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The next war for Iraq

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Is the Philippines, until now a staunch American ally, falling into the Chinese camp?

EVEN in a year of extraordinary reversals, few would have expected it. In July China reacted with fury when an international tribunal upheld a complaint from the Philippines and rubbished China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. This week it is rolling out the red carpet for the mercurial Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte. He is being feted in a four-day state visit, with 400-odd businessmen in tow. Rub your eyes: America's strongest ally in South-East Asia appears to be plopping like a ripe mango into China's hands.

Consider what Mr Duterte, in power since June, has said in recent weeks. He has branded Barack Obama a "son of a whore" for criticising his "kill them all" war on drug dealers and addicts, which has claimed thousands of lives, many of them innocent. He has demanded an end to joint naval patrols and to America's assistance in the southern jungles of Mindanao, where American special forces advise Filipino troops fighting against Abu Sayyaf, a violent group linked to al-Qaeda. And he has questioned whether America would honour its treaty obligation to come to the Philippines' aid if the archipelago were attacked.

What that means for the American "pivot" to Asia scarcely bears thinking about. But do the eyes deceive? American officials—from Admiral Harry Harris, commander in the Pacific, down—insist that all is dandy. Joint naval patrols continue, as does co-operation in Mindanao; and America still has five bases on Philippine soil. The close working relationship with Filipino counterparts, the Americans insist, is as strong as ever. The Filipinos, for their part, report no change of orders from the new chief.

Yet Mr Duterte talks of China like a moonstruck lover. On the eve of his visit he told Xinhua, the Chinese news agency, that China's generosity to poor countries was without reproach. China "deserves the kind of respect that [it] now enjoys...It's only China that can help us." He has been at pains to point out that one of his own grandfathers was Chinese. Thrilled, the Chinese ambassador in Manila talks of "clouds fading away" and the sun rising to "shine beautifully on the new chapter of bilateral relations".

What is Mr Duterte up to? Bear in mind that development and growth are his priority—one reason for his sky-high popularity in a country with an entrenched plutocracy lording it over legions of urban and rural poor. But development needs capital, and the Philippines has been excluded from recent Chinese largesse showered around the rest of the region. Relations suffered in 2012 after China dislodged the Philippine navy from the Scarborough Shoal, which is just over 200km from the Philippines proper, within its exclusive economic zone, and almost 900km from China. Filipino businesses have struggled in China, while little Chinese investment has come to the Philippines. The tribunal's ruling only made matters worse: afterwards, China told even its tourists to stay away.

The Philippines had been plucky in standing up to China. But it has paid a price. Now, the goodies that China is dangling look irresistible. Mr Duterte wants lots of infrastructure, particularly railways. China is offering cheap loans. He wants the country to export more. China is offering to reopen its markets to Philippine fruit. He wants help with the war on drugs. A Chinese businessman is building a big rehab centre. And he wants Filipino fishermen to be able to return to their traditional fishing grounds around the Scarborough Shoal. China has told Philippine officials that it is open to an accommodation.

Perhaps America, in banking so much on its plucky ally, should have been more clear-eyed about the cost to the Philippines of standing up to Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. Perhaps, too, it should not have assumed that all Filipino politicians have an instinctive allegiance to America.

Although Filipinos are overwhelmingly pro-American, they are also patriotic. The American colonial period saw its share of atrocities, especially in Mindanao. One colonial general mused that it might be necessary "to kill half the Filipinos in order that the remaining half of the population may be advanced to a higher plane of life". Mr Duterte himself says he was molested by an American priest as a child. The landed elite that he claims to be displacing achieved its ascendancy under American rule. And standing up for the little guy is part of his shtick. The insistence of his foreign secretary, Perfecto Yasay, that Filipinos will not be America's "little brown brothers" does not go down too badly.

