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Can Biden unite the states?

Anger and anxiety are in the air after a nail-biting presidential election in the United States. The winner will need to unify the nation, tackle the pandemic and mend the economy.

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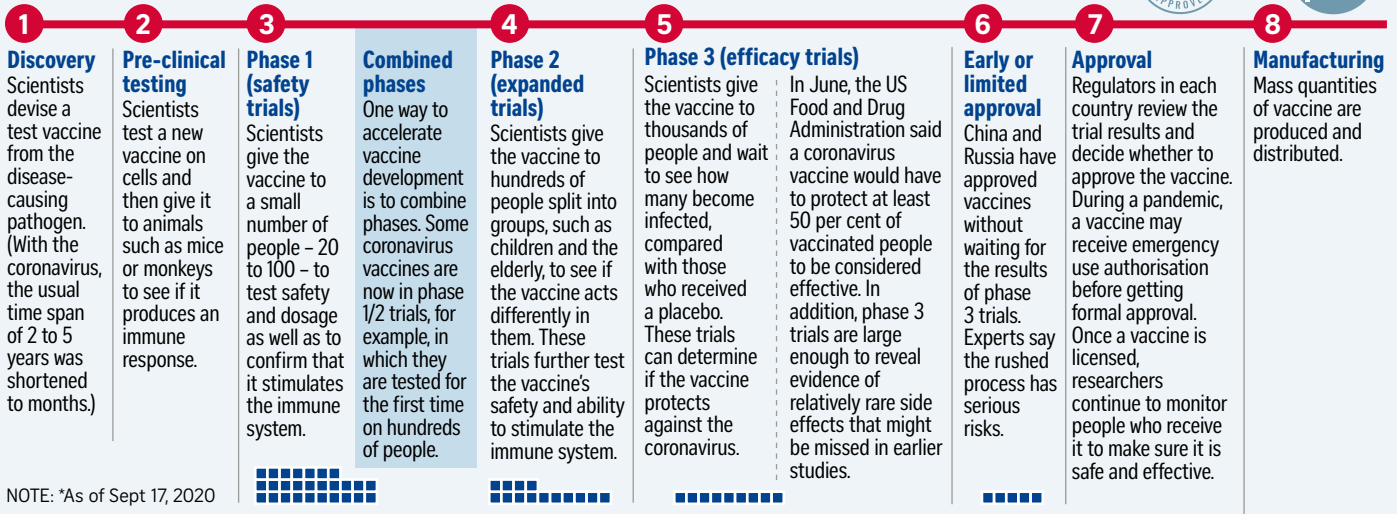
From lab to clinic for a Covid-19 vaccine

VACCINES TYPICALLY REQUIRE MANY YEARS OF RESEARCH before reaching the clinic. But scientists are now racing to produce a safe and effective Covid-19 vaccine by next year, within a highly compressed timeframe. The process began in January this year with the deciphering of the Sars-Cov-2 genome.

Currently almost 200 vaccines are being studied by scientists around the world. Of these, 44 are already in clinical trials, which means they are being tested in humans. The Lunar-Cov19 vaccine being co-developed by researchers in Singapore is among them. 154 others are at a pre-clinical phase.

Process

■ Number of vaccines at this stage*



Types of vaccines being developed

Not all the vaccines being developed work the same way. There are many different types of vaccine technologies being trialled. They include:



RNA vaccines

- Example: Lunar-Cov19 vaccine co-developed by Duke-NUS Medical School and Arcturus Therapeutics, as well as vaccines in late-stage testing by biotech companies Pfizer and BioNTech, and Moderna.
- Messenger-RNA vaccines involve injecting snippets of the viral genetic code so a patient's body mounts a protective response without being actually exposed to the whole virus.



Non-replicating viral vector

- Example: Vaccine candidate by University of Oxford and AstraZeneca.
- This vaccine is made using a weakened version of the virus that causes the common cold in chimpanzees, and modified through the infusion of the genetic instructions for the coronavirus "spike protein".

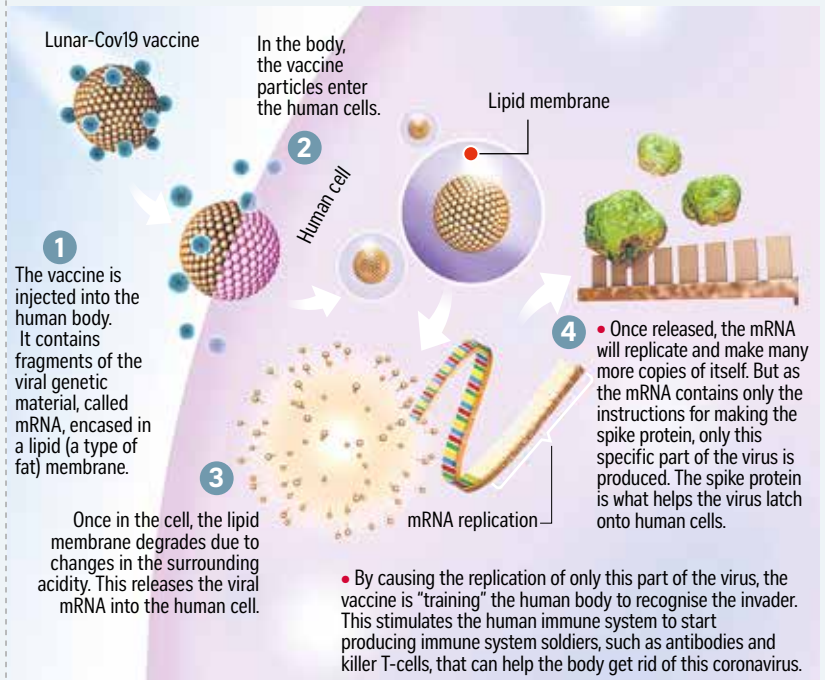


Protein sub-unit vaccine

- Example: Vaccine candidate by Sanofi Pasteur and GSK.
- This vaccine contains just a part of the virus, such as the spike proteins – the part of the virus that helps it latch on to a human host cell – instead of the whole virus.

How the Singapore co-developed vaccine works

In Singapore, late-stage human trials for the Lunar-Cov19 vaccine developed by Singapore's Duke-NUS Medical School and pharmaceutical company Arcturus Therapeutics could begin by the end of the year.



Sources: ARCTURUS THERAPEUTICS, DUKE-NUS MEDICAL SCHOOL, THE NEW YORK TIMES, WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION, BLOOMBERG
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Cover Story

US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Narrow race signals

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US Bureau Chief



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The close gap in votes for the two presidential contenders shows how dangerously deep and persistent the United States' internal divisions are.

THE WINNER OF THE UNITED STATES presidential election will be leading a country even more deeply divided than before the nation went to the polls.

The narrowness of the contest, with support for the candidates statistically split almost evenly down the middle, shows how dangerously deep and persistent the US' internal divisions are.

At the time of going to press, Democratic candidate Joe Biden had said he was on track to win over 300 electoral votes – comfortably more than the 270 needed to claim the White House. The numbers seemed to support that; he had overtaken President Donald Trump in the two most crucial battlegrounds, Georgia and Pennsylvania.

President Trump remained insistent that the election is being “stolen.” In effect, the outcome of the 2020 presidential election is already tainted in

PROTESTS RANKLE THE US AFTER THE ELECTIONS



Protesters took to the streets alleging irregularities in the voting process while in places, such as in New York, police stood on guard against outbreaks of violence. Increasing polarisation after the elections has been an issue of concern. PHOTOS: AFP, BLOOMBERG

a deeply divided US

the eyes of roughly half the country.

A landslide, or even a decisive victory either way, would have demonstrated a clear majority of Americans on one side or another.

But the country's next president faces divisions that will dog the US internally, poisoning national discussions and even, in a pessimistic scenario, threatening to tear the nation apart.

Mr Biden, if he wins, will have to rely on his reputation as a bipartisan dealmaker to push his policies through Congress, with its strong Republican presence. At press time the Senate remained tied, with Democrats' hopes of gaining control diminished.

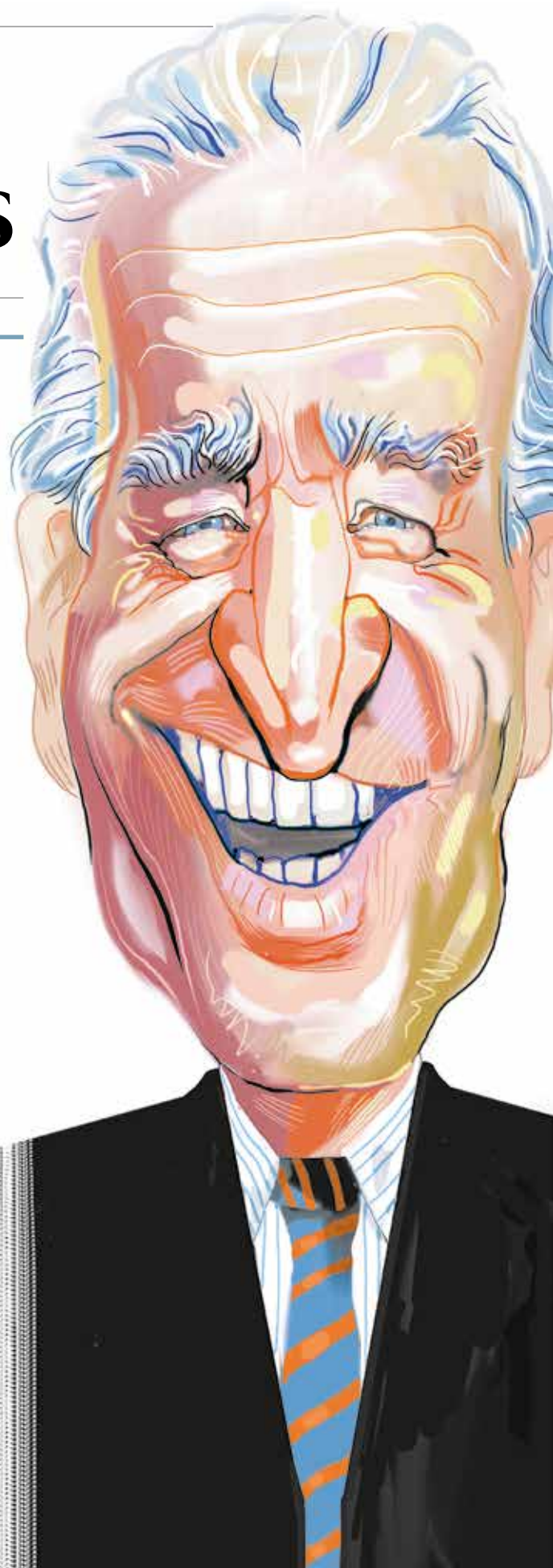
Even before this election, each side thought the other would cheat to win. That view has only been cemented. And in the interim power struggle, likely to be played out in the courts, the potential for unrest in the streets is also higher.

One standout difference from 2016 is the intensity of passions on either side. In 2016, the White House was not surrounded by high fences, and no shops and restaurants in downtown Washington or other major cities were boarded up in anticipation of rioting.

"Looks like Biden wins. Trump doesn't concede. And nearly half the population thinks the outcome

The country's next president faces divisions that will dog the US internally, poisoning national discussions and even, in a pessimistic scenario, threatening to tear the nation apart.

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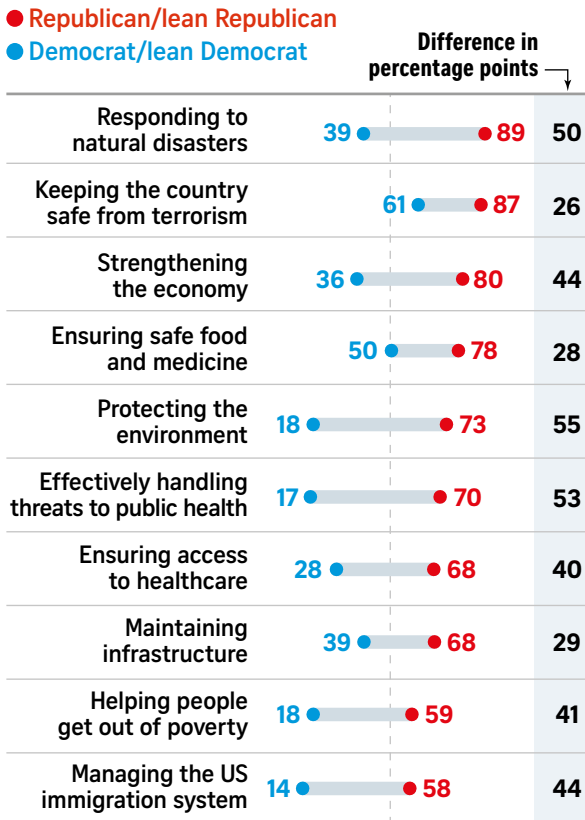


ST ILLUSTRATIONS: CEL GULAPA

PARTISAN GAPS

Largest partisan gaps in views of government performance on handling public health, disasters and the environment.

% who say the federal government is doing very/somewhat good job.



NOTE: Survey conducted between July 23 and Aug 4 this year.

SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER

GLOBAL ECONOMY AT RISK FROM DIVIDED ECONOMY

The US presidential election result may still be in doubt, but whoever emerges victorious will need to unite the country to adapt to the challenges of globalisation and digitisation or risk a backlash so severe it could damage the global economic system, Singapore's Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing has warned.

Without such a shift, "there will be a pushback against globalisation and the world economic system may fracture or fragment because of that", he said in an interview.

"One of the biggest challenges for the US going forward is how

can it maintain its leadership in the world by mobilising like-minded partners to work together to uphold and update the global economic and security order," the minister said.

Mr Chan made these comments as Democratic candidate Joe Biden was closing in on the 270 Electoral College votes needed for the presidency and incumbent Donald Trump was filing legal challenges to stop ongoing vote-counting in several states.

The results show the US electorate is "almost split down the middle", Mr Chan said. **- Bloomberg**

is illegitimate," Mr Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group tweeted. Indeed a formal concession from the President did not seem on the cards as long as the last handful of states remained statistically too close to call – even if it left Mr Trump with only the narrowest of paths to victory.

The Republican Party has launched a battery of lawsuits aimed at the election counting process, but most legal experts do not expect anything more than delays to the process. Under law, all election disputes must be settled by Dec 8.

Mr Trump's tactics are no surprise; months ago he began saying mail-in ballots were prone to massive fraud, though there is little or no evidence that they are. Analysts saw it as an obvious bid to undermine the credibility of the election in advance.

Tension is palpably climbing, fanned by right-wing commentators and conspiracy theorists.

The outcome thus far also reflects the asymmetry that defines the political divide.

Polls show that Republicans, and particularly President Donald Trump's supporters, place the economy at the top of their concerns. The President's promise of lower taxes would certainly have played into that.

The coronavirus pandemic and climate change are lower down on Republicans' list of concerns.

For Democrats, it is the opposite – the pandemic is a top concern. So is climate change. The economy, while certainly important, is not top of the list.

Even so, across the board, Mr Trump scored better on the economy than Democratic nominee Joe Biden. The former vice-president scored better in terms of expectations of his management of the pandemic.

There is also the question of President Trump's personality and track record. Multiple Trump supporters in the days before the election told The Straits Times they appreciated that the President kept his promises.

And they were willing to give him a pass on his handling of the pandemic, saying another president could have done no better.

Also, while many said they sometimes cringed at Mr Trump's abrasive style, they appreciated his authenticity and directness, compared with the duplicity and disingenuousness of the usual Washington politician.

In short, the President's odds-defying performance again demonstrates the appeal of his populist, strongman persona and maverick approach to his intensely loyal base.

One clear casualty of the process has been public opinion polling, which in 2016 also missed a late swing against the then Democratic contender Hillary Clinton. Analysts also blame partisan media for amplifying biases.

"A president trailing his opponent by close to 10 points going into election day should be considered a decided underdog," said the Cook Political Report.

"There's no doubt that expectations were a lot higher than what the reality turned out to be," the

political polling organisation acknowledged.

Opinions of the President have not moved much at all. The pandemic did not have any effect on Mr Trump's support, though it reflected for the Democrats in the higher early voting and mail-in ballots – which has remained crucial to the outcome in a few key states and is the focus of the Republicans' legal challenges.

Demographic change – for example in Georgia, where the Atlanta area is now much more diverse than it was a decade ago – worked in favour of Mr

Biden. But the US' urban-rural divide also remains entrenched and possibly also deeper.

Preliminary analysis however shows President Trump may have slightly improved his performance in rural areas. "In states like Ohio and Iowa, Trump's strength in rural/small-town America helped him," the Cook Political Report said.

For Mr Biden, winning the election in these circumstances, possibly via battling lawsuits, in an increasingly tribal political environment, will challenge his ability to unify the country. [ST](#)

Challenger who aims to be healer of divides

Elder statesman shaped by personal tragedy calls it the battle for the soul of America

FORMER VICE-PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN OFTEN talks about the black hole, that depthless void in a grieving mourner's chest that threatens to consume him whole.

He knows all about that despair. Mr Biden is a man shaped by tragedy and profound loss: the

deaths of his first wife Neilia and baby daughter Naomi in a car accident in 1972, and the death of his older son Beau, who had brain cancer, in 2015.

The elder statesman has turned this familiarity with grief into a cornerstone of his candidacy.

In his third and best shot at the US presidency, Mr Biden has positioned himself as a healer of the nation's divides who can empathise with the pain of racial justice protesters and the heartbreak of the 200,000 families who have lost loved ones to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

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Democratic Presidential candidate Joe Biden speaking at the Queen venue in Wilmington, Delaware, on Nov 5.
PHOTO: AFP

What drew him back to politics and prompted him to run for the White House was President Donald Trump's failure to denounce white supremacists at a rally in Charlottesville, said Mr Biden. The former vice-president has repeatedly called the presidential contest "a battle for the soul of this nation".

”

Yet the avuncular 77-year-old politician, well-known for his folksy charm and blunt comments, is far from infallible after nearly five decades in politics.

OVERCOMING TRAGEDY

Born in Scranton, Pennsylvania in 1942, Joseph Robinette Biden Jr – who was given his grandmother's maiden name for a middle name – moved with his family to Delaware at the age of 10 after his father found work there.

Money was occasionally tight enough at home that he once had to use a pair of nuts and bolts as cufflinks.

The younger Mr Biden worked hard to beat a stutter for which classmates picked on him.

He graduated in 1965 with a bachelor's degree in history and political science at the University of Delaware in Newark and went on to get his law degree from Syracuse University, where his sweetheart Neilia Hunter was studying. They married in 1966 and went on to have three children: Beau, Hunter and Naomi.

In 1972, then 29-year-old Mr Biden unseated Delaware's incumbent Republican senator, becoming the sixth-youngest senator in US history. But weeks later, while he was in Washington hiring staff, his wife and Naomi died in a car accident.

"I could not speak, only felt this hollow core grow in my chest, like I was going to be sucked inside a black hole," Mr Biden wrote in his 2007 memoir, *Promises To Keep*.

It was his second wife Jill Jacobs who gave him his life back and made him start to feel normal again, Mr Biden wrote. He met her on a blind date and they married in 1977. They had a daughter, Ashley, four years later.

LONG PUBLIC SERVICE

A "middle of the road" Democrat, as he has called



himself, Mr Biden was a long-time member and eventual chairman of both the Senate committees on foreign affairs and the judiciary.

He has called the 1994 Violence Against Women Act, which took aim at domestic violence and sexual assault, his proudest legislative accomplishment. But his past positions on criminal justice, desegregation and Supreme Court confirmation hearings have also been criticised by Democrats now.

He admitted last year that he had not always been right on criminal justice issues, calling tougher sentences on drug possession a "big mistake".

Mr Biden mounted a bid for the presidency in 1987, but later withdrew after a plagiarism scandal in

Pandemic's role in the election

IN A BINARY WORLD OF WINNERS AND LOSERS, heroes and suckers, United States President Donald Trump's personal victory over Covid-19 enhanced his personal myth to an adoring base.

"Covid, covid, covid," he has taken to saying recently, casting it as an overblown phenomenon amplified by a hostile media to crash the economy and make him look bad.

"Fire Fauci!!" the crowd has bellowed in return, referring to the US' top epidemiologist Anthony Fauci – that character in a play who has the unenviable role of bringing unpleasant news to the king.

Yet, if President Trump loses the White House, one of the characters laughing in the shadows may well be the coronavirus, which – contrary to Mr

Trump's suggestion that it will disappear after Nov 3 because it is only a political weapon – is still very much around.

On Nov 5, the US reported more than 127,000 new Covid-19 cases in one day, setting a record for the third time since the onset of the pandemic.

Case numbers are rising near vertically, and the death toll is following suit.

There is little doubt that the pandemic played a major role in this election. Certainly, it crashed Mr Trump's booming economy. Even more significantly for his political future, it has driven a surge in mail-in ballots.

Mail-in voting – often called absentee voting or vote-by-mail – has steadily gained in popularity in



US President Donald Trump and Democratic Presidential candidate Joe Biden during the final presidential debate on Oct 22. PHOTO: AFP

which he did not properly credit a British lawmaker for lines in a speech.

He suffered two brain aneurysms a few months later, from which he took seven months to recuperate.

Mr Biden ran unsuccessfully for the Democratic nomination for president in 2008, but accepted when then Senator Barack Obama asked him to be his running mate.

As President Obama's vice-president from 2009 to 2016, Mr Biden helped steer America through the recession, overseeing infrastructure spending in the stimulus package, and working with Democrats and Republicans to avert a federal government

shutdown in 2011.

He also had a hand in foreign policy, particularly when it came to Russia, Libya and Iraq.

