

UNDER THE MACROSCOPE



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South Korean scandal: Samsung Chief suspect

W2

The Pizzagate conspiracy

John Lewis: Trump slammed for attack on rights icon - BBC News



Congressman Lewis said he did not regard Mr Trump as a legitimate president

Politicians, entertainers and others have come to the defence of a US civil rights campaigner, Congressman John Lewis, who has become embroiled in a row with President-elect Donald Trump.

Mr Trump tweeted that Mr Lewis was "all talk" and should focus on his constituents, after he said Mr Trump was not a legitimate president.

But Mr Lewis' supporters reacted with anger, saying he was a hero and icon.

Mr Lewis was a leading figure in the 1960s civil rights movement.

He is the last surviving speaker from the 1963 March on Washington, led by Martin Luther King.

The row came as civil rights activists led by Rev Al Sharpton began a week of protests ahead of Mr Trump's inauguration on 20 January.

Several thousand protesters braved near-freezing temperatures to march to the Martin Luther King Jr Memorial in Washington DC, chanting "No justice, no peace".

In a separate development on Saturday, African American Broadway star Jennifer Holliday pulled out of performing at the inauguration after pressure from followers, many of them from the LGBT community.

Holliday, who has sung for both Republican and Democrat presidents, apologised for her "lapse of judgement" and said she did not realise her participation would be seen as expressing support for Mr Trump.

Media caption John Lewis is the last surviving speaker from the 1963 March on Washington
Mr Lewis, a Democrat, said on Friday he would not attend the inauguration on the grounds that he did not see the Republican as a legitimate president.

"I think the Russians participated in helping this man get elected," he told NBC's Meet the Press.

"And they helped destroy the candidacy of [Democrat] Hillary Clinton."

Mr Trump responded [in tweets on Saturday](#): "Congressman John Lewis should spend more time on fixing and helping his district, which is in horrible shape and falling apart (not to mention crime-infested) rather than falsely complaining about the election results. All talk, talk, talk - no action or results. Sad!"

Georgia's 5th congressional district

- Represented by John Lewis since 1987
 - Includes almost 75% of the city of Atlanta and some affluent suburbs
 - About 60% of constituents are African American
 - Crime and unemployment rates higher than national average
 - Contains most of the state's higher education institutions
 - Contains several Fortune 500 company headquarters, including Coca Cola and Delta Airline
-

But Mr Lewis' supporters were quick to rally round.

California Senator Kamala Harris, a Democrat, said it was wrong to treat him in this way.

"John Lewis is an icon of the Civil Rights Movement who is fearless in the pursuit of justice and equality," she tweeted. "He deserves better than this."

Others mentioned Mr Lewis' bravery and the fact that the exchange had taken place on the eve of Martin Luther King Day, on 16 January.

Many of them linked to photos of the two men, or to the 1965 so-called Bloody Sunday march in Alabama, in which Mr Lewis received a fractured skull as the protest was violently broken up by police.

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Twitter

Republican Senator Ben Sasse tweeted his support, saying Mr Lewis' "talk" had changed the world. However, he said he disagreed with his decision to boycott the inauguration, adding: "It isn't about a man. It is a celebration of peaceful transfer of power."

US visa-free residency for Cubans ends - BBC News



Until now, Cubans who reached the US got residency

President Barack Obama has ended the longstanding policy that grants residency to Cubans who arrive in the US without visas.

The 20-year-old policy allows Cuban migrants who reach US soil to become legal permanent residents after a year.

In exchange, Havana has agreed to start accepting Cubans who are turned away or deported from the US.

Many Cubans in the US say Washington is rewarding a regime which has failed to address human rights concerns.

But President Obama is trying to continue the thawing of relations with Cuba in his final days of office.

He said: "With this change we will continue to welcome Cubans as we welcome immigrants from other nations, consistent with our laws."

Cubans in the United States

- There were more than two million people of Cuban ancestry living in the United States in 2013, about 68% of whom lived in Florida
- The number of Cubans entering the US has increased significantly since President Obama began his rapprochement with the island's government. In the 2014 fiscal year, 24,278 Cubans arrived in the US. Nearly double that number - 43,159 - arrived in 2015, and more than that arrived last year
- Public opinion polls suggest that recent arrivals and Cuban-Americans born in the US are more supportive of warming US-Cuba relations than those who arrived before 1980

Sources: Pew Research Center; Cuban Research Institute

In a statement on state television, the Cuban government praised the move as "an important step in advancing relations" between the US and Cuba.

