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Asia report

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US-CHINA

Collision course?



The trade spat between the United States and China is part of a deeper contest for geopolitical dominance. Does history – and ongoing developments – hold hope for a solution, or some compromise?

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Tit-for-tat tariffs

Here's a look at the list of Chinese goods facing US tariffs and list of US goods that China is targeting as the trade war between the two economies continues.



List of Chinese goods facing US tariffs in latest retaliatory move

The US Trade Representative's Office plans to hold a public hearing in June on a proposal to impose duties on a further US\$300 billion (\$411 billion) worth of imports from China. Here are some of the items on its list of 3,805 product categories that could be subject to tariffs of up to 25%. If the tariffs are imposed, they would make virtually all Chinese imports to the United States subject to steep, punitive duties.



Food products

- Fresh produce
- Meat
- Fish, including cod, haddock and salmon
- Chicken
- Milk
- Wine
- Cocoa
- Olive oil and other kinds of oil, including sunflower oil, palm oil and coconut oil



Manufactured goods

- Chemicals
- Plastic and rubber
- Wood and paper products
- Leather
- Metal products



Consumer goods

- Clothing
- Bedsheets
- Shoes
- Watches
- Baby pacifiers
- Infant formula
- Pencil sharpeners
- Pesticides
- Books



Electronics

- Cellphones
- Laptops
- Tablet computers
- Microphones



Transport

- Cars, bikes and parts

List of US goods China is targeting with 25% tariff

China raises tariffs on US\$60 billion (\$82 billion) worth of US goods on June 1 in retaliation for the Trump administration's decision to increase tariffs on US\$200 billion worth of Chinese imports, from 10% to 25%. Beijing will increase tariffs on more than 5,000 US products from 5% to as high as 25%, the Chinese Finance Ministry said. Here is a list of some of the 2,493 goods that are be subject to a 25% tariff.



Food products

- Frozen, dried, smoked and salted beef
- Honey
- Frozen spinach and legumes, including peas,

beans and lentils

- Fine and coarse rice, corn and wheat flour as well as processed oats
- Any plant used mainly as a spice
- Virgin olive oil, peanut oil, soya bean oil, sunflower oil, coconut oil and sesame oil
- Soft drinks and bottled water
- Spirits, including gin, tequila, vodka and other distilled spirits and alcoholic beverages



Consumer goods

- Furniture, including metal or wood frames for upholstered furniture
- Bedding and sleeping bags

- Footwear, including leather and rubber boots, sports shoes and accessories for shoes
- Hats, umbrellas and walking sticks
- Lighting fixtures
- Watches and clocks
- Musical instruments, including upright pianos, stringed instruments, wind instruments and keyboards



Natural resources and chemicals

- Rocks, including granite, marble, chalk and sandstone
- Precious and semiprecious stones, including diamonds,

rubies and emeralds

- Metal ores, including iron, nickel, zinc, titanium and zirconium
- Natural liquid gas
- Fertilisers
- Chemicals, including chlorine, iodine and sulphuric acid
- Dyes and pigment



Transport

- Parts for railway or tramway locomotives
- Track signal equipment for railway or tramway

- Sailboats, motorboats and yachts
- Canoes and other recreational vessels



Electronics

- Coffee makers, hair dryers, microwaves, space heaters, electric ovens
- Television broadcast cameras
- Telecommunications equipment

- Microphones, headphones, speakers, recorders, DVD players and other accessories for video and audio equipment



Building materials

- Building stone, bricks, panels and floor tiles
- Wall and ceiling coverings
- Pipes and tubes
- Wood flooring and carpets

- Small tools, including handsaws, scissors and other blades
- Tools used for drilling, milling or boring

Warren Fernandez

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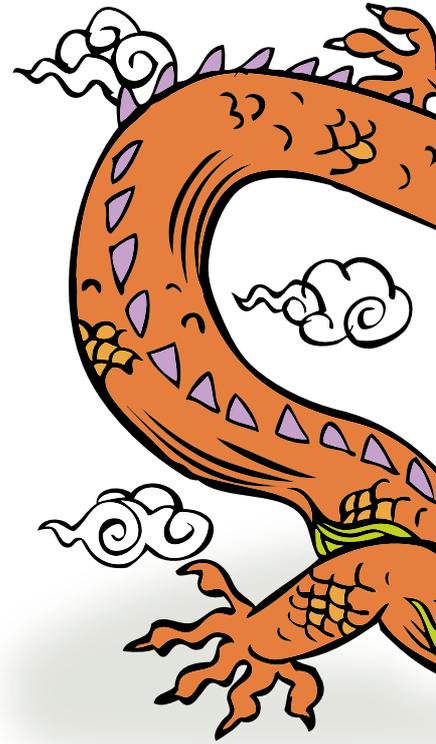
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44

Entertainment

How Game Of Thrones changed television



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4

Cover Story

Are the superpowers heading for a collision, or can they be frenemies?

What would Lee Kuan Yew advise?

A world where events 'ebb and flow'



16

Cover Story

China not blinking as it digs in for prolonged trade war

20

Speaking Of Asia

What if China does yield?

Shaping the Indo-Pacific story: Asean's turn



Cover Story

Trump may be seeking to decouple US economy from China's

contents



24

Business Watch

Huawei on the ropes?



28

Fight Fake news

Singapore adopts fake news law

37

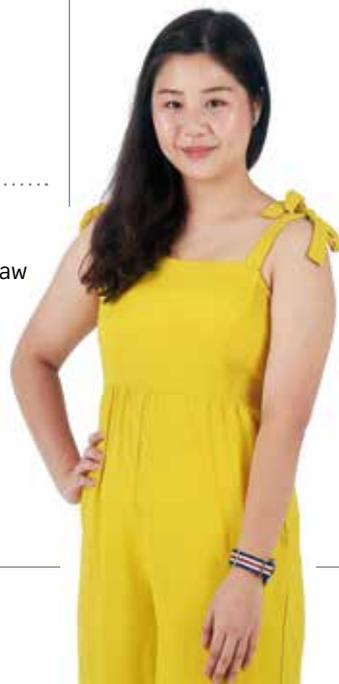
Country update

PM Morrison pulls off Australian election 'miracle'

43

Singapore Watch

Women expect to be paid less



39

Singapore Watch

Singapore's 19-year-olds: Who they are, what they want

Key finds of 19+ Worldview survey

A degree? Yes, please

Purpose over pay cheques

49

Entertainment

China's rumble over royals

52

Big Picture

Cardboard metropolis

US-CHINA

Are the superpowers heading for a collision, or can they be frenemies?



WARREN FERNANDEZ
Editor-in-Chief



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Harvard thinker Graham Allison, who wrote about conflicts between great powers, shares his insights on how to avoid clashes and find a way forward, perhaps through 'rivalry partnership' between the key players.

THESE DAYS, HARVARD PROFESSOR GRAHAM Allison is hailed as something of a prophet.

Officials he met in China recently referred to him as the man who "predicted" a clash between the United States and China, he says.

"It was not a prophesy," he adds. "I simply pointed out the recurring patterns of history.

"Today, the conversation has moved to the more urgent question, which is, what's to be done, and how to escape Thucydides' Trap?"

He is talking about his ground-breaking, best-selling book, published in 2017, with the ominous title, *Destined For War: Can America And China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*

The book, whose title refers to an ancient Greek historian's chronicle of upstart Athens taking on Sparta, caught global attention for its study of 16 periods of power rivalry over the past five centuries. These resulted in a major clash in 12 instances.

"It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this

instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable," the book notes.

The insecurity engendered in the incumbent power at the prospect of being displaced by an emerging challenger could set them up for a conflict that neither might want.

This could be sparked by events beyond their control, giving rise to a cycle of actions and reactions, resulting in an unintended clash.

"It's crazy, but these things can happen," notes Prof Allison, pointing to the events that led to the First World War. The assassination of archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, by a Serbian nationalist in June 1914 dragged Europe into a devastating war within weeks.

His analysis about the power dynamic between waxing and waning powers – China, he says, is a "fast-moving, unstoppable force heading for an immovable object", namely the US – seems prescient and timely, given the ongoing, increasingly bellicose,



Sino-US trade spat.

This took a marked turn for the worse in May, when US President Donald Trump accused Beijing of backtracking on commitments for a proposed trade deal, which Beijing denies.

The sticking points seem to be China's baulking at America's insistence that it cut state subsidies to its enterprises, open up its markets, curb industrial espionage, and agree to a mechanism to enforce any trade deal that might be reached.

These demands cause deep unease in China, as they revive painful memories of the so-called "unequal treaties" imposed on it by Western powers in the 19th century.

That gave rise to the much-lamented "century of humiliation", when China felt subjugated by Western powers, and which it is only now beginning to shake off. With China rising as an economic power, some voices in Beijing are asserting that the time has come for a rewriting of geopolitical rules framed at a time when China was a shadow of its past greatness.

Clearly, the trade dispute is symptomatic of a wider, deeper tussle under way for geopolitical leadership, as well as technological and military dominance, which is likely to play out for some time.

Against this backdrop, the debate over the

validity of the idea of a Thucydides trap is "largely over", insists Prof Allison, a former dean at my alma mater, Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, who has served as an adviser to defence secretaries under the Reagan, Clinton and Obama administrations.

He is at pains to add that his book was "not about predicting a war, but how to prevent one".

That, he reveals, is his next big project, which aims to galvanise "strategic imagination" from thinkers around the world to find ways to foresee and forestall potential conflicts.

LEE KUAN YEW, MY MENTOR

At a recent meeting in his book-filled office at the Kennedy school, where he still teaches, Prof Allison, 79, recounts how it was Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who pressed him to spend more time studying China, and who became "his tutor and mentor" on the subject.

Referring to the late Mr Lee as one of the world's foremost China watchers, Prof Allison recalls how the Singapore statesman, then 88, reacted when he asked him if he thought China under President Xi Jinping was minded to displace the United States as the world's pre-eminent power.

"His piercing eyes widened with incredulity, as if

US President Donald Trump and China's President Xi Jinping at a working dinner in Buenos Aires in December. Mr Trump recently accused Beijing of backtracking on commitments for a proposed trade deal, which Beijing denies.

PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

to ask, 'Are you kidding me?'. He answered directly: 'Of course. Why not? How could they not aspire to be number one in Asia and in time the world,' he writes in his book.

The driving force behind this push was President Xi's "China Dream", which Prof Allison sums up as a desire to "Make China Great again."

"Forty years ago, the Chinese people were miserably poor. Today, they now have a per capita income about a quarter the size of the US in purchasing power parity (PPP). How fantastic is that?" he notes in an interview with *The Straits Times*.

"But you can't say to them, 'that's good enough, you should be happy'. They will say, 'we want to make China great again'. Which means they want to have a GDP that is half the US, maybe three-quarters, or equal. And who could deny them that?"

from China's relentless economic march. Putting it starkly, he notes that, for some in Beijing, "Making China Great Again" entails:

Returning China to the predominance in Asia that it enjoyed before the West intruded.

Re-establishing control over the territories of "greater China", including not just Xinjiang and Tibet on the mainland, but also Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Recovering its historic sphere of influence along its border and in the adjacent seas so that others give it the deference great nations have always demanded.

Commanding the respect of other great powers in the councils of the world.

He adds in his book: "At the core of these national goals is the civilisation creed that sees China as the centre of the universe... In this narrative, the rise of the West in recent centuries is a historical anomaly, reflecting China's technological and military weakness when it faced dominant imperial powers. Xi Jinping has promised his fellow citizens: no more."

COLLISION COURSE

The US and China are on a collision course. The foundations of goodwill that took decades to build are rapidly breaking down. Many Americans are starting to see China as a rising power seeking unfairly to undercut America's economic prosperity, threaten its security, and challenge its values, while many Chinese see the US as a declining power seeking to prolong its dominance by unfairly containing China's rise.



– THE ASIA SOCIETY, in a report by a special China task force it set up and chaired by Orville Schell and Susan Shirk.

China, he adds, has already surpassed the US on several economic indicators, such as being the world's biggest economy (on PPP terms), its largest manufacturer and consumer of many products, and largest trading power to many countries around the world.

This, he argues, is a "structural reality" that has to be faced by the US, and the world.

Further, with China's huge market and economy, comes what Prof Allison calls "geo-economic power", the ability to hold sway over other countries seeking to participate in its surging economic growth.

But for generations of Americans brought up on the idea of the US being at the top of the pecking order on many fronts, with all the power and perquisites that this entails, the new reality comes as a shock. It leaves many discomfited about what it all portends for them, and the world.

"The US should stop playing, 'let's pretend'", he says pointedly in his book. "Instead, it needs to take the economic and strategic challenge from China seriously, start investing in boosting its economy and developing its technological capabilities, because the status quo cannot be sustained when the underlying economic balance of power has tilted so dramatically in China's favour."

With the same candour, the Harvard professor points to the geopolitical implications that arise

END OF THE ILLUSION

The view of China as a rising and revisionist power is now widely held in Washington circles, says Prof Allison. Indeed, I found this to be so in many conversations I had with business, political and academic leaders in the US while on a recent visit.

The previous consensus, advanced by the Obama administration, that drawing China into the international system would make it a responsible stakeholder – or strategic partner – in the global order is now regarded as overly optimistic, if not downright naive. It has given way to a new view of China as a strategic rival to the US, out to displace it from its present perch.

This deep shift in thinking straddles the political divide. It pre-dates, and will outlast, Mr Trump's tenure in the White House, notes Professor Joseph Nye, also a former dean of the Kennedy school.

"It would be a mistake to think that the cause of this shift is Trump. There was a fire that was smouldering... Trump is like the man who comes along and pours gasoline on the fire," he tells *The Straits Times*.

A report published in February by a special China task force set up by the New York-based Asia Society, chaired by seasoned China policy hands Orville Schell and Susan Shirk, sums up this new mood in Washington starkly: "The US and China are on a collision course. The foundations of goodwill that took decades to build are rapidly breaking down."

"Many Americans are starting to see China as a rising power seeking unfairly to undercut America's economic prosperity, threaten its security, and challenge its values, while many Chinese see the US as a declining power seeking to prolong its dominance by unfairly containing China's rise."

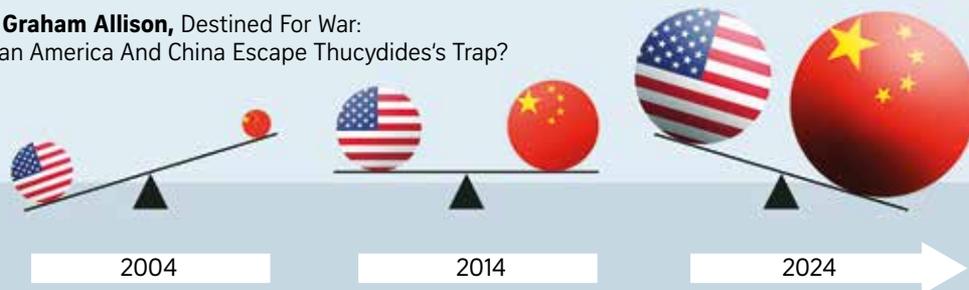
The report accuses China of "actions that defy norms of fair economic competition, abrogate international law, and violate fundamental

Who's rebalancing whom

Compare the relative weight of the US and Chinese economies as if they were two competitors on opposite ends of a seesaw. The conclusion is as obvious as it is painful. Americans have been debating whether they should put less weight on their left foot (the Middle East) in order to put more weight on their right (Asia). Meanwhile, China has just kept growing — at three times the US rate. As a result, America's side of the seesaw has tilted to the point that soon both feet will be dangling entirely off the ground.



– **Graham Allison**, *Destined For War: Can America And China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*



GDP (PPP) in billions of dollars

	2004	2014	2024 est.
China	5,760	18,228	35,596
US	12,275	17,393	25,093

Sources: **Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, IMF, Economist Intelligence Unit**

principles of reciprocity?”

It concludes: “The Trump administration is justified in pushing back harder against China’s actions, but pushback alone isn’t a strategy.”

In addition to becoming a responsible stakeholder in the global order, many Western liberals had also harboured hopes that economic progress would push China to become “more like us”, with political reforms following inevitably.

Their disappointment that this has not happened is well captured in a much-talked-about book by Mr Robert Kagan, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, *The Jungle Grows Back: America And Our Imperilled World*.

Mr Kagan says: “Where once many hoped that all nations of the world would converge on a liberal democratic capitalist development, we now see authoritarianism surviving, if not thriving.

“Where once we believed that economic progress must eventually require political liberalisation, we now see autocracies successfully practising a state capitalism compatible with repressive government.”

The idea that economic growth would push China towards becoming more liberal and democratic was not one that was universally subscribed to in Asia. Singapore’s Mr Lee, for one, often countered that view by asserting that rather than aspiring to become a liberal democracy, the Chinese people were seeking progress and development, in pursuit not only of better lives materially, but also a sense of pride and national dignity.

A belated recognition of this is now taking hold in Western policy circles, causing some discomfort, even dismay.

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY?

Not everyone, however, shares Prof Allison’s conclusions about what history tells us about the future of great power rivalry.

Prof Nye, for one, holds a rather different view about the future of Sino-US relations from his Harvard colleague. China, argues Prof Nye, is not about to overtake the United States any time soon, economically or technologically.

The US has many advantages, from the soft power it holds around the world, which boosts the strength of its partnerships and alliances, to its ability to draw talent from around the world to the US.

He recalls once asking Mr Lee, with whom he served on the board of French oil giant Total, if he believed that China might one day displace the US.

Mr Lee’s answer, according to Prof Nye, was that while China would give the US a run for its money, given its huge market and population, it would run up against America’s ability to tap the talents of billions of people around the world, combining their ideas in innovative ways.

Prof Nye concludes: “The problem for the US and China is not just the rise of power of China, it’s rather the fear in the US... So, what worries me about books with titles like *Destined For War*, is that they contribute to the problem they are diagnosing.”

Another veteran China watcher, National University of Singapore professor Wang Gungwu, also advises caution about the historical parallels drawn by Prof Allison.

“Athens and Sparta were close neighbours and basically the same people; like brothers fighting, or the bitterness of civil wars.

“Ditto with Germans and the English ruling class and most of Allison’s examples.

“I am not sure US and China relations have much in common. What is real is that China is trying to recover from a disastrous 150 years and thinks that the US prefers to see the country weak and divided.

“It sees itself as trying hard not to be provoked, while the US is pushing to provide an excuse to put China down. To the Chinese leaders, if the US is setting the ‘trap’, they will try to avoid falling into it.

“Given the nature of war today, the wise will try their utmost to manage the really dangerous risks.”

AVOIDING THE TRAP

What is real is that China is trying to recover from a disastrous 150 years and thinks that the US prefers to see the country weak and divided. It sees itself as trying hard not to be provoked, while the US is pushing to provide an excuse to put China down. To the Chinese leaders, if the US is setting the ‘trap’, they will try to avoid falling into it. Given the nature of war today, the wise will try their utmost to manage the really dangerous risks.



– Professor Wang Gungwu, National University of Singapore

FRENEMIES?

Amid the escalating Sino-US trade spat, with hawks in Washington ratcheting up the rhetoric about a “decoupling” of the US and China economies, and even talk of a “clash of civilisations” with rival political systems coming head-to-head, it is little wonder that musings about the possibility of war might strike some as needlessly alarmist.

But Prof Allison argues that it is precisely the souring of bilateral ties caused by the ongoing trade dispute that risks creating the politics, perceptions and psychology that make a clash harder to avoid.

