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CHINA DAILY

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Xi, Maldivian leader upgrade relations

Muizzu hailed as 'old friend' on his first state visit to China

By XU WEI
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President Xi Jinping and Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu announced the elevation of bilateral ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership on Wednesday, with both nations pledging further cooperation on the building of the Belt and Road, the digital economy and green development.

Xi rolled out the red carpet for Muizzu at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing with a welcoming ceremony that included a review of a guard of honor and a 21-gun salute. The Maldivian president is on a five-day state visit to China that started on Monday.

The two leaders witnessed the signing of an action plan for developing the comprehensive strategic partnership, as well as agreements ranging from the blue, or ocean, economy to infrastructure.

Inside

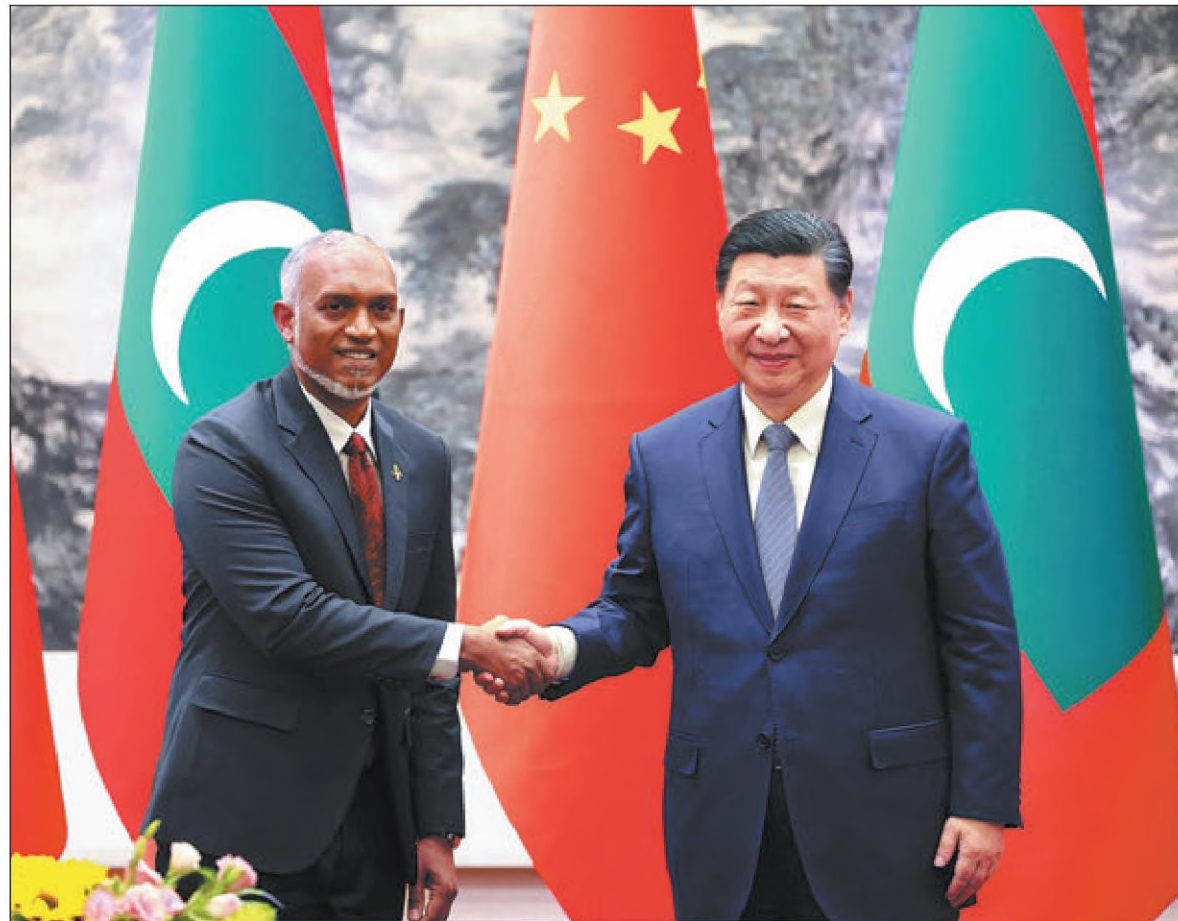
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Xi called his Maldivian counterpart "old friend" at the start of their talks, saying the fact that Muizzu is the first foreign leader he has hosted this year and that Muizzu chose China as the destination of his first state visit overseas since taking office, speaks volumes about the emphasis both nations place on the relationship.

"China-Maldives relations are presented with a historic opportunity to build on past achievements and forge ahead toward the future under the new circumstances," he said.

Xi underscored that China respects and supports the Maldives in exploring a development path that suits its national conditions, and firmly supports the Indian Ocean nation in safeguarding its national sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national dignity.

China will welcome the arrival of more students from the Maldives, and support the increase in the number of direct flights between the two nations, Xi told his guest.



President Xi Jinping shakes hands with visiting president of the Republic of Maldives Mohamed Muizzu in Beijing on Wednesday. The two heads of state announced the elevation of bilateral ties to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

Muizzu reaffirmed the Maldives' adherence to the one-China policy, saying that his country looks forward to further expanding new channels of bilateral cooperation and adding new dimensions to bilateral relations.

He said that the Maldives welcomes the arrival of more Chinese tourists, as China had been the nation's largest source of inbound tourism before COVID-19.

Muizzu arrived in Fujian province, the first stop of his China visit, on Monday, where he toured the Xiamen Free Trade Zone, the provincial

museum and a fishery company.

He told a business gathering in Fujian that he has no doubt that "China will be our closest partner in development", as he explained the Maldives' national target to double its GDP from the current \$6 billion to \$12 billion by 2028, according to a statement released by his office.

Liu Zongyi, director of the Center for South Asia Studies at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, said that Muizzu has adopted a more balanced foreign policy, and that support from China

is crucial for the nation's recovery from COVID-19.

"The Chinese market is crucial both for the tourism and fisheries sector of the Maldives, the two largest pillars of its economy, and Muizzu knows that he can rely on China for his economic agenda," he said.

Lu Yang, a research fellow at the Institute of the Belt and Road Initiative at Tsinghua University, said the elevation of ties between China and the Maldives was built on outcomes from years of pragmatic cooperation.

She explained that the landmark projects built by China, such as the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge and an ophthalmology center built through bilateral cooperation, have garnered public support for stronger bilateral ties in the nation.

"The visit will undoubtedly elevate bilateral relations and pragmatic cooperation to a new level, and both countries have vast cooperation opportunities in the fields of the economy and trade, tourism, environmental protection and new energy," she said.

China, US restart key defense policy dialogues

By JIANG CHENGLONG
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China is willing to develop healthy and stable military-to-military relations with the United States on the basis of equality and respect, and jointly implement the military-related consensus reached by the two heads of state during their meeting in San Francisco in November, according to a statement released by the Ministry of National Defense on Wednesday.

The statement was released after the 17th defense policy coordination talks between China and the US, which were held in Washington earlier this week.

This was the first such event since then US House speaker Nancy Pelosi visited China's Taiwan region in 2022, and it comes as China and the US are resuming military communication at various levels.

The two-day talks, which concluded on Tuesday, were co-chaired by an official from the Central Military Commission's International Cooperation Office and US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Chase.

The US should acknowledge China's concerns and do more to promote the development of bilateral military ties, said the ministry's statement.

China also reiterated its position on the Taiwan question and the South China Sea issue.

The country will never compromise on the Taiwan question and called on the US side to abide by the one-China principle, implement its relevant commitments, stop arming Taiwan and oppose "Taiwan independence", the statement said.

China also urged the US to reduce its military deployment and provocative actions in the South China Sea and stop providing support to certain countries that have infringed on China's territorial integrity and caused provocations.

The US should fully recognize the root causes of maritime and air security risks, strictly restrain its front-line troops and stop hyping up problems, the ministry said.

China has also made clear its solemn position and major concerns on issues concerning China's core interests and international hot spot issues, it added.

A readout from the US Department of Defense said that the two sides discussed US-China defense relations, and the US side highlighted the importance of maintaining open lines of military communication in order to prevent competition from veering into conflict.

See *Defense*, page 3

Davos meeting an essential opportunity for rebuilding trust

In 2024, the world seeks stability amid uncertainty. According to United Nations predictions, global economic growth will slow to 2.4 percent this year, which would be the lowest global economic growth rate since 2020.

The world has emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, but concerns remain about what and when the next one will be. Meanwhile, climate change is posing an increasingly prominent threat to lives and property in the form of record tem-

WORLD WATCH

By Liming Chen

peratures and extreme weather events, and new technologies call for an urgent improvement of the technology governance system. The ongoing situation in the Middle East and the protracted Ukraine crisis, among other humanitarian crises, show a fragmenting world.

How we respond to these challenges will largely determine the fate of humanity. Fostering mutual trust has never been more important.

How China acts now can help secure stability and progress in the years to come. With China's economic growth in the third quarter being faster than expected, the International Monetary Fund has raised its forecast for China's economic growth in 2024.

China-US relations show signs of warmth, and China is expected to

continue to be the recovery driver for emerging economies. The government has introduced policies to promote the development of the private economy and encourage foreign investment, but the key lies in how to implement them to benefit the national economy and people's livelihood.

For over 50 years, the World Economic Forum has gathered stakeholders to provide platforms for fair and equal dialogue. Convening under the theme of "Rebuilding

trust", the 54th Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum, which will be held from Jan 15 to 19 in Davos, Switzerland, is organized around four main areas: achieving security and cooperation in a fractured world, creating growth and jobs for a new era, using artificial intelligence as a driving force for the economy and society, and providing a long-term strategy for climate, nature and energy.

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Tense times



Soldiers patrol the streets of Quito, the capital of Ecuador, after the nation declared a state of emergency on Tuesday. At least 10 people have been killed in a series of attacks in what President Daniel Noboa called an "internal armed conflict". DOLORES OCHOA / AP See story, page 6

INNOVATION OPENS NEW DOORS FOR NATION'S EXPORTS

Cutting-edge technologies, sustainable solutions move to forefront over conventional goods

By ZHONG NAN and WANG KEJU

Early last month, work began on closing the hull of an offshore wind turbine installation vessel at a shipyard owned by a company in Yantai, Shandong province.

Yantai CIMC Raffles Ocean Technology Group has seen a notable increase in orders for this type of vessel since last year, with six of them currently under construction, accounting for one-third of its total orders.

In-depth

Wei Chuntao, director of the company's supply chain management center, said: "These vessels, which can each lift 3,000 metric tons, are being built for a Dutch shipowner. They are high-end ships and cost much more than bulk ships and small and medium-sized container vessels."

The technical specifications for these vessels, such as lifting

capacity and operational water depth, have been upgraded to meet clients' demands, Wei added.

Chen Bin, deputy director of the expert committee at the China Machinery Industry Federation, which is based in Beijing, said that Chinese products have benefited from continued improvements in technological capabilities and the advancement of industrial transformation and upgrading.

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Trade: Emerging market trends identified



A container ship waits to leave Lianyungang, Jiangsu province, for South Africa in May. WANG CHUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

From page 1

In particular, technology-intensive green products and those with long industrial chains, such as electronics, liquefied natural gas carriers and construction machinery, will drive the nation's exports this year, Chen added.

For example, there has been a significant increase in global demand for offshore wind installation vessels, with Chinese shipyards securing nearly 90 percent of the resulting manufacturing orders. As of October, 37 orders had been placed worldwide for such vessels, with Chinese shipyards responsible for building 33 of them, data from the China Association of the National Shipbuilding Industry show.

Ming Ming, chief economist at CITIC Securities, said that even though the current global economic landscape is characterized by persistently low levels of exports, consumption and investment demand among major economies, China's export sector has capitalized on its ability to adapt and diversify its product offerings.

Chinese manufacturers have demonstrated agility in identifying emerging market trends and adjusting their production to match them, Ming said.

Peng Bo, a researcher specializing in foreign trade at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation in Beijing, said: "It is crucial to recognize the emerging opportunities. China's foreign trade is undergoing a transition from rapid growth to focus on high-quality expansion."

Highlighting the ongoing optimization of the nation's foreign trade structure, the gradual reinforcement of new trade momentum, and the effective implementation of stable foreign trade policies, Peng said technology-intensive green products have emerged as a vital growth driver for China's exports.

At the annual Central Economic

Work Conference in Beijing last month, Chinese leaders stressed that among the top priorities for this year, efforts should be made to foster new drivers of foreign trade, consolidate the overall performance of foreign trade and foreign capital, and expand intermediate goods trade, services trade, digital trade and cross-border e-commerce exports.

Gao Lingyun, a researcher at the Institute of World Economics and Politics, which is part of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said traditional exports such as clothing and furniture are being replaced increasingly by high-tech innovations in fields such as new energy and advanced manufacturing.

This shift marks a significant transformation in the export landscape, where cutting-edge technologies and sustainable solutions are moving to the forefront over conventional goods, Gao added.

The strong export performance of the "new three" — electric vehicles, lithium batteries, and solar cells — has maintained double-digit growth for 14 consecutive quarters, with a year-on-year rise of 41.7 percent to 798.99 billion yuan (\$111.82 billion) in the first three quarters of last year, data from the General Administration of Customs, or GAC, show. These exports accounted for 4.5 percent of the nation's total.

With positive factors continuing to be seen in the fourth quarter, China's foreign trade value reached 3.7 trillion yuan in November, a rise of 1.2 percent year-on-year.

Shu Jueting, spokeswoman for the Ministry of Commerce, said, "A stable and improved foreign trade structure relies on a steady increase in volume," adding that external demand has also shown signs of recovery in recent months.

For instance, China's exports to the United States grew by 9.6 percent year-on-year in November, ending a 14-month decline, the ministry said.

Shu said there is a clear recovery



China's foreign trade is undergoing a transition from rapid growth to focus on high-quality expansion."

Peng Bo, researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation

momentum in demand for electronics products, including smartphones and home appliances.

Seeking new paths

Zhang Liqun, a researcher at the Development Research Center of the State Council, said that in confronting fierce competition abroad, more Chinese companies are venturing into the uncharted territory of innovation, with their role as primary innovators becoming increasingly prominent.

This emerging trend is exemplified by Suzhou Junion Intelligent Technology Co, a robotic products manufacturer based in Jiangsu province. The company has increasingly focused on technological innovation and expansion in markets overseas, particularly targeting the US and Europe in recent years.

Ge Jianhua, the company's president, said: "Solar power is currently an industry with the biggest

demand for industrial robots. In response to customer needs, we aim to develop comprehensive 'unmanned' products, achieving 'robot replacement' in all scenarios."

To offer companies more export options and minimize risks, the State Council, China's Cabinet, announced a series of measures early last month to accelerate integrated development of domestic and foreign trade. The aim is to simplify regulations and remove obstacles for businesses to access domestic and foreign markets.

The government will ease the alignment and integration of trade regulations between domestic market-oriented companies and export-oriented businesses, promote the coordination of domestic and international trade standards, inspection and certification, as well as regulatory systems, to continuously meet international standards.

Yantai Tiezongbao Steel Processing Co, another maritime equipment manufacturer based in Yantai, found that its original growth model focused on domestic trade no longer met its needs. As a result, it is seeking processing and trading orders in overseas markets.

Qu Xiaohu, the company's vice-president, said, "Even though we have exported a few components for offshore drilling platforms and specialized vessels in recent years, we found that it wasn't easy when we tried to independently engage in foreign trade."

The company decided to adopt a processing and trading approach. This involved importing steel alloy plates and transforming them into versatile guidance structures for use on oil pipelines and maritime equipment. These finished products are then exported to energy companies based in Qatar, France and Norway.

Recovery expected

Customs data show that China's foreign trade amounted to 37.96 trillion yuan from January to November, consistent with the corresponding period for the previous year.

Zhong Zhengsheng, chief economist at Ping An Securities, said the economic resilience of the US and Europe last year was primarily driv-

en by a recovery in the service sector, while manufacturing and commodity demand remained lackluster. This had a dampening effect on China's export performance.

There is hope for the synchronization and improvement of the manufacturing cycles in China, the US, and globally next year, Zhong said, adding that thanks to the recovery in global manufacturing and commodity trade, the general direction for China's export recovery and growth appears more certain.

"While there may be some pressure due to adjustments in the global industrial supply chain, which could affect China's export regions and their products' market occupancy abroad, the overall impact on the country's total volume of exports should not be overly concerning," he said. "We anticipate that in 2024, China's exports will experience a modest recovery, with export growth expected to reach up to 4 percent on a yearly basis."

Liu Xiangdong, a researcher at the China Center for International Economic Exchanges, which is based in Beijing, stressed the importance of diversifying export markets to reduce dependence on any single market and mitigate the effects of sluggish external demand. China should actively explore emerging markets and regions with growing consumption power, Liu said.

By expanding market access and promoting trade cooperation with these economies, Chinese exporters can tap new opportunities brought by the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the Belt and Road Initiative, the nation's pilot free trade zones, and the annual China International Import Expo to offset the decline in traditional markets, Liu added.

The use of digital technologies and e-commerce platforms is likely to help Chinese exporters adapt to changing market situations to expand their presence worldwide. This approach also opens up new avenues for accessing international markets and overcoming logistical challenges, Liu said.

To create effective drivers for China's foreign trade, the Ministry of Commerce said last month it would help the nation's exporters establish overseas warehouses for cross-border e-commerce, offer tailored training on new foreign trade formats to interested businesses, and encourage innovations in cross-border e-commerce.

China's imports and exports via

cross-border e-commerce stood at 1.7 trillion yuan in the first three quarters of last year, up by 14.4 percent year-on-year, the ministry said.

Xu Hongcai, deputy director of the China Association of Policy Science's economic policy committee, said the increasing importance of emerging economies in bolstering China's exports is undeniable. However, there is still a lack of supporting services for businesses venturing into these markets.

