

**PROTECT  
PUBLIC HEALTH**

**REVIVE  
THE ECONOMY**

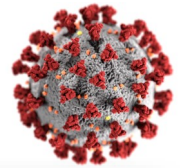
**STRENGTHEN  
OUR COMMUNITY**

## **CAPITOL CONNECTION**

**OCTOBER 2022**

### **From the governor: Staying ‘Hawai‘i Strong’ for us all**

**W**hen we needed it most, when it mattered most, Hawai‘i stepped up. During the past eight years, our community has weathered an unprecedented series of crises: a once-in-a-generation global pandemic, the Kīlauea eruption, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and fuel contamination at Red Hill. Through it all, Hawai‘i, its leaders and the community – from keiki to kūpuna – have shown the values that make us strong. This issue of Capitol Connection looks back at all we’ve survived and forward to what we’ve learned for the future.



**Q. How are you feeling about the progress of the tax refund distribution?**

**A.** The tax department is working as fast as it can. All of the direct deposit refunds have been processed, and the mailed checks should be distributed by the end of October as we take delivery of the paper stock to print them. I’m excited we’re able to get the refunds into the pockets of hard-working people quicker, thanks to our new tax modernization system.

**Q. Why is getting the new COVID-19 bivalent booster so important?**

**A.** We’re moving into this stage where we all need to learn to live with COVID-19. The bivalent booster not only provides protection for early variants but also the most recent ones that have become prevalent. We in Hawai‘i have shown we can be smart about public health recommendations to help slow the spread of the disease.

**Q. What have COVID-19 and the other emergencies taught us?**

**A.** The pandemic, hurricanes and other statewide emergencies have highlighted how vulnerable Hawai‘i is because of our geographic isolation and how we have to import so much of what we need. We operate on a “just in time” basis where food and other supplies arrive every week. If there’s any kind of disruption, it has a huge impact on our communities. That’s why sustainability is really about us being more self-reliant so we can produce our own food and generate our own energy instead of relying on imported sources.

**Q. What was the hardest decision you’ve had to make during the pandemic?**

**A. Establishing the travel quarantine we imposed because of its impact on jobs and our economy.** In the early days with no vaccines and no treatment, ordering the quarantine was the best public health action we could take to keep our community safe. At the time, everybody believed this was something that would end in a few months. I don’t think anyone thought three years later we would still be fighting the disease. Now at least we have vaccines, oral therapeutics and know more about how to prevent infection.

**Q. What has made the difference for Hawai‘i, in spite of our vulnerabilities?**

**A. It’s our sense of community.** I hear praise from FEMA people all the time about the high level of collaboration they see in Hawai‘i during an emergency or natural disaster. On weekly calls with other governors nationwide, the differences between some places on the mainland and Hawai‘i were like night and day. In some other states, people didn’t believe government should restrict their personal rights in any way. Hawai‘i’s people understood that masks and vaccines helped keep us all safe.

**Q. What do you want people to know about plans for a new stadium?**

**A.** We’re committed to completing the construction of a new stadium in Halawa as quickly as possible and streamlining that process going forward. For the first time, the state legislature provided \$350 million in bonds for construction and another \$50 million to operate the facility so we can simplify the process. We’ll be releasing more details in the coming weeks.



**The arrival of the first COVID-19 vaccines in Hawai‘i. Gov. Ige, Maj. Gen. Hara, National Guard personnel and county officials confer about the impact of Kīlauea’s lava on residents.**

# 'Ambassadors of Aloha' hailed as hometown heroes

It was smiles all around Sept. 8 at Washington Place as Governor and Mrs. Ige congratulated the world series champions from the Honolulu Little League and KADO Hawai'i, along with their proud coaches and family members. The governor issued two proclamations to honor the teams and spoke as much about their character as "ambassadors of aloha" as their skill on the baseball diamond.

"You fill us all with great pride and have shown the entire world what fine athletes you are," said the governor. "But I was most proud to hear many, many comments from the sportscasters not about the talent and the winning, but how you helped each other. You recognized that team came first, winning with humility and aloha and caring for those you meet, as well as celebrating your victories. Thanks so much for being terrific ambassadors for Hawai'i." Mrs. Ige added, "What makes the Honolulu Little League and KADO Hawai'i special are the coaches and managers of both teams. They serve as inspiring role models and life coaches to these young athletes and have instilled the values of respect, teamwork and humility."