History, he says, simply shows the past patterns. The key question is whether today’s political leaders will have the wisdom to learn the lessons that might be drawn from the past.

That, he says, is his next big project. He is calling for thinkers and players around the world to exercise “strategic imagination” and come up with ways to manage the “systemic risk arising from a structural reality”.

Doing so calls for some deep thinking about where tensions might flare up, such as by North Korea or in the Taiwan Straits, or even the South

China Sea, and working out pragmatic protocols that might enable such flashpoints to be avoided, managed and, if need be, defused.

He adds that he has been studying nine possible paths to escape the dreaded Thucydides trap. Each of these has its own lessons to be drawn, but none is exactly what he is looking for, so his search for ideas continues (see sidebar).

So far, the most promising of these, he says, is the Chanyuan treaty in 1005 between Song dynasty rulers and a proto-Mongolian tribe called the Liao, when both sides agreed to be “rivalry partners.” Or, in today’s parlance, “frenemies”.

“They agreed to be rivals and also be partners. That sounds complex, even contradictory. But, in life, we have many such complex relationships,” he says, adding that the pact gave rise to 120 years of peace.

Next, he points to the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, when President John F. Kennedy went head-to-head with his Soviet counterpart Nikita Khrushchev, and came close to plunging the world into a nuclear exchange.

Notes Prof Allison: “Kennedy came away from that experience a changed man. And he said, ‘We can’t do that again!’ He forged a new vision. To settle for a world that was safe for diversity.”

Given the tectonic shifts taking place in the world today with the rise of China, perhaps it is time to think of ways to “make the world safe for diversity”, he adds, proffering the idea of “rivalry partnership” again.

This idea, he notes, is well understood in the business world. Apple and Samsung, for example, compete aggressively in the market, yet Samsung is also a components supplier to its American rival.

Prof Nye takes a similar view, and refers to what he terms “cooperative rivalry.” China and the US need to realise that, despite their differences, there are many issues on which they can – and, indeed, need to – work together. These range from managing the global economy to tackling climate change.

He says: “The US and China are not existential threats to one another. We are not a threat to their existence and they are not to our existence. As long as it’s on that level, then we can manage a cooperative rivalry.”

Pointing to the challenge of global warming, he adds: “The present US President is not interested in climate change. But the next one, whether in 2020 or 2024, is going to have to be.”

Such an approach of working together on common challenges, even while competing in other areas, would diffuse some of the inherent tensions between great powers more used to taking a zero-sum view of the world.

And doing so might help avoid the dangerous dynamic whereby underlying suspicions give rise to actions, and counter-reactions, which – as history shows – can lead to unexpected and unintended conflicts. 

US-CHINA TIES

What would Lee Kuan Yew advise?

JUST WHAT WOULD SINGAPORE'S FOUNDING father Lee Kuan Yew say if he was asked for advice on how the United States and China might avoid a clash that no one wants?

This is the intriguing question posed by Harvard Professor Graham Allison in the conclusion of his book discussing the so-called Thucydides trap – where a rising power threatens to eclipse a rival, provoking conflict.

He argues that if China's President Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump listened to Mr Lee, they would focus on what matters most: their domestic problems.

"What is the single largest challenge to America's national security today? What poses the single largest threat to America's standing in the world? The answer to both questions is found in failures of the American political system," writes Prof Allison.

"Ask the same questions of China and the answers are again the same: failures of governance. Honest observers in both countries are increasingly recognising that neither 'decadent' democracy nor 'responsive' authoritarianism is fit for meeting the 21st century's severest tests."

The US, he laments, is paralysed by poisonous partisan bickering, which has undermined trust in the government. This has hampered its ability to make critical decisions, including on the need to invest in education and research.

China, for its part, was also hampered by an outmoded "operating system", with overweening central controls stymieing reforms and innovation, making it too closed to new thinking and ideas.

"If the leaders of each society grasped the seriousness of the problems it faced on the home front, and gave them the priority they deserved, officials would discover that devising a way to 'share the 21st century in Asia' was not their most serious challenge.

"Will they recognise this reality? Will either or both nations summon the imagination and fortitude to meet their domestic challenges? If they do so, will they be skilled enough to secure their vital interests without stumbling to war?"

Indeed, the sheer scale of the challenge posed by the "structural shift" caused by a rising China calls for a new approach to economic and foreign policy in the US, two seasoned China hands at the Centre for American Progress – Ms Kelly Magsamen and Ms Melanie Hart – argue in a thoughtful essay in



the latest issue of Foreign Policy magazine.

"A US-China relationship that works for the United States will ultimately be driven by how educated and healthy Americans are, whether their children and grand-children have viable futures, whether the US continues to dominate scientific research and higher education, whether the country has functioning infrastructure, whether it can maintain a thriving immigration system to sustain its economic growth, and whether its democratic institutions remain functional and resilient," they say. "In sum, the United States needs to get its own house in order..."

"(It) should launch a national competitiveness initiative that includes moonshot investments in research and development, once-in-a-generation public infrastructure investments and significant tuition assistance for graduate education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics degrees. That would get Beijing's attention.

"Competing effectively with China does not require the United States to launch a Cold War or end all cooperation with Beijing. That would be unrealistic and counterproductive to long-term US interests. The US can walk and chew gum at the same time."

Another variation on this theme emerged in the Asia Society's task force report on the China challenge, in which it called for "smart competition" on the part of the US.

"Smart competition involves building on America's strengths to compete effectively with China while maintaining as much cooperation as possible on areas of common interests; building international coalitions to press China to follow international laws and norms; negotiating resolutions to key disputes wherever feasible; and preserving and updating those international institutions that have enhanced the welfare and security of both countries and the rest of the world for so many decades." 

Harvard professor Graham Allison says that if China and the US were able to listen to Mr Lee Kuan Yew's advice, they would focus on what matters most: their domestic problems.

PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

– Warren Fernandez, Editor-in-Chief

Thucydides's Trap Case File

Here's a look at the 16 cases from Belfer Center's case file on this issue, and the result.

No	Period	Ruling Power	Rising Power	Domain	Result
1	Late 15 th century	Portugal	Spain	Global empire and trade	NO WAR
2	First half of 16 th century	France	Hapsburgs	Land power in western Europe	WAR
3	16 th and 17 th centuries	Hapsburgs	Ottoman Empire	Land power in central and eastern Europe, sea power in the Mediterranean	WAR
4	First half of 17 th century	Hapsburgs	Sweden	Land and sea power in northern Europe	WAR
5	Mid-to-late 17 th century	Dutch Republic	England	Global empire, sea power, and trade	WAR
6	Late 17 th to mid-18 th centuries	France	Great Britain	Global empire and European land power	WAR
7	Late 18 th and early 19 th centuries	United Kingdom	France	Land and sea power in Europe	WAR
8	Mid-19 th century	France and United Kingdom	Russia	Global empire, influence in Central Asia and eastern Mediterranean	WAR
9	Mid-19 th century	France	Germany	Land power in Europe	WAR
10	Late 19 th and early 20 th centuries	China and Russia	Japan	Land and sea power in East Asia	WAR
11	Early-20 th century	United Kingdom	United States	Global economic dominance and naval supremacy in the Western Hemisphere	NO WAR
12	Early-20 th century	United Kingdom Supported by France, Russia	Germany	Land power in Europe and global sea power	WAR
13	Mid-20 th century	Soviet Union, France, UK	Germany	Land and sea power in Europe	WAR
14	Mid-20 th century	United States	Japan	Sea power and influence in the Asia-Pacific region	WAR
15	1940s - 1980s	United States	Soviet Union	Global power	NO WAR
16	1990s - present	United Kingdom and France	Germany	Political influence in Europe	NO WAR

The full Thucydides's Trap Case File can be accessed here: <https://www.belfercenter.org/thucydides-trap/case-file>

Source: Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs



US-CHINA TIES

A world where events ‘ebb and flow’

Drawing straight lines from today into the future often misses how history makes twists and turns

A RUN ALONG THE SCENIC CHARLES RIVER IN Cambridge, Massachusetts, is a good way to get a sense of perspective.

The river runs through the heart of the university town where the Ivy League college of Harvard is located, twisting and winding its way along.

Look ahead and you might spot lovely spires rising on the horizon, seemingly just ahead.

But as you make your way forward, it soon becomes clear that this is an illusion. Those buildings lie deceptively around a bend in the river, farther afield.

So, too, it often is with life and affairs of the world, with simplistic straight-line projections into the future frequently being confounded, amid the ebb and flow of events.

Take, for example, the seemingly unstoppable rise of Japan in the 1980s that sparked much consternation in the United States, or the much-trumpeted End of History idea in the 1990s, which predicted the eventual and inevitable rise of liberal democracies everywhere.

Both ended in ways that were not foreseen, with events turning out quite differently from what was anticipated.

So, pondering the future calls for what I term “ebb and flow” thinking, rather than charting lines from where we are today to where we must be, going by current trends.

In my view, there is nothing inevitable about the rise of China, the decline of the US, or an eventual

US President Donald Trump and China's President Xi Jinping reaching out to shake hands in 2017 at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. There is nothing inevitable about the rise of China, the decline of the US, or an eventual clash between the two. Nor is the present global world order cast in stone. Rather, such geopolitical trends are likely to ebb and flow over time, with events that might take us by surprise and even be beyond the control of key players.

PHOTO: REUTERS

A factory in Anhui, China, producing American flags, could end up with lots of stock it can't sell if it gets hit by US tariffs.
PHOTO: AFP



A reordering of global rules and reform of some of its key institutions is called for, as China rises and takes its rightful place among the great powers of the world. But less clear is just what this new global order and its institutions might look like.



clash between the two.

Nor is the present global world order cast in stone. Rather, such geopolitical trends are likely to ebb and flow over time, with events that might take us by surprise and even be beyond the control of key players.

Indeed, even the recent sudden turn in Sino-US ties over their trade dispute, or wider contest for global influence, was not something that many had envisaged not so long ago.

Many Western commentators had asserted with great certainty that with economic reforms would come political liberalisation in China, making it “more like us.” Their dismay that this has not happened now explains some of the angst about the rise of China in Washington circles.

Some commentators in China take this further, noting that the present world order was framed by Western powers when China was weak. But, as with all things in life, such an order is impermanent and not fixed in time.

Certainly, a reordering of global rules and reform

of some of its key institutions is called for, as China rises and takes its rightful place among the great powers of the world.

But less clear is just what this new global order and its institutions might look like. The G-8 or G-20 groupings seem outmoded to some, with suggestions that these might be replaced by a G-2 world, in which the US and China might work together to sort out the world's challenges, such as climate change.

In today's world, this however, is unlikely to be accepted by other key nations such as Japan, India, Russia or Asean countries, all of which will want a say in global decisions that affect them.

MUDDLING THROUGH?

Time magazine's editor-at-large Ian Bremmer has argued instead that we now live in a G-Zero world, in which no country or alliance of nations is able, or willing, to step up to take charge and bear the political, financial and military burden of global leadership.

The idea of G-x also recognises that the world can no longer be dominated by just one or two countries. While China hawks might wish to see Beijing reassert itself as the dominant player in Asia, others such as Japan and India are unlikely to accept such a regional hierarchy.

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More likely, he contends, the world will muddle through or leave major issues unattended for lack of a consensus.

In a recent discussion with him, I offered another view. Rather, my sense is that we have moved into a rather fluid, even volatile, G-x world, where x represents a variable.

Differing coalitions or networks might emerge to address specific issues, balancing interests and shifting over time. For example, just when everyone thought that the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement was dead, a coalition of countries, led by Japan, emerged to give the pact a renewed push.

Then there is the US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific idea, which has emerged partly in response to the unease in several countries in Asia over China's more muscular assertions of power in this part of the world.

The idea of G-x also recognises that the world can no longer be dominated by just one or two countries. While China hawks might wish to see Beijing reassert itself as the dominant player in Asia, others such as Japan and India are unlikely to accept such a regional hierarchy.

Agreeing with this view, Mr Bremmer notes: "In North America, it is still mostly G-1, with the US dominating. In the Middle East, it is G-x, with several countries competing, which hate each other. In Asia, it is increasingly G-1, which is getting more and more uncomfortable for some."

Similarly, those in Washington who would like to see a "decoupling" between the West and China, or are promoting the idea of a "clash of civilisations", might also face a pushback.

Rather than the old Cold War idea of alliances or blocs seeking a traditional balance of power, the future might more likely be one of shifting G-x networks, with like-minded countries coming together to tackle pressing common challenges, even if they also compete on other fronts.

The challenge then will be to create the conditions and mental frameworks to make such shifting G-x alliances more durable, and stable enough to allow for a world that, as former US president John F. Kennedy once put it, is "safe for diversity." 

— Warren Fernandez, Editor-in-Chief

Challenge to ST readers

FOR HIS NEXT BIG PROJECT, PATHWAYS TO avoid a global conflict that no one wants, Harvard professor Graham Allison is open to ideas from many sources – including The Straits Times readers.

He issued this challenge to ST readers in Singapore and beyond: Put on your thinking caps, study history, imagine steps and actions that might be taken to help manage a transition to a new global order that might make the world a safer place for all to live in.

"There is no monopoly of wisdom in Washington or Beijing," he says in an interview with ST.

"Singapore understands China, understands the US, and has an independent perspective," he adds.

"There is no reason why a good idea might not come from one of your readers in Singapore.

"Your leaders, including Mr Lee Kuan Yew, have shared many great insights on China and global affairs.

"Singapore has also always punched above its weight – in ideas," he says during an interview in his office in Harvard.

Prof Allison himself has identified nine possible paths to avoiding a global conflict. But he says he is not yet sure that he has found the best option, so he is researching these further before putting his ideas together in a paper or a book.

The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, which is part of Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, recently launched a competition calling on anyone to submit a "Strategic Options memo of no more than 600 words", spelling out their thoughts on just how to manage Sino-US ties, amid the major "structural changes" taking place with the rise of China.

Details of this crowd-sourcing ideas initiative, such as the format the memo should take and recommended background readings, can be found on its website: www.belfercenter.org/publication/searching-grand-strategy-meet-china-challenge

To help promote this effort, ST is offering a \$3,000 prize to the best essay from one of its readers.

The ST contest is now open for submissions.

ST editors will pick the top entries to be sent to Prof Allison for his review.

The winner will also receive two tickets to participate in this year's ST Global Outlook forum, to be held in November.

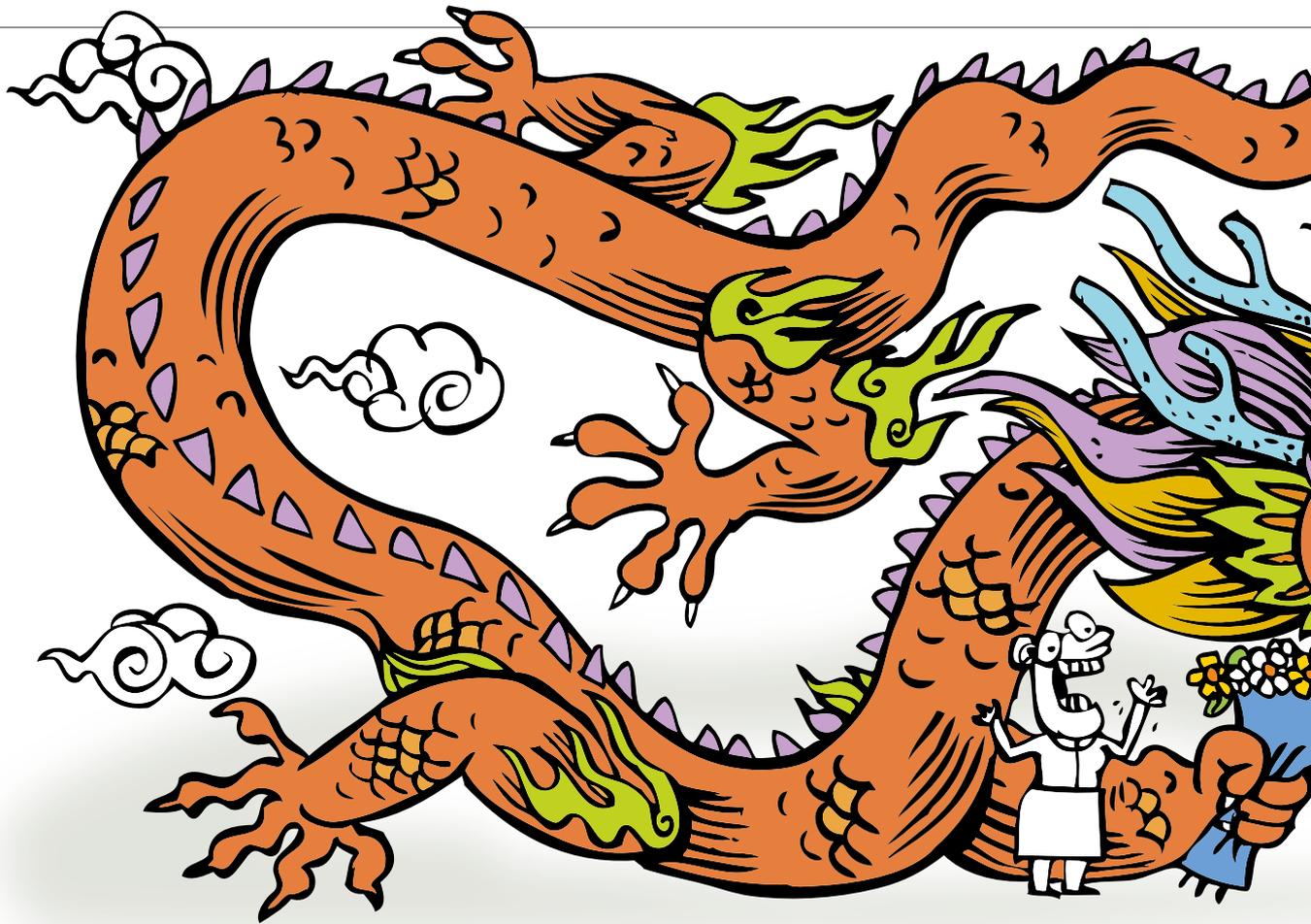
This is an ST signature event which looks at the big foreign affairs issues of the year and where these might be heading in 2020.

Entries for this ST essay contest should be submitted at <http://str.sg/oV6P>

These should reach us by 6pm on Oct 27. 



Harvard professor Graham Allison invites ideas from The Straits Times readers for his next big project, pathways to avoid a global conflict that no one wants. ST PHOTO: RACHEL AU-YONG



Trump may be seeking to decouple

NIRMAL GHOSH
US Bureau Chief



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Move could be tactic to get US firms in China to relocate elsewhere, say some analysts

A DEEPENING TRADE WAR WITH CHINA BATTERED the Dow Jones Industrial Average in April and raised not just pessimism over trade, but worries over the direction of US-China relations.

The latest round of tariffs is “far too great a gamble for the US economy”, the National Retail Federation said in a statement. “Taxing Americans on everyday products like clothes and shoes is not the answer for holding China accountable.

“We urge the US and China to get these critical negotiations back on track. Both sides will lose in a full-blown trade war, and the global economy will suffer.”

There are grounds to believe it is in China’s and America’s respective interests to reach a deal that addresses US priorities while not forcing China’s President Xi Jinping to lose face.

