them to farm responsibly and sustainably. More than 200 farmers have benefited from the project, which saw some 80,000 cacao trees planted, along with short-term crops such as bok choy and okra.

In 2019, Ms Mabulo received a Young Champions of the Earth award from the UN Environment Programme.



17 **Marylyn Tan, 27**
Writer, Singapore

Marylyn Tan became the first female winner of the Singapore Literature Prize for English poetry last year with her collection *Gaze Back*, which looks at the hidden violence perpetuated by the state and society against women.

The 27-year-old said she usually takes accolades lightly, but her historic win, sweeter for the nature of her entry, gives her hope that things could change.

“It is important to have unpleasant conversations that we feel we are not yet ready for. Singapore may not be equipped as a whole to deal with some issues, but some among us will be,” she said.

It helps her cause that her work is not profit driven, and she says she is against the triumph of a “commercial mentality”.

She has been exploring more mediums for her art, partnering the ArtScience Museum to interpret her poetry in videos that are available online.



18 **Nadia Samdin, 30**
Politician, Singapore

Elected on the People’s Action Party slate for Ang Mo Kio GRC headed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in July, Ms Nadia Samdin is one of the youngest MPs in Parliament.

A lawyer by training and a former journalist, she has advocated for issues such as early intervention for at-risk youth and modern loneliness, especially among seniors, which has been made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic.

She has also spoken up on the need for more blue and green spaces.

“I’m no stranger to being in rooms where I am the minority in age, race and gender,” she said.

Her desire to represent the voices of those who may be marginalised drives her to speak up in Parliament.

Still, she asserted: “Age should not hold anyone back. Young people are willing to be counted on.”



19 Naomi Osaka, 23 Tennis player, Japan

This is probably one face that needs no introduction.

As one of the world's best tennis players, Naomi Osaka used her star power to rally support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement at the US Open last year.

She sported seven different masks at her matches, each emblazoned with the name of a black victim of police brutality and racial injustice.

Osaka, who is of Japanese and Haitian descent, went on to win the tournament and become a three-time Grand Slam champion.

When asked what point she was making with the masks, she said: "Well, what was the message that you got was more the question. I feel, like, the point is to make people start talking."

Time magazine has named her among the 100 most influential people last year.



20 Nor Diana, 20 Wrestler, Malaysia

Standing at 1.55m tall, Nor Diana may be petite but she sure packs a punch.

She became the first woman to win the Malaysia Pro Wrestling Wrestlecon Championship in July 2019, after beating four male wrestlers.

Diana, who started taking wrestling lessons when she was 15, goes by the ring name Phoenix. She has been criticised for her tight costumes and close physical contact with her male counterparts. But as Malaysia's first hijab-wearing professional wrestler, Diana is not apologetic about it.

She once said in an interview with The Star: "After (news of me went) viral, many people were surprised at a hijab-wearing Muslim doing wrestling, but I do not want them to overlook my talents."

"I want people to see my passion and love for wrestling. At the same time, I want them to acknowledge what hijabi girls can do."



21 Okka Phyo Maung, 30 Social entrepreneur, Myanmar

Mr Okka Phyo Maung, who studied sustainable energy engineering in the United States and attended business school in Belgium, is an advocate of waste recycling and green business.

In 2017, he co-founded RecyGlo, Myanmar's first recycle-tech company, to help businesses safely process their waste materials, such as batteries and confidential documents.

It also provides data analytics on the amount of waste recycled and the impact on companies' carbon footprints.

Last year, RecyGlo received the World Economic Forum's Action on Ocean Plastic Award and Mr Okka Phyo Maung was recognised by Forbes as an outstanding Asian under 30.

His Yangon-based firm has now expanded beyond Myanmar, with offices in Singapore and Malaysia.



22 P. V. Sindhu, 25 Badminton player, India

P.V. Sindhu became the first Indian woman to win a silver medal at the 2016 Olympics and a gold at the Badminton World Federation (BWF) championships in 2019.

Born to former national volleyball players, Sindhu started playing badminton when she was eight years old.

The shuttler was 17 when she smashed her way up the BWF rankings and captured the world's attention. She is currently ranked among the 10 best women's singles

players in the world.

In 2019, she was the only Indian on the Forbes list of highest-paid female athletes in the world, coming in at 13th place with total earnings of US\$5.5 million (\$7.3 million).

When the Indian government imposed a nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of Covid-19 in March, Sindhu was one of several athletes who raised funds for affected daily wage workers.



23 Pratima Sherpa, 21
Golfer, Nepal

Pratima Sherpa aspires to become her country's first female professional golfer, a dream that may be within her reach.

Born poor, she was raised in a storage shed on a golf course. She grew up watching wealthy people playing their rounds at the golf club where her parents worked, and started playing the sport herself when she was 11.

Her very first club was fashioned from a tree branch by her father.

She was quick to pick up the sport and soon went on to win her first tournament. Gradually, she was filling her tiny shed with shiny trophies.

The first-ranked amateur golfer is on a full scholarship at Santa Barbara City College in California, where she continues to practise golf.

She finished fourth at the California Community College State Championships in 2019 and was named Athlete of the Year by her college last year.



24 Raeesah Khan, 27
Politician, Singapore

Ms Raeesah Khan of the Workers' Party made history last year by becoming Singapore's youngest ever parliamentarian.

At just 27, she has had a history of fighting for the rights of the disenfranchised. In 2016, she started the Reyna movement, which has helped to support Rohingya refugees in Kuala Lumpur as well as female education in Singapore.

She faced a police probe into her Facebook posts earlier, but was successfully elected as an MP of Sengkang GRC in the general election.

"I think my proudest achievement is being able to overcome the challenges that this year has thrown at me," she said.

"My aspiration for the future is that we see a country that allows everyone to reach their full potential.

All of us, regardless of age, want to see a Singapore that progresses without leaving anyone behind.



25 Ray Chiu Po-Jui, 29
Entrepreneur, Taiwan

While working on his master's degree in bioengineering and biomedical engineering in California in 2014, Mr Ray Chiu heard the news about a series of explosions caused by a gas leak back home in Taiwan that killed 32 people.

The disaster set him mulling over creating a cheap and accurate real-time biosensor to detect and analyse air chemicals, with the aim of preventing similar tragedies from happening.

He co-founded BioInspira that year for that purpose; the firm was rebranded as Calyx last year. It makes sensors using a low-cost material based on a non-toxic virus called bacteriophage. The highly accurate sensors can be deployed across different industries.

Calyx has so far raised about US\$5 million (\$\$6.6 million) in seed money from venture capitalists in Asia and the United States. In 2019, Forbes put Mr Chiu on its 30 under 30 list in the energy category.

26 Ryu Ho-jeong, 28
Lawmaker, South Korea

Ms Ryu Ho-jeong is the youngest lawmaker in South Korea's National Assembly and the only one under 30.

A champion of women's rights and warrior against sexism and inequality, the Justice Party lawmaker caused a stir in August when she wore a short red wrap dress to work.

She drew frowns from her much older male colleagues, but won praise from women for daring to push boundaries.

Brushing off criticism, she said she would

wear whatever helps her to work best.

Dubbed "Samsung sniper" by the media, Ms Ryu, during her debut at Parliament's annual inspection of state affairs in October, singled out conglomerate Samsung for allegedly seizing technologies developed by smaller firms.

As the youngest lawmaker, Ms Ryu reflects the voice of young people, something that is said to be lacking in South Korean politics.





27 Sheik Farhan Sheik Alau'ddin, 23
Silat world champion, Singapore

With two-time silat world champion Sheik Alau'ddin as his father, Sheik Farhan Sheik Alau'ddin has some grand shoes to fill.

He grew up watching his father's training sessions, going to the community club in Jalan Besar as regularly as he went to school, he said.

These days, he spends all his free time – sparse as it is as he is serving his national service – training.

He has swept the gold medals in the past few years at events like the SEA Games and Asian Games, and was crowned world champion in Bali in 2016.

He says silat is just “something I have to do.” This year, with the coronavirus putting a pause on most things, he has trained even more efficiently and feels better prepared than ever, he said.

He added that with desire, effort and discipline – his three qualities for what makes a good athlete – anyone can succeed.



28 Son Heung-min, 28
Footballer, South Korea

He is one of the hottest properties in football and currently the most expensive player in Asia.

Son Heung-min, who is both captain of South Korea's national football team and a Tottenham Hotspur star player, was named the English Premier League's (EPL) top player for October.

The highly rated footballer dropped out of the FC Seoul U-18 team when he was 16 and flew to Germany to join Hamburger SV's youth academy, where he spent six years before playing for Bayer Leverkusen. In 2015, he moved to Tottenham in London.

In 2019, Son, who is fluent in both German and English, was named Best Footballer in Asia for the fourth time and Premier League Player of the Year at the London Football Awards.

He wrapped up 2019 by winning the AFC Asian International Player of the Year award for the third time.



29 Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, 28
Former minister and Member of Parliament, Malaysia

The then political novice was only 25 when he was appointed youth and sports minister in 2018, making him the youngest federal minister since Malaysia gained independence.

One of Mr Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman's significant achievements was to successfully convince the Lower House of Parliament in 2019 to lower the voting age from 21 to 18, to give young people “the right and responsibility to choose the country's future.”

Last September, Mr Syed Saddiq established his own political party, Muda, which he said was to reboot and refresh Malaysian politics.

He may not be a contender for the premiership at the next polls, but he may not have to wait for long to be in the reckoning if Malaysia follows the recent trend of electing young leaders as seen in countries such as Ireland, Finland and France.

30 Wang Jianjiahe, 18
Swimmer, China

Born in China's Liaoning province, Wang Jianjiahe picked up swimming at age five in 2007 and joined the provincial swimming team five years later. In 2016, she was selected to join the elite national team.

In 2017, the rookie won the 800m freestyle final at the Fina Swimming World Cup in Doha, smashing the junior world record with a time of 8min 15.35sec. At the Asian Games in Jakarta the following year, Wang bagged four golds – for 400m,

800m, 1,500m and relay – in one of her first major championships.

Last September, the swimmer – who is 1.82m tall – set a new Asian record of 15min 45.59sec for the 1,500m freestyle at the Chinese National Swimming Championships in Qingdao.

In 2019, she was one of the two youngest honourees on Forbes' 30 under 30 China list, which presented the country's most accomplished young people. [SI](#)



Special Report

Will 2021 spell the end of coronavirus?

The arrival of vaccines by pharmaceutical companies spells hope for the region but much will depend on country efforts to secure enough for their people and the ability of governments to build trust on the issue.

An Indonesian Red Cross member in personal protective equipment (PPE) spraying disinfectant inside a house after one of its dwellers was tested positive for the Covid-19 coronavirus in Jakarta on Oct 7. PHOTO: AFP

EILEEN NG
Regional
Correspondent



✉ eileenng@sph.com.sg

Complex operation as countries start gearing up for Covid-19 vaccine rollout

THE YEAR STARTED OFF ON A GRIM NOTE, BUT it looks like 2020 ended with some good news: Mass Covid-19 inoculations have started to take off, fuelling hopes that the pandemic can finally be reined in.

Several health regulators have cleared Pfizer/BioNTech's Covid-19 vaccine for emergency use, while Moderna's is on the cusp of gaining regulatory approval and other experimental vaccines are inching closer to the finish line.

Countries from Austria to the United States are preparing to roll out the vaccines to ensure key populations are inoculated as Covid-19 cases soared to nearly 80 million, with more than 1.7 million deaths worldwide.

"I believe this is the weapon that will end the war," said Mr Andrew Cuomo, the governor of New York.

FREE JABS FOR ALL, LEADERS SHOW THE WAY

Countries and territories are rolling out mass vaccination programmes as soon as their health regulators give the green light. It will be done on

a voluntary basis – meaning populations will have the choice to opt for the jab or decide against it.

Leaders have offered to be among the first to get vaccinated to dispel any doubts about the safety of the vaccines, with US Vice-President Mike Pence receiving his on Dec 18, while President-elect Joe Biden was inoculated on Dec 21.

Most countries are making the vaccines free for all residents, with priority given to front-line personnel, healthcare workers, the elderly and other vulnerable people before the rest of the population.

However Indonesia, which received its first batch totalling 1.2 million doses from China's Sinovac Biotech on Dec 6, is looking to first inoculate its young working population, aged from 18 to 59, from early this year.

Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto said the elderly, those with existing health issues and pregnant women are not put into the country's priority list for the vaccination programme because it does not have the data to guarantee that the vaccine will be safe for them. The Sinovac trial shots were only tested on people aged between 18 and 59.

Still, not every government is rushing to inoculate its citizens.

Some are taking a wait-and-see approach, with regulators holding on for more safety data to become available.

New Zealand, which has eliminated community transmission of the virus, will only begin vaccinating its entire population in the second half of 2021, while inoculation will take place in neighbouring Australia from March if the health authorities deem it safe.

South Korea said vaccination will probably not take place until the second half of 2021 despite the country currently experiencing its third and most severe wave of infections.

“The big question now is, how safe and effective are the different vaccines?” asked Associate Professor Siouxsie Wiles from Auckland University’s School of Biological Sciences. “The scientific community are still waiting to see all of the data for how well each vaccine prevents transmission of the Covid-19 virus as well as preventing severe disease.”

MAMMOTH EXERCISE, CHALLENGES ABOUND

The vaccination of tens of millions of people will be a mammoth exercise for many countries. Many will be roping in volunteers, readying trucks and cargo planes, procuring ultra-cold storage refrigerators and conducting distribution dry-runs.

India’s experience in running the world’s biggest immunisation programme (it inoculates more than 40 million babies and pregnant women against 12 diseases every year) will stand it in good stead as it prepares to roll out its Covid-19 vaccination programme.

Three hundred million people – mostly frontliners and those above 65 – are expected to receive doses in the first phase lasting till July.

The federal government is encouraging states to choose one vaccine per district to simplify what is expected to be a huge undertaking. Indian media also reported that health officials are looking at using polling booths and wedding halls as vaccination centres.

Some 29,000 existing cold storage facilities will be used to stock the vaccines. Officials told the BBC that 154,000 of the country’s 223,000 nurses and midwives will be deployed to give Covid vaccines to people. It will be also inviting final-year nursing students to volunteer.

Britain, which on Dec 8 became the first country to start inoculating people, has brought in the military to help. Some sports stadiums and conference centres are being converted into temporary vaccination centres.

Initial doses of the Pfizer vaccine that arrived from Belgium are being stored in secure locations across the country, where they will be quality checked, the health ministry said, before being dispatched to vaccination hubs and then given to patients.

Logistical challenges will be confronting several countries as they seek to ensure the vaccines reach the targeted people.

In Indonesia, experts such as epidemiology professor Pandu Riono from the University Of Indonesia believe vaccinating just half of its population of 268 million might take up to four years.

“The government thinks the vaccine is the quick solution. But the vaccine itself doesn’t work if you don’t successfully deliver it to the people, and (that is) a complex job,” he told the Financial Times, noting the country’s size and underdeveloped transportation.

In neighbouring Malaysia, where the government has allocated RM3 billion (\$986 million) to acquire enough doses to cover the immunisation needs of about 60 to 70 per cent of the population, experts have pointed out that the complex requirements of the Pfizer vaccine, such as super-cold storage, will be an obstacle as minus 70 deg C freezers are not easily available.

“For remote clinics in Sabah and Sarawak, this is going to be an even bigger challenge as getting

Covid-19 immunity: questions still unanswered

How well does it work? And how long does it last?

Reasons to be hopeful

Increasingly positive vaccine trial results

Encouraging studies on convalescent plasma therapy

Record of years-lasting immune protection against Sars and Mers, which were also coronaviruses

Emerging molecular evidence of immune response lasting at least six months

Promising trial successes of Sars-CoV-2 antibodies reproduced as monoclonal antibodies

Rarity of documented reinfections

Tools of immunity

B cells



T cells



Immuno-globulin G (IgG) antibodies



Memory B cells



Memory T cells



Reasons to be cautious

Lack of data on longevity of immunity

Other common coronaviruses have shown to produce short-lived immunity

No information about effective quantities of antibodies produced in natural response to an infection

Concerns about weak immune response to mild infections

Probability that there are many more reinfections than the few that have been documented

The worry that the virus could mutate in the future

Source: AFP STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

According to an Oct 8 – 13 Ipsos survey on more than 18,000 adults covering 15 countries, 73 per cent say they would get a Covid vaccine if it's available.



the supplies to the clinics already takes quite a long time, what more to store it for use afterwards,” Universiti Malaya epidemiologist Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud told The Star.

Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin pointed out the country already has more than 125 ultra-cold freezers, mostly in its public universities and research institutions. “If these freezers cannot be redeployed, we will make arrangements for the procurement of additional ultra-cold freezers,” he said.

In the US, there are already reports of some vaccines being replaced after being stored at overly low temperatures. Reports of allergic reactions have also cropped up in the US and Britain.

And then there are worries that organised crime groups might target trucks containing vaccines for theft and hijacking.

“It is the most valuable asset on earth right now,” Ms Lisa Forte, a former British counterintelligence employee and a partner at cyber-security firm Red Goat, told The New York Times. “Naturally, this will attract highly skilled cyber criminals, criminal groups and state actors.”

TO TAKE OR NOT TO TAKE

Spaniard Luis Sacristan, 42, told The Straits Times that he is looking forward to getting the vaccine.

“I will take the vaccination because it offers protection for my son. It’s like a shield from the people closest to him to make sure he is safe,” said the Madrid-based business development manager.

His views are consistent with surveys indicating mostly positive reactions and large numbers of people who want to be immunised in various countries.

According to an Oct 8 – 13 Ipsos survey on more than 18,000 adults covering 15 countries, 73 per cent say they would get a Covid vaccine if it’s available. Research published by the journal Nature in October also noted that 71.5 per cent of 13,426 survey respondents in 19 countries reported that “they would be very or somewhat likely to take a Covid-19 vaccine”.

However, there are still some who are hesitant to get inoculated, citing concerns about side effects and vaccines moving through clinical trials too fast.

“I will probably give it some time, probably until the end of 2021, to see the effectiveness of the vaccine before actually getting it. The virus may mutate and there is no guarantee the vaccine will be effective (against the mutated virus),” said Ms Dymphna Lanjuran, 38, an artist-curator and gallerist in Malaysia.

Vaccine hesitancy is something that experts have been trying to battle. The Ipsos survey noted that the number who intend to get vaccinated has dropped by 4 per cent compared with a similar survey conducted in August.

