

Why is common sense not common?



ANDREW SHENG

As vaccines begin to roll out, there is increasing awareness that vaccines are not the silver bullets to kill the pandemic. First, there are lots of people

who do not like vaccinations. Moreover, if Covid-19 resides within one part of your community, you might still get infected even with the vaccine shot.

Second, the available vaccines are being very unfairly distributed. As public health expert Gavin Yamey observed in *Nature* magazine: "As I write this, 191 million vaccination shots against Covid-19 have been administered; more than three quarters were given in just 10 nations that account for 60 percent of the global gross domestic product. In some 130 nations with 2.5 billion people, not a single shot has been administered. High-income countries represent only 16 percent of the world's population, but they have purchased more than half of all Covid-19 vaccine doses."

Third, we don't even know whether there will be a Next Normal, since so many things are changing so fast that conventional knowledge is having trouble coping with change. The New Normal is super-fast change, with Covid-19 mutating as fast as vaccines are being innovated.

Given all such complexities, let's draw some simple common sense lessons on what to do next.

First, change has happened so fast that even experts are likely to be wrong.

Relying on medical expertise alone means shutting down the economy, and that has indeed very high costs. To be fair, there is so much distrust and fake news that no one knows who to believe anymore.

Second, in a chaotic transition with no agreement, we have to focus not on the "best", but on what is practical and achievable. The best cannot be the enemy of the good.

Third, common sense tells you that in a crisis, cooperation is the only practical way out of the mess. But there are lots of people who think that demonising and fighting each other on the basis of fundamental beliefs and values is what matters. That cannot be right, because if small fights escalate to nuclear war, there will be no one left. We have to accept that we live in one over-crowded planet in which we have to live with people we do not like, whether we like it or not. Migration is like shuffling deckchairs on the Titanic.

As someone trained to think logically and rationally, the US elections woke me up to the fact that no amount of facts and rational arguments can convince Trump supporters to accept the evidence that the majority won. We need to accept that there will always be a wide range of opinions on everything, so deciding issues democratically will be a noisy affair. Since public opinions are very polarised, it would make sense to start the process of building social consensus on what we think the post-pandemic economy and social system should look like.

Common sense tells us that top-down solutions where a small group decides how the present is being shared (as we see, unequally) will not do. We will need bottom-up feedback

mechanisms to ensure that each individual, community, nation and together, the world, will move towards a greener and more inclusive place with peace and hopefully prosperity.

Actually, we are in this chaotic phase because we have moved from a Unipolar to a Multipolar world. This is because not only is the hegemon power having an intense internal debate on what to do domestically, its foreign policy is also being questioned by the rest of the

religion, values, and interests that are not always rational or rather emotional. If the state is to stick together without fighting or civil war, these conflicts must be resolved amicably. But since those who advise the politicians are the economists and lawyers who are trained to think rationally, the solutions proposed, certainly those introduced in the last 30 years, don't seem to work as intended. For example, America preaches equality since its founding and

The common sense answer is that human beings are both rational and irrational at the same time. Just because scientific theories work in practice in nature, this does not mean that social science theories work in societies that do not conform wholly to rational thinking. The smartest solutions are those that the people will accept as something that is simple to understand, looks fair and works. Simply writing complex laws and rules, which is the standard political or bureaucratic response to crises, can fool some people some of the time, but not all of the time.

What is the most urgent task to re-build after the pandemic and global economic devastation? Conventional politics works through contentious debates where the opponents try to score points against each other, so that what makes headlines in the social media is what counts. What we need is a proper dialogue, not monologues that talk past each other, on how we together imagine a better future, and then how we can work together to deliver that future.

Common sense tells us that within a family, if we don't talk together, we don't belong together. We are no longer a collection of tribes and villages, but 7.8 billion people living in a crowded burning planet of our collective creation. Time to begin the first step of healing through local narratives, that will eventually form the basis for a global narrative of diverse plurality.

If we fail, we have only ourselves to blame, no one else.