"Expanding the scope of export credit insurance is critical, as it enables the expansion of credit assistance for companies engaged in exports to emerging markets," Xu said, adding that it is equally essential to encourage financial institutions to play a better role in advancing cross-border services, and facilitating investment and financing. This is particularly vital in sectors such as cross-border e-commerce and market procurement, where dedicated efforts should be made.

Apart from encouraging domestic companies to take part in international exhibitions and trade events, the government should provide comprehensive information services for exporters. This includes offering legal and regulatory information on areas such as land, environmental protection, and wages in overseas markets, Xu added.

In late October, the GAC introduced 16 reform measures to improve the quality of processing trade and provide stronger policy support for the industry's gradual evolution. Processing trade involves importing raw materials or components and exporting them as finished products after they are processed or assembled on the Chinese mainland.

Huang Lingli, deputy director of the GAC's commodity inspection department, said the policies are aimed at encouraging imports of key commodities such as crude oil, coal, natural gas, iron ore, copper concentrate, and grains.

The manufacturing facilities are located in central, western, and northeastern areas of China, and the initiative is designed to boost local processing trade activities to stabilize the supply and industrial chains of strategic commodities, Huang said.

Last month, Tang Wenhong, assistant minister of commerce, said at an economic forum held in Beijing by the China Center for International Economic Exchanges that for its next step, the government will introduce a number of innovative and comprehensive measures in areas such as trade, investment, finance, and other sectors to further advance its opening-up process.

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Left: Wind power devices for export are produced at a factory in Binzhou, Shandong province. CHU BAORUI / FOR CHINA DAILY Center: Wind turbines await shipment overseas at Penglai Port in Yantai, Shandong. TANG KE / FOR CHINA DAILY Right: Workers produce lithium batteries at a factory in Changzhou, Jiangsu. LI BO / XINHUA

TOP NEWS

China and Finland agree to enhance cooperation

By MO JINGXI
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China and Finland agreed on Wednesday to bolster their mutually beneficial cooperation and enhance communication on international and regional affairs amid global challenges, as President Xi Jinping met with Finnish President Sauli Niinisto via video link.

Xi praised Finland's continuity in maintaining a friendly China policy, saying that President Niinisto, in particular, has been committed to promoting pragmatic cooperation and friendly exchanges.

In 1950, Finland was one of the first Western countries to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.

During Xi's state visit to the northern European nation in 2017, the two sides decided to establish a future-oriented new-type cooperative partnership, which is unique in China's foreign relations.

Xi said that the two countries have constantly deepened cooperation in recent years in areas such as the forest industry, agricultural and food products and winter sports, bringing concrete benefits to the two peoples.

China has become Finland's third-largest trading partner and its fourth-largest destination for overseas investment, as well as its largest trading partner in Asia for 20 consecutive years.

As China advances its modernization drive, Xi said that the nation is willing to share development opportunities with Finland, strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation and deepen their partnership.

Xi expressed China's willingness to work with Finland and other European countries to maintain and develop China-European Union relations based on a strategic vision

and long-term perspective.

Niinisto, who is due to complete his second six-year term as Finnish president later this month, paid state visits to China in 2013 and 2019. He told Xi on Wednesday that these two visits remain fresh in his memory and he was glad to have witnessed the positive results achieved in bilateral cooperation in all fields.

The Finnish president's office said in a statement that the leaders also had a thorough discussion on the global geopolitical situation and the need to combat climate change and cooperation in this field.

Nation willing to promote Sino-US ties

Xi notes in letter to Iowa friend that future growth needs to rely 'more on the two peoples'

By ZHANG YUNBI
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President Xi Jinping said China is willing to work with the United States to promote the steady, sound and sustained development of China-US relations, and to seek more benefits for the two peoples and provide more public goods for the international community.

Xi made the comment in a reply letter on Jan 4 to one of his longtime friends in the US state of Iowa, Sarah Lande. She is former executive director of Iowa Sister States, a non-profit organization that builds global cultural, economic and educational partnerships.

In 1985, Lande received Xi, who was then secretary of the Communist Party of China Zhengding county committee in Hebei province, when he visited the small Iowa city of Muscatine.

During Xi's visit to the US in 2012 as China's vice-president, he went to Lande's home again to meet with those he has affectionately referred to as his "old friends" in Iowa.

In May, 2022, Xi sent a reply after Lande wrote to him and enclosed a copy of her memoir, "Old Friends": The Xi Jinping-Iowa Story, as a gift.

Recently, Lande wrote another letter to Xi, saying that the US and China, as major countries, should work together to address issues including climate change, food security, narcotics and regional conflicts, for the benefit of human society.

In his reply, Xi emphasized that China and the US are the world's largest developing and developed countries, respectively, and the future of the planet "needs the stability and improvement of China-US relations".

Beijing is willing to work with Washington to jointly build a world of lasting peace, universal security, common prosperity, openness and inclusiveness, as well as cleanliness and beauty, he said.

This year marks the 45th anniversary of the establishment of Sino-US diplomatic ties. On the first day of the

new year, Xi and US President Joe Biden exchanged congratulatory letters to celebrate the anniversary.

In his reply to Lande, Xi noted that the relationship, after weathering winds and rain, is bearing the fruits of cooperation, benefiting the two countries as well as the world.

He emphasized that the achievements made in the relations are first and foremost attributable to the joint efforts of the two peoples, and the ties' future growth "needs to rely even more on the two peoples".

In November, the Chinese and US heads of state met in San Francisco, and the two sides achieved a series of outcomes.

During Xi's visit to the US in November, Lande attended a well-coming banquet for the Chinese president that was jointly organized by US friendship groups, and she exchanged pleasantries with Xi.

In her letter to Xi, she said the president's speech at the banquet was well received and inspiring.

Noting the plan unveiled by Xi under which a total of 50,000 young people from the US will be invited for study and exchanges in China over the next five years, she said the program is exciting and she hopes that Muscatine High School will be part of the program.

In his reply, Xi said the future of China-US relations lies with youths, and he welcomed the students from Muscatine to participate in the exchange program.

He quoted a Chinese saying, "Read 10,000 books and travel 10,000 miles", which highlights the equal significance of theory and practice.

He said that he announced the exchange program in the hope that more young people from the US will visit China, observe the country with their own eyes, listen to China with their own ears, and measure China with their own feet.

He added that he hopes youths in the US can experience the real, multidimensional and comprehensive China, and "build more bridges of mutual understanding and affection between the two peoples".

Defense: Mechanism coordinates exchanges

From page 1

This was the first meeting under the mechanism of China-US defense policy coordination talks since Pelosi's provocative visit to China's Taiwan region, which triggered a series of Chinese countermeasures, including the cancellations of the defense policy coordination talks, the China-US Military Maritime Consultative Agreement meetings and telephone conversations between theater commanders.

At November's historic summit between President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden in San Francisco, they agreed to, on the basis of equality and respect, resume high-level military-to-military communication, including the three canceled mechanisms.

After the San Francisco summit, General Liu Zhenli, chief of staff of the Central Military Commission's Joint Staff Department, talked with General Charles Brown, Jr., chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, via video link in late December.

The US Department of Defense said in the readout that it will continue to engage in active discussions with Chinese counterparts about future engagements between defense and military officials at multiple levels.

The defense policy coordination talks were established in 2005. The most recent dialogue under the mechanism was held in 2021, according to the department.

Hu Bo, director of Peking University's Center for Maritime Strategy Studies, said the defense policy coordination talks serve as a crucial platform for China and the US to exchange views on military relations and policies.

Its primary function is to implement the important consensus reached by the leaders of both countries and defense officials, Hu said, noting that it involves agenda coordination at the working level for bilateral communication and dialogue.

He said that the defense policy coordination talks have been the "most active" dialogue mechanism between the two militaries in the past, with meetings held annually. "All military exchanges between the two sides are communicated and coordinated through this mechanism," he added.

An international relations researcher with a military academy, who asked to remain anonymous, said that the defense policy coordination talks are very important for the two countries to know about their concerns and enhance mutual trust.

Sports envoys



Young players from China and the United States pose for a photo after a match on Tuesday that was part of a table tennis exchange event at the International Table Tennis Federation Museum in Shanghai. ZHANG HENGWEI / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

Country's efforts will help unite ASEAN and world

By XU WEIWEI in Hong Kong
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As the global economic power shifts from the West to the East, the unique Chinese culture and China's efforts for a shared future for mankind, as promoted by President Xi Jinping, can help unite the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the whole world, said Malaysian political analyst Chin Yew Sin.

"President Xi's concept of building a community with a shared future for mankind, for instance, is resonant with the ancient concept of 'bringing peace to all states', which originated in *The Book of History*," said Chin, an adviser for the Asia-Pacific region at the Global One Belt One Road Association, in a recent interview with China Daily.

It has been more than 10 years since Xi proposed the shared future concept in 2013, the same year he put forward the Belt and Road Initiative proposal. It has reflected in China's foreign policy, incorporated in and carried out through the BRI by assisting many developing countries to build physical and digital infrastructures to enhance their economic growth in a much shorter time, he said.

"Eventually, this concept will promote 'universal brotherhood', 'global unity' and world peace for all," said Chin.

Xi's notion of peace and development as well as coexistence for mutual benefits is vital in resolving the current conflicts in the world, he said, adding that many conflicts can be resolved or avoided by adhering to this concept. "China is well poised to become a peacemaker in the world."

China has a long civilization as evidenced by new archaeological discoveries at Liangzhu and Erlitou sites, which were mentioned by Xi in his recent New Year message, he noted.

China is not only a state by legal definition, but also a civilization by itself, said the analyst of Chinese descent. China has about 5,000 years of historical records and is the only ancient civilization that still exists with uninterrupted continuity for 5,000 years. "Harmony in diversity, and not unity in disharmony, for instance, comes from the philosophy of Confucius."

Also, the Chinese culture always believes in a win-win outcome, which indicates that there is adequate space for everyone to develop, he said.

The essence of Chinese culture teaches the doctrine of "the golden mean" — or the most desirable outcome between two sides — which is very much different from the Western culture of "dominance", said Chin, who is also a successful businessman.

However, in the minds of some Western leaders, there is no such thing as a win-win situation, he said. There is no such thing as a compromise for them, as they think one party will have to lose, Chin added.

The analyst pointed out that, in the 248 years since the US achieved independence in 1776, there have been less than 15 years where the US has not been at war with other nations.

Some countries "can't survive economically without starting wars or conflicts with other nations," he said.

"The reason is that (when) there is a war, oil prices and agricultural production will go up, and weap-

ons can be sold better. This is known as the War Economy."

Chin noted that the BRI shows the difference between the two powers. "China constructs, US destructs," he said.

He said that countries such as ASEAN members cannot depend on the US dollar as the country can weaponize the currency and those who rely on it will become victims.

ASEAN countries should join BRICS — the recently expanded bloc started by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — as soon as possible so that the pace of de-dollarization can be faster for the benefit of its members.

ASEAN, with its 670 million population, is the second largest trading bloc in the world in terms of population after the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Several ASEAN members including Vietnam have been working with China in jointly building a community with a shared future.

"China's path to modernization will provide a very good example for other developing countries to modernize themselves and become prosperous solely based on their own efforts without having to rob other countries' resources," said Chin.

One of Xi's biggest achievements has been to uplift the living standards of people in rural areas and eradicate the absolute poverty of 800 million people from the total population of 1.4 billion Chinese people, he added.

He noted that Xi has also carried out many development plans to revitalize and modernize China, including rural areas, through modern infrastructure developments and advanced digital technologies.

Chin mentioned Xi's immense contributions to modernize China. "Since assuming office in 2013, Xi has made social, economic, technological, and military reforms," he said.

Released from hospital



Lee Jae-myung, leader of South Korea's opposition Democratic Party, leaves National University Hospital in Seoul on Wednesday. Lee, 59, underwent surgery and eight days of treatment after being stabbed in the neck on Jan 2 in the southeastern city of Busan. YONHAP VIA REUTERS

Davos: World Economic Forum committed to bridging East and West

From page 1

China is a crucial participant in global affairs, and the World Economic Forum hopes to deepen its cooperation with China to facilitate the building of trust in three key areas.

First, East-West dialogue is crucial. China, as the world's second-largest economy, plays an essential role in various fields including global politics, economics and scientific and technological innovation. As the global governance

system is undergoing profound changes, China is transitioning from a follower to one of its defining forces.

The WEF is committed to serving as a bridge between East and West, deepening mutual understanding, accelerating cooperation, enhancing dialogue and avoiding misjudgments, barriers and collisions.

Second, there is a need for increased public-private cooperation. Trust is the basis for interactions between countries, people, institutions and enterprises. With

the aim of achieving mutual benefit and promoting a shared future for China and the world, the WEF is working with governments,

business, academia and civil society to promote cooperation between the public and private sectors, gathering support from all sides on WEF initiatives launched in China.

Finally, China can contribute its insights to solving shared problems. Humanity is facing a series of common challenges that no single country or international organiza-

tion can address or tackle alone. China plays a leading role in many fields, including renewable energy. Its hydropower capacity, wind power and solar power generation rank first in the world. China has also made the country's low-carbon energy transition a principal part of its 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25).

The Chinese delegation attending this year's annual meeting has returned to its pre-pandemic size. Its members will have the chance to participate in sessions on a range of critical global issues,

making China's voice heard on the international platform and sending the signal of openness and cooperation.

The WEF acts as a window for China to understand the world and the world to understand China, exploring new areas of cooperation. When the first Chinese delegation arrived in Davos to attend the annual meeting in 1979, the country accounted only for 2 percent of the global GDP. Now that figure is approaching 20 percent.

Chinese stakeholders are increasingly active in utilizing the WEF platform to exchange ideas and viewpoints with global business leaders, academia and civil society.

Trust fosters collaboration, and dialogue leads to win-win results. We look forward to discussions with leaders from various sectors at the World Economic Forum annual meeting. The rebuilding of trust is imperative to improve the state of the world.

The author is Greater China chairman of the World Economic Forum. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Editor's note: As protection of the planet's flora, fauna and resources becomes increasingly important, China Daily is publishing a series of stories to illustrate the country's commitment to safeguarding the natural world.



Left: Zhao Liang (standing), Airman volunteers and villagers during field research in Baishe village, Shaanxi province, in August. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Middle: Airman volunteers discuss winter heating with residents of Nanzuo village, Shaanxi, after their traditional coal stoves were replaced with cleaner gas and electric heating. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Right: Environmental inspectors check the smoke emissions of a barbecue shop in Hua'an, Jiangsu province, on Nov 11. ZHAO QIRUI / FOR CHINA DAILY

NGO founder finds way to clear the air

Zhao Liang's volunteers gather evidence for oversight of polluters, engage in dialogue. **Hou Liqiang** reports.

When recalling the early days of Airman, an NGO he initiated in 2014 that mainly targets air pollution, Zhao Liang has many vivid memories of the struggles he faced.

With only a few volunteers to help, he often worked alone with nothing else but "a sense of smell, a pair of eyes and a smartphone". His enthusiasm, however, was always high.

The Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region was often shrouded by heavy smog back then, and there were many concerns about where the air pollutants were coming from, the 38-year-old recalled.

Some experts believed that smokestack industries in Hebei province were to blame, as they consumed a lot of coal. Zhao decided to go to Hebei to conduct air-quality surveys himself to see if that was true.

After doing some online research he went to Wuan county in Hebei, where many steel processing factories were located. On arrival, he immediately felt the physical effects of the heavy air pollution.

When talking with residents, he was told that some factories illegally emitted pollutants under the cover of darkness. Zhao decided to collect some samples as evidence so he could make a report to local environmental authorities.

It was wheat harvest time and the temperature at night was mild, so he lay on a pile of wheat in farmland to observe a steel plant to see whether it was emitting pollutants at night. "My family grew wheat when I was a child, so I didn't find it difficult to adapt to such conditions," he said with a smile.

As darkness fell, there was an increase in emissions from the plant. After noticing some dust on his hands, Zhao decided to spend the entire night in the field. He woke up in the morning with his face covered in soot and mosquito bites all over his body.

"But I was very excited, as I had collected evidence that showed the plant was illegally emitting at night," he said.

He went to the local environmen-



A giant air-supported membrane structure covering an area of 4,240 square meters is erected at a construction site in Beijing to prevent dust raised during construction work from polluting the air. LI XIN / XINHUA

tal bureau to report the violation. "Officials at the bureau were shocked. They attached great importance to the issue. A team headed by a deputy head of the bureau was then dispatched to investigate other violations," Zhao said, adding the factory was eventually fined.

Dirty work

Over the years, Zhao and his NGO volunteers have encountered multiple threats while conducting surveys. Factory security guards have set their dogs on them to deter them from photographing evidence, while others have tried to grab their phones.

The team members eventually turned to advanced technologies to help them better conduct their sur-

veys, which also reduced the number of threats they encountered.

In 2017, Airman joined a team of experts investigating a sulfur dioxide pollution scandal in Linfen, Shanxi province. They provided an independent report on the hazardous contamination based on aerial footage taken by drones and data processing technologies.

The investigation led to senior officials in Linfen being summoned by the country's top environmental watchdog, and approval of new projects in the city being suspended.

To date, Airman has reported over 1,500 violations to environmental authorities. Many of the cases were also reported to the country's high-profile central environmental inspection team, Zhao said.

Led by ministerial-level officials, the inspection team reports to a central group headed by a vice-premier of the State Council, China's Cabinet.

Zhao said his NGO has played a role in the rectification of 600 to 800 major environmental violations.

Airman has also seen the number of its volunteers expand to over 500 as it strives to address air pollution-related violations in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region and the Fenhe-Weihe Plain area that stretches across Shanxi, Shaanxi and Henan provinces. Both are key regions for air pollution control.