“People understandably are sceptical about the speed, but we have to keep emphasising speed means the science was extraordinary,” said Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. [S](#)

South-east Asia’s push to stockpile vaccines

In the evolving race for Covid-19 vaccines, Indonesia took the apparent lead in South-east Asia with the delivery of vaccines from China’s Sinovac Biotech Ltd. But Singapore became the first country in South-east Asia to get the Pfizer Inc.-BioNTech SE vaccine that has received UK and US regulatory approvals.

Here’s how the region of more than 650 million people is dealing with differing fiscal, demographic and distribution challenges in their vaccine strategies.

INDONESIA

- Indonesia is banking on both Western and Chinese vaccines, ordering 125.5 million doses from Sinovac and 30 million from Novavax Inc, while developing 57.6 million of its own Merah Putih
- It received 1.2 million doses of the Sinovac vaccine earlier in December, with another 1.8 million shots arriving in January
- It’s seeking another 16 million from the global GAVI vaccine facility while talks are also on for 100 million from AstraZeneca Plc and Pfizer Inc for possible supply



Sinovac and Novavax are set to help deliver 155.5 million doses of their Covid-19 vaccines to Indonesia. PHOTO: REUTERS

PHILIPPINES

- The country wants to have at least 50 million vaccine shots this year to inoculate about a fourth of the population, the bulk of which will likely arrive by the end of 2021 or early 2022.
- The nation is eyeing 73.2 billion pesos (\$2.02 billion) in vaccine purchases that it plans to fund with financing from multilateral agencies, state-owned banks and companies and bilateral sources
- Vaccinations could start as early as the first quarter of 2021 using Sinovac and Russia’s Sputnik V shots, according to vaccine czar Carlito Galvez
- The country will also receive 2.6 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccines as early as May purchased by local companies

Indian government prepares to counter vaccine scepticism



Health workers collecting personal data from a man during a door-to-door survey for the first shot of Covid-19 vaccine in India on Dec 14. PHOTO: REUTERS

In the country with the most cases of coronavirus infections in Asia, small pockets of resistance against vaccinations have regained momentum

VOLUNTEERS AT THE YOUTH ONLINE LEARNING Organisation (Yolo) have been hard at work since April busting misinformation related to the coronavirus pandemic.

For around a fortnight, they have detected a surge in a new kind of misinformation in India – vaccine scepticism.

“There is a bizarre conspiracy theory gaining ground that the vaccine will introduce something in your body that will control you,” said Mr Prem Prakash, the co-founder of Sarvahitey, which launched Yolo together with Social Media Matters, another non-government organisation.

“The human brain needs an answer that is

DEBARSHI DASGUPTA

India Correspondent



✉ debarshi@sph.com.sg

VIETNAM

- Vietnam is in talks with Pfizer and other medicine manufacturers in the US, the UK, China and Russia on acquiring coronavirus shots, Tuoi Tre newspaper reported
- The country is working on developing vaccines and will work with suppliers when vaccines are available, according to a spokeswoman at the foreign affairs ministry.
- Vietnam's Nonogen Pharmaceutical Biotechnology has started first-phase clinical trials of its coronavirus vaccine Nanocovax, with production in 2022 if tests are successful.

SINGAPORE

- The city-state has set aside roughly US\$750 million (\$995 million) for vaccines, tapping the likes of Arcturus Therapeutics Holdings Inc., Moderna Inc., Pfizer and Sinovac for supplies.
- It estimates there will be enough doses for its population by the third quarter of 2021, and will be able to offer vaccinations for the entire population of more than 5 million by the end of next year.
- Arcturus and Singapore's Economic Development Board have also entered into a supply agreement for the right to buy the ARCT-021 vaccine

MALAYSIA

- The country seeks to buy shots for 70 per cent of its population, more than double the current 30 per cent coverage, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said.
- Pfizer will deliver to Malaysia one million doses in the first quarter of 2021, 1.7 million in the second, 5.8 million in the third and 4.3 million in the final three months of the year, Mr Muhyiddin said in late November.
- It also plans to tap the Covax facility to provide vaccines for 10 per cent of the population while reaching out to 10 companies with vaccines that are at phase-III clinical trials.
- Malaysia conducted its first Covid-19 vaccine phase-III trial in December developed by the Institute of Medical Biology Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences as part of a government-to-government agreement with China.

THAILAND

- Thailand wants to inoculate about 50 per cent of its population by next year.
- It plans to get 26 million doses from the World Health Organisation-backed Covax programme, 26 million from AstraZeneca, and 13 million more from other sources, providing immunity to more than 30 million people.
- Under agreement with AstraZeneca, Siam Bioscience will produce vaccines at its facilities, and Thailand will supply coronavirus vaccines at “reasonable prices” to Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam when it begins production.

Information and data valid as of Dec 15, 2020.
SOURCE: BLOOMBERG



Vietnamese military medical officials giving a shot of the Covid-19 vaccine Nanocovax to a volunteer during the start of human trials at the Military Medical University in Hanoi. PHOTO: AFP

comforting. Making up this conspiracy theory allows them to negate the entire existence of Covid-19 and gives them some mental security that nothing is going to happen to them,” he added.

Mindful of a potentially growing anti-vaxxers movement in India, the government has initiated work on an awareness campaign to dispel doubts about the vaccine.

In a set of guidelines, the federal government asked states to ensure “factual and timely” information is shared with people to dispel apprehension that may have been “introduced after a short trial raising safety concerns, and fear of adverse events, misconception about vaccine efficacy, rumours and negative narrative in the media / social media space”.



A research scientist working inside a laboratory of India's Serum Institute in Pune. A vaccine trial participant was hospitalised after he was administered the firm's vaccine in October. PHOTO: REUTERS

There have been small pockets of resistance against vaccinations in pre-pandemic India, motivated by several factors, including a lack of trust in the government, fear of adverse side-effects as well as an entrenched belief in alternative medicinal practices such as naturopathy, which shuns the use of vaccines.

These forces have regained momentum as details of the government's coronavirus vaccination strategy were gradually made public.

While videos questioning the need for a vaccine are being circulated on social media networks, similar events have been held offline.

A press conference was organised on Dec 4 in Mumbai by Awaken India, a collective of citizens who advocate the use of naturopathy against Covid-19 and argue that the country's low death rate from the illness does not justify measures such as mandatory testing and vaccination of the entire population.

“One hundred per cent, I am not going to get vaccinated,” said Mr Ambar Koiri, one of the collective's members who works for a robotics firm in Mumbai. He added his family as well as around 200,000 members of Awaken India and their families will not opt for vaccination.

Lack of reliable information on the safety and efficacy of coronavirus vaccines – trials of which have been greatly hastened – has also contributed to this trend of vaccine scepticism, including even among some health workers who told the media they will wait for more details before getting vaccinated.

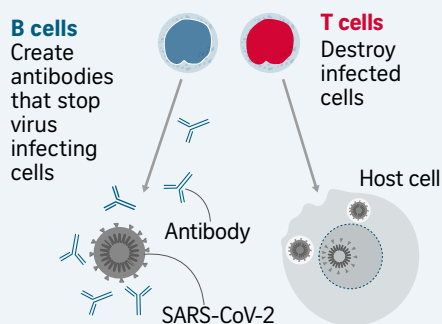
Results of a survey released by LocalCircles, a community-based social media platform, found that vaccine hesitancy had increased among Indians and 69 per cent of its nearly 9,500 respondents said they would not rush to get themselves vaccinated. Some even indicated they would wait until 2022 to get a dose of the vaccine.

In October, a 40-year-old trial participant was admitted to a Chennai hospital after suffering “a virtual neurological breakdown” 10 days after he was administered a dose of a vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India. The Pune-based firm dismissed the participant's claim that the reactions were a result of the vaccine as “malicious and misconceived” and also threatened to sue him.

Now that you've been jabbed...

The aim of inoculation is to activate a natural immune response, which can include short-term and long-term protection

Initial immune response



Protection from reinfection

B cells in the bone marrow continue to create immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibodies which circulate in the bloodstream

If strong enough, they are known as neutralising antibodies and can provide sterilising immunity

Functional immunity

Does not prevent reinfection but defeats it quickly



Memory B cells

Some B cells mature and enter lymph nodes and the spleen, these are activated if sterilising antibodies have dwindled



Memory T cells

Can also develop and settle in lymphatic organs and tissues ready to tackle reinfection

Covid-19 vaccines

To what extent a new vaccine succeeds in triggering long-term effects cannot be confirmed until enough time has passed since the jab



Newly approved Covid-19 vaccines will continue to be monitored to get a better understanding of their long-term efficacy



Studies have shown that it is possible for the same person to be infected twice with SARS-CoV-2



This could imply that the vaccination may also be short-lived



On the other hand, the second infections may have been due to a weak initial immune response



In which case, a sufficient dose delivered via a jab could ensure lasting protection

Source: AFP STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Public health activists have, however, criticised the lack of transparency around the handling of this event by authorities, including how it became publicly known more than a month after adverse reactions were first reported and that too only after the volunteer threatened to go to court.

The All India Drug Action Network (Aidan), in a letter to the government, said no public details were available to date regarding the handling of the adverse event, and how it was determined that the incident was not related to the vaccine candidate.

“The long silence from the authorities was perplexing. The vaccine may be good but its approval process has to be fully transparent. This is something that is not happening and that is where suspicion

starts,” Dr Anant Phadke, one of Aidan’s members told The Straits Times.

“Moreover, if all relevant details of the trial are not made public, if conflict of interests is not known and if pharma companies apply for emergency use authorisation without full data from Phase 3 trials as they have in India – how can this inspire confidence in the concerned pharma companies?”

While still not widespread in India, vaccine scepticism as an “emerging challenge”, said Mr Prakash. “If this seed of misinformation gets into minds, it will be very difficult for the government to vaccinate people. We, therefore, need to nip it in the bud. If we don’t control it, it will definitely escalate,” he told The Straits Times. [S1](#)

ELSEWHERE IN THE REGION

Here’s a look at how other Asian countries are planning to inoculate their people.

South Korea to import Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer vaccines for 16 million people

SOUTH KOREA HAS SIGNED DEALS WITH Pfizer Inc and Johnson & Johnson’s Janssen to import coronavirus vaccines to cover up to 16 million people, as it grapples with the third wave of infections, the country’s Prime Minister said.

The government has been facing growing public pressure over their Covid-19 vaccine procurement plans as the country struggled to contain a third wave of the pandemic, reporting its second-highest daily tally of cases on Dec 23.

Pfizer’s two-dose vaccine, developed with German partner BioNTech, will be enough to cover for 10 million people and its shipment is expected in the third quarter of 2021.

“We are mobilising the entire national capabilities to bring in the shipments within the second quarter,” Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun told a televised briefing. “The negotiation is underway.”

Mr Chung said the doses from Janssen – J&J’s pharmaceuticals division – were added from the initial amount for 2 million people to 6 million and will be ready for inoculation from the second quarter.

The Pfizer and Janssen deals are part of a government plan to buy enough doses that will allow immunisation of 85 per cent of South Korea’s population of 52 million.

The government had already signed a deal with



AstraZeneca Plc, which will be shipped as early as January next year, and is in final talks with Moderna Inc to sign a deal in January to secure 20 million doses.

Health authorities will start a public vaccination programme as early as February, which will be completed around November, before the start of the flu season, Dr Yang Dong-gyo, a senior official at the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA), told a briefing.

The government had allocated an additional 1.3 trillion won (\$\$1.56 billion) to this year’s budget for vaccines.

South Korea has ramped up testing to more than 55,000 people a day, compared with roughly 16,000 a day in September, to track down cases from unknown origin and asymptomatic cases.

Asia’s fourth largest economy won international plaudits earlier this year when it quickly tamped down outbreaks with aggressive, high-tech contact tracing, but officials acknowledged over-confidence that left them straining to contain a third wave. [S1](#) – Reuters

The Pfizer and Janssen deals are part of a government plan to buy enough doses that will allow immunisation of 85 per cent of South Korea’s population of 52 million.

PHOTO: AFP

China to vaccinate 50 million people in high-priority groups

CHINA IS PLANNING TO VACCINATE 50 MILLION people in the high-priority group against the coronavirus before the start of the peak Chinese New Year travel season early this year, reports said.

Beijing is planning to distribute 100 million doses of the vaccines made by Chinese firms Sinopharm and Sinovac Biotech, a report in South China Morning Post said.

China has granted emergency use status to two candidate vaccines from Sinopharm and one from Sinovac Biotech. It has approved a fourth, from CanSino Biologics, for military use.

The South China Morning Post report said that Chinese officials have been asked to complete the first 50 million doses by Jan 15 and the second by Feb 5.

The mass inoculation for high-priority groups aims to reduce the risks of the spread of the disease during the annual weeklong holiday, it added.

The high-priority group includes health workers,



Engineers working on monkey kidney cells for an experimental Covid-19 vaccine at the Sinovac Biotech facilities in Beijing. PHOTO: AFP

police officers, firefighters, customs officers, cargo handlers, as well as transport and logistics workers.

Meanwhile, China's Sichuan province planned to start vaccinating the elderly and people with underlying conditions once the new year gets under way, after it completes inoculations for priority groups, officials have said.

Sichuan is the first province to outline a timeline of its vaccination plans for the public.

The coronavirus, which first emerged in China late last year, has largely been brought under control in the country, but there have been a series of domestic outbreaks. [ST](#)

— Reuters, AFP, Xinhua

Malaysia to start Covid-19 vaccinations in February

MALAYSIA WILL BEGIN ADMINISTERING PFIZER'S Covid-19 vaccine as early as February, with Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin among the first to receive the shot before front-liners.

The government will also procure enough vaccines to cover more than 80 per cent of the population.

"To convince the people that the vaccine obtained is safe and effective, I will be among the first individuals to receive the Covid-19 vaccination," Tan Sri Muhyiddin said in a televised speech on Dec 22.

The vaccines will then be administered to front-liners before being given to high-risk groups such as the elderly as well as those with non-communicable diseases and chronic respiratory diseases, he said.

The government has also signed an agreement with pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca to procure 6.4 million doses of its Covid-19 vaccine for 10 per cent of the population, added the premier.

This means Malaysia now has vaccines for 40 per cent of its population.

After signing deals with Covax, Pfizer and AstraZeneca, and finalising agreements with Sinovac, CanSino and Gamaleya, Malaysia will have vaccines for almost 83 per cent of the population at RM2.05 billion. PHOTO: REUTERS

In November, it inked a deal with Pfizer for 12.8 million doses of the vaccine for 20 per cent of the population, and a pact with Covax to cover another 10 per cent.

Covax is an alliance of countries pooling their resources to ensure the equitable global distribution of Covid-19 vaccines.

The government is also in final negotiations with China's Sinovac and CanSino, and Russia's Gamaleya Institute to secure additional vaccine supply, Mr Muhyiddin said.

In total, there will be enough vaccines for more than 80 per cent or 26.5 million of the population at a cost of RM2.05 billion (\$675 million), he said.

The government had originally aimed to provide vaccines to 70 per cent of Malaysians, he added.

Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin tweeted that after signing deals with Covax, Pfizer and AstraZeneca, and finalising agreements with Sinovac, CanSino and Gamaleya, Malaysia will have vaccines for almost 83 per cent of the population at RM2.05 billion. The vaccines will be provided free to Malaysians, according to a poster which he tweeted.

Malaysia is currently battling a third wave of the Covid-19 outbreak, with 1,594 cases and three deaths recorded on Dec 28. [ST](#)

— Hazlin Hassan, Malaysia Correspondent



The Covid-19 economic crisis could morph

Negative growth and rising unemployment could give way to a corporate debt and banking crisis

ECONOMIC CRISES HAVE A TENDENCY TO MORPH. After a crisis gets under way, its epicentre can shift and it can turn contagious in unpredictable ways, impacting areas previously presumed relatively safe.

For example, what starts as a domestic crisis can take on regional dimensions, affecting even healthy economies, as we saw in Asia in 1997, or go global, as happened after the United States subprime mortgage crisis of 2007-2008. Crises can also spread quickly from one sector to another and then engulf entire economies. Europe's real estate crises in 2008 morphed into banking crises a year later and then into a euro zone-wide sovereign debt crisis by 2012.

Covid-19 started out as a health crisis, which it still is. But it quickly became an economic crisis in the face of lockdowns, supply chain disruptions and the near-total closure of industries such as international travel and tourism, parts of retail and hospitality, live entertainment and nightlife.

With vaccines being rolled out, economic recovery is now within sight. Yet, there is reason to believe that we may still be only at the end of the beginning of what could become yet another rolling crisis.

In an interview with *The Straits Times*, Mr Alfonso Garcia Mora, vice-president for the Asia-Pacific at the International Finance Corporation (IFC) – the World Bank's private-sector lending arm – provided some clues as to what might lie ahead, and what needs to be done.

The immediate impact of Covid-19 on companies, he pointed out, was a shortage of liquidity because of the collapse of demand and the disruption of supply chains, which led to severe cash flow problems. This was largely resolved, mostly by central banks, which pumped huge amounts of liquidity into economies.

THE COMING SOLVENCY CRISIS

But central banks can't deal with solvency issues, which are the next threat. The demand shock has led to solvency problems because many companies can't pay their essential expenses. "This is what is unfolding now," said Mr Garcia Mora, especially in the sectors worst impacted by the crisis, such as tourism, which in some countries accounts for as much

as 10 per cent of gross domestic product.

Across economies, about half of firms won't be able to service their loans. Bankruptcies could increase by 30 per cent in the Asia-Pacific over the coming year, he said.

So far, bankruptcies resulting from the Covid-19 downturn have remained largely bottled up, mainly because of government assistance, relaxed bankruptcy laws and forbearance by banks. In Singapore, for example, besides providing financial support, the Government has mandated moratoriums on legal action over rents and contracts, and raised the thresholds for bankruptcy and insolvency proceedings. Banks have been allowing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to defer repayments since April. They might extend the deferrals beyond this year on a case-by-case basis. Many other countries have adopted similar measures.

But when the economic recovery gets under way, the forbearance by banks will end and laws will revert to normal. The lagged effects of negative growth will also start to be felt. That is when bankruptcies could start to take off.

