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Videographer and lifelong student promotes love of ancient instrument

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CHINA DAILY

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Death toll from wildfire on Maui continues to rise

Above: Only the charred remains of buildings and vehicles are left on Friday after wildfires driven by high winds burned most of Lahaina, a town on the island of Maui in the US state of Hawaii. With a death toll of more than 90, it was the deadliest wildfire in the United States in more than 100 years. HAWAII DEPARTMENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES / HANDOUT VIA REUTERS

Right: Volunteers unload supplies from a van on Saturday in Maalaea, Hawaii, while transferring goods to boats for delivery to families affected by wildfires in West Maui. PATRICK T. FALLON / AFP

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Beijing slams US 'stopover' by Taiwan official

By ZHANG YI zhangyi@chinadaily.com.cn

Beijing has strongly opposed the "stopover" in the United States by Lai Ching-te, Taiwan's deputy leader, calling him a "troublemaker through and through" and stating that the move "seriously violates the one-China principle, and gravely undermines China's sovereignty and territorial integrity".

The remarks came after Lai arrived in New York on Sunday on his way to Paraguay — one of only 13 states that retain official ties with Taiwan — to attend the inauguration of the country's new president.

The Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Sunday that China strongly condemns the US decision to arrange the so-called "stopover" for Lai, who clings stubbornly to the separatist position for "Taiwan independence", in a move that seriously violates the one-China principle.

The Taiwan question is at the core of the core interests of China, the bedrock of the political foundation of China-US relations, and the first red

line that must not be crossed in China-US relations, the ministry said.

Urging the US to stop fudging and hollowing out the one-China principle, it said Beijing is closely following the developments of the situation and will take resolute and strong measures to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Zhu Fenglian, spokeswoman for the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, said in a statement on Sunday that "under the guise of so-called transit, Lai engages in activities that aim to betray Taiwan's interests and seek personal gains by selling out the island to the US".

"These actions not only harm the interests of the people on the island but also the peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, making him a complete troublemaker," she said.

Zhu said that "Taiwan independence" is incompatible with peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait, and the actions of the separatist forces run counter to the mainstream opinion on the island, which seeks peace, development, communication and cooperation with the mainland.

Ultimately, such actions will only push Taiwan into a dangerous

situation of conflict and jeopardize the well-being of the Taiwan people, she said.

A group of Taiwan residents gathered at the airport from where Lai set off on Saturday to protest his visit to the US. They shouted slogans accusing Lai of relying on the US to seek "independence" and colluding with the US to destroy Taiwan.

Chi Chia-lin, who heads the Reunification Alliance Party in Taiwan, joined the protest and said Washington has betrayed its commitment to Beijing, and that it has been frequently arranging the so-called "transit" trips for island politicians.

"We will tell the world that we support the reunification of the two sides of the Strait, and call on Lai to face up to our voice for cross-Strait peace," he said.

Lai, 63, Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party's 2024 leadership candidate, has previously called himself a pragmatic worker for "Taiwan independence". Last month he claimed "entering the White House" was his aim, which led to the US immediately seeking a clarification from him.

Arriving at an airport in the US,

Lai was greeted by Ingrid Larson, managing director of the American Institute in Taiwan's Washington office. He was scheduled to make another "stopover" in the US on his way back to Taiwan.

Lai's trip follows Taiwan leader Tsai Ing-wen's "transit" in the US in April, which prompted countermeasures including large-scale military drills by the People's Liberation Army.

Ji Ye, deputy director of Xiamen University's Graduate Institute for Taiwan Studies, said the "transit" happened against the backdrop of an increasingly strategic competition between China and the US.

He said that with Taiwan's regional election scheduled in January and the US presidential election scheduled at the end of next year, the Taiwan question is expected to become a focal point of political campaigns, adding greater uncertainty to the situation across the Taiwan Strait.

Under these circumstances, Beijing is expected to see increased pressure in the coming months to safeguard the one-China principle, and the battle against separatism and interference will likely intensify, he added.

Clear criteria for expanding BRICS urged

Experts say membership offers chance to strengthen the voice of developing nations

By EDITH MUTETHYA in Nairobi, Kenya edithmutethya@chinadaily.com.cn

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With BRICS expected to consider membership of additional countries at the upcoming 15th BRICS Summit, experts said the grouping should come up with clear modes for expansion and discuss its commitment to development amid geopolitical uncertainties.

Countries including Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Argentina, Mexico, the United Arab Emirates and Iran have applied for membership in BRICS, whose current members are the major emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

The summit will be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from Aug 22 to 24.

Philani Mthembu, executive director of the Institute for Global Dialogue associated with the University of South Africa, said the summit should consider modes of expansion not limited to immediate full membership.

He suggested that the group formalize the idea of BRICS dialogue partners, which would be invited to take part in the group's summits.

"Expansion shouldn't be limited to an immediate full membership; it could institutionalize the various outreach programs seen since 2013," Mthembu said.

David Monyae, director of the Centre for Africa-China Studies at the University of Johannesburg

Confucius Institute, said membership criteria should involve looking at each applicant's economy and ensuring fair representation of continents.

Monyae said expansion would strengthen the voice of developing countries as well as bring new ideas to the table on development and climate change.

It would also promote a global shift in how countries relate, moving away from the United States-led post-World War II world order, particularly regarding issues such as the US dollar's dominance, he added.

Monyae said expansion of BRICS would ensure a multiplicity of currencies in the global basket, which would offer countries more opportunities as well as alternative voices and funding sources.

"I believe it will make the developed countries listen more carefully," he said.

"The world will start experiencing balancing of power because the United States will not pull the weight that it's pulling currently and it won't be as reckless domestically in terms of overborrowing."

Increased membership might also compel the US to stop the use of sanctions and abuse of the institutions of global governance.

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David Monyae



Philani Mthembu



Fulufhelo Netswera

Africa ready to seize new opportunities

WORLD WATCH By Charles Onunaiju

tries in Africa a crucial entry point to the global economy through proper integration with the international value chain.

After nearly a decade and a half, the BRICS platform has become a consequential and formidable multilateral international mechanism, shaping the emerging trend of inclusive global governance.

Since the first summit in 2009 in Yekaterinburg, Russia, the mechanism has grown phenomenally in consolidating its internal consultative framework and has extended its outreach through the "BRICS Plus" approach.

The members of BRICS — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — are heavyweights in their own right as major emerging economies. However, they seized the opportunity to consolidate as an international mechanism, not only to enhance cooperation among themselves, but to invest in the trend of globalization through multilateralism, opening a new vista for inclusive and participatory global governance.

The opportunities for broad economic and financial inclusion, featuring market access, investments and a trend away from a dominant international currency, offer coun-

The early optimism about BRICS, when its members were just being seen as the emerging and hopeful economies of the 21st century, has proved self-fulfilling. BRICS countries have overtaken the G7 advanced Western capitalist economies in terms of contribution to the world economy, accounting for one-third of global economic activity.

The economies of the various countries in Africa have largely been constrained by the traditional structure of the global economy, in which they are mostly limited to a market share of commodities. This nature of the global economy has imposed a structural constraint in which the economies of African countries became dominated by a single commodity or a set of commodities, without the benefit of the multiplying effects of value addition. This has considerably constrained industrial capacity in the region and stalled any meaningful efforts toward economic diversification.

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MATURE STUDENTS PURSUE THEIR DREAMS ABROAD

Overseas studies broaden horizons, help in career development

By YU RAN in Shanghai For China Daily



A rising number of mature Chinese students are choosing to pursue education overseas to broaden their career prospects.

They include Li Yanqiu, 47, who decided to leave her job in print media, which she held for 18 years, to study in the United Kingdom six years ago. She has no regrets about making this move.

Li, who graduated from the Journalism Department at Fudan University in Shanghai, pursued a master's in ethnographic documentary film at University College London in 2017. She graduated with distinction, fulfilling her long-held ambition of studying abroad.

Just a few months after taking the International English Language Testing System exam and applying to several schools, Li received an acceptance letter from the London college.

"I had been thinking about studying abroad for a long time. I considered this idea during my college years, but studying overseas wasn't commonplace at the time," she said.

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PAGE TWO

Students: Careers develop on global stage

From page 1

"I also wanted to go abroad while working to experience the education system, but I put this on hold due to family reasons. However, my desire for change was always there."

Li opted to study abroad when her son was ready to enter high school, as she believed that both of them needed some space to pursue their respective goals.

In May, the 2023 China Study Abroad White Paper released by Chinese education company New Oriental Education & Technology Group said research data during the past five years showed that more individuals who are 25 or older are pursuing postgraduate studies overseas.

With increasing pressures in domestic education, these students and working professionals are looking to study abroad to further their education, enhance their employability, and broaden their career prospects.

Zhang Wei, chief expert at the Elite USA J1 Visa Program for Study Visits, said: "I clearly sense this trend of mature students studying abroad. Some seek to enhance their international perspective, explore overseas markets and establish international networks, some hope to find opportunities to start a new life, while others facing career stagnation seek to 'refresh' themselves abroad."

With the economic development and social progress achieved by China, young and middle-aged individuals, while dedicating themselves to their careers, will increasingly look toward the global stage, Zhang said, adding that this is inevitable in career development, and reflects people's ambitions amid nation's increased prosperity and expansion.

Before going abroad, Li did not have a clear goal, but she hoped to achieve a distinction for her academic work.

"That year was very precious to me, and I don't want to forget it. Of course, there are some regrets, as I was too eager to obtain good grades at the expense of exploring London. I was also too tense, and my studies were intense, meaning I could not fully enjoy life studying abroad," she said.

Her practical course in the UK required her to make three short documentaries, for which she had to work with different teammates. Li's graduation thesis was a seven-minute documentary. She drew on her experience of working in the newspaper industry by confidently conducting interviews and approaching strangers on the streets, proving more adept than classmates who lacked work experience.

"The decision to study abroad opened up the world for me. If I hadn't studied overseas, I might still be in my office doing the same old job. Now, I have gained more skills than just being a journalist. I have also matured and become more professional," Li said.

After returning to China in September 2018, she took a few months off before joining a Fortune Global 500 pharmaceutical company in January of the following year on a friend's recommendation.

In July 2021, Li joined the pharmaceutical company Biotech, working in the corporate communications department.

"I am willing to step out of my comfort zone, as remaining there without ambition or motivation is too boring. My life now has a sense of value every day, and I find my work interesting. I want to work for a few more years," said Li, who recently started running and doing other exercises to improve her fitness.

Visits to Japan

Similar to Li, Huang Youxin, 36, who has more than 10 years' work experience, has always dreamed of studying abroad, especially in Japan. She has visited rural areas in that country, and loves the tranquil lifestyle.

Last year, she felt that her own lifestyle did not match her aspirations. As work pressures and other issues led to emotional problems, Huang decided to study abroad.

"After making this decision, I had new goals and felt more positive every day. Studying abroad will give me another option," said Huang, who graduated from a second-tier university in Shanghai and now works in media operations while preparing to study Japanese.

She initially planned to focus on language learning and undertake a language study program, but decided to pursue a master's — shifting her focus to sociology.

"The advantage a mature student has is a strong sense of autonomy and life experience, which helps in adapting to living abroad. The downside is that it's been a long time since I left school, so whether I can quickly adapt to the learning environment remains to be seen," Huang said.

She has not yet fully planned her post-study arrangements, as she feels it's too early to decide on them.

Huang is preparing for her studies abroad, and plans to start her journey as a mature student before the end of this year.

"I believe that compared to the utilitarian approach to learning, where others tell you



Top: Students stroll on the campus at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, after graduating in May. TED SHAFREY / AP
Above: Harvard University students celebrate their graduate degrees in public health during commencement ceremonies in Cambridge, United States, in May. STEVEN SENNE / AP

"I am willing to step out of my comfort zone, as remaining there without ambition or motivation is too boring."

Li Yanqiu, 47, who pursued a master's in Ethnographic Documentary Film at University College London after leaving her print media job in Shanghai, which she held for 18 years



From left: Zhong Dailin, 41, quit her job in the internet industry in Beijing to study at the University of Florence in 2019; Dong Na, 46, completed her master's at Northwestern University in Chicago to qualify as a marriage and family therapist; Li Yanqiu, 47, has precious memories of studying at University College London in 2018. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

what to study for better job prospects, when we grow up and become financially independent, we have more opportunities to pursue our true selves. Compared to other dreams, studying abroad is relatively straightforward," Huang said.

The 2023 China Study Abroad White Paper released by EIC Education in March showed that after reaching a low point in 2020, the number of applications to study overseas continued to rise in the following two years. Last year, the number of applications grew by 23.4 percent compared with 2021.

Since 2008, China has been the largest source of international students studying in the United States.

The Open Doors 2022 Report on Inter-

national Educational Exchange said China remains the top country of origin for international students in the US, with some 290,000 Chinese accounting for 30.6 percent of all international students at higher education institutions in that country.

Counseling role

Four years ago, Dong Na, 46, resigned from her job at a State-owned enterprise, or SOE, in Shanghai.

She is now a full-time marriage and family therapist at Northwestern University in Chicago, US, counseling 20 couples each week. She also runs the Account Marriage and Family Therapist Ms Dong on the Chinese life-sharing platform Xiaohongshu.

After graduating from university, Dong, who is from Hunan province, found a job at a Shanghai SOE.

She lived and worked at the company until four years ago, when she faced demotion due to her age. Around that time, a friend in the US, who had been a full-time mother for many years, decided to pursue her dream of studying law after her children entered college.

These events prompted Dong to pursue self-discovery and fulfillment by living life on her own terms.

"I began considering which profession would suit me best. Through research, I discovered that, given my qualifications and life experience, psychological counseling appeared the most suitable choice. The

role of a marriage and family therapist appeared tailor-made for me," Dong said.

She planned to first apply for a Marriage and Family Therapy master's program at a US university, become a specialized therapist, and then return to China to practice.

In the next six months, Dong prepared for various exams until she received a long-awaited acceptance letter from Northwestern University for its Marriage and Family Therapy program. In September 2019, she traveled to the US after bidding farewell to her husband and daughter.

For someone with rich life experience such as Dong, the most challenging aspect of studying in the US was having to read 200-300 pages of material every week and completing 500 hours of therapy tasks.

Through perseverance, determination and self-belief, Dong overcame these challenges, successfully completed her master's after two years, and became a certified marriage and family therapist.

She then landed a position at her alma mater, Northwestern University.

"I'm grateful that I did not allow my age to hold me back, or lose the courage to pursue my dreams. I used to believe that experiencing the ups and downs of life was most important, but now I realize that doing what I love and helping others is what truly gives life meaning," Dong said.

"You should not limit yourself based on age. If there's something you want to do, just go for it, regardless of your age. Only by breaking free from the confines of societal expectations can you truly be free."

Lonely journey

After working in the internet industry for more than 12 years, where she ended up earning an annual salary of 240,000 yuan (\$33,408), Zhong Dailin, 41, decided to pursue her dream of living and studying in Italy.

Zhong, who was born in Harbin, Heilongjiang province and worked in Beijing, felt the internet industry was declining after reaching its peak, as it faced fierce competition and dwindling revenue.

"I just wanted to understand the culture of a country, experience its sunrise, sunset and all four seasons. Studying in Italy appeared relatively straightforward, and the cost was acceptable. It was the best choice for me," Zhong said.

In early 2019, she began preparing for her overseas studies. Her first year was dedicated to language school, and she then pursued a master's in Communication Theory at the University of Florence.

However, the academic challenges were more demanding than she imagined. Zhong chose a program from the Literature and Philosophy Department, which helped her understand Western culture.

"When I face difficulties, there are people willing to help me. During my two to three years in Italy, I have learned enough Italian to get by in daily life, but academically, it's still tough," she said.

"The teachers are extremely nice and provide a lot of help in English. Everyone is assisting me, so I can't give up," said Zhong, whose graduation thesis defense requires a 10-minute presentation in Italian and writing a 100-page thesis.

As an undergraduate in 2002, she experienced the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS. It seemed as if fate had repeated itself, as her studies abroad coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Zhong could have graduated in October, but chose to postpone this for 12 months.

"At my age, obtaining this master's isn't about finding a better job. Studying abroad is an experience, even though it hasn't been as smooth as I imagined. Life presents challenges one after another, and they are never-ending," she said.

"After experiencing all this, I've become stronger, but it doesn't mean that everything will be plain sailing," said Zhong, who plans to travel extensively to explore and understand local culture after she graduates.

Later this year, she plans to start sending out resumes. Ideally, she wants to be based in Italy to provide services for clients in China, such as travel support, route planning for studying abroad, and even marketing services for luxury brands in Italy.

"Most people don't want to live a predictable life. Life should have many diverse experiences. You never know what interesting people and things await you. When I look back on my life, the experience of studying and living in Italy will be significant for me, as this has been a truly beautiful and unforgettable journey," Zhong said.

Yu Hai, a sociology professor at Fudan University, said: "People studying abroad for various reasons, whether it's to escape or to embrace the future, all have their own goals and plans. The ultimate decision-making power lies in their hands, and to make the best choice they need to consider the pros and cons based on their personal circumstances."

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TOP NEWS

Evacuated to safety

Migrants take a vessel of the Tunisian National Guard's coast guard teams on Saturday after their boat was intercepted in the waters off Sfax, a migrant launchpad for Europe. The migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan countries, were reportedly trying to reach Europe illegally through the Mediterranean Sea route. The Tunisian coast guard said it had intercepted 34,290 migrants in the six months as of June 20, compared with 9,217 over the same period in 2022.

YASSINE GAIDI / GETTY IMAGES



Guidelines unveiled to boost foreign investment

Execs of multinational firms express confidence in nation's market

By ZHONG NAN and WANG KEJU

China has issued 24 new guidelines to attract more global capital and further optimize the country's business environment for multinational corporations.

The guidelines, which were part of a policy document released on Sunday by the State Council, China's Cabinet, cover topics such as encouraging foreign investors to undertake major scientific research projects, ensuring equal treatment of foreign and domestic companies and exploring a convenient and secure management mechanism for cross-border data flows.

Other topics include increasing protection of the rights and interests of foreign companies and providing them with stronger fiscal support and tax incentives.

China will create a market-oriented, law-based and first-class international business environment, give full play to the advantages of the country's ultra-large market, and attract and utilize foreign investment more vigorously and more effectively, according to the document.

Foreign investors are encouraged to establish research and development centers in China and undertake major scientific research

projects, the document said. Foreign-invested projects in the field of biomedicine will enjoy accelerated implementation.

The State Council also emphasized its commitment to ensuring that foreign-invested enterprises fully engage in government procurement activities according to law. The government will introduce relevant policies and measures as soon as possible to further clarify the specific standards for "manufactured in China" and accelerate the revision of the Government Procurement Law.

It will also explore a convenient and secure management mechanism for cross-border data flows and establish a green channel for qualified foreign-invested enterprises to efficiently carry out security assessments for the export of important data and personal information, and promote the safe, orderly and free flow of data.

The government will provide convenience to foreign executives, technical personnel and their families in terms of entry, exit and residence, said the document.

Given the slowdown in global economic recovery and the decline in cross-border investment, Pan Yuan, an associate researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social

Sciences' Institute of World Economics and Politics in Beijing, said all these policies will make it easier for foreign investors to develop in the Chinese market, as they are designed to meet the expectations of multinational corporations.

Pang Ming, chief economist at global consultancy JLL China, said the stronger policy support will guide more foreign investment toward areas such as medium- and high-end manufacturing and trade in services, as well as geographically toward the central, western and northeastern regions of the country.

This could better align the core businesses of foreign enterprises with China's shifting market dynamics, Pang said, adding that the negative list for foreign investment should also be further trimmed with wider, high-standard opening-up.