It is unclear where relations between the two countries will go now.

Mr Obama's successor, President-elect Donald Trump, has taken a much tougher stance and could reverse the change.

Until now, the so-called "wet foot, dry foot" policy has applied solely to Cubans, tens of thousands of whom reached US soil last year, including by land.

Thousands of other Cubans are intercepted at sea every year by the US coast guard before they can get a dry foot on land.

Immigrants from other countries who come to the US without a visa could be arrested and deported.

An extraordinary period of change: analysis by Will Grant, BBC News, Havana

There have been two key parts to Washington's policy towards Cuba for decades - a carrot and a stick. The stick is the US economic embargo on the island - that can't be removed without the approval of Congress.

But the carrot that has been dangled before Cubans is a special immigration right known as "wet foot, dry foot". Under that policy, Cubans who manage to get a single dry foot on US soil have the right to residency without a visa and can apply for citizenship.

The Cuban government blames the measure for the brain drain on the island and for encouraging thousands of people to risk their lives each year in attempts to make it to the US on rickety rafts.

In the US itself, it has also provoked anger among other Latin-American lobby groups who feel the policy unfairly favours Cubans and grants them an immigration status well above that of other Latinos.

The latest wave of Cubans trying to reach the US are economic migrants like any other in the region, they argue, and not political refugees.

With the recent thaw in relations between Washington and Havana, it always seemed likely that the policy had its days numbered - why provide an extra incentive to Cuba's people to escape if the communist island is no longer your enemy?

The Obama administration decision to remove the long-standing measure is probably its last act in an extraordinary period of change under the outgoing president.

'Bold move'

Felice Gorordo, a Cuban American from Miami and a former Obama White House staffer, told the BBC this was an important step in the normalisation process and a bold move from the president.

"Cuba will forever be an integral part of President Obama's legacy and I think he wanted to leave office knowing he made as much progress as he could to help define a new chapter with the Cuban people."

Florida Senator Bill Nelson said: "I believe changing this outdated policy - in order to be fair to all and also to prevent people from abusing the system - is the right thing to do."

Media captionWATCH: How Obama's olive branch caused a Cuban exodus

But Miami Mayor Tomas Regalado, a Cuban exile, blasted Obama for giving President Castro a parting gift.

"This is just a going-away present from Obama to Raul Castro," he said.

Mr Regalado does not believe ending the policy will slow the flow of Cubans coming to the US. All it does, he says, is throw the process into question. "The question now is what will happen when the Cubans arrive in the [Florida] Keys and cross the border?"

South Korea scandal: Samsung chief Lee Jae-yong a suspect - BBC News



Lee Jae-yong has already been quizzed by politicians over the scandal at a parliamentary hearing

Samsung heir-apparent Lee Jae-yong is to be interviewed as a suspect in a corruption scandal surrounding the impeached South Korean president.

The firm is accused of giving donations to non-profit foundations operated by Choi Soon-sil, a confidante of President Park Geun-hye.

The donations were allegedly made in exchange for political support of a controversial merger.

Mr Lee will face special prosecutors on Thursday, officials said.

Samsung declined to comment.

Mr Lee is currently vice-chairman of Samsung Electronics. But since his father, Lee Kun-hee, suffered a heart attack in 2014, he is considered de facto boss of the entire Samsung Group conglomerate.

Politicians voted on 9 December to impeach President Park over the scandal - a decision South Korea's constitutional court has six months to uphold or overturn. Until then she remains formally president but stripped of her powers, which are handed to the prime minister, a presidential appointee.

- - Grandson of Samsung founder Lee Byung-chul, son of current chairman Lee Kun-hee.
- - Aged 48, he's spent his entire career in the company and is vice chairman of Samsung Electronics.
- - Last year was nominated to join the board of Samsung Electronics - an appointment confirmed on 27 October.
- - Widely expected to take overall control of Samsung once his 74-year-old father steps down.
- - Critics say his position on the board is due to his birth, not his business experience.

The claims circle around a merger between the electronics giant's construction arm, Samsung C&T, and an affiliate firm, Cheil Industries.