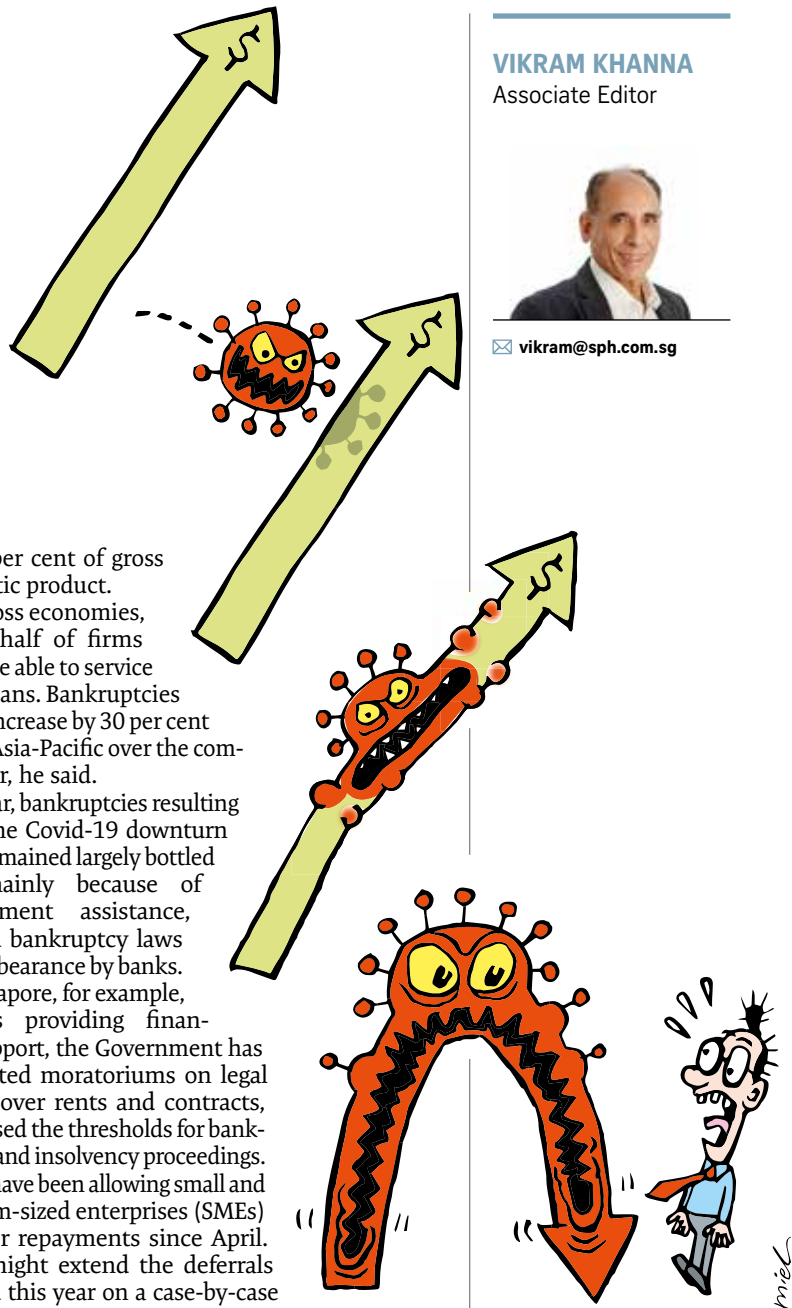
A SHOCK FOR BANKS

Rising bankruptcies could deliver a rude shock to many banks, which may not have been monitoring the solvency of their borrowers during the forbearance period. So while, right now, banks' non-performing loans (NPLs) may seem low and manageable, the picture could change dramatically once forbearance ends, and the later it ends, the

VIKRAM KHANNA
Associate Editor



✉ vikram@sph.com.sg



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL



The banking sectors of some countries could become stressed, especially those that entered the crisis with already weak financial sectors. As of today we don't have enough information to say whether banks will need to be bailed out, but we expect there will be cases which will need support.



— **MR ALFONSO GARCIA MORA** is vice-president for the Asia-Pacific at the International Finance Corporation.

more dramatic will be the change.

"When forbearance was announced, we thought it would last three months to six months," said Mr Garcia Mora. "But we have already passed nine months, and there may be three to four months more to go before forbearance ends." When that happens, banks could discover that their NPLs are not 2 per cent to 3 per cent as they were six months earlier, but in double digits.

"The banking sectors of some countries could become stressed, especially those that entered the crisis with already weak financial sectors," said Mr Garcia Mora. "As of today we don't have enough information to say whether banks will need to be bailed out, but we expect there will be cases which will need support."

Covid-19 has already morphed from a health crisis into a crisis of negative growth and rising unemployment. It could morph further into a corporate debt and banking crisis. So what needs to be done?

DEALING WITH INSOLVENCIES

The first order of business should be for countries to create strong frameworks to deal with insolvencies. Many countries in the Asia-Pacific don't have one, Mr Garcia Mora pointed out.

The goal should be to ensure, first, that firms which are still solvent, but facing cash flow problems, restructure so they can continue operations; and second, that firms which have become unviable go into bankruptcy and get liquidated.

Mr Garcia Mora proposed that ideally, these issues should be tackled through out-of-court processes.

He is hesitant to recommend that governments take equity stakes in troubled companies. One problem is that having already run up huge fiscal deficits during the Covid-19 crisis so far, most governments lack the fiscal space to bail out companies on a large scale. Another is that mechanisms for the government to unwind its investments can be problematic.

REALLOCATING CAPITAL

Once insolvencies are dealt with, the next priority should be to accelerate the economic recovery by channelling liquidity selectively to deserving sectors. What will be needed, Mr Garcia Mora said, is "a massive reallocation of capital."

This will be a tricky exercise. The general manager of the Bank for International Settlements, Mr Agustín Carstens, has pointed out that while economic growth will eventually return, "the engines will not be the same... the economic landscape may have fundamentally changed."

There will be more digital adoption in several sectors, and consumer attitudes will have changed and may never return to what they were, pre-pandemic. There will, for example, be more remote work, less travel, less offline shopping and less eating out. While such trends will strengthen some sectors, "they will also turn once-thriving sectors into deadwood."

Deciding which sectors merit support won't be easy, Mr Carstens added. Banks can help identify the appropriate targets. But they too would need to revise the types of clients they lend to. Thus, as the Covid-19 crisis morphs, the responses to it – from governments, banks and companies – will also need to change.

IFC'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19 AND SINGAPORE'S ROLE

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) is responding to the Covid-19 crisis with what Mr Alfonso Garcia Mora, its vice-president for the Asia-Pacific, calls "the three Rs" – relief, restructuring and recovery.

By way of relief, it has provided US\$8 billion (\$\$10.7 billion) for working capital liquidity to firms in countries whose central banks were not able to come up with enough liquidity support. It also extended US\$4 billion in financing for health, including support for countries to develop and distribute vaccines, pharmaceuticals and personal protective equipment.

It is also helping many of its client companies to restructure their businesses for a changed world and is working with banks to resolve non-performing loans and take them off their books, to unlock fresh lending.

The IFC wants to promote "a resilient recovery." This will involve several elements, according to Mr Garcia Mora.

A crucial step will be to expand digital connectivity. "There are about 3.5 billion people in the world who are still offline," he pointed out, which means they cannot benefit from rising digitalisation.

In many poor countries, only one out of 25 jobs can be done from home. "This pandemic is a crisis of inequality, which has increased significantly across countries, social classes and genders. Women have suffered 1.8 times as many job losses as men," said Mr Garcia Mora.

The World Bank group has launched a Digital Development Partnership to work with the private sector to promote digital transformation in the developing world. Google and Microsoft are among the companies that have signed up as partners.

A resilient recovery will also involve helping firms to access green finance and blue bonds (which raise funds for ocean-friendly projects), and build green infrastructure. These are areas where the IFC will be redoubling its efforts.

Singapore is critical to the IFC's Asian operations. It has the largest presence among all international financial institutions here, with more than 150 staff, who work on countries ranging from Afghanistan to the Pacific Islands.

"For us, Singapore is a vital knowledge hub for digitalisation, fintech and climate-related issues," said Mr Garcia Mora. "It is also a hub for infrastructure financing. We are mobilising private capital from Singapore. We want to help Singapore companies go overseas, where we can identify good opportunities and co-invest with them."

The Covid-19 crisis has opened up many new opportunities for companies in Asia, he added. **ST**

Challenges in China's quest for tech autonomy

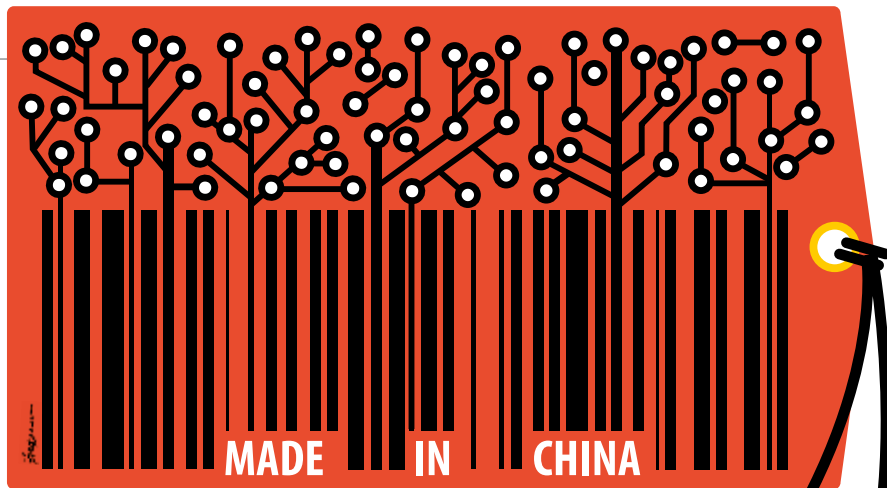


ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

China's response to the United States' tech decoupling is to aim for self-reliance and innovative excellence, but there are problems that it needs to overcome to succeed

IN LATE OCTOBER, THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT announced its economic and social development plans for the next five years and a vision for 2035 that included building technological self-reliance and becoming a world leader in innovation by that year.

In November, Vice-Premier Liu He, who led the drafting of the plans, in an article in the People's Daily called for the country to move faster towards becoming technologically self-sufficient, saying this and innovation are key to China's development.

After decades of being the factory of the world and lifting millions out of poverty, economic growth is slowing. It needs to move up the value chain to keep growing and escape the middle income trap.

In the last decade or more, as factories making products such as toys, cameras and personal computers relocated to lower-cost countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia, China has been investing in technology, making great strides in areas such as artificial intelligence, robotics and telecommunications.

But in recent years, the West including the US has become increasingly unhappy with what it sees as China's use of underhanded tactics such as forced technology transfer and intellectual property theft to acquire technology from the West. The US is also wary of China's technological progress as it sees China as a strategic competitor whose authoritarian system differs from the US' democratic one.

In response, the US has started to decouple technologically from the Asian giant, while other Western countries have become more cautious in dealing with China when it comes to advanced technology.

For example, the US has sought to undermine Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei's leading

position in 5G technology by banning the sale of microchips to the firm, and the sale of equipment to make those chips to top Chinese chipmaker SMIC.

Such decoupling efforts have led to China doubling down on its quest to attain technological self-sufficiency and innovative excellence.

This quest had its beginnings in the mid-2000s when China had sought technological self-sufficiency as a way to strengthen its own innovative capacity. The difference with the call now is that it is also a response to the changing and more hostile external environment.

As Mr Liu said in his article, "Faced with new contradictions and challenges brought about by changes in the external environment, we must adjust the path of economic development" to one that was more autonomous, sustainable and resilient. China is willing to throw money into technology – spending on research and development (R&D) is expected to rise to 3 per cent of its gross domestic product from 2.23 per cent in 2019 – and it is not short of talent among its 1.4 billion population. But the less friendly external environment and internal issues pose challenges to its quest.

PLAYING CATCH-UP

As China embarked on industrialisation in the 1990s, foreign companies in industries such as cars, electronics and pharmaceuticals were required to form joint-venture firms with local ones when setting up operations in China, to facilitate the transfer of technology.

In the 2000s, however, China began to promote indigenous innovation to catch up with the West in technology. As then President Jiang Zemin said in 1999: "In today's world, the core of each country's competitive strength is intellectual innovation, technological innovation and high-tech industrialisation."

Under Mr Jiang's successor Hu Jintao, a programme was drawn up in 2006 to promote indigenous innovation titled National Medium- And Long-Term Plan For The Development of Science and Technology (2006-2020). It acknowledged that "despite the size of our economy, our country is not an economic power, primarily because of our weak innovative capacity."

GOH SUI NOI

Global Affairs
Correspondent



✉ suinoi@sph.com.sg

China has been adept at applying new technologies to create wildly successful products and services, but has fallen short at inventing new technology – a deficiency it wants to redress.



China's Education Ministry launched an initiative called the Strong Base Plan to better allow graduates to contribute in areas such as high-tech chips, new materials and advanced production. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Apart from higher state spending on science and technology and new policies to encourage R&D, regulations were put in place to protect local tech industries. In response to the rapidly changing technological environment, however, this “go-it-alone” techno-nationalistic strategy was later replaced with one that combined indigenous innovation with collaboration with foreign firms.

In 2015, China launched its Made in China 2025 plan to update its manufacturing base by rapidly developing 10 high-tech industries including new energy vehicles, next-generation information technology and telecoms, advanced robotics and artificial intelligence.

Its goal was to help China transition from low-level, low-value manufacturing to a high-tech, high-productivity economy and reduce its dependence on foreign technology. Among the measures taken were direct subsidies to Chinese firms and investments in and acquisitions of foreign high-tech firms.

China's policies, together with its technical talent and entrepreneurship, have led to the country's rapid rise in areas such as artificial intelligence and 5G technology. Dr Kai-fu Lee, a tech venture capitalist based in Beijing, said there is now a clear US-China duopoly in artificial intelligence. “AI in China is rising rapidly, boosted by several structural advantages: huge data sets, a young army of technical talent, aggressive entrepreneurs, and strong and pragmatic government policy,” he told Project Syndicate last year.

He noted how the runaway success of TikTok could not be copied by top US firms as the video-sharing app had leveraged China's natural advantage in having access to huge amounts of data. It then created similar experiences for different audiences in other countries.

TikTok's success is due to the excellent application of artificial intelligence, not through any breakthroughs in artificial intelligence technologies. And therein lies the rub – China has been adept at applying new technologies to create wildly successful products and services, but has fallen short at inventing new technology – a deficiency it wants to redress.

SPEED BUMPS AHEAD

In announcing its plans for technological self-reliance, China has stressed that international collaboration

on research will continue, as it knows it needs to keep learning from advanced foreign partners. But in the climate of increased wariness, the question is whether it can continue with this strategy of cooperation with foreign research partners.

Apart from foreign collaboration, China is also well aware of the need to train more of its own talent in science and technology to boost its innovative capacities. Last January, the Education Ministry launched an initiative called the Strong Base Plan to get China's universities to enrol more students in subjects such as mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology. Graduates would be expected to contribute in areas such as high-tech chips, new materials and advanced production.

It also has schemes such as the Thousand Talents Programme to encourage top-tier Chinese scientists, scholars and entrepreneurs living overseas to return and is recruiting foreign researchers to work in its labs.

However, a study on China's research environment published in 2018 showed several challenges to its endeavour to become a global innovator. One is an environment that does not promote innovative or original research because quantity is emphasised over quality of research. Academic fraud is a recurring problem.

Another problem highlighted by the study is the excessive governmental intervention in directing scientific research leading to a rigid system that lacks academic freedom. While China's universities were granted greater autonomy in the 1980s and 1990s, the central government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have recently tightened control, as President Xi Jinping seeks to turn higher institutions of learning into “strongholds of the Party's leadership”.

It is a similar situation in the private sector, where the relatively open environment from the 1990s to the early 2010s that spawned the likes of Alibaba and Tencent is being curtailed as government and party control over private companies grows. From 2018, private firms were required to expand the role of the CCP in their governance. In September last year, the CCP announced guidelines that would give party committees in private companies greater say in personnel appointments and other important decisions.

Another question hanging over industrial innovation is whether in the current climate the government will continue to give space to industries to create and innovate by wielding a light regulatory hand, tightening the rules only when things threatened to spiral out of control, as it has done in the past.

Mr Liu emphasised the need to “develop the scientific spirit, encourage bold exploration and reasonable doubt, strengthen basic research and focus on original innovation.” It will be a difficult balancing act asserting control over academia and industry, yet allowing enough room for innovation.

But success in this, as well as in maintaining collaboration with foreign partners, will be key to China realising its ambitious goals of technological self-reliance and leading the world in innovation. [ST](#)



An iron fist in a velvet glove – the next chapter in Sino-US ties

As China sizes up the Biden team, both parties signal how they hope to shape bilateral relations

A YEAR AGO, CHINA AND THE UNITED States were on the cusp of inking the phase one trade deal, putting a halt to what was then an escalating tariff war.

In Beijing, there was cautious optimism that the interim deal could herald a turning point in what was then a rapidly souring relationship.

But as the intervening year has shown, Covid-19 put paid to those hopes. Distrust has grown and dialogue has all but stopped. Both sides have shut consulates and expelled journalists as relations entered a dangerous winter. One year on, the same cautious optimism is returning to Beijing.

With the Trump administration on its way out and President-elect Joe Biden set to take power with a fresh team come Jan 20, signs have emerged that Chinese leaders are seeking a reset in Beijing's relations with Washington, and are watching Mr Biden's key Cabinet appointments closely.

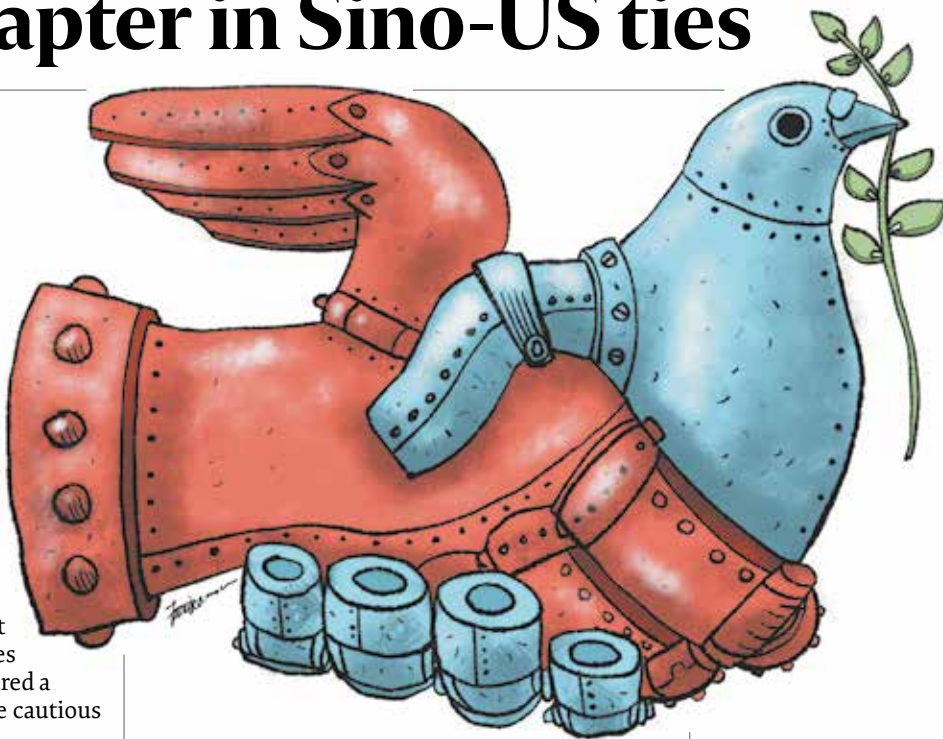
A flurry of signals on China's intention to rebuild the relationship has come since late November. Chinese President Xi Jinping in his congratulatory message to Mr Biden on Nov 25 wrote that he hoped both sides would be able to manage and control differences, and focus on cooperation to advance relations.