Yet it is not only Americans who lament the impetuousness of Mr Duterte's tilt to China: many Filipinos, including senior officials, are worried sick. Jay Batongbacal of the University of the Philippines fears Mr Duterte "is squandering all the practical leverage that comes from being in alliance with the United States"—without knowing what assurances, in terms of sovereignty in the contested South China Sea, the Philippines will get in return.

Bide your time

It is a reckless approach, but not necessarily a lasting one. For the time being, China wishes to draw the Philippines into its camp. That is why it has not yet attempted to build the kind of military facilities on Scarborough Shoal that it has constructed on other reefs in the South China Sea and that many Western analysts had assumed were imminent.

But China will have to offer more than fishing rights to make any deal acceptable to Filipinos. Even the China-loving Mr Duterte has talked about leaping onto a jet ski to defend the Philippines' interests in person if need be. So the Chinese idea of a "package deal" in which Chinese sovereignty over the Scarborough Shoal is acknowledged in return for fishing rights which Filipinos had anyway long enjoyed will be greeted as an insult back in the Philippines.

America, in short, can be patient. The Philippines may yet return to its camp. If so, both sides will claim it never left.

THE NEXT WAR FOR IRAQ

A revealing look inside the country's fight with ISIS—and itself

When fighters with the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria swept across Iraq in the summer of 2014, the largest prize they claimed was the city of Mosul. The jihadists forced the Iraqi military and a large portion of the city's population to flee. With roughly 600,000 residents remaining, Mosul is the largest population center under ISIS control, a key source of prestige and resources and a living advertisement for the group's claim that it is building a state.

In March, the Iraqi government announced the launch of a military operation to retake Mosul, but so far the campaign has only made incremental progress, reclaiming a series of villages with the help of the U.S.-led military coalition against ISIS. The Iraqi military lacks the troops to launch a full-scale assault on the city, and in late May the government committed troops to a separate campaign to retake Fallujah, another key ISIS-held city that lies closer to Baghdad. Pro-government forces retook the center of Fallujah on June 17. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared on Twitter, "Fallujah has returned to the nation and Mosul is the next battle."