But some analysts are beginning to wonder

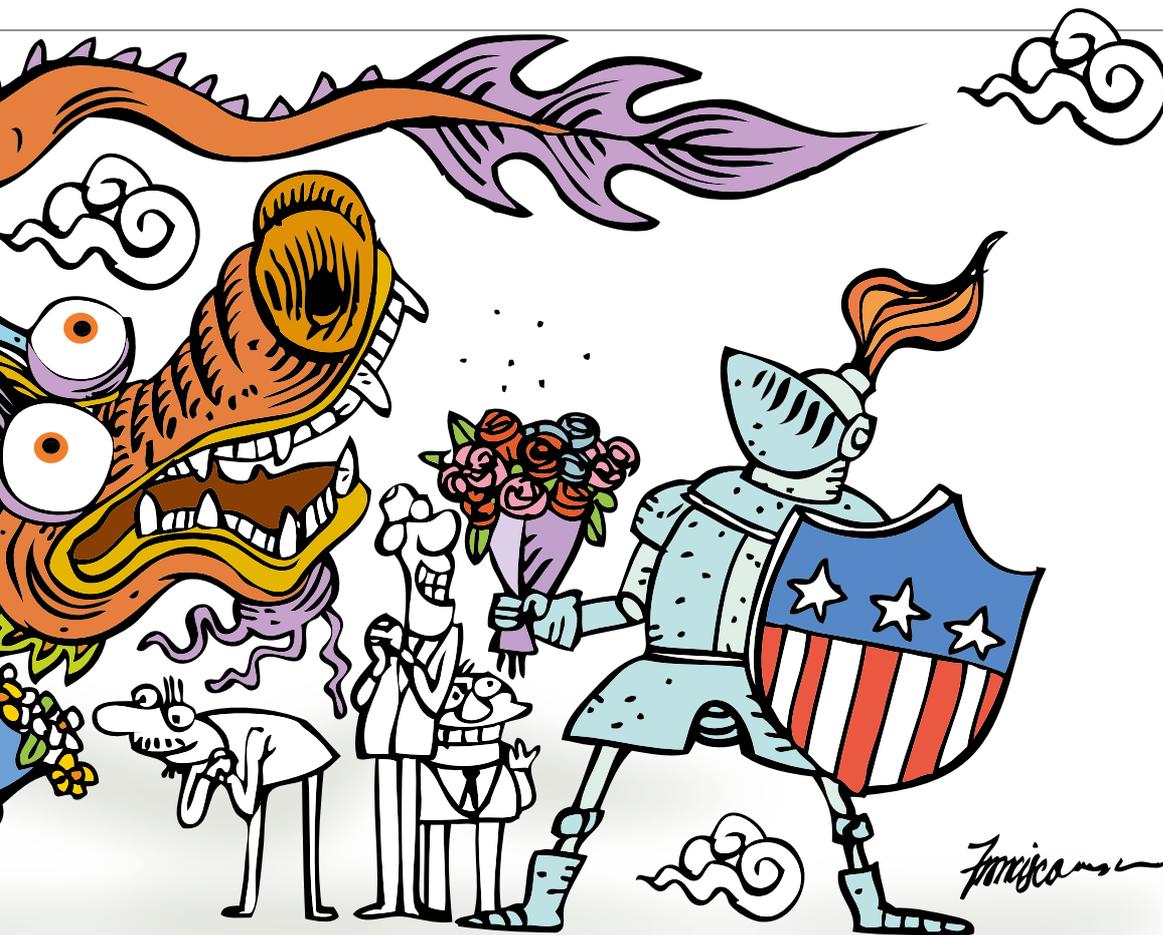
if a deal is possible at all, and whether what is really happening is the decoupling of America’s economy from China’s – something China hawks in Washington have been advocating for some time.

US companies operating in China are already beginning to research options to relocate; a favoured alternative manufacturing base is Vietnam.

“President (Donald) Trump wants American firms to leave China and come to the United States, not to South-east Asia,” said Ms Yun Sun, director of the China Programme at the Stimson Centre. “But South-east Asia will do because it is not a strategic threat to the United States.”

It may be too late to completely decouple the two economies, but that does not mean it cannot be done to some degree, she said.

“The US tariff hike threatens to dislodge China from the global supply chain,” Dr Chua Hak Bin, a senior economist at Maybank Kim Eng Research in Singapore, told Bloomberg. “The current China-centred supply chain will likely break up and shift towards South-east Asia and disperse more widely across the globe.”



ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

US economy from China's

The prospect of a deal remains up in the air, with all eyes on a meeting late this month in Japan between President Trump and President Xi.

The problem is that their goals are not compatible, said Ms Yun Sun. China wants the trade war to end, but in the words of its chief negotiator, Vice-Premier Liu He, it wants a “dignified” deal, which means President Xi – who is facing some internal criticism for provoking the US’ pushback – cannot afford to be seen as caving in to the Trump administration.

And there are some in the Trump administration who believe that even if there is a deal with China, Beijing will find a way to circumvent it – hence the US insistence on China codifying the deal into law. Beijing balked at having to do this, and analysts see this as unlikely to happen.

Whatever the outcome – and some analysts are saying the current stalemate may continue into next year – President Trump must also keep an eye on the political fallout at home.

There are two possible short-term outcomes, according to Dr William Reinsch, senior adviser and Scholl chair in international business at the Centre

for Strategic and International Studies.

He wrote on May 13: “The President can sign a weak agreement that gives him less than he wants, or he can walk away and maintain or increase the tariffs.”

A weak deal will leave him vulnerable to the Democrats. “They will attack the President for being soft on China and a poor negotiator,” Dr Reinsch wrote. If there is no agreement, they will label him a failure who has produced significant economic pain only to achieve nothing.

“Right now, we appear to be in a slow-motion train wreck, with both sides sticking to their positions – on the Chinese side to avoid loss of face and loss of control, and on the US side to prevent the political consequences of failure.”

Dr Glenn Altschuler, professor of American studies at Cornell University, remains cautiously optimistic about a deal with China. If there is no agreement by the end of the summer, pressure will build on both sides as the global economy begins to slow down, he maintained.

“In 2019, politicians respond to markets perhaps as much or more than they ever have,” he said. **ST**

The US administration, which essentially sees the company as engaging in espionage in the US on behalf of China's government, has been tightening the screws on the firm and took two actions against it the previous week.

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China not blinking as it digs in for prolonged trade war

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Beijing is counting on vast domestic market to help it weather the storm, say analysts

CHINA IS DIGGING IN FOR A PROLONGED TRADE war with the United States after talks in Washington turned sour in April.

It made good on its pledge to hit back at the US by raising tariffs on US\$60 billion (S\$82 billion) worth of US goods, and kicked off a propaganda war to galvanise public opinion against what it calls a “US-sponsored trade war”.

While Chinese negotiators were in Washington for talks then, the US more than doubled levies on US\$200 billion worth of Chinese goods, ending a five-month trade war truce.

Just earlier, both sides had seemed headed for a deal that would end a trade war that has seen tariffs slapped on billions of dollars’ worth of goods from both sides. The outlook now seems uncertain, and analysts are saying it could take years before the world’s two biggest economies reach a deal.

In the meantime, China is counting on its vast domestic market to help it weather the storm, said analysts.

ING economist Iris Pang said the US tariffs would hit export-related industries, which she expects would double down and focus on selling domestically instead.

“China also imposed tariffs on US goods (so) this will make some consumer goods prices go up. On the other hand, as some Chinese exporters change

their plans and sell their goods domestically, this will bring prices down,” she said.

Washington is betting big that the tariffs would hurt Beijing more and force foreign enterprises to leave China for other countries.

But Beijing is not blinking. Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said at a regular briefing that more than 60,000 foreign enterprises were set up in China last year, up almost 70 per cent from a year earlier.

“Whether or not China’s business environment is good, and whether money can be made in China, foreign companies, including American ones, have made this clear with their actions and voted with their feet,” he said.

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences economist Gao Lingyun said at a recent seminar that of the US\$200 billion of Chinese goods hit by higher tariffs, there were only 124 items where the US accounted for more than 50 per cent of the exports. This meant that China was not that reliant on exporting to the US, and could tap other foreign markets, he said.

Nevertheless, the uncertainty has roiled China’s stock markets. Following President Donald Trump’s tweet on raising tariffs, Chinese bourses early last week saw their biggest single-day losses in three years.

Such uncertainty was something markets would have to continue to grapple with, said Tsinghua University economist Yuan Gangming. But in the longer term, the Chinese economy was likely to remain stable, Professor Yuan said, playing down the trade war’s impact on China.

Last year, the economy grew 6.6 per cent, the slowest in three decades, but this has stabilised since the government took measures including

Vietnam stands to gain from US-China trade war

VIETNAM IS EMERGING AS A MAJOR BENEFICIARY of the trade war, with a string of American companies operating in China seeing the nation as the top choice for relocation.

Analysts say Vietnam offers the most competitive cost and skills as well as access to a range of other countries that Hanoi has, or is negotiating, free trade agreements with.

Meanwhile, costs in China, from land to wages, have risen. And for some US firms, the trade war has come as the final push over the line.

The latest is Brooks Running, which sells sports footwear and accessories and is part of investor Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway.

In April, chief executive Jim Weber told Reuters the decision was taken in January when President Donald Trump threatened to boost tariffs on Chinese-made shoes from 20 per cent to 45 per cent.

“We’ll be predominantly in Vietnam by the end of the year,” he said.

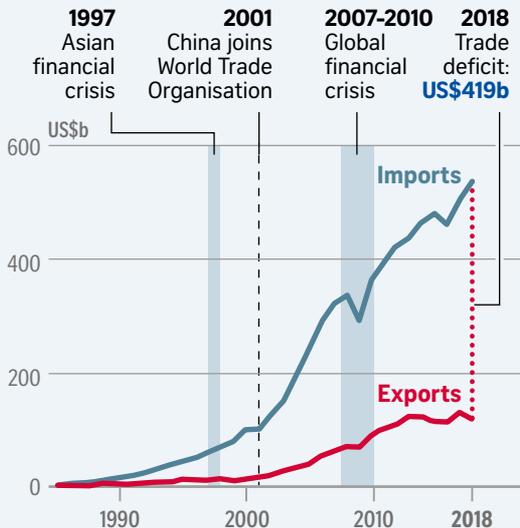
About 8,000 jobs will move from China to Vietnam. The shift will bring Vietnam’s share of the firm’s output up to 65 per cent and reduce China’s share to only 10 per cent.

Adidas has also cut the share of the footwear it makes in China in half, with Vietnam absorbing most of the shift. Nike has been moving production from China to Vietnam as well while some of Apple’s

Hotting up

U.S. TRADE WITH CHINA

US trade deficit with China has soared since 1990



Sources: BBC, US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, CROWELL AND MORING INTERNATIONAL TRADE GROUP STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

HOW THE TRADE WAR HAS PLAYED OUT

US tariffs on China*



Total Chinese goods imported into the US (2018)



Chinese tariffs on US*

Imposed in 2018



Total US goods imported into China (2018)



NOTE: *Value of goods affected. Information as at May 8.

cutting taxes for businesses.

“China’s economic slowdown is mostly due to internal problems and does not have a lot to do with the trade war,” said Prof Yuan.

Meanwhile, Chinese state media are striking a more strident tone – an about-turn from the conciliatory tone before early May’s trade discussions.

“The US-sponsored trade war with China is just a hurdle in China’s development process. It is no big deal. China will surely strengthen its confidence, overcome difficulties, turn crisis into opportunity

and fight for a new world,” state broadcaster CCTV said in a segment during an evening news bulletin.

A clip of the strongly worded statement is one of the most widely shared posts on social media platform Weibo.

Said investment manager Wang Wending, 26: “If there is an all-out trade war, both sides will definitely be affected, but the Chinese people have a stronger determination compared with the US. I think we will be able to take more pain.”

– Additional reporting by Lina Miao

suppliers have also gone there.

“We’re at the beginning of this process,” Mr Marc Mealy, senior vice-president for policy at the US-Asean Business Council in Washington, told The Straits Times. “Variables like talent, risk, cost of doing business still come first. In the context of those, Vietnam is becoming more competitive to begin with.”

But the US-China tariff war and the new trade deals Vietnam is participating in are an additional incentive, he said.

Vietnam is part of the Asean Economic Community and benefits from Asean’s trade agreements across the region. Vietnam also has

its own trade deals with Japan, South Korea, Chile, Israel and the European Union, and is part of the Asean plus six Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

Natixis Research noted last year that Vietnam had the lowest wages compared with Indonesia, Thailand, India and China. Of Vietnam’s top 10 exports, eight compete with Chinese goods subject to US tariffs.

In February, HSBC ranked Vietnam at the top of its list of Asian markets to benefit from trade diversion because of the US-China tariff war.

– Nirmal Ghosh

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Indonesian President Joko Widodo should win presidential elections: He holds a big lead in the match with challenger Prabowo Subianto and has the in-advantages of incumbency.



What if China does yield?

Chinese resistance provides America with a handy bogeyman. Consider the possibilities if it gave in to US terms. Washington may face an even stronger rival

RAVI VELLOOR
Associate Editor



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A DECADE AGO, THE UNITED STATES' ECONOMY was on the ropes amid a swirling global financial crisis and an untested President Barack Obama at the helm.

With homes being foreclosed and jobs rapidly being shed, the air was laden with a sense of doom. The era of US dominance seemed decidedly over.

Anyone in China waiting to succeed then President Hu Jintao could be forgiven for allowing himself a little self-congratulation.

Two years earlier, China had passed the US as the world's second biggest merchandise exporter, behind only the European Union.

Now, poised to pass Japan and take the spot of the world's second largest economy, China's

massive stimulus package was helping to also prop up growth in the world's No. 1 economy, whose own recovery was significantly tardy compared with China's. Defence scientists in Changsha had just developed a supercomputer that could do a quadrillion calculations per second, as good as any in the West.

Its model of governance was clearly far more stable, and durable, proving wrong the sceptics who had forecast China's imminent collapse.

When President Obama visited China that November of 2009, he was deeply respectful of the Chinese. The talk was of cooperation; indeed, there was even mention of a G-2, or Group of Two, angering the EU, Japan and India - all of whom see themselves as key players on the world stage.

China's economic size and global influence has only escalated in the decade since and while its economy may have slowed somewhat in recent months, its growth numbers are not bad at all.

Yet, you wouldn't know it from the tone of US President Donald Trump's tweets directed at the Chinese leadership over his frustration that Beijing may be reeling back some of the concessions it had made in trade negotiations with Washington.

Indeed, as he harangues China, you might think he was addressing sanctions-hit Iran, not the world's No. 2 economy and military power.

"China should not retaliate - will only get worse!" said one tweet of May 13, which began by warning that there will be "nobody left in China to do business with." Hello, how about a little respect?

Hubris? Supreme self-confidence from secret information about the vulnerabilities of China's economy or its president, Mr Xi Jinping? A marked desire to distinguish himself from the accommodating Mr Obama, the predecessor he so despises?

A killer instinct to go for Mr Xi's jugular, knowing that anything that appears like a kowtow would be lethal to his authority at home? Or simple unwillingness to trust a Chinese leader who did not keep some key past promises?



ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

Perhaps all of the above, mixed with the usual Trumpian bravado.

Mr Trump's actions are those of a man who wants to suggest he has Mr Xi over a barrel, and that victory is assured in this tense game of global chicken.

While he soft-soaps Mr Xi publicly, Mr Trump must be fully aware that it would be politically sensitive for his Chinese counterpart to put into law the changes Mr Xi's handpicked negotiators had agreed with Washington. Even if Beijing intends to keep its word, the US President wants it cast in stone. He is not prepared to cut his counterpart the slimmest of slack.

Some of his swagger is drawn from the strong US economy, no doubt. Since he took office, the Dow Jones index – Mr Trump is prone to see stock averages as indicative of economic strength when it suits him – has risen by nearly a third.

The economy clocked 3 per cent last year, and turned in a strong first quarter this year with an annualised 3.2 per cent growth. Unemployment is at its lowest in a half-century.

It is a different matter that economic numbers tend to reflect policies put in place two to three years ago – the so-called lag effect. Mr Trump, never too bothered about such inconvenient details, is happy to take credit.

TRUMP TRAPPED

But, perhaps there is another issue to be recognised here. Mr Trump, facing re-election next year, is himself on the back foot. A little trapped even.

In bitterly divided Washington, the sole common ground is on the matter of China and the need to handle it with unrelenting firmness and resolve.

Mr Trump's ideological confederates, like Mr Steve Bannon, are worried that any sign of compromise from him on China would bring him mortal political blows from the likes of Mr Charles Schumer and Mr Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party. Not just from the opposition, it would also open him to challenge from within his own Republican Party. Ambitious men, such as Florida Senator Marco Rubio and Texas Senator Ted Cruz, could seize upon an opportunity to paint him as weak on China.

There are also the unions to worry about. In 2016, his stunning and largely unexpected victory was based to a large extent on the support he garnered in the so-called Rust Belt of America – the area around the Great Lakes and Midwest that suffered industrial decline in the past three decades.

Rare for a Republican president, Mr Trump, with his hard line on China, had won support from trade unions, which tend to tilt towards Democrats. These days, their views on China are bitterly negative and it will be a brave US president who thinks they could be ignored.

In a recent interview with the Financial Times, AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka, who heads the nation's biggest union, had been critical of even the deal that Mr Trump had so nearly clinched as “neither earth shattering nor very helpful”

Mr Trumka particularly demanded that the administration secure binding commitments from China to restrain the use of subsidies to industries.

If not, he said, it would be an “inferior” agreement and favour Wall Street over US workers.

No politician wants to be seen as siding with big money over the common worker.

China's reluctance to go the whole hog – analysts note that Vice-Premier Liu He did not carry the “special envoy” tag the last time he went to Washington – is partly perhaps because it realises that no matter how much it gives in, the long-term trajectory of its relationship with the US is fraught.

Whether it be union leaders, such as Mr Trumka, Democrats like Mr Schumer, or the military brass in the Pentagon, there is a broadly uniform view that this is a “now or never” moment with China, a last opportunity to contain the inexorable rise of a potentially hostile power that almost is an existential threat. As I said in a piece on Oct 12 (Containment 2.0: With China in the crosshairs) the four key pillars of the US government – the White House, State Department, the Pentagon and Treasury – are now aligned on the matter of checking China.

In their anxiety to back China into a corner, they are willing to overlook what it would mean if China actually yielded to everything that they demand of it.

Take the so-called structural issues, the stickiest of the subjects under negotiation. These would include the slashing or elimination of subsidies and other forms of assistance the Chinese state provides to the SOEs, or state-owned enterprises.

China has agreed to be more transparent on subsidies but is baulking at stopping them. Apparently, it also is not keen to discuss the penalties to be imposed for any transgressions of what is in the agreement.

CHINA'S BITTER PILL

What if Beijing decided to swallow the bitter pill and agree to end all subsidies to SOEs? Things would slow on the mainland for a while, for sure. Some hundreds of thousands of jobs will probably be shed. But what would also ensue is a flowering of Chinese entrepreneurship as capital flows freely to private enterprise rather than being sent by official diktat to the state firms.

The big private firms, like Alibaba, Huawei and Legend Holdings, can already hold their own against any global competition. The country has a massive internal market and its universities are first class.

What if a hundred or thousand such corporate flowers bloomed in China instead of the dozen or so prominent ones of today? And if such steps were to be extended in other directions, including freeing up areas like government procurement, what then? Would American businesses retain their competitiveness against the China onslaught?

Where would that leave American power and alliances in the Indo-Pacific region if, for instance, China meets the conditions necessary to join strategic trade arrangements, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership?

In life, as in global politics, it is wise to be careful what you wish for. 

