

The Economist

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Politics this week

The world this week May 28th 2020 edition

Protests erupted in **Hong Kong** after an announcement that the National People's Congress, China's rubber-stamp parliament, would impose a national-security law on the territory. The demonstrations were also fuelled by a proposal in the city's legislature to make insulting China's national anthem a crime. Mike Pompeo, America's secretary of state, said that the "facts on the ground" showed that Hong Kong was no longer autonomous. This could pave the way for American action, including possibly treating the territory the same as the rest of China for trade and other purposes. See [leader](#).

At the opening of the National People's Congress in Beijing, the government abandoned a ^{GDP} target for the first time. The economy shrank by 6.8% in the first quarter.

A border dispute between **India** and **China** appeared to intensify. China reportedly sent soldiers and military vehicles onto land that India deems

Indian, where they dug defensive positions. A Chinese state mouthpiece asserted a new territorial claim.

The **Japanese** government lifted restrictions in the last remaining prefectures under lockdown. It also unveiled a second stimulus, worth \$1trn.

Rodrigo Duterte, the president of the **Philippines**, said schools would not reopen until a vaccine for covid-19 is available. That could mean a year or more of subpar education.

Four policemen were sacked in **Minneapolis** after a black man died while being restrained during an arrest. Video showed one officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck to keep him on the ground. Protesters later clashed with police.

The **University of California**, America's foremost public-college system, said it would phase out the use of ^{SAT} scores when deciding whom to admit. A faculty task-force had concluded that the tests were excellent predictors of academic success. But critics say they are unfair on those who cannot afford prepping courses.

Days after he began a new term in office **Binyamin Netanyahu**, the prime minister of **Israel**, stood trial on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. He has denied wrongdoing and has called the justice system politically biased. Mr Netanyahu also told members of his Likud party that extending Israeli sovereignty over parts of the occupied West Bank was a priority for his new government.

America accused Russia of sending fighter jets to **Libya** to support Russian mercenaries fighting on behalf of Khalifa Haftar, a rebellious warlord. General Haftar launched an offensive on the capital, Tripoli, last year but has been pushed back by forces aligned with the internationally recognised Government of National Accord, which is supported by Turkey.

Authorities in **Tanzania** charged a comedian, Idris Sultan, after a video on social media showed him laughing at a photograph of the president, John Magufuli, in an oversize suit. Mr Sultan was initially charged with

“bullying” the president. In court this was changed to using someone else’s mobile-phone SIM card.

Electoral officials in **Burundi** declared the ruling party’s candidate, Evariste Ndayishimiye, the winner in a presidential vote. Opposition parties say the election was rigged. Many dead people reportedly voted. See [article](#).

More **lockdown restrictions** were eased in England. From mid-June, all shops will be allowed to reopen; outdoor markets from June 1st. The government also announced a UK-wide quarantine on international arrivals from June 8th, including Britons returning from abroad. Ireland, which is in Britain’s common travel area, is exempt.

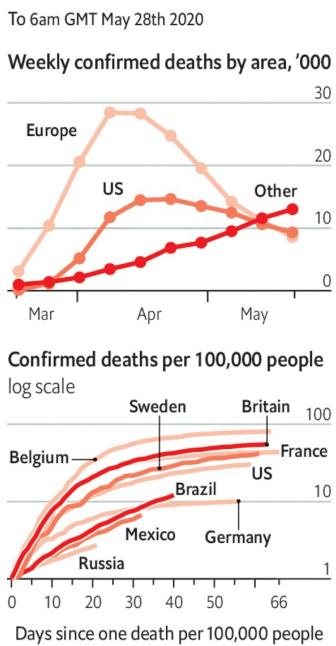
By contrast, other European countries started to **reopen their borders**. Germany said it would lift warnings and allow its citizens to travel abroad from June 15th; it is pushing neighbouring countries to agree on common standards for social distancing. Greece and Italy will allow tourism from June, and Spain from July 1st. Cyprus offered to repay some holiday costs to tourists if they contract covid-19 while visiting the country.

The **European Commission** proposed a new seven-year budget for the EU that includes a €750bn (\$825bn) post-covid recovery fund. The fund would distribute to member states €500bn in grants and €250bn in loans, and would be financed by borrowing based on guarantees provided by national governments. The plan builds on ideas proposed by France and Germany, but Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, the “frugal four”, are sceptical.

A judge on **British Columbia’s** Supreme Court ruled that extradition proceedings brought by the United States against Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei, a Chinese telecoms giant, could continue. The decision means she cannot go home. Her arrest in Vancouver in December 2018 provoked a diplomatic row between Canada and China.

Two women became the first same-sex couple to marry in **Costa Rica**, immediately after it became legal. The ceremony was shown on a three-hour television broadcast about marriage equality.

Coronavirus briefs



Countries in the Americas are the new centre of the pandemic, according to the ^{WHO}. Infections and deaths in **Mexico** have doubled over the past two weeks. **Brazil** now has the world's second-highest number of cases, prompting the United States (more than 100,000 deaths) to ban non-American travellers who have been to the country.

Russia has also reported sharp increases in confirmed cases and deaths over two weeks; the actual numbers are thought to be much higher.

Spain revised its death toll down by more than 1,900 because of “duplicates” and wrongly attributed deaths.

A test-and-trace system was introduced in **England**.

India resumed domestic flights, amid much confusion at airports about whether planes would be allowed to land in certain states.

This article appeared in the The world this week section of the print edition under the headline "Politics this week"



Business this week

The world this week May 28th 2020 edition

The German government offered to bail out **Lufthansa**, with an equity injection of €6bn (\$6.6bn) and loans worth €3bn. The government, which would own a fifth of the airline, will nominate two people to sit on the company's board. The board, however, initially refused to back the deal, after the EU required Lufthansa to give up slots at Frankfurt and Munich airports. Ryanair, Europe's biggest discount carrier, said it would appeal against the bail-out (it is also protesting against the rescue of Air France-KLM), arguing that it would "strengthen Lufthansa's monopoly-like grip on the German air travel market". See [article](#).

Macron in the driver's seat

In France the government said it would supply €8bn (\$8.8bn) in aid to the country's **carmakers**. Emmanuel Macron, the French president, hopes the money will "transform" the industry, providing incentives to produce electric and hybrid vehicles and increasing subsidies to motorists who buy

greener cars. Some said the deal was merely old-fashioned dirigisme. The government is also finalising a separate €5bn loan for Renault. See [article](#).

Aston Martin shook up its management team, and said Andy Palmer had agreed to step down as chief executive. The British maker of sports cars had a disappointing ^{IPO} in 2018; its share price has fallen by 90% since then. The changes in leadership were driven by Lawrence Stroll, a businessman and part-owner of a Formula One racing team, who put together a consortium to rescue Aston Martin earlier this year, becoming its chairman. The new ^{CEO} will be Tobias Moers, who is currently in charge of Mercedes-^{AMG}. He starts his new job in August.

The pandemic claimed another high-profile business failure, when **Hertz** filed for bankruptcy protection in America. The car-hire company, which also owns the Dollar and Thrifty brands, saw its sales collapse when business travel and tourism came to a virtual halt. With a debt burden of at least \$17bn Hertz had been struggling before the outbreak.

Uber decided to cut a quarter of its staff in India as part of the restructuring of its business that it recently announced. It is also closing its office in Singapore, as it considers a broader retrenchment of its ride-hailing services in Asia.

Amazon was reportedly in talks to buy **Zoox**, a startup that is developing electric-powered robotaxis. Amazon's interest in autonomous-vehicle technology so far has focused on how it might enhance the delivery of its goods.

Latin America's largest airline and its affiliates in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru filed for bankruptcy protection because of covid-19. **Latam** has its headquarters in Santiago, Chile's capital, and also operates subsidiaries in Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. It filed for bankruptcy protection in New York, where it has a listing.

China's securities regulator sharply criticised legislation in America that would require companies to delist from American exchanges if they do not open their accounts to national audit rules. A bill passed the American Senate recently in the wake of an accounting scandal involving Luckin

Coffee, a Chinese Starbucks, and is to be reviewed by the House of Representatives. But China's regulator warned that the measures target China, have "clearly departed from professional considerations" and were "politicising" securities.

Buoyed by the further easing of lockdowns and an unexpected rise in American consumer confidence, **stockmarkets** retained their fizz of the past few weeks. The ^{S&P 500} closed above the 3,000 mark for the first time since early March. Share prices in American banks have started to recover. JPMorgan Chase's stock is up by 21% since mid-March, Bank of America's by 25% and Citigroup's by 43%.

Back to work

The **New York Stock Exchange** partially reopened its floors to traders. Around 100 were allowed to return if they promised not to use public transport to get there and not to sue the exchange if they contract covid-19. The traders were allocated desks behind screens and given strict instructions on social distancing.

Retail sales in Britain plunged by 18.1% in April from March, the largest drop on record since the data began in 1988. Sales of alcohol continued to rise.

Carluccio's, an Italian-dining chain that was one of the first casualties of Britain's lockdown, sold 30 of its restaurants to the group that owns **Giraffe**, which serves an eclectic menu.

Warner Music launched plans for an ^{IPO} on the Nasdaq exchange. The music company's vast stable of artists includes Ed Sheeran and Bruno Mars. It used to be part of what is now WarnerMedia until it was bought out by Sir Len Blavatnik's Access Industries in 2011. If it is in tune with market sentiment, the listing could value the company at up to \$13bn, well above the \$3.3bn that Sir Len paid for it.

This article appeared in the The world this week section of the print edition under the headline "Business this week"



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Kal

KAL's cartoon

The world this week May 28th 2020 edition

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Leaders

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The American way How the world's most powerful country is handling covid-19

Contrary to what many Americans think, the death rate in America is about the same as in Europe

[Leaders](#) May 28th 2020 edition

Editor's note: Some of our covid-19 coverage is free for readers of The Economist Today, our daily [newsletter](#). For more stories and our pandemic tracker, see our [coronavirus hub](#)

AMERICA HAS passed a grim milestone: 100,000 deaths from a novel coronavirus that began to spread half a year and half a world away. Many Americans think their president has handled the epidemic disastrously, that their country has been hit uniquely hard and that there is a simple causal relationship between the two. The 100,000, which does not include excess deaths mistakenly attributed to other causes, is higher than any other country's. It has routinely been compared with the 60,000 American casualties in the Vietnam war. A Trump Death Clock in Times Square

purports to show how many lives the president's ineptitude has cost: as we went to press it stood at 60,262. Yet this widespread conviction that America has failed because of Donald Trump is not supported by the numbers. Or, at least, not yet.

The official death rate in America is about the same as in the European Union—which also has excess deaths, but has less erratic leaders and universal health care. Overall, America has fared a bit worse than Switzerland and a bit better than the Netherlands, neither of which is a failed state. New York has been hit about as hard as Lombardy in northern Italy; California acted early and is currently similar to Germany; so far, rural states have, like central Europe, been spared the worst. This reflects two things, both of which will matter now that America is reopening before it has the virus fully under control.

The first is that covid-19, when it first hit, displayed an indifference to presidents and their plans. Around the world it has killed in large, dense and connected cities like New York, London and Paris, and where people are crammed together, including care homes, slaughterhouses and prisons. In some countries, including America, testing was snarled up in red tape.

Having seen what was happening in China, Mr Trump could have acted sooner—as Taiwan, Singapore and Vietnam did. He has failed to do things ordinarily expected of an American president in a crisis, such as giving clear government advice or co-ordinating a federal response. Instead, he has touted quack remedies and spent the days when America passed its sombre milestone spreading suspicion of the voting system and accusing a television host of committing a murder that never happened. All this is reprehensible and it may have been costly. Yet, tempting as it is to conclude that the president's failures bear most of the blame for covid-19's spread through America, the reality is more complicated (see [Briefing](#)).

That leads to the second feature of the country's response to covid-19. The virus was always going to be hard on a population with high levels of poverty, obesity and diseases such as diabetes, especially among minorities (see [Lexington](#)). But, to a remarkable degree, other layers of government have adapted around the hole where the president should have been. The federal system has limited the damage, thanks to its decentralised decision-

making. Lockdowns vary by state, city and county. California responded as soon as it saw cases. In the north-east governors largely ignored the White House and got on with coping with the disease, earning the Republican governors of Maryland and Massachusetts the president's enmity, but high approval ratings. In Florida, though the governor was reluctant to impose a lockdown, county officials went ahead and did so anyway.

Contrary to demands for nationwide rules, this is a strength not a weakness, and will become more so as the pandemic runs its course. In the best-organised states, which have built up testing capacity, it helps ensure that flare-ups can be spotted quickly and rules adjusted accordingly. Because each region is different, that is more efficient than a nationwide approach.

One way democracies can deal with the virus is to draw on reserves of trust. People must behave in ways that protect fellow citizens whom they have never met, even if they themselves are feeling fine. Americans trust their local officials far more than the president or the federal government. And when it comes to public health those local officials have real power. Without this balancing feature, America might today look like Brazil, where a president with a similar love of hydroxychloroquine and distaste for face masks is wreaking havoc (see [article](#)).

If the public-health response in the United States so far matches Europe's, its economic response to the virus may turn out better. True, the unemployment rate in America is 15%, double that in the EU. Yet in Europe most governments are protecting jobs that may no longer exist once lockdowns end rather than focusing help on the unemployed as America's has. The EU is probably delaying a painful adjustment. Congress, not known for passing consequential legislation with big bipartisan majorities, agreed on a vastly bigger fiscal stimulus than in the financial crisis a decade ago. With a Democrat in the White House and a Republican-controlled Senate, America might not have mustered a response that was either so rapid or so large.

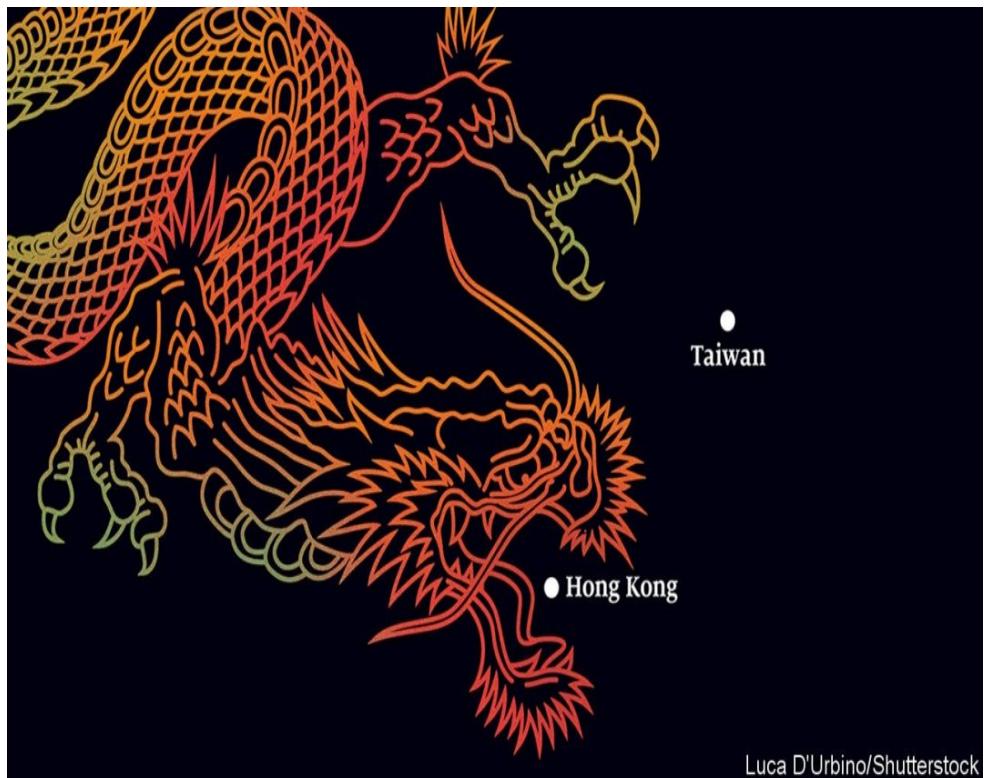
America still has a hard road ahead. Were daily fatalities to remain at today's level, which is being celebrated as a sign that the pandemic is waning, another 100,000 people would die by the end of the year. To

prevent that, America needs to work with the system it has, trusting local politicians to balance the risks of reopening against the cost of lockdowns.

In the next months the infrastructure built during the lockdown must prove itself. Because the virus has yet to decline in some states, it may flare up in new places, which will then need targeted lockdowns. The capacity to test, vital to spotting clusters of infection, has increased, but is still lacking in some places. Almost all the states lack the contact tracers needed to work out who needs testing and quarantining. When it considers how to withdraw fiscal support, Congress should remember this.

That America and Europe have fared similarly in the pandemic does not absolve Mr Trump. This is the first international crisis since 1945 in which America has not only spurned global leadership but, by cutting funds to the World Health Organisation, actively undermined a co-ordinated international response. That matters, as does Mr Trump's inability to cleave to a consistent message or to speak to the country in words that do not enrage half of the population. Yet four years after Mr Trump was elected, the time to be surprised by his behaviour has long gone. Luckily, he has mattered less than most Americans think.■

This article appeared in the Leaders section of the print edition under the headline "The American way"



Dragon strike China has launched rule by fear in Hong Kong

The rest of the world should worry, too

[Leaders](#)[May 28th 2020 edition](#)

THE PEOPLE of Hong Kong want two things: to choose how they are governed, and to be subject to the rule of law. The Chinese Communist Party finds both ideas so frightening that many expected it to send troops to crush last year's vast protests in Hong Kong. Instead, it bided its time. Now, with the world distracted by covid-19 and mass protests difficult because of social distancing, it has chosen a quieter way to show who's boss. That threatens a broader reckoning with the world—and not just over Hong Kong, but also over the South China Sea and Taiwan.

On May 21st China declared, in effect, that Hong Kongers deemed to pose a threat to the party will become subject to the party's wrath. A new security law, written in Beijing, will create still-to-be defined crimes of subversion and secession, terms used elsewhere in China to lock up

dissidents, including Uighurs and Tibetans. Hong Kong will have no say in drafting the law, which will let China station its secret police there. The message is clear. Rule by fear is about to begin.

This is the most flagrant violation yet of the principle of “one country, two systems”. When the British colony was handed back to China in 1997, China agreed that Hong Kong would enjoy a “high degree of autonomy”, including impartial courts and free speech. Many Hong Kongers are outraged (see [article](#)). Some investors are scared, too. The territory’s stockmarket fell by 5.6% on May 22nd, its biggest drop in five years. Hong Kong is a global commercial hub not only because it is situated next to the Chinese mainland, but also because it enjoys the rule of law. Business disputes are settled impartially, by rules that are known in advance. If China’s unaccountable enforcers are free to impose the party’s whims in Hong Kong, it will be a less attractive place for global firms to operate.

China’s move also has implications far beyond Hong Kong. “One country, two systems” was supposed to be a model for Taiwan, a democratic island of 24m that China also sees as its own. The aim was to show that reunification with the motherland need not mean losing one’s liberty. Under President Xi Jinping, China seems to have tired of this charade. Increasingly, it is making bare-knuckle threats instead. The re-election in January of a China-sceptic Taiwanese president, Tsai Ing-wen, will have convinced China’s rulers that the chances of a peaceful reunification are vanishingly small. On May 22nd, at the opening of China’s rubber-stamp parliament, the prime minister, Li Keqiang, ominously cut the word “peaceful” from his ritual reference to reunification. China has stepped up war games around Taiwan and its nationalists have been braying online for an invasion.

China is at odds with other countries, too. In its building of island fortresses in the South China Sea, it ignores both international law and the claims of smaller neighbours. This week hundreds, perhaps thousands of Chinese troops crossed China’s disputed border with India in the Himalayas. Minor scuffles along this frontier are common, but the latest incursion came as a state-owned Chinese paper asserted new claims to land that its nuclear-armed neighbour deems Indian (see [article](#)). And, as a sombre backdrop to

all this, relations with the United States are worse than they have been in decades, poisoning everything from trade and investment to scientific collaboration.

However much all the regional muscle-flexing appals the world, it makes sense to the Chinese Communist Party. In Hong Kong the party wants to stop a “colour revolution”, which it thinks could bring democrats to power there despite China’s best efforts to rig the system. If eroding Hong Kong’s freedoms causes economic damage, so be it, party bigwigs reason. The territory is still an important place for Chinese firms to raise international capital, especially since the Sino-American feud makes it harder and riskier for them to do so in New York. But Hong Kong’s ^{GDP} is equivalent to only 3% of mainland China’s now, down from more than 18% in 1997, because the mainland’s economy has grown 15-fold since then. China’s rulers assume that multinational firms and banks will keep a base in Hong Kong, simply to be near the vast Chinese market. They are probably right.

The simple picture that President Donald Trump paints of America and China locked in confrontation suits China’s rulers well. The party thinks that the balance of power is shifting in China’s favour. Mr Trump’s insults feed Chinese nationalist anger, which the party is delighted to exploit—just as it does any tensions between America and its allies. It portrays the democracy movement in Hong Kong as an American plot. That is absurd, but it helps explain many mainlanders’ scorn for Hong Kong’s protesters.

The rest of the world should stand up to China’s bullying. On the Sino-Indian border, the two sides should talk more to avoid miscalculations, as their leaders promised to in 2018. China should realise that, if it tries the tactics it has used in the South China Sea, building structures on disputed ground and daring others to push back, it will be viewed with greater distrust by all its neighbours.

In the case of Taiwan China faces a powerful deterrent: a suggestion in American law that America might come to Taiwan’s aid were the island to be attacked. There is a growing risk that a cocksure China may decide to put that to the test. America should make clear that doing so would be extremely dangerous. America’s allies should echo that, loudly.

Hong Kong's options are bleaker. The Hong Kong Policy Act requires America to certify annually that the territory should in trade and other matters be treated as separate from China. This week the secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, declared that "facts on the ground" show Hong Kong is no longer autonomous. This allows America to slap tariffs on the territory's exports, as it already does to those from the mainland. That is a powerful weapon, but the scope for miscalculation is vast, potentially harming Hong Kongers and driving out global firms and banks. It would be better, as the law also proposes, to impose sanctions on officials who abuse human rights in Hong Kong. Also, Britain should grant full residency rights to the hundreds of thousands of Hong Kongers who hold a kind of second-class British passport—much as Ms Tsai this week opened Taiwan's door to Hong Kong citizens. None of this will stop China from imposing its will on Hong Kong. The party's interests always trump the people's. ■

This article appeared in the Leaders section of the print edition under the headline "Dragon strike"



Europe's bail-outs Government handouts threaten Europe's single market

The dangers of Europe's bail-outs

[Leaders](#) [May 28th 2020 edition](#)

Editor's note: Some of our covid-19 coverage is free for readers of The Economist Today, our daily [newsletter](#). For more stories and our pandemic tracker, see our [coronavirus hub](#)

A BILLION OR two here, a giant government cheque there: the money doled out by European governments to support businesses is starting to add up. Some €2trn (\$2.2trn) or so has been earmarked to keep firms afloat. The early beneficiaries included bakeries, bookshops and the like. Now it is increasingly the turn of corporate titans. This week France announced an €8bn package to support its carmakers, including a large loan to Renault. Lufthansa is negotiating a €9bn bail-out from Germany which may involve the state taking a 20% stake. Now the taps are open, more blue-chip bail-outs are expected.

In normal times such state aid is all but banned by the European Union to ensure a level playing field for firms across the bloc (see [article](#)). The idea is to ensure that companies thrive on their merits, not government favours. Restricting state aid frustrates politicians of a dirigiste persuasion—there are lots—but is vital to spare taxpayers, consumers and competitors the burden of a rigged market.

The rules have been quietly shelved as Europe grapples with covid-19. Giving governments a temporary reprieve was unavoidable as national exchequers battle to stave off depression. But it also carries long-term dangers. Even before the crisis, France and Germany railed against European rulings that they say prevented the creation of corporate champions able to compete with rivals from China and America. Now they may seize the moment to try to water down competition rules permanently.

State aid

Proportion approved by the European Commission, to May 23rd 2020

Germany
47%

Other countries
53%

The Economist

It is not hard to see the harm that free-flowing state money could do. Germany represents a quarter of the bloc's GDP but nearly half of its state aid, because its buoyant public finances allow it to be generous. Tough luck if you are a company in Spain or Italy where tighter budgets mean smaller handouts. Politicians usually favour certain companies—famous flag-

carriers instead of scrappy low-cost airlines, say. And the bail-outs invariably come with nationalist strings. Renault and other French carmakers are promising to keep production and research in France (see [article](#)). Once the state becomes a shareholder or creditor, bosses know their firm's prospects partly depend on a willingness to please their political masters.

How to ensure that the necessary evil of bail-outs does not cripple the single market? They should be tolerated only when all other options have been exhausted. In America even cruise-liners—a challenged business model if ever there was one—have raised bonds and found new shareholders. Europe has shallower capital markets, but plenty of investors with money to spend.

The risks of an uneven playing field will ease if bail-out money is distributed evenly around the eu. On May 27th the European Commission unveiled a €750bn plan to offer grants and loans from mainly rich countries to mainly poor ones. Though there is much haggling left to be done, this proposal heads in the right direction.

