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# We straddle the world



**Ravi Vellor**  
Associate Editor  
The Straits Times

**ST continues to strengthen its reach overseas with correspondents in more than a dozen locations giving a local perspective to global issues**

IN March last year, the Foreign Press Centre Japan (FPCJ) organised a symposium on A Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Moderated by a senior commentator for Nikkei and including a Law professor from Keio University, the journalists on the panel were veteran New York Times security and diplomatic writer Steven Lee Myers who is currently the paper's Beijing bureau chief, Gideon Rachman, chief foreign affairs commentator for The Financial Times, and myself.

That the FPCJ thought it important to include The Straits Times in the discussion underscored the recognition the newspaper has gained in the past quarter-century for its authoritative coverage and commentary of the shifting geopolitical landscape and domestic transitions of the Asia Pacific region.

Much of it stems from the vision of Mr Cheong Yip Seng, who was Editor-in-Chief of this paper for a full two decades until retirement in December, 2006. His approach was endorsed and enhanced by the two editors who succeeded him in that position, Patrick Daniel, and current editor-in-chief Warren Fernandez. Last year, Mr Fernandez was elected President of the World Editors Forum – clear recognition of the paper's standing among the tallest masts in journalism.

In 1981, the ST had just one overseas correspondent and he was based in Bangkok. By 1992, it had a network of overseas correspondents, contributors and home staff totalling 48. Since 2012, when Warren took over as editor, the foreign desk strength, which had grown to 66, has been tightened to 48, then further to 40. This was achieved by shedding support staff in order to support a constellation of experienced writers. While the HQ operations were tightened, the number of correspondents in the field grew to 30.

A further flow of news through Asian eyes comes from ST's participation in the Asia News Network, an exchange agreement of more than 20 Asian newspapers.

"It was a shame that we were looking at our region largely through foreign eyes," Mr Cheong

wrote in *OB Markers*, a book recounting his Straits Times journey, as he explained his decision to invest in content rather than through Western wire agencies alone. "From the corporate angle, using foreign agency copy was cost-effective. But it shortchanged our readers, and did not strengthen the paper for the long haul."

Although handed what essentially was a comfortable monopoly in a growing economy – the freesheet Today did not show up until the turn of the century and SPH owned 40 per cent of it in any case – Mr Cheong had realised early on that while commodity news can win you eyeballs and page views, it was the quality editorial that lends a newspaper the gravitas to command an advertising premium.

These days, the ST footprint spans every important Asean capital, the top four Asian economies – China, Japan, India and South Korea – as well as correspondents in Washington and London – reporting and interpreting events and trends to an audience of educated, travelling and investing Asians as well as outsiders interested in the region. And the task of producing the most authoritative coverage of the Asian region and the global flows that feed into it falls on a mix of talent that include people sent from headquarters and local hires.

They also come from varied backgrounds: Dawn Tan, China bureau chief, Walter Sim in Japan and Chang May Choon in South Korea are Singaporeans who speak and read the local language comfortably. On the other hand, Indonesia Correspondent Wahyudi Soeriatmadja, who usually is the first to be tipped off to any major breaking news in his sprawling nation, is a Jakarta native who came to ST from Bloomberg News. That overseas presence is backed by headquarters staff, many with deep subject interests such as environment, or China.

Last September, Warren named the Foreign Desk's David Fogarty to be the paper's first Climate Change Editor, a title that has since begun to show up at many news platforms, including David's former employer, Reuters. Goh Sui Noi, whose China commentaries are well-followed, draws on experience gained from postings in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China. Connie Er, assistant foreign editor, spent three months in China in 1998 working with Beijing Review and went back four years later to spend three months in Peking University studying global public policy.

The paper also made a significant talent acquisition last year when it hired the North-east Asia expert Benjamin Kang Lim. A former Beijing bureau chief for Reuters, Ben shot to global fame in 2007 for accurately naming Xi Jinping, then on nobody's radar, as among two likely next-generation candidates to be elected to the powerful Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party by the 17th Party Plenum. Until then, party plenums only tended to project a single next generation leader and all eyes had been on Li Ke-qiang.