The Iges congratulate the Honolulu Little Leaguers and KADO Hawai'i.

## Good news: Tax refunds on the way, says governor



Gov. Ige announces the distribution of tax refunds this fall.

Governor Ige has announced Hawai'i taxpayers will be receiving either \$300 or \$100 tax refunds this fall, depending on their income levels. Checks will either be direct deposited into bank accounts or mailed to individuals through the U.S. postal service. Currently, about 600,000 taxpayers are scheduled to receive approximately \$294 million in refunds, thanks to the dramatic rebound in the state's economy.

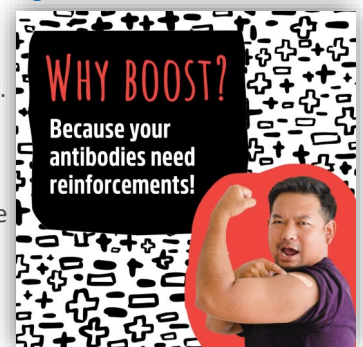
- Taxpayers who earn less than \$100,000 a year, or couples earning less than \$200,000 a year will receive \$300 each (including dependents, so a family of four would receive \$1,200).
- Taxpayers who earn \$100,000 or more, or couples earning \$200,000 or more will receive \$100 each (including dependents).

The idea of a refund was first proposed by the governor in his 2022 State of the State address to help families struggling in the wake of the pandemic. "We do know there are many challenges in these tough economic times," said the governor. "This money will go directly into the pockets of Hawai'i's hard-working people." The state Legislature enhanced the amount for moderate- and lower-income residents, in part to address rising costs of goods and services. Eligible taxpayers must file their 2021 tax returns by Dec. 31 of this year to qualify for the tax refund. For more details, go to <https://tax.hawaii.gov/act-115-ref/>.

## New bivalent boosters offer enhanced protection

The state Department of Health (DOH) is urging those eligible to sign up for the recently issued bivalent boosters designed specifically to protect against original COVID-19 and the BA.4 and BA.5 Omicron subvariants. The Pfizer-BioNTech booster is recommended for people age 12 and older. The Moderna booster is recommended for adults age 18 and older. Bivalent boosters can only be administered if it has been at least two months since a person's most recent vaccination.

"The COVID-19 boosters have been doing a good job of protecting us against severe illness," said state health director Dr. Libby Char. "The new bivalent boosters are an upgrade because they take into account the mutations of the COVID-19 virus to specifically address Omicron subvariants." Those interested can schedule an appointment with pharmacies and other providers by going to <https://hawaiiicovid19.com/vaccine/>.



Hawai'i's hurricane season in the Central Pacific region runs through November, which means residents and visitors need to prepare and plan. The Hawai'i Emergency Management Agency (HI-EMA) offers these tips for residents and visitors: 1) Check where you live, work and play for potential hazards, such as blocked drainage or tree limbs that could blow through a window or roof; 2) Fill up on gas and charge mobile phones, in case power fails or you need to move someplace safer; 3) Make sure you have water and food supplies, necessary medicine, masks and sanitizer, a battery-powered radio and other emergency supplies for at least 14 days.

# Pandemic success came from many hands, hearts

*“I want to thank the people of Hawai‘i for putting the community first.”* — Governor David Ige

Three years ago, no one could have imagined we’d be battling a global pandemic.

Yet when we needed it most, Hawai‘i stepped up. Governor Ige and the county mayors worked with the Department of Health, the Hawai‘i Emergency Management Agency, the Healthcare Association of Hawai‘i, and multiple state, county and federal agencies to keep us safe. Community groups reached out to help, and businesses reinvented themselves to survive. And the Hawai‘i National Guard was everywhere to provide critical support. Because of the precautions taken and community cooperation, Hawai‘i has fared dramatically better than most states. The virus may still be with us, but revenues are up and the economy is rebounding. In fact, the Commonwealth Fund ranked Hawai‘i best in the nation on overall performance across 56 measures during the COVID-19 pandemic.



