



Passengers arriving at Changi Airport walking past a thermal scanner when temperature screening was on for the Middle East respiratory syndrome (Mers) in 2014. With inexpensive travel and increased connectivity, pathogens cross borders with alarming frequency, as demonstrated by Sars, Mers, H1N1 influenza, Zika and the Ebola outbreak of 2014-2015 in West Africa. ST FILE PHOTO

15 years after Sars, it's even more vital to stay vigilant

MOH has proposed greater powers to help it curb infectious diseases. Quarantine and isolation of high-risk individuals may cause inconvenience but everyone must play his part.

Irving Charles Boudville and Leo Yee-Sin

For The Straits Times

Fifteen years ago on May 31, the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) which claimed 33 lives here – and provided a wake-up call about trans-border disease transmission – was declared over in Singapore.

Caused by infection with the Sars coronavirus (CoV), Sars first emerged in Guangdong, spread to Hong Kong, and eventually affected over 8,000 people in 26 countries. The first Singaporeans affected were holidaymakers who fell ill shortly after returning from Hong Kong in late February 2003.

Sars infected 238 persons in Singapore, and the 33 who died did so despite the best efforts of healthcare workers in Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), which was the designated Sars hospital, and at other hospitals.

Beyond the suffering and loss of lives, Singaporeans were affected by disruption to education, work,

travel and daily life. The economy contracted by 7 per cent that quarter, leading to a government relief package of \$230 million for the tourism and transport-related sectors.

Infectious pathogens (disease-causing agents) like viruses and bacteria are no respecters of national borders. With inexpensive travel and increased connectivity, pathogens cross borders with alarming frequency, as demonstrated by Sars, the Middle East respiratory syndrome (Mers), H1N1 influenza, Zika and the Ebola outbreak of 2014-2015 in West Africa.

Indeed, noting that it is imperative for Singapore, a major trade and travel hub, to remain vigilant to new and emerging infectious diseases, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said it is seeking public feedback on proposed changes giving it more powers to curb the spread of such diseases here. The Straits Times reported earlier this week.

A key proposal is to stop high-risk individuals who break isolation orders from leaving the country, and isolate them. The current practice is to arrest them. Another proposal is to deny entry

into Singapore for foreign travellers who have not been vaccinated against certain infectious diseases.

Even a relatively well-studied pathogen such as the influenza virus is known to pose a risk of epidemics or pandemics. The ability to detect the early signal of an outbreak is challenging. To nip an outbreak in the bud is essential to prevent further transmission.

Hence the need to engage novel technologies and methodologies to

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continuously improve the local surveillance system. The MOH's proposals include being able to carry out surveillance of carriers or contacts of infectious diseases remotely such as by phone calls or video-conferencing instead of in person.

However, scanning must also be expanded to regional and international horizons to monitor the situation elsewhere, assessing the risk of spread to Singapore, and ensuring readiness. Hence, the Singapore Government conducts proactive "horizon scanning" – the systematic examination and methodical investigation of potential threats to ensure adequate and resilient preparation against them.

This also highlights the importance of regional and international networks which facilitate sharing of outbreak information, medical knowledge and positive control samples for testing.

Infectious pathogens also do not respect a country's state of development. In the Ebola outbreak of 2014-2015, although the main countries affected were in West Africa, developed countries were not spared, with four infected

persons entering the United States, Britain and Italy undetected, and a secondary spread to three persons in the US and Spain.

NO ROOM FOR COMPLACENCY

The lesson for Singapore is that the country cannot be complacent about outbreaks in other countries such as the current Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, or the outbreak of the Nipah virus in Kerala, South India.

These outbreaks have educated Singaporeans on the steps that must be taken to guard against the threat of infectious disease outbreaks. One of the steps is the development of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), which is equipped with high-level isolation units against highly lethal and highly contagious infectious diseases like Ebola.

The NCID will ensure that Singapore is in a constant state of readiness, equipped with the best expertise and resources for the fight against infectious diseases.

Doctors at the NCID and all hospitals in Singapore have valuable experience in providing expert patient care in outbreaks, and the health system is ready to execute the necessary response. However, ultimate success requires the responsible cooperation of all Singaporeans.

They need to adopt a mindset of "total defence", to borrow the national defence catchphrase. Measures to protect the health of the public are inconvenient but necessary, such as those designed to prevent the entry of infectious diseases through Singapore's borders, or their spread to other countries from Singapore.

Quarantines and isolation during outbreaks may also cause inconvenience to individuals.