Highlighting China's massive market, well-developed industrial system and strong supply chain competitiveness, Francis Liekens, vice-president for China at Atlas Copco Group, a Swedish industrial equipment manufacturer, said China will remain one of the world's most dynamic markets and this trend will certainly sustain in the coming years.

China is transitioning from being the "world's factory" to a high-end

manufacturer, with growing domestic consumption, Liekens said.

The trend toward localization has been driving growth in many sectors over the past several years, including electronics, semiconductors, automobiles, petrochemicals, transportation, aerospace and green energy. Atlas Copco will work with all industries in the country, but particularly with these sectors, he added.

Zhu Linbo, president for China at Archer-Daniels-Midland Co, a United States-based grain trader and processor, said that with a series of supportive policies being unveiled and gradually taking effect, the group is confident about China's economic vitality and development prospects.

By partnering with Qingdao Vland Biotech Group, a domestic producer of enzymes and probiotics, ADM will put a new probiotic plant into production in Gaomi, Shandong province, in 2024, Zhu said.

China retains its appeal for foreign investors, thanks to the country's immense economic vitality and huge consumption potential, said Zhang Yu, a macro analyst at Huachuang Securities.

China has a complete industrial chain with more than 220 industrial products ranking first in the world in terms of output. It is easier to find reliable and cost-efficient suppliers in China than in any other part of the world, said Zhang.

In the first half of 2023, China saw its newly established foreign-invested enterprises reach 24,000, up 35.7 percent year-on-year, according to the Ministry of Commerce.

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Envoys praise Xinjiang's role in reviving Silk Road

By MO JINGXI
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Foreign envoys have said that the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region is witnessing increasing economic and cultural exchanges with countries involved in the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative, and they expect more BRI cooperation, particularly with Xinjiang, to revive the centuries-old Silk Road.

The diplomats made the remarks during a recent trip to the region, which has played a pivotal role in Belt and Road cooperation. Envoys from 25 countries participated in the event.

Mohsen Bakhtiar, the Iranian ambassador to China, said that Iran and China, as two great Asian civilizations, have been in contact with each other for thousands of years through the ancient Silk Road.

"Today, the Silk Road has emerged in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative," he said, noting that his country is connected to both Xinjiang and the broader Chinese landscape through the BRI platform.

"Iran is seeking to revive the historical role it played in connecting transportation between China, West Asia and Europe in the modern era. The country is focusing on fostering deeper economic, cultural and social partnerships with Xinjiang," Bakhtiar said.

Customs statistics from Urumqi, the regional capital, showed that Xinjiang has witnessed strong economic and trade exchanges with countries along the Belt and Road in the first half of this year, with the trade between the region and the countries reaching 138.3 billion yuan (\$19.1 billion) as of June, a year-on-year increase of 68.2 percent.

The ambassador said that the establishment and continuity of the Silk Road over many centuries can

be attributed to the peace and security that Xinjiang has ensured for this route. "And this security has been achieved as a result of tolerance, respect for cultural differences and diversity in beliefs and religions," he said.

Iran signed a memorandum of understanding with China in 2016 to officially participate in the BRI. As of June, China had signed more than 200 BRI cooperation documents with 152 countries and 32 international organizations, according to the National Development and Reform Commission.

Ijaz Ahmad, minister at the embassy of Pakistan in Beijing, said: "We in Pakistan hold China as a development partner. For Pakistan, Xinjiang is of special significance. It is the first nodal point of our CPEC partnership." This year marks the 10th anniversary of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a flagship project of the BRI.

"We hope to see more people-to-people and economic linkages between Xinjiang and its neighboring territories of Gilgit Baltistan in Pakistan for realization of our common objectives of peace and prosperity," Ahmad added.

Batir Tursunov, minister-counselor at the embassy of Uzbekistan in China, said that Xinjiang, which played a crucial role in the ancient links between Uzbekistan and China for centuries along the Silk Road, has become China's important western gateway to Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

"Now we are trying to revive this ancient Silk Road through the BRI, not only in terms of political ties but also people-to-people exchanges," he said, expressing his hope for the early construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway in order to bring more convenience to people.

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Summit: Balancing act key amid global challenges

From page 1

Mthembu said he believes the expansion of BRICS would signal further movement toward a multipolar world order.

"BRICS countries do not like the unipolar world order. They believe that each of the regions has an important voice in global affairs," he said.

"An expansion, whether a conservative approach or a much stronger approach of admitting full membership, will have an important impact, and it will be a catalyst toward an increasingly multipolar world order," Mthembu added.

Fulufhelo Netswera, executive dean on the faculty of management sciences and head of the BRICS Research Institute at Durban University of Technology, said it would be highly speculative to suggest the criteria that should be used for new membership.

However, "one could think about the following as potential membership requirements: a demand that a member should not wage war against another unless and until the organization has exhausted all means at resolving the problem through peaceful means," he said.

He also suggested requiring "that no member country should engage in unfair economic practices in the form of excessive importation or exportation taxation, and that members who violate the fundamental principles will have their membership revoked."

Netswera said that BRICS

BRICS countries do not like the unipolar world order. They believe that each of the regions has an important voice in global affairs."

Philani Mthembu, executive director of the Institute for Global Dialogue

nations contribute a combined 31.5 percent of the world's GDP, a figure that the International Monetary Fund expects to rise to 50 percent by 2030.

Should BRICS expand, new members could call for the name to be changed to reflect the additional economies, Netswera said.

Amid geopolitical challenges, BRICS can play a very important balancing role in ensuring its own interests as well as those of the developing Global South, he added.

Reform of the United Nations and its Security Council, the IMF and the World Bank is also expected to be high on the agenda of the BRICS summit, Netswera said.

"The post-World War II (Bretton Woods) world order has not guaranteed the liberties and freedoms of those in poorer nations, but has presided over their exploitation," he said.

"This reform should enable all nations of the world to have a voice on global affairs, even if it might be disproportionately organized."

Monyae said BRICS should align its core issues with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the African Union's Agenda 2063 to lift people out of poverty.

This could be achieved through agriculture, education, empowerment of people, infrastructure development, health and being able to communicate among themselves, he said. "We need to ... look at other areas that bring these countries together, like having an understanding on climate change, green financing and the environment."

Monyae said BRICS countries should invest in data technology.

"There is a new form of colonialism and imperialism that comes with high-tech, where all our data is stored in California. We have no access to buy back our own data. We need to lessen the dominance of one power. We need to have BRICS collaborating on these core new areas of development focusing on science and technology," he said.

Mthembu said there is a need for the BRICS summit to reinvigorate and add momentum to the development agenda, noting that the UN's 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development has been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing Ukraine crisis.

"They should come up with very concrete measures, especially that are related to Africa, like development of regional value chains, investing in Africa's manufacturing capacity, strengthening the trade agenda within BRICS and furthering economic cooperation."

Ndumiso Mlilo in South Africa contributed to this story.

BRICS: African countries can benefit from openness, inclusiveness of framework

From page 1

BRICS membership or outreach to Africa would not be a magic wand to wave off the decades of structural distortion and disarticulation of economies in the region fostered by the unequal relationship with the Global North. However, it would provide impetus and enable African countries to shake off the structural gridlock that has mostly shackled these nations, despite their best efforts.

The openness and inclusiveness of the BRICS framework would provide the objective conditions for African countries to recalibrate and retool their economic outlook to benefit from the reciprocal economic exchanges that are at the heart of BRICS dynamics.

The BRICS promise to be inclusive and embrace a broader cooperation mechanism is not a fluke. At the 14th BRICS Summit, held by video link last year, President Xi Jinping urged his counterparts to uphold openness and inclusiveness and pool collective wisdom and strength, adding that BRICS countries are not a closed circle but a big family of mutual support and a partnership for win-win cooperation.

Xi noted that over the past five years, BRICS has organized a variety of "BRICS Plus" events that have served as a platform for cooperation among emerging markets and developing countries and set a prime example of South-South cooperation.

African countries, which have had extensive and pragmatic cooperation with China in people-to-people exchanges and bilateral relations as well as in the multilateral frameworks of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative, have experienced practical and tangible outcomes that have considerably supported their economic transformation. With the BRICS mechanism, either through outright membership or more concerted outreach, they can gain a clear understanding of the transformative impact of BRICS.

The Ukraine conflict has awakened African countries to the mortal dangers of geopolitical alliances and bloc confrontation. During the Cold War, African countries insulated themselves from the ideological and military confrontation through the Non-Aligned Movement. However, the conflict in Ukraine and efforts led by Washington and Brussels to compel African countries to line up behind their proxy war with Russia have encouraged reflection on a prospective and genuine multilateral international framework that is neither an alliance nor an exclusive club. The BRICS mechanism fits the bill.

African countries that have had to stave off pressure from NATO view BRICS as a reincarnation of the Non-Aligned Movement, a historical framework of positive neutrality.

The 15th BRICS Summit in South Africa will be a watershed

moment for African countries in particular, and the developing Global South in general. South Africa, the summit chair, has already invited all African countries and many other countries from the Global South.

The African Continental Free Trade Area, the world's largest trade area, will be spurred by BRICS engagement. This also offers a unique opportunity for BRICS itself, as the zone can generate momentum for BRICS to rationalize its outward investment in a huge market with potential investment returns.

Africa and BRICS have complementarity in opportunities, costs and even risk sharing. All these prospects are not going to be freely available, given that the Global North and especially the United States-led Western alliance, long used to a "rules-based international order" being drawn and set exclusively by it, will not watch gleefully while their well-crafted global hegemony unravels.

Despite the contemporary trend and historical process validating and supporting multilateralism, there should be no illusion that this can be secured without a struggle. BRICS stands on the threshold of history and must exert itself to the utmost to reserve a place in history.

The author is director of the Center for China Studies in Abuja, Nigeria. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

CHINA

Editor's note: *Potside Chats* is the Edgar Snow Newsroom's video column, which aims to explore everything about China via table talk, with three China Daily journalists sharing their understanding and experiences. In the latest episode, they delve into the topic of *diao cha yanjiu*, or "investigation and research", which represents the CPC's commitment to governance.

In 1930, Chairman Mao Zedong visited Xunwu county in Ganzhou, Jiangxi province. During his visit, he conducted meticulous research in the town to understand the economic situation in rural areas and small cities at that time, and later wrote the well-known 80,000 word-plus piece "Report from Xunwu."

The founding father of the People's Republic of China completed his survey based on the real situation in Xunwu, including transportation, commerce and handicrafts.

That approach has become a significant part of China's governance, emphasizing the importance of thorough investigation and research before making decisions or formulating policies. Today, evidence-based decision-making remains the cornerstone of Chinese political philosophy, guiding the country's development and progress.

While Mao was conducting his research in Xunwu, it is said that he had an interesting conversation about tofu with his comrades.

"Of all the villagers doing business in Xunwu, which group is the largest?" Mao asked. His comrades answered "tofu makers."

"Which tofu in Xunwu is well-made and sells best?" Mao then asked.

The others failed to answer the question this time. However, Mao could not only name the village with the best tofu, but also the most successful families dealing in the food.

"Mao believed that assessing the quality of tofu in the town could provide insight into prosperity, living conditions, productivity and areas where socioeconomic improvements could be made," China Daily reporter Stephanie Stone said.

Mao's granular approach, focusing on collecting detailed and specific information before making a decision or drafting a policy, was later adopted as a commendable practice and tradition for Chinese officials.

Education campaign

The Communist Party of China is now carrying out a Partywide thematic education campaign about studying and implementing Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.

The campaign is targeting 98 million Party members, and extensive fact-finding activities are encouraged to help officials at all levels come up with concrete solutions.

This will enable them to better serve the Party and contribute to the construction of a modern socialist country in all aspects, and advance the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts.

The coverage of these activities prompted China Daily journalists to delve into this intriguing topic.

In the latest episode of *Potside Chats*, an Edgar Snow Newsroom video column that aims to explore everything about China over table talk, three China Daily journalists share their understanding of *diao cha yanjiu*, or "investigation and research", based on their own down-to-earth coverage experiences.

Stone traveled to Xunwu — where Mao first put forward his famous maxim, "No investigation, no right to speak" — to learn more about the Xunwu Research Memorial Hall.

Built in 1917 and converted into a memorial hall in 1968, it is a two-story building with a unique design based on the building style of the Hakka ethnic group.

Hou Aiping, director of the Xunwu

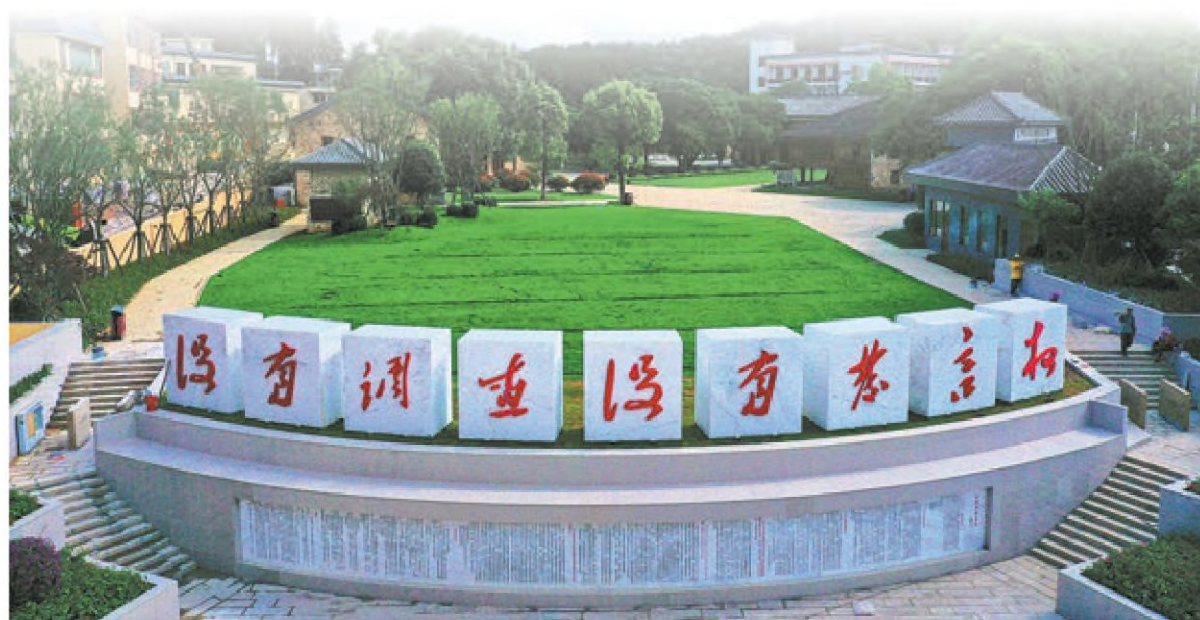


Left: A guide at the Xunwu Research Memorial Hall in Xunwu, Jiangxi province, explains a painting to China Daily reporter Stephanie Stone. CHINA DAILY Right: A guide at the memorial hall shows a painting featuring Chairman Mao Zedong holding a discussion. CHINA DAILY



Diao cha yanjiu: a legacy and firm guide for policymakers

The solid and practical problem-solving ideology is seen as a common thread in Chinese political philosophy and a cornerstone of the DNA of the Communist Party of China. **Jiao Jie** and **Nathan Williams** report.



Clockwise from top: "No investigation, no right to speak," Mao Zedong's famous maxim is immortalized in the yard of the Xunwu Research Memorial Hall. XU JINKING / FOR CHINA DAILY Mao's desk in Xunwu, where he wrote "Report from Xunwu" and "The Opposition to Dogmatic Idealism." CHINA DAILY A sculpture in the memorial hall features Mao conducting investigative studies with farmers in Jiangxi. CHINA DAILY



Research Memorial Hall, told Stone that when Mao conducted his investigation in Xunwu, he organized town hall meetings, with local people representing different strata of society. The meetings could last more than 10 days, including investigations into specific topics, comprehensive investigations and a concluding investigation.

"During the concluding investigation, Chairman Mao brought together more than 50 people, even a few delinquents, to address any lingering questions," Hou said.

"He would sort out the confusion and seek input from everyone until they arrived at plausible answers. This is why Comrade Mao Zedong said that these investigative meetings were the simplest, most practical and most reliable method."

Hou also quoted Mao's words, "I gained significant benefits from this approach (investigation and research), surpassing what one might learn in any university."

Walking in the hall, Stone noticed an exhibit on the wall that said: "Research is like being pregnant for

10 months. Solving problems is like giving birth in a day. So, research is about solving problems" — a quote from Mao's famous article "The Opposition to Dogmatic Idealism", which he wrote in Xunwu in 1930.

That sentiment forms the basis of China's commitment to evidence-based governance and informed decision-making — a crucial first step in establishing a solid foundation for the Party.

Its implications still cast an overarching influence on CPC officials today.

Informed decisions

"A leader needs to make informed decisions," said Cao Shuqiang, a researcher of CPC history in Jiangxi's Huichang county. "Without the proper knowledge, their decisions would be detached from reality. That's why it's crucial to conduct detailed investigations and research, and gain a clear understanding of the circumstances before making decisions — to ensure that the decisions are targeted and accurate."

China Daily reporter Nathan Williams said that one of China's decisive

moves at a crucial juncture in its transformative era — reform and opening-up — was also made with the same ideology. He recapped this watershed moment in the history of the CPC, based on his reporting experiences in South China's Guangdong province.

"In 1980, a groundbreaking development unfolded on China's southern coast with the establishment of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. This marked a significant milestone in the country's economic transformation, propelled by visionary leadership, bold experimentation and a commitment to market-oriented reforms," Williams said.

Deng Xiaoping, the architect of the reform and opening-up policy, granted the zone unprecedented autonomy to implement market-oriented practices and pilot economic experiments.

"Later, reform and opening-up shifted toward the mature practice of evidence-based decision-making based on local experiments that were measured in every sense of the word, metrically and gradually," China Daily reporter Erik Nilsson said. "This gave rise to the saying 'Crossing the river by feeling for stones.'"

After spending 18 years exploring China and witnessing the development of this vast country, Nilsson has become a seasoned observer of CPC policies. "If a trial implemented following research and investigation worked in one place, it would, after tweaking, be moderately and incrementally adopted on a greater scale in more places, sometimes nationally. This also recalibrated ideas about practical results in relation to ideology," Nilsson said.

Having shared their own journeys into this topic, the journalists found that this solid and practical problem-solving ideology is a common thread in Chinese political philosophy and a cornerstone of the CPC's DNA.

First milestone reached

China has achieved the first of its "Two Centenary Goals" — victory over extreme poverty, attained on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Party. It has now embarked on its journey to realize the second: Building a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious by 2050.

"Both goals, which are meant to define the country's legacy for the 21st century, are absolutely reliant on research and investigation and, subsequently, experimentation followed by adoption," Nilsson said.

He believes that Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era stands as an essential prerequisite for advancing the country's endeavors toward the second goal.

"This has relied on evidence-based decision-making since reform and opening-up, but with enhanced sophistication and precision following the adoption of targeted poverty alleviation, proposed by President Xi, which also required a unified understanding and determination," he said.

After delving into the topic, the journalists discovered that the common thread connecting different times in history lies in their association with the CPC leadership and their roles in shaping China's political and socioeconomic development.

While representing different eras and responding to distinct challenges, these ideological systems reflect the party's commitment to evidence-based governance and its efforts to navigate the complexities of a changing world.

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Online See more by scanning the code

REPORTER'S LOG

Understanding China from inside requires patience



Jiao Jie

It's always tough to explain Chinese political or ideological phrases that are exclusive to our society to my expat colleagues. I ran into this problem again when I was pitching a new video idea, themed *diao cha yanjiu* or "investigation and

research", to the hosts of our news column *Potside Chats*, where Chinese matters are discussed over a meal.