In the blur of the past nearly three years, it’s easy to forget how far we’ve come — from knowing nothing about a strange, new coronavirus to transforming our lives to survive. The Department of Health collaborated across all levels of government and partnered with the community to respond to the crisis. Multiple state departments were involved in supporting new programs, new websites and new multi-media campaigns for mask wearing, vaccinations and boosters, social distancing, contact tracing, quarantining and isolation, and providing advice for schools, businesses, healthcare facilities, the visitor industry and more. **Whole new programs, such as Safe Travels,** were developed and systems improved to distribute unemployment benefits, rental relief and housing assistance and grants to small business and non-profits. As the world pivoted online, the state created sites like **Buy Hawai‘i, Give Aloha** and **Remote Work Hawai‘i.** And programs such as the **Hawai‘i Restaurant Card** and the **Da Bux program** helped feed people statewide.

## Dr. Libby Char: Some advice for managing the road ahead



Gov. Ige with DOH’s Dr. Libby Char.

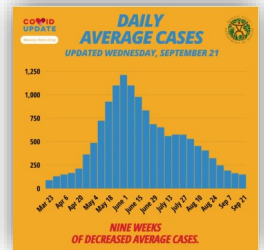
She’s been described as “no-nonsense,” “a straight shooter,” a doctor who will tell you the truth, even if it hurts. But if ever Hawai‘i needed someone in the right place at the right time, it was Dr. Libby Char, whom Governor Ige appointed in fall 2020 as the state director of health. Her job has been to lead a vast department of some 2,600 employees whose work we often take for granted — in public and behavioral health and environmental protection.

In a recent **Capitol Connection** interview, Dr. Char talked about the stresses her team felt handling COVID-19, along with all the other work of the department. “It’s not like the rest of the work went away,” she said. She also said that COVID-19, Red Hill and other recent crises have underscored the importance of a robust public health system — an area that suffered major budget cuts more than a decade ago. “When public health is functioning well, it’s invisible, protecting us every day with clean air, clean drinking water. You talk about an ounce of prevention; the prevention is the public health side. It’s really worth the investment.”

**Q. Why is getting the bivalent COVID-19 booster important?** “The bivalent booster provides better protection from the most common COVID-19 subvariants. If enough people get boosted, we hope to be able to prevent a huge surge in the fall and winter. This booster has two parts to it: the original vaccine, and protection specifically for the Omicron variant, including BA. 4 and BA.5 subvariants. The White House and the CDC say this will allow us to get ahead of things and finally transition to an annual booster, much like annual flu shots.”

**Q. Are you concerned that some people with milder COVID symptoms are leading others to think it’s okay to let down their guard?** “I’m guessing those with mild symptoms have been vaccinated and boosted. That’s why we keep saying that vaccinations and boosters really work. But we also know people who are getting long COVID, and that’s going to be life-changing for them. They may never return to their jobs or have the quality of life they currently have. And people, especially kūpuna and those with health issues, are still dying from this disease. So we need to remain vigilant and continue to protect ourselves and our loved ones.”

**Q. Is it likely we’ll have to deal with COVID-19 for the rest of our lives?** “We all want to be done with COVID, but COVID isn’t done with us. We reported 108 COVID deaths in August and September in Hawai‘i — COVID is still taking a toll on our state. It’s not realistic to think we are going to eradicate COVID. The good news is that staying up to date on vaccines provides strong protection against severe illness and death. The most common types of COVID currently circulating in Hawai‘i are milder, so fewer people who get sick with the virus end up in the hospital. Also, until COVID comes down worldwide, we still have to worry about it here.”



**Q. What has been the most rewarding part of this job for you?** “The feeling we all did a good job of protecting our state. People have been willing to do the right thing with wearing masks and getting their shots, and there’s a real sense of community. These efforts paid off. Hawai‘i has the second lowest COVID-19 death rate per capita and was ranked as the top state for COVID-19 management by the Commonwealth Fund. That sense of ‘we,’ not ‘I’ is very much the governor’s approach. I always felt he truly approached issues based on what’s good for the people of Hawai‘i, their health and how to protect that — not only in the here and now, but for future generations.”

# Behind the scenes: What it took to keep Hawai'i safe



Hilton Raethel, president/CEO of HAH.