Most important, all bail-outs need to be carefully policed. This means ensuring that companies are not using public cash to run large losses or to pay for their expansion plans once the economy opens up. Governments may have to take shares in firms in order to safeguard taxpayers' financial interests. But there should be rigorous enforcement of rules that encourage firms to repay loans and buy back government stakes quickly by banning them from paying dividends and bonuses. Bail-outs are taking place everywhere. But in Europe they are especially dangerous, because they can undermine economic integration and encourage politicians' inexhaustible appetite to meddle in industry. Creating a giant, open and competitive market has been one of Europe's great achievements. In the rush to help business it must not be eroded.■

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The summer holiday will be back How tourism will survive the pandemic

Foreign adventure, discovery and hedonism are on hold. They will be back

Leaders May 28th 2020 edition

Editor's note: Some of our covid-19 coverage is free for readers of The Economist Today, our daily [newsletter](#). For more stories and our pandemic tracker, see our [coronavirus hub](#)

Tourism is the most popular and least controversial form of globalisation. For those travelling abroad it promises an infinite variety of pleasures, from admiring Titians in Venice to sipping piña coladas in Goa. For the host countries it brings in cash—lots of it. The industry accounts for 7% of world exports and 330m jobs. But business is on pause (see [article](#)). Ticket sales at Angkor Wat in Cambodia are down by 99.5% compared with last year and countless Mediterranean sunbeds lie empty. Around the world a vital question is being asked: what will happen to the summer holidays?

The answer is that tourism will be back—but not in exactly the same form, and only if NIMBYS and governments don't spoil the fun.

Over the past half-century the travel industry has grown faster than a beach-bar tab on a sunny afternoon. In 1970 fewer than 200m people went on holiday abroad; last year the figure was 1.5bn. Soaring incomes in China explain part of the increase. It has also become cheaper to fly and easier to browse for the perfect swimming pool online—Expedia lists 1m hotels and properties. Visa rules have been loosened. The average person in the rich world can travel to over 100 countries without a visa, compared with 50 half a century ago, and the rules have got easier for people in emerging economies, too. As the industry has boomed, small firms and workers have prospered from the business of holidays. Some 80 countries, including Tanzania, Thailand and Turkey, rely on tourism for a tenth or more of their exports.

These countries' need for foreign exchange means that they are desperate to ensure this summer is not a write-off. Hotel firms are keen to fill rooms and younger consumers are prepared to take risks, judging by the packed beaches in America on Memorial Day. Nonetheless, caution is warranted. By jamming together people from around the world, tourism can be a lethal spreader of the virus. A single bar in an Austrian ski resort may have caused outbreaks across Europe, while cruise ships turned into floating biohazards. That means tourism in 2020 and 2021 will necessarily involve restrictions. One is filtering visitors by nationality. Cyprus plans to open on June 9th to most European tourists, but not those from Britain and Russia, two covid-19 hot-spots. America has just banned visitors from Brazil. Another fix is lower density. Brian Chesky, the boss of Airbnb, reports a surge in bookings for out-of-town dwellings. All told, the number of tourists this summer will be a fraction of normal levels.

In the long term, supposing a vaccine is found, the picture is brighter. Even if some consumers remain nervous, the industry will adapt. Marriott has appointed a cleanliness council and is introducing electrostatic disinfectant sprayers; Airbus is working on touchless bathrooms. Better testing will give travellers and governments confidence that outbreaks can be managed.

The big danger is that temporary barriers become hard to remove because of squabbling and lobbying. At the end of April more than 150 countries were closed to foreign tourists. Ongoing restrictions include quarantines and incompatible tracing apps. History suggests that it is complacent to assume these will just fall away. It took a global summit in 1920 to set rules on passports and travel after a world war and Spanish flu closed borders—and some western Europeans needed visas to go to America as recently as 1991. Already the politics of travel in Asia have caused tensions (see [Banyan](#)). Meanwhile, NIMBYs may seek to keep tourists out of the world's most beautiful but busiest cities.

This summer should be used to make tourism work better. That means taxes and more astute planning to tackle overcrowding. And as the global travel and airline industries restructure, there is a chance to speed up the introduction of aircraft with lower carbon emissions. It must not take decades before the world returns to the levels of openness that it had as recently as January. Tourism makes the world wealthier and happier. It should be on only a temporary break.■

This article appeared in the Leaders section of the print edition under the headline "Summer break"



Face it The case for mandatory masks

In places where covid-19 is still rife, governments should require people to wear face coverings in crowded public spaces

Leaders May 28th 2020 edition

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THE PANDEMIC has not been kind to fashionistas. Shops are closed and online purchases can be displayed only through the dismal prism of Zoom. Yet there is a chink of light in this dark sartorial night, for it offers the opportunity for self-expression through this season's latest must-have item: the face mask.

The fact that the market for chic masks is well-developed in Paris (see [article](#)) is hardly surprising, but the explanation does not lie only in the

exquisite taste of its citizens. Since May 11th Parisians have been required to wear masks on public transport or face a penalty of €135 (\$150), so it is rare to see anybody on the Métro without one. On London's Tube, by contrast, where the government merely advises people to wear one, only around a third of people are doing so.

In much of the rich world, governments now require people to wear masks when they are in crowded public spaces. Britain and America are among the few hold-outs. In America, where few states away from the east coast make them compulsory, the issue has been infected by the polarisation that bedevils the country's management of the outbreak. That is regrettable, for masks could both save lives and allow people to get back to work.

People think of masks as protecting them from nasty stuff in the air. They can do that. But in the case of covid-19, their more important job is to protect others from an infected wearer. That is because of one of the peculiar characteristics of this disease: it seems likely that infection by people who have not, or not yet, developed symptoms accounts for about a third to a half of cases. So even if everybody with symptoms stays at home, the virus will still spread. Social distancing can help, but is hard to maintain in crowded places. Masks block the respiratory droplets that carry the virus, so make risky situations safer.

In normal times, governments should require solid evidence, such as a randomised controlled trial in which a treated group is compared with a control group, before advocating some new health practice. But these are not normal times, and the need for speed makes that impossible.

Besides, there are signs that masking is useful. Even home-made face-coverings can block spit. Experiments show that a tea towel over the mouth and face can block 60% of droplets—not as good as a medical mask, but a great deal better than nothing. That puts to rest the concern that advising the public to wear masks will deprive health workers of vital equipment.

East Asian countries' success in controlling the disease argues in favour of masks. In many of their cities, masks have been worn for years to protect against pollution or disease, so people covered their faces as soon as they got wind of covid-19. In the West mask-wearing is alien. And in all of the

countries where mask-wearing is common practice, the epidemic was swiftly suppressed.

This is not incontrovertible evidence in favour of masks. Other factors distinguish those mask-wearing countries from bare-faced Western nations: some (such as South Korea) had rigorous track-and-trace systems; some (such as Japan) do not shake hands. And countries that adopted masks only recently (such as Germany) have successfully suppressed the epidemic.

Yet the combination of this natural global experiment, laboratory studies and asymptomatic transmission suggests that masks can help keep people safe. The clincher is cost. Lockdown destroys economies. Social distancing damages them. Masks cost next to nothing. They will not by themselves stop an epidemic. Hand-washing, track-and-trace systems and widespread testing are all essential, too. But masks can do their bit to protect people and rebuild economies. And they can be stylish.■

This article appeared in the Leaders section of the print edition under the headline "Face it"

Letters

- [Letters to the editor: On Bolivia, bio-weapons, covid-19 research, food, “The Leopard”](#)

On Bolivia, bio-weapons, covid-19 research, food, “The Leopard”

Letters to the editor

A selection of correspondence

LettersMay 28th 2020 edition



Zuma Press/eyevine

A new constitution for Bolivia

As well as a dire need for fresh elections, Bolivia requires a new constitutional order (“[In limbo](#)”, May 16th). Our constitutional institutions were not able to handle the crisis that led to the ousting of Evo Morales as president in 2019. The proper path of presidential succession was not followed; Jeanine Áñez’s declaration that she was president was unlawful and polarising.

Bolivia is in a state of instability last seen 15 years ago. Back in 2005 my interim government was able to conduct fair elections. The resulting constitution of 2009 flowed from a legitimate process. It affirmed the rights

of indigenous citizens. Yet the institutional provisions it designed have been ineffective. The Constitutional Court granted Mr Morales a “human right” to re-election and sanctioned Ms Áñez’s accession despite her lack of a constitutional mandate.

The problem is a fixation on presidentialism. Our weak national state is held hostage by the dominance of the powerful heads of both the central government and the states. Court-packing limits the development of an independent and efficient judiciary. The Plurinational Assembly (formerly our congress) plays little part in decision-making or promoting checks and balances. That means that the main pressure-point on the presidency has come from protesters taking to the streets calling for change.

The liberalisation of social traditions by expanding civil rights is facing a terrible backlash. A new constitution must end presidentialism. Our regions need to be more independent from La Paz. Corruption is better tackled through oversight at lower levels of government. But overall, we need a strong parliamentary system, to end *caudillismo* and bring true plurality to politics.

EDUARDO RODRIGUEZ VELTZÉ

Former president of Bolivia, 2005-06

La Paz



AP

Deadly diseases

Covid-19 has indeed raised concerns over the threat posed by biological weapons (“[Spore wars](#)”, April 25th). Fortunately, while advances in science and technology may be lowering the technical barriers to developing biological weapons, there are still many hurdles to overcome by anyone wishing to do so. One of these is provided by the Biological Weapons Convention and the widely accepted norm that it embodies against the use of disease as a weapon. As the preamble to the convention states, any use of a biological weapon would be “repugnant to the conscience of mankind”. Although a piece of paper alone will not stop a bio-attack, 183 countries have pledged to co-operate and come to each other’s aid in such an event.

The next review conference will take place in late 2021 and will provide the perfect opportunity to adapt the treaty to the challenges posed by technological advances and to reflect on the lessons learned from the current pandemic.

DANIEL FEAKES
Chief

Biological Weapons Convention Implementation Support Unit
United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs
Geneva



Speeding covid-19 research

You looked at the speed at which research into covid-19 is being released and preprinted on servers without peer review (“[Reaping from the whirlwind](#)”, May 9th). However, publishers are collaborating to ensure peer review is thorough. We heard from academics who were overwhelmed with requests for peer review and from authors needing quick turnaround times. We have thus created a common database of peer reviewers to which we are asking researchers from around the world to sign up.

Reviewers are asked to commit to work fast and that their reviews and identity be shared among publishers and journals if submissions get rerouted for any reason. So far more than 1,200 researchers from around the world have signed on. Authors submitting relevant research will be asked to agree that reviews can be portable between publishers. So if a journal thinks

work is more appropriate elsewhere it can be passed on with reviews alongside it, to speed up the decision for those editors.

This previously unheard of level of collaboration across publishers stresses the importance of working together on this challenge. Many of us within the open-science community hope that some of these changes will become the norm when we come out of the pandemic, laying the groundwork for more systematic cross-publisher collaboration that would further advance the dissemination of research. For now though we hope that our effort benefits research into this public-health emergency.

SARAH GREAVES

Chief publishing officer

Hindawi

London



Nourishing thoughts

You called for “a new productivity revolution” to feed the world by 2050 (“[The food miracle](#)”, May 9th). It has already started, driven by the clever manipulation of crop biomes, gene editing (CRISPR technology), precision

agriculture with big data, and the emergence of “new” protein sources, such as plant-based foods, insects and cultured meats. However, this revolution is happening in tandem with rejuvenated agricultural practices characteristic of previous centuries, which include composting, minimal tillage, integrating livestock and cropping, improving crop diversity and crop rotation. This is good news for farmers, consumers and our planet.

DAVID HUGHES

Emeritus professor of food marketing
Imperial College London

The food system has held up well over the past couple of months in tough circumstances. However, the main challenges lie ahead. Around 130m more people may face crisis levels of hunger by the end of 2020, a humanitarian tragedy unless strong domestic safety nets with international support can be put in place. Crops in sub-Saharan Africa are already affected by locusts and poor weather conditions in some regions.

Far from being “left free to work its magic”, the current food system needs a reset. There are \$12trn “hidden” environmental costs—emissions, biodiversity loss, eutrophication—caused each year by the food system. And we need to move beyond a narrow focus on hunger to deal with people suffering from micronutrient deficiency (or hidden hunger) as well as those who are overweight and obese.

SHENGEN FAN
AGNES KALIBATA
PAUL POLMAN
JEREMY OPPENHEIM

Food and Land Use Coalition
London



Fact wrecking

Re-reading “The Leopard” ([Home entertainment](#), May 2nd) as the world debates what is or is not fake news brings to mind a quote from the melancholy finale of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel:

Nowhere has truth such a short life as in Sicily; a fact has scarcely happened five minutes before its genuine kernel has vanished, been camouflaged, embellished, disfigured, squashed, annihilated by imagination and self interest; shame, fear, generosity, malice, opportunism, charity, all the passions, good as well as evil, fling themselves onto the fact and tear it to pieces; very soon it has vanished altogether.

YACOV ARNOPOLIN

London

This article appeared in the Letters section of the print edition under the headline "On Bolivia, bio-weapons, covid-19 research, food, “The Leopard”"

Briefing

- [Covid-19 in America: 100,000 and counting](#)



Getty Images

100,000 and counting America's covid-19 experience is tragic but not that exceptional

The epidemic could get worse

[Briefing May 28th 2020 edition](#)

Editor's note: Some of our covid-19 coverage is free for readers of The Economist Today, our daily [newsletter](#). For more stories and our pandemic tracker, see our [coronavirus hub](#)

IN ABSOLUTE TERMS, America has been the country worst affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Nearly 1.7m of its inhabitants have been infected, a number which is still growing by around 20,000 every day. On May 27th the country passed its 100,000th confirmed death. Such official death tolls do not necessarily capture all of the lost, and the real tolls in some other countries may be much higher than they seem. But America's official figure is more than 20 times that, say, of China, the country where the disease originated. China is unlikely to have managed to hush up 95% of its deaths.

In most countries such a national tragedy would bring with it a wave of unity. And in many places across America that is what has been seen. All sorts of communities have been suffused by a spirit of mutual aid. People have stopped their ordinary lives to flatten the infection curve, pooled cash to feed unemployed restaurant workers, clapped and banged on pots nightly to celebrate health workers, and held drive-in church services for socially isolated spiritual succour.

On the national stage, though, no such luck. President Donald Trump has done little if anything to bring the nation together or to provide effective leadership to the government's executive branch. He has used the exceptionally prominent bully pulpit he engineered through daily prime-time press briefings to spread confusion, misinformation and folly.

To get beyond the spectacle of Mr Trump's shortcomings, and the hatred and disdain with which all his actions are greeted in some quarters, requires seeing America's experience of the epidemic for what it is: highly uneven geographically; disproportionately harmful to some minorities; but, in terms of its death rate, not as yet particularly bad when compared with many countries in Europe.

There were a number of structural reasons to imagine that America would be hit particularly hard by an epidemic such as this. Its health infrastructure is set up principally to maximise profits, and such a system's incentives are not well aligned with pandemic preparedness. One cannot bill an insurer for surge-capacity ventilators, let alone spare intensive-care beds, for specialists in infectious diseases whose expensively acquired expertise is not normally needed or for stockpiles of personal protective equipment (^{PPE}).

The health-insurance system is patchy and expensive, leaving many Americans with too little or no coverage. Researchers speculate that African-Americans may have had a particularly deadly experience of the virus in part because, being less likely to have adequate insurance than their fellow citizens, they tended to seek treatment later in the course of their disease, which typically leads to worse outcomes.



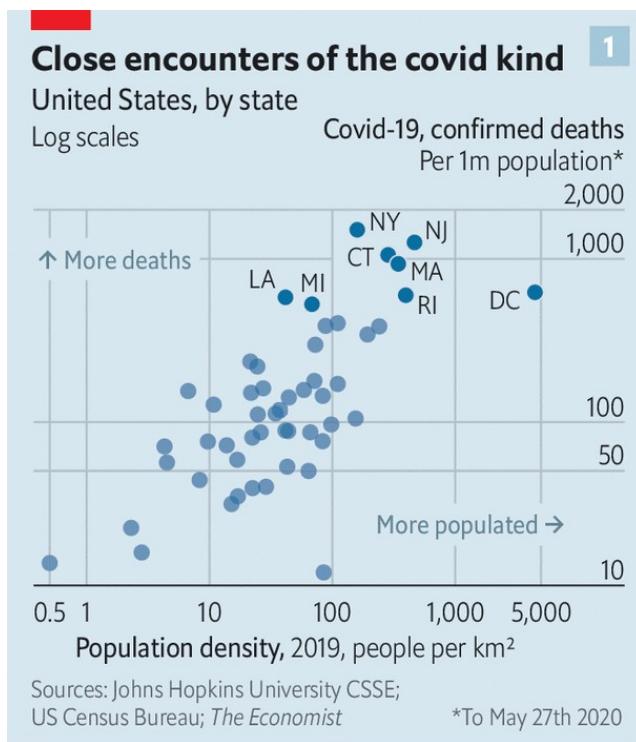
Odd man out

America, like China, has a younger population than Europe's. Other things being equal, that should have helped. But other things were not equal. Americans have high levels of conditions that make the virus more lethal, such as diabetes, hypertension and obesity. Roughly 11% of Americans are diabetic, compared with 5% in Italy or France; more than one-third of adults are obese, compared with less than a quarter in Germany. The burden of cardiovascular and respiratory disease in America is substantially higher than it is in western European countries.

Different in many ways

Despite all this, the statistics to date do not show America doing particularly badly. As of May 27th it had seen 301 deaths per million citizens. The 27 countries of the EU have between them seen a death toll of 125,000; 279 deaths per million people. But seven EU countries (including Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain) currently rank above America in their mortality rate. So does Britain, where the official rate is a shocking 559 per million. America thus looks to have fared better, so far, than most major European states, despite significant structural

disadvantages when it comes to its people's health and the system meant to maintain it.



The Economist

Against this, though, should be counted two other factors. The first is that America is less densely populated than Europe, and much less densely populated than the western European states that have been very badly hit. The pandemic has in general been worse in densely populated places. The parts of America which have been worst hit are those with western European population densities (see chart 1).

The second is that the infection began to spread in at least some parts of Europe significantly earlier than it did in America. Italy passed the 100-confirmed-deaths milestone on March 4th, almost two weeks before America did; South Korea had logged 3,000 cases before America's first death was reported. There was thus a short grace period during which America might have shored up its response.

Current evidence suggests that the best thing to have done with that time would have been to get into lockdown sooner. Researchers at Columbia University have estimated that if America had implemented its social-

distancing measures just one week earlier it could have reduced nationwide infections by 62% and deaths by 55%.

In America's federal system the timing of shelter-in-place orders and other population-wide measures aimed at stopping the spread of the virus was always going to be a matter for states and cities. Those that went earlier can now be seen, in general, to have done better. A team of economists studying the differences in timing of shelter-in-place orders among states found that the average effect of social-distancing orders in America was to reduce caseloads by 44% within three weeks—with better results for high-population-density states.

The divergence between the East and West Coasts of the country shows the difference vividly. Seattle and San Francisco were early hotspots but shut down fast—which seems likely to be part of the reason that they avoided a meltdown like New York's, where the unwillingness of Bill de Blasio, the mayor of New York City, to adhere to the advice of his public-health agency may have lost valuable time. San Francisco has seen just 40 deaths, compared with New York's 21,000.

Some states might have shut down earlier had they had enough testing capacity to properly evaluate the spread of the virus. Alas the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (_{cdc}) botched the manufacturing of the test for the virus that it had created in January. Its failure might have been made good, at least to some extent, by private industry. But the Food and Drug Administration (_{FDA}) was unwilling to license their efforts. Thus much of the head start which might have made America safer was lost.

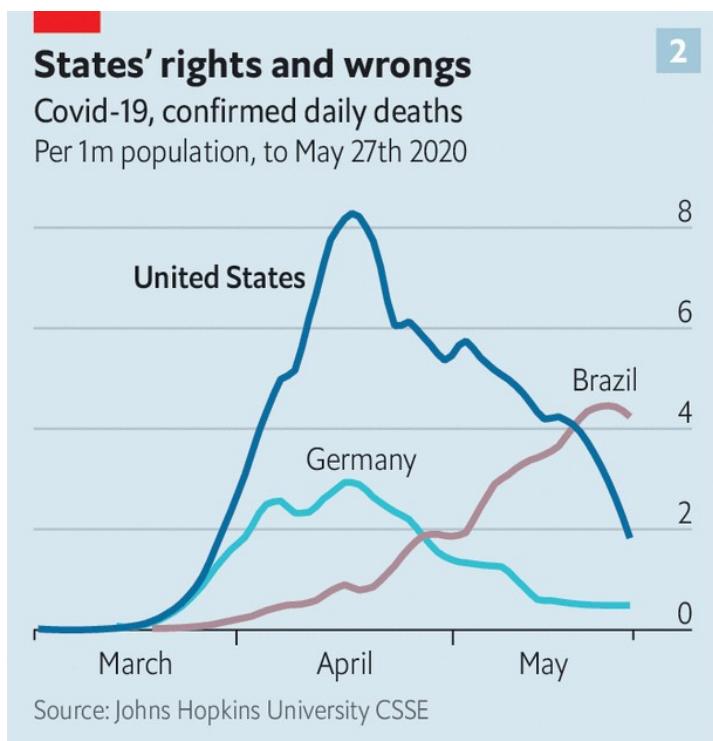
Special in some sort of way

This was not Mr Trump's fault. He did not set the timing of the lockdowns, sabotage the _{cdc} or fetter the private labs. But that does not exonerate him. His public statements in the early stage of the pandemic sought to minimise the threat that it posed to America well after scientific advice was making it clear that it would hit America hard. A clear, realistic warning from the White House might have concentrated the minds of state governments. And the jostling with the _{FDA} could have been avoided had Mr Trump's

administration banged agency heads together and insisted on a co-ordinated, purposeful response.

America's public-health services are a remarkable resource in terms of brainpower, analytic capability and experience, but they are also numerous and disparate. There are at least a dozen federal ones; local agencies number in the thousands. During the Ebola crisis of 2014 President Barack Obama appointed a tsar to keep the various necessary efforts aligned with one another. Mr Trump has done nothing similar. Nor does he feel he should have. On March 13th, when talking about the failure to get a serious testing infrastructure in place early on, he said, "I don't take responsibility at all."

There was no wartime management of the supply chains for testing reagents, swabs and other needed kit. Rather than acting as a co-ordinator, the federal government encouraged an internecine competition between states for ^{PPE} and ventilators. A federal agency outbid the commonwealth of Massachusetts for 3m medical-grade face masks, dramatically seizing them after they had been delivered to a New York port. Larry Hogan, the Republican governor of Maryland, was so worried about the federal government muscling in on an order of 500,000 testing kits from South Korea that state police spirited them away to a secret location straight from Baltimore airport.



The Economist

In assessing this friction, it is worth having a look at the fortunes of two other federated republics during the pandemic (see chart 2). In Brazil Jair Bolsonaro, the president, thinks that containing covid-19, which he once likened to “sniffles”, is not worth the economic cost (see [article](#)). He has tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent some states from locking down. When tasked with enforcing those lockdowns which have gone ahead, the police, who are generally sympathetic to the president, have been dilatory. Brazil’s death toll has been climbing steeply.

Germany provides a counter-example. Its states quickly set the country’s many private labs to work on testing; this wealth of testing capacity in the early stages of the epidemic allowed local public-health officials to trace contacts and close hotspots of transmission. Angela Merkel, the chancellor, clearly communicated the risks to the public. She and the heads of Germany’s states collectively agreed to shutter the economy just a day after the country had recorded its tenth death.

The degree to which Mr Trump’s denial of the problem and lack of engagement with the response made America’s epidemic worse is unknowable. But it is hard not to imagine that the country might have been

better served by an approach more like Mrs Merkel's. Germany's overall death rate has remained considerably lower than that of other comparable European countries; it is one-third that of America's.

In one area, though, Mr Trump's mere presence has been integral to America's outperformance of comparable countries, indeed of any countries: stimulus spending. The states' actions have hit America's economy hard. The official unemployment rate, 3.5% in February, was 14.7% in April. Almost 40m Americans have now filed for unemployment during the epidemic, roughly a quarter of the pre-crisis labour force. "Absent a historically unprecedented burst of hiring, the unemployment rate could remain in double digits [until some time in] 2021," economists from the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco recently concluded.

The federal response to this incipient depression has been remarkably generous. Congress has provided ample unemployment benefits and a grant-and-loan scheme for big and small businesses. Its fiscal stimulus has so far amounted to something like 14% of _{GDP}—higher than most European countries. Of the \$9trn the _{IMF} estimates to have been spent on fiscal stimulus globally, \$2.8trn has been American. There has been a one-time grant of \$1,200 to most Americans and a temporary \$600 boost to weekly unemployment benefits, which means many of those laid off will be receiving more than they did in work until payments sink back to where they were on July 31st.