A day earlier, former top Chinese diplomat Fu Ying wrote in a commentary in *The New York Times* saying both countries needed to have candid talks to restore trust. She suggested that both sides could cooperate on dealing with health crises and climate change, and that their militaries should have talks at a "strategic level".

Then in early December, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made clear China's desire for a reset in a video call with board members of the US-China Business Council when he said restarting dialogue and rebuilding trust were the most pressing tasks at the moment.

READING THE RUNES

Now with a changing of the guard, Beijing sees an opportunity to stabilise relations after the tumult of the Trump administration.



Mr Biden's Cabinet appointees responsible for shaping the administration's China policy are being closely scrutinised.

Chinese experts have been poring over the comments and writings of Mr Antony Blinken and Mr Jake Sullivan, the President-elect's nominees for secretary of state and national security adviser respectively, to suss out their views and likely policy responses on China-related matters.

Articles like the one Mr Sullivan co-wrote with former assistant secretary of state Kurt Campbell for *Foreign Affairs* magazine, titled "Competition without catastrophe", have been held up as examples that Mr Biden's America would find ways to coexist with China even as the two countries compete.

As for Mr Blinken, he is a familiar face in Chinese foreign policy circles. He visited China in 2015 and 2016 when he was deputy secretary of state, and co-hosted a bilateral security dialogue with then Chinese vice-foreign minister Zhang Yesui during the latter's visit.

Reports in September that he had remarked that it was unrealistic and counter-productive for the US to "fully decouple" from China would be a relief to the Chinese looking for some moderation after the Trump years.

But analysts are less sure about Mr Biden's choice for trade representative, Democrat trade lawyer Katherine Tai.

Ms Tai, who has extensive experience in dealing with China and speaks fluent Mandarin, taught

ST ILLUSTRATION:
MANNY FRANCISCO

DANSON CHEONG
China Correspondent
In Beijing



✉ dansonc@sph.com.sg



Chinese experts have been poring over the comments of Mr Jake Sullivan, to suss out his views on China-related matters. PHOTO: REUTERS



Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken is a familiar face in Chinese foreign policy circles and visited China in 2015 and 2016 as deputy secretary of state. PHOTO: AFP



Analysts are less sure about President-elect Joe Biden's choice for trade representative, Democrat trade lawyer Katherine Tai. PHOTO: REUTERS

(Rolling back Trump's sanctions) will invite political accusations that Biden or his people are weak on China and it will become an issue in the midterm election in two years or in the next presidential election.



— ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR LI MINGJIANG

English at a university in Guangzhou from 1996 to 1998 under a Yale University fellowship and was chief counsel for China trade enforcement at the Office of the US Trade Representative from 2011 to 2014. She has called for both an “offensive and defensive” approach in trade policy.

The trio have been described as “establishment elites” and old hands – all were senior administration officials during the Obama years.

The consensus in Beijing is that the Trump administration’s mercurial approach to China relations will give way to a more coordinated one under Mr Biden.

The nationalist Global Times, which has been withering in its criticism of current Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, has also undergone a change of tone. In a report in November that canvassed the views of Chinese experts, it said the Biden officials would bring back a “rational and pragmatic approach” to Sino-US ties.

Given the cautiously optimistic nature of Beijing’s recent comments, it is possible that China could send a high-level representative to Washington soon after the inauguration on Jan 20 to kick-start dialogue, said Associate Professor Li Mingjiang from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

“Their appointments (of Mr Blinken and Mr Sullivan) would have given Chinese leaders some positivity or glimmer of hope that Sino-US relations could be shaped towards a more stable or cooperative track,” he said.

LIMITS TO BETTER TIES

Having said that, a complete reset in relations will be highly unlikely. Among Americans, distrust in China has grown to historic highs, and Chinese experts acknowledge that Mr Biden’s China policy will continue to be dictated by the bipartisan political consensus on China.

This would limit the incoming administration’s space to roll back Trump-era measures. Mr Biden has already said he would not immediately remove trade war tariffs on China without reviewing the phase one trade deal and consulting allies.

Therefore, even if Mr Biden’s China team dialled down the harsh Trump-era rhetoric, expect its members to seek out allies as they exert pressure on Beijing on issues from trade to human rights.

Mr Sullivan has tweeted his support for Australia

(currently embroiled in an ugly spat with Beijing) and pro-democracy lawmakers in Hong Kong.

As one Chinese expert neatly summarised for the Global Times, he sees Mr Biden’s foreign policy team as an “iron fist in a velvet glove”.

Some would say the same of Beijing’s response to the incoming US administration. It is instructive that while China has said it would like to cooperate with the US on areas such as climate change and pandemic preparedness, the red lines remain on issues related to Hong Kong, Xinjiang or Taiwan.

Longer-term objectives aside, there are signs that Beijing is already moving tactically to counter Washington’s efforts to court other countries in order to forge a multinational front against China.

For instance, China’s Foreign Minister, Mr Wang, visited Japan and South Korea in late November to discuss cooperation over Covid-19 and trade. Experts have said the visit could also lay the groundwork for a trilateral summit.

Mr Xi has also been busy phoning European leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron – where he stressed the need to maintain close communication and co-operation between China and the European Union.

With Asean, Beijing recently inked the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership trade pact, and has also been offering Chinese Covid-19 vaccines as part of its diplomatic push.

Not all of China’s tactical efforts to nip in the bud a US alliance are velvet-tact soft. Australia, frequently described by China’s state media as America’s “lapdog”, has in recent months been subjected to Chinese curbs on its key exports such as wine and coal, not to mention a controversial tweet by combative Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian.

The hard-pressure tactics are widely seen as a warning to other countries against being too enthusiastic in supporting America in its contest with China.

But Chinese leaders face a delicate balancing act in this carrot and stick approach – using the stick too hard to bend others to its will will likely increase anxieties over the rise of China, and encourage some nations to avoid being trapped in a dependent relationship with China.

A bitter cold has descended on Beijing’s ties with Washington, and if Chinese leaders hope to usher in a new spring come Jan 20, addressing this unease would be a good place to start. [ST](#)

ASIA'S VIRUS BUSTERS

6 heroes in fight to end Covid-19 pandemic

SIX PEOPLE WHO HAVE SPENT 2020 TIRELESSLY seeking a way out of the greatest crisis of our era have been named The Straits Times Asians of the Year.

Between them, the recipients of the 2020 award capture the entire trajectory of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

They are Chinese researcher Zhang Yongzhen, who led the team that mapped and published online the first complete genome of Sars-CoV-2, the virus that sparked the pandemic; three scientists – China's Major-General Chen Wei, Japan's Dr Ryuichi Morishita and Singapore's Professor Ooi Eng Eong – who are among those at the forefront

of developing vaccines against the virus; and two businessmen – South Korea's Mr Seo Jung-jin and India's Mr Adar Poonawalla – whose companies will enable the making and dispensing of the vaccines and other Covid-19 treatments to the world.

Collectively referred to as “the virus busters”, they are heroes of a kind, having devoted themselves to the pressing cause of resolving the coronavirus pandemic, each in their own capacity.

“Sars-CoV-2, the virus that has brought death and hardship to the world's largest and most populous continent, is meeting its tamer in The Virus Busters,” the award citation said. “We salute your courage,

MAGDALENE FUNG

Assistant Foreign Editor



✉ magfung@sph.com.sg



PHOTO: CHINACDC.CN

Professor Zhang Yongzhen, 55

Professor Zhang published the first complete genome of Sars-CoV-2 in January, which allowed health authorities around the world to recognise the mysterious pathogen. His decision to publish the genome map helped save countless lives by reducing the time it takes to get a diagnosis.

Read more: <https://str.sg/JEBM>



PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Major-General Chen Wei, 54

Maj-Gen Chen worked from a makeshift laboratory in Wuhan during the start of pandemic, where she and a team of military scientists researched on treatment for patients. She was given the title of People's Hero by President Xi Jinping at a ceremony in September and has also been leading a team to work on a vaccine with Chinese biopharmaceutical firm CanSino Biologics.

Read more: <https://str.sg/JEBQ>

care, commitment and creativity. In this peril-filled hour, you are a symbol of hope for Asia, indeed the world.”

In deciding to honour The Virus Busters, ST editors had in mind those who have, in one way or another, enabled the complex, multi-stage process of preventing as many people around the world from getting the deadly disease in as little time as possible.

Said Mr Warren Fernandez, editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings’ English/Malay/Tamil Media Group and editor of ST: “Each year, ST editors seek out a person, team or organisation that has not only made or shaped the news, but also helped contribute positively to Asia in the process.

“This year, we naturally looked to those involved in the fight against Covid-19, which has dominated the headlines. We debated long and hard, but finally agreed on a group of people who have done the most to help find an answer to the crisis brought on by the virus.

“They are a disparate group whose collective efforts have pushed forward the search for vaccines, allowing these to be discovered and delivered with

an urgency never attempted or seen before. Their commitment and actions have helped save lives and give hope to people all around Asia, and the world.”

WORKING TO END PANDEMIC

Professor Zhang Yongzhen, 55, of China’s Shanghai Public Health Clinical Centre helped kick-start the process of working towards an end to the pandemic.

He and his team toiled through two straight nights in early January – after receiving their first sample of the mysterious illness then plaguing the city of Wuhan in central Hubei province – to map the first complete genome of the virus.

With the identification of the pathogen came the realisation of the enormity of the situation.

Prof Zhang’s team quickly shared their findings with the authorities and posted the information online to alert the global scientific community of the dangerous virus about to sweep the world.

It would have taken extraordinary gumption to do so, as some whistle-blowing doctors who had earlier tried to sound the alarm about the disease had been detained at that time. Prof Zhang and his team’s timely transparency proved vital in the swift

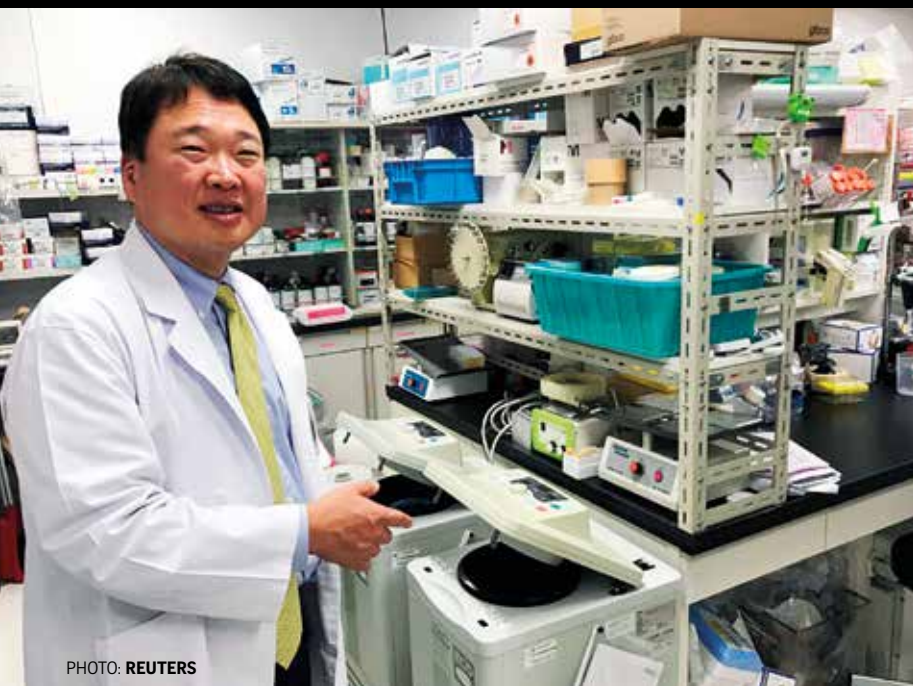


PHOTO: REUTERS

Dr Ryuichi Morishita, 58

Dr Morishita is charting a radical path in the field of biopharmaceuticals by experimenting with DNA vaccines against infectious diseases like Covid-19, as well as intractable diseases like cancer and hypertension.

Read more: <https://str.sg/JEBA>



PHOTO: CELLTRION

Seo Jung-jin, 63

Chairman of one of South Korea’s largest pharmaceutical firms, Celltrion, Mr Seo is investing 300 billion won (\$370 million) into the firm’s experimental antibody treatment that will complement the Covid-19 vaccines. About 100,000 doses have already been made for domestic use.

Read more: <https://str.sg/JEBW>

development of testing kits and early research into treatments and vaccines for the illness.

Over in Wuhan, the Chinese military's top epidemiologist Chen Wei, 54, scrambled to develop a viable vaccine to bring an end to the outbreak that she could already foresee wreaking havoc across the globe.

In barely 50 days, she and her team had produced a potential vaccine with Chinese firm CanSino Biologics ready for clinical trials. It became the world's first vaccine to be approved for restricted use.

While Maj-Gen Chen's vaccine employed a tried-and-tested method of using a common cold virus to carry genetic data of the coronavirus' protein to elicit an immune response, other researchers are blazing a trail in experimenting with novel technologies in developing their own vaccines.

In Japan, Dr Ryuichi Morishita, 58, a professor of clinical gene therapy at Osaka University, is working with home-grown biotech start-up AnGes on a DNA vaccine, while Singapore's Professor Ooi Eng Eong, 53, is leading scientists at the Duke-NUS Medical School and US pharmaceutical firm

Arcturus Therapeutics to develop a messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccine.

The DNA and mRNA vaccines differ from traditional ones in that, instead of injecting a form of a virus into the body, they take only a small part of the coronavirus' genetic data to stimulate cells to create a protein that would produce antibodies against the virus.

If the DNA and mRNA Covid-19 vaccines make it through the clinical trials and are approved for use in humans, they will be among the very first of their kind.

The first such mRNA vaccine, an American-German collaboration by drug-makers Pfizer and BioNTech, was approved for mass production only on Dec 2.

These novel technologies can be developed quickly, and may churn out vaccines that are cheaper to produce.

The Asian efforts are but part of a wider, global collaboration. Developers in the United States and Europe, too, have been working at lightning speed to crunch down the typical years taken to create a vaccine to just months.



PHOTO: SERUM INSTITUTE OF INDIA

Adar Poonawalla, 39

Billionaire chief executive of India's Serum Institute Mr Poonawalla has put US\$250 million (\$333 million) of his family fortune into ramping up his firm's vaccine manufacturing capacity. The institute has started off by producing 40 million doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine, which will retail for US\$3 (\$\$4) to US\$4 per dose for government procurement and US\$5 to US\$6 for direct private sales.

Read more: <https://str.sg/JEBP>



ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

Professor Ooi Eng Eong, 53

Professor Ooi Eng Eong of the Duke-NUS Medical School is co-developer of a Covid-19 vaccine candidate that is among only 51 in the world being tested on humans. The early-phase trials for the Lunar-Cov19 vaccine co-developed by Prof Ooi and American pharmaceutical company Arcturus Therapeutics began in Singapore in October.

Read more: <https://str.sg/JEBn>

There are promising vaccine candidates from Russia and China as well, though they have been less transparent in releasing clinical trial results.

BUSINESSES INVOLVED

Scientists and researchers are not the only ones with a part to play.

Nations are now gearing up for mass production and distribution of these much-anticipated vaccines, with many in Asia moving to make them free for their people. Among those enabling the process are two key Asian businessmen whose contributions have helped push us closer by the day towards the end goal of getting billions of doses of the vaccines and treatments within reach of people around the world.

Mr Seo Jung-jin, chairman of one of South Korea's largest pharmaceutical firms, Celltrion, and the country's second-richest man, is investing 300 billion won (\$370 million) into producing an antibody treatment that will complement the Covid-19 vaccines. Celltrion is also South Korea's biggest distributor of biological medicines worldwide.

With an eye towards offering affordable treatment, Mr Seo, 63, has vowed to provide Celltrion's Covid-19 drug – which will seek conditional approval by the end of this month – at production cost in South Korea, and at lower prices than competitors to the rest of the world.

"During a pandemic crisis, pharmaceutical companies must serve as public assets for the country," said Mr Seo.

Mr Adar Poonawalla – billionaire chief executive of India's Serum Institute, the world's biggest producer of vaccines, has put US\$250 million (\$333 million) of his family fortune into ramping up his firm's manufacturing capacity.

"I decided to go all out," said Mr Poonawalla, 39, who has pledged that his firm's Covid-19 vaccines will help supply lower- and middle-income countries that face significant disadvantages in the quest to obtain them.

Serum Institute is also developing its own vaccine.

In the big picture of ending the pandemic, commonality of purpose is key. The ST Asians of the Year have led the way, as have scores of other individuals in their own fields. When an end comes into sight, it will be due in no small part to these people who – undaunted by the tumult – have committed themselves to the sobering, much-needed work to put together an exit plan from the crisis, for humanity.

Said Ms Bhagyashree Garekar, ST's foreign editor: "There has not been a day this year when the pandemic has not been in the news. ST's editors felt there could be no more deserving recipients this year than the people squaring up to Asia's biggest-ever health challenge, engaged in pioneering and courageous efforts to prevent the highly contagious virus from wreaking more damage.

"In a year that is ending with a wish for great resets... Asia's virus busters are the face of hope on the horizon." **ST**

Past recipients of The Straits Times Asian of the Year award

2012

Myanmar President
Thein Sein

2013

Chinese President Xi
Jinping (right) and then-
Japanese Prime Minister
Shinzo Abe

2014

Indian Prime Minister
Narendra Modi (right)

2015

Singapore's founding prime
minister Lee Kuan Yew (right),
awarded posthumously



2016

"The Disruptors": Grab co-founders
Anthony Tan and Tan Hooi Ling,
Flipkart co-founders Binny Bansal and
Sachin Bansal, Gojek founder and chief
executive Nadiem Makarim, Tencent
Holdings founder Pony Ma and Razer
co-founder Tan Min-Liang

Grab co-founders Tan Hooi Ling (left)
and fellow Malaysian Anthony Tan.