Mr Trump, facing re-election next year, is himself on the back foot. A little trapped even. In bitterly divided Washington, the sole common ground is on the matter of China and the need to handle it with unrelenting firmness and resolve.

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Shaping the Indo-Pacific story: Asean's turn

The US and Japan have their own narratives. Amid concern about the China containment sub-text, it's time South-east Asia stepped up to control how the concept develops.

RAVI VELLOOR
Associate Editor



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EARLIER THIS YEAR IN JAKARTA, INDONESIA'S foreign ministry played host to a constellation of senior figures from the area once known as the Asia-Pacific to discuss the future of the "Indo-Pacific", as the region is increasingly being called at the prodding of the United States and Japan.

On the table, among other issues, was a small yet significant question: Do we call this vast swathe of territory the Indo-Asia-Pacific? Or Asia-Indo-Pacific? Or, leave it as Indo-Pacific? Is it 'strategy', 'vision' or 'outlook'?

Ultimately, the consensus seemed to be that the name comfortable to all was 'IndoPacific Outlook.'

Regardless of the nomenclature, what's been shaping up in recent months is an attempt by Asean to get into the driver's seat of a still-hazy concept that has the potential to develop into a strategic arrangement of considerable significance.

At the moment, Japan and the US – the two nations that have most enthusiastically embraced it – seem to have slightly different ideas of what Indo-Pacific means. For Japan, the Indo-Pacific stretches to the east coast of Africa. For the US, it seems to stop at India's western coast, or in the memorable words of former US defence secretary James Mattis, "Hollywood to Bollywood."

It is not a bad time for South-east Asia to show some initiative to control the future narrative of this development.

For long years, many in the region had wished the US had looked at our region not with an Atlantic eye but a Pacific perspective. Now that we are getting this wish, things are getting a mite warm.

THE CHINA THREAT

To start with, from what once seemed diffuse and disparate threads, an idea is coalescing in the US, and spreading to other parts of the Western camp, of China as an "enemy" state.

While a lot of this revolves around bragging rights about economic might and leadership in technology, fear of the expanding influence of a governance system alien to the West's familiar values is also playing into the Western calculus.

It was no surprise, therefore, that in last October's Schriever Wargame, the 12th in a series of US Air Force Space Command wargames, the 350 US civilian and military experts from 27 US agencies were joined by experts from Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, France and Canada.

The exercise – using a 2028 scenario – explored combined command and control frameworks to employ and defend air, space and cyberspace capabilities in support of global and regional operations. Tellingly, it included a global scenario with the focus of effort towards the US Indo-Pacific Command Area of Responsibility.

In Asia, as Washington looks around on how best to ring-fence this uncertain force, it sees two nations with the economic heft, military potential – and attitude – to enlist as allies.

Those two nations are Japan and India.

Since Japan is a treaty ally anyway, it considers half the journey done but India, with its strong centrist instincts in foreign policy, needs some wooing. It helps the US that memories of a defeat in the 1962 border war with China remain seared in India's memory – even as the events leading up to that would suggest that the blame rests at least equally with India for precipitating the conflict.

At the conceptual roots of the Indo-Pacific concept, therefore, is the advancement of a stream of thought that holds that the strategic compulsions of the Pacific and Indian Oceans have finally found convergence. The desired result, clearly, is the bookending of China and this is something that leaves South-east Asians distinctly uncomfortable.

ST ILLUSTRATION:
MANNY FRANCISCO



Still, the linkage drawn between the destinies of the people surrounding the two oceans is not such a novel idea.

Japan's Shinzo Abe has been speaking about it for a decade, but the idea took time to gain. The Pentagon – the US Pacific Command, specifically – had seen it coming for a while; in the second term of the Barack Obama administration, its admirals had started making references to the “Indo-Asia-Pacific” at the start of the decade.

Then, as military ties with India accelerated, it progressed in a natural sort of way to “Indo-Pacific”. Last year, on his way to Singapore to attend the Shangri-La Dialogue and a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who delivered the keynote speech, Mr Mattis stopped in Hawaii to formally rename the Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command.

While the label is meant to flatter, and plays to Indian great power aspirations and desire to have a larger strategic say in East Asia, it also is reflective of the nature of the US-India defence relationship.

The US conducts more wargames with India than any other power and New Delhi's decision to sign onto defence agreements like Lemoa and Comcasa underscore the logistics and communications connections between their militaries.

In May, when the Indian Air Force took delivery of the first of the Apache attack helicopters – half of the 22 on order are to be fitted with the Longbow fire control radar system – that relationship will tighten even more. While Indian warplanes on the China front are still mostly of Russian origin, the M777 howitzers being deployed since November are of US origin. There is growing interoperability between the US and Indian forces.

THE QUAD

Ordinarily, Asean would not have needed to worry about all this. In the days when Asia-Pacific was the concept of the day, few ever saw Asia extending westwards beyond Thailand. That left South-east Asia on the fringes of a region that extended to southern America. Strictly speaking, and from a visual perspective at least, “Indo-Pacific” should accord Asean more of its cherished “centrality” than the older Asia-Pacific concept.

The problem, however, is that like it or not, the Indo-Pacific has also come to be conflated with another loose concept called the Quad, which is short for Quadrilateral Dialogue.

The Quad groups the US, Japan and India with Australia. Nascent as it is and riddled with internal suspicions (India believes Australia, which has no territorial dispute with China and whose economy depends on the mainland for its recession-proof quality, is an uncertain partner), the Quad makes Asean uncomfortable because of its not-too-subtle undertones of China containment – even if the two recent meetings of Quad senior officials have taken place on the sidelines of the East Asia Summits (EAS) in Manila and Singapore.

The other issue is that no Asean state relishes the idea of being asked to choose sides in this emerging tussle. South-east Asian societies have too many

linkages with China – trade, ethnicity, tourism, to name just three – to want to side with what essentially is a geopolitical construct over a close and key neighbour.

This is why Asean, particularly Indonesia, feels it must step in and take control of the Indo-Pacific storyline.

The open and inclusive architecture that Asean has constructed for its region over the decades has taken some doing and is worth preserving.

Today, the Asean Regional Forum, which groups more than two dozen nations, is the one platform where even lesser powers like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka can carry their voices to the region. Through all its years of isolation, it was also the one multilateral forum where North Korea met its peers from the region.

Likewise, Asean has prided itself on being no one's poodle, no matter how powerful. Fifteen years ago, when the East Asia Summit was conceptualised, China sought to turn it into a restricted venue for Asean to engage with China, Japan and South Korea. Some Asean countries were inclined to go along, but Indonesia and Singapore stood firm and brought in India, as well as Australia and New Zealand, into the EAS process.

The Indo-Pacific concept, therefore, already resides within Asean. Now, with every EAS member nation having established individual missions to the Asean Secretariat and all Quad members paying at least lip service to Asean's centrality in their dealings with Asia, it makes sense for future directions of this concept to be guided by its hand.

FINE-TUNING THE CONCEPT

Naturally, the discussions in Jakarta were intense. Issues at stake included the following: Should, for instance, Asean move on formulating principles for its Indo-Pacific in consultation with the Quad nations, or simply offer it to them on a take-it-or-leave-it basis? Should maritime security cooperation be included as a key element, regardless of the discomfort some continental Asean states, especially those beholden to Chinese largesse or diplomatic support, may feel about such a decision?

Some might even feel that there is a mild dialling back of the very concept of Indo-Pacific itself, now that the Quad nations seem to be in no urgency to formalise their ties, and Japan has adroitly changed its Indo-Pacific “strategy” into the milder Indo-Pacific “vision.”

Nevertheless, it is wise to be prepared for all eventualities. It also is not a bad thing at all that Indonesia, Asean's largest nation and one whose borders touch both oceans, should show some initiative on the matter. It was not too long back that Asean feared that the Joko Widodo government had scant time for the regional body.

Today, with the elections behind him, who knows, Mr Joko may even see some profit in taking charge of the Indo-Pacific story. After all, it does him no harm that as he settles into his second term and becomes mindful of his legacy, it would not be a bad thing for the former furniture salesman to leave the stage as an international statesman. 

– Ravi Velloor

Japan and the US seem to have slightly different ideas of what Indo-Pacific means. For Japan, the Indo-Pacific stretches to the east coast of Africa. For the US, it seems to stop at India's western coast, or in the memorable words of former US defence secretary James Mattis, “Hollywood to Bollywood”.

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Huawei on the ropes?

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New set-up designed to foster collaboration and meet readers' needs

AS THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT'S restrictions on Huawei hit American technology companies, Wall Street stocks fell in early trading on May 20.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average was down 0.4 per cent and the broad-based S&P 500 shed 0.6 per cent about 15 minutes after markets opened for the week.

Google parent Alphabet lost 2.3 per cent, while shares of chip companies Qualcomm and Intel also retreated.

Huawei, dealt a major blow by a US ban on suppliers from selling it parts and services without a licence from the Commerce Department, moved to assure customers it would continue to support existing smartphones and tablets.

This came from a company spokesman after Google said it would comply with an order barring the Chinese company from getting updates to its Android operating system.

"We have made substantial contributions to the development and growth of Android around the world," the spokesman said. "Huawei will continue to provide security updates and after-sales services to all existing Huawei and Honor smartphone and tablet products, covering those that have been sold and that are still in stock globally."

Google also said services like Google Play and Google Play Protect would keep functioning on existing Huawei devices.

But several American tech giants joined Google in following the government ban. Intel, Qualcomm, Broadcom, and Xilinx all told employees that they would not supply Huawei, Bloomberg News reported, citing people familiar with the companies' actions.

Headquartered in Shenzhen, Guangdong, Huawei is the world's second largest smartphone maker, selling nearly 203 million phones last year.

The US administration, which essentially sees the company as engaging in espionage in the US on behalf of China's government, has been tightening the screws on the firm and took two actions against it the previous week.

Huawei was the unspecified target of the first, an executive order banning US telecommunications firms from installing foreign-made equipment that could prove a threat to national security.

The US also added Huawei and its 68 affiliates to the Commerce Department's Entity List, banning it from doing business with US companies, and calling into question its ability to continue manufacturing.

Separately, the US is pursuing extradition proceedings in Canada against Huawei's chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou, daughter of the company's founder Ren Zhengfei. Meng is under house arrest in Vancouver and fighting the charge that she conspired to defraud global banks about Huawei's relationship with a company in Iran.

The US' latest moves cast a cloud over a potential meeting between President Donald Trump and China's President Xi Jinping in Japan in late June, which is seen as a critical opportunity for the two giant economies to reach a deal and wind back a damaging trade war.

"At this timing, the latest moves against Huawei are interpreted by many as additional maximum



Huawei put on hold

Firms are stepping back from dealings with the Chinese telecoms giant

Announcements, statements by major companies

May 19

Google

United States
Beginning to cut ties with Huawei

Other major players in 5G race

- ZTE (China)
- Ericsson (Sweden)
- Nokia (Finland)
- Qualcomm (US)
- MediaTek (Taiwan)
- Samsung Electronics (South Korea)

Source and Photo: AFP
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

May 22

KDDI and SoftBank

Japan
To delay releasing new Huawei handsets

NTT Docomo

Japan
Suspending pre-orders for a new Huawei handset

EE

Britain
"Paused" the launch of Huawei 5G phones
Will launch a 5G network, without Huawei technology as originally planned

Vodafone

Britain
Suspending pre-orders of Huawei 5G handsets

May 23

Panasonic

Japan
To stop supplying some components to Huawei

"Huawei's 5G will absolutely not be affected. In terms of 5G technologies, others won't be able to catch up with Huawei in two or three years"

Company founder **Ren Zhengfei** told Chinese media on May 21 after the US moves to ban companies using foreign gear deemed a security risk

Ren
in Switzerland
2015



The US administration, which essentially sees the company as engaging in espionage in the US on behalf of China's government, has been tightening the screws on the firm and took two actions against it the previous week.

”

pressure to force China to sign a trade deal desired by the US," Ms Yun Sun, director of the China Programme at the Stimson Centre told The Straits Times.

President Trump has considerably raised the stakes for the June meeting. On the other hand, nationalist sentiment in China is sure to rise further, said Eurasia Group founder Ian Bremmer.

There remains some uncertainty as to whether the US will issue temporary licences or exemptions for American suppliers to Huawei. Last year Mr Trump threatened another Chinese telecom company, ZTE, but relented. With Huawei though, there is more at stake, analysts say.

If the US does not issue a general licence, it would be a major blow to the stability of one of China's most important companies, the Eurasia Group said.

"Even a less severe scenario, in which US companies are covered under a temporary licence that could be revoked at any time, would make Beijing less likely to yield on some of the core technology issues at the heart of the trade dispute."

Huawei "is heavily dependent on US semiconductor products and would be seriously crippled without supply of key US components", Mr Ryan Koontz, an analyst with Rosenblatt Securities Inc told Bloomberg News.

"The extreme scenario of Huawei's telecom network unit failing would set China back many years and such a failure would have massive global telecom market implications." 

Huawei founder says US underestimates company as Washington grants 90-day relief

HUAWEI TECHNOLOGIES FOUNDER REN Zhengfei has struck a defiant tone against US attempts to block his company's global ambitions, saying the United States "underestimates" the telecom giant's strength.

Mr Ren spoke to Chinese state media days after US President Donald Trump issued orders aimed at thwarting Huawei's business in the US, capping months of efforts to stop the company's bid to become the world leader in next-generation 5G technology.

"The current practice of US politicians underestimates our strength," Mr Ren said, according to CCTV. "Huawei's 5G will absolutely not be affected. In terms of 5G technologies, others won't be able to catch up with Huawei in two or three years," he said.

Mr Trump declared a "national emergency" empowering him to blacklist companies seen as "an unacceptable risk to the national security of the United States" – a move analysts said was clearly aimed at Huawei.

At the same time, the US Commerce Department announced the effective ban on American companies selling or transferring US technology to Huawei. But the department issued a 90-day reprieve on the ban on the transfer of technology.

The department said it will allow Huawei to purchase American-made goods in order to maintain existing networks and provide software updates to existing Huawei handsets. The company is

still prohibited from buying American parts and components to manufacture new products without licence approvals, which likely will be denied.

The new authorisation is intended to give telecommunications providers that rely on Huawei equipment time to make other arrangements, US Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross said in a statement. Mr Ren, however, shrugged off the move, saying Huawei can make its own chips and "can't be isolated" from the world.

The 90-day reprieve by the US suggests changes to Huawei's supply chain may have immediate, far-reaching and unintended consequences for its customers.

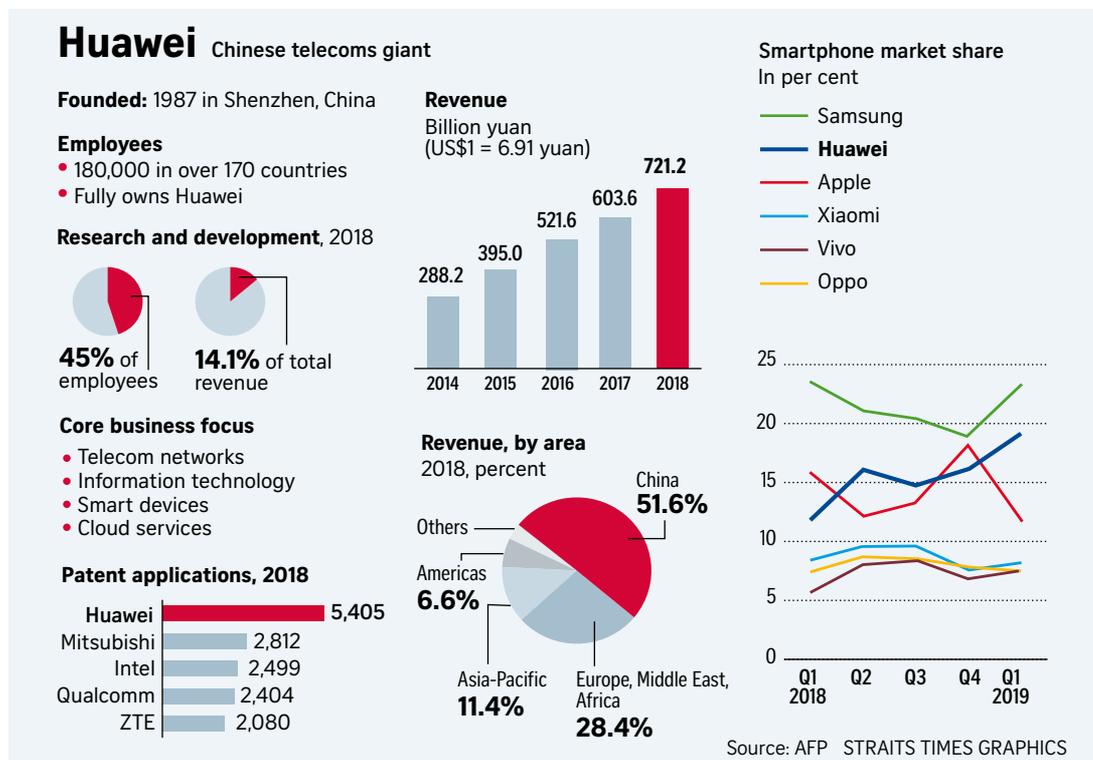
"The goal seems to be to prevent Internet, computer and cellphone systems from crashing," said Washington lawyer Kevin Wolf, a former Commerce Department official. "This is not a capitulation. This is housekeeping."

The Commerce Department said it will evaluate whether to extend the exemptions beyond 90 days.

In April, the US Commerce Department added Huawei and 68 entities to an export blacklist that makes it nearly impossible for the Chinese company to purchase goods made in the US.

The companies on the list are deemed to be engaged in activities contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the US. **ST**

– Reuters, AFP





Existing Huawei smartphones will continue to have access to Google apps and services, as well as security updates. But Huawei may not be able to update the Android software to the next version promptly, if at all. PHOTO: REUTERS

What you need to know if you own a Huawei or Honor phone

HERE'S A LOOK AT WHAT RECENT MOVES MEAN for Huawei and Honor (Huawei's sub-brand) users.

CAN I USE GOOGLE APPS AND SERVICES ON MY HUAWEI SMARTPHONE?

Existing owners of Huawei smartphones can continue to enjoy Google apps and services, such as Google Maps, Gmail and YouTube. They can still use the Google Play Store and receive security and software updates for Google apps and services.

WHAT ABOUT FUTURE HUAWEI SMARTPHONES?

The same Google apps and services will not be available on future Huawei smartphones because of the US ban. The same already applies to smartphones built for the China market, which substitute Google apps and services for Chinese-made equivalents from the likes of Baidu and Tencent.

Huawei can still use the Android mobile operating system, which is available via an open-source licence. This open-source version - Android Open Source Project (AOSP) - can be used and modified by anyone. Huawei, though, will lose early access to future versions of Android, potentially delaying new Android updates.

But the biggest blow is the lack of Google apps and services, which will dissuade most users outside China from buying Huawei smartphones. This will likely dash Huawei's hopes of overtaking South Korea's Samsung as the top smartphone maker this year.

SHOULD I BUY A HUAWEI SMARTPHONE?

Existing Huawei smartphones, like the recent Huawei P30 Pro, will continue to have access to Google apps and services, as well as security updates. But Huawei may not be able to update the Android software to the next version promptly, if at all.

Since most Android smartphone makers, such as Samsung, take months to update the Android software with the latest features, consumers may not be overly concerned about this.

Huawei said it has been stockpiling hardware components in anticipation of a US ban. It also makes its own proprietary smartphone processors. Hence, it is likely that Huawei will be able to replace any damaged components in the event that a smartphone breaks down within its warranty period.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER HUAWEI DEVICES?