Prosecutors allege that Samsung gave €2.8m euros (\$3.1m; £2.5m) to a company co-owned by Ms Choi and her daughter, in return for Ms Park's support for the deal.

Lee Jae-yong has already given evidence to politicians over the scandal, but this is the first time he will be quizzed as a suspect by investigators.

At the parliamentary hearing in December Samsung admitted giving a total of 20.4bn won (£16m; \$17.46m) to the two foundations, but denied seeking favours.

And Mr Lee also confirmed the firm gave a horse and money to help the equestrian career of Ms Choi's daughter, Chung Yoo-ra, something he said he now regretted.

Earlier this week two other Samsung executives were interviewed by the special prosecutors, but were treated as witnesses rather than suspects.

Ms Park's position began to unravel in October last year when details of her friendship with Ms Choi began to emerge. They included revelations that the president had allowed her old friend - who holds no government role - to edit political speeches.

Since then, hundreds of thousands of protestors have gathered every weekend to demand Ms Park stands down.

Ms Park denies wrongdoing but has apologised for the way she managed her relationship with Ms Choi, who also denies committing criminal offences.

Ms Choi has been charged with coercion and attempted fraud.

The saga of 'Pizzagate': The fake story that shows how conspiracy theories spread - BBC News



Comet Pizza

No victim has come forward. There's no investigation. And physical evidence? That doesn't exist either.

But thousands of people are convinced that a paedophilia ring involving people at the highest levels of the Democratic Party is operating out of a Washington pizza restaurant.

The story riveted fringes of Twitter - nearly a million messages were sent last month using the term "pizzagate".

One man even travelled hundreds of miles to the restaurant with a gun and opened fire, claiming he was there to "self investigate" the claims.

So how did this fake story take hold amongst alt-right Trump supporters and other Hillary Clinton opponents?

Let's start with the facts.

In early November, as Wikileaks steadily released piles of emails from Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta, one contact caught the attention of prankster sites and people on the paranoid fringes.

James Alefantis is the owner of Comet Ping Pong, a pizza restaurant in Washington. He's also a big Democratic Party supporter and raised money for both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. He was once in a relationship with David Brock, an influential liberal operative.

Alefantis - who's never met Clinton - appeared in the Podesta emails in connection with the fundraisers.

And from these thin threads, an enormous trove of conspiracy fiction was spun.

Users of 4chan, a message board known for free speech, extreme content and trollish behaviour, began posting speculation and supposed connections gleaned from internet searches. They trawled Alefantis' Instagram feed for pictures of children and the modern art which lines his restaurant's walls, and dreamt up a paedophile sex ring involving prominent politicians and political donors.

Soon there were protesters outside of Comet Ping Pong. Alefantis even invited some of them in - they filmed the encounter and put it on YouTube.

"They ignore basic truths," Alefantis tells BBC Trending. For instance, the conspiracy supposedly is run out of the restaurant's basement. "We don't even have a basement."

"Sometimes an innocent picture of a child in a basket is just an innocent picture of a child in a basket and not proof of a child sex trafficking ring," he says.

The conspiracy theory bubbled up from 4chan onto the mainstream internet when a Reddit user posted a long document with all of the "evidence" several days before the US election. It first appeared on a section of the site popular with Donald Trump supporters from the extremist white nationalist alt-right.

Alefantis, along with Comet Ping Pong employees and others, started to get threatening messages. He locked his Instagram account.

The fake story remained the preserve of 4chan and alt-right Reddit until mid-November, when Turkish pro-government media outlets suddenly took an intense interest.

Their tweets were in Turkish, but they used the English hashtag: #Pizzagate.

As outlined by Efe Kerem Sozeri of the Daily Dot, supporters of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan cottoned onto the tale as a way to accuse opponents of hypocrisy.

Those opponents, the logic goes, had been sharply critical of Erdogan following the revelation of a real child abuse scandal at a Turkish government-linked foundation. So why weren't they similarly outraged about "pizzagate"?

The rumour also provided a distraction from another controversy: Erdogan's party also recently proposed a controversial draft bill that would have given amnesty to child abusers if they married their victims. It was later withdrawn after protests.

Sozeri says liberal and secular opponents of Erdogan, already sensitive to mistreatment of children, also picked up on the rumours.