Nothing works for everybody

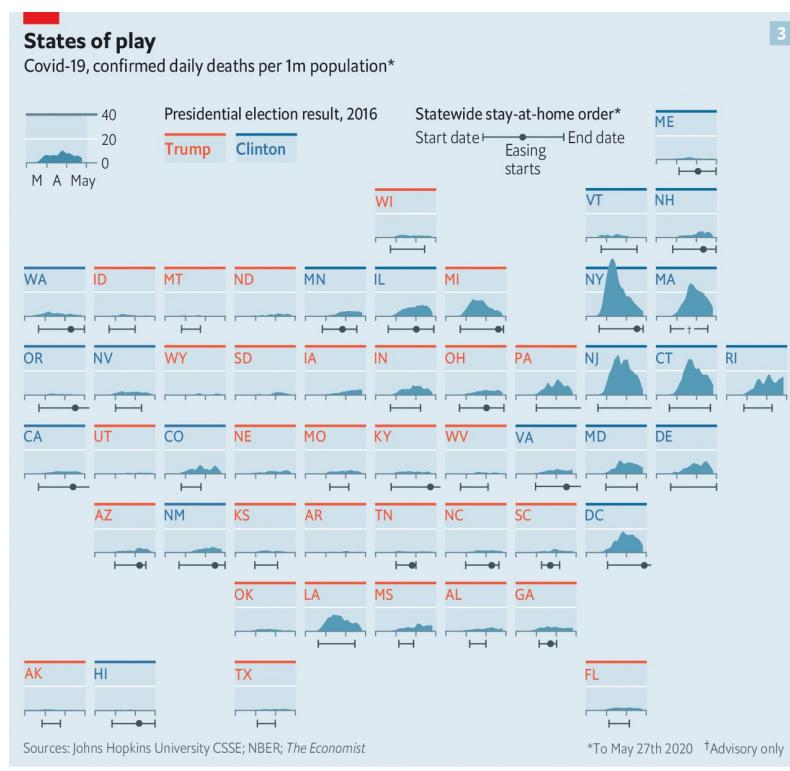
There have been difficulties in getting some of this money out fast enough—state unemployment offices had few staff and run on antiquated software—and gaps in provision remain. Since the start of the crisis, food banks have distributed nearly 1bn meals, 20% more than usual. A recent survey found that more than one in six young children were not eating enough because of their parents' loss of income. But there is more money in the hands of the unemployed than there might have been.

To get a sense of the counterfactual, compare the prompt generosity of this year's action to what Congress provided in the wake of the financial crisis of 2007-09: \$840bn. The difference is nothing that Mr Trump has done—

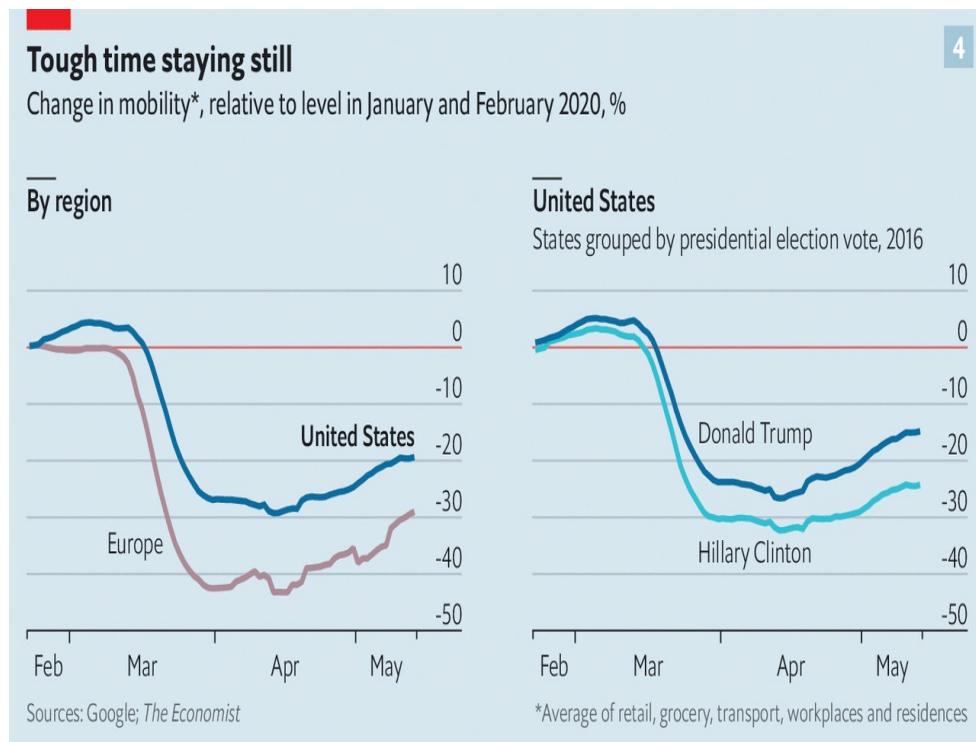
co-ordination with Congress has been the treasury secretary's task—but the simple fact of his election-year incumbency. Republican lawmakers are much more willing to loosen the purse strings under Mr Trump, not least because of the effect of the economy on his election prospects, than they were under Mr Obama. Had covid-19 struck late in President Hillary Clinton's first term, rather than Mr Trump's, it is a fair bet that there would have been similar hostility this time round, too.

Spending may ease the pain; but many states are nevertheless reopening businesses and easing restrictions on work and social gatherings. Thirsty patrons are snaking around the block to get into reopened bars in Dallas; vacationers at Missouri's Lake of the Ozarks filled up swimming pools over the holiday weekend.

Again, it is the states which are doing this, not Mr Trump—despite his various attempts to undermine the shelter-in-place orders while they were in force. But the politics of Mr Trump's presidency are a key part of how things have unfurled.



This is because the geographical underpinnings of covid-19 epidemiology and electoral politics are correlated. Low population density predicts both a low covid-19 death rate and a propensity for supporting the Republican Party. Places where Mr Trump has the most support tend to have atypically low experience of the medical effects of the epidemic (see chart 3). Recent polling by YouGov has found that only 9% of Republicans have had a family member, friend or acquaintance die of covid-19, compared with 15% of Democrats. Many Republicans in sparsely populated areas feel entirely justified in their exasperation with blanket stay-at-home orders.



The Economist

But the partisan divide on reopening is not just a matter of population density. Researchers at Stanford, Harvard and NYU, armed with location data from mobile phones, have found that throughout lockdown Republicans have been less likely to adhere to social-distancing orders than Democrats, even when living in places with similar levels of infection and similar official constraints on activity. This is in line with research by *The Economist* on movement during lockdown in America and elsewhere (see chart 4).

The tyranny of the blood test

The right-wing media, which give their audiences a sense that lockdowns, mask-wearing and calls for greater testing are weak-willed coastal liberalism, have also played a role. Economists estimating the causal effect of watching Fox News, the television channel in closest alignment to the views of the president, find that it may have persuaded one-third of its viewers not to comply with stay-at-home orders. Nearly 4m Americans watch the network's prime-time opinion shows each night.

America is not an outlier in the fact of its reopening; the same is happening in western Europe. But there is a crucial difference. European reopenings have been preceded by clear indications that the rate of infection was falling. The same is not true for all of America.

An epidemiological analysis published by researchers at Imperial College London, found that, as of May 17th, “the epidemic [was] not under control in much of the _{us}”. In 24 states the number of further cases to be expected as a result of each new case remained above one. The situation has improved since then, but not by leaps and bounds. New York and surrounding hard hit states are showing declining levels of infection. In other states, such as Alabama and Mississippi, infection rates do not appear to be under control, perhaps because their lockdowns were not that well observed. Outside New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, hospitalisation rates have not changed since the start of May.



Time to remember—and to prepare

Part of the point of a sustained lockdown is to take the time it buys to build the capacity to deal with later recurrences with well-thought-through and resourced testing and contact-tracing programmes. These are not in place nationwide. “We had time to develop these capabilities that required a national co-ordinated effort, and we have not used this time,” says Leana Wen, a former health commissioner of Baltimore. “And I’m afraid that as a result, the sacrifices that people have made are in vain.” Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984, testified before the Senate that, should states skip guidelines and open prematurely, “There is a real risk that you will trigger an outbreak that you may not be able to control.” Local spikes in new cases, if they go unnoticed, will allow community spread to re-establish itself.

Experts have recommended that a disease-surveillance scheme up to the task of nipping such recurrences in the bud would require testing rates of at least 1m per day. Some want a rate double or triple that. But today’s rate is reported to be less than half the desideratum—about 400,000—and that is probably an overstatement. Some states are juicing their numbers by

reporting the results of antibody tests (which reveal that someone has had the disease) alongside diagnostic tests (which reveal current infections), an apples-for-oranges mistake.

In spite of this, as far back as May 11th a barefaced Mr Trump triumphantly told a Rose Garden of mask-wearing journalists that the testing mission was accomplished: “We have met the moment and we have prevailed.” If that is by happy chance the case, it is no thanks to Mr Trump. But re-openings which feel premature after lockdowns which were sketchily observed suggest it may not be the case at all. There may be more sad records yet to be set. ■

This article appeared in the Briefing section of the print edition under the headline "100,000 and counting"

United States

- [Cyber-defence: Policing the Wild West](#)
- [The Mashpee Wampanoag: To lose your land twice](#)
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Klawe Rzeczy

Cyber-defence America rethinks its strategy in the Wild West of cyberspace

The challenge of defence in the world's most lawless battlefield

[United States](#) May 28th 2020 edition

COVID-19 HAS been a phisher's friend. Millions of professionals are at home and online, adjusting to new routines and anxious about their jobs. That makes them perfect marks: apt to click on an email that purports to be from their boss or a supplier asking for payment. Law-enforcement officials in many countries have reported a rise in cybercrime since the pandemic started.

But according to the FBI and Department of Homeland Security, not all such attacks come from gangs or individuals looking to make a quick buck. On May 13th those agencies warned that cyber-actors affiliated with China were trying to steal covid-related data and intellectual property. China is not the only worry. Russian hackers may probe for weaknesses in American

electoral systems; Iranians have targeted an American drugmaker; North Koreans have gone after cryptocurrency stores.

Just as the attacks of September 11th 2001 spurred America to change its counterterrorism strategy, repeated intrusions are doing the same for its cyber-security. Yet it first has to define the problem. Terrorist attacks tend to involve carnage, a political motive and an attribution. Cyber-assaults have a range of motives, including theft (North Korea's raids on banks), digital disruption (Russia's NotPetya strikes on Ukrainian and other infrastructure), sabotage (the Stuxnet attacks on Iran's nuclear programme, probably by America and Israel) and political warfare (Russia's interference in America's election in 2016). Sometimes states use non-state actors to carry out cyber-attacks, much as some use terrorist proxies. Attackers may target private-sector networks in banks, hospitals or payment systems, which often appeal to the government for protection.

Defence is difficult. Potential targets are many and diffuse. Attackers' identities are often obscure. They make use of vulnerabilities often unknown until exploited.

The National Defence Authorisation Act of 2019, which sets the Pentagon's budget, set up a commission to rethink cyber-defence. The Cyberspace Solarium Commission, named after Project Solarium, Dwight Eisenhower's effort in 1953 to create a durable cold-war strategy, and headed by Angus King, an independent senator from Maine, and Mike Gallagher, a Republican congressman from Wisconsin, had the misfortune to release its recommendations on March 11th, just before America went into lockdown. The commission made its first public presentation to lawmakers via video conference on May 13th.

America's cyber-defence, it argues, is hobbled by jurisdictional boundaries. Intruders are nimble; America's defence is ponderous. Responsibilities are scattered among the ^{FBI}, the National Security Agency (^{NSA}, America's signals-intelligence agency), the Pentagon's Cyber Command, the Department for Homeland Security, the Cyber-security and Infrastructure Security Agency (^{CISA}), and others.

The commission recommends creating a national cyber-director within the White House, a co-ordinating role much like that of director of national intelligence, which emerged from the 9/11 Commission's report. It also recommends permanent congressional cyber-security committees and a beefed-up ^{CISA}. Yet the White House is cool on a new Senate-confirmed cyber-security post, and creating new congressional committees would mean convincing current ones to surrender jurisdiction.

More important than government structure, however, is working closely with the private sector. The commission recommends declaring some private servers, such as those for the energy, financial and telecoms industries, critical infrastructure. They would receive enhanced government monitoring in exchange for meeting more stringent security standards.

It also recommends building a platform, managed by ^{CISA} with help from other agencies including the ^{NSA}, where government bodies and private firms can share information about threats. The ^{NSA}'s British counterpart, ^{GCHQ}, has a similar system. Some companies may be reluctant to let an agency that has engaged in widespread, warrantless surveillance monitor their security, but Mr King believes the proposal "will have support from industry".

If one way to halt cyber-attacks is to parry the blows, another is to punch back. After Russian electoral intervention in 2016, American officials grew convinced that their country was seen as a soft touch because it had not done so hard enough. "They don't fear us," lamented General Paul Nakasone, head of both the ^{NSA} and Cyber Command, in early 2018. The commission accordingly urges American hackers to "strike back with speed and agility".

In practice, though, America's approach has already shifted from punishment to pre-emption—not so much striking back as striking first. In April 2018 Cyber Command and the ^{NSA} announced a strategy built around "persistent engagement" and "defend forward". The first of these reflects the belief that competition in cyberspace is not a series of set-piece battles, but a constant digital mêlée. The second embodies the principle that to prevent an attack, you should go to its source. Just as "our naval forces do not defend by staying in port," says General Nakasone, "our forces must operate against our enemies on their virtual territory as well." In August

2018 President Donald Trump rescinded Obama-era guidance and made it easier for Cyber Command to operate beyond Pentagon networks without presidential authorisation.

The more aggressive posture was road-tested during America's mid-term elections. Cyber Command attacked servers belonging to Russia's Internet Research Agency, the company that sowed social-media discord in 2016, and sent text and email messages to Russian operatives warning them that America was tracking them—the digital equivalent of a horse's head in the bed. "We're now opening the aperture, broadening the areas we're prepared to act in," noted John Bolton, then national security adviser, last summer.

Yet taking the fight to rivals presents challenges. The internet has no clean front lines. Attacks from enemy-held cyberspace can be routed through the networks of allies, says Max Smeets of the Centre for Security Studies in Zurich. In 2016 Cyber Command irritated Germany by wiping Islamic State propaganda on German servers without asking for permission. Mr Smeets says adversaries might route attacks via particular countries in the hope of driving wedges between America and its friends.

Taking offence

Another problem is that if one defends far enough forward, it can look an awful lot like attacking. America is said to have secreted malicious code deep into Russian and Iranian infrastructure networks. The practice is akin to burying arms caches behind enemy lines for use in wartime: it makes it easier to strike back if Russia, which has probed America's own power grids, crosses a line. But the same access can be used for unprovoked attack.

An alternative is to punch back by other means. America and several like-minded allies have grown bolder in publicly attributing major cyber-attacks to China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. In 2014 the Obama administration indicted five members of China's armed forces for hacking into American companies. The Trump administration has brought similar charges against Iranian, Russian and North Korean hackers, including a dozen officers of the GRU, Russia's military-intelligence agency, who intervened in the 2016

election. Though few American officials expect that foreign hackers will turn up in the dock, legal tools are still seen as useful for several reasons.

One is shame. Most countries do not like getting caught in the act. Second, Russian intelligence officers would rather avoid a sanctions listing that would cut off shopping trips to Paris and boarding schools in Britain. Third, the forensic evidence laid out within these indictments—even down to Google searches conducted by individual GRU officers—is a powerful way for America to hint at its reach.

Exposure also helps establish norms, defining what is considered beyond the pale in cyberspace. America and its allies argue that the existing laws of war, including ideas such as proportionality and distinctions between combatants and civilians, apply in the digital world (how this squares with suspected American attacks like Stuxnet is less clear). Russia, China, Cuba and others fear that this line of thinking might legitimise American retaliation.



Double standards abound. America indicted Russian officers for hacking the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, but the NSA has

itself run riot in international institutions. And practical deals have not survived contact with reality. An agreement in 2015 between Barack Obama and Xi Jinping, China's president, to ban commercial espionage is widely deemed to have fallen apart.

These divisions play out at the United Nations, where one group of experts, favoured by America and its allies, works parallel to a larger, Russian-dominated group. "What we've really seen is a kind of a fracturing of the process," says Adam Segal of the Council on Foreign Relations. "There are some interesting ideas percolating through, but they will never be formalised or centralised in any important way." So cyberspace remains a Wild West. ■

This article appeared in the United States section of the print edition under the headline "Policing the Wild West"



AP

Native America **What connects casinos, the first Thanksgiving and the Trump administration?**

The Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, which stands to lose its land again

[United States May 28th 2020 edition](#)

“UNLESS YOU walk in moccasins” it’s a difficult concept to capture, says Cedric Cromwell, chairman of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe in Massachusetts, of the tribe’s link to its land. In March the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs informed Mr Cromwell that the reservation will be “disestablished”, meaning the land will be taken out of trust and would lose its federal protection. The tribe says this is a blow to tribal sovereignty and undermines the future and sustainability of the Mashpees. Taking land out of trust is exceedingly rare. It was last done in the 1960s.

The Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, also known as the People of the First Light, has occupied the same spot for more than 12,000 years. Every American child knows that the tribe befriended the newly arrived Pilgrims

and was part of the first Thanksgiving in 1621. The tribe was not recognised as a sovereign nation until 2007, after decades of pushing for it. Federal recognition meant that it could resume control of some of its ancestral lands beyond Cape Cod, through a trust held by the government. The land is not subject to state or local tax laws and cannot be sold without the federal government's approval.

In 2015 the Obama administration approved the transfer of lands in Taunton, a city in south-eastern Massachusetts. About 63% of Taunton's voters endorsed the tribe's plans to build a casino on the land. Not everyone was happy: two dozen residents living close to the proposed site sued to block not just the casino, but whether the land should be held in trust. One of the plaintiffs told the *Boston Globe* that it was not so much the casino they opposed, but the "incredible arrogance" of the federal government in building an Indian reservation in their backyard.

In 2018 the Department of Interior reversed the decision to recognise the reservation, rolling back the interpretation of what is an "Indian". "They're not supposed to change the rules on you mid-game," says Heather Sibbison of Dentons, the tribe's law firm. The tribe sued. A federal appeals court ruled in February that the tribe must show it was "under federal jurisdiction" in 1934, when the Indian Reorganisation Act was passed. This statute allowed Indian tribes to govern themselves and protected tribal land by putting it into trust.

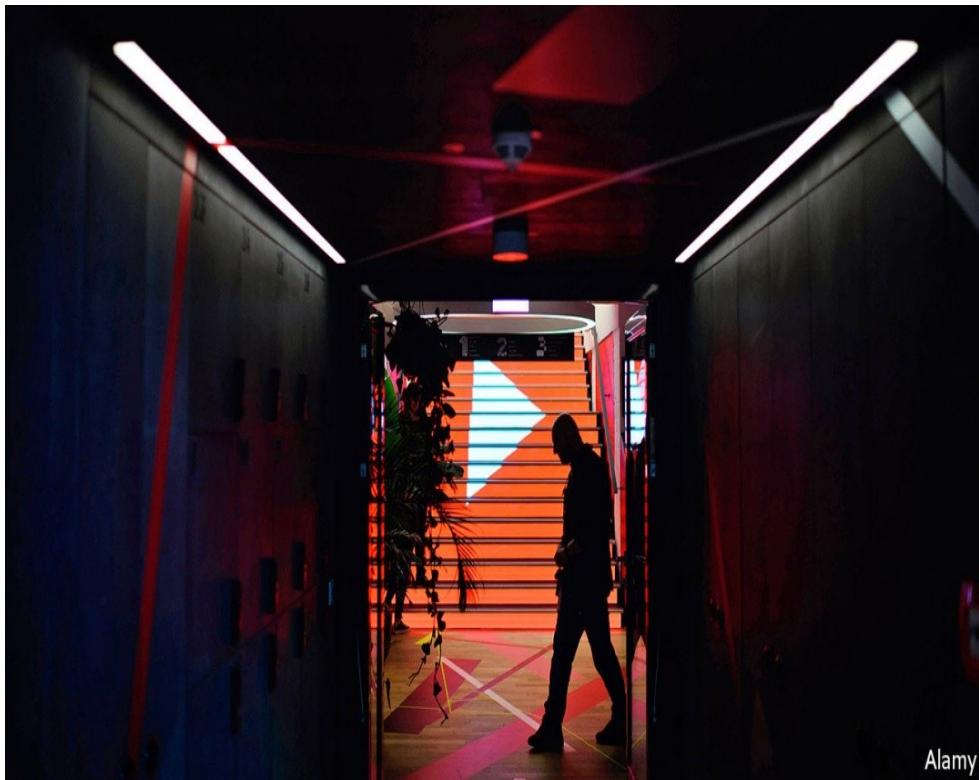
The tribe has asked for a preliminary injunction to prevent the land from being taken out of trust until the cases are resolved. A judge will make a decision by early June on whether to grant the order. Congress, meanwhile, is working on a bill that would supersede the court ruling. A bill backed by both parties passed the House last year, but has yet to reach the floor of the Senate. Donald Trump is not a fan of Indian-run casinos. He believed that "so-called Indians" undercut his casinos in the 1990s. Some of his inner circle and donors are in the casino business and may agree.

Other tribes are worried about what the decision means for them. More than 100 other tribes have gained federal recognition since 1934 and hold thousands of acres of land in trust. Mr Cromwell said he was "blindsided" by the call in March from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He thought the

bureau was checking in to see how the tribe was coping with covid-19, which has hit Native Americans particularly hard.

The impact of disestablishment extends beyond the casino. The tribe had started building housing for its community and a childcare centre on the land. Those projects, along with a tribal courthouse, could be in jeopardy. Losing the land itself is a possibility, if they cannot pay taxes. Federal recognition is not at risk, but Ms Sibbison wonders what that is worth if land and sovereignty can be taken away.■

This article appeared in the United States section of the print edition under the headline "To lose your land twice"



Alamy

A YouTube mystery Google's removal of anti-Beijing comments raises political eyebrows

The case of the vanishing comments

[United States](#) May 28th 2020 edition

ON MAY 26TH Palmer Luckey, an American best known for making virtual-reality headsets, alerted the world to an odd phenomenon. YouTube was deleting all comments which mentioned Wumao, slang for propagandists paid by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to flood online forums with pro-CCP views. “Who at Google [YouTube’s parent] decided to censor American comments on American videos hosted in America by an American platform that is already banned in China?” Mr Luckey asked on Twitter.

Mr Luckey was not the first to notice this, but his tech heft drew an immediate response from the right of the political spectrum, with which he has had connections. Ted Cruz, a Republican senator from Texas, called it “very disturbing” and asked why YouTube was “censoring Americans on

behalf of the CCP". Jim Banks, a Republican congressman from Indiana, fired off a letter to Sundar Pinchai, Google's boss. One would expect, he wrote, that the "spirit" of the First Amendment would be extended into the American firm's online platforms.

Google says the moderation of Wumao and other anti-CCP terms was an "error", which it has fixed. YouTube's moderation systems, which are highly automated, had not taken "proper context into account and incorrectly removed some comments".

But what context did the systems miss, and why? Google will not say. The conspiratorial suggestions popular with more hyperbolic sectors of the internet commentariat do not wash. The idea that Chinese spies who had infiltrated YouTube would risk blowing their cover just to mess up the moderation system is nonsense. So too is the suggestion that Google is somehow being paid off by the CCP; few issues cut across the partisan divide in American politics more effectively than the perception of a looming threat from China. For Google knowingly to censor any criticism of the CCP would have been political madness.

More likely, the explanation lies in the nature of the software Google uses to moderate content automatically, which uses a set of computer-science techniques called machine learning. Such software can update itself based on how users interact with the website, without any intervention from human programmers. This automated nature, combined with the software's complexity, make it plausible for errors to arise in ways that are difficult to understand.

For example, if YouTube comments about Wumao and other CCP-critical phrases are flagged enough times by enough users as spam, hate speech or bullying, then the system could start removing them automatically. This could be the result of something as harmless as a furious comment war between pro- and anti-China factions, or of a campaign designed to influence the moderation software. Google says this was not the source of the error, but would not say what was.

It is also possible that the error occurred on Google's side. Machine-learning systems need to be given context to understand the material they

are to be used on, and Google probably contracted out the job of labelling the Chinese phrases that are being blocked. Its supplier may have labelled Wumao and other words as being in breach of Google's community guidelines, without Google checking its work. Google declined to comment.

Problems with complex systems like this can be solved, but they are opaque not just through Google's choice, but inherently through their technical design. If YouTube's comment-moderation systems were nudged into the automated deletion of anti-_{CCP} phrases, despite the application of the highest tech, similar holes will surely pop up in future.

The only way for Google to win this game of cat-and-mouse is to shut down YouTube comments entirely. Or it could gain an edge by spending a lot of money on humans to do the moderating. Neither is likely. Instead, such issues will probably keep providing sticks with which Mr Cruz and friends can beat the tech giant. With the outcome of a Department of Justice investigation into Google's monopoly power looming, that may prove a liability. ■

This article appeared in the United States section of the print edition under the headline "Everything in moderation"



College blues Could a fifth of America's colleges really face the chop?

Problems that predated the virus have been accelerated by it

[United States May 28th 2020 edition](#)

MARTYNA MALECKA, a criminology student at Stonehill College, can't wait for classes to restart in August. Her campus in Easton, Massachusetts, "feels like a village": its elegant red-brick buildings sprawl over 384 bucolic acres. She judges time spent there less of a coronavirus risk than staying at home in Chicago.