Their initial reaction was, "Yeah, research is important, we even did that with our theses. What's special?"

My colleague Nathan Williams, from the United Kingdom, even jokingly brought up his favorite character, Moriarty, in the crime drama *Sherlock* and started role-playing while we were brainstorming.

To get everyone on the same page,

we started browsing books and stories about the history of the Communist Party of China. We did a comprehensive retrospective into Party leaders at different times in history and the decisive moves they made during changing times.

We came to this conclusion: thorough research and detailed fact-finding are always the prerequisites for making judgments.

Our host, Stephanie Stone, even headed to Xunwu in Ganzhou city, Jiangxi province, to take a closer look

at how Chairman Mao Zedong did his "investigation and research" in 1930. She expressed amazement when she saw a photo in the Xunwu Research Memorial Hall of Mao working in the fields in the summer heat, wiping away sweat.

Mao would spend days in the fields laboring with the farmers so he could make their acquaintance and chat with them to get a deeper and more detailed understanding of the town.

"It's very rare to see officials at

such a high level to go to the grassroots to get these granular facts and information," Stone said. "US senators or congressman, however, are often criticized for being a little disconnected from the people they're supposed to represent. Some of them just sit in their office and listen to lobbyists."

After conducting their own extensive investigation and research, my colleagues came to understand the significance of this informed approach.

Chinese people prefer abstract, succinct language, and when it comes to political linguistics with distinct Chinese characteristics, it's

usually hard for foreign friends to get through. On the surface, a couple of phrases may stand for nothing but if you have the patience to dig deeper into the context and history, you'll find the underlying wisdom.

That's why we started working on this video series last year by inviting journalists, Chinese experts and academics to sit down and chat over a meal to discuss a different facet of China each time. There are many cultural shocks and mind-blowing opinions during the in-depth discussions. We ourselves have learned a lot about the differences between Chinese and Western culture, for sure.

CHINA



Spectators surround the field during an elimination game on the final day of the "Village Super (Soccer) League" in Rongjiang county, Guizhou province, on July 29. PHOTOS BY ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY

RURAL SPORTS REEL IN FANS

By ZHU XINGXIN, YANG JUN and WU YUCHEN in Guiyang

Soccer, basketball and volleyball are the three major sports in China and are even popular in the country's rural areas.

This year, after the successful staging of the "Village Basketball Association", known in Chinese as Cun BA, in Guizhou province, the "Village Super (Soccer) League", known in Chinese as cun chao, became a sensational event, attracting audiences from both home and abroad to the southwestern province.

The soccer league, known as the "Village Super", consists of 20 teams from various villages and ethnic groups in Rongjiang county, Guizhou. The players are amateurs from all walks of life, including farmers, students, businessmen, police officers and drivers age 15 to 50.

On the evening of July 29, the final of the Village Super drew thousands of people to a fully-packed stadium. Since its launch on May 13, the league has attracted over 3.38 million fans.

The charm of rural sports events

lies not only in the fierce competition on the field but also in the integration of various offerings and activities, including the chance to try local foods, socialize with residents and learn about ethnic folk culture.

Last year in Taipan village in Guizhou's Taijiang county, which is more than 160 kilometers away from the Village Super venue, the Village Basketball Association became a sensation after its debut at the Miao ethnic group's June 6 New Year Festival.

In addition, the "Village Volleyball Association", known as "Village Volleyball", known in Chinese as Cun VA, in Hainan province, has also gained popularity on the internet.

With the continuous promotion of the rural revitalization strategy, rural sports are expected to have greater development opportunities.

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Watch the video by scanning the code



Children wearing traditional costumes of ethnic groups cheer during a "Village Super" game on July 28.



Members of the team that won the "Village Basketball Association" championship pose with their prize, a roasted piglet, in Taipan village, Taijiang county, Guizhou, on July 31.



From left: Liu Yanhan (left), a former member of the National Women's Volleyball Team, plays with several children using a stool as she warms up for a "Village Volleyball Association" game in Wenchang city, Hainan province, on July 21. A villager sells soccer balls outside the stadium before the "Village Super" final on July 29. Tourists play a basketball game in Taipan village in Taijiang county on July 23.



From left: An aerial photo shows villagers playing a beach volleyball game in Lantian village, Wenchang, Hainan on July 20. Spectators pack a stadium to watch the final of the "Village Basketball Association" staged in Taipan village, Taijiang, on July 30.

WORLD

Flood of misery



Children float on rubber tires in stagnating water in Bago Region, Myanmar, on Saturday. Floods and landslides caused by monsoon rain have killed five people and forced more than 48,000 people to flee their homes, authorities said. MYO KYAW SOE / XINHUA

Pain, anger as Hawaii fire toll reaches 93

LAHAINA, Hawaii — Anger is growing over the official response to a horrific inferno that leveled a Hawaiian town in the deadliest wildfire in the United States in more than 100 years.

The death toll from the Maui wildfires reached 93 on Saturday, according to Maui County's website.

More than 2,200 structures were damaged or destroyed as the fire tore through Lahaina, on the island of Maui, according to official estimates, wreaking \$5.5 billion in damage and leaving thousands homeless.

Hawaiian authorities have begun an investigation into the handling of the fire, with residents saying there had been no warning.

"The mountain behind us caught on fire and nobody told us jack," Agence France-Presse quoted Vilma Reed, 63, as saying.

"You know when we found that there was a fire? When it was across the street from us."

Reed, whose house was destroyed by the blaze, said she was now dependent on handouts and the kindness of strangers.

"This is my home now," Reed said, gesturing to the car she has been sleeping in with her daughter, grandson and two cats.

Lahaina, a town of more than 12,000 and the former home of the Hawaiian royal family, has been reduced to ruins, its lively hotels and restaurants turned to ashes.

A banyan tree at the center of the community for 150 years has been scarred by the flames but still stands upright, its branches denuded and its sooty trunk transformed into an awkward skeleton.

The death toll makes the blaze the deadliest in the US since 1918 when 453 people died in Minnesota and Wisconsin, said the National Fire Protection Association, a nonprofit research group in Quincy, Massachusetts.

The death toll surpassed 2018's Camp Fire in California, which virtually wiped the small town of Paradise off the map and killed 86 people.

Hawaii congresswoman Jill Tokuda told CNN that officials had been taken by surprise by the disaster. "We underestimated the lethality, the quickness of fire."

Maui's fires follow other extreme weather events in North America this summer, with record-breaking wildfires still burning across Canada and a major heat wave baking the US southwest.

For many who fled the flames, the misery was compounded on Saturday as they were prevented from returning to their homes.

Some residents waited at a roadblock for hours hoping to be allowed in to look for missing pets or loved ones. Then abruptly the way was blocked, NBC News reported.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

Russia: Ukraine drone over Belgorod downed

By REN QI in Moscow
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Russian air defense systems destroyed a Ukraine-launched unmanned aerial vehicle over the Belgorod region early on Sunday morning, the Russian defense ministry said.

Ukraine launched missile and drone attacks on the Russian border district and Crimean bridge as Kyiv started registering ships willing to use the Black Sea corridor on Saturday.

The latest attack was intercepted by missile defenses as a drone from Ukrainian troops was shot down above the Belgorod region on Sunday morning, Russia's Defense Ministry said.

Three Ukrainian missiles were shot down over the Kerch Bridge that connects Crimea to the Russian mainland, said Crimean governor Sergey Aksyonov.

"Two enemy missiles were shot down by air defense forces near the Kerch Strait. The Crimea bridge has not been damaged," Aksyonov said.

Shortly after, Aksyonov updated on his Telegram channel that another missile had been shot down in the Kerch Strait in the Black Sea on Saturday.

The bridge, a vital link for Russia's

special military operation in eastern Ukraine, has come under repeated attacks during the conflict.

Russia's Defense Ministry said the Ukrainian troops attempted to hit the bridge with surface-to-air S-200 missiles on Saturday afternoon, and 20 drones were shot down on their way to the peninsula on Sunday morning.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Ukraine's "act of sabotage" will be responded to in kind. "There can be no justification for such barbaric actions and they will not go unanswered," she wrote in a post on Telegram.

Interfax news agency reported the bridge had been briefly shut for traffic but that it had later reopened.

Registration opened

Ukraine opened registration on Saturday for merchant ships sailing through temporary corridors in the Black Sea, according to the Ukrainian Navy.

"Registration is now open, and the coordinator is already working," a spokesperson from the Ukrainian Navy, Dmytro Pletenchuk, said on national television.

The temporary routes aim to overcome the global food security crisis, Pletenchuk said, adding it

would allow shipowners and companies to "finally take back their merchant vessels that are in humanitarian captivity due to the constant threats of Russians at sea."

The Ukrainian Navy first announced the temporary corridors for civilian ships to sail to and from Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea on Thursday. The navy said only vessels whose owners or captains officially accept the current conditions will be allowed to use the routes. However, it is not immediately clear when ships will begin using the new routes.

Several beaches in the Black Sea city of Odesa were officially opened for swimming for the first time since the start of the conflict.

Until now the local authorities had banned swimming due to the risk of mines in the sea washing up near bathers. The Governor of Odesa, Oleh Kiper, said the decision to open the beaches had been made jointly by the city's civilian and military administrations.

The beaches would be open from 8 am to 8 pm but would close when air raid sirens are sounded, he said. Nets have been set up to catch sea mines that might otherwise end up close to the shore.

Agencies contributed to this story.

ECOWAS seeks to engage with Niger military

ABUJA — West Africa's regional bloc aims to send a parliamentary committee to Niger to meet coup leaders who seized power last month, a spokesperson said on Saturday. It is part of a last-ditch regional effort to resolve the crisis.

Niger's military last month detained President Mohamed Bazoum and dissolved the government, drawing condemnation from regional powers, which have activated a standby military force they say will be deployed as a last resort if talks fail.

Coup leaders, headed by General Abdourahmane Tiani, have rebuffed diplomatic efforts by the Economic Community of West African

States, or ECOWAS, and others.

The military in Niger detained Bazoum on July 26 and chose Tiani, former leader of the country's presidential guard, to lead the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland, a governing body established by the soldiers after the coup, which has been since exercising legislative and executive authority.

The ECOWAS parliament met on Saturday to discuss further action in Niger. No decision was made, but the parliament set up a committee that plans to meet Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, who holds ECOWAS' revolving chairmanship, to get his permission to go to Niger, the spokesperson said.

A group of prominent Nigerian scholars led by Sheikh Abdullahi Bala Lau also met Tinubu to get the green light for an intervention, which Tinubu granted, a Nigerian presidential source said on Saturday.

The regional army chiefs were set to meet in the coming days.

The African Union, the European Union, the United States and the United Nations have said they are worried about Bazoum's detention.

UN Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk said on Friday that conditions were "rapidly deteriorating" and could amount to a violation of international human rights law.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Trade deal solidifies China-S. Africa ties

Firms see growth potential as pact expected to create job opportunities

By NDUMISO MLILO
in Johannesburg, South Africa
For China Daily

China-South Africa relations have received a fillip with the signing by Chinese companies of 20 deals to buy products worth \$2.2 billion from South African companies.

South African and Chinese government officials attended a signing ceremony in Johannesburg on Thursday. Ebrahim Patel, South Africa's minister of trade, industry and competition, said the deals will create jobs in the country and grow the economy. South African companies that signed the deals included Anglo Platinum, Glencore and Sappi.

In addition to creating jobs and benefiting South Africa economically, they provide opportunities to young people, Patel said.

"This represents the building block to the next phase of our relationship, to deepen the close partnership with China to strengthen industrialization in South Africa. ... As we deepen our trade we look forward to doing more things together."

The country's relationship with China resulted in a two-way trade worth more than \$47 billion last year, and Chinese investment in South Africa is now worth about \$10.5 billion, he said, and the countries' governments are committed to strengthening the relationship in those two spheres.

Wang Wentao, China's minister of commerce, met South African



A South African employee works with his Chinese colleague at an automobile factory in Eastern Cape on May 9. ZHANG YUDONG / XINHUA

Deputy President Paul Mashatile in Pretoria, and toured some businesses, accompanied by Patel.

The two countries held an official session of the Joint Economic and Trade Committee. Patel said the aim is to change the composition of trade so that South Africa exports more manufactured and value-added products to China.

Wang, speaking at the signing ceremony, said trade relations are growing steadily, and there is the prospect of even greater growth in trade ties not only with South Africa but with other countries on the continent as well.

'Big thing'

Andre Oberholzer, group head of corporate affairs at Sappi, a paper producer, said his company had signed a deal worth \$20 million to export to China wood fiber used in making textiles.

"The big thing for us is that forestry helps the rural economy, creates stable jobs over a long period and generates export income for South Africa."

Humaira Thebe-Choonara, chief

executive of the Progressive Business Forum in Johannesburg, welcomed the signing of the deals, saying that in addition to generating additional income for South African companies, they would generate employment.

Thebe-Choonara said she came with 25 companies that are looking forward to doing business with Chinese companies.

Theuns Botha, chief executive of Kingday Textiles, said he has been selling its products to China for 30 years. There are many opportunities in China in various sectors, and it is up to South African companies to seize the opportunities once they find out about how to do business there, he said.

Stavros Nicolaou, of the South African chapter of the BRICS Business Council, said relations with China have grown at the political and business level.

The council has adopted a targeted approach for trading with all BRICS partners, Nicolaou said.

The writer is a freelance writer for China Daily.

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WORLDUS

Chinatowns in US hit by gentrification

Skyscrapers and rising rents threaten to undermine vibrant cultural centers

By BELINDA ROBINSON
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Chinatowns across the United States are being irrevocably changed by large-scale building developments, gentrification and rent rises that threaten to dim the culture that made the areas vibrant, displacing long-standing residents.

In Manhattan's Chinatown the looming development of One Manhattan Square, a 72-story skyscraper that costs more than \$1.2 million per residential unit, could have a knock-on effect on the cost of rent for long-time residents in nearby properties, opponents say. Extell Development, JDS Development Group and Chetrit Group in New York also plan to add four more high-rises to the area.

Last year a New York City Council member, Christopher Marte, the Coalition to Protect Chinatown and the Lower East Side and residents filed a lawsuit against the owners of the Two Bridges Complex in Lower Manhattan, saying it would bring pollution. However, in April a judge dismissed the suit.

Chinatowns emerged in the US in the mid-1800s after early Asian immigrants arrived to build railroads. After work dried up and in the face of discrimination, the community banded together to create self-sufficient business centers that still stand today.

However, in the past few years Asian residents have left Chinatown in New York in larger numbers than in any other borough. Some have chosen to live in Brooklyn and Queens, which have their own Chinatowns, such as Sunset Park and Flushing, according to the 2020 US Census.

It is a far cry from the past, when Chinatown in Manhattan was reputed to have the largest concentration of ethnic Chinese in the Western Hemisphere. In 2020 it had 67,000 residents, at least 55 percent of whom were of Asian descent, along with 38,000 workers and up to 4,000 businesses.

The Museum of Chinese in America, a nonprofit organization in New York, whose mission is to document Chinese American history, culture and heritage, says Chinatown holds significant importance not just to local Chinese but to the rest of the US as well.

Nancy Yao Maasbach, the museum's president, told China Daily: "Neighborhoods like Chinatown ... merge one culture with the myriad of other cultures that comprise the American way of life."

It is not just luxury developments that are threatening to change these areas. In New York there was a successful protest against a proposed jail and homeless shelter. In other cities, pro-

tests are continuing against large sports venues and stadiums.

In Philadelphia plans for an arena costing \$1.3 billion for the basketball team the Philadelphia 76ers, due to open in 2031 and just a block from the historic Chinatown, have upset residents and local business owners.

"Hands off Chinatown" was the cry from a group of about 200 community residents and advocates at a protest in December gathered for a town hall meeting against the stadium, local reports said. In June thousands marched again from Chinatown to city hall to make their voices heard.

The Chinatown in Washington has fallen victim to gentrification and changes that have decimated the area, locals said.

An open letter in The Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper last year by Washington residents discussed how the Washington Convention Center and Capital One sports arena used 25 percent of their land and shut out Chinese residents, businesses and culture. They warned those in Philadelphia of what may be ahead.

In Oakland, California, residents protested in June against plans for a new Oakland Athletics baseball park just 1.6 kilometers from the city's Chinatown. The plans were scrapped in February. Developers are now expected to build the stadium in Las Vegas.

Unexpected demolition

In Detroit's historic Chinatown a dilapidated two-story building owned by Olympia Development Management of Virginia was unexpectedly demolished on July 29, much to the dismay of local city council members and advocates who had rallied to save it.

Four days earlier Detroit City Council had voted to delay the demolition until September. However, the city's corporation counsel allowed the demolition to proceed.

Detroit no longer has a central place where the Chinese community is located. In the early 20th century recent Chinese immigrants moved near Third Avenue and Bagley Street. President Dwight Eisenhower's decision to expand a highway in 1956 displaced many residents.

As most Chinatowns in the US undergo changes that result in an exodus of residents, the population of Chicago's Chinatown has bucked the trend, doubling its Chinese population between 1990 and 2020, the US Census Bureau said.

However, it has been unable to escape large-scale developments in the area. A \$7 billion high-rise residential and office tower called The 78 near the north of Chinatown could change much of the area, local reports quoted residents as saying.

is FDA approved at higher doses for an obesity treatment, named Wegovy.

Wegovy has been popular on social media for a while, and endorsements from celebrities, including Elon Musk and Jeremy Clarkson, are driving the demand for the drug amid a shortage. That has led people to shift their attention to Ozempic, which is also manufactured by the same company and contains ingredients similar to Wegovy.

People without diabetes have started using the diabetes drug Ozempic off-label for weight loss. For instance, the Facebook group "Ozempic Weight Loss Peer Support Group" has more than 31,000 members.

The popularity of the drug is driving a shortage worldwide. The UK's Department of Health and Social Care has suggested that no new

Chinese sporting event thrills Bay Area

By CHANG JUN
in Redwood City, California
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Unity, peace, inclusiveness and sportsmanship were the themes at events of this year's Overseas Chinese Sports Tournament.

Some events in the tournament — the largest of its kind outside of the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan — were held Saturday at Sequoia High School in Redwood City, about 25 miles south of San Francisco.

Nineteen US elected officials throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, representatives from business and academia, and China's top diplomat in Northern California attended an opening ceremony.

The tournament's organizer, the Northern California Chinese Culture-Athletic Federation, said that the number of athletes and audience members exceeded 2,000, which is a record figure since the inception of the federation 20 years ago.

"Sports can break barriers. It transcends differences. It brings people together. It makes our society more inclusive and harmonious," said Zhang Jianmin, China's consul general in San Francisco, who said that "this is the very reason why this tournament has been so popular in the Bay Area."

The tournament offers 18 categories of sporting events, including the traditional, such as swimming and volleyball, and the newly adopted, such as square dance, a popular exercise of middle-aged women in China that is usually performed to music in public areas of a mall, park or community center.

The track and field event Saturday drew about 200 athletes who are both physically and academically strong.

"About 50 are Tsinghua graduates, and 70 are representing Peking University," Li said, referring to China's two most prestigious universities. "Competition became fierce and intense."

The schedule of different competitions at various venues stretches from as early as July to as late as December, said Li, adding that the aim of the tournament is to



Zhang Jianmin, China's consul general in San Francisco, speaks at the opening ceremony of the Overseas Chinese Sports Tournament, in Redwood City, California, on Saturday. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

encourage as many overseas Chinese as possible to pursue an active lifestyle.

The tournament also aims to connect the "Chinese community" with different ethnic groups. "We have been mobilizing our community leaders to participate and take charge in different events," said Li.

"I believe sports is a superb platform, through which our overseas Chinese can interact with people from different backgrounds, to communicate on the track field, in the swimming lanes. ... Through our efforts, we are refining our collective image as overseas Chinese," said Li.