The Turkish tweets boosted "pizzagate" to whole new levels of prominence online. Around the same time, Donald Trump backed away from talk of an investigation of his defeated opponent over her use of a private email server while she was Secretary of State.

On Twitter alt-right activists, conservative journalists, and others who had urged Clinton's prosecution over the emails - took up the "pizzagate" cause with renewed vigour.

Despite the complete lack of physical evidence or victim testimony, there are reasons why the hardcore conspiracy theorists are particularly sensitive to allegations of child sex abuse.

It's known, for instance that Bill Clinton and Donald Trump flew on the private plane of convicted child abuser Jeffery Epstein. Tony Podesta, the brother of the Clinton aide whose emails were hacked, was a friend of Dennis Hastert, a Republican politician who earlier this year was sentenced to 15 months in prison, and has admitted abusing boys. The Jimmy Savile scandal in the UK has featured in speculation as an example of a serial child abuser getting away with his crimes.

Viren Swami, professor of social psychology at Anglia Ruskin University, says "pizzagate" might well be an example of a trend in a hyper-partisan America, where conspiracy theories become fodder for political factions.

"What's happening in the US over the last year or two is that conspiracy theorising is being deployed as a political weapon," he says. "And that's a very big change in the way that conspiracy narratives are being used."

The saga has prompted debunkers by the New York Times and Fox News, among many others, but no factual news story has slowed the torrent of Tweets from the true believers.

"There is some evidence that presenting critical information can reduce belief in a theory, but only among people who have not made up their minds yet," Swami says. "For the people who have already made up their minds, it probably won't change anything."

Other stories have fuelled the rumours and prompted claims of a cover up. For instance, Reddit deleted a "pizzagate" thread - the page now reads "we don't want witchhunts on our site" - and its CEO admitted altering posts made by Donald Trump supporters.

Alefantis says threats against him, his staff and his customers have reduced somewhat since the height of the social media flurry, but that he is still wary of the conspiracy mongers.

"It's very scary to be under a social media attack, a lot of threats are death threats or serious continuing threats by very impassioned people," he told Trending. He's reported the threats to the FBI and local police.

"I consider this to be a politically orchestrated attack," he says. But it hasn't discouraged him from continuing to be involved in politics: "I like to push back because I consider these threats against me, the artists on our walls, the musicians who play here and my customers here as an assault on first amendment rights and my right to freedom of expression."

Meanwhile, on 4chan, where the whole saga started, while some users continued to promote the rumours, others were lamenting what had happened.

"I'm sorry to say this guys but it was a mistake," said one recent post. "Not every conspiracy theory is true."

"Moral panics are not something new and you're just experiencing a new cycle of it," said another. "You guys have a bunch of creepy pictures and you're finding symbols and other circumstantial bunk... You guys have absolutely nothing and it's a little embarrassing that you guys are on a rabid witch hunt based on this evidence."

"Are you guys even aware of how stupid all of this is."

Glenn Greenwald urges press to be skeptical of intel report

Journalist Glenn Greenwald said Sunday that the recently released intelligence report on Russian hacking contained no "convincing evidence," and urged journalists to be skeptical of US intelligence claims.

After CNN's Brian Stelter asked him to lay out his case, the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter made reference to "critical lessons" the press should learn from the past when it comes to trusting government information.

"The same lesson in 2002 when a group of bipartisan senators assured the nation that the intelligence community convinced them that Saddam (Hussein) has weapons of mass destruction ... and the same lesson we learned in 2013, when, just months before the (Edward) Snowden reporting, James Clapper, Obama's top national security official, lied to the faces of the country when he said that he wants to assure everybody that the NSA doesn't collect data," he said.

"The lesson is we don't blindly and uncritically accept the claims of the intelligence community, especially provocative claims about a foreign adversary, without seeing convincing evidence presented by them that those claims are true," Greenwald added.

As for the US intelligence report released Friday, "we absolutely have not seen that in this case," he said. Much of the information on the hacking remains classified and was not released to the public.

"You're not obligated through patriotism or decency to simply accept what the CIA says," Grennwald said.

"On the key claims that Putin directed this hacking and that he did so to elect Donald Trump, there is no evidence for it ... just CIA assertions over and over, and that just simply isn't enough," Greenwald said.