A Filipino, the 61-year-old Ben has spent 43 years in Taipei and Beijing. Along with US bureau chief Nirmal Ghosh and global affairs writer Jonathan Eyal, who works at a think-tank in London,

he is part of a team of highly experienced writers interpreting Asia for the world.

What's more, foreign coverage, once seen as an adjunct to the home news pages, gets prime position in print – the World section is positioned just after Top Stories in the newspaper's layout. Little wonder that in 2009, when the inaugural Journalist of the Year for SPH's English Malay Newspaper Division was announced, it went to ST's Nirmal Ghosh, who was based in Thailand at the time. The same year, another foreign desk hand, Kuala Lumpur-based Leslie Lopez won Story of the Year for his scoop on a Jemaah Islamiyah man with links to the Sept 11 attacks winning freedom.

## SCOOP ARTIST

Journalists live to break news and Lopez has had more than a few, including the stunning scoop in May 2009 of the Singaporean terror suspect Mas Selamat's capture in Malaysia. Two years ago, his insider account of the political manoeuvrings before the Malaysian King invited Dr Mahathir Mohamad to form a Cabinet was among the top-read stories of the year. The 57-year-old Lopez's insights into politics are enhanced by having been a business correspondent in Jakarta and Manila for SPH publications and the Asian Wall Street Journal.

Like at every news organisation, ST correspondents abroad have had their forgettable moments as well. One of the most dire was suffered by the Hong Kong-based China specialist Ching Cheong, who was jailed for three years by Chinese authorities between 2005 and 2008.

While he was charged with spying for Taiwan – charges he robustly denied – many thought he had paid a price for being too accurate in his predictions of the new line-up of Chinese leaders. ST editors stood by him throughout his ordeal.

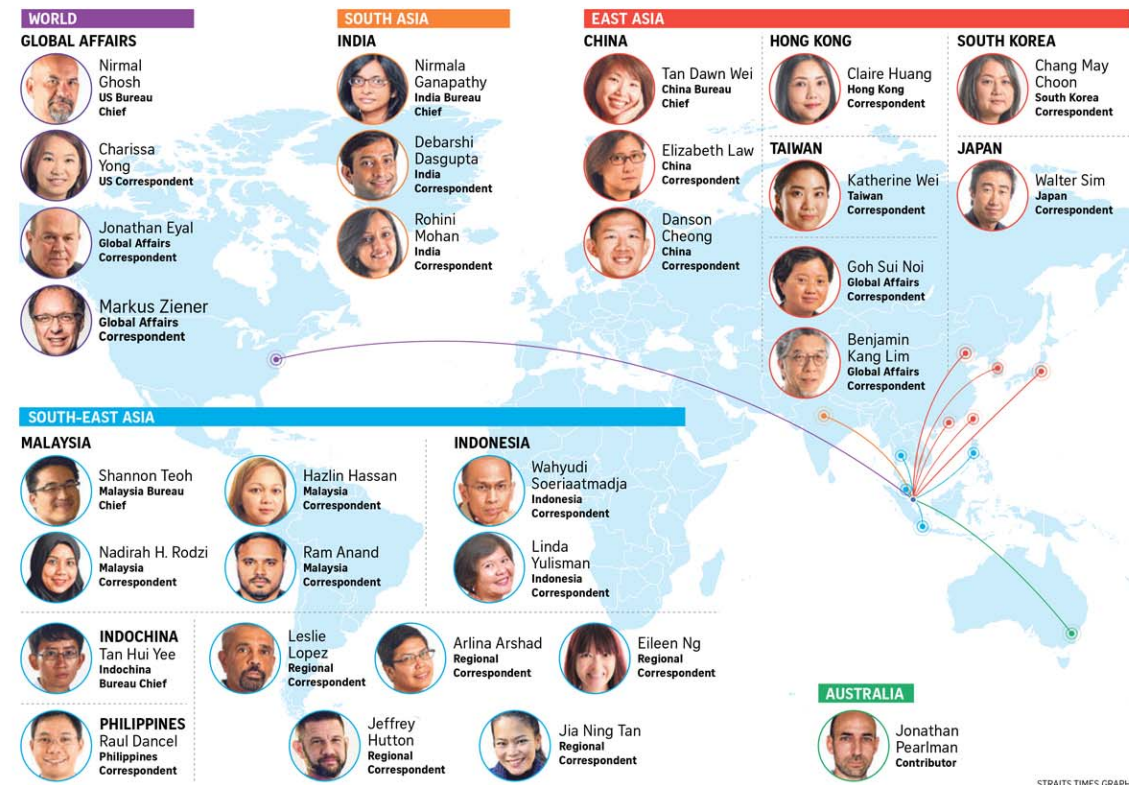
Meanwhile, US bureau chief Ghosh, a committed environmentalist, epitomises the modern ST foreign correspondent. After Warren Fernandez began transforming ST into a true multimedia operation, Ghosh was one of the early adopters. Today, from his Washington DC perch he does a weekly video feature *Asian Insider*, drawing upon his experience gained over postings in Manila, New Delhi and Thailand. Like him, it is commonplace for ST correspondents to be now doing their own video, taking pictures – and appearing on radio shows.