In 2019 in Hancheng, Shaanxi, frequent explosions at a quarry caused noise pollution and sent heavy clouds of dust into the air.

The dust level was so severe it significantly affected the growth of vast stretches of white mulberry trees, causing farmers heavy economic losses, Zhao recalled.

Airman invited media to join its inspection of the location. After the violation was exposed by the invited media, the quarry was shut down and local authorities also took measures to rehabilitate the damaged agricultural areas, Zhao said.

After the actions, farmers saw an increase in their incomes as the output from the mulberry trees rose, he added.

"A farmer who ran a horse-breeding farm called me after the shutdown. He said the things we did were of great significance and had helped them solve a big problem,

and he wanted to join Airman as a volunteer," he said.

Time to cooperate

Zhao said he has found companies and governments increasingly open to NGOs such as his.

For example, the NGO and Longmen Steel Co Ltd in Hancheng had been in opposition to each other for years. Since 2016, Airman had reported company violations to the central environmental inspection body and the local environmental authority several times, he said.

However, in April the company invited the NGO to visit its plant. A group consisting of Airman volunteers and representatives of other NGOs Airman had invited inspected the company's entire production process, he said.

"Following our consistent concerns about this company for over seven years, it finally opened its doors to us. I think this is a significant milestone," he said. "Instead of confronting each other, we sought to build dialogue."

After the visit, the local environmental bureau invited Airman to participate in a symposium, hoping the NGO would help build a green development model for a Longmen Steel industrial park.

Hancheng city officials, executives of the industrial park, company representatives, and grassroots officials took part in the symposium.

"We took the opportunity provided by the symposium to reach a consensus to build up a governance mode that features multiple parties," Zhao said.

"Previously, our attention was mainly focused on individual violations scattered across different areas. We found violations and then reported them to authorities."

He said the NGO now focuses on a key region and strives to address the problem "to the best of our capability".

"We seek to connect different resources and establish a joint environmental governance mode," he said.

Contact the writer at houliliqiang@chinadaily.com.cn

By HOU LIQIANG

Liaoning couple foster forest in mountains

The Luling Mountains in Jinzhou, Liaoning province, used to be a desolate area without even a single tree.

Now, it is a leafy paradise for birds, and tourists are flocking in.

The huge transformation has occurred thanks to the consistent efforts of Tian Wangui, 67, and his wife Lu Min, 63, over nearly half a century.

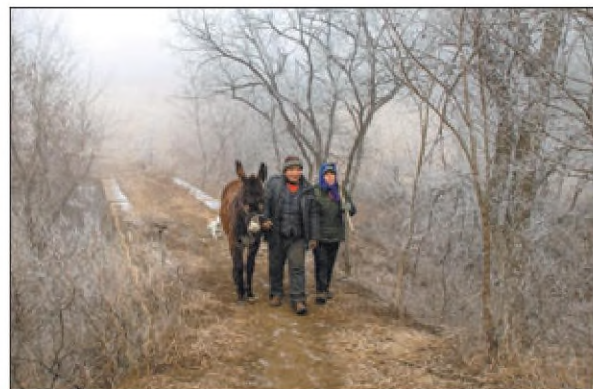
In 1982, the couple contracted the land-use rights of the two mountains near their home. They planned to plant fruit trees in the mountains to make a living.

"Back then, the mountains were desolate with no trees at all," Lu recalled.

To help seedlings they planted survive in the barren land, they had to carry water to the mountains on their backs, she said. They also bought whatever seeds were available from a nearby forest farm and sprinkled them every spring, hoping to afforest the mountains.

With such an extensive planting method, however, they initially failed to see many seeds take root in the barren soil.

But the couple didn't give up. "If they didn't grow out, we would have simply kept sowing seeds the



Left: Tian Wangui and Lu Min patrol the Luling Mountains in Jinzhou, Liaoning province, on Feb 10 last year. **Right:** Two gray herons in the Luling Mountains. PHOTOS BY XINHUA

second year. We were determined to transform the desolate mountains," she said.

The couple's perseverance finally paid off. They discovered that some tree species were tough enough to survive, including pine and mulberry.

Now, more than 50,000 trees of over 20 species cover the land they

contracted, following their consistent efforts to sow tree seeds year after year.

Their afforestation effort has cost them not only a lot of time, but also a great deal of money. The couple used proceeds from fruit sales to fund the effort.

"It has been so long, and we have

spent so much money that I have lost count," Tian said. "But it was all worth it to witness the mountains turning green."

As the mountains became lush, Tian and Lu were charged with a new task — patrolling their nearly 67 hectares of forest every day to prevent fires. The patrol even didn't stop on

the eve of last year's Chinese Lunar New Year.

Instead of watching the CCTV Spring Festival Gala on Jan 21 like most Chinese, the couple went to patrol the mountains with the families of their son and daughter.

Many people set off fireworks to mark the arrival of the new year, so

the holiday is a time when they have to stay vigilant against fire hazards, Tian said.

The couple has also welcomed some unexpected winged visitors since the turn of the century.

In the spring of 2000, several egrets and herons came to the mountains and took advantage of a nearby reservoir, and they didn't leave until the weather turned cold.

Egrets and herons are often recognized as environmental monitors, as they have very strict requirements for environmental conditions in their habitats.

More birds have come in the ensuing years. Currently, the number of birds that inhabit the two mountains during the warm period every year stands at around 2,000.

Last year, local authorities named the mountains "Luling" — which literally means "the mountains herons inhabit" — as tourists kept pouring in, lured by the trees and rare birds.

The couple has no plans to quit their work, and they hope their children will follow in their footsteps.

"We cherish the mountains and trees as we cherish our own children," Lu said. "Even as we grow old, they will continue to guard the woods and watch over the birds."

WORLD

Germany troubled by nationwide protests

Deeper reason for unrest lies in country's severe economic difficulties, experts say

By CHEN YINGQUN

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As William Lau hurriedly departed from Berlin for a business trip on Tuesday, he saw that certain areas of the city were obstructed by farmers' protests.

He said he hoped the intensity of the protests would diminish by the time he returned to the city three days later. However, as he sat on the train and attempted to book a return ticket, he realized that he might not be able to return on time.

Starting from Wednesday, German commuters will encounter train cancellations throughout the country because of a three-day nationwide rail strike. The GDL train drivers' union began its main strike in the early hours of Wednesday, following a previous strike by cargo train drivers who had walked out on Tuesday evening.

GDL is demanding a reduction in working hours from 38 to 35 hours per week for shift workers, as well as a pay increase of 555 euros (\$610) per month and a one-off inflation compensation bonus of 3,000 euros.

Since Monday, German farmers have initiated a weeklong series of nationwide protests against subsidy reductions, causing disruptions by blocking roads with tractors. They argue that the government's plans to eliminate two tax breaks, which currently provide them with about 900 million euros in annual savings, unfairly burden them and will force them out of business.

Joachim Rukwied, head of the German farmers' association DBV, vowed to ramp up protests on Wednesday and called for the government to take the subsidy cuts off the table completely.

The protests have piled further pressure on Chancellor Olaf Scholz, whose government is trying to get its 2024 budget over the finish line.

Meng Hong, a senior researcher in the School of Global and Area Studies at Renmin University of China, said the protests by farmers and strikes by

rail drivers are driven by their specific demands, but the deeper reason lies in Germany's severe economic difficulties, accompanied by increasing criticism of the coalition government by the general public.

"Since 2008, the German economy has been struggling. It initially faced the impact of the European debt crisis, followed by the repercussions of the refugee crisis. The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine for two years has had a significant impact on the German economy, affecting the lives of individuals across various sectors in Germany," she said.

Germany, considered the economic powerhouse of Europe, has even been criticized by observers for dragging down the development of the European economy.

Social instability

The protests and strikes would cause economic losses and even social instability in the country, Meng said. Although the German government is not considering further changes to its plans to phase out agricultural subsidies, prominent politicians have expressed concerns that the unrest could be exploited by extremist groups and are closely monitoring the situation's development.

Tian Deven, a researcher on European issues at the Chinese Academy

of Social Sciences, said the German economy has been continuously sluggish, and state finances are becoming increasingly tight. In this situation, various interest groups from different social classes may resort to forms of pressure on the government such as strikes and protests to protect their existing benefits.

In Germany, disputes involving businesses, employees and the government are generally resolved through negotiations, Tian said. However, the rising number of strikes and protests indicates that their conflicts have become sharper than before, and the degree of social division and fragmentation has also increased.

The current strikes and protests are likely to be ultimately resolved through negotiations in the end and should not lead to widespread chaos in society, he said. However, with the worsening economic difficulties in Germany, an increasing number of people may express their dissatisfaction with the current government through parliamentary elections at various levels this year.

Tian added that mainstream political parties in Germany are receiving less support from domestic voters, while support for the far-right Alternative for Germany party is growing rapidly. This situation would make it more difficult for the coalition government to govern.

Agencies contributed to this story.



The main station in Berlin is deserted on Wednesday. JOERG CARSTENSEN / AP

Scholz pressured to tighten immigration laws

By JULIAN SHEA in London

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Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz is coming under pressure to go through with pledges to tighten the country's immigration laws after newly published figures from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees showed a 51 percent rise in asylum applications in 2023.

In an interview with Der Spiegel newspaper in October, when questioned on immigration, Scholz announced a variety of measures to make it harder to enter the country, and also vowed to get tougher on deporting people with no right to stay in the country.

"On the one hand, there is the immigration of workers that we need. And there are those who are seeking asylum because they are the targets of political oppression," he said. "On the other hand, though, that means that all those who don't belong to one of those groups cannot stay. That is why we are limiting irregular migration to Germany. Too many people are coming."

In 2023, 351,915 asylum applications were registered in Germany, a figure that Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said showed the country "must consistently continue our course to limit irregular migration".

A breakdown of the figures showed that of the asylum applications, the largest number — 104,651 — came from Syria, followed by Turkey (62,624), Afghanistan (53,582), Iraq (12,360), Iran (10,206), Georgia (9,399) and Russia (9,028). And in 52 percent of cases on which a ruling had been reached, protection status had been granted.

Scholz's coalition government has been coming under fire on a variety of fronts, including the economy and agricultural policy. Immigration is a particularly volatile issue that the increasingly popular far-right Alternative for Deutschland, or AfD, party will be keen to exploit.

Previously, AfD support had mainly been in the east of the country, but following electoral success further west in October, its co-leader, Alice Weidel, said: "AfD is no longer an

eastern phenomenon, but has become a major all-German party. So we have arrived."

In a survey carried out by the Infratest Dimap research organization in fall and quoted by the Politico website, when asked what topics had influenced supporters' decision to vote for AfD, immigration, at 65 percent, was the biggest concern.

Scholz's government faces a difficult balancing act because of a nationwide skills shortage that means Germany is increasingly in need of migrants to help maintain certain sections of society.

In April 2023, a survey by the Competence Center for Securing Skilled Labor showed that the previous year, there were 1.3 million job vacancies in Germany requiring skilled or qualified professionals, and almost half remained unfilled.

With many neighboring European Union nations that might be the obvious source of new employees facing similar demographic challenges to Germany, the country might need to look further afield to fill those vacancies.



People wearing masks as a precaution wait for their appointments at a hospital in Barcelona, Spain, on Monday. EMILIO MORENATTI / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Flu, COVID-19 spread across Europe

By JONATHAN POWELL

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As both flu and COVID-19 continue to spread across Europe, Spain's government is seeking to implement a nationwide mandate that would require individuals to wear face masks in hospitals and clinics, while Italy has reported a surge in respiratory illness infections that has reached record levels.

Guidance from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has suggested individuals on the continent stay home if they feel sick and consider wearing masks in crowds or healthcare settings, noting that certain countries are experiencing greater impact than others.

The advisory body said flu is currently circulating at higher levels compared to other common respiratory pathogens, including the SARS-CoV-2 virus responsible for COVID-19.

Spain's government has proposed

mask rules be enforced nationwide, but regional leaders responsible for health policy were still considering the idea on Tuesday, with a final decision expected on Wednesday, Reuters reported.

"One thing we know will limit epidemics and protect vulnerable people is the mask," Spain's Health Minister Monica Garcia said in an interview on television channel TVE. "It is a common sense measure, scientifically supported and widely accepted by the public."

The government has suggested a policy that would permit individuals to self-diagnose milder cases and take three days off work without requiring a doctor's note, Garcia said.

Following the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Spain was one of the last European countries to lift the mandatory face mask requirement.

While masks were still mandated on public transport in Spain until February last year, the obligation to wear them in health cen-

ters and pharmacies continued until July.

According to data released by Italy's National Institute of Health, flu-like illnesses, encompassing both flu and COVID-19, soared to a record high in the country during the final two weeks of 2023, surpassing even the impact of the initial COVID-19 outbreak.

There has been no indication that the Italian government is contemplating reintroducing mask mandates, despite experts at the institute attributing the surge to reduced mask-wearing and a lower vaccination rate this season, Reuters commented.

Portugal is also facing a flu epidemic, said Health Minister Manuel Pizarro, who stated that waiting times in hospital emergency wards were more than 10 hours in recent weeks.

In the last week of 2023, the proportion of influenza cases in intensive care units reached a record high of 17 percent, the nation's health authority reported.

2 convicted ex-Polish ministers held

By EARLE GALE in London

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Police in Poland have arrested two former ministers in the latest major confrontation between the new, pro-European Union coalition that runs the country and the former administration of the right-wing Law and Justice party, or PiS.

Mariusz Kaminski and Maciej Wasik, the country's former interior minister and deputy interior minister, were taken into custody at the presidential palace in Warsaw on Tuesday, after failing to hand themselves to the authorities following their convictions last month for abuse of power over crimes committed in 2007, when the men were in charge of a government anti-corruption office.

Kaminski is starting a hunger strike, he said in a statement on Wednesday.

"I declare that I treat my conviction... as an act of political revenge," Kaminski said in the statement, read by his former deputy Blazej Pobozy at a news conference in front of the prime minister's office. "As a political prisoner, I started a hunger strike from the first day of my imprisonment."

In December, the pair, who were still serving as PiS lawmakers, were

sentenced to two years in custody, but they refused to accept the court's decision because staunch PiS ally President Andrzej Duda had pardoned them back in 2015.

The arrests, which followed the country's Supreme Court ruling that the president's pardon was invalid and a standoff at the presidential palace, prompted the current interior minister, Marcin Kierwinski, to write on X, "Everyone is equal before the law."

Widening the gulf

The incident will, however, have widened the gulf between the government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk's Law and Justice party, which came to power last month, and Duda, who insisted his pardon should have been respected.

The two sides are also divided on whether Kaminski and Wasik remain lawmakers, with Tusk's government insisting they have been stripped of their roles, and Duda saying they are still lawmakers.

Before his arrest, Kaminski told reporters from the grounds of the presidential palace that he and Wasik were about to become "political prisoners".

"We are dealing with a very serious state crisis," he said. "A grim

dictatorship is being created."

Tusk, who was president of the European Council from 2014 to 2019, came to power after eight years of rule by former prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki ended with him failing to win a vote of confidence following weeks of wrangling about who should form the next government in the wake of October's indecisive general election.

Tusk, who has described the previous administration in similar terms as the "grim dictatorship" invoked by Kaminski, told reporters Duda appeared to have been trying to help convicted men evade justice.

"There is no rulebook for the prime minister or interior minister on how to act when convicts are in the presidential palace," he said ahead of the arrests that prompted protests from PiS supporters at both the palace and the police headquarters where the men were taken.

Tusk's party campaigned during the general election on undoing controversial changes PiS had made to the country's legal system, its media, and its civil service that the EU described as undemocratic and illegal.

Reuters contributed to this story.

2023 hottest recorded year as Earth nears key limit

BRUSSELS — Last year was the planet's hottest on record by a substantial margin and likely the world's warmest in the past 100,000 years, the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service said on Tuesday.

Scientists had widely expected the milestone, after climate records were repeatedly broken. Since June, every month has been the world's hottest on record compared with the corresponding month in previous years.

"This has been a very exceptional year, climate-wise... in a league of its own, even when compared to other very warm years," Copernicus Director Carlo Buontempo said.

The agency confirmed 2023 as the hottest year in global temperature records going back to 1850. When checked against paleoclimatic data records from sources such as tree rings and air bubbles in glaciers, Buontempo said it was "very likely" the warmest year in the past 100,000 years.

On average, the planet was 1.48 degrees warmer in 2023 than in the 1850-1900 preindustrial period, when humans began burning fossil fuels on an industrial scale, pumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Countries agreed in the 2015 Paris Agreement to try to prevent global

warming surpassing 1.5 degrees to avoid its most severe consequences.

The world has not breached that target — which refers to an average global temperature of 1.5 degrees over decades — but the Copernicus Climate Change Service said the temperatures had exceeded the level on nearly half of the days last year, setting "a dire precedent".

Hayley Fowler, a professor of climate change at Newcastle University in England, said the record-breaking year underlined the need to act "extremely urgently" to reduce emissions.

"The speed of change in the political world and the will to actually

reduce greenhouse gas emissions is not matching the speed of change of extreme weather and warming," she said.

The Copernicus findings come one month after a climate agreement was reached at COP28 in Dubai calling for the gradual transition away from fossil fuels, the main cause of climate warming.

"We desperately need to rapidly cut fossil fuel use and reach net zero to preserve the liveable climate that we all depend on," John Marsham, atmospheric science professor at the University of Leeds, said.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA



People cool off during a hot summer day at the Bosphorus in Istanbul, Turkey, on July 26. FRANCISCO SECO / ASSOCIATED PRESS

WORLD

Envoy calls for end to attacks in Red Sea

China's top UN representative says Houthi rebels need to respect freedom of navigation

By **MINLU ZHANG**
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China's top envoy to the United Nations on Wednesday called on Houthi rebels to stop attacking ships in the Red Sea, emphasizing respect for the freedom of navigation. The call came as the UN Security Council adopted a resolution demanding an end to Red Sea attacks.