FAMILY MAN

Mr Biden has remained close to his family, who rallied to support his seriously ill son Beau, an attorney-general of Delaware.

"He had the best of me, but with the bugs and flaws engineered out," Mr Biden wrote proudly of his older son, who died in 2015 after a two-year battle with brain cancer.

"May 30. 7.51pm. It happened, I recorded in my diary. My God, my boy. My beautiful boy," Mr Biden wrote in *Promise Me, Dad*, his 2017 memoir.

Again, the black hole opened up. Mr Biden later said it was his promise to Beau "to be okay" that kept him going, though he ultimately decided not to run for president in 2016.

What drew him back to politics and prompted him to run for the White House was President Donald Trump's failure to denounce white supremacists at a rally in Charlottesville, said Mr Biden. The former vice-president has repeatedly called the presidential contest "a battle for the soul of this nation."

Mr Biden, who acknowledges his "reputation as a gaffe machine", is still prone to slip-ups and politically incorrect comments. He has been told off for being inappropriately touchy-feely with women supporters, and has denied an allegation of sexual assault in 1993 by his former staff assistant Tara Reade, which media reports note was inconsistent with a complaint she filed that year.

He still loses his cool at times, particularly over accusations against Hunter, whom he refers to as "my only surviving son."

Said Biden biographer Evan Osnos in a National Public Radio interview: "If you talk to the 77-year-old Joe Biden now, he's a man who is at peace. He's at peace from a series of hard-won scars." [S](#)

the US, with voters this year casting a record number of over 65 million mail ballots.

The pandemic was a catalyst.

Polls show the pandemic as a major concern for Democrats, who also give the President low marks for his management of it.

Conversely, Republicans give the President good marks, or at least a pass, on his pandemic management, and the pandemic is lower on their list of priorities than the economy.

Mr Trump himself weaponised the pandemic, pouncing on a statement from Mr Biden that he would listen to scientists and lock down where and when the science deemed it necessary. If Mr Biden becomes president, he will ruin the country ("There will be no more Christmas... no more Fourth of July!!"), Mr Trump has thundered at his packed rallies.

Mr Trump himself weaponised the pandemic, pouncing on a statement from Mr Biden that he would listen to scientists and lock down where and when the science deemed it necessary.



"Don't let it dominate your life," President Trump declared when he returned to the White House last month after recovering from Covid-19 (partly due to a cocktail of drugs not readily available for an ordinary person).

He won that battle, but the coronavirus may have won the war – and it is not going away any time soon. [S](#)

– Nirmal Ghosh, US Bureau Chief



Mao Zedong ruled China with an iron fist for nearly 30 years.
PHOTO: AFP



Deng Xiaoping sought to diffuse power through a system of collective leadership. PHOTO: AFP

Special Report

Xi & the paramount power of being chairman

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Power is set to be further concentrated in the hands of Mr Xi and a handful of party leaders, with the changes driven by several imperatives.

AS CHAIRMAN OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST Party (CCP), Mao Zedong ruled China with an iron fist for nearly 30 years. While the revolutionary hero may forever be associated with the slogan “the Chinese people have stood up”, with the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, he also nearly brought the nation to its knees again when his power ran unchecked.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a reign of terror which saw Chairman Mao purge his political rivals, mobilising radical youth in political campaigns marked by humiliating “struggle sessions”, torture, arbitrary arrests, killings and suicides. One of its victims was Deng Xiaoping, who was demoted from vice-premier to a worker at a tractor factory in Jiangxi province in 1969. Deng consoled himself that at least he was able to care for his son who was left a paraplegic after jumping out of a building to escape a mob of marauding Red Guards.

After Mao’s death in 1976, one of Deng’s acts on returning to power was to abolish the post of party chairman in 1982, to avoid a repeat of the Great Helmsman’s demented excesses and the cult of personality that enabled them.

Deng sought to diffuse power through a system of collective leadership – embodied in the party general secretary and the Politburo Standing Committee. He also introduced a peculiar unwritten rule in which he named his handpicked heir’s successor – a move that was tantamount to imposing a term limit on the general secretary who had to eventually pass on the mantle.

That succession system Deng put in place is deemed obsolete today. And President Xi Jinping looks set to create a new one more in keeping with the times.

The CCP intends to resurrect the post of chairman at the party’s 20th congress in 2022 and make other moves that would further tighten President Xi’s grip on power, two sources with ties to the Chinese leadership told *The Straits Times*, requesting anonymity. They noted that while Deng eschewed formal titles as head of state or the CCP, he was the power behind the throne; Mr Xi, on the other hand, is choosing to be more transparent on who is the one wielding ultimate power in China.

Other major changes in the works by an ad hoc committee include a restructuring of the CCP’s top echelons and bending the customary retirement age.

The party’s elite Central Committee, which held its fifth plenum from Oct 26 to 29, is expected to endorse the broad outlines of the ad hoc committee’s work on these internal changes. Given the CCP’s opaque ways and obsession with secrecy, the details of the restructuring will not be formally unveiled to the public until the 20th congress.

But it is understood that the changes would involve reinstating one to three vice-chairman



Xi has accumulated more titles than any of his recent predecessors since coming to power in 2012. PHOTO: AFP

positions, shrinking the current seven-member Politburo Standing Committee to five or even three. Premier Li Keqiang is tipped to become head of Parliament in 2023, but it is not clear at this juncture if he will become a party vice-chairman and concurrently a standing committee member.

It is also unclear at this stage if the post of general secretary would be scrapped to make way for the revived post of party chairman. But it is unlikely that Mr Xi would hold both positions.

The upshot: Power will be further concentrated in the hands of Mr Xi and a handful of party leaders. The changes are driven by several imperatives. These include the growing strategic power rivalry with the United States as well as the need to accommodate rival political factions, party sources say.

“China needs a political strongman at this juncture to deal with an increasingly hostile US,” a source with ties to the Chinese leadership told ST.

STEADY HAND NEEDED

The thinking behind the redesign of the top power structure is that China needs an experienced and steady pair of hands to guide the nation at this critical juncture. Apart from having to confront a hostile US, it also faces a fundamental restructuring of an economy still vulnerable after the devastating blow of the Covid-19 pandemic, the challenges posed by environmental degradation, income disparities and an ageing population, not to mention the never-ending battle against corruption.

In short, it would be too risky to change horses mid-stream. “Xi cannot (step) down. A younger leader would lack experience and not be able to fend off US pressure,” a political commentator who writes under the pseudonym Lan Jiang said last week, referring to increasingly fraught relations with Washington, with both countries crossing swords over a lengthening list of issues including the coronavirus, trade, technology, Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the South China Sea.

Mr Xi has accumulated more titles than any of his recent predecessors since coming to power in 2012. Other than president, general secretary and Central Military Commission chairman, he is also being referred to as the party’s “core” and the “people’s leader.” But he has yet to acquire two of Mao’s titles: chairman and “great leader.” He is unlikely to be referred to as the “great leader”, which is reserved exclusively for Mao.

In 2018, Mr Xi’s hold on power was strengthened when China’s Parliament amended the Constitution, scrapping the two-term limit on the presidency, thereby allowing him to stay on in the post indefinitely if he so chooses.

As party general secretary, Mr Xi is first among equals in the standing committee but in real terms he is politically stronger than his predecessors except for Mao and, arguably, Deng.

“Xi is general secretary in name, but already wields power close to that of a party chairman,” said Professor Wang Hsin-hsien, a China expert at Taiwan’s National Chengchi University. “If he becomes party chairman, he will have the final say whenever there are differences of opinion.”

Signs that there will be major changes in the top power structures could be gleaned from Mr Xi’s call for “enhancing top-level design” – communist jargon for reform of the party’s top echelons – during an inspection tour of Hunan province last month.

The fact that Mr Xi made the call in Hunan, Mao’s birthplace, lent weight to the reading by party insiders that one of the changes would involve the revival of the party chairmanship, with Mr Xi assuming the post.

Mr Xi’s call, it should be noted, was not the first by a Chinese leader. His immediate predecessor, Mr Hu Jintao, coined the phrase “top-level design” during the waning years of his second five-year term, but whatever changes that were contemplated then were never implemented or made public.

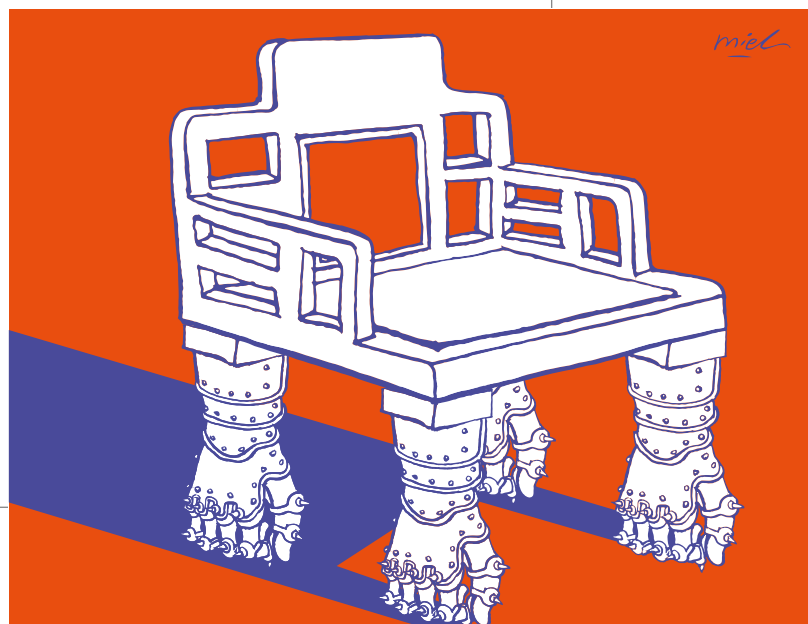
If confirmed, Mr Xi would be the party’s fourth chairman since the 1949 revolution and Mao’s true heir.

Xi is general secretary in name, but already wields power close to that of a party chairman. If he becomes party chairman, he will have the final say whenever there are differences of opinion.



– PROFESSOR
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ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL



After Mao died, Hua Guofeng became party chairman but he was outmanoeuvred by Deng in internal power struggles. Between 1980 and 1982, Deng replaced Hua as Central Military Commission chairman and gave Hua's two other posts—party chairman and premier – to other people.

Deng appointed one of his proteges, Hu Yaobang, as party chairman in 1981, but Hu relinquished the post the following year and settled for the position of general secretary.

“Mao was the first-generation (party chairman). Hua Guofeng and Hu Yaobang's terms (as chairmen) were too short,” said a party source. Mr Xi's elevation to the top position would make him effectively the second-generation chairman and true heir to Mao.

President Xi has lofty ambitions for China, including making the country great again and eventually reunifying with self-ruled democratic Taiwan, which Beijing claims as its own. The boldness of his visions reinforces the argument that term limits should be lifted as he would need more than 10 years to realise these goals.

Given his track record, few political elites could, or dare, argue against Mr Xi serving a third and

possibly fourth five-year term at the helm of the party which, according to the country's Constitution, “leads everything”.

While the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in China under his watch, Mr Xi's decision to impose harsh measures, including a prolonged lockdown of a province of almost 60 million people, was instrumental in China being able to get back on its feet rapidly, certainly much faster than the US and other Western countries still grappling with a resurgence of the outbreak.

Mr Xi's sweeping crackdown on corruption is part of his pledge to improve “party building”, or good governance, but critics say it has been selective, targeting political rivals. A risk taker, Mr Xi has no qualms about making enemies. More than one million party, government and military officials and their business cronies have been ensnared in the clampdown.

AGE LIMIT

Mr Xi has also shown a willingness to depart from norms which he considers arbitrary or serving no good purpose. The expectation among party insiders

CCP sets course for China to become tech power by 2035

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CHINA'S COMMUNIST PARTY ELITE HAVE pledged that the country would become a leader in innovation by 2035, setting a course to substantially increase the nation's technological strength.

In a communique released at the end of a four-day conclave of the party's Central Committee, it said China would achieve major breakthroughs in key core technologies by that year.

The year 2035 is significant as Chinese President Xi Jinping has set it as a midterm target for China to “basically realise socialist modernisation”.

This is part of his grander vision for the country to become a “great, modern socialist country” by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

The communique provided broad strokes of the 2035 plan, emphasising the need for a big jump in China's economic, technological and comprehensive national strength.

China should also be at the forefront of innovative countries, said the report at the end of the closed-door meeting of more than 350 Central Committee members.

Known as the Fifth Plenum – so-called because it is the fifth such meeting since the 19th Party Congress in 2017 – the meeting is also being closely watched for China's economic and development priorities over the next five years.

The 14th Five-Year Plan, a development blueprint, also stressed the core position of innovation in China's modernisation.

Party leaders said “technological self-reliance must be the strategic pillar of the country's development”.

China must “strengthen its strategic technological strength and raise the ability of its enterprises to innovate”, said the communique.

While Mr Xi had set similar goals for technological progress at the 19th Party Congress, developing indigenous technology has taken on critical importance because of the United States-China tech war, said Beijing-based political economist Hu Xingdou.

He pointed out that this emphasis on technological self-reliance was recognition from China's top leaders that there was a big gap between the country and other developed nations in core technologies such as microchips, engine technology and precision instruments.

“China is too far behind and the party can see that if there is no indigenous innovation, only a dead end awaits,” said Professor Hu.

Now that Beijing has set down the broad blueprint, it will be up to Chinese officials down the line to come up with the details.

The communique also referenced challenges posed by a complex international environment and rising uncertainties, but said peace and development were still the main themes for this era.

This seemed to be an indication that top leaders did not want to inflame tensions with the US, said Prof Hu, adding that the focus was clearly on “immersing ourselves to develop the country”.

is that he is also likely to bend another unwritten rule which calls for officials to step down at 68, to allow a select group of high-performing loyalists to stay on.

The rule was bent in 2018 when Mr Wang Qishan, who had retired from the Politburo Standing Committee, was made state vice-president at the age of 70.

If the age limit is set aside again in 2022, one beneficiary is likely to be Vice-Premier Han Zheng, who will be 68 then. Mr Han is close to former president Jiang Zemin. Having him stay on in the standing committee would be one way to keep the Shanghai Gang, a political faction headed by Mr Jiang, onside.

Another likely beneficiary is Mr Chen Xi, who heads the party's organisation department overseeing the promotion and demotion of cadres. Mr Chen, who belongs to President Xi's faction dubbed the "Xi Family Army", will be 69 in 2022.

Premier Li, who belongs to a faction headed by former president Hu Jintao, will be 67 in 2022 and is technically eligible to stay on in the standing committee.

Many Western media outlets have painted President Xi as a dictator with an insatiable appetite for power. The acquisition of the chairman title would likely reinforce fears that China is headed down the Mao route again, with power held tightly in the hands of one man who, in his dotage, could ruin the lives of millions with unwise decisions.

But the changes in the power structure may not necessarily go down that path. The streamlining of the standing committee could be read as one way to avoid factionalism at the top; that in time, China could return to collective leadership with Mr Xi's most trusted political allies holding key positions and taking more of the burden of running the country from him.

It will be foolhardy to try to decipher China's future from the present volatile circumstances. But what is clear is that Mr Xi has no desire to copy Western liberal democracy. He is still reshaping the Chinese political model, which has so far helped China defeat the coronavirus but is still subject to myriad challenges both internally and externally. Only time will tell if Mr Xi will prove to be more adept than Mao. [S](#)



President Xi Jinping (centre), General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, with Premier Li Keqiang (third from right) and members of the Politburo Standing Committee at the fifth plenary session of the party's 19th Central Committee in Beijing on Oct 29. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

As expected, party leaders also doubled down on the "dual-circulation strategy" mooted by Mr Xi, which aims to boost domestic consumption and reduce reliance on foreign markets in the face of greater uncertainty.

China would have to form a strong domestic market in order to build new patterns for development, said the report, pointing out that there was a big gap between the development and incomes of urban and rural areas.

Party leaders also took stock of China's achievements and estimated that gross domestic product this year would exceed 100 trillion yuan (\$20.34 trillion).

The country is also expected to lift 55.75 million people out of poverty this year. [S](#)

XI JINPING'S PROPOSALS FOR 2021-2025

- Uphold the central role of innovation in its modernisation drive and implement an innovation-driven strategy.
- Build a modern industrial system and upgrade the economic structure.
- Nurture a strong domestic market and establish a new development pattern. The country will smooth domestic circulation and let domestic and international circulation reinforce each other, spurring consumption in an all-round way and expanding investment.
- Deepen reform comprehensively in pursuit of a high-level socialist market economy.
- Prioritise the development of agriculture and rural areas and fully advancing rural vitalisation.
- Advance coordinated regional development and a new type of urbanisation.
- Promote the cultural sector and improve its cultural soft power.
- Accelerate green and low-carbon development, continuously improve the environment and quality and stability of ecosystems and raise the efficiency of resource utilisation.
- Pursue high-level opening-up and explore new prospects of win-win cooperation.
- Improve people's standard of living and



PHOTO: REUTERS

actively implement strategies to address the aging population.

- Strengthen national security capabilities and increase the capacity to deal with traditional and non-traditional security challenges to protect people's lives and security and maintain social stability.
- Maintain the long-term prosperity and stability of the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions and promote the reunification of the Chinese mainland and Taiwan, as well as peaceful cross-strait development.

Source: CTGN



PHOTO: REUTERS

Is China overdeveloping economic zones?

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Critics say the rapid rise limits the success of newer ones

WHEN CHINESE PRESIDENT XI JINPING GAVE a speech on Oct 14 to mark the 40th anniversary of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ), he chose to do it in the Qianhai district, a relatively new area positioning itself as a hub for cross-border services with Hong Kong.

Just over two hours' drive away, and across the estuary where the Pearl River flows into the sea, is the island of Hengqin. Much like Qianhai, it lies close to an established economic zone (Zhuhai, in this case) and also positions itself as a hub for cooperation and trade with Macau.

Further up north in Shanghai is the Lingang Special Area, which focuses on high-tech development and cross-border projects with incentives for foreign investors.

In the four decades since Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping first designated four cities in southern China as SEZs – Shantou, Shenzhen, Xiamen and Zhuhai – similar economic development zones (EDZs) targeted at attracting foreign direct investment have mushroomed across the country,

including smaller zones within a zone, like Qianhai, Hengqin and Lingang.

With more than 2,000 such areas of varying sizes across the country – split into at least 15 different categories at the national level alone, with more at provincial and municipal levels – China has by far more special zones for economic activity than any other country, making up half of the world's total.

While these are all in line with the country's aim of opening up the economy to international trade, critics say the proliferation of such zones has limited the success of newer ones.

The problem: A lack of an established ecosystem and too many similar areas fighting for a slice of the same pie.

In recent years, the country has built more economic zones in the less affluent central and western provinces – trading areas where goods are not subjected to Customs duties or taxes, and where firms get tax breaks and even preferential residential policies to attract talent.

This was ramped up in the past two years in a bid to make underdeveloped areas more attractive to high-quality manufacturers, to boost the local economy and help weather trade tensions with the United States.

A cargo ship carrying containers is seen near the Yantian port in Shenzhen.
PHOTO: REUTERS





Residential and commercial buildings stand in the Pudong area of Shanghai, 2013, the year it was expanded to include free trade zones.
PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

POLICY EXPERIMENTS

In 1978, as China was looking at opening up to the world, there were concerns within the party leadership about going from a planned economy to a market-driven one.

The central government needed areas where it could test out policies it had little experience in managing. Some of these experiments in accommodating foreign investors and selling land use rights were later rolled out nationwide.

Goods produced in these early special economic zones were export-oriented and the areas allowed foreign entities to operate in China.

The four cities, along with Hainan, were chosen because of their proximity to shipping routes and Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

In 1990, the government started setting up economic and technological development zones, like Shanghai's Pudong New Area, which were in 2013 expanded to include free trade zones (FTZs). In such areas, which are generally smaller than SEZs, policies target certain industries like artificial intelligence and civil aviation to facilitate the creation of an industrial hub.

By the 2000s, as coastal provinces grew affluent, the central government also shifted its focus inwards and to the western regions, resulting in the designation of Kashgar and Khorgos in Xinjiang as SEZs.

They were meant to replicate the model that had been established in the coastal economic development areas - where foreign firms could easily tap business-friendly policies and infrastructure.

Each geographical zone would also have a special area of focus, and the economic growth was intended to benefit the region.

Yet, some, like the Khorgos Gateway, struggle to meet their full potential.

Located on the border of China and Kazakhstan, the Khorgos Gateway dry port and SEZ were meant to be a cornerstone of the Belt and Road Initiative, an ambitious infrastructure project. The dry port

allows trains to carry goods between China and Europe in just about two weeks, shaving several weeks off container shipping and cutting the cost of air freight.

But the 180,000 TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit) of goods that go through Khorgos annually is a fraction of the millions of containers that continue to go between China and Europe via sea freight.

It is also prohibitively expensive: According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a think-tank headquartered in Washington, rail freight from China to Europe via Central Asia is not economically viable without up to 40 per cent subsidies from the Chinese government.

There are other obstacles.

MIXED SIGNALS

When Lingang was last year added to Shanghai's expanded pilot free trade zone, there were plans for the area to facilitate freer activities in trade and investment, alongside plans to turn the area into an automotive hub complementing Tesla's US\$2 billion (\$\$2.71 billion) factory that opened in 2018.

This meant that there would be preferential tax policies, such as a reduced rate of 15 per cent on corporate income tax, and import duty exemptions for high-tech firms. The government had also promised to level the playing field in several key

China has by far more special zones for economic activity than any other country, making up half of the world's total.