## NOT POLITICS ALONE

There was a time when the Political desk was thought to be the surefire springboard for a swift ascent to the top of ST's editorial ladder. While stints on PolDesk, as it is called, is no doubt a bonus, the newspaper's leadership has found it useful to rotate promising staffers through Foreign as well.

As the top news outlet serving a nation hugely dependent on the outside world – trade, for instance, is three times Singapore's GDP – it could not have been otherwise. Warren distinguished himself as foreign editor before moving up as deputy editor, then returning as editor after a stint at Royal Dutch Shell, Plc, gaining valuable

## ST Global Correspondents



STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

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— Former Editor-in-Chief Cheong Yip Seng



**Piyush Gupta**  
Chief Executive Officer, DBS Bank

Today more than ever, people need trustworthy and reliable journalism to separate real from fake news, and make sense of the dramatic shifts in the political, social and business landscape. As Singapore's newspaper of record, The Straits Times is uniquely positioned to take on the responsibility of bringing clarity to major events as they unfold. However, with the media landscape and technology changing so quickly, this will not be an easy task. To stay relevant, The Straits Times will have to rise up to the challenge of constantly reinventing itself to cater to a more diverse and well-educated readership, and delivering credible, newsworthy and timely stories and analysis daily. I'm confident that The Straits Times is up to the task having gone through this process multiple times throughout its 175-year history.



**Lim Ming Yan**  
Chairman of the Singapore Business Federation  
Former President and Group CEO of Capitaland Limited  
Independent Director, Singapore Press Holdings

The Straits Times has documented many of Singapore's milestones, from the British surrender to the Japanese to Singapore's independence, and many more. Its rich history, together with its timely coverage of local and international news and in-depth analyses, has cemented its position as a reliable and credible resource for Singaporeans. Over the years, it has evolved to remain relevant and I am confident that it will continue to make good progress in the new digital world.



**Sim Wong Hoo**  
Founder, Chairman and CEO, Creative Technology

I have been reading The Straits Times every day for 50 years, despite the rise of new media everywhere now. ST provides more balanced reporting than other mainstream media. Congratulations, and thanks for the uninterrupted service provided to Singapore for the past 175 years.



**Professor Lily Kong**  
President, Singapore Management University

For most Singaporeans, The Straits Times has been part of our lives for as long as we can remember. We have become accustomed to the stories and analyses within its pages. On this anniversary, it's timely to acknowledge its significance to us individually and collectively. ST promotes both robust debate and intellectual tolerance; it reflects our ethnic diversity and national unity; it records our rich heritage and breathless modernity; and it celebrates not only our quirky popular culture but also our contributions to Asia and the world through our technology, commerce, sports and the arts.



**Professor Subra Suresh**  
President, Nanyang Technological University

The Straits Times plays an important role in reporting, explaining and discussing national, regional and global developments. From a university perspective, in addition to the focus on education, I also hope to see its continued support in raising public understanding of the importance and benefits that science, evidence-based findings, research and innovation bring to society.



**Professor Tan Eng Chye**  
President, National University of Singapore

The fields of education and journalism share a beating heart – a common desire for meaningful change in society. The Straits Times has, in its own enduring way over 175 years, fostered valuable space for such change to occur – chronicling thought and framing discourse, parsing great minds and new ideas, and bearing the freight of many Singaporeans' concerns and sentiments.