"We call on the Houthi rebels to immediately cease their attacks on civilian vessels and respect the freedom of navigation of all countries in the Red Sea waters in accordance with the requirements of the Security Council resolutions," said Zhang Jun, China's permanent representative to the UN.

"We call on all relevant parties to strictly abide by the UN Charter and international law and play a constructive and responsible role in easing tensions in the Red Sea. No country may misinterpret and abuse the relevant provisions of this resolution to create new tensions in the Red Sea," he told the Security Council.

The Security Council passed a resolution on Wednesday strongly condemning the multiple attacks on merchant and commercial shipping in the Red Sea by Houthi rebels, demanding that the group immediately cease all such attacks.

The resolution passed with 11 votes in favor, none against, while four countries abstained: China, Russia, Algeria and Mozambique.

China abstained from voting because the resolution didn't include all the suggested amendments proposed by China, Russia, Algeria and others, and it still "seems unclear on important issues," said Zhang. It raises concerns about its effectiveness and the possibility of making things worse in the region, he said.

"China is open to further appropriate action by the Security Council to safeguard the navigational rights of merchant ships of all countries in the waters of the Red Sea in accordance with international law," said Zhang.

Zhang highlighted the Red Sea's vital role in trade and energy transport, emphasizing its importance for regional peace, global supply chains and international trade.

"Ensuring the safe and smooth

flow of this water area is not only conducive to the maintenance of regional peace and stability, but also conducive to the maintenance of a stable and smooth global supply chain and international trade order, and is in line with the common interests of the international community," he said.

Around 12 percent of global trade passes through the Suez Canal in the Red Sea, handling 30 percent of all global container traffic and more than \$1 trillion worth of goods annually, according to data from the Baltic and International Maritime Council.

Houthi rebels started to target vessels bound for Israel since mid-November as they demanded full humanitarian supplies to enter Gaza, leading many companies to redirect ships south around the Cape of Good Hope, increasing costs and posing a threat to the global supply chain.

There have been more than two dozen separate attacks on international shipping by the Houthi rebels since the Oct 7 terror attacks by Hamas led to the new round of conflict in Gaza, according to the UN.

In the latest strikes, the Houthi group announced Wednesday that it has launched "a large batch" of drones and missiles toward a US Navy vessel in the Red Sea, which was "assisting" Israel. The group also said the attack was a "preliminary response" to the US sinking of Houthi ships in the Red Sea on Dec 31.

"It must be noted that the current tensions in the Red Sea are one of the manifestations of the spillover effects of the Gaza conflict. This is a fact that cannot be ignored," said Zhang.

"China has repeatedly emphasized that the immediate realization of a cease-fire in Gaza is urgent and is the overriding prerequisite and the highest priority of international diplomatic efforts. We regret that the resolution just adopted by the Security Council failed to clearly call for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza," he said.

He reiterated China's commitments to ongoing efforts for a Gaza cease-fire, reducing Red Sea tensions, resolving the Yemen issue and achieving peace in the Middle East.



Soldiers in an armored vehicle patrol the city's historic center following an outbreak of violence a day after Ecuador's President Daniel Noboa declared a 60-day state of emergency, in Quito, on Tuesday. KAREN TORO / REUTERS

At least 10 killed in Ecuador violence

QUITO — Ecuador's president gave orders on Tuesday to "neutralize" criminal gangs, after gunmen opened fire in a TV studio and bandits threatened random executions on a second day of terror in the country.

At least 10 people have been killed in a series of attacks blamed on gangs as the country exploded in what President Daniel Noboa called an "internal armed conflict."

He ordered military operations to "neutralize" criminal gangs after gangsters declared war following Sunday's prison escape of one of Ecuador's most powerful narco bosses.

Eight people were killed and three were wounded in attacks in the port city of Guayaquil, and two officers were "viciously murdered by armed criminals" in the nearby town of Nobol, police said on Tuesday evening.

After the escape of Jose Adolfo Macias, alias "Fito", leader of Ecuador's biggest gang Los Choneros, Noboa on Monday declared a countrywide state of emergency and nightly curfew. Gangs retaliated, taking police

officers hostage and setting off explosions in several cities. On Tuesday, they stormed into a studio of state-owned TC Television in Guayaquil with guns and explosives.

Some 39 inmates broke out of a prison in Riobamba in Chimborazo province on Monday night.

Riobamba Mayor John Vinuesa told local Pichincha radio station that the breakout occurred during a prison riot, where detonations of explosives were heard.

Authorities reported multiple explosions and cars set alight on Tuesday, including in the capital Quito, and said seven police officers had been kidnapped.

A video circulating on social media showed three of the kidnapped officers sitting on the ground with a gun pointed at them as one was forced to read a statement addressed to Noboa.

"You declared war, you will get war," the visibly terrified officer read.

There was panic on the streets, with shops and businesses in various cities closing early and residents rushing home as face-to-

face classes were suspended nationwide until Friday.

Brian Nichols, top US diplomat for Latin America, said Washington was "extremely concerned" by the violence and kidnappings, and pledged to provide assistance and "remain in close contact" with Noboa's team.

Peru on Tuesday put its border with Ecuador under a state of emergency.

Chile, Colombia and Brazil sent messages of support for Noboa on Tuesday.

The Chinese embassy and consulates general in Ecuador will be temporarily closed from Wednesday until further notice, according to an official statement on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said China "supports the government of Ecuador in its efforts to safeguard social stability and hopes that Ecuador will soon restore normal order."

"We have not received any reports of casualties of Chinese citizens in Ecuador," she added.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Japan ramps up air safety efforts

By **JIANG XUEQING** in Tokyo
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Japan's transport ministry has introduced urgent safety measures for air traffic control in the wake of a tragic collision at Tokyo's Haneda Airport.

On Jan 2, a Japan Airlines, or JAL, passenger plane collided with a Japan Coast Guard, or JCG, aircraft during landing, resulting in the deaths of five individuals on the JCG plane. The pilot survived but sustained severe injuries.

All 379 passengers and crew members aboard the JAL flight escaped without life-threatening injuries before the plane was fully engulfed in flames.

The incident is believed to have occurred when the JCG aircraft mistakenly entered the runway, possibly due to the pilot misinterpreting the air traffic control phrase "No 1", a phrase indicating the plane is next in line for takeoff, as clearance for takeoff.

According to the radio communications transcript released by the transport ministry, the air traffic controller, responsible for determining when planes can access the runway and take off,

granted clearance for the JAL plane to land before the accident, Kyodo News reported.

Subsequently, the air traffic controller instructed the JCG aircraft: "Good evening, No 1. Taxi to the holding point C5." The plane responded: "Taxi to holding point C5. No 1. Thank you."

The C5 holding point — where the JCG plane was instructed to wait before being cleared for takeoff — is located on the taxiway preceding the runway.

In the aftermath of the collision, the JCG said the pilot, the only survivor aboard their aircraft, had explained that he believed he had obtained permission to enter the runway.

Yoichiro Hatta, a former JAL pilot, said the pilot of the JCG plane may have misinterpreted the term "No 1" to mean that he had received permission to take off, as reported by the Asahi Shimbun newspaper.

The newly announced safety measures involve temporarily refraining from informing pilots of their position in the lineup when granting takeoff permission. This protocol will be implemented not only at Haneda but

also at other airports across Japan.

To enhance safety, authorities will raise awareness among pilots regarding air traffic control terms for runway access. The ministry plans to hold an emergency meeting on communication protocols between air traffic controllers and pilots, exploring potential misunderstandings and devising appropriate countermeasures.

Additionally, airports will intensify monitoring to prevent inadvertent runway entries. This will involve assigning personnel to continuously monitor screens, alerting staff if an aircraft enters a runway already designated for another plane.

Japan's Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Tetsuo Saito said on Tuesday that the ministry aims to establish permanent measures to prevent similar accidents after thorough investigations and discussions with a panel of experts.

He emphasized the mission to restore trust in aviation and revealed the intention to establish a committee consisting of experts to discuss safety measures in response to the incident.

Extreme cold leaves towns in Ukraine in the dark

By **REN QI** in Moscow
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Ukraine's power grid operator said on Tuesday severe winter weather left more than 1,000 towns and villages without electricity in nine regions and urged residents to conserve power as the energy system has been weakened under the conflict.

Electricity consumption was at the highest levels this week as temperatures fell to about -15 C in many parts of the country, grid operator Ukrenergo said.

"The consumption level continues to grow due to the considerable drop in temperature across the country," the company said, adding that electricity consumption in the morning was already 5.8 percent higher than the day before.

"As of this morning due to bad weather — strong winds, ice — power was cut off in 1,025 settlements."

The weather caused significant damage to distribution networks with strong winds, frost and a thick layer of ice on equipment, which delayed repair works.

Vitaliy Kim, governor of the southern Mykolaiv region where 215 towns and villages have been cut off from electricity, said ice on electricity cables was over 5 centimeters thick.

Ukraine had to import electricity from neighboring Romania and Slovakia to be able to meet the demand.

Ukrenergo said Ukrainian thermal power plants were still recovering from last winter's massive Russian strikes and solar power plants could not work at full capacity due to dense clouds and bad weather.

It also reported more damage to electricity networks in Donetsk, Kharkiv and Kherson regions, which are near to the front lines and within reach of artillery shelling.

High consumption

Russia is also facing a tough challenge of high electricity consumption, as temperatures in Moscow last week dropped to this winter's lowest.

The Russian government decided to lift duties linked to the rubble-dollar exchange rate on most coal exports, according to a decree published on the government's website.

The export duties — which were introduced on a number of goods in October and had been expected to last until the end of this year — were scrapped for exports of thermal and coking coals, as well as anthracite, the decree showed.

Analysts, cited by Russian newspaper Kommersant daily, said the decision to scrap the duties may help Russian coal producers save between \$1.1 billion and \$1.5 billion per year.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's attacks have spread to more Russian regions. A woman was killed in Ukrainian shelling of Russia's Kursk region and drones struck a fuel facility in neighboring Oryol region, the two regions' governors said on Tuesday, amid an escalation of cross-border attacks.

At least five drones were shot down over Kursk on Tuesday, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

Russian border regions have repeatedly come under fire from Ukraine in recent months. On Dec 30, at least 20 people were killed in a missile strike on Belgorod city, 40 kilometers from Ukraine.

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Blinken meets Abbas as bombing continues in Gaza

TEL AVIV — Israel kept bombing Gaza on Wednesday as US top diplomat Antony Blinken met the head of Palestine.

Blinken said he has secured commitments from multiple countries in the region to assist with rebuilding Gaza after the conflict, and that wider Israeli-Arab normalization is still possible, but only if there is "a pathway to a Palestinian state."

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told Blinken on Wednesday that Gaza is integral to Palestinian statehood hopes and should not be cut off as a result of Israel's conflict with Hamas.

Abbas further called for the "con-

vening an international peace conference to end the Israeli occupation of the land of the State of Palestine."

Global concern has flared over the spiraling humanitarian crisis, and Blinken, while urging steps to reduce the surging death toll, has voiced continued US political and military support for its ally Israel.

On Wednesday, the White House reiterated that the US does not support a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

Cease-fire protests have been seen recently in many parts of the US, ranging from near airports and bridges in New York City and Los Angeles to vigils outside the White

House and marches in Washington near the US Capitol.

South Africa, which has long been a critic of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, has launched a case against the Israeli offensive in Gaza at the International Court of Justice in the Netherlands.

On Tuesday, former UK opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn said he will join the South African delegation for this week's hearings at the ICJ, where the country accuses Israel of committing genocide against Palestinians.

On the Israel-Lebanon border, the exchange of fire between Israeli forces and Hezbollah escalated on Tuesday. Israel Defense Forces spokesman

Daniel Hagari admitted Israel was behind the assassination of Ali Hussein Barji, a Hezbollah commander, in Lebanon earlier on Tuesday, a day after it killed a senior commander of Hezbollah.

The IDF on Tuesday carried out several strikes on southern Lebanon, killing three Hezbollah members who, according to Hagari, were attempting to launch drones at Israel.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army said it was "expanding" its assaults in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, where at least 40 Palestinian militants were killed over the past day.



People line up for free food during the ongoing Israeli air and ground offensive in the Gaza Strip in Rafah on Tuesday. HATEM ALI / AP

AGENCIES—XINHUA

WORLD US

Key role seen for US-China education exchanges

By YIFAN XU in Washington
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People-to-people exchanges, especially educational ones, play a key role in the big picture of United States-China relations, and sometimes the events with the most impact "occur quietly," said an expert on Sino-US educational cooperation.

"I'm hopeful that as we continue the dialogue in 2024, we will see even more progress that will help to sustain and support the continuation of educational exchanges and cooperation between the two countries," said Denis Simon, a distinguished fellow at the Washington-based Institute for China-America Studies, in an interview with China Daily.

Simon most recently served as a clinical professor of global business and technology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Kenan-Flagler Business School. He also was vice-president and executive vice-chancellor of Duke Kunshan

University, a joint venture of Duke University in the US, Wuhan University in Hubei province and the city of Kunshan, Jiangsu province, from 2015 to 2020.

Simon emphasized the role of exchanges in overall US-China relations. "If we can maintain the progress and maintain the discussion, I'm hopeful that the education relationship can insulate itself to some degree from these larger problems," he said.

"Sometimes these kinds of people-to-people diplomacy occur quietly. They're not accompanied by a lot of fanfare and noise, but they accomplish a great deal," he said.

Simon said the first post-COVID US-China Higher Education Dialogue, held in New York in September, was "extremely successful". The event, co-hosted by the Institute of International Education and the China Education Association for International Exchange, involved about 15 Chinese universities and a similar number of US universities.



Lincoln High School students pose with gift pandas from Sichuan province at an event celebrating the friendship between Washington state and Sichuan in Tacoma on Nov 20. LINDA DENG / CHINA DAILY

"The discussions covered every aspect of the bilateral education relationship," including undergraduate education, graduate education, university research collaboration and also policy issues like visa issues that are affecting the bilateral education exchange, Simon said.

"I think that we can keep talking and have dialogues like this and have them conducted in such an open and frank way. That gives me great hope," he said, adding that relations involving education are still in a "transitional phase".

"We've gone from a height of having

370,000 Chinese students in the US before COVID, and now we're down to about 289,000," Simon said.

"We're starting to see some recovery, of course, in this post-COVID era. But it's yet unclear whether or not we're going to go back to the good old days of... big numbers wanting to come to the United States."

On the other hand, the number of US students in China "is really limited," he said, noting that the number peaked at about 15,000 around 2011, while by 2022 it was around 400. "The ability of our two countries to understand one another really does depend on the young people who are crossing the Pacific, learning about each other's cultures and countries, learning to speak the languages," he said.

"And if they don't achieve that, then the United States, in particular, is going to suffer because we will not have a generation of professionals, whether they're in business, government or academia, who have a deep understanding of the situation in

China, and that does not bode well for the long term," he added.

During the November summit between President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden in San Francisco, Xi said that China was ready to invite 50,000 young people from the US to participate in exchange and study programs in China over the next five years. Simon said it was "a wonderful gesture" by China's president.

"Because I think he, too, realizes, as do many, many of my Chinese friends, that Americans need to have access to China and need to have an experience living and working with Chinese counterparts," said Simon.

"And now there's a whole new generation of students who want to study China in terms of its global role," Simon said. "That means they want to understand more about China's environment policy, China's health policy, China's policies about food security, and all sorts of things that influence the way China interfaces with the rest of the world."

Avalanche hits slopes



Rescue crews work at the scene of an avalanche at a California ski resort near Lake Tahoe on Wednesday. The avalanche roared through a section of expert ski trails, killing one person and injuring another, as a major storm with snow and gusty winds moved into the region, authorities said.

MARK SPONSLER VIA AP

Dolby deepens ties with China, inspired by innovation, consumers

By LIA ZHU in Las Vegas
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Gone are the days of simply offering technology. Immersive entertainment technology leader Dolby Laboratories is now actively co-creating innovations with Chinese brands, fueled by the country's fast-paced tech development and a discerning consumer base hungry for the best.

This shift is evident in Dolby's latest offerings, showcased at this week's CES in Las Vegas, with Dolby Atmos FlexConnect as a highlight. The technology is capable of seamlessly pairing wireless speakers with a TV's sound system, offering flexibility in speaker placement.

With Dolby Atmos FlexConnect, listeners no longer must think about channels for speakers or where the right spots are to set up speakers because once connected, the system intelligently optimizes the listening experience for any room layout and speaker setup.

It allows users to place a sound anywhere in the room and then translates that into a listening environment, according to the company.

Dolby's first partners to adopt the technology and bring it to global market are Chinese electronics brands Hisense and TCL. Their products, powered by Dolby Atmos FlexConnect, are on display at the world's largest tech show.

The partnership has changed since the time many years ago when Dolby brought technologies to Chinese companies, which were trying to move into foreign markets or looking to catch up with other customers.

"That is no longer the case. In many situations, our partners in China are bringing the technology to market for the first time. They are the people who are leading the innovation," John Couling, senior vice-president of entertainment at Dolby, told China Daily.

Citing the examples of Chinese TV manufacturers, he said now new experiences can first start in China with their Chinese partners



Si Da, vice-president and chief brand officer of Chinese display panel manufacturer BOE, showcases a transparent screen on display at CES 2024, which runs through Jan 12 in Las Vegas. LIA ZHU / CHINA DAILY

and then be bought into the global market.

The automotive industry tells a similar story. Driven by consumer demand for more immersive in-car audio experiences, Dolby now has more than 10 automakers that have started shipping or announced plans for vehicles supporting Dolby Atmos. A majority of them hail from China.

Chinese electric vehicle brands — like Neo, Xpeng, Zeekr, and Yangwang — have been early adopters of Dolby Atmos audio technology. "China has been the region that's been most innovative in terms of grasping this new technology and bringing it into their cars," said Couling.