"Yes, we are of Chinese descent, Li said. "Yes, we continuously contribute to the United States and make it a better place for all. We are building the US-China friendship bridge."

Zhang emphasized the importance of a healthy China-US

relationship, "especially under the current difficult circumstances."

"A good China-US relationship is in the interests of not just the people of our two countries. It is one that people throughout the world want," Zhang said, adding that the US should understand the necessity and urgency to uphold the one-China principle.

On Saturday, Lai Ching-te, "deputy leader" in Taiwan, made a brief "stopover" in New York, which prompted strong opposition from the central government as well as criticism from the overseas Chinese community.

Beijing has strongly opposed Lai's "stopover" in the United States, calling him a "troublemaker through and through" and stating that the move "seriously violates the one-China principle, and gravely undermines China's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

The remarks came after Lai arrived in New York on Saturday on his way to Paraguay — one of only 13 states that retain official ties with Taiwan — to attend the inauguration of the country's new president.

The Taiwan question is at the heart of the core interests of China, the bedrock of the political foundation of China-US relations, and the first red line that must not be crossed in China-US relations, China's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

"So I sincerely hope all Chinese compatriots, wherever we come from, no matter which part of China we come from, we can stay united in a joint pursuit for the eventual reunification of our motherland and for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and of course, for better and more cooperation between China and the United States," said Zhang.

AI spells danger for Hollywood's stunt performers

LOS ANGELES — Hollywood's striking actors fear that artificial intelligence is coming for their jobs, but for many stunt performers, that dystopian danger is already a reality.

From *Game of Thrones* to the latest Marvel superhero movies, cost-slashing studios have long used computer-generated background figures to reduce the number of actors needed for battle scenes.

Now the rise of AI means cheaper and more powerful techniques are being explored to create highly elaborate action sequences, such as car chases and shootouts — without humans.

Stunt work, a time-honored Hollywood tradition that has spanned from silent epics through to Tom Cruise's latest *Mission Impossible*, is at risk of rapidly shrinking.

"The technology is exponentially getting faster and better," said Freddy Bouciegues, stunt coordinator for movies such as *Free Guy* and *Terminator: Dark Fate*. "It's really a scary time right now."

Studios are already requiring stunt and background performers to take part in high-tech 3D "body scans" on set, often without explaining how or when the images will be used. Advances in AI mean these likenesses could be used to create detailed, eerily realistic "digital replicas," which can perform any action or speak any dialogue its creators wish.

Bouciegues fears producers could use these virtual avatars to replace "nondescript" stunt performers, such as those playing pedestrians leaping out of the way of a car chase.

The lack of guarantees over the future use of AI is one of the major factors at stake in the current strike by the Screen Actors Guild, or SAG-AFTRA, and Hollywood's writers, who have been on the picket lines for more than 100 days.

Last month, SAG-AFTRA warned that studios intend to create realis-

tics digital replicas of performers, to use "for the rest of eternity, in any project they want" — all for the payment of one day's work.

The studios dispute this, and



Students attend a stunts training session at the Tempest Academy in Chatsworth, California, on Thursday. JONATHAN NACKSTRAND / AFP

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

said they have offered rules, including informed consent and compensation.

Run on diabetes drug used for weight loss causes problems

By MINLU ZHANG in New York
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Twenty pounds, 40 pounds, 55 pounds. On social media platforms, one can find many videos and posts comparing body shapes before and after weight loss with the help of a diabetes drug.

In a new weight-loss trend, Americans are turning to a diabetes drug resulting in a national shortage of the medication. The shortage also poses a threat to individuals with Type 2 diabetes, who depend on the drugs.

Ozempic is a weekly injectable medication originally developed eight years ago to help people with Type 2 diabetes keep blood sugar under control. The drug is going viral on social media because of one of its side effects: weight loss.

In fact, the active ingredient in Ozempic, known as semaglutide,

participants be started on Ozempic. Ongoing shortages also have been observed in Australia and Ireland, along with intermittent supply challenges in Canada.

Ozempic's manufacturer, Novo Nordisk, has appealed to health authorities to intervene and discourage off-label prescribing.

Diabetes and weight loss have long been problems in the US, where more than 14 percent of adults have diabetes and nearly 42 percent are considered obese, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In February, the US saw over 373,000 Ozempic prescriptions filled, marking a surge of 111 percent compared to the same week in 2022, according to a JP Morgan analysis reported by CNN. Among these, more than 50 percent were new prescriptions, CNN reported.

However, taking Ozempic to

manage weight comes with a substantial cost, both financially and in the form of potential side effects.

The medication is priced at approximately \$1,000 to \$1,300 monthly. While private insurance generally covers diabetes medications, it frequently excludes drugs intended for weight-loss purposes.

At the bottom of an Ozempic TV advertisement, a small line of text states, "Ozempic is not a weight loss drug."

On TikTok, "Your friend Mel" said she lost 80 pounds over the past year by taking Ozempic and another drug. She noted, "It can take three months for side effects to wear off; the first month is usually the worst, and the first week is definitely the worst."

"That's going to make you more nauseous, heavy meat is going to have a harder time to digest. Constipation can also cause nausea and

burps ... different infection sites can give you different effects, regardless of what people say ... If you're diabetic, pre-diabetic ... it might take you a little bit longer to start losing weight," she said.

"I will drink water and immediately have to throw it up. I can't put down salad, food, or pretty much anything. At first, it's just alcohol, but now it's literally everything across the board. I'm no longer going to be taking Ozempic," another TikTok user said in her post. She lost 20 pounds by taking the drug and said she "was happy with that."

A Mayo Clinic study released in May found that half of 305 patients using semaglutide drugs for weight loss over one year suffered side effects, with the most common reported being nausea and diarrhea.

Another study published in Nature noted that 82 percent of

participants taking a semaglutide drug reported adverse effects, generally mild to moderate gastrointestinal problems.

As many patients depend on Ozempic for managing diabetes, healthcare providers are facing the challenge of finding suitable replacements.

John Hallam, 82, has been dealing with Type 2 diabetes for 33 years. He said Ozempic is "vital and highly beneficial" for him. Due to the shortage, Hallam is being prescribed an alternative, which he believes is less effective and causing blood sugar spikes, which can lead to a stroke or sight problems.

"I feel very annoyed and frustrated that people can buy it privately and are denying people who rely on it," he told the BBC.

"We're getting messages daily about patients not being able to get their own medication," Disha Narsing, endocrinologist and director of obesity medicine at Northwestern Medicine, Lake Forest Hospital, told CNN. "It's been tough for patients and providers alike."

BUSINESS

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H2 growth hopes surge on buoyant equities

With real estate on the mend and consumption upgrade strong, bull run in sight

By SHI JING in Shanghai
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Starting July 25, the Shanghai Composite Index, China's benchmark stock barometer, rose 3 percent in two weeks. The daily trading value at the Shanghai and Shenzhen bourses has since reached 1 trillion yuan (\$139.2 billion). "Technically and emotionally, the A-share market will be more upbeat in the second half of this year," said Chen Li, chief economist of Chuancai Securities.

These days, there are many others in China, including foreigners, who share Chen's optimism. To be sure, the upbeat mood is not limited to equities.

There are hopes of a turnaround, if not a rebound, in the debt-laden real estate industry. What's more, consumption across industries is seen set for a further round of upgrade. Companies' profitability will further recover. Overall, macro-economic growth will fare better in the second half on the back of policy support, experts said.

All this confidence has been emerging amid lingering concerns about external uncertainties and unsteady recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. What's going on?

On July 24, a day before the SCI began its ascent, the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee decided that more efforts should be made to invigorate the capital market and boost investor confidence.

What followed next was a series of moves to give a concrete shape to the leadership's guidance.

For instance, on July 25, the China Securities Regulatory Commission said policies should be implemented comprehensively to facilitate investment, financing and trading.

Chen said the average valuation of the A-share market, with an average price-to-earnings ratio of about 13 times for Shanghai-listed companies, is at a relatively lower level, compared to historical data. More foreign capital inflows can be expected in the following months via the northbound leg of the stock connect program linking the Shanghai, Shenzhen and Hong Kong bourses, he said.

"The A-share market's overall capital supply will be sufficient in August, as the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank, had said earlier this month that liquidity shall remain reasonably ample in the second half of the year," Chen said.

The troubled real estate industry, whose leading names are A-share market heavyweights, also seems set for a recovery. On July 28, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development said that strong support will be given to satisfy both inelastic demand from first-home buyers and demand from existing homeowners seeking to buy better homes as part of consumption upgrade.

The ministry said down payment ratio and loan interest rates for first-time homebuyers will be lowered. Tax will be exempted for those who sell existing homes to fund purchase of better homes.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

“The A-share market's overall capital supply will be sufficient in August, as the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank, had said earlier this month that liquidity shall remain reasonably ample in the second half of the year.”

Chen Li, chief economist of Chuancai Securities

Mou Yiling, a strategist at Minsheng Securities, said the expected A-share recovery will likely be led by companies whose fundamentals were impaired in the past few years but are now looking a lot better. Real estate companies and financial services providers are among them — and their recovery “should by no means be overlooked”, he said.

On July 31, the National Development and Reform Commission, the country's top economic regulator, announced that more measures will be rolled out to facilitate the recovery and expansion of consumption.

Automotive, tourism and electronics industries, among others, were mentioned in the NDRC announcement, suggesting consumption potential in these areas will be unleashed.

Sheng Songcheng, a professor at China Europe International Business School and former director of the PBOC's statistics and analysis department, said revived consumption is of utmost importance to China at this moment, for pent-up household consumption will reduce companies' investment demand. A weaker investment appetite will weaken demand in the job market, exerting further negative impact on incomes and consumption.

Xun Yugen, chief economist of Haitong Securities, said he believes that consumption will be one of the major focus areas for A-share investors in the second half.

The annual growth rate of China's retail sales of consumer goods increased to 9 percent in 2019, but plummeted to a range of 4 percent to 5 percent during the pandemic. As economic activities recover and people's life is restored to its normal rhythm, consumption data will return to the pre-pandemic level. That would mean investment opportunities in the short term, said Xun.

From a longer-term perspective, consumption upgrade will accelerate when GDP per capita is between \$10,000 and \$30,000, as shown by the experience of developed economies. China's per-capita GDP at \$13,000 happens to fall within that

range. Therefore, consumption growth will last longer, he said.

Consumption-related A-share companies are mostly undervalued at present. Mutual fund companies have not directed a large proportion of their capital to these companies. The latter's lower valuations and expected capital allocation by funds could create many investment opportunities, Xun said.

Foreign investors are also expressing more optimism about the A-share market performance in the second half, observers said.

Lou Chao, consumption analyst for Morgan Stanley for China, said mass consumption demand in China will improve in the second half. This will benefit travel and experience-related categories, as well as basic consumer goods.

The majority of consumption-related companies that are listed in the A-share market have a presence in the categories mentioned above, and they are currently undervalued, she said.

The external environment is also improving, with the slowdown of interest rate spikes in the United States seen as one of the major positives.

Although the US Federal Reserve in late July raised the target range for the federal funds rate by 25 basis points to 5.25-5.5 percent, the highest level since early 2001, market expectations are the US interest spikes that started in early 2022 will soon end.

Seth Carpenter, global chief econ-

omist for Morgan Stanley, said the Fed may start to lower interest rates from March 2024.

Cai Rui, a researcher at BOCOM International, said an end to US interest rate hikes will help boost the valuations of risky assets globally, and the A-share market will be no exception.

The renminbi has become more buoyant as the market expects an end to the latest rounds of US interest rate spikes, said Chen of Chuancai Securities. A stronger RMB has already introduced more northbound inflows, and this trend will continue in the following months, he said.

Northbound capital has reported a net capital inflow of over 230 billion yuan at the end of July, exceeding the whole-year figure of 2022.

But experts also pointed out that China's improving economic fundamentals would be the major pillar upon which will rest a more bullish performance of the A-share market.

China's GDP grew 5.5 percent year-on-year in the first half, higher than the whole-year target of 5 percent. But, Yang Delong, chief economist of First Seafont Fund, said economic recovery in the second quarter was weaker than expected, suggesting more policies to boost economic recovery may be needed.

Li Xunlei, chief economist of Zhongtai Securities, said China has managed to register a seemingly perfect economic growth curve over the past two decades via counter-cyclical adjustments.

But there is still room for further improving the quality of China's economic development, taking the stock market performance as an indicator. Over the past 20 years, the A-share market has somehow remained flat.

While GDP is an aggregate indicator, stock indexes indicate quality. In this sense, more importance should be attached to the capital market in the future, as per the top leadership's guidance on July 24. Such an approach will help China to attain its goal of high-quality economic development, said Li.

Meng Lei, China equities strategist at UBS Securities, said he is more positive now that China will likely reach its full-year GDP growth target.

Profitability of companies listed in the A-share market will likely increase by 10 percent this year by combining the nominal GDP growth rate, performance of major economic indicators such as the consumer price index and the income growth rate of non-financial sectors. Such companies' profitability will be the major driver of the A-share market in the next few months, he said.

Meanwhile, Chinese entrepreneurs' confidence that UBS Securities has been surveying every six months since 2017, has come in at a relatively higher level in the latest poll. The company owners' optimism shows their positive outlook on China's economic recovery, which will support the 10 percent profitability increase, said Meng.

Time to shed anxiety, embrace new investment philosophy

REPORTER'S LOG

By Shi Jing

I've been reporting on China's capital market for several years now, and I can almost instinctively sense it when anxiety grips A-share retail investors. I can sense it now. But this time around, it's a different kind of anxiety. I can sense that too.

Typically, investors turn anxious when there's a sense of impending gloom or doom. But now, they seem to be anxious that what should have been a long-term bull run by now is still nowhere in sight.

COVID-19 control measures were

optimized in December, followed by supportive government policies. Economy has been recovering against odds. Yet, China's major stock indexes don't indicate bulls have been on the rampage, despite the bounce in late July. What gives?

Well, I can theorize that in the era of COVID-19 and big data, market veterans wouldn't like to act in a hurry either way. Sudden surges or dives are a thing of the past. If you recall, recovery from the impact of COVID-19 on the market sentiment took its own time.

China's stock market is faced with a rising number of challenges that seem to heighten existing complexities and uncertainties. For instance, the protracted Russia-Ukraine tensions have been taking a heavy toll on

commodity prices. Soaring inflation may lead to possible economic recession in major economies.

Another key factor is China's economic transformation. Since 2017, focus has shifted from growth rate to high-quality development. The improvement in overall innovation capability, industrial capacity and sustainable development has been phenomenal.

But, the impact of the three-year pandemic seems to be so overwhelming that people tend to overlook or forget the transition, which the pandemic has slowed down. Combined with other black swan or grey rhino cases over the past three years, the pandemic impact has served to underline that economic restructuring may be more “pain-

taking” than we had imagined.

Peter Thiel, the legendary founder of Paypal and a veteran investor, wrote in his bestselling book *Zero To One* that the process of innovation is more time-consuming and requires more efforts than normal. But it's the best way for companies to make profits. The process from “one to n” is easier, as it's simply about replicating what has been achieved during the “zero to one” process, which we call innovation.

I'd argue the same rule applies to economic growth. As China now prefers innovation to play a bigger role in its growth, more time should be allowed for that process because healthy and sustainable growth is the only way to a long-term bull run.

Thiel's take on his business prac-

tices appears to be in line with the basic macroeconomic theory: Solow growth accounting equation. It states three major variables affect an economy's GDP growth: labor, capital and technological progress.

After years of rapid development, China's competitiveness in terms of lower labor cost is decreasing, which is complicated by an aging nation. The function of capital investment is also weakening marginally, given the economy is getting larger. In this context, technological progress or innovation should get the spotlight and make a bigger difference.

Given all these factors, retail investors should rest assured the long-term outlook is positive, for China is definitely progressing on the right track. Its long-term devel-

opment goal reflects an investment philosophy: stick to emerging industries and invest in companies that are technologically advanced.

Over the past few years, some retail investors may have gotten used to reaping short-term profits from a stock's fluctuations. Mind you, that requires more time and efforts than normal. Now, in the post-COVID-19 scenario, however, retail investors do not seem to have that kind of time to monitor the market ups and downs during work hours. Worse, these days, asset management firms, which command market-moving ability, leave short-term investing to algorithm-powered trading software.

All in all, now is probably the best time for retail investors to align with the country's growth pace and development focus, and transition to a new investment philosophy: make long-term, value-oriented investments.

BUSINESS



A street screen in Shanghai shows the Shanghai Composite Index, Shenzhen Component Index and Hong Kong's Hang Seng Index of the day on July 19. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Mutual funds to turn around after sluggish market in H1

Experts say risk appetite will recover despite liquidations, low income so far

By SHI JING in Shanghai
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While the mutual fund market was relatively sluggish in China in the first half of the year, both measured by issuance pace and trading activity, more vibrancy can be expected in the following months amid investors' rising risk appetite and more importantly, the country's economic recovery, said experts.

According to financial information service provider iFinD, the Chinese market saw a total of 613 new mutual fund products released in the first six months, down 17.94 percent from a year earlier. The total issuance value was also slashed by 22.05 percent year-on-year to 540.6 billion yuan (\$75.27 billion).

While the average fundraising of one mutual fund product was 996 million yuan in the first half of 2022, the average reading contracted 10.84 percent on a yearly basis to 888 million yuan in the first six months of 2023.

Due to temporary difficulties with new product releases, up to 92 extended their fundraising period in the first half, the majority 60 percent of which were equity-focused mutual fund products.

At least six mutual fund prod-

ucts, including the photovoltaic-themed product issued by Gowin Asset Management in March and a fund-of-funds product that Minsheng Royal Fund released in June, faced fundraising weakness in the first half.

Over 30 fund managers, including Shenzhen-based Baoying Fund and Beijing-based China Post & Capital Fund Management, reported no income in the first six months.

Jiang Han, a senior analyst of market consultancy Pangoal, explained that global market uncertainties and A-share market volatility in the first half may have impaired the confidence of investors and fund managers.

The benchmark Shanghai Composite Index gained 3.65 percent in the first six months while the Shenzhen Component Index only eked out a 0.1 percent increase in the period. The technology-focused ChiNext in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, slid 5.61 percent in the first half.

Due to the less satisfactory performance of the A-share market, a total of 105 mutual fund products ended up in liquidation in the first half, up 9.38 percent from a year earlier.

Mutual fund liquidation refers to the sale of all of a fund's assets and the distribution of the pro-

ceeds of fund shareholders. Poor performance, smaller scale and management difficulties are the major reasons for mutual fund liquidation.

Fu Lichun, founding partner of Beijing-based YTI Capital, admitted the strong correlation between a large number of mutual fund liquidations and the sluggish A-share market performance during the first six months.

Yang Delong, chief economist of Shenzhen-based First Seafont Fund, said that a large number of mutual funds have reported losses over the past few years. Some smaller-scale funds encountered redemption, and their net asset values have shrunk as a result.

When a mutual fund's net asset value decreases by about 10 million yuan to 20 million yuan, the maintenance fees will be extremely high. It is wiser to opt for liquidation under such circumstances, said Yang.

Such market volatility, combined with retail investors' less positive outlook on market performance, will hinder the issuance pace of mutual fund products, said Jiang.

As explained by Jiang, the issuance of mutual fund products hit a five-year low in May amid investors' shrinking risk appetite. Investors were eyeing more bond-based mutual fund products, thus affecting companies' issuance schedules.

Data from iFinD showed a total

of 170 bond-based mutual fund products in the first half. The total issuance value of these products exceeded 334.4 billion yuan, taking up the majority 61.86 percent of the total fundraising of all mutual fund products. The four largest mutual fund products released in the first half were all bond-based.

