



A27 Calling Uighurs 'terrorists' won't work

A27 Getting to the heart of the art of service

## Raising productivity: It's personal

**T**HE Budget statement, as usual, had a range of incentives to help businesses raise their productivity rate as the economy is restructured. Over the years, the emphasis has been on training workers and nudging companies to adopt technology and new processes so that productivity and incomes may grow. These efforts should be sustained as the return on investment in productivity help schemes and tax incentives has not met expectations.

Another aspect of this challenge is the vital cultural change that has to be embraced by employers, workers and consumers if Singapore is to match or exceed the performance of the best elsewhere. This was a theme of Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam's

speech that deserves greater attention.

Mr Tharman said that to attain advanced-country incomes, Singapore would need to develop advanced-country capabilities, like sound management and commercialising research. The criteria ought to include the intangible matter of attitudes and how these can be developed into normative behaviours.

The minister mentioned three aspects: A workplace culture wherein workers' opinions are welcomed and valued; job mastery, as in going beyond competence to strive for excellence; and consumers learning to be adaptive, such as embracing self-service practices.

Where does Singapore rank with the best? A starting point would be to agree that being good enough is just not good

enough. It was plain that the minister felt Singapore could do better in the areas highlighted. This is the nub of the matter, which businesses and workers ought to ponder. Productivity could be boosted if interaction and people management improved, if workers are self-motivated and service trades are prepared for a wholesale image change. Start by dealing with common grouches about "disengaged" workers and old-style bosses who cling to "presenteeism", equating presence in the office for long hours with being productive.

Japanese workers are known to be perfectionists, taking pride in even mundane work they do. This shows in their craftsmanship and attention to detail - from simple things like exquisite prod-

uct packaging to the manufacture of cars, cameras and consumer electronics. In America, allowing creative mavericks space to explore wild ideas has spawned all-conquering products from Google and Apple. In Europe and Australia-New Zealand, multi-tasking waiters and tour coach drivers who double as guides and porters are the norm. They earn good wages.

It was timely for Mr Tharman to frame the productivity issue in a refreshing new light. The change he is seeking may be harder to execute than offering support programmes, as habits die hard. An important part of the process is seeing value in all forms of work - whether one is at the giving or receiving end. Labour should be anything but "cheap".

## Lessons for small states from Ukraine

Ukraine has become the victim of Great Power politics. Small states like Singapore should draw the appropriate lessons.



By **BILAHARI KAUSIKAN**  
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

**L**AST December, finding myself in Ukraine, I took the opportunity to visit Kiev's Independence Square to observe the EuroMaidan demonstrations. On one visit I listened to some European Union (EU) politician - I think it was a member of the European Parliament - give a rousing speech.

He spoke of freedom and democracy, the usual phrases tripping off his tongue fluently. The speech was in English and I do not know how much the crowd really understood. But the intent was clear in any language and the crowd responded enthusiastically to the expression of support. There was an almost festive air.

### Ukraine and Russia

**BUT** the thought crossed my mind: This could end up like Hungary in 1956. At that time, the West encouraged an anti-Soviet revolt, then folded its arms as Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest.

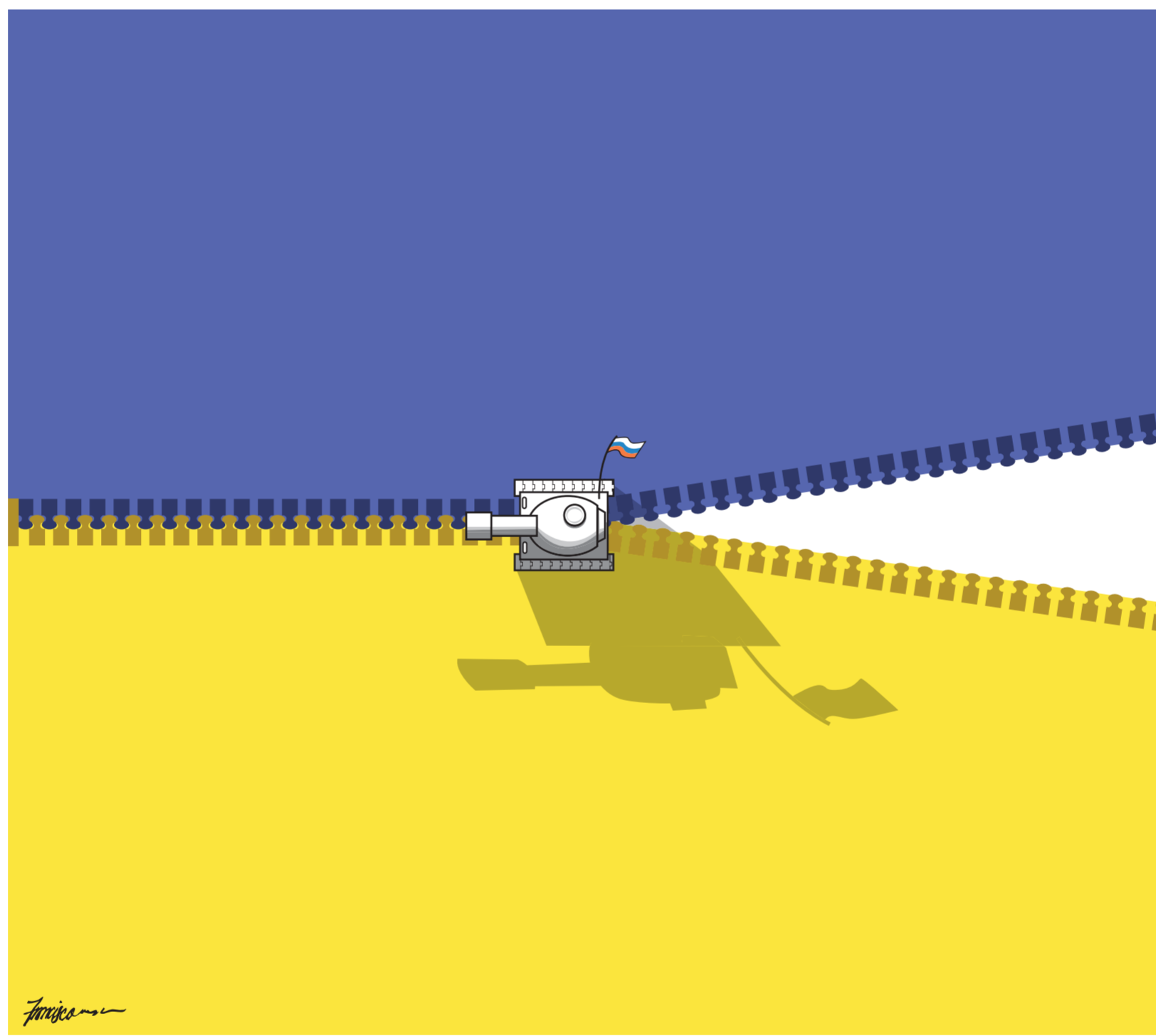
Thankfully, the current Russian intervention has so far been limited and less bloody. But Russia's response was entirely predictable, as anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the region's history and Ukraine's complicated relationship with Russia should have known.

Russia cannot allow Ukraine to become part of the Western system without losing an essential part of itself and without abandoning President Vladimir Putin's goal of a revived Russia as a great power. And Mr Putin's own authority rests in no small part on his reputation as a strong Russian nationalist.

Some 17 per cent of Ukraine's population - more than eight million - is ethnically Russian, the largest Russian diaspora in the world. Ethnic Russians constitute the majority of the population in the Crimea. There are also substantial numbers in East and South-east Ukraine next to the Russian border, as well as in the major cities. Indeed, the origin and heart of Russia's Slavic culture lies in the mediaeval kingdom of Kievan Rus centred in modern Ukraine, not Moscow.

The pipelines that supply Russian gas to West Europe pass through Ukraine. That revenue is essential to the Russian economy. Geopolitically, Sevastopol on the Black Sea in the Crimea is Russia's only warm water port.

In August 1991, with the Soviet Union on the brink of collapse, then US President George H. W.



Bush flew to Kiev and cautioned the Verkhova Rada, Ukraine's Parliament, against "suicidal nationalism". He was roundly criticised by the Western media. But the wisdom of Bush senior is now clear.

Ukraine was and remains deeply divided over the question of closer association with the EU, opinions generally mirroring the ethnic divisions. It was reckless of the post-Yanukovich government to have abolished Russian as Ukraine's second language as its very first act.

It aroused the worst fears of Russia and Russian Ukrainians. In January and February this year, it is estimated that almost 700,000 Ukrainian citizens, most believed to be ethnic Russians, fled to Russia.

It was inevitable that Russia would move decisively. And so it did, with its customary ruthlessness that caught the West flatfooted.

### Russia and the West

US PRESIDENT Barack Obama has said the Russian intervention will have "costs". But what costs?

The United States and the EU are not going to go to war with Russia over Ukraine, as Mr Putin well knows. After a decade of wars in the Middle East, the American public is weary of foreign adventures. That was among the rea-

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sons that Mr Obama was elected in the first place. The EU has neither the capability nor the stomach to wage war on Russia.

Will there be sanctions? Perhaps there will be some symbolic sanctions, and they may inconvenience individual Russians and businesses. But they will not bite deep enough to make Russia reverse course. Will - or can - Western Europe stop buying Russian gas? That is the only sanction that would really hurt, and it is not going to happen, as Mr Putin again well knows.

There will probably be a boycott of the Sochi G-8 Summit. Russia may even be expelled or suspended from the G-8. So what? Does Mr Putin really care? Ukraine is a vital interest to Russia and to him personally. Weighed in that balance, any cost the US and EU can realistically impose is insignificant.

The United Nations Security Council met in an emergency session. Predictably, it achieved nothing.

As a permanent member, Russia holds a veto. The US and EU know this. Arguably the very reason they convened the Security Council was precisely that it would achieve nothing: It was a low-cost gesture to preserve some semblance of *amour propre*.

### International readjustments

CRIMEA is lost to Ukraine. In some weeks or months, there will probably be a referendum or some other act of self-determination. A new state will then be set up in Crimea on the model of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Russia established after its 2008 intervention in Georgia.

I doubt that Russia will intervene in East or South-east Ukraine in the same way as it did in Crimea. Moscow need not resort to naked military intervention again to drive home the point that Russian interests cannot be disregarded in its "near abroad". On a personal level, Mr Putin has

made himself look strong and American and European leaders look weak. He can afford to stop.

After a decent interval, the US and EU will again "reset" relations with Russia. As a nuclear weapon state, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a major energy supplier, Russia simply cannot be ostracised forever.

The EU was itself divided over the prospect of a closer association with Ukraine. The EU members that were formerly part of the Soviet empire - Poland and the Baltic states - were the most enthusiastic. Other EU members were more ambivalent, fearing the costs of a closer partnership with such a huge country at a time when their economies were still fragile.

The EU politician I heard last December was not the only or the most important Western leader to give encouragement to the Ukrainians. It was irresponsible to do so without the capacity to deter a Russian intervention or to respond effectively when Russia did intervene.

None of this in any way excuses Russia's actions. As a small country, Singapore must take seriously any violation of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, wherever and whenever they occur. I am certain that those Singaporeans who have paid attention to recent events in

Ukraine feel sympathy for its people.

### Lessons for Singapore

**BUT** more importantly than empathy for yet another country that has fallen prey to Great Power politics, the plight of the Ukrainians holds valuable lessons for us.

Do not just listen to the sweet words of foreigners, however pleasing to the ear. We must calculate our own interests as clinically as we can and not let anyone beguile us into believing they know better.

The West speaks often and eloquently of democracy and elections with a near religious fervour. The ousted Yanukovich government, whatever its failings, was popularly elected in a manner that just four years ago the US and the EU hailed as free and fair.

Yet when the US and EU thought that it was in their interests, they did not hesitate to recognise the government that seized power in Kiev after President Viktor Yanukovich was forced from office. In doing so, they broke an agreement to hold new elections that had been signed by Mr Yanukovich, the Ukrainian opposition and the European foreign ministers themselves just weeks earlier.

A Russian Special Envoy was present at those negotiations but did not sign. That was a strong signal that should have been heeded.

Why did the US and EU miscalculate so disastrously? One important reason why they were blindsided by Russia was that having no stomach for drastic action themselves, they thought everyone else was similarly squeamish.

The US and the EU responded to the new government in Kiev by immediately offering International Monetary Fund assistance. This was undoubtedly very necessary. But they failed to understand that Russia's calculations and priorities were entirely different. The US and EU mistook their own beliefs and hopes for reality. We must never do that.

A world ruled by international law is the ideal world for small states. But is this really such a world? Perhaps sometimes; or even most times; but not all the time.

International law is an instrument of state policy, not an autonomous reality. Great powers resort to it only when convenient. Russia is not unique in this respect. This is a dangerous world.

The US and EU have suffered a blow to their credibility. But they, or at least the US, will eventually recover. It is the Ukrainian people who paid and who will continue to pay the heaviest price for Western miscalculations.

There is yet another particularly apt lesson here for Singaporeans. Calls for a reduction in national service commitments should be regarded with great scepticism. We must never lose the ability to look after ourselves, because if we cannot look after ourselves, nobody will look after us.

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