2017

Chinese President Xi Jinping

2018

"The First Responders":
Singaporean paraglider Ng Kok
Choong (awarded posthumously),
Indian Navy helicopter pilots
P. Rajkumar and Vijay Varma,
Indonesia's national disaster
management agency spokesman
Sutopo Purwo Nugroho, Singapore's
Mercy Relief, and Jakarta-based
Asean Coordinating Centre for
Humanitarian Assistance on
Disaster Management

2019

Indonesian President Joko Widodo

PHOTOS: REUTERS, AFP, ST FILE, GRAB

No cakewalk for upcoming digital banks in Singapore

OVAIS SUBHANI

Senior Correspondent

✉ osubhani@sph.com.sg



But long-term opportunities abound if they can go regional, make services user-friendly

WHILE THE USE OF DIGITAL SERVICES HAS surged, winners of Singapore's digital bank licences face a long haul to attain business viability and realise the full potential of the local and broader South-east Asian markets.

First, it will take them at least a year to fulfil prudential and regulatory requirements, and raise the resources – capital and manpower – as well as put together the necessary technological infrastructure to launch their operations in earnest.

Next, in a market like Singapore's, with dominant incumbent banks, the newcomers may face difficulty out-investing leading conventional banks in digitalisation to offer a distinctive value proposition beyond niche areas.

Timing-wise, early 2022 would probably be the most opportune period to kick-start a new business. By that time, most – if not all – economies in the region would have recovered from the debilitating shock delivered by the coronavirus pandemic.

Social distancing and lockdowns associated with Covid-19 have accelerated the shift towards digital services, including banking.

On the other hand, the challenges posed by the pandemic-driven downturn to the business models of virtual banks worldwide may offer valuable lessons for newcomers on surviving, and even thriving, through a recession.

Some of the momentum of the surge in digital usage is likely to persist in the post-Covid-19 world.

Businesses and consumers fresh out of the pall of gloom cast by the pandemic may look for new and more accessible sources to whet their renewed appetite for investment and retail spending.

Reaching out to underbanked individuals and underserved businesses by incorporating innovative technology – such as artificial intelligence – is, in fact, the key value proposition of digital banks that sets them apart from the traditional incumbents.



But winning the trust and loyalty of the unbanked and underserved segments, who have been disproportionately hit by the economic shock, may take time, and keep opportunities for profitable lending few and far between in early days.

Also, Singapore is not exactly considered an unbanked or underserved market. So unless the digital banks here can spread out their services to the rest of South-east Asia, their profitability will remain a question.

For instance, South Korea's Kakao Bank achieved break-even – the point at which cost and income are equal – in about two years from its launch in mid-2017.

Singapore has only one-tenth of the population of South Korea, and its incumbent banks – DBS, OCBC and UOB – are far more digitally advanced than their North Asian peers.

ST ILLUSTRATION:
CEL GULAPA



Social distancing and lockdowns associated with Covid-19 have accelerated the shift towards digital services, including banking. PHOTO: MCI

The Covid-19 crisis did not just boost demand for digital services, it also triggered a flight to quality that benefited traditional banks, in terms of access to funding.

”

GRACE HO
Senior Political
Correspondent



✉ graceho@sph.com.sg

The journey to business viability took time, even though the mobile-only bank – built on the back of its popular messaging platform Kakao Talk – attracted a whopping 300,000 accounts in the first 24 hours after its launch.

In terms of consumer lending, excluding housing mortgages, Kakao's loan portfolio stands at just 2.6 per cent of the South Korean market and it took three years to secure that share.

The Grab-Singtel consortium – one of two winners of a digital full bank licence – is likely to take more time to achieve break-even and may struggle to secure a sizeable share in the consumer loan market here.

That is because the Grab-Singtel subscriber base spread across South-east Asia comes to about 190 million, and a much smaller number of those subscribers are on Singtel's Dash wallet and Grab Pay. In comparison, Kakao Bank started with the 220 million global subscriber base of Kakao Talk.

The Covid-19 crisis did not just boost demand for digital services, it also triggered a flight to quality that benefited traditional banks, in terms of access to funding.

The crisis has also forced these established banks to accelerate their digitalisation efforts, reducing the risk of complacency, and potentially closing off openings for new entrants. Still, another winner of a digital full bank licence – Sea – may have an edge, given its extensive global footprint.

Putting together the user base of its existing platforms – Garena for digital entertainment, Shopee for e-commerce and SeaMoney for financial services – the total comes to about 685 million.

Part of that user base can be monetised for starters and gives Sea a substantial advantage over its competitors.

The New York-listed Sea can also exploit the large volume of high-frequency and real-time data on its existing platforms for developing credit models and internal digital-only risk management frameworks.

Shopee alone can provide Sea with the perfect springboard to launch financial banking services – transactional accounts and merchant loans – across South-east Asia.

E-commerce penetration is, however, quite weak in this region. For instance, the penetration rate in Indonesia is less than 3 per cent.

While the underpenetration represents a huge opportunity if new digital banks here can come up with user-friendly apps to access their financial products and services, it is also a reality check on the lack of tech-savviness among regional small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs are a target market for digital full banks and the only focus area for digital wholesale banks.

However, SMEs across the region continue to struggle with extracting the full benefits of the emerging digital economy, even in countries like Singapore, where the Government has several schemes to help them get connected.

So, digital banks may have to play a key role in educating their commercial clients on how to access their services and loans – an area where incumbent traditional banks are already quite active.

The need for, and competition to develop, user-friendly and educational apps can open up some interesting opportunities for the fintech community in Singapore.

If the newcomers and incumbents aggressively tap the expertise of local fintechs, the benefits may spill across Singapore's financial industry and jobs market.

Ant Group's success in winning a digital wholesale bank licence guarantees heated competition on the technological front.

Ant's parent is China's fintech and e-commerce giant Alibaba, owner of Alibaba Cloud, which offers everything from electronic clearing services and e-learning courses to virtual servers for payments.

Such competitors, with the right pedigree and financial and technological resources, may pose a greater competitive threat over the medium term to the region's digitally less-prepared rivals. **S**

Singapore strong on digital adoption: WEF





While the nation fared well with healthcare and social safety nets, it performed less so on flexible work arrangements

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE ITS LAUNCH ABOUT 40 years ago, the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Competitiveness Report has suspended its annual ranking of the competitiveness of countries.

Faced with the need for new thinking on economic recovery, as well as missing data from international organisations amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the WEF has instead turned its focus to the qualities that will empower a country for future economic transformation.

WEF Global Competitiveness Report 2020:

Top 10 economies across different areas of digital transformation

Rank	 Information and communications technology adoption		 Flexible work arrangements		 Digital skills		 Digital legal framework	
1	South Korea	93.7	Netherlands	82.7	Finland	84.3	United States	78.0
2	United Arab Emirates	92.3	New Zealand	77.7	Sweden	79.5	Luxembourg	77.4
3	Hong Kong	90.2	Switzerland	75.8	Estonia	77.9	Singapore	76.5
4	Sweden	89.7	Estonia	75	Iceland	77.6	United Arab Emirates	72.5
5	Japan	88.3	United States	74.2	Netherlands	77.3	Malaysia	70
6	Singapore	88.1	Luxembourg	73.6	Singapore	77.3	Estonia	69.3
7	Iceland	87.8	China	73.6	Israel	76.5	Sweden	67.9
8	Norway	84.7	Australia	72.9	Denmark	74.7	Finland	67.7
9	Qatar	83.9	Finland	72.5	Saudi Arabia	74.1	Germany	67.3
10	Lithuania	83.8	Denmark	72.4	South Korea	73	Netherlands	65.5

NOTE: All scores are expressed on a 0-100 scale.

Sources: WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, EXECUTIVE OPINION SURVEY 2019-2020 AND INTERNATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATION UNION, WTDS 2020 DATABASE STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

It has identified 11 priority areas for governments across four key areas: the enabling environment, human capital, markets and the innovation ecosystem. These are listed in a special edition of the WEF annual report released on Dec 16.

It also said that countries like Singapore, which are digitally advanced, are well placed to manage the impact of Covid-19 because they have strong social safety nets and robust healthcare systems.

“While the immediate priority is to respond to the health crisis... it is also a moment to determine how we may shape our economic systems in the future so that they are not just productive but also lead to environmental sustainability and shared prosperity,” it added.

Here is how Singapore fared in some of the areas:

1 Human capital development

Singapore tied with Finland for having a tertiary education system that is well placed to meet the needs of employers. It scored 79 out of 100 points, behind Switzerland (82).

Overall, human capital development in advanced economies has stagnated over the last 10 years, the report said. “Across developed and developing economies, talent gaps remain large, local education systems are increasingly outdated and there are limits to international mobility.”

It added that global talent shortages will remain significant unless countries ramp up reskilling and upskilling programmes. It cited Singapore and France as examples of countries which have funded workers for additional training.

2 Safety nets and financial soundness

Economies with strong safety nets – such as Denmark, Finland and Norway – are better able to salvage livelihoods.

The report also cited Singapore, Taiwan, Finland, the United States and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as economies with strong financial systems.

This means they can more easily provide credit to small and medium-sized enterprises and keep them afloat, it said.

3 Governance and planning

Countries that can better plan and coordinate health measures with fiscal and social policies are more successful in tackling the crisis, said the report.

Countries that have performed “relatively well” in this area include Singapore, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Austria and the UAE.

4 Healthcare system and research capacity

Anecdotal evidence shows economies that experienced previous coronavirus epidemics like Sars – such as South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan – had better protocols and technological systems in place to contain the Covid-19 pandemic.

Countries with greater biotechnology capacity and established collaborations between universities and companies – such as Switzerland, the US and the Netherlands – are better able to develop solutions to cope with future pandemics, the report said.

5 Digital transformation

Singapore is placed third on a list of top 10 economies with a robust digital legal framework. The US is first, followed by Luxembourg. It also fared well in information and communications technology adoption (sixth) and digital skills (sixth). But it is not among the top 10 for flexible work arrangements like virtual teams and remote working.

The report noted that while countries should incentivise companies to move towards digital business models, invest in ICT development and digital skills, and update their digital legal frameworks, few countries are advanced in all these aspects.

6 Movement of people

Singapore is among the 30 economies out of 141 surveyed where hiring foreign labour has become harder than it was in 2008.

Others include Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Italy, Iceland, the United Kingdom and Sweden. The tightening of migration policies has limited companies’ access to the international pool of talent, said the report.

It also said Covid-19 has sharpened the decline in international openness, and there is a risk that these protectionist policies and mindsets will persist. [ST](#)

It added that global talent shortages will remain significant unless countries ramp up reskilling and upskilling programmes.

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Budget crisis ends, but Malaysia no closer to stability



Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's Budget 2021 has finally been approved after surviving scares that have gripped Malaysia for six weeks. PHOTO: REUTERS

Speculation surrounding whether the Perikatan Nasional administration would be ousted has persisted and grown progressively more incredible.

PRIME MINISTER MUHYIDDIN YASSIN'S BUDGET 2021 was finally approved in December after surviving threats, warnings, scares and sometimes ridiculous rumours that have gripped Malaysia for six weeks.

Perhaps the intrigue need not have gone on after the first vote on Nov 26, when Parliament adopted the budget at the second reading.

After all, Tan Sri Muhyiddin, 73, was sworn in on March 1 after a week-long political crisis that engulfed the nation, simply because he was the only acceptable compromise candidate among enough MPs who wanted to ensure Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim would not ascend to the premiership.

In the end, Mr Anwar's gambit in recent months of joining hands with scandal-hit Umno president Zahid Hamidi and former premier Najib Razak to oust Mr Muhyiddin was simply too toxic.

"Anwar has to forget about getting Umno's support to be PM. It is the end of the road for that idea," BowerGroupAsia's political risk analyst Adib Zalkapli told The Straits Times.

But speculation surrounding whether the Perikatan Nasional administration would be ousted persisted, and in fact grew progressively more incredible.

Right from when opposition leader Anwar claimed the now widely mocked "strong, formidable and convincing" majority in September, the open secret that he wanted the 91 MPs in his Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition to join hands with Umno rebels seemed an unlikely prospect.

One rumour that went viral was that Mr Anwar had secured up to 115 out of Parliament's 220 MPs, and that his ally, the Democratic Action Party, had a total change of heart about working with Zahid and Najib, to the extent of allowing dozens of corruption charges levelled against the duo to be dropped, and even for the latter to head the government in an interim role.

The momentum pointing to a defeat of Budget 2021 gathered steam on Dec 14, when two former foes – Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Umno's advisory council chief Tan Sri Razaleigh Hamzah – held a shock joint press conference predicting the collapse of the Muhyiddin administration and calling for lawmakers to vote with their conscience, and then to form a unity government ostensibly led or guided by these two veterans.

The perceived political risk spooked investors enough to end a five-day winning streak on the local bourse, with the benchmark Kuala Lumpur Composite Index falling by 2 per cent on Dec 14 afternoon. It swiftly recovered as soon as the final budget vote was won late the next day.

Through it all, Tan Sri Muhyiddin's majority has stood firm. Aside from the abstaining Tengku Razaleigh – the 83-year-old is Malaysia's longest-serving lawmaker – the other 111 MPs, including a handful of Umno leaders who have complained about Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia president Muhyiddin's leadership, were present and accounted for. This leaves Malaysia still mired in uncertain times.

"It has been 10 months since the formation of the new government," Umno deputy president Mohamad Hasan said, referring to when the Dr Mahathir-led PH government fell. "Sadly, there seems to be no solution... The continuous bickering has only further frustrated the people, and as such, Malaysia's leaders need to resolve their fickleness."

SHANNON TEOH

Malaysia Bureau Chief



✉ shannont@sph.com.sg

Still, some questions have been answered, or at least replaced by new ones. Mr Anwar simply needs to wait for a general election to be held and, for now, work at maintaining his position as the opposition's prime ministerial candidate, in the face of a challenge by former Sabah chief minister Shafie Apdal.

Former premier Mahathir, 95, continues to be a widely respected figure. But even his influence

combined with that of a senior Umno MP failed to sway the ruling elite.

And for those in Umno who decided to back Mr Muhyiddin 10 months ago, Budget 2021's passage indicates that they have to lie in the bed they have made. Whether they like it or not, they are stuck with this prime minister until an election can be called, once the resurgent coronavirus pandemic is over. **ST**

Farmers protest a major challenge for Modi



Protesters holding a banner as they pay tribute to farmers who lost their lives of natural causes while participating in protests against the central government's recent agricultural reforms, in Amritsar on Dec 20. PHOTO: AFP

WITH A CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC THAT HAS seen more than 10 million cases in India and a tanking economy to deal with, Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not need a protracted protest by a powerful political constituency to add to his woes.

Tens of thousands of farmers across the country protested against new legislation that seeks to reform the sale of agricultural produce. The protests intensified with the calling for a nationwide strike.

Farmers sat on roads and rail tracks and held rallies, amid support from opposition parties and trade unions, in a peaceful protest to mount further pressure on the government to repeal three farm laws passed in September.

The laws are part of the Modi government's reform agenda aimed at facilitating greater private investment in agriculture, a sector that accounts for around 15 per cent of the country's gross domestic product.

But farmers, a majority of whom are small landowners struggling to eke out a living, feel that their lot may worsen with the introduction of the farm laws.

Highly suspicious of big corporations, they feel this is the first step towards dismantling a system where the government ensures a minimum price for their foodgrains.

Five rounds of talks between the government and farmers have failed. Those representing the farmers were also called in for a meeting with Home Minister Amit Shah.

"Our demand is for all three farm laws to be repealed and we want new legislation that guarantees a minimum support price for our produce," said Mr Abhimanyu Kohar, national coordinator of the Rashtriya Kisan Mahasangh, a group representing 180 farmers' organisations.

"The farmers won't leave (the protest sites) without their demands being met. They have come with rations (of food) for six months."

In a country where 60 per cent of the population is directly or indirectly tied to agriculture, the protesting farmers have gained sympathy across the board.

Reports of farm leaders taking their own tea, food and water into meetings with government

NIRMALA GANAPATHY

India Bureau Chief



✉ gnirmala@sph.com.sg

In a country where 60 per cent of the population is directly or indirectly tied to agriculture, the protesting farmers have gained sympathy across the board.

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leaders have only added to the support for them.

Over 15 opposition parties, including Tamil Nadu's Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, have pledged their support as have trade unions from other sectors. For Mr Modi, the protests could not have come at a worse time.

India is the second-worst affected country by the coronavirus pandemic, after the United States.

Growth has also slowed. It hit a six-year low of 4.7 per cent in the final quarter of last year and contracted by 23.4 per cent in the first quarter of this year, which in India runs from April to June, due to a strict lockdown imposed in March.

The lockdown brought economic activity to a complete halt. Mr Modi's government, otherwise unwavering in its reform agenda, has offered to amend the laws to defuse the situation.

The Prime Minister, who has been driving reform in many sectors over the years, including rolling out the goods and services tax in 2017, appealed for support for change, noting it is necessary for development.

"We cannot build the next century with the laws of the previous century," said Mr Modi, who has remained popular through the pandemic and economic troubles.

He has also weathered earlier protests including those against the Citizenship Amendment Act

(CAA), which gives religion-based citizenship. But farmers are a lobby group that no politician is keen to antagonise.

"They (the government) didn't want to hold talks on CAA. They shut the door. This is a much more inclusive agitation and it cuts across social identities. This is a very serious challenge. The farm issue has become politically sensitive," said journalist and writer Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay.

"In India, everybody has some connection to a farmer. Everyone who is staying in urban areas will have family in the village. Sympathies of a large number of urbanites will be with farmers."

The farmers' issue has also caught international attention, particularly due to the diaspora from the state of Punjab, whose farmers are leading the protests.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has spoken out in favour of the farmers' protests, eliciting a sharp diplomatic response from the Indian government wary of any criticism of domestic developments.

Protests in support of the Indian farmers have also taken place in Britain and Australia.

"I think this is the first major challenge which the Modi government is facing both in terms of public response and unity of the opposition," said political analyst Sandeep Shastri. [SI](#)

Thailand's new generation political disruptors

TAN HUI YEE

Indochina Bureau Chief



✉ tanhy@sph.com.sg

CAN A POLITICAL SYSTEM BE CHANGED FROM within? That's the question gripping Thailand these days, amid near daily protests challenging the royalist military establishment helmed by King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

"We joke among ourselves, that if we cannot reform the monarchy through Parliament, then we should have a revolution," says Ms Chonthicha Jan-grew, who, at the age of 27, counts herself as an "elder" among the leaders driving the demonstrations.

