

PREMIER UPBEAT ON THE ECONOMY

But Li says factors affecting growth are 'more complex than before'

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PARTY IS OVER FOR 'NIGHT VIBES' PUSH

Many believe initiative to reboot the city's nightlife has failed to deliver

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'HISTORIC' CHANGES FOR HK DENTISTS

Amendments to registration ordinance include internship for graduates

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CROSS-BORDER TRAVEL



Sino Group chairman Robert Ng visits a CTS service centre to apply for the new travel permit, which he said would boost exchanges between foreigners and the mainland. Photo: May Tse

TYCOON, STUDENTS IN FIRST-DAY RUSH FOR NEW TRAVEL PERMITS

Permanent residents with foreign passports hail scheme, but some face difficulties with documents

Connor Mycroft, Oscar Liu and James Modesto

A tycoon, businessmen and students were among the Hong Kong permanent residents with foreign passports who applied for a new travel permit to enter the mainland after applications opened yesterday.

Many hailed the five-year multi-entry permit as a "game changer", while others faced difficulties over a lack of correct documents.

Sino Group chairman Robert Ng Chee Siong, a Singaporean national, headed to China Travel Service (Hong Kong) (CTS) to apply for the permit and described the measure as "tremendous" in boosting exchanges between foreigners and the mainland.

"It just goes to show [the] motherland's strong support to Hong Kong [under] 'one country, two systems'," Ng told the Post at the CTS HK Island Service Centre, referring to the principle governing relations between the city and the central government.

British national Steve Hart, who visited the same centre, said he was looking forward to easier entry procedures, compared with those for his previous trips to the mainland.

"Everybody I speak to knows about [the new permit]," said Hart, who is in his early 40s and has lived in Hong Kong for 16 years. "I'm quite excited to try this method to get across the border."

Other centres across the city also saw a steady stream of foreign nationals arriving throughout the morning.

Sanders Chung Tai-cheung, an 18-year-old Philippines-born Hong Kong resident, arrived at the CTS centre in Mong Kok with his mother before 9am to apply for the new permit for studying purposes.

"I know about the new permit and my school suggested that I apply for this for easier access to the mainland campus," said Chung, who is studying media at Shenzhen University's Hong Kong College.

90

Holders of the new travel permit will be able to spend up to this number of days for each stay on the mainland

"This permit will be a game changer as it allows me to have a faster border check multiple times."

Chung told the Post he was not able to proceed with the application as CTS staff advised him to book another appointment after he was unable to provide a mainland phone number.

Other applicants said they did not provide a mainland phone number and were not turned away.

At the Mong Kok and Tuen Mun centres, the Post also spotted a notice informing people that if they applied for the new permit, their other forms of mainland visas would be cancelled.

Those holding Apec business travel cards are also unable to apply for the new permit, according to the notice.

But CTS Hong Kong chairman Perry Yiu Pak-leung said in the afternoon that based on his understanding, those with valid Apec business travel cards could apply for the permits as long as they brought all the required documents.

Announced on July 1, the permit will allow non-Chinese nationals with permanent residency in Hong Kong and Macau to enter the mainland for purposes such as short-term investment,

visiting relatives, tourism, business, seminars and exchanges multiple times for a period of up to five years.

Permit holders can spend up to 90 days for each stay on the mainland and enjoy self-service clearance at control checkpoints once they have their fingerprints taken at ports of entry. Permits will be issued within 20 working days if their applications are successful.

Before its introduction, most of the city's 270,000 adult non-Chinese nationals with permanent residency had to apply for separate visas to visit the mainland.

Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu has said the new measure would help to enhance Hong Kong's "unique status and advantages", while foreign business chambers have said the move would help reinforce the financial hub's gateway role.

Demand for the permit has surged, with bookings for appointments at CTS' sole Hong Kong Island centre full until July 30. Other centres were fully booked until the end of this week, according to a check by the Post on Tuesday night.

Yiu, who also represents the tourism industry in the legislature, said he hoped the new permit

could provide convenience for those looking to apply, especially students.

"We have a lot of young talent and students who may want to spend time and visit the mainland for summer holidays, join study tours or exchanges," he said at the CTS Kowloon East centre.

"Considering how long and complicated it is for students to cross the border, we hope this new measure can be more convenient for them."

But some foreign nationals found themselves turned away after being told they did not have the right documents.

Common issues observed by the Post included failure to book an appointment without a "Notice of Application for Access to Information". Applicants are required to obtain the document that states their Hong Kong permanent resident status and nationality information from the Immigration Department before making an appointment.

Indian national Wesley Kotian, 59, a stay-at-home father, went to a service centre but did not know he had to apply for the document and make an appointment in advance.

"I thought I could just walk in and apply with my Hong Kong ID card," said Kotian, who has lived in the city for 32 years. Additional reporting by Tom Shuai and Alice Kong

TRADE

Beijing to examine the EU's treatment of Chinese firms

Investigation seeks to determine if bloc's Foreign Subsidy Regulation is unfair amid tariff dispute

Kandy Wong, Mia Nulimalaiti and Finbarr Bermingham

Beijing has begun an in-depth investigation into whether the European Union has adopted unfair trade practices in targeting Chinese companies, adding heat to an already broiling dispute.

The probe, which began yesterday, is looking at how the EU's Foreign Subsidy Regulation has affected Chinese companies.

Authorities will use questionnaires, public hearings and field inspections, and aim to finish by January 10, the Ministry of Commerce said, adding that the probe could be extended to April 10 under special circumstances.

The move came after the EU's additional duties of up to a revised 37.6 per cent on Chinese battery electric vehicles took effect on Friday, initially for a period of four months.

Mofcom said the EU practices that fell under the scope of its investigation included the bloc's probes into locomotives, solar panels, windpower products and security-check equipment.

Gary Ng, senior economist at Natixis Corporate and Investment Bank, said such an investigation "usually marks the beginning of trade retaliations".

"It is not the first time China has used such a policy tool, and it is possible to see more tariffs on selected European goods," he said.

"Still, the fragmented political landscape means the EU-China relationship is probably in a deadlock but may not significantly worsen further."

Lea Zuber, the EU's competition spokeswoman, said the commission was studying the details of China's investigation but added that "we are making full use of the tools we have at our disposal, including the Foreign Subsidies Regulation".

"Internally, the EU has an elaborate state aid control system in place - this is a key pillar to ensure fair competition and a level playing field across companies and member states within the Union," she said.

"All companies, regardless of their seat or nationality, are subject to the rules set out in the Foreign Subsidies Regulation. This is also the case when applying state aid or antitrust rules," Zuber added.

On Sunday, EU ambassador to China Jorge Toledo said that Beijing had only recently responded to the EU on tariffs after the bloc had offered consultations for months.

The ministry later said the ambassador's remarks were "grossly inconsistent with the facts", adding that China had been consulting the EU since the investigation's launch last year, referencing seven unsolicited communications sent to the EU from October to June.

"Trade-protectionist measures are not conducive to the development of the global green industry or cooperation in the automotive sector," the ministry's

spokesperson said, adding that China would take all necessary measures to safeguard its own rights and interests.

"Since the investigation will be ongoing until January and could be extended ... it is still quite unclear what the outcome will be," said Dong Jinyue, principal economist at BBVA Research.

"But historically speaking, there are two types of outcomes - one is to engage in retaliatory behaviour toward the EU, and the other is to solve the issue politically or get back to the negotiation table."

Other analysts said the investigation did not necessarily reflect an escalation in trade frictions, and could instead be a gesture following recent negotiations.

"[This is] a normal move in trade negotiations, and it's likely a response from Beijing after recent talks with Brussels over tariffs on electric vehicles," said Ding Shuang, chief economist for Greater China at Standard Chartered.

"Negotiations need to ensure fairness on both sides, including not only the EU's investigation of China but also China's further investigation of the EU's probe," Ding said.

It is not the first time China has used such a policy tool, and it is possible to see more tariffs on selected European goods

GARY NG, NATIXIS

"Whether trade frictions between the two sides will escalate depends on whether they can find common ground after negotiations."

Mei Yuan, assistant professor of economics at Singapore Management University, said the EU's investigation was in line with countervailing World Trade Organization rules.

"We don't know whether the EU was more stringent or even differentiated between Chinese enterprises in the actual process, which is why [Mofcom] has to investigate the situation," he said.

Zha Daojiong, a professor at Peking University's school of international studies, said "China is in an unfavourable situation" in this tit-for-tat interaction with the EU regarding the countervailing duties, because the odds that the EU would "relent" were "virtually nil".

"The EU can hope to incentivise an increase in Chinese electric vehicle investment in its member economies," he added, while China does not "necessarily have the option" of matching the EU with tariff levels on those products it investigates, to "avoid adversely pushing sales prices".



Chinese electric cars ready for export. Such vehicles have become the focus of trade friction after the EU imposed tariffs on them. Photo: AFP

TRADE

City's bid to join RCEP has wide support, Lee says

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A majority of members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) responded positively to the city's application to join the trade bloc, Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu said at a conference yesterday.

For the past two years, Hong Kong officials including Lee have been advocating for the city to join the RCEP, the world's largest free-trade pact encompassing all 10 Asean member states plus China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

"Hong Kong in 2022 applied to join the RCEP, which promotes regional cooperation," Lee said in a speech at the Chinese General Chamber of Commerce World Chinese Entrepreneurs Summit in Hong Kong.

"The city can contribute a lot

to the members of the region in areas such as supply chain management, financial services and fintech development.

"With backing from the central government and the efforts of all the parties involved, a majority of RCEP members, including all Asean members, have responded positively to Hong Kong."

Hong Kong had a sound legal system, free trade, and a good business environment, Antony Chan, vice-president of the Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, said during a panel discussion at the summit.

"Hong Kong has so many advantages that I could not think of any reason not to let Hong Kong join the RCEP," he said.

Lee said the city's active financial market, large pool of professionals and unique role under the "one country, two systems" regime made it the only city in the

world to connect mainland China and the world.

"The population, economic output and trade volume of RCEP represents 30 per cent of the world," the chief executive said.

"Hong Kong and RCEP members also have close trade relationships, with bilateral trade volume reaching nearly US\$800 billion, representing 70 per cent of all trades in Hong Kong."

The city can offer a lot of benefits to RCEP members, including acting as a wealth-management centre, a venue for companies to go public and a source of green financing and fintech innovation, according to speakers on another panel focused on how Hong Kong's financial services industry can help RCEP members capture market opportunities.

"The RCEP is the fastest growing region in the world, and it has created a lot of wealth," Secretary for Financial Services

and the Treasury Christopher Hui Ching-yu said. "Hong Kong can act as a wealth-management centre for these countries. Hong Kong has introduced a lot of law changes and incentives to attract more private equity firms, family offices and listings of new-economy companies and exchange-traded funds."

The city was also a green financing hub that companies across the RCEP could use to issue green bonds and other financial products to raise funds for their efforts to cut emissions and develop clean energy, Hui said.

Bourse operator Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing (HKEX) had implemented listing reforms since 2018 to allow biotechnology companies and firms with different classes of voting rights to list, said Wilfred Yiu Ka-yan, HKEX's deputy CEO. Since last year, it has also allowed pre-revenue technology companies to raise funds.

"Hong Kong has a super well-designed model ecosystem," Yiu said. "The listed market and the over-the-counter market cover a wide spectrum of stocks, bonds, derivatives and ETFs."

These provided issuers around the world with many vehicles to raise funds to meet their financial needs, while also giving investors exposure to these firms, Yiu said. Fintech was another area where Hong Kong could work with RCEP members, said Chan Ka-keung, chairman of digital lender WeLab Bank and former secretary for financial services and the treasury.

"Hong Kong is a first mover in developing digital banks and is also working on a lot of projects in cross-border digital payments, e-HKD and others," he said. "We can have a lot of cooperation with companies in RCEP member countries to promote fintech development in the region."

DAY BY DAY

MY TAKE - ALEX LO

Vassalise allies, destabilise the rest is now US strategy in Indo-Pacific

Divide and conquer, well-honed in Middle East and Latin America over decades, is being applied to only real growth engine of world economy

A peaceful and prosperous Asia? Think about it, there is no upside in that for the United States. This is especially so because there is no scenario in which that doesn't also mean a more stable, prosperous and, therefore, even more powerful China.

For the US to contain China must also mean impoverishment and instability for its neighbours, intentionally or as collateral damage.

That is the real meaning behind the hatefest currently taking place at Nato's 75th anniversary summit in Washington. For an alliance that has "North Atlantic" in its name, it's extraordinary that it now spends as much time fretting about China as Russia, against which it is waging a hot proxy war.

The purest expression of this US strategy in Asia has been Australia's costly deal for nuclear-powered submarines under the Aukus security partnership with the United Kingdom and the US.

“Gould revealed for the first time what has long been suspected: one of the submarine's most important requirements would be to work with the Americans in the South China Sea,” Fowler wrote in Nuked: The Submarine Fiasco that Sank Australia's Sovereignty.

“He explained that the submarine would need 'to get through the archipelago to the north of Australia and into the South China Sea and operate in the South China Sea for a reasonable period of time and then come back again, without docking, or refuelling or anything. That's what it needs to do.'”

That was in fact the criticism of Paul Keating, former Labor prime minister, from day one. The original contract for much-cheaper conventional submarines, which would have been adequate for the defence of the continental homeland, was unilaterally broken by the Liberal government of Scott Morrison.

The book quoted Gould as saying the submarines would work alongside the US and Japan in an “integrated system”, which had become “even more pertinent with China”. The revelation, of course, undermines Canberra's claim that the new submarines would be used to defend Australia and protect its shipping lanes.

The argument is, of course, ludicrous. Why would Australia need to defend sea lanes against China, its best customer and biggest trading partner that had, until recently, helped boost its economic growth over two decades?

It is at the same level of absurdity as Brussels and Washington's claim that the Nord Stream pipelines, blown up in September 2022, was the work of the Russians, who built them to supply oil to Germany and beyond. But you can always count on the stenographic mainstream news media in the Anglo-American sphere to duly repeat the absurd propaganda.

Across the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, it's the same story. A little more diplomatic finesse could have considerably eased tensions. But then, Washington would neither be able to sell expensive but obsolete weapons to the island, nor justify deploying massive naval hardware to the region. Taiwan's secessionist forces are only too happy to play along.

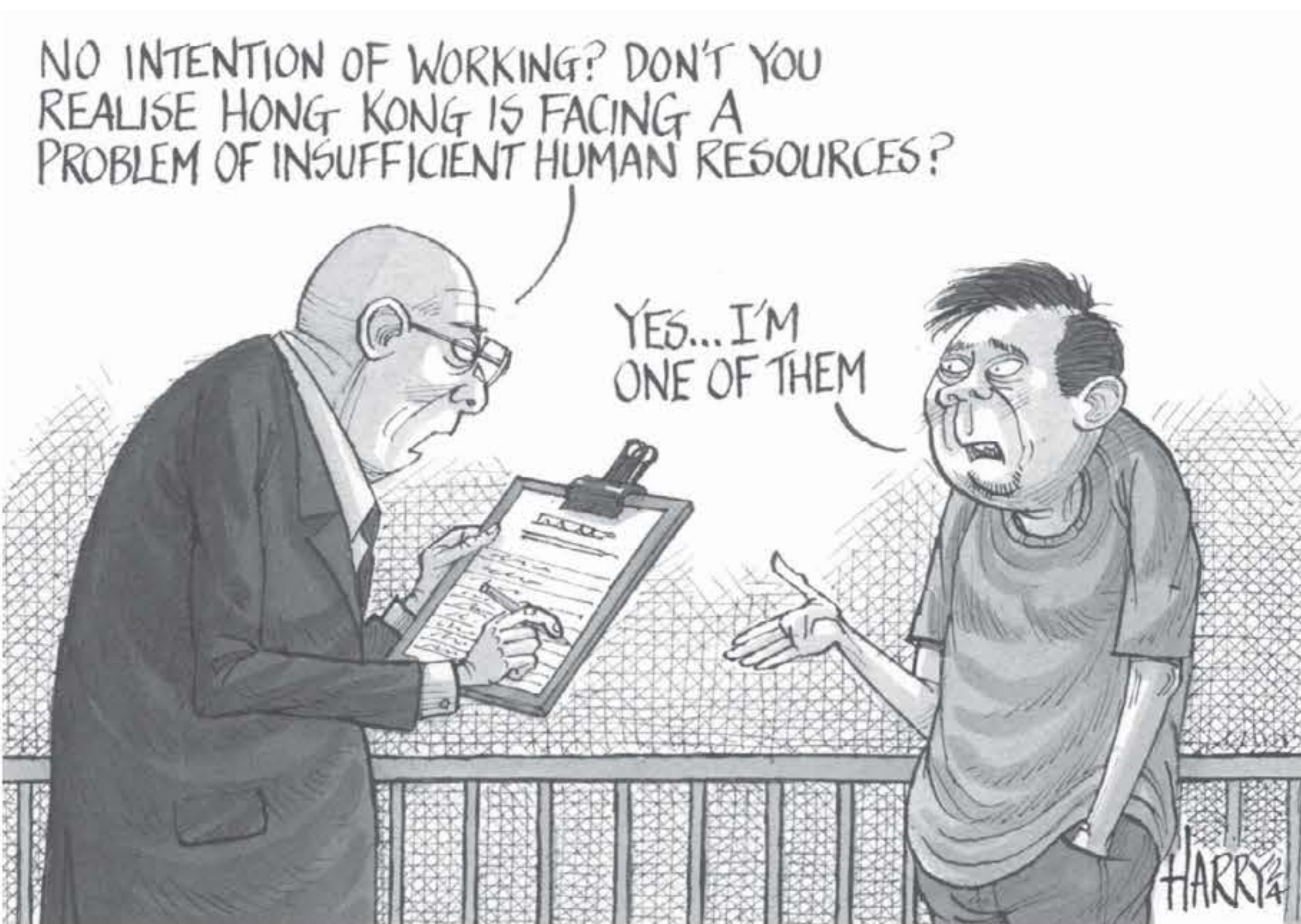
“Today Ukraine, tomorrow Taiwan” – that has been the argument Nato and the US have been using to justify an increasingly aggressive Western posture. It is not that Beijing wants to go against the island, but Nato and Washington want it to do precisely that or at least threaten the island enough to justify Western intervention.

That's why President Xi Jinping has openly declared that China will not be goaded into launching a cross-strait war. Now, even the Philippines and Australia are having second thoughts about the frontline role assigned to them by the US.

If there is hope, it is that India and most Asean countries recognise the malignancy that Nato and Washington have been trying to introduce into the region's geopolitics and economics. That's why non-alignment and neutrality remain their best strategy.

Even the Philippines and Australia are having second thoughts about the frontline role assigned to them

HARRY'S VIEW ON A WORKFORCE RETRAINING SURVEY > A3



VIDEO SPOTLIGHT

Seoul influencer promotes a childless, unmarried life

On the outskirts of the South Korean capital Seoul, Seen Aromi promotes the single life, showing her YouTube followers how she practises yoga and sleeps as late as she wants. Aromi's channel aims to empower her more than 200,000 followers, many of whom voice shame about being unmarried and childless. The 37-year-old said she had never considered becoming a “good” wife or mother as the ultimate purpose of her life. However, her message has drawn a backlash in a country with a looming demographic crisis. South Korea is struggling with the world's lowest birth rate and a rapidly ageing population.



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- University of Nottingham Ningbo

HKSAR

- University of Hong Kong
- Chinese University of Hong Kong
- Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
- Hong Kong Polytechnic University
- City University of Hong Kong

POSTS FROM THE PAST

A thumbnail image of the South China Morning Post newspaper cover from 2019. The main headline is "TALKS IMPEDED BY FAILURE TO AGREE ON FARM IMPORTS". Other headlines include "IS HUAWEI REALLY A TROJAN HORSE?", "Joy and heartbreak", and "Tech firms go from opponents to trailblazers".

2019

China's internet giants used to be called copycats for creating clones of Western social media platforms – but those days are long gone and that trend is now in reverse. Global internet firms from the US to Southeast Asia are looking to replicate Chinese concepts, according to findings from the China Internet Report 2019.

A thumbnail image of the South China Morning Post newspaper cover from 2014. The main headline is "LAM ISSUES WARNING ON OCCUPY SHUTDOWN". Other headlines include "Joint pledge to ease military tensions" and "China's trade deficit widens".

2014

Chief Secretary Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor says government operations may break down if Occupy Central brings the main business district to a standstill. Her warning comes at a meeting with civil service and disciplined services unions ahead of the unveiling of the government's electoral reform report.

A thumbnail image of the South China Morning Post newspaper cover from 2009. The main headline is "Wen orders support for stocks, homes". Other headlines include "Rio Tinto staff held for bribery" and "Premier says rebound not yet solid".

2009

Premier Wen Jiabao orders efforts to be made to support the property and stock markets and carmakers, saying they are crucial to sustaining the economic recovery, at least in the short term. Wen also says the central bank should keep the credit tap fairly wide open to support big government spending.

A thumbnail image of the Sunday Morning Post newspaper cover from 2004. The main headline is "Jockey Club floats year-round racing". Other headlines include "Stop the Sars blame game: minister" and "Stomach of parent gets plan to boost falling revenue".

2004

Hong Kong Jockey Club chairman Ronald Arculli says he is considering extending race meetings through the height of summer amid falling revenue. Hinting further declines from the city's single largest taxpayer could hurt government finances, Arculli says the club may hold evening race meetings in July and August.

CONTACT US

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POLITICS

PREMIER UPBEAT ON ECONOMIC ISSUES

Li says factors affecting growth ‘more complex than before’ and calls for candid analysis of situation

Frank Chen and Mia Nulimaimaiti

Premier Li Qiang has struck a positive tone on the state of China’s economy in a meeting with business leaders and economists, while also cautioning heightened complexities choking growth, as inflation data added to persistent pressures.

Stressing that China’s economy was in “stable operation”, Li admitted that factors affecting growth were “more complex than before” and that the difficulties needed to be resolved with greater efforts.

“We must candidly analyse the situation and not avoid the problems so as to accurately grasp the situation and make scientific policy decisions,” the premier said during the event in Beijing on Tuesday.

The world’s second-largest economy continues to grapple with an uneven recovery, but Li and other top leaders have tipped stable growth in the first half of the year and said that the objective of around 5 per cent annual growth was attainable.

Beijing is trying to whip up more positivity in the lead-up to the reform and economy-centric third plenum slated for next week, but the upbeat official portrayal of the economy is marred by poor demand and confidence, which has been further compounded by weak inflation.

China’s consumer price index (CPI) edged down to a three-month low in June after growing by a paltry 0.2 per cent year on year, compared to an increase of 0.3 per cent in May, the National Bureau of Statistics said yesterday.

The producer price index – which measures the cost of goods at the factory gate – dipped 0.8 per cent last month, falling for the 21st straight month, although the reading represented a 17-month high.

Amid uncertainties, consumers and businesses are seen to be unwilling to spend due to a prolonged property slump and a bleak jobs market, with the CPI having stagnated around zero since April 2023, in contrast to Beijing’s annual target of around 3 per cent.

At the meeting on Tuesday, Li said efforts must be dialled up to tackle the “troubles” in economic operation and that decisions must be based on a factual diagnosis of the situation.

He also urged solid implementation of macro policies to unleash their effectiveness to promote

development, while giving full support to the role of enterprises, which can expect targeted policy support to be further strengthened to bring about tech and innovation breakthroughs.

Echoing vows made by President Xi Jinping in a rare dialogue with business leaders in May, the premier also urged “unreasonable systems and mechanisms” to be reformed to boost enthusiasm, initiative and creativity of all entities.

The attendees at Tuesday’s meeting included the heads of state-owned enterprises and private entrepreneurs, including tech start-up founders, and economists.

A Beijing-based scholar said the Chinese economy was set to grow by 5 per cent or slightly higher this year, but that the premier’s remarks were proof that his

attention was on the complexities and deeply entrenched problems.

“The premier has admitted to these challenges in a face-to-face meeting with business representatives and experts, not to cadres,” said the person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue.

“This is a gesture by Li, who is tasked by Xi to run the economy, to assure entrepreneurs that he knows their difficulties and complaints.

“Compared with Xi’s remarks in the May meeting, Li’s words are more reflective of the headwinds and problems.

“It’s a bid to reassure businesses that their hardship is not ignored, a bid to restore confidence as the premier will face the issues squarely.”

The scholar added that with the recent exchanges with the business community before the third plenum, expectations for

reform policies and implementation had been raised.

Peng Peng, executive chairman of the Guangdong Society of Reform think tank in Guangzhou, also said the top leadership was keenly aware of challenges and expectations.

“As we head into the second half of the year, stakes are high as we anticipate the third plenum to come up with strong reform measures and effective economic policies,” Peng said.

“Although the economy remains on a growth trajectory, the consumption sector is not optimistic. This is not only reflected in the weak growth of retail sales but also in the sluggish CPI.

“The fact is that residents are saving rather than spending under pessimistic expectations for employment, income and business profitability. It even puts pressure on achieving the annual growth target.”

US warned China close to taking STEM lead

Top American scientist notes ‘worrying trends’ over R&D spending and published studies

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The US appears to be losing out to China in the race for global scientific leadership, but may counter the trend by adapting to the emerging research environment and trying “new things”, a senior American science official said.

Delivering the inaugural State of the Science address in Washington, National Academy of Sciences (NAS) president Marcia McNutt said the US was still the biggest investor in research and development, but it would not be long before it was overtaken by China.

The US spent US\$806 billion versus China’s US\$668 billion on R&D in 2021, but China’s rate of investment was twice that, said McNutt, who is the first female president of the NAS, and became a foreign member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 2019.

Since the end of World War II, the US had been “not just world-leading but world-dominating” in science and engineering, accounting for nearly 60 per cent of all Nobel Prizes ever awarded, she said.

Meanwhile, China had been catching up quickly in both quantity and quality of papers published, while doubling the number of patents filed by the US in 2021.

“This all suggests to me that there are very worrying trends,” she said.

Various ranking methods, including those used by analytical institutions in the US, Britain and Japan, all suggest that China has surpassed the US in the number of most-cited papers, a key measure of research impact.

According to McNutt, the US has become “exceptionally dependent” on international students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), including from China and India.

Foreign students not only outnumbered domestic students in American university graduate programmes, but also 65 per cent remained in the US for at least 10 years, maintaining the country’s STEM workforce, she said.

“We literally couldn’t fill our STEM jobs if it were not for these foreign students coming and staying in the US.”

However, as China’s R&D efforts have grown, US universities have seen a decline in the number of Chinese students in recent years. “International students have so many choices, and we are no longer a destination of choice,” McNutt said.

She recommended protecting US leadership in science by strengthening its own K-12 STEM education and building a domestic scientific workforce.

The tradition of having other nations – especially those in Asia – invest in their K-12 training and then “steal their students to come here” should be changed.

According to McNutt, the US should also work on luring “the best and brightest talent” from around the world by reducing red tape for student visas.

A top-down national research strategy was also critical to help coordinate R&D spending by government agencies and the private sector, she added.

ROAD SAFETY

Countdown clock for crossing boosts safety, trial shows

With the devices, pedestrians are better alerted before flashing ‘green man’ light turns red

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More pedestrian crossing lights could be fitted with countdown timers after a HK\$1.14 million trial by transport authorities found they helped cut the number of those who risked their safety by making a dash just before the “red man” lit up.

“Preliminary data shows that after the installation of the countdown device, there was an improvement in pedestrians crossing the road completely before the flashing ‘green man’ light ends,” Secretary for Transport and Logistics Lam Sai-hung said in a written reply to the Legislative Council yesterday.

But Lam said the results of the latest trial would be analysed by university experts before firm conclusions were made.

He added the trial might be extended to more crossings to give “a more comprehensive understanding of its application and performance at other locations in Hong Kong with different characteristics”.

Lam also said the results would help steer the next phase of implementation of the clocks at crossings.

Of the HK\$1.14 million, HK\$573,000 was spent on software and hardware development, design, installation, testing equipment and temporary traffic arrangements. The remaining HK\$571,000 was earmarked for a university to carry out a full analysis of the results.

But Lam said it was unlikely there would be similar trials of a countdown clock for vehicles at light-controlled crossings because of controversy over the potential effects.

Some drivers might slow down if they saw the green light time drawing to an end, while others might choose to accelerate through, increasing the risk of accidents, he explained.

“With the view of upholding road safety, vehicular traffic light countdown devices were not implemented in Hong Kong.”

Lam added the Transport Department would continue to monitor developments in other jurisdictions.

Lawmaker Chan accused the government of being too slow to make changes.

“They have been talking about implementing this for a long time ... the last trial was six years ago,” he said.

Chan said he wondered why it was taking so many months for the results to be analysed as the device had been in place since December, and he vowed to continue pressuring authorities to speed up their progress.

They have been talking about implementing this for a long time

LAWMAKER CHAN SIU-HUNG

He was responding to questions from lawmaker Chan Siu-hung, who had grilled authorities over the trial’s progress.

The countdown clock, in operation at the pedestrian crossing at Tat Tung Road and Mei Tung Street in Tung Chung since December last year, produced results that were “unlike” and “more effective” than similar tests carried out in 2006 and 2018.

Unlike in the earlier studies, the timer started its countdown as soon as the green man appeared, rather than when it started to flash.

The Transport Department found in the previous trials that more pedestrians were unable to complete a crossing before the red man lit up.



The countdown clock at the pedestrian crossing at Tat Tung Road and Mei Tung Street in Tung Chung. Photo: Sam Tsang

Defeat for Transformers



Pedestrians pass by Transformers: The Ark on Causeway Bay’s Russell Street amid revelations that the restaurant is to close, a victim of high rent, a consumption slump and intense competition. The eatery serves Autobot-themed hamburgers

and pizzas. Transformers figurines and merchandise are also sold. “The space will be transformed into an empty [lot] soon,” said Oliver Tong, head of retail at JLL, which lists the property on its website. Photo: Robert Ng > FULL REPORT B1

AVIATION

Drones soar 48% to power China ‘low-altitude economy’

Kinling Lo and Amanda Lee

Newly registered unmanned aircraft or drones surged by 48 per cent in China in the first six months of the year amid a push for the “low-altitude economy” to foster high-value jobs, bolster innovation in science and technology and inject momentum into the overall economy.

About 608,000 new unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) were registered in China in the first six months of the year, bringing the total to more than 1.87 million, according to data provided by the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) yesterday.

“To push for the healthy development of the low-altitude economy, we as the regulator will continue to work on coordinating the upgrade of the traditional

aviation industry and innovative developments in the unmanned aerial vehicles industry,” CAAC director Song Zhiyong said.

Minister for transport Li Xiaopeng also previewed plans to upgrade China’s logistics and transportation network through policies that would encourage the replacement of old vehicles, such as trucks, ships and locomotives, with new models or methods, including UAVs.