The Chinese automaker-partners showcase "tremendous energy and a perfect fit with Dolby's vision", as Couling put it.

He also found that in many cases the companies that stepped forward to embrace new ideas are based in China. "In China, innovation is very fast-paced. Companies are very quick to adopt new technologies and push the experience forward. I think that has set up the marketplace so that they really can embrace these new innovations," he said.

That innovation ecosystem thrives on China's tech-savvy consumers who demand the very best.

"Chinese consumers truly care about entertainment quality," explained Couling, who has witnessed firsthand the Chinese consumers as he has engaged the market for many years.

"The Chinese consumers really care about the quality of that entertainment, and we see that across the industry," he said upon returning from a trip to the country at the end of 2023 and considering himself "fortunate to spend time in China".

"We see Chinese manufacturers of cars, televisions or phones continue to increase their product performance. We also see creators of music or TV shows and sports also making the content better and better all the time," he said.

"They're really trying to provide the best experience they can for the Chinese consumers."

Concerns about "de-risking" in the Chinese market were dismissed by Couling.

"We build our business on strong partnerships, wherever they are in the world, and that's what we'll continue to do," he emphasized.

US seized record number of guns at airports

By AI HEPING in New York
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A record number of guns in carry-on luggage were seized from airline passengers last year, and most were loaded, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) said Wednesday.

In 2023, airport security officers prevented passengers from carrying 6,737 prohibited guns, and 93 percent of them were loaded, the agency said.

The previous record for intercepted firearms at airports was in 2022, with

6,542 firearms stopped at checkpoints, a number that surpassed the previous record in 2021. The number of guns seized at US airports has risen every year since at least 2014, except for in 2020, when travel was limited by the pandemic.

Last year, TSA screened more than 858 million people, which indicates the agency intercepted 7.8 firearms per million passengers — a drop from 8.6 per million passengers in 2022, the agency said.

"We are still seeing far too many firearms at TSA checkpoints, and what's particularly concerning is the amount of them loaded, presenting an unnecessary risk to everyone at the TSA checkpoint," TSA Administrator David Pekoske said in a news release.

More than 1,100 guns were found at just three airports, the TSA said.

Officers at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, the nation's busiest, found 451 firearms in carry-ons last year, more than any other airport in the country, according to the agency.

At Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, officers found 378 guns, the

second most, and 311 were found at Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport for the third most.

When TSA staffers see what they believe to be a weapon on an X-ray machine, they usually stop the belt so the bag stays inside the machine, and the passenger can't get to it. They immediately contact local law enforcement, who remove the passenger and the firearm from the checkpoint area, the TSA said.

Depending on local laws, a law enforcement officer could arrest or cite the passenger. TSA does not confiscate firearms.

Firearms and ammunition are prohibited in carry-on baggage. Passengers are only allowed to travel with an unloaded firearm, and only if they pack it properly in a locked, hard-sided case in their checked baggage and first declare it to the airline at the check-in counter.

TSA warns passengers who bring a gun to a checkpoint that they face a fine of up to \$15,000, ineligibility for the PreCheck expedited screening program, and potential criminal charges.


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BUSINESS

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SME performance improves in 2023

Small, medium-sized enterprises buoyed by series of supportive policy initiatives

By OUYANG SHIJIA
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Business performance of China's small and medium-sized enterprises improved in 2023 on the back of the gradual resumption of work and production after the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside a package of supportive policy measures, the latest data showed on Wednesday.

Analysts said the improvement indicates the steady recovery of business activity among SMEs after the COVID-19 shocks, adding to signs of further momentum.

China's Small and Medium Enterprises Development Index, based on a survey of 3,000 SMEs, averaged 89.2 in 2023, up from 88.4 in 2022, said the China Association of Small and Medium Enterprises.

However, the index declined from 89.3 in November to 89 in December. For the fourth quarter, the index came in at 89.1, from 89.2 in the third quarter.

"Despite some fluctuations, the latest figures point to a continued recovery trend," said Hong Yong, a research fellow at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation's e-commerce research institute.

"This indicates that SMEs made certain progress in development last year, driven by a steady consumption rebound, growth in services consumption, recovery in fixed-asset investments and the vigorous development of high-tech industries."

Hong said the country introduced a series of policies last year aimed at promoting growth of the private sector, which has created a better development environment for SMEs and significantly boosted their confidence.

Looking ahead to 2024, he believes development prospects for SMEs will continue to improve with existing policies taking effect



An employee checks equipment at a tech company in Chongqing. SUN KAIFANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

gradually and more supportive measures in the offing.

Citing the latest figures, Yue Xiangyu, a researcher at the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics' Institute for the Development of Chinese Economic Thought, said while the 2023 index showed an overall rebound, it remains below the 100 mark that separates an upward trend in business performance from less vitality. He said that suggests China still suffers from "scarring effects" caused by the pandemic over the past few years.

Yue's views were echoed by Zhou Maohua, a macroeconomic researcher at China Everbright Bank, who called for further steps to support the development of hard-hit SMEs, saying more efforts should be made to promote a more balanced recovery.

China has already pledged efforts to bol-

ster its private sector, mostly SMEs, as the National Development and Reform Commission on Tuesday held a meeting with five private companies to address private enterprises' concerns and support their sustainable development.

Zheng Shanjie, head of the NDRC, said at the meeting that the commission will carefully review the opinions and suggestions of participating entrepreneurs and establish a mechanism for cross-regional and cross-departmental coordination to solve problems.

Kelvin Hou, founder and CEO of Time Traveler, a Beijing-based company offering extended reality and artificial intelligence services and content, said the government has provided robust policy support for technology and cultural enterprises, creating a favorable business environment and vast

market opportunities for SMEs such as Time Traveler.

"I am highly optimistic about China's long-term economic development," Hou said. "China possesses several favorable conditions, including its ultra-large domestic market and robust industrial innovation capabilities, indicating that it remains one of the most promising markets with huge growth potential."

Looking ahead, he said businesses need to better cater to market demands, and refine their strategies to seize existing opportunities while strengthening their capabilities.

Zhan Junhao, founder of Fujian Huace Brand Positioning Consulting, also expressed optimism regarding China's prospects this year, saying SMEs will also experience steady improvement in the coming months.

Private brands spur sales of retail stores

By WANG ZHUOQIONG
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Chinese supermarkets, warehouse club chains and convenience stores are increasingly relying on their own store brands to better serve consumers seeking value and affordability.

This shift indicates that store brands, which are also known as private brands, are critical to the survival and success of many brick-and-mortar retailers in China, a survey by the China Chain Store & Franchise Association revealed.

Private brands have risen steadily in recent years catering to middle-income consumers who patronize supermarkets and warehouse club chains that are membership-driven, according to the report 2023 Retailer Private-Label Best Practice and Analysis.

In 2022, private brands constituted 5 percent of total sales among the top 100 supermarkets in China, compared to 4.1 percent in 2019 and 3.2 percent in 2018, said the report.

In 2019, each retail enterprise surveyed averaged 865 products under private brands, up 32.3 percent year-on-year.

The private brands owned by the top 100 enterprises reached 40 billion yuan (\$5.57 billion) in sales revenue, with each product generating 500,000 yuan in average revenue in 2019, said the report.

Private brands are expected to be the key drivers of sales at many retailers in China, said the report.

For example, Sam's Club, the high-end warehouse club chain of Walmart Inc, has seen products of its store brands account for about 30 percent of total sales.

Zhang Qing, an executive in charge of procurement at Sam's Club China, said that in the past 12 months, the company has invested nearly 1 billion yuan on private brand development to lower prices of many frequently purchased items. Development of a new product under a private brand takes between 12 months and 18 months, Zhang said.

"We dig value out of efficiency, to offer market average prices or even lower prices, with quality surpassing the market standard."

Hema, the grocery unit of Alibaba Group, promoted its own store brands throughout last year. It now boasts over 1,200 private brands. Such brands contributed 35 percent of its total sales by the end of October 2022. Hema aims for its own private brands to generate up to 50 percent of total sales by 2025.

Jason Yu, general manager of Kantar Worldpanel China, said private brands signify a distinctive strength of retailers such as Sam's Club and Hema.

"Their private brands offer not only lower prices and better quality but more consumer-oriented brand assets, boosted by innovations in technology and supply chains," Yu said.

In recent years, modern retail entities in China, including supermarkets, hypermarkets and convenience stores, have transformed into solution providers rather than being mere distribution channels, Yu said.

"By integrating supply chain resources, retailers have invested in brand building and innovation of products under private brands, allowing them to swiftly and effectively translate shopper demands into products and solutions."

The private brand market has a massive potential to grow in China, said the survey report, citing rising consumer awareness.

In 2022, nine out of 10 consumers were aware of private brands; half of them were able to pronounce the name of each store brand they recognized; and 35 percent said they made purchases in the past six months. Of the 87 percent of consumers who did not buy products sold under private labels, many said they are open-minded about store brands.

To enhance recognition of their store brands, retailers adopted various marketing strategies, including food testing, forming WeChat groups to promote new products and offering introductions from store employees.

For instance, at Sam's Club in China, 15 metric tons of samples of shrimp were consumed annually. The company has also set up Sam's Kitchen where professional chefs provide recipes and cooking tips for food products bearing store brands.

However, a major challenge is the lack of innovation, which means others could easily copy many private labels, said Yu of Kantar.

Inadequate focus on private labels also hampers consumer awareness of the real value of these products. Enhancing the distinctiveness and perceived value of private labels is crucial for the evolution of retailers, he said.

Briefly

Xinjiang contributes to green energy

With an abundance of strong winds and plentiful sunshine, Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region delivered 740.8 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity to other parts of the country over the past 13 years up until the end of 2023, of which clean electricity accounted for nearly 30 percent, said State Grid Xinjiang Electric Power Co. Xinjiang is rich in clean energy including wind and solar. Clean electricity transmitted from the region to other areas amounted to 210 billion kWh since the transmission program was launched there in November 2010. This is equivalent to a reduction of approximately 171.52 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions, said the company. The company aims to form a main power grid network which will include seven circle lines for power supply within the region and six lines to transport power out of Xinjiang by 2025.

NavInfo wins lawsuit vs Baidu over infringement

NavInfo, a Shenzhen-listed company, has won a lawsuit over internet search firm Baidu, which was ordered by Beijing High People's Court to pay 64.5 million yuan (\$8.99 million) for an infringement case. NavInfo said on Tuesday it received a verdict, saying the court had rejected Baidu's appeal in a follow-up trial. NavInfo, a market leader in navigation maps and traffic information, sued Baidu in the Beijing Intellectual Property Court in 2017. In the initial trial in 2020, the court ordered Baidu to pay 64.5 million yuan to NavInfo and cease its infringement activities. Baidu said it will seek a retrial with the Supreme People's Court.

Geely launches Zeekr EV sales in Israel

Chinese automaker Geely has launched sales of two of its new electric Zeekr-branded vehicle models in Israel, the company said. One of them is the electric mid-sized sedan Zeekr 001, which features a 620 kilometer range with a top speed of 200 kilometers per hour, and is equipped with a 100 kilowatt-hour battery. The second model is the electric subcompact luxury crossover SUV Zeekr X, offering a maximum range of 440 km, speeds of up to 180 km/h and a 69 kWh battery.

CHINA DAILY-XINHUA

CES

Xpeng's flying car unit to accept orders

By ZHU WENQIAN
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Chinese electric vehicle maker Xpeng Motor's flying car unit Xpeng Aeroht said its modular flying car will be available for preorders in the fourth quarter, with plans to begin mass production and delivery to individual users in the last quarter of 2025.

The company revealed this at the ongoing 2024 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, the world's largest consumption technology show that concludes on Friday.

More than 4,000 exhibitors, including over 1,000 Chinese companies, are participating in the event this year.

As Xpeng Aeroht's second breakthrough vehicle, the electric vertical take-off and landing (eVTOL) flying car made its international debut at the CES, demonstrating the transition between terrestrial and aerial modes.

The vehicle boasts a two-part design, with the air module facilitating vertical takeoff for low-altitude flights, while the ground module, which envelops the air module, allowing for ground transportation.

Beyond helping individual drivers take to



The land aircraft carrier modular flying car developed by Xpeng Aeroht is on display at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

the air, the modular flying car holds potential for public services like emergency rescue, satisfying both public and private demand, the company said.

"The future of mobility goes beyond cars. Whether people want to travel by car, air or other modes, we aspire to change what's possible," said Gu Hongdi, vice-chairman and president of Xpeng Motors.

China is gradually opening up its low-altitude airspace for personal use, and it is seen as a market with significant potential for flying cars.

The low-altitude economy was listed as a national strategic emerging industry at the tone-setting Central Economic Work Conference held in December. Local governments have been making efforts to map out more specific policies.

Xpeng Aeroht, the largest flying car company in Asia in terms of the scale of its team,

has been exploring low-altitude flights for more than 10 years as it races to take flying cars from concept to reality.

In 2022, the company accomplished a test flight of a prototype weighing about 2 metric tons.

The flying car is designed for future three-dimensional transportation, with the company proceeding to mass production once related policy, regulation and application scenarios become more mature, it said.

Globally, the urban air traffic sector has entered a quick development phase.

Japan and South Korea both elevated industrial planning of the sector to the national level in 2020.

Companies such as Lilium, Volocopter, Kitty Hawk and car manufacturers Audi and Geely have been involved in the development of flying cars, according to market research provider LeadLeo Research Institute.

XGIMI projector sets standard

By CHENG YU
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Chinese intelligent projector manufacturer XGIMI said it is confident the launch of the Horizon Max, its latest groundbreaking projector that is IMAX Enhanced-certified, will create greater international presence for the brand.

XGIMI launched its newest product at the ongoing Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in the United States. IMAX Enhanced is a partnership between IMAX and DTS, a well-known provider of audio technologies.

The Horizon Max will bring IMAX's picture and signature sound to users. It also adopts a new-generation dual light technology, which the company claimed will result in an ultra-wide color gamut and ultra-high brightness.

Zhong Bo, chairman of XGIMI, said the

Horizon Max not only sets a new benchmark for the industry with this certification but also represents a significant milestone for the brand with the most refined version of its signature light technologies.

"Despite market challenges, our long-term vision will not change. We hope that XGIMI will become the world's largest intelligent projector as soon as possible."

XGIMI will strive to enhance projection technology and continue to invest in research and development for future success, he said.

The latest data from Runto Technology, a global provider of information on semiconductor displays, internet and consumer electronics, said the global projector market shipments reached 13.5 million units in the first three quarters of last year, up 4.5 percent year-on-year.

XGIMI, with a market share of 5.1 percent,

ranked second in terms of global shipments. Japanese intelligent projector maker Epson topped the rankings. Chinese projector maker JMGO and US projector manufacturer ViewSonic rank among the top four projector brands.

In recent years, consumers in advanced economies have been increasingly using screen-free televisions in the form of high-end projectors that are capable of beaming very high-resolution pictures.

In the first three quarters of 2023, projector companies from the Chinese mainland, with a 37.6 percent market share, topped other countries in terms of shipments.

"As the domestic market reaches a saturation point, Chinese tech firms are increasingly looking overseas for growth opportunities. While their desire is stronger than ever, they have gained an edge in terms of technological prowess," said Xiang Ligang, director-general of the Information Consumption Alliance, a telecom industry association, in an earlier interview.

BUSINESS



Visitors gather at the CMS booth during a medical exhibition in Shanghai. The company announced the acquisition of a factory in Singapore in December to expand its global footprint. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Pharma firms eye Singapore for bigger global footprint

City state boasts advanced medical resources, efficient management

By ZHENG YIRAN
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With improved innovative capabilities, competitiveness and international initiatives, Chinese pharmaceutical firms are expanding business in Singapore to tap into a new "battlefield".

In late December, China Medical System, a Shenzhen, Guangdong province-based biopharmaceutical company, announced the acquisition of a factory in Singapore through wholly owned subsidiary CMS Medical Venture Pte Ltd and non-wholly owned units Rxilient Health and PharmaGend Global Medical Services Pte Ltd. The factory, which is located in Tuas Biomedical Park in Singapore and occupies 60,000 square meters, is expected to support CMS' contract development and manufacturing organization (CDMO) business in Southeast Asia.

"With Chinese innovative pharmaceutical companies deepening their globalization drive, exploring a 'second battlefield' in Singapore has become a must. With its role as a hub for the intersection of East and West, as well as its geographical advantage of being part of the Southeast Asian market, Singapore provides ideal industrial and international support for Chinese phar-

maceutical companies going abroad to Southeast Asia," said Zhang Jue, a pharmaceutical expert at VBDData.cn, a Chongqing-based healthcare service platform.

Specifically, Zhang said Singapore owns advanced medical resources, efficient management, abundant talent resources, a comprehensive medical product administration system, a developed infrastructure and an efficient logistics system. Several high-quality biopharmaceuticals are manufactured in Singapore, and more than 15 renowned multinational drugmakers have established factories in the city state.

Meanwhile, other Chinese pharmaceutical companies have also been accelerating their commercialization process in Singapore over the past year. In March, Shanghai Junshi Biosciences Co Ltd announced collaboration with Singapore-based Rxilient Biotech on development and commercialization of an antibody drug through a joint venture in nine Southeast Asian nations — Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Li Ning, CEO of Junshi Biosciences, said, "Southeast Asia boasts a thriving pharmaceutical innovation environment, flexible drug regulatory policies and diversified

medical security systems, so it has great potential as an emerging market for innovative drugs."

The company said it is planning to launch the antibody drug in more markets. At the end of last year, the product was approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration. Many regulatory authorities in Southeast Asia rely on the FDA results, and the application process is more about completing the registration process.

"In addition, obtaining high-quality endorsements from the FDA will also greatly assist in accelerating the approval of more indications of the product, especially in Southeast Asian countries where companies can accept applications for indications already listed in China," Li said.

