

Analysis

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US President Donald Trump waves after speaking during an event about expanding health coverage options for small businesses and workers in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington on June 14, 2019. — AFP

Brusque to bruised: Lam caves to pressure on extradition bill

With an escalating US trade war, a faltering economy and tensions in the South China Sea vexing her bosses in Beijing, Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam appeared in no mood to compromise on a planned extradition law at recent meetings, according to foreign envoys and business people who met with her. Some of the people at those meetings in recent weeks pointed to media reports that even Hong Kong's usually reticent judges were worried about the proposed law which threatened to send people for trial in mainland China for the first time.

But Lam bluntly dismissed concerns about a Chinese justice system that is widely criticized, saying judges were not supposed to speak. Worries over the bill's impact on Hong Kong's international standing as a financial hub with a respected legal system were building in Washington, London and other European capitals, but Lam stressed the need for the extradition law to help solve the murder of a Hong Kong woman in Taiwan. "She needed a dinghy and she deployed the Titanic," one diplomat who met Lam this month told Reuters, declining to be identified due to the sensitivity of the issue.

In numerous public appearances after that, Lam was unyielding on the need for the bill, despite huge and sometimes violent street protests including one last Sunday that organizers said drew more than a million people. Then on Saturday, Lam suddenly announced the bill had been postponed indefinitely. She told a news conference she felt "deep sorrow and regret that the deficiencies in our work and various other factors have stirred up substantial controversies and disputes in society".

Hong Kong's self-styled Iron Lady had cracked, having apparently created an entirely fresh crisis for President Xi Jinping - and the city's biggest since Britain handed it over to Chinese rule in 1997 with the guarantee its freedoms and autonomy would be preserved. Clues to the catalyst for the about-face may lie in a reported meeting between Lam and China's Vice-Premier Han Zheng. According to Hong Kong's Sing Tao newspaper, Lam had a clandestine emergency meeting with Han, a member of the Politburo's seven-person Standing Committee, China's top decision-making body, across the border in Shenzhen on Thursday. The content of the meeting is unknown. Lam on Saturday refused to confirm or deny that it had taken place, despite repeated questions.

Beijing backdown

Beijing's grip over Hong Kong has intensified markedly since Chinese President Xi Jinping took power in 2012, and after the city's protracted 2014 pro-democracy street protests. He warned in 2017 that any attempts to undermine Chinese sovereignty were a "red line" that Beijing would not allow to be crossed - warnings that reinforced his strongman image amongst Hong Kongers. Many politicians, diplomats and analysts had not expected Beijing to allow any backdown on the bill, unlike in 2003 when contentious national security laws were scrapped after half a million people took to the streets.

But a source in Beijing with ties to China's leadership who meets regularly with senior officials, said the Hong Kong government had handled the extradition saga badly. And while a backdown from Beijing on the bill seemed near inconceivable just a week ago, the violence and escalating unrest forced their hand. "The outcome doesn't bear thinking about if this situation wasn't turned around," the source said, also declining to be named given the sensitivity of the matter.

The source added that Beijing now had severe doubts about Lam's capabilities. China's State Council and the central government's liaison office in Hong Kong did not immediately respond to Reuters requests for comment. Steve Tsang, a London-based political scientist, said Lam had caused Xi "major embarrassment" at a time that is not helpful for him given trade tensions with the United States, and ahead of a possible meeting with US president Donald Trump at the month's end at the G20 summit in Japan. "Xi is not a leader who tolerates failures of officials," Tsang said.

Retired senior Hong Kong government official Joseph Wong said he was shocked by Beijing's U-turn, but the situation had become so untenable that he believed it had led to a recalculation by Han after meeting Lam in Shenzhen. "I suspect ... he (Han) would have had to consider, are we prepared to continue to fire rubber bullets or even real bullets in order to get this through, and what would be the implications for the central government internationally, vis-a-vis the US. So that protest was the turning point." Lam has refused calls from the opposition and protestors to step down but her ability to govern has been questioned on numerous fronts, including her failure to gauge the pulse in Hong Kong, the broader US-China relationship, and Taiwan's refusal to accept any extradition bill, undermining her core argument the bill would resolve the Taiwan murder case. — Reuters

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Salesman Trump pitches for a second term

Donald Trump considers himself a legendary salesman, but can he really sell America on giving him four more drama-filled years at the White House? Tomorrow, he'll make his big pitch. The 2020 reelection kickoff rally is being held in Orlando, Florida and campaign operations chief Michael Glassner says the "historic" event "has already generated tens of thousands of ticketing requests".

There's little mystery about how the night will go down. Expect Trump, the self-promoting hero of his ghost-written book "The Art of the Deal," to claim the US economy is richer, the military stronger, and the country more respected than ever in history. Expect ultra-loyal, core Republican supporters in red "Make America Great Again" baseball caps to chant "USA!" When the president points to journalists covering the event, expect the crowd to boo.