Universities everywhere have made valiant efforts to function remotely. A few, such as California State University, say they will continue teaching only online next year. Ms Malecka doubts that distance study works. She gets top marks, but laughingly admits she has "no idea" what she has learned after being at home since March. It is too easy to ignore lecturers who appear by video, she says, and some hardly set assignments. Like other students, families and faculty, she craves in-person learning.

Whether or not universities get back quickly to that, many are likely to suffer. Stonehill is private and Catholic, with 2,500 students and a \$200m endowment. It looks in good shape, but many similar liberal-arts colleges, especially in the north-east and Midwest, are not. Their problems are long-standing. Nathan Grawe of Carleton College in Minnesota, who researches demography and higher education, says the core difficulty is the slipping fertility rate. Overall enrolment has drifted down over the past few years.

This squeezes smaller colleges hardest. A study by Parthenon-EY, an education consultancy, of over 2,000 colleges suggested 800 are so small or inefficient that they may go bust. Around one-fifth run budget deficits. Others pile up debts, fail to build sufficient endowments or sustain student numbers only by agreeing to painfully big discounts on fees. Mr Grawe points out that eight colleges were already closing each year before the pandemic.

Those that fail are usually small, among the 40% of higher-education institutions with fewer than 1,000 students. In the past decade these have seen enrolments slip faster than medium-sized ones. (The biggest typically still thrive.) Of the 72 colleges Parthenon found had shut since 2007, almost every one was small. They are vulnerable because they depend most on revenue from students; others find ways to hire out campuses for conferences, raise research funds, earn bequests and the like.

Robert Zemsky of the University of Pennsylvania, who co-wrote a recent book on the growing woes of universities, expects a “collapse, lots of closures” of smaller colleges, notably in the wider Midwest. He blames both demography and teaching methods that do not suit some students, noting how, at many universities, more than a quarter of freshmen quit in their first year. Curriculums, he says, are outdated, faculty are out of touch and four-year degrees should be cut to three to save costs and force a rethink of higher education.

Among the most vulnerable colleges are those that cater mostly to non-white students. “African-Americans are more than two times as likely to attend an institution at risk, compared with whites and Hispanics,” he says. Crystal Nix-Hines, a lawyer in Los Angeles who specialises in the

education sector, also expects an “enormous winnowing” of historically black colleges.

Consolidation of higher education is overdue. Students increasingly prefer bigger and more urban institutions, so some smaller, rural ones will go. How many? Just before the pandemic, Mr Zemsky and his co-authors suggested that 10% of colleges would eventually close. He now expects 20% to shut or merge with others.

The pandemic further dims their prospects in several ways. Take universities’ efforts to recruit foreign students, who typically pay full fees. For each of the past three years, enrolments of foreign undergraduates have slid. A drop in Chinese students explains much of that. Travel bans and concern that America has bungled the coronavirus will only put off more.

The economic slump means some poorer families will not send youngsters to study. Others will delay. Funding from states for public universities is certain to fall. A report by Pew Charitable Trusts published on May 18th points out that states cut funds for higher education by 29% per student between 2008 and 2012. This time the slump is likely to be worse. Already Nevada and Ohio say they have plans to cut. The University of Michigan has talked of losing out on \$1bn. Federal spending will rise (\$14bn in emergency help went to universities and students under the Cares Act), but is unlikely to make up all the shortfall.

Finally, many universities face possibly costly legal trouble. Ms Nix-Hines counted 134 lawsuits, mostly class-action ones, levied against the “whole gamut” of private and public colleges by late May, mostly as students sought the return of tuition fees, saying they received a substandard service online. Some colleges might now seek a “liability shield” to protect against future prosecutions before they reopen. For universities, it all adds up to “their greatest challenge in history”, she says. That may sound alarmist, but it is probably true.■

Editor’s note: Some of our covid-19 coverage is free for readers of The Economist Today, our daily [newsletter](#). For more stories and our pandemic tracker, see our [coronavirus hub](#)

This article appeared in the United States section of the print edition under the headline "College blues"



Lexington
The vulnerability of African Americans to the coronavirus is a national emergency

It is past time to fix a glaring disparity

[United States May 28th 2020 edition](#)

“THE MOST difficult social problem in the matter of Negro health”, wrote the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois in 1899, was to understand why so few white Americans were bothered by it. The poor black lives Du Bois described in his pioneering study, “The Philadelphia Negro”, were spent “in the most unhealthy parts of the city and in the worst houses”, with minimal medical attention. They tended to be sickly and short. Yet he could think of “few other cases in the history of civilised peoples where human suffering has been viewed with such peculiar indifference.”

Modern medicine has since transformed the life expectancy of all Americans. But many of the disparities Du Bois observed remain. African-Americans are still the country’s poorest, poorest-housed and unhealthiest

large group, with high incidences of asthma, diabetes, hypertension, cancer and obesity. In 1899 infant mortality was almost twice as high among blacks as among whites; now it is 2.2 times higher. If anything, African-American diets are unhealthier now than the rations of milk, bread and fried pork Du Bois described. So-called “food deserts” are a modern phenomenon. The 160,000 people who live in the District of Columbia’s two poorest and overwhelmingly black wards, 7 and 8, east of the polluted Anacostia river, have only three supermarkets. They also have the sparsest health care in the city, with no major hospital.

Little wonder blacks have been so stricken by covid-19. The disease kills in tandem with the ailments they suffer from the most. The latest data suggest one in 2,000 African-Americans has died of it, even though the southern states, where over half live, have been relatively spared. Partly for that reason, black Americans are not unusually likely to catch the virus. Yet those who do are 2.4 times likelier to die than whites and 2.2 times likelier than Asians and Latinos. In Washington, ^{dc}, blacks are less than 47% of the population, but account for 80% of its 445 coronavirus deaths.

A visit to a makeshift testing facility in Ward 7, across the river from the Washington Redskins’ crumbling and abandoned former stadium, provides a snapshot of this calamity. Bertina, a 64-year-old teacher wearing sweatpants and a Redskins’ bandanna (“Don’t photograph me, I look like a bum”) said her aunt had died of the virus in Atlanta after three hospitals had refused to admit her. Seventeen-year-old M’Kya said she had heard her brother, incarcerated in New York, had the virus. Overweight and sweating heavily, she was visibly unwell; she hoped it might be her allergies.

The facility, where both women had come to have their nostrils swabbed for the virus, is another symptom of a general failure. It was launched three weeks ago as a philanthropic endeavour by Howard University—America’s first black medical school—to address a shortage of testing in the part of Washington that needs it most. “You can tell things are bad when a dermatologist is running covid-19 tests!” said Ginette Okoye, a Howard professor wrapped in a mask, goggles and layers of protective clothing.

Though there are many causes of black ill-health, the solution probably starts with improving blacks’ access to health care. There have been three

significant efforts to do so since slavery, which all to varying degrees spluttered in the face of a backlash from whites.

The first, during Reconstruction, was a decade-long effort on behalf of freed slaves, which constituted the first government intervention in health care. The second, in 1964-65, was a bundle of laws and edicts, including the passage of the civil-rights and Medicaid acts and court rulings to desegregate hospitals. It gave African-Americans access to the regular health-care system for the first time. Yet the legacy of Jim Crow remained, as Wards 7 and 8 illustrate, in a patchy extension of services to black areas—and sometimes worse. Doctors in Macon County, Alabama, continued their 40-year “study of untreated syphilis in the Negro male” until 1972. (They didn’t tell the 400 sharecroppers under observation that they had syphilis. They told them they had “bad blood”.)

The advances of the civil-rights period led to a big improvement in black health, which by the mid-70s had levelled off. Barack Obama’s Affordable Care Act, which followed the example of Medicaid in trying to improve the health care of all poor Americans, can be viewed as the third major effort to correct the disparity. The 20m Americans who received health insurance under the act were likeliest to be black or Latino. Yet the fury this elicited among some whites—fuelled by a vague feeling that their tax dollars were being squandered on the undeserving—helped get Donald Trump elected. Having failed to repeal the act, as he had promised to, the president has since sought to shrink it through technical changes.

Some dare hope the pandemic may lead to a fourth push to close the gap. “I’m always optimistic—especially when there are trillions of dollars circulating,” said Muriel Bowser, Washington’s mayor. African-Americans’ electoral heft might help. Even Mr Trump has been courting their votes; Joe Biden’s health-care plan was aimed at blacks even before the pandemic struck.

Never again

Covid-19 has also made clear that such an intervention should not be considered ideological. Perhaps government action is not the best way to raise blacks economically, as conservatives argue; but their poor health

cannot be improved otherwise. The virus afflicts the industrious and work-shy alike—a point made by Mr Trump's trim African-American surgeon-general, Jerome Adams, when he acknowledged his own asthma, high blood pressure and heart disease. Indeed the most industrious blacks—such as Bertina's son, labouring in harm's way at Costco—are likeliest to expose themselves and succumb to the virus. Poor black health is a disincentive to work that work alone cannot fix.

It only remains to be seen, to revert to Du Bois's difficult problem, whether a majority of Americans can be mobilised behind the issue. That must surely be possible, after the vulnerability of millions has been so cruelly exposed. If not now, indeed, when?■

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This article appeared in the United States section of the print edition under the headline "Black America in peril"

The Americas

- [Brazil: Losing the battle](#)
- [Mexico: The mystery of the missing mummies](#)
- [Bello: Forwards and backwards](#)



A tropical tragedy Brazil's losing battle against covid-19

The country entered the pandemic with some advantages. Because of Jair Bolsonaro it is squandering them

The Americas May 28th 2020 edition

Editor's note: Some of our covid-19 coverage is free for readers of The Economist Today, our daily [newsletter](#). For more stories and our pandemic tracker, see our [coronavirus hub](#)

ON MAY 18TH Bruno Covas, the mayor of São Paulo, Brazil's biggest city, announced an unscheduled five-day holiday to discourage people from going out. The residents of Paraisópolis, a favela of perhaps 100,000 people in southern São Paulo, where covid-19 deaths are rising at a faster rate than anywhere else in the city, saw the festive side. A popcorn vendor set up shop to serve the stream of patients entering a clinic. School-aged boys flew kites nearby. "Brazil adapted well to this new reality," joked one, pointing to crowded rooftops and the dancing diamonds overhead.

Brazil's covid-19 curve looks like a kite string. On May 28th it had 411,821 confirmed cases and 25,598 deaths. The United States, the only country with more cases, barred Brazilians from entering from May 26th. The World Health Organisation has declared South America "a new epicentre", with Brazil the worst affected country. A study in 133 cities by the Federal University of Pelotas in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul concluded that Brazil's caseload is seven times the official number.

Brazil entered the pandemic with strengths. Like the United States it has a federal system. Governors (and mayors) have the power to declare lockdowns. Brazil's free Unified Health System (^{sus}), modelled on Britain's National Health Service, serves 80% of the population, though poorly in some regions. In earlier crises, such as the _{H1N1} ("swine flu") epidemic in 2009 and the mosquito-borne Zika outbreak in 2015, the three levels of government and the ^{sus} co-operated effectively.

More contagious than _{H1N1}, covid-19 exploits Brazil's weaknesses. Rich travellers brought the virus, but it is now concentrated in poor neighbourhoods like Paraisópolis, where people are packed together and have jobs without contracts or benefits. That makes social distancing hard. A monthly benefit of 600 reais (\$110) introduced in April has helped millions of informal workers, but long queues of people unable to obtain it are still forming at banks.

What makes social distancing harder is that Brazil's populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, scoffs at the medical establishment and its advice. He has quarrelled with and lost two health ministers since the crisis began. His attitude to covid-19 resembles that of President Donald Trump: both tout hydroxychloroquine, a malaria drug that is useless against covid-19 and can be dangerous, according to a new study in the *Lancet*.

Mr Bolsonaro's attitude causes more damage, however. Brazil's federal system is more president-centred than America's. To work well in a crisis, all levels of government must co-operate. Luiz Henrique Mandetta, Brazil's health minister when the outbreak began, held daily meetings with state and municipal health secretaries to plan for getting and distributing money, tests and equipment to combat the pandemic. But after Mr Bolsonaro sacked him

on April 16th those meetings ended. “The ^{sus} is a three-legged animal,” Mr Mandetta says. “If you cut off one of its legs, it starts to go in circles.”

Rich states with relatively strong health systems are coping better. In the state of São Paulo co-ordination among municipal and state health agencies and the private sector helped open thousands of hospital beds, including in stadiums and convention centres. Even so, in the city more than 90% of intensive-care beds are occupied. Douglas Cardozo, an auxiliary nurse at Hospital do Campo Limpo, south of Paraisópolis, says that staff lack bodysuits and other necessities. At least 50 patients a day check in with covid-19 symptoms, he says. Two colleagues have died from it.

In poorer regions of Brazil the health system is buckling. Less than a month after the first covid case was reported on March 13th in Manaus, a city of 2m in the Amazon rainforest, the mayor said that its system had collapsed. A promised field hospital has failed to materialise and mass graves are being dug for victims, some of whom are dying on boats en route to the city.

The weaker the health system, the more it needs the protection of strict lockdowns. But Mr Bolsonaro has made these a wedge issue. He shows up at weekly protests in Brasília, the capital, against quarantines. Unlike in some European countries, Brazilians do not come to their front doors and windows to applaud health workers. Their covid clamour signals conflict. When Mr Bolsonaro says something incendiary, his fans drive around blasting car horns in approval while his critics bang pots and pans. In municipalities where support for Mr Bolsonaro is strong, adherence to social distancing is correspondingly weak, according to a recent paper by Nicolas Ajzenman, an economist, and two other authors.

This forces governors and mayors to fight on several fronts. Mr Bolsonaro mounted a legal challenge to their quarantine orders, which the Supreme Court rejected on April 15th. João Doria, the centre-right governor of São Paulo state, says that to implement a strict lockdown “would mean a clear confrontation with millions of Brazilians” who support Mr Bolsonaro. (Critics say he wants to avoid angering businessfolk.) Some Brazilians are merely confused. They ask themselves: “whom should I listen to, the governor or the president?” says Mr Doria.

This adds to the economic and cultural forces that jam people together even as the president divides them. Just half in São Paulo are adhering to lockdown rules. To stop the virus's spread 70% is needed, says the state's government. On bustling Avenida Senador Teotônio Vilela on the city's southern periphery more than 20 shoppers browse in a variety store, ducking in and out under half-lowered metal shutters. Reinildo Carneiro, a construction worker, donned a puppy-print mask and popped into a bar in Paraisópolis for a game of snooker. "You're more vulnerable if you get depressed from staying at home," he says. Beer kills the virus, he read on WhatsApp.

Mr Bolsonaro will not set him straight. His presidency is consumed by melodrama. In a two-hour video of a cabinet meeting released by the country's Supreme Court and watched by millions of Brazilians, he gave himself over to unhinged and profanity-filled rants against police investigations of his sons but had little to say about protecting citizens from the pandemic. Widespread testing, a precondition for easing lockdowns safely, is not happening. By May 26th Brazil had processed fewer than 500,000 tests, just a tenth of the number acquired by the health ministry. Its testing rate is far lower than that of European countries and the United States.

Governors are yielding to pressure anyway. Mr Doria announced plans to begin opening parts of his state, including the city of São Paulo. At the city's São Luis cemetery 3,000 fresh graves await covid-19 victims. Several hundred have been filled. The cemetery's old average of 11 burials a day has jumped to more than 40, says a gravedigger. Most graves are covered with flowers but unmarked due to a backlog in engraving the plaques. A banner warns about Zika. None is needed for covid-19, says the gravedigger. "Once people lose a family member, they finally believe." ■

Editor's note: This article has been updated to include more information about Mr Doria's plans to open up parts of São Paulo state.

This article appeared in the The Americas section of the print edition under the headline "Losing the battle"



Death and taxes Mexico's missing mummy mystery

Heedless of curses, The Economist goes to investigate

The Americas May 28th 2020 edition

WITH ITS steep hills, candy-coloured buildings and winding passageways, Guanajuato has a claim to be Mexico's most beautiful city. Its main tourist attraction may be the country's most ghoulish. The Museum of Mummies, set underneath the city's Santa Paula cemetery, contains 117 specimens. They are encased in glass, some standing, some recumbent, clothed and naked, their faces alive with agony. When local media reported in May that 22 mummies had gone missing, the city's living residents grimaced.

The claim comes from Paloma Reyes Lacayo, who was the museum's chief between 2015 and 2018. Mistrustful of its current managers, she requested an inventory. Some of the mummies did not appear on it. Locals suspected that someone in the city's hierarchy had purloined its patrimony. Nonsense,

says the city's cultural director, Jesús Antonio Borja. The mummies are all present and accounted for.

They are the offspring of Guanajuato's dry, hot climate and Mexico's political history. After the country's government separated church and state in the 1850s, towns created their own cemeteries. To defray the cost of Santa Paula cemetery the local government levied a burial tax on survivors, payable every five years. If the money did not come, the cemetery disinterred the remains. Not many years after its founding workers began to discover that Guanajuato's arid heat had preserved some of the bodies that had been buried above ground in Spanish-style wall vaults. "Mexico is so generous that its wonders happen by accident," mused Juan Villoro, a writer, in a recent newspaper column. "Egypt dedicated centuries to the art of embalming. Here the mummies appear without effort."

They have slowly gained fame. In "Las Momias de Guanajuato", a wrestling film released in 1972, they come alive and attack El Santo, Mexico's most popular *luchador*. In the film's thrilling climax he prevails by choke-slammimg them in Santa Paula cemetery. The museum, now in a pandemic pause, draws 620,000 visitors a year, three times the city's population. It is the city's second-biggest source of revenue after property tax.

The late El Santo's son, who wrestles as El Hijo del Santo, rejoiced when the city issued a press release claiming that no mummies had gone missing. "I am sharing great news," he tweeted. Mr Borja has invited more sceptical observers to come to Guanajuato to confirm his headcount.

The Economist accepted. Our tally: 59 mummies on display in the main museum, 22 in storage and 36 in a separate exhibition space in the nearby town of Sangre de Cristo. No absentees. The inventory Ms Reyes had requested had listed only the mummies on display.

That may not be the end of the spat over Guanajuato's mummy management. Ms Reyes, who has degrees in biochemical engineering and cultural management, accuses Mr Borja of irresponsibly sending mummies for exhibitions in other cities. A similar museum in Sicily never lends out

its mummies. Mr Borja answers that Ms Reyes failed to deal with a fungus that infected a mummy in 2016.

The two are at odds over plans for a new museum, which will cost 200m pesos (\$9m). Mr Borja says it will relieve crowding and provide space for mummy maintenance. Ms Reyes says Guanajuato's pro-business government wants a new site for the museum because shops are more profitable neighbours than gravestones.

No one questions the power exerted by the mummies themselves. To some residents, they are ancestors rather than display objects. Some visitors see in their arrested decomposition a sign that life refuses to surrender fully to death. Ms Reyes calls the time she spent caring for them "the best years of my life". The fuss she helped create at least gives them more time in the sun.■

This article appeared in the The Americas section of the print edition under the headline "The mystery of the missing mummies"



Bello

Why a president from the 1980s offers lessons for Colombia today

What Iván Duque should learn from Virgilio Barco

[The Americas](#) May 28th 2020 edition

“IT IS DIFFICULT to find in the recent history of the West a democratic state confronted with such serious threats as Colombia was in the mid-1980s.” So writes Malcolm Deas, a British historian, in a biography published last year of Virgilio Barco, the country’s president from 1986 to 1990. Colombia had the world’s highest murder rate, as Pablo Escobar and his drug-trafficking friends ran amok, slaughtering judges, journalists and ministers. The state’s writ did not run in many rural areas, where the FARC and other left-wing guerrillas battled right-wing paramilitaries, all financing themselves from extortion, kidnapping or cocaine. With Colombian politics suffering from a surfeit of veto players, from ex-presidents to business lobbies, academics began to talk of a “blocked society”.

Barco began the unblocking. He ended a cosy power-sharing arrangement between his Liberal party and the Conservatives and set in motion the writing of a new constitution. He correctly identified the narcos as a more pressing threat than the guerrillas, with some of whom he made peace. He began to strengthen a weak state and launched a development programme for conflict-ridden areas. Several of his successors continued his work. In this century Álvaro Uribe, a right-winger, expanded the army, caused the paramilitaries to disband (formally, at least) and beat back the ^{FARC}, allowing Juan Manuel Santos to conclude a peace agreement in 2016.

Outwardly, Colombia is in much better shape today. Violence has fallen steeply. Colombians are less poor, healthier and better educated than they were in the 1980s. Between them the current president, Iván Duque, big-city mayors and the health service have coped well with covid-19. Colombia has recorded 16 deaths per million people, compared with 120 in Peru and 44 in Chile. The hospitals have spare beds, allowing the government to ease its lockdown.

Mr Duque, who is sponsored by Mr Uribe, has seen his approval rating rise from 23% in February to 52% in April. Yet he would be rash to relax. Peace has allowed new aspirations: mass protests last year focused on better education and pensions. But Colombia's progress has all but halted since the peace agreement, and in some ways before that. Many crucial issues, from judicial reform to tackling corruption, have been shirked.

There are new worries. Partly because it has never managed to raise enough taxes, Colombia has been less ambitious in trying to offset the covid-19 recession than Peru or Chile. With poverty and unemployment surging, discontent is bound to return. This is all the more worrying because the security forces seem to be losing their grip. Earlier this month a dozen officers were fired after it was revealed that army intelligence spied on opposition politicians, journalists, activists and even a senior aide to Mr Duque. The dictatorial regime of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela claims, plausibly, to have infiltrated Colombian intelligence. Meanwhile, a Mexican drug “cartel” and assorted armed groups are running free on the Pacific coast.

Some of Mr Duque's opponents accuse him, in part unfairly, of failing to implement the peace agreement. "The big complaint is not peace, it's security," says a former defence official. "It's what they were supposed to be good at." The peace agreement offered the chance to shrink the army, expand the police and concentrate on bringing the rule of law to rural areas. Instead, Mr Duque's government has allowed the army to become politicised, and has failed to exercise civilian oversight of it.

Mr Duque is young, personable and a good orator. But Mr Uribe controls his party. The government's achievements include absorbing 1.8m Venezuelan migrants, a law to get broadband to rural areas and, so far, coping with covid-19. But with more than half his four-year term still to go, they risk being wiped out by recession and, with it, a probable rebound in crime.

As for Barco, he was an unlikely leader. An engineer, educated at MIT when few Colombians studied abroad, he seemed distant, was a poor communicator and, many said, an inept politician. But having worked his way up in the Liberal party, he had much political and government experience. He quietly emancipated himself from his predecessors and his party's bosses, kept his distance from business lobbies and was his own man with a clear programme, writes Mr Deas. In all those things, Mr Duque would do well to emulate him.

This article appeared in the The Americas section of the print edition under the headline "Forwards and backwards"

Asia

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Reuters

Running out of juche Standoffish North Korea discovers the limits of self-reliance

Economic damage is forcing it to lift a self-imposed quarantine

[Asia May 28th 2020 edition](#)

THE ECONOMY was not on the agenda when Kim Jong Un, North Korea's dictator, appeared at a party meeting on May 23rd after his second three-week absence from public view in as many months. According to state media, the Supreme Leader promoted several military officials and laid out plans to beef up the North's nuclear deterrent. That was exactly the sort of action Mr Kim should avoid, America's national security adviser responded, if he wanted North Korea to have a "great economy".

Over the past few months, the North's economy has looked even less great than usual. The leadership's decision in January to shut the country off from the world to prevent the spread of covid-19 (of which North Korea continues to claim to have no cases) has meant sealing the border with China, through which it conducts almost all its trade. Beside causing

hardship for ordinary North Koreans, the self-imposed blockade also seems to have affected privileged people in Pyongyang, the capital. The government's attempt to limit the impact on state coffers through a compulsory bond-buying scheme seems to have exacerbated the problem. North Korea's cherished policy of *juche*, or self-reliance, may have reached its limits.

Even before the pandemic hit, the most recent tightening of sanctions had reduced North Korea's trade with China. According to Chinese customs data, exports to the North declined from just under \$350m in the first two months of 2016 to less than \$250m during the same period in 2019. Imports from North Korea dropped from \$350m to less than \$50m in the same period. These numbers do not tell the full story, because they exclude deliveries of crude oil from China via pipeline. Nor do they include smuggling by ordinary North Koreans, nor the regime's illicit trading activities, such as ship-to-ship transfers of oil on the high seas.

Even so, sanctions seemed to be causing pain. In his New Year speech, Mr Kim warned his people that leaner days lay ahead and that the country needed to become still more self-reliant—a break with the promises of growth and prosperity that had previously marked his tenure.

The decision in January to close the Chinese border has compounded the problem, by bringing official trade between the two countries almost to a halt. Imports from China dropped below \$200m in January and February and below \$20m in March. Exports disappeared almost completely. The lockdown also seems to have ended what little private-sector smuggling there had been, with traders in China reporting nigh-on-insurmountable controls.