"With rapid economic development and the rise of the emerging middle class in Southeast Asia, the region will play a role as a new engine of growth for the global pharmaceutical and biotechnical market in the future," said Lee Ker Yin, CEO of Rxilient.

"From Rxilient to PharmaGend, a closed loop for Chinese pharmaceutical companies' 'new globalization' path is gradually formed — new domestic drugs are produced using Singapore as a development platform and sold on the global market," Zhang said.

Market consultancy CPhI Insight expects that by 2025, pharmaceutical sales revenue in

Southeast Asia will surpass \$44.4 billion. So far, an increasing number of pharmaceutical companies from home and abroad have flocked to Southeast Asia to establish factories, distribution channels and marketing networks.

Hong Yong, an associate research fellow at the e-commerce research institute of the Ministry of Commerce, said: "The fact that Chinese pharmaceutical companies are expanding business to not only developing countries in Southeast Asia, but also Singapore, demonstrates that their innovative capabilities, competitiveness and international strategies have been improved. As an important hub of both global pharmaceutical research and development and production, Singapore presents higher requirements for drug enterprises' R&D capability, product quality and international compliance. Successfully entering and gaining a foothold in Singapore shows that they have made great progress in supply chain management, quality control and adaptation to the global market."

For further development in Singapore, Hong suggested that Chinese companies strictly follow local laws and regulations, enhance intellectual property protections, and pay attention to localized operations in order to achieve long-term development.

Digital fabric printing gaining popularity among textile players

By MA ZHENHUAN in Hangzhou
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Digital fabric printing is gaining a strong foothold in the Yangtze River Delta region, a hub for textile production and exports in China.

This new mode of printing, which uses inkjet technology to print on fabric or garments, has the advantage of etching colorful and complicated designs on fabric with high precision, reducing harm to the environment due to its "green" technologies.

Digital fabric printing is appropriate for small-scale production, as it is more cost-effective and less demanding than screen printing techniques.

Nevertheless, it is becoming popular in large-scale and mass-production fabric printing, as an alternative to rotary screen printing.

At a factory of Hi-ink Digital Technology Co Ltd in Zhejiang province, several large machines are running at high speed, efficiently printing patterns on fabrics through digital printing technology.

These machines belong to the "KUN" series of single-pass digital printing equipment, which was first produced by the company.

Founded in 2016, Hi-ink Digital Technology is located in Shaoxing, Zhejiang, which is known as the "World Cloth City".

The company first produced the "KUN" series of single-pass digital printing equipment in 2019, reforming the traditional printing technology and increasing the competitiveness of China's digital printing technology in the international market.

China is the world's largest textile processing and exporting country, and the Yangtze River Delta area is its hub for both production and exports.

Earlier, traditional printing and dyeing technology — which involved the costly process of making the screen and paste — used to lead to excessive wastage that harmed the environment.

After the advent of digital printing technologies, multipass printing was widely applied. However, its daily output could only reach 600 to 3,000 meters per set, much smaller than that of traditional machines, which can produce 20,000-60,000 meters per set.

In 2014, Song Shuiyou, founder of Hi-ink Digital Technology, proposed a digital printing platform that had more advantages in terms of daily output and printing costs than traditional printing techniques.

After a number of experiments, the "KUN" series of single-pass digital printing equipment was developed, overcoming previous disadvantages.

The "KUN" single-pass digital printing machine's speed is 80 meters per minute and its daily output hits 60,000-100,000 meters per set, which

is 1.5 times that of a traditional rotary screen printing machine, five times that of a flat screen printing machine, and 1.5-2 times that of similar foreign-made products.

Furthermore, the machine also features higher printing quality, with a physical accuracy of up to 1200 dpi×2400 dpi, which is four times that of the common multipass machine in the market.

Since it does not involve making the screen and paste, the printing cost is greatly reduced, making it effective over traditional printing in mass production.

The single-pass digital printing machine has the potential to completely replace traditional printing machines, causing less waste and pollution.

According to a third-party testing report, the "KUN" single-pass equipment can reduce electricity consumption by 52.02 percent, water by 46.66 percent, steam by 51.39 percent, and carbon dioxide emissions by 51.44 percent during the printing process, compared with traditional printing methods.

At present, a total of 21 sets of "KUN" single-pass machines have been applied in China, accounting for more than 70 percent of all single-pass machines in the country.

In 2023, the company achieved a revenue of 140 million yuan (\$19.63 million).

The emergence of the "KUN" single-pass digital printing equipment has enabled the textile printing and garment industry to reverse the earlier model of basing sales on production, helping to solve the problem of overstocking and resource wastage, thereby realizing environmentally friendly and sustainable development of the industry.

With this, China's textile industry has entered a new era in three new aspects: science and technology, fashion, and green processes.

As a key link in the textile industry chain, printing and dyeing is an important process to enhance the added value of textiles.

In recent years, China has issued a series of industrial policies to encourage intelligent manufacturing equipment and green printing and dyeing, thus supporting the application of digital printing technology in the textile industry.

Song said that in addition to the existing "KUN" single-pass machine for fabric printing, the company is working on new product lines and exploring new application areas, including printing equipment for wide fabrics in home textiles and for book printing.

"We are now actively seeking to explore further international markets, such as India, Pakistan and Southeast Asian countries, with more Chinese textile manufacturers growing active in seeking to enhance their supply chain abroad," Song said.

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Virtues and laws, double protection for pangolins

Between heaven and earth, together with other sentient beings, I live.

—Zhuangzi's Qi Wu-Lan (Easy on Seeing Things as Equal)

AD

BUSINESSFOCUS

Xizang expressway brightens local lives

State-owned company offers helping hand for jobs, improved living standards

By MA CHENGUANG and ZHUANG QIANG

The completion of a key expressway linking Lhasa, capital of the Xizang autonomous region, and Shigatse, a prefecture-level city, has boosted local transportation and transformed the livelihoods of residents.

The 166.98-kilometer-long expressway, whose first phase had opened to traffic earlier, saw the second phase, or the middle section partly built by China Railway No 4 Engineering Group Co Ltd, fully connected on Dec 5.

Tenzin Phuntsog, a native of Sog county in Xizang and a worker at CREC4, was told by the company that he could end his probationary period six months earlier than scheduled and become a formal employee, due to his dedication to the job.

Tenzin, who had received technical training and been admitted to CREC4's project department in Rinpung county in July 2021, said he was glad that his diligence at work had so quickly won praise from his company, a State-owned builder.

In June 2018, CREC4 builders arrived in Rinpung to construct the Yaan-Yecheng Expressway running through the county. It embarked on a plan to help the local people. Rinpung, located in the northeastern tip of Shigatse, borders Lhasa in the north and Shannan in the east.

Tenzin, who now works as a technician for the Cholongya River bridge, earns 15,000 yuan (\$2,270) per month, greatly boosting income support for his family.

Previously, the family of four, including his father, mother and elder sister, lived mainly on the meager salary of his father, who used to toil as a road maintenance worker.

The Yaan-Yecheng Expressway starts at Juntian village under Yaan's Yucheng district in Sichuan province, and ends at Yecheng under Kashgar in the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, spanning three provincial-level regions: Sichuan, Xizang and Xinjiang.

As a key east-west artery in the national expressway network, work on it officially started in October 2012. On Dec 31, 2018, the entire Sichuan section was opened to traffic.

Sog county is in Nagqu prefecture, bordering Shigatse in the south.

"As my father works on roads, I am so proud that I could also work as a road builder," Tenzin said, adding that his salary has helped lessen the burden on his family.

For Nudron, a widowed mother of two, her job at CREC4's construction site on the expressway



Tenzin Phuntsog, a native of Sog county, Xizang autonomous region, and an employee of China Railway No 4 Engineering Group Co Ltd, takes measurements at the construction site of the Lhasa-Shigatse Expressway. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

has helped stabilize all the basic family expenses.

Before landing the new job in 2020, she was a poverty-stricken resident of Nubikam at Rinpung's Chewa township, shouldering all the responsibilities of the family.

She now works as a traffic guide for CREC4's project mixing station and the intersection of National Highway 318. She earns a monthly income of 5,000 yuan.

"I really cherish my current job, as I can do my bit for the work safety of the project," said Nudron, who is always by her post, whether on a hot summer's day or a cold one with heavy snowfall during winter.

On May 9, 2022, the Nyingchi-Lhasa section of the Yaan-Yecheng Expressway was opened to traffic, following the trial operation of the first phase, the Lhasa-Shigatse Expressway, in the east since Nov 22, 2021.

Local road

Situated in the valleys of the middle reaches of Yarlung Tsangpo, Xizang's most famous river, Rinpung is known as the "east gate" of Shigatse. With an average elevation of over 3,950 meters above sea level, Rinpung is mountainous and riddled with deep gullies.

When CREC4 builders arrived, they realized that the local popula-

tion faced many difficulties in their daily travels.

Rinpung administers nine townships, with 366 natural villages organized into 72 administrative villages and one neighborhood committee.

In addition to building the expressway, CREC4 staffers decided to offer a helping hand by setting up an assistance team, of which Xu Keming is the head.

Xu said: "A good local road can serve as a transport artery linking the rural Tibetan fields and the urban market. Once built, the local rural resources can be revitalized."

Based mainly on agriculture, the local people produce highland barley, wheat, rapeseed, peas and potatoes, as well as rear cattle and sheep.

Rinpung's rich mineral resources include ferrochrome, lead, zinc, marble and jade.

With help from the assistance team, CREC4 Second Engineering only took six months to renovate 36.9 km of existing roads and 12.6 km of permanent roads, breaking the bottleneck facing the Tibetan farmers and herdsmen along these roads.

Techniques, jobs

Rinpung has a population of some 38,800, including over 35,600 Tibetans, but the local residents



Nudron, a widowed mother of two, employed by CREC4 as a traffic guide, works at a construction site near National Highway 318 in the Xizang autonomous region. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

mainly rely on agricultural produce for income. They need industrial support and tourism to boost their incomes.

Xu said aiding in skill development and jobs is the best solution to help in the development of local residents.

As technical training can lead to decent jobs, the assistance team organized CREC4 staffers in conducting "skills training" and "pre-job training" sessions through the mode of "a teacher helping an apprentice".

The skills mainly covered steel bar binding and electric welding.

Tenzin Dondrup is a fervent attendee at the training sessions. After breakfast, he immediately rushes to the training room.

"Today, we are going to have classes on electric welding. I need to have a good seat for a clearer view," he said, adding, "I'm to apply for an electrician's certificate to prepare for my job."

So far, more than 140 training sessions have been launched, drawing over 2,400 attendees.

After the training, the assistance team picked the local people to work as CREC4 builders based

on their acquired skills and educational levels.

So far, CREC4 Second Engineering has hired more than 400 Tibetan farmers and herdsmen, and leased more than 300 sets of local machinery and equipment, helping them garner a total income of more than 20 million yuan.

Children's education

CREC4 builders wouldn't let the Tibetan children down without proper support.

For CREC4 builders, extending a helping hand to needy students in Rinpung ensured educational equality and social fairness.

The assistance team visited the Rinpung County Education Bureau, the Chewa township and the Lhain township and their surrounding villages, and launched an aid-the-kids drive.

Some 20 CREC4 staffers decided to offer each primary school student 600 yuan per semester and each middle school student 1,000 yuan per semester for their studies.

"I will definitely cherish this aid fund and use it for my own study," said Lhadron, who is studying in the third grade at Rinpung County Middle School.

Contact the writers at zhuangqiang@chinadaily.com.cn

Builders help weave dreams, win hearts

By HAN RONGHUA and ZHUANG QIANG

For Fang Shanzhi, an employee of State-owned builder China Railway No 4 Engineering Group Co Ltd, building an expressway in the Xizang autonomous region has made his life fruitful and rewarding over the past few years.

In June 2018, Fang and his colleagues arrived in Rinpung county to help construct the Lhasa-Shigatse Expressway — part of the east-west artery Yaan-Yecheng Expressway — whose main construction was completed on Dec 5.

As Party secretary of the CREC4 project department in Rinpung, he has worked with more than 400 Tibetan farmers and herdsmen on the CREC4 task, and leased more than 300 sets of machinery and equipment from the local people, offering them an opportunity to earn more than 20 million yuan (\$2.73 million).

In June 2021, Fang received a phone call from Pasang Gyatso, gov-

ernment head of Chewa township where his project department is based, requesting him to join Thubten, then government head of Rinpung county, on the rostrum for a local celebration.

Seeing the Tibetans dance and sing wholeheartedly, Fang thought the work that CREC4 staff members had done to help the local residents had been rewarding, and that they would be happier after the fully opened expressway offers an easier mobility option.

According to Zhang Zhengrong, Fang's colleague who is the chairman of the project department's trade union, during the local Saga Dawa Festival and Sho Dun Festival (yogurt festival) each year, the local residents would invite them for a grand gala to enjoy the folk performances and taste the local cuisine.

By presenting Khata — an auspicious ceremonial silk fabric marking a show of respect — to CREC4 employees, they would express their warmest welcome and gratitude to the guests.



Local people and employees attend various events held by local governments and China Railway No 4 Engineering Group Co during engineering works in the Xizang autonomous region. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Zhang said that while celebrating the anniversary of the founding of the Xizang autonomous region, villagers at Chewa township also invited the CREC4 builders, helping to solidify their friendship.

During each Mid-Autumn Festival, the Tibetans also invited the CREC4 employees — who worked far away from their hometowns and could not get back for family reunions during the traditional festival — to their homes for a get-together, he said, adding that he

was touched by the gesture.

Wang Hao, a staffer at the publicity department of CREC4 Second Engineering Co Ltd, which sends the builders to Xizang for construction work, said his colleagues have forged a deep bond with the local Tibetan residents during the course of their work.

On Oct 1, the Tibetan residents in Dingrong village of Bome county, which is administered by Nyingchi prefecture, invited the CREC4 builders working nearby for a celebration to spend the

National Day holiday.

At the start of the event, the Tibetans presented Khatas to the CREC4 builders, expressing their deep thanks for the construction work.

The Tibetan villagers and the CREC4 builders jointly carried out a number of cultural and sports events with unique Tibetan features, such as holding sandbags, a tug-of-war and high-altitude basketball matches, attracting much mirth from the spectators.

The enjoyable moments made

them blend in amid colorful flowers with the snowy mountains and grasslands in the background, Wang said.

Feng Jun, an official at the CREC4 project department, said, "We need to create a favorable external environment for promoting smooth and stable construction here."

He said the event boosted ethnic ties of "the Han people and the Tibetan people being one big family" and created a harmonious atmosphere.



COMMENT

Editorials

Washington's hoopla over Chinese tech symptom of its own harmful dysfunction

Nvidia announced at a technology conference in Las Vegas that four Chinese automakers will use the company's DRIVE technology to power their automated driving systems.

The Chinese market accounts for about 20 percent of the company's revenue and it is seeking to maintain its presence while still complying with Washington's export restrictions.

Previously, the company said it is exporting chips that are customized for the Chinese market so they do not fall foul of Washington's advanced chip ban targeting the country.

Nvidia is only one of the chipmakers from the United States, as well as its allies, including the Republic of Korea, trying to adapt to the new normal of "chip war" Washington has launched to try and stifle China's high-tech progress.

At the Sixth China International Import Expo in Shanghai in November last year, apart from Nvidia, almost all the major chipmakers, including Intel, Qualcomm, AMD, Micron, Texas Instruments, ASML and Samsung Electronics, showcased their latest products, technologies and services.

With the boom of its digital economy, China is now the largest semiconductor market in the world. Its imports of chips and related equipment were valued at \$415.6 billion in 2022.

That's why the semiconductor giants, including those from the United States, cannot afford to withdraw from China, and are taking various measures

to diversify their products so they satisfy Washington's export controls. As industry insiders, what they are well aware of is that the "national security" concerns Washington cites to justify its "chip war" are only unwarranted charges some China-bashing politicians are peddling in an attempt to give credence to their fanciful "China threat" theory.

In fact, as the competitive scaremongering of its politicians shows, the main threat the US faces today is from its inability to perform any self-rectification or apply the brakes to the extreme partisan squabbling that has crippled its political system. As a consequence of the country's dysfunctional politics, US society is ripping itself apart, as many pressing domestic issues have been left unattended. Were it not for the dominance the US enjoys in global finance, high-tech and military sectors, the US would not have been able to scapegoat China for its self-created woes.

Under great pressure from the Republicans on China-related issues in a US presidential election year, the Joe Biden administration is reportedly considering levying punitive tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles and including older-generation chips in its export control list.

Instead of doubling down on the coercive, bullying and irrational trade practices aimed at China, it should heed the calls of the chipmakers, as well as US companies in other affected industries, for an end to them as they actually serve no party's interest.

China respectful partner of the Maldives

Over the past decade, the China-Maldives partnership has set a good example of equality and mutual benefit between countries regardless of their sizes. Yet that has not stopped some media in the West from continuing to harp on the old tune of China's "debt trap", by claiming that Chinese lending to the country will compromise the Maldives' long-term growth.

Which is not true.

The fact is the current debt repayment obligations of the Maldives are mainly to multilateral financial institutions, not China. As a matter of fact, the Chinese assistance brings tangible benefits to the local people. And China has ensured the arrangements for loan interest rates, repayment periods and grace periods are appropriate.

Over the past 10 years, bilateral relations have deepened and the practical cooperation between the two countries has achieved fruitful outcomes in various fields, especially after the Maldives joined the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative in 2014.

Belt and Road projects have helped transform the Maldives' economic landscape and significantly improved its people's well-being and livelihood. The China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, which opened in 2018, has made commuting much easier for hundreds of thousands of Maldivians and allowed for expanded economic activities. Chinese assistance has also enabled the construction of social housing units in the country and made the expansion and upgrading

of the Velana International Airport possible.