The low-altitude economy has been identified as a new growth point for the world’s second-largest economy.

It refers to the realm of industries developed from civil manned and unmanned aerial vehicles that operate in the airspace below 1,000 metres above ground, such as for agriculture, delivery services and emergency response purposes.

The development of flying cars and drones in China was combined with artificial intelligence, the digital economy, green energy and biomedicine at the annual central economic work conference in December as “strategic new industries”.

But the latest figures for licenced companies operating drones have fallen from the 19,000 reported at the end of 2023 to 14,000 yesterday.

The number of people registered with an operating licence, meanwhile, stood at 225,000, up from 194,000 at the end of last year.

Building resources and data sharing infrastructure with local governments to develop low-altitude communication, navigation and surveillance capabilities would be among the next steps for the low-altitude economy to

eventually realise a “one-stop” service for low-altitude flights, Song said.

The CAAC would strengthen the certification standards for drones to adapt to new designs and fully utilise the potential of the low-altitude airspace, upgrades on safety regulations and the use of airports, he said.

While pushing for the sector to develop, authorities have also expressed their intention of enacting further regulations.

The first set of national regulations introduced in June last year required registration of drones of varying sizes, including those lighter than 250 grams, used for photography, filming and racing.

Under the regulations, users are banned from taking pictures or videos of military or defence industrial installations or secret facilities.

LABOUR

Third of city’s jobless youth in poll plan to stay idle

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More than a third of young Hongkongers not working or studying have no intention of finding a job, a survey on training needs for the labour force has found, as the city continues to battle a manpower shortage across a range of industries.

The results came from a survey commissioned by the Employees Retraining Board and conducted by an independent research organisation. It saw 1,261 respondents, including homemakers and recent retirees, interviewed between last November and March of this year.

The independent statutory body wrote in a paper submitted to the Legislative Council yesterday that about half of all

interviewees had expressed little interest in working.

“Homemakers aged 30 to 49 were inclined to enter into employment, but most of them are only looking for part-time jobs,” the board wrote. “People who have recently retired were less inclined to work, while young people who are neither in employment nor in education were the least motivated.”

The study found that 36.1 per cent of young people not in education or employment had no plans to find jobs. But perks such as a good salary and benefits, working from home and flexible hours would motivate some.

Among recent retirees, 60.9 per cent expressed no interest in working. But good salaries and perks, easy stress-free duties and support from jobseeker organisations appealed to them.

The paper did not provide details on the demographics of the respondents. The Post has requested such information.

In the Legco paper, the board also wrote that there was a mismatch between the demand for workers with technical skills and training courses, appraisal systems and work situations.

It highlighted the importance of technology-based skills, saying: “It is also necessary to include skills on software development or programming, artificial intelligence, big data analysis and other higher-end skills in accordance with market demand.”

Alexa Chow Yee-ping, managing director of AMAC Human Resources Consultants, said the survey might not reflect the overall picture among young people, since it focused on those not in education or employment.

“If this group of people is in a constant state of idleness, it’s not surprising that one-third of them have no intention to work,” she said. “If the survey targeted those about to finish university and yielded the same result, that would be a huge issue.”

But Chow also noted a trend where young Hongkongers were no longer desperate to work thanks to a wealthier society and facing less financial pressure due to coming from smaller families.

She advised employers to consider accommodating young people’s preferences for more flexible hours and work-from-home arrangements, while offering more leave, training and a hi-tech work environment.

“From the perspective of the government, it’s also lost subsidies, because many students will have been supported by the gov-

ernment in their education who are now not working, meaning they are not taxpayers,” she said.

Rennie Wong Man-shun from the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups’ Youth Employment Network said more details about the survey were needed to fully understand the results, such as the age range of people in the study and the questions asked by interviewers.

But he noted that a person’s ability to work negatively correlated with the amount of time spent away from employment, especially staying at home without contact with other people.

“They could gradually lose their ability to communicate or other skills that you will only pick up if you are in the workforce. We’re worried about this,” he said.

FOCUS

The party is over for ‘Night Vibes’ campaign



Many are saying the initiative to reboot the city’s nightlife after three years of pandemic restrictions has failed to deliver, raising questions of competence and commitment

Wynna Wong and Alice Kong

It was a warm evening and there were dozens of visitors at Temple Street night market in Yau Ma Tei. Food and drink sellers offered everything from Turkish coffee and bubble tea to Taiwanese buns, dim sum, snake soup, stewed beef offal and more – the latest additions to the 350-metre-long strip of stalls selling clothes, costume jewellery, souvenirs and trinkets.

It fell short of providing a comprehensive solution for Hong Kong’s economic revival

ENTERTAINMENT TYCOON ALLAN ZEMAN

Although the crowd swelled as the evening progressed, the scene remained a stark contrast from January, when the temporary market launched with much fanfare and visitors – tourists and locals – thronged the place. The diminishing footfall has been noticed by vendors. “The popularity and energy around this street is dying down, and there are fewer visitors,” said Peter Nul, 60, who sells handmade necklace charms.

Nevzat Durmus, 51, a Turkish restaurant owner who opened a coffee stall at the market, said: “In May, we had a lot of rain, so things became slow.” However, he said he remained hopeful the summer holidays would bring more business. The Temple Street night market has become the last major holdout of the government’s “Night Vibes” campaign. The initiative was launched by Financial Secretary Paul Chan Mo-po last September to reboot the city’s nightlife after three years of pandemic-induced restrictions with citywide night bazaars, shopping and dining discounts, and events. Some established, traditional events that were halted or downsized during the pandemic, such as the annual Wine and Dine Festival and holiday fireworks over Victoria Harbour, were made part of Night Vibes. Nine months in, the campaign appears to have fizzled out.

Officials rarely mention it and authorities’ attention has shifted to new tourism and economy-boosting initiatives such as mega events. Stakeholders, unclear if the campaign is still going on, have been left questioning its effectiveness and asking: what now? The night market at Temple Street, at least, is continuing to the end of the year. Meant to last six months, it attracted 1.5 million visitors over the first five months and has been extended by another six months from mid-June. In April, the Tourism Board promised more decorations, food options and promotions for the strip, including a song and music video by veteran pop singer Wan Kwong. The campaign also included a series of short-term weekend night markets along the waterfronts of Wan Chai, Kennedy Town and Kwun Tong last year. These have all stopped. The calendar on the campaign’s official website also showed events up until January 2024. A spokeswoman from the Financial Secretary’s Office did not say whether the Night Vibes campaign had ended, but told the Post it had received “positive feedback from locals and tourists alike”. Lantern carnivals held during Mid-Autumn Festival last year, for example, drew about 660,000

people, while individual retailers reported their business received a boost of up to 30 per cent. The spokeswoman said the post-pandemic change in lifestyle habits needed time to settle, and the government would consider the views of the public and review the effectiveness of campaigns. “The government will keep exploring every possible means, such as promoting mega events and so on, to boost our overall economy, including nighttime economy,” she said. Entertainment tycoon Allan Zeman said he believed the Night Vibes campaign was able to generate a “temporary boost”. “But you could say it fell short of providing a comprehensive solution for Hong Kong’s economic revival,” he said. Zeman described the campaign events as “haphazard” and much smaller in scale than expected. Curiosity over the hype drew people initially, but the events did not prove compelling enough to make them want to return regularly, he said. The Temple Street night market, for example, was tiny compared with the sprawling markets in London or Bangkok that spanned multiple blocks. The strong Hong Kong dollar also deterred tourists and locals from spending in the city, said Zeman, chairman of the Lan Kwai Fong Group. That was why about 200,000 locals continued to head across the border to mainland cities such as Shenzhen every weekend. “It’s much cheaper – the restaurants, the spas, everything,” he said. Although Hong Kong’s visitor numbers had risen steadily, visitor spending had not risen in tandem, Zeman said. According to the Tourism Board, there were 3.4 million visitors in April, a 17 per cent increase from 2.89 million in April last year. But retail sales in April fell 14.7 per cent from a year ago, according to the latest official data. Annie Tse Yau On-ye, chairwoman of the Hong Kong Retail Management Association, recently lamented that the city’s retail sector had hit rock bottom, and the outlook for the full year looked grim. Visitors’ preferences had changed too, and mainlanders, who make up the majority, were more focused on experiential tourism rather than shopping.

Geopolitical tensions between Beijing and the West meant Hong Kong had yet to draw back international visitors, Zeman said. To combat these issues, Hong Kong had to provide top notch events that justified the premium of being in the city, as well as take full advantage of the new 50,000-seat Kai Tak stadium scheduled to be completed by next year, he said. “We should do about three shows a month – some big, some small – and bring in entertainment from around the world, the US, UK, Korea, Japan,” he said. “Artists who are very well known around the world.” He said the government might have to pay promoters to attract the big names, as Singapore had done to secure megastar Taylor Swift’s exclusive performances in the city state. Zeman said he believed such investment would be worth it to make an impact in reintroducing Hong Kong to the world. “International visitors don’t come for small street markets or pyrotechnic shows,” he said. “You really need to go first class. Hong Kong is a first-class city, not business class or economy.” Lawmaker Doreen Kong Yuk-foon said the Night Vibes campaign exposed a lack of continuity and sustained effort. “The government often launches new initiatives with great enthusiasm, but fails to follow through with proper monitoring and assessment,” she said. She noticed that the night markets became quiet after about

a month, with some stalls closing early due to lack of business, but there had been no analysis of attendance numbers and whether the goals were met. Officials had said soon after the Night Vibes campaign kicked off that it would be best not to quantify how the drive boosted the economy, with Deputy Financial Secretary Michael Wong Wai-lun saying it was more important to look at the social impact.

The government often launches new initiatives with great enthusiasm, but fails to follow through

LAWMAKER DOREEN KONG

But Kong countered: “These things are necessary so we can properly monitor, assess, learn from the experience and avoid repeating mistakes. “If things don’t work out, that’s fine, it’s not that we want to blame authorities for trying something new.” Calling for a more transparent review, she said the authorities were accountable to taxpayers and should explain what was achieved. “The problem now is that we never do any reviews, so we keep doing the wrong thing once, twice and a third time,” she said. She also felt the government

should be more open to public input and questioned if it had done enough to consult Hongkongers on what they wanted. “If you want to gain the trust of Hongkongers and increase their happiness, public engagement is very important,” she said. Kong said the uncertain and temporary nature of the Night Vibes events contributed to a vicious cycle. “No one wants to make capital investments into things that aren’t going to last, which leads to subpar products that are not exciting or high quality,” she said. “So how do you expect to attract consumers this way?” She said it might be better to allow the private sector to take the lead in such campaigns in future. “They are bound to do much better because they are the real talents in their fields with the correct experience,” she said. A local restaurateur who took part in the waterfront night markets agreed authorities lacked the organisation skills needed. Speaking to the Post on condition of anonymity, he said he was frustrated with the way the night markets played out. He referred to the first two days of the Wan Chai bazaar last September, when power supply disruptions left some vendors struggling to serve hot dishes, while others could not accept electronic payments or had to operate in the dark. “That’s the thing, they talk, talk, talk, but have no idea how to do it,” he said. “They should hire professional companies if they want to organise a great market for Hong Kong because, from the way they handled it, it doesn’t even feel like they cared.” He added that authorities should also be more open to different views, especially those of young people. “They need to understand what youths want as well because right now with your old-school 50- and 60-year-olds, what can they do to facilitate change?” he said. “Nothing, because they’re all bureaucrats who don’t listen.” Back at Temple Street, watch seller Sye Man-fu quipped that the Night Vibes campaign should be renamed “Quiet Vibes” for the fewer visitors turning up along the stretch. “Temple Street is like a thermometer for Hong Kong’s economy,” he said. “The size of the crowd, energy and visitors here reflects the state of Hong Kong’s economy.”



Visitors buy souvenirs from a stall on Temple Street. The market is quieter than before the pandemic.



Taking a selfie at the Temple Street night market. Photos: Xiaomei Chen

HONG KONG

UTILITIES

CLP Power issues apology after latest drop in voltage

Incident on Tuesday night led to flickering or dimmed lights in some homes in Sham Shui Po

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The city's largest electricity provider has apologised after a voltage dip in Sham Shui Po led to flickering or dimmed lights in some homes, with the under-fire utility vowing to investigate the latest in a string of such disruptions.

CLP Power yesterday said its 11,000-volt power supply system in the district recorded a drop in voltage at 11.09pm on Tuesday.

"During this period, some customers may have experienced lights dimming or flickering, while some may also have observed the circuit breaker in their electronics tripping due to the activation of protection devices," the firm said. "CLP apologises for any inconvenience caused, and will investigate the cause of the incident."

Lawmaker and engineer Chan Siu-hung, who is also an adviser to CLP Holdings, said voltage dips could be caused by a number of factors, including weather events such as lightning, thunderstorms and strong winds.

He said the latest case was unlikely to be due to ageing equipment or mismanagement.

"When lightning strikes transmission lines, it can cause a temporary voltage dip, but the power supply is usually restored within half a second," he said.

This was why some residents saw their lights flicker, he added.

Chan said the drop in voltage could cause more sensitive equipment such as air conditioners and lifts to shut down temporarily, but the machines were likely to work again after being restarted.

"I would deem these as temporary inconveniences rather than a complete loss of power supply," he said.

Such incidents were seen more frequently worldwide amid an increase in extreme weather events due to climate change, he said.

The disruption occurred just hours after CLP Power submitted to the government an investigation report which blamed external factors for an outage that plunged more than 2,000 Wong Tai Sin households into darkness last month.

The power company said in a public statement that cable joints had "previously been interfered with", which caused a gradual degradation in insulation and eventually led to the two sequential faults that day.

Edward Lo Wai-chau from the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers explained that "joints" referred to the connection point between two cables, as they might not be long enough to span the entire circuit they were serving.

Asked whether the damage could have been caused by previous roadworks in the area, as earlier reported by the media, Lo said such incidents were not unheard of.

"This was actually quite common, but the Electricity Supply Lines (Protection) Regulation was introduced in 2000 and such cases have dropped since then," he said on a radio show. The regulation imposes construction standards during roadworks to prevent damage to underground cables.

He said the question was whether third-party road workers had followed the rules under the regulation.

CRIME

Customs arrests CEO and director of drug rehab unit



Customs officers arrest Siu Yu-fat, a director of a controversy-plagued drug rehabilitation centre on Lantau Island. Photo: SCMP Pictures

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Customs officers have arrested the chief executive and a director of a scandal-hit drug rehabilitation centre, after the now-closed institution allegedly failed to refund students as promised.

The Post learned the person arrested yesterday was CEO Lee Kwok-kei, aged 47, of the Christian Zheng Sheng Association, which operates Christian Zheng Sheng College, a drug rehabilitation centre in Ha Keng on Lantau Island. Authorities a day earlier arrested 66-year-old Reverend Siu Yu-fat, who serves as a vice-chairman.

The college suspended operations on Sunday. Its bank accounts have been frozen by police since January.

Customs said the pair were arrested on suspicion of having applied for a false trade description for the service supplied, and of engaging in unfair trade practices involving a misleading omission, in contravention of the Trade Descriptions Ordinance.

"Customs earlier received information alleging that a staff member of a rehabilitation institution falsely claimed to a customer [saying] the prepaid book fees for a two-year training course could be refunded," it said. "However, the institution did not refund the fees in the end."

It added the pair claimed the accommodation deposit paid by

the customer would be refunded after his children completed the course.

But it was only after the institution ceased to provide the course that the customer was told the deposit would not be refunded even if the course was discontinued. Customs officials estimated the course fees were approximately HK\$7,495, and the accommodation deposits amounted to about HK\$8,000. The two men have been released on bail pending further investigation.

Siu told the Post the issue was relatively minor and that law enforcement agents did not fully understand the situation. He said the issue was related to directors who were in charge before he joined the board in April.

He also claimed that the previous directors had reached an agreement regarding refunds.

In January, police detained four former directors and were seeking the arrest of three others in relation to allegations of fraud and embezzlement of HK\$50 million in donations to fund the college in 2020.

The wanted trio – founder Jacob Lam Hay-sing, principal Alman Chan Siu-cheuk and Chan Yau-chi – are accused of transferring funds from the association's bank accounts to their personal accounts. None is in Hong Kong.

Under the Trade Descriptions Ordinance, offenders face a maximum penalty of a fine of HK\$500,000 and imprisonment of five years.

SOCIETY



The five flagpoles on the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront are repainted ahead of National Day. Photo: Elson Li

Themed lights show, lantern carnival to mark National Day

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Authorities will hold a special lights show and a Mid-Autumn Festival lantern display at Victoria Park themed around National Day as part of celebrations to mark the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism Kevin Yeung Yun-hung told lawmakers yesterday that some museums would also offer free admission as different government bureaus and departments rolled up their sleeves to prepare for this year's October 1 anniversary.

"The chief secretary for administration has given instructions [...] asking all bureaus and departments to make concerted efforts to plan and take forward the preparatory work for the National Day celebrations on all fronts," he said.

"Apart from the key programmes such as the annual

large-scale National Day reception, flag-raising ceremony, variety show and fireworks display, all bureaus and their departments will also organise an array of celebratory activities [...] with a view to enabling more members of the public from different backgrounds and age groups to take part in and share the joy of National Day."

Among the highlights revealed by Yeung are a special National Day edition of Victoria Harbour's nightly light show "A Symphony of Lights" that will be held throughout October; a Mid-Autumn Festival lantern carnival at Victoria Park in Causeway Bay; and free admission to all museums managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department on October 1.

"The lantern carnival at Victoria Park will also invite secondary and primary school pupils from all over Hong Kong to submit their concepts for lanterns under the topic of celebrating National Day," Yeung said.

Yeung also said the

department was organising an exhibition called "Brothers in Arms: War of Resistance Activities of the East River Column in Shenzhen and Hong Kong Areas".

He added that the Home Affairs Department would lead efforts to celebrate the occasion at a district level.

"We are hoping to push or utilise different resources in the community," he said.

Yeung said the government had encouraged private museums to mark the occasion with some special offers or exhibitions.

Apart from the events revealed by Yeung, Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu previously said he would strive for a pair of pandas being gifted by Beijing to arrive in the city by National Day.

He has said the pair would be young adults of an age suitable for breeding and described them as "agile", "gentle" and "adorable".

The pair must undergo 30 days of quarantine on the mainland and another 30 in Hong Kong before they can be introduced to the public.

HEALTH

‘HISTORIC MOMENT’ FOR DENTAL PROFESSION

Legco approves major changes to registration ordinance – first in over 60 years – including the introduction of an internship for graduates

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Lawmakers yesterday approved "historic" amendments to the registration ordinance for dentists, including the introduction of a controversial internship for graduates.

Secretary for Health Lo Chung-mau said the changes were a "historic moment" for the profession and the first major alterations to the legislation governing dentists in decades.

"The amendment bill is Hong Kong's first large-scale and thorough amendment on the city's dentist registration ordinance in more than 60 years," Lo said.

He was speaking after the Dentists Registration (Amendment) Bill, which has been scrutinised by the legislature since April, was passed by lawmakers after the second and third readings were done on the same day.

The bill introduced two other major changes to the ordinance in addition to the one-year internship arrangement for Hong Kong dental graduates or an assessment for dentists trained elsewhere.

There will also be new pathways to limited registration and special registration, similar to the current system for doctors, for dentists trained elsewhere in a bid to increase the number of professionals amid a shortage.

They would be able to work in specified health institutions in the public sector without having to pass the city's licensing exam.

Dental hygienists and dental therapists will also be renamed as dental care professionals and a statutory registration system for them set up.

Lo said the shortage of dentists in the public sector was a serious problem and that the Department of Health had 110 vacancies out of 370 positions.

He added the health department would start to recruit dentists from outside Hong Kong immediately.

The Dental Council said it was "delighted" that the amendments had passed and that the decision was a "significant milestone" for the city's dental profession.

It added that the amendments would come into force on the days stipulated by the health chief and published in the government gazette.

The council said it would reveal further details, including

how to apply for the various types of registration, at a later date.

The internship arrangement was the most controversial of the proposed changes, and sparked debate among dental students, the watchdog Dental Council, and the University of Hong Kong (HKU), home of the city's only dental school.

Lawmakers voiced their support for the internships on the last day of the Legco debate.

"Students could only have contact with screened patients when they were at school," Lam So-wai said. "But during an internship, they can have contact with a wider range of clinical cases."

She added dental graduates may also need to handle urgent cases, as well as people with mental disabilities and the elderly.

During an internship, they can have contact with a wider range of clinical cases

LAWMAKER LAM SO-WAI

But some in the legislature backed dental students who earlier said they had been deprived of their right to informed consent because they were not told about an internship programme before they signed up for the degree course.

"Before students made the decision [to undertake the degree], should they have been clearly informed there would be one more year of dental internship?" Chan Hoi-yan asked.

She criticised the government, the Dental Council and HKU, insisting they could have handled the matter better.

Chan said the authorities should also have revealed "structural problems" in the university's bachelor of dentistry programme earlier.

She added the difficulties in the profession would not be entirely dealt with through the passage of the amendments. "The problem is not yet solved," she said. "The Dental Council and the government should look into how HKU's faculty of dentistry solves the difficulties faced by year one to year five students."

COURTS

Ex-lawmaker ‘pressured’ to back subversion bid

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A former lawmaker affiliated with the city's largest opposition party has sought leniency in a subversion case, arguing "radical" competitors pressured her into backing a conspiracy to topple the government through a 2020 unofficial legislative primary election.

Helena Wong Pik-wan's legal team yesterday sought a jail term limit of three years under the Beijing-decreed national security law over her "peripheral role" in the case implicating 45 opposition politicians and activists.

Mitigation proceedings for the city's largest national security trial resumed at West Kowloon Court with submissions from a fourth batch of nine defendants, who had competed in the Kowloon West constituency and two functional sectors.

Former district councillor Lee Yue-shun, who was one of two defendants cleared in the trial, appeared in court for the first time since his acquittal was confirmed by prosecutors' decision not to

lodge an appeal. Lee said he hoped his attendance would show his support for the other accused.

Former lawmaker Shiu Ka-chun and activist Chan Po-ying, chairwoman of the League of Social Democrats, were also among the attendees at yesterday's session.

Wong's counsel, Erik Shum Sze-man, stressed his client had never subscribed to the radical ideologies raised in the case and had avoided endorsing an indiscriminate vote against government budgets to paralyse its operations.

He argued the ex-lawmaker was "cornered" by other primary contestants during a public

debate, where she blurted out a promise to exhaust all available tools to force authorities to accede to protesters' demands raised during the 2019 social unrest.

"This is very unfortunate, because considering her background, her political career and teaching career, it was completely out of her character for her to have a subversive intent to interfere with the operation of the [Hong Kong] government," Shum said.

A mitigation letter by ex-transport chief Anthony Cheung Bing-leung, also a former Democratic Party member, described Wong as "a victim in the 2019 confrontational politics" who was dragged into the situation.

Shum argued Wong was implicated by party chairman Wu Chi-wai, who openly supported the use of lawmakers' vetoing power to bring down the government.

Another convicted ex-legislator, Claudia Mo Man-ching, sought five to six years' imprisonment over her role in the scheme.

Mo's counsel, Albert Wong Nga-bun, said his client had reflected on the potential harm caused by her actions and wished to apologise.

It was completely out of [Helena Wong's] character for her to have a subversive intent

ERIK SHUM, HELENA WONG'S COUNSEL

Former pro-Beijing legislator Abraham Razack and ethnic minority rights advocacy group Hong Kong Unison were among those who signed mitigation letters submitted on Mo's behalf.

Mr Justice Andrew Chan Hing-wai, one of three High Court judges presiding over the hearing, said Mo had advocated foreign countries' intervention at one point in her campaign, but Wong stressed that was irrelevant to the present case.

The court also heard mitigation pleas from former district councillors Calvin Ho Kai-ming, Lester Shum and Henry Wong Pak-yu, as well as activists Frankie Fung Tat-chun and Nathan Lau Chak-fung.

Albert Wong, who also sought leniency for Lester Shum, highlighted the defendant's "reformed character" and deep regret over his misdeeds.

Shum said in his mitigation letter he had been put in solitary confinement because of this case and had now realised "anger, not to mention hatred and resentment, will lead us to nowhere".

"Upon painstaking reflection, I realised that some underlying

reasons for my political participation were not as bright as they appeared to be," he wrote.

Shum added he wished to reunite with his wife and repay her support as soon as possible.

Barrister Anthony Yuen Wai-ming asked for no more than three years in jail for his client Ho.

He urged the judges to give greater weight to a mitigation letter for Ho by ex-lawmaker Frederick Fung Kin-kee, whom the counsel described as a "patriot" as shown in his participation in the "patriots-only" Legislative Council polls in 2021.

Senior Counsel Nigel Kat, speaking on behalf of Frankie Fung, described his client as an idealist who was "enthusiastically naive" in believing the plan remained lawful under the new legal order. He suggested if his other client, ex-district councillor Tiffany Yuen Ka-wai, deserved four to five years in jail, Fung's culpability would call for four.

The court will hear mitigation submissions today from protest organiser turned former district councillor Jimmy Sham Tsz-kit, as well as activist and former hospital worker Winnie Yu Wai-ming.

CHINA

Large majorities in nearly all the nations we polled say China has a great deal or a fair amount of influence on their country’s economic conditions

WASHINGTON THINK TANK THE PEW RESEARCH CENTRE SURVEYED PEOPLE IN 35 NATIONS ON HOW THEY VIEWED CHINA’S ECONOMIC INFLUENCE > CHINA A7

FOOD SAFETY

COOKING OIL ROW ‘ON PLENUM AGENDA’

Top leaders to look into report alleging same trucks are used to transport both fuel and food products

William Zheng and Vanessa Cai

Allegations that companies have been using the same trucks to transport fuel and cooking oil are likely to be raised at a key political meeting next week and could prompt Beijing to tighten food safety policies, observers say.

An investigative report by state-backed Beijing News last week said the tankers were being used for both fuel and food products like cooking oil, soybean oil and syrup.

It said it was an “open secret” that the tankers did not get

cleaned between deliveries to save costs.

The report has sparked widespread public concern and calls for more oversight of the industry, and on Tuesday the State Council, the country’s cabinet set up a team to investigate the allegations.

Observers say Beijing does not appear to be trying to cover up the scandal, even though it has emerged at a politically sensitive time ahead of the third plenum of the Communist Party’s Central Committee, which starts on Monday.

There has been limited censorship around the report,

which implicated a subsidiary of state-owned stockpiler Sinograin and private firm the Hopefull Grain and Oil Group. Both companies have launched their own investigations.

As well as a public outcry on social media, the report has prompted harsh criticism from state media over the alleged wrongdoing.

Wang Xiangwei, an associate professor at Baptist University’s School of Communication in Hong Kong, said Beijing appeared to have taken the attitude of “facing this problem head-on”.

“China’s internet users have been able to make sarcastic

comments on the scandal so far. Meanwhile, the State Council also took immediate action to assemble a joint inspection team to tackle it,” said Wang, a former editor-in-chief of the South China Morning Post.

“It all seems to indicate that they want to turn the scandal into an opportunity for the party to live up to [President Xi Jinping’s] famous command: the party’s mission is to meet people’s desire for a happy life.”

Xi has repeatedly vowed to tackle China’s notorious food safety problems. In a 2013 speech, he said his heart “became very heavy” when he thought of these

issues, and warned that the party’s legitimacy to rule would be questioned if it “cannot even do a good job in food safety”.

A political analyst based in mainland China said given the latest scandal, food safety was likely to be raised when the party’s Central Committee held its third plenum, and it could be mentioned in the “resolution document” released after the meeting.

“Discussions including on reform will certainly include this topic as it’s the most crucial and important issue concerning people’s lives,” said the analyst, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

He said the scandal highlighted the need to strengthen regulatory supervision.

Xie Maosong, a senior researcher at the National Institute of Strategic Studies at Tsinghua University in Beijing, agreed that food safety could get “a higher priority” in the final communique of the third plenum.

Meanwhile, the report that exposed the alleged malpractice showed that “media oversight is indispensable in any country, especially in contemporary China”, according to Zhan Jiang, who was a journalism professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University before he retired.

He said it could lead to a shift in the official mindset “that views media reporting on social issues and negative reports as disruptive and affecting stability”.

Employee made to sit in ‘dark room’ for four days

Firm locked him out of computer system and premises during bitter resignation process

Iris Jiang

A bitter labour dispute has seen a company confine an employee to a “small dark room” for four days in a draconian bid to make him resign.

In an unusual twist, the incident came to light not via the employee but the company, Guangzhou Duoyi Network, after it challenged a court ruling on the case.

The firm published the full court document on its official Weibo account, openly disagreeing with a ruling made in May by a district-level court in southwestern Sichuan province.

The court decided that Guangzhou Duoyi Network’s subsidiary in Sichuan should pay the employee, Liu Linzhu, 380,000 yuan (HK\$408,000) in compensation for its actions.

However, the company responded by saying: “We believe that there are many problems with the labour laws which severely hinder economic development and are arbitrarily enforced by judges who distort the facts.”

The court’s official website has not yet made records of the trial public.

Liu’s lawyer confirmed the authenticity of the published court document with Shangyou News, a municipal government-owned newspaper.

The story began in December 2022 when Liu found that he could not log into the company’s computer system or use his entry pass. This happened following protracted negotiations over his resignation.

The firm told Liu he was required to participate in “training” and took him to a room on a different floor from his usual workstation. The room had no power supply and was furnished only with a table and chair. No one else was working there.

Over four days, although Liu was allowed to leave the room “freely”, including going home after “work”, he was assigned no tasks and his mobile phone was confiscated.

It was only on day five, after Liu’s wife reported the company’s treatment of her husband to the police, that an official notice laying him off was issued.

In a bid to avoid paying compensation, Guangzhou Duoyi Network insisted the lay-off was because Liu had violated company policies.

He was accused of viewing nude images and browsing unrelated websites during working hours.

However, as a game art editor, Liu argued that the images he viewed were for work purposes.

The lower court agreed with Liu.

It ruled that confining Liu to the “dark room” was illegal under the Labour Contract Law, which mandates employers provide proper working conditions for employees.

SCIENCE

Ultra-strong carbon fibre for submarine drones unveiled

Tech set to boost underwater performance, giving Beijing edge in South China Sea and Taiwan Strait

Stephen Chen

Scientists have unveiled an ultra-strong carbon fibre hull for the large-scale production of high-performance underwater drones.

The hull is suitable for shallow seas and can easily withstand immense pressure at a depth of 6,000 metres, boosting overall performance while significantly cutting manufacturing costs, according to researchers behind the project.