The impact of these developments on life in North Korea is even harder to discern than usual, given that the border restrictions have also reduced the already meagre flow of information out of the country. There are no signs of an acute shortage of food and other essentials, but prices have gyrated. In the border town of Hyesan, the price of a kilo of rice rose by more than 20% between January and April, according to DailyNK, a website specialising in news from North Korea. The price of petrol also jumped, it reports, and the North Korean currency, the won, tumbled against the

Chinese yuan and the American dollar. Big regional differences in prices suggest there may have been restrictions on domestic movement as well as the border closure, says Teodora Gyupchanova of NKDB, an NGO in Seoul.

The impact on livelihoods is likely to be compounded by the fact that late spring is traditionally the lean season in North Korea, when winter stores run low but few crops are ready to harvest. In early April *Rodong Sinmun*, the government's mouthpiece, which had been printing lots of its usual reports about the over-fulfilment of production plans, admitted that the people were suffering "hardships". It said the country "lagged behind" others in economic development and would require an extra dose of "self-reliance" to overcome this failing.

Reports of panic-buying of imported goods in Pyongyang's glitzy department stores suggested shortages, or at least pervasive rumours that such items might soon be in short supply. There were also reports of rising prices for Chinese-made goods in other parts of the country. Factories that make consumer goods, such as clothes and shoes, have been encouraged to find alternatives to imported raw materials, rather than waiting for the border to reopen.

Meanwhile, the apparent shortage of foreign currency has probably been hampering progress on pet projects such as new holiday resorts, which are designed to please cronies of the regime. It has responded by tapping reserves held by businesses. It has launched an extensive bond-buying programme to finance more than half the annual budget, with some firms compelled to use their foreign-currency reserves to purchase government debt. Given North Korea's patchy record of repaying its debts and the methods used to persuade people to buy the bonds (one mining boss has reportedly been executed for refusing), the programme looks like little more than a polite form of expropriation.

Chris Green of the University of Leiden believes that it may be part of a longer-term strategy to restore state control over the economy. "There was a time early on in the Kim Jong Un era [when] big enterprises were allowed to accumulate their own hard-currency supply, but that is apparently no longer desirable." However, North Korea's entrepreneurs, used to the regime's periodic attempts to seize their money, are adept at hiding it.

Whether the government was having trouble funding itself, or was worried that the officials who form the bedrock of the regime were upset about the shortages of imported goods, Mr Kim seems to have decided that complete isolation is unsustainable. Restrictions on the border appear to be easing, with some goods reportedly getting through again in recent weeks. Prices for rice and petrol have fallen. Of course, the looser restrictions might yet result in some less sought-after imports, such as cases of covid-19. ■

This article appeared in the Asia section of the print edition under the headline "Running out of juche"



Bye degrees Australia's foreign-student bubble has burst

But the government is reluctant to help stricken universities

[Asia](#)[May 28th 2020 edition](#)

AUSTRALIA'S OLDEST university campus should be heaving on a sunny autumn afternoon. Before the pandemic, the University of Sydney hosted more than 70,000 students. At lunchtime they would cram into its cafés and crowd onto its lawns. Now its grounds are practically deserted. Although Australia has almost quashed covid-19, social-distancing rules forced the campus to close in March, and only a few stragglers have stayed on amid the historic sandstone and modern plate glass.

The abrupt halt to international travel is even more painful for Australian universities than their counterparts in other English-speaking countries (see [article](#)), because they lean more heavily on revenue from foreign students. More than 440,000 such students enrolled in Australian institutes of higher

education in 2019. At the last count, they took up roughly 30% of all places. Almost 40% of them came from a single country, China.

The foreign students are lucrative. In 2018 they brought in almost A\$9bn (\$5.8bn) in revenue—just over a quarter of all university funding, and far more per head than local students bring in through fees and government subsidies. The boom turned education into Australia's fourth-biggest export, behind coal, iron ore and natural gas. It funded world-class research centres, shiny new learning facilities and vast collections of art. Vice-chancellors' pay packets swelled (in big universities they rake in well over A\$1m). Campuses bulged to sizes, as an academic at La Trobe University puts it, "matched only by the epic institutions in India and China".

For years, this has been the subject of heated political debate. Universities say they were forced to woo foreign students because the government does not give them enough money to cover their rising costs. Michael Spence, the vice-chancellor of the University of Sydney, says: "The education of domestic students doesn't break even." If Australia is "more dependent on student fees than comparable systems around the world," he argues, "that's a decision successive governments have made."

Some in the current conservative coalition government retort that universities have brought the crisis on themselves. They "bet big on the international-student dollar" and "have become badly over-exposed", James Paterson, a senator, recently declared. Vice-chancellors have "privatised the profits" from foreign students, "building Taj Mahals to themselves", a conservative commentator complains. Even some of those employed by universities are critical. "It wasn't a Ponzi scheme," says the academic at La Trobe, "but it's in that ballpark."

Now, argues Salvatore Babones of the Centre for Independent Studies, a think-tank, "the chickens have come home to roost." Australia's academic year starts in January, so as covid-19 first appeared in China, a flight ban locked out an army of its students just as they should have been enrolling. Some wriggled back in through third countries, but Australia has since closed its borders to non-citizens, and they are not likely to reopen until at least the end of the year.

Universities Australia, which represents the industry, is not sure exactly how many foreign students it has lost. The University of Sydney has fallen 17% short of its enrolment target for 2020, according to Mr Spence, and now faces a budget shortfall of A\$470m. Across the industry, revenue could fall by A\$3bn-4.6bn, according to Universities Australia, putting 21,000 jobs at risk, many of them in research.

Since students who do not enroll this year will not pay fees in 2021 or after, a quick bounceback seems impossible. Peter Hurley of Victoria University's Mitchell Institute, another think-tank, estimates that the industry might lose A\$19bn over the next three years. Building projects and casual staff have already been axed.

So far, the government has been disinclined to help. It says it will still fund the places of domestic students, even if they drop out rather than embrace online learning. But it has excluded universities from its A\$60bn wage-subsidy scheme, JobKeeper. Dan Tehan, the education minister, has called for "a greater focus on domestic students".

Few seem to think universities will fail. Smaller, regional institutions are in the most danger, but since they are an important source of jobs, state and federal governments might be persuaded to prop them up. They will, however, have to shrink to survive. Universities will be "smaller in staffing and smaller in revenue", says John Dewar, La Trobe's vice-chancellor. There could be "a massive change in the types of courses they offer", Mr Hurley predicts. That seems to be just what the government wants. ■

This article appeared in the Asia section of the print edition under the headline "Bye degrees"



AFP

Mountain claimers A border dispute between India and China is getting more serious

China is nibbling away at Indian territory and digging in

[AsiaMay 28th 2020 edition](#)

WHEN INDIAN and Chinese soldiers brawled at Pangong lake high in the Himalayas earlier this month—a punch-up serious enough to leave many in hospital—General M.M. Naravane, India's army chief, was unworried. Such “temporary and short-duration face-offs” happened from time to time in remote stretches of the 4,000km (2,500 miles) border between the two countries, he said. Both sides had “disengaged”. But a week later he dashed north to the headquarters of the 14th Corps in nearby Leh, the regional capital, suggesting that something more serious was afoot.

According to Indian press accounts, Chinese troops have crossed the undefined border with India at several points, some reportedly penetrating 3-4km over punishing terrain. They are said to have destroyed Indian posts

and bridges, and dug in with tents and trenches. Incursions have been reported at the confluence of the Galwan and Shyok rivers, the Hot Springs area and Pangong lake, the site of the original scrap (see map).



There is considerable uncertainty over the precise size and location of the forces involved, but Ajai Shukla, a former army colonel now with the *Business Standard*, an Indian newspaper, estimates that three Chinese brigades—each comprising thousands rather than hundreds of soldiers—might be involved, one several hundred kilometres to the south near the Indian state of Uttarakhand. Though this might evoke images of an invading land army, the bulk of troops are likely to be to the rear, on the Chinese side, in support of intruders nibbling at Indian territory.

General Naravane is correct to say that face-offs are not unusual. But the present imbroglio is odd both because of the scale of forces involved and because some of the incursions are occurring in an area, west of the Galwan river valley, that China was not thought to claim. In fact, the valley was overrun by China in a brief border war in 1962, but handed back—unlike several big chunks of territory that India still claims but China continues to

occupy. On May 25th the *Global Times*, a state-run tabloid in Beijing, asserted: “The Galwan Valley region is Chinese territory.”

One reason for China’s ire may be the uptick in the Indian army’s construction work on the Indian side of the border. In particular, the road to Daulat Beg Oldi, the world’s highest airstrip and the site of a Sino-Indian standoff in 2013, was completed last year. The road, which runs along the Shyok river to the west of the Chinese positions in the Galwan valley, makes it easier for India to move troops for routine patrols or reinforcement in a crisis.

The recent construction of offshoots from that road running towards the border probably triggered the Chinese intrusions. “The situation remains tense,” notes P. Stobdan, a former Indian diplomat, with “troops … chasing each other in high-speed patrol boats” on Pangong lake. ■

This article appeared in the Asia section of the print edition under the headline "Mountain claimers"



Andre Malerba

Aygay angslay Gay people in Myanmar have adopted a secret language

Their slang can help protect them from abuse

[AsiaMay 30th 2020 edition](#)

WEDNESDAY HAS just turned into Thursday in Yangon, Myanmar's biggest city, and pleasure-seekers are on the prowl in a glitzy neighbourhood. Drivers slow down to inspect sex workers waiting by the kerb. Three of them, all transgender women, chat brightly. Your correspondent tries to eavesdrop but even her translator cannot understand. Theresa, the most forthright of the three, withdraws the lollipop from her mouth. "Yeah, we're speaking *bansaka*," she shrugs.

A dialect of Burmese spoken by gay and transgender people in Myanmar, *bansaka*, meaning slang, involves switching vowels within words (coffee, a loan word from English, becomes keefaw) and giving new meaning to Burmese words. Puns feature heavily. Asin, an adjective used to describe gemstones of great clarity, refers to an attractive man. Neologisms often riff

on popular culture. To say one likes reading *Tayza* magazine, once popular among young men, is to signal that one is attracted to such people.

The overall result is gibberish to outsiders. That's the point. Sexual minorities often invent their own secret languages to conceal their identities and speak privately. Gay and transgender Burmese switch to *bansaka* when they want to gossip about somebody nearby. "When an ugly customer walks in wanting to look like Beyoncé," explains Thu Yain Maung Maung, a make-up artist, "you'd bitch about this with your colleagues."

In private, gay people deploy *bansaka* as a sign of affection and invent new words and even gestures to entertain each other. Moe Aung of Kings N Queens, an ^{LGBT} advocacy group, laughs as he and his friend explain the latest addition to their repertoire. The “^{OK}” hand gesture, with thumb and index finger forming a circle and the remaining three fingers flared out, resembles *wa lone*, a letter in the Burmese alphabet; “wa” also refers to a full belly. To those in the know, the hand gesture therefore means “I've had enough, stop” and sometimes “Stop talking”.

Some 90% of Burmese are Buddhist, and many of them believe that being gay or transgender is punishment for sexual sins committed in a past life. ^{LGBT} people are seen as morally corrupt, a view which is bolstered by colonial-era laws that still criminalise homosexual sex. The more feminine the man, the fiercer the contempt. "Going from man to woman, you lose status and rank," says La Min, a transgender woman. ^{LGBT} people routinely endure discrimination and abuse at school and in the workplace; many also report being assaulted by family members or the police, according to David Gilbert of Australian National University.

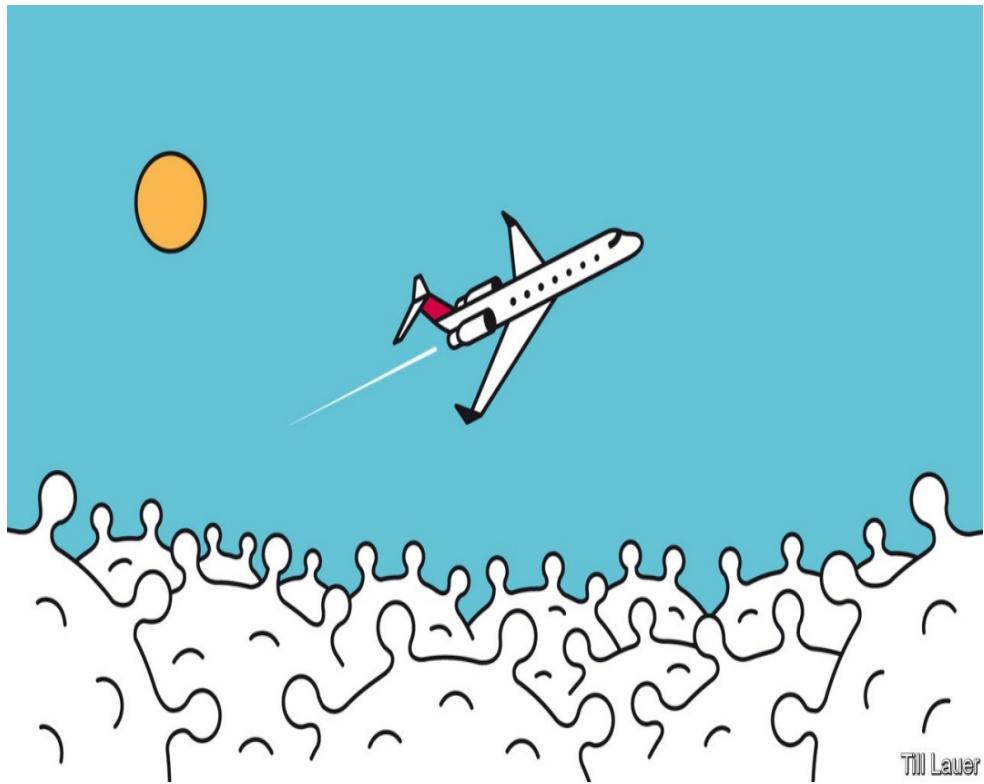
Bansaka can provide a modicum of protection. When Mr Moe Aung, who performs as a drag queen, wants to go to a public toilet, "I might want a friend to go with me for my safety. That conversation needs to be private. If I don't use slang in that situation people can look at me funny." He says that going solo invites rape.

Most gay men and transgender women learn *bansaka* at work, in the few jobs open to them: spirit mediumship, hairdressing, make-up and floristry. "[These jobs] offer more than employment," says Mr Gilbert. "They operate

more like alternative families.” Employees typically live together, in their workplaces. Younger members of staff, or “children”, pick up the lingo from their boss or “mother”.

Today *bansaka* offers less protection than it used to. Over the past 15 years, the public has cottoned on. Though most don’t understand it, they “do recognise that it’s *bansaka*”, says Mr Thu Yain Maung Maung, and have even adopted some words. *Bansaka* may also be losing its utility for the young. Hein Maung, a gay 24-year-old, says that gay youths hardly speak it anymore; instead they communicate privately with each other via social media. But Mr Moe Aung is sceptical. His organisation hosts picnics attended by lots of youngsters who find learning *bansaka* fun. “The slang will never disappear,” he says, before flashing the “OK” hand gesture. ■

This article appeared in the Asia section of the print edition under the headline "Aygay angslay"



Banyan

Asian countries try to build travel “bubbles”

These will not be as carefree as they sound

[AsiaMay 28th 2020 edition](#)

IN CONTRAST TO most of Europe and America, still buffeted by covid-19, swathes of East Asia and the Pacific have climbed through the worst of the turbulence and can glimpse blue skies again. Testing and tracing, prompt social distancing and swiftly mobilised health-care systems have brought impressive results: Vietnam claims no deaths, Hong Kong only four and Taiwan just seven. Japan has brought new daily infections down below 40 and has lifted a state of emergency. Local transmission is close to or at zero in Hong Kong, where offices and schools have reopened, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam and, of course, China. Down Under, Australia and New Zealand are also blinking in the sunlight.

But the ascent to blue skies remains purely metaphorical. As economies start to normalise, the glaring exception is international air travel. When

Banyan recently returned on one of only two flights a day from Tokyo to Hong Kong, where he is resident, crew outnumbered passengers. On his last evening in Japan, when an Airbus flew over the neighbourhood, a thousand heads craned in awe to see it. At Hong Kong airport, every scrap of apron is taken up with Cathay Pacific's grounded fleet.

The pressing question is how to restart international travel safely. Compulsory two-week quarantines, such as the one for returning Hong Kongers, are unfeasible for tourists and business travellers. One answer is “bubbles” or “air bridges” joining jurisdictions that have all but banished the virus and believe in each other’s testing and honesty. But setting them up is far from simple.

Australia and New Zealand lead the way with a proposed “covid-safe travel zone”, better known as the trans-Tasman bubble. It should make a big difference. Tourism used to generate a fifth of New Zealand’s foreign earnings, and the 1.5m Australians who travelled across the ditch last year made up nearly half of all visitors. Kiwis flocked the other way, too, visiting families and friends. Winston Peters, New Zealand’s deputy prime minister, hopes the bubble will be running in time for the looming ski season. Ann Sherry, co-chair of the Australia New Zealand Leadership Forum, thinks a trial might be ready for the school holidays in July.

The devil is in the details. New Zealand is close to eliminating covid-19. Australia’s “aggressive suppression” is still finding a few new cases daily. There is no decision yet on whether local transmissions should be quashed completely before trans-Tasman travel can resume. Meanwhile, confusion reigns over a hodgepodge of different rules across Australia’s eight states and territories. Some, such as Queensland, ban incoming travellers; others force them to quarantine for 14 days. New Zealand’s prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, says “it matters” whether travellers can move freely once inside Australia. Another snafu involves the smartphone apps both countries use for contact tracing—how to get them to talk to each other? Not easy, says Jill Slay, a cyber-security expert at La Trobe University.

Whether the bubble can be expanded quickly is also unclear. Small countries in the Pacific including Fiji and the Cook Islands, which have kept the virus at bay, are keen to join. Many islanders live and work in

Australia and New Zealand, which in turn supply a big chunk of the tourists who are the islands' other main source of cash. But Pacific countries worry that Australian tourists might bring the disease with them. They lack testing facilities. Workers may be allowed to travel first.

Other covid-conquerors such as Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan would like to enter the bubble. But working out all the necessary protocols could take months or years and could be derailed by a second wave of infections. Other approaches are being discussed. Singapore proposes "green lane" arrangements with a handful of countries with equivalent or lower risks of community transmission. The travel would have to be essential, and numbers strictly limited.

Meanwhile, Taiwan is pioneering work with Stanford University, first reported by the *Financial Times*, to create a "safe-travel protocol". Next month 500 human guinea pigs will travel from San Francisco to Taipei. Passengers will be tested before a preflight period of quarantine. They will then be tested every two days in quarantine when they land. The aim is to find the shortest safe quarantine period for brief business trips, rather than the typical two weeks. But for anything other than essential travel, the regime is no bundle of fun: more decompression chamber than bubble.

Editor's note: Some of our covid-19 coverage is free for readers of The Economist Today, our daily [newsletter](#). For more stories and our pandemic tracker, see our [coronavirus hub](#)

This article appeared in the Asia section of the print edition under the headline "Take these broken wings"

China

- Hong Kong's freedoms: Rule by fear
- Chaguan: “Wolf Warrior” fantasies



Getty Images

Rule by fear China's national-security bill for Hong Kong is an attempt to terrify

It could turn the territory into a Sino-American battleground

[China](#) May 28th 2020 edition

THE ARMoured vehicles of China's security forces have not rolled onto Hong Kong's streets, as last year officials in Beijing hinted they might amid anti-government turmoil in the territory. But late in May Chinese officials may have done more than their troops would have to kill the notion of a "high degree of autonomy" in Hong Kong, which was promised when it returned to China in 1997. As Chinese legislators gathered in the capital for an annual, coronavirus-delayed meeting, the body's standing committee dropped a bombshell.

The committee said it had reached a "decision" that China would impose a national-security law on Hong Kong. The territory's own legislature would have no role in drafting it. The bill would prevent and punish "any conduct

that seriously endangers national security”, including separatism, subversion of state power, terrorism and “activities by foreign and overseas forces” that “interfere” in Hong Kong’s affairs. It could be promulgated in Hong Kong as early as late June.

America is not waiting. On May 27th its secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, declared that “facts on the ground” showed Hong Kong was no longer autonomous. This opens a new front in the intensifying struggle between China and America. Mr Pompeo’s words mean that what many businesses in Hong Kong had once treated as unthinkable is becoming more possible. Namely, America could decide to impose the same tariffs, trade restrictions and visa requirements on Hong Kong as it does on the rest of China. That would cause as much if not more distress in the territory than the draconian new bill.

Officials in Beijing and Hong Kong have gone into overdrive to reassure foreign investors in the international city. Carrie Lam, its chief executive, used to say in private that if the central government were to impose a national-security law in this way, the perception would be highly negative. Now she finds herself arguing that by targeting acts of secession and interference by “external forces” (never defined), the new law is doing foreign business a favour. Last year’s open defiance of the police by protesters will no longer be tolerated. Hong Kong can go back to business.

Briefing diplomats, businesspeople and journalists on May 25th, China’s foreign-affairs commissioner in the territory, Xie Feng, said the new law would merely plug a legal “loophole” exploited by a “small minority of criminals” backed by dark foreign forces bent on splitting China. Foreign investors and other business folk, Mr Xie purred, had no reason to panic. On a more threatening note, he suggested that anyone who did sound the alarm was out to block China’s development. Mr Xie urged his audience to await “details” of the proposed legislation—then people would see there was nothing to worry about.

Yet as Margaret Ng, a barrister and former member of Hong Kong’s quasi-parliament, the Legislative Council (Legco), points out, the details are “almost irrelevant”. The proposed law, she says, would blow a hole both in the handover agreement that China signed with Britain, and in China’s own

mini-constitution for Hong Kong, the Basic Law. It is fundamental to Hong Kong's guarantees that it makes its own criminal laws and that people in the territory may be punished only under Hong Kong law by Hong Kong agencies.

The new bill would wreck that. True, the central government is making use of a clause in the Basic Law that allows it to legislate for Hong Kong. But that is permitted only in matters relating to diplomacy, defence and "other matters outside the limits" of Hong Kong's autonomy. Democrats in Hong Kong argue that the proposed bill is within Hong Kong's scope. Article 23 of the Basic Law says Hong Kong should enact laws "on its own" against treason, secession, sedition and subversion, as well as to prohibit ties between Hong Kong bodies and foreign political organisations (though an attempt to do so in 2003 was abandoned after a huge protest).

The central government, then, has no legal authority to add a national-security law to the Basic Law's annexe. Hong Kong's Bar Association also points to a lack of any assurance that the new bill will comply with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the Basic Law pledges to uphold.

There is a final breach of Hong Kong's legal and other norms. Mainland organisations may be set up in the territory to "safeguard" national security and oversee the new legislation. The implications are profound, including the possible stationing in Hong Kong of China's secret police. It is hard to imagine how their will would not prevail in any matter relating to interpretation of the new bill and who should be targeted. The Basic Law says no arm of the central government may interfere in the administration of Hong Kong's own affairs. But secret agents do, such as those who grabbed a Hong Kong bookseller in 2015 and spirited him away to the mainland.

Three broad and interconnected sets of questions now need answers. First, how will Hong Kongers react? As coronavirus restrictions ease, will anger erupt on the streets again? Second, how will companies doing business in Hong Kong respond? Can Hong Kong continue to serve as a global hub for finance, commerce and the media—a place comfortably apart from mainland China? Or will firms up sticks and run for Singapore or even

Taiwan? Can China, indeed, count on Hong Kong as the pre-eminent place to raise “red” capital for its firms? Lastly, what steps might follow from Mr Pompeo’s pronouncement? What impact on the calculations of both citizens and businesses in Hong Kong might America’s actions have?

For Hong Kong’s young, the identity of a generation was forged in last year’s protests. These began in June in opposition to a draft bill that would have allowed Hong Kongers accused of crimes in China to be extradited, without recourse, to the mainland. The protests quickly snowballed into a broader rebellion against both the local and central government. Over time they became more violent—participants began using slings, arrows and petrol bombs against the police, who became ever readier to resort to tear-gas, rubber bullets, water cannon and occasional live rounds. Hong Kong had seen nothing like it since the Communist Party itself instigated riots in the British colony in the 1960s.

The protests eventually ebbed last year as activists turned their attention to elections for the territory’s district councils, the only tier of government fully elected by universal suffrage. Pro-democracy candidates swept them in a landslide, a powerful rebuff to the establishment and its backers in Beijing. A point had been made, and many protesters returned to their work or studies. Then, in January, when life looked like returning to something closer to normal, the pandemic struck. The authorities handled it well—there have been only four deaths from covid-19. An unintended blessing was that the cycles of confrontation subsided as people became cautious about leaving their homes.

But the central government will not let bygones be bygones. It has been tightening the screws on Hong Kong all year. In January President Xi Jinping installed a loyalist, Luo Huining, to head the central government’s outpost in Hong Kong, the Liaison Office. Once it was supposed merely to facilitate mainland enterprises’ dealings. Instead, it has grown to become Hong Kong’s pre-eminent centre of power. Its networks run through business, civil society, schools, newspapers and political parties. It controls Hong Kong’s largest publisher and bookstore chain.

In China’s provinces and major cities, the party secretary wields the real power—governors and mayors are secondary. So it is in Hong Kong. Once,

the Liaison Office was barely heard. Now it pronounces on nearly everything and regularly denounces the pro-democracy camp. In April, when legal experts reminded the office that Article 22 of the Basic Law forbids interference by mainland entities in Hong Kong's domestic affairs, the office said it was exempt from this rule. The Hong Kong government appeared embarrassed at first. But Mrs Lam later backed the Liaison Office's position—confirming, by doing so, that it held more sway than her government.