In 2016, Trump was a novelty, a candidate so different and to many outrageous that few seriously thought he could beat his seemingly bulletproof Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton. But this time around, everyone knows what to expect. "The way he looks at it, it worked beautifully in 2016 when everyone else was wrong, so he'll follow the same instincts and (believe he'll) win again in 2020," veteran University of Virginia political analyst Larry Sabato said. "It may not be the right strategy, but it is Trump, and he's incapable of reorienting himself."

The sale never stops

While Tuesday is framed as a launch, the former reality TV actor and property dealer has never actually stopped campaigning since his 2016 bid opened with a choreo-

graphed ride down the Trump Tower golden escalator in New York. Seeing himself as an outsider who prefers connecting directly with voters, rather than Congress or - even worse - the "enemy" media, Trump holds far more rallies than recent presidents.

As if following the script in a long-running play, each event barely differs. First, Trump warms up the crowd with classic rock, then he comes out to tout his achievements in office, and to brag about his 2016 win, often harking wistfully back to the "day I came down with your First Lady on the escalator." The escalator has become such a mythical element in Trump's narrative that son-in-law Jared Kushner - part of the extended Trump family presence in the White House - even considered recreating the scene for the 2020 bid. The New York Times reported.

Insomniac vs 'Sleepy Joe'

Instead, Trump will rock the 20,000-seat Amway Center in Orlando, deep in a state whose 29 Electoral College votes could help decide whether he gets to keep his job. It's the kind of scene that the president relishes and a perfect stage for his showmanship skills. Just as he used to revel in over-the-top swaggering - often exaggerated - about his real estate triumphs, Trump hardly holds back on the campaign trail.

He does, in fact, have positives to trumpet. The economy, traditionally the number one selling point for voters, is booming, with rock bottom unemployment and strong growth. But to the despair of many Republican leaders, the 45th US president can't help dropping from the news agenda's sunny uplands into dark, seething valleys of

grudges and conflicts - whether with personal Washington enemies or entire foreign countries.

The trade war with China that Trump once claimed would be "easy" is threatening to settle into a perilous new normal of permanent tariffs and tension. The Mexican border wall, which he told his supporters would be paid for by Mexico, remains largely unbuilt, underfunded, and the source of often ugly debate across the country. And while the two-year investigation into Trump's Russia links may be over, the president appears incapable of letting go, most recently getting in hot water for saying he might not tell the FBI if a foreign government came to him with dirt on political opponents.

The constant controversy and scandal have left US voters angrier and more polarized than they have been for decades. That makes the election unpredictable. Democrats are not even close to picking their presidential candidate from a long list of more than 20. And whichever figure gets the nomination, he or she faces a savaging from Trump. Frontrunner Joe Biden, who was vice president under Barack Obama, has already been indelibly branded "Sleepy Joe".

Still, polls show Biden ahead of Trump and several Democrats believe they can make him a one-term president. Trump may even end up regretting his "Sleepy Joe" jibe if Biden does get the nomination, says New York Times columnist Gail Collins. "Americans may start asking themselves whether they'd rather have a president who sleeps through the night or one who's up at 5 am sending out tweets with a lot of misspelled words," Collins wrote. — AFP

I, Chatbot: Getting your news from a talkative automaton

"Do you ever lie to your friends?" Jam asks, popping up in a private message box at the bottom of your screen. If it seems like a personal question, don't worry - Jam isn't a person, but a chatbot, eager for a bubbly conversation about the news, environment, pop culture and more. This particular cryptic query leads to Jam telling the story of Romain Gary, a French author who deceived the literary world by writing under a pseudonym. Jam is one of a new generation of sophisticated chatbots that mimic how real people write in messages and on social media to inform their readers, rather than the traditional dry question-and-answer format.

The French "chatbot media" startup launched three years ago and now has exchanges with 150,000 people every day, most of them young. Jam communicates via Facebook Messenger and adopts a talkative, casual tone, like a friend telling an anecdote, peppering its banter with plenty of smiley-face emojis, pop-culture gifs and links to viral content. It chats about the news - particularly click-friendly, shareable stories - or asks about broad subjects, such as your favorite band.

Once you settle on a subject, it offers up information - for example if you're discussing a movie it will link to the trailer. You can type in responses, but it works best if you simply click on one of several possible automatic answers, which of course include your own appropriately cool emojis. "Given the possibilities of this technology, the 'bot' must lead the conversation, not the other way around, otherwise it gets limited very quickly," says Jam co-founder Marjolaine Grondin.

Old-school media gets chatty

She is hoping to find a successful business model in news as traditional media outlets struggle with the transition to online, with internet giants siphoning off advertising revenue. Chatbots have come a long way since embarrassing blunders committed by Tay, a Microsoft chatbot launched in 2016 and quickly grounded after being gamed by some internet users to post racist and misogynous tweets and to praise Adolf Hitler. Jam has been turning a profit since September, carrying out surveys for brands keen to access the anonymous data of its young database.