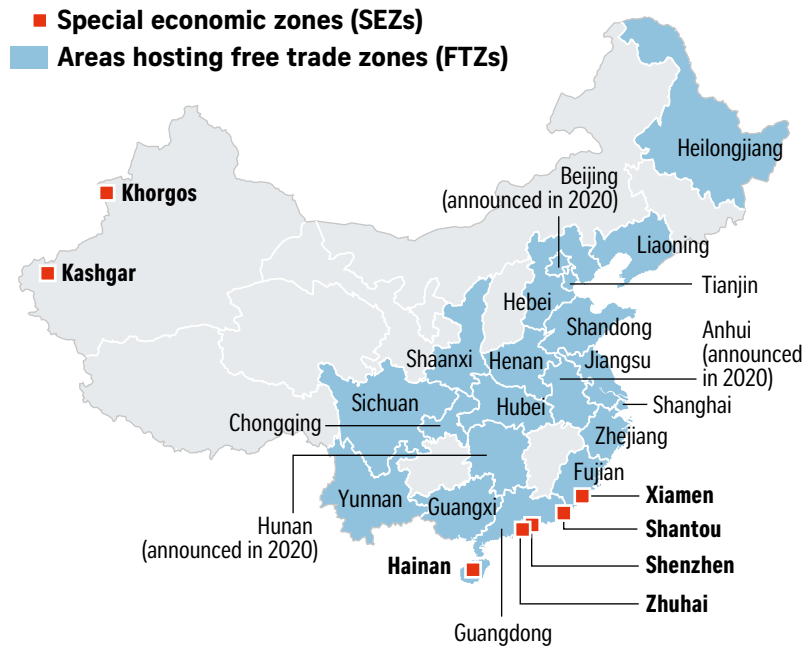


Hengqin positions itself as a hub for cooperation and trade with Macau.

ST PHOTO: LI XUEYING



SEZs and FTZs in China



WHAT'S COMING TO SHENZHEN

Here are some of the key measures covered in the National Development and Reform Commission's (NDRC) list for Shenzhen

- The city will start a stock futures index
- Innovative companies can stage IPOs on the Shenzhen Stock Exchange with depository receipts
- State-owned companies in the region will be given greater autonomy to carry out market-based reforms
- Shenzhen will build a new intellectual property rights protection system that ensures digital IP protection and punishes infringements
- Restrictions on foreign ownership in telecommunications will be lifted
- Shenzhen will streamline visa rules to attract talent
- The city will be allowed to issue offshore, yuan-denominated local government bonds
- Designated medical institutions across nine mainland cities in the Greater Bay Area will be allowed to use drugs available in Hong Kong and Macau [ST](#)

– Bloomberg



sectors like telecommunications, and insurance and securities.

But not everyone can be a Tesla supplier, said an automotive executive whose firm was looking at expanding in Lingang.

“(Furthermore) for the bigger firms, they want to see more policy incentives before moving in,” he said, asking not to be named as he is not authorised to speak to the media.

“When we were told about Lingang last year, they made it sound like it would be the new place to be, but from government announcements, it also looks like they’re directing more resources to Hainan – which is sending us a lot of mixed signals.”

Months after Lingang was announced, the central government declared the entire province of Hainan a free trade zone and free trade port catering to the domestic market.

This means that unlike in most of the other economic zones where goods and services are geared towards the export market, firms that set up shop in Hainan could have an advantage in accessing China’s 1.4 billion-strong market.

And investments in some areas appear to be slowing: According to Shanghai government data, foreign investment growth in its free trade zone fell 3.5 per cent to US\$6.77 billion in 2018, compared with a 13.5 per cent rise to US\$7.02 billion the previous year. Data from last year was not available.

Economic zones have also been hard-pressed to replicate the success of the Shenzhen SEZ.

Shenzhen’s transformation from sleepy fishing village to tech and manufacturing hub with nearly 20 per cent annual growth is oft held up as a success story and a case for economic development zones.

The city’s gross domestic product last year was nearly 2.7 trillion yuan (\$550 billion), and its international trade accounts for some 2.8 billion yuan, or about 10 per cent of the country’s total volume.

According to a special report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, as at last year, China had 2,543 EDZs of varying sizes and functions, with 13 still under development.

Proponents of such zones say the sheer variety allows a more even spread of economic development across the country, allowing areas to be opened to foreign investments while allowing the opportunity to experiment with various policies.

“There are a variety of different names but essentially they all serve the same purpose: They are the only way that China’s (market) policies can match those in the international arena,” said Dr Li Jinkui of the China Development Institute, a think-tank based in Shenzhen.

“It’s a means for the local governments to open their own areas to trade with the outside world because if not, some of our government policies are incompatible with those of international trading norms.”

While China this year implemented a foreign

investment law that allows foreign firms to wholly own companies across the country, there are still limits on capital controls and “negative lists” of industries foreigners cannot enter.

The lack of established ecosystems and clear growth trajectories has also held back firms from expanding into newer areas, said Associate Professor Gu Qingyang of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

“For instance, in Singapore, when they wanted to build a biomedical hub, it wasn’t just about building the labs and attracting top scientists. They needed to have a strong foundation,” he said, pointing to the increased emphasis on life sciences in schools while also having top pharmaceutical firms set up shop in the country.

But in the case of China, there has also been

a finite amount of talent with international experience that can bring value to such zones, as many choose to stay in the more established areas.

For instance, the Yunnan FTZ, when it was set up, was intended to be a destination for wellness tourism, but development has been sluggish – its role facilitating trade with neighbouring Myanmar, connected by a porous land border, has been far more successful.

“China is moving from a state of high-quantity to high-quality growth, (so) it’s about survival of the fittest,” Prof Gu said.

“Very few places can replicate the success of Shenzhen and the entire Pearl River Delta, where there’s an established supply chain. And talented people don’t want to go somewhere they don’t see a future.” **ST**

Making Shenzhen the engine in China’s global tech hub ambition

CHINA WILL PRESS ON WITH ITS GLOBAL high-tech ambitions as President Xi Jinping tasks its most innovative city, Shenzhen, to drive the campaign in the next phase of its development.

The mission has gained urgency amid a worldwide economic slump and threats of decoupling from the United States and other countries, a challenge that the Chinese leader acknowledged.

In a 50-minute speech on Oct 14, to mark 40 years since Shenzhen pioneered a special economic zone that helped propel its exponential growth, President Xi said China was at a key stage of transforming its economy at a challenging time.

Tech capital Shenzhen’s job is to continue to reform and open up, lead the way in innovation and drive the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area plan to turn the cluster into the country’s economic powerhouse.

The blueprint calls for the integration of nine cities in Guangdong province, including Shenzhen, Hong Kong and Macau, to create a megalopolis with cross-border business opportunities.

“It is necessary to continue to encourage and guide Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan compatriots and overseas Chinese to the investment opportunities,” he said.

Mr Xi’s speech was made just before a crucial political meeting in Beijing where the Chinese leadership will unveil the country’s next five-year social and economic plan, and another economic development blueprint that will guide it through to 2035.



A television screen at a restaurant in Beijing showing Chinese President Xi Jinping at the event to mark the establishment of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. PHOTO: AFP

On Oct 11, the government announced that it would give Shenzhen greater autonomy to carry out reforms in its finance sector, technology development and the hiring of foreign talent. It also tasked Shenzhen to become a “model city that can represent a modernised and vibrant socialist country.”

The southern metropolis – a fishing village four decades ago – has seen its gross domestic product grow from 270 million yuan in 1980 to 2.7 trillion yuan (\$544 billion) in 2019, said President Xi, making it the fifth biggest economy among Asian cities.

Hailed as China’s Silicon Valley, it is home to some of the country’s biggest and most innovative companies, such as Tencent, Huawei, DJI and BYD as well as scores of tech start-ups. It is also the first city in China to have full-scale 5G coverage. **ST**

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Ant Group and Alipay headquarters building in Shanghai. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Spotlight

Abrupt halt to Ant IPO stuns investors

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Move driven by concerns over systemic risks to the Chinese banking system

INVESTORS IN SINGAPORE AND GLOBALLY WERE stunned by the abrupt suspension of Ant Group's listing on the Shanghai Stock Exchange (SSE) less than two days before the world's largest initial public offering (IPO) was to take place in the Chinese city and in Hong Kong.

Brokers say there had been a lot more interest than usual in the US\$37 billion (S\$50.4 billion) dual listing from Singapore investors, many of whom are now "in a state of shock."

Ahead of the listing, the fintech firm's IPO had even started to trade at a 50 per cent premium in the grey market, CMC Markets market analyst Kelvin Wong said. This refers to an unofficial market where people can bet on first-day IPO share price movements, brokers say.

"Some trades were executed at HK\$120 in the grey market (on Nov 2) versus its Hong Kong listing price of HK\$80," Mr Wong noted.

But the writing was on the wall when Ant Group co-founder Jack Ma and two top executives were

summoned to a meeting with Chinese regulators on Nov 2.

The next day, the SSE suspended the mega IPO, saying that Ant has "reported on material matters including a change in the regulatory environment on financial technology"

"Due to the material matters reported, (Ant) may no longer meet the conditions for offering and listing, or the requirements for information disclosure... (Ant) and (its) sponsors shall make public announcements according to regulations, explain the situations related to the material matters," SSE said in an announcement on Nov 3.

The IPO has also been suspended in Hong Kong, Ant Group said. US-listed shares of Alibaba Group, which has a 33 per cent stake in Ant through its subsidiaries, plunged 8.1 per cent on Nov 3, marking their largest single-day decline since Jan 29, 2015, when they lost 8.78 per cent.

Uncertainty over the regulators' next move is not helping sentiment, said Mr Terence Wong, chief executive of Azure Capital.

"Even if they were to give the all-clear to the IPO, it may still leave a sour taste in investors' mouths given that this happened on the eve of the listing," he added.

Analysts say the suspension may mean Chinese regulators are worried over whether systemic

risks to the Chinese banking system have been adequately addressed.

CIMB Private Banking economist Song Seng Wun noted: "Ant has to decide if it can satisfy Chinese regulatory requirements as soon as possible and whether to proceed with the IPO or to refund the monies. The outcome also depends on whether Chinese regulators are satisfied with the actions taken by Ant."

Reuters reported that Ant had been told that its consumer lending business will face tougher scrutiny over matters including capital adequacy and leverage ratios.

This comes as some regulators were "surprised" by Ant's business and financial figures, including the scale and profitability of its credit business, details of which were disclosed for the first time in its IPO prospectus in late August, Reuters reported one source as saying.

Mr Ma's recent criticism of regulators stifling innovation could also have provoked Chinese regulators, observers say.

A Bloomberg report had quoted him as saying: "Good innovation is not afraid of regulation, but is afraid of outdated regulation."

The comments fuelled the perception that Ant considered itself different and subject to a different set of rules, said Mr Frank Troise, managing director and chief executive of SoHo Advisors.

"The Chinese regulators have made explicitly clear that safety comes first," he said.

"They have concluded that Ant should be subject to similar regulatory oversight (like) any financial institution. This oversight includes the amount of leverage that Ant can deploy in its lending business, which when compared with its banking peers may be seen as a potential systemic risk."

But Mr Troise said he "expects the suspension to be lifted, and the IPO to move forward with a new set of financial assumptions added into IPO disclosure documents that incorporate the regulator's new requirements"

Professor Duan Jin-Chuan from the National University of Singapore Business School said the timing of the regulatory action was a surprise and "markets will demand a revaluation to reflect new regulatory realities."

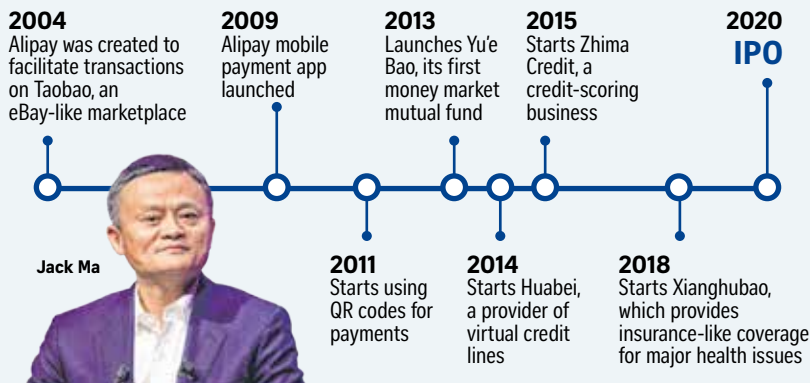
NUS Business School's Adjunct Associate Professor James Cheng noted that "at the core, it is an issue of how the entire financial sector's profit margin and risk are distributed among players." [ST](#)

Stock activity of the Alibaba Group Holding Ltd (BABA-SW) is displayed in Hong Kong on Nov 4. PHOTO: AFP



Ant's IPO in numbers

Road to IPO

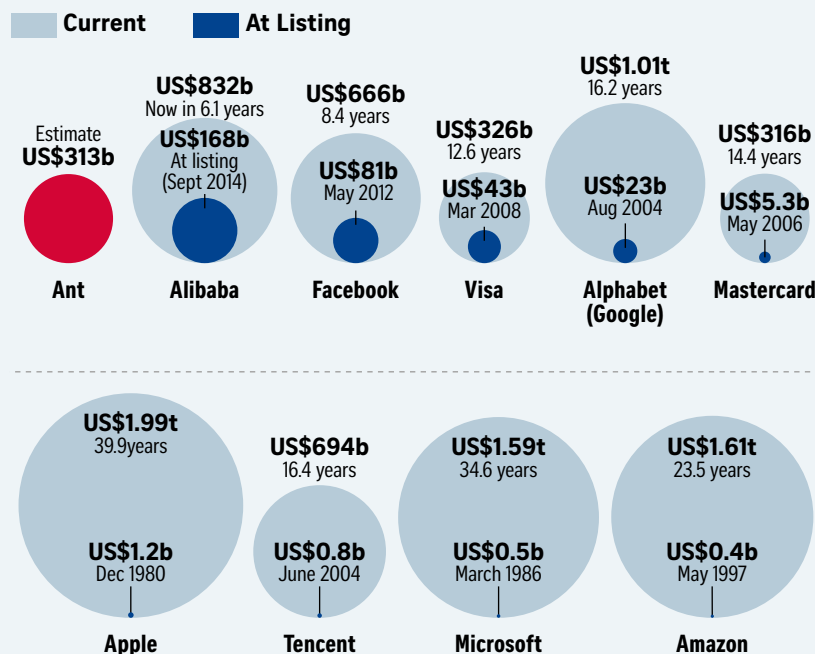


The biggest IPOs of all time

Date	Company	Total raised (US\$billion)	Listing venue
Nov 2020*	Ant	34.4 (estimate**)	Hong Kong/ Shanghai
Dec 2019	Saudi Aramco	29.4	Riyadh
Sept 2014	Alibaba	25	New York
July 2010	Agricultural Bank of China	22.1	Hong Kong/Shanghai
Oct 2006	ICBC	21.9	Hong Kong/Shanghai
Dec 2018	SoftBank Corp	21.3	Tokyo
Oct 2010	AIA	20.5	Hong Kong
March 2008	Visa	19.7	New York
Oct 1998	NTT Docomo	18.4	Tokyo
Nov 2010	General Motors	18.1	New York
Oct 1999	Enel	17.4	Milan

NOTE: *Expected listing date. **Final deal size could be increased by 15%.

Market value of the world's top tech and payments companies



Source: THE WALL STREET JOURNAL PHOTO: BLOOMBERG STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

ROYALS' ROLE IN POLITICS

Political logjam drags Malaysia's royal households into the fray

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The neutral position Sultan Abdullah Ahmad Shah had adopted is no longer an option.

MALAYSIA'S NINE ROYAL HOUSEHOLDS, WHICH are part of a unique constitutional monarchy system, have long been content with playing a passive role in upholding Malay Muslim values in the country's complex and often combustible multiracial politics.

Now, with the ethnic Malay community divided like never before, the King is being dragged into the fray to play the central role of adjudicator in a bid to resolve the country's worsening political gridlock, developments that are stirring fresh debate on the role of monarchy in society.

The King, Sultan Abdullah Ahmad Shah, has been reluctant to take on the task because any decision would be construed as taking sides in the deeply divided political landscape.

But the neutral position he had adopted when dealing with the bid by opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim to form the next government is no longer an option.

The decision by the King and his brother rulers to reject the controversial plan by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's very fragile government to declare a state of emergency, ostensibly to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, has made them direct players in the crisis.

"In unprecedented times there is a need for a referee. But the only trouble is that many politicians are not above manipulating the royal power to their advantage," noted a senior member of Datuk Seri Anwar's Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR).

Sultan Abdullah Ahmad Shah has been reluctant to take on the task because any decision would be construed as taking sides in the deeply divided political landscape.

PHOTO: EPA-EFE

The move to lean on Sultan Abdullah, who was installed as King for a five-year term in late July 2019, to resolve the current political crisis represents a major twist in the relations of Malaysia's political elite and the monarchy.

Relations between the two pillars of Malay political dominance have long been prickly, particularly during the first premiership of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, which began in 1981 and lasted 22 years. During that time, the former premier took on the sultans on three separate occasions and in each encounter secured major victories in curbing their limited powers.

The tables were turned on Dr Mahathir in March, during his second stint in office, when he abruptly resigned from the premiership following the collapse of his Pakatan Harapan coalition.

Dr Mahathir had intended for the King to allow him to constitute a so-called unity government to resolve the crisis at the time.

But the breakaway political faction from Dr Mahathir's own Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia led by Tan Sri Muhyiddin convinced the Conference of Rulers that a new premier should be elected.

Sultan Abdullah spent days meeting lawmakers and heads of political parties before he established that Mr Muhyiddin enjoyed majority support in the 222-member Parliament.

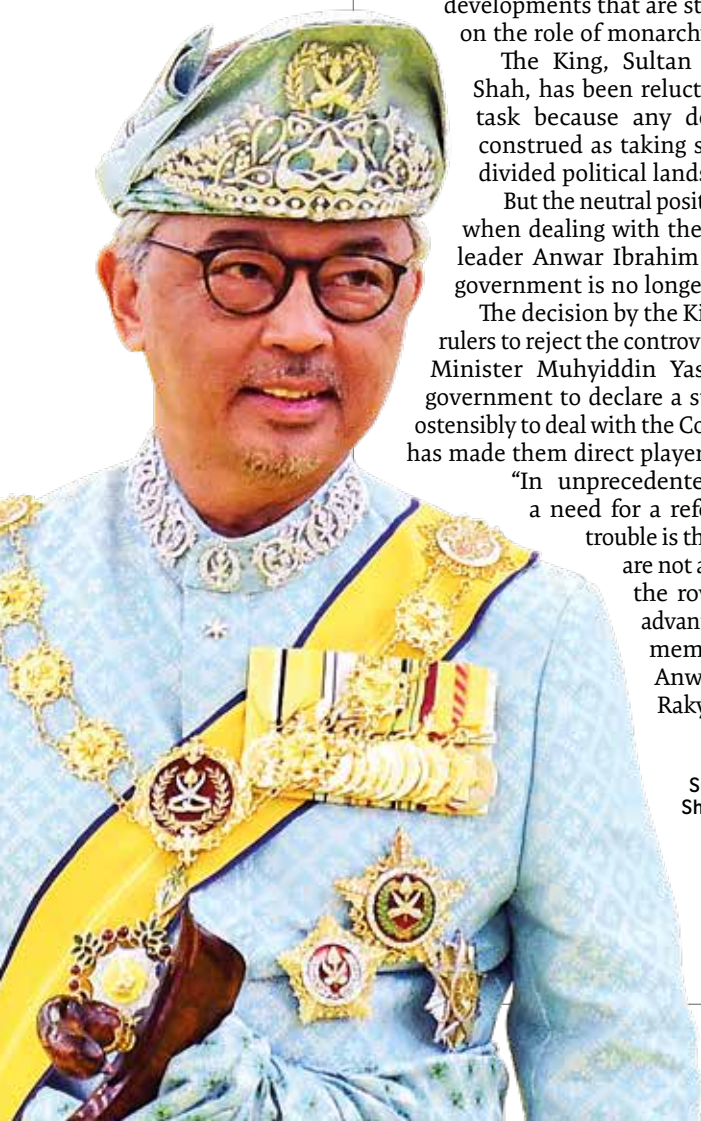
But the razor-thin majority of just two MPs that the embattled premier is widely believed to command is now in question following Mr Anwar's declaration in September that he had secured "formidable" support from a majority of MPs, including powerful factions in Umno, the largest party backing Mr Muhyiddin's Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition government.

Mr Anwar has insisted that he had provided Sultan Abdullah with documentary evidence of the support he enjoys, and his political allies have been pushing the Palace to initiate a process for the change in government.

But several lawyers contend that the King's powers are limited to initiate any leadership change.

"The King stepped in (in March) because Dr Mahathir had resigned. There needs to be a trigger for the King to intervene this time around," noted a lawyer closely aligned to former premier Najib Razak, who remains a powerful force in Umno despite being tainted by the scandal surrounding the 1MDB state investment firm.

PM Muhyiddin's move on Oct 23 to push his



proposal for emergency measures has made it more urgent for the King to deal with issues over the current government's legitimacy to rule and Mr Anwar's power bid.

The opposition leader claims that he has the backing of more than 120 elected Members of Parliament in the country's 222-member lower house.

But he has not made public a list of those supporting him, raising doubts about the claim.

Under Malaysian law, only the King can declare a state of emergency if he is satisfied there is a threat to national security. There have been four occasions since independence when a state of emergency has been declared, with the most serious in the aftermath of the bloody race riots in May 1969. Another nationwide one was declared in 1964 during the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation, after Indonesian soldiers landed on Malaysian soil.