Their technological advance challenges the belief that carbon fibre cannot be used under water, potentially granting China an advantage in the drone arms race in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

“Currently, the pressure-resistant structures of deep-sea submersibles typically employ alloy steel or titanium alloys, but due to their high material density, the weight of these pressure-resistant structures accounts for a large proportion of the total weight, limiting the load capacity of deep-sea submersibles,” wrote the project team led by Guo Yuqi, a senior engineer with Harbin FRP Research Institute, in a peer-reviewed paper published in the Chinese academic journal Fibre Composites last month.

6,000

The ultra-strong carbon fibre hull can withstand immense pressure at a depth of this many metres under water, according to researchers

“In today’s era of rapid national development with a high demand for deep diving and high load capacity, carbon fibre materials have been widely used in the pressure-resistant structures of manned and unmanned submersibles due to their excellent properties, such as low density, high strength, high modulus, fatigue resistance, corrosion resistance and design flexibility,” wrote Guo and his collaborators from Harbin Institute of Technology, a university sanctioned by the US.

In the West, carbon fibre has been considered unsuitable for use in the submarine industry.

The world’s first carbon fibre crewed submersible, Titan – operated by private American firm OceanGate – was destroyed by immense water pressure during its journey to the 4,000-metre-deep wreck of the Titanic, resulting in the deaths of all five people on board in June last year.

Many industry insiders attributed this tragedy to the weakness of carbon fibre under water: under immense pressure, water can penetrate gaps between the fibres, and repeated ascents and descents potentially crack and deform the hull.

“I never believed that the technology of wound carbon fibre filament on the cylindrical hull would work. I thought it was a horrible idea,” said James Cameron, an undersea explorer and director of the film *Titanic*, in an interview with The Wall Street Journal following the tragedy.

The carbon fibre pressure hull made in China has a wall about 3cm thick – one-quarter the thickness of Titan’s walls. According to Guo’s team, however, during laboratory tests it could easily withstand water pressure of 77 megapascals (MPa), more than double the pressure Titan’s hull could withstand in lab tests at the University of Washington.

Guo and his colleagues estimate a cabin made of this carbon fibre material could withstand 90MPa pressure, equivalent to an ocean depth of nearly 9,000 metres. However, to ensure safety, they have set its operational depth at 6,000 metres, corresponding to a pressure of 60 MPa.

The external layer of the carbon fibre pressure hull is a slim 1mm waterproof coating. The researchers said the coating provided a certain degree of protection and did not allow leaks, damage, interfacial debonding, cracking or other issues during normal use.

It could withstand a degree of impact, scraping and other challenges without failure or damage, according to Guo’s team.

“After experiencing high pressure for a long time, the appearance of the pressure test sealing system outside the pressure hull remained intact, with neither leakage nor weight increase in the pressure hull,” Guo’s team wrote.

The front and rear ends of the carbon fibre pressure hull use T4 titanium alloy material. Because it must withstand alternating seawater pressure from zero to 6,000 metres, the designers have considered fatigue issues, such as pressure and temperature variations in the carbon fibre hull, and the joints between carbon fibre and titanium alloy.

“It can tolerate alternating cycles more than 2,000 times,” they said in the paper.

Guo’s team has also developed a carbon fibre unmanned submersible hull suitable to operate at less than 200 metres deep. With a thickness of just 3mm but a diameter of 1 metre, it could be used for low-cost underwater drones operating in the shallows.

“Underwater submersibles are an indispensable means to safeguard national marine rights, interests and resource security. Their technological level represents, to some extent, national defence capabilities and technological prowess,” Guo’s team wrote in a separate paper published in the same journal in May.

Both China and the United States plan to deploy a large number of unmanned weapons in key waters, such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. The side that wins in a potential conflict will largely depend on the performance and quantity of their drones.



An image released yesterday by Japan’s Ministry of Defence shows the People’s Liberation Army Navy aircraft carrier the Shandong in the Pacific Ocean southeast of Okinawa prefecture. The Shandong is the second aircraft carrier to enter service for China, and its first to be domestically constructed.

Photo: AFP

ECONOMY

Call for mortgage relief to ease burden of homeowners

Amanda Lee

The central bank should take an active role in reducing the financial burden of hundreds of millions of homeowners, and the government should step in to provide affordable housing to migrant workers – actions which would both serve to release much-needed consumer demand, a former government researcher has said.

Many residents in China were still paying hefty interest on their mortgages because they bought their homes when prices were high, said Zhou Tianyong, a professor with the Dongbei University of Finance and Economics and a former senior researcher with the Central Party School in Beijing.

“The central bank could introduce monetary policy to reduce interest rates on existing loans for hundreds of millions of residents who bought homes at high prices,” said Zhou in a post on his

WeChat account. “It is possible that the previous generation won’t be able to repay it, and the next generation will now have to pay. This may not be in line with the [government’s] people-centred approach.”

The academic estimated homebuyers had to pay a cumulative 5.74 trillion yuan (HK\$6.16 trillion) in interest on their mortgages, and – after factoring in the allocation of extra income to cover high housing costs in addition to interest – 41 trillion yuan of consumption was lost between 2000 and 2023.

Zhou also urged central and local governments to provide affordable housing for migrant workers, including college and technical school graduates with rural household registration looking for jobs in cities.

This, he said, would lower the costs of moving and urban living for the rural population, and would in turn help boost the labour force as well as their overall income – seen as essential in

stabilising the country’s future economic growth.

Zhou has joined a growing chorus of analysts who have argued homeowners who bought their houses at peak pricing are less inclined to benefit from easing measures introduced last year.

Last week, a commentary in the state-run Economic Observer questioned the “fairness” of the current policy. First-time homeowners in Beijing, for instance, who took out a mortgage in 2019 had to pay 4.75 per cent on their loans compared to 3.5 per cent if they had bought a house this year.

Several local governments have intensified their efforts to shore up demand in the property market by cutting minimum ratios for down payment.

The discussions on lower mortgage costs revolved around whether banks should conduct a new round of discounts for existing mortgage loans, said Vivian Xue, director of Asia-Pacific financial institution ratings at Fitch Ratings.

MILITARY

Satellite images hint at strategy in event of conflict

Sylvie Zhuang

Recent satellite images appear to show that the Chinese military has been practising attacks on US fighter jets and aircraft carriers in the deserts of Xinjiang, offering possible clues about what its strategy would be in the event of conflict.

The images, taken by Google Earth on May 29, feature a model aircraft carrier and more than 20 replicas of jets resembling US stealth fighters.

“Chinese PLA Air Force pilots are learning to practice air strikes on American F-35 and F-22 mock-ups,” said a post containing four satellite pictures published on X, formerly Twitter, by the Turkey-based Clash Report.

The military blogging account identified the location as Qakilik

in the Taklamakan Desert. The Post has not been able to verify the images and there has been no official confirmation from Beijing.

Several of these replicas appeared to be severely damaged.

The exercises reflect the People’s Liberation Army’s efforts to build up its long-range ballistic and cruise missile systems to neutralise the threats from US

naval forces, according to Collin Koh, a research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

“US and allied naval forces in general would be a natural target because of their power projection capabilities, which are perceived by Beijing as a threat,” he said.

Koh added that it would be in line with Beijing’s growing



A satellite image shows replicas of aircraft resembling US stealth fighter jets at a location in the Taklamakan Desert in Xinjiang. Photo: X

emphasis on simulating realistic campaigns and “by and large, Beijing’s wartime scenarios appear aimed at counter-intervention against the Americans” especially in the event of conflict in the South China Sea or Taiwan.

If the drill involved the PLA’s intercontinental-range systems, it might have been practising strikes on targets such as Guam, Alaska and Hawaii, he added.

The PLA has long held that its exercises are not aimed at any specific party, but mock targets can sometimes give away its thinking – either by accident or design.

In 2015, state broadcaster CCTV broadcast footage of PLA troops taking part in mock battles near a building that closely resembled Taiwan’s presidential office.

Malcolm Davis, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic

Policy Institute, said the exercise appeared to fit the PLA’s counter-intervention strategy, designed to deny US and allied naval forces in the Western Pacific access to potential war zones further east.

“This implies the PLA’s strike capabilities will probably have either an electro-optical or synthetic aperture radar terminal guidance system to image the target and guide the warhead prior to precisely striking at a specific location on a military base,” he said.

The exercise would allow the PLA to improve its precision in scenarios such as a ballistic missile “seeking to strike a moving target at sea, such as an aircraft carrier”.

He also said that practising in the desert would help the PLA to improve its ability to carry out long-range conventional precision strikes on land targets, such as airfields.

Playing it cool



Visitors cool off in a massive swimming pool at the Lang Lang Lang Water Park in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. China is facing hotter and longer heatwaves and more frequent and unpredictable heavy rain as a result of climate change, the weather bureau has warned, as the nation braces for another scorching summer. Photo: Getty Images

ECONOMY

MIXED VIEWS IN GLOBAL POLL ON RISE OF CHINA

Richer nations are less keen but middle-income countries see the Chinese impact on their economies as a good thing, Pew survey shows

Holly Chik
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People in middle-income countries view China's overseas economic influence more positively than those in high-income ones, according to a Pew Research Centre survey conducted in 35 nations.

"Large majorities in nearly all the nations we polled – spanning six continents and ranging in income level – say China has a great deal or a fair amount of influence on their country's economic conditions," the Washington think tank said in a report released on Monday.

In 10 of 13 countries, more people said China had a great deal of impact on their country's economy than when the question was asked five years ago, Pew said.

The biggest jump was in Brazil – from 26 per cent in 2019 to 51 per cent in 2024 – followed by India, Kenya, Argentina, Mexico, Tunisia and Turkey, with those increases ranging from 12 to 19 per cent.

Chile also saw a marked climb although in a different survey time frame. Sixty per cent of Chileans surveyed this year said China was influential in their economy, up from 29 per cent in 2013.

The survey saw more than

44,000 adults in 35 countries polled between January and May. The countries encompass the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, the Americas, Africa and the Middle East-North Africa region.

Much of the overseas economic influence was seen as a result of the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing's push for overseas investment and trade that began around 10 years ago.

76%

This proportion of survey respondents in the United States said China had a negative impact on their own economy

Now, China's "global outward foreign direct investment is close to US\$3 trillion", the Pew report said.

The report also tracked how views of China's impact on countries' economic conditions had changed over time.

In eight of the 15 nations where data from previous surveys was available, people's views of that impact had become more

negative, Pew found. Japan saw the biggest jump – from 42 per cent in 2019 to 67 per cent in 2024 – of respondents who said China had a negative impact on their economic conditions.

Israel followed with a rise of 16 percentage points. Argentina increased by 8 percentage points, and South Korea and Tunisia by seven points compared with 2019.

Mexico was the only country where more people considered China's influence to be positive, growing from 53 per cent in 2019 to 60 per cent this year.

Looking at results from this year alone, the survey showed that views on China's economic impact were divided between different income levels.

In the 17 middle-income countries surveyed, a median of 47 per cent of people said China had a positive influence on their country's economy.

When it came to the 18 high-income countries polled, the survey showed that a median of 57 per cent of people found it negative.

The most negative view was found in the United States, where 76 per cent of respondents said China's impact was negative, followed by Germany at 69 per cent, France at 68 per cent and Canada, Japan, South Korea and Australia at 67 per cent.

In Singapore, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand and Peru, 60 per cent or more of respondents said China was having a positive impact.

SOUTH CHINA SEA

Ecological survey of second disputed shoal finds healthy marine conditions

Dewey Sim
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A Chinese investigation into the marine conditions at Scarborough Shoal has found the area in good health – in stark contrast to an earlier evaluation this week of Second Thomas Shoal, another flashpoint between Manila and Beijing in the South China Sea.

According to Chinese state broadcaster CCTV, a "comprehensive" examination of the ecological environment surrounding Scarborough Shoal – known as Hanyang Island in China – determined the environmental quality of its waters was "excellent".

The shoal is claimed by Beijing and Manila and has been effectively controlled by China since an international stand-off in 2012. Filipino fishermen have been barred by the Chinese coastguard from entering the lagoon ever since.

The latest investigation's results were unveiled yesterday at a briefing by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment. The investigating team was formed from three of the ministry's agencies.

The team conducted a "systematic on-site investigation" from May to June, covering sea-water quality, biological quality and marine debris, as well as coral communities. Satellite remote sensing technology was also used in the analysis, CCTV said.



Pollutants in the shoal are below standard limits, the report found.

Residues of pollutants were found to be below the evaluation standard limits, the coral reef ecosystem was "healthy", and the diversity of reef-building coral species was said to be "rich".

According to the CCTV report, this is the first time a Chinese investigation team has determined pollution levels of marine debris around Scarborough Shoal and the status of reef-dwelling fish there.

The positive findings contrasted with a Ministry of Natural Resources report released on Monday, which said a grounded Philippine warship at another disputed shoal had "seriously damaged the diversity, stability and sustainability of the coral reef ecosystems".

The earlier report found the BRP Sierra Madre – grounded in 1999 by the Philippines to serve as an outpost in the disputed waters – had caused serious harm at Second Thomas Shoal, called

Renai Reef in China and Ayungin Shoal in the Philippines, and must be removed to stop the damage.

Manila on Tuesday rejected the accusation, accusing "Chinese experts" of trying to sow disinformation and calling for an independent third-party marine scientific assessment of the causes of coral reef damage in the South China Sea.

The Philippines has previously said that it plans to file a formal complaint against the Chinese government, citing environmental damage to coral in several areas of the South China Sea.

The Chinese reports have landed at a time of heightened tensions between the two countries in the South China Sea, which is claimed almost in its entirety by Beijing. There are also overlapping claims by the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Vietnam.

Beijing and Manila have clashed several times in the past year over Philippine resupply efforts to the Sierra Madre outpost.

One of the most serious confrontations occurred on June 17, when a Chinese coastguard vessel rammed a Philippine resupply ship, injuring eight Philippine sailors, including one who lost his thumb, according to Manila.

China has dismissed the Philippines' account, countering that the Philippine vessels attacked Chinese boats.

DIPLOMACY

New Iran leader 'to retain China policy'

But observers say Pezeshkian will also seek 'constructive relations' with West

Zhao Ziwen
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Iran's incoming reformist president is not likely to fundamentally change the Islamic Republic's foreign policy towards China, observers have said, citing his limited powers and Tehran's economic and geopolitical dependence on Beijing.

Masoud Pezeshkian defeated hardcore conservative Saeed Jalili in a presidential run-off election on Saturday, held after no candidate secured a majority in the first round on June 28. He will replace the late ultraconservative Ebrahim Raisi, who was killed in a helicopter crash in May.

President Xi Jinping sent Pezeshkian a congratulatory message on Saturday, vowing deeper connections in the face of "complex landscapes".

According to the foreign ministry in Beijing, Xi said he attached great importance to the development of bilateral relations and was willing to work with Pezeshkian to "guide the deepening of the comprehensive strategic partnership".

"In the face of the complex regional and international landscapes, China and Iran have always supported each other ... and maintained sound communication and coordination on regional and international affairs.

"It has not only benefited the two peoples but also made positive contributions to promoting regional and world peace and stability," Xi said.

The presidency of Pezeshkian, who has called for "constructive relations" with the West, is expected to be marked by a shift to a more liberal, pro-Western stance, in contrast to the hawkish US policy of his predecessor.

However, Tehran's China policy is unlikely to change, according to Fan Hongda, a professor at the Shanghai International Studies University's Middle East Studies Institute.

This was because Iran's

supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had the final say in its foreign policy, Fan said.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the main force of the Iranian military, also had more of a say in the matter, and just a political spectrum change with regard to the president's office would not have a significant impact, Fan said.

A balancing act from Tehran was more likely, he suggested. "Under the leadership of the new government, Tehran may conduct balancing acts in great power diplomacy, it will not alienate Russia and China despite seeking closer ties with the United States," Fan said.

According to Iranian state media, Pezeshkian will be sworn in before parliament early next month as Iran's ninth president.

He takes office against a backdrop of sharp regional tensions over the Israel-Gaza war, with Tehran a major supporter of Palestinian militant groups, and as years of US sanctions over Iran's nuclear programme spark crippling shortages and discontent at home, especially over jobs and inflation.

For a China keen to extend its Middle Eastern influence beyond the economic front, Iran has become a crucial target for greater engagement.

China helped Iran to avoid large-scale isolation in the face of US sanctions during Raisi's four years of headline rule.

Last year, Beijing brokered a peace deal between long-time adversaries Iran and Saudi Arabia, reshaping relations between the Middle Eastern powerhouses that had formally cut ties in 2016. Iran also joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Brics groups last year.

"Even if Iran seeks warmer relations with the US and the West, 'looking eastward' will still be an important part of its multi-lateral diplomacy strategy. Tehran will simply not give up on China," Fan said.

Iran on Monday pledged to

continue to deepen relations with China. Commenting on the future of ties with China following Pezeshkian's victory, Iran's foreign ministry spokesman said: "China is one of the most important and influential countries. Our relations with China will continue normally.

"Iran's relations with friendly countries are based on ... comprehensive and stable policies ... [and] will be strengthened and consolidated by focusing on common interests."

China has been Iran's biggest trading partner for more than a decade, a relationship largely driven by oil – a revenue lifeline for Tehran – especially after it was severely sanctioned by the West.

Chinese imports of Iranian oil tripled between 2020 and 2023, marking a 10-year-high. To get around US sanctions, Iranian oil

Tehran ... will not alienate Russia and China despite seeking closer ties with the United States

PROFESSOR FAN HONGDA, SHANGHAI INTERNATIONAL STUDIES UNIVERSITY



Masoud Pezeshkian will be sworn in as Iran's president next month.

entering China is branded as originating from Malaysia or other Middle Eastern countries.

Wang Jin, an associate professor at the Institute of Middle East Studies at China's Northwest University, said economic cooperation with China would still take precedence during Pezeshkian's presidency.

Developing "friendly economic relations with China is still a major option [for Tehran]", he said, citing the US sanctions and Western curbs on exports.

Wang said although Pezeshkian was likely to pursue friendly relations with the West, Iran's conservative-leaning parliament and uncertain US policy towards Tehran meant cooperation with China would still be an "important and realistic" part of his foreign policy.

But Pezeshkian has been critical of China in the past, such as during his election campaign, when he highlighted Beijing's reluctance to implement a landmark 25-year cooperation deal signed in 2021.

The agreement, which has yet to be publicised, reportedly includes a promise of more than US\$400 billion in Chinese investment in return for a steady and discounted oil supply from Iran, according to The New York Times. But implementation has largely stalled.

In a presidential debate on Monday, Pezeshkian suggested that China was not investing because Iran continued to be on the global blacklist of the Financial Action Task Force, arguing that Tehran should avoid economic or political isolation.

Fan in Shanghai said the agreement had been criticised a lot and become a "central debate for China-Iranian relations", and there was little hope of it being implemented during Pezeshkian's four-year term.

"The implementation of the 25-year cooperation agreement has been an old and much-criticised issue. This is not a new topic in Iran ... The official publicity in both countries has a relatively high tone, but the reality does not seem to be too favourable."

AUCTION OF TRADITIONAL VEHICLE REGISTRATION MARKS

Date: 14 July 2024 (Sunday) | Place: Meeting Room S421, L4 Old Wing, Hong Kong Convention & Exhibition Centre, Wanchai

Time: 9:25 a.m. | 170 marks will be put up for auction in the following order:

1. UL 5944	30. *JB 3223	59. XZ 992	87. MR 493	115. DW 990	143. MY 946
2. CH 9806	31. NC 825	60. *FU 14	88. *AW 82	116. *MR 2000	144. *TK 717
3. CW 1130	32. *WR 919	61. BU 216	89. JY 1933	117. LF 621	145. MB 624
4. AK 1017	33. CA 611	62. *AV 500	90. *CC 4466	118. *RE 616	146. *NT 2020
5. BC 1011	34. *WC 919	63. XZ 866	91. SC 833	119. LX 2011	147. GW 650
6. AD 9941	35. VS 229	64. *ST 17	92. *WA 2222	120. *PL 616	148. *SF 6789
7. DC 6689	36. ND 323	65. XZ 126	93. EV 806	121. XZ 993	149. EV 214
8. KL 2209	37. AX 880	66. *FF 1010	94. *PP 404	122. *SY 9988	150. *SY 6789
9. AB 7152	38. *MS 747	67. YT 103	95. CS 832	123. VA 813	151. HP 412
10. FW 824	39. KH 426	68. *SG 91	96. *TT 404	124. *WK 828	152. *SM 505
11. RH 8327	40. *MS 92	69. SU 226	97. XZ 6698	125. WL 749	153. VX 851
12. BL 1963	41. YM 321	70. *BU 36	98. *BA 26	126. *GX 51	154. *VW 1991
13. VP 6829	42. *KH 9898	71. AF 960	99. KG 210	127. ST 716	155. FW 817
14. DW 1381	43. AC 9331	72. *LL 1001	100. *CU 26	128. *JA 3636	156. ZA 1102
15. TF 3899	44. *KC 72	73. AW 560	101. XZ 1689	129. GH 304	157. AK 2813
16. *NV 1717	45. YS 813	74. *WM 4444	102. *DR 1818	130. *WH 52	158. KH 7200
17. RK 411	46. *HA 46	75. EL 962	103. HB 381	131. VK 322	159. LY 5001
18. *EB 1991	47. YD 911	76. *UU 1616	104. *JS 3388	132. *WH 95	160. AU 5513
19. MW 680	48. *SR 1010	77. AS 820	105. CA 720	133. RC 704	161. PS 3822
20. *MR 131	49. CS 3931	78. *US 11	106. *LP 83	134. *CR 75	162. MR 9636
21. JN 217	50. *SR 21	79. BU 221	107. PD 314	135. ZF 119	163. FA 8013
22. *PM 131	51. ZB 925	80. *WA 55	108. *EK 2000	136. *TY 313	164. SM 4803
23. SA 820	52. *RJ 95	81. XZ 208	109. GR 627	137. AS 817	165. WY 8797
24. *TK 929	53. KS 607	82. *KC 12	110. *HH 94	138. *UJ 46	166. FJ 6282
25. FZ 779	54. RA 45	83. XZ 699	111. DV 316	139. MR 866	167. LY 2509
26. *NC 1212	55. ET 369	84. *RJ 11	112. *MH 91	140. *DK 2233	168. KD 3219
27. SP 615	56. *MY 2525	85. XZ 119	113. XZ 689	141. RL 925	169. FP 441
28. *JP 8383	57. DS 109	86. *AN 82	114. *LL 94	142. *EK 929	170. FJ 1317
29. TC 329	58. *JW 51				

Time: 2:25 p.m. | 180 marks will be put up for auction in the following order:

1. HN 1105	31. *TL 13	61. *MD 68	91. *HU 8	121. HK 903	151. *DD 70
2. FY 1130	32. ED 3444	62. XZ 6999	92. DD 3688	122. EA 1314	152. JC 598
3. AJ 891	33. *PM 77	63. *SV 4	93. * 6797	123. *EE 2288	153. *EK 818
4. HL 1125	34. SS 1682	64. BX 8088	94. ST 388	124. YY 1119	154. BB 4089
5. PP 1102	35. *CB 1111	65. *BB 858	95. * 9122	125. *VW 7	155. *NZ 100
6. CJ 1021	36. YY 577	66. JP 9993	96. XZ 1168	126. TJ 3999	156. KY 778
7. MH 667	37. *EE 1133	67. *XX 1313	97. * 3266	127. *PW 23	157. *PW 222
8. JC 891	38. YY 816	68. XZ 488	98. NP 388	128. AC 6333	158. VN 8638
9. AT 6111	39. *TZ 999	69. *LL 21	99. * 678	129. *AP 6666	159. *NM 87
10. EX 6119	40. YY 862	70. FE 138	100. XZ 5888	130. NP 228	160. KW 1708
11. *EM 76	41. *JG 12	71. *BB 848	101. * 424	131. *US 33	161. *RM 50
12. CC 2810	42. ZA 519	72. AA 5031	102. RL 2388	132. YY 1112	162. CC 7727
13. *AV 60	43. *WN 111	73. XX 327	103. * 325	133. *VV 93	163. *JM 60
14. GG 109	44. HB 7282	74. GU 428	104. NP 288	134. HK 852	164. DD 1516
15. *BR 40	45. UN 111	75. XX 124	105. * 8233	135. *UC 666	165. *AN 59
16. HH 1822	46. UM 8788	76. WK 1688	106. UR 3688	136. CS 9328	166. KC 1931
17. *BM 93	47. *MY 89	77. XX 7177	107. * 4268	137. XX 9891	167. *PS 2020
18. DD 6119	48. LU 177	78. XZ 520	108. NP 688	138. YY 932	168. NM 1413
19. *NM 90	49. *LZ 89	79. *XX 4000	109. * 3104	139. *FE 98	169. *WE 1221
20. EE 1209	50. GB 6728	80. VM 8828	110. AU 4448	140. KK 6922	170. JL 7600
21. *RW 69	51. *LJ 89	81. *MM 16	111. *HK 39	141. *JB 98	171. SC 6889
22. LM 314	52. TK 1113	82. XZ 880	112. XZ 886	142. HY 8278	172. TR 1011
23. *MA 96	53. *JW 89	83. *DD 16	113. HK 779	143. *NY 47	173. ZF 1214
24. BG 2826	54. BV 9993	84. KL 3338	114. FY 618	144. YY 902	174. TH 3066
25. *RM 87	55. *GH 89	85. *XX 91	115. * 3389	145. *DD 50	175. RM 2007
26. AH 213	56. ZA 228	86. VM 8288	116. XZ 6663	146. FT 3555	176. HB 7940
27. *TT 67	57. *SD 66	87. *UU 66	117. *JK 888	147. *ER 18	177. BW 3251
28. KK 806	58. XZ 881	88. WX 668	118. AU 4168	148. CY 1114	178. UV 2892
29. *TD 81	59. XX 2310	89. *HV 9	119. *JX 888	149. *RK 7777	179. YA 7200
30. EE 213	60. PN 3218	90. FK 488	120. XZ 6889	150. GY 7378	180. WY 1003

* Not Transferable. Note: Successful bidders are required to complete the registration of purchaser procedures, and pay the auction price through Easy Pay System (EPS) or by crossed cheque immediately. For the conditions of sale and points to be noted by bidders, please visit the Transport Department's website www.td.gov.hk.

ASIA

MALAYSIA

Naval reliance on America revealed in scathing report

Half of warships found operating past lifespan after non-delivery of latest vessels over years

Hadi Azmi
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Malaysia's plans to replace its ageing naval fleet have stalled amid rampant mismanagement, a scathing government audit has revealed – highlighting the country's growing reliance on the United States to bolster its maritime capabilities as regional tensions simmer.

The auditor-general's report exposed a troubling reality: the Royal Malaysian Navy has received only four of its 18 planned new vessels, severely handicapping its ability to patrol the nation's vast maritime domain, which spans more than 500,000 sq km, exceeding its land area. "We do not possess a sufficient level of deterrence and this directly affects the strategic space and options that defence planners and policymakers have," warned Thomas Daniel of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.

We do not possess a sufficient level of deterrence and this directly affects the strategic space

THOMAS DANIEL, INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES MALAYSIA

He said "the hollowing out of Malaysia's naval and aerial capabilities", as exposed by the audit report, hurt the country's maritime security.

The report's revelations come amid heightened concerns over the South China Sea, where China's expansive claims have put it at odds with Malaysia and other regional claimant states, including the Philippines.

Analysts warn that Malaysia's naval shortcomings could leave it increasingly vulnerable as competition over the vital global trade route intensifies.

Malaysia's naval woes run deep. The auditor's damning report, published last Thursday, found that half of the country's

fleet of 49 ships were now operating beyond their serviceable lifespan because of the non-delivery of 14 new vessels commissioned over the past decade.

These "delays in the acquisition and acceptance of new ships" were directly blamed in the report for the continued "use of ships that are beyond their useful life". It also uncovered 384.5 million ringgit (HK\$637.5 million) in losses arising from more than 1.62 million unused spare parts that are no longer compatible with the country's ships.

Despite Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's sharp criticism of US support for Israel's war on Gaza and his administration's perceived tilt towards China, including a push to join the Brics bloc, Washington continues to view Malaysia as a vital regional security partner.

A US\$60 million maritime surveillance upgrade for three of the Royal Malaysian Air Force's transport planes, outfitting them with the capability to pick up small targets as far as 200 nautical miles away, was recently completed under the US-led Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative.

Thanks to the upgrade, Malaysia was "better able to maintain vigilant watch" over its waters and "better postured to secure the maritime environment", US Ambassador Edgard D. Kagan said at the handover ceremony on June 17.

Washington previously stepped in to bolster Malaysia's maritime capabilities, including with the 2019 donation of 12 American-made ScanEagle drones to enhance its security and intelligence-gathering under the same security initiative.

Meanwhile, the US Coast Guard was "moving forward with some sense of urgency" to donate a recently decommissioned 210-foot patrol boat to Malaysia, coastguard commandant Linda Fagan told Malaysia's national news agency Bernama.

Malaysia's leadership in this domain was "critical", Fagan said in Kuala Lumpur on May 30, emphasising that the US coastguard was excited to share skills and opportunities with its Malaysian counterpart, which she described as "a useful partner of choice."



A Kasturi-class corvette of the Royal Malaysian Navy fires a missile during a military exercise in the South China Sea. Photo: DPA

INDIA



Vladimir Putin with Narendra Modi after conferring on him the Order of St Andrew the Apostle at the Kremlin in Moscow. Photo: AP

FAMILIES WANT FIGHTERS TO RETURN FROM RUSSIA

Relatives of Indian nationals who have been duped into joining Moscow's army pin hopes on Putin after he promises Modi to discharge the victims

Junaid Kathju

Raja Banu was stunned when she received news that Russian President Vladimir Putin had agreed to send home all Indians who were misled into fighting in the Ukraine war, many of whom were promised lucrative job opportunities.

One of the 60-year-old Indian national's sons, Aazad Yousuf Kumar, 31, was among the Indian men who were offered these opportunities, allegedly by Dubai-based employment agency Baba Vlogs. The men ended up being enlisted into the Russian army to fight in the conflict that erupted in February 2022.

At a private dinner hosted by Putin in Moscow on Monday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised the issue during his first official visit to Russia since the start of the war. Putin agreed to Modi's request to discharge all Indians involved in the conflict and facilitate their return.

Four Indian nationals have lost their lives in the war while 10 have returned home so far, according to New Delhi's Ministry of External Affairs. A viral video uploaded earlier this year showed several men from the states of Punjab and Haryana in army uniforms claiming they were deceived into fighting in Ukraine and pleading for help.

It is believed up to 40 Indians are still stuck in Russia – though it is unclear how many of them are involved in the conflict.

Addressing a press conference after the end of Modi's two-day

tour, Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra confirmed the deal reached between Modi and Putin, saying the "Russian side promised early discharge of all Indian nationals from the service of the Russian army".