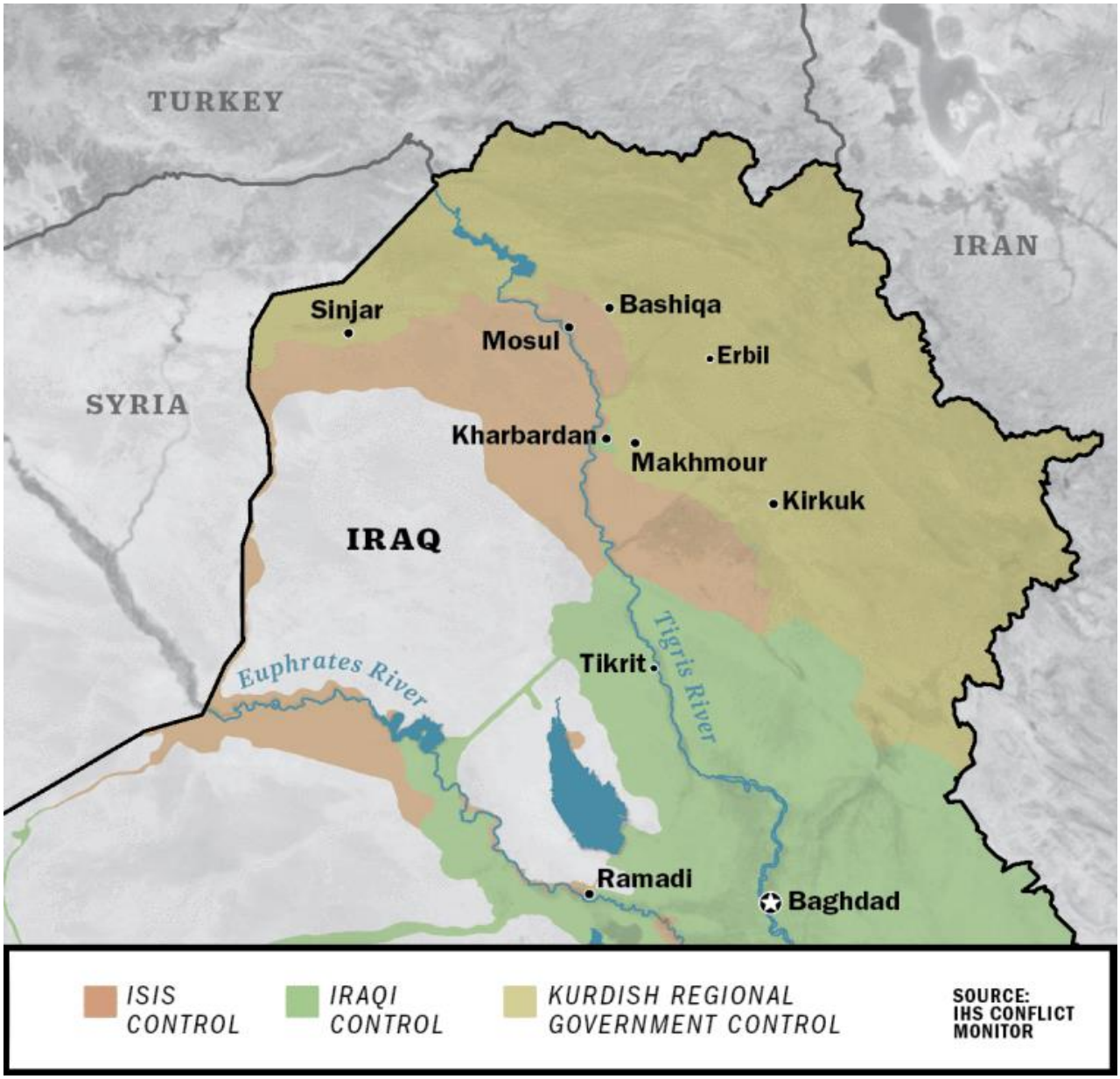
An explosion in Sinjar, Iraq, May 13, 2016, near Mount Sinjar, Nineveh Province, Iraq. Kurdish forces retook the town from ISIS in Nov. 2015. Its population in 2013 was estimated at 88,023.

But Mosul won't be easy, and it's not just because of the military challenge. The Mosul campaign is complicated by a political stalemate within Iraq. The military is expected to rely on powerful Kurdish militias to help pave the road to Mosul, but the semi-autonomous Kurdish government in northern Iraq has yet to commit to the operation, claiming they are not properly equipped for an attack on the city. In Fallujah and other battles, the government has relied on Shi'ite-majority militias called "*hashd al-shabi*," or popular mobilization forces. Prime Minister Abadi said in February that the militias would join the battle for Mosul, but to date none of them have been sent to the front lines approaching the city. Rights groups have accused some of those groups of of war crimes, and critics say that sending the militias into a Sunni-majority city like Mosul could cause further sectarian violence.

While the battle for Mosul has yet to begin in earnest, members of the Iraqi military, Kurdish militias, and the U.S. military are already fighting and dying in the battle against ISIS. Iraqi civilians are fleeing by the thousands, and hundreds of thousands of others remain trapped under ISIS rule. The jihadists continue to counterattack the opposing forces, harassing the troops holding the front lines.

In May I visited the front lines surrounding Mosul with the war photographer Yuri Kozyrev. We spoke with Iraqi, Kurdish, and U.S. soldiers involved in the battle against ISIS. The resulting report—on the cover of this week's international TIME—is a rare glimpse at the situation on the front lines and the looming battle for Mosul.

Our reporting took us to several places that had recently been wrested from ISIS control, a set of devastated towns now under the control of an array of competing forces. We visited a village south of Mosul called Kharbardan that had been retaken by the Iraqi military in March. The Iraqi troops there are in control of a deserted hamlet, with ISIS forces just out of sight in an adjacent village. The troops there had repelled an ISIS ambush only two days before we arrived. "Every Thursday we have a party to welcome them," one soldier said of the attackers.



