# THIS WEEK IN ASIA

MAY 24-30, 2020

HIGHLIGHTS

## PICS OF THE WEEK

A FLOODED ALLEYWAY IN KOLKOTA AFTER CYCLONE AMPHAN HIT LAND. Photo: AFP

PEOPLE ON A SPORTS PITCH IN INCHEON, SOUTH KOREA, WAIT TO BE TESTED FOR COVID-19. Photo: AP

MAO YIN REUNITES WITH HIS MOTHER LI JINGZHI IN SHAANXI. HIS PARENTS LOST HIM AT A HOTEL 32 YEARS AGO. Photo: Reuters

MANNEQUINS CHEER ON A SEOUL FOOTBALL CLUB. FANS LATER DISCOVERED THEY WERE SEX DOLLS. Photo: AFP

PRO-DEMOCRACY PROTESTERS ARE BLESSED BY BUDDHIST MONKS AT A TEMPLE IN BANGKOK. Photo: EPA

## TALKING ABOUT

**The implementation of one country, two systems is very different from what I expected in the 1980s**

Veteran legislator Allen Lee Peng-fei, who has died aged 80. Lee, once touted as a potential Hong Kong leader, had in 1983 lobbied Beijing for an extension to British rule

**No, there's no trade war**

Australia's Agriculture Minister David Littleproud rules out retaliating against China's tariff of over 80 per cent on its barley exports

**This pandemic has forced some people to be alone with their thoughts for maybe the first time in their life**

Hong Kong-based rapper Txmiyama

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## THIS WEEK IN ASIA

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# Chinese medicine

*With the coronavirus having infected Pakistan's economy, Islamabad looks east for a new dose of investment*

*BY* **TOM HUSSAIN**

CPEC PROJECTS, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: THE MULTAN-SUKKUR MOTORWAY; THE ORANGE LINE METRO TRAIN IN LAHORE; GWADAR PORT.
Photos: Xinhua, Reuters

AFTER A TWO-YEAR slowdown in the execution of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) following the 2018 election of Imran Khan as prime minister, Pakistan officials are finalising proposals for new infrastructure projects worth billions, ahead of a state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping this year.

According to recent statements by Pakistan's CPEC Authority, which was established during Khan's visit to Beijing last October, officials are close to wrapping up the "action plan" for the estimated US$8 billion ML-1 project to rehabilitate Pakistan's rickety railway network.

It would be the single largest project of the CPEC, the first phase of which saw a collective US$19 billion of Chinese credit and investment poured into energy, motorway and other projects, said Chinese ambassador Yao Jing at a conference last year.

Asim Saeed Bajwa, the retired three-star general appointed as founding chairman of the CPEC Authority, said last month he expected to soon sign an agreement with the China Three Gorges Corp for the US$2.5 billion Kohala hydropower project, which would generate 1,124 megawatts of electricity.

Bajwa announced on May 7 that construction work had begun for a US$230 million airport at Gwadar, the site of a Chinese-developed and operated port on the Arabian Sea. Pakistan last month granted approval for the port to handle Afghanistan transit trade.

**CHINA IS, THANKS TO TRUMP, ASSUMING GLOBAL LEADERSHIP**
Mustafa Hyder Sayed, Pakistan-China Institute

Bajwa said work on building a second motorway route through western Pakistan, to improve overland transit connectivity between Gwadar and China's Xinjiang province, had accelerated. Contractors were recently invited to bid for the second section of motorway connecting the Karakorum Highway to Quetta, the administrative capital of Balochistan province, where Gwadar is located.

Andrew Small, author of the China-Pakistan Axis, said in the lead-up to Xi's visit – which earlier this year was said to be happening in July – there had been a push from China and Pakistan to put together "a decent new package of projects, and also to ensure that any elements of the phase-one plans that had been stalled were pushed forward".

The political stakes had been raised since CPEC was dragged into the "informational war" which erupted between Beijing and Washington last year, said Small, a Brussels-based senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund, a US think tank.

"Given the scrutiny that any visit from Xi would bring, and the need to convey a narrative of progress and success, there would always have been an effort of this sort," he said.

After taking office in August 2018, Khan's administration trimmed the overall size of CPEC to US$50 billion, from US$64 billion under his predecessor Nawaz Sharif, as part of efforts to counter a payments crisis brought on, in part, by the inability of Pakistan's narrow economy to absorb a massive influx of Chinese plant and machinery imports under CPEC.

Khan's government also switched the focus of the CPEC away from big-ticket infrastructure projects to dedicated manufacturing zones, agriculture and social sector development.

As austerity bit, Pakistan's economy skidded to a grinding halt in the 2018-19 financial year, Khan's first year in power. GDP growth fell to 1.9 per cent, from 5.8 per cent the year before, according to revised government figures issued on Monday. That is substantially less than the provisional estimate of 3.3 per cent GDP growth issued by the government last June.

The Planning Commission estimated that Pakistan's economy will shrink by 0.39 per cent in the 2019-2020 financial year, which ends on June 30, because of the additional impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

The plunging economy has prompted a rethink by Khan, who is desperate to quickly create jobs for Pakistan's youthful population of 208 million, which has a median age of 22.


The government said an estimated 25 million informal-sector workers had already been rendered unemployed by the closure of most commercial activity since late March, to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

Khan has prioritised the revival of the labour-intensive construction sector, and has introduced tax breaks to encourage investment in housing, backed by a promise not to ask questions about the source of investment – a major departure from his government's accountability-driven political agenda.

He has launched a renewed push for infrastructure projects because they would revitalise associated domestic industries like cement, rerolled steel and aggregates, and incentivise fresh investment in the key job-generating manufacturing sector.

On May 14, Power China and the Frontier Works Organisation, a commercial arm of Pakistan's powerful military, were awarded a US$2.75 billion contract to build the reservoir and other early infrastructure of the Diamer-Bhasha Dam, envisaged as Pakistan's third such major project. With a 70 per cent stake, Power China has arranged credit for the project, but the terms have not been made public.

It is being executed as a Pakistan government project, rather than as part of the CPEC. An earlier Chinese proposal to include it in CPEC fell through because of national security concerns about Beijing controlling the flow of the Indus River, the lifeblood of Pakistan's agriculture sector.

An Islamabad-based expert, who works closely with the Chinese and Pakistani governments to promote cooperation between the "iron brothers", said that the CPEC would be key to reviving Pakistan's moribund economy, which could face another one year of recession at least, according to forecasts by multilateral institutions and ratings agencies.

"As the world braces itself for a 2008-like or worse recession, we see a renewed importance of CPEC projects in Pakistan, as it emerges as an island of prosperity that provides hope, jobs and tangible foreign direct investment in a sea of economic uncertainty," said Mustafa Hyder Sayed, executive director of the Pakistan-China Institute.