The lower risks of bond-based products, as well as their rising yield, are the major reasons attracting retail investors' attention, which has triggered more releases of mutual fund products of this kind, said Jiang.

But Jiang said the mutual fund market will stabilize in the following months, as China's economic recovery is steadily advancing and the stimulus packages introduced earlier will make a bigger difference. Market sentiment is likely to pick up in the next few months.

Meng Lei, China equities strategist at UBS Securities, further explained that the issuance of new mutual fund products is a lagging indicator. Based on past experience, the release pace will pick up three months after the A-share market starts to show an upward trend.

As market sentiment has been more buoyant since July, more capital will be introduced into the stock market, facilitating the issuance of new mutual fund products in the next three months, he said.

Foreign companies set up R&D centers amid China's innovation boom

TIANJIN — In recent years, many foreign companies have chosen China as the ideal location to settle their research and development centers to cater to the vast Chinese market demand and serve a larger global market.

In late July, The Laundress, a high-end fabric care brand affiliated with global consumer goods giant Unilever, unveiled its Asia R&D center in North China's Tianjin municipality.

The R&D center is inside Unilever Tianjin Industrial Park, which aims to give full play to the effectiveness and safety of the local manufacturing base.

Thanks to leading technologies in China's intelligent manufacturing, the speed of its new production line will be significantly improved and transportation efficiency is expected to soar by 90 percent. The comprehensive support of the local supply chain can also better ensure the quality and stability of products from the source, said the company.

"We have seen exceptional demand for our products in China since launching in 2019. The opening of the R&D center shows our commitment to fostering local innovation and tailoring products that better cater to the needs of our valued customers in this dynamic and thriving market," said Clemens Herrmann, CEO of The Laundress.

As relevant industry sectors develop rapidly in China, Unilever is not alone in shifting to localized production and leveraging the advantage of China's intelligent manufacturing.

Another laboratory is the global refrigeration industry giant Danfoss' most advanced and largest scroll compressor R&D and testing center in Tianjin.

Mounted on the ceiling and walls, numerous anechoic wedges give the room a low ambient noise brimming with a striking sci-fi atmosphere.

In the center of a testing room, a compressor does the major work, with over 10 detection sensors positioned above to capture acoustic signals from multiple angles, while the control center receives and displays real-time compressor noise data.

"The R&D center conducts dozens of projects each year," said Duan Chenjun, head of the center. The tested and validated technologies and solutions will find widespread applications in many sectors, such as air conditioning, data centers, cold chain and energy storage, Duan added.

Arthur Xu, president of Danfoss China, said it is significant for the group to move from "producing" in China to "creating" in China, which reflects the company's confidence in China's green development and

long-term prospects in the Chinese economy.

Over the past 27 years, Danfoss has set up 12 factories and 26 sales locations in China, which is the company's second-largest market and largest source for procurement. In 2022, the company's sales volume in China reached about 10 billion yuan (\$1.4 billion).

Likewise, German carmaker Volkswagen Group set up a technology company with a total investment of about 1 billion euros (\$1.1 billion) in May in Hefei, capital of East China's Anhui province, as its R&D, innovation and procurement center for new energy vehicles and intelligent connected vehicles.

Moreover, in March, global water technology provider Xylem put its R&D center in China into operation, while French multinational Schneider Electric launched its automation R&D center in Wuxi, Jiangsu province. In May, a new Volvo car design studio, among its total of three design studios around the globe, opened in Shanghai.

In the past, foreign investment in China targeted the massive potential of the Chinese consumption market, but more and more foreign investors are building R&D centers in China, testifying to the country's well-recognized innovation ability.

Many multinationals have strived to consolidate their business capabilities and seize the initiative to gain worldwide development with the help of China's industry-university-research cooperative innovation ability and diversified industrial talent.

Hu Xiao, senior vice-president of Schneider Electric, said with more industrial talent, the company's R&D center built in Wuxi can better meet the needs of Chinese consumers and, in the meantime, serve a larger global market with a more agile innovative organization and a stronger local collaborative innovation capability.

Since the beginning of this year, China has further strengthened its efforts to attract foreign investment by launching a series of business promotion activities.

Chen Chunjiang, assistant minister of commerce, said that foreign-funded R&D centers are important parts of China's scientific and technological innovation system, which has made positive contributions to the introduction of international cutting-edge technologies and high-end talent, the upgrading of industrial technology levels and scientific and technological innovation capacity, and promoting the rapid development of global industrial and innovation chains.

XINHUA

GOING GLOBAL

BRI helps CEEC tap green biz in Central Asia

By ZHUANG QIANG
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Chinese enterprises led by China Gezhouba Group Overseas Investment Co, an overseas investment arm of China Energy Engineering Corp, recently embarked on a transformative journey to Central Asia, amid the strong push globally for green energy transition.

Earlier this month, a freight train carrying solar modules left Xi'an, Shaanxi province, to the construction sites of two upcoming photovoltaic power plants, of 500-megawatt capacity each, in the Bukhara and Kashkadarya regions in Uzbekistan. In the following months and years, more batches of such freight trains will set forth to these destinations to build the groundbreaking 1-gigawatt energy projects.

"The investment and construction of renewable energy projects have played a leading role in transforming Uzbekistan's energy structure and infrastructure," said Jurabek Mirzamahmudov, minister of energy, Uzbekistan, during an event to celebrate the departure of the first freight train.

This endeavor, part of a

Infrastructure companies seeking bigger global presence ... boast diplomatic advantages earned by the nation through its efforts in advancing multilateralism in recent years, for example, the BRI."

Long Chaocan, an investment consultant with China Galaxy Securities Co Ltd

cooperation outcome after the China-Central Asia Summit in May, marks the first bold leap into new energy investment in the Central Asian region, and one of the results of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The project is estimated to generate 2.4 billion kilowatt-hours of clean electricity and mitigate car-

bon emissions by about 2.4 million metric tons annually. It will help improve the local power infrastructure and upgrade its energy consumption, said Lin Xiaodan, president of the CEEC unit.

Beyond its green impact, the project is also set to spur socioeconomic development, as it is expected to generate around 1,600 local jobs and inject a projected \$140 million in tax revenue, Lin added during the ceremony.

A total of 60 freight train trips will be arranged before the end of next June, bringing over 3,000 photovoltaic modules to the construction sites, the CEEC unit said.

Such a footprint of the centrally administered State-owned enterprise in the Uzbek market is nothing short of profound.

With commitments exceeding \$1 billion, spanning green energy, environmentally friendly construction materials, and urban development, the company is eyeing opportunities from Uzbekistan's surging population and accelerated internal reforms, which are "a fertile ground for investments for the company", Lin said.

Going forward, the company has

a blueprint drawn up well through 2025. It has committed to bolster infrastructure investments and pioneer benchmark projects in global novel energy fields, especially in BRI-related markets, such as Kazakhstan, Indonesia and Vietnam, Lin said.

LONGI Green Energy Technology Co, a leading PV company in China that is also taking part in the BRI project, will enhance cooperation with all parties on this project, and seek a bigger role in boosting the new energy transition of the Central Asian markets, said its President Zhong Baoshen.

According to a report by CITIC Securities in July, Chinese infrastructure bidders will embrace more opportunities in BRI regions this year — the 10th anniversary of the initiative — as the release of pent-up demand is gathering pace in the post-COVID-19 era.

Citing demand for infrastructure in BRI-related markets, CITIC Securities said conditions have recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels, and projects that were delayed by the pandemic are also progressing quickly since the beginning of the year.

"Infrastructure companies seek-



The freight train carrying the first batch of solar modules for China Energy Engineering Corp's 1-gigawatt projects in Uzbekistan, departs from Xi'an, Shaanxi province, on Aug 3. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ing bigger global presence, especially in Central Asian and Southeast Asian nations, boast diplomatic advantages earned by the nation through its efforts in advancing multilateralism in recent years, for example, the BRI. And with the nation's competitive edge in infrastructure building, major Chinese players in the sector, central SOEs in particular, will stand out from global peers for their solutions and operations," said Long Chaocan, an investment

consultant with China Galaxy Securities Co Ltd.

However, the impact of geopolitical tensions is weighing on companies striving for a global presence, he said.

"The ongoing tussle between China and the United States, and the unstable global industrial chain due to geopolitical tensions, must be taken into consideration while making global investment strategy, as there may be invisible obstacles affecting implementation efficiency and investment returns," he added.

BUSINESSINSIGHT

Fiscal-monetary balance key to steady growth

EAGLE EYE

By The China
Macroeconomy Forum

Against the backdrop of global economic downturns, China set an annual GDP target of around 5 percent for 2023. However, quarter-on-quarter growth for the second quarter increased by only about 0.8 percent.

Theoretically, each quarter should ideally see about 1.5 percent sequential growth in order to achieve a 5-percent annual growth target. Therefore, although the year-on-year data suggest the growth target is plausible, the quarter-on-quarter data still indicate potential economic pressure during the second half of this year or the first half of the next.

China's role as a manufacturing hub positions the secondary and tertiary sectors as the primary engines behind its GDP growth. Its secondary sector must therefore maintain moderately high growth in order to achieve the target. However, economic growth of the secondary sector only stood at 4.3 percent in the first half, significantly below 5 percent, and has not fully recovered to the pre-pandemic levels of around 6 percent, indicating a weak recovery.

The performance of upstream sectors like mining often reflects downstream industries' expectations and thus serves as a barometer of future economic trends. Value-added growth of the mining industry remained at a modest 1.7 percent in the first half, remaining in a downward trajectory since 2022 and suggesting a relatively weak overall market outlook as well. In a word, although the GDP growth remained relatively stable in the first half, future economic performance may still fall short of expectations.

Year-on-year growth of the consumer price index for the first half was a modest 0.7 percent, indicative of a lower inflation level. In developed countries, a normative inflation rate is around 2 percent, while developing countries usually have slightly higher rates. First-half CPI performance signals less robust consumer demand and a limited capacity to withstand external negative shocks.

Producer price index performance has transitioned from positive to negative since late 2022, with the contraction continuing to expand. In June, the PPI decreased 5.4 percent year-on-year. Twenty-five out of the 40 major industrial categories experienced price declines, with the major-



CAI MENG / CHINA DAILY

ty belonging to upstream industries, such as fossil fuels and chemical raw materials, underscoring a lack of robust downstream demand.

Year-on-year growth performance of both the CPI and PPI reflect relatively weak demand in general. Social retail sales grew 3.1 percent year-on-year in June, up 0.23 percent month-on-month, corresponding to an annual growth of less than 3 percent and a continued low level of consumption demand.

The easing of pandemic-related controls led to a notable rebound in the services industry in April, however, followed by gradual declines afterward. Other retail sectors also mirrored similar trends. Moreover, both urban and rural areas have experienced declines in consumption growth.

Online consumption has also witnessed a decrease. During the COVID-19 pandemic, limited offline consumption led to an uplifting average online consumption growth of around 16 percent, which has fallen

to 10.8 percent since the beginning of this year. The diminishing influence of factors such as e-commerce promotions on people's lives also suggests a transition to new patterns of online shopping is on the way.

Investments demonstrated relatively steady performance in the first half, with a slight improvement in the second-quarter performance. Cumulative growth of fixed-asset investment amounted to 3.8 percent year-on-year during the first six months, with a month-on-month increase of 0.39 percent in June after seasonal adjustments. Investments in the private sector saw a year-on-year decrease of 0.2 percent in the January-June period, indicating insufficient support for economic growth and macroeconomic policies.

Trade played a pivotal role in bolstering China's GDP growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in the first half, both imports and exports registered conspicuous declines when measured in US dollars, down 6.8 percent and 12.4 per-

cent year-on-year, respectively.

Although the above-mentioned data may lead to an overly prudent perspective on China's economic recovery, a comprehensive and thorough understanding still requires insightful analysis of facts, trends and cyclical patterns underlying the numbers.

The CPI remained generally steady compared with last year — in other words, a neutral inflation rate of around zero. In the first half, the food category — which usually propels inflation — maintained a regular growth. Thus, it was the decline in transportation and communication prices that primarily led to the stagnant CPI growth. Several other categories still maintained relatively robust growth, despite a marginal dip in housing prices, reflecting an economic convalescence.

As a pivotal importer of raw materials globally, China's PPI has a strong correlation with fluctuations in international commodity prices. The declining PPI trend is a result of

both insufficient domestic investment and industrial demand, as well as the influence of international commodity prices.

It is strange to see that China's economic recovery outperforms that of its Western developed counterparts, while the country still confronts relatively higher unemployment rates when there have already been decreases in the West. The disjunction between youth unemployment and the overall macroeconomic milieu merits further discussion. The rise in the countertrend in the youth unemployment rate reveals prominent problems from structural problems and industrial upgrades, such as regulation of the education sector after the COVID-19 pandemic and emergence of cutting-edge technologies, including artificial intelligence and big data, which hold the potential to worsen joblessness, especially in a global manufacturing hub like China.

China is poised to transition from merely realizing a post-pandemic recovery to achieving steady growth

driven by huge domestic demand potential, which inevitably calls for the implementation of specific policy measures at the macro level.

It is imperative to recognize the significance of a supportive policy environment during this stage, where fiscal policy is believed to play an even more potent role than monetary policy due to shorter time lag and better efficiency when realizing overarching macroeconomic objectives.

For fiscal policy, direct subsidies usually prove more efficacious than tax exemptions or rebates. This is because one has to first have income to enjoy tax relief, rendering it ineffective in scenarios of operational hardship and revenue shortfalls. What's more, subsidy-oriented policies should primarily target households, supplemented by support to businesses. This is because subsidies in businesses may foster redundant capacity expansion in traditional sectors, while judicious subsidies to households will help facilitate decisionmaking that bolsters consumption and future economic development.

Furthermore, as of the first quarter, the Chinese government's leverage ratio marginally surpassed 50 percent, a relatively moderate level compared to developed countries. Notably, the leveraging ratio of the central government remains comparatively lower than that of local governments, indicating China's capacity to carry out expansionary fiscal policies.

For monetary policy, price-based approaches appear to outperform quantity-based ones. Price-based approaches help bring in a low-interest rate environment conducive to entrepreneurial initiatives and technological innovations. By contrast, quantity-based approaches may risk diverting funds toward less-efficient sectors and exacerbating leveraging ratios.

Nevertheless, despite proactive efforts to stimulate monetary policy, M2 and social financing growth have both experienced year-on-year declines. This trend points to the fact that it is the real economy and companies that ultimately generate demand for money, rather than a top-down regulation. Therefore, for monetary policy, a low-interest rate that kindles demand from the real economy may yield better effects than top-down supply-side augmentation.

This article is an excerpt from the China Macroeconomy Forum's monthly analysis and forecast report on China's macroeconomy, published in late July. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Time to reposition trade for long-term high-quality development

MAIN STREET

By Sheng Bin

China has cemented its position as a trade powerhouse, becoming the largest in terms of export volume and second in imports worldwide. The country accounts for a 14 percent share of export volume and 10 percent of imports globally.

China has transformed itself from a major exporter of low value-added final products to a key link in the global supply chain. The scale of exports of high value-added intermediate goods and capital goods has expanded, with an ever-increasing share in the international market. This has helped China move up the value chain both regionally and the world over.

Of late, China's foreign trade has been facing headwinds, induced by factors such as sluggish external demand and rising costs, as well as geopolitical tensions.

The slowdown in foreign trade remains a challenge, as evidenced by a significant decline in the growth rate of trade in the first half of this year compared to the same period in 2022. However, China's trade situation is better than many countries and regions.

To sustain foreign trade growth, the Ministry of Commerce, along with various departments and localities, has unveiled a package of supportive policy measures, in terms of

credit loans, insurance, export tax rebates and trade facilitation. China's time-bound lower tariff rates have also created conditions for expanding imports.

Efforts have been made to enhance efficiency and reduce costs of Customs clearance. More exhibitions are expected to be held, and business exchanges will be made more convenient.

Diversification strategy

China is vigorously exploring emerging markets and diversifying its trade partners, against a backdrop of sluggish demand in developed economies and increased geopolitical uncertainty.

Recent statistics have shown that the relationship between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has warmed up rapidly, resulting from the adjustment of foreign trade policies and the implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

In a broader sense, trade between China and the countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative is growing rapidly, with the trade volume accounting for nearly one-third of China's total foreign trade.

This has laid the foundation for the country to better explore emerging markets and optimize the regional trade structure in future.

It is, however, imperative to place a high premium on risk prevention and control while engaging in trade and investment activities with developing countries.

Meanwhile, trade liberalization has picked up pace in China's central, western and northeastern

regions over the years. The combined trade volume in these regions accounts for one-fifth of the total, a significant increase from the past.

Rapid trade growth in these regions has benefited significantly from the development of processing trade. Cross-regional relocation and transfer of processing trade to these regions have taken place in the past few years. At present, processing trade in these regions accounts for about one-third of the national total.

In addition, the trade volume of private businesses is more than half of China's total foreign trade. The country has rolled out a raft of measures and incentives to revitalize the private sector. Going forward, foreign trade carried out by private enterprises is expected to become a new growth driver.

Alongside the shifting dynamics of the trade structure, the trade quality has improved as well.

A large number of academic studies and data have shown that the prices and technological content of China's exports are becoming high value-added, with prices increasing at a steady pace.

In particular, exports of the "new three" products, namely electric vehicles, lithium batteries and solar cells, have registered notable growth, becoming a new highlight in the country's foreign trade.

With the growing importance of global supply chain security and economic resilience, China needs to further expand its commodity imports in future and increase its stockpiles to guard against potential economic risks, and the country should enhance preparedness for

any possible political and diplomatic changes or shocks.

Going forward, transformation and upgrading of foreign trade should better leverage cross-border e-commerce. Meanwhile, greater emphasis should be placed on green trade to better facilitate sustainable development.

In addition, vigorous efforts should be made to boost digital trade, especially digital trade in services, which is characterized by online delivery and digital transmission.

In the negotiations on plurilateral agreements under the WTO framework, China has played an important role and benefited much.

The negotiations on Services Domestic Regulations have come to an end, providing new policy guidelines to further promote the reform and opening up of the domestic services sector and the development of trade in services.

Preliminary textual negotiations over the Agreement on Trade Facilitation have also been concluded. Although there are not many substantive binding provisions yet, it still bodes well for massive benefits as it is viewed as the first multilateral agreement since the WTO's inception in 1995. Negotiations on a Digital Economy Partnership Agreement have not yet concluded.

It involves a number of digital trade issues that have been closely watched by various parties. As the negotiations wind down, the pact will provide guidelines for the future development of digital trade in China.

China has inked 19 free trade agreements with 26 countries and regions, and the conclusion and implementa-

tion of the RCEP agreement is of great significance to the nation.

Efforts to fully utilize the rules of origin for trade with RCEP member economies are crucial for enterprises. In future, China will also launch a new round of upgrade of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area to further strengthen regional economic and trade cooperation between itself and the Asia-Pacific region.

The leading and demonstrated role of high-level opening-up platforms will be better brought out. China has 21 pilot free trade zones. It has also set up the Hainan Free Trade Port, which has outperformed the other free trade zones in terms of taxation and other preferential policies.

The trade growth in pilot free trade zones and free trade ports is higher than the national average.

The foreign trade of Hainan's free trade port, especially, has grown by double digits. Such platforms should be fully utilized as a pilot for promoting China's institutional opening-up.

China applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, as well as the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement. Domestic efforts will be made to advance reform and better align with these international trade and commerce rules.

Holistic approaches will be adopted to better coordinate the domestic economic development with foreign trade growth and fully harness both domestic as well as international markets. The role of a unified national market will be given full play.

A new pattern of development

that is focused on the domestic economy and positive interplay between domestic and international economic flows will be further improved.