China was already the largest source of foreign tourists to the Maldives in 2019, with Chinese tourists representing about 20 percent of all foreign visitors to the archipelagic nation. The number is expected to increase rapidly and return to pre-pandemic levels this year following the resumption of outward travel from China.

As Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu said at a forum in Fuzhou, Fujian province, on Tuesday, China has become one of the Maldives' closest developmental partners.

Muizzu is paying a five-day state visit to China, which is expected to push bilateral relations to new heights, as it opens up new opportunities for the two countries to expand their mutually beneficial cooperation in such areas as infrastructure, tourism, modern agriculture and fisheries.

This has prompted those clinging to the Cold War mentality, who choose to look at the closer China-Maldives engagement through the tainted glasses of geopolitical competition, to speculate that China is vying for influence in the region against India, the traditional strategic partner of the Maldives, as it is the first time a Maldivian president has visited China before visiting India.

Nonetheless, such thinking could not be further from the truth. China fully respects the Maldives' right to choose its own development path and partners. It is those making such claims who regard a country as enjoying exclusive rights to exert a certain degree of unwarranted influence over another.

Peaceful reunification is the future of Taiwan

Starting from Jan 1 this year, the Chinese mainland suspended tariff reductions on some chemicals from Taiwan island. This is a consequence of the island's Democratic Progressive Party authorities' secessionist policies.

The DPP authorities on Taiwan island have long imposed unilateral and discriminatory trade bans and restrictions on products from the mainland, breaching the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement between the two sides. What the DPP authorities have been doing has damaged the interests of quite a few mainland industries and enterprises, according to the spokesperson for the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council.

What is peculiar about the matter is the fact that the DPP authorities have not taken any steps to engage in talks with the mainland to ease the worsening cross-strait trade relations. Instead, they have sought to shift the blame onto the mainland.

The ECFA was signed in 2010 by the two sides in the spirit of the 1992 Consensus — that there is only one China — to facilitate cross-strait trade relations. With the facilitation of the ECFA, the trade volume across the Taiwan Strait increased from \$145 billion in 2010 to more than \$319 billion in 2022.

From January to November 2023, the trade volume across the Strait was \$244.5 billion, with the volume of goods the mainland purchased from

the island dropping by 16.1 percent and its sales to the island declining by 17.1 percent.

Relevant departments on the mainland are considering further reducing the number of products from Taiwan that enjoy tariff reductions, according to reports.

But rather than taking measures to promote trade relations across the Strait, the DPP authorities have refused to recognize the 1992 Consensus since taking office in 2016. Instead they have imposed bans and restrictions on products from the mainland, and fiddled with the rules of the ECFA and set up obstacles to normal economic exchanges and cooperation across the Strait.

Such issues could have been properly handled via cross-strait negotiations, but the DPP authorities have obstinately adhered to the policy of "Taiwan independence" and refused to recognize the 1992 Consensus, which has damaged the political foundation necessary for cross-strait negotiations and made it hard to properly handle the issues.

A local leadership election is to be held on the island this month. No matter which political party wins, it is important for the new authorities to recognize that any attempt to seek the separation of the island from the motherland is a lost cause. For the benefit of Taiwan people and the long-term development of the Chinese nation, peaceful reunification is the future of the island.

Cai Meng



Opinion Line

Global economic growth gloom due to breakable bottlenecks

The United Nations recently released a report lowering its forecast for world economic growth for this year to 2.4 percent from 2.7 percent in 2023, citing high interest rates, escalating geopolitical conflicts, sluggish international trade as well as tightened credit and rising borrowing costs.

Earlier, international institutions including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank warned of a global economic slowdown in 2024. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development also predicted at the end of 2023 global economic growth will slow from 2.9 percent in 2023 to 2.7 percent in 2024.

Analysts point out that under the impact of monetary policies in developed economies and continued inflationary pressures, the tightening of the global financial environment, the weakening of trade growth, and the decline of business and consumer confidence have become increasingly obvious. This, coupled with the abuse of trade protectionism by the United States and its stoking of geopolitical

conflicts, has caused huge shocks and damage to the world economy.

In order to change the current downbeat expectations for a global recovery, great efforts should be made to remove the obstacles facing economic growth.

First, economic and trade cooperation among countries should be strengthened rather than weakened. In this respect, the experience of cooperation among emerging market and developing economies can be built on. The policy dividends released by the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in 2023, the ever-bigger presence of the Belt and Road Initiative, and strengthened policy coordination and cooperation among emerging markets and developing economies, have helped cope with the spillover effects of the crises in Europe and the US. That the UN report lowers its forecast for the growth of developing economies slightly from 4.1 percent in 2023 to 4.0 percent in 2024, compared with the sharply lower expected growth for developed economies, also shows the greater resilience of

developing countries in coping with risks.

Second, the US-led advanced economies should do more to guide market expectations. Since the third quarter of 2023, the US Federal Reserve's judgment on the trend of inflation has fluctuated back and forth, adding more uncertainties to the market. The developed countries should adopt responsible fiscal and monetary policies, rather than being capricious or reckless as they have been.

Third, green development and digitalization should be accelerated to foster new growth points for a global economic recovery. The wide application of digital technologies such as big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence and the internet of things, as well as the promotion of green technologies, and the forming of a circular economy, will help promote industrial upgrading and economic growth, create new market demand, improve production efficiency, and promote international trade cooperation.

— ECONOMIC DAILY

Harbin's good service leaves lasting impression

Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province that is famous for its snow and ice tourism, has become the hottest travel destination this winter. It received 3.04 million visitors and made tourism revenue of 5.9 billion yuan (\$824 million) during the three-day New Year's Day holiday.

So hot has been its social media-boostered appeal that some visitors may not even be aware of why it created a buzz in the first place. It was in mid-December

that the 25th Harbin Ice and Snow World opened, attracting over 40,000 tourists on the first day. Yet the organizers had to refund the ticket money to some of them because they complained about having to wait in long queues in the bitter cold. The local tourist bureau responded quickly by hurrying to site and solving the problem. This gave the people a good impression of the city.

While the incident has made

Harbin the go-to place of the moment, the city's good service, varied snow and ice attractions and rich historical and cultural resources can ensure that Harbin remains a popular tourism destination even when the buzz has moved on to somewhere else.

After all, good service is what tourists want when they visit somewhere. Other cities can draw lessons from Harbin's success this winter.

— ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Wave of nostalgia for 'good old days' of Chinese soccer

Der Kaiser, German soccer legend Franz Beckenbauer, passed away at 78 in Munich on Sunday. A versatile player, Beckenbauer, whose career lasted from 1959 to 1983, started out as a midfielder, but made his name as a central defender. He worked as a coach from 1984 to 1996.

Although Beckenbauer spent most of his career as player and coach in Germany, his influence was global. One of nine players to have won the FIFA World Cup, the European Champions Cup, and the Ballon d'Or, he is credited as having invented the role of the modern sweeper (*libero*).

His passing has triggered a wave of nostalgia among many Chinese soccer fans about the "good old days" when they would watch soccer matches together on the only small black-and-white TV in their neighborhood in a crowded room

in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as Chinese soccer at that time, when it was still regarded as a formidable football power in Asia.

Another important reason why the Chinese people cherish that memory is the Chinese soccer players then valued their jobs and took it as great honor to play for the national team, and the game was not tainted by corruption as it is today.

After China established its professional leagues in the 1990s to try and replace the former State-owned soccer system with one funded by enterprises and private businesses, and run by professional managers and associations, corruption started sweeping through the whole system.

As indicated by some cases related to soccer corruption that the discipline watchdog departments have recently released, in the process,

some players, coaches and referees have become active brokers between soccer officials and bribers both speculating on the huge popularity of the sport in the country with a soccer fan body of nearly 300 million.

There have been at least three waves of anti-graft campaigns in the Chinese soccer circle since the late 1990s. But it seems that they have only served to make vacancies for newcomers. The Chinese men's national team today is doubtlessly a third-rater in Asia.

If the soccer system of China is not effectively reformed, the sport will continue to be a hotbed of corruption ceaselessly exploiting the appeal of the sport and the fans' passion for it. Allowing that to happen time and again only damages the credibility of the relevant departments.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

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COMMENT

Chen Qinghong

Will Manila stop creating trouble in 2024?

The Ferdinand Marcos Jr government in the Philippines veered away from the previous Rodrigo Duterte administration's South China Sea policy in 2023, by making provocative moves that have raised tensions in the region.

True, Philippine President Marcos Jr, acknowledging the souring of Sino-Philippine relations, has said that his government will "solve that problem of Ren'ai Reef" itself, raising hopes that Manila might navigate a different course and appropriately handle the South China Sea disputes. But the shift in the Marcos Jr government's South China Sea policy is not merely a result of inexperience or wrong policies; it is the result of a confluence of internal and external factors.

First, the imminent deterioration and disintegration of the vessel, BRP *Sierra Madre*, is the direct reason behind the Philippines' frequent attempts to create troubles in the region. In May 1999, just one day after a US missile dropped on the Chinese embassy in what was then Yugoslavia, the Philippine authorities intentionally ran aground the dilapidated tank landing ship on Ren'ai Reef. Using the excuse of a leaking hull, they refused to tow it away later.

For quite some time, Manila had been transporting construction materials to the reef to reinforce the stranded vessel. Due to continuous erosion caused by sea waves and winds, BRP *Sierra Madre* seems to be on the verge of disintegrating, prompting Manila to accelerate the large-scale transportation of construction materials to repair the stranded ship and turn it into a permanent structure with the aim of unlawfully occupying Ren'ai Reef.

Second, the escalating domestic political strife is a key reason why the Philippines has changed its South China Sea policy with the tacit help of the United States. The situation became increasingly clear last year due to an imminent rupture in the political alliance "UniTeam" between the Marcos and Duterte families.

Particularly noteworthy is the intensifying dispute between Martin Romualdez, a cousin of Marcos Jr and the current speaker of the House, and Rodrigo Duterte and his daughter Sara Duterte. The dispute stems from the Marcos Jr camp's attempt to break free of the influence of the Duterte family, establish its own authority and expand the Marcos family's influence.

As a result, either driven by Marcos Jr himself or by his camp, there has been a shift in the Philippines' domestic and foreign policies. It is now "leaning towards the US and opposing China". This move serves two purposes: garnering the support of the military and police, as they can benefit significantly from appropriations; and securing the support of the US to weaken the power and influence of the political rivals.

And third, the US' intensifying efforts

to contain China is an external factor prompting the Philippines to take risky actions. Over the past decade, the US, identifying China as its primary competitor, has been meddling in the South China Sea, the East China Sea and other regional issues to sow discord between China and its neighbors, and build a unified front to counter China. The US has been using the Philippines, a treaty ally and a crucial link in the "first island chain", as a key lever to interfere in the South China Sea issue, consolidate its military presence in the region, and trigger regional confrontations.

After encouraging the Philippines to stir up trouble in the South China Sea, the US said that its Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines is applicable to the South China Sea issue. The two countries also released the US-Philippines Bilateral Defense Guidelines in 2024, asserting that "an armed attack in the Pacific,

including anywhere in the South China Sea, on either of their public vessels, aircraft, or armed forces — which includes their Coast Guards — would invoke mutual defense commitments under Articles IV and V of the 1951 US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty".

This has emboldened the Philippines to test the reliability of the US' commitment, by frequently creating trouble in the South China Sea.

The three factors mentioned above do not seem to have diminished this year, when the erosion of *Sierra Madre* could accelerate, widening the cracks between the different political camps in the Philippines.

Moreover, in the past year, while transporting construction materials to Ren'ai

Reef, the Philippine authorities invited a large number of journalists to visit the reef in the name of "transparency". In reality, Manila fabricated false information and edited video clips to arouse public anger against China.

The frequent provocative moves of the Philippines in the South China Sea last year have further damaged Sino-Philippine ties and undermined regional stability, forcing knowledgeable individuals and businesspeople, both in the Philippines and other countries, to criticize the Philippine government's moves.

In short, the prospects of the Philippines changing course, exercising restraint and appropriately handling the South China Sea issues in 2024, are not high. But it is clear that Manila's wrong approach will create more troubles not only for the region, but also itself.

The author is an associate research fellow at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Francisco José Leandro

BRI inspires concerted efforts for global development

The Belt and Road, after 10 years of operation, has acquired the status of the ancient Silk Road, raised its brand status, and become one of the biggest protagonists and practitioners of economic globalization.

The evolution of this Chinese initiative has taught the international community a number of lessons. Among them, two are inspiring as well as revealing. First, the Belt and Road Initiative has prompted a number of global power contenders to take parallel steps to build on similar ideas while raising new concerns in order to promote high-quality development, environmental sustainability and social progress. And second, the initiative has not only been developing and extending its reach; it has also pioneered a leading cooperation mechanism, making modernization a new driver of globalization.

The Belt and Road Initiative has prompted other economies to launch similar initiatives to advance economic development both regionally and globally. For instance, India and Japan announced the "Asia-Africa Growth Corridor" in 2016, the United States, Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development advanced the "Blue Dot Network" in 2019, the G7 member states launched the "Build Back Better World" initiative in 2021 and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment in 2022 to mobilize \$600 billion for global infrastructure investments by 2027, and the European Union proposed the "Global Gateway" in 2021 to boost smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors and strengthen education, healthcare and

Moreover, the Belt and Road Initiative does not present itself as the only model for realizing modernization and globalization to be copied by the current and potential partners.

research systems across the world.

These initiatives are in different stages of development and have different levels of global engagement, in some cases with very limited success, but they all share a common thread: promoting values on a global scale and pushing for globalization. As the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said, the Global Gateway will facilitate "smart investments in quality infrastructure, respecting the highest social and environmental standards, in line with the EU's values and standards. The Global Gateway strategy is a template for how Europe can build more resilient connections with the world."

The latest example of such an initiative is the "India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor", which was launched by France, Germany, India, Italy, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and the European Commission at the G20 Summit in New Delhi last year to link Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

More important, the Belt and Road Initiative is challenging the monopoly of the West in the postwar world order, as it

represents a framework of collaborative practices so as to present quasi-global solutions to common global problems. And at the opening ceremony of the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, China's top leader emphasized that Belt and Road cooperation has developed from physical connectivity to institutional connectivity.

China has laid down the important guiding principles for high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, which include the principle of "planning together, building together, and benefiting together", the philosophy of open, green and clean cooperation, and the pursuit of "high-standard, people-centered and sustainable cooperation". One of the strongest arguments in favor of the initiative, apart from its size and economic leverage, is its unequivocal contribution to global economic growth, which in turn will help realize the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

All these initiatives are aimed at connecting markets and production centers around the world to ensure the unimpeded flow of goods as well as to raise social capital. Similarly, all the initiatives are committed to protecting the environment, improving governance and pursuing sustainable growth. But what differentiates the Belt and Road Initiative from non-Chinese driven global initiatives is the fact that the former has been adapting to new challenges by, for example, promoting digitalization, raising product and service quality, transferring technologies, enhancing industrial efficiency, better protecting the environment, safeguarding energy security, and improving governance while also pro-

moting supplementary initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative.

Moreover, the Belt and Road Initiative does not present itself as the only model for realizing modernization and globalization to be copied by the current and potential partners. It rather presents a conglomerate of intertwined viewpoints, seeking joint efforts, promoting people-to-people exchanges, investing in development projects, and making more efforts to create a fairer and equitable global economic order by ending the US dollar's hegemony in global trade.

The Belt and Road is a framework initiative, which in conjunction with a number of others and with an innovative global vision seeks market access with consent and promotes globalization as an alternative to the United States-led monopolized economic and trade order. The Belt and Road Initiative has not only prompted other economies to launch similar trade and development initiatives, but also captured the imagination of the majority of the countries, as it advances a framework for cooperation rather than adopting a "buy or leave" attitude.

The Belt and Road is a leading global initiative and a framework for global cooperation, encouraging other global powers to launch similar initiatives, and promote modernization and global economic development based on a shared vision.

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Chu Zhaohui

The young need to cultivate personal traits for jobs

The employment situation in 2024 remains challenging because of factors such as the fast-changing international landscape, economic condition at home, private enterprises' below par performance, and the increasing number of college graduates. Recognizing these challenges, the Ministry of Education recently issued a notice outlining 26 measures to boost employment and entrepreneurship. The notice is especially aimed at youths who will graduate from college this year.

While the notice emphasizes the need to increase market-oriented employment channels and encourage private companies and small and medium-sized enterprises to recruit more people, it acknowledges the limitations of administrative departments in this regard. That's why the notice highlights specific efforts, including ongoing initiatives such as "university leaders visiting enterprises for job opportunities", developing a high-quality employment guidance service system, and increasingly using of the national university student employment service platform to get jobs.

Additionally, it emphasizes leveraging policy-driven positions, exploring grassroots employment opportunities, and continuing initiatives such as the "special positions plan" designed for graduates to teach in rural elementary schools, "three supports and one relief" that encourages graduates to contribute to the development of rural areas by working in fields such as agriculture, education, healthcare and poverty relief, and the "western plan" that encourages graduates to engage in volunteer service in remote western areas for one to three years.

In a society that accords high importance to colleges degrees, qualifications translate into employability.

But given that private enterprises typically account for about 90 percent of employment, the impact of policy-driven programs is limited and may not help overcome all the employment challenges. Increasing policy-driven programs beyond the government's fiscal capacity not only disrupts the normal market order and burdens taxpayers, but also affects the business environment of private enterprises, leading to long-term social problems and hindering employment.

On a macro level, the key to solving the employment problem lies in liberated thinking, a regulated legal market, and the use of technologies to create more jobs. Also, by promoting social equality and eliminating extreme disparities, the authorities can empower workers to become real stakeholders in businesses.