He said there was growing concern in Pakistan about the US' reliability as an economic partner, because of President Donald Trump's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

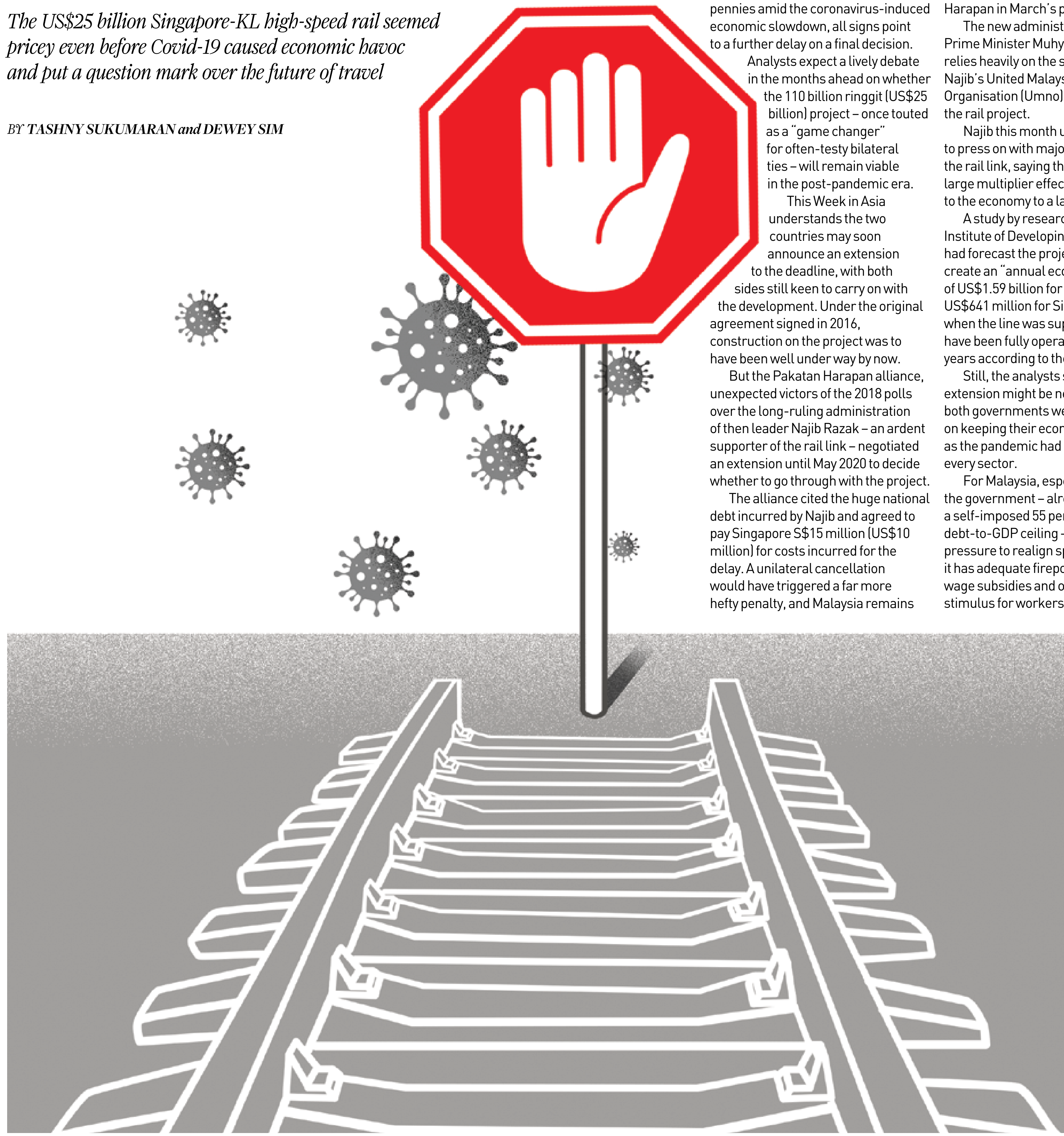
"The contrast between the US and China is stark," Sayed said. "And China is, thanks to Trump, assuming global leadership by standing up and being counted, which in the pre-Covid and pre-Trump period, would have always been the role of the US."■

BRIEFING

# End of the line?

*The US$25 billion Singapore-KL high-speed rail seemed pricey even before Covid-19 caused economic havoc and put a question mark over the future of travel*

*BY* **TASHNY SUKUMARAN *and* DEWEY SIM**



MAY 31 WAS supposed to have been decision day on the future of the high-speed rail link between Malaysia and Singapore, but as the neighbours count their pennies amid the coronavirus-induced economic slowdown, all signs point to a further delay on a final decision.

Analysts expect a lively debate in the months ahead on whether the 110 billion ringgit (US$25 billion) project – once touted as a "game changer" for often-testy bilateral ties – will remain viable in the post-pandemic era.

This Week in Asia understands the two countries may soon announce an extension to the deadline, with both sides still keen to carry on with the development. Under the original agreement signed in 2016, construction on the project was to have been well under way by now.

But the Pakatan Harapan alliance, unexpected victors of the 2018 polls over the long-ruling administration of then leader Najib Razak – an ardent supporter of the rail link – negotiated an extension until May 2020 to decide whether to go through with the project.

The alliance cited the huge national debt incurred by Najib and agreed to pay Singapore S$15 million (US$10 million) for costs incurred for the delay. A unilateral cancellation would have triggered a far more hefty penalty, and Malaysia remains liable for that fee if it decides to go down that route.

Transport industry observers said this was extremely unlikely, given the collapse of Pakatan Harapan in March's political coup.

The new administration led by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin relies heavily on the support of Najib's United Malays National Organisation (Umno), which favours the rail project.

Najib this month urged Muhyiddin to press on with major projects like the rail link, saying they would "have a large multiplier effect and contribute to the economy to a large extent".

A study by researchers at Japan's Institute of Developing Economies had forecast the project would create an "annual economic benefit" of US$1.59 billion for Malaysia and US$641 million for Singapore by 2030, when the line was supposed to have been fully operational for four years according to the original plan.

Still, the analysts said the extension might be needed as both governments were focused on keeping their economies afloat as the pandemic had hit almost every sector.

For Malaysia, especially, the government – already nearing a self-imposed 55 per cent debt-to-GDP ceiling – is under pressure to realign spending so that it has adequate firepower to fund wage subsidies and other forms of stimulus for workers and businesses.

A suitable financing solution – along with Malaysia's proposal to cut the costs of the original plan – is expected to feature in talks between the two governments' point men for the development: senior minister for economic affairs Azmin Ali for Malaysia and Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan for Singapore.

Singapore-based transport economist Walter Theseira believed the Muhyiddin administration's immediate focus would be restarting the economy as well as existing trade and travel links.

"To put bandwidth on a new travel link when old ones haven't been restored properly would not make much sense," said Theseira, an associate professor with the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

Lee Ju Ye, an economist with Maybank Kim Eng, said financing the project could be a key hurdle, with the two governments having already poured billions of dollars into their stimulus packages.

Singapore has rolled out US$45 billion worth of measures, while Malaysia's stimulus so far adds up to nearly US$60 billion – including US$8 billion of direct fiscal injections.

Theseira rebuffed the notion that the rail link could have an immediate stimulus effect. "It's unlikely that the spending will come in early enough to make any difference for the local economy," he said. Also onanalysts' minds was the long-term feasibility of the project, amid a rising consensus that the post-pandemic "new normal" would include a sizeable reduction in travel.

Experts say the use of videoconferencing tools, which have grown popular during lockdown periods, is likely to linger long after the health crisis has passed, reducing the need for business travel.

In the investment world, the wholesale dumping of US airline stocks by the famed American conglomerate Berkshire Hathaway – led byinvestment guru Warren Buffett – has added to the bearishness about the future of travel.

However, Law Teik Hua, an associate professor with Malaysia's Putra University, remained upbeat about the viability of the rail link.

The original plan was for the line to bring the door-to-door travel time from downtown Kuala Lumpur to Singapore's central business district to 2.5 hours, from an average of 4.2 hours by air.