Two other declarations were limited in nature to the states of Sarawak and Kelantan.

Malaysia's internal security situation is far from tense or menacing even though the number of Covid-19 cases have been rising steadily in recent weeks.

Political temperatures have also risen in tandem with the Covid-19 situation with the razor-

thin majority that brought Mr Muhyiddin the premiership in March increasingly in serious doubt.

Over the past seven months, the PM has dodged bids from his rivals for a motion of confidence in Parliament.

The political logjam has left Malaysia with no choice but to turn to the monarchy.

There are several options open to Sultan Abdullah.

First, he could persuade Mr Muhyiddin to step down if he is convinced that Mr Anwar's support in Parliament will lead to the formation of a stable government.

The King could also toss the issue to Parliament and request the Speaker of the Lower House to convene a special sitting to hold a confidence vote that could pave the way for a handover of power.

Alternatively, the King could push for the dissolution of Parliament and set the stage for fresh elections that must be held within 60 days, a prospect that everyone acknowledges would be a disaster against the backdrop of rising Covid-19 virus infections in Malaysia.

Sultan Abdullah and his brother rulers have to decide what, in their opinion, would be best for the country and its people. **ST**

Sultan Abdullah spent days meeting lawmakers and heads of political parties before he established that Mr Muhyiddin enjoyed majority support in the 222-member Parliament.

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Muhyiddin gets a breather – but for how long?

MALAYSIAN PRIME MINISTER MUHYIDDIN Yassin was thrown a lifeline in the early hours of Oct 27 when leaders from Umno declared that it would continue to back his Perikatan Nasional government.

But Umno sources noted that the support is conditional on concessions that the premier may be unlikely to meet, underscoring the growing view that Tan Sri Muhyiddin's grip on power is weakening.

“Muhyiddin has won some breathing space but the prospects are still uncertain, especially with the growing clarity that not all of Umno is with him,” said Mr Ibrahim Suffian, head of independent polling firm Merdeka Centre.

Mr Muhyiddin is not the only one with his political future on the line.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has also suffered a serious setback after he lost the support of his Umno allies, who had earlier pledged support for his bid to form a new government. Several of his closest supporters believe that Datuk Seri Anwar was strung along by Umno president Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who used the opposition leader to gain political leverage over Mr Muhyiddin.

“When it mattered the most, Zahid played Anwar out,” noted a close associate of Mr Anwar shortly after the Umno statement pledging support to Mr Muhyiddin was released on Oct 27 morning.

The following account, pieced together from more than a dozen interviews with government and opposition politicians, spotlights the deeply unsettled state of Malaysia's volatile politics.



The growing political paralysis is only raising the country's worrying risk profile, battered by a weak government, a recession and sharp spikes in recent weeks of Covid-19 infections.

In normal times, the decision by Malaysia's sultans to reject the controversial plan presented by Mr Muhyiddin would have set the stage for a constitutional crisis. But in these extraordinary times for Malaysian politics, key players took advantage of the palace decision to push new political realignments that threatened to hasten Mr Muhyiddin's exit.

Sultan Abdullah spent days meeting lawmakers and heads of political parties before he established that Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin enjoyed majority support in the 222-member Parliament.
PHOTO: BERNAMA

Muhyiddin has won some breathing space but the prospects are still uncertain, especially with the growing clarity that not all of Umno is with him.



— MR IBRAHIM SUFFIAN, head of independent polling firm Merdeka Centre



Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has insisted that he had provided Sultan Abdullah with documentary evidence of the support he enjoys, and his political allies have been pushing the palace to initiate a process for the change in government.
PHOTO: REUTERS

Amid the growing tension triggered by the stunning palace rebuke, backers of the premier tried to put up a bold front, stressing that Mr Muhyiddin still enjoys the backing of the rulers because the palace had endorsed his government's handling of the pandemic.

The palace's calls for politicians to stop bickering and work together to deal with the many challenges resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic have also been presented as tacit support from the sultans for the premier.

But his opponents have seized on a separate statement released by the Keeper of the Rulers' Seal Syed Danial Syed Ahmad that offered a different insight on the late October meeting among the sultans.

Tan Sri Syed Danial noted that the rulers stressed the importance of respecting the mechanism of checks and balances and the role of the King in ensuring fairness and curbing abuse of power.

"In palace-speak, this is a sharp rebuke of what they think about the emergency bid (by the government)," noted an Umno politician aligned to Zahid, adding that what is likely to resonate with the country's dominant ethnic Malay population is that the premier can no longer hide behind the palace.

The deep chasms in the Muhyiddin-led PN coalition, and within Umno, became public shortly after Mr Anwar declared in late September that he had secured a strong majority among elected MPs to form a new government and claim the premiership, a position that has eluded him since 1998.

Widely rumoured but not publicly verified was that Mr Anwar had secured the backing of lawmakers within Umno led by party president Zahid and former premier Najib Razak in his bid to wrest power from the Muhyiddin government. Documented pledges of support for the opposition leader, including one signed by Zahid and Najib, found their way into the public domain about 10 days ago, and were widely distributed through social media.

Meanwhile, Umno party leaders with key Cabinet positions in the government privately harangued Zahid to retract the letter of support, believed to have been delivered to the King, Sultan Abdullah Ahmad Shah.

Foreign Minister and Umno leader Hishammuddin Hussein vehemently objected to backing Mr Anwar, saying no to working with him or the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), which is a part of the Pakatan Harapan pact led by Mr Anwar.

Senior Umno politicians also noted that Zahid was sharply attacked by several of Mr Muhyiddin's close allies in separate closed-door meetings. One senior minister suggested that the Umno president declare publicly that the letter of support was fake, which Zahid flatly refused to do.

Zahid sought to cool rising tensions within the PN when he called for a ceasefire and stressed that Umno would support Mr Muhyiddin's government.

But that move failed to repair the growing trust deficit within the PN coalition towards the factions led by Zahid and Najib.

The Anwar-Zahid-Najib troika had spooked Mr Muhyiddin and his allies. Senior Minister Azmin Ali and Home Minister Hamzah Zainuddin pushed Mr Muhyiddin to take tough measures to quell opposition to his premiership.

It was against this backdrop that Datuk Seri Azmin and Datuk Seri Hamzah convinced Mr Muhyiddin to embrace the plan for the declaration of a state of emergency.

The rejection of the plan was a blow to Mr Muhyiddin's political credibility and it presented the opening Mr Anwar had been hoping for in his bid to wrest control of government.

It also strengthened Zahid's authority as party president, particularly against Umno leaders who are in the Muhyiddin Cabinet, such as Datuk Seri Hishammuddin, Defence Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob and Mr Khairy Jamaluddin, who is currently serving as Minister of Science Technology and Innovation.

Senior Umno leaders, including Zahid and his deputy, Mr Mohamad Hassan, snubbed an invitation from Mr Muhyiddin for a meeting of leaders of PN component parties. They instead held separate sessions with the party's other political allies to discuss whether to withdraw from PN and demand that the premier resign.


Shortly after lunch, former premier Najib, who is appealing against his conviction for graft tied to the 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB) scandal, would make public his readiness to work with Mr Anwar. In a Facebook posting, Najib said he had floated the idea of Umno working with Mr Anwar to form government but that the pact cannot include DAP.

Behind the scenes, political lieutenants of Mr Anwar and Najib were also working furiously to collect statutory declarations from Umno MPs pledging support for the opposition leader, according to Umno politicians close to Zahid and Najib. One Umno politician noted that by late Monday, both sides had collected pledges of support from more than 20 Umno lawmakers.

But Zahid, who is facing 47 charges of corruption and money laundering, was beginning to waver on his backing for Mr Anwar.

After the meeting on Oct 29 of the Umno supreme council, the party's chief policymaking body, that lasted more than four hours and chaired by Zahid, the party decided to continue backing Mr Muhyiddin, a decision that sent shockwaves to both the Anwar and Najib camps.

It is not clear what caused Zahid to change his mind.

But there is a growing consensus from politicians on both sides of the divide that this return to status quo is far from stable and Malaysia's sultans may once again be called upon to nudge the country's political elite towards finding some common ground. 

— Leslie Lopez, Regional Correspondent

Thai king in spotlight as pro-democracy protests continue

AMONG THE CORE DEMANDS OF THE THOUSANDS of pro-democracy protesters who have taken to the streets of Thailand since mid-July is one that was previously unthinkable.

They are appealing for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha and amendments to the Constitution, but it is the most recent demand that is perhaps the most significant: The protesters want the monarchy to be reformed and the powers of 68-year-old King Maha Vajiralongkorn curbed.

By openly challenging the monarch, who was formally crowned last year, the protesters have broken a taboo in a kingdom with one of the strictest lese majeste laws in the world – insulting the royal family can carry a jail term of up to 15 years.

“With the genie out of the bottle, it could lead to more oversight and limits on the institution’s power, though there is strong objection and pushback from staunch royalists, including the Prime Minister,” says Mr Jay Harriman, senior director at strategic advisory firm Bower Group Asia, noting that recent protests are the largest since the 2014 coup where the Thai military led by former junta leader, Mr Prayut, seized power.

The late King Bhumibol Adulyadej was revered as a demigod and had great influence within Thai society.

Since ascending the throne in 2016, months after the death of his father, King Bhumibol, King Vajiralongkorn has sought to increase his direct control over the country’s institutions and public assets.

King Vajiralongkorn has consolidated his power by taking personal control of the multibillion-dollar assets of the Crown Property Bureau and two army units.

He also directed the government to rewrite parts of the Constitution that touched on the role of the king, including the need to appoint a regent in the king’s absence.

This comes as foreign news outlets have put out numerous reports about the King’s absence from Thailand. He spends most of his time abroad, especially in Germany, where he keeps a home.

Some of the monarch’s moves have been seen as controversial by critics as, officially, Thailand is a constitutional monarchy and the royals are supposed to be politically neutral or above politics.

But protesters have accused the monarchy of enabling years of military domination and wanted to curb the King’s powers.

With strong calls for reform of monarchy, analysts say it will be difficult for King Vajiralongkorn to play a mediating role in the current turmoil



STUDENT SENTIMENTS

The current student-led movement, comprising mostly those from Generation Z and late millennials, differs from protests of previous times, analysts tell The Straits Times.

Previous demonstrations were led by opposition politicians, activists and farmers and rarely touched on the state or the role of the royal institution, says Dr Ayako Toyama from the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Tsukuba in Japan.

“(This time), most of the participants are young students,” she says. “Students’ reform demands are more pure and idealistic than past demonstrations’, which makes it difficult for governments to deny demonstrations.

“This is the first time that such a straightforward reference has been made to royal reform, and many adults are surprised.”

Dr Toyama also says this segment of the population might be less reverent towards the monarchy and military. Frustration may be building as there could be perceptions that the pro-military government has failed to effectively address the economic problems associated with the coronavirus pandemic.

Not exempt from the Covid-19 shocks plaguing economies worldwide, Thailand’s economy – South-east Asia’s second largest – is reportedly expected to shrink a record 7 per cent-plus this year.

The protests are also about the students’ lost future, says Dr Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a political

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Regional
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Students' reform demands are more pure and idealistic than past demonstrations, which makes it difficult for governments to deny demonstrations. This is the first time that such a straightforward reference has been made to royal reform, and many adults are surprised.



– DR AYAKO TOYAMA, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Tsukuba

scientist from Chulalongkorn University in Thailand.

In September, he wrote in a Straits Times opinion piece that “the student generation is now challenging the status quo right down to its foundations, demanding reforms even of the once-untouchable monarchy to become more transparent and accountable, and for the entire political system to be answerable to the popular will”

SPEAKING FRANKLY

The students also appear to be unafraid of the lese majeste laws, says Professor James Chin, director of the Asia Institute at the University of Tasmania.

“In terms of the impact on the monarchy, it shows that younger people have less respect for (it).”

In August, during a protest gathering, human rights lawyer Arnon Nampa, 36, who has been at the forefront of the movement, made unprecedented frank and public comments calling for reform of the monarchy, encouraging others to speak “frankly” about the topic.

With such strong calls, analysts agree that it will be difficult for King Vajiralongkorn to play a mediating role in the current turmoil as his father, King Bhumibol, did during previous crises.

This is because the royal institution has become a direct target of the protesters' demands, says Bower Group Asia's Mr Harriman.

“We're unlikely to see a similar scene as in 1992 when, on national TV, the King ended the political crisis by telling opposing leaders, prostrating on the ground, to bring an end to their violence,” he says in reference to King Bhumibol, who helped mediate

when government forces and pro-democracy protesters clashed.

On that May 20 night, King Bhumibol appeared on national broadcasts and interceded between the leaders of the two rival groups who were both seated at his feet, eventually calming the tense situation.

Referring to the current King, Dr Paul Chambers of Naresuan University's Centre of Asean Community Studies says: “If he wants to preserve the power of monarchy in Thailand, it might help if he involves himself in the problems of Thailand more frequently and visibly, using his father as a model.”

TENSIONS ESCALATING

While the protests have been largely peaceful, tensions have escalated following the arrests of key protest leaders as well as the declaration of a state of “serious emergency” in Bangkok during which water cannons were used to disperse demonstrators.

Attempts were made to shut down media outlets that appeared sympathetic to protesters, as well as restrict the messaging app Telegram used by them.

However, protesters have continued to rally in Bangkok and across Thailand, defying restrictions that ban public gatherings of five or more people, and which give security forces broader powers.

But even with pressure mounting to curb the monarch's influence, University of Tasmania's Prof Chin says it is unlikely that the King will agree to the demands for change.

He says: “(He) will not give in because he just recently consolidated his power, so he won't accept any moves to accede to constitutional amendments.”

King Vajiralongkorn has so far made no direct comment on the three months of protests, but on Oct 16 he appeared on state television, saying the country needed people who loved the monarchy.

Thai royalists have also taken to the streets and social media in attempts to counter the anti-monarchy protesters.

Meanwhile, Mr Prayut has said he will not resign and, on Oct 22, the government ordered the removal of emergency measures put in place a week earlier.

The Thai Parliament will also hold a special session to discuss the demands of pro-democracy protesters. The two-day sitting is expected to take place tomorrow.

Chulalongkorn University's Dr Thitinan tells The Sunday Times that the move might be a “time-buying tactic” and that the session is unlikely to achieve much as a third of Parliament is still comprised of the military Senate.

Of the various demands, the resignation of the Prime Minister seems the most “workable”, although it is already a huge demand, says Dr Thitinan, adding: “Unless Prayut resigns, no amount of change is likely to satisfy the student-led protest movement.”

“From the government's side, there will be reluctance to give in to any demand, because this will lead to a slippery slope. It's a face-off to see who is going to budge first.” **ST**

10 DEMANDS TO REFORM THE MONARCHY

One of the student groups involved in Thailand's pro-democracy protests, United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, has issued 10 demands relating to monarchy reform. These are:

1. Revoke Article 6 of the Constitution that does not allow anyone to make any accusation against the king. And add an article to allow Parliament to examine the wrongdoing of the king.
2. Revoke Article 112 of the Criminal Code, the lese majeste law that forbids insult of the monarchy. Allow the people to exercise freedom of expression about the monarchy and give an amnesty to all those prosecuted for criticising the monarchy.
3. Revoke the Crown Property Act of 2018 and make a clear division between the king's personal assets and the assets of the king under the control of the Ministry of Finance.
4. Reduce the amount of the national budget allocated to the king to be in line with the economic conditions of the country.
5. Abolish the Royal Offices. Units with a clear duty, for example, the Royal Security Command, should be transferred and placed under other agencies. Unnecessary units, such as the Privy Council, should be disbanded.
6. Cease all giving and receiving of donations by royal charity funds in order for all of the assets of the monarchy to be auditable.
7. Cease the exercise of royal prerogative over expression of political opinions in public.
8. Cease all public relations and education that excessively glorify the monarchy.
9. Search for the facts about the murder of those who criticised or had some kind of relation with the monarchy.
10. The king must not endorse any further coups.

Amending Thai Constitution may be only way to reach political resolution

THAILAND'S YOUTHFUL ANTI-GOVERNMENT protesters outsmarted police on Oct 16 evening by switching their gathering point at the last minute.

In the end, though, the police got the last laugh when they cleared Bangkok's Pathumwan intersection by blasting protesters with stinging jets of water and sending in officers with riot gear to push back crowds of umbrella-toting demonstrators.

This marked an escalation of the student-led protest movement that was erstwhile on a slow burn.

Analysts say this crackdown may slow the protest movement, which has both challenged the military-led government as well as raised uncomfortable questions about the role of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, but will also likely harden the resolve of protesters and narrow the chances of a political resolution.

"This will generate fear," said Dr Titipol Phakdeewanich, the dean of Ubon Ratchathani University's political science faculty. "It might work to slow down the movement, but I don't think it will stop."

Dr Stithorn Thananithichot, a political scientist at King Prajadhipok's Institute, expects the police action to diminish the legitimacy of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's government, even though he will be able to stay on by dint of the majority held by his coalition.

The former coup leader, trying to save a tourism-dependent economy sinking from border closures due to the coronavirus pandemic, took a hardline stance earlier when he warned people not to violate the law.

It was a law enacted by the government overnight in Bangkok, via a declaration of "serious emergency", which forbade gatherings of five or more people and gave security officers broad powers to search and detain individuals, as well as censor news.

In a sense, said Dr Stithorn, the police were forced to act on protesters. "They have no choice because it says in the emergency law that this is their duty."

Government spokesman Anucha Burapachaisri, quoting Mr Prayut, said the enforcement was in line with international conventions and necessary to forestall interference from third parties trying to instigate violence.

King Vajiralongkorn, who has not publicly commented directly on the protests, appeared on television saying "the country needs people who love the country and love the monarchy."



These were pre-recorded comments from an event, when he was addressing a group of former communists in northern Thailand.

"All your experience and the things that you've done – you can teach the new generation of your experience. This will be greatly useful," he told them, according to a Reuters report.

Observers suggested that such comments may rouse more royalists to confront the protesters, who have been openly calling for the King, who controls two army units, to trim his expenditure as well as power, in keeping with Thailand's status as a constitutional monarchy.


This uneasy possibility was sighted, when hardcore royalist figures such as former monk Suwit Thongprasert and fiery former lawmaker Suthep Thaugsuban mustered supporters along the route where the King's convoy was due to pass protesters who had vowed to flash a three-finger salute at the monarch in defiance.

Mr Harrison Cheng, the Singapore-based associate director of Control Risks consultancy, said in an analysis note: "Rogue elements of the 'yellow shirt' movement could replicate their tactics of old, including staging security incidents at protest sites with the aim of creating more public disorder and giving the police and military a pretext to intervene."

He added: "As risks of street violence grow, so will the potential for the reimposition of military rule in the country."

On Oct 17, a call by protesters to muster supporters at skytrain stations prompted the authorities to shut down the entire electric rail network serving central Bangkok.

With positions hardening on both sides, the only way out would be to start the process of amending the military-backed Constitution – one of the demands made by protesters.

"In the end, the government has to open the door for some resolution and to make some changes to the Constitution," said Dr Stithorn. It may be the only way to keep the government and monarchy secure, he said. 

A protester pushing against police officers during an anti-government demonstration, in Bangkok on Oct 16.

PHOTO: REUTERS

TAN HUI YEE

Indochina Bureau Chief



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As risks of street violence grow, so will the potential for the reimposition of military rule in the country.



– **HARRISON CHENG**, associate director of Control Risks consultancy

**NOTE FROM THE
 EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

We have thought long and hard about how you choose to read ST, when and where, and have strived to meet these needs. Our role, as always, remains to tell the stories of our times, reliably and credibly, aiming always to be timely, trusted and true.

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THE STRAITS TIMES MULTIMEDIA,

Dear ST Reader,

On July 15, 1845, the first edition of The Straits Times hit the news-stands here in Singapore.

Today, 175 years later, more people than ever before are reading ST, in many more ways – not just in print, but also online, on your phones, desktops, tablets, through our website and app, engaging with our correspondents through video, on the radio, our podcasts and events.

Happily, many of these readers are younger ones too, with ST dominating audience share among younger segments, as several recent surveys have shown.

To build on this, we have redesigned all our products across platforms, taking a content-driven approach, rather than focusing only on aesthetic changes, for this revamp.

We have thought long and hard about how you choose to read ST, when and where, and have strived to meet these needs.

Our role, as always, remains to tell the stories of our times, reliably and credibly, aiming always to be timely, trusted and true.

We will play to the respective strengths of each platform, bringing these stories to life in words, pictures, videos, interactive graphics, podcasts, on the radio, newsletters and events.

So popular features, like Lunch with Sumiko, will come not only as long reads, but also as videos and podcasts.

Our Life correspondents, including Food writers Tan Hsueh Yun and Wong Ah Yoke, will offer their top picks of where to eat, places to hang out or movies to watch, in a Life Weekend edition on Fridays.

They will also go on air, on our regular show, The Big Story, live on our website, Facebook and YouTube on Thursday evenings. In addition to The Big Story, which runs daily at 5.30pm, we have added a new daily round-up, ST News Night at 9pm, while our new ST Live, will bring you breaking news stories as they happen from the ground, pushed to alert you on your app.

Among the changes in this revamp you will find:

- **Something old:** Our longstanding commitment to striving to be accurate, balanced and fair remains unchanged, with respected correspondents and columnists, in Singapore and around the world. We remain focused on covering comprehensively and authoritatively the key stories related to Singapore, Asia, climate change as well as the changes in our society brought on by sweeping technological change, and the current Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Something new:** There are new columns and features, new forms of storytelling, such as the Discover section on our website and app.