Also that month, 15 grandes of the pro-democracy movement, including Martin Lee, Hong Kong's best-known champion, and Ms Ng, the barrister, were arrested and accused of unlawful assembly. To many Hong Kongers the simultaneous rounding up of so many luminaries smacked of instructions from Beijing. In May the mainland intervened angrily when an exam for school leavers invited a nuanced view of Japan's role in China's pre-communist history. At China's instruction, Legco is debating a law against insults to the national anthem (at international football matches, Hong Kong fans often boo the song).

That law had its second reading on May 27th. People who had planned to gather near Legco to protest against it and the new national-security bill were kept away by hundreds of police. At demonstrations elsewhere police fired pepper bullets and rounded up more than 360 people, including schoolchildren in uniform. As with attempted protests on May 24th (pictured), the first of any size this year, a new police tactic was apparent: move hard and fast, swamp the area and make mass arrests.



Given such methods, it is hard to predict whether protests can grow. Young Hong Kongers face dismal job prospects and see the space for political expression rapidly shrinking. They may see little to lose in one last summer of defiance before facing the full wrath of new anti-subversion laws. But to control covid-19 all public gatherings are banned, which makes it easier for the police to stop protests. The restriction will remain in place at least until June 4th, the anniversary of the crushing of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 which Hong Kongers traditionally mark with a mass vigil. Police have refused permission for the usual event. Thereafter, police will reject many applications for protests, as they did last year citing possible violence.

Furthermore, support for demonstrations may be ebbing. Last year the biggest ones attracted up to 2m people. This week office-workers groaned when managers urged them—once again—to work from home because of the risk of disruption to transport by protesters. After last year's chaos and this year's anti-virus measures, much of Hong Kong is desperate for normal life. Some ordinary folk with little interest in politics or love for China have cheered news of the national-security legislation.

A bellwether of public support for street action will be July 1st, the anniversary of the start of Chinese rule and a traditional day of protests. If many turn out, then it could be another long, hot summer. But after the arrests of nearly 9,000 people for offences related to the unrest, many of the most ardent demonstrators may be out of action. Some have fled to Taiwan.

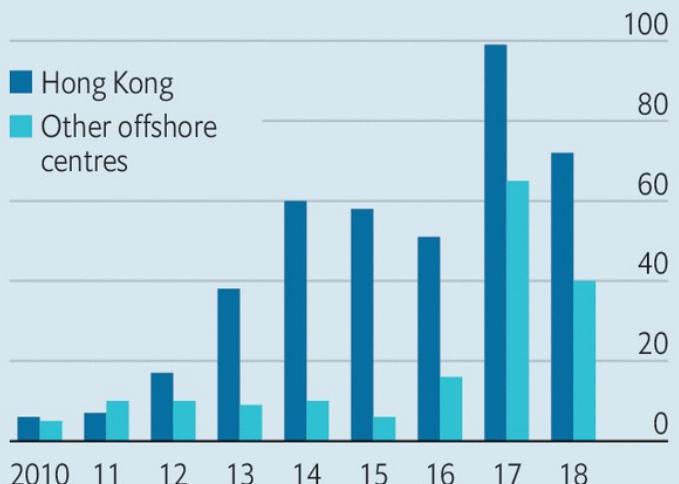


The Economist

As for business, Hong Kong's foreign chambers of commerce were unusually vocal against last year's extradition bill but now seem to be more muted. Mainland firms will certainly grin and bear it, and they are becoming the backbone of Hong Kong's economy. The number of foreign firms with their Asian headquarters in Hong Kong fell last year. But in 2018 the number of mainland businesses with offices of any kind in the city eclipsed the number of American firms for the first time (see first chart). Mainland companies accounted for 73% of the Hong Kong stockmarket at the end of last year, compared with 60% five years before. Many mainland firms also turn to the city when selling their bonds (see second chart). In 2018 they were responsible for about 70% of the corporate bonds issued in Hong Kong, says Natixis, a French bank.

A capital place

China, dollar bonds issued by non-financial mainland firms, \$bn



Source: Wind Info

The Economist

As tensions grow between China and America, Chinese firms seeking to raise capital abroad are increasingly drawn to Hong Kong rather than New York. Baidu, an online-search giant, may even delist from NASDAQ and offer its shares in the territory instead. Other Chinese tech firms, including NetEase, Ctrip and JD.com, may follow Alibaba in seeking a secondary listing in Hong Kong. At the other end of the territory's business spectrum is refugee capital that has escaped the mainland to avoid scrutiny by the Chinese government. But if you are an individual hiding your money from officials on the mainland, "I'm not even sure you are still in Hong Kong by now," says one observer.

The chances of national-security laws ensnaring foreign businesspeople may be remote. Yet fear had already been causing some to have second thoughts, even before the announcement about the security law. British businesses say they are struggling to persuade executives to move to Hong Kong. The cruel detention in China of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, two Canadians who have been held since December 2018 as pawns against America's bid to extradite the daughter of Huawei's founder from Vancouver, deters some long-time residents of Hong Kong from crossing

the border into the mainland. As a foreign official puts it: “Two foreigners have been detained without a specific charge for more than 530 days. And we are told everything is strictly according to law. So my question is: is this the way the national-security laws work? Are these the institutions that are coming to Hong Kong?”

Eyes now are on Washington. Mr Pompeo’s decision to notify Congress that Hong Kong is no longer autonomous sets a potent legal mechanism in motion. The Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, amended and toughened last year, allows the American government to treat Hong Kong as a separate entity for trade and other purposes, as long as it is demonstrably freer than the rest of China. The White House must now lead a multi-agency discussion about which of Hong Kong’s privileges to revoke.

Any moves to end Hong Kong’s special privileges pose a dilemma. America could apply anti-dumping measures and other tariffs on the territory. But they are hard to deploy with precision and would not greatly affect mainland interests, says James Green, who was the head of trade policy at the American embassy in Beijing until 2018. Some speculation—including talk of Mr Trump using an executive order to make it more difficult to convert Hong Kong dollars into greenbacks—is hard to credit, because it would involve using legal powers usually reserved for pariah states like Iran or North Korea.

Among more likely measures are the imposition of sanctions on officials who abuse human rights in Hong Kong, such as by denying them visas and freezing their assets. Another possible step involves changes to Hong Kong’s status as a partner trusted to enforce controls on the export of sensitive items and technologies. American officials grumble that shell companies in the territory are shipping controlled items to Iran or mainland China, and say Hong Kong seems nervous of working closely with America in case that angers China. And the Senate is mulling a bipartisan bill that calls for sanctions against banks that have dealings with human-rights abusers in Hong Kong. Measures could even include cutting off access to America’s financial system.

Mr Trump may be cautious. He signed last year’s bill, which amended the Hong Kong Policy Act to give it more teeth, but only reluctantly. (He had

earlier suggested he might veto it to promote a trade deal with China.) He may balk at an escalation. But but these are febrile, unpredictable times in the Sino-American relationship and American politics. As a congressional staffer puts it, television scenes of heads being cracked on Hong Kong's streets could play into the "whole Democratic notion that President Trump is soft on autocrats and weak on human rights." So more dramatic steps by America are growing more likely, as accusations in Beijing of foreign meddling grow shriller. Not only are Hong Kong's freedoms in peril. So too are badly strained ties between the two great powers on which its future most depends. ■

This article appeared in the China section of the print edition under the headline "Rule by fear"



Chaguan China’s “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy gamble

Foreign policy is not like an action film

[China](#) May 28th 2020 edition

LATE ONE night this week, Chaguan brewed strong green tea and rewatched the highest-grossing film in Chinese history, “Wolf Warrior 2”. This action flick is both preposterous and oddly compelling, offering clues about the sort of China that modern-day patriots yearn to see on screen. That China is formidable. At one point the film’s hero, Leng Feng, a retired Chinese commando, uses a home-made crossbow to take on African mercenaries armed with tanks. Then he kills their American boss, a murderous racist who—moments before Leng punches him to death—sneers: “People like you will always be inferior to people like me.” The China of the film is self-confident. A crowd-pleasing scene shows warships of the People’s Liberation Army steaming towards a war-torn, pandemic-stricken corner of Africa to evacuate Chinese citizens, past American warships fleeing in the opposite direction.

The China of the movie is respected. A climactic scene sees the hero halt a battle by sticking a Chinese flag on his arm and holding it aloft. He then leads a convoy of Chinese and African refugees to safety between two rival armies, as awestruck commanders bellow: “Hold your fire! It’s the Chinese!”

Three years after its release, this noisy fantasy is back in the news. In an era of crises, from a global pandemic to an ever sharper contest between China and America, Chinese envoys and state media have gone on the attack. Ambassadors and official mouthpieces have threatened and insulted governments and elected politicians on every continent. Some have promoted conspiracy theories that America’s army spread covid-19. In China, this trend is being dubbed “Wolf Warrior diplomacy” by fans and critics alike. Actually, that is an insult to wolf warriors.

It is not hard to find Chinese who cheer the foreign ministry’s pugnacious new style. Against that, some members of China’s foreign-policy establishment express alarm over this assertiveness, calling it a mistake born of inexperience. That is letting foreign ministry hotheads off too easily. A well-travelled bunch, China’s quarrel-picking diplomats know how they sound. They are using aggression as a signal that China has grown strong, and is tired of waiting for the world to show respect and deference. To diplomatic and national-security hawks in Beijing, if some countries have to feel pain in order to understand that China’s rise is inevitable and that resistance is futile (and that no help is coming from an America consumed with its own problems), then that pain is itself a useful education. Nor is this approach about to stop. Reporters at the annual meeting of China’s legislature, the National People’s Congress, asked the foreign minister, Wang Yi, about “Wolf Warrior diplomacy”. He did not endorse the term but embraced its spirit. China’s diplomats “never pick a fight or bully others, but we have principles and guts”, he said. “We will push back against any deliberate insult to resolutely defend our national honour and dignity.”

Leng the wolf warrior would only half approve. His China is not merely feared. It is admired because it is generous, in deed and in spirit. In the film, doctors at a Chinese-funded hospital have given their lives to develop a

vaccine for a deadly virus. Tasked with rescuing Chinese workers from a remote factory, Leng brings their African wives and colleagues too, even lying that a local boy is his son to sneak him aboard a Chinese ship. The film is strikingly respectful of international law. A lantern-jawed naval commander launches missiles to save the day only when a radio operator shouts news from the Chinese ambassador: “Sir, we have received authorisation from the United Nations!” The film ends with a giant passport filling the screen, and a promise that China will use its strength to protect citizens in danger abroad. Some Chinese audiences so liked this magnanimous, self-confident vision of their country that they sang the national anthem in their cinema seats.

The real-world China of 2020 is not magnanimous. Start with notions of brotherhood with Africa. In April thousands of African traders living in the southern city of Guangzhou were tested for covid and forced into quarantine, regardless of their travel histories. Some Africans were left to sleep on the streets after being evicted by landlords. Others were told by Chinese police to delete social-media posts complaining about mistreatment. Rather than apologise, Chinese diplomats and state media went on the offensive, declaring that “so-called discrimination against Africans” never happened and blaming anti-China forces for spreading “fake news”.

Cinematic promises to protect Chinese worldwide are not being kept, either. With officials desperate to avoid importing covid cases from America or elsewhere, flights to China remain severely limited, stranding hundreds of thousands of students abroad. Their fate divides netizens on Chinese social media, with many scorning overseas students as spoiled, unpatriotic rich kids.

Over the long run, being obnoxious has costs

This pandemic is that rare event: a crisis that frightens every country on Earth. Alas, the moment finds China in an exhaustingly narcissistic mood. Mr Wang, the foreign minister, declares covid-19 an “all-round test” of China’s social system and governance, which China has comprehensively passed. Such swagger offends plenty of foreign governments, especially when they are told to thank and praise China before they are allowed to buy

Chinese medical kit. As for rising geopolitical tensions, Chinese officials deny any connection with their assertiveness. Instead they place all blame on established powers sulking about relative decline.

China is not the only large country consumed with its own grievances. America First is a narcissistic slogan, too. But there is at least a bleak candour to President Donald Trump's pitch to the world. Unblushing self-interest is his brand. In contrast Chinese envoys talk of being a responsible, globally minded major power. Then they turn round and stoke nationalism at home, and play the obnoxious bully abroad. Fighting as a lone wolf is dangerous in an action film. It is even riskier as a foreign policy. ■

This article appeared in the China section of the print edition under the headline “‘Wolf Warrior’ fantasies”

Middle East & Africa

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Soldiers of misfortune Why African governments still hire mercenaries

Professional gunmen are cheap, efficient and deniable

[**Middle East & Africa**](#)**May 28th 2020 edition**

WHEN PRESIDENT FILIPE NYUSI wanted help last year to tackle a jihadist insurgency in northern Mozambique, various private military firms were keen to oblige. Mr Nyusi chose Russia's Wagner Group, which vowed to make short work of the rebels. But after a bunch of its men were killed, it pulled out, humiliated.

In its place, the government has hired a firm with a very different pedigree: the Dyck Advisory Group (^{DAG}), led by a South Africa-based colonel, Lionel Dyck. Mr Dyck served in the army of Rhodesia, the white-run state that became Zimbabwe at independence in 1980. In the 1970s, when Mr Dyck wore its uniform, the Rhodesian army used to attack Mozambique and the Zimbabwean guerrilla bases that Mr Nyusi's Frelimo party was hosting. Times change, as do alliances.

Despite a UN treaty banning mercenaries, their day is far from over. Some analysts think there are now more of them in Africa than ever. But can they ever be a force for good? Some of them served in special forces known for their ruthlessness during the dying days of white rule in southern Africa. Since then many have worked in Iraq and Afghanistan before returning closer to their old haunts.

In the years after most African countries gained independence, mercenaries were notorious for supporting secessionist movements and mounting coups. They fought for Moïse Tshombe in Katanga as it tried to break away from Congo in the early 1960s, and in Biafra when it sought to secede from Nigeria in the late 1960s. More recently Simon Mann, a former officer in Britain's special forces, tried to overthrow the dictator of oil-rich Equatorial Guinea in 2004, but ended up in jail.

Western governments have in the past winked at mercenary activity that served their commercial interests. But nowadays Russia is seen as the leading country egging on mercenaries to help it wield influence. It does so mainly through Wagner, whose founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, is close to President Vladimir Putin. Shortly after Mr Nyusi met Mr Putin in Moscow last year, Wagner was awarded the contract for Mozambique, which has rich gasfields and is developing Africa's largest energy project.

Wagner has been hired to prop up a number of shaky African regimes. In Sudan it tried to sustain the blood-drenched dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir. He was ousted last year after big protests. In 2018 hundreds of Wagner men arrived in the Central African Republic to guard diamond mines, train the army and provide bodyguards for an embattled president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra. In Guinea, where Rusal, a Russian aluminium giant, has a big stake, Wagner has cosied up to President Alpha Condé, who has bloodily faced down protests against a new constitution that lets him have a third term in office.

In Libya, despite a UN arms embargo, Wagner is reported to have deployed 800-1,200 operatives in support of a rebel general, Khalifar Haftar, who has been trying to defeat the UN-recognised government. On May 26th America's military command for Africa said Russia had flown modern fighter jets to Libya to give air support to Wagner. It released satellite photos purporting

to show the jets at al-Jufra airbase. It seems, however, that Wagner has been failing in Libya too, with hundreds of its men being forced to retreat.

Private military firms typically say they fill gaps in security that would otherwise lead to chaos. In the Central African Republic, for example, France withdrew almost all of its peacekeeping troops in late 2016, leaving a ^{UN} force and a small European training mission that struggled to keep order. Wagner has hardly fared better. In north-eastern Nigeria in 2015 a South African firm called ^{STTEP} (Specialised Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection), had some success in bolstering the Nigerian army in its fight against the jihadists of Boko Haram. However, its contract was cancelled by a new president, Muhammadu Buhari, who reckoned his own forces should finish the job alone. They have signally failed to do so.

Mercenaries have three main advantages over regular armies. First, they give plausible deniability. Using them, a government such as Russia's can sponsor military action abroad while pretending not to. Second, they tend to be efficient, experienced, nimble and flexible. Third, they are cheaper than regular armies. Whereas soldiers receive lifelong contracts and pensions, mercenaries are often paid by the job. They are also better value for money than the heavy, expensive weaponry that African governments often import, which is not much use against terrorists. ^{DAG}'s hardware in Mozambique is reported to include several helicopters (one of which recently crashed after being shot at by jihadists) and some small aircraft, but nothing hugely expensive.

Colonel Tim Collins, a veteran of Britain's Iraq campaign who has been running a private military firm in Afghanistan, says that "for the money Britain spends on booze at Christmas" such firms could provide African governments with a continental force (not that they would ask for one). He points out that in Sierra Leone in 1995, mercenaries from Executive Outcomes played a key part in routing the murderous rebels of the Revolutionary United Front. That bare-bones force was co-founded by a South African, Eeben Barlow, who now chairs ^{STTEP}. Manned mainly by former apartheid-era commandos, Executive Outcomes had previously helped the Angolan government to defeat the rebels of ^{UNITA}, which South Africa had once fostered.

DAG's website claims it has undertaken "security-based operations" in at least eight countries, including the Central African Republic, Malawi and South Africa. Zimbabwe's president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, is said to be close to Mr Dyck, who caught his eye back in 1981. That was when he led a battalion of the mainly black Rhodesian African Rifles in suppressing a mutiny of disgruntled ex-guerrillas loyal to Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's bitter rival, Joshua Nkomo, leaving many dead.

OAM Middle East, another security firm run by a former Rhodesian, John Gartner, lists no fewer than 18 African countries where it has operated. Many such companies stress their credentials as wildlife conservationists, using helicopter gunships to deter poachers.

Although opposed to mercenaries on paper, the UN may have softened its stance of late. It now has a code of conduct for how they may work and has itself used them to help with things such as logistics, neutralising landmines and training security teams. Chris Kwaja, a Nigerian who chairs a "working group on the use of mercenaries" for the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, thinks they can be useful as long as they are subject to "binding international instruments". Some private military firms now accept ethics clauses written into their contracts.■

This article appeared in the Middle East & Africa section of the print edition under the headline "Are mercenaries no longer taboo?"



AFP

Where dead men vote Burundi's rigged election

A landslide victory for the president's hand-picked successor

[**Middle East & Africa**](#)[**May 28th 2020 edition**](#)

AS PEOPLE ELSEWHERE hunkered down at home to avoid covid-19, millions in Burundi crowded into polling stations on May 20th to vote in the general election. Among the many voters were scores of dead people, activists allege. Human-rights watchdogs said that members of the ruling party, CNDD-FDD, boosted its tallies by adding the ballots of people locked up in jail—and of those who had died.

“When I saw the same person voting for the third time I complained,” says one voter. He was sent packing by officials and told to “stop creating problems”.

Shenanigans such as these might explain why, for instance, in Bukeye in Muramvya province 4,000 more votes were cast than there were voters on

the register. Another reason could be that some boxes already had papers in them when polling stations opened, suggests Aimé Magera, spokesman for the National Freedom Council ([CNL](#)), an opposition party. Few in Burundi were surprised when the ruling party's candidate, Evariste Ndayishimiye, was declared the winner with 69% of the vote. Mr Ndayishimiye, an ex-general, was handpicked by Pierre Nkurunziza, the outgoing president who has ruled since 2005. Mr Nkurunziza is no stranger to controversy. In 2015 he won a third term, despite a constitutional limit of two. (He said his first term didn't count, as he was chosen by parliament, rather than directly elected.)

Agathon Rwasa, the leader of the [CNL](#), called the election a "fiasco" and plans to challenge the result in the constitutional court. Yet Burundi's judiciary is not seen as independent. In 2015 the constitutional court ruled in favour of Mr Nkurunziza's third term, days after the court's vice-president fled into exile saying judges had received death threats.

More than 400 of Mr Rwasa's supporters are in prison. Many were rounded up on polling day. In the months leading up to the election an exiled Burundian watchdog, Ligue Iteka, counted 67 killings, more than 200 arbitrary arrests and some 20 cases of torture. In Busiga in northern Burundi members of the ruling party's fearsome youth wing painted red crosses on the doors of opposition supporters.

This sort of nastiness has been common in Burundi in recent years. Having at last agreed to retire, Mr Nkurunziza will become an adviser to his successor with the new title of "supreme guide to patriotism". The next president will be legally obliged to consult him on matters of national unity and security.

So far, Mr Nkurunziza has appeared unfazed by covid-19. His party held huge rallies in the run-up to the election while his spokesman suggested that Burundi would be spared for putting "God first". There are only 42 registered cases in the country, though hospital staff whisper that beds are full of undiagnosed sufferers. Handily, the pandemic did mean that no foreign election observers could get into the country. A delegation from the East African Community was warned just 12 days before the election that its members would be quarantined for two weeks.

The country is relatively calm, for now. Many fear that if they start protesting against the result, Mr Nkurunziza will enforce a belated lockdown—to stop the spread of covid-19, of course. ■

This article appeared in the Middle East & Africa section of the print edition under the headline "Burundi's sham election"



Devaluation gardens Hobbyists hope to halt hunger in Lebanon by growing their own crops

Expensive food is pushing people to the brink

Middle East & Africa May 28th 2020 edition

THE COVID-19 pandemic has brought no end of comparisons to Spanish flu, which raced around the globe in 1918. For Lebanon, though, that decade's defining event was not flu but famine: years of hunger that killed half the population during the first world war. History feels newly relevant as the country tips into depression and food prices soar. Trapped at home these past months, often in their ancestral villages, some Lebanese have tried their hand at growing their own food. On a rooftop in Beirut, tomato vines crawl towards the sky. A designer spends weekdays behind a computer and weekends plucking broad beans in the mountains. Young people swap tips on what to grow and when.

Famous for its food, Lebanon is better at preparing the stuff than producing it. Some 20-25% of workers are involved in agriculture (including part-time and seasonal work on family plots). About 13% of the land is arable, with microclimates suited to nearly every crop. Rolling fields in the Bekaa valley can grow winter wheat and summer vegetables. The Mediterranean coast supports a year-round rotation.

Yet agriculture generates less than 3% of GDP and Lebanon imports 80% of its food. Farms are often too small to benefit from economies of scale. One-third of factories in Lebanon make packaged food, everything from poultry to pickles. Again, though, almost 90% of these are small, family-owned businesses, estimates Mounir Bissat, a director of Lebanon's industrial syndicate.

Now a worsening currency crisis threatens to devastate the industry. The Lebanese pound has lost 63% of its value since October. This ought to help farmers and producers, as consumers shift to local products—but little about Lebanon's food business is truly local. Most of its inputs, such as seeds, fertiliser and animal feed, are imported. The government subsidises fuel, but for everything else suppliers must obtain dollars on the black market, which has sent prices soaring. Potatoes and onions cost a third more than they did last spring. Tomato prices have more than doubled. Pine nuts are so expensive that people joke about using them in lieu of diamonds on engagement rings. Triangle, a local think-tank, estimates that even simple dishes like *mujaddara*, a mix of rice and lentils topped with fried onions, now cost 50% more to prepare.

Farmers are trapped in a cycle of debt. With cheap credit scarce, they take loans from companies that import agricultural supplies. Riad Saade, the head of the Centre de Recherche et d'Etudes Agricoles Libanais, puts outstanding debts at \$140m. That seems a pittance compared with the broader economy (banks are staring at losses of up to \$80bn). But farmers may struggle to repay even that sum. Weak demand and a weaker currency will cause their revenues to plunge. Mr Saade estimates the value of field crops sold in 2020 at just \$58m, down from \$181m in 2018.

Poor practices add to the burden. The ill-funded agriculture ministry offers little help. Farmers often get technical advice from their suppliers—and

some of it is bad. “These companies have a vested interest in people using more of their products,” says Hadi Jaafar, an agriculture professor at the American University of Beirut. Lebanese farmers lay down 330kg of fertiliser per hectare of arable land, one of the highest rates in the world. Pesticide use is also similarly high.

Hobbyists can help, but only so much. Almost 90% of Lebanese live in urban areas. In greater Beirut, home to a third of the population, few have more than a balcony or rooftop for planting. Hassan Diab, the prime minister, has promised to subsidise staple imports, a temporary fix (if a costly and inefficient one). Farmers need access to credit and proper scientific advice. Some economists have called for a temporary freeze on their debts. Factories need reliable electricity and better transport, both of which the government has failed to sort out for decades. Investment in agriculture would bring not only food but jobs and exports—all badly needed in a country that can no longer live beyond its means. ■

This article appeared in the Middle East & Africa section of the print edition under the headline "Devaluation gardens"



Getty Images

Dial it up The covid-19 crisis is boosting mobile money

In Rwanda, transactions rose fivefold during a lockdown

[Middle East & Africa May 28th 2020 edition](#)

THE STORY of mobile money is one that turns during crises. In Kenya in 2008, violence broke out after a disputed election the year before. As supporters of the rival candidates clashed on the streets, ordinary folk were afraid to go out. Many started sending money to each other by phone using a newfangled service called ^m-Pesa. The habit stuck. Today ^m-Pesa is the most celebrated mobile-money service in the world. It processes 11bn transactions a year and has spawned imitators across Africa and farther afield.