The actual travel time on the 350km rail link would be 90 minutes, similar to a flight when take-offs, landings and taxiing are taken into account. A bus ride – the cheapest mode of travel between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore – takes an average of 6.5 hours.

"If anything, demand will increase over time," said Law, who specialises in civil engineering. "Covid-19 will be over one day, and we cannot let the old days of buses, a packed Causeway and so on, hold back economic progress."

SINGAPORE PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG AND MALAYSIA'S THEN LEADER NAJIB RAZAK AT THE HIGH-SPEED RAIL SIGNING CEREMONY IN 2016. Photo: EPA

Others, like independent Malaysian transport analyst SM Sabri SM Ismail, said a fresh feasibility study might be needed to assess just how demand for the link would be affected by factors such as the dramatic rise of online corporate meetings.

Estimates publicised soon after plans for the link were first announced by Najib and Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2013 put the passenger load at 22 million a year within 10 years of operation.

James Su, an infrastructure analyst at Fitch Solutions in Malaysia, said the uniqueness of travel between the two neighbours, with their intertwined economies and societies, was reason to remain bullish about passenger loads even after taking into account the pandemic's effects.

"Given that the KL-SG route is one of the highest trafficked international air routes, and given the interconnectedness of the Malaysian and Singapore economies, we believe that there is still a strong business case for the construction of the high-speed rail," Su said.

The analysts said that given the experience of the pandemic, it was likely the project would have "parameters" built in to accommodate future health crises.

"We never thought about things like these before because the coronavirus was so unprecedented, but now hygiene and social distancing must be considered in construction," Su said.

Attention is expected to focus next on the final deadline that the two countries agree to.

Once the project gets the green light, attention will turn to the international tender for a company to design, build, maintain and finance rolling stock and rail assets.

An earlier exercise – which drew interest from major rail players from Japan, China and Germany – was called off after the September 2018 deal to delay the project.

In a sign of upbeat market expectations for the project, the shares of Malaysian construction firms YTL Corporation, Gamuda Berhad and Malaysian Resource Corp Berhad – which were previously awarded a contract for civil works for part of the Malaysian portion of the line – soared last week. It is not known if the awards will be valid when the development is restarted.

The listed arm of Iskandar Waterfront Holdings, a real estate firm that co-owns the Bandar Malaysia development that will serve as the rail link's Kuala Lumpur terminus, has also gained over the last week.

Bandar Malaysia's other owners are the Malaysian government and China's China Railway Engineering Corp. ■

**COVID-19 WILL BE OVER ONE DAY, WE CAN'T LET IT HOLD US BACK**

Law Teik Hua

BRIEFING

# No cure for ill will

*America versus China, the privileged versus the poor, a disunited United Nations. As the race for a vaccine shows, conflict is more, not less, likely in the post-Covid-19 world. Does dystopia beckon?*

*BY MICHAEL VATIKIOTIS*

WITH THE SCALE and impact of the coronavirus pandemic, we are told to expect a different kind of world when lockdown and quarantine regimes are eventually lifted.

But almost certainly, the one aspect of life that will not change is a proclivity for conflict. Rather, existing divides between powers, regions, neighbouring countries and within societies will be exacerbated. New drivers of conflict will emerge.

An analogy could be made with the end of World War II, which gave birth almost immediately to the Cold War struggle between communist states and the Western powers. Thirty more years of war and suffering ensued, especially in Asia.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to anticipate emerging fault lines created by the Covid-19 pandemic and design new frameworks to contain and resolve them to prevent more death and suffering. A global consensus is unlikely, so Asia will have to fend for itself.

We see this already in the global race to find a Covid-19 vaccine. As soon as one emerges, there will be conflict over who gets it first. The French pharmaceutical giant Sanofi was forced to back down after announcing that the United States would have priority access to the vaccine it is developing, because it was first to fund the company's vaccine-making effort.

The challenges of international distribution, the decision over which segments of our profoundly unequal societies are inoculated, and how the issue of immunity is managed as it becomes a passport to employment and security, are likely to become triggers for protest and even conflict.

Just as the voices demanding sustained lockdowns and restrictions on movement are mainly of those who can afford to work from home, the privileged will demand premium care and attention, while the poor and marginalised will be at the end of the queue. "We have some perfectly effective vaccines on this planet that we have not used effectively," said a senior official of the World Health Organisation (WHO) recently.

Sadly, the institutional framework and rules designed to ensure equitable protection of global health and security are badly frayed. The WHO has been politicised and defunded, its prescriptions and warnings go unheeded, while the UN Security Council cannot even pass a resolution on a global truce.

In the light of this, Asia needs urgently to consider how to collectively pool resources, learn from each country's experiences and chart a regional path to the protection of public health and security.

Asia is both where the first outbreak of Covid-19 emerged, and also the region that has arguably the most effective containment efforts. With better-coordinated regional leadership and action, some of the missteps taken in some countries can be addressed and corrected. But first, the existing modes of regional cooperation and decision-making need to be adjusted, and the barriers to effective action must be lowered.

Formal summit-level meetings have not worked out well among Asian leaders relying on video conferencing. Diplomacy and decision-making at the official level have slowed down. There should be more attention paid to actions taken at the grassroots level.

Despite a long history of having authoritarian governments, local communities, NGOs and individuals in the region have risen to the challenge of helping one another. While governments fumbled and fiddled over balancing public health with economic security, Malaysians made mass petitions urging the government to maintain lockdowns, while Indonesian leaders in towns and villages enforced local measures to protect their communities as the central government issued confusing messages. In Thailand, women's groups and teams of doctors led the way in shaping medical advice and mobilising food supplies.

Scale up this basic common-sense civility and you could have humanitarian organisations, charities and health foundations coming together at a regional level to pool data, share experiences, and establish a strategy for rolling out vaccines and preventive safeguards that are tailored to regional needs.

Questions such as how to ensure that the legions of migrant workers are included in vaccine programmes, even if they are undocumented or illegal, or the delivery of life-saving drugs to areas of conflict will require more effective regional cooperation as many of the region's most vulnerable people live along contested or remote border areas.

With the blessing of the 10 Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member states supported by China, India, Japan and South Korea, one possible configuration could include Asean Regional Forum members such as Australia, New Zealand and even North Korea. A broader multi-state configuration is

**A GLOBAL CONSENSUS IS UNLIKELY. ASIA WILL HAVE TO FEND FOR ITSELF**

needed to ensure that countries like Bangladesh, which hosts close to a million Rohingya refugees, can be sure of a seat at the table. The ad hoc group model deployed to manage people-smuggling in the region, co-chaired by Indonesia and Australia and known as the Bali Process, might be one option.

A more inclusive regional approach would give China, which has been widely criticised for being defensive about the coronavirus pandemic, an opportunity to show regional leadership and responsibility.

Popular resentment towards China has erupted in countries such as Thailand, where the economy relied heavily on Chinese tourists and business before Covid-19 closed its borders. That this sentiment is being expressed in societies in the neighbourhood should be a worry for Beijing and prompt a more transparent and softer diplomatic approach.