The share of net exports in China's GDP growth reached 7 percent in 2008, before it showed a downward trend. It now stands at around 3 percent. The role of exports in driving overall economic growth has been on the wane.

China's economic growth will, going forward, depend more on internal demand and the domestic market. Though foreign trade will be an important growth driver, expectations should remain modest.

China's foreign trade has strong resilience and flexibility to cope with short-term pressures and challenges.

What's more, it is imperative to shape an objective and correct positioning of China's foreign trade in the overall economic growth, in line with long-term development.

It is important to boost foreign trade while refraining from setting hard-to-achieve goals.

China should place a higher premium on realizing greater openness through foreign trade activities and advanced international rules, as well as improving the socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics through institutional innovation.

The writer is vice-president of Nankai University. The article is based on the translation of his Chinese op-ed piece published on the WeChat account of the China Macroeconomy Forum, a think tank. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

COMMENT

Editorials

Separatist intent of Lai's 'transit stays' exposes his nature as real troublemaker

Anti-secession protests sent Lai Ching-te, leader of the Democratic Progressive Party, on his way as he departed Taipei. Similar protests welcomed him during his stopover in New York on Saturday on his way to Paraguay and protesters are expected to greet him in San Francisco on Tuesday en route back.

Although how to prevent Paraguay, the largest country among the 13 countries that still keep official relations with the island, from aligning itself with the majority of the international community that recognizes Beijing as the sole representative of one China is part of his agenda, assuring Washington of his ability to follow in the footsteps of Taiwan leader Tsai Ing-wen tops Lai's agenda.

Lai, who is currently leading in the polls for the upcoming leadership election on the island, understands the pitfalls that led to Tsai's loss of leadership within the DPP. It is Tsai's reckless actions that have directly provoked Beijing to accelerate military preparations to potentially reunify the island by force in the event that proves necessary.

Consequently, although seeking support and trust from Washington, Lai is keeping an unusually low profile during his trip.

He told his supporters last month that "When

we can go to the White House, we'll have reached the political goal that we're pursuing."

Yet apparently, he will only meet some of his supporters among the local Chinese American population in the two cities, with no official contact with the US government, according to the itinerary he released, at least. Whether that will indeed be the case, remains to be seen.

Lai's performances in the island over these years as a radical separatist have already made it unmistakably clear that ultimately he can only be an exaggerated version of Tsai. As the Foreign Ministry pointed out in a statement it issued on Sunday, clinging stubbornly to "Taiwan independence", he is a troublemaker through and through.

The more he tries to impress the US, the more trouble he will make.

Beijing is closely following the developments of the situation and its warning that resolute and strong measures will be taken to safeguard the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity should never be taken lightly.

Lai's "transit stops" once again show that the fundamental cause of the continued tensions in the Taiwan Strait is the Taiwan separatists' attempts to solicit greater US support for "Taiwan independence" and the China hawks in the US are intent on exploiting their agenda to smear Beijing.

Toxic effects from alleged security threat

The 2023 National Intelligence Strategy released on Thursday is an unfortunate new expression of the United States government apparatus' determination to treat strategic competition with China as the country's priority security challenge. Besides cultivating further hostilities, it will do substantial disservice to the ongoing efforts to inject stability into the already volatile bilateral relationship.

Building on the 2023 Security Assessment Report of the US Intelligence Community that was issued in February, the new document features a definitive focus on China and Russia as preeminent national security challenges, with the emphasis on China.

According to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the National Intelligence Strategy "is a foundational document" that is derived from a consensus among 18 intelligence elements and provides strategic direction for the US over the next four years.

Despite the "immediate and ongoing threat" Russia poses, "it lacks the across-the-spectrum capabilities of the PRC", the report states. It asserts that the People's Republic of China "is the only US competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so".

Such a claim is consistent with other policy documents of the Joe Biden administration, reflecting a clear dedication to an all-of-government concentration on countering the alleged threats from China. Taken together, these policy documents point to a dangerous turn in the US' China strategy that threatens to fundamentally change the nature of the two

countries' relations. Increasingly they are helping China hawks turn what has generally been a constructive and mutually beneficial partnership into a relationship dominated by animosity, which not only causes distress for the Chinese, but also many Americans.

The toxic effects have been obvious in the two sides' diplomatic rhetoric, which is getting less and less friendly as time goes by. Washington sounds tougher on China with each passing day, which is only serving to convince Beijing that it will be perceived as an enemy regardless of what it does to try and prove the contrary.

Even setting aside the "good old days" of engagement, it was not that long ago that the two governments were careful to show conspicuous restraint when commenting on emerging differences over issues of concern. That kind of restraint has evaporated though as the China hawks in Washington have stepped up their efforts to push bilateral ties toward a geopolitical showdown. More than ever before, the relationship looks like having embarked on a path of no return, a course of collision.

But, ironically, it is equally evident that neither party truly wants that collision to occur. Beijing continues reiterating its desire for a "healthy" relationship. The Biden administration keeps expressing a commitment to cooperate whenever, wherever possible.

The Jekyll and Hyde nature of the US administration in terms of what it says and what it does is the root cause of the problematic relationship between the two countries, with the latter encouraging the China hawks to go ever further in their provoking of Beijing.

US should show some nous in South China Sea

Despite the initial fault lying with the Philippines, China has been exercising great restraint following the incident at Ren'ai Reef, in which China Coast Guard vessels had to block Philippine ships from transporting construction materials to the warship the Philippines has grounded on the reef.

The Philippines grounded the warship on the reef in 1999, and has kept it occupied since, in a bid to support its illegal claim to the reef and its surrounding waters, which are Chinese territory. Although that action has strained relations, Beijing has tried to not let it prove terminal to Sino-Philippine ties. Keeping the bigger picture in mind, it has patiently waited for time and the elements to take the ship from the reef, rather than forcibly doing so itself.

Now though, the recent attempt by the Philippines to shore up the disintegrating vessel has prompted the Chinese Foreign Ministry to call for the removal of the grounded warship in order to prevent any further incidents. The recent incident at the Ren'ai Reef bears all the hallmarks of US meddling, with Washington openly goading the Philippines to challenge China.

Manila should not misjudge China's strategic patience or try to exploit it. Beijing has both the determination and capacity to protect its territorial waters. It is crucial for countries in the region to remain vigilant and join hands to maintain the peaceful environment. China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have made great efforts to

maintain stability in the South China Sea and create a peaceful environment for regional cooperation and development. But outside forces, particularly the United States, have continually sought to undermine those efforts and create disruptions in the region.

Not only does its interfering in the South China Sea disputes undermine the principles of the rules-based order that the US claims to hold dear, but its unwarranted and unwanted interference in the Ren'ai Reef situation could destabilize the already parlous region. The South China Sea is home to various competing interests, and any misguided action has the potential to exacerbate existing tensions between neighboring nations or spark conflict.

Non-interference in the South China Sea disputes would be a more principled and responsible approach for the US, which would be better served by concentrating its attention and resources on its domestic problems. Investing in healthcare, infrastructure, education, and climate change mitigation would ultimately strengthen the US' position as a global leader more than it becoming embroiled in another ill-judged overseas conflict.

In its efforts to prevent tensions from escalating and to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea, Beijing has reached out to Manila, hoping to resolve the tensions through dialogue and adherence to past agreements. The US should support those diplomatic efforts rather than trying to prod Manila to take a step too far.

Li Min



Opinion Line

CIA like a thief criticizing vigilance of homeowner

In a recent statement, the Ministry of National Security explicitly identified the United States' Central Intelligence Agency as the organization responsible for training and employing a spy to steal China's military and industrial technologies.

The ministry asserted that the suspected individual, who has been detained, was a staff member at a military-industrial company, who was sent to Italy for educational purposes. During his time there, he was approached and enticed by the CIA to become a spy through promises of substantial financial compensation and help for him and his family to emigrate to the US. The suspect was subsequently trained by the CIA to carry out espionage activities and gather sensitive information for his US handlers.

This incident raises concerns about the efforts of CIA Director

William Burns to develop an intelligence network within China while affirming the Ministry of National Security's earlier call for increased vigilance among the nation's citizens.

Despite its status as the world's sole superpower, the US has a persistent inclination to employ morally and legally questionable tactics when dealing with perceived adversaries and even its allies. The US boasts the largest spy network globally, engages in phone tapping activities even against its allies, spearheads the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, and is actively trying to gain a foothold for the transatlantic military alliance, NATO, in the Asia-Pacific by facilitating intelligence sharing with Japan. Former US president Donald Trump appointed a former CIA director as secretary of state, and the present occupant of the White House president Joe Biden appointed William

Burns, the current CIA director, to his Cabinet.

Taken together, these indicators paint the US as an empire of espionage. Yet this paragon of spying feels aggrieved that China has called on its citizens to participate in counter-espionage work. This is akin to a thief expressing anger toward a homeowner for installing a security system.

Regardless of the thief's protestations, it is imperative that the homeowner be on the alert and take precautions. The US has long targeted Chinese scholars studying abroad. It is vital for the entire nation to be aware of the persistent espionage endeavors of the US.

Other nations can also learn a lesson from China. Even if they are friends or allies of the US, it is advisable that they fortify their defenses to ward themselves against this spying empire's surreptitious snooping.

—ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY

Fed likely to keep interest rates unchanged

On Thursday, official data showed that the US Consumer Price Index rose by 3.2 percent year-on-year in July, slightly lower than the expected 3.3 percent. Excluding the more volatile food and energy components, the core CPI in July increased by 4.7 percent. In response to this, the market widely believes that the Federal Reserve might halt its rate hikes in September. The increase in prices was led almost exclusively by housing. The housing component of the CPI tracks the change in the rental value of different housing units or the equivalent rent if owner-occupied, and it takes roughly 12 months for changes in market rents to become fully incorporated into the CPI.

Following the outbreak of the pandemic, the boom in the US real estate market drove rents up rapidly.

With the Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes, the growth momentum slowed significantly in the latter half of the previous year. This slowdown is now beginning to manifest in the CPI statistics, one year later.

A letter this week from the Los Angeles Federal Reserve revealed that all private-sector house price and rent indicators are currently decreasing, and it is expected that they will continue to decline in the future. The contribution to the year-on-year CPI indicator may drop from the previous high single digits to negative values by the middle of next year, becoming the most severe contraction since the financial crisis in 2008.

The crisis in small and medium-sized banks and the potential credit tightening could also be a factor in the Federal Reserve's considerations

for its next policy steps, which could further encourage the Fed to end its rate hikes. Even before the release of the July CPI data, some officials within the Federal Reserve had already indicated that they might halt the rate hikes. Of course, there are differing views within the Fed as well. The final decision will still depend on future economic data, and at least the data for August, which will be available before the September meeting, needs to be observed.

Looking at the overall situation, it's highly likely that the Fed will keep interest rates unchanged. They are likely to continue observing the follow-up effects of the previous rate hikes, allowing monetary policy and market mechanisms to fully play their roles.

—21ST CENTURY BUSINESS HERALD

What They Say

Zero tolerance for corruption in medical sector

An anti-corruption campaign is sweeping across the country's medical sector. Since the beginning of the year, over 150 hospital directors and deans have already been subjected to investigations. The majority of these are related to activities such as favoritism in drug procurement, medical equipment procurement, consumables procurement, and even bribery.

The medical sector directly affects public interests, including the accessibility and affordability of medical treatment, while also influencing the overall development of the healthcare industry. The problems within the medical sector are deeply entrenched and complex in nature. They involve supervision of leadership officials and key personnel, the pharmaceutical procurement model, interactions between doctors and pharmaceutical companies, as well as payment systems for healthcare

workers. A comprehensive examination is necessary in order to effectively address these issues and implement necessary improvements.

Notably, investigations have shown that the previously deemed pharmaceutical procurement model as an anti-corruption measure has not been immune to kickback practices. This suggests that, in addition to combating existing corruption, there is a need for further enhancement of the relevant systems to close any institutional loopholes that facilitate corruption and to ensure comprehensive reform.

It is important to recognize that the problems plaguing the medical field go beyond the improper transfer of benefits between doctors and pharmaceutical representatives. There are also a range of irregular operational issues within hospitals.

Therefore, while tackling corruption, efforts should also be directed toward purifying and standardizing the internal management and medical ecosystem of healthcare institutions.

Addressing deep-seated issues necessitates strong measures. The current situation underscores the need for a comprehensive initiative encompassing investigation, cleanup, and reshaping within the pharmaceutical sector. Concentrated efforts should aim to eradicate corruption without disrupting the normal functioning of the pharmaceutical industry or the healthcare system, while still recognizing the valuable contributions of healthcare professionals. It should also serve as a reminder that actions toward better governance could greatly benefit from increased transparency and timely responsiveness to public concerns.

—BEIJING NEWS

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COMMENT



China and the World Roundtable | The Global South

Editor's note: The Global South has evolved to prioritize economic growth and social welfare. And as part of the Global South, China has been promoting economic development in other developing countries, especially in less-developed countries. Three experts share their views on the issue with China Daily.

Wang Zaibang

Absurd to deny developing nation status

The United States already defines China as a strategic adversary. Now it has passed an act to deprive China of the status as a "developing nation". The "Ending China's Developing Nation Status Act" was passed unanimously by the House of Representatives on March 27 and the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Senate on June 8. It is likely to soon go from the Senate to US President Joe Biden's table to be signed into law.



The author is a senior fellow at the Taihe Institute.

The act is another tool the Biden administration will use to contain the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, as it requires the US Secretary of State to try and change China's status in international organizations and treaties from a "developing nation" to a "high-income economy" or a "developed country". The US' aim is clear: it wants to deprive China of its right to special and differential treatment within the framework of the World Trade Organization.

But since few in the world believe the US can contain China's development, it will be difficult for Washington to succeed in forcing all countries and organizations to consider China as a "developed country".

First, major international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the WTO have no clear and fixed standard to distinguish between developed and developing countries. The World Bank classifies countries according to per capita gross national income, not as developed and developing countries. The bank adjusted its criterion on July 1, 2022, to define a country with per capita GNI of \$13,205 as a high-income economy. And even by the World Bank's criterion, China is not a high-income country, not to mention the complicated difference between a high-income country and a developed country.

Second, according to the WTO, member states can "self-designate"

themselves as a developing or developed country. China joined the WTO in 2001 with the self-declared status of a developing country.

The 12th WTO Ministerial Conference in June 2022 made a decision on Exemption from Intellectual Property Obligations of Vaccines in COVID-19, exempting "eligible members" from the obligation to protect the patents of COVID-19 vaccines. This means "eligible members" can authorize the production and export of COVID-19 vaccines developed by any country or organization to other "eligible members" without the permission of the patentee. It also encouraged developing country members with vaccine production capacity to make binding commitments to follow this decision.

The WTO website shows China is an eligible member that made the commitment. In other words, China got a written confirmation from the WTO that it is still a developing country, by making the commitment.

Third, the US has been trying to deny China's status of a developing country in multilateral forums and organizations for the past five years, but in vain.

In January 2019, the US submitted a motion to the WTO titled "An Undifferentiated WTO: Self-declared Development Status Risks Institutional Irrelevance", listing China's achievements in different fields including human development index, macroeconomic index, trade, foreign investment, size of companies, and national defense.

It asserted that some countries like China should no longer be allowed to enjoy the special and differential treatment given to develop-

ing countries. On July 26, 2019, the then Donald Trump administration issued the "Presidential Memorandum on Reforming the Status of Developing Countries in the WTO", requiring the Office of the US Trade Representative to urge the WTO to carry out substantive reforms within 90 days, to prevent some member states from enjoying special and differential treatment as developing countries.

After President Joe Biden assumed power, the USTR issued the "China WTO Compliance Report" in February 2022, once again mentioning its proposal to the WTO in January 2019 and viewing it as an important tool to continue putting pressure on China to stop enjoying the "developing country" status.

However, since the "Ending China's Developing Nation Status Act" is just an attempt to "stir-fry leftover rice", the US is not likely to achieve a breakthrough even this time.

But why do they bother raising this question again and again? It seems US politicians, despite knowing it is difficult to deny China the "developing nation" status, hype the issue just to feel confident that they will succeed this time.

And fourth, even after the WTO reforms, especially the reform of WTO rules and procedures, the global trade body should continue to safeguard the rights of developing country members to enjoy special and differential treatment, improve the effectiveness and operability of relevant provisions, and encourage both developed and developing country members to fulfill their responsibilities in accordance with their development level and economic capacity.

In this regard, many things need to be done. For example, a working group should be formed under the UN Economic and Social Council and authorized to further classify high-income countries into several categories based on their per capita GNI, and determine their corresponding responsibilities more fairly.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Khalid Taimur Akram

Beijing is fostering shared development through initiatives

China has not only transformed its economy, lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, but also promoted development initiatives aimed at fostering growth and prosperity, and improving the well-being of people in other developing countries. In doing so, China has demonstrated to the world how to create development opportunities for, and benefit, all of humanity.

China has entered a new era as a result of its industrialization and modernization drive, and contribution to global peace. For instance, it has helped other countries make greater efforts to jointly build a shared future for all and boost global cooperation in every possible way.

China has provided technical and financial assistance to many developing countries and backed renewable energy projects in Africa and Asia, while initiating various projects in other countries.

In this regard, the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at improving connectivity and boosting development throughout Asia, Europe and Africa, has had a positive impact on millions of people in not only developing countries but also developed nations.

China believes that the world is a shared community in which people should coexist peacefully and all individuals live as members of one family. While China's foreign policy is

based on the concept of building a unified global community, the country's concern for humanity's well-being has prompted it to deepen cultural relations with other countries and promote mutual understanding.

China believes in the values and aims of the United Nations Charter, and therefore respects the sovereignty of all countries, never interferes in the domestic affairs of other countries, and favors settling bilateral issues through diplomacy and discussions.

Developing countries recognize China's role in driving global socioeconomic development and fostering shared prosperity. Apart from the Belt and Road Initiative, China has also proposed the

Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative, offering Chinese solutions to global problems and Chinese wisdom to promote global growth and cultural enrichment.

The Global Development Initiative is committed to promoting inclusive economic development by adopting a people-centered approach. Its primary aim is to help the developing countries realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, forge deep global development partnerships, and facilitate international cooperation for development.

President Xi Jinping proposed the Global Security Initiative during the opening ceremony of the 2022 Boao Forum for Asia. The initiative aims to eliminate the root causes of international conflicts, improve global security governance, encourage joint international efforts to bring more stability and certainty to a volatile and changing world, and promote durable peace and development in the world.

In terms of non-traditional security, China supports all countries in their efforts to combat climate change and address global challenges.

As for the Global Civilization Initiative, it was proposed by President Xi during the Communist Party of China in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting on March 15. The initiative's main goal is to provide new opportunities for global development, add new impetus to humanity's exploration of paths toward modernization and make new contributions to the theory and practice of humanity's modernization as China makes new progress in modernization.

The Global Civilization Initiative urges countries to respect the diversity of world civilizations and uphold the principles of dialogue and inclusion. China is advancing its mission by fostering shared values among humanity, and encouraging people-to-people exchanges and mutual learning among different cultures. Besides, China's efforts to promote humanity's common values facilitate cooperation and collaboration to address global challenges.

The West has always had a problem with China's unprecedented socioeconomic development. The West has been criticizing the Belt and Road Initiative since its inception even though the initiative has helped build roads, railways, ports, airports and power plants in many countries, and is desperately trying to check China's peaceful rise by accusing it of violating human rights.

The militaristic nature of the US' alliances, from NATO to AUKUS (the security alliance among Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States) and the "revitalized Quad" (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among the US, India, Japan and Australia), are all aimed at isolating China from the rest of the world.