- **Much more visual:** More photo essays, news and feature videos, interactive graphics, and online programming, including podcasts.
- **A lot more views:** Your weekend now starts on Saturday, and we will give you much to ponder in a beefed up News Focus section. This includes Asian Insider features by our correspondents abroad, as well as our Insight commentaries. On Sundays, we will have a new Views section, with thoughtful pieces by some of our best writers, such as Rohit Brijnath and Olivia Ho.

In making these changes, we have taken on board feedback from readers and stakeholders. Yes, we heard the



VIEWS ON SUNDAY

A new Views section featuring Lunch with Sumiko and Wong Kim Hoh Meets, plus columns by Rohit Brijnath, Olivia Ho and others.



Olivia Ho



Wong Ah Yoke



AS YOU LIKE IT



call for a larger font size in print, as you can see.
We won't stop here and will keep striving to improve to serve you better. So please send us your thoughts and feedback.

Thank you for reading The Straits Times.

Warren Fernandez

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Tan Hsueh Yun



YOUR WORLD, EXPLAINED

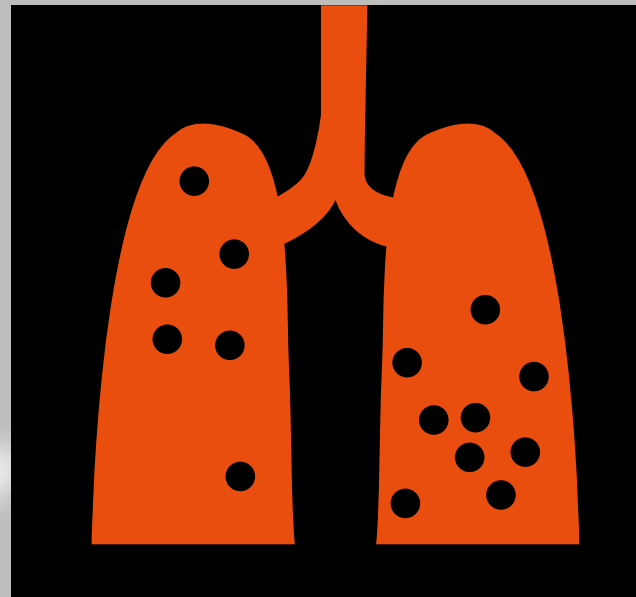
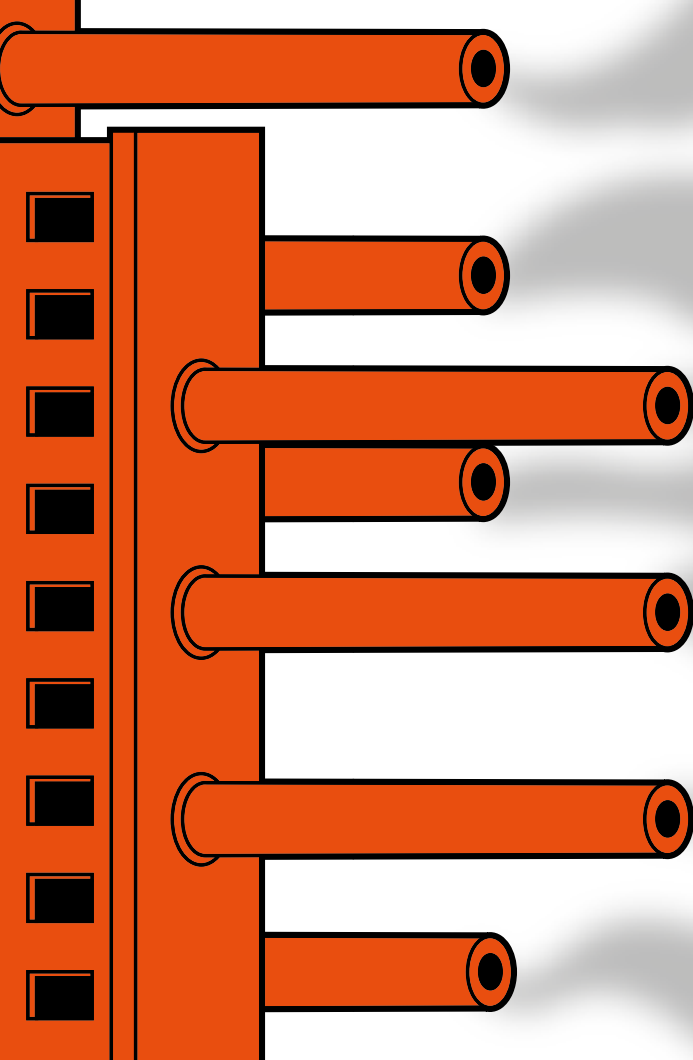
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STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS



ST ILLUSTRATION: PRUDENCIO MIEL JR

Climate Change

East Asia's climate pledges

TAN DAWN WEI
China Bureau Chief



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Three of East Asia's major economies are pledging to go carbon-neutral by 2050 and 2060, but critics have raised doubts about the viability of targets that remain years in the future.

QINGXIA, A VILLAGE OF 1,500 IN THE INDUSTRIAL city of Zhuzhou in Hunan province, has the ignominy of being one of hundreds of "cancer villages" in China.

As much as 10 per cent of its population suffer from cancer, a startling number when put against the national average of 1 per cent.

As industrial plants dumped all manner of harmful chemicals into rivers or produced large amounts of

pollutants within the facilities themselves, people who lived near them or worked in the factories fell sick. Chinese media began identifying these cancer villages as early as 1998, but the government did not acknowledge them until seven years ago.

Between 2000 and 2009, as many as 186 such villages were identified, making up half of all cancer villages. There could be more, as pollutants in the body take an average of two decades to turn cancerous.

These cancer villages epitomise the devastation that nationwide pollution has wreaked on people's health in China, says global health expert Huang Yanzhong, a crisis that could be modern China's Achilles heel.

THE COSTS

In his new book, *Toxic Politics: China's Environmental Health Crisis And Its Challenge To The Chinese State*, Dr Huang, a senior fellow for global

health at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City, argues that air, water and soil pollution not only afflict the Chinese with more diseases and health problems than previously thought, but they are also exacting a significant toll on the country's economy and polity while crimping its ascendance in the world.

"If you look at the damage associated with environmental pollution, it was estimated to have cost up to 18 per cent of China's GDP (gross domestic product) in 2013. So, whether you like it or not, you can't deny the economic cost of pollution. And if you look at its sociopolitical implications, the stakes become even higher," Dr Huang tells The Straits Times in an interview.

China's ability to project its power internationally is also constrained by its environmental crisis at home; the obstacles to overcoming it are much more daunting than anywhere else.

As many as 80 per cent of Chinese citizens are regularly exposed to pollution levels much higher than those considered safe by the US Environmental Protection Agency, America-based non-profit organisation Berkeley Earth found in 2015.

In a study published in August in the scientific journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Chinese researchers said they found evidence that as many as 30.8 million people could have died prematurely in China between 2000 and 2016 from breathing in polluted air.

While both domestic and international attention has largely been on bad air, water and soil contamination – which has until recent years been under the radar – is wreaking as much havoc on people's lives.

The Chinese authorities released in 2014 its first nationwide soil survey, which showed that 16 per cent of the country's soil was contaminated, including nearly 20 per cent of farmland, which was found to be laced with heavy metals such as cadmium.

The situation was so grim over "cadmium rice" that state media began advising people to diversify their diet. It wasn't until 2018 that the country passed its first comprehensive soil pollution prevention and control law. And, even as there are massive efforts



Smoke belching from a coal-fueled power station near Datong, in China's northern Shanxi province. PHOTO: AFP

to clean up China's waterways, about 7 per cent of its water is still unfit for use in either agriculture or industry, said the Environment Ministry in 2018.

ACTION PLANS

The quest for economic growth has come at the great expense of China's environment and the health of its people. Yet the government has been successful in managing people's expectations.

In January 2013, just as the Chinese government began making public the air quality index (AQI) that measures fine particulate matter, PM2.5, for many cities, the capital Beijing faced an "airpocalypse" when AQI readings hit nearly 1,000 one day – over 300 is already considered "hazardous" and could trigger the authorities to take emergency action.

The record levels of pollution led to an outpouring of anger, finally inducing the government to take action. It released the first Air Pollution Action Plan in September that year, setting out targets to improve air quality by reducing PM2.5 levels.

Since then, PM2.5 levels have plunged by as much as 40 per cent, although ground-level ozone – a key focus in a 2017 updated action plan – spiked as the decrease in PM2.5 sped up ozone production, according to a Harvard University study published early last year.

Still, with more visible blue-sky days and a concerted propaganda effort to highlight its achievements, Beijing has successfully controlled the narrative – and public opinion – on its war on pollution.

A WHO report showed that in 2016, the annual median exposure to ambient PM2.5 in China was 48.8µg/m³, nearly five times higher than the global health body's recommendation.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY

As the regional authorities accelerate economic activity in their patch, highly polluting coal and steel production is increasing.

Beijing has already committed to ramping up infrastructure building across the country to pull it out of the doldrums, pushing up the demand for steel. It has also approved plans for new coal power plant capacity at a record rate since 2015, despite an effort to reduce its dependence on this dirty energy source. More than half the country's energy mix still comes from coal, of which China is the top producer and consumer.

Dr Huang blames China's environmental conundrum on a flawed political system.



Garbage floating beside garbage-collecting boats on the bank of Yangtze River in Yungang county, in southwestern China's Chongqing province. PHOTO: AFP

The Chinese authorities released in 2014 its first nationwide soil survey, which showed that 16 per cent of the country's soil was contaminated, including nearly 20 per cent of farmland, which was found to be laced with heavy metals such as cadmium.



“The problem is with policy implementation, which continues to heavily rely on mobilisation campaigns,” says Dr Huang, who in 2012 authored *Governing Health In Contemporary China*, a book on the political and policy dynamics of health governance in post-Mao China. The root cause of the problem is performance-based legitimacy. The Chinese Communist Party has to continue to deliver goods and services to the Chinese people at a time when the gap between people’s expectations and the capacity to deliver them is widening.”

Hence, there is an urgency to promote economic growth and stabilise employment, which have strong implications for the country’s sociopolitical stability.

CARBON NEUTRALITY

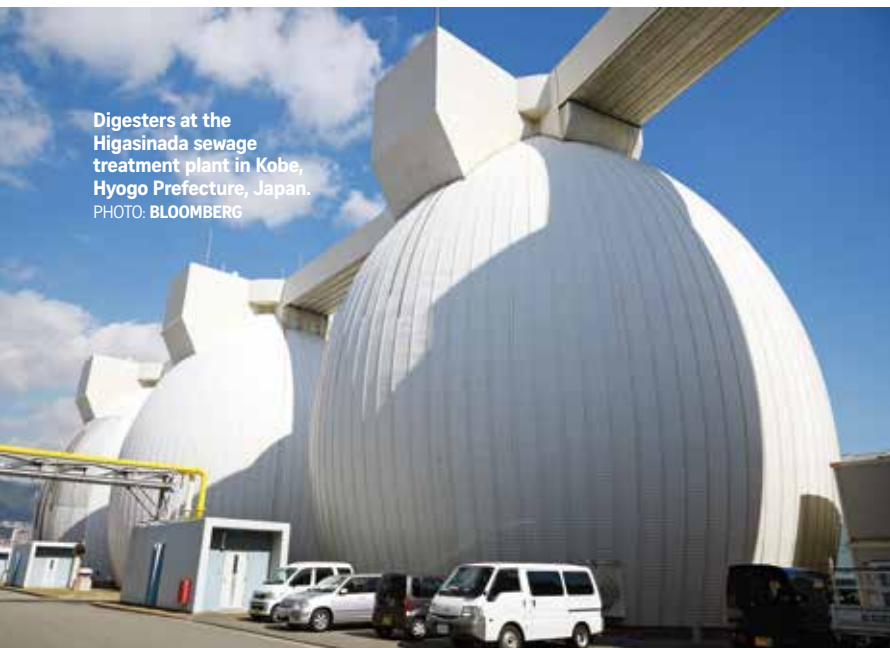
In September, Mr Xi made a bold promise that his country – the world’s biggest polluter – would be

carbon neutral by 2060.

If China doesn’t change its policy implementation model, Dr Huang says he is not confident carbon neutrality can happen in 40 years.

Achieving this daunting goal will require revolutionising its economy and dramatically transforming its energy mix, experts have pointed out. It would mean forgoing coal for electricity and significantly boosting nuclear and renewable power generation. Coal still accounts for 58 per cent of the country’s total energy consumption, and 66 per cent of its electricity generation.

Ultimately, China’s environmental crisis is multifaceted and complicated and would require a multi-sectoral approach involving coordination among various government entities and public participation, all working to achieve common goals, rather than its usual top-down approach. **ST**



Digesters at the Higasinada sewage treatment plant in Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture, Japan.
PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

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Japan Correspondent



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Japan’s net-zero carbon pledge hailed, but questions remain over coal

WHILE SCANT ON DETAIL, JAPANESE PRIME Minister Yoshihide Suga’s statement of intent to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 has been hailed by green activists, progressive businesses and the international community.

Vowing to build a “virtuous circle of environment

and economic growth”, Prime Minister Suga had said in his debut policy speech to the Diet on Oct 26: “Responding to climate change should no longer be seen as a constraint on economic growth.”

Dr Takeshi Kuramochi, a climate policy researcher at the New Climate Institute in Germany, told *The Straits Times* that behind the pledge is a recognition that coal energy, which Japan has long held firmly onto, is fast losing its competitiveness to renewable energy or low-carbon alternatives such as hydrogen.

Noting that Japan is still building coal plants domestically, he added: “To achieve the net-zero emissions target by 2050, Japan needs to at least domestically go well beyond what has been committed and advanced so far.”

The push comes amid international pressure for Japan, the world’s fifth largest carbon emitter, to make a more explicit commitment to fight global warming, above and beyond its lukewarm pledges thus far. It was twice awarded the satirical “Fossil Award” at the COP25 climate change conference in Madrid last year for its refusal to give up coal.

Mr Suga’s pledge marks a significant shift from Japan’s previous goal to achieve an 80 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. He cited innovations such as next-generation solar cells and carbon recycling to help Japan reach the goal.

The national push comes as several Japanese sectors, including automotive and steel, have lagged behind their international peers in developing environmentally friendly policies.

“This stronger commitment to reach carbon-neutrality will offer Japan’s alternatively fuelled vehicle segment – electric and hydrogen-powered vehicles – a significant boost over the coming years, especially as Japan is lagging behind other Asian peers, such as China, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea,” Fitch Solutions said in a research note.

Mr Suga’s pledge was also welcomed by the Japan Climate Leaders Partnership, a coalition of more than 150 companies including Fujitsu, Kikkoman,

real estate developer Mitsui Fudosan, Takashimaya and pharmaceutical firm Takeda.

The coalition said that Japanese advanced technological development puts it in good stead to build a decarbonised society that can “not only help avert climate crisis but also revitalise the country’s economy and strengthen (its) international competitiveness”.

It warned that Japanese companies face the risk of being shut out from global supply chains.

To achieve the net-zero carbon emissions goal,

the coalition called on the government to remove its cap on the investment of new energy resources – labelled the “national burden” and comprising costs to manage grid stability – so as to promote economies of scale for renewable energy sources.

With coal power plants still under construction even as inefficient old plants are being phased out, the group also urged the government to fully decarbonise and develop a new energy mix “without factoring in new coal power capacity”. [ST](#)

South Korea pledges carbon neutrality by 2050

SOUTH KOREAN PRESIDENT MOON JAE-IN HAS vowed to make his country carbon-neutral by 2050, in line with recent pledges by major economies including China and Japan to fight against climate change.

“Together with global communities, the government will actively tackle climate change, and move towards the goal of carbon neutrality by 2050,” he said during a budget speech. “Transitioning from coal to renewable energy, the government will create new markets, industries and jobs.”

Already adopted by the European Union, the 2050 goal was first raised in South Korea in March this year as part of the ruling Democratic Party’s (DP) green manifesto ahead of elections, which the party won in a landslide.

While Mr Moon announced a Green New Deal in July to invest 114 trillion won (\$137 billion) in green jobs, renewable energy, electric cars and energy-saving buildings, as part of a post-pandemic economic recovery package, he stopped short of backing net-zero emissions.

His endorsement finally came two days after Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga pledged to cut carbon emissions to net-zero by 2050, and a month after Chinese President Xi Jinping set a 2060 target for carbon neutrality.

Mr Moon’s declaration, made amid mounting pressure on South Korea to stop investing in coal power plants overseas, was welcomed by environmentalists, climate-conscious investor groups and the United Nations.

South Korea, the world’s seventh-biggest carbon emitter according to the World Bank, has long been labelled a climate villain for being the third-largest coal financier, after China and Japan.

State-owned Korea Electric Power Corporation and conglomerate Samsung’s construction arm Samsung C&T were heavily criticised earlier for investing in the Vung Ang 2 coal power plant in Vietnam.

Mr Kim Joo-jin, managing director of non-

governmental group Solutions for Our Climate, said South Korea is “finally one step closer to aligning itself with the reduction pathway compatible with Paris Agreement goals”.

But he pointed out that there is “much to be done to make this declaration actually meaningful”, such as enhancing South Korea’s 2030 emissions reduction target, making a clear road map to phase out coal by 2030, and ending coal financing.

South Korea now has 60 coal plants generating about 40 per cent of its electricity. Four have been shut down, and six more will be closed by 2022, as the power grid shifts towards renewable energy.

By 2034, South Korea should have only 30 coal plants left.

Mr Moon’s 2050 target will be welcomed by investors who increasingly want to deploy funds into markets that are reducing climate risk, said Ms Rebecca Mikula-Wright, executive director of Asia Investor Group on Climate Change.

“The three largest economies in East Asia now have clear commitments to net zero emissions by or near mid-century,” she said. “This is a powerful market signal that should help encourage other Asian nations to follow suit and send a strong message to carbon-intensive trade partners further afield that the region is moving to decarbonise.” [ST](#)



File photo of Greenpeace activists on a Stop Coal Financing campaign in Seoul. South Korea should have only 30 coal plants left by 2034. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

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At the 5th Asean Ministerial Conference on Cybersecurity, Singapore's Communications and Information Minister and Minister-in-Charge of Cybersecurity, Mr S Iswaran spoke about Singapore's readiness to work with Asean partners to safeguard our cyberspace.
PHOTO: SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL CYBER WEEK

Contributed Content

Singapore to work with UN to help nations implement norms for responsible cyber behaviour

WITH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC DISRUPTING normal life, this year's Singapore International Cyber Week (SICW), the region's most established cybersecurity event, was held in a hybrid physical-virtual format. Most of the tracks were held online, with selected events, like the Opening Ceremony, organised at Marina Bay Sands under strict social distancing guidelines. The event brought together political leaders, policymakers and thought leaders from around the world to discuss major cybersecurity related issues and geopolitical challenges related to them. 138 speakers from across governments, industry and academia participated in the event, with more than 6,000 public and private sector attendees from 60 countries around the world.

Setting the tone for SICW 2020 with his keynote address, Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said: "We are not only in the midst of a global pandemic; we are also at the centre of a digital revolution, one that would fundamentally change societies and economies around the world."

DPM Heng noted that there are challenges to digitalisation that need to be addressed early, such as the ethical use of technology, user privacy and a growing digital divide. DPM Heng reinforced the need to strengthen cooperation between countries, businesses and people. He also announced the launch of the Safer Cyberspace Masterplan, the Government's blueprint to create a safer cyberspace in Singapore.

One of the highlights of this year's conference was an agreement between Singapore and the United Nations (UN) to develop a norms implementation checklist, which comprises a series of steps that countries need to take in order to implement a set of cybersecurity norms for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace.

Speaking at the SICW, Izumi Nakamitsu, UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs said the checklist would assist countries in the implementation of the 11 voluntary, non-binding norms of responsible state behaviour crafted by the 2015 UN Group of Governmental Experts (UNGGE) and adopted by consensus at the UN General Assembly.

The checklist will enable countries to take steps in contributing to a stable and secure, trusted and interoperable global cyberspace. This will be facilitated through workshops carried out through the Asean-Singapore Cybersecurity Centre of Excellence under the auspices of the UN-Singapore Cyber Programme (UNSCP).

She added that the UN considers Singapore to be a global leader in the field of cybersecurity and the country is playing a key role on the world stage in terms of fostering stable and peaceful cyberspace. The UN Office for Disarmament Affairs has been collaborating with the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore (CSA) since 2018 under the UNSCP.

Speaking at the SICW 2020 Joint Press Conference



with Ms Nakamitsu, Singapore's Communications and Information Minister and Minister-in-Charge of Cybersecurity, Mr S Iswaran, said the checklist builds on a system developed by Asean last year to implement the norms. Asean will share its experience with the UN so that other countries, especially developing nations, can identify the steps they need to take to implement the norms, such as putting in place legal frameworks and building up sharing networks.

Mr Iswaran said the digital economy, as well as cyber threats, are borderless and there is thus a need for a multilateral effort to deal with the challenge.

This is all part of a larger effort to ensure that the digital commons remains safe, secure and interoperable, "so that we can all benefit from the opportunities that it has to offer", he added.

According to Ms Nakamitsu, international cooperation and capacity-building is a key element to ensure cybersecurity for all. "The development of regional approaches to capacity-building would be beneficial, as they could take into account specific cultural, geographic, political, economic or social aspects and allow a tailored approach," she added.