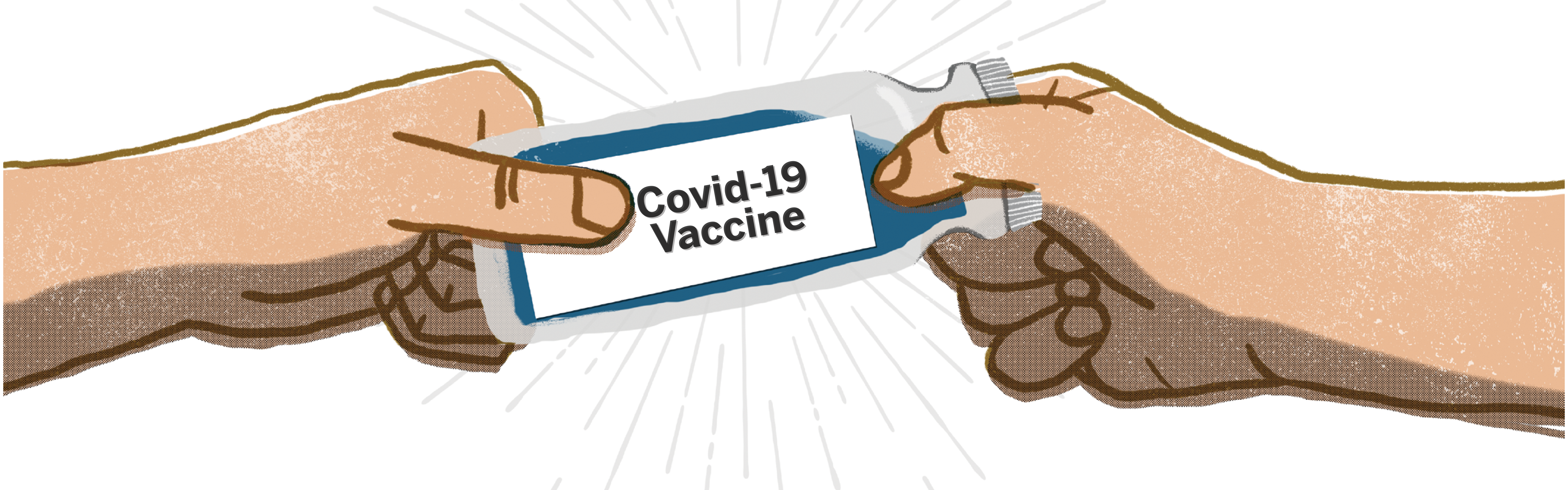
Removing the increasingly toxic geopolitical rivalry between the US and China from the regional equation might coax Beijing into a less reflexively defensive and at times aggressive stance. This is not the time for assertive manoeuvres in the South China Sea and confrontation between the US and Chinese navies – countries in the region want the US and China to work together, not against each other at the expense of other nations.

To be sure, finding the right regional approach will be challenging. The effectiveness of ad hoc groups like the Bali Process has been hampered by resistance from states which feel pressured. By and large, Asian governments have been allergic to civil society and grassroots activism. But something has to give.

The Covid-19 pandemic is having an immediate and catastrophic impact on everyone's lives. Visions of dystopia like that crafted by Asian-American writer Chang Rae-lee in his 2014 novel On Such a Full Sea imagined a wrecked world divided between the privileged living in protected communities, and the rest of society eking out a precarious existence in an anarchic wilderness bereft of life-saving technology.

Is that the future we want? If so, we will be condemned to perpetual conflict and insecurity. ■

Michael Vatikiotis is the author of Blood and Silk, Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia



# Bring on the bubbly

*If the Covid-19-induced moratorium on travel has left you feeling flat, cheer up. Travel bubbles and Chinese tourists are rising to the challenge of refloating Asia's tourism industry*

*BY* ***KOK XINGHUI***

ENTREPRENEUR CATHERINE TOK typically leaves Singapore for a holiday six to eight times each year, but she believes her days as an avid traveller are over. At least, that is, until a vaccine for Covid-19 is discovered and border restrictions, quarantine periods and flight disruptions – like the ones that scuppered her trip to Taiwan last month – become a thing of the past.

But a vaccine remains a distant hope. Many experts estimate it will be at least a year before a viable vaccine could be made widely available and some have warned one may never be found.

That's a depressing thought for people like Tok, 31, who have seen one of their favourite pastimes disappear as if into thin air, but there is yet hope.

Increasingly, countries across the world are floating the idea of forming "travel bubbles", in which reciprocal nations agree on guidelines that enable their populations to move freely across their borders, just like in those halcyon days before the outbreak of the novel coronavirus.

All of a sudden, "bubble" has become the buzzword for countries hoping to boost their coronavirus-battered economies by restarting their tourism industries.

South Korea and China opened one such bubble on May 1 for business travellers to go between Korea and 10 Chinese regions on a fast-track entry, provided they test negative for Covid-19 before departure and after arrival. Among the first travellers to use the scheme was Samsung Electronics vice-chairman Lee Jae-yong, who made a three-day visit to inspect Samsung Electronics' chip plant in Xian, Shaanxi province. Korea is seeking to float further bubbles and is in discussions with Vietnam, Hungary, Poland and Kuwait.

Meanwhile, a bubble containing Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania opened on May 15, and others are


planned linking Singapore to Canada, and Australia to the Pacific Islands.

Nanyang Technological University tourism expert Wong King Yin said: "All of them know that if they want to stimulate their economy, they need to reopen their borders. But the thing is, they are still not sure if there will be a second or third wave of virus so everyone is trying to do it step by step."

Singapore, Australia, Canada, South Korea and New Zealand, for example, are working to open their borders to each other and will start with essential business trips before adding leisure travel at a later date. The countries are looking to standardise protocols so that there will be mutual assurance of health standards in terms of testing and contact tracing.

Still, while the countries are taking a cautious approach, the potential of leisure travel resuming has got the tourism industry bubbling with excitement.

That shouldn't be surprising. After all, tourism has long been a huge driver of Asian economies. In 2018, tourism receipts accounted for 5.5 per cent of Singapore's gross domestic product (GDP), 5.8 per cent of Malaysia's, and more than 11 per cent of Vietnam's and Thailand's. In Cambodia, it was a whopping 17.8 per cent of GDP, while in regions heavily reliant on tourism – such as the Indonesian island of Bali – up to 70 per cent of the people depend on tourism.

That was the world before the coronavirus. The World Travel & Tourism Council projects there will be a staggering 63.4 million tourism job losses in Asia due to the pandemic. Singapore's Changi Airport, the world's 17th-busiest airport last year, has closed two of its four terminals as the number of flights dwindled. It has gone from handling 5.63 million passengers in March last year to just 100 arrival and 700 departure passengers a day.

## CHINESE TOURISTS TO THE RESCUE

One key plank of the strategy to restart tourism in Asia will be Chinese tourists.

Last year, Chinese tourists accounted for a fifth of arrivals in Singapore and more than a quarter of arrivals in Thailand. In 2018, 27 million Chinese tourists visited Asean countries, up almost tenfold from 2003.

Luckily for the region, of the 1,252 Chinese surveyed by the Pacific Asia Travel Association in March, 60 per cent said they intended to travel this year if the pandemic was brought under control and 35 per cent said they would give priority to countries that had supported China during the outbreak.

The top five places on their destination wishlist are Japan, Thailand, Europe, the Maldives and Singapore – good news for Thailand in particular, as Chinese made up 27 per cent of its 39.8 million tourists last year.

Meanwhile, Cambodia's tourism-facing businesses and destinations are preparing packages featuring health and safety measures such as social distancing on buses and in restaurants to appeal to Chinese travellers.

Cambodia tourism minister Thong Khon said he was optimistic Chinese tourists would support the kingdom after the pandemic because Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen had visited Beijing in February during the virus outbreak.