Could covid-19 have a similar catalytic effect in other countries? In Rwanda the number of mobile-money transfers doubled in the week after a lockdown was imposed in March, according to data collected by the telecommunications regulator and analysed by Cenfri, a South African

think-tank. By late April users were making 3m transactions a week, five times the pre-pandemic norm (see chart). The value of transfers between individuals had risen six-fold to 40bn Rwandan francs (\$42m).



The Economist

The data do not show what caused the spike. Maybe Rwandans switched to digital payments because restrictions on movement made it hard to use cash; perhaps they were sending help to loved ones in need. A third explanation is that official policy changed. Just before the lockdown, the central bank told telecoms companies to eliminate charges on all mobile-money transfers for a three-month period. It also raised transaction limits.

The picture elsewhere is mixed. Tayo Oviosu of Paga, a Nigerian payments firm, says the number of customers signing up to use its mobile wallet has been 330% higher in this financial quarter than in the one before. MTN, a South African telecoms firm, says it has seen a rise in payments across its 16 African markets. Operators and regulators have agreed to reduce charges in several countries temporarily, sacrificing profits. “The transactions have gone up but I think we have been earning less money,” says Raghunath Mandava, the boss of Airtel Africa, another mobile-phone company.

But the crisis has also made people poorer. In Kenya, where mobile money is well established, the central bank reports a 10% rise in the number of daily transactions but a 5% fall in their total value. Although the volume of digital transfers has risen in many countries, housebound users are loading and withdrawing cash less often, says Ruan Swanepoel of the GSMA, a global association of mobile operators. The use of these “cash-in, cash-out” services fell by half in the weeks after a curfew was imposed in Kenya, reckon Caribou Digital, a research firm, and MicroSave Consulting, a consultancy. That is a blow to the thousands of agents who earn commission on the transactions they handle.

Many of these effects will be temporary. Lockdowns are already starting to ease. In several countries transaction charges are being restored: without them, the mobile-money business is unprofitable. But as the M-Pesa story shows, habits formed during a crisis can sometimes outlast it. One of the biggest barriers to mobile-money adoption is that people do not trust the service, says Hennie Bester of Cenfri. The pandemic is forcing them to set aside their wariness, perhaps for good. ■

Editor's note: Some of our covid-19 coverage is free for readers of The Economist Today, our daily [newsletter](#). For more stories and our pandemic tracker, see our [coronavirus hub](#)

This article appeared in the Middle East & Africa section of the print edition under the headline "Dial it up"



The revolution will be televised The battle over state TV in Iran

Come for the entertainment, stay for the propaganda

[**Middle East & Africa**](#)[**May 28th 2020 edition**](#)

THE COMEDY series “Payetakht” (Capital) has been one of the most popular shows on Iranian state TV since it began airing in 2011. It follows a family from the north who get into all sorts of trouble. In one season, for example, they take a balloon ride in Turkey—and end up in Syria, fighting jihadists. Such storylines allow the show to promote official policy, such as Iran’s support for President Bashar al-Assad of Syria. But in a more recent episode the shot of two newly-weds on a motorcycle (pictured) enraged conservatives. It seemed to emulate a film made before the Islamic revolution in 1979, a period they view with sanctimonious disdain.

Was the offending scene a result of negligence or the work of a “fifth column”? An internal probe aims to find out. But the row has already shed light on a larger struggle over state TV. Young hardliners think their pious

and conservative older managers are not pious enough. The young hotheads want to use the airwaves to spread Iran's revolutionary theology.

At the moment few people are watching. Viewership of state ^{TV} has been declining for years, according to ^{IRIB}, the state broadcasting monopoly. This is partly a result of a boom in satellite dishes. The government banned them in 1994, but that hasn't stopped Iranians from watching Western entertainment on satellite ^{TV} channels broadcast from abroad. Iranian versions of Netflix and apps such as Instagram also draw viewers. Meanwhile, ^{IRIB} has done itself no favours. Many Iranians switched off after 2009, when state channels aired false reports about reformist presidential candidates and promoted the fishy victory of the hardline incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

That trend has continued. During the presidential elections of 2013 and 2017 state ^{TV} touted the hardline opponents of Hassan Rouhani, who won both races and continues to be a target of harsh attacks. Many have been aired on a channel called "Ofogh" (Horizon), which was created in 2014 and is overseen by the young crowd. They have since taken control of other networks, such as the popular Channel 3. Now they are seeking two of the top jobs at ^{IRIB}, in charge of news and programming. The youngsters accuse the current leaders of corruption. More importantly, they say the old guard is too cosy with Mr Rouhani and others who have favoured engagement with the West. In their eyes the scene in "Payetakht" and others like it are out of step with revolutionary ideology.

But, desperate to win back viewers, the youngsters are crossing their own red lines. They show Western-style programmes on Channel 3, such as Iranian versions of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" and "America's Got Talent". They have hired relatively liberal celebrities to host new shows. It seems to be part of a strategy: regain an audience before injecting them with a strong dose of propaganda. Take the series "Gando", which appeared on Channel 3 last year. It was a thriller based loosely on the story of Jason Rezaian, an Iranian-American reporter charged with espionage and imprisoned for 544 days before being released in a prisoner swap in 2016. (Mr Rezaian denies all charges.) The show's message was clear: those who

reach out to the West are weak and traitorous, while hardliners want to protect Iran.

Networks on the other side of the divide use similar tactics. A satellite channel called Manoto, which appears sympathetic to the ousted monarchy, began by broadcasting entertaining shows and documentaries. But after gaining an audience it started airing slanted reports critical of the government and shows that portray the late shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, in a positive light. In order to attract more viewers still, broadcasters of all stripes might consider telling it straight.

This article appeared in the Middle East & Africa section of the print edition under the headline "The revolution will be televised"

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The Economist

The visible hand Europe's habit of propping up firms may outlast the pandemic

State-aid rules have been relaxed, and may stay so

[Europe May 28th 2020 edition](#)

Editor's note: Some of our covid-19 coverage is free for readers of The Economist Today, our daily [newsletter](#). For more stories and our pandemic tracker, see our [coronavirus hub](#)

IT NORMALLY TAKES the European Commission about six months to review an EU member state's request to derogate from the rules against subsidising domestic industry. Not these days. Since the outbreak of covid-19 roiled economies everywhere, requests to circumvent "state-aid" rules are often approved in under 24 hours, even on weekends. A trickle of demands from all over the bloc has turned into a flood. Nearly 200 subsidy schemes and bail-outs worth over €2trn (\$2.2trn), equivalent to Italy's GDP, have been cleared by eurocrats.

The single market at the heart of the European economy is built partly on the premise that national governments do not unduly aid “their” firms. Policies preventing them from doing so date back to the very first flushes of European integration. Now Europe finds itself in uncharted policy territory. Never have the rules been loosened to the extent they have been today. Politicians are brokering aid packages to industry in a way no one in living memory has been allowed to do.

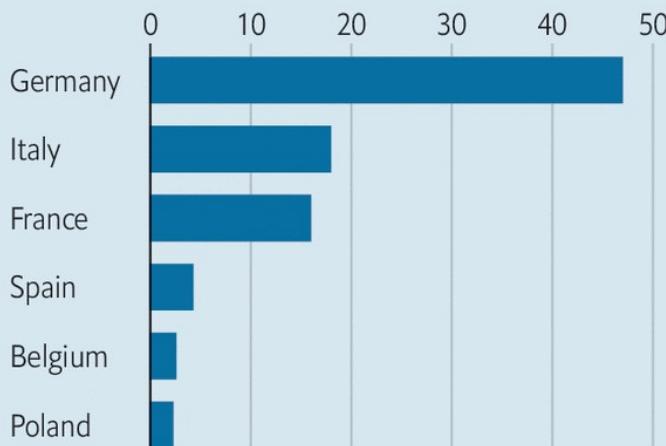
Trouble is: they might get used to it. Even before the crisis, Europe was moving in a dirigiste direction. Now a breach has opened in a set of rules that had curtailed politicians’ penchants for picking winners. When rules were loosened in past crises, notably in 2008, the state-aid regime quickly snapped back to its old self afterwards. But fewer countries support the principles behind state-aid rules nowadays. So the new relaxed norms may endure beyond the crisis, perhaps permanently. That would mark a new economic era for Europe.

European state-aid rules are a policymaking oddity. American states, for example, can and do try to poach companies from each other with promises of tax breaks, soft loans and the like. Europe went for the subsidy equivalent of a disarmament pact. All aid that isn’t expressly allowed to companies is banned, even to state-owned firms. Governments are regularly taken to task for everything from granting football clubs subsidised land to giving multinationals sweetheart tax deals. Policing this is one of the real powers wielded by Brussels, where the rules are enforced by the same commission officials who regulate antitrust.

Them that's got shall have

State aid approved by the European Commission*

To May 23rd 2020, % of total



Source: European Commission

*From an estimated total of €2.13trn

The Economist

Tensions have long brewed between that bit of the commission, overseen since 2014 by Margrethe Vestager, the competition commissioner, and some member states. France and Germany have repeatedly demanded competition rules be bent to allow the creation of “European champions”. They were furious last year when Ms Vestager blocked the planned merger of the rail bits of Siemens and Alstom.

Merging companies is one way to create champions, but gorging them with state aid is just as effective. That is now allowed, albeit temporarily. Granted, the goal right now is not to create champions so much as to prevent unnecessary bankruptcies and job losses. But if the rules remain eased for too long, the money sloshing to companies will aim less to rescue them in crisis than to boost their prospects afterwards.

Already some countries, notably Spain, have complained that the free-spending regime threatens the single market. That is because a few rich countries are doing most of the spending. Almost half the state aid paid out across Europe is done by Germany, which is big, wealthy and entered the crisis with relatively little debt. Smaller and poorer countries worry that their firms, which have not been so generously aided, will get gobbled up.

Politicians are busy untilting the playing field. On May 27th Ursula von der Leyen, the commission's president, unveiled a €750bn package of loans and grants that will redistribute money from those with the ability to pay (Germany) to those struggling to (Spain). National capitals will now haggle over a final deal.

Ms Vestager says higher German spending has been on the EU's wish-list for years. As for long-term risks to the state-aid regime, she emphasises that the easing of the rules is temporary. She has insisted that companies which were in bad shape before covid-19 struck cannot be rescued; troubled firms that get government bail-outs must pay them back. Those that get the most help cannot pay dividends or bonuses until they repay most of the state aid.

Old Brussels hands say the commission has little choice but to give states leeway in the crisis. "Governments will simply ignore EU rules if they don't flex enough—that's what the commission wants to avoid," says one lawyer. Once everyone has bought into the system's fast-track approval process, the rules can be tightened, for example by demanding that aid to companies is gradually withdrawn.

The aftermath of the crisis of 2008 gives backers of the state-aid regime confidence that such tightening will happen. But this time looks different. A decade ago Europe was in the ascendant, implementing its new fundamental treaty. Aid had gone mainly to unpopular banks seen to have gamed the system, so throttling that aid was politically easy. Fiscal weaknesses had yet to be exposed by the euro crisis.

In 2020, by contrast, bail-outs are seen as necessary and companies blameless. The crisis has amplified voices demanding that supply chains be repatriated to Europe, which would be easier if states could pay more subsidies. Britain, which long backed vigorous curbs on state aid, has left the club. Southern Europe gets nailed by state-aid rules regularly, and would not mind seeing the back of them. Ireland and the Netherlands have fallen foul of Ms Vestager for giving tax breaks to multinationals, a form of forbidden aid. Poland and Italy like the Franco-German plans to create industrial champions.

Ms Vestager says the concept of a “level playing field”—backed by state-aid rules—remains as important as ever. But concerns that China and America are pampering their own firms with subsidies are widespread. Even before covid-19, Europe had made concessions, allowing industrial projects of the sort politicians favour (such as factories to make high-tech batteries for electric cars) to get government largesse.

A Franco-German deal made possible the whopping package Mrs von der Leyen is now touting. While suggesting that the EU receive huge new powers, Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel, France’s and Germany’s leaders, also called for the commission to “adapt” state-aid rules permanently to favour industry. That may prove a difficult recommendation to ignore. ■

This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "The visible hand"



The Economist

The virus detectives Germany's contact tracers try to block a second covid-19 wave

A low-tech technique that worked in Asia is working in Europe, too

[Europe May 28th 2020 edition](#)

IF YOU HAD fallen asleep three months ago in Germany and woken up today you might not immediately notice much amiss. In much of the country shops are bustling, museums have reopened, and any bar that can pass for a restaurant is pulling in custom. If the shuttered theatres and conference halls dampen the spirits, consolation may be found in the beer gardens, in full swing under the spring sun.

New covid-19 infections in Germany are now consistently below 500 a day. But as German states lift restrictions they must try to prevent a second wave. Masks are compulsory on public transport and in shops, and social-distancing rules remain in place (if often ignored). Borders and schools are partially shut. But perhaps most important in fighting contagion are

Germany's phalanx of contact-tracers—part detectives, part social workers, part medical auxiliaries and part data clerks.

Their work has three elements. First, to obtain from people who have tested positive for covid-19 a list of their recent contacts, and to categorise them. (Spending 15 minutes face-to-face with an infected person, for example, places you in a high-risk bracket.) Second, to alert those people and instruct them, if needed, to self-isolate for 14 days. Third, to check in with them periodically and get them tested, in some cases even if they show no symptoms.

In some countries contact-tracers work from home or outsourced call centres. In Germany they are housed in one of 375 *Gesundheitsämter* (public health offices), such as one in north Berlin recently visited by your correspondent. In a light-filled room lined with maps and charts, two dozen people (of a total staff of 98) were managing various aspects of the pandemic, from manning phones to tapping in data. Doctors were on hand, ready to be dispatched to administer tests. The work has changed in recent weeks, says Lukas Murajda, head of the office: 80% of the contacts his team follows up are now in care homes for the elderly or other residential centres.

The Robert Koch Institute (RKI), a federal health agency, provides local offices with guidance and basic software to crunch their data. It has also recruited and helped train 500-odd “containment scouts” to help overloaded areas. But the offices retain considerable leeway to organise their own work. Some struggle to co-operate or share information, a task already hampered by data-privacy rules. (Certain information may only be shared via fax.)

But the advantages of decentralisation far outweigh the drawbacks. Health workers who know their regions are better placed to chase down infection chains in potential hotspots like meat-processing plants. Better-off health offices often ditch the RKI software and build or buy their own. “That’s the beauty of it,” says Peter Tinnemann, an epidemiologist at the Charité University Hospital in Berlin. “Local workers adapt solutions to local circumstances.” Some regions are struggling to meet the federally mandated

target of five contact tracers per 20,000 inhabitants. But if they have seen no new cases for a week or more, they may see no reason to try.

There are valuable lessons in the history of contact-tracing, a technique long deployed to manage outbreaks of tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases. “People underestimate the nature of the work,” says Marcel Salathé, a Lausanne-based digital epidemiologist. Inexperienced tracers may be unprepared for interviewees who react defensively to intrusive questions, or who fear their answers will send friends to quarantine. The two-day training of Mr Murajda’s recruits is limited to technical matters, though psychologists are on hand to help. Offices need multilingual staff to reach non-German-speakers. Most tracers read to their charges from prepared scripts, but the better-trained may deviate from it. Rather than ask directly about contacts, for example, they might jog interviewees’ memory by asking general questions about their social networks.

Having abandoned contact-tracing in March, only this week did Britain kick it back into gear. American states have also struggled to up their efforts. In Germany the *Gesundheitsämter* have long been underfunded; many in particular lack doctors, who can earn more in hospitals. Yet most offices maintained contact-tracing throughout the pandemic, even if understaffed spots in rural areas struggled when daily infections were in their hundreds. Many pulled in furloughed colleagues, like teachers or librarians. Some called on the army. Baden-Württemberg, an especially hard-hit state, ramped up contact-tracing staff from 500 to 3,000 and never saw infections spiral out of control, says Manne Lucha, its social-affairs minister.

Manual contact tracing has its limits: even the most helpful patient will struggle to identify fellow passengers on a train. Like other countries, Germany hopes to automate some tracing with a mobile app using Bluetooth. Yet its development has been plagued by technical and data-privacy woes; officials now hope to launch it in mid-June. Even then, technology can only support manual contact tracing, not replace it, says David Holtgrave, dean of the school of public health at the University of Albany, in New York state. Germany’s virus detectives have plenty of work ahead. ■

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This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "The virus detectives"



To your good stealth A beery European spy club is revealed

How the Danes, Swedes, Germans and Dutch shared secrets

[EuropeMay 28th 2020 edition](#)

A DANE, A Swede, a German and a Dutchman walk into a bar. It is 1979 and spooks from the four countries are conferring in a Munich suburb over dark and malty lagers. For years they had co-operated in the business of signals intelligence, or ^{SIGINT}—intercepting messages and cracking codes—and wanted a name for their budding spy pact. “They looked at their glasses, filled with Doppelbock beer of the local brand Maximator,” writes Bart Jacobs, a Dutch computer-science professor, “and reached a decision.”

In a paper published last month, Mr Jacobs revealed the existence of the Maximator alliance for the first time. It was formed in 1976, when Denmark joined forces with Germany and Sweden to intercept and decipher messages sent by satellites. The Netherlands joined two years later, bringing

its intercept stations in the Caribbean to the party. France came along in 1985. The group is alive and well today.

Maximator's history is a fine illustration of the chicanery involved in good cryptology. As well as plucking signals out of the ether, the group would swap details of weaknesses in cipher machines which encrypted diplomatic and military messages. How did they know of those weaknesses? Crypto AG, a Swiss firm that dominated the global market, turns out to have been co-owned by the CIA and its German counterpart, the BND. They would sell rigged machines to friends and enemies alike, including several NATO countries. Without letting on how it knew, Germany slipped information about those machines' flaws to its Maximator partners.

The revelation of Maximator is a reminder that the Five Eyes—a globe-girdling intelligence pact between America, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—is not the only game in town. Other eavesdropping alliances have coalesced around common goals, like the war in Afghanistan. For instance, the Fourteen Eyes, officially known as SIGINT Seniors Europe, brings together the countries in Five Eyes and Maximator, along with Spain, Norway, Belgium and Italy. “These groupings are not exclusive,” says a British insider, but “more of a patchwork focused on particular shared interests.” None is as wide-ranging and intimate as the Five Eyes.

Nevertheless, Maximator is staunchly European, something that carries certain advantages as transatlantic divisions grow wider. “German and French engineers work very well together,” notes Bernard Barbier, a former head of SIGINT for French intelligence, who once proposed a fused Franco-German spy agency. “In contrast,” he laments, “a British engineer with a French engineer is complicated.” Maximator also appears to have been especially secretive, unknown even to many people within the spy agencies involved. “I’ve seen some spectacular stuff that I think the Five Eyes would very much like to have,” says a former Dutch intelligence official. “And it couldn’t be shared.” ■

This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "To your good stealth"



Getty Images

Paris masked Covid masks give the French a new way to be chic

They are compulsory, so they may as well be stylish

[EuropeMay 30th 2020 edition](#)

A WOMAN CYCLES by in a pistachio-green mask that matches the colour of her bicycle. Masks in black, the perennial fall-back for the stylish, are the new staple in the fashionable quarters of the French capital. Since the government made mask-wearing compulsory on public transport on May 11th, elegant Parisians have ditched the mass-market pale-blue surgical ones for a dash of coronavirus chic.

Erik Schaix, a designer, sells couture models in charcoal-grey denim and batik print at his Paris boutique. They meet a demand “to get away from the pharmacy utility version”, says a sales assistant, and “add a bit of fantasy.” When Emmanuel Macron dropped in on a school wearing a navy-blue mask with a small French flag on the trim, its manufacturer was “flooded with calls” the next day, says Thomas Delise, who runs the firm. Based in

eastern France, Bonneterie Chanteclair makes high-filtration masks approved by the French army, and Mr Delise had sent the president a mask on the chance he might wear it. Now the firm is launching that model in 44 different shades. A limited-edition mask with Breton stripes sold out in half an hour.

Mask-wearing presents a particular problem in France. “The Enlightenment ideal realised by the French revolution was built against the masks that aristocrats adorned themselves with,” argued Frédéric Keck, an anthropologist, in *Le Monde*. To the French, some suggest, the uncovered face represents modernity and liberation from religious, patriarchal or other prescriptions.

Yet Parisians have embraced the look with panache. “It’s the new statement t-shirt,” said Jean-Paul Gaultier, a designer. Home-made masks may even be a form of silent rebellion at the government’s original advice against mask-wearing. Parisians have a long history of defiant style even at times of disaster. In post-revolutionary France, aristocrats who had lost relatives to the guillotine are said to have attended “victims’ balls”, at which women tied a jaunty blood-red choker around the neck. Under Nazi occupation, Parisiennes fixed wooden wedges under their sandals to fashion high heels. Today’s mask may not be the accessory of choice. But Parisians are turning it into a choice accessory.

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This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "Paris masked"



Into the trough Eastern Europe's covid-19 recession could match its post-communist one

The whole EU faces a downturn, but the east is especially fragile

[Europe May 28th 2020 edition](#)

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EUROPE HAS so far been hit the hardest of any continent by covid-19, but the pandemic has been more tornado than hurricane, ravaging some areas while leaving others nearly unscathed. Eastern Europe has been less affected than the west, and even eastern Germany less than western Germany. Southern Europe has suffered more than the north. Gaps between neighbours can be striking: Spain's excess mortality per person is more than triple that in Portugal, and France's quadruple that in Germany. Economically, too, the

impact is uneven. As forecasts of the pandemic's economic damage emerge, central and eastern Europe look especially precarious.

It is not that the rest of the continent is doing well. In the first quarter of 2020 the EU suffered its deepest economic contraction on record. Its GDP shrank by 3.5% compared with the previous quarter. Europe's biggest economy, Germany, dwindled by 2.2% in the same period. Figures for the second quarter, when lockdowns were at their most stringent, are expected to be much worse. Recent data suggest the union's economic activity in March and April dropped by approximately 30% compared to the previous year. On May 6th the European Commission predicted a "deep, uneven recession", with GDP this year contracting by 7.5% for the EU as a whole and a bit more in the part that uses the euro. Some forecasters are even gloomier: Morgan Stanley, an investment bank, sees the euro zone's GDP falling by 11%.

The depth of each country's recession will depend on the duration of its lockdown, the stringency of social distancing and the strength of consumption, explains Jacob Nell, an economist at Morgan Stanley. The bank thinks Germany's economy will shrink by 8% in 2020, whereas France's will contract by 11% and Italy's by 15%. Germany's lockdown was one of the lightest in Europe: factories and public transport operated throughout, and shops, restaurants, hairdressers, libraries, zoos and some schools have reopened. France, Spain and Italy forced far more of their economy into a covid coma.

Like Germany, eastern Europe has had low rates of infection and death, and is relaxing its lockdowns early. Slovakia, for instance, recorded just 1,513 confirmed cases of covid-19 and 28 deaths; neighbouring Austria had 16,557 cases and 643 deaths. Eastern Europeans did well in part because they knew they were vulnerable: fearing that the pandemic could quickly overwhelm their creaky health-care systems, they locked down hard and fast and contained the virus quickly. (Health-care expenditure per head in Poland and Hungary, for example, is about one-quarter that of Austria at purchasing-power parity.) It helped that few eastern Europeans ski at fancy resorts in Italy or Austria, which turned out to be coronavirus hotspots.

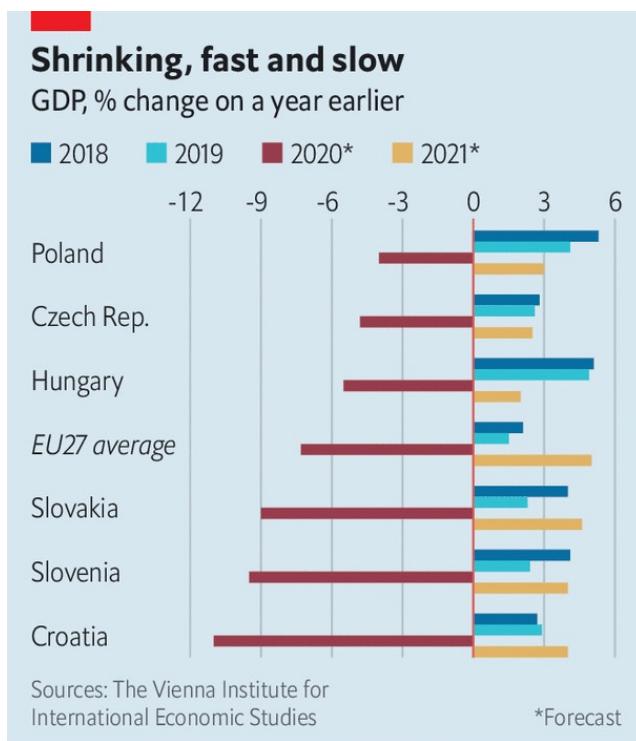
Yet the economic pain may be worse in much of the east than in the west. “Eastern Europeans dealt with the pandemic efficiently,” notes Richard Grieveson of the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (^{wiiw}), “but this recession will be as bad as the transition recessions”—those following the collapse of communism. In the five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, annual output in former Soviet-bloc countries fell by more than 40%.