Noting that Asean's digital economy is expected to increase from about US\$31 billion (S\$42 billion) in 2015 to nearly US\$200 billion by 2025 – a six-fold increase in 10 years – Mr Iswaran said "Singapore stands ready to work with all our Asean partners and together, our people and businesses can thrive in a safe digital future".

He added that from his discussion with his counterparts at this year's Asean Ministerial Conference on Cybersecurity (AMCC), it is clear that Asean is eager to capitalise on this digital opportunity and is well-positioned to do so. "Singapore and Asean member states reiterated our collective commitment to take practical steps to enhance the cybersecurity of our region, in particular, the urgent need to protect national and cross-border Critical Information Infrastructure (CII) that serves as the backbone for regional communications trade, transportation, and logistics links," Mr Iswaran said.

As a part of Singapore's ongoing efforts to safeguard cyberspace, Mr Iswaran launched a new Cybersecurity Labelling Scheme to indicate the cybersecurity levels of Internet of Things (IoT) devices, at the AMCC.

The Scheme establishes cybersecurity rating levels for smart devices and is meant to guide consumers into making informed choices and encourage manufacturers to make safer products.

Relating to this labelling system, the Minister added that CSA will work with Asean member states and other international partners to establish mutual recognition arrangements.

Mr Iswaran also announced measures to ramp up Singapore's cybersecurity in Operational Technology (OT) systems, including those in the energy, water, and transport sectors. The CSA will establish an OT Cybersecurity Expert Panel (OTCEP) comprising internationally renowned practitioners, to advise




government agencies and stakeholders on strategies to enhance the resilience of Singapore's OT systems, he said.

Speaking at the International IoT Security Roundtable 2020, Dr Janil Puthuchear, Senior Minister of State (SMS), Ministry of Communications and Information, and SMS-in-Charge of Cybersecurity, highlighted that even as we tackle the cyber challenges of today, it is important to prepare for the cyber threats of tomorrow. With emerging technologies such as quantum computing, research and innovation are pivotal in extending our cybersecurity capabilities in areas of strategic importance. He announced that CSA is working with Tel Aviv University to launch a second joint grant call in late 2020, under the ambit of the National Cybersecurity Research and Development (R&D) programme. The call will seed research collaboration efforts on challenging areas in cybersecurity, including the Security of Smart Cities and IoT.

Giving his reaction as a private sector representative at the conference, Mr Eric Hoh, APAC President of cybersecurity company FireEye said cyber resilience takes on a whole new meaning in smart nations like Singapore.

"SICW 2020 underscores this and calls out the importance of collaboration, especially in the wake of the global Covid-19 pandemic. We are continuing to see new threats emerge, more incidents of cyber espionage and intrusions, and cyber attackers relentless in their pursuit of monetary gains," he said and added that the stakes are high – governments, policymakers, and industry partners need to cooperate to "prevent the balkanisation of the Internet and find practical ways to pivot forward in this new normal".

Summing up the significance of this year's SICW, Mr David Koh, Chief Executive of CSA, said, "Digitalisation has accelerated because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has sparked innovation and boosted the growth of the digital economy. Cybersecurity is now more important than ever. With all stakeholders – our international partners, the cybersecurity sector, the ICT industry, enterprises and users – working together, the economy can harness the full potential of technology to create good jobs and new opportunities." 

Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat announcing the launch of the Safer Cyberspace Masterplan in his keynote address at the opening of SICW 2020.

PHOTO: SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL CYBER WEEK

Quad gets China's attention

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Reports suggesting that the Quad has lost its fizzles may be vastly exaggerated

SHORTLY AFTER THE QUADRILATERAL SECURITY Dialogue that groups the United States, Japan, Australia and India was revived in November 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was asked about the development at a press conference held on the sidelines of the National People's Congress.

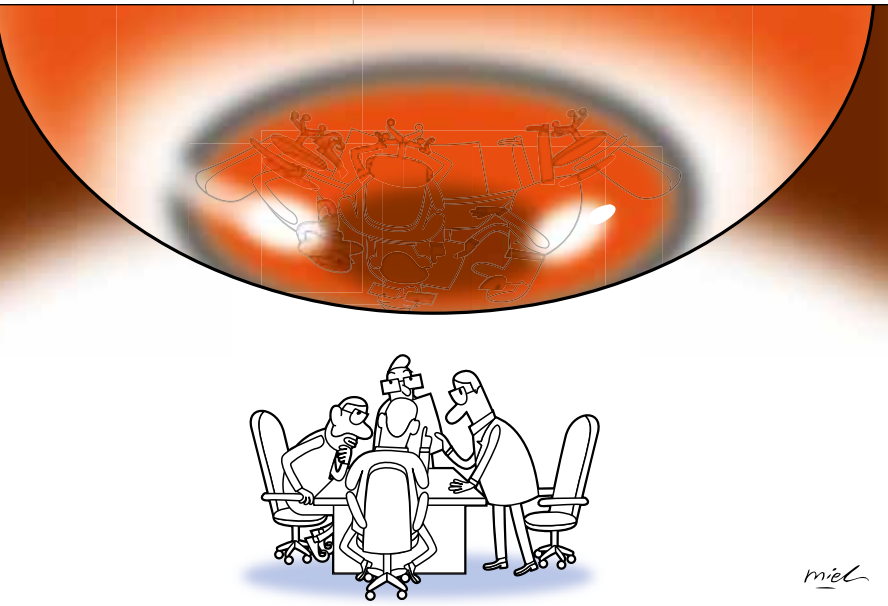
Mr Wang's response at the time was that there was no shortage of headline-grabbing ideas and the Quad was one such. It would be "like the foam on the sea... (to) get attention but will soon dissipate", was his assessment then.

Prior to the meeting of Quad foreign ministers in Tokyo in early October, only the second time the group had met formally at this level, China's Global Times headlined: "Not easy for Pompeo to sway China's neighbours in building military alliance". After the event, the newspaper spoke of "All US' bark and no bite in Quad meeting".

Mr Wang seemed to be taking the Quad more seriously than the Global Times, the flintier of China's English-language mouthpieces, seemed to do. In Kuala Lumpur, he criticised the Quad's "Cold War mentality" and warned of heavy security risks from a "so-called Indo-Pacific Nato".

Whichever way you look at it one thing is clear – the Quad has come a long way since its first iterations more than a decade ago.

ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL



That new Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga chose to make hosting a meeting of Quad foreign ministers his debut foreign policy initiative suggests that some countries do indeed set much store by it, enthusiastically backed by the Trump administration in the US.

This is why US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, whose planned trip to Asia had to be cut short because of President Donald Trump's hospitalisation for Covid-19, made it a point to show up physically in Tokyo, for a stop lasting less than 24 hours.

DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS

Yet, the realistic assessment of October's meeting – the US was the only participant to call out China – has to be that even if a Quad member or two would have liked to stall for time, they are pushed swiftly into a strategic embrace because of developments in the region.

Make that India, Asia's second-largest nation by population, which is now tangled up in a serious border crisis with the dominant Asian power – a situation from which it needs to extricate itself in order to focus on a runaway pandemic and a collapsed economy. With talks on getting the People's Liberation Army to move further back from the contested border in the Ladakh Himalayas going nowhere, India went ahead and invited Australia to rejoin the annual Exercise Malabar it conducts with the US and Japanese navies. Indeed, this year the maritime exercises are to be held on both flanks of the Indian subcontinent.

The same goes for Australia which has shown significant steel in standing up to China this year, even with some costs.

Much of the nation's elan for the past three decades has been based on what seemed like a Teflon-coated economy. But that owed to its ability to pump commodity exports into China, and domestic assets such as real estate that inflated thanks to Chinese buying.

Without China, its economy weakens substantially. Its retail scene, for instance, is moribund. Retail spending slumped to a 28-year low last year and many establishments have shut down, driven by a wave of consumer change the sector had not foreseen.

"If one word had to be used in describing the current state of Australian retail and broader economy, perhaps 'tempestuous' is the most appropriate," said KPMG, a consultancy, in its Australian Retail Outlook for 2020.

The retail slump predated the pandemic. In September, China's debt-gorged real estate sector's woes reverberated all the way Down Under when China's Poly Group pulled out from a major real

estate development promoted by Lendlease, the country's iconic builder, and told Australian Financial Review that it was rethinking all its prospective Australian projects.

However, there has been little evidence that Beijing is inclined to ease any of the pressure it has applied on Taiwan, Tokyo, New Delhi or on South China Sea issues. Against this background, a nervous India went ahead and signed BECA – Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement – the last of the so-called foundational agreements with the US. As much as India still possibly hopes that it can keep a measure of its cherished strategic autonomy this makes New Delhi a strategic ally of Washington in all but name.

Given its relative weakness in the power balance, sustained pressure from China makes for a swifter Indian drift into the US orbit.

ASIAN NATO IN THE WORKS?

All Quad members today are linked by bilateral supply-sharing pacts and now that Australia's navy got the Indian invite to this year's Exercise Malabar, the direction of the drift towards an Asian Nato is faintly discernible.

"At the appropriate time, once we've institutionalised what we're doing, the four of us together, we can begin to build out a true security framework, a fabric that can counter the challenge that the Chinese Communist Party presents to all of us," Mr Pompeo told Nikkei Asia in Tokyo during an interview.

His deputy, Mr Stephen Biegun, had hinted at what a formalised Quad could look like in September when he noted at a seminar that the Indo-Pacific region did not have "strong multilateral structures".

"They don't have anything of the fortitude of Nato, or the European Union... There is certainly an invitation there at some point to formalise a structure like this," he said.

While Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi said the Quad ministers agreed to meet every year, the Indian external affairs ministry merely said the foreign ministers would hold the consultations "regularly".

Mr Motegi also said the group would welcome other countries joining in, possibly meaning South Korea and Indonesia, as well as France and Germany – two European powers moving rapidly on the Indo-Pacific.

Nevertheless, it may be premature to think of Asean states making such a move at this point. At a webinar, the French ambassador to India, a country with which the French military has rapidly scaled up exchanges, skirted around the question of whether France would consider participating in an expanded Quad. Instead, he chose to talk of his nation taking a "principled position" on regional events.

Be that as it may, Beijing has much to ponder. For now, there is no talk of setting up a Quad "headquarters", only about initiatives on vaccine development and building resilient supply chains.



Aircraft carrier USS Nimitz (CVN 68) leading a formation of ships from India, Japan and the US in the Bay of Bengal as part of Exercise Malabar, 2017. Australia's navy has been invited to join this year's exercises.

PHOTO: AFP

BABY STEPS

Several so-called Quad Plus meetings focusing on the coronavirus pandemic have already been held with countries like South Korea, Vietnam and New Zealand. Those baby steps could lead to something bigger.

In October, New Zealand, a member of the Five Eyes intelligence gathering network of nations, held its elections. Beijing would not have been displeased with New Zealand First, a key member of the Labour-led coalition government, fared poorly in the polls, as it was tipped to do.

Under NZ First nominated deputy PM Winston Peters, New Zealand surprised many earlier this year by endorsing Australian PM Scott Morrison's call for an inquiry into how China handled the virus outbreak in Wuhan. He also called for Taiwan to be allowed to participate in a Covid-19 conference organised by the World Health Organisation. New Zealand also joined 38 other countries recently in issuing a strong statement criticising China over Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

Still, even if Mr Peters' influence has diminished opinion in New Zealand has shifted in the wake of the pandemic. Lately, some Kiwi voices have been talking of a "Quad Plus One" formula that would bring Wellington closer to the Quad.

The impressive US response to the South-east Asian tsunami of December 2004, with backing help from the Indian military, was one of the early examples of the potential of such cooperation, albeit in a peaceful way. Since then, much water has flowed under the bridge of strategic embraces.

As much as they dislike being the stuffing in the sandwich of US-China competition, many Asian states are watching to see which way the wind blows post the US presidential election, to decide on where precisely they want to stand on this axis and whether the time is coming to adjust positions a mite.

A nudge here and a nudge there and before you know it, there's enough momentum for a shove. Keep an eye on the jostling! **ST**

Whichever way you look at it one thing is clear – the Quad has come a long way since its first iterations more than a decade ago.

”

India-Taiwan ties receive fresh impetus amid tensions with China

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THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY IS MY FRIEND.

This notion of statecraft, documented in the ancient Sanskrit text, Arthashastra, appears to be lending fresh impetus to ties between India and Taiwan as both take on an increasingly assertive China.

Quoting an unnamed source, Bloomberg reported that there is growing support within the Indian government to formally initiate talks on a trade deal with Taiwan, something Delhi has so far held back from.

Taiwan has even been propped up as a potential strategic partner for New Delhi after the violent border clash between Indian and Chinese troops in Ladakh in June. Several rounds of talks since then between Beijing and New Delhi have failed to resolve the border standoff that continues to mar bilateral ties and drive widespread anti-China sentiment in the country.

Strategic analyst Brahma Chellaney tweeted on Oct 20 that “Taiwan is to India what Pakistan is to China”, suggesting that India help bolster Taiwan’s defence capabilities and finalise a trade deal that would aid India’s efforts to “decouple from China and its goal of attracting greater foreign investments.”

Even prior to the border clash, China’s policy decisions, including on Kashmir and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Pakistan-held Kashmir, have riled India.

“China says India must ‘remain committed to one-China principle and approach Taiwan-related issues prudently and properly.’ In the absence of China’s commitment to a one-India principle, why should India stick to a one-China policy?” said Dr Chellaney.

This surge in pro-Taiwan sentiment in India has also seen growing bonhomie between two sides on social media, something President Tsai Ing-wen has reinforced with her tweets thanking Indians for

their good wishes on Taiwan’s National Day (Oct 10). She has also tweeted at least twice in October to appreciate Indian cuisine and reminisce about her visit to the South Asian country, drawing tens of thousands of “likes” from Indians.

The focus on Taiwan has also been strengthened by a growing admiration in India and across the world for how well it has suppressed the Covid-19 infection.

India does not have formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan but the two sides maintain business and cultural links through the India Taipei Association in Taipei and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Center in New Delhi. In 2018, they signed a bilateral investment agreement to further expand economic ties.

India has, however, been cautious about confronting China over Taiwan. Air India was forced to change the name of Taiwan to Chinese Taipei on its website in 2018 following an objection from China. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) had then said Air India’s decision was “entirely consistent with international norms and our own position on Taiwan since 1949.”

China has also responded strongly to this week’s reports of trade talks and has asked India to approach ties with Taiwan “prudently and properly,” insisting that Beijing would “firmly oppose” any official exchange between New Delhi and Taipei. An official from India’s Ministry of Commerce and Industry told The Straits Times that there are no plans to launch such trade talks “as of now.”

But the mood vis-a-vis China has soured drastically since the second informal summit between leaders of the two countries in Tamil Nadu in October last year.

“Sino-India relations have entered into uncharted territory and a lot of the things we took for granted before the present border dispute no longer apply,” said Professor Harsh V Pant, the head of the Strategic Studies Programme at Observer Research Foundation.

This reassessment has prompted a greater degree of cooperation with countries that share India’s concerns over China. The inclusion of Australia in the Malabar series of naval exercises slated to be held this year is one case in point. “If you look at it from that perspective, there is enough scope to revamp and recalibrate India’s outreach to Taiwan,” Prof Pant told The Straits Times.

“India wants greater leverage with China, and Taiwan is certainly one of those levers. But this is something India can achieve by expanding its ambit of cooperation with Taiwan within the One China policy,” he added. “It is in India’s interest not to repudiate the One China policy because doing so will also entail some potential costs.” **ST**

People dining freely in a restaurant in Taipei on Oct 24. There’s been a growing admiration in India about Taiwan’s ability to suppress the Covid-19 infection.

PHOTO: EPA-EFE



Suu Kyi's party expected to win again in polls, but faces a hard slog ahead

It will look like a different party compared with five years ago, having shed outspoken or disillusioned stalwarts and allies who have accused Ms Suu Kyi of micromanaging and suppressing dissent.

YANGON RESIDENTS HAVE BEEN HOLED UP AT home in the run-up to Myanmar's Nov 8 general election because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many were hooked on social media which was awash in red. The ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) ran campaigns elsewhere, flying its red fighting peacock flag on Facebook, and on cars, boats and bullock carts.

Widely expected to triumph again, the NLD has not changed its winning formula which largely leans on the charisma and influence of 75-year-old Ms Suu Kyi. Its 2020 election manifesto is light on specifics and heavy with broad promises towards peace, sustainable development and a genuine federal democracy.

Perhaps more revealing were Ms Suu Kyi's comments as she unveiled the party's candidates in July. "The road that the NLD has taken is very rough. It is long, unending," she was quoted by Frontier Myanmar as saying. "That is why we place so much emphasis on endurance and loyalty."

The NLD will be counting on voter loyalty in this election, given its lacklustre first-term performance, wrestling with a diarchy fashioned by the country's former military rulers.

In 2015, the party won 57 per cent of the popular vote and 79 per cent of the elected seats in the national Lower House, a solid block against the military, which is guaranteed a quarter of all parliament seats as well as control of the defence, border affairs and home affairs ministries.

Supporters say change has been slow but visible. With international aid, some 50 per cent of Myanmar households are now connected to the electricity grid, compared with 35 per cent in 2016.




After an initial policy logjam, the NLD administration dismantled enough business hurdles to help Myanmar climb in the latest World Bank's Ease of Doing Business rankings, to 165th out of 190 economies.

The pandemic shrank Myanmar's economic growth forecast this year to 0.5 per cent, compared with 6.8 per cent last year, according to the latest World Bank projections. Yet the country still managed to attract US\$5.68 billion (S\$7.75 billion) in foreign direct investment by end-September. Its target was US\$5.8 billion.

Still, despite its relatively bigger say on economic issues, the administration failed to articulate clear policies to rehabilitate an economy left stunted by years of isolation and economic sanctions, notes Ms Ngu Wah Win, a senior policy coordinator for the Centre for Economic and Social Development, who is also a vice-chairman of the opposition People's Pioneer Party.

On the international front, Myanmar's Rohingya crisis has pushed the country back into pariah status. Ms Suu Kyi's fronting of Myanmar's defence last year against allegations of genocide at the International Court of Justice was decried as an attempt to pander to nationalist sentiments back home.

Myanmar's other minorities have voiced fears of growing marginalisation. Peace talks to end long-running civil wars are making little headway, with one of the most powerful ethnic armed groups, the Arakan Army, shut out by virtue of the government labelling it a terrorist organisation. Myanmar's election commission last month cancelled voting in the whole or in parts for the majority of townships in Rakhine state – where ethnic-based parties posted the strongest showing in the last election.

In a scathing report last month, policy research and advocacy group Progressive Voice said: "As the ultimate arbiter of power for so many years, the Myanmar military has long benefited from the constructed narratives of hate aimed at advancing Bamar Buddhist dominance at the expense of ethnic and religious minorities in the country. But, more recently, the NLD government has increasingly aligned itself with such rhetoric." 

A supporter of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party wearing a face mask with a portrait of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi during an election campaign rally on the outskirts of Yangon.

PHOTO: AFP

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There was a good rule of law during NLD's term in government. There was transparency. People today dare to speak freely and they dare to protest too. This is where we have succeeded.



– NLD Party spokesman
Monywa Aung Shin



A worker spraying disinfectant along a street in Itaewon, a major nightlife district in Seoul, on Oct 29. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Country Report

Asia remains vigilant on Covid-19 even as infections start falling

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Easing of lockdowns; typhoons and festivals remain worries

SOME PARTS OF ASIA APPEAR TO HAVE A GRIP – albeit a tenuous one – on Covid-19 recently, compared with the situation in Europe and the US where cases are not only barely contained but spiralling.

India – which has recorded Asia's highest number of infections at more than 8.2 million cases – has seen its daily count fall steadily since the peak of the outbreak in mid-September.

Although it reported another 45,000 new cases on Nov 2, that number is less than half of the daily figure about six weeks ago.

Indonesia remains South-east Asia's worst-hit nation with more than 415,000 infections and over 14,000 fatalities, while the Philippines is the second

worst-hit country in the region, with some 385,400 infections and 7,200 fatalities.

"Experience with previous pandemics has been critical to help (some Asian) countries be better prepared to manage Covid-19," said Dr Shenglan Tang, a policy expert with the Duke Global Health Institute, who with his team reviewed the Covid-19 strategies of seven Asian countries and regions earlier this year.

In North-east Asia, Japan continued to report fewer new Covid-19 cases from a month ago, with 667 new infections on Nov 2.

The country has begun to ease some travel curbs, lifting its entry ban on foreign travellers from Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and six other locations.

It is the first time Japan has lifted its entry ban since the pandemic began, reflecting its growing confidence in managing the outbreak, on top of a

necessity to revive its battered economy.

However, the health authorities in many Asian countries remain wary about the situation.

South Korean officials are warning of growing virus clusters in Seoul and its surrounding Gyeonggi province. The government has said it would expand its mandatory mask policy to spas, malls, wedding halls and elsewhere as part of new rules aimed at preparing for a prolonged pandemic.

The Filipino authorities, too, are bracing themselves for more potential Covid-19 cases as rescue and evacuation operations due to Typhoon Goni prevent people from observing proper social distancing measures.

In India, health officials have warned against complacency as an upcoming Hindu festival season is forecast to bring a new cascade of Covid-19 cases. **ST**

Asia's worst hit countries

Country	Total cases	Total deaths
India	8,267,623	123,139
Indonesia	415,402	14,044
Bangladesh	410,988	5,966
Philippines	385,400	7,269
Pakistan	336,260	6,849
Nepal	176,500	984
Kazakhstan	113,309	1,857
Japan	101,813	1,774
China	86,070	4,634

NOTE: Data as at 6pm, Nov 3, 2020

Source: CENTER FOR SYSTEMS SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING (CSSE)
AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

More Indians buying health insurance as Covid-19 cases surge

SALES OF COVID-SPECIFIC HEALTH INSURANCE policies in India have grown almost 10 times in a month, making it the fastest-selling type of insurance in decades.