Already, Cambodia has lifted a travel ban on people arriving from six countries, including the United States, as long as they meet some requirements.

Korea Tourism Organisation's Beijing office has been running online marketing campaigns for Chinese tourists, including a quiz show. An official said: "China is one of our closest neighbours and I hope Chinese people acknowledge South Korea's efforts to maintain exchanges of people between the two countries despite the pandemic, although priority is now given to preventing the spread of the virus."

In Singapore, tour agency Dynasty Travel said China was still a top market for inbound tourists and it was looking at how to woo these visitors back.

Japan's destination management firm Aviareps is advising clients to set a good price point for a first wave of travellers who will hopefully post about their experiences online and encourage others to visit.

Aviareps general manager Ashley Harvey said he would target "Japan's most immediate and important markets" with a campaign specifically for health care workers and first responders from China.

"I think that China appreciates the support that Japan has extended during the crisis," Harvey said. "In the very early stages, before we all knew quite how bad this was going to be, Japan provided Wuhan with face masks and made other positive gestures. I think that will go a long way to encourage tourists to return to Japan."

In Indonesia, the city of Yogyakarta and the Riau islands province are hoping to reopen to tourists in October.

Australia's reopening is more cautious. A travel bubble with New Zealand is among its first measures, but it is also hoping to remain in the consciousness of travellers farther afield. Recently, it ran live virtual travel experiences with iconic Australian personalities, such as a morning workout with actor Chris Hemsworth.

## CHANGING MINDSETS

Still, even with a vaccine and the pandemic over, travel might not return to how it was before 2020. Deutsche Bank analyst Siobhan Lynch said history showed it took two to three years for passenger numbers to return to pre-crisis levels. Even then, some business travellers could choose to meet virtually instead, while leisure travellers might look for more flexible booking options such as flights that allow cancellations or changes, or book holidays with a shorter lead time.

Experts are also expecting a shift to domestic travel.

**SOUTH KOREA AND CHINA HAVE ALREADY OPENED A TRAVEL BUBBLE**

The Pacific Asia Travel Association survey of Chinese travellers found that 56 per cent would prefer domestic locations. This is already prevalent in Vietnam, where airlines say domestic flights are fast reaching capacity and the authorities debuted a tourism-promotion campaign, "Vietnamese People Travel in Vietnam", with hotels and resorts offering discounts to local travellers.

Even for small markets like Singapore, Dynasty Travel is looking at growing new market segments such as local tours.

Other trends tourism experts expect include a fall in the popularity of long-haul flights and a shift in preferences for travel destinations.

"People would prefer to go to destinations that are less crowded. Cities may not be that attractive, they may look at wellness travel – yoga or meditation holidays – adventures or retreats," said Wong.

In a market survey of its customers, Dynasty Travel found that people were now more keen on self-driving holidays in destinations such as Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand, or beach resorts in Indonesia and Thailand.

Its marketing director, Alicia Seah, said: "Once borders are opened, people may travel less than seven hours for holidays. Travellers will opt for more open spaces, nature resorts, stay in the suburbs instead of in the city, and engage in more outdoor activities."

Ngee Ann Polytechnic's senior lecturer in tourism Michael Chiam said it was early days, but he expected a focus on "quality tourism and not quantity tourists", so as to avoid another epidemic or pandemic. "Some say that niche tourism will grow as it appeals to small groups of tourists rather than the masses," he said.

"The industry will never be the same again. We must do things differently, given the new normal, and find new areas that we can thrive in." ■

A PALACE IN SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA. FAR LEFT: LOCAL TOURISTS RETURN FROM A CRUISE IN HA LONG BAY, VIETNAM. Photos: AFP

# Thais that bind

*The post-Covid future of the tourism industry that the Thai economy rests on lies in Chinese hands, and phones*

*BY VINCENT VICHIT-VADAKAN*

FEW PEOPLE ARE as aware of the devastation the novel coronavirus has inflicted on international travel as Chattan Kunjara Na Ayudhya, a deputy governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT).

Tourism accounts for 12 per cent of his country's GDP (up to 20 per cent when ancillary services are included) and provides jobs for almost one in 10 Thais, according to the International Labour Organisation.

But with borders closed and planes grounded across the world, this pillar of the Thai economy faces an uncertain future. The TAT's best-case scenariois that 14-16 million people will visit this year, more than the 8.5 million projected by the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, but far fewer than last year's record of 39.8 million, a figure that made it far and away Southeast Asia's most popular tourism destination.

Amid such unsettling figures, Kunjara Na Ayudhya knows one thing for sure: that "China will remain Thailand's and Asia's biggest outbound tourist market".

> **CHINA WILL REMAIN ASIA'S BIGGEST OUTBOUND TOURIST MARKET**
> Chattan Kunjara Na Ayudhya

Chinese accounted for more than one in four of the tourists who visited Thailand last year and their importance has only been magnified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Given that long-haul travel is not expected to rebound quickly, Thailand's tourism strategy is now focused squarely on the short-haul travellers who are most likely to return first: visitors from China.

Refloating this market will be crucial not only to resurrecting Thailand's economy, but also those of neighbouring Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. The ability of these countries to revive their own tourism industries depends in part on Thailand's successful reopening, as the airports of Bangkok serve as a hub for the region.

Doing so will be no easy task as Thailand will face increased competition from regional competitors like Vietnam and the Philippines, both of which had been in the middle of their own tourism booms before the virus struck, attracting 8.5 million and 8.26 million foreign arrivals respectively last year.

Both will be hoping to take out a chunk of the visitors who would traditionally pick Thailand. It will also face competition from China itself, with the pandemic having boosted interest in travel within the country.

"We cannot leave it too late to prepare for Chinese arrivals," Kunjara Na Ayudhya said. "International competition for this market is bound to be intense."

## FISH WHERE THE FISH ARE

Complicating matters is the fact that wholesale group travel – previously the sector's backbone – seems unlikely to bounce back swiftly. A survey of more than 1,000 seasoned travellers in major Chinese cities co-authored by the industry consultancy C9 Hotelworks found that 71 per cent of those planning foreign travel in 2020 would consider travelling to Thailand, and 83 per cent of this group said they would want to go as independent travellers.

The consultancy also believes older travellers will be slower to return to the market, noting that more than 80 per cent of those who responded to its survey were between the ages of 20 and 40.

There was additional good news for Thailand: half of those surveyed said they would spend 15,000 yuan (US$2,100) per trip.

C9 managing director Bill Barnett said targeting those predisposed to travel was a good way to drum up business in a short period of time. "Fish where the fish are" has become a mantra of his, repeated to travel professionals around the region in a series of webinars he co-hosts in which he urges businesses to pursue travellers likely to return to familiar territory, over first-timers who will take longer to convince.

He believes that despite the economic pressures facing travellers, their primary concerns are in fact health and safety. "Open markets when they're safe," he said. "We are by no means saying 'rush to market'."

Chinese may be among those most sceptical that it is indeed safe to return. Even before the pandemic, the industry was reeling from an incident in 2018 in which a poorly designed boat capsized in bad weather off Phuket, killing 47 Chinese tourists.

While Thailand responded to the incident with a series of new health and safety measures, the damage to Phuket's image had been done. The number of Chinese visiting the island plummeted after the incident and has never fully recovered.

To ease concerns over the coronavirus, hotels have embraced new protocols, from food safety to physical distancing, and want people to know it.