Besides smartphones, Huawei makes tablets, smartwatches and laptops. Its smartwatches are probably the least affected, as they run Huawei's own LiteOS software instead of Google's. But Huawei's Android tablets will likely face the same issues as its smartphones.

The US ban is also a blow to Huawei's aspirations in the PC market. Its MateBook laptops had received excellent reviews last year and new, updated models are slated to launch in the US and other countries, including Singapore, this year. But, like most computers, these Huawei laptops will be affected as they rely on technology from US firms - Microsoft's Windows software and Intel processors. **SI**

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ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

Fight Fake news

Singapore adopts fake news law

It is not a political tool but about shaping a society that keeps lies out, says Law Minister

THAM YUEN-C

Senior Political Correspondent



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AFTER A MARATHON TWO-DAY DEBATE, Singapore's Parliament passed a comprehensive piece of legislation to combat fake news, last month.

The proposed law is not a political tool for the ruling party to wield power, said Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam, but is about shaping the kind of society that Singapore should be.

Summing up the often fractious debate on the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill, he painted a picture of a society in which lies are kept out and there are honest debates among people based on truth and honour.

"(Debates) should be based on a foundation of truth, foundation of honour, and foundation where we keep out the lies, that's what this is about. It's not about the Workers' Party or the PAP or today, it's about Singapore," he said responding to the 31 MPs who spoke during the debate on the draft law aimed at protecting society from fake news that harms public interest.

At around 10.20pm, the Bill was passed with 72 MPs saying "yes", nine Workers' Party (WP) MPs saying "no", and three Nominated MPs abstaining.

WP chief Pritam Singh, whose party had strenuously objected to the new law for giving ministers too much powers, had called for a division in which each MP's vote is recorded. The opposition party wanted the courts, instead of the ministers, to be the arbiters of falsehoods, and accused the Government of creating a self-serving law that can be abused to quash critics.

Rebuttals came from many of the People's Action Party (PAP) MPs as well as Communications and Information Minister S. Iswaran, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung and Mr Shanmugam, who stressed that a minister's decision under the new law is subject to court appeal and judicial review.

The new law is designed to give the Government the tools to deal with falsehoods on the Internet that can go viral in a matter of minutes and cause

untold harm, said Mr Shanmugam, who spent much of his speech addressing WP MPs' claims.

There was no way to guarantee that the courts would be able to respond within hours each time a falsehood needed to be dealt with, he added. He also stressed that the Bill narrows the scope of the Government's powers, instead of broadening them.

"There is no profit of any sort, including political profit, in trying to allow these lies to proliferate and damage our infrastructure of fact. It will damage our institutions and, frankly, no mainstream political party will benefit from it.

"It will damage any party that wants to consider itself mainstream and credible. You've seen what happens in the US, you've seen what happened in the UK, the centre gets hollowed out, it's the extremes that benefit," he said.

MPs had asked for clarifications on technical aspects such as how the law defines falsehoods and public interest, and also raised practical concerns like whether people who inadvertently forward fake news will run afoul of the law.

Mr Shanmugam stressed that orders to put up corrections or remove content would mostly be

directed at technology companies.

The man in the street who does not purposely manufacture falsehoods to undermine society need not fear, he added.

During the debate, Mr Ong addressed the concerns of academics, some of whom had sent him a letter about their fears that academic work would be caught under the law.

He said their main concern was that the law would be abused to stifle political discourse "because not all researchers are just researchers, they may also be activists." He assured them that criticism based on facts and not falsehoods would not come under the new law.

Mr Iswaran, meanwhile, spoke about how the Government was fighting the fake news scourge from other fronts, such as working with technology companies on a code of practice that will prevent their platforms from being misused to ramping up media literacy through education.

"Ultimately, our first and most important line of defence against online falsehoods is a well-informed and discerning citizenry, equipped with the tools to combat online falsehoods," he said. **ST**



Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam

How Finland is winning the war on fake news

A GROUP OF STUDENTS IN HELSINKI ATTEND a lecture in which they are shown a PowerPoint presentation titled Have You Been Hit By The Russian Troll Army, including a checklist of methods used to deceive readers on social media: image and video manipulations, half-truths, intimidation and false profiles.

The lesson wrapped with a popular "deepfake" – highly realistic manipulated video or audio – of Barack Obama to highlight the challenges of the information war ahead.

The course is part of an anti-fake news initiative launched by Finland's government in 2014, aimed at teaching residents, students, journalists and politicians how to counter false information designed to sow division and is just one layer of a multi-pronged, cross-sector approach the country is taking to prepare citizens of all ages for the complex digital landscape of today – and tomorrow, reports CNN.

This is one example of Finland's anti-fake news initiative implementation. In 2016, it imported American experts to advise officials on how to recognise fake news, understand why it goes viral and develop strategies to fight it.

While Russia maintains that it has not and does not interfere in the domestic politics of other countries, Finnish workshops are largely focused on one thing to counter Russia-linked disinformation campaigns: developing a strong national narrative, rather than trying to debunk false claims.

At the French-Finnish School of Helsinki, a group of 10th-graders in Valentina Uitto's social studies class were locked in debate over what the key issues

will be in the upcoming EU elections. The students grab laptops and cellphones to investigate their chosen topics – the idea is to inspire them to become digital detectives.

With a long tradition of reading – its 5.5 million people borrow close to 68 million books a year – the country has also maintained a strong regional press and public broadcaster and has topped the charts for media trust, which means its citizens are less likely to turn to alternative sources for news, the CNN report said.

Last year, the Helsinki District Court handed harsh sentences to two pro-Putin activists on charges of defamation – a Finn of Russian descent who ran an anti-immigrant, pro-Russia website and a self-declared "human rights activist." It was the first time that an EU country had convicted those responsible for disinformation campaigns, drawing a line in the sand between extreme hate speech and the pretense of free speech.

Perhaps the biggest sign that Finland is winning the war on fake news is the fact that other countries are seeking to copy its blueprint. Representatives from a slew of EU states, along with Singapore, have come to learn from Finland's approach to the problem. **ST**



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

Laws that other countries have adopted or are considering to combat online falsehoods

UNITED STATES

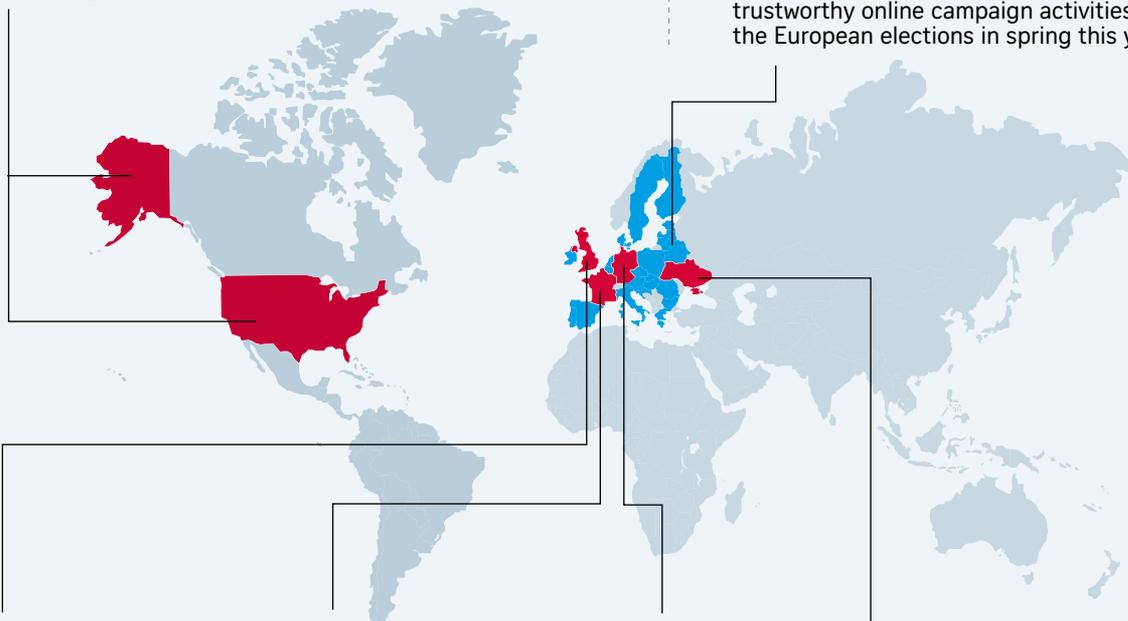
Considering new legislation

- Legislation proposed in response to concerns about use of social media bots to spread misinformation and sow discord online.
- Various states are exploring laws that would require Internet companies to offer the public more information about the people or groups funding political ads for state and local candidates.
- In New York, a law was signed in April last year directing the state board of elections to create an archive of digital political ads, require online platforms to check independent political advertisers' paperwork and prohibit foreign entities from forming committees to buy local election-related ads.

EUROPEAN UNION

Closely monitoring the industry's Voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation; may propose further regulatory actions

- Action plan outlined to help the EU improve detection, have a coordinated response to threats, collaborate with online platforms and industry as well as raise awareness and empower citizens about disinformation.
- EU-wide Code of Practice signed in October last year by Facebook, Google, Twitter and Mozilla and trade associations representing online platforms and the advertising industry.
- Steps taken to ensure transparent, fair and trustworthy online campaign activities ahead of the European elections in spring this year.



BRITAIN

UK Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee set up inquiry on disinformation and fake news

- Examines sources of fake news, how it spreads and its impact on democracy.
- Explores a range of legislative and non-legislative options, including requiring technology companies and online forum operators to act against illegal content.
- Recommends establishing independent legislation and defining what is harmful content.

FRANCE

2018 Law to Combat the Manipulation of Information

- Targets widespread and extremely rapid dissemination of fake news digitally, in particular through social media and foreign-influenced media.
- Particular attention to election campaigns, and attempts to influence election results.
- Penalties: One year in prison and a fine of €75,000 (\$114,000).

GERMANY

2017 Network Enforcement Act

- Combats hate speech and fake news in social networks.
- Applies only to social media networks with two or more million registered users.
- Social networks to remove offending content within 24 hours after receiving a user complaint, or take seven days to investigate matter and delete content.
- Penalties: Fine of up to €50 million.

UKRAINE

Updated national media laws in 2017 to meet the new challenges of disinformation

- Several Russia-related platforms were blocked, including social media platforms, search engine Yandex and email service mail.ru
- Decrees on cyber security and information security introduced in February 2017, calling for development of legal mechanisms to block, monitor and remove content deemed threatening to the state.
- Multiple Internet users in Ukraine have been fined, detained or imprisoned for various offences.

Sources: GOUVERNEMENT.FR, EURONEWS.COM, BBC.COM, PARLIAMENT.UK, LOC.GOV, REF WORLD.ORG, EC.EUROPA.EU, BLOOMBERG.COM, SLATE.COM STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS



PHOTO: ThisPersonDoesNotExist.com

Opinion

‘These people never existed’: How AI is powering fake news

‘Seeing is believing’ no longer holds true as technology makes the job of detecting false content increasingly difficult

AT THE HORASIS GLOBAL MEETING IN APRIL IN Cascais, Portugal, which brings together innovators and social scientists from around the world, a researcher in artificial intelligence (AI) showed me about 20 photographs of people’s faces on her mobile phone.

She asked me to guess which of those faces belonged to actual people.

They all looked lifelike to me, down to fine details like wrinkles, skin tones, hair texture and candid expressions.

So I said, of course, those must be real people. I was wrong.

All the photos were fake – they were photos of people who never existed.

They had been created by a new kind of AI developed by a company called Nvidia and made public.

Earlier this year, a website called thispersondoesnotexist.com was launched, which uses the technology to show faces of never-existent people, all of which look real.

See the sample images on this page and judge for yourself.

I knew there were apps like FaceApp which uses AI to transform anyone’s face, making it look older or younger, adding a smile, or changing a hairstyle, as well as various selfie-editing apps.

But what I just saw was something different.

It was the creation of real-looking people out of thin air.

It was proof that AI can now have imagination and can come up with convincing results, unsupervised.

The same technology can generate imagined images of anything: pets, cars, homes and beautiful art out of rough sketches.

It can also create original poetry.

All of that is already available. Some of these imagined, synthetic renderings can be helpful, for instance, to designers, architects, interior decorators and artists, enabling them to experiment and generate new ideas.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

But they can also have unintended consequences, some of which can be dangerous.

For example, technology writer Adam Ghahramani, who argues that Nvidia’s new AI technology should be restricted, warns that it is a gift to con artists and purveyors of fake news. Non-existent people can, for instance, be portrayed in sensationalised stories as the perpetrators or victims of heinous crimes, creating panic.

Romance scammers can fool star-struck online

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In what is developing into an AI arms race, researchers are working on new AI technologies to detect AI-generated fakes. But until these appear – if they do – the gatekeepers who are supposed to guard against fake content, such as social media companies, mainstream media, corporations and governments, will have their work cut out...



paramours by impersonating imaginary people using unverifiable images. Pet scammers can cheat people into buying non-existent pets online.

Untraceable images can also create problems for policing, making criminal evidence more difficult to obtain and cases harder to prove.

The already flourishing fake news industry has also been boosted by new techniques that use AI for video and audio.

Last year, tech website The Verge reported that film-maker Jordan Peele had teamed up with news portal BuzzFeed to create a “realistic fake” video of former United States president Barack Obama delivering a “public service announcement” in which he calls current President Donald Trump “a dips***”

The video was produced with the help of an AI-powered face-swapping tool called “FakeApp”. You can watch it here: <https://www.theverge.com/tldr/2018/4/17/17247334/ai-fake-news-video-barack-obama-jordan-peelee-buzzfeed>

A Canadian AI start-up called Lyrebird has developed a voice-imitation algorithm that can mimic any person’s voice and accent after analysing barely a minute of pre-recorded audio.

In a promotional exercise, the company provided samples of the voices of Mr Obama, Mr Trump and former US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, extolling its technology. Although the voices are not entirely convincing – though the quality of the mimicry is expected to improve as the technology matures – a lot of people could be fooled. You can hear the mimicked voices here: <https://soundcloud.com/user-535691776/dialog>

FAKE NEWS GETS NEW TOOLS

Such breakthroughs in AI technology have given the fake news industry powerful new tools.

Now, anybody – politicians, religious leaders, CEOs or even people we know personally – can be made to say anything, in what sounds like their own voice, intonation and all, and on video.

For many people, suspension of disbelief will become harder and harder still as the technology improves. The maxim “seeing is believing” is no longer true.

In what is developing into an AI arms race, researchers are working on new AI technologies to detect AI-generated fakes. But until these appear – if they do – the gatekeepers who are supposed to guard against fake content, such as social media companies, mainstream media, corporations and governments, will have their work cut out. There may be times when they, too, will be fooled, despite their best intentions.

The problem will be compounded by the fact that fake news spreads faster than the truth.

In 2017, before the appearance of the AI innovations discussed above, consulting firm Gartner predicted that by 2022, most people in mature economies will consume more false than true information. Academic research adds credibility to this claim.

In a study in the journal *Science* published last year, Massachusetts Institute of Technology researchers Sinan Aral, Deb Roy and Soroush Vosoughi found that false stories “spread significantly farther, faster and more broadly than did true ones”

For instance, falsehoods were 70 per cent more likely to be retweeted and reached far more people than true stories.

Falsehoods about politics, urban legends – mainly myths and rumours – as well as science reached the most people.

Such falsehoods can do serious harm. They can influence political choices, lead to a misallocation of resources during emergencies and create panic and fear. Some of these outcomes have materialised.

IT’S PEOPLE, NOT BOTS

Worryingly, the research also found that people were more responsible than bots for spreading falsehoods.

One reason is that false news is more novel and inspires surprise, which makes it more likely to be shared. Spreaders are also motivated by a desire to demonstrate that they are people who are “in the know” or have some “inside information”.

These disquieting findings apply to advanced, mature democracies.

We can only imagine what the results of similar studies might be for developing countries with a higher proportion of uneducated people equipped with smartphones and access to easy-to-use AI apps.

The evidence we have so far is that falsehoods that go viral have led to mayhem – for example, a spate of lynchings and murders in India since 2017, triggered by WhatsApp messages – and even inspired acts of communal violence and terrorism.

The latest advances in AI, harnessing video and audio, could turn the rising tide of false news into a tsunami.

As digital marketers know, visual content commands more attention than text. For example, video content makes information more digestible, leads to more engagement and retention, and generates 12 times more shares than just words.

Singapore is creating a law to guard against fake content, which is timely and important – even if the proposed law is controversial.

The debate so far has focused mainly on who should be the arbiter of what is true and what is false, and what recourse people might have to challenge rulings.

But fighting falsehoods should also address the issue of the technologies that make them appear more credible and convincing. In any event, it will take more than a law, however well-intentioned and implemented, to ensure that people are more informed by content that is true rather than false.

It will take people themselves – us, in other words – to be more vigilant and discriminating about the information we consume and share. **ST**

Jokowi now needs to reunite Indonesia after divisive elections



THERE WAS ALWAYS AN AIR OF INEVITABILITY about the outcome of Indonesia's presidential election, even before the lengthy vote-counting process crawled to an end.

Unofficial quick counts and interim results from the April 17 polls regularly showed incumbent Joko Widodo on course to be re-elected.

Yet even though the official vote count was finally concluded on May 21 – giving Mr Joko an 11 percentage point victory over his rival Prabowo Subianto – there remains a sense of unfinished business.

One of the key questions is how far Mr Prabowo – who has talked a good game about winning the presidential race – will go to challenge the results released by the General Elections Commission, even though they show him losing by a wider margin than in 2014, when he was defeated by 6.3 percentage points.

For the President, the results, which saw him take 55.5 per cent of the votes to Mr Prabowo's 44.5 per cent, are as good as it gets, considering he managed to double his winning margin from five years ago to almost 17 million votes in this contest.

His stronger performance can be attributed to his continued popularity, while his choice of Islamic cleric Ma'ruf Amin as running mate may have also helped shore up enough Muslim support to give him an edge over Mr Prabowo.

Yet Mr Joko will be presiding over a divided nation, according to Mr Achmad Sukarsono, a political analyst from strategic consulting firm Control Risks.

Voting patterns in the April 17 polls revealed a polarisation along religious identity lines within the country with the world's largest Muslim population, he said.

Mr Achmad noted that Mr Joko won in provinces that were more religiously diverse and tolerant of pluralism, while Mr Prabowo triumphed in areas with larger Muslim majorities and "purist" societies.

To reunite the nation following one of the most divisive elections in Indonesia's history, Mr Joko may have to placate Muslims who backed Mr Prabowo, the analyst added.

This means he is likely to focus on pro-Muslim policies, beginning with efforts to make

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EASING TENSIONS

Jokowi must meet Prabowo soon to calm things down... That is the best and perhaps only way for a peaceful end to the elections for Indonesia.