The chairman of India's insurance regulatory body, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (Irdai), said on Oct 16 that the market grew from 1.5 million rupees (\$27,560) to 11 million rupees from September to October.

India has had over eight million Covid cases, and 123,000 people have died. Although the Ministry of Health says more people are recovering than ever before and infection rates are declining, India still records the world's second largest number of Covid infections and is set to overtake the United States as the worst-hit country.

Sources said that since July, 450,000 insurance claims worth about 67.5 billion rupees have been reported and about 300,000 claims worth around 28 billion rupees have been settled and paid.

Many Indians were spurred to buy insurance in July as infections peaked and the lockdown was eased.

Mr Mohan Elango, a 28-year-old television producer in Chennai, said that it was when India's pandemic "situation got serious" that he bought a Covid-specific insurance policy from Star Health and Allied Insurance company for a cover of about \$9,200. It was his first health insurance policy.

"One of my relatives was admitted in a private hospital with Covid, but in six days the family opted for home treatment because they could not afford to pay more bills. I too can't bear the expense, so I got a Covid insurance policy," added Mr Elango.

Although treatment in government hospitals is



A government health worker disinfecting a residential area during the coronavirus pandemic in Kolkata, India, on Oct 29.
PHOTO: EPA-EFE

free, shortage of beds and lack of trust about safety has made many Indians opt for private hospitals. Some state governments have regulated Covid testing and treatment fees, but many hospitals have still been charging controversially high prices for sanitation, admission and personal safety equipment of medical staff.

As Covid-infected Indians struggled with enormous bills and rejected claims on their existing health insurance policies, the Irdai designed two standard Covid specific products called Corona Kavach (Armour) and Corona Rakshak (Protector) in June.

Based on these guidelines, many insurance companies have rolled out policies that will cover the treatment cost of the Covid disease. Corona Kavach is an indemnity-type plan for individuals and families to get their hospital bill reimbursed up to the sum insured.

A benefit-based plan, Corona Rakshak gives hospitalised individuals a fixed payout to cover expenses.

Both are short-term policies, issued for 3.5, 6.5, and 9.5 months. The one-time premiums are low, ranging from 120 to 15,000 rupees, based on each insurer's underwriting standards and expectations of claim ratios, reported online insurance retailer PolicyBazaar.

Some companies are also buying Covid insurance for employees as a stand-alone policy or as a "top-up" to their existing health cover. **ST**

— Rohini Mohan in Bangalore

Many Indians were spurred to buy insurance in July as infections peaked and the lockdown was eased



Indonesia overtakes Philippines as South-east Asia's Covid-19 hot spot

A health worker in a protective suit taking a swab sample from a woman during a rapid Covid-19 test in Medan, North Sumatra.

PHOTO: EPA-EFE

INDONESIA HAS OVERTAKEN THE PHILIPPINES as South-east Asia's new pandemic hotspot on Oct 15, as it struggles to contain surging Covid-19 infections and fresh cases hitting 4,000 cases a day.

The world's fourth most populous nation's tally hit 418,375 - the highest in South-east Asia, by Nov 3. There have been 14,146 deaths, also the highest in the region.

The Philippines reported 387,161 coronavirus infection cases by Nov 3 and 7,318 deaths.

Indonesia surpassed Singapore as the country with the most number of coronavirus infections in the region on June 17, the position it retained until Aug 6 when the Philippines took over.

It has seen a faster growth in infections in the past few months as large-scale social restrictions were eased in many parts of the vast archipelago from June, to give some reprieve to an economy battered by the pandemic. South-east Asia's biggest economy is expected to contract by more than 3 per cent, President Joko Widodo said on Nov 2.

The capital Jakarta went into a second partial lockdown on Sept 14 in a last-ditch attempt to contain the rapidly surging coronavirus cases. The lifting of restrictions started on Oct 12.



The government has blamed the spike in cases on people's failure to comply with health protocols, such as wearing masks and keeping a safe distance, but critics say the authorities have prioritised resuscitating the economy over tackling the pandemic properly.

In the Philippines, with fewer Covid-19 cases surfacing, the government has been easing quarantine restrictions to speed up the reopening of an economy that is already in deep recession, despite warnings from experts that this could lead to a surge in infections.

The government is allowing commuters to sit closer together when taking public transport, and more businesses can now operate at full capacity. Teens and those aged 61 to 65 are also now allowed to go out of their homes. [ST](#)

– Linda Yulisman in Indonesia & Raul Dancel in Philippines

Policy flip-flops in Malaysia spark concern



Malaysians are questioning their government's flipflops over restrictions, with Senior Minister for Security Ismail Sabri Yaakob explaining "we must create a balance between reviving the economy and protecting the people from the virus". PHOTO: REUTERS

WITH MALAYSIA'S COVID-19 SITUATION worsening and a record daily increase of 871 cases on Oct 18, people are questioning government flip-flops over restrictions in the Klang Valley even as Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's government is at the risk of collapse.

Just days after announcing that tighter controls would begin on Oct 14, the government, among other things, allowed mosques, gyms and parks to reopen.

"There are quarters who called for stricter control, but there are also those who think otherwise," said Senior Minister for Security Ismail Sabri Yaakob. "Nevertheless, we must create a balance between reviving the economy and protecting the people from the virus."

On Oct 20, he announced yet another new rule: Klang Valley residents must work from home starting two days later.

Malaysia is experiencing its worst wave of the coronavirus.

Sabah's Covid-19 situation is increasingly dire, prompting the federal government to fly front-line workers into the state and send in the military to set up field hospitals.


Sarawak may be the next Covid-19 battleground as some politicians are pushing for state polls soon even though they are not due until mid-next year.

Kuala Lumpur resident Susan Lim, 50, said: "The U-turns make it seem like the government is bowing to populist demand. Our positive cases are higher and more widespread than during the earlier lockdown in March, but the measures are more relaxed."

Tan Sri Muhyiddin was previously seen as having managed the outbreak well but this is fast changing, with politicians seemingly distracted by ongoing power grabs and the constant U-turns.

Political analyst Awang Azman Awang Pawi of Universiti Malaya said: "Muhyiddin's position is increasingly shaky... as many Malaysians are unhappy over how the current outbreak is handled."

"The government needs to be firmer in handling the outbreak. Flip-flops will just create confusion among the people, and the government will be seen as lacking a clear policy in the fight against Covid-19."

"This will lead to a further lack of confidence in the Perikatan Nasional administration and Muhyiddin's premiership." 

– Hazlin Hassan in Kuala Lumpur

China shakes off virus in Golden Week

TRAINS WERE PACKED, TOURIST attractions crowded and airports crammed – these were the scenes across China during its just-ended eight-day National Day holiday.

They were an unusual sight in a world gripped by the coronavirus pandemic, where many countries are still recording mounting infections and contemplating renewed lockdowns. But not so in China, which reported the first coronavirus case in the world late last year.

The national Golden Week holiday – which was extended by a day this year because of the Mid-Autumn Festival – saw 637 million domestic trips being made, about 81 per cent of the 782 million trips made last year, according to just-released figures from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

The travel rush generated 466.56 billion yuan (\$94.3 billion) in tourism revenue, about 70 per cent of that generated during last year's holiday stretch.

This year's Golden Week travel rush has been closely watched as a barometer of China's economic recovery.

While Chinese state media extolled the initial figures as evidence of the country's robust recovery, some economists had expected the numbers to be higher, which suggested the pandemic and the economic slowdown were still weighing on Chinese consumers.

The official China Daily said in an editorial on Oct 8 that while the figure did not match last year's, it still reflected a "strong recovery in consumer confidence" and a "palpable widespread post-epidemic feel-good mood."



The crowd waiting to enter Beijing's Forbidden City on Oct 8. This year's Golden Week travel rush has been closely watched as a barometer of China's economic recovery. PHOTO: AFP

"If this momentum can be maintained, the Chinese economy – which surged 3.2 per cent in the second quarter from the 6.8 per cent fall in the first quarter – might realise substantial positive growth this year, despite the combined blows it has taken from the pandemic and the US administration's containment and protectionist policies," said the newspaper.

China's economy is projected to grow 2 per cent this year, the World Bank has estimated, and is widely expected to be the

only major economy to register positive growth.

In Hubei province, where the virus was first discovered in December, tourists were back out in force, said tour guide Guo Qiang, who told The Straits Times that some popular tourist sites appeared to have more visitors after entry fees were abolished to draw in the crowds.

"I am quite optimistic about the tourism industry in Hubei. Tourists now are not worried about the pandemic anymore because they know it's very safe in China," said the 31-year-old, adding that he has a packed month of bookings.

But others remained less sanguine.

Political economist Hu Xingdou said the fact that tourism spending did not recover to last year's levels showed that Chinese consumers were still cautious about the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

He pointed out that many people had lost their jobs and fewer consumers had enough spending power to travel.

"For many, if they can maintain their lifestyles, it's good enough. Travel is a luxury for those who are richer," he added.

– Danson Cheong in Beijing

DOMESTIC HOLIDAY TRAVEL

637m Number of domestic trips made this year during the national Golden Week holiday, compared with 782 million trips last year, according to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

467b yuan Tourism revenue generated this year – about 70 per cent of that generated during last year's holiday stretch.



A man looking at his smartphone in Hanoi, Vietnam. The country took Facebook's local servers offline until the social media giant agreed to increase censorship of "anti-state" posts by its Vietnamese users.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Business Trends

S-E Asian govts pressure social media giants to control content

TAN HUI YEE

Indochina Bureau Chief



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Tussle over online platforms growing contentious as more consume news on them

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR PIMYADA PANYAPUWASED uses Facebook and Instagram to talk to her peers, Twitter to express her thoughts and the Line messaging app to communicate with her parents.

Social media, says the 17-year-old girl, is her soapbox because mainstream media content is dominated by the state or older folk. So she was dismayed when the Thai government recently made police reports against Twitter and Facebook after the companies failed to restrict online content it deemed illegal.

"It is not right," she fumed. "They limit our speech for their own convenience."

Debate over curbs on online content boiled over after the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society

filed complaints in September with the cybercrime police against the two social media firms for failing to remove 500 posts as ordered by the court.

This comes amid growing social media chatter about the role of Thailand's monarchy, with anti-government protesters openly questioning the expenditure of and power wielded by King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

For years, a law criminalising insult of the monarchy helped keep a lid on criticism of the palace, but young Thais – emboldened by the anonymity provided by social media – are no longer so restrained.

Thailand is escalating legal action against the global social media giants as its regional peers similarly turn up the heat on them.

Vietnam reportedly took Facebook's local servers offline this year until the company agreed to increase censorship of "anti-state" posts by its Vietnamese users.

According to a Reuters report in April, the restrictions were carried out by state-owned

telecommunications companies, which knocked Facebook's local servers offline for about seven weeks.

Singapore last year enacted the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, which can compel an Internet intermediary to send a correction notice to its Singapore users or block access to the offending material.

The Asia Internet Coalition, a technology industry group that Facebook and Twitter belong to, declined comment on the action taken by regional governments against social media companies.

The tussle over who gets the last word on social media is becoming contentious as people increasingly consume news via these platforms.

According to social media agencies We Are Social and Hootsuite, active social media users in July made up 77 per cent of the population in Singapore, 73 per cent in Thailand, and 67 per cent in Vietnam.

Twitter revealed it had blocked 926 accounts it had linked to the Thai army that were amplifying pro-military positions as well as targeting the political opposition. The army denied association with these accounts.

Facebook, under pressure in places like India and Myanmar for being too lax on hate speech, raised eyebrows in August when it declared it was preparing a legal challenge to the Thai government's order that it block the Royalist Marketplace, a group which allegedly posted defamatory content on the monarchy.

While regional governments say they increasingly need to combat disinformation and misinformation, human rights groups allege that this is a cover to stifle dissent.

"Domestic cyberlaws, their technical requirements and even institutional barriers that are put in place for other purposes such as preventing cybercrimes, protecting against cyber attacks or regulating electronic transactions are instead weaponised by South-east Asian governments to control content shared (and shape) their own narratives," said Ms Emilie Pradichit, founder of the Bangkok-based Manushya Foundation.

Under Thailand's cybercrime law, social media companies can be fined 200,000 baht (\$8,700) for ignoring a take-down order, as well as an extra 5,000 baht for every day the offending content stays up.

But legal experts doubt the domestic law can be enforced, because Digital Minister Puttipong Punnanak had said the complaints were filed against the United States-based parent companies rather than their Thai subsidiaries.

"The key point is to signal to the public that you don't cross this line and try to persuade social media platforms to self-censor," said Associate Professor Kanathip Thongraweewong, who heads the Institute of Digital Media Law at Kasem Bundit University in Bangkok.

On a broader scale, placing restrictions to control data within physical borders will affect the utility of the Internet and how well companies are able to provide their services, warned Mr Rajnesh Singh,



Pro-democracy protesters wearing protective gear and holding closed umbrellas sitting on the ground during an anti-government rally in Bangkok on Oct 26. PHOTO: AFP

Asia-Pacific regional vice-president of the Internet Society, a non-profit group working to keep the Internet open.

Making online intermediaries liable for user-generated content could also affect how much a company is willing to invest in creating or expanding its services because of the risks involved, he said.

"What we see right now is resistance by the tech companies, and in cases where there is some willingness, there is an attempt to set the rules of the game. Governments then tend to take a stricter stance and start considering—or implementing—legislative measures," he told The Straits Times.

Neither of these approaches is workable or sustainable, Mr Singh emphasised.

More likely than not, he added, "these will end up creating barriers to entry for new players and at the same time further strengthen the dominant position of the larger players." [ST](#)

Twitter revealed it had blocked 926 accounts it had linked to the Thai army that were amplifying pro-military positions as well as targeting the political opposition.



REGIONAL LAWS

Vietnam

Vietnam's cyber-security law, passed last year, requires online service providers like Facebook and Google to remove content deemed to be opposing the state. They are also required to set up local offices and servers to continue operating in the country.

Thailand

Thailand's cybercrime law makes social media companies equally liable for a user's illegal content, unless the firms comply with orders to remove the content. The government can request a court order to remove content which affects national security or public order.

Singapore

Singapore's Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, which came into force last year, allows a minister to declare online material "false" and compel social media companies to upload correction notices accessible to Singapore users or block access to the offending material within Singapore.



Business Trends

Amid the downturn, is Asia losing its draw for talent?

Many Asian cities remain affordable for expatriates even if they have to take a pay cut. PHOTO: NYT

TAN JIA NING

Regional Correspondent



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Many who have left want to return, but will likely take on different roles as business landscape changes

WHEN BRITISH TEACHER KIRAN COOLICAN hurriedly left Chengdu at the onset of China's coronavirus outbreak in January to take on a new job in Spain, he did not expect that he would be quickly laid off and end up jobless for the next eight months.

The 30-year-old was teaching English on a one-year contract at a private school in Sichuan's capital Chengdu when he secured a new job to teach the subject at school camps in Spain from March to August.

"I took the painful decision to end my contract (with the school in Chengdu) at the end of January because I was deeply concerned that the situation in China would get out of control, and the Spanish company would refuse to allow me to work for them," Mr Coolican says.

But little did he know that the coronavirus had already crossed China's borders into countries across the globe, and that Spain would end up becoming one of the worst-hit nations in the pandemic.

Just two weeks after Mr Coolican started working in Spain, he was axed.

Spain had recorded its first coronavirus case on Jan 31. In less than two months, the number of infections shot up to 46,621 to become the highest

in Europe, prompting the government to impose a nationwide lockdown on March 14.

Mr Coolican's story is just one of many, as the pandemic drove millions of expatriates back to their home countries worldwide.

Covid-19 has limited the movement of 7.2 billion people, or 93 per cent of the world's population, as countries have been forced to restrict their border crossings to prevent the spread of the deadly disease, according to an analysis by Pew Research Centre.

As people stay home, businesses suffer. Jobs are eliminated and internal transfers are frozen.

Would-be expatriates are not travelling and the existing ones are packing up because of health fears and restrictions.

In Asia, there are no clear statistics on how many expatriates have left. But there has been a consistent decline in their numbers and their hiring across every market, though on a smaller scale due largely to a high level of trust in the governments that have kept the crisis under control with clear and consistent guidelines and safety measures, says Mr Toby Fowlston, chief executive of recruitment agency Robert Walters.

Some left because they were furloughed. Others did so because they wanted to be closer to their elderly parents and families back home, he notes. He oversees 13 countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Their departure will leave a lasting impact in post-pandemic Asia, but when things pick up, going by their comments, they would like to return, though the roles being offered then may be different.

IMPACT ON RENTAL MARKETS

In January, when it became clear that the coronavirus was spiralling out of control in the Chinese city of Wuhan – the initial epicentre of the pandemic – countries across the world scrambled to evacuate their citizens, who made up some 1.03 million international migrants in China.

Anecdotes of expatriates who missed their flights and were stranded in the locked-down city spread on the Internet like the virus itself.

Teachers who work in international schools in China have been among the expatriates most affected by the pandemic.

Many international schools in the region have had their enrolments slashed by as much as 30 per cent this year, according to ISC Research.

Students were dropping out at short notice because their parents were leaving. And parents demanded reimbursements or refunds as campuses were ordered to close.

These schools are having trouble keeping the teachers on their payroll.

Alongside, many expatriates who had their jobs lined up in Asia suddenly found those positions eliminated as companies shifted their priorities.

And as these expatriates leave Asia, they are leaving behind rental properties for which there are few takers.

In Kuala Lumpur, the average asking rents in upmarket suburbs Ampang Hilir and Damansara Heights – popular among expatriates – have declined in the first half of this year, as there was lower demand from expatriates and corporate tenants, a report by real estate consultancy Knight Frank Malaysia noted.

In Beijing, rentals in high-end residential areas have been falling by as much as 20 per cent.

“Foreigners are not coming in and some apartments have been empty for half a year. Rents are dropping but no one is coming in,” says Beijing property agent Zhao Xu. Expatriates make up 80 per cent of her clients.

MANY EXPATRIATES PREFER TO STAY

The lives of these expatriates may be disrupted but the toll the pandemic has taken on them is far less severe than it has been on low-wage labour migrants, who do not have that many options.

Says Assistant Professor Ye Junjia from the School of Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University: “Because of the way our system is set up to accommodate transient migrants, the impact of the pandemic is greater felt by the migrant workers than foreign professionals. (They) don’t have the privilege to work from home, (or) work from another country.”

Many Asian cities remain affordable for expatriates even if they have to take a pay cut. Many The Straits Times spoke to chose to stay put because it is safer to be in Asia, where the virus is largely under control. And they are likely to be rehired when the region recovers from the pandemic.



But the hiring policies of these companies and how they operate in the post-pandemic world will change.

CHANGES AHEAD

A survey by The Adecco Group recruitment agency showed a majority (55 per cent) of employees expect that a proportion of their working time will be spent at home, as companies are more likely to allow flexible workplace arrangements.

Companies are also more likely to spread decision-making power across the organisation so regional operations are less dependent on executives based in the headquarters on the other side of the globe.

“They have come to realise that it is important not to run their operations from the headquarters and they will want to empower local leaders who are able to see what is happening on the ground, understand the situation and make important decisions,” says Mr Fowlston.

He adds that while some roles in the traditional market such as retail and aviation may be coming to an end, huge investments are being poured into talent in critical sectors such as tech, cyber security, compliance, regulatory and healthcare.

So, will expatriates return to Asia? They most certainly will. But they are more likely to take on different roles and less likely to be stationed in one place for an extended period.

Malaysia has begun to allow expatriates and professional visit pass holders from 23 countries to enter.

Similarly, China announced on Sept 23 that foreigners with valid residence permits can enter the country for work without applying for new visas.

If their permits had expired after the March suspension, these foreigners will be able to apply for new visas, although they will still have to complete a 14-day quarantine.

As border controls begin to ease, many expatriates are more hopeful than ever that they will be able to return to Asia soon. **ST**

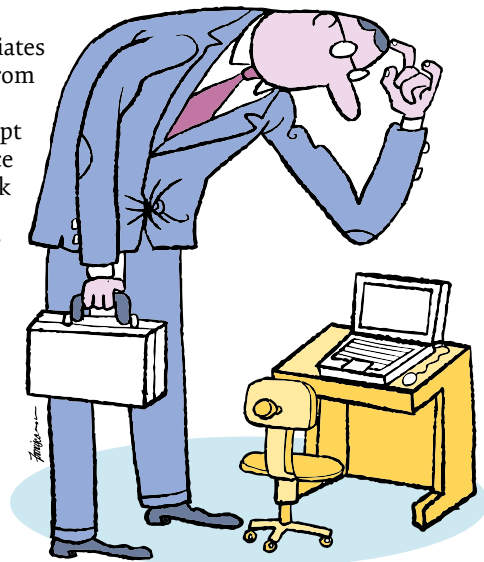
Additional reporting by Danson Cheong and Hazlin Hassan

In Kuala Lumpur, the average asking rents in upmarket suburbs Ampang Hilir and Damansara Heights – popular among expatriates – have declined in the first half of this year.
PHOTO: SLP

Would-be expatriates are not travelling and the existing ones are packing up due to health fears and restrictions.

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ST ILLUSTRATION:
MANNY FRANCISCO



Japan PM faces grilling by opposition

OPPOSITION LAWMAKERS ARE GRILLING Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on a controversy over academic freedoms in the Diet session that opened on Oct 26 and will last until Dec 5.