Andrew Sheng is an honorary adviser with the CIMB Asean Research Institute and a distinguished fellow with the Asia Global Institute at the University of Hong Kong. He writes on global issues for the Asia News Network (ANN), an alliance of 24 news media titles across the region, which includes *The Daily Star*.



A boy looks at Sinovac Biotech LTD's vaccine candidate for Covid-19 on display at the China International Fair for Trade in Services in Beijing. PHOTO: AFP

world. Do the rest of the world want the United States to remain as the world's policeman? And can America even afford this role, given her rising deficits?

These common sense questions have a paradoxical answer. Political scientist Professor Deborah Stone in her book, "Policy Paradox" identify politics in any country as the art of reconciling conflicting differences arising from race,

yet black Americans still face serious racial discrimination. Why is it that in the richest country with the best medical facilities, native Americans have a Covid-19 mortality rate two and half times higher than the whites and Asian average?

In short, rational solutions may not be able to explain let alone solve irrational or emotion social conflicts or issues.

A possible obstacle to the revival of the Iran nuclear accord



JAMES M DORSEY

A little acknowledged provision of the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear programme explains

jokeying by the United States and the Islamic republic over the modalities of a US return to the deal from which President Donald J Trump withdrew.

The provision's magic date is 2023, when the Biden administration if it returns to the agreement, would have to seek Congressional approval for the lifting or modification of all US nuclear-related sanctions against Iran.

Both the administration and Iran recognise that Congressional approval is likely to be a tall order, if not impossible, given bi-partisan US distrust, animosity, and suspicion of the Islamic republic.

As a result, the United States and Iran have different objectives in negotiating a US return to the accord.

The Biden administration is attempting to engineer a process that would allow it to sidestep the 2023 hurdle as well as ensure a negotiation that would update the six-year-old deal, limit Iran's controversial ballistic missiles programme and halt Iranian support for non-state actors in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.

A prolonged negotiation would allow President Joe Biden to focus Congress on his domestic legislative agenda without Iran being a disruptive distraction.

Biden "needs something to get beyond 2023. So, he wants a process that would take a number of steps that could take... a number of years to accomplish. During that time, the United States could ease some sanctions... These small things along

the way could happen in a process but the key is going to be to have a process that allows the Biden administration to draw this out for some time," said former State Department and National Security Council official Hillary Mann Leverett.

An extended process would, moreover, make it easier for Biden to convince America's sceptical Middle Eastern partners—Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—that a

to its international commitments and multilateralism as well as a revival of the nuclear agreement but not at any price.

The administration has reinforced its message by asking other countries to support a formal censure of Iran over its accelerating nuclear activities at next week's meeting in Vienna of the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) board of governors.

The United States wants the IAEA to take Iran to task for stepping up

is compounded by a public that is clamouring for economic and public health relief and largely blames government mismanagement and corruption rather than harsh US sanctions for the country's economic misery and inability to get the pandemic under control.

The sanctions were imposed after Trump withdrew from the nuclear accord in 2018.

The pressure is further bolstered by the fact that recent public opinion polls show that the public, like the government, has little faith in the United States living up to its commitments under a potentially revived nuclear deal.

The results suggest that neither the government nor the Iranian public would have confidence in a process that produces only a partial lifting of sanctions. They also indicated a drop of support for the deal from more than 75 percent in 2015 to about 50 percent today.

Two-thirds of those polled opposed negotiating restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile programme as well as its support for regional proxies even if it would lead to a lifting of all sanctions.

Public opinion makes an Iranian agreement to negotiate non-nuclear issues in the absence of a broader effort to restructure the Middle East's security architecture that would introduce arms controls for all as well as some kind of non-aggression agreement and conflict management mechanism a long shot at best.

Among Middle Eastern opponents of the nuclear agreement, Israel is the country that has come out swinging.

The country's chief of staff, Lt Gen Aviv Kochavi, last month rejected a return to the deal and signalled that Israel would keep its military options on the table. Kochavi said he had ordered his armed forces to "prepare a number of operational plans, in addition to those already in place."