**W**e've all seen the courage on the COVID-19 front lines as doctors, nurses and staff cared for those hit hard by the virus. **But what we didn't see was the intense, behind-the-scenes coordination** between Governor Ige and his team, private sector health care partners, mayors, federal, state and county agencies and community providers as the state navigated a never-ending series of crises with thousands of lives at stake. At the center for many of the discussions was **Hilton Raethel, head of the Healthcare Association of Hawai'i (HAH)**. He became the voice of the healthcare community because HAH represents 170 organizations in the state, including all the major hospitals and other healthcare facilities. Raethel praised the collaboration he saw among local leaders throughout the pandemic. He said this spirit of aloha and community is unique to Hawai'i and one of the reasons our state has been as successful as it has in confronting this pandemic.

**Q. From HAH's perspective, what made the pandemic so challenging from the start?** "There were so many unknowns about this new virus: How lethal was it? How did it spread? Who was the most vulnerable? Early on, there was a lot of uncertainty about what to do at a very basic level. One of the early crises involved PPE and the worldwide shortage. All of a sudden we're using PPE at a much higher rate and manufacturers couldn't keep up. And the Trump administration was slow to recognize the gravity of the situation."

**Q. How would you describe the Ige team's leadership during the pandemic?** "I think we were incredibly fortunate to have the leadership of the governor, his team and his departments. Because I interact with health care leaders across the nation, I hear first-hand what happens in other states. What we have in Hawai'i is unique — a level of collaboration where we can work together and communicate with each other. In other states, you don't have that same level of support for hospitals, strange as it might seem. The governor instituting a quarantine for travelers was a very controversial decision, but it was one of the things that protected us as a state, even though it had a dramatic effect on the economy. It was a very brave move to protect the people of Hawai'i."

**Q. What were two of the most dramatic moments of the pandemic the public never saw?** "One was when Airgas told us on a Friday morning that Hawai'i was going to run short of oxygen in 10 days. That afternoon we met with Governor Ige, HI-EMA, DOH, FEMA, HAH, the Attorney General's office and others. Those discussions continued over the next 48 hours. Long story short, we were able to avert that crisis because we had all of those people coming together quickly. The other close call we had was our labor shortage for the Delta variant surge where we were literally days away from going into **crisis standards of care**. That meant we would have had to say to some people "You're sick, but we can't accommodate you in our hospitals because we don't have the staff." For that emergency, we were able to get FEMA funding quickly for more staff because everyone did their part in record time. These were VERY REAL CRISES that could have resulted in huge, catastrophic effects for the state of Hawai'i. **We should never forget what we accomplished together during the pandemic. It demonstrates what you can do when you work together and focus on the goal, not the politics.**"

## The incident commander: A career handling crises

**M**aj. Gen. Kenneth Hara has spent 38 years handling disaster response for Hawai'i, but he said COVID-19 has been "the hardest and most challenging of my career." Hara wears several hats — as adjutant general and commander of the Hawai'i Army and Air National Guard; director of the Hawai'i Emergency Management Agency; and as director of the Hawai'i Office of Homeland Security. He was appointed incident commander in March 2020 for COVID-19, which meant helping to coordinate multiple elements of prevention, detection, containment and treatment of the disease, in partnership with the Department of Health and numerous other agencies.



Maj. Gen. Kenneth Hara

**Q. What made responding to COVID-19 so challenging?** "I'd have to say it was the duration and all the unknowns. All the other disasters I've handled — floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, landslides — we knew what needed to be done. But with COVID, things were changing so fast, my role was to ensure that everyone was aligned to the state's priorities. We launched the largest and longest support mission in Hawai'i National Guard history, involving 1,800 service members. We administered 24,000 COVID-19 swab tests, provided screenings at airports, transported thousands of pounds of cargo, did contact tracing, and distributed food and free PPE. From March to October 2020, myself and our executive team actually lived at the Diamond Head HI-EMA headquarters."

**Q. What has it been like working with the governor during COVID-19 and these multiple crises?** "It was clear Governor Ige was in charge. He's a calm person in the most challenging times. I think that calming effect carried over to everyone else who supported the state. The governor is definitely decisive, but he's methodical and thoughtful in the process. Those people who try to second-guess leadership — they're not there to hear the discussion and don't understand the complexities of the decisions we have to make. If we were constantly changing policies — knee-jerking under the guise of decisiveness — it would create more confusion."