"I was keenly waiting for some news about Modi raising this issue. And when I heard, I just rushed to my mother to tell her. These last six months have been nothing short of hell for her," Sajad Yousuf Kumar, Aazad's 36-year-old brother, said. The family hails from Pulwama in Indian-administered Kashmir.

Aazad had yet to see his son, who was born after he left for work in Russia last December to support his family, Sajad said.

The family was assured by the Indian foreign ministry that the matter of Aazad's return, along with other Indians stranded in the Ukraine war, would be highlighted to the Russian authorities, Sajad said. "We are happy that Prime Minister Modi raised this matter with the Russian president himself. We are now eagerly awaiting my brother's return. Until he is safely home, this assurance won't fully comfort us."

Kumar said his brother was among 18 people in his batch, including some from Nepal, who were entangled in the war and struggling to survive each day.

"I had a telephone call with him [Aazad] last night, before the Putin announcement," Sajad said. "He told me that nine of his colleagues were sent to the front while the rest were tasked with building bunkers. I haven't spoken with him since to find out



Raja Banu shows a photo of her son who is fighting in the war.

We are happy that Prime Minister Modi raised this matter with the Russian president

SAJAD YOUSUF KUMAR, BROTHER OF AAZAD YOUSUF KUMAR

if he has heard the news about his return home."

Zahoor Ahmad Sheikh, 29, from Kupwara village in Indian Kashmir, also left home in November last year hoping to earn a decent living in Russia, only to find himself trapped in the Ukraine war. Sheikh has been missing since January, according to his family, who have not lost hope of finding him.

"The announcement [Putin's assurance] has given us a glimmer of hope. If all Indians are returned

to India, maybe he [Sheikh] is still alive," Mudasir Ahmad, brother of Sheikh, told the Post.

Sheikh was working for a private company in Chandigarh state when he got a job opportunity in November last year in Russia through Baba Vlogs. Two of his colleagues – Arbab Ahmad from Uttar Pradesh and Mohammad Afsan from Hyderabad – were also offered the job.

After he arrived in Moscow, Sheikh called home but there has been no communication with him since January, Mudasir said.

"Initially, we thought he must be busy adjusting to his new job. But after five days, it was Arbab who called us and said they had been thrown into a war zone. There has been a huge attack and he has managed to escape without knowing the whereabouts of Afsan and Sheikh."

A few days after the call, news of Afsan's death was reported while Sheikh remains missing.

"We have written to the Indian embassy in Russia and even went to Delhi but to no avail," said Mudasir, adding that the family's appeal to Indian authorities was their "last hope" to see Sheikh alive.

At his meeting with Putin, Modi spoke about India's "special and privileged" strategic partnership with Moscow. The two sides also held talks on strengthening cooperation in trade, capital market linkages, energy, science and technology, defence and security.

Former Indian diplomat Anil Trigunayath said Modi raising the issue of the Indian men who were misled into fighting in the war in Ukraine and Putin's decision to discharge them reflected the special partnership between Delhi and Moscow.

Manila 'to exhaust all options' in sea dispute

Military chief makes vow after rejecting US offer to help in troop resupply missions

Jeoffrey Maitem

The Philippines' rejection of a US offer to help with resupply missions for troops on a disputed shoal in the South China Sea shows Manila prefers to handle operations on its own, while Beijing could view Washington's involvement as an attempt to incite conflict, analysts say.

Chinese and Philippine ships have been embroiled in a series of confrontations in the South China Sea in recent months. A Filipino sailor lost a thumb in a June 17 clash when the Philippines attempted to deliver essentials to soldiers on a military outpost at the Second Thomas Shoal.

The United States has reiterated its ironclad defence commitments in the case of any attack on Philippine aircraft or vessels in the South China Sea under their 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty.

But Philippine military chief General Romeo Brawner said his country would "try to exhaust all possible options that we have before we ask for help".

"Yes, of course, they have been offering help and they asked us how they could help us in any way," Brawner said.

Rej Torrecampo, a security analyst at the Political Economic Elemental Researchers and Strategists think tank, said Manila's decision was "a sign that we can do our own military and civilian missions".

"China's criticism against us since last year when we started making public what is happening in the West Philippine Sea is that our actions were dictated by the US which is not correct. It's a wrong characterisation of our action," Torrecampo said.

The West Philippine Sea is the term Manila uses to describe a portion of the South China Sea that falls within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Torrecampo said having the US or other allies assist operations could anger China and influence its aggressive maritime tactics.

"When other countries step in, what will they do? Will they change their standard operating procedure which we have not seen yet? For sure, knowing China, they would be preparing for that because we already announced the US is offering help," he said.

Jose Antonio Custodio, a defence analyst and fellow at the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers, said Manila could resupply its troops even without US help as the country's naval capabilities had improved, but having American drones or reconnaissance aircraft patrolling and sending real-time information would be useful.

Custodio also said the Philippines could opt for non-lethal measures or equip its personnel with riot gear in case a June 17 type of incident occurs again, or it could airdrop the supplies to prevent violent maritime run-ins.

SOUTH KOREA

Seoul braces for upheaval as Trump shadow looms over White House

Park Chan-kyong

South Korea is bracing for a diplomatic dilemma should Donald Trump reclaim the White House in November, as analysts warn that a second presidency could upend Seoul's global alliances and security commitments.

Seoul is particularly concerned that Trump may leverage North Korea's escalating nuclear threats to pressure South Korea into shouldering greater costs for the 28,500 US troops stationed on the peninsula and joint military drills – a demand that could severely test the resilience of the critical US-South Korea alliance.

Despite these looming concerns, President Yoon Suk-yeol has expressed confidence that ties would "stay strong going forward" even under a renewed Trump administration.

Fred Fleitz, a former top Trump security official, arrived in Seoul this week in an apparent bid to assuage concerns, denying in local media

interviews that Trump had threatened to withdraw US troops unless Seoul paid billions of dollars more.

"I believe that Trump is a friend of South Korea. Trump is a deal-maker. But ... this is an issue that has to be negotiated," Fleitz said during an interview with Channel-A TV in Seoul on Tuesday.

Fleitz said that Trump would view China as the "number one threat", in contrast to other issues that are "clearly not at the top of the list of national security threats".

There has also been speculation that a re-elected Trump would seek to revive his personal diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, which hit a wall at their 2019 Hanoi summit when talks collapsed after Kim demanded the full lifting of US sanctions in exchange for limited nuclear concessions.

"I believe very strongly that Trump probably will try to resume personal diplomacy with Kim," Fleitz said during the television interview.

"He frequently says in his campaign speeches that his diplomacy with leader Kim was one of the big successes of his foreign policy."

In a separate press conference on Tuesday, Fleitz said a reelected Trump would press Kim to follow through on his 2018 pledge to denuclearise, and would demand that North Korea "stop sending weapons" to Russia as a precondition for any renewed dialogue.

I believe that Trump is a friend of South Korea. Trump is a deal-maker. But ... this is an issue that has to be negotiated

FRED FLEITZ, FORMER TRUMP SECURITY OFFICIAL

However, Moon Seong-mook of the Korea Research Institute for National Strategy warned that a second Trump administration would find reviving talks challenging.

"A deal with Kim means the US acknowledges the North as a nuclear-armed state and seeks mutual disarmament," he said. "Could Washington stomach this?"

"They may say whatever they want to say, as they are not in office now, but they would find it a different matter if they try to translate those words into policies."

Sohn Yul, a political-science professor at Seoul National University, expressed concern that Trump's policy of retrenchment from international affairs and towards domestic priorities could undermine Washington's commitment to its allies' defence.

He cautioned that a second Trump term would present "hugely bloated bills" to Seoul for US troops and joint military exercises, putting Yoon – already struggling with low approval

ratings – "on the horns of a dilemma". "The Yoon government would face two difficult choices – accept the bills and risk losing power, or reject the bills and risk the withdrawal of at least part of the US troops from South Korea," Sohn warned.

Under a second Trump presidency, South Korea would likely face pressure to address its large trade imbalance with the United States. In recent years, the US has overtaken China as South Korea's biggest trade partner with a surplus. South Korea's trade deficit with China, meanwhile, has narrowed significantly.

In the first half of this year, South Korea reported a US\$27.4 billion trade surplus with the US, a 50 per cent increase from the same period the previous year. During this time, South Korea's trade deficit with China fell by 59 per cent to US\$5.43 billion.

Yang Moo-jin, a political science professor and dean of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, said another Trump presidency would

present both challenges and opportunities for South Korea.

He said that US-Russia relations could improve under Trump, while US-China ties could deteriorate further, given Beijing's status as a rising superpower.

Yang said harmonious US-China relations were needed to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula.

He also suggested that if Trump resumed talks with Kim, it could create an opportunity to ease cross-border tensions between the two Koreas. But he cautioned that the "Washington Declaration" made in April last year, strengthening US-South Korea nuclear deterrence, "could hang in the balance" under a new Trump administration.

Additionally, Yoon's "ideology-centred" approach to diplomacy fostering closer ties with the US, Japan, and Nato could clash with Trump's "America First" foreign policy that is focused on increasing the US national interest, Yang said.

While President Biden has made clear he feels he is the best candidate to win this election, nothing that has happened over the past 12 days suggests that voters see things the same way

CONGRESSWOMAN LORI TRAHAN JOINS A GROWING NUMBER OF DEMOCRATS IN THE U.S. CONGRESS WORRIED THAT PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN CANNOT BEAT DONALD TRUMP

Heat of the moment



Tourists snap pictures as a thermometer in Death Valley National Park in California shows a temperature of 54 degrees Celsius, amid a heatwave that is affecting much of the US state. Park visitors have been urged to “travel prepared to survive” as temperatures are predicted to hit record highs this week. Death Valley is the hottest and driest place in the United States. Photo: Getty Images

UNITED STATES

MORE DEMOCRATS VOICE FEARS BIDEN WILL LOSE

A seventh member of Congress calls on the 81-year-old president to end his re-election campaign yet no plan has emerged for collective action

Reuters

A growing number of Democrats in the US Congress said they worried that President Joe Biden could not beat Donald Trump in the November 5 election, though they emerged from closed-door meetings with no plans for collective action.

A seventh Democrat in the US House of Representatives publicly called on the 81-year-old incumbent to end his wounded re-election campaign, and the first Senate Democrat came forward to say that Biden could not win, though he stopped short of calling on him to drop out.

“Donald Trump is on track, I think, to win this election and maybe win it by a landslide and take with it the Senate and the House,” Democratic Senator Michael Bennet said in an interview on CNN.

Asked if Biden should end his campaign, he replied: “This is something for the president to consider”.

If Trump wins the White House and Republicans win majorities in both chambers of Congress, he will face few obstacles in pursuit of major policy changes.

Democrats already face an uphill battle to protect their 51-49 Senate majority, as they must defend multiple seats in Republican-leaning states. Republicans hold a 220-213 majority in the House.

The party’s leaders in the US Senate and House, Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries, said little about hours of closed-door talks among Democratic lawmakers, who in any event lack the authority to push Biden aside even if they agreed on a course of action.

Biden’s halting June 27 debate performance against Trump and low public approval have raised fresh doubts among some Democrats about his ability to win or to keep up with the demands of his gruelling job for another 4½ years.

Congressman Mikie Sherrill became the seventh House Democrat to call on Biden publicly to drop out of the race, saying in a statement: “The stakes are too high—and the threat is too real—to stay silent”.

Many more lawmakers have expressed worries that Biden has not done enough to convince voters that the debate was an aberration, rather than a true reflection of his abilities.

But the president continues to argue that he is best positioned to defeat Trump, 78, whom he casts as a singular threat to American democracy.

Senate Democratic leader Schumer brushed off questions about Biden’s fitness, saying three times, “I’m with Joe”, during a brief exchange with reporters after Democrats met over lunch to discuss the campaign.

“While President Biden has made clear he feels he is the best candidate to win this election, nothing that has happened over the past 12 days suggests that voters see things the same way,” congresswoman Lori Trahan said in a statement on Tuesday.

A Reuters/Ipsos poll last week found that one in three registered Democratic voters believed that Biden should quit the race, with 59 per cent saying he is too old to work in government. The poll also found none of his possible replacements fared better in a match-up against Trump. The poll showed Biden and Trump tied at 40 per cent each.

While national public opinion polls offer a view of candidates’ standing, US presidential elections are decided state by state.

The non-partisan Cook Political Report changed its

ratings on three of the most competitive states – Arizona, Georgia and Nevada – to “lean Republican” from “toss-up”, citing shifting voter views of Biden following the debate.

Biden delivered a forceful speech to a gathering of Nato leaders in Washington on Tuesday, while Vice-President Kamala Harris – seen as the most likely candidate to replace Biden if he were to stand down – campaigned in Nevada.

“The one thing we know about Joe Biden is he is a fighter. He is the first to say when you get knocked down, you get back up,” Harris told supporters.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre faced another salvo of questions from reporters about Biden’s health.

In a statement, the White House doctor said Biden was not being treated for any neurological condition and had received a clean bill of health at his most recent physical examination in February.

Biden has secured renewed support from several key constituencies, including from members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Black voters make up a crucial component of the party’s base.

Some House Democrats expressed frustration that the party was focused on Biden’s shortcomings rather than unifying against Trump.

Trump teases VP pick as he revels in his rival’s turmoil

Associated Press in Washington

Donald Trump has revelled in the mounting turmoil surrounding President Joe Biden’s campaign in the wake of their debate and teased the expected announcement of his Republican running mate with one of the top contenders, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, in attendance.

After days spent lying low, golfing and letting Democratic infighting play out in public, Trump used his return to the campaign trail in Florida to ratchet up his attacks on both Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris, indulging speculation that she could replace the president as the Democratic nominee this year and alleging, without evidence, that his son Hunter Biden is “running our government” and first lady Jill Biden “is helping”.

Biden has repeatedly insisted he will not withdraw from the race.

The former president rallied his supporters on Tuesday at one of his Miami-area golf courses as the presumptive Republican nominee nears a deadline to announce his running mate.

But he appears in no rush, as much of the political world’s attention is still centred on



Marco Rubio speaks at the event in Florida. He is a top contender to be Donald Trump’s running mate in this year’s election. Photo: Bloomberg

questions about Biden’s ability to govern for another four-year term. Some Democrats have started calling for Biden to step down as their presumptive nominee following his dismal debate performance last month.

Trump, speaking from the 10th hole of his course, challenged Biden to another debate or even a “golf-off”, reviving an offbeat argument from their debate. But mostly, he rubbed in how their meet-up left Biden’s campaign facing a grim prognosis.

“Our victory was so absolute that Joe’s own party now wants him to throw in the towel and

surrender the presidency after a single 90-minute performance,” Trump said. “They want ‘Crooked Joe’ out of the race. It’s a shame the way they’re treating him. But don’t feel sorry for him. He’s a very bad guy.”

James Singer, a spokesman for Biden’s campaign, responded to Trump with a series of challenges, saying in a statement that: “We’d challenge Donald Trump to create jobs, but he lost 3 million. We’d challenge Donald Trump to stand up to Putin, but he bent the knee to him. We’d challenge Donald Trump to follow the law, but he breaks it.”

Singer also said: “Joe Biden doesn’t have time for Donald Trump’s weird antics – he’s busy leading America and defending the free world.”

Trump laced into Harris with more specifics than usual. She has become a focus of the former president and his allies as speculation has mounted that she would replace Biden as the Democratic nominee.

Trump called her “Laughing Kamala” and referred to the “Biden-Harris administration”, rather than just pinning actions on Biden as he had for months, and blamed the vice-president for the White House’s immigration policies.

Trump, ever the showman, repeatedly played into the speculation that he might elevate Rubio to his ticket.

Rubio, a Miami native and one of the contenders for the vice-presidential post, was among the Florida politicians who spoke at the event. The son of Cuban immigrants, Rubio is seen as a potential running mate who could help Trump as he tries to secure support from Hispanic Americans, a point the senator emphasised in his remarks as he switched several times in his remarks to Spanish.

Additional reporting by Bloomberg

ISRAEL-GAZA WAR

Strike on Gaza school kills at least 29 amid truce talks

Major Israeli offensive may reset the negotiation process, Hamas official warns mediators in Qatar

Agence France-Presse

A deadly strike has hit a school-turned-shelter in southern Gaza as Israeli forces in the war-ravaged territory’s main city pushed on with a major offensive that has again displaced Palestinians.

The Israeli military said the air force had used “precise munition” to strike a “terrorist from Hamas’ military wing” near the school.

“The incident is under review,” the military said in a statement.

The strike hit the entrance to Al-Awda school in Abasan, said a source at Nasser hospital in the nearby southern city of Khan Younis, where the victims were taken, adding that 29 were killed and dozens wounded.

The Hamas-run government media office accused Israel of carrying out a “terrible massacre” and also gave the death toll as 29, saying the “majority” were women and children.

“We were sitting at the entrance of the school ... suddenly and without warning, rockets were fired,” a witness, Mohammed Sukkar, told Agence France-Presse about the strike.

Three previous Israeli strikes since Saturday on schools across Gaza used by displaced Palestinians have killed a total of at least 20 people, according to officials and rescuers.

In the northern Gaza Strip, Israeli troops, tanks and fighter jets swooped on Gaza City on the eve of new contacts in Qatar aiming for an eventual hostage-prisoner exchange and a truce in the war, raging into its 10th month.

CIA director William Burns and Israel’s Mossad chief David Barnea were expected to travel to Qatar yesterday, after Burns held talks with Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Cairo.

Hamas, whose October 7 attack triggered the war, has softened a key demand and accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of deliberately escalating fighting to thwart an agreement.

The Islamist group’s Qatar-based political chief Ismail Haniyeh said he had warned mediators that the “catastrophic consequences” of the latest battles could “reset the negotiation process”.

Hamas’ armed wing, the Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigades,

described the latest fighting in Gaza City as “the most intense in months”.

The United Nations said tens of thousands of civilians had been affected by the surge in fighting since the first of three evacuation orders for Gaza City was declared on June 27.

Philippe Lazzarini, head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees UNRWA, said “we have around 350,000 people again on the road” but “basically, there is absolutely no safe space in Gaza”.

After almost two weeks of battles in Gaza City’s eastern Shujaia district, Israeli forces have extended the fighting further into the city’s east, west and south.

Residents said they saw helicopter strikes, “explosions, and numerous gun battles” in the city’s southwest.

Elsewhere in Gaza, witnesses reported artillery shelling near the central Nuseirat refugee camp and west of Rafah, in the territory’s south.

Israel’s military said its air and ground forces were pursuing Palestinian militants in Gaza City, six months after it said it had dismantled Hamas’s “military framework” in the territory’s north.

The UN Human Rights Office said it was “appalled” at the way civilians, many of whom had been displaced multiple times, had been ordered to head to areas where “military operations are

ongoing and where civilians continue to be killed and injured”.

Thousands were seen marching down dusty roads past bombed-out buildings, with mothers carrying babies and others packing belongings onto donkey carts.

Independent UN rights experts accused Israel of carrying out a “targeted starvation campaign” that had resulted in the deaths of Gazan children and constituted “a form of genocidal violence”.

“Thirty-four Palestinians have died from malnutrition since October 7, the majority being children,” said the experts, who are appointed by the UN Human Rights Council but who do not speak on behalf of the UN.

Israel’s mission to the UN in Geneva accused the panel’s members of “spreading misinformation” and “supporting Hamas propaganda”.

Yussef Jaber, 24, said there was hardly any food left in northern Gaza, lamenting “a life of shame and humiliation”.

“There is nothing for us except some flour and tinned goods that make us sick,” he said. “We have no vegetables to cook or meat.”

More than nine months of war have closed many hospitals across Gaza, and on Tuesday the Palestinian Red Crescent said all of its facilities in the Gaza City area were out of service.

Jagan Chapagani, head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, said on social media platform X that “the closure of these vital medical facilities exacerbates an already dire healthcare system”.

“These clinics and medical points are often the only lifeline for many civilians.”

Hamas’ October 7 attack on southern Israel resulted in the deaths of 1,195 people, mostly civilians, according to an Agence France-Presse tally based on Israeli figures.

The militants seized 251 hostages, 116 of whom remain in Gaza, including 42 the military said were dead.

Israel responded with a military offensive that has killed at least 38,243 people in Gaza, also mostly civilians, according to figures from the Hamas-run territory’s health ministry.

Hamas has signalled that it would drop its insistence on a “complete” ceasefire – which Israel has repeatedly rejected – as a condition for starting truce talks, mediated by Qatar and Egypt with support from the United States.



A boy sits on debris at a UN-run school in Nuseirat, Gaza Strip.

SPACE

First successful launch of Ariane 6 rocket brings Europe back into the space race

Agence France-Presse

Europe’s new Ariane 6 rocket successfully blasted off for the first time on Tuesday, releasing satellites into orbit and restoring the continent’s independent access to space.

European space efforts have suffered a series of blows, including four years of delays to Ariane 6, that have robbed the continent of its own way to launch missions into space for the past year.

But with the successful inaugural flight of Europe’s most powerful rocket yet, European space chiefs were keen to move on from recent setbacks.

“Europe is back,” announced Philippe Baptiste, head of France’s CNES space agency.

The rocket launched from Europe’s spaceport in Kourou, French Guiana at 4pm local time. Initially delayed for an hour by a small problem, it lifted off into clear skies.

When it launched, Ariane 6 carried with it the hopes of European sovereignty in space. Since the last flight of its workhorse predecessor, Ariane 5, a year ago, Europe has had to rely on rivals such as Elon Musk’s US firm SpaceX.

Selected by the ESA back in 2014, Ariane 6 will be able to place satellites in geostationary orbit 36,000km above Earth, as well as satellite constellations a few hundred kilometres up.

The first flight was carrying a payload of university microsatellites, various experiments and two

atmospheric re-entry capsules that will be jettisoned near the end of the mission. The last of three ignitions of the Vinci engine will be to shoot it back down into the Pacific Ocean, so it does not contribute to the space debris cluttering Earth’s orbit.

Successful inaugural flights are by no means guaranteed.

Historically, nearly half of the first launches of new rockets have ended in failure. That includes Ariane 5, which exploded moments after lift-off in 1996.

But out of 117 launches over



The Ariane 6 heads to space after its first successful launch.

nearly 20 years, only one other Ariane 5 flight completely failed.

Space has become big business and competition is soaring, particularly from SpaceX’s fully reusable Falcon 9 rockets, which now launch around twice a week. Yet Europe has recently found itself without an independent way to get satellites into space.

Russia pulled its Soyuz rockets, long used for European launches at Kourou, after Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2022. Later that year, Europe’s Vega-C light launcher was grounded after a launch failure. Ariane 6 delays compounded the crisis.

After months of analysing the rocket’s inaugural launch, a first commercial flight is expected before the end of the year.

The next challenge will be to successfully ramp up the number of flights. ESA space transportation director Toni Tolker-Nielsen said. Six launches are scheduled for next year, and eight for 2026.

The rocket has an order book of 29 missions, many of which are to deploy some of Amazon’s Kuiper constellation of internet satellites.

But just weeks before the launch, the programme suffered a surprise setback. Europe’s weather satellite operator EUMETSAT cancelled plans to use Ariane 6 in favour of SpaceX’s Falcon 9, citing “exceptional circumstances”.

ESA chief Josef Aschbacher said the European operator’s decision to ditch the European rocket was “difficult to understand”.

OPINION

EDITORIAL

Better preparations can help China ride out flooding storm

Harrowing scenes of water from a rain-swollen lake in central China pouring through a breach in a dyke protecting low-lying areas serve to illustrate the devastation being wrought by this year's flooding season. More is yet to come. The only option for local authorities in the destructive path of floods is to bolster their emergency preparation and responses.

This rainy season arrived stronger and earlier in the year than usual, feeding floodwaters that have swept across the country, killing scores of people and displacing thousands. Last week, Premier Li Qiang toured areas of central Jiangxi province, observing flood control efforts and urging local officials to prepare early.

The drama shifted to the west of Jiangxi at the weekend to the neighbouring province of Hunan, where Dongting Lake, the country's second largest freshwater body, burst through an embankment, flooding a 47 sq km area on Friday. The breach was 10 metres wide but expanded to 226 metres on Saturday. Emergency workers scrambled to rebuild the levee with tonnes of stone, gravel and other materials, sealing the gap on Monday night.

In addition to the obvious humanitarian crisis, rainfall and flooding threaten agricultural production even as Beijing tries to shore up food security. Authorities already expect a drop in harvests of early-season rice, which has sprouted prematurely due to heavy rains that have fallen since mid-June, even as distant parts of the country suffer from drought.

Beijing wisely revised a law strengthening central leadership over responses to emergencies, just as the floods were spreading across much of southern and central China, swamping local governments unable to cope with the deluge.

The revised Emergency Response Law, passed in late June by China's top legislative body, the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee, takes effect in November, and calls for stronger warning, reporting, distribution and relief efforts for natural disasters and other threats to public health and safety. A parliament spokesman said the revision was prompted by the pandemic.

President Xi Jinping ordered officials in February 2020 to build a centralised emergency resource reserves system, just after China imposed zero-Covid policies with mass testing and quarantines. The health threat may have receded but floodwaters keep rising.

With the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River expected to remain high for up to two weeks, millions of people are bracing for more of nature's fury. It is hoped the preparation work by local authorities, combined with central government support for relief efforts, will help them weather the storm.

Shot at latest moon rocks a lift-off for city

The moon has long served as timekeeper, calendar and powerful symbol for people around the world. In Chinese culture, Earth's only natural satellite reflects peace, prosperity, family ties – and now cutting-edge science. So, it is exciting to see Hong Kong researchers take on an important role in supporting national space exploration efforts.

Polytechnic University has requested access to some of the lunar soil collected last month during the Chang'e-6 mission – the first samples from the far side of the moon ever brought back to Earth. The university also confirmed last week that it has secured a loan of lunar soil samples collected by the Chang'e-5 mission in 2020.

The China National Space Administration's Lunar Exploration and Space Engineering Centre is providing two samples of regolith or lunar soil to facilitate efforts to search for water on the moon.

Some of the material was collected using sampling and packaging equipment developed and manufactured at PolyU. Chang'e-5 was the only lander to bring back regolith in the past 40 years, from a lunar region many millions of years younger than the previously explored site.

Tiny amounts can go a long way. Yung Kai-leung, chair professor from PolyU's industrial and systems engineering department, said a single crystal or particle of regolith would allow the team to "tell a lot of stories" including "how the moon was formed".

The university received 400 milligrams of surface soil and 42.6mg of subsurface soil from the 1.7kg of regolith Chang'e-5 gathered on the nearside of the moon. Researchers said such resources should give them an edge in applying for material from the Chang'e-6 mission.

Professor Wu Bo, director of the Research Centre for Deep Space Explorations at the university, said the team hoped to "compare and contrast" samples from near and far sides of the moon. Studying water is critical for plans to have astronauts build a moon base.

PolyU researchers deserve praise and encouragement for their many years of work supporting space exploration. Their accomplishments also reflect the out-of-this-world potential Hong Kong has to contribute to scientific advancement.

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Focus on nature

Christine Loh says the interest of finance professionals and corporate leaders in conservation is a welcome surprise as city updates its biodiversity strategy

Financiers are finally starting to recognise the significance of biodiversity and ecosystems, acknowledging nature's importance to financial investments and economies. This relatively recent realisation is driven by the global surge in attention to environmental sustainability and climate change.

For too long, we have taken nature for granted, ignoring its fundamental role in our lives. We have focused on the monetary aspect, emphasising the resources needed to acquire material possessions without duly considering their origins.

Biodiversity represents our planet's natural capital and encompasses its invaluable resources. Ecosystems are the intricate interconnected systems that sustain life, providing vital services such as soil fertility, pollination, climate regulation, clean air and fresh water.

Numerous industries, including agriculture, fisheries, mining and energy, all depend on natural capital for their businesses. Financiers are beginning to grasp the critical role of biodiversity and ecosystem services. Losing them would be catastrophic.

Consequently, financiers, leading businesses, governments and even philanthropists are becoming interested in nature-based solutions to address climate change. Working with nature through protection, conservation and restoration, rather than against it, is evidently a more effective long-term strategy.

This paradigm shift requires a fresh perspective on managing natural capital, such as halting deforestation, reviving mangroves and establishing protected areas or restrictions to allow fish stocks to recover.

Financial professionals understand the concept of risk. They recognise the need to assess the potential impact of biodiversity damage or loss on businesses, investments and financial performance.

Integrating biodiversity risks into investment analysis and portfolio decision-making can reduce expo-

sure to biodiversity-related risks, such as water scarcity for a drinks business, while also identifying new opportunities aligned with biodiversity conservation.

Financiers in Hong Kong are aware of the government's plan to introduce a new Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (BSAP), to be updated with an eye to the Cop15 UN Biodiversity Conference and the resulting Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. This framework acknowledges the urgent need to address biodiversity loss and sets global targets to be achieved by 2030 and beyond.

These targets will need to be localised by governments to enable the recovery of natural ecosystems over the next 20 years.

Hong Kong's authorities are naturally eager to engage with financiers and leading businesses in the creation of the city's new biodiversity strategy. Still, the new-found interest of financial professionals and corporate leaders in nature conservation has been a surprise to government officials.

Indeed, businesses are already working with the local biodiversity community and together they have organised a non-government process to interact with the authorities on the Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. There is keen interest in how the government will foster innovation in biodiversity by enabling the collection, sharing and understanding of biodiversity data for nature-based solutions.

Investors are seeking out firms with innovative practices, such as property developers who integrate biodiversity into their projects. The backdrop to all of this is the effort of the public sector – the stronger the government's plans, the more the private sector can add to them.

Sustainable agriculture as well as marine farming and aquaculture are also attracting investors' attention. There is growing interest in local food production, such as in expanding local-regional oyster

cultivation and branding it as a high-quality speciality from Hong Kong through rigorous certification.

Local nature-tech start-ups have attracted investments, such as from the Middle East to produce 3D-printed reef tiles. In addition, investors and business leaders are urging the government to invest in nature conservation and recreational facilities.

This would include investments in country parks, marine parks and waters, and facilitating activities that connect people to nature, such as hiking, swimming, yachting, sailing, boating, fishing and organising local and international competitions that embrace Hong Kong's natural environment.

Strengthening the enforcement of laws against wildlife crimes in Hong Kong is also essential, given the city's reputation as a trafficking hub for endangered species. The private sector, including banks, can help to trace the flows of money to fight the trafficking.

Additionally, it is an opportune time for the government and universities to invest in studies related to ecology and sustainability, to expand and strengthen the city's talent pool in biodiversity. This will align with the city's long-term growth areas blending data, finance and business – capabilities that will serve the city well in helping to raise green funding for Asia.

Hong Kong stands to reap numerous benefits by adopting such a comprehensive approach since it has significant biodiversity expertise. Embracing biodiversity conservation and integrating it into various policies and sectors can lead to enhanced environmental sustainability, improved climate adaptation and strengthened economic resilience.