Israel's ambassador to the United

States, Gilad Erdan, suggested a couple of weeks later that his country may not engage with the Biden administration regarding Iran if it returns to the nuclear agreement.

"We will not be able to be part of such a process if the new administration returns to that deal," Erdan said.

By taking the heat, Israel's posturing shields the Gulf states who have demanded to be part of any negotiation from exposing themselves to further US criticism by expressing explicit rejection of Biden's policy.

To manage likely differences with Israel, the Biden administration has reportedly agreed to reconvene a strategic US-Israeli working group on Iran created in 2009 during the presidency of Barack Obama. Chaired by the two countries' national security advisors, the secret group is expected to meet virtually in the next days.

It was not immediately clear whether the Biden administration was initiating similar consultations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

In a confusing twist, Israel has attracted attention to its own officially unacknowledged nuclear weapons capacity by embarking on major construction at its Dimona reactor that was captured by satellite photos obtained by the Associated Press.

Some analysts suggested that Israel's hard-line rejection of the Biden administration's approach may be designed to distract attention from upgrades and alterations it may be undertaking at the Dimona facility.

"If you're Israel and you are going to have to undertake a major construction project at Dimona that will draw attention, that's probably the time that you would scream the most about the Iranians," said non-proliferation expert Jeffrey Lewis.

Dr James M Dorsey is an award-winning journalist and a senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore and the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute.



President Biden said Friday that Thursday night's airstrikes against facilities tied to an Iranian-backed militia group in Syria were meant to warn Iran.

PHOTO: MANDEL NGAN/AFP

return to the deal is the right thing to do.

Biden sought to reassure its partners that, unlike Trump, he would stand by the US commitment to their defence with this week's missile attack on an Iranian-backed Shiite militia base in Syria. The strike was in response to allegedly Iranian-backed militia attacks on US targets in Iraq as well as the firing of projectiles against Saudi Arabia reportedly from Iraqi territory.

The US attack also served notice to Iran that it was dealing with a new administration that is more committed

production of nuclear fuel in violation of the nuclear accord and stalling the agency's inquiries into the presence of uranium particles at undeclared sites.

While risking a perilous military tit-for-tat with Iran, the US moves are likely to reinforce Iranian domestic and economic pressures, in part in anticipation of the 2023 milestone, to seek an immediate and unconditional US return to the accord and lifting of sanctions.

Pressure on the Iranian government to secure immediate tangible results

QUOTABLE Quote

MUHAMMAD ALI
(1942-2016)
American professional boxer

Don't count the days; makes the days count.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Fresh reaction
- 5 Amorous archer
- 10 Pan, for one
- 12 Make amends
- 13 Singly
- 14 Audacity
- 15 Outfit
- 16 Be a contender
- 18 TV's Danson
- 19 Tyler of Aerosmith
- 21 Confession list
- 22 Pump thump
- 24 Deplete
- 25 Card for a sweetie
- 29 Trapper's item
- 30 Flight units

DOWN

- 1 Ship poles
- 2 Frasier's ex
- 3 Orbital point
- 4 Signing need
- 5 Walking aid
- 6 Salt Lake City
- 32 Hackneyed
- 33 Queen, e.g.
- 34 Barracks bed
- 35 Act part
- 37 Mary's TV pal
- 39 Goofed
- 40 Company division
- 41 Romantic dozen
- 42 Stocking makeup

player

- 7 Moon of Uranus
- 8 Dream up
- 9 Title papers
- 11 Car gear
- 17 Deeply felt
- 20 Bank fixture
- 21 Brown shade
- 23 Tops, as toast
- 25 Fastening stuff
- 26 American shrubs
- 27 Kidman of film
- 28 Wears down
- 29 Tricky puzzle
- 31 Hide away
- 33 Garden areas
- 36 Called once
- 38 Sandwich choice

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	C	T	I	B	E	B	O	P
A	A	H	O	S	U	S	A	G	E
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T	I	M	E	P	A	U	L	E	T
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT