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YOUR OPINION

Seizing trade opportunities in the age of Donald Trump

MALAYSIA'S exports, largely dominated by electrical and electronic (E&E) products, are potentially facing an uncertain outlook following persistent and assertive trade measures imposed by the United States under the Donald Trump administration.

The E&E sector contributed approximately 40% to Malaysia's overall exports and 7.4% to our GDP. Also, as the sixth-largest semiconductor exporter globally, the country holds a 7% global market share in this space. Notably, Malaysia also packages 23% of all American chips, reflecting its strong ties with US firms.

The protectionism measures currently being taken by Trump's administration could disrupt global supply chains.

Protectionism measures are not new in US history. Between the start of WWI and the end of WWII global trade volume fell and the world "de-globalised". To protect American farmers and businesses, the US government

passed the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, which imposed the then highest ever tariffs in the US, raising them by about 20% on foreign agricultural imports and thousands of other imported goods.

However, in the recent case, tariff increases seem to merely be Trump's way of undermining China, which has become one of the world's fastest-growing economies. As a comparison, in 2001 when China first joined the World Trade Organisation, US GDP was US\$10.6 trillion, while China's was only US\$1.3 trillion – the US economy was eight times larger than the Chinese economy. By 2022, US GDP, at US\$25.5 trillion, was only 1.4 times larger than China's GDP, at US\$17.9 trillion (US GDP at RM113,245 trillion and China's GDP at RM79,503 trillion).

However, the situation is not entirely grim for the rest of the world as there are opportunities to be seized. Malaysian exporters have viable alternatives to miti-

gate the impact.

Markets such as Germany, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, where rapid technology growth and evolution – especially in producing artificial intelligence (AI) chips – are driving strong demand for semiconductor products, offer promising opportunities.

More importantly, the 17 trade agreements that Malaysia has ratified, including the Asean Free Trade Area and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, provide Malaysian exporters with smoother access to these alternative markets.

On top of that, the recent decision made by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to resume negotiations with the European Union (EU) on the Malaysia-EU Free Trade Agreement during his visit to Brussels last month could potentially help Malaysian exporters to diversify their customer base, reducing dependence on the US

market and insulating themselves from future geopolitical trade disruptions.

Last but not least, Malaysia could also leverage Asean in conjunction with holding the Asean chairmanship this year to make this trade bloc persistently stronger together to face headwinds. As the world's fifth-largest economy with a combined population of over 670 million, it is timely for Asean to collectively use one voice to safeguard each other in the face of potential tariffs imposed by United States on its members. Asean would then become more resilient and be able to withstand, and counter, global economic uncertainty caused by geopolitical tension and trade wars worldwide.

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The urgent case for AI governance

THE escalating concerns surrounding artificial intelligence (AI) and data privacy are reaching a boiling point. South Korea recently suspended new downloads of the Chinese chatbot DeepSeek over data protection violations, adding to a growing list of countries taking action.

This, along with DeepSeek being blocked on other government devices and OpenAI's €15mil (RM69.6mil) fine in Italy, demands immediate and decisive government intervention. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into our lives, citizens will rightly expect their governments to be the first line of defence.

DeepSeek, the cost-effective Chinese chatbot, presents a particularly thorny challenge. While its popularity has exploded, so too have anxieties over its data collection practices, viewed by some as aligned with China's strategic interests. Is this about privacy alone, or a new front in the US-China AI war? Clearly, AI has become a geopolitical weapon. The South Korean action, ostensibly about data protection, also reflects the broader anxieties surrounding Chinese technology and national security.

OpenAI's hefty fine demonstrates that no one is immune to scrutiny. This penalty sends a clear message: prioritise transparency and user privacy or face the consequences. It sets a critical precedent for future enforcement.

But privacy is just the beginning. AI governance must also confront misinformation, bias, and the question of accountability. Large-scale AI models risk amplifying societal biases and becoming engines of disinformation. Deepfakes, AI-generated news, and political manipulation raise profound ethical questions. Who sets the guardrails – governments, corporations, or a global body? The time for debate is over; the time for action is now.

These developments demand proactive, not reactive, governance. Governments must anticipate, not merely respond to, the ethical, social, and economic implications of AI. The challenge? Finding a balance between fostering innovation and protecting citizens.

Over-regulation stifles progress, while a hands-off approach invites disaster. Collaboration between governments, industry, researchers, and privacy advocates is not optional; it's essential. Recent events, including the action taken in South Korea, underscore the immediate and critical need for balanced governance in the face of the AI revolution. The era of accountability has arrived.

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The letter writer is a lawyer focusing on artificial intelligence, data centre, and cybersecurity issues.

We need to talk about sexual assault against males

THE recent case of a university lecturer charged with sexually assaulting two male students highlights the rising number of cases of sexual assault in Malaysia, including against males.

Sexual assault does not discriminate. It affects women, children, and men alike. This incident is a stark reminder that males are also vulnerable to such violations, and the victims should be applauded for coming forward. Deep-seated stereotypes about masculinity create shame and fear, leading to underreporting and silent suffering.

We must encourage open dialogue and challenge the misconception that only women can be victims of sexual assault. Even more damaging is the misconception that underaged boys or adult males cannot be victims because of the mistaken belief that men should welcome or enjoy such violations. Sexual assault is a grievous crime, and dismantling the barriers that prevent minor or adult males from seeking help starts with open conversations in communities, followed by con-



Photo: Tribune News Service

crete legal and institutional action.

Support for male victims must be expanded. Inclusivity in trauma recovery programmes is crucial, and funds should be allocated towards awareness campaigns so that men are not looked down upon for seeking help, especially in cases of sexual assault. Creating safe spaces where boys and men can speak

openly without fear of ridicule can encourage more survivors to come forward. We can learn from countries where male-specific support services exist, such as the UK and Ireland.

From the legal perspective, more can be done. Governmental bodies must look into sexual assault laws so that the specifications can change. As of now, legally, acts of rape are commit-

ted only by males while the sole victims are females. This is based on Malaysia's Penal Code that defines rape as a man having sexual intercourse with a woman against her will or without her consent, leaving men out of the equation as victims.

In 2023, the police recorded 3,361 cases of sexual harassment and assault, with 135 male victims making up about 4% of the total. This figure is already significant, and the number of unreported cases is likely much higher. When male rape victims lodge reports, cases are often classified under different provisions, reinforcing the legal gap.

Sexual assault is not about gender. It is about power by the perpetrator over the victim. A criminal offence should not be defined by who it happens to, nor be gender specific, but by the violation itself. Progress means recognising that all survivors deserve support, justice, and the right to be heard.

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Sort out coconut shortage before Ramadan, please

THE Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) urges the Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority (Fama) to overcome the coconut shortage issue. A recent market survey in Penang revealed that coconut and coconut milk traders are concerned about the reduced supply of coconuts, which has resulted in a sharp rise in prices.

Imported coconuts have seen a gradual price increase and now reach RM4 each, while the shortage of local coconuts has worsened. This price hike has also led to an increase in the cost of coconut milk, which is rising from RM16 per kg. Traders are predicting that the price of coconut milk will continue to increase, possibly

reaching RM20 a kg by the beginning of Ramadan in March, as the coconut supply continues to dwindle.

Despite CAP raising this issue in December 2024, followed by a statement from Fama promising to import more coconuts from neighbouring countries to ensure an adequate domestic supply, the

problem persists.

CAP calls on Fama and the Agriculture and Food Security Ministry to resolve this recurring issue before Ramadan.

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