Old-school news organizations, meanwhile, are also experimenting with chatbots as a different way to connect with and inform their audiences. Grant Heinrich, the bot develop-



This photo taken on Feb 28, 2019 shows the "Jam" chatbot displayed on a smartphone and a binary code displayed by a tablet in Paris. — AFP

ment producer for BBC News Labs, said they recently used a chatbot to give a five-day crash course covering Brexit. "We had a high completion rate with a very small amount to do each day, it didn't waste your time, didn't try to be super cute," he said. "We've seen markedly better results for bots that ask the audience their opinion rather than getting the audience to ask questions," he said, giving the example of a question that asked whether the reader thought 15, 20 or 30 percent of people are alcoholic. He added that readers who accessed the BBC's daily newsletter via the chatbot clicked on links about 12 times more than those who received it by email.

Emily Withrow, the director of the bot studio at the business news website Quartz, says that the main mistake many media organizations make is thinking of chatbots as a way to attract a new audience to their existing website, rather than as "its own medium". "It requires its own style of writing, so we have a dedicated team of writers and editors who produce this content just for our bot and app every day, we're not taking news articles and putting it in the bot, (or vice versa)," she says. "What we would like to do is use machine learning to get smarter about patterns and content that we don't even necessarily know about and to better deliver content to users without them having to put in a lot of effort." Withrow says Quartz has stopped experimenting with Amazon's digital assistant Alexa because people didn't want to listen to robotic voices - it seems, for the moment at least, that it's easier to communicate in a believably human manner via text. — AFP

Mindfulness profits as meditation apps mature

From the Zen capital of LA to the Champs Elysees comes the calming voice of a British Buddhist monk-turned entrepreneur, introducing American-style online mindfulness to the stressed-out French. "Relax your muscles, breathe," Andy Puddicombe, the bronzed co-founder of the app Headspace, intones by videoconference to a roomful of participants gathered on Paris's ultra-chic shopping artery. The Englishman and his French team are hoping to replicate the US success of Headspace with a French-language version, in a market where New Age philosophies from the "Anglo-Saxon" world are often viewed askance.

Its path has been helped by the success of French mindfulness app PetitBambou, which launched in 2015 - five years after Headspace - and claims more than three million users in France for its free and paid platforms. Both apps use guided meditations for an array of situations - from coping with bereavement to just getting through a difficult day at work - with support from online counsellors, funky animations and videos.

In France as in the United States, Britain and elsewhere, companies have been signing up to subscriptions for their employees. PetitBambou says it has secured "hundreds of licenses" from companies such as Deloitte and railways group SNCF and that it has nothing to fear from Headspace, which along with rival Calm has come to dominate the US market. In a Paris studio, working on voice recordings for the app, PetitBambou co-founder Benjamin Blasco said his company was in any case aiming for the long haul.

'Mental health unicorn'

"We broke even three years ago. We will not sacrifice anything on the altar of marketing," Blasco told AFP. "We do not try at all costs to keep people in the app," he said, but to solicit a two-way exchange and tailor

therapy to the user's needs. "Meditation is not a miracle tool, rather a mental hygiene: What's essential is regular practice," Blasco added. Investors are certainly buying in to the concept. Calm - which like Headspace was co-founded by a British emigre to California, Michael Acton Smith - raised \$88 million from a fundraising round in February.

That gave it a valuation of \$1bn, which Smith noted made Calm the first "mental health unicorn". "Unicorns" are start-up companies with a billion-plus valuation. But like Headspace, Calm has its sights set further afield. In Britain it has enlisted actor and TV presenter Stephen Fry to record bedtime stories for use on a popular feature that helps users get to sleep. "America is only 4.5 percent of the total global population, so there are a lot of other people that can enjoy the product and help the company grow," Smith told CNBC after the investment round.

According to figures from Marketdata, the US mindfulness market as a whole including the dozens of apps on offer topped \$1 billion in 2017, and should double that by 2022. Helped by the growth in apps, a survey by the National Center for Health Statistics found 14 percent of Americans had meditated in 2017, a threefold increase in five years.

Headspace alone says it has 50 million users worldwide, and has raised \$75 million from investors in total, despite marketing a product that preaches "digital detox". The paradox is not lost on Richard Pierson, the company's other British co-founder. "Although there is the irony that the phone is probably causing us a lot of our stress, our hope is that by using Headspace, you'll be able to teach yourself the techniques that you need to learn in order to be able to use your phone in a more mindful way," he said at the Paris launch.

Many of the techniques in mindfulness apps have long been familiar to practitioners in Asia. But what, if any, science underpins the apps? Boosters got new backing with a US scientific study released in late April that looked at the effects of an experimental mindfulness app aimed at smokers. The app helped many participants cut their smoking or give up altogether, by helping to rewire impulses in the brain linked to addiction. — AFP