It is a joke that has become darker with the avenues for political negotiation steadily closed off and key youth leaders slapped with the dreaded lese majeste charge that comes with a jail term of up to 15 years.

Given the seismic developments since the 2019 general election, it's hard to tell where Thailand is now heading.

In their recently launched book, *Future Forward: The Rise And Fall Of A Thai Political Party*, political scientists Duncan McCargo and Anyarat Chattharakul chart the meteoric rise and dissolution of the new-generation party that shook the very foundation of Thai politics. Today, it reads like both a postscript and star chart of what's in store for Thailand.

It was Future Forward Party's court-mandated ban in February that sparked the youth demonstrations

roiling the country now. But Thailand's young protesters have since progressed to making more fundamental demands: the resignation of former coup leader and current Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, the amendment of the Constitution and monarchy reform.

Future Forward's former leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, now banned from politics, recently toured the country to help local politicians affiliated with his Progressive Movement campaign for the Dec 20 elections to fill seats in provincial administrative organisations (PAOs).

Royalists think he is orchestrating the youth protests. They picketed at his campaign locations to drive him out.

Ms Chonthicha, who says she has amassed over 20 police charges for her political advocacy, is amused that Mr Thanathorn is still keeping faith with Thailand's electoral system.

"Our movement has already gone far away from Thanathorn and Piyabutr," she tells me, referring to the party's firebrand former secretary-general Piyabutr Saengkanokkul.

"They are here," she says, tapping the coffee table we share. "And we are already on the moon." She waves her arm above her head. "We don't care about the PAO election."

Such cynicism had been growing. For some two decades prior, the kingdom was trapped in a colour-coded conflict that pitted the Bangkok-centred “yellow” royalist, pro-military establishment against “red” supporters of political parties linked to exiled former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Since 2006, the Constitutional Court has dissolved two parties and thrown out three prime ministers in the latter camp.

Prime Minister Prayut tried to paper over this bitter divide after staging a 2014 coup. But the new Constitution appeared exhaustively designed to counter the electoral might of big parties like the Thaksin-linked Pheu Thai.

Then came Future Forward, led by activist tycoon Thanathorn and legal scholar Piyabutr. Both under the age 40 when they launched the party in 2018, they offered an alternative to voters sick of the red-yellow conflict.

Orange was its chosen shade. “For some, orange was the new red. For others, orange was the new yellow,” write Dr McCargo and Dr Chattharakul.

“For others, the beauty of orange was precisely that it was neither red nor yellow. And for the remainder, who didn’t care about red or yellow, orange was simply a bright new colour.”

Aided by the new and more proportionally representative election system, Future Forward emerged after the election as the third-biggest party in Parliament, behind Pheu Thai and military-aligned Palang Pracharath.

Mr Thanathorn’s appeal among young voters and his stridently anti-military stance made him an existential threat to the established powers.

Future Forward’s dissolution convinced its supporters that the political system had become too rigged for meaningful participation – a theme constantly echoed in street protests now.

Dr McCargo and Dr Chattharakul write that Future Forward was plagued by a “structural contradiction” from the start – was it “a political party, dedicated to transforming the system from within” or “a bunch of disruptors, trying not so much to improve the system as to bring it crashing down”? With the party banned and Mr Thanathorn and Dr Piyabutr focusing their energy on the Progressive Movement, they could “get on with their real project: political agitation and intellectual sabotage”, the authors add.

In an interview two years ago, Mr Thanathorn similarly gave me the impression he was more keen on changing mindsets than winning seats. He talked about a “war of ideas” that could take “decades.”

“Coup d’etats do not happen in isolation. They are intertwined with other social forces, particularly conservative forces,” he said then. “In order to stop the military coup d’etat you also have to confront conservative cultures in Thailand.”

The seed of political disruption planted by Future Forward has now taken on a life of its own.

While Mr Thanathorn remains popular, he has been upstaged by high school students half his age denouncing the old-style backroom deals that they claim are robbing them of their future.

They are saying aloud what merely months ago was unsayable, demanding that King Vajiralongkorn be governed by the Constitution like other Thais. With their pointed language about the palace and its expenses, they are redefining what it means to be radical.

Mainstream political parties have been left in their wake. Lawmakers have begun processes needed to amend the Constitution, but will not touch the monarchy issue.

Having schooled themselves in subversion, Thai youth are unfazed by the institutional hurdles they know lie ahead.

The government’s response is still unfolding. Both Mr Prayut and army chief Narongpan Jitkaewthae have been battling away talk of another coup – something not out of the question in a country that has seen 13 military takeovers since 1932.

Protest leaders facing charges of lese majeste have ramped up their rhetoric on stage, making a reconciliation panel mooted by Lower House Speaker Chuan Leekpai look pointless.

At least two shooting incidents after recent protests have stirred unease, as well as sightings of men in military-style buzz cuts dressed in casual clothes being transported to protest sites.

King Vajiralongkorn, 68, has not addressed the protesters’ demands except to say “we love them all the same” and “Thailand is the land of compromise.”

He has instead spent time close up with royalists who do not find it appropriate to question his estimated wealth of more than US\$40 billion (\$54 billion) and his control of two army units. “

All things considered, Ms Chonthicha knows it will take a while for Thai people to reach a consensus on the monarchy’s role. But change, she says, is really only a matter of time.

“The young people who want to reform the monarchy, in the next few years, they are going to be adults who run this country,” she says. “They are going to teach their children their values.”

One can only hope that Thailand’s youth uprising will nudge it along the path of evolution, rather than trigger a violent eruption. [ST](#)



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL



Indonesia's President Joko Widodo (right) greeting his new Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy Sandiaga Uno shortly after a swearing-in ceremony at the Merdeka Palace in Jakarta, Indonesia on Dec 23.
PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Jokowi replaces 6 ministers to help virus-hit Indonesia recover

Incoming health minister, a former banker, says inclusive approach needed to revive economy which is in recession

LINDA YULISMAN

Indonesia
Correspondent



✉ yulinda@sph.com.sg

WAHYUDI SOERIAATMADJA

Indonesia
Correspondent



✉ wahyudis@sph.com.sg

PRESIDENT JOKO WIDODO REPLACED SIX ministers in a Cabinet reshuffle aimed at helping Indonesia recover from the coronavirus pandemic, which has plunged the country into its first recession since the 1998 financial crisis.

Mr Budi Gunadi Sadikin, a deputy state-owned enterprises minister who also leads the national economic recovery task force, has been named the new health minister to replace Dr Terawan Agus Putranto.

Mr Sandiaga Uno, a former Jakarta vice-governor who contested the presidential election as a running mate to Mr Joko's rival, Mr Prabowo Subianto, has been appointed tourism and creative economy minister, replacing Mr Wishnutama Kusubandio.

Mr Joko has also replaced two ministers arrested for alleged fraud: Mr Sakti Wahyu Trenggono has been appointed maritime affairs and fisheries minister to replace Edhy Prabowo. And Surabaya Mayor Tri Rismaharini will be the new social affairs minister, replacing Juliari Batubara.

The new religious affairs minister is Mr Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, leader of the Ansor youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's biggest Muslim organisation, and also a Member of Parliament.



A former banker, Mr Budi Gunadi Sadikin is known to possess strong management skills, which may be valuable when dealing with such issues as distribution of healthcare resources. PHOTO: REUTERS

The trade minister has also been replaced with Mr Muhammad Lutfi, the current Ambassador to the United States.

The Cabinet comprises 34 ministers, excluding Mr Joko and Vice-President Ma'ruf Amin.

Mr Joko had threatened a ministerial shake-up as early as June, when he reprimanded his ministers for their lacklustre handling of the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia, the world's fourth-most populous nation of 270 million.

Incoming Health Minister Budi is expected to chart a new course of action and commitments to mitigate the health and economic impacts of Covid-19 in South-east Asia's largest economy. **ST**



Cleaned up Khao San Road also features shiny bollards that can be removed whenever the area is turned into a pedestrian mall. ST PHOTO: TAN HUI YEE



The cleaned-up and revitalised Ong Ang canal in Bangkok. ST PHOTO: TAN HUI YEE

South-east Asia watch

Bangkok cleans up its act

Thai capital is transforming into a city that is cleaner, greener and more walkable

FEW IN THEIR RIGHT MIND WOULD CONSIDER kayaking down a Bangkok canal for fun, but that is exactly what some people have been doing lately.

Ong Ang canal, near the Chao Phraya river, has been transformed from a fetid channel covered by a toy and electronics market to a jade-coloured waterway lined with wide pavements and street art. From Fridays to Sundays, Ong Ang's banks host an evening flea market with buskers serenading the crowd.

The kayaks are free for anyone to use, said Mr Pongsakorn Kwanmuang, spokesman for the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration.

"People in Bangkok think canal water is dirty, and they cannot touch it," he told The Straits Times.

"But we have tested the water here and it's very clean."

It is all part of a wider evolution that has seen the city of more than 10 million residents gradually become cleaner, greener and more walkable, partly because mass transit options have improved.

Bangkok's steadily growing skytrain and subway network can now deposit visitors right in the heart of Yaowarat - its Chinatown - or as far away as the Erawan Museum in Samut Prakan province.

The city has an average of 7 sq m of green space per person, and wants to raise it to 8 sq m, said Mr Pongsakorn.

"When you go to London, you think of Hyde Park. When you go to New York, you think of Central Park. When you go to Singapore, you think of Gardens

by the Bay," he noted. "We want to create a tourist attraction like that."

Mr Stuart McDonald, co-founder of Travelfish, a South-east Asia travel planning website, still recalls his first experience of the city.

"I first arrived in Bangkok in 1993, flying in from Kathmandu, Nepal. I walked out of Don Mueang (airport), into air as thick as butter and every single person had a motorbike. That evening, around Phra Athit, near Khao San Road, I ate delicious food off the street.

"The vibe was amazing - it was love at first sight and bite," he told ST. "The city was grubbier then, but it felt more real and lived in."

That grubbiness is fast disappearing. Fresh flower vendors in the famous Pak Khlong market, who used to spill onto the sidewalks with their scented wares, have since been moved indoors.

Khao San Road, the backpacker hub, now sports smooth new footpaths level with the street and shiny bollards that can be removed whenever the area is turned into a pedestrian mall.

It is hard to tell how popular the changes are since most tourists are still shut out by Thailand's entry ban to curb the Covid-19 pandemic. But Mr McDonald thinks some of the revamps like the one in Pak Khlong are ill-considered.

"There is clean and there is sterile. Their character, people, life and energy are being sucked out. For what? To create a contrived and tacky Instagram background," he said.

Local resident Sumrit Paitayat is not complaining. On a cool Friday evening, he was strolling along Ong Ang canal with his wife and two-year-old son.

"It used to be really messy and crowded. Now it's beautiful and relaxing," said the 49-year-old engineer.

"I think I'll come again." ST

TAN HUI YEE

Indochina Bureau Chief



✉ tanhy@sph.com.sg

"It used to be really messy and crowded. Now it's beautiful and relaxing. I think I'll come again."



Local resident
SUMRIT PAITAYATAT



A man promotes real estate at a street market almost a year after the global outbreak of the coronavirus disease in Wuhan. PHOTO: REUTERS

WUHAN ONE YEAR ON

Special Feature

A city of resilience, scars

ELIZABETH LAW
China Correspondent



✉ esmlaw@sph.com.sg

Over 86,000 people in the country have contracted the illness, of whom 50,300 were in Wuhan.



Life appears to be back to normal in Wuhan, a year after the coronavirus first surfaced. But a closer look shows up scars left by the pandemic.

NEARLY A YEAR AFTER A MYSTERIOUS PNEUMONIA appeared in a Wuhan seafood market, life has largely returned to normal in the central Chinese city, even as the rest of the world battles the deadly pandemic.

But beneath the veneer of normalcy, scars remain: in the masks that have become commonplace, the use of “health codes” to enter places, and the missing family members around dining tables.

The economy, having staged a remarkable comeback earlier in the year, is now struggling to keep up the momentum.

And nearly 12 months on, questions about the virus’ origin and its spread still remain unanswered.

FEAR OF ANOTHER WAVE

In late January, after realising the scale of the outbreak, Wuhan went into an emergency lockdown that dragged on for 76 days. No one was allowed to leave home, let alone the city, as schools, factories and shops were ordered to shut.

After it was lifted on April 8, fears of a second wave arose when a cluster of cases was reported in May,

prompting the city to order mass testing for all 11 million residents.

Since then, the worry has been intermittent, with traces of the coronavirus showing up on imported frozen food, and as cases continue to surface in pockets in cities such as Tianjin and Chengdu.

Mask-wearing and disinfection have become a part of daily life, along with the use of “health codes”, contact-tracing applets that are hosted on the ubiquitous WeChat and Alipay platforms.

But while the worst appears to be over, the experience of the lockdown, of not knowing when it would end, or what tomorrow would bring, still haunts Wuhan resident Zhang Yingyue.

She had come back from Singapore to visit her parents for the Chinese New Year holidays, and could not leave for close to five months because of the lockdown and international travel restrictions.

Ms Zhang, 46, lost her job as an administrator in Singapore and now works as a housekeeper in Wuhan.

“We don’t talk about it openly because us Wuhan people are stubborn but the fear is there, especially now that it’s winter again,” she said.

In China’s battle against the coronavirus, Wuhan bore the brunt. Over 86,000 people in the country have contracted the illness, of whom 50,300 were in Wuhan. A bulk of virus-related deaths – 3,869 out of 4,755 – were in the city.

And it is still ravaging the city. Research has shown that disasters such as epidemics, which can quickly overwhelm communities and cripple their ability to

respond, can leave long-lasting mental health impacts on both front-line workers and survivors.

Counsellors at the Hubei Province Counsellors Association, who set up a wellness hotline as soon as the lockdown started, said post-traumatic stress disorder is likely to manifest in various ways in the coming months and years.

The city, too, appears to have been shocked out of complacency: In early January, when The Straits Times first visited Wuhan, residents interviewed had dismissed reports of the “mysterious pneumonia”, saying it was a seasonal flu. Those wearing masks were scoffed at for being paranoid.

By April, even as the lockdown had been lifted, people barely batted an eyelid at pedestrians dressed in white full-body protective suits.

When ST visited again in November, masks were still commonly seen – albeit improperly worn – while hand sanitiser, disinfectant and thermometers were a common sight in shops, restaurants and even taxis. Careful drivers even spritz disinfectant on change and receipts from toll booths, one of the few places where cash is still commonly used.

EARLY MISSTEPS

Across the city, there is acceptance of the fact that it was here that the virus first spread widely.

“We can’t escape that reputation, even though the source of the virus is still a mystery,” said businessman Weng Maowei, 60, who has lived here for nearly two decades. Where there is little consensus is how the virus came about.

Many believe it originated elsewhere. Some are adamant it came through foreign soldiers attending military games in October last year, while others believe it escaped from a Chinese lab.

But even though the origins of the virus are murky, people agree on one thing – that the government bungled its early response to the outbreak.

One of the earliest cases, seafood merchant Wei Guixian, started to feel sick on Dec 10 and was treated at a local clinic before she went back to work at the Huanan market. Eight days later, she was barely conscious in a hospital bed, fighting for her life.

By Dec 31, doctors in Wuhan knew they had a new coronavirus on their hands, but the fact that it was spreading between humans was not made known to the public for another two weeks.

And it was not until Jan 19 that Beijing dispatched epidemiologists to investigate the outbreak. By then, nearly 200 people had fallen ill and two had died.

Dr Zhong Nanshan, who headed China’s Covid-19 response task force, said later that had action been taken in December or even early January, “the number of sick would have been greatly reduced”

OVERWHELMED SYSTEM

By end-January, Wuhan’s hospitals were overwhelmed, with front-line medical staff often working double shifts. Protective gear was also in short supply, with some reusing masks and even



A public service announcement poster in Wuhan telling people not to go out unless absolutely necessary. PHOTO: M ISHIKAWA FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Wuhan residents queuing for a Covid-19 test at the outdoor facility of the Wuhan Union Red Cross Hospital in the city centre. PHOTO: M ISHIKAWA FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

resorting to putting trash bags over their clothing when they ran out of protective suits.

In February, the Chinese authorities reported that at least 3,300 medical workers had been infected, most of them in Hubei province, of which Wuhan is the capital.

It highlighted the strain that the healthcare system was under, and the acute lack of resources. These problems prompted the central government to send 42,000 reinforcement medics from across the country and the military to the province.

SLUGGISH ECONOMY

On paper, Wuhan appears to have bounced back in a big way: The economy contracted 10 per cent in the first three quarters of the year, a sterling comeback from the 40.5 per cent plunge in the first quarter, when factories were shut and all construction projects halted.

In a bid to drive up domestic consumption, the government has also given out consumption vouchers encouraging residents to support the local economy.

But business owners say the effects have been short-lived. After a spike in sales in July and August, around the time the vouchers were handed out, sales have started to taper off.


Restaurant owner Wang Jing, 66, who runs a Cantonese eatery in the heart of the city, said she struggles to fill even half her restaurant on weekends.

The main clientele for Madam Wang’s restaurant are business travellers, who have not returned to China in any meaningful way.

But at the Wuhan No. 18 Brewery, which has one of its five gastropubs in the Guanggu mall, business has started to pick up after a rough few months.

When the lockdown was first lifted and eateries were allowed to serve only takeout orders, Wuhan No. 18’s takings dwindled to just 3 per cent of its usual amount, said owner Wang Fan, 36.

His business would have folded during the outbreak if not for the support of other bar owners who held promotional events to support the brewery.

But as the curbs eased, customers returned. “I think no matter what happens, the people of Wuhan still do like coming out to spend money,” Mr Wang said. 

Read more online



Wuhan market where Covid-19 outbreak started now walled off

<https://str.sg/JaGh>



Life in Wuhan almost back to normal, but scars still visible

<https://str.sg/Jenu>

Reviving travel through a bubble



An artist's impression of Connect@Changi. PHOTO: CONNECT@CHANGI



Workers constructing guest rooms at Connect@Changi. PHOTO: REUTERS

CLEMENT YONG
Correspondent



✉ clementy@sph.com.sg

Analysts, however, said the move has a larger symbolic effect and will boost confidence in Singapore's status as a business hub, especially with the World Economic Forum set to take place here next year.