Seizure of SAF vehicles shouldn't be politicised, says Vivian Balakrishnan

He says Singapore has been assured issue will be handled through proper legal process

Singapore has been assured that the seizure of its military vehicles in Hong Kong will be handled through proper legal process, and the issue should not be politicised, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan told Parliament yesterday.

He was responding to MPs' questions about how the seizure of nine Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Terrex infantry carriers has affected Singapore's relations with China.

Noting that both Hong Kong and China have stated that the matter would be handled in accordance with Hong Kong's laws, he said: "Let's avoid politicising this and let's avoid megaphone diplomacy. Let's give this incident every opportunity to resolve itself in, I hope, an appropriate and sensible way."

This was a point he repeated several times in the House, as he urged MPs to "have some patience and give this matter time to resolve".

The SAF vehicles were on their way back to Singapore after a military exercise in Taiwan when they were seized in Hong Kong in November, and have not been returned.

Shipping SAF equipment using commercial carriers

The Singapore Government has asserted its sovereign rights over the nine Terrex infantry carriers which were seized in Hong Kong on Nov 23, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said yesterday. This means the armoured vehicles cannot be legally detained, Dr Ng said, a point which has been conveyed to Hong Kong on several occasions over the past two months. Hong Kong has responded, saying that investigations are ongoing, and the matter will be handled according to the law, he told Parliament.

COST EFFICIENCY

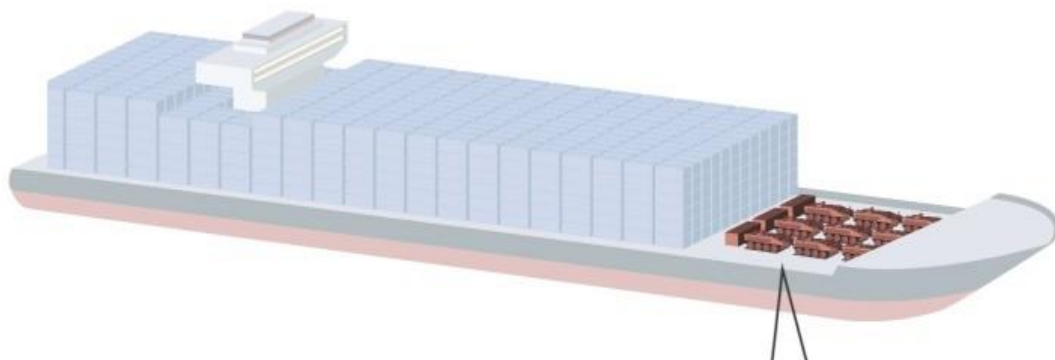
- Using commercial shipping is a value-for-money option and the SAF has done so without incident for **over 30 years**.
- **For sensitive SAF military platforms**, the SAF will apply added precautions or not use commercial shipping companies altogether.

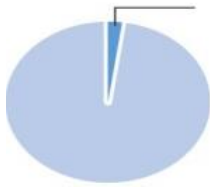
8 Number of countries that the SAF ships military platforms to/from for training

70 Number of shipments of SAF military platforms each year

More than 700

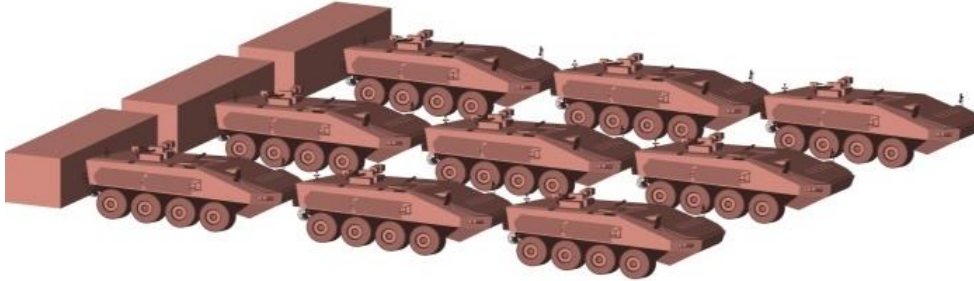
Number of SAF military platforms shipped each year using commercial carriers to Asia, Australia, Europe and the US for overseas training