Map data as of June 13, 2016

Everywhere, front line forces said they faced frequent counterattacks from ISIS. In the town of Bashir, south of Kirkuk, Iraqi police said ISIS had fired chemical weapons at them, injuring at least 46 people. The town itself was reclaimed from ISIS by both Kurdish forces and an ethnic Turkmen unit of the Shi'ite Popular Mobilization forces. Armed men from both groups waved to each other as they patrolled the bombed out streets of the town in pickup trucks, even though Kurdish and Turkmen fighters had fought deadly gun battles in a town just an hour's drive away. It was just one example of the kaleidoscope of armed groups operating on the ground in Iraq, and the tensions among forces that may share little more than an enemy.

Backed by U.S.-led airstrikes, Kurdish forces retook the town of Sinjar from ISIS in November 2015, seizing a site where ISIS forces committed some the worst atrocities during their march across Iraq. ISIS jihadists killed hundreds of people and captured and raped thousands of women and girls from the Yazidi religious minority. Like other recaptured towns, Sinjar today is an empty shell, and only a handful of locals have returned.

The ruins of Sinjar illustrate double-edged nature of the U.S.-led air campaign supporting the fight against ISIS. While the local forces battling ISIS depend on the airstrikes for support, the raids can also result in immense destruction. Coalition airstrikes have killed at least 1,323 civilians in Iraq and Syria since the war began in 2014, according to a rigorous count by the London-based group Airwars. (The U.S. government puts the toll at 42.)

The ruins also underscore the daunting task ahead for Iraq's weak state institutions, which are still struggling to recover from the destruction of the U.S. invasion in 2003 and the mismanagement of the occupation in the years that followed. Recapturing cities like Mosul and Fallujah will only spawn a deeper set of problems of reconstruction, governance, and counterinsurgency.

The only way to defeat ISIS is to retake lost territory and dismantle it so-called caliphate. But

victory, ironically, would transform the conflict from a contest over territory to an endless battle against a determined jihadist group that has a proven ability to carry out or inspire attacks far beyond its territorial core. And retaking territory from ISIS in Iraq poses the question of what comes after victory. How can Iraq restore state control in Sunni areas where residents are deeply skeptical of the Shi'ite-dominated government in Baghdad. Over the long term, winning the war against ISIS will require answers to some of Iraq's deep political and social dilemmas—dilemmas this country has never been able to solve.

36 years on, ex-refugee meets one of her rescuers

Early on Friday morning, Australian-Vietnamese social entrepreneur Yen Siow and her family of five headed to Changi Airport's Terminal 2.

They were armed with placards, waiting to welcome a Norwegian man whom she had met only once, 36 years ago.

It was an encounter she would never forget.

When she was just four years old in October 1980, she was one of hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled in boats across the South China Sea after South Vietnam fell to the communists in 1975.

Adrift and on the verge of death while crowded with 81 others in a flimsy boat, a Norwegian oil

tanker by the name of Berge Tasta came to their rescue.

The ship's crew of 29, which included 18-year-old Mr Bernhard Oyangen, fed and clothed them and eventually found a temporary refuge for them - the Hawkins Road Refugee Camp in Sembawang.

It was the first and only refugee camp here until 1996, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees decided to shut all its camps in the region.

When 54-year-old Mr Oyangen entered the arrival hall, Ms Siow, 39, wrapped him in a long hug and introduced her three children, aged between five and 10.

"I said to him, 'Mr Bernhard, these are my children, and without your team and your captain, they wouldn't be around today'," recalled Ms Siow.

She resettled in Australia after her four-month stay in the refugee camp, and relocated here last year with her Singaporean husband.

In August, she decided to track down her Norwegian rescuers and contacted Mr Oyangen through Facebook.

They arranged to meet this month when he was due to pass through Singapore on a business trip to New Zealand.

Over breakfast at the airport, she found out other details of their 10-day journey at sea - why and how the crew had willingly taken in a group of refugees with an "indescribable" stench and given them the clothes off their back.