ASIA JOURNALISM FELLOW EKO MARYADI

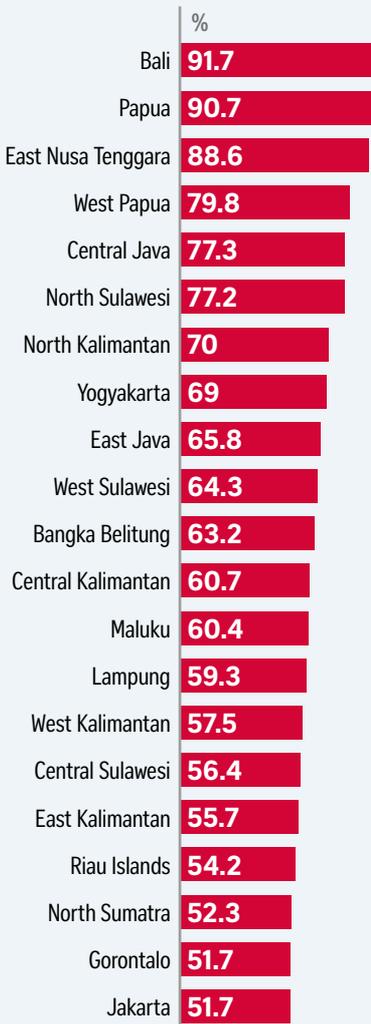
President Joko Widodo addresses his supporters during his final campaign rally in Jakarta, just days ahead of the biggest-ever elections in the world's number-three democracy. PHOTO: AFP

Jokowi power in 21 provinces

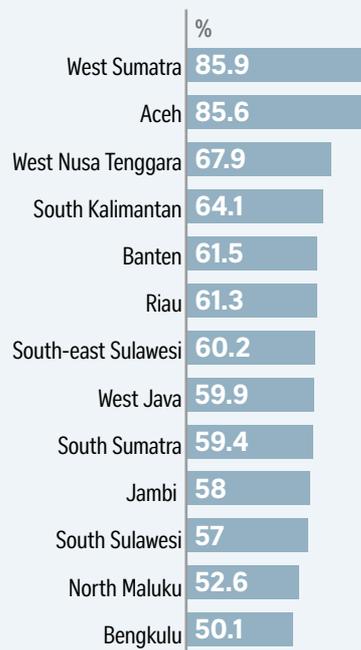
President Joko Widodo defeated his rival Prabowo Subianto 55.5 per cent to 44.5 per cent of the votes in the April 17 polls. Official results out on May 21 saw the President, better known as Jokowi, winning more votes than Mr Prabowo in 21 out of 34 provinces and territories, including in Central Java and East Java. But Mr Prabowo managed to retain his strongholds in West Java, Aceh and Banten.



JOKOWI WIDODO



PRABOWO SUBIANTO



TEXT: FRANCIS CHAN Source: GENERAL ELECTIONS COMMISSION STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

the economy more equitable, instead of prioritising the rights of minorities, or risk being perceived as overly friendly towards foreign businesses.

But given that this will be Mr Joko's last term in office, the President will be keen to leave a visible legacy by prioritising physical infrastructure development, which is part of a broader plan for Indonesia to become the world's fourth-largest economy by 2045.

Mr Achmad added that this emphasis on infrastructure building will lead to incentives for businesses, particularly those with commercial interests aligned with the President's vision for Indonesia.

Mr Joko's efforts to consolidate power also received some good news, with five of the nine political parties in his coalition collectively securing 54.9 per cent of the seats in Parliament in the legislative elections – held on the same day as the presidential poll.

These include heavyweights such as the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle and Golkar as well as fringe parties such as NasDem, whose candidates performed better than expected.

All this means Mr Joko can expect stronger support in the House, which would enable him to push through new legislation to support his reform agenda with relative ease – something he was not able to do at the beginning of his first term in office.

The President has also reportedly made overtures to the Democratic Party and National Mandate Party, which had endorsed Mr Prabowo for the presidential election.

If the two parties switch their allegiances, his ruling coalition would have almost 70 per cent control of Parliament.

All this, however, will result in a new dynamic in his coalition, which he will have to manage with a deft touch, particularly in the appointment of his Cabinet ministers – a key incentive for political parties when deciding on who to back in a presidential race.

It is, however, early days yet, according to JP Morgan economist Sin Beng Ong, who said in a research note that there is likely to be "limited visibility on the final composition of the Cabinet" until after Mr Joko and Dr Ma'ruf begin their term in October.

For now, the President's immediate priority may be simply to sit down with Mr Prabowo in a bid to ease tensions for the sake of peace, Asia Journalism fellow Eko Maryadi told The Straits Times.

"Jokowi must meet Prabowo soon to calm things down," he said, using the popular moniker for Mr Joko. "That is the best and perhaps only way for a peaceful end to the elections for Indonesia."



PHOTO: REUTERS

The 4Ms behind BJP's repeat landslide win

Money, machine, media and, above all, Modi himself helped party retain power

THEY HAVE A WORD IN INDIA FOR THE REPEAT landslide win pulled off by its Hindu nationalist Prime Minister: tsunami.

That's short for a tsunami for Mr Narendra Modi. Not only did his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seem set to improve on its 2014 showing, but it also kept the opposition Congress down to no more than a marginally better performance than the all-time low it hit in that election.

While Mr Modi's charisma and oratorical skills played a huge role in the BJP's massive win, including a stunning and wholly unexpected increase in vote share, other factors also worked in its favour.

Political scientist Yogendra Yadav calls them the four Ms: money, (party) machine, media and, needless to say, Modi.

Add the majoritarian messages by Mr Modi and party chief Amit Shah, and you get the formula that

now sees Mr Modi, presiding over an economic downturn that has seen growth fall below the trend rate of 7 per cent, retain power in the world's largest democracy.

Start with money power. This election is estimated to have cost US\$7 billion (\$9.7 billion) to US\$9 billion, including state money spent on conducting an election that stretched to over six weeks. It is probably a record for polls since democracy emerged as a form of government in Greece in 508BC.

The BJP collected more money and outspent every other party to fill the 17th Lok Sabha, the powerful Lower House of Parliament. Last week, Congress party president Rahul Gandhi claimed that the BJP had outspent his party 20:1.

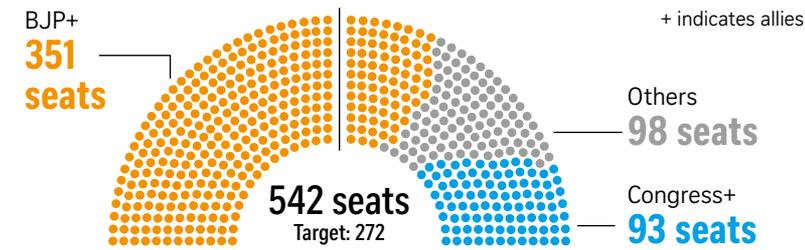
The Association for Democratic Reforms, a non-governmental body that monitors elections, says the

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Saffron wave



Key states	Total seats (won + leading)	Alliance		
		BJP+	Congress+	Others
Uttar Pradesh	80	64	1	15
Maharashtra	48	41	5	2
West Bengal	42	18	2	22
Bihar	40	39	1	0
Tamil Nadu	38	1	31	6
Madhya Pradesh	29	28	1	0
Karnataka	28	25	2	1
Rajasthan	25	24	0	1
Kerala	20	0	19	1
National Capital Territory of Delhi	7	7	0	0

NOTE: Figures as of 10pm on May 23

Source: ELECTION COMMISSION
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Mr Modi's abiding popularity with voters was also a huge factor, particularly after he turned the election into a presidential-style one. He repeatedly told voters that "every vote you cast for BJP comes directly into my account"



Congress party president Rahul Gandhi lost his own Parliament seat in a family borough in Amethi, in Uttar Pradesh state – which his family has held almost continuously for the last four decades.

PHOTO: REUTERS

declared income of Mr Modi's BJP between 2013 and last year was 42.7 billion rupees (\$846 million). Congress reported an income of 18.8 billion rupees.

The figures do not include money from electoral bonds, which the BJP introduced two years ago to clean up election funding. These tax-free bonds gifted to political parties allow buyers to remain anonymous. In the first two weeks of March alone, bonds worth 13 billion rupees were bought.

The BJP is estimated to have netted over nine in 10 electoral bonds sold by the central bank.

As impressive as the funds was the BJP's party machinery, aided by the sustained on-ground presence of its ideological parent, the fiercely Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

In West Bengal, for instance, where BJP seats



are projected to go from two in 2014 to 18 this time, the RSS has been operating since 2014. Once a Marxist bastion, millions of Bengalis are thought to have shifted their vote from left parties to the BJP, convinced it had the best chance to beat the state's dominant party, the Trinamool Congress.

Across India, RSS cadres helped the BJP not only in the run-up to the polls, but also in persuading voters to walk, cycle, take the bus or ride to polling stations. Their efforts outperformed any boost the opposition enjoyed, such as Mr Gandhi's popular sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra entering the campaign, or the alliance of caste-based parties the opposition cobbled in the vital heartland states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

As much as Mr Modi, the BJP's other big asset was Mr Shah, who is considered one of the canniest political organisers of his time. He reached out to key regional forces in places where he considered the party's firepower inadequate.

Key alliances with regional outfits helped the BJP in vote-rich states like Bihar and nearby Odisha.

Mr Modi's abiding popularity with voters was also a huge factor, particularly after he turned the election into a presidential-style one. He repeatedly told voters that "every vote you cast for BJP comes directly into my account"

Living in a country with hostile neighbours – with no credible opposition figure – Indians fell back on what they perceive as Mr Modi's strong leadership.

Congress attacked him on a controversial defence deal for Rafale aircraft, alleging that Mr Modi, the self-styled "chowkidar", or watchman, is a "chor" – the Hindi word for thief. But there is little evidence that any of the mud stuck, even as many considered Mr Modi vulnerable on other issues, like the botched cancellation of high-value currency notes in late 2016 and the implementation of a complicated goods and services tax.

"It does not matter whether I profit and I think some measures he implemented could have been done better," Mr Govind Kumar Sahani, 25, a boatman of the Kewat caste who plies his trade along the Ganges in Varanasi, told me yesterday. "But I also believe there is no better person to lead India."

The BJP also received favourable media attention. A television news anchor exulted on air that Mr Gandhi, under siege from the BJP in his traditional bailiwick of Amethi in Uttar Pradesh, "had to flee to Wayanad" in southern Kerala to be re-elected. Mr Gandhi conceded defeat in Amethi, even as he won in Wayanad by a landslide.

Thousands of BJP workers have been invited to celebrate in New Delhi tomorrow. Truckloads of sweet meats were ordered on Wednesday as exit polls signalled the party was poised to do well. Fireworks were heard yesterday in central New Delhi, mixed with thunder announcing pre-monsoon showers – considered a good sign.

Indians, particularly the Gandhi dynasty-led Congress, now have five years to digest the results. **ST**

PM Morrison pulls off Australian election ‘miracle’

Analysts say voters back Coalition’s economic record as they fear Labor’s ambitious agenda



Australia's newly elected Prime Minister Scott Morrison waving to the crowd as he arrives to deliver a victory speech with his family after winning Australia's general election in Sydney on May 18. PHOTO: AFP

AUSTRALIA'S RULING COALITION WON A spectacular victory in a federal election on May 18 after voters backed its economic record and roundly rejected Labor's ambitious agenda to overhaul taxes and tackle climate change.

Despite opinion surveys consistently showing that the Liberal-National Coalition was set to lose, Prime Minister Scott Morrison pulled off the upset with a disciplined campaign that focused squarely on the economy and on voter concerns about Labor leader Bill Shorten.

Appearing jubilant alongside his wife and two daughters, Mr Morrison, a devout Christian, announced victory by declaring: "I have always believed in miracles.

"Tonight is not about me... Tonight is about every single Australian who depends on their government to put them first."

With 82 per cent of the vote counted, the Coalition had secured a narrow majority. ABC News predicted that it was set to win 78 seats in the 151-member Lower House, compared with 67 for Labor. Another five were won by independents and one by the Greens.

Mr Morrison, 51, has been prime minister only since August after an internal Liberal party coup led to the toppling of Mr Malcolm Turnbull. A social conservative, Mr Morrison presented himself during the campaign as an ordinary, sports-loving, unpretentious father whose main priority was the economy and jobs.

Mr Shorten, a former union leader who has led Labor since 2013, phoned Mr Morrison to concede defeat and then announced that he would stand aside as opposition leader. He urged the country to finally adopt a plan to tackle climate change.

"Clearly on climate action, among others, parts of our nation remain deeply divided. For the sake of the next generation, Australia must find a way forward on climate change," he said.

Australia has enjoyed a world-record 27 years of continuous economic growth and unemployment remains relatively low.

But opinion surveys indicated that voters were angry at the Coalition's toppling of successive leaders – Mr Tony Abbott and Mr Turnbull – during the past six years.

Surveys in Australia are typically highly accurate,

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Australian opposition Labor leader Bill Shorten concedes defeat at the Federal Labor Reception at Hyatt Place Melbourne on May 18, 2019.
PHOTO: EPA-EFE



but analysts suggested that a switch from landlines to mobile phones in recent years has made it hard for polling groups to find reliable voter samples from across the nation's vast geography.

The Coalition ran on its economic credentials and its promise to cut taxes as well as returning the budget to surplus next year. But Mr Morrison largely avoided proposing significant changes.

In contrast, Labor made an ambitious – and politically risky – set of proposals, including higher taxes for property investors and plans to substantially cut carbon emissions and boost renewable energy.

Most analysts said the results indicated that voters were fearful of Labor's agenda and preferred to avoid significant change.

Mr Morrison will now hold a strong command over the party after pulling off the win that few thought possible.

There will be high hopes that he will lead a united party and that Australia's leadership circus – which has involved internal party coups against four prime ministers in less than a decade – will finally be over. [SI](#)

Morrison's coalition poised to win outright majority in Parliament

Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison is set to secure an outright majority in Parliament following an election victory that stunned the nation and sent the share market soaring to its highest level in 11 years the next trading vday.

As counting continued, the ruling Liberal-National Coalition was on track to win 78 out of 151 seats in the Lower House, compared with 67 for Labor, plus five independents and one Green MP.

The coalition's majority is likely to add to the nation's political stability and ensure that the coalition will not need to rely on the support of independent MPs, including several who have called for greater action on climate change.

The government will now be able to pass its 10-year tax cuts unfettered and avoid pressure to adopt a stronger climate policy, though it does not have a majority in the Senate, or Upper House.

Mr Morrison's election victory defied three years of consistent opinion surveys which indicated that the coalition was destined to lose. Despite his underdog status, Mr Morrison ran a disciplined campaign that focused on the economy and raised concerns about Labor's bold, wide-ranging agenda.

Mr Morrison, a devout Christian who presents himself as an unpretentious hard-working father, said he represented "quiet Australians" who wanted the coalition to lower taxes, improve services and avoid the "politics of division."

"They just want to see us get back to work," he told 2GB Radio.

"They've had their say, they've made their decision. Now they expect us to get on with it so they can get on with their lives. That's what the quiet Australia has said and I'm going to honour that."

Mr Morrison must now assemble his new Cabinet, and will then recall Parliament in June to pass his A\$158 billion (\$\$151 billion) 10-year tax cuts. The cuts were the centrepiece of his

campaign, but he otherwise ran on a relatively unambitious agenda. His campaign focused on attacking Labor's plans to boost taxes for some property investors and retirees, and to spend significantly more on health and other services.

Analysts credited the coalition victory for a rapid rise in share prices yesterday, as the stock market saw a 1.7 per cent increase, leaving it at its highest level since late 2007. Australia's dollar also rose by about half a cent to 69.2 US cents. The shares of the country's big four banks rose by 6 per cent to 9 per cent.

Commentators said the impact of a Labor victory had been factored into share prices before the election but this was unwound the next day. Private health insurers had gains of up to 16 per cent because they will no longer face Labor's proposed cap on insurance premium increases for two years.

Mr Morrison's victory follows a tumultuous era in Australian politics, including the ousting by the Liberal party of prime minister Tony Abbott in 2015 and his successor Malcolm Turnbull last year. But the electorate appeared to have forgiven the Liberal chaos due to concerns that Labor's adventurous agenda was potentially risky. "Australians have shown themselves to be cautious about change, susceptible to doubt and to fear," said ABC News commentator Andrew Probyn. "Morrison gambled, correctly, that Australians were a conservative lot who always preferred gradual evolution, not a simultaneous step-change on a number of policy fronts."

Labor leader Bill Shorten announced that he will step down, raising questions about the party's direction. Popular Sydney-based MP Anthony Albanese is set to become the new Labor leader. [SI](#)

– JONATHAN PEARLMAN

Singapore's 19-year-olds: Who they are, what they want



Ms Martina Veloso views a degree as a back-up plan.
ST PHOTOS: KELVIN CHNG

BY ONE DEFINITION, THE 19-YEAR-OLDS BORN IN 1999 are the last cohort of the millennial generation. By another definition, they are already part of Generation Z, aka, iGen - those born between 1996 and 2010 - because the Internet and smartphones have defined many of their experiences thus far.

The generation coming up after Gen Z is already being referred to by some as Generation Alpha.

The Straits Times and Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) decided to study 19-year-olds to understand who they are, how they view the world and what they want out of life. While some of this information could have been gleaned from snap polls done by marketers, we decided to ask this group to characterise themselves and share their thoughts, for a more nuanced and complete picture. We held two focus group discussions to understand some of the findings further.

The survey, carried out between August and November last year, had 1,056 respondents. They were either about to enter first year in university, or

were final-year polytechnic or Institute of Technical Education students. Some of the males were serving national service. A small number were working.

As the majority were in post-secondary institutions and looking to further their education at the universities, we asked them about the education system they had been through and what their educational and career aspirations were.

The 19-year-olds belong to a generation shaped by the smartphone and the concomitant rise of social media. They were asked about their usage of mobile phones, laptops and various forms of media. The earlier millennial cohorts grew up with the Web as well, but it was not ever-present in their lives, at hand at all times, day and night.

We also sought to understand their views on issues, including political ones - from Section 377A, the law that criminalises gay sex, to whether the race of a prime minister should matter. Their responses give us a window into their views, and provide some clues about where this generation

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might be headed.

Many of them shared views and values consistent with the generalisations often trotted out about millennials and iGen. That said, some stereotypes were also debunked.

This study examines the characteristics of this age group through the lens of their differences, as well as through aspects which distinguish them from other groups.

Some differences are discernible across gender, education pathways, as well as socioeconomic status. Others are based on formed habits, such as extent of mobile phone use, or reading preferences. Still others are based on how they relate to technological developments.

The Straits Times and SUSS have attempted to distil the key findings of this survey, in the context of what these young people have seen, heard or experienced by way of history and culture since their birth.

SUSS president Cheong Hee Kiat said the

university and The Straits Times share an interest in studying youth, adding that it is important to understand the worldview and aspirations of younger Singaporeans as it will influence how the country's future society will be like and will function.

SUSS is developing expertise in various critical areas such as early childhood development, life and career development in adulthood and senior citizenry.

Mr Warren Fernandez, Straits Times editor and editor-in-chief of Singapore Press Holdings' English/Malay/Tamil Media Group, said reporting on the issues that matter to young Singaporeans would help ST stay relevant to them.

"ST has served generations of Singaporeans through the years and we want to continue doing so for a long time to come. The best way to do so is to be in touch with our young, understand them and what moves them. If they read about themselves and the issues they care about in ST, they are more likely to stay engaged with us." **ST**

Key finds of 19+ Worldview survey

- 1 Only about 15 per cent of their parent's generation had tertiary education. But nine in 10 of the 19-year-olds now want to go to university.
- 2 They say they are seeking degrees simply to earn higher salaries and access the careers they want. Only 37 per cent said they want a degree for the status it confers upon them.
- 3 By the time they sat for the primary school leaving examination (PSLE) and were considering their secondary school options, the Integrated Programme (IP) had been established in several top secondary schools. So, not surprisingly, more than half of those who went to an IP school, had consciously aimed for it. The top two reasons for aiming for the IP - no need to sit for O levels and wanting to get into a top school. One in three said they wanted the IP for the prestige it brought while one in five said their parents wanted them to enter the IP.
- 4 Education Minister Ong Ye Kung recently announced that the Normal-Express stream divide will be done away with and replaced with subject-based banding. But, surprisingly, most 19-year-olds felt it is appropriate for students to be streamed.
- 5 At first glance, their views on the PSLE appeared contradictory - they said it was stressful but, at the same time, they said the exam should stay. In focus group discussions, it came out that their parents were

stressed over exams while the students see the exams as a fair and transparent way to stream them.