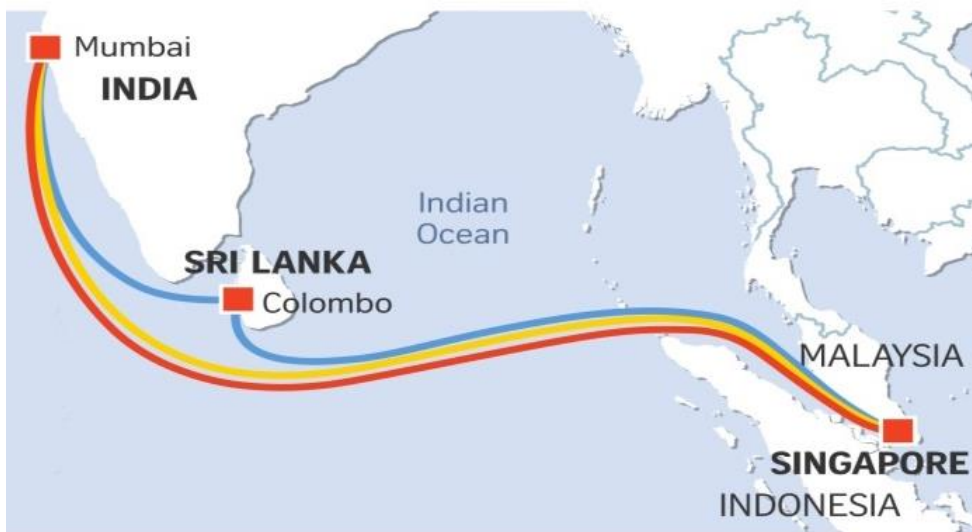
Less than 2%

Percentage of cargo space the detained shipmen of nine Terrex Infantry Carrier Vehicles and three containers of equipment took up on the commercial ship



COST EFFECTIVENESS

There are alternatives to using existing commercial shipping routes that go through multiple ports. However, the difference in monetary and opportunity costs is high. The scenario below depicts SAF shipping military platforms to and from India for training purposes.



Cost of shipping SAF military platforms

Existing multi-port route	■ 1 time
Direct route	■■■ Up to 3 times
Republic of Singapore Navy vessels	■■■■■ Up to 5 times

Source: MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Dr Balakrishnan said Singapore's relationship with China is a longstanding, multifaceted and mutually beneficial one, and should not be seen as a "zero-sum game".

"We believe in interdependence characterised by open, inclusive regional architecture that promotes collaboration and win-win outcomes," he said.

Mr Low Thia Kiang (Aljunied GRC) had questioned if China had respect for the law, saying if that were the case, the incident would not have happened. He also asked if China's economic progress has "made her arrogant and aggressive and become a big bully".

The minister said Singapore has long been a firm believer that a strong China that is "deeply engaged with the rest of the world and economically integrated" would bring enormous benefits. Citing China's achievements such as lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty, he said these developments will bring opportunities but also "issues to resolve from time to time".

He said it was a reality of realpolitik that big countries would sometimes pressure other countries to "act entirely in line with their own national interests", adding that Singapore has encountered such expectations from time to time.

"However, it is important for us to conduct our foreign policy as a sovereign, independent nation, and not be seen as acting at the behest of any other country," he said.

This is essential to Singapore's international credibility, standing and relevance to its foreign partners and friends, he added.

Singapore has to maintain its emphasis on upholding international law, he said, as a rules-based international order is crucial for the survival and independence of small states.

Mr Zaqy Mohamad (Chua Chu Kang GRC) asked about the Chinese state-owned media's portrayal of the Terrex issue. The tabloid Global Times said in a November editorial that the vehicles should be confiscated and melted down.

Dr Balakrishnan said there was no need for "megaphone diplomacy", adding: "I don't believe in... conducting affairs in a way which generates more heat than light."

He stressed that Singapore's relations with China and interactions with Hong Kong and Taiwan are "based strictly on our 'one China' policy". "We have consistently abided by this policy and the understandings reached when we established diplomatic relations with China in 1990. And we will continue to do so."

He called on all MPs to stand with the Government on its foreign policy. "This is one of those occasions for us to learn the right lessons, to stand together, because, ultimately, foreign policy begins at home."



Under the Macroscopic 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.

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