"It was wonderful to hear simple replies like, 'You're humans. We're people. We would save you no matter what'," said Ms Siow.

"The profound kindness of his actions really hit me when I met him and heard those words from him."

She has found four other crew members since August, and hopes to travel with her family to Norway to meet them in December.

Mr Oyangen, who owns a business in the shipping industry, was surprised when Ms Siow contacted him out of the blue.

The last time that he had met former refugees from the camp was about 15 years ago in Norway.

"Helping people at sea is a part of seamanship," he said. "I was happy to meet her and hear her story.

The Vietnamese people didn't talk much (about their history), but I know a lot more today after meeting her."

Mr Oyangen will be in Singapore until Tuesday, and has been spending time with Ms Siow and her family, visiting landmarks and having meals together.

Yesterday, they also met Norway's Ambassador to Singapore, Mr Tormod C. Endresen, at his residence.

Next Sunday, Mr Oyangen will visit Singapore on the way back to Norway, in time to celebrate Ms Siow's birthday on Oct 30, and mark the 36th anniversary of the arrival of the tanker in Singapore.

It brings a sense of closure for Ms Siow. "(It was very) important for me to put the story together so I can teach my children the importance of the kindness of strangers, the value of human life and how we treat each other... It affects people for the rest of their lives."

Birth of world's first three-parent IVF baby birth 'revolutionary': Doctor

NEW YORK (Reuters) - A New York fertility specialist, who said he successfully carried out a "three-parent" in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) technique resulting in a baby boy, called the procedure a "revolutionary approach in human reproduction".

Dr John Zhang, medical director of New Hope Fertility Centre in New York, spearheaded the technique roughly five months ago with a Jordanian couple at a clinic in Mexico.

The procedure, which the United States government has forbidden due to perceived risks to the mother and child, is designed to help families with mitochondrial diseases passed down maternally, affecting around one in 6,500 children worldwide.

The treatment uses the genetic (DNA) material from the parents and an egg donor to create an embryo. Some stem-cell scientists say Mexico lacks the regulatory oversight and clinical expertise to carry it out safely.

"This new technology, the first time in human history, a healthy live person that is created by two eggs recombined it together with one sperm," Dr Zhang told Reuters during a fertility conference in New York. "This not even has happened in nature."

Dr Zhang said the mother of the baby carries the gene for Leigh syndrome, a fatal and inherited disorder caused by mutations in mitochrondial DNA that affect the central nervous system. Symptoms begin within a year of a child's birth and lead to death within a span of several years.

Dr Egli said that he expects the number of patients seeking such treatments to grow and hopes it will be approved in the US.

"I think it is unfortunate that the political situation here results in the paralysis that does not allow the use of the expertise present here," said Dr Egli. "The outcome for patients would be

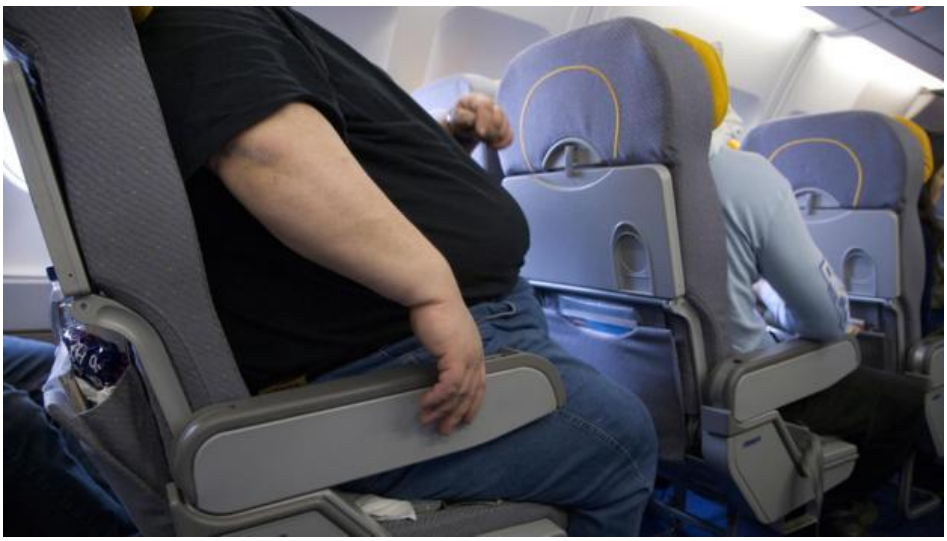
much better... the way it is now is they cannot keep up with the scientific progress."