The collaboration between financiers, businesses, government, universities and ecology experts will encourage innovation. By facilitating collaboration on the Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, Hong Kong can position itself as a model for balancing economic growth with environmental stewardship.

Christine Loh is chief development strategist at Institute for the Environment, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and chairperson of the BSAP expert working group

VIEWPOINT



A reflection gives a body to a cut-out of Ultraman at a Kowloon Bay shopping centre. Photo: Eugene Lee

Visa-free scheme is a boon to business community

Daryl Ng says easier travel to the mainland is sure to make Hong Kong more attractive to foreign companies and workers aiming to call city their home

Yesterday marked a historic moment for Hong Kong. A new, long-awaited visa-free scheme took effect, ensuring seamless travel for non-Chinese permanent residents in Hong Kong and Macau to the mainland.

Announced on July 1, the 27th anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, these non-Chinese permanent residents can apply for a mainland travel permit with validity of five years, during which they can make multiple visits to the mainland of up to 90 days each for both business and leisure.

This is an excellent move that will bolster both cross-border travel and commercial activity. In addition, it will signal the country's determination for Hong Kong to continue to serve as an international hub under the "one country, two systems" framework. It demonstrates that the central and Hong Kong governments are working together to enhance this framework to bolster the city's international appeal.

As someone who was born in Hong Kong and has lived abroad, I have benefited from our city's international openness, dynamic multinationalism and flourishing business community.

Many of my friends hail from non-Chinese families who settled here generations ago and built their bases here, and they identify with this city as their home. One area that is often highlighted to boost cross-border travel is clearance at immigration checkpoints.

With our unique East-meets-West cultural ambience, recreation and dining scene in Hong Kong,

we are well-placed to help non-Chinese residents acclimatise to and cultivate deeper contextual expertise on China. Our institutional distinctiveness, common law jurisdiction and quality of life for expatriate workers are all conducive to attracting talented people, capital and firms to Hong Kong.

All these strengths exist on top of the city's Top Talent Pass Scheme, introduced in late 2022, which has received more than 72,000 applications, among which some 60,000 have been approved. The relaxation of cross-border travel adds to a highly competitive offer for global talent, forming a pathway for these people to capitalise on their expertise and contribute to the development of Hong Kong and beyond.

For leading international firms looking to deepen their trade and knowledge exchange with the mainland, they can tap into Hong Kong as a premier hub for their management and regional executives. The international business community, which includes the American Chamber of Commerce, the European Chamber of Commerce and many others, has voiced its support for the city's new business-friendly scheme.

The more interconnectivity there is between Hong Kong and the rest of the Greater Bay Area, the better. Creating easier cross-border travel and greater intensity and volume of people-to-people exchanges is conducive to the deepening of mutual understanding and appreciation between the Chinese people and their friends. Hong Kong can capitalise on this opportunity to attract talented people from Southeast Asia and beyond.

Many friends from Southeast Asia who have lived in Hong Kong for decades shared their delight with me after reading the news of the visa-free scheme. They see it as a recognition of their contributions towards China's growth trajectory for years to come. With the new scheme, these overseas friends can now enjoy the international lifestyle in Hong Kong while carrying out their business seamlessly on the mainland.

It is not only the added convenience that they cherish but also the sense of togetherness. In playing their role in serving and building up the resilience of Hong Kong, they are also collectively leaving a positive mark on China's opening-up to the world at large.

Hong Kong must capitalise on this opportunity and formulate more measures to attract talent from Southeast Asia to the city, an ideal gateway into the mainland. Businesses across a wide range of industries can engage and collaborate with their counterparts in the region to devise exchanges and programmes to tap into the talent pool. Together, they can form ecosystems covering talent development, in collaboration with overseas and regional partners.

The government could also consider opening the door wider, for instance, by adding top-tier universities in Southeast Asian countries and their graduates to the eligibility list for the Top Talent Pass Scheme.

In the current geopolitical climate of competition and friendshoring, enacting the visa-free mainland travel scheme is a wise move by the central government and Hong Kong's administration. It adds value to both Hong Kong's attractiveness as an international hub and shows the world that China knows how to use the one country, two systems framework to secure added value for both Hong Kong and the mainland.

Daryl Ng is chairman of the Hong Kong-Asean Foundation

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OPINION



Time to step back

Zhang Xiaotong says US and China owe the world their best efforts to avert war in East Asia

As Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues into its third year in the western part of the Eurasian continent, another source of war is brewing in the east. Two potential military blocs, the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral grouping and the Russia-China-North Korea coalition, are in the making, positioning East Asia on the brink of war.

The four triggers escalating tensions in East Asia include the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit at Camp David in August last year; Taiwan President William Lai Ching-te's election in January; North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's declaration on January 16 designating South Korea as its "principal enemy", abandoning peaceful reunification; and the mutual defence pact signed between Russia and North Korea during Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang last month.

As a result, two emerging military blocs in East Asia could be poised for large-scale conflict. The US-Japan-South Korea grouping leverages long-standing bilateral military treaties. On the other side, the Russia-China-North Korea alliance, though not fully formed, shows strong potential, bolstered by strategic partnerships and mutual defence agreements.

These agreements could pave the way for a formal trilateral military alliance in response to a regional conflict.

The source of war in East Asia is brewing. Russia, China and North Korea, three nationalist authoritarian regimes, see war as necessary for regime survival when it is at risk. The war in Ukraine is crucial for the legitimacy of Putin's regime, and failure

could cost him everything. For President Xi Jinping, reunifying Taiwan is a significant source of legitimacy for the Communist Party of China. Regime survival is also paramount for North Korea, where Kim would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons if his regime's survival is threatened.

This contrasts with Western liberal democracies, where politics is more fluid and subject to regular elections. In a nutshell, these three authoritarian regimes are ready for war if their regime survival is threatened.

The world is not facing a new cold war but rather a large-scale hot war. The first shot might have been Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which could escalate and expand to eastern Europe, potentially followed by conflicts in the Korean peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait. The two military blocs will be the warring parties.

It will not just be conventional warfare. It is likely to involve nuclear warfare since all the major warring parties, including the United States, Russia, China and North Korea, are nuclear powers. Japan and South Korea could quickly become nuclear powers as well.

Such a war will not be confined to East Asia but could extend globally, at least across the vast Eurasian continent. Russia's invasion of Ukraine could involve the entirety of Nato if the conflict extends to eastern Europe.

The conflict across the Taiwan Strait could escalate into a direct military confrontation between China and the US, potentially involving Southeast Asian countries and others across the Asia-Pacific.

The looming conflict in East Asia involves simultaneous tensions in the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Strait, revealing a complex web of regional security ties. China considers Taiwan an integral part of its territory, while it views North Korea as a strategic buffer.

China has put forth substantial efforts to defend Korea in a variety of conflicts throughout history, such as the Imjin war and the first Sino-Japanese war. These were not only about territorial integrity but also influenced the fate of Taiwan. For instance, China's inability to protect Korea in the first Sino-Japanese war led to the loss of Taiwan to Japan.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine could involve the entirety of Nato if the conflict extends to eastern Europe

Even when successful, these military efforts often came at a great cost. Should Beijing decide to use military force to reunify with Taiwan, it is likely that North Korea and Russia would be critical allies, emphasising the strategic link between the security situations in Taiwan and the Korean peninsula.

The key to preventing war in East Asia is for democratic countries to engage in dialogue with the three authoritarian

regimes without threatening their regime stability. If the survival of their regimes is at risk, war becomes inevitable and the consequences could be catastrophic for the world. It would be a strategic mistake for the West to set regime change as the goal.

China holds the key to peace as it possesses the leverage needed to persuade Russia and North Korea not to take extreme actions. China is the largest trading partner and a major provider of foreign aid to North Korea. It is also Russia's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade valued at US\$240 billion last year, marking a 26 per cent increase over the previous year.

Russia is increasingly dependent on China as its invasion of Ukraine drags on. Moreover, China is the country most integrated with the global economy. Therefore, China has the leverage, capacity and will to safeguard peace and prevent war in East Asia.

The US should avoid escalating tensions and maintain its commitment to the "one-China" policy, ensuring that the US-Japan-South Korea grouping does not evolve into a full military alliance. Additionally, the US should refrain from actions China views as supporting Taiwan's independence, such as selling advanced military equipment to the island.

East Asia stands on the brink of war. All potential warring parties must contribute to peace efforts before it is too late. In particular, China and the US hold special responsibilities in this endeavour for peace, and they must get their relationship right.

Zhang Xiaotong is a professor at Department of Political Science and International Relations and director of the China and Central Asia Studies Centre at KIMEP University, Kazakhstan

Iran's incoming president is already walking a tightrope

C. Uday Bhaskar says the country voted for change, but what can be achieved is uncertain

A little-known reformist politician Masoud Pezeshkian, a heart surgeon by profession and former health minister, will be sworn in as Iran's ninth president in early August. He will succeed the late former president, Ebrahim Raisi, who died in a helicopter crash in May. The crash led to speculation that Raisi was assassinated, among other conspiracy theories.

Iranian domestic politics has been in a state of unexpected churn since the tragic development. This most recent presidential election pit a well-entrenched conservative faction, supported by Iran's clerics, against the country's disparate reformist constituency.

The first round of the elections on June 28 was marked by a very low turnout of around 40 per cent. None of the four candidates received the requisite majority – leading to a second round on July 5. Turnout for the run-off election is reported to have increased to almost 50 per cent. Pezeshkian secured more than 16 million votes, while his rival, the ultraconservative candidate Saeed Jalili, won over 13 million votes.

The more significant outcome of this election pertains to the domestic context. Iran has been dealing with a variety of challenges that have led to considerable public apathy and disaffection. US-led sanctions over Tehran's nuclear programme have isolated the Iranian economy from global trade and impacted peoples' lives. A covert proxy war against Israel has become more virulent and public. Meanwhile, the youth are chafing at

moral policing and the harsh implementation of religious jurisprudence.

The compulsory wearing of the hijab for women became an explosive issue in 2022 when 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died after being arrested by the police for ostensibly not wearing the hijab in the prescribed manner. Iranian citizens were outraged but then-president Raisi cracked down and protests were quelled with a heavy hand.

Whenever Iran has felt insecure due to citizen discontent or other governance setbacks, the supreme leader and the conservative core – comprising clerics, the judiciary and the military – have allowed a reformist or moderate leader to enter the political arena and don the "crown of thorns" as president. Former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rowhani are both examples of this.

President-elect Pezeshkian will have a number of domestic issues to address, while having to adhere to the governance framework imposed on him by the country's conservative political template. Assuaging the discontent and frustration

Externally, it is unlikely that there would be any major change to Iran's foreign and security policies

among the youth will be a priority. He will also have to steer the economy out of the current doldrums. Reducing the overbearing presence of the morality police will be a high visibility issue but in all likelihood, the new president will make change slowly.

Iranian politics is dominated by certain abiding elements – loyalty to the supreme leader, the theological principles of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and a rejection of Israel. Hence, terms such as reformist, conservative, hardliner, pragmatist and even opportunist may be used to describe various factions, but these are all different blinds of zealotry adherence to the country's state ideology of Shia jurisprudence.

Gender inequity in Iran has been a major area of contestation among the hardliners and the moderates and the death of Amini became a catalyst for nationwide protests. At that time, the current president-elect boldly asserted, "It is our fault. We want to implement religious faith through the use of force. This is scientifically impossible."

He went on to say, "I bear part of the blame, the distinguished religious scholars and the mosques bear part of the blame, and the [Iranian] broadcasting authority bears part of the blame. Everybody should step forward and be held accountable, rather than capture that girl, beat her up and eventually deliver her body [to her family]." This statement from Pezeshkian burnished his appeal to young voters, but whether he will be able to retain this conviction in the transition from candidate to president is moot.

In keeping with tradition, the president-elect has vowed to uphold the country's institutions and has also declared his loyalty to the supreme leader. The choice of the cabinet will provide some clues about how empathetic the Pezeshkian administration will be, and what degree of autonomy he would be given by the supreme leader.

Externally, it is unlikely that there would be any major change to Iran's foreign and security policies. The West Asian region is in a state of violent flux due to the Israel-Gaza war. Moreover the possibility of a second Trump presidency can lead to greater uncertainty and discord in the already troubled US-Iran relationship.

Major foreign, security and nuclear policy decisions will be made by the supreme leader and the conservative core. However, during a presidential debate before the second round of voting, Pezeshkian made an instructive observation about Iran's seemingly intractable nuclear deadlock with the US.

Indicating his preference for dialogue with Iran's traditional adversaries, he said, "The primary issue is the perspective: do we want to solve our problems with the world or not? I believe we must get out of the deadlock to solve the country's problems."

How Iran will respond to these challenges, by way of adhering to the tenets of Shia jurisprudence while accommodating the aspirations of its citizens, will be the litmus test for the astuteness of Pezeshkian when he assumes office in August.

Commodore C. Uday Bhaskar is director of the Society for Policy Studies (SPS), an independent think tank based in New Delhi

LETTERS

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Deaths in haj heat should spur action to build safer world

That 1,300 pilgrims died during this year's haj pilgrimage is not only a tragedy but also a stark reminder of the urgent need for better management of mass gatherings. This incident raises critical questions about the safety protocol and infrastructure in place to protect the millions who undertake this sacred journey each year.

As we grapple with our sorrow over the deaths, we must also confront the undeniable impact of climate change. The harsh weather conditions exacerbated by global warming increasingly pose a threat to those attending outdoor events, particularly in regions like the Gulf. The relentless heat is not just uncomfortable; it is deadly.

The Gulf nations are at a crossroads. Their ambitions to diversify their economies and attract tourists and investors are laudable. However, as this tragedy shows, economic aspirations cannot overshadow the value of human life. The question then arises: will financial investments alone be sufficient to safeguard against such calamities in the future?

It is time for a paradigm shift. We must invest in sustainable infrastructure that can withstand the challenges posed by climate change. This means designing buildings and event spaces that are both environmentally friendly and capable of providing safe shelter from extreme weather conditions.

Moreover, as these nations strive to become global hubs for tourism and investment, there must be a parallel commitment to improving emergency response systems and crowd management strategies. The world is watching how these countries respond to this tragedy and whether they will take the necessary steps to prevent such incidents from recurring.

Money can fuel growth and innovation, but it is not a panacea. It takes foresight, planning and a commitment to sustainability and safety to truly prepare for the future, one where climate change is an ever-present reality. The lives lost during this year's haj must not be in vain; they should galvanise action towards creating a safer, more resilient world for all.

Ilnur Minakhmetov, Yau Ma Tei

Why government should leave ride services like Uber alone

My family have just returned from a highly enjoyable three-week trip to the San Francisco Bay Area and Hawaii, places we are extremely familiar with. It was also safe and hassle-free because we relied on Uber for our transport needs throughout our trip.

Cost-wise, it was quite similar to renting cars, which would have involved paying for parking and valet services. It was also nice to be chauffeured around, instead of having to adjust to driving on the opposite side of the road and worry about directions. Even more interesting was that we were able to enjoy rides in well-maintained and clean cars and chat with drivers who were both pleasant and professional.

In particular, a young man who drove us in Hawaii exhibited great pride in his work. He proudly told us he considered himself not only a professional driver but also an entrepreneur running his own transport business which is affiliated with a sophisticated world-renowned ride-hailing corporation. He works hard, about 10 to 12 hours a day, but is able to adjust his schedule when he is tired. He also feels his income is more attractive than from other work options available to him and he is in the process of upgrading his vehicle to further enhance his service.

I believe there are many young Hong Kong Uber drivers who share this positive outlook. The authorities should leave Uber and other ride services alone while upgrading our existing deplorable taxi system.

P.H. How, Mid-Levels

Encroaching cars problem could be solved by fence

Further to my letters to the Post about the problem of the pavement near Deep Water Bay Beach, I wrote to various government departments to see if they would reply. In about a month, I received a response from the Transport Department, which acknowledged "some sections of the footpath along Island Road are narrow".

The department said it was considering reducing and rearranging some metered parking spaces "with a view to creating some space for footpath widening along Island Road", but that it would consult stakeholders before carrying out the work.

The department added it would "continue to liaise with the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, and collaborate with the Invigorating Island South Office and the Civil Engineering and Development Department on the 'Round-the-Island Trail' project, which would include possible improvement to the pedestrian connectivity along Deep Water Bay Beach".

I appreciate very much the planned improvement. However, this might take time, especially when the relevant stakeholders have to be consulted. In the meantime, I have noticed another situation while hiking in that area. There is often a problem of drivers parking their cars such that the bonnet is protruding over the pavement, thereby narrowing pedestrian space by half.

My suggestion is to put a fence along the kerb to stop cars from encroaching on pedestrian space. This should be simple enough to be implemented quickly, say, in a couple of months. As a layperson, I do not think this timeline is unreasonable.

Jeannie Y.L. Lee, Lam Tin



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A WRITER'S JOURNEY

A river trip in Indonesian Borneo retraces voyage by Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad > **TRAVEL B9**

RETAIL

FILM THEME EATERY IN CAUSEWAY BAY TO SHUT

Transformers: The Ark restaurant opened in Russell Street just 15 months ago and combined fast food with movie and toy merchandise

Cheryl Arcibal
cheryl.arcibal@scmp.com

Transformers: The Ark restaurant on Russell Street is set to close as the media franchise behind Optimus Prime and his Autobots surrenders to Hong Kong's costly rents amid a consumption slump and intense competition.

The fast-food eatery, which opened for business at Soundwill Plaza in April 2023, serves premium hamburgers and pizzas with Autobot-imprinted buns and trays. Part of the 4,540 sq ft space over three floors in Causeway Bay is reserved for selling Transformers figurines and merchandise made by the toy companies Hasbro and Takara Tomy.

HK\$1m

Monthly rent being paid by Transformers: The Ark burger and pizza restaurant on Russell Street, according to property agents

The Ark restaurant pays about HK\$1 million a month in rent, according to property agents, half of what the previous tenant Burberry paid before it succumbed in late 2021 to the economic slump of the pandemic.

"The space will be transformed into an empty [lot] soon," said Oliver Tong, head of retail at JLL, which lists the property on its website. Another agent confirmed that Soundwill Plaza had notified him of the need for a new tenant soon, without providing a date.

The Ark operates along a retail strip that was the world's most expensive commercial real estate as recently as six years ago, when landlords demanded up to US\$2,671 per square foot in average annual rent, more than Fifth

Avenue in New York or the Champs Elysees in Paris. Burberry paid HK\$8.6 million in monthly rent in 2015 at the height of Hong Kong's retail boom.

Since then, a cascade of factors combined to weigh on the city's luxury retail sector. The mainland scrapped an import tax on luxury goods in 2015, killing off a swathe of *daigou* professional buyers and arbitrageurs. Anti-government protests of 2019 and three years of the pandemic also suppressed luxury retail sales and rental charges, driving Causeway Bay out of Cushman & Wakefield's list of the world's 10 costliest shopping streets.

Rent aside, the Ark also operates in a competitive area, surrounded by half a dozen burger restaurants within walking distance including Five Guys, Shake Shack, TGIF, Ruby Tuesday, White Spot Triple O, as well as a McDonald's and a KFC branch.

The restaurant opened amid much fanfare 15 months ago, a jolt in Hong Kong's post-pandemic economic recovery. It offered what marketeers called "experiential" consumption, where food and merchandise combine to serve diners and shoppers alike. Still, the experience stopped at the restaurant's decor and fit-out.

The overall experience should not be "just about the decor and not the food," Tong said. "The right experience includes a lot [more] effort than just the right pictures, and there is so much more to the experiential component than just the fit-out."

A Black Truffle Angus burger with an Autobot-imprinted bun costs HK\$90, according to the Ark's menu.

"People were expecting fast food but then it turned out to be way more expensive than [just] fast food," Tong said. "Not everyone is a fan of Transformers, so they're charging very expensive [prices], targeting a very small segment of [customers]."

LISTINGS

Aircraft assembler prices its stock at middle of range

Eric Jiang
junzhe.jiang@scmp.com

An aircraft assembler has priced its stock at the middle of the range for its Hong Kong listing, and will become the first company of its kind to raise capital on the local exchange as the pace of fundraising picks up from a three-year slump.

Cirrus Aircraft, the Minnesota-based assembler of light planes owned since 2011 by China Aviation Industry General Aircraft (Caiga), would offer its shares at HK\$27.50 apiece, Reuters reported, citing a source with direct knowledge of the matter.

Cirrus raised HK\$1.5 billion by selling 54.87 million shares, about 15 per cent of its stock. Its cornerstone investors, including a state-owned enterprise restructuring fund, bought HK\$851 million of the offering, according to regulatory filings.

The stock, listed under the code 2507, will trade for the first time tomorrow.

The company was set up four decades ago by the Klapmeier brothers to produce the VK-30 kit aircraft. That model was followed by the four-seat, SR20 and SR22 single-propeller planes, among the bestselling products in the segment in the past 20 years,

according to the General Aviation Manufacturers Association. The SR2X series contributed to more than half of the company's revenue in 2023, Cirrus said.

Its Vision SF50, a US\$7 million single-engine jet plane, is the dominant model for light aircraft and can accommodate seven occupants.

Worldwide delivery of personal aircraft rose by 15 per cent to 2,215 units in 2023, from 2021, helped by the recovery from the pandemic and by consumers' preference for premium travel, Frost & Sullivan said.

The US consultancy shows Cirrus is the leading company in the global private aircraft market. It took over 32 per cent of the market in deliveries and 24.9 per cent in market share.

The company laid off staff and had to struggle to ward off bankruptcy in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, after two decades of success. It was sold in 2011 for US\$210 million to Caiga, a unit of China's state-owned Aviation Industry Corporation.

The Chinese electronic appliances giant Zhuhai Gree Group owns around 5 per cent of Caiga. Cirrus' net profit rose 3.5 per cent last year to US\$91 million while sales jumped by 19.4 per cent, according to its filing to the Hong Kong stock exchange.

ELECTRIC VEHICLES



Prospective customers prepare to test drive a Neta electric car from Hozon at a sales outlet in Nairobi, Kenya. Hozon exported 17,019 electric cars last year. Photo: Xinhua

Hozon plans to use IPO funds for global expansion

Electric-car firm chairman says technology, not price cuts, will grow sales

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Hozon New Energy Automobile, the mainland start-up behind the Neta brand of electric vehicles, which is eyeing an initial public offering in Hong Kong, wants to push ahead with its global plans with forays into Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Fang Yunzhou, founder and chairman of the Shanghai-based carmaker, said Hozon would not resort to price cuts that have gripped the mainland as it moves up the value chain with more intelligent vehicles. "As we sell vehicles to global customers, we are also constantly fine-tuning our service network," he said. "Neta does not rely on pricing advantages to spur deliveries. Instead, we look to grow bigger and stronger by localising our best technologies, products and services in markets worldwide."

He added that the expansion of the company's sales network outside the mainland would follow after the offering. Hozon filed its listing application last month as it joins the fray against local rivals from BYD, the world's largest electric-car builder, to Stellantis-backed start-up Leapmotor, amid cutthroat competition on the mainland and trade barriers set by the US and the European Union. "We will consolidate our foothold in Southeast Asia, try to grab market share in South America and develop businesses in the Middle East and Africa," Fang said. "Hozon will work with local authorities and partners to create ecosystems encompassing R&D, manufacturing, sales and after-sales service around the globe."

Hozon has already started assembling vehicles in Thailand. The firm handed 3,752 electric cars to Thai customers between January and May, trailing only BYD which delivered 7,315 units in the same period, according to Yiche, an online dealer of new and used cars. Hozon exported 17,019 Chinese-made vehicles in 2023,

which represented 13.7 per cent of its total deliveries last year. The average selling price of its cars rose to 113,000 yuan (HK\$121,300) at the end of April from 109,000 yuan in 2023, as the carmaker turned the Neta brand more hi-tech and sophisticated, Fang said.

"Constant product innovation and adjustment of marketing strategies will enable us to chase sustainable, high-quality growth in future." Neta is a variation of the name Nezha, a protection deity in Chinese mythology. The brand falls in the budget category in China and is aimed at middle and low-income drivers who prefer battery-powered vehicles to petrol-driven cars.

Hozon, founded in 2014, has raised 26.4 billion yuan in venture capital funding over 11 rounds from 19 investors, according to data compiled by Crunchbase. Its backers include the mainland cybersecurity firm Qihoo 360 Technology and Citic Securities, the mainland's largest brokerage.

Hozon's loss stood at 6.9 billion yuan last year, narrowing by 40 per cent from a year earlier. Fang did not disclose the targeted size of the offering, but Bloomberg reported it could be in the region of US\$1 billion, which would make it one of the city's top five listings this year.

It is the latest mainland electric-car builder to pursue a Hong Kong listing, following rivals such as Xpeng and Nio. As of June 18, 158 firms had obtained approvals for overseas listings, the China Securities Regulatory Commission's

vice-chairman Fang Xinghai said during the Lujiazui Forum in Shanghai last month. Of these, 85 are headed for Hong Kong and 73 to New York.

China is the world's largest electric vehicle market, where sales of the cars account for 60 per cent of the global total. Since mid-February, prices of nearly all electric and petrol cars have been slashed by mainland carmakers to maintain market share amid a price war.

In May, the White House announced a quadrupling of tariffs on Chinese-made electric cars amid measures to protect American companies from unfair subsidies doled out by Beijing to its firms.

Last Thursday, additional European duties of between 17.4 and 37.6 per cent on Chinese-made electric vehicles provisionally came into effect.

"We will keep our focus on improving profitability," Fang said.

"We will stay away from price competition if the price war escalates. The competition, as I see it, lies in efforts to bring higher value to users."

Constant product innovation and adjustment of marketing strategies will enable us to chase ... high-quality growth

FANG YUNZHOU, CHAIRMAN, HOZON

Love for local brands 'putting foreign rivals at risk'

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International carmakers may be forced to retreat from the mainland market if they fail to catch up with home-grown competitors in developing smart electric vehicles that local consumers crave and can afford, according to a global consultancy. Indigenous electric car brands now enjoyed overwhelming advantages over foreign rivals in production efficiency and technological innovation, which translated to products that provide value for money and were thus set to take the lion's share of the market, AlixPartners said.

"Fast electric vehicle adoption has put international marques in jeopardy," Stephen Dyer, the firm's Greater China co-leader and head of its Asia automotive practice, said yesterday. "The penetration rate will surge to 75 per cent, tipping the balance in favour of Chinese companies."

He did not name any of the international brands that could be forced to exit the world's largest market for cars. Chinese electric-car makers from BYD – the world's largest builder of the cars – to start-ups like Nio and Xpeng dominate the mainland market, where sales of battery-powered cars account for 60 per cent of the global total. At present, four out of every 10 new vehicles sold on the mainland are powered by electricity.

Foreign carmakers such as Volkswagen and General Motors have witnessed huge declines in market share owing to their lack of high-performance electric cars.

Twenty years ago, international carmakers held 80 per cent of the market, according to the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers, as they reaped the benefits of the rising affluence among local consumers.

Their combined share fell to 48 per cent last year, as electric cars built by domestic companies increasingly replaced petrol vehicles on the mainland's roads. Chinese carmakers had a huge cost advantage over overseas competitors in building electric cars, buoyed by their complete supply chains and strong manufacturing heft, Dyer said.

A Chinese-made electric vehicle would cost 35 per cent less to produce than a similar foreign counterpart, he added.

China's electric vehicle sector is expected to see sales growth of 20 per cent this year, compared with 37 per cent in 2023, according to a forecast by Fitch Ratings in November.

But the mainland would maintain its status as the key growth driver for the global electric-vehicle industry, Dyer said. "Time is against international marques," said Chen Jinzhu, chief executive of consultancy Shanghai Mingliang Auto Service.

Shenzhen-based BYD, which stopped making petrol-engined cars in 2022, sold nearly 3 million battery-powered and hybrid electric cars to Chinese buyers last year.

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Buyers check out the latest BYD electric cars at the firm's showroom in Beijing. The company sold nearly 3 million vehicles last year. Photo: EPA

BUSINESS

Fruits of the market

People shop for fruit and vegetables at a supermarket in Handan, Hebei province. China's consumer price index in June rose 0.2 per cent from a year earlier, against a 0.3 per cent increase in May, the slowest in three months, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. Food prices slipped 2.1 per cent year on year, compared with a 2 per cent decline in May. Photo: AFP



EXCLUSIVE

RISING STAR IN CHIP DESIGN ‘TO CUT UP TO HALF ITS WORKERS’

X-Epic, maker of high-end semiconductor tools, is slashing jobs amid market slump, sources say

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A leading Chinese chip design software start-up is slashing as much as half its workforce, casting a shadow over Beijing's efforts to achieve tech self-sufficiency, according to three people familiar with the matter.

X-Epic, established in 2020 to develop electronic design automation (EDA) tools to break the monopoly of United States firms, started cutting jobs this week in different departments, including its core research and development unit, according to sources familiar with the situation who declined to be identified.

The company, which is privately owned, did not immediately respond to a request for comment yesterday.

While it does not disclose details of its operations, PitchBook data showed that it had about 400 employees working in offices in Nanjing, Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu and Shenzhen as of March 2023.

The firm was founded in March 2020 by Wang Libin, a former engineer from US EDA giant Cadence Design Systems. X-Epic, which stands for “acceler-

ating EDA pioneer innovation centre”, had raised US\$121.7 million as of March 2023, according to PitchBook. It counts HongShan (formerly Sequoia Capital China), Matrix Partners China, China Information and Communication Technology Group as investors.

It is a rising star among local EDA firms, and was included on the provincial Nanjing government's list of favoured innovative start-ups in May.

X-Epic and other Chinese EDA firms like Empyrean Technology are working to develop software tools for high-end chip designs, a field long dominated by Cadence, Synopsys and Mentor Graphics – three US companies, although Mentor is now owned by European giant Siemens.

The reliance on imported EDA software and intellectual property

constitutes one of China's biggest vulnerabilities in the semiconductor value chain, along with hardware bottlenecks in the area of lithography machines.

US tech sanctions, imposed over national security concerns, encompass hardware and software aspects of EDA.

Washington first restricted China's access to the technology in August 2022, when it prohibited gate all-around, or GAA-capable, EDA software from being exported to countries including China.

This posed long-term challenges for domestic chip makers in adopting more advanced processes such as the 3-nanometre node, and in the development of high-performance computing or artificial intelligence chips.

However, mastering EDA technology at home has seen slow progress.

The big three foreign vendors together control about 70 per cent of China's EDA market, with Beijing-based Empyrean, the biggest Chinese player, trailing with a 7 per cent market share, according to data from consultancy JW Insights.

Domestic EDA firms saw their business slow in the first quarter amid broader market headwinds after China's semiconductor sales fell 14 per cent last year, the steepest decline among all markets in the world.