The West's policy toward China is becoming so hostile that it could trigger conflict. For example, the US-led West's intervention in the South China Sea disputes and provocative actions, such as sailing warships through China's waters in the name of "freedom of navigation", have raised tensions and are jeopardizing peace and security in the region. In fact, the US has been continually devising new strategies to maintain its global hegemony by suppressing China.

Military interventions by the US have resulted in the loss of millions of lives and immense economic destruction in many parts of the world, tearing the social fabric of many countries. And yet the US has got away with such heinous crimes by claiming to be promoting democracy and protecting human rights. But the US-led West's militarization in the region, obviously targeting China, will not realize its goal. Nor will the West succeed in weakening China or halting its development.

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MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Adnan Akfirat

US won't succeed in checking China's rise

The fable of the wolf and the lamb comes to mind whenever a bully tries to defend his behavior. Like the ravenous wolf in the fable, the United States has issued legislation after legislation and taken measures after measures to disrupt China's development and check its peaceful rise, thereby impeding the economic growth of Asia as a whole. The latest piece of such legislation is the "Ending China's Developing Nation Status Act".

The bill to "end China's unfair international advantage" was proposed by Senators Chris Van Hollen of the Democratic Party and Mitt Romney of the Republican Party on Feb 9. And while the House of Representatives approved it in March, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed it on June 8.

The goal of the "Ending China's Developing Nation Status Act" is to prevent the granting of "developing nation" status to China in future treaties and international organizations, especially the World Trade Organization.

The US has been trying to justify its move by claiming that China "unfairly" benefits from the "favorable treatment" in the WTO due to its developing nation status. The US purposefully ignores the reality that China is home to more than 1.4 billion people, and focuses only on the size of China's economy and its foreign trade volume to object to China's developing nation status.

In a news briefing on June 9, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said: "The United States does

not label China as a 'developed country' because it appreciates or recognizes China's development achievements. The real reason behind the termination of China's developing country status is to hinder China's development." He added that, "China's status as the world's largest developing country is based on facts and international law" and its "legal rights as a developing country will not be deprived by US politicians".

Wang pointed out that China's status as a developing country is recognized internationally, including by the WTO, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Montreal Protocol.

The Foreign Ministry spokesman also emphasized that China's contributions to global economic growth and the UN's regular budget and peacekeeping missions are much higher than those of most developed countries. "Some US lawmakers are concerned that China will use its developing country status to evade international responsibilities. This is completely unnecessary," Wang said.

The US' primary worry is that China is challenging its hegemony in the WTO by bringing developing nations together. In the WTO, developing countries make up about two-thirds of the total 164 members. And realizing trade is critical for their development, these countries are participating more intensely in WTO affairs. So by attempting to check China's development, the US is also trying to check their development.

As a developing nation, China is aware of the obstacles to progress and the unjust treatment other develop-



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ing countries have to endure. That's why China has been promoting the interests of these countries by helping accelerate just and equitable development. China sees its interests as being intertwined with the collective interests of other developing countries. As an active player in the Global South, therefore, China has been making efforts to help maintain global economic development by advocating international rules which support their right to access markets, engage in fair competition, play a role in commodity pricing, sign trade agreements with other economies and demand quality products.

China's unique position in the international community also allows it to serve as a bridge between the developed and developing economies, and balance the interests of large and small economies, thus becoming a powerful force driving shared global development.

The country's most recent white paper on foreign development cooperation, issued in January 2021, opens with a simple sentence: "China is the world's largest developing country." China asserts throughout the policy document outlining the country's vision for global cooperation that it is based on the "principle of mutual

benefit" and declares that South-South cooperation, which promotes the sharing of expertise among countries in the Global South, is the focus of China's international cooperation in the 21st century.

Also, China calls on the developing world to take its future into its own hands. The US is understandably not amused by China's role on the global stage, because if a country of more than 1.4 billion people can become a high-income economy by following the Chinese development model and Chinese modernization, its impact on the world will be decisive. It will instill new confidence among developing countries that they no longer have to depend on the industry and supply chains controlled by the developed nations to further their economic development.

During the early years of England's most intense anti-absolutist campaign, Henry Herbert, earl of Pembroke (1538-1601), became famous for declaring that "A parliament can do anything, but it cannot make a man a woman or a woman a man." The US Congress' move to deprive China of its developing country status is an attempt to turn men into women. To put it politely, it is not up to the US to decide whether China is a developing country or not.

A Turkish proverb, "fear is helpless in the face of certainty!", makes it clear that fear will not prevent the inevitable from happening. Similarly, the frantic struggles of the US cannot prevent China's rise.

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GLOBAL VIEWS

RONNIE LINS

Building bloc

Increasing its representativeness would help BRICS assume a greater role in addressing the challenges of the new era

The term BRIC first appeared in 2001 in an article by economist Jim O'Neil. He defended the idea that Brazil, Russia, India and China would be the potential future economies. That's because these countries were experiencing accelerated economic growth. In addition, these countries have large populations, which could boost their economic development through increasing their purchasing power.

Over the years, this materialized, but in a heterogeneous way. Some of the countries had fantastic development, but others did not. The group is now known as the BRICS, with the incorporation of South Africa, where its next annual meeting will be held later this month.

The world is undergoing intense transformation, mainly due to new global challenges. Among them is intolerance in adopting peaceful measures for conflict resolution, the lack of objectivity in efforts to harmonize with the environment, and the significant technological impact on products, services and processes. In this context, there is a need for the BRICS and other similar institutions to articulate new governance guidelines and actions to adapt to the latest global modernization process.

The issue of global security has only one viable path: The implementation of peaceful actions that guarantee the integrity of the planet we live on. China has made an essential contribution to this matter by proposing the Global Security Initiative.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, world military spending increased by 3.7 percent in real terms in 2022, reaching a record \$2.24 trillion. Global spending grew 19 percent in the 2013-22 decade and has increased yearly since 2015. The arms race led by some important countries does



WANG YANGYANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

not contribute to world peace. Only through global pacifist policies can we build a better future for humanity. This future could be even better if after the amount

necessary for maintaining countries' sovereignty is deducted from this total, the surplus was invested to minimize major global social problems. Full adherence of

the BRICS to this line of thought would be of great importance, given their immense worldwide representation.

The issue of social inequality is

a dire global challenge that deserves the urgent attention of all countries. Global modernization is directly related to implementing better living conditions for the world's population. However, in recent decades, socioeconomic inequality has increased instead of decreased. Therefore, it will be essential for the future of humanity to improve the living conditions of all inhabitants of the planet, regardless of gender, color, religion or any other attribute.

The need to restore harmonious relations with nature is another major global challenge that will affect countries regardless of their level of development. In recent years, we have observed intense climate and environmental changes, which reflect mistaken policies regarding the preservation of the environment. With their great global representation, the BRICS countries could lead actions to prevent and control pollution, restore diversity and ensure the sustainability of ecosystems, and implement concrete steps to reach the agreed goals of peaking emissions and carbon neutrality. The positive results of these actions would represent a significant step toward a broad and profound transformation of the environmental and biodiversity crises.

Speculation about other countries joining the BRICS increases every year. In the current global context, some aspects corroborate this. In the year the institution was established, there was no doubt that the founding countries were the most correlated with the characteristics and objectives of the institution. However, other countries have developed over the years and have great potential to contribute politically and economically to the institution.

We all know that multilateralist policies will be the best path to global development. As the developing countries know that the

BRICS members are supporters of this line of thought, it is natural that they seek to join the institution. Countries such as Argentina, Ethiopia, Belarus, Bangladesh, among others, have expressed their intention to join the BRICS. Furthermore, Honduras has expressed its desire to engage with the New Development Bank of the BRICS, and Egypt has become a member.

The BRICS must seek alternatives to create mechanisms that minimize the dollar's influence on their commercial activities. Even considering it a complex mechanism, there is the possibility of a gradual implementation, which could be through an alternative currency, gold or a basket of currencies. This year, the institution's leaders must decide on this matter.

The speed of development and application of digital technologies will condition countries' greater or lesser development in the coming years. In the case of the BRICS, this becomes even more urgent because the countries are in the development phase. To cross the bridge, which will transform them into developed countries, adapting more quickly to technological transformations is necessary. Potentially shareable technologies must be related to increasing production quality, minimizing social inequalities and adapting the educational sector to a new digital world.

The BRICS will face significant global and internal challenges for discussion at this year's meeting. However, the political moment is auspicious, and this institution can strengthen its worldwide representativeness.

The author is the director of the China-Brazil Center for Research and Business. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

XU FEIBIAO

Byte by byte

BRICS digital economy cooperation should rise above obstacles to gain new ground

The 15th BRICS summit is scheduled to take place in South Africa on Aug 22 to 24, with the theme "BRICS and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development and Inclusive Multilateralism". The upcoming summit will push the global agenda to refocus on development issues and prompt the international community to return to genuine multilateralism. The summit will also officially begin the BRICS membership expansion process and create new opportunities for cooperation in the digital economy among the BRICS members.

The BRICS cooperation is characterized by dialogue on an equal footing, mutual benefits and win-win results, inclusiveness and mutual learning, and common development. The BRICS cooperation is not targeted at any third party, but rather, focuses on mutually beneficial cooperation in the economic area. The five BRICS members are all emerging and developing economies and non-Western major countries. They all want to reform the existing international order, which is neither fair nor reasonable, safeguard the interests of developing countries, and promote world peace and development.

Currently, the BRICS members have vastly different economic development levels, policy priorities and strategic focuses, but they also have convergence of interests and need each other in many areas. Therefore, they should find a way out of the stalemate of "multiple initiatives and implementation challenges". They should invest substantial resources in areas of common concern, such as infrastructure, technological research and development, and industrial transformation, to create sample projects for practical cooperation, based on which new breakthroughs could be made in elevating the overall cooperation level. The digital economy is a prime area in

which they can bolster their cooperation.

After more than 10 years of development, the BRICS members have already made significant strides in cooperation in the digital economy. For instance, China's e-commerce business AliExpress currently accounts for 25.8 percent of Russia's e-commerce market; Russia's largest e-commerce business Ozon is working closely with China Post to jointly build a China-Russia cross-border e-commerce logistics network.

Bilateral investment cooperation has been expanding as well. Since 2021, China and Russia have signed a memorandum of understanding on investment cooperation in the digital economy and pushed for the implementation of a number of projects including the Sino-Russian Research Center for the Digital Economy, among others. Furthermore, the BRICS members are going all out to advance cooperation in infrastructure construction, industry and supply chains, technological research and development, small- and medium-sized enterprises and digital finance.

Once an international cooperative mechanism takes shape, it will continuously push forward cooperation. To date, the cooperative mechanisms among the BRICS members have been established, with a good start for cooperation in all areas. This will produce an "accumulative effect" and a "spill-over effect" for the BRICS cooperation and create new room for cooperation.

The five BRICS members have fast-growing digital economies and huge market potential, providing ample room for further cooperation in the digital economy. The BRICS members collectively account for a considerable share of global GDP and the world's population. Together, the BRICS countries comprise more than 40 percent of the world's internet users and have abundant digital resources. In 2022 alone, China's data output



SONG XIAOYAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

and data storage capacity reached 8.1 zettabytes and 724.5 exabytes respectively, accounting for 10.5 percent and 14.4 percent respectively of the global total. Moreover, the membership expansion process has opened new room for the BRICS cooperation in the digital economy.

However, the BRICS cooperation in the digital economy is still in the primary stage. Currently, on average, the digital economy accounts for around 44 percent of the global GDP, with digital trade accounting for 64 percent and 13 percent respectively of the global goods trade and services trade. The BRICS members fall short of the global average in all these indicators.

Cooperation in the digital economy among developed nations such

as the United States and European countries has evolved from "first-generation" cooperation, such as in the internet and e-commerce, to "second-generation" cooperation, such as in artificial intelligence, big data, cloud computing, the internet of things, open source and digital security. In comparison, the BRICS cooperation in the digital economy has yet to rise above the "first-generation" policy cooperation. They even have disparities over e-commerce rules such as

paperless customs clearance, electronic billing, and mutual authentication of e-payments, among other things.

The different development strategies, governance concepts, policy focuses and opening-up levels in the digital economy of the various BRICS members have become a significant obstacle to their coopera-

tion. In particular, in recent years, India has been advocating "India first" and "data localization", in the face of the rising nationalist sentiments domestically. The nation even cracks down on Chinese digital companies based in India and Chinese digital products without any bottom lines, which wrecks havoc on the BRICS cooperation in the digital economy.

Compared with other areas for cooperation such as trade and investment, the digital economy is more sensitive as it concerns a nation's development and security interests. Over the past few years, with the rapid increase of China's comprehensive national strength, certain BRICS members have become more suspicious of China. Moreover, the US-led West has been going all out to court some of the BRICS members and consequently increased divisions within the bloc. In particular, to counter the growing influence of China, India has been noticeably stepping up efforts to court the US-led West, which is detrimental to the solidarity of the BRICS.

That said, the aforementioned obstacles and constraints are neither uncontrollable nor overwhelming. Compared with the G7, the BRICS is a relatively young and a new type of international organization. It's quite normal for such a new organization to have some growing pains. The BRICS members should face up to the difficulties, adopt corresponding measures to play to their strengths, and promote the steady, sound growth of the BRICS cooperation in the digital economy.

In the face of a decline in political mutual trust, the BRICS members should display greater political courage, resolve and wisdom, rise above challenges brought by populism and nationalism, seek common ground while shelving differences, and dilute and resolve differences through cooperation in the digital economy, so as to break the vicious cycle of "conflict — decline in mutual trust — deepened conflict".

The author is a researcher and the director of the Center for BRICS and G20 Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

LIFE



The many charms of an ancient instrument

Videographer, teacher and lifelong student promotes love of *guqin* music to the masses, **Cheng Yuezhu** reports.

Against a serene natural backdrop, like sunlight flickering on the surface of a lake, or a vast, flower-strewn meadow, and clad in traditional Chinese attire, *guqin* player Xu Chaoran aims to create an immersive experience for her audience.

Better known online as Mr Nanyi — like a female hero in martial arts novels, Xu adopted a male alias when she decided to start uploading videos of her playing the *guqin* just over seven years ago. The seven-stringed Chinese zither, which is China's oldest stringed instrument, has been around for about 3,000 years, and was inscribed in 2008 on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Xu is best known for putting it to modern use, playing her own adaptations and rearrangements of popular songs.

With an innate passion for music and art, Xu studied various arts as a youngster, from dancing and learning to play the *guzheng* (the Chinese plucked zither), to learning Western instruments like the guitar, piano and clarinet.

"As a child, I had an affinity for traditional Chinese music, and learning Chinese instruments came more naturally to me. After all, the five notes of the traditional pentatonic scale flow in my blood," she says.

Xu's experience of learning the *guzheng*, which she first took up at the age of 9, gave her a solid foundation for learning the *guqin*. The other instruments she learned to play also contributed to her musical journey, by giving her a better understanding of harmony and the balance between tension and release, for example.

Xu entered the Wuhan Conservatory of Music in Hubei province in 2009, to specialize in traditional Chinese music. As the conservatory encourages students to expand their learning, she chose to add the *guqin* to her repertoire, an instrument she had long considered both venerable and elegant.

After graduation, she continued to improve her playing while giving *guqin* lessons at her teacher's studio, and occasionally performing at commercial events before opening up a studio of her own.



Video blogger Xu Chaoran has been uploading videos where she dons traditional Chinese attire and plays the *guqin*. Many of her videos are filmed in natural surroundings, because she wishes to take her *guqin* on a journey around China. She is known for her adaptations of contemporary songs so as to draw more people into learning about the instrument. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"I feel that the *guqin* is something I'm willing to work on for a lifetime. To be able to master the instrument, teach it properly, and carry on its tradition takes a lot of effort, and comes with great responsibility. There's so much to be done," Xu says.

In addition to teaching, she

embarked on a new journey into the realm of social media. Some of her first videos later became trademarks, and her rearrangements of contemporary music, such as popular songs or TV series theme songs, have been published in two books.

"The reason I rearrange and adapt

these songs is because I believe that the *guqin* has strong, expressive power," Xu says. "It's not limited to playing traditional pieces. In fact, some of today's music can also be played on the *guqin*, showcasing the instrument's unique charm in the process."

Many of Xu's videos are filmed in

natural surroundings, which she says reflects her wish to take her *guqin* on a journey through the varied landscapes of China.

She uploads the videos to popularize the instrument, so that more people are able to appreciate its charms and also learn about it, which also helps deepen their understanding of traditional Chinese culture.

One top comment on one of her videos says: "The moment the first note is struck, there is a sensation that seems to reach the soul. The distant, ethereal sound of the *guqin* creates an instant resonance in me."

Xu believes that the mesmerizing sound of the *guqin* has the power to fill the heart with peace, and says that, contrary to the tranquil and solemn quality of her videos, she is actually outgoing and vivacious in real life.

"Every time I practice the *guqin*, I find sanctuary. When I close my eyes as I play, the deep resonance of a single note can give me the sensation of enlightenment, so that when I open my eyes again, everything seems more lucid," Xu says.

"Studying a particular piece also involves learning the history and culture it embodies. When I started to learn about the mindset and aesthetics of the *guqin* players of the past, I began to truly grasp the breadth and depth of traditional Chinese culture."

While she continues to teach and make videos, Xu feels that she needs to improve her own ability to strike a balance between tradition and innovation.

This includes honing her techniques, so that she is able to more faithfully interpret and present ancient music, as well as leveraging the strengths of the *guqin*, and preserving its integrity as she makes adaptations.

In 2021, Xu was taken on as a private student by Zhao Jiazhen, a professor at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and a national-level inheritor of the *guqin*.

"I feel happy that through my videos, I've been able to draw people into *guqin* music, and some have even started learning to play. This brings me immense joy," Xu says.

Contact the writer at chengyuezhu@chinadaily.com.cn

What's on

Profiling Xinjiang



It is not uncommon to find people posting about their journeys to different parts of the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region these days on social media platforms. A year-round destination for tourism and

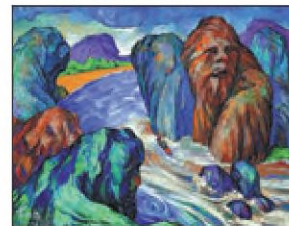
adventure, for many people, Xinjiang is a must-visit place. *Painting Xinjiang*, an ongoing exhibition at the Art Museum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, shines a spotlight on depictions of Xinjiang by different generations of 20th century Chinese artists. The exhibition categorizes the rediscovery of the region by modern artists into four periods, the first during the 1930s and '40s, when the western areas of the country became a wartime refuge for people from elsewhere. Artists were astonished by the history and heritage they found, as well as the dynamism of ethnic cultures, which inspired them to create new styles. This generation of artists laid a foundation for their successors to seek motivation in the history, culture and art of Xinjiang. Their findings are presented through a diverse array of forms, with the perspective of Xinjiang shifting from landscapes and cultural heritage, to individual

experience. The exhibition runs until Aug 20.

9:30 am-5:30 pm, closed on Mondays. 8 Huajiedi Nanjie, Chaoyang district, Beijing. 010-6477-1575.

Painterly life

Ding Tianque was part of the second generation of students to be trained at the China Academy of Art after it was founded in 1928. Together with peers like Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-ki, Ding followed in the footsteps of first-generation Chi-



nese artists living and working in Europe, who introduced them to a broader and deeper perspective of art, through the dramatic landscapes of the 20th century. *Painting Fragments*, a retrospective of Ding's life and work, examines the efforts of an artist and educator to live up to his dream of art, as well as the changes to the cultural scene in the second half of the 20th century. It is a celebration of the close relations between the students and the teachers of his time, as a result of which the cultural traditions, new aesthetics and passion for art were passed onto the next generation. This intimate link is not only presented in Ding's works, but also in his letters, diaries and other manuscripts, which are all on display at the Chinese Academy of Oil Painting until Aug 26. The show is not just the profile of one individual with a firm belief in art, but a presentation of the collective image of his time.