"Our first priority is to make all guests feel secure about health and hygiene," said Kris Priyajana, general manager of X2 Khao Lak Anda Mani Resort. "Being a small property, we can provide the luxury of space, privacy and distance."

TAT will reinforce that message, transforming its "Amazing Thailand" brand into "Amazing Trusted Thailand".

## NEW ACTIVITIES

Beyond addressing safety concerns, businesses are also developing new activities to appeal to experienced travellers. Expique, known for its nighttime excursions in open-air tuk-tuks, is gearing up to cater to individual travellers and smaller groups craving personalised experiences. China is "a bigger opportunity than ever", said founder Simon Philipp.

The company plans to offer tailored cooking classes and market tours by July. Philipp has had interest from Airbnb Experiences, the activity and events platform of the short-term accommodation giant. "They have big Chinese demand but limited [Chinese language] supply," he said.

The Peninsula Bangkok has partnered with James Liang, the CEO of Trip Group, parent company of Ctrip, by far the biggest online travel agent in China. The campaign labelled "Boss Recommends" will highlight experiences outside the hotel with Liang's personal stamp of approval.

The Peninsula has also turned to platforms like Fliggy, where individual brands can sell products and packages, then receive payment directly through the site's integrated Alipay system. Both companies are owned by Alibaba, which also owns the *South China Morning Post*.

From the earliest days of the shutdown in Wuhan, TAT posted uplifting messages of support and solidarity on WeChat and other platforms. On Douyin, better known outside China for lip-synching and choreographed dance numbers shared on its international version TikTok, TAT has continued to work with influencers like Wenyiqianer and her half million followers to maintain an active online presence throughout the crisis. Finding the right platform to reach consumers is key, whatever the message. Vanessa Zhu, director of Delivering Asia's Shanghai office that conducted the survey with C9, said there was an unexpected benefit of the prolonged lockdown. China's digitally connected population used their time online to "gain a lot of information about destinations they want to travel to, local foods they want to taste, all saved in their to-do list in their phone".

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: AN EMPTY BEACH IN PATTAYA; EMPTY BOATS AT A FLOATING MARKET, ALSO IN PATTAYA; HEALTH OFFICIALS CHECK TOURISTS' TEMPERATURES IN FEBRUARY, BEFORE FLIGHTS WERE GROUNDED. Photos: AFP, EPA

Even before the pandemic, the authorities were promoting ways to increase tourism, including schemes that give visitors discounts of up to 70 per cent on shopping. Other measures under discussion included the extension of opening hours of entertainment venues in destinations like Pattaya, Phuket and Krabi. To support Thai businesses, TAT has been organising webinars and video clips to provide the industry with up-to-date information and helping them to prepare for the return of tourists in the post-Covid-19 era.

Critically, discussions are also being held about the possibility of fast-tracking travellers from key markets, including China, if they can produce medical certificates and proof of travel insurance.

## WAITING FOR TAKE-OFF

Despite these great efforts to tempt tourists back, it is as yet uncertain when exactly travel to Thailand will be viable again.

International flights are scheduled to resume on July 1, a month later than previously announced. And even when flights do eventually resume, capacity will be a fraction of pre-Covid-19 levels.

The troubled national carrier Thai Airways, now facing restructuring under Thailand's receivership and bankruptcy laws, had previously offered a twice-daily service to Shanghai; from July, it will offer just two rotations a week. The other Thai Airways destinations in China – Beijing and Guangzhou – will be served by one and two flights a week respectively.

One solution may lie with low-cost carriers, which have more flexibility than traditional airlines to increase capacity quickly.

Air Asia is offering one rotation a day between Bangkok and Shanghai beginning on July 1 and two rotations with the megacity of Chongqing, among other destinations in China. Low-cost carriers may also add direct flights from Phuket and Chiang Mai to Chinese cities.

For TAT's Kunjara Na Ayudhya, the "best-case scenario" would be if, come October and the Chinese National Day holidays, the number of Chinese travellers had returned to 70 per cent of last year's level.

Time will tell if the combination of an industry eager to do business and a customer base of travel-starved consumers will be enough to make that dream come true. ■

ECONOMICS

# Conflict of interest

*A near-zero interest rate for Singapore's banks has led to a massive surge in lending to SMEs. But experts warn that if the V-shaped economy becomes a U-shape, everything will go pear-shaped*

BY **DEREK WONG** *and* **TAN SHAN MIN**

IN A CORONAVIRUS-STRICKEN world, Singapore's loan sharks and licensed moneylenders are feeling the pinch as struggling customers look elsewhere for cheaper credit.

Some loan sharks have been driven to desperation from a lack of business. Bogus advertisements for staff to enforce stay-home orders are actually requests for runners. Hundreds of dollars worth of food deliveries are sent to debtors as harassment.

ValueMax, one of Singapore's biggest moneylending and pawning chains with over 30 outlets, said it had seen fewer clients borrowing money since the start of the city state's partial lockdown, termed a "circuit breaker", on April 7.

A ValueMax spokesman attributed this to government assistance schemes. One such initiative, the MAS (Monetary Authority of Singapore) Singapore Dollar Facility, allows banks to borrow at a near-zero interest rate.

This means banks can reduce the cost of loans to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and offer an interest rate of between 2 and 4.5 per cent per annum, down from up to 6 per cent previously. In contrast, licensed moneylenders can charge up to 4 per cent monthly interest.

The result has been business owners flocking to apply for the government-backed loans. About 2,500 loans totalling S$1.9 billion (US$1.3 billion) were issued in March and April – six times the credit extended in the same period last year – with a high approval rate of 90 to 95 per cent.

The government has taken on a risk share of 90 per cent of the loans, with banks taking up the remainder.

But with many borrowers likely to close their businesses as the pandemic drags on, the risk of defaults looms large.

### TAKING THE HIT

Some business owners do not expect to see a quick recovery. One of them, who wanted to be known only as Peter, is planning to close his 14-year-old events company by the end of June if business does not pick up soon. This does not seem possible, as events which draw crowds of people are not likely to happen for the foreseeable future, even after the circuit breaker measures are eased next in June.

"Totally zero revenue since February. Two office spaces, six vehicles and 25 staff. We are bleeding S $100,000 a month and our reserves are almost dry," said Peter, who has turned to folding pizza boxes to make ends meet. He recently got married and has to fork out more than S$2,000 a month for his mortgage and car loan.

"Taking a loan is never off the table, but I see no way to pay it back," he said.

With doomsday scenarios looming for such sectors, loan defaults may take place en masse. Banks are already bracing themselves with billions of dollars' worth of provisions, resulting in profit drops for Singapore's three local banks for the first time since 2016. DBS, OCBC and UOB posted declines in year-on-year profits of between 19 and 43 per cent for the first quarter. The government and banks are holding out hope that the economy will bounce back and the loans will be enough to tide SMEs over for this period. But Professor Kim Sun Bae from the National University of Singapore Business School believes this may not work.

"Many governments, including Singapore's, appear to be making the baseline assumption that businesses are faced with a liquidity problem, not necessarily a solvency problem," he said.

"The risk of this backfiring clearly is if there is no 'V-shaped' recovery but a 'U-shaped' one, pushing some borrowers into insolvency."

THE MONETARY AUTHORITY OF SINGAPORE; STORES AT TIONG BAHRU MARKET SHUT DURING THE CIRCUIT BREAKER. Photos: Bloomberg

**TAKING A LOAN IS NEVER OFF THE TABLE, BUT I SEE NO WAY TO PAY IT BACK**
Peter

### WHATEVER IT TAKES

This was why the authorities were using the market to mitigate risk, said Professor Bernard Yeung, president of the Asian Bureau of Finance and Economic Research.