Singapore to pilot quarantine-free business travel

Short-term travellers will have to stay, work and meet at dedicated facilities here

SHORT-TERM BUSINESS TRAVELLERS FROM ALL countries will be able to stay, work and meet at dedicated facilities here from mid-January, without the need for prior quarantine, as efforts get under way to draw them back to Singapore.

Those who opt to use the arrangement – likely the first of its kind in the world – will be transported from the airport to large dedicated facilities equipped with self-service food and beverage options and gym pods.

There, they can have meetings through floor-to-ceiling air-tight glass panels with local businessmen and businessmen from other countries, with safe distancing measures in place.

“Global business travel has been severely affected by the need for quarantine measures... Different countries will continue to have different risk profiles, and we should not let this hinder business meetings,” Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing said while on a tour of Connect@Changi, one of the facilities that will be used to house travellers in the segregated travel lane.

“Dedicated facilities can allow Singaporeans to meet (business) travellers from elsewhere. They can

also allow (business) travellers from elsewhere to meet one another.”

Regular Covid-19 testing will be conducted throughout the duration of their stay – for instance, on alternate days – in addition to tests before departure from their home countries and upon arrival here.

They will also have to move within the facility in their pre-declared travel group of up to five people to reduce the risk of mass transmission.

The segregated travel lane is distinct from existing reciprocal green lane arrangements, which apply only to selected countries but allow those on essential business here to move around Singapore more freely.

The new scheme is expected to increase traffic at Changi Airport, where about 15 per cent of travellers pre-Covid-19 entered the country for business-related reasons.

It should also have knock-on effects on the hospitality sector, which could cater food and provide accommodation for the travellers once they are given approval, although restrictions in travellers' movements mean the impact could be limited.

Analysts, however, said the move has a larger symbolic effect and will boost confidence in Singapore's status as a business hub, especially with the World Economic Forum set to take place here next year.

CIMB Private Banking economist Song Seng Wun said: “We have fallen a long way from our peak, so these calculated steps to ease restrictions all go towards helping as many people as possible to claw back some business. The more we can reassure business travellers, the better.”

Based on patterns established in 2019, roughly

nine in 10 of business travellers to Singapore stayed in the country for five days or fewer, hinting at the demand for such expedited, business-specific travel arrangements.

Many of these travellers are currently not covered by reciprocal green lane arrangements and have to undergo quarantine before they can meet their local partners face to face.

Connect@Changi is a four-star facility currently being built at Singapore Expo and Max Atria, about a five-minute drive from Changi Airport.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry will study the demand for the segregated travel lane to assess the number of dedicated facilities needed, and could broaden the use of the lane for medical or family-visiting uses. [ST](#)

Singapore-Hong Kong travel bubble delayed

THE LAUNCH OF THE MUCH-ANTICIPATED TRAVEL bubble to facilitate leisure travel between Singapore and Hong Kong has been further delayed amid a rising number of Covid-19 cases in Hong Kong.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS) has said that both cities have decided to defer the start of the air travel bubble to beyond December, as the number of local unlinked cases in Hong Kong is still high.

The exact start date of the arrangement was due to be reviewed at the time of going to press.

The move follows harsher social distancing measures to curb what the Hong Kong health authorities warned could be the city's worst Covid-19 wave so far.

The city has been recording more than 70 new daily Covid-19 infections for over a week in early December. As at Dec 28, its total tally had crossed 8,600 cases, including 136 deaths. Singapore has recorded more than 58,000 cases.



Singapore and Hong Kong had previously agreed that the travel bubble arrangement would be suspended if the number exceeded five in either city.

The bubble would have allowed travellers to fly between the cities with no restrictions on the purpose of travel. Travellers would have to take Covid-19 tests instead of serving quarantine.

The first air travel bubble flight was originally planned for Nov 22, but both governments announced on Nov 21 that it would be delayed.

Ms Alicia Seah, director of public relations and communications at Dynasty Travel, said the agency had received several bookings for tour packages to Hong Kong for the mid-December to Christmas period.

While acknowledging that the delay is unfortunate, she added: "It's really (about) putting the health and safety of travellers as the top priority." [ST](#)

– Toh Ting Wei and Claire Huang

S'pore, Vietnam plan to launch green lane by early this year

VIETNAM AND SINGAPORE ARE PLANNING TO launch a green lane for business and official travel by the start of this year.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Permanent Secretary Chee Wee Kiong and Vietnam's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyen Quoc Dung agreed to conclude ongoing discussions on the green lane arrangement and restore regular commercial return flights between the two countries, MFA said in a statement, in December.

Singapore will be among the first few countries that Vietnam will resume regularised essential business and official travel.

Both parties agreed to enhance cooperation to

fight the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic by resuming air connectivity and maintaining supply chain links.

They also co-chaired the 13th Singapore-Vietnam Bilateral Consultations via video conference on the same day, where both sides affirmed mutual support rendered during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as facilitating the return of nationals residing in both territories, and the mutual contribution of supplies and equipment. [ST](#)

– Ang Qing

A woman shopping inside a clothing store in Hanoi. Singapore will be among the first few countries that Vietnam will resume regularised essential business and official travel. PHOTO: AFP



A nearly deserted Causeway across the Singapore-Malaysia border on Aug 21 after travel curbs were introduced in March.
PHOTO: MARK CHEONG



Experts urge caution as Malaysia eyes travel bubbles

HAZLIN HASSAN

Malaysia Correspondent



✉ hazlinh@sph.com.sg

MALAYSIA'S ANNOUNCEMENT THAT IT IS exploring travel bubbles with other countries to revive the tourism industry has drawn cautious optimism from experts, who say the government first needs to bring down coronavirus infections, which have recently been rising by close to 2,000 new cases daily.

"We need to work harder to bring the number down to a manageable level first. This is to ensure that the 'bubble' will not deflate soon after its implementation," Professor Sazaly Abu Bakar, director of the Tropical Infectious Diseases Research and Education Centre at Universiti Malaya, told *The Straits Times*.

Professor Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud, an epidemiologist at Universiti Malaya, said the factors that must be carefully considered include economic benefits, feasibility of such travel bubbles, health risks and plans to mitigate risks. The number of new cases in the countries concerned also had to be taken into account, as well as the number of new daily infections per capita, tests per capita, positivity rate, severity of infection in those countries, and rate of increase or decrease in cases.

"Malaysia and whatever country it is negotiating with will need to agree on criteria for a reasonably safe environment before such a travel bubble can be agreed on," Datuk Dr Awang Bulgiba said.

"One needs to remember that the pandemic situation can take a turn for the worse quickly in countries... So such a travel bubble needs to take that possibility into account and take appropriate measures to ameliorate the situation."

Senior Minister in charge of Security Ismail Sabri said on Dec 12 that the nation's borders cannot remain closed for too long and that "Covid-19 will always be around us, like dengue."

Malaysia suffered a 78.6 per cent drop in tourist

arrivals between January and September, against the corresponding period in 2019.

According to Tourism Malaysia, Singapore was the country's top source of tourists in 2019, with Indonesia second, and China third.

Currently, the foreigners allowed to enter the country are mostly spouses or children of citizens, permanent residents, and long-term pass holders.

Malaysia reopened its border with Singapore for essential travel on Aug 17, but with restrictions. In August, Singapore allowed Malaysians with Singapore work passes to serve a seven-day stay-home notice (SHN) at their own residence as Covid-19 prevalence rates in Malaysia were similar to Singapore's at the time.

But from Nov 22, following a spike in Malaysia's Covid-19 numbers, anyone entering Singapore with a travel history to Malaysia in the previous 14 days is now required to complete a 14-day SHN at a dedicated facility, and undergo a swab test.

Malaysia, on its part, has shortened its quarantine period for incoming travellers to 10 days from 14 days.

Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Nancy Shukri does not deny that there are hurdles in the bubble plan: "With many countries previously designated as green zones having experienced resurgences of the virus, it remains challenging to kick-start general tourism and country-to-country travel," Datuk Seri Nancy told ST.

But Malaysia is continuing to pursue "extensive discussions" at regional and international levels "for when the situation surrounding Covid-19 gets better and when countries are ready to receive international leisure travellers in the future"

The activities the ministry is exploring for visitors include golfing, diving, bird watching, hiking and caving, with pre-planned itineraries through registered travel operators. **ST**



Lunch with Sumiko

Singapore's IP Man in Geneva

Lawyer Daren Tang made history when he became the first Singaporean to head a United Nations agency. The director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation tells Executive Editor Sumiko Tan what's on his to-do list.

WHEN DAREN TANG WAS PACKING TO MOVE from Singapore to Switzerland for his new job posting, he decided to ship his trusted Yamaha piano along as well.

Music – in particular, jazz – is a big love for the lawyer who made history when he became the first Singaporean to head a United Nations agency.

Another passion, not quite as lyrical, but with a connection to music, is intellectual property (IP).

In October, Mr Tang took up the position of director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo), which is headquartered in Geneva.

Wipo is one of the United Nations' 15 specialised agencies. Others include the World Health Organisation and International Civil Aviation Organisation.

The agency currently has 193 member states, including the United States and China. Among other things, it ensures the protection of IP and also the use of IP to support innovation and creativity to benefit the world.

Prior to this, Mr Tang was chief executive of the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore (Ipos), a statutory board which helps innovators use IP to take their ideas to market.

In that role, Mr Tang had served on a committee at Wipo. With Australian lawyer Francis Gurry retiring as Wipo director-general this year, Singapore nominated Mr Tang for the top job.

This was approved by Wipo's general assembly in a closely watched race. Other countries, including China, had also offered candidates.

We're meeting virtually in late November. The time difference means he will be having lunch while I will be eating dinner.

His people have arranged for him to do a Zoom call from Wipo's impressive studio, complete with three camera angles and a virtual backdrop showing a sunny Alpine scene of mountains and lake. I'm told it's a photograph of what he sees from his office window.

Mr Tang during his virtual meeting with ST Executive Editor Sumiko Tan.

ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

SUMIKO TAN
Executive Editor



✉ sumiko@sph.com.sg



Executive Editor Sumiko Tan speaking with lawyer Daren Tang, director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation in November.
ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

I don't talk about patents, I talk about technology. I don't talk about trademarks, I talk about brands. I don't talk about industrial designs, I talk about design and packaging.



I'm calling in from The Straits Times' recreation room in our much less picturesque newsroom in Toa Payoh.

He appears on screen at our arranged time and settles into the studio chair. You have a nice view from your office, I remark.

"But today it's not sunny and brilliant like that," he laughs, referring to the virtual backdrop. "Today is cloudy and foggy. The temperature is about 5 deg C."

Over the computer screen 10,482km away, the 48-year-old is amiable – "call me Daren" – and has the careful, courteous manner one often sees in a diplomat.

He's having cream of pumpkin soup. It's what he normally has over there – "it's convenient and it keeps me warm." To add a Swiss touch, there's a plate of Swiss chocolates.

I've decided to go Swiss myself with a fondue. I'd gone to Carousell to buy a mini fondue set. It's filled with a gruyere cheese dip I made, and I've also prepared a plate of bread, vegetables and fruit.

"Bon appetit," he says.

GO WITH THE FLOW

His Wipo role wasn't something he had foreseen. "I don't try to structure my life in a very planned way," he says.

He has a go-with-the-flow attitude, and this has given him space to enjoy different experiences.

What he has discovered is that "later on in life, all those past experiences will enrich you and put you in a position where you can do your current work in the best possible way."

He grew up in a four-room flat in Commonwealth Avenue West.

His father, now 74, is Eurasian-Peranakan. He was a businessman and ran a dental studio that made dentures, and is now a tour guide.

His housewife mother, who died 18 years ago, was Cantonese, and he has a younger brother in

the food and beverage industry.

Mr Tang says he's grateful for his multicultural heritage. "My dad's side, they enjoy life, and from my mum's side, I got the discipline and the commitment to studying and all that. So it's the best of both worlds."

Another advantage of his background is how he grew up with lots of good food from both sides of the family.

One of the things he and his wellness consultant wife made sure to take along to Geneva was ikan bilis for making soup, and another was chicken powder for use in stir-frying. He has three children – daughters aged 20 and 10, and an 18-year-old son.

He studied at Henry Park Primary, then Raffles Institution, where he was in the scouts, and Raffles Junior College.

He was always interested in music and had piano lessons, although he found music much more enjoyable without a teacher and exams.

Jazz has been a large part of his life, and he helped start the NUS Jazz Band when he was studying law at the National University of Singapore.

He's also a founding member of the Thomson Jazz Club and Thomson Jazz Band. "I don't think I studied very much in law school," he says with a chuckle.

A law schoolmate remembers him in the faculty band. "In between Madonna's Like A Virgin and Material Girl, he would quietly run through bits of jazz standards. I never quite found out if he was amusing or consoling himself. But there he was, a gifted jazz pianist playing rock and metal at boozy faculty jam and hops."

The schoolmate also remembers Mr Tang's dry and laconic sense of humour "plus a first-class poker face, so you can never quite tell when he is pulling your leg."

"He'll be going on about something very serious, like the Peloponnesian War, in that very serious way of his and everybody will be listening intently. And just when everyone is completely hooked, he will suddenly start guffawing. That's when you realise you've just been pranked by Daren."

At NUS, he did constitutional law and international law – not IP law – and thought he would enter private practice.

In his third year, he went on an exchange programme at McGill University in Montreal for a year. He had an amazing time there, but when he returned to his final year, all the pupillage places at law firms had been given out.

"I didn't really have that many choices left. So I thought, why not join the Government? It's going to be an interesting experience."

He joined the Attorney-General's Chambers, was a deputy public prosecutor for a while, then transferred to the international affairs division, where he later became senior state counsel.

He was posted to the Ministry of Trade and Industry to help negotiate the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and was also part of the legal

team which argued Singapore's case in the dispute with Malaysia over the sovereignty of Pedra Branca.

Working with experienced diplomats and civil servants gave him a "broader, more holistic view of the law", he says.

The experiences also taught him about diplomacy, managing relationships and understanding geopolitics – all of which have come in useful.

In 2012, he moved to Ipos as deputy chief executive. "That started my arranged marriage with IP, but I've gone on to fall in love with it quite deeply", is how he puts it. He became chief executive in 2015.

CREATING JOBS

Mr Tang will be the first to agree that IP is not a topic people find exciting. Most see it in legal technical terms, like trademarks, copyright and patents.

"But when you see it in its broader context, when you see how it impacts our lives, it suddenly becomes alive," he says.

He declares, with feeling: "I don't talk about patents, I talk about technology. I don't talk about trademarks, I talk about brands. I don't talk about industrial designs, I talk about design and packaging. I don't talk about copyright, I talk about content."

IP creates jobs, drives enterprise growth and spurs economic development. He points out how Singapore household names like Ya Kun Kaya Toast have been able to make it overseas because they are protected by trademark.

He refers to how Singapore's ST Engineering came up with the Air+ Smart mask, which has a unique microventilator. IP allows the invention to be sold globally and protected from being copied.

The coronavirus pandemic has also amplified the relevance of IP.

The German company BioNTech, which worked with Pfizer to push out a Covid-19 vaccine, has filed close to 70 patents using Wipo's and other systems, he says.

In recent years, Asia has become a big driver of IP, and not just North-east Asia but also South-east and South Asia, like in Vietnam and India. Six out of 10 IP filings with Wipo now come from Asia, compared with four out of 10, 20 years ago.

"You see more and more countries looking at innovation as a way of driving economic growth."

His term at Wipo, which has 1,500 employees and a biennial budget of about \$1 billion, is for six years.

It comes at a time of continuing US-China tensions. The pandemic and race to develop vaccines and treatments have also resurfaced issues like pharmaceutical monopolies, IP protection and wider public access to medicine.

I ask what's on his to-do list. He has many and lists them all, but high up there is to help innovators and creators take their ideas to market.

What does being a Singaporean bring to his UN role?

Singapore, he says, does well in world rankings on IP systems. "We are regarded highly for the development of our IP systems, so we are seen as being technically competent in this area."

Singapore is also viewed as a very neutral party that is a bridge builder between different countries.

The Republic's multi-ethnic background – and his own – allows him to connect to different parts of the world too.

ANY DOWNSIDES?

"Singaporeans sometimes think that the technical solution is the only facet of a problem, and that once you arrive at a good technical solution, the problem can get solved," he offers.

"We tend to forget that the relational aspects are very important. We tend to downplay the political parts of it. That, I think, needs to be adjusted."

His background in international work, however, has taught him the requirements needed of a leader operating on the world stage.

Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh says Mr Tang was an "outstanding colleague" when they worked on Pedra Branca and the US-Singapore FTA.


"He is a good lawyer, a good diplomat, a good team player and a conciliator. I am confident that he would be a very successful director-general of Wipo and bring great credit to Singapore," Professor Koh tells me when I ask for a quote.

Mr Tang and I wrap up the meal and he heads for more meetings. His days have been packed since he arrived and, no, he hasn't had time to play his piano.

We aren't able to take a portrait of him, so his office gets a photo done and e-mails it to me.

I couldn't tell from our Zoom call, but beneath his suit he has on cheeky, multicoloured socks.

I write to thank him for the photo and ask: Are colourful socks a trademark?

"Hahaha," comes his e-mail reply. "It wasn't deliberate, but a bit of flair does no harm at all in an agency that supports innovators and creators!" 

Mr Daren Tang started his six-year term as director-general of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo) in October.

PHOTO: WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ORGANISATION



Indonesia's new dynasty in the making?

With President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo's son and son-in-law set for a bigger role in politics, after their win in recent regional elections, speculation has been gaining momentum of a new chapter in dynasty politics in the country. Here's a look at the two of them:



Gibran Rakabuming Raka, the son of Indonesia's President Joko Widodo, riding a bicycle to meet supporters after declaring victory in the mayoral election in Solo on Dec 9. PHOTO: AFP

Son of Indonesian President Joko has big shoes to fill as Solo mayor

WITH HIS QUIET DEMEANOUR AND TERSE public remarks, Mr Gibran Rakabuming Raka often appears cold and aloof, but to the residents of Solo city in Central Java, their mayor-to-be is nowhere near stand-offish.

The 33-year-old, who is President Joko Widodo's son, listens to their complaints, from choked drains to leaky roofs.

No job seems too small or dirty – he once helped clean a filthy canal in a neighbourhood during an impromptu visit.

The hands-on management style that he learnt from his father – who was the city's mayor from 2005 to 2012 – has certainly worked its charms on residents, who overwhelmingly voted for him in the Dec 9 regional elections.

"As the son of the president, he leads a privileged life. Yet, he's still willing to go to the ground and meet

ordinary people. He has done this consistently for more than a year... it's not pencitraan, it's more than that," campaign volunteer Guntur Wahyu Nugroho, 42, told The Straits Times.