Dr Zhang, who is scheduled to present his findings at a meeting of the American Society of Reproductive Medicine on Wednesday in Salt Lake City, Utah, said the questions were all a part of the scientific progress he thinks is being made.

"Eighty per cent of the time there is criticism, and 20 per cent of the time maybe in favour. I think what happened is very healthy and very encouraging," he said.

Dr Zhang said he relished seeing families who have suffered from the death of a child finally able to have a healthy child. "I just feel that I am bringing a gift. I really think it's just a wonderful thing."

Airlines want more money from heavy fliers, but some say it's a rights violation.



Airline seats have been one-size-fits-all since the beginning. Today, those 16.5 to 18-inch wide seats are anything but.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), obesity has more than doubled since 1980. In 2014, more than 1.9 billion adults were overweight, and over 600 million were obese. (WHO defines "overweight" as a BMI greater than or equal to 25 and "obese" as a BMI greater than or equal to 30.)

It’s a trend that has thrown up thorny issues with respect to air travel, one that highlights the conflict between airlines’ needs and basic passenger rights.

Last month, lawyer Giorgio Destro from Padua, Italy sued Emirates, claiming his flight was disrupted by an obese passenger seated next to him. According to reports, Destro was not able to comfortably sit in his assigned seat, and spent much of the nine-hour flight from Cape Town to Dubai standing or sitting in crew seats. His proof for the lawsuit? A selfie that includes his fellow passenger’s arm in his seat space.

Passenger rights advocates argue that most aeroplanes can’t accommodate passengers of all body types, and that everyone has the right to fly.

“Tall, short, thin or fat, broad shoulders, wide hips or longer legs… people come in all sizes and it is rare for any coach seat to provide a comfortable and pleasant travel experience,” says Peggy Howell, Vice Chairman and Public Relations Director of National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). “The responsibility of serving customers of all sizes is the cost of doing business in today’s modern world and that cost should not come at the expense of any one group of individuals.”

Mass charges

Many airlines have responded to the growing obesity epidemic by insisting passengers of size buy two seats to ensure safety and comfort. Sometimes the airline will offer a refund if there was at least one other empty seat on the flight.

But as of late a new fee has been created. Samoa Air is charging by weight (which has become known as a "fat tax"). On top of all the other additional charges that appear to be creeping in, from checked baggage fees to in-flight drinks, is charging heavy customers an extra fee another profit ploy? And should added charges really extend to how much a person weighs?

At first glance, the fat tax issue sounds discriminatory, but some argue that this is purely down to numbers. The heavier a plane is, the more fuel it burns through. And airlines are always looking for ways to travel lighter.

One clue to the effect of in-flight loads comes from pilots. For 75 years, pilots have had to haul 40-pound Jeppesen flight manuals aboard every working flight, but now most US airlines have spent millions of dollars converting these heavy bags to electronic flight bags — in other words, iPads. “Between two pilots, that’s 80 pounds per takeoff,” says Kurt Doerflein, a veteran mechanic for a major US carrier. “At over 100,000 commercial flights a day in the world, that adds up.” For instance, American Airlines has said the switch would save the airline $1.2 million a year in fuel costs.

As well as charging customers by weight, which Samoa Air insists is not intended to create shame, it also offers an XL (extra large) row that has a more comfortable seat for larger people. It measures 12 to 14 inches wider than the traditional seat.