Eastern European countries are vulnerable for three reasons. First, their economies are export-dependent, leaving them at the mercy of demand in other countries. As a proportion of ^{GDP}, exports of goods and services range from 96% in Slovakia and 85% in Hungary down to 67% in Bulgaria and 61% in Latvia. By way of comparison, in Spain the ratio is 35%.

A second reason is that eastern European governments have less capacity to finance rescue packages. They cannot run large deficits because investors are wary of lending to them. Most have low levels of public debt, but their credit ratings tend to be poor. Austria’s debt, as a percentage of ^{GDP}, is more than three times as high as Bulgaria’s. Yet its bonds are rated AA+ by Standard and Poor’s, a ratings agency, while Bulgaria’s are BBB.

Finally, many countries in the east rely heavily on one of the industries hardest hit by the pandemic: tourism. In Croatia, for example, it generates 25% of ^{GDP}. The ^{wiiw} thinks Croatia’s economy will contract by about 11% in 2020.

On the bright side, central Europe could benefit from its dependence on Germany, which is expected to recover quickly. It is by far the biggest trading partner of the Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland). Morgan Stanley expects Germany to expand by 6.4% in 2021, and German businesses are growing more confident about this year’s outlook, according to a survey last week by the Ifo Institute. Being outside the euro zone has its advantages, too: the ^{wiiw} expects the Czech Republic and Poland to be helped by the devaluation of the koruna and the zloty (see chart).

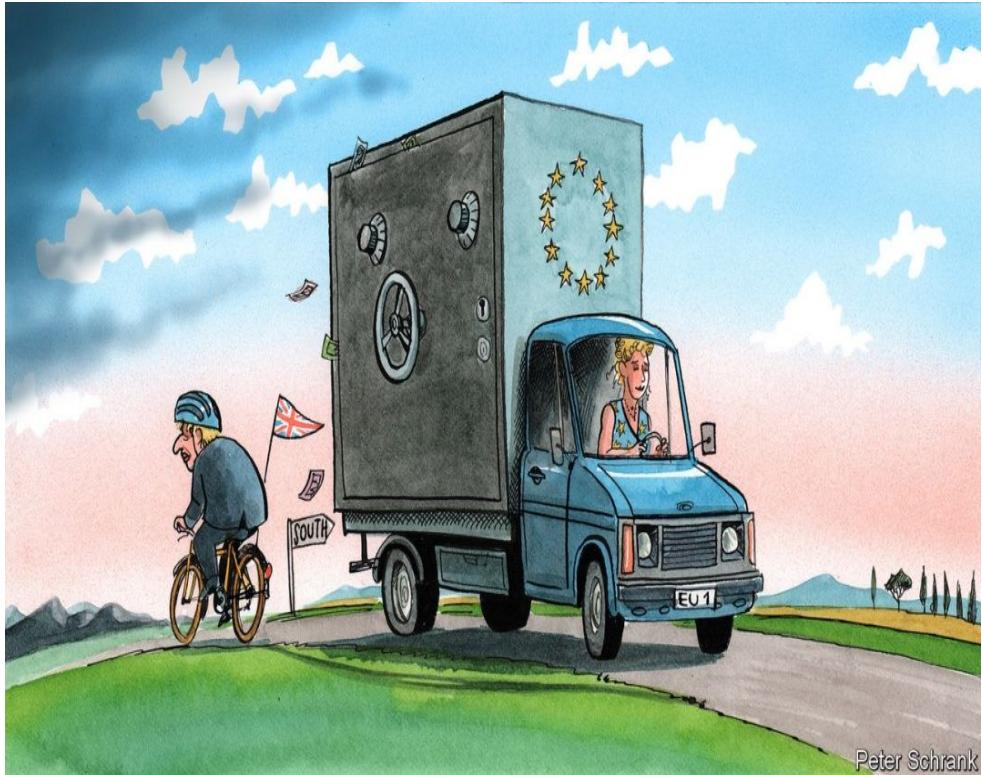


The Economist

Mr Grieveson thinks the crisis will fundamentally change some aspects of the region's economies, sometimes for the better. Central and eastern Europe could benefit from "nearshoring" (moves by China-wary western European manufacturers to bring production closer to home). The rise in online shopping, which is expected to continue even after the pandemic abates, might help too. Related services, such as call centres and warehouses, could be outsourced to the region.

The Commission's forecast notes that the recovery will be "uncertain", especially in hard-hit countries that were weak before the pandemic struck. An incomplete recovery in one country, it warns, could dampen economic growth everywhere. It is a call to Europeans to do what Germans did after the fall of the Berlin Wall: help each other out for the benefit of all. ■

This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "Into the trough"



Charlemagne The EU's recovery fund is a benefit of Brexit

The bloc takes steps that would have been impossible with Britain as a member

Europe May 30th 2020 edition

CONSIDER A COUNTERFACTUAL. A few years after the referendum in which Britain narrowly voted to stay in the EU, David Cameron hands power to a loyal chancellor, George Osborne. Upon taking office, Mr Osborne faces a global pandemic and Britain's deepest recession since 1706. To cap it all, an unwelcome proposal from Brussels arrives: a €750bn (\$825bn) recovery fund earmarked for the struggling economies of southern Europe, paid for with debt issued by the bloc. Britain is on the hook for about €90bn. "I did warn you, George," writes Boris Johnson, now editor of the *Evening Standard*, London's local newspaper, in a gleeful column.

Had history taken that route, Britain would have vetoed the scheme that EU officials hope will dig the bloc out of its economic hole, points out Sir Ivan

Rogers, the country's former ambassador to the EU. Reality turned out differently. Britain voted to leave, Mr Johnson became prime minister and Mr Osborne edits a local newspaper in London. And, for the first time, the EU is taking a path that would have been blocked by its former member.

With Britain gone, the EU is coalescing. The scheme to issue a mix of grants worth €500bn and loans of €250bn to countries struggling with the effects of covid-19 is a step towards a more integrated bloc. Some breathlessly compare the move to America's decision to mutualise debts in 1790. For others, it is less a leap than a shuffle: the EU has issued debt in this way before, if on a far smaller scale. In any case, the big member states are all on board. France and Germany proposed a plan similar to the European Commission's, while Spain and Italy called for an even more generous one.

Yet even without the British, the path is not entirely clear. Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark — the so-called “frugal four” — have criticised the scheme. Each has a veto in the coming talks, like every other member state. In a paper, the foursome demanded that aid must be paid back, not granted outright, and must come with strict promises of economic reform. Any fund will be negotiated as an add-on to the EU's €1.1trn seven-year budget, which still has some souvenirs of British obstinacy. The “frugal four” are fond of rebates, the complicated systems of cashback for countries who pay in more than they receive, which have greased EU budget negotiations ever since Britain's prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, demanded one in the 1980s.

Without Britain, the dynamics of the debate have changed. Budgetary hawks have far less weight than when they could rely on Britain's support. Now they have no big ally. The crucial shift came when Germany, traditionally opposed to mutualised debt, gave its backing to the fund. Together the foursome have only 42m citizens—not even a tenth of the EU's population and smaller than Spain's. Their critiques of aid plans are restrained by the fact that each governing coalition contains stridently pro-EU parties. In Austria, Sebastian Kurz, the fiscally conservative chancellor, governs alongside the Green party, which is much keener on handing cash to needy Italians. In the Netherlands, the Christian Democratic Appeal's

hardline finance minister, Wopke Hoekstra, sits in government with the Europhile liberals of ^{D66}.

The fissures that do still exist, such as the division between the 19 states in the euro zone and the eight outside it, are narrower than when Britain was a member. During the euro crisis of 2010-12, Britain chose not to chip in to rescue funds for any euro-zone member apart from Ireland. Instead of help, Mr Cameron, then Britain's prime minister, offered lectures on the structural flaws of the euro—the equivalent of a neighbour extolling the virtues of fire safety while the house next door is burning.

Running the recovery fund through the _{EU}'s budget means all members are financially responsible for it, even if most of its beneficiaries sit in the euro zone. Sweden and Denmark, which are outside that currency area, seem happy to help, though they do not agree on how. Economic need is motivation enough: over 70% of Swedish exports end up in the _{EU}. If the single market burns, so do they. Even countries such as Poland have fallen into line with the idea of a recovery fund, as long as it does not cut into the regular _{EU} aid (“cohesion funds”) that flows from west to east. A one-size-fits-all approach to policies becomes more viable now that Britain, the most oddly shaped member, has departed.

Relying so heavily on the _{EU}'s budget to fix the bloc's ills has drawbacks. Chunks of _{EU} funds aimed at building infrastructure in eastern Europe have often ended up in surprising places, such as the pockets of businessmen close to Viktor Orbán, Hungary's leader. If not trousered by some ne'er-do-well, the cash is sometimes ill spent, as deserted airports in southern Europe attest.

But the _{EU} is not doomed to repeat old mistakes. Rules of spending have tightened. A new European Public Prosecutor's Office will investigate any misuse of funds. In any case, dishing out bales of cash covered in _{EU} flags is not the worst idea when countries clobbered by the pandemic are losing faith in the entire project. Polls suggest four in ten Italians want to leave the bloc. After Britain's slapstick departure, no government is likely to put such a question to a vote. But it would be foolhardy to ignore the signals.

The dash for cash

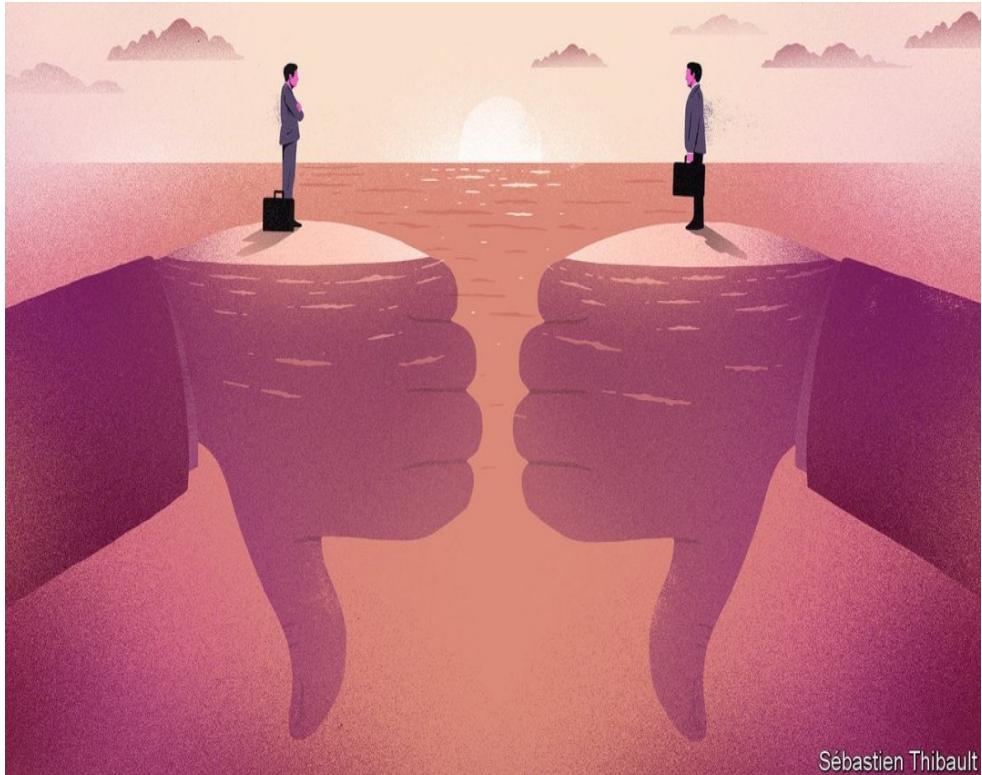
Whenever money is involved, the _{EU} descends into an undignified brawl. Yet the outline of a deal is emerging. A compromise whereby the “frugal four” keep their rebates, eastern Europe continues to receive generous transfers, and Italy and Spain get their recovery fund seems feasible. France is able to cast itself in a lead role, while Germany reassures itself that nothing can happen in the bloc without its blessing. A scrap is still necessary. Part of this is choreography so leaders can declare victory at home; part of this is leaders grabbing what they can. With the seven-year budget and the recovery fund totalling €1.85trn, there is plenty to wrestle for, and even a planned negotiation can turn nasty. During the coming summer of arguments over cash, it may seem as if Britain never left. ■

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This article appeared in the Europe section of the print edition under the headline "The benefits of Brexit"

Britain

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Sébastien Thibault

Brexit Deadlock looms at Brexit talks next week

The chances Britain will leave the EU without a trade deal are rising

[Britain May 28th 2020 edition](#)

IT IS NO surprise that negotiations on Britain's future relationship with the EU have been difficult. The two sides have dug into opposing positions on such issues as a level playing-field for competition, fisheries and the role of the European Court of Justice. Negotiating on politically contentious matters by video link, thanks to covid-19, makes it much harder to feel out necessary compromises. And the clock is ticking: the deadline for a deal is December 31st, when the transition period is due to end.

Next week sees the final round of talks before a summit in June due to assess progress. The previous one ended in a bad-tempered exchange of letters between the British negotiator, David Frost, and his EU counterpart, Michel Barnier. Mr Frost called for the EU to think again about its proposals. Mr Barnier said success was possible only if tangible and parallel progress

was made in all areas. Both sides have published opposing draft treaties. Since each is under a mandate that can be changed only by their political masters, who are preoccupied by covid-19, expectations of any progress next week are low.

This is compounded by mistrust over implementing the withdrawal agreement, especially the protocol that keeps Northern Ireland in the EU's customs union. Next week also sees the second meeting of the joint committee supervising this agreement. The EU is pleased that Britain has belatedly accepted that there will be border and customs checks between Northern Ireland and the British mainland. But it frets that not enough preparations have been made, especially against the risk that the negotiations may end without any trade deal in place.

For this is now a genuine prospect. Mujtaba Rahman of the Eurasia Group, a consultancy, says it is even possible that the June summit may decide to abandon the negotiations, though Charles Grant of the Centre for European Reform, a think-tank, suggests the crunch is more likely to be in the autumn. A recent poll by the UK in a Changing Europe (UKinACE), an academic think-tank, found that over 70% of its Brexit analysts believe a trade deal is unlikely to be agreed by the end of the year.

Such a gloomy prognosis is triggering renewed debate about the year-end deadline. The withdrawal treaty provides that, before the end of June, it can be extended by up to two years by agreement. But Boris Johnson is viscerally opposed to an extension. He has even made clear that he would veto any EU request for more time. Why such stubbornness, given that he also claims to want a deal?

One answer is that he and his team associate talk of extending deadlines with Theresa May's weak government. They also maintain that an extension would betray those who voted for Brexit in 2016 and for the Tories last December. This is hard to swallow, since Brexit formally happened in January and most voters seem to back an extension. An opinion poll by Best for Britain, a lobby group, found that two-thirds of respondents supported the idea, with almost half of those who voted Leave in 2016 also being in favour.

The government also thinks a tight deadline and tough bargaining increases pressure on Brussels to offer concessions. Mr Johnson harks back to last October, when he won changes to Mrs May's withdrawal agreement that the _{EU} had insisted could not be reopened. Yet what actually happened was that he accepted the _{EU}'s original preferred option for averting a hard border in Ireland, which was to keep Northern Ireland alone in a customs union, implying controls in the Irish Sea.

A darker explanation is that Downing Street thinks the massive impact of covid-19 will swamp any adverse effects from leaving without a trade deal. Some ministers think covid-19 may now make a complete break with the _{EU} easier to sell politically, especially if the blame can be placed on an intransigent Brussels. Yet the damage from reverting to World Trade Organisation terms would be large and enduring. A new study by the _{UKINACE} team reckons that, compared with the status quo, it would lower _{GDP} by 8.1% after ten years.

To avoid this, an extension could be made more palatable. One possibility would be to go for less than a year, and insist that even this would be used only if a deal cannot be done sooner. Another idea, proposed by Raoul Ruparel, a former European adviser to Mrs May, is to agree to an extension only to sort out the practical implementation of a deal that still has to be reached in broad outline by December. Anand Menon, _{UKINACE}'s director, says an extension is needed even in the event of no deal, because covid-19 has left businesses on both sides ill-prepared for the disruption this could create.

An alternative is to ignore the end-June deadline for an extension and leave it to the autumn to decide. After all, Mrs May's various extensions of the Article 50 Brexit deadlines were all done at the last minute. Yet there is a big legal problem. The withdrawal treaty was drawn up under Article 50. If its end-June deadline is not met, Article 50 can no longer be used because Britain is a third country. That means any extension in the autumn would have to go through a separate treaty. Worse, such a treaty might have to be ratified by national and, in some cases, regional parliaments.

In short, the risk of ending the year without a trade deal with the _{EU} and with no extension of the deadline looks uncomfortably high. And, after months

when covid-19 wholly usurped the agenda, Brexit is back to the fore. ■

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Reuters

Politics

The damage Dominic Cummings has done to Boris Johnson

Arrogance and populism don't go

[Britain May 28th 2020 edition](#)

DOWNING STREET aides have a habit of creating headaches for their bosses. Damian McBride, Gordon Brown's pressman, quit over a smear campaign. Andy Coulson, who did the same job for David Cameron, resigned over his role in the tabloid phone-hacking scandal. Such rows are often complex, who-knew-what-when stories that delight insiders, but which the public would soon forget.

Boris Johnson hopes that's so in Dominic Cummings's case. His chief aide drove 270 miles from London to his parents' farm in late March, while most Britons were following the government's edict to "stay home". More than three dozen Tory MPs have protested and a minister has resigned. Cabinet ministers have been rolled out to defend the aide, a spectacle described as "humiliating and degrading" by William Wragg, the Tory chair

of Parliament's Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. Mr Johnson's approval ratings are bleeding. More than half of voters, including a majority of Leavers, think Mr Cummings should go.

Mr Johnson is determined he should not. On May 27th he told ^{MPs} it was time to "move on" from the "political ding-dong about what one adviser may or may not have done". Yet this affair feels less like a backstairs intrigue and more like the parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009, which undermined confidence in lawmakers. Like those ^{MPs} who billed the taxpayer for Mars Bars and swimming-pool maintenance, Mr Cummings's wrongdoing is pretty trivial. (Breach of the lockdown laws, which he denies, carries a £30 (\$37) fine for first offenders who pay promptly.) But the public, many of whom have sacrificed the opportunity to meet newborn grandchildren, visit dying relatives or attend funerals in order to follow the rules, could instantly grasp the story.

As in 2009, anger has mixed with ridicule. Mr Cummings's claim he drove to Barnard Castle, a beauty spot, on his wife's birthday in order to test his eyesight is the butt of jokes and memes online. Just 8% of Britons accept the alibi, a similar proportion to those who believe the earth is flat.

Mr Johnson's administration—which he calls the "people's government"—is particularly vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy. He and his aide owe victory in the ^{EU} referendum and 2019 election to harnessing suburban England's resentment of political elites. Mr Cummings's fiery blogs rail against ministers who treat voters with contempt, are deaf to popular anger and fail to fire incompetent officials. His stammering defence at a press conference on May 25th that the "stay home" regulation was open to interpretation appeared a parody of the behaviour he once denounced. Appeals to Britain's culture war—dismissing the reports of his trip as "fake news" by "campaigning newspapers"—fell flat. Voters now think the Tories are more "out of touch" than Labour by a margin of two to one, a big shift since January.

Mr Johnson's keenness to keep his adviser has demonstrated how remarkable a figure Mr Cummings is. His press conference in the Downing Street rose garden, a space normally reserved for foreign dignitaries,

accorded him a status unusual for an adviser, whose code prohibits them from making public comments.

His importance lies in part in his vision, and Mr Johnson's lack of one. Mr Johnson became prime minister with little idea what he wanted to do with the job, other than "Get Brexit Done"; his agenda for government—to "level up" poorer regions, boost scientific research and break hard with Europe—comes straight from his aide's blogs. Mr Cummings has also built himself a formidable power base. Many Downing Street aides, working on communications, Brexit policy and in Mr Johnson's private office, are loyal graduates of the Vote Leave campaign Mr Cummings ran, while independent-minded ministers and aides have been shoved out. Yet Mr Cummings's power rested on his reputation as a strategic genius. This week he did not look so clever. ■

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This article appeared in the Britain section of the print edition under the headline "Ill-advised"



Back for summer English schools reopen, but not without a fight

Why the government has struggled to manage the return to class

[Britain May 28th 2020 edition](#)

ON MAY 10TH, in the speech in which he began to lift the lockdown, Boris Johnson said he hoped schools would welcome back pupils at the start of June. The announcement was heavily caveated. Getting older children in before the summer break was an “ambition”. Primary schools would reopen with only three year groups. “I must stress again that all of this is conditional, it all depends on a series of big ifs,” the prime minister warned.

If the statement was designed to reassure, it did not succeed. The National Education Union, the country’s biggest teaching union, reckons that around 35 local councils in England are advising their schools to hold off; a rebellion the union has loudly supported. In some cases, schools won’t open because of problems putting in place precautions. More often, it is because they are unconvinced it is safe even with precautions. According to Teacher

Tapp, a pollster, 60% of state-school teachers say they are “nervous” to return.

This nervousness is partly because reopening schools is inherently tricky. Modelling from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which informs the government’s view it is safe, is sensitive to assumptions about how much children spread the virus, which is still uncertain. Although there is little doubt that keeping classrooms empty will cut the amount children learn and their parents’ productivity, the extent to which this is the case is hard to guess.

Even things that are clear—such as the fact that children are at little risk themselves from the virus—are hard to communicate. “We’re being asked by lots of parents: ‘Is my child safe if he or she goes back to school?’” says Sir Jon Coles, head of a charity which runs 85 schools, and who has advised the department for education on reopening. Misconceptions abound. One is that four- and five-year-olds will be expected to keep 2 metres apart. The government recognises this will not be possible, but to mitigate the risk of infection they will be kept in groups of no more than 15.

Yet lots of this is true across Europe, too, where the reopening of schools has proved less difficult. Some English teachers’ unions have been notably recalcitrant, perhaps because they know English people are nervous of ending the lockdown, and they therefore think this is a battle they can win. And the government messed up its negotiations: it annoyed the unions unnecessarily by going against their views on which years should return to school first, and by springing the approach on them.

It is harder for the government to order schools around in a system, like England’s, in which accountability is fragmented. “Schools have a vast amount of autonomy,” notes one former education secretary. “That is a strength of the system but there are times—and this is one—where it can create a tension.” In deciding whether to reopen, some heads are thus stuck between the wishes of the government and the wishes of their teachers’ unions.

The hope at the department for education is that, as children return to school, parents and teachers will be reassured it is safe; something which

seems likely. Yet four in ten primary-school teachers expect less than half of their pupils to actually return when gates open. The way the government and the unions have handled the return to school has made it more fraught than it needed to be. ■

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This article appeared in the Britain section of the print edition under the headline "Back to school, sort of"



Cover Images

Carmaking Lotus benefits from its Chinese connection

The sports-car maker gets back to work

[Britain May 28th 2020 edition](#)

NOTORIOUS MECHANICAL capriciousness once led frustrated owners to propose that Lotus was an acronym for “Lots of trouble, usually serious”. The cars are now reliable, but the accusation could be levelled at the firm, whose 72-year history is of elusive profits and periodic threats of bankruptcy. Yet just as petrolheads put a reputation for sobriety aside to own a brand burnished by past racing glory so too has Geely, a privately owned Chinese carmaker, which acquired a controlling stake in 2017.

For now, admits Phil Popham, the carmaker’s boss since 2018, the “brand is bigger than the business”. Last year 1,700 cars rolled off the production line in its Norwich factory, which has the capacity to build 10,000. But at least the Lotus badge remains attached to cars. Since the heyday of British sports-car manufacture in the 1960s many of the marques such as Austin

Healey, Sunbeam and Triumph have perished. Lotus suffered from a string of unsuitable owners.

Geely might succeed where others have failed because it comes with financial backing, and a track record of expanding abroad and turning round struggling car firms. In the decade since it acquired Volvo the Swedish firm has thrived. Since taking over the company that manufactures London Taxis in 2013 it has developed a smooth-driving electric black cab that has cleaned up London's air by reducing emissions and improving the mood of tetchy cabbies.

Geely is rumoured to be pumping around £1.5bn (\$1.8bn) into the firm, an estimate that Mr Popham says is “conservative”. The cash will pay for the firm’s first new model for a decade—the Evija £2m electric hypercar, a “halo” vehicle designed to restore Lotus’s reputation for technology and speed; 130 of them will be made. A cheaper new sports car will follow in 2021.

The relationship should benefit both sides. The British firm can piggyback on Geely’s investment by outsourcing the development of a new platform, the basic underpinning of a car, and the costs of electrifying all future models. Geely can tap British expertise in aerodynamics and building light vehicles, important for keeping down the tonnage of electric cars with hefty batteries.

The tie-up may also insulate Lotus from some of the worst effects of the viral slowdown on Western carmakers, which will be aiming to cut costs and retrench. Forecasts suggest that China’s carmakers will not suffer as badly as those in the rest of the world. But questions remain over how well sports cars which mostly sell for between £55,000 and £110,000, and that are basically toys, will sell in a post-covid world of recession and gloom.

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