Empyrean saw its first-quarter net profits drop 64 per cent year on year to 7.7 million yuan (HK\$8.3 million) due to increased research and development spending, according to the company's financial reports issued in April.

The value of China's EDA market is expected to reach 18.5 billion yuan next year, up from 9.3 billion yuan in 2020, according to the China Semiconductor Industry Association.

TECHNOLOGY

Developers bypass barriers to access OpenAI models

Users turn to third-party services and virtual private networks after US firm tightens curbs

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Developers have continued to find ways to access OpenAI's artificial intelligence (AI) models from the mainland after the Microsoft Corporation-backed start-up further restricted access to the technology behind its popular ChatGPT service.

Seven developers spread across the mainland told the Post yesterday that they were using virtual private networks (VPNs) and third-party services that still had GPT access to continue to use the AI models considered the global industry benchmark.

OpenAI was once aggressive about blocking VPN access by banning internet protocol addresses known to be associated with such services.

OpenAI was still accessible using a Chinese VPN service that advertises ChatGPT access yesterday, the first full day in China that OpenAI had blocked the country from accessing its application programming interface (API), according to tests by the Post.

The developers, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the murky legality of using foreign AI technologies and VPNs on the mainland, were based in cities around the country including Guangzhou, Chengdu and Dalian.

OpenAI did not immediately respond to a request for comment yesterday.

The company announced late last month it would start blocking connections to its API from regions that it does not support starting from July 9. Unsupported regions include those sanctioned by the US – such as Iran, North Korea and Russia – along with China, Hong Kong and Macau.

Other large AI services such as Google's Gemini and Anthropic's Claude have also blocked access

from China and Hong Kong amid geopolitical uncertainties exacerbated by a US-China tech war. Microsoft, however, has maintained access in the region.

Third-party services that still have GPT access such as Microsoft Azure are another means through which developers in China can use GPT models.

While most Chinese services offering this access have been shut down owing to regulatory pressure, Microsoft maintains enterprise access on the mainland and has repeatedly committed to maintaining access to its Copilot AI service in Hong Kong, where it hopes to put AI in every school.

The jury is still out on whether OpenAI can effectively restrict unwanted access to its publicly available services.

One developer explained that using an account linked to a foreign mobile phone number while connected to OpenAI's API through a VPN made it difficult for the company to determine where the connection originated from.

But there are anecdotal signs that it is getting harder to access OpenAI on the mainland, where the use of unapproved VPNs is illegal and publicly available large language models must be licensed.

One developer said that his GPT service provider had disabled some OpenAI services.

Still, most of the developers said the move was unlikely to deal a significant blow to their work as there were now many large language model alternatives from both local and global AI firms.

Many of the developers said that they were coming up with backup plans, such as migrating to Anthropic, whose latest Claude Sonnet 3.5 has received wide acclaim for its capabilities relative to the latest GPT-4 models. However, Anthropic also restricts API access in China, according to tests by the Post.



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THE INFORMER

EVENTS

Wednesday, September 11: Belt and Road Summit (until September 12).

Thursday, September 12: ReThink HK – Sustainable Business Forum & Solutions Expo (until September 13), Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre.

RESULTS

Today 3rd Quarter: Fast Retailing

Tomorrow AGM: China Ting Group Holdings

July 15 Final: Century Energy International Holdings
AGM: Le Saunda Holdings

July 18 AGM: Lenovo Group, Mobile Internet (China) Holdings

July 19 AGM: Topsports International Holdings

July 22 AGM: Jiu Rong Holdings

July 24 Final: Wanka Online Inc.
AGM: Chow Tai Fook Jewellery Group, VTech Holdings

July 25 AGM: Chi Ho Development Holdings, China New Consumption Group

July 26 AGM: Oriental Payment Group Holdings, Shentong Robot Education Group

July 29 AGM: Novacon Technology Group

July 30 Interim: Hang Lung Group, Hang Lung Properties
AGM: Grand Talents Group

July 31 Interim: HUTCHMED (China)
Final: Oi Wah Pawnshop Credit Holdings, QPL International Holdings, Vongroup, Wisdom Wealth Resources Investment Holding Group
AGM: Echo International Holdings Group, Shi Shi Services, Willas-Array Electronics (Holdings)

August 1 AGM: Hong Kong Economic Times Holdings, Taste-Gourmet Group

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E-COMMERCE



Alibaba.com will feature NBA star Tony Parker in advertisements across Paris during the 2024 Summer Olympics. Photo: Handout

Alibaba.com signs NBA legend ahead of Olympics

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Alibaba.com, a cross-border business-to-business e-commerce platform owned by Alibaba Group Holding, has signed French-American basketball star Tony Parker as its new brand ambassador ahead of the Paris Olympics, as the Chinese technology giant focuses more attention on the European market.

Advertisements featuring the four-time NBA championship winner will appear across the French capital at airports, train and metro stations, as well as on the famed Champs-Elysees, according to a WeChat post published by Alibaba.com on Tuesday evening. Alibaba owns the Post.

Parker "can use his proven experience to attract more overseas entrepreneurs and start-ups to buy from Alibaba.com", the post read, referring to him as a "successful basketball player-turned-entrepreneur".

"Coupled with the sports boom in an Olympic year, the partnership will provide small and medium-sized enterprises in China with huge opportunities to expand to overseas markets."

The latest marketing move by Alibaba.com reflects widening efforts by the Hangzhou-based online shopping juggernaut to grow its international business amid tepid demand at home.

Europe is one of Alibaba's key targets. The company currently offers five-day online-shopping

delivery in Germany, France and Portugal, in addition to the United States, Mexico and Saudi Arabia, supported by Alibaba's smart logistics network Cainiao.

The Summer Olympics, which will take place from July 26 to August 11, are expected to draw about 10,500 athletes and between 2.3 million and 3.1 million ticket-holding visitors, according to the International Olympic Committee and the Paris Tourism Office.

To lure more European users, Alibaba.com has planned a special sales campaign covering more than 15,000 merchants and over a million products ahead of the Games, according to Chinese media reports last week.

Alibaba.com's partnership with Parker comes weeks after its consumer-facing sibling AliExpress announced it had signed English football star David Beckham as its global brand ambassador.

Alibaba.com was launched in 1999 as an online directory to help overseas wholesalers find Chinese manufacturers.

Today, the site is primarily used for supporting online transactions between Chinese suppliers and foreign businesses.

It is expected to achieve US\$60 billion in gross merchandise value this year, a 20 per cent increase from US\$50 billion last year, Alibaba.com president Zhang Kuo told the Post in June.

The platform has recorded a sevenfold jump in gross merchandise volume over the previous five years.



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BUSINESS

ByteDance, Alibaba, SenseTime lead AI drive

Three firms combined held 50% share of the market in second half of 2023, report finds

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TikTok owner ByteDance, e-commerce giant Alibaba Group Holding and artificial intelligence (AI) specialist SenseTime are the top generative AI (GenAI) infrastructure services providers in China, according to market research firm IDC.

The three companies combined had a more than 50 per cent share of the market in the second half of 2023, according to a report on Tuesday by IDC, without offering each firm's exact share. Alibaba owns the Post.

They lease software, computing power, storage and networking resources for enterprises to build applications using large language models, the technology underpinning GenAI services like ChatGPT.

GenAI refers to algorithms that can be used to create new content – including audio, code, images, text, simulations and videos – in response to short prompts.

¥11.4b

The entire intelligent computing market in China is worth this much after growing nearly 86 per cent, the IDC report says

The IDC data reflects how mainland China has swiftly become a world leader in GenAI adoption since OpenAI released ChatGPT in November 2022, which sparked an investment frenzy and soul searching on the mainland's technology industry.

According to a survey of 1,600 decision-makers in industries worldwide by American AI and analytics software company SAS and Coleman Parkes Research, 83 per cent of Chinese respondents said that they used GenAI.

That was higher than the 16 other countries and regions in the survey, including the United States, where 65 per cent of respondents said they had adopted GenAI. The global average was 54 per cent.

The entire intelligent computing market in China, which covers GenAI and non-GenAI market segments, has seen larger contributions from GenAI applications, according to the IDC report.

It said this market grew nearly 86 per cent to reach 11.4 billion yuan (HK\$12.2 billion), with GenAI infrastructure services providers contributing nearly 60 per cent of that growth.

RENEWABLE ENERGY



A solar power station in Ningxia Hui autonomous region. China's photovoltaic industry is struggling with overcapacity. Photo: Xinhua

BEIJING MOVES TO CURB SOLAR SECTOR EXPANSION

Ministry seeks public feedback on rules issued to strengthen photovoltaic industry, including requiring minimum capital ratios of 30% for projects

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The central government has drafted rules aimed at controlling the expansion of the country's solar industry, as the sector struggles with excess capacity after a collapse in global prices.

The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) is soliciting feedback from the public on rules that require minimum capital ratios for both new and expansion projects of 30 per cent. Earlier, that floor was applied to polysilicon manufacturing projects, while the minimum for other projects producing wafer, cell, and modules was 20 per cent. The draft will be open for comments until July 15.

MIIT also ordered solar com-

panies to spend a minimum of 10 million yuan (HK\$10.7 million), or 3 per cent of total sales whichever is higher, on research and development and product improvement.

The annual output of solar manufacturing projects should also be at least 50 per cent of their annual production capacity, according to the draft regulations.

The rules were issued to "strengthen the management of the photovoltaic industry, guide the industry to accelerate upgrading and structural adjustment, and promote the photovoltaic industry's high-quality development", MIIT said.

The ministry said the country's solar companies should refrain from establishing new photovoltaic manufacturing projects simply for the sake of expanding

production capacity, and should instead focus on strengthening technological innovation, improving product quality and cutting production costs.

Chinese solar manufacturers, who control over 80 per cent of the global supply chain, are experiencing a major shakeout as production outstrips demand worldwide. This has forced smaller manufacturers out of the market with even major players struggling to break even, triggering calls by industry executives for government intervention to solve the demand-supply mismatch.

The draft document is designed as a solution to "constrain the chaotic pricing system and sustained losses caused by disorderly expansion and price wars" in the solar sector, said Lu

Rixin, an analyst at Orient Securities, in a report yesterday.

Shares of major solar manufacturers surged yesterday following the release of the draft rules.

The top manufacturer, Longi, saw its share price jump by as much 6 per cent to 13.74 yuan. The gains came despite the Shanghai-listed company saying in a preliminary filing on Tuesday that it expected a net loss of 4.8 billion to 5.5 billion yuan in the first half of 2024, a huge fall from the 9.2 billion yuan net profit in the same period in 2023. It blamed the "mismatch" between overall supply and demand in the solar sector for the reversal.

Another leading player, TCL Zhonghuan, saw a surge of as much as 7 per cent in its share price yesterday. The Shenzhen-listed company said it expected a net loss of 2.9 billion to 3.2 billion yuan in the first six months of this year, compared to a 4.5 billion yuan net profit in the same period last year.

TECHNOLOGY

Microsoft defends China iPhone push, cites security risks

Switch to iOS devices for employees triggers uproar among internet users, who question firm's intent

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Microsoft Corporation has defended its request for all mainland-based employees to use iPhones at work, saying it was necessary owing to the absence of Google's Android services there, after the decision triggered speculation over the company's intent.

As part of its global cybersecurity initiative to fend off worldwide hackers, the US tech giant has started requiring all employees on the mainland to verify their identities through the Microsoft Authenticator password manager and Identity Pass apps, available on Apple's App Store and Google Play only.

Microsoft planned to offer Apple's iOS devices to employees so they could access those apps because of the "lack of availability of Google Mobile Services in this region", a company representative said.

Google Mobile Services – a collection of Google apps and other tools, such as Play, Search, YouTube and Gmail – are blocked on the mainland.

Microsoft employees in the country currently using Android handsets will be given an iPhone 15, according to Bloomberg, which first reported the news on Monday.

The move by Microsoft shows the challenges faced by multinational companies when operating in a global technology sphere divided between US and Chinese systems.

Google pulled its search engine out of the mainland in 2010 after it refused to follow domestic censorship regulations. Since then, users of Android devices in the country cannot access the majority of Google

services, relying instead on domestic alternatives, including app stores run by local companies.

Microsoft, on the other hand, has been operating in the country since 1992, providing access to its 365 Office suite, search engine Bing and Azure cloud computing services, while adapting to Beijing's growing regulatory demand over data security, as well as intensifying competition with local rivals.

At home, Microsoft is contending with growing political scrutiny amid rising US-China tensions.

Microsoft president Brad Smith was questioned by American lawmakers last month over how the company could safeguard US national security while still involved in China's tech development.

The executive said China had accounted for just 1.5 per cent of Microsoft's global revenue, and confirmed the company was offering 700 to 800 mainland-based employees working on artificial intelligence to relocate to other markets.

While Microsoft maintained that its switch to iOS devices was based on practical reasons, it still caused an uproar among patriotic Chinese social media users who favour local brands.

A Weibo post describing Microsoft's new rules has drawn 27,000 comments, with one user commenting that the company had set a precedent for foreign companies to ban the internal use of Chinese Android smartphones.

Another user questioned Microsoft's decision, suggesting that the company should consider HarmonyOS, an Android alternative developed by Huawei Technologies.

TECHNOLOGY

Apple ads use humour to trumpet iPhone privacy protection



Adverts featuring comedian Yue Yunpeng went viral on Weibo.

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Apple is using humour to trumpet the privacy and security functions of its iPhones in its latest advertising campaign targeting Chinese consumers, at a time when personal data leaks on Android phones have become a concern on the mainland.

Apple has published video skits featuring well-known comedian Yue Yunpeng, in which an Apple employee introduces him to privacy features including face ID and private browsing on Safari.

In one of the videos, Yue, wearing a black Chinese robe, forgets his password during a crosstalk performance. An Apple employee in the audience advises him to use the iPhone's automatically generated password that is protected by face ID.

In another video, the Apple staff introduces Yue to Safari's private browsing feature that can stop websites tracking or identifying users, as the comic wears a disguise over fears of being snooped on.

The videos went viral on social media, as people expressed surprise at the collaboration between

the US tech giant and a grassroots comedian, but praised the creativity of the videos.

They quickly became the top trending topic on microblogging platform Weibo, attracting over 110 million views and 21,000 discussions as of yesterday.

The campaign comes as Apple reiterates its commitment to privacy on the mainland, where consumers are increasingly wary of data security issues and regulators tighten scrutiny of how businesses are handling user data.

This is not Apple's first attempt to appeal to Chinese consumers' concerns over data privacy. In

May last year, the company launched a one-minute video featuring Hong Kong martial arts star Donnie Yen Ji-dan, who delivered kicks and punches when anyone invaded the privacy of iPhone users.

However, Apple has faced doubts about its privacy protection. Some mainland iPhone users reportedly received smut spam via iMessage, which the public security authority in the city of Hangzhou attributed to iCloud account leaks, according to a local report in 2023.

On the mainland, Apple has ceded legal ownership of its

customer data to Guizhou-Cloud Big Data, a company owned by the provincial government.

Apple had the largest smartphone market share on the mainland in the fourth quarter last year but has slipped to third behind Vivo and Honor after a 19.1 per cent fall in sales, market research firm Counterpoint has said.

The company has been defending its position by offering steep discounts on iPhones, a move which helped boost sales by 2.7 per cent during the 618 online shopping festival, Counterpoint data showed.

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The undersigned have received instructions from the Registrar, High Court HK SAR, to sell by Public Auction at 11:00am on Thursday, the 11th July, 2024, at the Sales Room at Rm 1A, 10/F, Summit Bldg., 30 Man Yue St, Hunghom, Kln, HK, under EXECUTION NO.HCMP 2373 OF 2023:- The goods and chattels seized at Flat B6 including Balcony on 8th Floor, Atrium House (瑤園), No.99 Shap Pat Heung Road, Yuen Long, New Territories (TONG TAU TAU (唐豆豆)) (Nature of Goods – Domestic furniture and electrical appliances)

All members of the public are welcome to attend the public auction, and any interested parties can contact our office by telephone to arrange for an inspection of the distressed properties and for details of terms and conditions. [This auction can be cancelled before hammer down without prior notice.]

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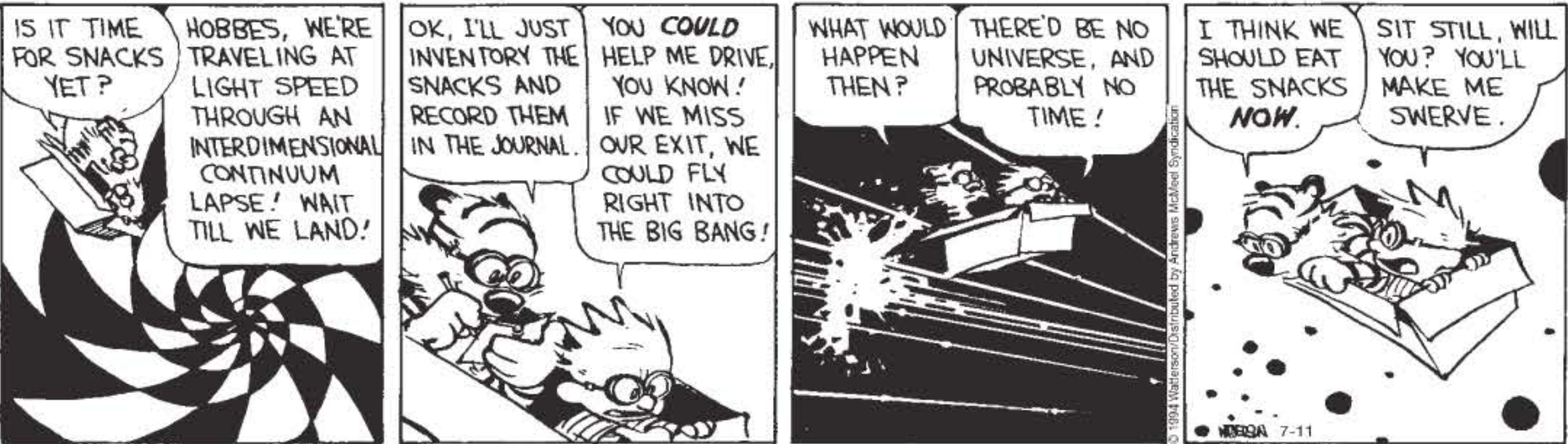
“To inform and inspire the global business community.”



DIVERSIONS

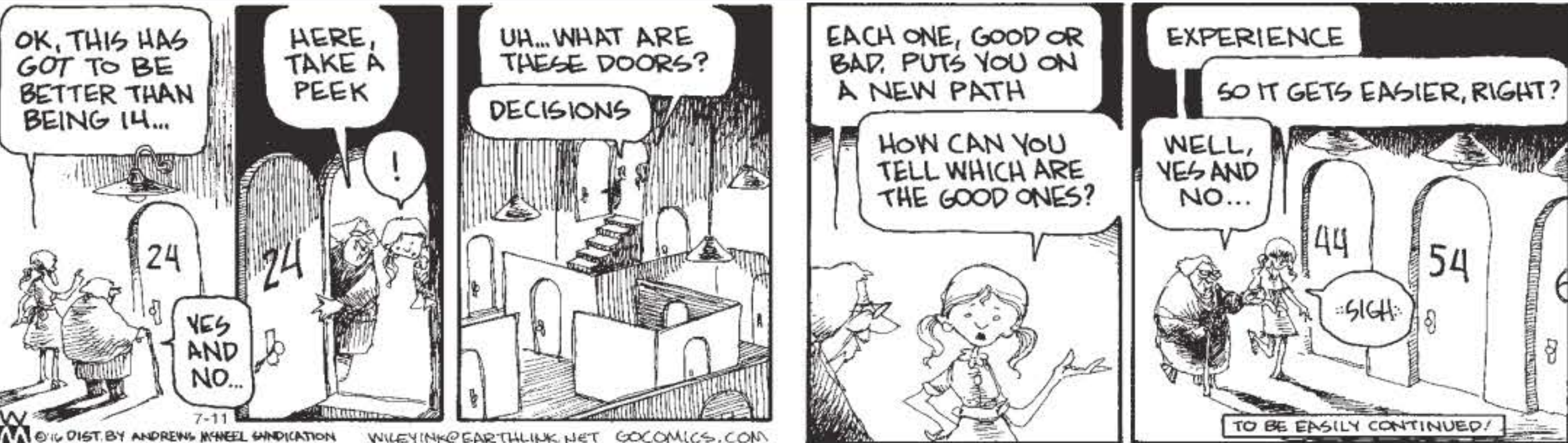
The Best of Calvin and Hobbes

by Bill Watterson



Non-Sequitur

by Wiley Miller



Doonesbury Flashback

by Garry Trudeau



Pooch Cafe

by Paul Gilligan



Bridge

South dealer. North-South vulnerable.

NORTH
♠ J 9 5 3
♥ K J 2
♦ K 10
♣ Q J 7 4

WEST
♠ 7
♥ 9 7 6
♦ J 8 7 5 2
♣ 9 6 3 2

EAST
♠ 8 4
♥ Q 10 4 3
♦ Q 6 4
♣ A K 8 5

SOUTH
♠ A K Q 10 6 2
♥ A 8 5
♦ A 9 3
♣ 10

The bidding:
South 1♠ West Pass North 3♠ East Pass

Opening lead: two of clubs.
There is a lot of room for deception in bridge, as anyone who has been victimised by a cunning play can readily testify. For example, consider East's performance in this deal where he was defending against six spades. West led a club, won by East with the ace after declarer played low from dummy. East thereupon returned the five of clubs!

Had South known that East had the king also, he could have made the slam then and there by discarding a heart on the return. But, lacking X-ray vision, South ruffed the club and staked his hopes on a heart finesse. He naturally assumed from East's plays to the first two tricks that West had the king of clubs, in which case a heart finesse offered by far the best chance for the contract. When South attempted the finesse later on, dummy's jack lost to the queen and he went down one.

East's more normal play on the opening lead would have been to win the trick with the king. But this would have given the show away because, for practical purposes, it would have marked him with the ace. Declarer would sooner or later have been able to trap the ace by leading dummy's queen through East to establish a parking place for his heart loser.

Even though South might have allowed for the possibility that East had the king of clubs and was false-carding when he took the ace, East's daring low-club return at trick two was the clincher. After this, there was almost no way South could go right.

East was on relatively safe ground when he returned a low club at trick two, because he knew from the deuce-of-clubs lead that West either had four clubs or one.

Steve Becker

ONLINE

For details about local bridge events, go to the HK Contract Bridge Association website hkcb.org

Sudoku

					1		2	8
		8	6	9				
		4		3			5	
	2			7	5			4
4			8	2			6	
	3			1		8		
				6	7	2		
7	5		9					

Complete the grid so that each row, column and 3x3 box contains every digit from 1 to 9, inclusive.

Difficulty: 5/5

Yesterday's solution:

9	1	8	2	6	4	3	5	7
7	6	4	8	5	3	1	9	2
3	5	2	9	7	1	6	8	4
8	4	3	7	1	9	5	2	6
2	7	5	4	8	6	9	1	3
1	9	6	3	2	5	7	4	8
4	8	9	1	3	7	2	6	5
5	3	1	6	4	2	8	7	9
6	2	7	5	9	8	4	3	1

Kokonotsu Supersudoku

4								7
	6			2	8	1		4
				4		9		
	1	9				5	3	
	2						7	
	4	6				2	1	
				7	4			
	3			1	2	5		9
9								2

Complete the grid so that each row, column and the two centre diagonal lines contain every digit from 1 to 9, inclusive.

Difficulty: 1/5

Yesterday's solution:

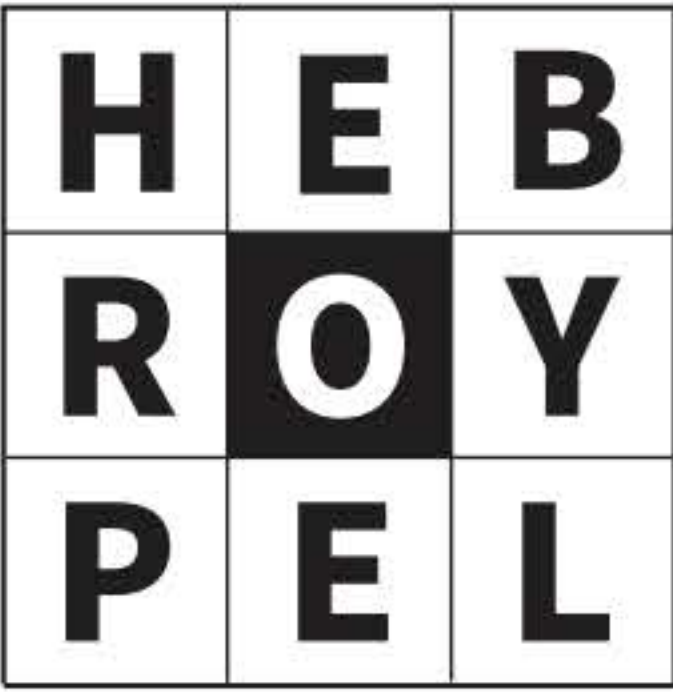
6	2	5	9	7	3	8	4	1
7	9	8	2	4	1	6	5	3
1	3	4	8	6	5	7	9	2
8	5	7	3	1	4	9	2	6
9	6	3	5	2	8	1	7	4
4	1	2	6	9	7	3	8	5
2	4	9	1	8	6	5	3	7
5	8	6	7	3	2	4	1	9
3	7	1	4	5	9	2	6	8

Target

How many words of four letters or more can you make from the letters shown here? In making a word, each letter may be used once only. Each must contain the centre letter and there must be at least one nine-letter word. No plurals ending with 's'. Reference: Collins Concise English Dictionary

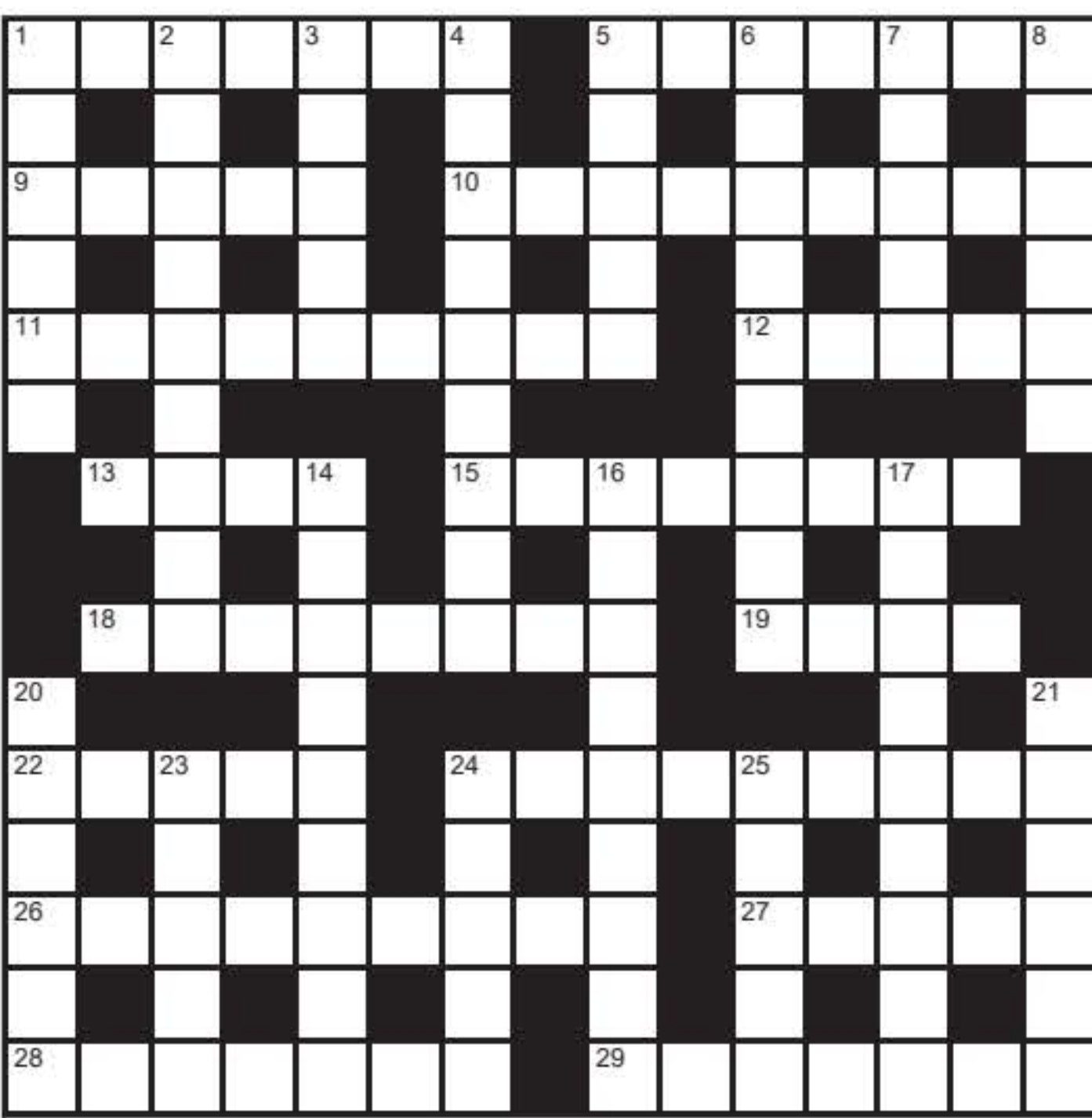
Today's target: 12 words good; 18 words very good; 25 words excellent.

See solution tomorrow.