Another area where public good depends on personal responsibility is immunisation.

Last year, low measles immunisation rates in Europe resulted in a fourfold increase in measles cases, and outbreaks in one in four countries resulted in 35 deaths. Closer to home, a Taiwanese traveller who acquired measles in Thailand was responsible for outbreaks earlier this year in both Okinawa, Japan (where he travelled to even after falling sick) and Taiwan.

Through the National Childhood Immunisation Schedule, Singapore has achieved high population coverage for vaccinations against infectious diseases such as diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), tetanus, measles, mumps and rubella, preventing outbreaks of such diseases.

Also last year, MOH published the National Adult Immunisation Schedule of vaccines so that specific demographic groups such as the elderly and those with chronic illnesses and weakened immunity can be protected.

Singapore has come a long way in building up its defences against infectious disease outbreaks since the baptism of fire by Sars. The country came through because everyone responded as one nation: individuals and groups, the public and private sectors, the Government and the people.

Even today, everyone must continue to be ready to each do their part. Singapore cannot afford to let its guard down in the battle against infectious diseases.

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Domestic casualties in Trump's trade war

If protectionism succeeds, Americans will be worse off for it

Martin Sandbu

The first shots in United States President Donald Trump's trade wars ("good and easy to win") have been fired.

Who is most likely to be hurt? And in particular, were some of us right to say when Mr Trump first started rattling his sabre that it would soon become clear that those bent on protectionism face high costs from turning words into action? Quite right, it seems.

The story of the week is how the European Union's retaliatory tariffs – which Brussels introduced in response to Mr Trump's tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from Europe – have prompted

Harley-Davidson to move production for the European market out of the US to avoid import duties it says will add US\$2,200 (S\$3,000) to the cost of each motorcycle.

It is not the only example of domestic casualties from Mr Trump's trade aggression. It is important to understand that this is not just a matter of the EU lashing out in revenge.

That would fit Mr Trump's narrative and he could, with some justification, argue that the US can give harder than it gets, hence it stands to "win". But retaliatory import duties are just one of three ways Americans are hurt by their President's protectionism.

There is also the higher cost of steel and aluminium he has engineered, which hits the bottom line of Harley-Davidson and other metals-consuming industries directly.

The US industries that use steel and aluminium as input must be

much more productive than those that produce the metal – that is why steel and aluminium producers want protection – so the tariffs hurt the things Americans are relatively good at to make them do more of what they are relatively bad at.

Finally, and least well understood, if other countries lower trade barriers between them in a liberalisation that does not include the US, American exporters become less competitive in those markets. That is what is happening.

Japanese motorcycles, on which the EU import duty is being eliminated, now stand to gain market share from American ones.

Meanwhile, the EU has just published its negotiation directives for the talks on liberalising trade with Australia and New Zealand. Perhaps Harley-Davidson should reconsider a decision to close its Australian plant.

What about China? It is playing the tariff game too. Note how it is reducing tariffs on soya bean

imports from Asian trading partners while raising them on US supplies, but it is less well positioned at it.

That is because it imports so much less than it exports, and it is unwilling to undertake the sort of domestic reforms and policy commitments that would be required for free trade agreements with large economies.

Economist Brad Setser has looked at what else China can do to make Americans suffer from Mr Trump's trade war against it.

Focusing mostly on the threat to sell off Beijing's huge stake of US government bonds, he concludes that the answer is "not so much".

As he correctly points out, the Federal Reserve could easily buy whatever stock of bonds China decides to sell so as to keep interest rates moderate.

That is not the end of the story, however. If China shifts its holdings from low-paying bonds to higher-yielding assets, or pursues a

Harley-Davidson move production out of the US, surely Mr Trump's own protectionism can make other production move in. And his supporters, for now, seem to agree.

The explicit goal of some of the President's advisers is to repatriate supply chains. They – and Mr Trump and his supporters – may think a world in which each economy (at least each large economy) produces mostly for its own domestic market would be a better one than the interdependent global economy we have now.

Until, that is, they see the cost. The rise of global production chains has transformed the nature of trade since the 1980s.

Continental- or global-scale production is more efficient than national-scale. The upshot is to be careful what you wish for.

If Mr Trump achieves a self-sufficient US economy, it would be a much less productive American economy than it could be.

That would mean squeezed living standards, an increasing awareness of falling behind global leaders and a less harmonious society that squabbles over how to divide a smaller pie. In the end, even his voters might get tired of so much winning. FINANCIAL TIMES