9 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 1704 Gaobeidian Cultural and Art New Street, Chaoyang district, Beijing.

Blue and white

The use of blue and white is not only reflected in the majesty of cobalt-blue *qinghua* porcelain, but also in the dynamism of daily life through pieces of hand-dyed cloth, like printed calico. Originating along the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in the 12th and 13th centuries, blue calico was once an essential part of everyday life. The techniques used to make it, as well as its rich patterns, reflected the booming economy, handicrafting and aesthetics of places like Nantong, Jiangsu province. It is this tradition that captured the heart of Wu Yuanxin, and inspired him to become an inheritor of the blue calico technique, and founder of a museum dedicated to the craft in his home in Nantong.



Now, Wu has placed his collection of vintage calico cloth and his own creative attempts to revive the tradition on display in an exhibition at the Chinese Traditional Culture Museum, *Transcendence*, which runs until Sept 10. 9 am-5 pm, closed on Mondays. 16 Hujing Donglu, Chaoyang district, Beijing. 010-8799-1766.

CHINA DAILY

LIFE

Ethnic harmonies

Musicians and singers, representing the Nu, Lisu, Miao, Zhuang and Dong people, among others, kick start the NCPA August Chorus Festival, **Chen Nan** reports.

Jiang Xiaochun's first musical instrument was a *dabiyi* that his father made for him. Growing up, Jiang, a musician, who belongs to the Nu ethnic group from the Nujiang Lisu autonomous prefecture, Yunnan province, earnestly learned and played the four-stringed, plucked instrument, which resembles a *pipa*, but is much smaller in size.

"The *dabiyi* is like a totem for the Nu ethnic group. We take it wherever we go, even hunting and farming. For example, when a man expresses his affection for a woman, he plays the *dabiyi* and sings rather than talking to her," says Jiang, 45.

"Because the Nu ethnic group has no written language, in the past, our ancestors used music to record our history and our daily lives. The *dabiyi* is a musical instrument that belongs to every family of the Nu ethnic group," he adds.

When he was invited to perform at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing on Aug 4 and 5, Jiang took his *dabiyi* and traveled around 3,000 kilometers to the capital by bus, train and airplane.

Along with his band, named Wood and Fire, Jiang performed six songs he adapted from folk music of the Nu ethnic group, including *Tiger and Otter*, *Toast Song of the Nu People* and *The Love Song of the Nu People*.

"It's definitely the peak of my music career. We had never performed at the NCPA, one of the top-level art institutions in the country, before. The four members of our band all have regular jobs and we rehearsed every night after work for the concerts," says Jiang, adding that his 6-year-old son also joined in the performances.

Wood and Fire, which was founded by Jiang in 2015, features four members, including Jiang's wife, Zhang Xiaohui, and was one of the ensembles that performed in the opening concerts of the NCPA August Chorus Festival.

Liu Xiaogeng, a veteran composer and the artistic director of the concerts, says he curated the programs from over 100 folk songs from Chinese ethnic groups, hoping to display the beauty and the diversity of Chinese folk music. People from nearly 10 ethnic groups from Southwest China, including Nu, Lisu, Miao, Zhuang and Dong, performed in the concerts.

"The songs were divided into four chapters: *Love Songs*, *Singing for Nature*, *Toast Songs* and *Singing for a Good Life*. The value of the songs goes beyond music itself. They need to be preserved and heard because they provide access to the origins of the cultural identity of those ethnic groups," says Liu, who was born and raised in Yunnan's Luquan Yi and Miao autonomous county. He graduated from Yunnan Arts University as a composer in 1981 and has traveled around the country collecting, researching and adapting ethnic



Clockwise from top: Two concerts featuring performers from nearly 10 ethnic groups from Southwest China were held on Aug 4 and 5, kicking off the annual NCPA August Chorus Festival; Over the Rainbow Miao Duoyueliang Youth Art Ensemble from Guizhou province performs at the concert; performers Jiang Xiaochun and his wife Zhang Xiaohui; singers from the Poya Song Book Choir display a piece of fabric bearing 81 pictographic characters while performing; and Wood and Fire, a band from the Nujiang Lisu autonomous prefecture, Yunnan province, at the concert. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

music into songs for choral singing. So far, he has collected over 6,000 folk songs from ethnic groups in Southwest China.

"Their songs conjure up images of mountains, rivers and forests,

which provide a great escape for people living in cities," adds Liu.

Wu Chenglong, a man from the Dong ethnic group from Qiandongnan Miao and Dong autonomous prefecture, Guizhou province, also

made his debut at the NCPA by performing as a member of the Huanggang Dong Ethnic Group Chorus. The chorus performed, among other songs, *Coming From Afar to Meet You*, *We Are Pledging to Marry Each*

Other and Beautiful Mountains.

The Huanggang Dong Ethnic Group Chorus, led by Wu, is known for performing in the Grand Song style, which involves multipart singing performed with-

out instrumental accompaniment or a conductor.

Liu says that when he visited Dong ethnic group villages, he was impressed by the group's Grand Song tradition, which has a large repertory based on children's songs, and songs about nature, and for families and lovers. He was particularly interested in the local singers' ability to mimic the sounds of animals. The Grand Song of the Dong ethnic group was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009.

"Our chorus has over 100 members, 42 of whom performed in the concerts at the NCPA," says Wu, who was listed as an intangible cultural heritage inheritor by the government of Guizhou in 2010. "We were very excited to sing our songs at the NCPA. We usually sing those songs spontaneously at home or in public places around our village."

Since 1999, Wu has been learning, performing and preserving music of the Dong ethnic group. With his *nintuqin*, a stringed musical instrument with a shape resembling a cow's leg and played with a bow in a manner similar to that of a fiddle, he has adapted ancient folk songs and also written some original ones.

The opening concerts also featured the Poya Song Book Choir, which is from Poya village, Funing county, Wenshan Zhuang and Miao autonomous prefecture in Southwest China's Yunnan. The choir, founded in 2012, is committed to singing songs from the *Poya Songbook*, which originated in Poya village and is a collection of Zhuang ethnic group folk songs recorded on a piece of hand-woven cloth bearing 81 pictographic characters. Each of the characters symbolizes a folk song of Zhuang ethnic group. In 2011, the *Poya Songbook* was added to the National Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

From Aug 4 to 20, the annual NCPA August Chorus Festival, themed "Sound and Harmony", is staging 13 choral concerts from all over the world. Highlights will include the award-winning Inner Mongolia Youth Choir, founded in 2008 and led by its conductor Yalungerile, which will perform songs from the Mongolian ethnic group in a concert on Tuesday, the China National Traditional Orchestra Chorus, which will draw a Chinese musical map by performing folk songs from different parts of the country, and Spanish vocal group, B Vocal.

The NCPA August Chorus Festival will close with a concert featuring the chorus of the China National Symphony Orchestra. Conducted by Wang Linlin, the concert will feature Chinese songs, including *Xinjiang Youth Dance*, *Rainbow After the Storm* and *Yellow River Cantata*.

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International youths gather in Beijing to build bridges through art

By CHENG YUEZHU
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The 9th edition of the Joy Dancing Beijing Culture and Art Exchange Week of International Youth opened in Beijing on Tuesday.

The opening ceremony saw the participation of children and teenagers, from both home and abroad, deliver performances featuring dance, songs, rap, djembe (a West African drum) and poetry recitals, showcasing regional cultural elements and expressing the themes of harmony and peace.

"All the performances in the opening gala were meticulously selected to showcase international perspectives, the characteristics of Beijing and the grandeur of China," chief director of the ceremony Chen Xini says.

"Many contemporary subjects, such as the Global Civilization Initiative, the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, biodiversity conservation, global intangible cultural heritage, rural vitalization and traditional Chinese culture, were showcased through artistic expression."

This year's event consisted of three major sections – the opening



Left: The 9th edition of the Joy Dancing Beijing Culture and Art Exchange Week of International Youth hosts its opening ceremony in Beijing on Tuesday. **Right:** Young participants display a scroll painting they completed together on the theme of world heritage sites. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

gala, an art carnival and an art education program, with the aim of providing young people, from both home and abroad, the opportunity to foster friendship, deepen their understanding of other cultures, as well as immerse themselves in the cultural atmosphere of Beijing.

Sixteen youth delegations, from countries including Brazil, Italy, Nigeria, Russia and Thailand, as well as more than 3,000 young people

from around China, participated in performances and cultural exchange activities.

A few delegations also attended events hosted at the embassies of Mali, Ghana, Chile, Armenia and Uzbekistan, among others.

The exchange week, which concluded Thursday, was overseen by the China Soong Ching Ling Science and Culture Center for Young People and the Beijing People's Association



for Friendship with Foreign Countries, and was co-hosted by Beijing Trade Association for Performances and the Charming Schools event committee.

"Under the theme of 'colorful Silk Road', we aim to foster mutual learning among civilizations through art exchanges, promote connections through dialogue, and create a new chapter in Belt and Road cooperation featuring extensive consulta-

tion, joint contribution, and shared benefits," says Wang Yanxia, vice-president of the Beijing People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries.

Guo Xinbao, director of the China Soong Ching Ling Science and Culture Center for Young People, says that the Joy Dancing Beijing program has been embracing the spirit of the ancient Silk Road since 2012, inviting young people from coun-

tries along the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to Beijing.

"This initiative has been planting the seeds of peaceful cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and benefit in the hearts of young participants, and has built a platform for cultural exchange and learning among young people, encouraging them to become important contributors to the co-construction of the Belt and Road," Guo says.

A team of students from Thailand staged their dance performance *Amazing Thailand* at the opening ceremony, and a member of the team, Nantanut Boonbusakorn, gave a speech as a representative of the international participants.

"I believe that every country possesses its unique charm, and I believe that each young person onstage here today can become a bridge between nations. Through cultural and artistic exchanges, we can further mutual understanding and integration," she says.

"Learning about, and understanding, the diverse cultures of the world, civilizations become more colorful through exchanges, and are enriched through mutual learning."

CULTURE

Pianist's music brims with the joys of spring

After years in the UK, Xiao Di is a big part of its Spring Festival, **Xing Yi** reports in London

After living in the United Kingdom for almost 20 years, pianist Xiao Di is fluent in Mandarin, Cantonese, and English — but she believes music is the best language for promoting understanding between people and cultures.

Since 2012, during each Spring Festival, Xiao holds a concert in the Elgar Concert Hall in Birmingham, known as the "Didi & Friends Chinese New Year Celebration".

The concert series involves musicians from different genres giving performances at an event that mixes Chinese culture with Western music, offering British audiences another way to celebrate the traditional Chinese festival.

"One of my aspirations is to be a cultural ambassador, using art to break down cultural barriers and bring people together, and it's a role I take very seriously," said Xiao, who was born in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, and who started learning piano at age 4.

She went on to train at China's top music institution, the Central Conservatory of Music, where she took her bachelor's and master's degrees.

Later, she finished a doctoral degree at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and became the first Chinese piano professor at the renowned British music institution.

But the start of the Spring Festival concert series was humble.

"In the beginning, it was only me and two other friends, who were invited by the China Institute of the University of Birmingham to give a small concert to celebrate the Lunar New Year," recalls Xiao. "We played classical chamber music, but the audience felt that it lacked Chinese elements for the Chinese festival."

During the following years, Xiao tried to introduce Chinese music

and other creative elements, such as Chinese opera and Chinese instruments, and she invited other musicians, both professional and amateur, to join in and showcase their talents.

This February, the concert featured 16 artists, including solo percussionist Wang Beibei, Chinese traditional dancing artist Zhou Hangyu, and Sichuan opera artist Zhao Shuai, who gave performances to a packed house of 600 people.

British musicians Max Gittings and Mike Skelton also contributed, playing the Chinese traditional instrument *hulusi*, or gourd flute, and the *sanzian*, a three-string lute.

"The Spring Festival concert has become an annual cultural highlight in the city," Xiao said, adding that Mike Whitby, a member of the House of Lords, and Li Lian, cultural minister counselor at China's Embassy in the UK, attended this year's concert.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, Xiao could only hold online concerts during the preceding two years. When the restrictions were lifted for this year's event, the tickets sold out in five minutes.

"I was so moved when I saw the hall was full of the audience again," said Xiao. "It motivated me to continue organizing the Spring Festival concert, and next year will be the 12th edition. It will be significant to the project because 12 years are a cycle in traditional Chinese philosophy."

Xiao arrived in the UK in 2005, studying under a full scholarship at Birmingham Conservatoire under Mark Racz. After completing her studies, she was selected for the European Concert Halls Organisation's Rising Star program for the 2008-09 season, during which she toured Europe and gave recitals in prestigious venues in the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, and Austria.

Among all the performances she



Xiao Di performs during a solo concert at Birmingham Town Hall in 2019, when she released her *Femmes de Legende* album that celebrates work by female composers and their inspirations. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

has given over the years, Xiao still vividly remembers playing in a small church in the West Midlands during her first winter in the UK, where,

feeling homesick, she played a traditional tune from her hometown as an encore — a lullaby that her mother used to hum to her at bedtime.

When the recital finished, an elderly English gentleman approached her with tears in his eyes, telling Xiao he had recently lost his mother and thanking her for the encore, which he said gave him much comfort.

"I have played in many prestigious venues since then, but that particular connection remains one of my fondest memories," Xiao said, noting that, since then, she often combines both Chinese and Western repertoire in the programming of her concerts.

Xiao often travels back to China, giving master classes, lectures, and concerts. But the exchanges were interrupted by the pandemic until May, when Xiao released a new album and held a solo concert tour in a dozen Chinese cities, including Beijing, Guangzhou, and Nanjing.

The new album, *To Spring*, includes pieces that pay tribute to the season by famous composers,

including Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *Song of the Lark*, and Felix Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*, and also a creation by Xiao from spring last year, which, in hindsight, was effectively the last period of the pandemic.

"During the lockdown, a folk song from my hometown came to my mind. It was a song taught by a music teacher when I was in primary school. Amid this tough time, the beautiful melody was both new and familiar, adding bittersweet flavors as I missed China so much," Xiao said.

She combined the ballad with a new harmony on the piano, creating the nostalgic solo *Wistful Spring*.

"Spring is a symbol of hope, love, and rebirth," she said. "Just as British poet Percy Shelley has said: If winter comes, can spring be far behind?"

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Xiao Di and other performers gather for a group photo at this year's Didi & Friends Chinese New Year Celebration in Birmingham.

Maestro brings ancient Chinese sounds to London

By XING YI in London

Every second month, during the afternoon of its second Saturday, musician Cheng Yu dresses in traditional Chinese attire and takes a *guqin* and *pipa* to a special gathering she started in London 20 years ago.

Cheng is a *pipa* and *guqin* virtuoso who trained at Xi'an Conservatory of Music in the 1980s before playing the *pipa* at the China National Traditional Orchestra. She later studied for her master's and doctoral degrees in ethnomusicology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, or SOAS, in the 1990s.

She has been active ever since in educating people and performing Chinese music in the United Kingdom.

To Cheng, sharing and promoting Chinese traditional instruments and music to Westerners

brings her the utmost joy and fulfillment.

"This is something that I enjoy doing," Cheng said. "It enables them to appreciate a culture that is very unique and different from theirs."

The gathering Cheng initiated, called *yaji* in Chinese, is a tradition among the Chinese literati that goes back more than 1,000 years, to when ancient scholars and artists first got together to drink tea, write poems, appreciate art, and enjoy music.

The bi-monthly *yaji* in London is now organized by the London Youlan Qin Society and focuses on traditional Chinese music, with attendees playing various pieces of music on Chinese instruments, including the *guqin*, *pipa*, and flute, and with musicians sharing their understanding of the music.

Elegant gatherings

The *guqin*, or *qin*, a seven-stringed Chinese zither, is one of China's oldest instruments, with a history dating back some 3,000 years. In 2003, UNESCO proclaimed China's ancient *guqin* music a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.

Over the years, the *yaji* gatherings

in London have drawn professional musicians, scholars, office workers, and amateur appreciators of Chinese culture, among others, with attendees coming from all over the United Kingdom, and sometimes from other countries in Europe.

"In 2003, I established the London Youlan Qin Society and invited a *guqin* master, Gong Yi from Shanghai, to teach classes and give concerts in London, and since then, we have been holding *yaji* on various themes. It is like an informal salon in the West that provides a forum for *guqin* and Chinese music lovers to perform, and discuss music as well as its associated philosophical and cultural aspects," Cheng said.

In early July, the society marked its 20th anniversary with the 124th *yaji* gathering in the Djam Lecture Theatre at SOAS.

Charlie Thomas, who traveled from Birmingham to London for the gathering as he had five times before, said: "It's not just Chinese people who come. I met a German lady who also liked *guqin* and I started talking with her. People here are so welcoming, and they have different backgrounds but share similar interests in *guqin*."

Thomas has studied *guqin* with Cheng for about a year.

"Compared with violin, the sound of *guqin* is very meditative and more calming," he said, adding that playing the *guqin* helped him calm down and solved a sleeping problem he had.

Guqin, go, calligraphy, and painting were regarded in ancient China as the four arts that a person must study to become a learned scholar, because they cultivate one's mind and disposition in different aspects.

Musical roots

Born into a musical family in Beijing, Cheng first studied the *pipa*, the Chinese plucked lute, with her father at age 7, and she then got to study with *guqin* master Li Xiangting when she was at the Xi'an Conservatory of Music.

"My father is a *pipa* master, and I still remember receiving the *pipa* on my 7th birthday as a gift," said Cheng. "My grandfather plays *guqin*, so I was interested in learning both."

In 1987, Cheng graduated with distinction in *pipa* and *guqin* performance before playing in the China National Traditional Orchestra in Beijing. She moved to London in

1990 and studied ethnomusicology at SOAS, and later taught both the *guqin* and *pipa* at the school.

In the early 2000s, Cheng conducted research to recreate the five-string *pipa*, which was lost in the 8th century in China, with the current *pipa* only having four strings. The work won her major awards from Women in Music, the Arts Council of England, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Throughout the years, Cheng has always been active in performing at various concerts and on special occasions and in collaborating with musicians from different genres and countries. She also co-founded UK Chinese Ensemble, which performs throughout the UK and Europe, in occasions such as the Chinese Spring Festival when tens of thousands of people gather at Trafalgar Square to watch the annual grand show.

Blending genres

Cheng's most recent collaboration was with Manchester's Psappha Ensemble in its 'Composing for ...' project early this year, during which six young composers worked with Cheng to create new compositions

for the *pipa*. The six pieces were released on July 28.

"I felt very proud that I was the only female musician in this year's project, and the *pipa* is the only non-Western instrument. It's a challenging and exciting experience for me," Cheng said.

"During workshops, I explained the features of *pipa*, and showed the composers how it is played, and worked with them to create music that combines elements of contemporary and classical, Chinese and Western."

Currently, Cheng has been busy preparing for the 2023 London International Chinese Music Festival, which is scheduled to take place from Aug 20 to Aug 27 and that will combine a series of concerts, academic exchanges, and a summer school on traditional Chinese musical instruments.

"Three decades flew by since I first came to London, and I have taught hundreds of students — a lot of them were foreigners who show great appreciation toward Chinese civilization," Cheng said.

"I enjoy what I am doing. I simply feel the joy when watching them progress in their skills and understanding of Chinese music."



From left: Pipa and *guqin* virtuoso Cheng Yu; Cheng and the Silk Breeze ensemble perform her composition *Dream Butterfly* on a five-stringed *pipa* at East London's Rich Mix Theatre in August 2021; UK Chinese Ensemble members pose in front of London's Tower Bridge after a performance in 2022. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