Yesterday's solution: bent, bite, bone, bootie, cent, cite, cone, inject, jibe, nice, note, notice, object, OBJECTION, objet, oboe, once, time, tone

Daily Crossword



Across

- Elf collapsed by the money box and was sick (4,3)
- The lass could be bare-headed (7)
- Steer clear of a vacuum (5)
- Not a new teacher, but costs a lot to obtain nowadays (3,6)
- They may click at dances (9)
- Throw out mixed peel about ten (5)
- String orchestra? (4)
- Putting up with ancient city, in conclusion (8)
- Peculiar remedy (8)
- Engrave some sketches (4)
- Kind of column featured in the edition I consult (5)
- Popular government production of funny comedy about over-turned car (9)
- Did he present a crazy threat to Alice? (3,6)
- From Megan I take this name (5)
- Left one's seat, flushed and blushing! (4-3)

- Take no notice of Glen, etc. (7)

Down

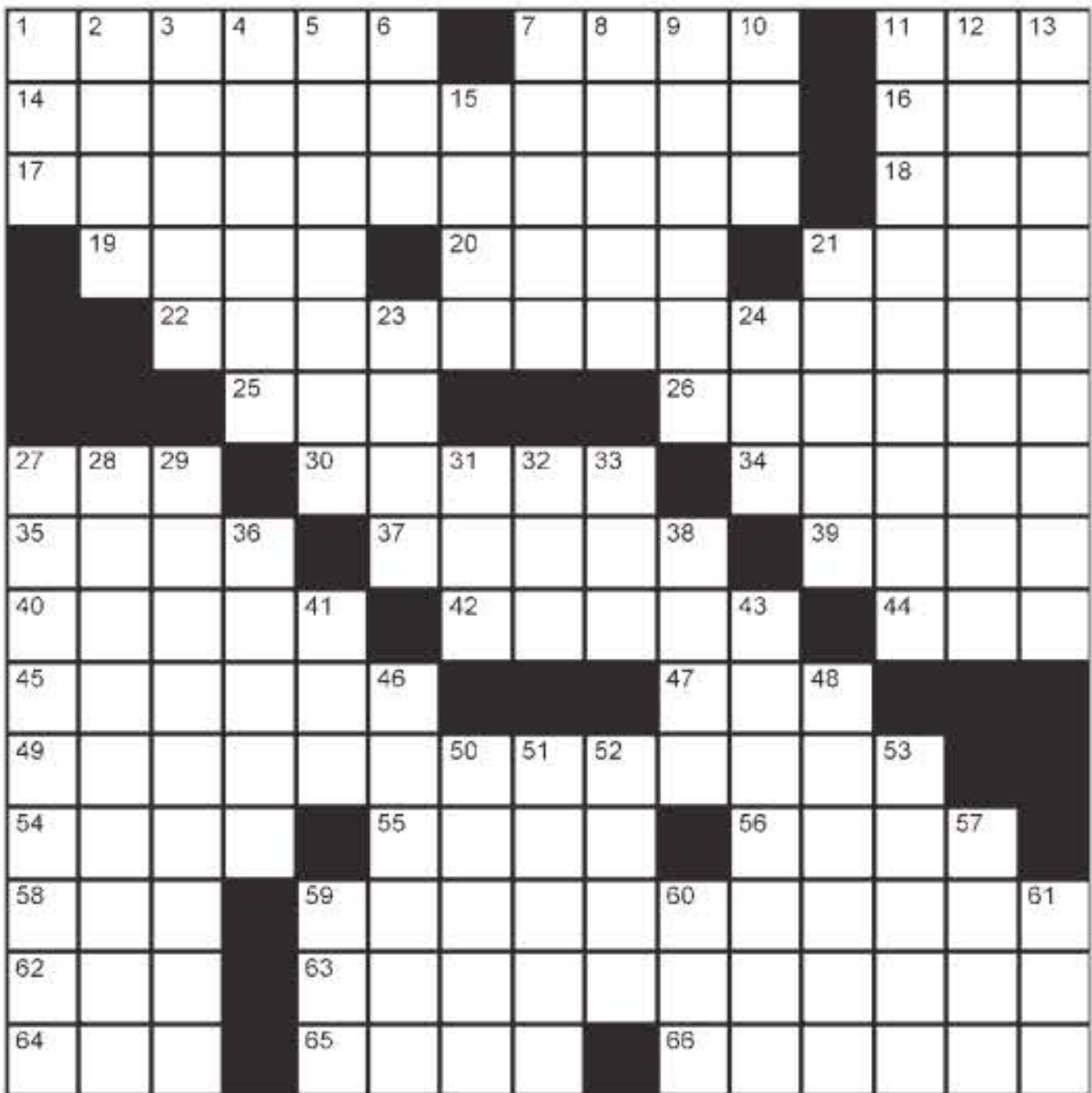
- One who has fallen in love is revealed by a change in face (6)
- Be quick to appear intelligent (4,5)
- Country may take the rubber (5)
- This kind of book isn't bound to be used (5-4)
- Doesn't reveal the sources of leather (5)
- Not altogether how an undergraduate works (2,1,6)
- Legally prevent poets being translated (5)
- Parchment needed for South Carolina register (6)
- It may be adjusted for the rest of the holiday (9)
- Boccaccio's collected tales of French romance, maybe (9)
- Fruit is nice, neat, and served up about right (9)
- Less intelligent switch? (6)
- The autocrat in the party ran things his way (6)

- Artist's models who barely earned a living? (5)
- Old-fashioned father doesn't keep teen inside completely (5)
- Sound as a bell (5)

Yesterday's solution:



Universal Crossword



Across

- Like the sound of a trumpet
- Gaping mouths
- Admit (to)
- Birds in a Christmas carol
- French affirmative
- "Seems like you and I have crossed paths for a second time"
- Everest or Denali: Abbr.
- Like one's hands after a long written exam, maybe
- Organ inside a cage
- Classroom fixture
- Shopping in order to lift one's spirits
- Ref. book whose 2023 word of the year was "rizz"
- Popeye, for one
- In favour of
- Covered stadiums
- Energy-healing discipline
- Fictional captain of the Pequod
- "Tell me!"
- Reindeer in "Frozen"
- Apple product?
- Point of connection
- HS class with essay assignments
- Submitted taxes online
- School ____
- Baby garment that provides (nearly) full coverage

- Storylines' shapes
- Living room fixture
- Preschool basics
- Film FX in "Jurassic Park"
- They're twisted in some drinks
- Wee one
- Chart that might have a big "X" on it
- Messy room
- For fear that
- Elapse

Down

- Texter's "I wanted to mention ..."
- Regrets
- Knight's protective gear (US)
- Sound system
- Came down as freezing rain
- Ghost of Christmas ____ to Come (Dickens character)
- Tycoon
- ____-garde
- Evaluates, as options
- Tax ID
- Fill up with excitement and energy
- Vocal
- Small digital loop?
- Surrealist painter Salvador
- Towels off
- Commotions
- Place for an AirPods
- Accept the truth
- "Oops, slipped my mind ..."

- Big Apple entertainment venue nicknamed the "Showplace of the Nation," informally "Jeez!"
- Cyclops feature
- Musical about the many wives of Henry VIII
- Alternatives to suspenders
- Baritone's larger cousin
- Outdoor gear retailer
- Indonesian island known for coffee
- Strong urge
- Buffalo hockey team
- Fishing rods, e.g.
- G-sharp equivalent
- Some blue birds
- Con jobs
- DNA sample collector
- Cardinals, on a scoreboard
- "Yo"
- Intel collector

Yesterday's solution:



There are a thousand billion bacteria in one gram of stool, 125 times as many as there are people on the planet. It's unbelievable when you think about what lives inside you

MEDICAL MICROBIOLOGIST ADRIAN EGLI FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH > HEALTH B11

LIFE

TRAVEL



Crew members aboard a Bajau boat in Indonesia's East Kalimantan province. Photos: Oliver Raw, Getty Images

An inspiring voyage

One hundred years after Joseph Conrad's death, we retrace the Polish-British novelist's journey on the Berau River in Indonesian Borneo that features in several of his works

Oliver Raw
life@scmp.com

Our incredibly loud, incredibly slow, diesel-powered wooden boat grinds up the wide river. On either side, nipa palms rise 10 metres high, forming an unbroken wall of green. Far ahead, lightning flickers within a cloud as the afternoon light starts to fail.

We are a four-man crew. Well, technically, there are three crew members – Bajau men from islands off the coast – and me, hitching a ride. Our destination is the town of Berau – pronounced “Brow” – 60km up this river in Indonesian Borneo, where the boat is to be loaded with supplies to take back to its island home.

A speedboat would make the journey in less than an hour, yet there is a reason for this folly. I am retracing, in part, a voyage Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad made nearly 140 years ago.

Conrad – who died a century ago this summer – is best remembered as the author of *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the Congo-set novella that became the basis for the movie *Apocalypse Now*. Yet half of everything he wrote is set in the equatorial regions of Asia, including several novels inspired by this very river.

Before he was Conrad the writer, he was Konrad the sailor, a merchant seaman, not yet 30, who spoke English, his third language,

with a thick accent. (Born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, he grew up in northern Ukraine as a subject of the Russian tsar.)

He would undertake this journey on four separate occasions in 1887 and 1888 as first mate of the SS Vidar – a trip that, from Singapore, took several months there and back. After 10 hours on this noisy, juddering work boat, in blazing sunlight and intense heat, I have a new-found respect for men of this profession.

Half of everything [Conrad] wrote is set in the equatorial regions of Asia, including ... novels inspired by this river

The estuary begins to narrow as we approach Lingard's Crossing, as it is called on old navigation maps. The passage was first charted by a British merchant adventurer, William Lingard, in the mid-19th century. Lingard was the first European to trade on the Berau River, mostly in rattan, gum resin and gutta-percha, a natural latex derived from sap.

Conrad never met Lingard, yet he was sufficiently familiar with his legend – the Malays called him Rajah Laut, “King of the Sea” – that he would make the Briton the overarching figure in a trilogy of

novels. In Conrad's work, William Lingard becomes Tom Lingard, captain of *The Flash*, the fastest brig in the East and the man who would claim this river as his own.

Because of strong currents Widarto, the captain of our boat – a chain-smoker and man of few words – is forced to dock. It is after midnight when we set off again, 18 hours since our voyage began.

As we round a bend in the river, I make out lights twinkling against the silhouette of low-slung hills, and the town of Berau drifts into view, as it had for Conrad long ago, and with equal slowness.

Officially known as Tanjung Redeb – and called Sambir in the novels – the town is on a promontory where the Segai and Kelay rivers come together to form the Berau River. It was a small trading post in Conrad's day but now serves as the capital of the Berau Regency, in Indonesia's East Kalimantan province.

Home to 70,000 mostly Malay, Javanese and Bugis people, it is best known for its open-pit coal-mining industry, which produces 35 million tonnes of coal a year. As I amble along the Segai waterfront that afternoon, huge barges shift pyramids of coal downriver to be exported overseas, mainly to China.

The town's other main product, to judge by the sound of recorded swallow calls blasted from rooftops, are birds' nests – something else the Chinese cannot go without.

It was while unloading cargo at this riverside that Conrad first met Charles Olmeijer (1828-1900), a Dutchman and William Lingard's trading representative in Berau. Conrad would later write about this encounter in a memoir, describing Olmeijer as “clad ... in flapping pyjamas of crettonne pattern ... and a thin cotton singlet”.

Unimpressive as Olmeijer may have appeared, Conrad would make him the protagonist of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1895), written while he was still at sea, and published when he was 38.

“If I had not got to know Almayer [Olmeijer] pretty well,” Conrad would write in a memoir, “it is almost certain there would never have been a line of mine in print.”

Somewhere along this riverside, among the stores selling fishing tackle and motorboat engines, Olmeijer had his home, and the area is where the fictional Almayer nurtured dreams of finding gold to escape his poverty.

Here, too, was the warehouse of the fictional Lingard & Co, already disintegrating as the novel begins, after another of Tom Lingard's agents, Peter Willems – the focus of a prequel novel, *An Outcast of the Islands* – betrays his employer and ruins his business by revealing the secret passage up the river. (The third novel of the trilogy, *The Rescue*, concerns Tom Lingard's backstory before his arrival in Sambir.)

I spot a few ramshackle wooden structures, but none dating back, I think, to Conrad's time. I have better luck in the opposite direction, passing workmen unloading sacks of rice with a quayside clamour that would have been familiar to Conrad.

Further along, past the food carts selling bakso (meatballs) and *mie ayam* (noodles with diced chicken), I come upon several Bugis schooners. Although equipped with engines, their rigging and wooden hulls make them appear as if they belong in the age of sail.

On his visits to Berau, Conrad would have crossed paths with another of Lingard's business representatives, his nephew. A tall and youthful Englishman, Jim Lingard would be the first European to permanently settle on the river (Olmeijer, a Eurasian, was born in Surabaya in Java).

Given the honorific of *tuán* (lord) by the Malays, he would serve as the prototype for Conrad's most sympathetic creation, the eponymous hero of the English classic *Lord Jim* (1900).

Lord Jim is the tale of a British



Joseph Conrad (above, right) on board a ship; a house on the banks of the Berau River.



Conrad would undertake this journey on four separate occasions in 1887 and 1888 as first mate of the SS Vidar

seaman with “blue boyish eyes” and “capable shoulders” who, in a moment of weakness, abandons his ship after it hits a reef.

Stripped of his sailing papers and spurned by his peers, Jim eventually finds redemption as the talismanic protector of Sulawesi settlers in the fictional remote trading post of Patusan, one of the “lost, forgotten, unknown places on earth”.

These days, Berau does not feel so forgotten, with an airport and a road connection to Indonesia's new capital, Nusantara, once it is built.

On the opposite bank of the Segai River is the village of Gunung Tabor, which feels closer to the spirit of Patusan. With its tin-roofed wooden houses flanking the river, and the local sultan's yellow palace, or keraton, it has the air of a mini-fiefdom over which Jim might once have ruled.

In the novel, Patusan is divided into two seats of power: that of the corrupt Rajah Allang, and that of Doramin, the Bugis headman, Jim's ally. In Conrad's time, Berau functioned as a split sultanate: following a power struggle in 1810, one branch of the royal family ruled from Gunung Tabor and the other from across the Kelay River, in the town of Sambuliang.

The same split exists today, but the role of sultan is now purely ceremonial, for Indonesia has been a republic since 1950.

At the Gunung Tabor palace, among the display cases of Qing vases and ornate krises (daggers), are a pair of bronze cannons. I'm reminded of the “rusty seven-pounders” Jim used to chase out the chief's enemies, thus winning the confidence of the people of the river, and earning the distinction of *tuán*.

Over at the Sambuliang palace, or at a building like it, the Rajah of Sambir, along with the despised Willems, conspired to force Tom Lingard out of business. It would be a Singapore-based Arab trader, with his line of steamers, that would supplant Tom Lingard on the river.

As in fiction, so in life: Conrad's employer was also an Arab businessman based in Singapore. (His descendants, the Al Jufrie clan, still operate in Berau.)

Having lost its monopoly, Lingard & Co went bust. Tom Lingard, his beloved brig lost at sea, would squander the last of the profits searching for gold upriver.

Almayer, his dreams of a wealthy retirement dashed, would succumb to opium. Young Jim, meanwhile, having salvaged his pride, would also come to a sticky end, betrayed once more by his wavering resolve.

Their real-life counterparts would go on to live more contented lives, and would now be forgotten had it not been for Conrad's fateful arrival at this remote trading post.

Aside from the two palaces, there is little else to see, whether as a tourist or a literary pilgrim, and I spend the rest of my afternoon strolling on the Segai waterfront.

The esplanade is busy with young people drinking coffee or juice, the golden light filled with mosque calls and swallow cries.

The Bugis schooners are still docked and giant coal barges continue down the muddy river. Between them, perhaps, is the ghost of the Vidar, Conrad's boat, leaving with rattan and resin, and enough material to fill several novels.



FILM & ENTERTAINMENT



A still from the AI-generated feature-length Japanese animation *Who Said Death is Beautiful?* Photos: Rain Trail Pictures, BiFan, Handouts

Artificial intelligence looms large at festival

BiFan is staging the first competition in South Korea for AI-generated short films, as experts debate its impact on content creation and on the future of the film industry

Pierce Conran
life@scmp.com

"This is the worst that AI will ever be." A catchphrase in the exploding artificial intelligence space, this captures the sentiment that today's AI programmes will pale in comparison with anything that will be here tomorrow.

Applications for AI are being pioneered in just about every industry under the sun on what seems like a daily basis, but among today's most visible examples is AI-generated content.

Provided with simple or complex prompts by users, programs like Midjourney can create surprising and intricate images. The AI model Sora, developed by ChatGPT creator OpenAI and not yet available to the public, goes even further, creating fluid video content in expansive and photorealistic worlds.

Social media channels are now flooded with AI-generated imagery and video content, and it is continually improving. Naturally, it is a small step from there to AI-powered feature film production.



Filmmaking will cease to be a battle of cash, it will only be one of creative challenges

SHIN CHUL, BIFAN FESTIVAL DIRECTOR

The first Korean film festival to acknowledge this is the Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival (BiFan), which this summer is staging the country's first AI film competition during its 28th edition.

Seeing the writing on the wall, BiFan has gone all in on AI this year. In addition to its new AI short-film competition, the festival is screening the AI-generated feature-length Japanese animation *Who Said Death is Beautiful?* and staging a three-day AI



Festival director Shin Chul.

International Conference with experts on artificial intelligence from around the world.

But the festival is not only screening AI content and investigating its dangers and potential – it is also developing its own.

It held a 48-hour AI Workshop during which participants learned from mentors and had access to premium AI tools to make their own films. One of those, the short film EGG, premiered during the opening ceremony of BiFan+, the festival's entertainment- industry programme.

In addition, BiFan commissioned an AI-generated "Identity Film", which serves as the trailer for this year's festival. Against a backdrop composed of a dizzying collection of AI-generated moving images, the film asks "AI, who are you?", and gives the response: "I'm just your mirror."

While many companies and innovators in the content creation industry in Korea and elsewhere welcome BiFan's seeming embrace of AI, there are those that are more cautious, and many that still reject it outright; the latter cite concerns ranging from job security and copyright infringement to content quality.

It is the idea of AI being a mirror for those who use it that is key to understanding why BiFan has so swiftly hopped aboard the AI train.

Long before the advent of AI, content creation had been shifting from a producer-centric model to a user-centric one. As users we have more control over the digital products we use than ever before, whether that means uploading content on social media channels or publishing books on Amazon.

AI is expected to greatly accelerate this shift, since it is designed to be intuitive. Used correctly, it could be a tool that enables a creator to achieve or expand on their vision with greatly reduced resources.

In his remarks at the BiFan+ opening, festival director Shin Chul was bullish about AI's potential to enfranchise creators and

democratise an industry dominated by those in control of the purse strings.

In his days as a film producer he realised early on that he had two choices: "Do I stand in line to get money, or do people stand in line to get money from me?"

He believes AI will change this rigid industrial binary "because now there's a completely new way of making movies".

"Filmmaking will cease to be a battle of cash, it will only be one of creative challenges," Shin says.

This is an admirable position to take, one that banks on the creative potential that AI could unleash. But even if we put aside ethical and legal concerns, it is still not clear to what degree these tools will enable creators to achieve their visions.

Today's AI-generated content, while undeniably novel and impressive, is still rudimentary, and it is hard to say that it accurately reflects the intentions of the people plugging in the prompts.

AI pushes aggressively in its own direction, borrowing liberally from all the conventionally generated content that has come before it. How pronounced is the human element? Are these AI tools truly a mirror?

One of the keynote speakers at the AI International Conference was Sten-Kristian Saluveer, the founder and CEO of Storytek, a content and media technology incubator, and the head of programming at Cannes Next, an innovation-focused business and networking platform within the Cannes Film Market held in conjunction with the annual Cannes Film Festival in France.

Saluveer sketched out the broad, confusing and rapidly evolving realm of AI-powered content. He went through the pros and cons of generative AI, outlined the challenges facing the content creation industry on the road ahead, and imagined where that road would take us in the years ahead.

In describing how we perceive and approach AI today, Saluveer uses the analogy that it is like ice

cream. It is tasty and exciting, but has a tendency to be uncontrollable, just as ice cream melts in its cone and dribbles down the sides.

Saluveer explains how AI has arrived at a very sensitive time for the content creation industry. In what he calls a "polycrisis", the industry is still reeling from the effects of the pandemic, the disruptive rise of global streaming platforms, and the aftermath of the largest Hollywood labour disputes seen in over a decade.

These problems have severely affected the value chain of content creation and robbed many corners of the industry of crucial financial resources. Many large studios don't have access to the money they once did.

Enter AI, which, though still in its infancy, provides many ways of drastically cutting costs.



Though still in its infancy, [AI] provides many ways of ... cutting costs ... many people fear for their livelihoods

Like those who face redundancy because of automation, many people, from technicians to creatives, fear for their livelihoods as the vast potential of AI to lower costs and save time on content creation becomes ever more appealing with each new iteration of AI-powered programs.

On the other hand, as Shin, the festival's director, asserts, much like cheaper digital video technology, AI has the potential to enfranchise and assist legions of creators who might otherwise not have a way into content creation nor access to meaningful funds.

Perhaps we could stretch Saluveer's AI-as-ice-cream analogy even further. Eating it too quickly can give you a brain freeze, temporarily shutting down your ability to function normally. We should therefore eat it slowly.

Then again, can ice cream ever be more than a simulacrum of the flavours of real food and a source of empty calories that stimulate our senses without providing us with nourishing sustenance?

FILM REVIEWS

INSIDE OUT 2

Voiced by: Amy Poehler, Phyllis Smith, Kensington Tallman
Director: Kelsey Mann
Category: I
3.5/5 stars

With apologies to *Soul* and *Turning Red*, 2015's *Inside Out* was arguably the last Pixar masterpiece. Masterminded by the magician that is director Pete Docter, the film took you inside the inner landscape of a young girl, personifying her emotions.

Now it's time for Round 2. Riley (voiced by Kensington Tallman) is 13 and about to be beset by a whole new set of emotions as adolescence hits her like the proverbial avalanche of bricks.

Inside, trying to steer her personality, is the eternally upbeat Joy (Amy Poehler), with help from Sadness (Phyllis Smith), Anger (Lewis Black), Fear (Tony Hale) and Disgust (Liza Lapira).

Joy is tidying up some of Riley's less palatable memories when a bunch of workmen raid their HQ, fiddling with the controls and erecting a sign: puberty is messy. It is the natural step for *Inside Out 2* – taking Riley through that awkward coming-of-age stage.

Within seconds, the orange-hued Anxiety (Maya Hawke) appears, flanked by Envy (Ayo Edebiri), Embarrassment (Paul Walter Hauser) and, amusingly, Ennui (Adèle Exarchopoulos), a Gallic figure who just expresses boredom and disdain.

Together they want to change Riley's sense of self – which soon means she is dumping her old friends and trying to get in with the cool kids at the ice hockey camp she is attending.

As the emotions traverse Riley's interior, a huge gorge – Sar-Chasm – opens up as she starts acting sarcastic to impress her new friends.

They also arrive at Mount Crushmore, a rocky monument to all of Riley's secret girl crushes. Not to be outdone on the puns, Hawke's angst-ridden character is settled down with a nice cup of Anxi-Tea.

Debutant director Kelsey Mann does a solid job of replicating the intelligence of the first film, even if the innovation and originality isn't quite there second time around.

Riley's attempts to ingratiate herself with her new hockey buddies also isn't all that exciting – a better story could have been found. The only dramatic eruption might be the spot that is on Riley's chin.

That said, the new emotions bring real flavour to the film, while there are some nice nods to old-school animation – including a *Final Fantasy*-like game character that Riley had the hots for.

Doubtless *Inside Out 2* plays well for adults and kids alike. It just does not quite touch the genius of its predecessor.
James Mottram

Inside Out 2 opens in cinemas today



A still from *Inside Out 2*. Photo: Disney/Pixar



Channing Tatum and Ray Romano in *Fly Me to the Moon*.

FLY ME TO THE MOON

Starring: Scarlett Johansson, Channing Tatum, Woody Harrelson
Director: Greg Berlanti
Category: IIA
3.5/5 stars

Set during the 1960s space race, *Fly Me to the Moon* is a breezy romantic comedy that taps into the mythology surrounding the 1969 moon landing.

Scarlett Johansson plays Kelly Jones, a go-getting advertising executive with a slightly chequered past. One day, she is accosted by Moe Berkus (Woody Harrelson), a government operative looking to recruit her to promote NASA's man-on-the-moon mission to politicians and the public.

Before she arrives at NASA, Jones crosses paths with Apollo 11's launch director, Cole Davis (Channing Tatum), "the best pilot who will never get to space".

It is his job to make sure Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins complete their mission safely. But he immediately bristles at Jones' trickery, not least her use of actors pretending to be NASA staff in media interviews.

Like a female version of *Mad Men*'s Don Draper, Jones knows how to sell the mission to keep the money rolling in so NASA beats the Russians to the moon.

But then comes the real test, as Berkus engages her in Project Artemis, a secret scheme to film a fake moon landing in case the real one goes belly up.

Touching on the long-held conspiracy theory that Stanley Kubrick was involved in faking the event (the director gets name-checked more than once), *Fly Me to the Moon* counts down to the big day in July 1969 well enough.

Less successful is the on-off attraction between Jones and Davis, who is taking her for a spin in his plane one minute, then chiding her for her duplicitous nature the next minute. Their coupling never really seems in doubt, despite the friction.

Director Greg Berlanti, known for his work on American television shows such as *Dawson's Creek*, has conjured up romcoms before, including films such as *The Broken Hearts Club*, but this feels a little too slick to be truly enchanting.

Elements of the story – including one about a pesky black cat – are telegraphed in such a way that even a child could see what is coming. But Johansson and Tatum are polished, easy-on-the-eye actors and Harrelson plays the de facto villain well.

Moreover, with a script that explores the idea that the space race was more a battle of ideologies than the triumph of man, it has enough charms to rocket past its flaws.
James Mottram

Fly Me to the Moon opens in cinemas today



CULTURE



Louis Cha, who used the pen name Jin Yong, is regarded as one of the most talented writers China has produced. Photo: SCMP Pictures

REMEMBERING TWO LITERARY GIANTS OF THE WUXIA GENRE

A century after Jin Yong and Liang Yusheng were born, their novels still influence popular culture

Ashlyn Chak
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Standing in his “18 dragon subduing palms” stance, a large sculpture of Guo Jing – one of the best-known protagonists in Chinese wuxia martial arts fiction – has welcomed new arrivals at Hong Kong International Airport since March.

The 3.5-metre-tall statue commemorates 100 years since the birth of the character’s creator, Jin Yong (real name Louis Cha Leung-yung), one of the most popular wuxia novelists of all time.

Another of those novelists – Chen Wentong, better known by his pseudonym Liang Yusheng – is also having the centenary of his birth celebrated this year.

Few writers captured the spirit, philosophy and beauty of Chinese martial arts in text as vividly and brilliantly as Jin Yong and Liang. Their legacy has inspired countless television series, films, radio dramas, even video games, and continues to do so years after their deaths.

Born into a scholarly family in Haining, in China’s Zhejiang province, in 1924, Cha was always an avid reader. It is said that he discovered the wuxia genre, which was very new at the time, at the age of eight, after reading *Huangjiang Nüxia* (*The Swordswoman of Huangjiang*) by Chinese novelist Gu Mingdao (1897-1944).

In 1948, Cha graduated from Soochow University in Shanghai



Chinese martial arts novelist Liang Yusheng.

Jin’s novels are the best in the world; they are unrivalled in the ancient and modern times

NI KUANG, HONG KONG NOVELIST

at the age of 24 with a degree in international law, before moving to Hong Kong to join the Chinese-language newspaper Ta Kung Pao. Two years later, he became an editor of the New Evening Post, the evening edition of Ta Kung Pao, and met Chen.

Like Cha, Chen was also born into a scholarly family, and grew up in a village in Mengshan county, in Guangxi province. He, too, moved to Hong Kong, in 1949, and quickly found work in Ta Kung Pao.

As colleagues, Cha and Liang pioneered a new era of wuxia interest in the mid-1950s as they prolifically published serials in their shared column “Three Swords House” in the New Evening Post. When the column ceased in 1957, both organised their published stories and released them as novels, while continuing to write.

Chen’s *Pingzong Xiaying Lu* (1959-60) was said to be at the forefront of the new school of wuxia novels at the time. His other famous works include *Qijian Xia Tianshan* (1956-57), which inspired Hong Kong director Tsui Hark’s *Seven Swords* (2005); and *Baifa Montu Zhuang* (1957-58), which was adapted into *The Bride with White Hair* (1993), a Hong Kong cinema classic directed by Ronny Yu and starring Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia and Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing.

But it was Cha who reigned not only in the world of Chinese literature but also Hong Kong pop culture with his beautiful writing and addictive stories.

The Legend of the Condor Heroes (1957-59) was the source of inspiration for director Wong Kar-wai’s *Ashes of Time* (1994); while his final and longest novel, *The Deer and the Cauldron* (1969-72), has been the subject of many television adaptations over the years, with its main character, Wei Xiaobao, played by actors including Tony Leung Chiu-wai.

Chen’s writing heavily references history and elements of traditional Chinese poetry and literature, and his heroes tend to

be versatile and well-read. Cha, who was also influenced by Chinese history and culture, penned chivalrous but solitary protagonists who obsessively devote their lives to the craft and philosophy of Chinese martial arts.

This difference perhaps had to do with how the wuxia literary giants chose to lead their lives. For most of his career, Chen focused on writing novels, columns, critiques and essays before he migrated to Australia with his family in 1987, where he converted to Christianity at age 70 in 1994.

Cha, on the other hand, had more of a rebellious and entrepreneurial streak. He co-founded the Hong Kong-based Chinese-language newspaper Ming Pao in 1959 and began to criticise communist China’s policies around 1964.

He was also outspoken against the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and during Hong Kong’s 1967 leftist riots, which saw him receive death threats. In 1985, he was a founding member of the Hong Kong Basic Law Drafting Committee, but resigned in 1989 in protest against Beijing’s martial law that led to the Tiananmen Square crackdown.

In 1998, Cha and Daisaku Ikeda, a Japanese philosopher and author who was awarded the United Nations Peace Medal in 1983, co-wrote *Compassionate Light in Asia*, a series of intellectual discussions between the two.

In the book, Ikeda wrote of Cha: “I marvelled at his strength of

character in the face of immense power ... This is the ‘grandmaster’ spirit that has been passed down through thousands of years of Chinese history ... Mr Jin Yong used his pen as a sword, shining sharply.”

Hong Kong literary giant Ni Kuang once said of Cha: “Jin’s novels are the best in the world; they are unrivalled in the ancient and modern times, at home and abroad. There is no one else like him.”

In 2004, Cha received an honorary doctorate from the University of Cambridge, in England.

The following year, the writer left Hong Kong for the UK to study at the university for a non-honorary doctorate, and received a PhD in 2010 for his thesis “The Imperial Succession in Tang China, 618-762”.

Chen died on January 22, 2009 in Sydney, Australia, aged 85, while Cha died on October 30, 2018 in Hong Kong, at 94.

Their legendary status in the Hong Kong literary world remains undisputed, while their works continue to be widely revered in the larger Sinosphere and diasporic Chinese communities around the world.

“Sculpture: Guo Jing”, Terminal 1 Arrivals Hall, Hong Kong International Airport, 1 Sky Plaza Road, Chek Lap Kok. Open 24/7. Until July 19.

“Sculpted by Ren Zhe”, Hong Kong Heritage Museum, 1 Man Lam Road, Sha Tin. Open 10am to 6pm on weekdays (closed Tuesdays), 10am to 7pm on weekends and public holidays. Until Oct 7.

TRAVEL

‘Secret’ Kazakh city hopes tourism will put it on map

Once the site of a Soviet missile base, Priozersk is trying to reinvent itself as a seaside resort

Agence France-Presse

Alexei Vereshchagin remains certain that tourists will one day sip cocktails from the roof of his now abandoned hotel as they enjoy the lakeside view of Priozersk – a former secret city in central Kazakhstan.