"The government goes through the local banks which have firm-specific information. The co-sharing of risks is to safeguard against overextension. But if the government takes on 100 per cent risk, then it is clearly a case of over-insurance," he said.

The loans were a risk worth taking to prevent the larger calamity of more businesses collapsing, said CIMB Private Banking economist Song Seng Wun. "There is no choice but for governments and central banks to use the 'whatever it takes' approach now, to roll out more and more measures to help as many businesses as possible to get back on their feet through this long, bumpy road," he said. "Unfortunately, there will be some who bail on the loans, but this is inevitable in any recession."

The effort was worth it as the potential downsides went beyond mere economics, observed Singapore Management University associate law professor Eugene Tan, a former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP).

"Should SMEs – which employ the vast majority of Singaporeans – fold, there would be knock-on effects on employees, their families and the economy," he said. "It's a ripple effect and the human costs, often untold, are not to be trifled with – in terms of lost opportunity, livelihoods, personal and family well-being."

For now, it may be better to err on the side of saving more businesses, believes economist and NMP Walter Theseira, although he warned that more care may have to be shown in follow-on lending, or lending to sectors which are structurally affected by Covid-19.

Nonetheless, he said Singapore's banks were well-capitalised and regulated enough. "It is not plausible that the bad loans in this programme are so large as to threaten banking viability. Banks have made provision for far greater losses already in the context of the Hin Leong collapse, those losses are not supported by the government, and nobody thinks that the Singapore banks are unable to bear the loss," he said, referring to the three local banks that had more than S$871.5 million combined exposure to Hin Leong. ■

**CHINA BRIEFING** WANG XIANGWEI

# China should rein in 'wolf warrior' diplomats and let actions talk instead

IN THE RUN-UP to the two-day meeting last week of the World Health Assembly, the decision-making body of the World Health Organisation (WHO), expectations were building in the international media that China faced an unprecedented backlash.

Beijing reportedly was resisting growing pressure for an independent investigation into the origins of the pandemic; Taiwan was lobbying hard on its latest attempt to join the body as an observer, and some expected the United States to use the forum to ratchet up attacks on China and the WHO, all of which threatened to mar the international body's first major gathering since the outbreak of the coronavirus.

But in fact it turned out quite well for Beijing, which largely came across as the good guy, as compared to Washington which threatened to permanently cut off funding to the WHO at a time when health officials are saying it is needed more than ever to lead the fight against Covid-19.

Let's hope Chinese officials will ride on the back of Beijing's performance at the WHO to improve the country's global image by scaling back the blame game with Washington and its aggressive "wolf warrior" diplomacy, and allow its actions to speak louder than words.

**FANNING NATIONALISTIC SENTIMENT CAN BACKFIRE**

While US President Donald Trump was notably absent, Chinese President Xi Jinping projected China as a responsible world power in his speech on Monday by appealing for international cooperation, pledging US$2 billion to the WHO in the next two years, and promising to make self-developed vaccines available to all as "a global public good".

More importantly, Xi said China would back "a comprehensive review of global response" to the coronavirus, to be led by the WHO after the pandemic was brought under control.

And in the end, the sensitive issue of whether Taiwan should be granted observer status failed to make it on to the agenda at the assembly meeting, just like on previous occasions.

To be sure, Beijing's gesture of goodwill at the assembly was overshadowed by Washington's efforts to lob accusations against China. These included Trump labelling the WHO as "a puppet of China" and threatening to withdraw funds permanently unless the body could "demonstrate independence from China".

And Xi's speech might have been met with scepticism in the international media, where some interpreted it as an attempt by Beijing to distract attention from its earlier missteps in handling the outbreak.

But it should go down well in the developing countries, particularly in Africa where medical infrastructure and preparedness for virus outbreaks are weak. Indeed, Xi said the Chinese government would work with the United Nations to set up a global humanitarian depot and hub in China and help establish "green corridors" to move medical supplies quickly to the rest of the world. China will also allow its hospitals to "pair up" with 30 African hospitals and accelerate the building of the African CDC headquarters to enhance Africa's response to the pandemic. He said Beijing would work with the world's richest countries on debt relief for the poorest nations.

PATRIOTIC: WU JING AND CELINA JADE IN WOLF WARRIOR 2. File photo

Regardless of China's motives, it has offered concrete and detailed measures and financial commitments to help fight the global pandemic. In comparison, Washington's sole focus has been on blaming China.

Xi's speech came shortly before China began its long-delayed annual session of the National People's Congress on Friday. The Chinese leadership hopes to use the hugely symbolic occasion to project an air of assuredness in the face of the pandemic.

Xi's public backing of "a comprehensive review" of the global response to the pandemic is welcome but it should have come much sooner. Until Monday, China had been at a distinct disadvantage as the US and Australia tried to build a campaign calling for an international investigation targeting China's initial handling of the outbreak. Chinese officials had rightly argued that such a campaign was politically motivated to stigmatise China but Beijing's sole focus on resisting such calls was counterproductive.

As argued in this space, China's backing for an international science-based investigation without prejudice and preconditions, as voiced by Xi on Monday, could help Beijing break out of Washington's encirclement, clear the air with the international community and win more friends.

Over the past few weeks, Trump and other China hawks have ratcheted up tensions by calling the virus "a plague from China", hoping to make Beijing appear solely responsible for this human tragedy. Chinese officials and state media have reacted furiously, calling certain US politicians – US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in particular – names. Such a blame game is not only useless, but it is dangerous too.

Xi's speech on Monday offers hopes for a change. Throughout, Xi appealed for international collaboration and promised detailed measures and support for the global battle against the pandemic, without going after the US.

That is the wise thing to do. Over the past few months, Beijing has ramped up its propaganda machine to push back against Washington's narrative and its diplomats around the world have conducted so-called "wolf warrior" diplomacy by taking a robust, often confrontational approach to any criticism of China, in the name of defending the national interest.

This style of diplomacy is named after a movie series that depicts China's special forces undertaking overseas operations. The movies have become popular with the Chinese public, thanks to their patriotic tone.

But the reality is that China's propaganda is just propaganda, disingenuous and ineffective. The more the Communist Party tightens the control of its media for the propaganda purpose, the less convincing its messages will become.

For instance, China's national television station CCTV has aired a daily commentary during prime time over the past two weeks that blasts US politicians as "evil", like "monkeys wearing a hat" and "hated by both man and god". Such vitriol is unnecessary and unproductive, reminding many people of the language common in official media during the Cultural Revolution.

The efforts by the "wolf warrior" diplomats who used to be trained to write dispatches behind closed doors like their foreign counterparts have produced mixed results at best.

The fiery response from the state media and the "wolf warrior" diplomats may go down well with the hardliners and give vent to their anger towards what they see as unfair treatment of China in the international media.

But fanning such nationalistic sentiment can also backfire. Wang Gungwu, an eminent historian and sinologist, was right on point when he said in a recent interview that "the more nationalistic the Chinese people become, the less attractive their country will become".

Over the past few months, the Chinese media has turbocharged propaganda about the wisdom and leadership of the Communist Party in taming the pandemic, but highlighting the ideological superiority of communist values is hardly a way to win friends overseas. On the contrary, such propaganda will do nothing constructive as communism and its values are off-putting for most people in the world.