"Pencitraan" in Bahasa Indonesia means "building a good image", but in Indonesian politics, it is often used to describe pretentious politicians seeking praise.

To him, Mr Gibran is determined, committed to his causes, and enthusiastic to learn new things, including politics which he had shown little interest in until about a year ago.

This gave rise to speculation that President Joko, popularly known as Jokowi, wanted to build a political dynasty, rumours vehemently denied by Mr Gibran as he struggled to step out from the shadow of his father.

"I am taking part in the race and I can win or lose. People can vote for me or not and there's no obligation to choose me. It is a contest, not appointment," he said in July.

So far, Mr Gibran has at least eight businesses to his name, amassing a tidy fortune totalling 21.15 billion rupiah (over \$2 million). But like his father, he lives modestly. He often flew on economy class to domestic and overseas destinations and without security guards.

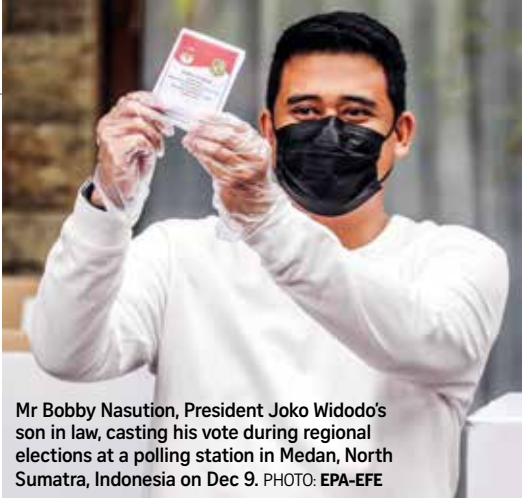
He is married to Solo beauty queen Selvi Ananda and they have two children. **31**

LINDA YULISMAN

Indonesia
Correspondent



✉ yulinda@sph.com.sg



Mr Bobby Nasution, President Joko Widodo's son-in-law, casting his vote during regional elections at a polling station in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia on Dec 9. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Medan's new mayor Bobby Nasution used to the limelight

ARLINA ARSHAD

Regional Correspondent

✉ aarlina@sph.com.sg



SMART, HUMOROUS AND FIRM. THESE TRAITS stand out for people who have come to know Mr Bobby Nasution, the son-in-law of President Joko Widodo, who is set to be the new mayor of Medan, the provincial capital of North Sumatra.

Campaign team member Indra Gunawan, 47, who has known Mr Bobby, also called Muhammad Afif, for a year, said he was quick in understanding issues and swift in making decisions.

"He doesn't fritter money unnecessarily. He is able to lighten up a tense situation with jokes but his jokes are not slapstick. He is also direct when pointing out mistakes," he told The Straits Times.

Despite being a political novice, the 29-year-old Mr Bobby received the backing of some of the biggest political parties, including Mr Joko's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle.

He and his deputy, Gerindra Party's Aulia Rahman, won against incumbent Akhyar Nasution and deputy candidate Salman Alfarisi by about 10 percentage points, according to unofficial tallies.

Mr Bobby married the president's only daughter, Kahiyang Ayu, 29, in November 2017.

The youngest of three children of a former director of a state-owned plantation firm, Mr Bobby has a master's degree in business management from Bogor Agricultural University, outside Jakarta. That was also where he met his wife, a fellow student.

One advantage Mr Bobby has as a politician is that he is no stranger to the limelight. Often smiling, he has been a guest on several local TV shows where he would launch into song and freely share his love story. **ST**

Japan PM Suga under fire for year-end dinners as coronavirus cases mount

JAPANESE PRIME MINISTER Yoshihide Suga has drawn criticism for joining end-of-year social gatherings after imploring residents to avoid such parties as the country sees record numbers of coronavirus cases.

Despite his own public warnings against large group meals, Mr Suga went ahead with a series of get-togethers in December, stirring up criticism from politicians and social media users, including his party's coalition partner.

Government spokesman Katsunobu Kato said the Prime Minister had taken necessary precautions for the gatherings.

Mr Suga had joined six others including senior officials at the ruling party who gathered at a high-end steak restaurant in Tokyo's Ginza district. All of them are over 70.

A day later, Mr Suga met Haruyuki Takahashi, an executive of the Tokyo Games organising committee, and two executives from a local TV network at another steak restaurant,



Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's outings have stirred up criticism from politicians and social-media users. PHOTO: REUTERS

local media reported.

Mr Suga's outings came after the government abruptly halted a government travel subsidy programme he had long defended, the latest wrangle to overshadow his first months in power. **ST**

— Reuters

Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai freed on bail, Apple Daily says

HONG KONG MEDIA TYCOON AND Next Digital founder Jimmy Lai has been granted bail by Hong Kong's High Court, local media including the Apple Daily newspaper reported.

Next Digital founder Jimmy Lai being escorted to the West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts in Hong Kong on Dec 12. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG



Mr Lai was charged earlier with colluding with foreign forces under the city's new national security law. He is the owner of the pro-democracy Apple Daily.

Mr Lai was released on HK\$10 million (\$\$1.7 million) bail, Apple Daily said.

He must also hand over his travel documents and is forbidden from taking meetings with foreign politicians, giving any interviews and posting and commenting on social media, the paper reported.

He will be confined to his home and be required to report to police three times a week under the bail terms, according to Apple Daily.

Hong Kong's Department of Justice is appealing against the court's decision, Apple Daily's report said. **ST**

— Bloomberg



Biryani Depot's cloud kitchen in Pune, which accounts for over 3,500 briyani servings every month, offers mutton briyani (above) among several options on its menu. PHOTO: BIRYANI DEPOT

Letter from New Delhi

Briyani delivery in India is recipe for success

DEBARSHI DASGUPTA

India Correspondent



✉ debarshi@sph.com.sg

The tasty and popular one-pot dish can be assembled quickly in cloud kitchens and is ideal for home delivery amid Covid-19 curbs.

A BIRYANI WORTH SAVOURING IS A DAUNTING labour of love that can stretch over hours. But I am told I will have to wait no longer than 35 minutes for my order of Lucknowi chicken briyani.

I am at a Biryani By Kilo (BBK) kitchen in Noida, a Delhi suburb. It is a chain that transformed the painstaking centuries-old process of making briyani, which involves layering rice and meat in various stages of doneness into a pot that is sealed and cooked further, into a precision-driven dash. Briyani is known as biryani in India.

Four pieces of semi-cooked chicken that have been marinated in their proprietary spice mix are whipped out of a freezer. They are dunked into a wok together with some milk and screw pine essence.

A few minutes on the flame, the meat is then passed on to Mr Mohammed Kazim, one of the employees, who lays it into a small earthen pot.



A view of Biryani Depot's central kitchen in Pune. PHOTO: ST FILE

The other prepared ingredients are quickly layered in – all according to specifications on a chart that is glued on an opposite wall – and the pot is sealed with dough. Another four minutes on the flame and it is then popped into an oven for 20 minutes.

The entire process, true to their commitment, takes just under 35 minutes. This zippy model has transformed briyani into India's most-ordered item on food delivery platforms, with multiple variants now available through restaurants as well as cloud kitchens that are easily accessible online.

As many as 100 million portions of briyani were ordered last year on India's top food aggregators – Zomato, Swiggy and Uber Eats.

In 2018, the total briyani market (both organised and unorganised) was estimated to be 275 billion rupees (\$5 billion).

Even the lockdown – or the occasional use of briyani as a slur to attack Muslims and other “anti-nationals” – has not dislodged the dish from its pre-eminent position on food delivery apps.

Its timeless appeal as an aromatic one-pot meal has cemented the dish's popularity in a rice-eating nation that also loves meat. Whether it is a lazy night at home or a party, an order of chicken or mutton briyani is bound to be a crowd-pleaser.

When it launched its first outlet in 2015, BBK tapped this growing appetite for a quick fix of briyani.

“I have never seen an outlet ramp up that fast in terms of sales and repeat customers,” said Mr Kaushik Roy, one of the two BBK co-founders, who launched close to 200 restaurants in his career.

The chain has since grown to 41 outlets across the country, accounting for around 9,000 pots of briyani daily that come in two options – 500g and 1kg.

Technology allows every order at BBK to be tracked until it is delivered, and 70 per cent of its orders reach customers in less than 60 minutes. Individual customer preferences are also tracked on its in-house software for targeted marketing.

With the pandemic whiplashing the restaurant industry, the cloud kitchen model selling briyani for delivery and takeouts has come in handy for those forced to reinvent their careers.

Mr Saptadeep Roy, who worked as an area general manager for an Italian restaurant chain in Pune, is one of them. The chain's outlets were closed temporarily in March because of the lockdown.

With no certainty of when they would reopen, he quit his job that month and started a briyani delivery chain – Biryani Depot – in August with a cloud kitchen in Pune that accounts for over 3,500 briyani servings every month.

He plans to open another 40 kitchens across the country by the end of 2021.

It is a thriving pandemic-era business formula that not only reaches out to customers wary of eating out, but also works around steep rentals that deter launches of dine-in restaurants.



A jackfruit biryani from Biryani By Kilo, which tapped a growing appetite for a quick fix of briyani.

PHOTO: BIRYANI BY KILO

Briyani is also central to Rebel Foods, which describes itself as the “world's largest Internet restaurant company” and operates over 300 cloud kitchens in India. Two of its brands – Behrouz and The Biryani Life – are built around the dish.

In July, it received funding from a host of investors, including Gojek.

Over the next year or so, Rebel Foods and Gojek plan to build around 100 cloud kitchens in Indonesia serving nasi goreng and possibly even briyani, among other dishes.

But true connoisseurs feel the mass production of briyani – including that which is cooked and frozen to be reheated and delivered – has reduced the dish to a soulless assembly-line pastiche.

Restaurants even have components of briyani prepared and stocked separately, ready to be assembled and microwaved on order.

Mr Osama Jalali, a food historian who is working on a book on briyani, tells me he has even come across instances where reduced meat curries are layered with rice and then cooked as if it were briyani, a dish that requires rice to be partially cooked in meat stock.

It's a sacrilege, he said.

“Maybe 10 years down the line, we may call any combination of meat and rice a briyani.

“It is the procedure of making briyani that makes briyani what it is and that is getting lost in this race,” Mr Jalali added.

He launched Village Degh in August, a cloud kitchen that sells two variants of briyani that are slow-cooked over four hours in large pots. He told me proudly that his unit, which runs out of a farm in Gurgaon, uses no electrical appliances or gas, relying instead on mortar and pestle and firewood.

Also sceptical of ordering briyani from untested cloud kitchens, Ms Marryam H. Reshii, a Delhi-based food writer, described the dish as a “huge art form” and a “wonderful subject to keep studying and discovering more and more nuances.” [ST](#)

Food historian and chef Osama Jalali preparing briyani at a cloud kitchen that he runs out of a farm in Gurgaon that uses firewood for cooking. PHOTO: OSAMA JALALI

With the pandemic whiplashing the restaurant industry, the cloud kitchen model selling briyani for delivery and takeouts has come in handy for those forced to reinvent their careers.

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TFBoys

Life: Music

Charming groups in Chinese music

BENSON ANG
CORRESPONDENT



✉ bang@sph.com.sg

GROUPS IN THE CHINESE MUSIC SCENE HAVE PUT out an impressive body of work recently, with smooth harmonies, catchy hooks and snazzy choreography. Understanding the individual strengths of their members, many of these boy bands and girl groups have delivered more than the sum of their parts.

Here are 10 new releases.

01 TOGETHER WITH YOU (POP) TFBoys

Hear it on: KKBox, Spotify and other music streaming platforms

Watch it on: bit.ly/36TaKZw

Every year, millions of fans eagerly await the new songs from this Chinese superstar boy band – comprising Roy Wang, Karry Wang and Jackson Yee – for their anniversary concert.

While the performance of this year's numbers – Together With You and Lights – appeared rather wooden during the group's seventh anniversary online concert in August, the tunes brim with the same boy-next-door wholesomeness and positivity that have endeared the trio to legions of fans.



PHOTO: G.O.F/FACEBOOK

02 GIRLS ON FIRE (HIP-HOP/POP) G.O.F

Hear it on: KKBox, Apple Music and other music streaming platforms

Watch it on: bit.ly/36TbZrE

Seven-member girl group G.O.F, short for “Girls On Fire”, are a product of the Taiwanese reality competition Dancing Diamond 52 (2020).

On their first album, they prove to be a force to be reckoned with.

The opening song, Runaway, features a sturdy, galloping beat, rapid-fire rapping and screams. Many bass-heavy numbers, such as Boom Cha Cha La Ka and Fairy Temple, combine fiery passion with boundless energy.

Looks like exciting things lie ahead for this fireball of a band.



PHOTO: HIM INTERNATIONAL MUSIC

03 BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH (ROCK) F.I.R.

Hear it on: KKBox, Spotify and other music streaming platforms

Watch it on: bit.ly/3lZlyL2

Taiwanese pop-rock band F.I.R. make full use of lead singer Lydia Han's rich, full-bodied voice to deliver a rousing theme song for the animation series Da Shen Xian, which premiered in November.

Its lush instrumentation – including the use of the shakuhachi Japanese flute, gongs and cymbals – as well as its wide emotional range fit well with the magical powers and creatures featured in the show.



ONE AND ALL

04 ONE AND ALL (POP) Mirror

Hear it on: KKBox, Spotify and other music streaming platforms

Watch it on: bit.ly/37d3RCH

PHOTO: MUSIC NATION RECORDS

Hong Kong boy band Mirror were formed in 2018 from 12 contestants on the Good Night Show – King Maker talent show.

In November, they released the heart-warming

Cantonese song One And All, celebrating their camaraderie and shared ups and downs.



PHOTO: TIANJIN HUA LU CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

05 UNFORGETTABLE (POP/HIP-HOP) Unine

Hear it on: KKBox, Apple Music and other music streaming platforms

Watch it on:
bit.ly/2HnxZCe

The Chinese nine-member boy band, which debuted in 2019 and disbanded last October, were around for only 18 months, with many posts saying the members had “graduated.”

Their last EP, Unforgettable, was ironically quite forgettable. While the songs Speechless and Shiny Day emphasise the specialness of their time together, it is hard to feel for a group whose lifespan was so brief.



PHOTO: ENJOY RECORDS

06 NAUGHTY BEAUTY (POP) Per6ix

Hear it on: KKBox, Spotify and other music streaming platforms

Watch it on:
bit.ly/2UQGsAU

Releasing their first EP in April, Taiwanese girl group Per6ix's name combines the word “persist” with the fact that there are six members.

A sense of youthful determination pervades this second EP's title track, Naughty Beauty, which is about staying the course and having no regrets.



PHOTO: THE CHAIRS/FACEBOOK

07 REAL LOVE IS... (ALTERNATIVE FOLK) The Chairs

Hear it on: KKBox, Apple Music and other music streaming platforms

Watch it on:
bit.ly/3lUEgo6

After clinching the award for Best Vocal Collaboration at 2019's Golden Melody Awards, Taipei-based indie band The Chairs – comprising Jin Chiu, Zhong Chen and Benson Sun – are back with a new album, Real Love Is...

With many laid-back, loungey numbers – from the idyllic Paradise... How Far? to the folksy Maybe Maybe – this work is perfect for a lazy afternoon.



PHOTO: HIM INTERNATIONAL MUSIC

08 LET BYGONES BE BYGONES (ROCK) Power Station

Hear it on:
KKBox, Apple Music and

other music streaming platforms

Watch it on: bit.ly/35XfyxX

Taiwanese rock duo Power Station's 2001 song Walking On Chung Hsiao East Road Nine Times was about heartbreak surrounding a failed relationship, with lyrics written by famed lyricist Wu Yu-kang.

In November, they released what they call a sequel, Let Bygones Be Bygones, with its Chinese lyrics also penned by Wu. The new song, about letting go of the past, is full of wistful longing and a worthy follow-up to the original.



PHOTO: MEDIA ASIA MUSIC

09 DESTINATION NOWHERE (POP/ROCK) Nowhere Boys

Hear it on: KKBox, Spotify and other music streaming platforms

Watch it on:
bit.ly/2IZNVem

The five members of Hong Kong rock band Nowhere Boys come from diverse backgrounds – from architecture to fixing guitars – and it shows in their music.

Their album Destination Nowhere has myriad influences and subjects, such as superheroes in Superpowers, Disney films in Electronic Dream and the Hong Kong housing situation in That's Why. It is a joy to unpack their eclectic references.



PHOTO: ENJOY RECORDS

10 UHHO UHHOHO (POP) AKB48 Team TP

Hear it on: KKBox, Spotify and other music streaming platforms

Watch it on:
bit.ly/3nLzDNv

This Taiwanese idol girl group feature 16 members on the cover of their latest EP, Uhhoh Uhhoho, and online sources suggest there might be even more members and trainees.

Given the sheer number of voices, they sometimes sound like a classroom of schoolgirls singing in unison. In the title track's music video, the members are also shown setting up yurts and dancing around a campfire, presumably on an excursion.



Big Picture

PHOTO: AFP

Fire pots for winter in Kashmir

THESE VENDORS IN SRINAGAR ARE HAWKING THE kangri, a traditional fire pot made by local craftsmen for use in winter in the region.

Made with clay and twigs, the 15cm-wide pot holds hot coal and keeps people warm. Temperature can dip to as low as -20 deg C.

In a village in Kashmir's Ganderbal district, twigs (picture below) used to make the pots are left to dry in a field. The twigs are collected from shrubs, scraped and peeled and go through a process of soaking, drying and dyeing. They are then woven



PHOTO: REUTERS

around the bowl-shaped earthenware pot.

The kangri is encased in a handmade wicker basket and it is carried as a personal warmer. The fire pot is also decorated with colourful threads, mirror-work and sequins.

Since March, when the region went into lockdown, Kashmir's tourism industry has faced a heavy blow after already being crippled by New Delhi's decision to revoke the region's semi-autonomous status last August.

According to Reuters, more than 60,000 jobs have been lost since then, with Kashmir's economy across all sectors losing nearly 400 billion Indian rupees (\$7.2 billion).

Tourism is an important industry for Kashmir, contributing about 7 per cent of the region's gross domestic product, according to government data.

The Kashmir region has seen more than 116,000 coronavirus cases and around 2,000 deaths, reported the Hindustan Times.

While worries about security have kept many visitors away, others are put off by travel restrictions to curb the spread of the virus, say industry experts.

Hoteliers, taxi drivers and others relying on tourism in the region now fear that Kashmir's tourism industry could take years to recover. [ST](#)

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