Because of a lack of investment, Vereshchagin has been renovating the hotel alone – including putting in new windows in each of the 150 rooms. This mammoth task is likely to take years.

The hotel’s former Cyrillic-lettered “Hotel Russia” sign has been removed and is gathering dust on the roof alongside a rusty portrait of Vladimir Lenin.

“I want there to be a beautiful hotel in the centre of the city, like in the Soviet era. So I am restoring it, little by little,” says Vereshchagin, a Soviet Army veteran.

Once the hotel is renovated, tourists will be able to stay in the property near Lake Balkhash’s shores and enjoy the “magnificent views”, Vereshchagin says.

The development of a tourism sector in Priozersk would mark a dramatic change of fortune for the once-closed city, long unmarked on maps because of secretive military sites.

The Sary-Shagan missile range was built nearby in 1956, to test anti-ballistic weapons systems, and a portion of the city is still leased by the Russian government, Priozersk’s mayor, Mansur Akhmetov, says.

Reminders of its Cold War heyday are everywhere in the town of 15,000 people. Replicas of the S-75 surface-to-air missiles tested in Priozersk have been placed in the city centre and at its entrance, along with fading posters praising the “glory of the anti-missile shield of the Fatherland”.

Several sites dotted across the sprawling testing range on an arid steppe have been abandoned, and are now guarded by the likes of Ivan Sabitov. A Kazakh civilian, Sabitov whiles away the time watching over empty missile silos, dismantled radars and rocket fairings with his dog.

“These Soviet installations are destroyed, but other bases are still active,” says the 61-year-old with a weathered face.

Russian troops from the Strategic Missile Forces – which

helps manage the Kremlin’s nuclear arsenal – are still stationed in the area and sometimes swim in Lake Balkhash in the evening with their families.

Despite the presence of Russian bases, Priozersk’s mayor is trying to transform the city into a seaside resort. This project is in line with President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s desire to develop the country’s tourism sector, which represents just 3.2 per cent of its GDP.

“We are going to redevelop the entire coastline, so that pedestrians can walk along it,” Akhmetov says. “We also plan to build hotels and organise efforts to clean the beaches.”

Priozersk is already home to a smattering of small hotels that mostly host fishermen and a trickle of tourists during the first days of summer.

We ... plan to build hotels and organise efforts to clean the beaches

MANSUR AKHMETOV, MAYOR

“Even if the town seems partly abandoned, Lake Balkhash is magnificent,” says Olga Ryapolova, a Russian tourist from Siberia who “hopes to come back” to Priozersk soon. “I enjoy the warm water and the sand on the beach.”

The picturesque lake contrasts with the desolation elsewhere. A disused cement factory still stands near the lake’s shores, which Akhmetov hopes to demolish.

But on the only road leading to the end of the peninsula stands a new hotel: The Golden Sands. This four-star spa was built in 2016 and has become a welcome source of jobs, with its 120 employees.

“In Priozersk, jobs are scarce, and mainly linked to the army,” says the spa’s receptionist, Aizhan Musina.

Musina was born in Priozersk when the city was still sealed off from the public. She has long been waiting for her hometown to open up to tourists.

“I hope that our city will gain fame, and that people will know that we have such a beautiful spa.”



Ivan Sabitov guards a semi-abandoned military base on the steppe around Priozersk. Photo: AFP

HEALTH

Scientists move closer to improving gut health by freezing human faeces

Deutsche Presse-Agentur

In Switzerland, a bold initiative is under way: the freezing of human faeces to preserve global biodiversity.

This isn’t just about safeguarding nature’s diversity of plants and animals – human gut biodiversity is also at stake.

“We have discovered we are losing biodiversity in the gut,” says medical microbiologist Adrian Egli from the University of Zurich. “There is much more diversity in Amazon populations compared to those in the West. This has to do with stress, antibiotics and diet.”

“There are a thousand billion bacteria in one gram of stool, 125 times as many as there are people on the planet,” Egli says. “It’s unbelievable when you think about what lives inside you.”

There are between 300 and 500 different species of bacteria in one person, he adds.

Now an international effort aims to conserve this biological treasure through a so-called Microbiota Vault, akin to a huge rescuers’ vault for human faeces.

Bacteria can survive for decades in a special solution, Egli says.

Research into intestinal flora is currently still in its infancy.

“It may be possible to use knowledge about the microbiome to develop therapies to positively influence obesity, diabetes, rheumatic diseases or chronic intestinal inflammation,” Egli says.

The microbiome also includes fungi and viruses, but bacteria are particularly important because they have many significant metabolic properties.

At the University of Zurich,

Egli’s laboratory buzzes with activity. Laboratory manager Diana Albertos Torres is inspecting Petri dishes that contain bacteria that has been extracted from stool samples.

To the untrained eye, only small dots can be recognised on the red agar plate. Torres knows that it is probably *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, a bacteria that causes pneumonia, among other things.

1 trillion

There are this many bacteria in one gram of stool, according to medical microbiologist Adrian Egli from the University of Zurich

“There are new discoveries every week,” Egli says. “And the whole of humanity can benefit from analysing bacteria.”

The microbiome is linked to diseases such as cancer and autoimmune disorders, for example.

It is conceivable the targeted use of bacteria could one day improve the response to cancer therapies, Egli says.

Stool transplants are another field of medicine. “A stool sample with an optimal microbiome given to a patient – studies have shown this can contribute to recovery.”

Maria Gloria Dominguez-Bello, a microbiologist from Venezuela who conducts research in the US, has campaigned for an intestinal bacteria vault for years.

She was one of the first to establish the extent to which bacterial diversity in humans

differs depending on where they live and their living conditions, using samples from the Amazon region as an example.

A few years ago Tim Spector, a British medical doctor and professor of genetic epidemiology at King’s College London, conducted an experiment: he spent three days with indigenous hunter-gatherers in Tanzania and shared their lifestyle and food, including fruit pods from the baobab tree and all kinds of meat.

After just three days, the biodiversity in his gut had increased by 20 per cent, as he reported in the online journal The Conversation.

A team led by microbiologist Frances Spragge from the University of Oxford has just reported in the journal Science that gut bacteria can, for example, prevent the colonisation of pathogens that make people ill.

People can contribute to a good microbiome themselves. For example, a diet rich in fibre is important. Fibre means largely indigestible, plant-based food components.

These have an influence on how full we feel when eating, how long food remains in the stomach and intestines, and how well nutrients are absorbed by the body.

According to the German Nutrition Society, a high fibre intake has a protective effect against cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure and colon and breast cancers.

High-fibre foods include edible plant seeds, nuts, and wholegrain products, vegetables such as artichokes and peppers and fruit such as rhubarb.

Egli has freezers in which

around 2,500 stool samples from Ethiopia, Laos, Puerto Rico, Switzerland and other countries have been frozen at minus 80 degrees Celsius.

The samples have to be frozen within hours to preserve bacterial diversity; Dominguez-Bello has shock-frozen samples in remote Amazon regions using liquid nitrogen. A continuous cold chain and lots of paperwork are required to export the samples to Switzerland.

According to Egli, the pilot project is almost complete, with largely positive results. Tens of thousands of samples from all over the world will soon be arriving in Zurich.

A vault for final storage will have to be built for this, he says, since the ice cabinets in his laboratory will soon no longer be sufficient.

Relieved Whyte secures Valley double

Jay Rooney
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"I've had a bit of hard luck with seconds and bad draws. You can't often raced without luck. The drought-breaking success was a bit of a surprise."



Lucky Planet sealed Whyte's double in style with his first career victory at start 15. Fired to the front by Matthew Chadwick from gate one, the popular \$2.6 favourite led all the way to emphatically beat Sight Hero by two and a quarter lengths. Lucky Planet was placed five times and often raced without luck before the drought-breaking success.

Teetan fired in a double of his own when he lifted Danny Shum Chap-shing's Brave Witness to his first career

"We had the perfect barrier [one] and the pace was just nice. Everything went smoothly and this horse really deserved to win. This horse has been beaten by some nice horses this season. I think he can still progress because he's young."



Comments by Phillip Woo

Goodmanship quickened nicely after settling on the rail in midfield to notch a second win at his 28th start and from 10 runs this term. He was well rated off a third over this course and distance off 37 in November. Favourite **Happy Tango** found one just too good to miss after a box-seat run. It was another honest performance. **Gallant Goody** ran on well to snatch third after finding a spot behind midfield on the fence. It was his best effort at his 24th start and in Class Five. **Plentiful** was stopping 50m out after easily clearing to lead from gate 1. It was a better effort following a recent trial win. **Noble One** came from the rear to finish fourth on the top four after a slow start. He is limited and better suited over 1200m. **Prestige Moochi** ran on late to finish next best after making his run one from the rear. **Multimore** did not fire after a prominent run with cover one off the fence. It was a disappointing effort as one of the favourites. **Easy Two** never landed a blow from behind midfield. He couldn't lift on back-to-back placings and will now be mandatorily retired off a rating of 18.

Well backed late, **Ninja Derby** kept on nicely after barging his way into the open 250m top for a first local win at his 17th start. He was able to build on a career-best second last time out. Favourite **Go Go Go** had his chance but found one too good after settling on the rail with cover in midfield. He continues to race well without winning. **Turtle Again** closed well to fill a placing after settling on the rail behind midfield. He had been out of form but relished a return the course and distance of a win in November. Purged late, **Fruity Warrior** whacked on one-paced after a prominent run off the fence. He should find his mark in this grade. **Sunny Baby** made a mild bid after settling on the rail in the 200m but was out of the running in two of his last four starts despite a return to the level of a win in January. **Harry's Hero** ran on without threatening after travelling off the rail behind midfield. **Vulcanus** was on his tippy toes over the last 100m after dictating the run from gate six. He has had an uneventful first campaign but is only a three-year-old.

Favourite Brave Witness just scrambled home from Matsuo Victor after surging to the lead along the inside for a first win at his 12th start. He deserved the victory after seconds in three earlier runs. Late-fancied **Matsuo Victor** ran on well with only one wider out to finish a close second after settling one off the fence in midfield. He is heading in the right direction now. **Winning Steps** ran on well near the inside to just take third after travelling one off the rail behind midfield. He was able to back up a new win last start on his 10th start. **Wingtip** was a bit off after poking his head in front near the 200m after tracking the speed from gate 12. He got a win. **Sunshine Baby** gradually faded after getting his own way in front from gate three. He is not genuine. **Atomic Beauty** came up one-paced after a prominent run one off the fence. He was given every chance but has had a lot of racing. **Durham Star** was a spent force over the final 200m after settling on the rail behind midfield. Specked late, **Solar Goo** failed to and a blow after settling in better than midfield.

Late-fancied favourite **Skyway Planet** easily made all after jumping straight to the front from gate one for a first win at his 15th start. He had been racing consistently well and relished a return to the Valley. **Sight Hero** ran on nicely for second after settling on the rail in midfield. He is always a chance over the Valley 1,200m. Early favourite **Harold Win** stayed on for third after a prominent run. It was another good effort with a switch to the Valley and he should be winning races next season.

Bowser made good ground late for fourth after travelling on the outside behind **Alphalee**. The gelding has been improving since his last start when he plodded over the last 150m after stalking the pace from gate three. He's itching for the summer break after a busy but productive campaign. **Skeye Blue** weakened after a box-seat run. The lightly-rated three-year-old is still a work in progress and may improve next season. **Golden Champion** ran on without threatening towards the rear.

Amazing Ace will sleep well after getting posted wide without cover from midfield.

Post time favourite **Giant Leap** kept on gamely after turning the final bend a length on top dictating the pace from gate two for a first win at his sixth start. There's more improvement to come from the three-year-old. **Prime Mortar** stayed on well to just take second after a prominent run on the fence. He continues to perform well with seconds in two of his past three starts following a win for his new trainer in May. Early favourite **Camino** stormed home late with two wider out but just missed second after settling one off the rail behind midfield. He has the tools to add to a May win following eye-catching efforts to place in his past two starts. **Joy Coming** kept on well for fourth after chasing the leader but without cover the entire trip. **Jolly Conston** made a steady race for fifth after making his run one off the fence from better than midfield. He's not far off a rating below. **Vanastic Choice** succumbed over the last 100m after stalking the pace from gate seven. Speckled late, **Smart Leader** came from last to finish next best. He's a Class Five horse.

Punted late, **Woodfire Bro** reeled in **Yuplup** along the inside after a box-seat run to start up a fifth career win. It was not a surprise after placing in four of seven earlier starts this term. **Yellowfin** prompted a hot pace from a tricky gate and produced a cheeky sting after moving to the lead 45m out. He is as honest as the day is long. Favourite **Chilli Chilli** ran on well for third after settling one off the rail behind midfield. He is always a chance over this course. **Helene Feeling** stayed on for best after a prominent run one pace behind the leaders. **Admiral** was a bit off his stride in the home stretch. **Chilli Chilli** ran from behind midfield. He was more effective over a longer trip. **Universal Horizon** kept on one-paced from midfield. It was an OK effort in a higher grade. **Berlin Tango** came from last at the 200m to finish next best. It wasn't a bad run in a higher class. **Outgate** was a non-factor after settling in third last from a wide draw. It was an out-of-character effort carrying more weight following a last-start win. **Adurfin** never landed a blow ridden for luck from a wide draw. He's a dirt horse.

Favourite **Prince of Party** just held off the late surge of outsider **Strike For Glory** after rallying to lead 150m out for a first win from 10 starts this term. He's honest and the move to blinkers worked the oracle. **Strike For Glory** ran on nicely to finish a close second after settling on the rail in midfield. It was his best effort from 11 starts over the Valley 1,200m. **Charity For All** came from towards the rear to fill a placing without threatening the top two. It was a vastly improved second up effort with a step up to 1,200m. **Nebraska** grudgingly gave away after working forward four wide from gate 11 to finish second. He's a bit of a stayer but he's got to be a bit more consistent. He's got to be heading in the right direction. **Lean Master** showed on one-paced after settling effectively one-out, one-back from a middle draw. It was another genuine effort. **Bulb Emperor** ran on without threatening from midfield. It was a better effort following a travelling day. **Gimme Five** produced only a grinding effort after settling one off the rail downing beyond midfield from gate 10.

After drifting in better, **Atomic Force** timed things perfectly from midfield for an upset win. He was able to build on two positive runs following a stable change. **Red Elegance** stepped on well to just edge favourite **Youthful Spirits** for second after a one-run, one-back run. It was his best performance from seven runs at this level following a last-start win in Class Four. **Youthful Spirits** grudgingly gave way after going straight to the lead from gate one. The rise in weight took it's toll following a last-start success. Punted late, **Ka Ying Cher** found a few too smart after a box-seat run. He's better suited over 1,200m. **Sugar Sugar** was doing his best work late as expected travelling two from the back. He's clearly at his best over 1,200m. **Speckled Lady** **One** weakened after the start for the early lead from gate 11. He didn't have things work his way on his initial Valley start. **Motoman** whacked on one-paced from midfield. He's still acclimatising to Hong Kong. **Do Your Part** never figured after travelling in second last on his local debut in the city.

Flamingo Trillion justy asked **Romantic** Laos by a nose after shaking off a mid-race challenge for the front by **Awesome Folatic** to make it three wins over the Valley,1800m from his past four starts. He loves the Valley, **Punted late Romantic** Laos weaved a late rear the inside to make it close on the wire after a wide with cover trip from behind in midfield. He has had a very productive campaign. **Hameron** stayed on well for third after a run from midfield. He should find a suitable race to win in this grade next term. **Perfect Team** was a bit of a surprise to see him in the top three after a long layoff. He is promising a run to challenge for the lead 750m out. It was a decent sort carrying top weight following back-to-back 2,000 wins. **Supreme Agility** ran on well with two winners out to just miss a top four spot. He is naturally acclimatising and should be winning races next season. **Perfect Team** made some ground without threatening after biding his time for three from the rear. It wasn't a bad effort. **Samakand** made some halfway late settling in second last after getting squeezed out at the start. He had an excuse.

VITAL STATISTICS
Total turnover: **\$1,287,798,714** (down 4.82 per cent)
Total attendance: **17,401** (up 0.15 per cent)

(5) FLAMINGO TRILLION	K. C. Leung	\$117.50	\$33.00
(7) Romantic Laos	H. Bowman		23.50
(2) Hameron	L. Ferraris		24.00

12 starters. Quinella: \$338. Forecast (5-7): \$632. Tierce: \$4,114. Trio: \$649. First 4 (1,2,5,7): \$612. Quartet (5-7-2-1): \$512. Quinella Place (5-7): \$117.50. (2x5): \$159.50. (2x7): \$96.50. 8th Double: \$2,242.50. Consolation: \$254.50. 2nd Treble: \$10,354. 2nd Treble Consolation: \$1,249. 4th Double Trio (3,5,7,2,5): \$13,984 (216.4 units). Six Up: \$8,492 (499.4 units). Six Win Bonus: \$1,526,662 (37 units). Jockey Challenge winner: M. Chadwick. Trainer Challenge winner: D. Whyte

SWIMMING

SINGAPORE STAR ‘GETTING UP TO SPEED’

Amanda Lim says training with Hong Kong team could help her break Lion City’s national record

Lars Hamer
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Singaporean swimmer Amanda Lim Xiang Qi said a long and healthy relationship with the Hong Kong team could push her to break a national record on Saturday.

Lim will compete at the Hong Kong Open Swimming Championships at Victoria Park this weekend, and has her city’s 50-metre freestyle record in her sights.

The 31-year-old has been training in Hong Kong for the race

for the past two weeks, while also helping her counterparts prepare for the 4x100m freestyle and 4x100m medley relays at the Paris Olympics.

“One of the reasons I chose to train here in Hong Kong for this period of time is because the Hong Kong relay team is at my speed, we are kind of all doing the same times,” Lim said.

“Being surrounded by people who are similar to you, I believe that will bring me to even greater heights.

“During the past week of training here, I’ve been swimming really well. The times during train-

ing are giving me the confidence that I can do it.”

Last month, Lim swam the 50m at the 19th Singapore Championships in 24.94, 0.12 seconds off the Olympic Consideration Time and 0.02 away from the Singaporean record, set by Quah Ting Wen.

Missing out on the Games by seconds was made more painful by the fact that a week before the race she dropped a 10kg weight on her foot and fractured a toe.

But Lim dusted herself down and will attempt to break the Singaporean record in Victoria Park on Saturday, before heading

to Toronto for the Speedo Canadian Swimming Championships.

Next year, she will compete on home turf at the World Aquatics Championships.

“There are a lot of what ifs, but what is going through my mind is that if I had started this type of training earlier, where would I be right now?” she said, referring to her decision to join Hong Kong Olympian Stephanie Au Hoi-shun in training in Brisbane – a move she said made her personal bests fall like dominoes.

“In December, I kind of hit a pretty low point in my swimming career and I just wanted a change



Amanda Lim has been training in Hong Kong for two weeks.

Within a week my flights and everything were booked.

“Honestly it was one of the best times in my life, and it showed in my swimming results, too. At 30 years old, I was doing personal best swims. I hadn’t been doing PBs for like 10 years.”

For Lim, the friendship she has built with Hong Kong’s swimmers has been a benefit to both sides.

“I have trained with Australian coaches before, and I think I work better with the Australian programme. And of course, like being around friends who are actually going towards the same goal really helps,” she said. “I feel pretty loved by the team and I feel very supported. And that is the main reason my swimming is faster.”

Wada cleared in probe of 23 Chinese swimmers

But anti-doping groups call report on handling of incident flawed owing to ‘limited scope’ of inquiry

Reuters

An investigator appointed by the World Anti-Doping Agency (Wada) to look into its handling of the 23 Chinese swimmers who tested positive for banned substances has cleared the drugs body of any wrongdoing.

Swiss prosecutor and lead investigator Eric Cottier found there was nothing in the file to suggest Wada in any way had favoured the 23 swimmers who tested positive for trimetazidine (TMZ), a medication that increases blood flow to the heart.

But his report brought a stinging response from athletes groups, while the United States Anti-Doping Agency (Usada), the global body’s fiercest critic, questioned how much Cottier had actually been able to investigate.

“This [report] is unsurprising since Wada itself hand-picked the investigator and set the extremely limited scope of the investigation, preventing a meaningful review,” Usada said.

“Given its cosy role in the creation of the investigation, the world also has to wonder if Wada was able to see and even sanitise the report before its release.”

PARIS 2024 OLYMPICS

Kong keen to ‘not let people down’ in Games medal quest

World No 1 fencer reveals mental challenges as she works on regaining full fitness after injury

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Hong Kong’s world No 1 fencer Vivian Kong Man-wai said she “does not want to let down” her support team, or fans at home, when she fights for Olympic gold this month.

Kong, who is poised for her third Games, is only 80 per cent fit following a knee injury, according to coach Octavian Zidaru.

And the 30-year-old Kong said her recovery was presenting mental challenges, after serious ACL injuries in 2017 and 2019.

According to the top-ranked epeeist, while approaching full health, she woke up every day thinking: “Yay, the Olympics is not today, I have another day to prepare, and to get better.”

Zidaru, meanwhile, said he would “not go to a competition without a medal in my mind”.

Kong was an Olympic quarter-finalist in Tokyo three years ago, after reaching the last-16 at Rio 2016.

A two-times World Championship bronze medallist, she said her most recent Games experience, which coincided with the coronavirus pandemic, forced her to re-evaluate her reasons for chasing success.

“I had to ask myself, what am I training for?” Kong said. “What does the gold medal mean to Hong Kong people?”

“The whole, ‘I want to win, it’s my dream’, is so egocentric. Making it more meaningful motivates me to train hard.”

Kong said she was “very impatient” to recapture peak fitness, but “really grateful we have the best medical team, and the best coaches.”

“Rehab is my specialty, I’ve had two broken knees,” she joked. Previous injuries, however, were responsible for Kong’s hesitation to fully commit in practice.

“I can fence, and do all the

I had to ask myself, what am I training for? What does the gold medal mean to Hong Kong people?

VIVIAN KONG, FENCER



technical stuff,” she said. “A lot of [my recovery] is mental. I’ve had so many experiences with the knee that being brave enough to tell myself I’m OK is the hardest part.

“I have so much support, and I give all this stress to my team ... my coach, my physiotherapist, and my trainer. I completely trust them, so I just have to do my job, and I hope I don’t let them down.”

But Kong said the increased scrutiny on Hong Kong fencers after Cheung Ka-long’s Tokyo gold was not an issue, because “he has all the pressure”.

Still, she said she had worked with psychologists at the Hong Kong Sports Institute because she knew how much of her regaining full fitness was “mental, as well as physical”.

Kong will immediately set up home in the Olympic Village, after flying to Paris on July 20, with Zidaru, who was fourth in the épée team event at the 1980 Games, saying it would be “dangerous” to practice with unfamiliar training partners in a pre-Olympics camp.

And she acknowledged it would be a blow to miss the opening ceremony, with her competition set for the next day, after similar experiences in 2016 and 2021. She was counting her blessings, nonetheless, after being unable to even step forwards or backwards only weeks ago.

“I am older and, hopefully, wiser [than in Rio and Tokyo],” Kong said. “I can handle pressure better ... and I appreciate this sport so much more than I used to.”

EURO 2024



Spain’s Dani Olmo celebrates his winning goal against France in the Euro 2024 semi-final. Photo: Reuters

‘Spirit of sacrifice’ lifts upbeat Spain to championship final

Reuters

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente hailed his team’s quality and cohesion in coming from a goal down to beat France and reach the Euro 2024 final, a feat he took no credit for and said was all about his players’ insatiable hunger for success.

De la Fuente said his team had versatility and outstanding individual qualities, which when put together created a special brand of football that would be on show in Sunday’s final, regardless of whether the opponents are England or the Netherlands.

“Our idea of football is based on our self-assurance. This is what we want to play, we want to play to our strengths. I know that we are able to play football, we’ve seen it throughout the tournament,” he said.

“Individually they are fantastic but they offer the collective benefits of their individual qualities ...

they always work for the common good, for the collective effort.

“They are very generous in their efforts and work rate. This is just one more sign that this is an insatiable team, that they want to keep improving with the spirit of sacrifice.”

Spain went behind to an early goal from France’s Randal Kolo Muani before teenager Lamine Yamal levelled with a brilliant strike in the 21st minute, then Dani Olmo added a second just a few minutes after in a spectacular first half.

De la Fuente hit back at critics who had previously questioned some of his decisions and team selections, reminding them that he knew his players best after a long history with many of them.

“I want you to know that this may surprise you more than it surprises us, because we knew the possibilities we had ... I know these footballers and I make my decisions based on how much I know them,” he said.

“It’s not out of a whim. You’ve been asking for this player or this other player, when you don’t know the history behind each and every one of them,” de la Fuente said. “We do know – me and the technical staff – and I know my players can give much more and they can improve and be even better.”

De la Fuente had special praise for Yamal, whose goal he described as “a touch of genius”.

“We all know who he is. We need to take care of him,” he said.

“I want him to work with the same humility, keep his feet on the ground in order to keep improving, learning with the same kind of attitude and that professionalism, that maturity that he shows on the pitch.

“He looks like a much more experienced player to be honest but fundamentally I celebrate that he’s in our team, that he’s Spanish and that we count on him and I hope we can enjoy him for years to come.”

This [report] is unsurprising since Wada itself hand-picked the investigator

USADA

The swimmers were previously cleared by a Chinese investigation, which said they were inadvertently exposed to the drug through contamination. The report determined the swimmers were staying at a hotel where traces of TMZ were discovered in the kitchen.

Wada said it had no evidence to challenge China’s findings and that external counsel had advised against appealing them.

Cottier’s investigation reached a similar conclusion, finding no irregularities on the part of Wada’s review of the China Anti-Doping Agency (China) decision and that it had covered all relevant issues in determining whether to appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

“All the elements taken into consideration by Wada, whether they come from the file produced by China with its decision or from the investigation procedures that it carried out, show the decision not to appeal to be reasonable, both from the point of view of the facts and the applicable rules,” wrote Cottier in his report.

The report did not impress anti-doping groups FairSport and Global Athlete, which called the process “inherently flawed from the outset due to its limited scope and independence.”

“The report ... does not provide sufficient evidence to support Cottier’s findings and conclusions – it also does not explain why 23 Chinese athletes were not provisionally suspended with mandatory public disclosure,” the groups said in a joint statement. “Until all related documents are made public, trust in the system will not be regained and Wada’s position as the global regulator will continue to be challenged.”

From rags to the ring: Filipino boxers train for glory and better life in Bago City gym

Agence France-Presse

At a bare-bones gym in the central Philippines, children in torn shoes put on frayed head guards in pursuit of their Olympic boxing dream – and a way out of poverty.

Aged from 10 to 18, they spar in the Bago City gymnasium after school before sleeping under the ring’s canvas at night.

Located on the island of Negros, in the sugar-growing region which has some of the country’s starkest rich-poor divides, the city of 200,000 calls itself the Philippines’ “boxing capital”.

Eight of the 70 Filipino boxers to have made it to the Olympics got their start at the Bago City gym. Boxers there work out on peeling punching bags under the buzz of giant old electric fans straining to give some relief from the oppressive tropical heat.

The most recent Bago Olympian – Rio 2016 light-flyweight Roger Ladon – did not qualify for Paris, leaving the city pinning for a new poster boy.

The five-strong boxing team heading for the French capital is made up of men’s featherweight Carlo Paalam, men’s middleweight Eumir Marcial – who has been likened to Manny Pacquiao – women’s flyweight Aria Villegas, women’s featherweight Nesthy Petecio and women’s middleweight Hergie Bacyadan.

“Life is hard here. Job opportunities are limited,” said coach Larry Semillano, a Bago native who fought at lightweight in the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Ignacio Denila, the city government’s executive assistant for sports, said they all idolised eight-time world champion Pacquiao. “I hope to be recruited into the national team in order to join competitions and win medals abroad,” AJ Vicente, 17, one of Semillano’s hopefuls, said.

Bago lightweight Leopoldo Cantancio blazed the Olympic trail when he made it to the 1984 Los Angeles Games, reaching the round of 16. He also fought at the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

Bago fighters have since won one Olympic silver medal and one bronze, while eight of the

country’s 14 Olympic medals so far have come from boxing – three silvers and five bronze.

Semillano said Vicente, a right-handed flyweight who won a bronze at the Philippine national games last year, had a “70 per cent” chance of eventually making it to the national team.

“The skill is there,” Semillano said. “What we’re trying to develop now is his power.”

From the age of seven, children are welcome to join the training programme. Last year, three minors trained by Semillano qualified for the national government’s amateur boxing pool.

The Bago City government-funded programme was launched in the mid-1960s and bore fruit in 1992 when light-flyweight Roel Velasco won a bronze medal at the Barcelona Olympics.

His younger brother, Mansueto Velasco, went one better with a light-flyweight silver in Atlanta in 1996. “Not all of them will be Olympians or make the national team,” Denila said. “For me, what is important is they develop discipline, even if they do not achieve success in life.



Young fighters train at a gym in Bago City, known as the Philippines’ “boxing capital”. Photo: AFP

COPA AMERICA

Messi enjoys ‘last battles’ as Argentina reach title match

Agence France-Presse

Lionel Messi said he was enjoying his “last battles” with Argentina after finding the net in a 2-0 win over Canada to book a place in the Copa America final.

After a lacklustre display against Ecuador in the quarter-finals at the MetLife Stadium, the 37-year-old looked back to himself again, connecting with Angel Di Maria and strike partner Julian Alvarez, who also scored.

Now playing with Inter Miami in Major League Soccer, Messi has yet to indicate whether he would continue to play with Argentina in the 2026 World Cup.

“I’m living it like I lived it in the



Lionel Messi (centre) celebrates his goal against Canada.

battles” comment, Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni asked for calm.

“We have to leave him alone, he knows that we will not be the ones to close the door on him. He can stay with us as long as he wants, even when he retires ... Let him decide what he wants,” Scaloni said.

Messi has a chance to win a third consecutive major title with his national side following their 2022 World Cup triumph and their 2021 Copa America win.

The eight-time Ballon d’Or winner referenced veteran teammates Di Maria and Nicolas Otamendi and said success was validation for the difficult barren years the team had suffered.

“The truth is that it’s crazy what this group has done, what the Argentina national team have been doing, because after all this it gives value to all [the tournaments] I and the old generation have played in,” Messi said.

“It’s not easy for us to be in a final again, for us to compete again to be champions.”

Despite Argentina reaching the final with some comfort against Canada, the former Barcelona forward said it had been a tough test so far.

“It’s a difficult Copa, even matched, with very bad pitches, with high temperatures, very tough teams, and for us to be in a final again is something to enjoy,” he said.

RICHARD MILLE



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