That is not to say Chinese officials or the state media should bite their tongues but they must be disciplined in responding to the backlash from the West. They must choose their battles wisely and fight for what really matters, instead of the current approach of swinging indiscriminately.

More importantly, at a time when many overseas analysts and investors have complained about "promise fatigue" – in reference to China promising things then failing to deliver them promptly – it is time to allow actions to speak louder than words.

Currently, China is a leader in the frantic race to develop coronavirus vaccines and Xi has vowed to make the China-developed vaccines available to all in the world as a "global public good". This promise comes amid rising worries that vaccine nationalism will see certain countries keen to supply their citizens first, thus disrupting global distribution.

Just imagine the goodwill China will reap if it succeeds in becoming among the first to develop viable and safe vaccines and uses its massive production facilities to share them promptly with the world. ■

Wang Xiangwei is the former editor-in-chief of the South China Morning Post. He is now based in Beijing as editorial adviser to the paper





# No money, no food and 2,000km from home

*That is the situation facing millions of India's migrant workers in a growing humanitarian crisis*

*BY KUNAL PUROHIT*

OFF THE DUSTY national highway that connects Mumbai to northern India, Rambhau Prasad Yadav, 52, sits on his haunches, waiting. It is early Thursday evening and his face mask is wet from sweat, the fabric so thin his lips are showing through.

Yadav, a labourer in a gas utility company, is looking for ways to return to his hometown, 2,000km east in the state of Bihar.

He has been waiting to do so for two months. At first, he was waiting for India's lockdown, implemented in mid-March and now scheduled to last until May 31, to be lifted. Things had looked up, briefly, when the Mumbai police asked migrant workers like him to fill in forms to be repatriated, but then he heard nothing more.

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In the three days before *This Week in Asia* spoke to him, Yadav was waiting for food. Out of money after his employers stopped paying him due to the lockdown, he lived on khichdi, a porridge made of rice and lentils, handed out by a community kitchen. When the kitchen closed, Yadav asked neighbours if he could borrow money to buy fuel to cook the rice grains he had left. They turned him down.

"After three nights of sleeping on an empty stomach, I could not take it any more," he says, the whites of his eyes yellow.

On Thursday morning, he began walking to the highway, taking only a half-filled small gunny sack. After walking more than 25km in eight hours, he stopped.

"I can't walk much in this heat," he concluded, pointing to his slip-on shoes with a hole in them. His urine, he added, was blood red. He said he was hoping, and waiting, for someone – perhaps a truck or bus driver – to give him a ride east.

Yadav's story has echoes across India's cities, where millions of migrant workers, scarred by an economic shutdown that has left them jobless, hungry and penniless, are struggling to return to their villages and families.

Their migration has become an unending humanitarian crisis for the country's poorest.

Critics say New Delhi's handling of the pandemic, with few provisions for the millions of migrant workers serving India's large unorganised sector, broke the fragile social contract these workers shared with the government.

And as these migrants desperately try to leave cities – walking hundreds of kilometres, pedalling on rickety bicycles with children riding pillion, hanging onto overcrowded trucks, sneaking across police checkpoints in milk containers and cement mixers and even swimming across rivers – for some it has proven fatal. In the last week alone, more than 50 migrant workers have been killed in road accidents, while on Sunday, 26 were killed when the truck they were travelling in collided with another truck in Auraliya, Uttar Pradesh.

## FRUSTRATION AND DESPERATION

Mumbai's position as the country's economic nerve centre makes it one of the biggest destinations for India's migrant workers. Data from India's last population census in 2011 shows that between 2001 and 2011, Mumbai and its neighbouring areas absorbed more than 3 million new migrants from across the country. These workers form the backbone of the city's economy, from its construction sector to its transport services to smaller manufacturing industries.

Illyas Shaikh, 22, from West Bengal's Murshidabad, is among them. A labourer on construction sites, his job vanished with the lockdown.

"My employer owes me over a month's salary, but he refuses to take my calls and answer my texts," he said, his mask barely touching his upper lip.

Shaikh used to earn 450 rupees (US$6) for a day's labour. With no income for nearly two months, Shaikh had just 100 rupees left when he decided to leave and started asking friends to lend him money. "But they were all as broke as I was," he said. Eventually, having borrowed from 20 people, he had a total of 500 rupees and started walking out of Mumbai. His hometown is 2,100km away.

On Wednesday, when he reached the city's borders at Majiwada, a busy junction where arterial roads intersect the National Highway 160 connecting northern India to Mumbai, Shaikh was happy to see buses that could take him 400km north. Never mind that he had to go eastward.

But the long lines meant he could not board the bus. And there was no one to tell him when the next bus would come.

So, Shaikh, like thousands of others at the highway junction, waited. "I just slept on the highway, under that flyover," he said, pointing to the bridge in the middle of the junction. On Thursday, when he was interviewed, he was not any closer to leaving.

"I don't know how I'll get there, but I need to get out of here," he said.

## THE SLIVER OF HOPE

Last week, the government announced that it would distribute free foodgrains to 80 million migrant workers who have, so far, not been eligible for such subsidies. It also announced affordable, rental homes for these workers.

But these measures will take time to have an effect. In the meantime, little has been done to address the immediate needs of people like Yadav. On the highway, for instance, where thousands of workers gather each day, there are no toilets or shelters. The absence of food security has meant that civil sector organisations have had to step in to fill the void.

One of them is Khaana Chahiye, which has been distributing food packets daily at the highway and at railway stations where migrant workers are being sent back in limited trains each day.

It has also been sending meals to frontline workers. So far, it has distributed over 2.4 million meals at the highway since March 27, each meal consisting of a hot snack, at least two different fruits and a bottle of water.

The group has teamed up with city restaurants to provide hot meals to the group at cost price.

Such a model, said co-founder Swaraj Shetty, ensured only the best quality food was used.

Funded by donations, the group of 100 volunteers, from accounting consultants to IT professionals, fan out across the city each day, donning gloves, masks, face shields and orange reflector jackets.

"Our volunteers have been the backbone of our operations. When a funding crunch forced us to curtail operations for a few days, I would get angry calls from our volunteers because they wanted to go out and help and weren't able to," said Ruben Mascarenhas, another co-founder.

The project started when one of the co-founders stopped to talk to some of the migrants in an unending stream on the highways leaving the city.

Pathik Muni, another co-founder, said stories of hardship often played out in front of them.

"We once saw a couple with a nine-month-old baby, walking back home north, 2,000km away. We just kept thinking, how is the baby going to make it in this heat?"

For Yadav, the hot snack he got from the volunteers was his first meal in three days.

As he tucked in, he went over his options, wondering aloud which one he shouldtake – a bus for a few hundred kilometres, "but then what?", or a truck all the way home, "but I don't have the money".

Eventually, he broke down. The answers weren't easy, he said.

Before he set out on his trek to the highway, Yadav saw Prime Minister Narendra Modi announce economic initiatives aimed at helping India turn the pandemic into an opportunity to produce more and import less.

It has been on his mind since.

"Modi said he wants India to be self-reliant. Has he left us any choice, anyway?"

**I DON'T KNOW HOW I'LL GET THERE, BUT I NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE**

Illyas Shaikh, 22, who has US$6 in his pocket and 2,100km to travel

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE: MIGRANT WORKERS OUTSIDE MUMBAI'S BANDRA TERMINUS RAILWAY STATION; ILLYAS SHAIKH (IN GREEN TOP); VOLUNTEERS WITH KHAANA CHAHIYE. Photos: Kunal Purohit