- 6 They want jobs with a purpose. The pay cheque is less important. When asked what counts in a job, 42 per cent said it must be meaningful. Only 17 per cent said good salary prospects are important.
- 7 Education pathways were aligned with salary aspirations, with those from the JC and IP route, expecting to go on to university and starting on salaries of \$3,900.
- 8 Despite the strides made on closing the salary gaps between males and females, the females had lower salary aspirations than their male peers.
- 9 They were born at the time when mobile phones and laptops were ubiquitous. They got their first phones at age 11 and their first laptop at 13, just as they entered secondary school.
- 10 Females get their phones earlier, but when it comes to laptops it is the males who get them earlier. IP students got their phones a year earlier as well.
- 11 The majority spend five to six hours a day on the phone. One in five, say they wake up to check their mobiles, with most checking them one to three times a night. This group also reported 2.5 hours more of daily usage.

12 Those in the highest socioeconomic status (SES) group are less hooked on phones – spend at least one hour less on them each day. Those from disadvantaged segments tend to overuse mobile phones.

13 Three out of five follow social media influencers, with more than 80 per cent saying that they do so because of the content they create.

14 One in five actually prefer interacting through social media rather than face-to-face, while one in three say they would feel lost if they had no access to social media for a day.

15 The Government may fret about young Singaporeans not marrying and starting families. But close to nine in 10 say they wish to get married, and 86 per cent wish to have children. The majority said they would like to do so by the time they turn 30.

16 The fake news law is hotly debated, but among the 19-year-olds, the majority – 70 per cent – agree that there is a need to control the dissemination of fake news.

17 Asked about other laws – including 377A and the ban on chewing gum – about half of them said laws concerning gay rights and 377A should be relooked.

18 They have never known Mr Lee Kuan Yew as their Prime Minister. For most of them, he was their Prime Minister's father. By the time they were born, Mr Goh Chok Tong was PM, followed by PM Lee Hsien Loong. They prefer a “gentler”, “softer” and more consultative style of governance, an opening up of civic space.

19 Asked if the race of a PM was an important factor in voting during the next election, 51 per cent said it was not important at all.

20 Reading widely, including online newspapers, correlates with being better informed. The survey found that those who report reading various types of materials are more likely to say there are laws which should be changed. The most significant effect is seen with those who report reading e-newspapers.

– SANDRA DAVIE

A degree? Yes, please

THE GOVERNMENT IS WELL ON TRACK TO MAKE good on the promise that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made to young Singaporeans in 2012 – that 40 per cent of every age group will have a shot at education in the local universities.

Back when PM Lee made the pledge, only 27 per cent of each cohort landed a place in the local universities.

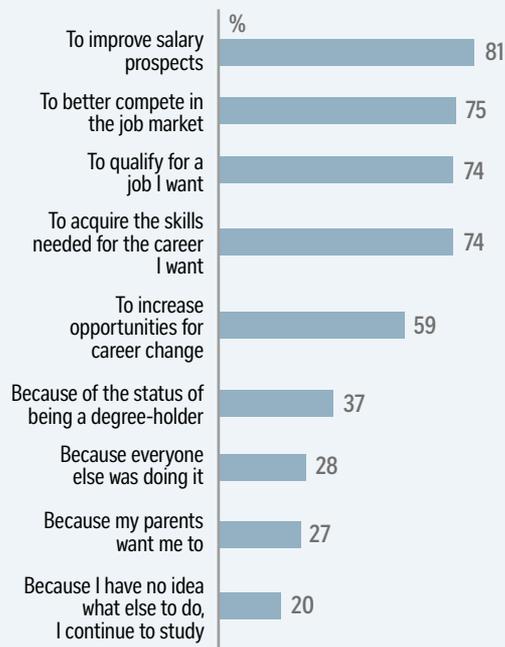
It now appears that even the 40 per cent mark falls far short of the aspirations of school leavers and polytechnic graduates.

Of the 1,056 19-year-olds surveyed in the ST-SUSS survey, 27 per cent were already pursuing a degree or already had a place in university. Of the others, 91 per cent said they wanted a degree. The reason for their hunger for degrees – to earn higher salaries, to better compete in the job market and access the careers they want. Only 37 per cent said it was for the status of being a degree holder.

A dozen 19-year-olds – from the junior colleges, polytechnics and Institute of Technical Education – were interviewed further about their higher education plans. All said they hope to eventually head to university. Among this group are national shooter Martina Veloso and School of the Arts graduate Nicholas Papayoanou.

Ms Veloso, who won two gold medals at the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, Australia,

Why they want a degree



Source: SINGAPORE UNIVERSITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

91% of ST-SUSS poll respondents see it as way to earn more, get careers they want





Mr Nicholas Papayouanou says having a degree means “you are higher up in the food chain”.
ST PHOTOS: KELVIN CHNG

last year, wants to be a full-time athlete while Mr Papayouanou, who played young Simba in the Disney Theatrical Productions musical *Lion King* when he was just 12 years old, is set on becoming an actor.

They admit that although they do not need a degree to access the careers they want, they are considering various university options.

Ms Veloso, who recently graduated from polytechnic with a diploma in sports and wellness management, said: “I definitely want to be a full-time athlete but what do I do later on in life? Having a degree is a back-up plan... It will give me more opportunities.”

Mr Papayouanou, a full-time National Serviceman, plans to pursue a degree in acting or theatre, saying: “I do see the importance. It gives casting directors trust in your work, they know you have been trained and are capable of carrying the workload.”

He said having a degree means “you are higher up in the food chain” and you will get a higher salary and climb the ladder faster. **ST**

– SANDRA DAVIE

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Purpose over pay cheques

YOUNG PEOPLE WANT JOBS WITH MEANING, and they will even put purpose over pay cheques.

A survey conducted by The Straits Times in partnership with the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) found that the most important factor in choosing a job for them was how meaningful it was.

The study examined the views of more than a thousand 19-year-old Singaporeans.

Nearly 42 per cent said the job must hold some meaning for them. This was more than twice as popular as the next highest ranking factor of good salary prospects, which 17 per cent of the respondents agreed with.

They also said other considerations, such as work-life balance, how related the job is to one’s field of study and the opportunity to progress in the career, would not affect their job choice.

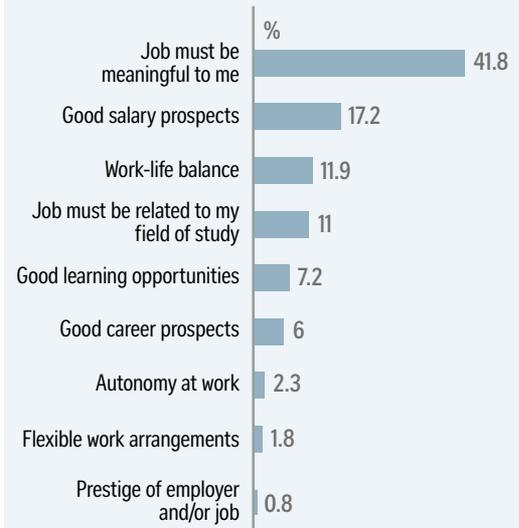
However, fewer of the respondents from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) – 32 per cent – felt that a meaningful job was important, in contrast with 42 per cent for those from polytechnics and 45 per cent from junior colleges (JCs).

The survey also showed that ITE students had more practical considerations. More of them said factors such as salary and how related the job is to their discipline of study would influence their decision to take it up.

Those from JCs also had higher salary expectations than their polytechnic and ITE peers.

The desired starting pay for young people on the JC route was \$3,905, compared with \$3,312 and \$3,247 for those from polytechnic and ITE.

What they want in a job



Source: SINGAPORE UNIVERSITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Labour economist Randolph Tan, who led the ST-SUSS study, said: “Young people value their freedom and have greater confidence in their own abilities than the generations before them, and do not believe in serving merely as a cog in the system.”

The SUSS associate professor noted that there is a difference in socio-economic status between students from ITE and JC, suggesting that this plays a role in shaping their career outlook.

Temasek Polytechnic student Charmaine Goh, who hopes to take up a job which can benefit others, said: "It goes back to what you want to do in your life and how your career fits in with that, and how it helps you achieve that purpose."

The third-year communications and media management student said there is a "clear shift" in thinking between her parents and her generation today.

"In the past, it was about finding a job that you could stay in for a long time, and work and life were two separate things," she said.

"Today, the lines are blurred. My friends and

I would like jobs that we would personally enjoy, something that can benefit other people."

SUSS first-year marketing student Victoria Wong said that while pay is important, finding passion in a job is still the most essential.

"If you're doing something you don't enjoy, it will be draining, tedious and not good for your physical and mental health in the long run."

She added: "Young people today also want to work in an environment that is open, that will allow them to apply what they've learnt in school and challenge themselves to come up with innovative ideas."

"This sort of work process will eventually help you to grow as a person, instead of just taking instructions from others." 

– AMELIA TENG

Women expect to be paid less

DESPITE YEARS OF TALK ABOUT GENDER equality, not only is there still a gender pay gap, but young women also expect to be paid less than men.

The results of a survey of over one thousand 19-year-old Singaporeans last year show gender is a key factor that influences salary aspirations.

Of the respondents, 28 per cent expected a monthly pay of \$2,500 to \$3,000.

But 68 per cent of females desired salaries of less than \$3,000, compared with 50 per cent of men. In contrast, 49 per cent of males expected to be paid between \$3,000 and \$5,000, compared with just 32 per cent of females.

According to the Ministry of Manpower's latest statistics, the median monthly salary of a woman in full-time work was 9 per cent less than a man in full-time work.

Associate Professor Randolph Tan, noting that there is scant research on salary expectations in Singapore and almost none that he is aware of on salary expectations of those who have not yet joined the labour force, said: "In general, we would expect prior expectations about asking salaries to be directly linked to future asking salaries. Where a gap already exists at the point where expectations are formed, it makes it more likely for the actual gender salary gap to persist."

"The fact that 19-year-olds display such a gender-based gap suggests that difference arises even before actual labour market experience, and are therefore not formed through first-hand experience of workplace discrimination," he said, adding that more research can be done to see if there are other cultural or socio-economic factors at work.

Randstad Singapore managing director Jaya Dass said the results were not a surprise, given that on average, men around the world still earn 20 per cent more than women.

She said: "Salary expectations are references

to salary benchmarks that are mainly based on historical data which takes into account past traditional values where men were commonly the breadwinners and women were housewives.

"Furthermore, men tend to gravitate towards science, technology, engineering and mathematics careers which command a higher average salary as the jobs require highly technical and niche skills."

She also said females are drawn to careers in soft skills, such as people management and communication. 

– AMELIA TENG



In the past, it was about finding a job that you could stay in for a long time, and work and life were two separate things... Today, the lines are blurred. My friends and I would like jobs that we would personally enjoy, something that can benefit other people.



– MS CHARMAINE GOH, a third-year student at Temasek Polytechnic.

First-year SUSS marketing student Victoria Wong says that perhaps cultural expectations make men think they have to earn more.

ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

RAISE THE GAME

How Game Of Thrones changed television

The world of television has been transformed after eight seasons of the hit HBO series, Game Of Thrones

JOHN LUI

Film Correspondent



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FOR FANS OF GAME OF THRONES, LAST MAY 21 is a day of mourning.

Not only is the show gone, but also the lunch-time arguments with friends and office buddies (“This season is awful!”, “No, it was all foreshadowed!”), the theories posted on Reddit and fan forums, the geeky YouTube breakdowns (“Could Arya be the real Prince That Was Promised?”) and the rash of Thrones-related podcasts that have sprung up.

Over its eight seasons, the series grew into a phenomenon many believed was gone with Friends (1994 to 2004) – the water-cooler show, the event that people gathered to chat about the next day.

Friendships have been broken over spoilers and angry fans – more than one million at last count – have signed a petition urging a remake of the final season.

Fun fact: 560 baby girls born last year in the United States were named “Khaleesi” and 2,545 were given the name “Arya.”

Back in 2011, when the first season aired, few would have guessed that a show in the unfashionable genre of mediaeval fantasy would grow into the world’s most-watched programme.

HBO’s expensive gamble paid off handsomely and content creators around the world have taken notice. Here are some ways Game Of Thrones has changed television.

FANTASY IS HOTTER THAN EVER

Thrones took a nerdy branch of the fantasy genre – the mediaeval fantasy – and made it mainstream.

Other studios noted that viewers wanted dynasties, duels and dirty deeds.

Netflix responded with the shortlived period drama Marco Polo (2014 to 2016) and fur trade western, Frontier (2016 to present), starring Jason Momoa, also known as Khal Drogo. The History Channel produced Vikings (2013 to present).

With the lavish science-fiction western Westworld (2016 to present), HBO is hoping for lightning to strike twice.

Every studio wants its own Thrones clone, but none has come close to what its showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss have done.

USE THE PIRATES

The first episode of the final season was downloaded 55 million times in 24 hours on torrent sites, and more than one billion downloads were recorded for Season 7, helping the show keep its crown as the most pirated on Earth.

HBO treats piracy the way Westerosi mainlanders see the Ironborn raiders: as an enemy that needs to be tackled with both the stick and the carrot.

Over time, it has been trying to make its services

The Game of Thrones Experience: World of Westeros is a free interactive event, which features a display of actual weapons from the series, a replica of the iconic Game of Thrones Iron Throne, and an oculus rift virtual reality experience titled Game of Thrones: Ascend The Wall.



more affordable and easier to purchase. In Singapore, for example, the HBO Go streaming service recently became available through the Toggle catch-up service at around \$10 a month for a year's contract.

HBO's policy could very well set the tone for other studios.

If you have a heavily pirated hit, fight it using the usual laws, but also use it as an opening to lure subscribers to the app – which you have made cheaper and easier to use – and hope they stay for other shows.

FEEDING THE BEAST

Real Thrones fans do not stop at Thrones-branded hoodies, make-up, jewellery, shoes, whiskies or wines, all of which are available.

There are now more than a dozen Thrones podcasts and a similar number of Thrones YouTube channels.

You can also buy Game Of Thrones electric guitars from Fender engraved with the sigils of Houses Lannister, Stark and Targaryen. The Targaryen Stratocaster guitar features a sterling silver dragon inlay and leather accents and costs US\$35,000 (S\$48,000).

What do guitars have to do with the Thrones

universe? If a series has strong original music, as Thrones does, Fender can create a marketing video featuring celebrity players jamming the Ramin Djawadi theme tune.

Thrones fandom is insatiable and post-Thrones, show creators will realise that the deeper the lore, the greater the money-making potential.

SEX AND VIOLENCE FIND A WAY

In 2016, the Media Development Authority ruled that if an online content provider put age checks in place, it could deliver R21-rated content over the Internet to devices in Singapore. In time for Game Of Thrones fans to watch Season 7 uncut on the HBO Go app for smart devices.

Was the decision driven by Thrones pressure? It is hard to say, but, in Singapore, almost every year, online forums had been ablaze with complaints by fans about the snipped version on traditional cable delivery systems without age checks.

Piracy rates for the show are high in China, even though HBO is available there, as Chinese fans want the uncut version.

Indirectly, the world's most popular television show is paving the way for television to take artistic risks with less fear of losing audiences to piracy or censorship controls.

MAKING CABLE TELEVISION EVEN MORE RELEVANT

Game Of Thrones helped make over-the-air television feel antiquated. Not just because on HBO, there are no commercial breaks and the adult content. It is because of the freedom Thrones' producers had over the number of episodes and their length.

There are only six episodes in Season 8, but they vary in length from just over 50 minutes to 80 minutes. Free-to-air broadcasters would have a fit trying to schedule a series like that, with their commitments to advertisers and a schedule broken into 30-minute chunks.

THINKING BIG – AND EXPENSIVELY

After watching armies clash on the battlefield, dragons raking castles with fire and hordes of ice zombies attack a fort, anything less feels like a letdown. That is not even counting the amount spent on arms and armour for hundreds of knights and soldiers, and locations that range from Iceland to Eastern Europe.

In 2014, Netflix replied with an expensive period drama of its own, Marco Polo, which cost a reported US\$9 million an episode, compared with Thrones' US\$15 million. But Netflix's shot at blood and bawdiness failed to find an audience and lasted two seasons. It has had more success with the royal biopic The Crown, which cost US\$13 million an episode.

Bet big, win big. Thrones has shown studios that one huge hit can change everything.

Game Of Thrones is available on HBO Go. **ST**

Over its eight seasons, the series grew into a phenomenon many believed was gone with Friends (1994 to 2004) – the water-cooler show, the event that people gathered to chat about the next day. Friendships have been broken over spoilers and angry fans... have signed a petition urging a remake of the final season.

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The best and worst scenes of Game Of Thrones

OVER EIGHT SEASONS OF THE HIT FANTASY series Game Of Thrones, the top moments have been the ones when viewers realised that this show was going to break rules and upend expectations.

We knew it was fond of killing off favourites – see Oberyn Martell's (Pedro Pascal) death under the thumbs of The Mountain (Hafthor Julius Bjornsson) – and it liked to slow things down so viewers could see the deaths in gory detail.

It was also good with the big set piece scenes, such as the Battle of the Bastards, Cersei's walk of shame and the Red Wedding, which were engineered to get attention.

The best scenes, though, had emotional impact, and not just scale or shock value.

1 **Hodor is no more**
This is the farewell that made everyone cry. In season 6, episode 5, viewers find out why the mentally challenged giant Hodor (Kristian Nairn) says only one word, the one that came to replace his real name, Wylis. It closes the arc of a character that, up till then, seemed to be not much more than a walking joke. That joke turns tragic and bitter in a matter of minutes, paying off a setup several seasons in the making.

2 **Drogon cannot play nice with people**
This is another memorable tearjerker of a scene, courtesy of a powerful performance by Darren Kent. The actor, who has a genetic bone and skin condition, has a few short lines. He nails it. In season 4 episode 10, the Khaleesi (Emilia Clarke) is listening to petitioners in the royal court of Meeren when the goatherd played by Kent appears with a bag of charred bones. "He came from the sky. The black one. The winged shadow. He came from that sky and... my girl. My little girl."

3 **Tyrion commits Shae-cide and patricide in one night**

In the finale of season 4, Tyrion (Peter Dinklage), accused of killing King Joffrey, has been freed from prison by Jaime (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau). Instead of slipping away to freedom, he makes a detour to his father Tywin's (Charles Dance) bedroom. In his father's bed is Tyrion's lover, Shae (Sibel Kekilli), whose first betrayal was to give false testimony against him in his trial. His first murder is hot: he strangles her, sobbing. His next killing is cold and almost comical. He shoots his father with Joffrey's gilded crossbow as Tywin is sitting on the toilet.