Japan's academia has been upset by Mr Suga's unprecedented omission of six nominated scholars from the Science Council of Japan in what has long been a rubber-stamp process. All six had opposed the policies of Mr Suga's predecessor Shinzo Abe.

The saga has hurt Mr Suga's approval ratings, which fell 11 percentage points in a weekend poll by the Nikkei and TV Tokyo



from September, though it is still healthy, at 63 per cent.

Opposition lawmakers are also set to question Mr Suga on the government's Covid-19 pandemic response during the Diet sitting, even though Japan has avoided the soaring numbers other countries have had.

Mr Suga has prioritised the reopening of the economy, such as the multibillion-dollar Go To campaign to encourage domestic travel. Just dozens have been infected out of the more than 25 million travellers who tapped the subsidies, he said.

The Prime Minister has vowed to secure enough vaccines for all Japan residents by next June, and said he will push ahead for the Olympics to be held. [ST](#)

— Walter Sim, Japan Correspondent

Japan's PM Yoshihide Suga's approval ratings fell 11 percentage points in a weekend poll by the Nikkei and TV Tokyo from September, although it is still healthy at 63 per cent.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

US courts Prabowo amid rivalry with China

IT READ A LITTLE LIKE A ROMANCE NOVEL. Separated by the Pacific Ocean and a longstanding travel ban to the United States, Indonesian Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto spoke to United States Defence Secretary Mark Esper by phone a few times on defence cooperation between their countries.

On at least two occasions – March 31 and Aug 4 – both had “conveyed their desire to meet soon”, according to US Department of Defence statements.

Mr Esper had expressed his intention to visit Indonesia in July. By October, this was replaced with an invitation for Mr Prabowo to travel to Washington instead.

On Oct 15, two days before his 69th birthday, Mr Prabowo started the five-day trip, effectively ending two decades of being blacklisted by the US over alleged human rights abuses.

The diplomatic move by the US was aimed at closing ranks with Indonesia and tempering China's burgeoning political and economic clout in the country and the region, experts told *The Straits Times*.

“The US is trying to get closer to Indonesia, as it has grown concerned over China's growing influence in the region, including Indonesia,” Dr Yohanes Sulaiman, a political and security analyst from Jenderal Achmad Yani University, said.

“And truly, I think this is a very overdue move, which reflects the lack of attention the Trump

administration gives to the region,” he added.

The US had remained out of bounds to the retired special forces general, shut out since 2000 over accusations of his involvement in kidnapping activists during his father-in-law president Suharto's New Order regime, which fell in May 1998.

As Indonesia's Defence Minister, a surprise job offered by his erstwhile political foe-turned-boss, President Joko Widodo, following a bitterly fought election in April last year, Mr Prabowo has since criss-crossed the globe – to China, Russia, Japan, and the Philippines, among others – to engage in “defence diplomacy”.

Defence communication has deepened between Indonesia and China since Mr Prabowo's visit to Beijing last December, just two months after he was sworn in as minister.

Mr Prabowo also personally welcomed at the airport medical supplies flown in from China for the country's Covid-19 fight in March.

His recent trip to the US, however, must not be misunderstood as an indication that Jakarta is leaning towards Washington. After all, Indonesia has always practised a “free and active” foreign policy, said Dr Susaningtyas Kertopati, a military expert from Indonesia Defence University.

This means playing an active role in international relations, while not taking sides in rivalries. [ST](#)

— Arlina Arshad, Regional Correspondent



The recent Washington trip by Indonesian Defence Minister Prabowo Subianto (centre) effectively ended two decades of being blacklisted by the US over alleged human rights abuses. PHOTO: REUTERS

Brunei's Prince Azim died from multiple organ failure

BRUNEI'S PRINCE 'ABDUL 'AZIM DIED FROM multiple organ failure due to an autoimmune disease, his younger brother revealed on Oct 27.

Prince 'Abdul Mateen, said in an Instagram post that his brother was diagnosed with severe systemic vasculitis earlier this year, a condition characterised by inflammation of blood vessel walls.

"At the same time, he was also coping with bipolar disorder which made the fight harder," said Prince 'Abdul Mateen.

"Eventually, my brother succumbed to multiple organ failure caused by persistent infections due to the autoimmune disease."



Prince 'Abdul 'Azim died on Oct 24. He was 38.
PHOTO: PRINCE ABDUL AZIM/
FACEBOOK

Prince 'Abdul 'Azim died on Oct 24 and was laid to rest at the Royal Mausoleum on the same day. He was 38.

Prince 'Abdul Mateen, 29, said he shared the details of his brother's death, as that was what the late prince would have wanted. "He was a big advocate of bringing awareness to different causes," said Prince 'Abdul Mateen.

The post was accompanied by a black and white childhood picture of them having fun. [ST](#)

– Eileen Ng, Regional Correspondent

Lee Myung-Bak's return to jail means all four of South Korea's living former presidents are either behind bars or have served jail terms.
PHOTO: AFP



South Korean ex-president headed for jail after losing final appeal

FORMER SOUTH KOREAN PRESIDENT LEE Myung-bak headed to prison on Monday (Nov 2) after a Seoul court upheld a 17-year term on corruption charges.

It is effectively a life sentence: unless he is pardoned or paroled, the 78-year-old will not leave jail until 2036, when he would be 95.

He left his residence in southern Seoul in a black car, passing a throng of journalists and former aides, but did not say anything and was not visible through the vehicle's darkened windows.

Lee was taken to the Seoul Central District Prosecution's Office for a registration process before being transferred to a prison in the east of the capital.

His return to jail means all four of South Korea's living former presidents are either behind bars or have served jail terms – often as a result of investigations begun under successors who are political rivals. [ST](#)

– Bloomberg

Indonesian tycoon Benny Tjokrosaputro sentenced to life in jail for stock manipulation

AN INDONESIAN GRAFT COURT HAS sentenced businessman Benny Tjokrosaputro to life in prison for a stock manipulation scheme that helped trigger losses of more than US\$1 billion (\$1.36 billion) at state insurer Asuransi Jiwasraya, state news agency Antara said.

Three of the insurer's executives were among the five other defendants sentenced to life terms in one of Indonesia's biggest anti-graft trials by a special corruption court in Jakarta, the capital.

Tjokrosaputro, who had made international headlines with a US\$1 billion lawsuit he once filed against

Goldman Sachs, was ordered to pay compensation of 6 trillion rupiah (\$556.6 million) at his sentencing on Oct 26, the agency added.

The court found Tjokrosaputro, chief commissioner of property developer Hanson International, guilty of corruption and money laundering by conspiring with other investors to inflate shares in Indonesia's main equity market.

He made arrangements with Jiwasraya executives to invest in stocks and then used gains to buy properties and foreign currencies, the agency said, citing court documents. [ST](#)

– Reuters



Benny Tjokrosaputro made international headlines with a US\$1 billion lawsuit he once filed against Goldman Sachs. PHOTO: ANTARA

Singapore begins cruises to nowhere from November

Pilot scheme with strict screening, safety measures part of effort to reboot economy

TIFFANY
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Correspondent



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TWO CRUISE LINES HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE GREEN light to offer cruises to nowhere from Singapore starting this month, giving locals what is likely to be their only option for a year-end overseas holiday.

Genting Cruise Lines and Royal Caribbean International will be part of a “safe cruise” pilot scheme that will cater only to Singapore residents, at a reduced capacity of 50 per cent, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) said.

The round-trip cruises will not have ports of call, and feature strict screening and safety measures to prevent the on-board spread of the coronavirus.

All passengers will have to be tested for Covid-19 prior to boarding as part of the STB's CruiseSafe programme, jointly developed by global classification body DNV GL.

They will also have to comply with safe management measures, such as mask-wearing and safe distancing of one metre between groups. The travel group size is also subject to prevailing laws on group sizes.

Cruise lines must be audited and receive CruiseSafe certification to sail out of Singapore, the STB said.

Mandatory measures include testing of passengers and crew, ensuring fresh air throughout the ship and emergency response plans for incidents related to Covid-19.

Ship crew arriving from overseas will be subject to isolation and testing requirements both in their home country and here.

Regular on-board inspections will be conducted, and cruise lines found to be non-compliant will face penalties including fines, suspension of sailings and having their CruiseSafe certifications revoked, the STB said.

Cruise ships have not been allowed to call here since March 13, when the Republic joined a number of countries in closing its ports to these vessels over fears that they may carry infected passengers.

The Diamond Princess, which was quarantined off the coast of Japan in February, served as a cautionary tale of the coronavirus' rapid spread, with more than 700 passengers and crew members found ill.

Infectious disease experts say the likelihood of an outbreak on board Singapore's planned cruises is low, given the stringent measures and lack of ports of call, though there is no guarantee that testing will eliminate the possibility of an infected person embarking.

Ms Annie Chang, STB's cruise director, told The Straits Times that with the appropriate measures in place, such cruises are no less safe than other activities that have resumed in Singapore.

Contingency plans are in place in the event of an infection or outbreak, she said. These include isolating infected passengers and their close contacts, ceasing on-board activities and having the ship return to Singapore.

The tourism board said that Singapore is one of the first countries in the world to develop and implement a mandatory audit and certification programme for cruise lines, adding that it aims to set a benchmark for the future of cruising in the South-east Asian region as the lead coordinator for cruises in Asean.

The Government will monitor the outcomes of the pilot trips carefully in the coming months before deciding on the next steps for cruises, STB said. **ST**

The World Dream cruise ship in a promotional photo.
PHOTO: GENTING CRUISE LINES



Cruising safely

Genting Cruise Lines and Royal Caribbean International are launching cruises to nowhere this month as part of a safe cruise pilot scheme by the Singapore Tourism Board.

OVERVIEW

Cruises range from
2 to 4 nights

Will be open to
Singapore residents

They will run at
50% capacity

All ships sailing out of Singapore will have to receive **CruiseSafe certification** and adhere to its safety and hygiene guidelines to screen for and prevent the spread of Covid-19.

CRUISESAFE STANDARDS INCLUDE:



- Infection control measures at every stage of a passenger's journey, including a mandatory Covid-19 test prior to boarding



- Strict and frequent cleaning and sanitisation protocols on ships



- Safe management measures aligned with prevailing national policy at the time of sailing



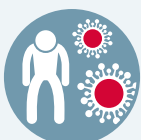
- Ensuring 100 per cent fresh air throughout the ship



- Reducing ship capacity to enable sufficient safe distancing



- Measures to discourage close contact and intermingling between groups of passengers



- Emergency response plans for incidents relating to Covid-19

ROYAL CARIBBEAN'S QUANTUM OF THE SEAS

Start date: **Dec 1**



Three-night cruises start at
\$374



Four-night cruises start at
\$509

Ticket prices **include swab test** done 48 to 72 hours before embarkation and coverage of up to \$25,000 per person for Covid-19-related costs, including on-board medical costs and any required quarantine and travel home.



GENTING CRUISE LINES' WORLD DREAM

Start date: **Nov 6**



Two-night cruises start at
\$359



Three-night cruises start at
\$599

Additional charge of **\$60 for swab test**, done at the cruise terminal before embarkation. Those who test positive will be given credit for a future sailing.



UPGRADED AIR FILTERS ON ROYAL CARIBBEAN SHIPS

1st filter

Blocks larger particles (like salt)



2nd filter

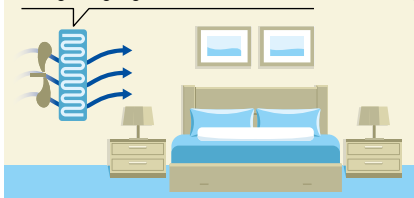
Blocks smaller particles (cold and flu germs, coronaviruses)

Incoming air filtration

Incoming air is **double-filtered** to remove salt and other particles, making it cleaner than the air outside

Localised filtration

Fan coil units in staterooms and public venues continuously **scrub the air of pathogens** using a high-grade filter



Continuous fresh air replacement

Fresh air is continuously **pulled in from outside**, replacing existing "used" air



About 15-20 times per hour

Air changes in large public spaces on Royal Caribbean ships (and up to 12 times per hour in staterooms)



About 3-4 times per hour

The number of recommended air changes for land-based public venues like grocery stores, movie theatres and hotel lobbies



Jiang Ziya: Legend Of Deification. The success of films such as Nezha has heralded a spring in the Chinese animation film industry.
PHOTO: ENCORE FILMS

Lifestyle

Chinese animation comes to the fore

JAN LEE



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Jiang Ziya: Legend Of Deification aims to replicate the success of Chinese animation after last year's Nezha

WHEN CHINESE ANIMATION MOVIE NEZHA, the debut feature of a college dropout who spent years trying to finance his movie, opened last year in its home country, it blew past all expectations to become a runaway summer blockbuster.

It earned more than US\$719 million (\$985 million) in China alone, making it the biggest animated movie in a single market.

In October, Jiang Ziya: Legend Of Deification, a follow-up film set in the same universe as Nezha opened in China and Singapore.

Cheng Teng, one of two main directors on the project, and co-director Wang Xin said in a telephone interview with local press that they were thankfully spared the pressure of living up to Nezha when they were making their film.

"The two projects began at around the same time. By the time Nezha opened in August last year, we

were pretty much done too," says Cheng, 32.

But Wang, who is in his 40s, adds: "I think the pressure is from audiences' expectations because Nezha did so well at the box office."

Jiang Ziya, like Nezha, is a figure from the ancient Chinese mythological folklore epic novel Investiture Of The Gods, whose premise is the fall of the Shang dynasty at the hands of a nine-tailed fox demon.

While animation has been dominated by Hollywood and Japanese anime, the success of films like Nezha has heralded a spring in the Chinese animation film industry.

Both directors worked in the United States extensively before returning to China.

Having experienced the Hollywood system, the directors are under no pretences that Chinese animation is anywhere as developed as Hollywood's.

"On the technical aspects of production, China still has a distance to go," Cheng notes.

"But what's amazing about Hollywood is the entire process of developing, making and exhibiting a film. It has clear rules and a very well-established infrastructure. That process doesn't have a lot of flaws, but, at the same time, it's hard for it to adapt and change as well."

He adds: "A lot of Hollywood animation works

are ultimately entertainment products, but I think Chinese ones have more of an authorial voice. I don't think we can play catch-up to Hollywood per se, we have to do our own thing."

Wang agrees. "Hollywood studios have great foundation, but also their own set of challenges."

"Their superhero movies and the Disney princesses are relatively formulaic and they are changing too."

"The Chinese industry will be fundamentally different because the market is different. We are appealing to different tastes."

He feels that Chinese audiences are "more exposed to a variety of productions from different markets, be it Asia or Europe or our own domestic films, while American audiences tend to stick to their own productions."



Wang Xin, a director for Jiang Ziya: Legend Of Deification.
PHOTO: ENCORE FILMS



Cheng Teng, one of two main directors on the project.
PHOTO: ENCORE FILMS



Jiang Ziya: Legend Of Deification took three years to complete.
PHOTO: ENCORE FILMS

He has high hopes for the future of Chinese animation. "I think it'll be a lot of small to medium-sized teams working fluidly together to create major pop culture properties," he says.

With Jiang Ziya, the team spent 15 months on pre-production to ensure that pre-visualisation of the entire film was done and more than 100 employees working in Beijing and Suzhou were hired for the animation work. The film took three years to complete.

Cheng says there are already plans for a sequel, possibly linked to the story of Investiture Of The Gods, but no details can be revealed at this time. [ST](#)

New animation titles from Chinese studios

KUNG FU MULAN

Mulan, the Disney live-action adaptation of the ancient female warrior of Chinese lore, is expected to pull in only about US\$50 million (\$68.5 million) for its entire run in China.

But perhaps China's own adaptation of the tale will do better. Its animated version opened on Oct 1 and shows Hua Mulan struggling to get out alive when she dives into enemy territory for a solo mission.



PHOTO: WEIBO

OVER THE MOON

Based on the Mid-Autumn Festival tale of the moon goddess Chang'e, this American-Chinese Netflix film produced by the Shanghai-based Pearl Studio has a star-studded



PHOTO: NETFLIX

voice cast of Phillipa Soo, Ken Jeong, John Cho, Margaret Cho and Sandra Oh.

It depicts the story of Feifei, a girl who builds a rocket ship in the hopes of flying to the moon to meet Chang'e. It is available on Netflix.

WISH DRAGON

This dragon-in-a-bottle movie – about a dragon who grants wishes – is the first feature by Base Animation, a new animation studio by Beijing-based visual effects firm Base FX.



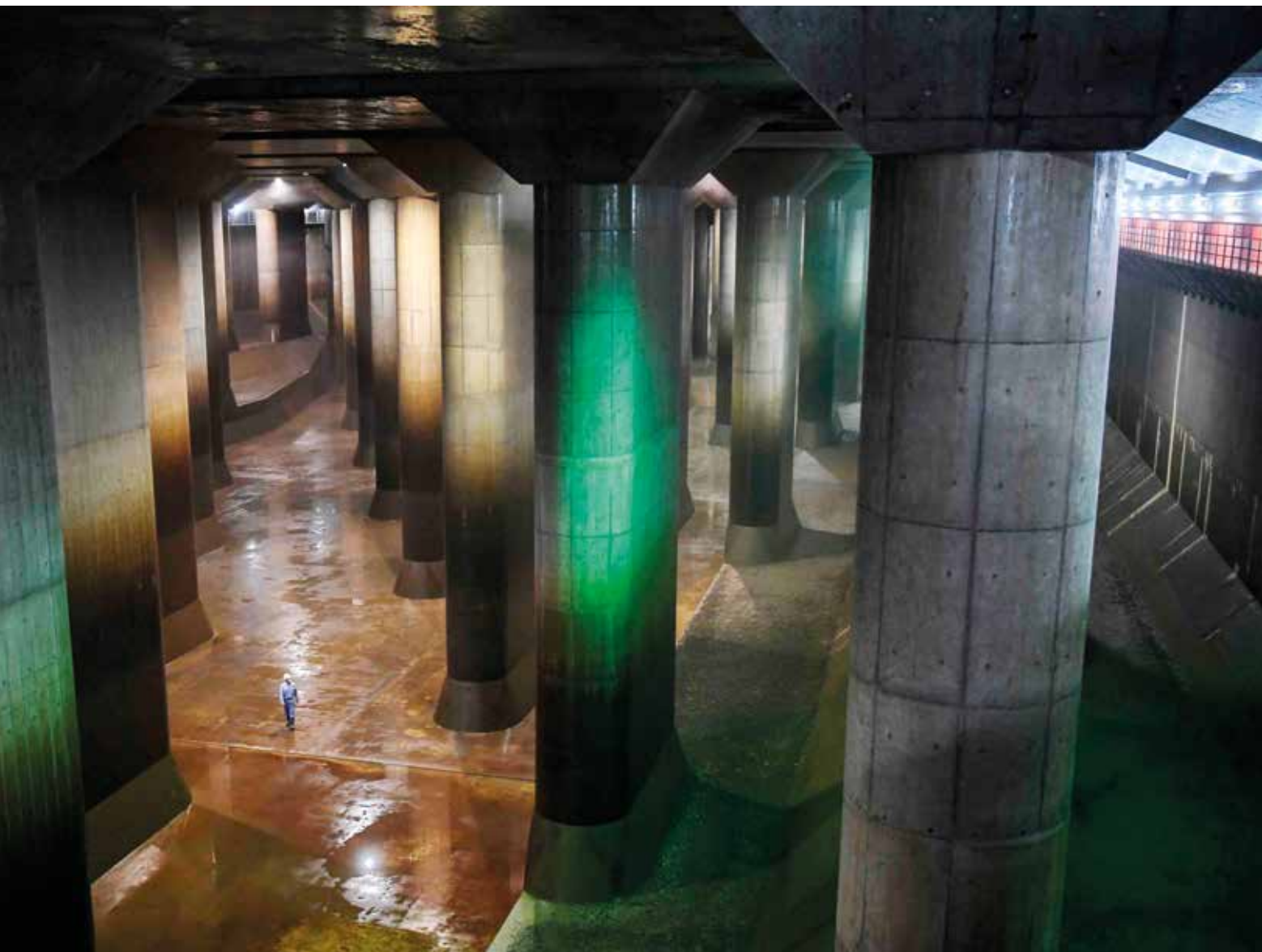
PHOTO: NETFLIX

It also counts Sony Pictures Animation, Tencent Pictures and action superstar Jackie Chan's Sparkle Roll Media as producers, with production focused at Base's new studio in Xiamen.

We used a Chinese understanding of beauty. We're not too overly complex in our use of the colours, portrayal of the scene's environment, the way we manipulate the light.

”

— WANG XIN, a director for Jiang Ziya: Legend Of Deification, on the movies' style of animation



Big Picture

PHOTO: AFP

Going under to protect city

THIS CAVERNOUS COMPLEX THAT HAS BEEN called Japan's underground "Parthenon" is charged with protecting Tokyo and surrounding areas from catastrophic flooding.

Above ground, there is little to give away the cathedral-like feat of engineering that forms the main reservoir of the Kasukabe flood tank, the largest facility of its kind in the world.

The immense structure – deep enough in some parts to hold the Statue of Liberty in New York City – funnels away and redirects excess water from storms and typhoons, protecting one of the globe's

most populous capitals.

Soaring pillars weighing 500 tonnes each support the main reservoir, a bare concrete tank the length of two football fields.

Staff at the facility in Saitama, north of Tokyo, are on constant alert, especially during Japan's rainy and typhoon seasons from June to late October.

But experts warn that more of such flood-protection structures may be needed, as global warming makes what were previously once-a-century storms increasingly common, and catastrophic. [S](#)

– Agence France-Presse

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