Chris Langton, Chief Executive Officer of Samoa Air says the pay-by-weight system isn't going anywhere. "Aircraft only have weight to sell and people will recognise that immediately," he says. "So they will ask questions as to why should light-weight people pay for heavy-weight people, and why they get charged for 'excess weight' with excessive fees."

In other words, the argument is whether it is fair that a 150-pound person is charged for their 50-pound bag, when a 300-pound person with a carry-on isn't charged anything extra. "As we say, 'a kilo is a kilo is a kilo,'" Langton says. "So it has nothing to do with the condition of the weight."

However, Peggy Howell of NAAFA argues that obesity is an illness, and that obese people should be entitled to having certain rights protected.

"We question the legality of the discriminatory policy and whether it violates the Air Carrier Access Act governing the treatment of passengers with disabilities," she says. "The American Medical Association (AMA) recently declared obesity a disease, which should make fat passengers a protected class."

Howell points out that the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA) addressed this issue in 2009, and issued a 'one-person, one-fare' ruling covering passengers with disabilities. Those passengers include ones who are 'clinically obese' and who cannot fit into a single seat. (Clinically obese is defined as having a BMI of 35 or higher.)

Cost of weight

What isn't fully clear yet is how much passenger weight actually drives up costs compared to other factors like fuel, labour, aircraft ownership and maintenance.

“On the surface level, a heavier passenger does increase the overall weight onboard an aircraft — therefore increasing fuel burn and cost to the airline,” says Luke Jensen, a researcher at MIT International Center for Air Transportation. “The actual difference in fuel cost varies by flight, but rough order of magnitude, the difference is relatively small. On a typical 737 flight from Boston to Denver for example, a 50-pound weight increase would increase fuel consumption by about $3 to $5.”

He says that it might be “fair” to weigh each passenger and his or her bag, and then charge them accordingly — he says it could be less than a $10 difference between smaller and larger passengers on most domestic flights.

“Given that body weight is driven by both genetic and behavioural factors, the purely economic argument loses heft,” says Jensen. “The airline is selling a common-carriage seat, not a payload allocation — and common carriage implies that tickets are made available without respect to race or gender.”

He does point to one key exception: that in some cases, the aircraft’s weight distribution affects safety of the flight, especially on smaller aircrafts.

“Large jets are also subject to limitations in weight and loading, but normally have larger engineering margins,” says Jensen. “In cases where the airline deems that weighing passengers is necessary for safe operations, I think it is certainly justified.”

Seating plans

Ultimately, the solution will be to start at the very beginning: with the design of the aircraft cabin itself. “There is a long way to go,” admits Langton. “Boeing and Airbus and other aircraft manufacturers will need to redesign the inside of an aircraft in order to accommodate in both pitch and width so that people get what they must pay for: weight.”

But some ideas are on the drawing board. In 2015, German IT and engineering company SII

Deutschland’s SANTO Seat won the Crystal Cabin Award in the category “Passenger Comfort Hardware”. The seat size is one-and-a-half times the width of the average airline seat, and its objective is to safely accommodate passengers travelling with toddlers and overweight passengers in the rear of the aircraft cabin where the fuselage narrows.

Another possible option is a "reconfigurable passenger bench seat" by Airbus' Sven Taubert and Florian Schmidt. The bench would be flex space that can accommodate larger people of several peoples, such a family with young children. The patent is pending.

For now, there may be a surprisingly simple solution. There are spots that people can seek out on existing planes to try and secure the most space.

“With respect to seat width, something that most people don’t realise is the seat width is different based on the location in the cabin,” says Doerflein. “For example, the first five rows and the last five rows are much narrower.” His tip: “The roomiest seats are in the middle of the aircraft.”

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UNDER THE MACROSCOPE

Under the Macroscope is a weekly summary of what's happening around the world and what's worth pondering. Stay on top of international and local news with this bulletin produced by the Raffles Economics and Current Affairs Society.