4 **Brienne brings The Hound to heel**

Coincidental meetings are a staple of the show, even back when it still had the A Song Of Ice And Fire books for source material. In season 4, episode 10, Brienne (Gwendoline Christie) runs into Arya (Maisie Williams) in the Vale. The encounter is sweet at first - Arya is delighted to meet a woman warrior - but turns ugly when The Hound (Rory McCann) refuses to let Brienne take Arya. Their battle begins as a clean sword fight, but descends into a nasty series of low blows and head butts after Brienne calls him "ser" and Sandor characteristically treats that as an insult, spitting out, "I am not a knight."

5 **Tyrion finds everyone guilty**

In season 4 episode 6, Tyrion is on trial, accused of Joffrey's murder. Jamie has brokered a deal with his father Tywin: He will quit the Kingsguard, marry and carry on the Lannister line. In return, Tywin will release Tyrion into the Night's Watch. But on the stand, shattered by Shae's betrayal, he makes a speech filled with fury and heartbreak about being on trial all his life for being a dwarf. The deal is trashed. It is a glorious and pointless act of oratory, showing that while he has a reputation for cleverness, Tyrion is impulsive, self-destructively so.

6 **Shireen at the stake**

Upsetting deaths do not come much more upsetting than this. Shireen (Kerry Danielle Ingram), daughter of throne claimant Stannis (Stephen Dillane), is burned as a sacrifice to the Lord of Light. In season 5 episode 9, Stannis is desperate - his supplies have been burned by a Ramsay raid



and with winter approaching, his men will starve whichever way he moves. Melisandre (Carice van Houten) says the “king’s blood” in Princess Shireen may cause a miracle. Her death, thankfully, happens offscreen, but her screams go on for what feels like an eternity.

7 Bran finds his super power

Before season 4 episode 5, Bran (Isaac Hempstead Wright) and the team travelling beyond the wall are mostly defenceless. They have been captured by the mutineers at Craster’s Keep. Locke (Noah Taylor), embedded in the Night’s Watch, is a Bolton spy who has worked himself into the raiding party led by Jon Snow (Kit Harington). Locke is about to whisk Bran away to the Boltons when Bran wargs, or implants his mind, into Hodor’s, causing the giant to snap Locke’s neck. The scene is a surprise as it shows that Bran, the weakest in the group, might just be the strongest.

8 Arya is the Lannister kid Tywin wishes he had

In season 2, Arya, posing as a commoner, is a prisoner of forces loyal to Tywin Lannister. Without realising who she is, Tywin takes her as a servant and in a series of tense, sharply written scenes, they form a weird father-daughter bond, even as she tries, and fails, to not give anything away about her highborn status. In episode 7, in an exchange about the futility of castles against dragonfire, there is a battle of wits in which she gently chides him for failing to mention it was women with dragons who helped found the Targaryen dynasty.

9 Arya and The Hound walk into a bar

One of Arya’s earliest kills is among the most satisfying because The Hound is there and the two form a great odd couple. In season 4 episode 1, at an inn, they run into Polliver (Andy Kellegher), a Lannister soldier. In season 2, he took her sword, Needle, from her and killed her friend with it. Two seasons later, he lies maimed on the floor of the inn. She coldly repeats what he said as he killed her friend, before stabbing him in the same place, the throat. “Funny little blade. Maybe I’ll pick my teeth with it,” she says.

10 Olenna goes down swinging

In season 7 episode 3, the forces of the wily matriarch Lady Olenna (Diana Rigg) have been defeated by troops led by Jamie Lannister. He enters her room and is respectful in his triumph, ready to give her a dignified exit by poison. She cannot resist popping his balloon before her death. In a pungent exchange, she tells him that Joffrey’s murder was her doing, not Tyrion’s, as Cersei has insisted. “You love her. You really do love her. You poor fool. She will be the end of you,” she says to Jaime, with real pity.



WORST SCENES

THE STARBUCKS COFFEE CUP THAT APPEARED this season can be excused because it happened by accident. Here are howlers the makers wrote, shot and broadcast intentionally.

1 Suddenly, Ed Sheeran

The singer-songwriter’s cameo as a Lannister soldier in season 7 episode 1 caused many eyes to roll, not only because it was jarring to see a pop superstar in a fantasy series, but because it was so self-indulgent and irrelevant to story or character. Here, on the road to King’s Landing, Arya shares a campfire with a group of merry Lannister men, instead of massacring them.

2 We are not pleased, says the Queen

There was always the chance that Queen Daenerys would be a maniacal tyrant. Over the seasons, she and others recognised how the Targaryen disease could flare up. It happened in the final season, episode 5. A furious, despairing Dany razes King’s Landing and its civilians with it, completing the job her ancestor Aerys Targaryen wanted to do with wildfire, before he was slain by his bodyguard, Jaime Lannister. That act of carnage might have been an ironic closing of the loop, but a longer build-up would have helped make it feel more inevitable.

3 The Winterfell battle, planned by throwing random things on charts

We know that the people of Westeros know battle strategy. People boast about it. Rob Stark was brilliant at it. So was Jamie Lannister, when he captured Highgarden. So why is the defence of Winterfell against the White Walkers so weirdly inept? From the absence of trenches, which would have stopped Walkers in their tracks, to using the catapults only once, to sending the Dothraki out on a wild charge, almost every move was wildly unconventional and wildly unsuccessful. **ST**



SCAN TO LISTEN

The Straits Times’ podcast review of Game Of Thrones’ final episode.



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Entertainment

China's rumble over royals

The country's disdain for Chinese period dramas may be rooted in the belief that these series draw unwarranted comparisons with today's political leaders

IN A SCENE IN CHINESE DRAMA STORY OF YANXI Palace, Emperor Qianlong chances upon an opera which depicts two women in love.

He rushes to the chambers of the Empress, who, some palace maids whisper, is uncommonly close to a concubine.

But his fears are unfounded – the rumours are yet another attempt to backstab the Empress.

Today, life imitates art.

Just like in this scene in the world's most Googled drama series last year, some say the Chinese authorities are reading too much into dramatised reality.

In late March/early April, the Chinese authorities finally loosened curbs on period dramas that were passed down in late January, provided that television stations report each month what they plan to show.

Before the relaxation, TV stations scrambled to yank period dramas off the air or to delay the premiere of new period series.

Dragon Television from Shanghai was still showing Episode 72 of Ruyi's Royal Love In The Palace (2018) on Jan 28, but ended the series abruptly the next day.

Likewise, Zhejiang satellite TV station took Yanxi (2018) off air from Jan 29, Duowei magazine reported.

The show is now on Singapore's Channel U.

While TV stations have been given more leeway to show period dramas, the episode has left a bad taste among viewers and underlined the tug of war between political ideology and art in China.

It is widely speculated that Chinese officials are fearful that such shows make heyday political leaders look bad and draw unwarranted comparisons – the imperial infighting depicted in shows like Yanxi could lead to the impression that something is rotten in the state of China.

It does not help that the show is based on actual historical figures like Emperor Qianlong and Empress Fucha, making it harder for viewers to tell fact from fiction.

Professor Tan See Kam, a film studies expert at the University of Macau, says the current disdain for Chinese period dramas, generally set in mythical time or Imperial China, is not unprecedented.

"In communist China, period dramas have historically borne the taint of politically incorrectness vis-a-vis socialist arts.

"In Mao Zedong's China in particular, they have been attacked, for example, for propagating bourgeois individualism and class harmony."

Ruyi's Royal Love In The Palace (top) charts the love story between Emperor Qianlong and his queen.
PHOTO: STARHUB

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Empresses In The Palace featured scheming and backstabbing concubines.
PHOTO: SINGTEL



Some say the tone of some of the criticism against period dramas is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, which led to a crackdown on traditions and the arts in the 1960s and 1970s.

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Some say the tone of some of the criticism against period dramas is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, which led to a crackdown on traditions and the arts in the 1960s and 1970s.

A strident opinion piece in the Beijing Daily published just before the clampdown accused these shows of causing people to become obsessed with past royalty, instead of the heroes of current day.

The article accused shows like Yanxi, about a feisty palace maid who wins the Emperor's favour, and Empresses In The Palace (2011), about scheming and backstabbing concubines, of at least five sins, including promoting a life of luxury over one of frugality and worsening societal relations.

That this is 2019 could also have made leaders in China extra jittery.

Quite a few years ending with the digit nine have been politically tumultuous for China, be it 1919, the year of the May 4th uprisings; 1949, which saw the victory of the communists over the nationalists; and the 1989 Tiananmen student protests.

Prof Tan says the upcoming 70th anniversary of China's founding in October may also be a factor as "politically incorrect material would tar the celebrations."

He adds that, unlike the Maoist period, the reasons for the suppression of period dramas under President Xi Jinping's watch are not made explicit.

"What we now see could be understood as a re-tightening – or further tightening, if you like – of

the government's political control of media and entertainment," says Prof Tan.

Last year, the authorities ordered the pay of celebrities to be capped, to curb the worship of money. This issue gained traction last October when Chinese actress Fan Bingbing was fined for tax evasion.

Censors have also gone to the extent of blurring out the earlobes – and earrings – of young male actors on TV, The New York Times reported.

Summing up, Prof Tan says "the current move to suspend period dramas from the country's mediascape is ideologically driven."

Dr Foo Tee Tuan of the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) says Yanxi is also a victim of its own overwhelming popularity. It was streamed a whopping 15 billion times and more on the Beijing-based iQiyi online streaming platform.

"If it's not popular, they won't be concerned that people might try to copy the lifestyle," he adds.

A BLOW TO SOFT POWER?

While the clampdown might have been relaxed, the episode has made many wonder if censorship will foil China's ambitions of rivalling the United States in soft power.

"China wants to enhance its soft power through cultural products like TV dramas," Dr Song Geng, of the School of Chinese at the University of Hong Kong, tells the South China Morning Post. "But if historical dramas are banned, it could have a negative impact on China's soft-power endeavours."

Dr Foo notes that it is clear where the Chinese government's priorities lie – that social and political stability trumps all.

"For the Chinese government, soft power is important. But the stability within society and the stability of the government is even more important."

But there is no doubt China's cultural influence,

through the export of its lavishly produced dramas and variety shows, has grown.

Yanxi was the most searched for TV drama on Google last year, with the searches mostly from Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and Hong Kong, reported BBC. And this is not counting China, where Google is blocked.

In Taiwan, where the ruling independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has tried to remove references to China from textbooks to buildings, Chinese period dramas are a weapon to enhance the Taiwanese's feelings of affiliation towards the mainland.

The same goes for Hong Kong. Even Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP once disclosed that she would watch the shows Yanxi and Ruyi before she goes to bed.

Indeed, period dramas have long been China's main cultural export, from 1980s classics such as Journey To The West to 1990s shows like Yongzheng Dynasty.

It has an advantage in making such historical dramas, given its vast land and trove of historical monuments, says Dr Foo.

Prof Tan says Chinese period dramas generally have high production value as their domestic market is huge, which makes lavish productions commercially viable and very profitable for those that are hits.

An episode of a Chinese series can cost more than one million yuan (\$200,000), Yazhou Zhoukan reported.

For one episode of popular period drama Nirvana In Fire (2015), you can produce five episodes of a Taiwanese idol drama, the weekly news magazine added.

In contrast, Chinese modern-day dramas do not tend to travel well as overseas audiences find it hard to relate to the concerns of the Chinese, such as the household registration system, which limits where a person is allowed to live.

Dr Foo says: "In Singapore, we don't really watch their contemporary dramas. The kind of stories and concerns are quite different."

It is not just TV shows though – China recently scored a breakthrough with its first hit science-fiction movie, The Wandering Earth, which has been bought by streaming giant Netflix.

Few would bet against the expansion of Chinese cultural influence.

As Prof Tan says: "If the current suspension becomes an extended one, this would make a dent on China's attempts to cultivate soft power overseas via its media products.

"But only to a certain degree, I would say, since China is not solely dependent on period dramas to carry the torch. It has other torch-bearers such as the variety-cum-talent show The Voice Of China and Hollywood co-productions."

Successful TV exports can boost soft power anywhere, he says.

Yanxi has certainly conquered legions with its gutsy heroine and bold storylines – while there was disrobing, no affair took place between the Empress and the concubine, only acupuncture done in secret. **SI**

Fact or fiction?

JAN LEE

Chinese palace period dramas have gained legions of fans with tales of love, lies, politics and betrayals in the Forbidden City.

While many of these popular dramas, like those set in the Qing dynasty, take inspiration from real people of the time, plot lines are often plucked from showrunners' imaginations than history books. The Straits Times explains what is true or false about the key characters in these shows.

EMPRESS FUCHA

FACT: Empress Fucha, who married Emperor Qianlong – one year her senior, at 16 – was the one great love of his life. After her death at age 37, Emperor Qianlong penned more than 100 poems for her. Critics consider these poems the outstanding ones out of the 40,000 and more mediocre poems written by him.

He also kept her place of residence, Changchun Palace, untouched after she died. He visited it on her death anniversary every year until he stepped down from the throne more than 40 years later.

FICTION: While Empress Fucha's death soon after her second son raised speculations of depression from historians, she did not commit suicide by jumping off the roof of a Forbidden City building, as told in Story Of Yanxi Palace (2018). The Empress was played by Qin Lan.

According to historical records, Empress Fucha died on a ship when the royal couple were on a tour of the country.



STEP-EMPRESS NARA

FACT: Step Empress Nara, Emperor Qianlong's second Empress, did abruptly lose favour.

In 1765, she was on a royal tour of the country with Emperor Qianlong when she was suddenly sent back to the palace after lunch one day. Historical records suggest that she cut her hair – a major taboo at the time – and that soured her relationship with her husband.

Emperor Qianlong was not subtle with his dislike of her even in death. She was not buried in a dedicated grave – which all concubines had – when she died. Her coffin was buried in the grave of Imperial Noble Consort Chunhui, who ranked lower than her in life.

FICTION: While several dramas such as Yanxi – whose character was played by actress Charmaine Sheh – and Ruyi's Royal Love In The Palace (2018) depict and explain the hair-cutting story, the reason Step-Empress Nara cut her hair is unknown and never specified in history.



IMPERIAL NOBLE CONSORT NIAN

FACT: The younger sister of Nian Gengyao, an important official during Emperor Yongzheng's time, she was one of the Emperor's favourite concubines. While her brother was initially the Emperor's political ally, he was later sentenced to death by the king for his arrogance and corruption – as was seen in Empresses In The Palace (2011).

FICTION: While the 2011 hit drama characterised her as a ruthless concubine who was secretly rendered infertile by the Emperor, this was far from the truth. Imperial Noble Consort Nian, who was said to be gentle and kind, was not infertile. She bore the Emperor four children – although none survived to adulthood.



Big Picture

PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Cardboard metropolis

A VISITOR POSING FOR A PHOTO IN THE CENTRE of an artwork featuring a metropolis made of cardboard, on display at the De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde in Manila in late April.

The artwork, titled *Here, There, Everywhere: Project Another Country*, is the latest piece by artist couple Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan, who are based in Brisbane, Australia.

Commissioned by the Mao Jihong Arts Foundation, Chengdu, and Centre Pompidou, the piece was created with the help of volunteers in

China who underwent workshops by the artists on cardboard art-making.

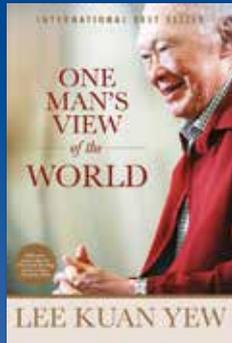
While the installation was originally made in and patterned on the city of Chengdu, the Filipino artists said the use of cardboard packs more meaning in Manila. "The cardboard is very much important in the Philippines. In other places, it's discarded... Here, we use it for everything. We construct with it, it becomes your bed, it becomes your house, it becomes everything," said Ms Aquilizan in an interview with Agence France-Presse. [SI](#)

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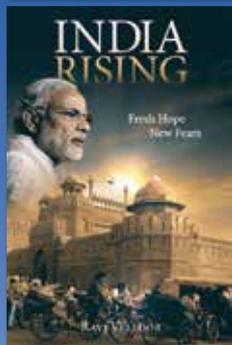
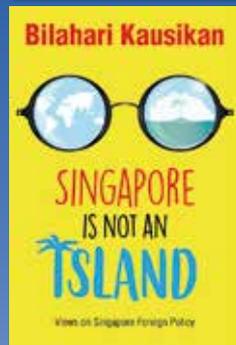
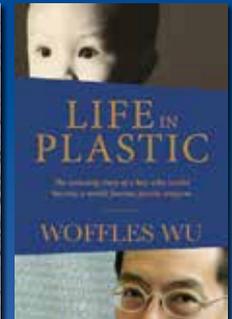
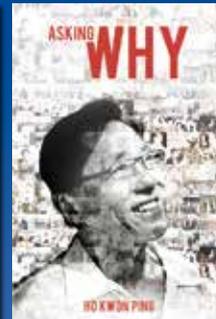
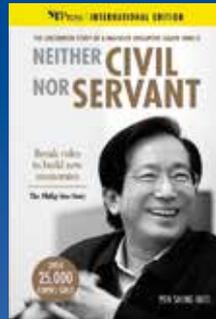
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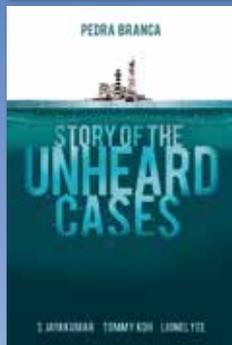
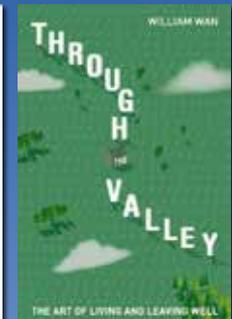
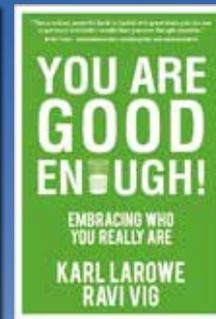
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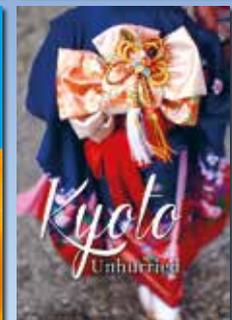
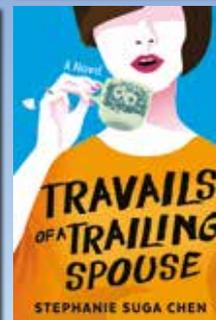
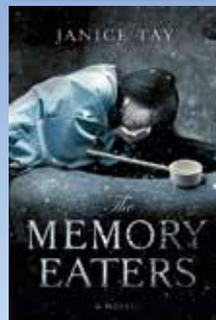
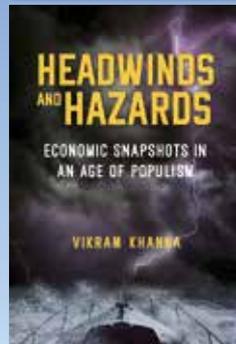
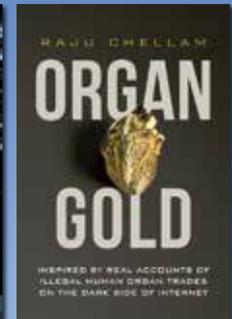
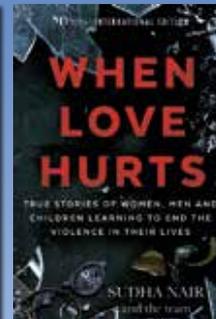
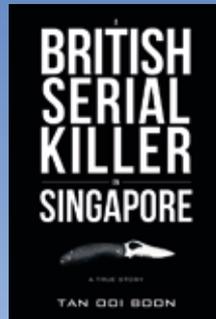
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