**Q. What have we learned from these multiple disasters, including COVID-19?** "We've got to plan for the worst-case scenario and can't assume it's not going to happen. What's challenging, though, is how to mitigate things before a disaster happens. For example, suppose we adjust building codes to make our buildings more resilient to hurricanes and flooding, in anticipation of climate change. People will say it drives up the cost of construction. It's the right thing to do, but we won't get there unless more people push for change."

# Resilience in the face of floods, hurricanes and volcanoes

Over the past eight years — especially in 2018 — the Ige administration responded to more natural disasters than any other period in state history. But with each incident, Hawai'i has learned valuable lessons as communities and agencies came together to help residents rebuild. The state continues to plan for the future, including the threats from climate change, utility and system disruption, and impacts to harbors, airports and highways.

**April 2018 - Devastating floods** hit from Hā'ena, Wainiha and Kōloa on Kaua'i to Waimānalo and Niu Valley on O'ahu. The scenes were overwhelming: flooded homes, businesses and farmlands knee-deep in mud and floating debris everywhere. In the hardest hit areas on Kaua'i, residents and tourists boarded Hawai'i Air National Guard, Army and county helicopters to evacuate since many areas were isolated by landslides and left without electricity and water after the storm. Besides the rebuilding of Kūhiō Highway on Kaua'i, the disaster led to a community-wide discussion and a plan to manage visitors and protect natural resources in the area.

**May 2018 - An earthquake and the Kīlauea eruption** threatened Puna residents with red-hot lava and toxic fumes. Governor Ige and his team were on the ground to work with county officials to reassure communities and move quickly on disaster declarations and recovery efforts. The lava flow destroyed over 700 homes and devastated residential areas. The governor, state and county officials and teams from many departments, the Hawai'i National Guard, the Department of Defense, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and volunteers sprang into action to set up emergency shelters and provide supplies over the next few months.

"When I arrived in Puna, my first impression was this was a very different kind of eruption," the governor said. "Fissures were opening in the middle of a subdivision, and we didn't know if the eruption was going to last a few weeks or months. We had to be ready to execute plans if roads were lost to lava and air and sea evacuation became necessary." The governor also moved to prevent a blowout of the wellheads at Puna Geothermal Venture power plant.

**August 2018 - Hurricane Lane hit the islands — the first of three Category 5 hurricanes that year — followed by Tropical Storm Olivia.** Governor Ige and a multitude of state, county and federal agencies and volunteers earned praise for the speedy, coordinated support provided as thousands of residents sought to rebuild their lives. For both storms, the governor held multiple news briefings with representatives from the National Weather Service, FEMA, the utilities, shipping, airlines and others from the community. One resident on Facebook wrote, "Super-impressed with the coordination of emergency response among all the agencies and the private sector. Thanks for keeping us safe."



Scenes from (top) Kaua'i floods, Kūhiō Highway mudslides, the Kīlauea eruption and Gov. Ige with Hurricane Lane FEMA relief workers.

## Holding the Navy accountable on closing Red Hill



The Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility sits 100 feet above O'ahu's sole-source groundwater aquifer, which supplies 77% of the island's drinking water. In late 2021, the release of an estimated 14,000 gallons of fuel and water from a pipeline about one-quarter mile from the tanks led to contamination of the Navy's drinking water system, impacting 93,000 users and raising grave concerns about the broader impact on the aquifer.

Governor Ige and the Department of Health took unprecedented action to protect residents and the environment. DOH, in conjunction with federal regulators, worked for months to oversee the restoration of safe drinking water. In December 2021, DOH issued an Emergency Order requiring the U.S. Navy to suspend operations, treat the contaminated water and drain the fuel tanks. The Navy objected to the state's Emergency Order for months in administrative proceedings and in court. Finally, on March 7, 2022, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced that the Department of Defense will defuel and permanently close the Red Hill facility. At press time, DOH is reviewing a revised plan from the Navy to defuel the tanks by July 2024. DOH director Dr. Libby Char emphasized, "We have a real sense of urgency about the fuel sitting in these large storage tanks, and we want to remove that risk of contamination of our aquifer as safely and expeditiously as possible."

Governor Ige has said the naming of Rear Adm. John Wade to lead a Joint Task Force for Red Hill is an important step in focusing efforts. The U.S. Pacific Fleet's own investigations revealed a long list of operational and leadership failures, communication breakdowns, and lack of oversight of the fuel facility over the years. As reported in a June 30 Honolulu Civil Beat article, Adm. Samuel Paparo, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet said, "The Navy was wrong to say that it (Red Hill) was safe. That is clearly evident in the outcome."

# Perpetuating the queen's legacy and Washington Place

**P**eople have said they've lived here all their lives but never had the chance to visit Washington Place. I wanted more people to see the home, to experience it," said First Lady Dawn Amano-Ige. That vision became the driving force behind a nearly eight-year effort by Mrs. Ige and many others to preserve the home and its legacy as well as bring it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century for more people to enjoy.

**"This home belongs to the people of Hawai'i.** It's where Queen Lili'uokalani lived for 55 years, so it should be a place we preserve for generations to come," said the First Lady. A major restoration project in 2017 transformed the entire second floor of the historic mansion into a public exhibit area. Another project involved revitalizing the home's gardens, including the addition of more of the queen's favored native plants. "We also created an organic garden and aquaponics system to reflect the governor's initiative on sustainability," said Mrs. Ige. "We have so many events here, I thought we should use local products and locally grown produce."



**The culmination was the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration** this year of Washington Place, with a statewide keiki hula performance, Royal Hawaiian Band concert, virtual lectures, a new exhibition and open house to showcase the queen's life at the home, a commemorative booklet, and a KHON-TV special, "**Hale o Nā Alaka'i**," which reached thousands of people. "The event was basically created with the community for the community," Mrs. Ige explained. "We had an amazing committee who used their expertise to develop the program so everyone, from keiki to kūpuna, could participate."

**Also, for the first time in the home's 175-year history,** information on Washington Place and the celebration were shared and documented through digital media. The March 31 hula performance of 2,300 keiki from 38 schools was live streamed statewide. The new updated website makes Washington Place accessible to the world through virtual tours, as well as to register for in-person tours and events. It provides extensive history of the home and the queen's life, a digital photo gallery, and the queen's own descriptions of the house and gardens. "**My goal was to give people a window into the queen's life,** a sense of the families who lived here and what Washington Place meant to them," Mrs. Ige said. She thanked the 175th host committee members, including the Washington Place Foundation, the Department of Accounting and General Services, the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, the Department of Education, the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, the State Archives, the Historic Hawai'i Foundation, the Bishop Museum, the Office of the Governor, and community stakeholders. For more details, go to <https://washingtonplace.hawaii.gov>.

## Building bridges between Japan, Hawai'i

**G**overnor Ige and First Lady Dawn Amano-Ige traveled to Japan last month for **sister-state missions in Hiroshima and Yamaguchi prefectures.** Besides signing the first sister-state agreement with Yamaguchi, the trip also marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a similar, long-standing agreement with Hiroshima. The goodwill mission included a surprise visit in Suo-Oshima with a cousin the governor had never met. Gov. Ige even had a chance to demonstrate his own baseball cred when he threw out the first pitch — a strike — in a Hiroshima CARPS baseball game. The goal was to promote greater cultural understanding and advance programs, including tourism, benefitting both Japan and Hawai'i. "The longer I serve, the more I recognize how important these relationships are," the governor said. "**The U.S.-Japan relationship is the most important one we have for peace in the Pacific and in the world.**"



**The Iges also established a sister-library relationship — the first in Hawai'i's history —** between the Hawai'i State Public Library System and the Hiroshima Prefectural Library in Japan. "After we developed the 'Ohana Readers program on some of the neighbor islands, I thought about what we could do to share our local stories beyond our shores," said Mrs. Ige. "The sister-library relationship allows us to share our culture through authentic books written by our local authors. And the librarians in Japan will share their books as well." Nearly 4,000 people came from the Suo-Oshima area to Hawai'i during the Meiji era to work on the plantations. Some returned to Japan while others, like Governor Ige's grandparents, stayed in the islands to build new lives. The governor continued, "**Hawai'i's role is very important because it's more than just a business relationship.** These sister-state relationships are about building personal and international bridges. Some see Europe as the power center, but the reality is Asia is strategically important to the world."

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