People, in general, have a tendency to link employability to educational qualifications. In a society that accords high importance to college degrees, qualifications translate into employability. However, in a normal work evaluation environment, job performance becomes crucial. As such, people who are professionally competent can perform very well at their job, and those with pleasing personality can more easily land a job.

The emphasis on academic qualifications has led to an oversaturation of degrees in the job market. As a result, the number of students taking the postgraduate entrance examination this year has decreased by more than 300,000. The factors contributing to this "degree inflation" are numerous and challenging to address in the short term, meaning they will continue for some time.

As for job seekers, they must broaden their description of job, by moving away from a narrow focus on academic credentials. Surveys show that today's job seekers, mostly the only child of their parents burdened by excessive pressure to earn a college degree but without learning life skills and practical knowledge, often exhibit two common personality deficiencies.

One, being what can be called passive personalities, most of today's job seekers lack the ability to set independent goals for learning and work, and are, to a large extent, dependent on their parents. And two, many of them are loners and therefore reluctant to engage with others and build friendship and forge connections, which could help them get a job.

It is evident that for the majority of job seekers today, learning new skills is key to increasing their chances of getting a job. Hence, higher education institutions should not confine students to classrooms; they should also work out programs to enhance students' cooperation spirit and teach them new skills.

Also, given that technological advancements are creating new employment opportunities, many believe humanities graduates are less likely to get well-paying jobs. Despite this, humanities graduates still find stable jobs in their respective fields. This shows there is still room to accommodate new graduates in the job market.

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GLOBAL VIEWS

E ZHIHUAN

Progress with stability

While promulgating policies to promote economic growth, China should improve policy coordination, bringing new impetus to its economy

In all, it is necessary to strengthen coordination and consistency among different macro policies. At the same time, policymakers need to pay attention to the market's reaction to relevant policies. While promulgating policies to promote economic growth, they must effectively improve the coordination of the policies to bring new impetus to China's economy.

Since the United States launched the trade war against China in 2018, the global industry chains have seen widespread decoupling and transfer, coupled no less by the recent pandemic. European countries and the US have made efforts to draw back investment and diversify industry chains. The US' introduction of the Inflation Reduction Act, the European Union's imposition of barriers on China's electric vehicle exports, and Japan's complicity in restricting China's access to technologies for chips and high-end manufacturing all prove the point. In response, China has shifted some of its foreign trade orders to emerging markets such as Southeast Asia, India and Latin America. This kind of the global adjustment of industry chains will still reign in 2024.

Multinationals are relocating their supply chains on a global scale out of market-based choices — whether for better use of resources and potential markets in emerging regions or on the requirements of governments, mainly those of the developed countries. This global transfer may affect China's share in the global trade and the scale of foreign investment. A deficit in direct investment was already showing in China's balance of payments in the third quarter of 2023.

Japan's economy might have some lessons to offer. After the US-Japan trade war in the 1980s, Japan saw a large amount of industrial outflow, which led to economic growth in Southeast Asia and integration of the regional economy. Then, in 1996, it signed free trade agreements with countries including Singapore, Mexico and the Philippines. Since 2000, Japan's share of investment in Europe has increased, which increasingly took the form of capi-

tal- and technology-intensive manufacturing rather than traditional manufacturing. The mainstay of overseas enterprises have changed from large enterprises to small and medium-sized ones. The increased diversification of investment entities and investment destinations has ensured a steady increase in the scale of Japan's outbound investment.

Similarly, China is optimizing its economic structure, attracting foreign investment while also increasing its own overseas investment. Its investment in the countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative is becoming more market-oriented. The latter's contribution will surely have an impact on China's economy. In this regard, GNP will likely play a more significant role along with GDP. As the world's second-largest economy, China's GDP per capita has exceeded \$12,000, a number qualifying it for middle-income country status. For its GNP to catch up, China needs to effectively increase the outbound investment of the private sector (enterprises and households) so that its stock of outbound FDI and portfolio investment exceeds that of FDI and portfolio investment in China.

China's economic transformation is also in steady progress. From the onset of 2023, consumption has contributed more significantly to China's GDP growth than investment and net exports. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, China's GDP grew by 5.2 percent year-on-year in the first three quarters. Final consumption expenditure contributed to 94.8 percent of economic



WU HAOZE / FOR CHINA DAILY

growth, driving GDP growth by 4.6 percentage points. Gross capital formation contributed to 22.3 percent of economic growth, driving GDP growth by 1.1 percentage points.

But the economy's transition to more consumption-driven growth is experiencing tail winds, too. On the one hand, the dividends of increased revenue and reduced taxes have paid off in recent years, leaving more space for consumption upgrading. On the other hand, emerging consumer groups and rising urbanization levels are fueling the consumer market. In the longer run, continuously increasing residents' income and expanding consumption capacity is the key to expanding domestic demand.

Echoing these good signs, China's Central Economic Work Conference in December called for

implementing the principle of "seeking progress while maintaining stability, promoting stability with progress, and establishing first and excelling later". Market expectations and better communication between the policy and the market will be prioritized. In terms of monetary policy, there will be ample room for Reserve Requirement Ratio cuts in 2024 and greater liquidity in the future economic growth.

Some cautions need to be taken. Authorities need to consider the inversion of interest rate differentials between China and the US when adjusting interest rate. Although China's nominal interest rate is currently lower than that of the US, the level of real interest rates after adjusting for inflation is actually higher. The inversion of nominal interest rates has also put significant pressure on the

RMB exchange rate. If the US Federal Reserve cuts interest rates by 80 to 100 basis points in the second half of 2024, more policy space may appear.

In all, it is necessary to strengthen coordination and consistency among different macro policies. At the same time, policymakers need to pay attention to the market's reaction to relevant policies. While promulgating policies to promote economic growth, they must effectively improve the coordination of the policies to bring new impetus to China's economy.

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LIU YUN

Fresh perspective

The more emphasis Japan attaches to security, the less secure it will become

Japan's secure development is highly dependent on globalization. In recent years, faced with the global upheavals triggered by the relative decline of United States hegemony, Japan's strategic choices have relied overwhelmingly on conservative thinking, but this has undermined its own development foundations. The true solution lies in its return to genuine openness.

Tokyo has emphasized that the Japanese economy must serve its national strategy, and it is seeking to exert tight control over key elements and links in its industry and supply chains. The aim is to establish Japan's "strategic indispensability" in the global industrial structure, maintain its core competitiveness, and explore new indispensable areas. At present, the core strategy involves a global industrial layout centered on the Japan-US alliance. This includes enhancing Japan-US cooperation to construct a "free, fair and open" economic order, the essence of which is to build an alliance-led global industrial structure that reduces its dependence on China. For example, Japanese companies in industries such as semiconductors, components and industrial materials have received official incentives to invest in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations member economies. Tokyo has also encouraged Japanese companies in China to shift toward ASEAN. In 2022, the Japanese government sponsored 17 Japanese companies in two rounds of an initiative known as the "Program for Strengthening Overseas Supply Chains", an indicator of its bid to control overseas industry chains.

The second aspect of Tokyo's measures involves overcoming Japan's economic deficiencies by building up reserves, seeking alternatives, strengthening supply capabilities and enhancing cooperation with allied nations. The Japanese government has underscored that economic and fiscal operations should ensure the supply of crucial materials such as minerals and pharmaceuticals.

Tokyo has strengthened financial and fiscal support in this regard, saying that such measures cannot only reduce "asymmetric dependence" on other countries, but also enhance local technological capabilities and increase employment and income for residents. In the energy sector, there is a push to restart nuclear power, flexibly utilize renewable energy, and improve energy self-sufficiency. In terms of food and raw materials, Japan has increased domestic production of feed, wheat, starch and wood, as part of broader efforts to promote the substitution of imported raw materials with domestic alternatives.

The third aspect involves using the Japan-US alliance as the foundation to promote rules-based trade agreements. Japan actively participates in global and regional governance to incorporate its "values" into international rule-making. It has proposed the Data Free Flow with Trust concept for digital trade rules, green transformation rules for industries and goals for high-quality infrastructure development. During the Shinzo Abe administration, Tokyo put forward initiatives such as the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure and G7 Ise-Shima Principles for Promoting Quality Infrastructure Investment. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has expressed the belief that only by having the right to formulate global infrastructure rules can



WANG YANGYANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Japan reverse the decline in Japanese corporate competitiveness and expand its global market share.

The coupling of conservatism in Japan and the US, with both nations in excessive pursuit of conservative values, has led to the stagnation in regional cooperation and the accumulation of trust deficits. The more emphasis the two nations attach to security, the

less secure they will become. The greater the efforts they make to achieve decoupling and the severing of industry chains, the less development they will achieve. In the end, their approach will become a key factor that harms Asia's stability and prosperity. The core of Abe's concepts such as Confluence of the Two Seas and "Indo-Pacific" Strategy was freedom and openness, but Japan has

never truly achieved openness and inclusiveness. The global landscape is now confronted with changes and instabilities, with risks and challenges continuously emerging. The Ukraine crisis is ongoing, conflicts have erupted again in the Middle East, and the peaceful and stable regional environment in Asia-Pacific is threatened by disruptions. The peace and stability in the Asian region are invaluable and require diligent nurturing.

The economies of China and Japan are interdependent, with further expansion of the industry and supply chains in Asia forming the value axis for the secure development of various countries in the region. From 2000 to 2022, the global share of the Asian economies increased from 26.8 percent to 33.1 percent. The region is Japan's most important trading area, accounting for 50.3 percent of its global trade. China surpassed the US in 2007 to become Japan's largest trading partner.

Without the Chinese market, Japan's semiconductor industry faces a "double loss" in technology and market, as China is Japan's most important market for semiconductors and semiconductor manufacturing equipment, with exports to China reaching 26.6 trillion yen (\$184.04 billion), or 27.3 percent of its total semiconductor exports, in 2022. Japan's

policy of containing China in the semiconductor field will not help achieve its goal of preventing China's technological upgrading. On the contrary, the effectiveness of its export controls policies will be undermined because of China's accelerated independent research, leading to the loss of its key edges in the industry and supply chains.

For Tokyo, a more reasonable approach would be to strengthen technology research and development, produce more high-tech products, and increase its exports to China, and thereby enhance the interconnection between the two countries to gain a win-win result. Japan's secure development cannot be attained without the Chinese market and technology, and deepening cooperation with China is an essential prerequisite for its power in industry, resources and rule-making. Tokyo must rethink whether it should embrace the international order or rebuild an international order suited to its own will.

China and Japan should objectively and rationally view each other's development, establish positive and friendly mutual understanding, and constructively manage conflicts and differences. It is also important for Japan not to overstretch the concept of national security on economic issues, and view the world, Asia and China-Japan relations from a developmental perspective, and recognize the complex diversity of regional production networks, which is not simply an issue of supply chains. Both countries should build a cultural foundation for the development of regional productivity and production relationships, find their own position at the historical crossroads, and attain a common understanding while seeking to reshape regional values.

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LIFE

An idea and idyll worth protecting

Rangers at Wuyishan national park keep the wildlife safe from the twin threats of fire and poachers, **Yang Feiyue** reports.

It was late December, and a winter chill was gripping Wuyishan, a county-level city of southeastern China's Fujian province. A two-hour drive from the downtown area through the depths of lush forest led to Xianfengling (Xianfeng Ridge) of Mount Wuyi, where an imposing fault zone cuts through a myriad of mountain trees.

"It's part of the fault belt that runs 1,200 kilometers from Jiangxi province all the way to Guangdong province," says Xu Zikun, head of a law enforcement team with the Wuyishan national park.

"The V-shaped zone was a result of collision and compression of the Pacific Plate and the Eurasian Plate ... and we are in the northern and central part of it, where the strata are relatively stable," Xu adds, as if to assure the visitors of the area's safety.

Xianfengling sits 1,200 meters above sea level and at the hinterland of the forests, so the temperature is much lower than downtown, giving the air a sharper bite.

But its redeeming feature was the offer of a bird's-eye view of Mount Wuyi that has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its cultural, scenic and biodiversity values since 1999.

"The forest we see here, characterized by a mixture of pine and broad-leaved trees, is referred to as a mixed coniferous and broad-leaved forest," Xu explains.

After graduating from the Nanjing Forestry University in Jiangsu province in 2002, Xu came to the deep woods of Mount Wuyi and buried himself in ecological conservation work for the next two decades.

His social media practically serves as an exhibition hall for the flora and fauna of Mount Wuyi.

"Almost every inspection tour has led to new discoveries of species," Xu says.

A complex landscape, warm and humid climate, well-preserved vegetation and limited accessibility have all contributed to a sparse human presence and, thus, make for an ideal land for biodiversity.

"The biodiversity in our region is extremely rich, with approximately 3,000 species of higher plants and over 840 species of lower plants," Xu says.

That, in turn, gives rise to more than 7,000 species of animals, including insects

and mammals, Xu says.

The place has been widely considered as a haven for birds, snakes and insects, he adds.

For those who want to ascend higher and get a better view, they can access a five-story observation tower via a steep flight of steel stairs.

"It was built in 1984 and initially served as a fire lookout tower," Xu says.

Later, a communication relay station was installed to enhance the fire-fighting capabilities in the area.

Additionally, a small-scale weather observation function was established to measure meteorological data, such as rainfall, temperature, humidity, wind speed and wind direction, within the region.

In recent years, with the development of the tourism industry, it has been opened to the public as a scenic viewpoint to meet the demands of visitors.

Chen Shuiwang, a local villager who has been hired as a rancher in the Xianfengling area, says he has felt a significant improvement in biodiversity over the past decade.

"I would see some of the birds only a few times, but now they seem pretty common," says Chen, who walks more than 6 km every day to ensure forest safety.

Tackling fire hazards and trespassers are a major part of his job.

About a 40-minute drive from Xianfengling, the Tongmuguan (Tongmu Pass) further tests travelers' threshold for coldness.

The pass separates Fujian and Jiangxi provinces. The water stored in buckets had a thick layer of ice, and the tap-water pipes were sometimes frozen stiff.

Li Hong, head of the pass, had to break the ice and run the taps before he stepped out for inspection.

Normally, the cold spell will last until mid-February.

Tongmuguan is one of the highest checkpoints in Fujian and plays a key role in crucial ecological protection tasks, such as forest fire prevention and resource conservation.

Li and several of his colleagues



Top: Travelers ascend Tianyou Peak at Wuyishan, Fujian province. PENG SHAN'AN / FOR CHINA DAILY **Above:** Visitors take photos of frost-encrusted trees on Huanggangshan, the highest peak in Wuyishan. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY **Below left:** *Lophura nycthemera* (silver pheasant). HUANG HAI / FOR CHINA DAILY **Below right:** Cabot's tragopan. WAN YONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

have to work in 24-hour shifts and often stand in the bitter cold.

Whenever vehicle horns blow, the personnel on duty take turns to man the checkpoint.

Facing the biting north wind, they signal the passing vehicles to stop for inspection and registration.

"We need to ascertain if they are carrying any contraband items, such as wood and wildlife," Li says, adding that they need to remove

their gloves and touch the items with their bare hands to conduct a full inspection.

In addition to guarding the pass, Li and his colleagues also have to tour the surrounding forest.

"When encountering hikers entering restricted areas, we must immediately intervene and persuade them to turn back," Li says.

If hikers suffer from frostbite or injury, they also have to carry out first aid.

Although the work in the deep recesses of the mountain is arduous, Li says the best reward comes when he helps endangered animals.

According to local authorities, the natural reserve has had no fire or poaching incidents in the past four decades.

A 90-minute drive from Tongmuguan, in the direction of the downtown area, the Wuyishan national park's intelligent management center keeps track of the real-time entry and exit of tourists, the hydrological and atmospheric conditions, as well as the movement of patrol and protection personnel.

"This allows for dynamic supervision of resource protection, emergency management and environmental capacity warnings at the national park," says Fan Zhiwei, a staff member with the park.

The application of evolving technology has also made things easier for workers on the front line.

Forest rancher Zhang Quan says he now just has to put the coordinates of a specific location into his tablet computer and the real-time satellite images and historical satellite images of that area will be presented.

"Through comparison, we can identify whether there have been changes in the ecological environment, greatly enhancing our efficiency," Zhang says.

In 2023, the national park designed 4,970 patrol routes where patrols have cumulatively reached 33,830 km.

The park has also introduced

drone patrols in key protected areas and unmanned zones that are difficult for personnel to reach.

This not only expands the scope of inspections, but also ensures the safety of patrol team members, the park's management says.

The technology-empowered protection has led to a steady improvement in the quality of the local ecological environment, which has attracted many bird-watching enthusiasts and biological researchers.

Wen Gengyin is still reminiscing on his trip to Xianfengling in May.

He took photos of many rare birds there.

"It was my second trip to Mount Wuyi," Wen says.

"I was impressed by the green mountains, clear waters and various birds and insects here during my first visit a few years ago," Wen says.

"Coming back to Mount Wuyi this year, the environment has improved, and I've captured many birds that are not commonly seen in the city, which is delightful," he adds.

For Xu Zikun, he still vividly remembers the first time he spotted a male *Teinopalpus aureus* in 2011, a rare species of butterfly that is a national first-class protected insect.

More than a decade has passed, and Xu says he increasingly sees such rare creatures at the national park.

"In recent years, two new species, *Megophrys ombrophila* (an amphibian) and *Gastrodia fujianensis* (a plant), have been found in Wuyishan, while the number of newly discovered insect species exceeded 1,000," Xu says.

"It's proof of (improvement of) Mount Wuyi's ecological conditions," he says, adding that the area has served as a rare genetic repository for species worldwide.

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Bottom: An aerial view of Tongmuguan, one of the highest checkpoints in Wuyishan, which separates Fujian and Jiangxi provinces and plays a key role in crucial ecological protection tasks. ZHANG DONGHUA / FOR CHINA DAILY

Community health centers provide convenient care for elderly

With respiratory diseases on the rise in China during winter, a key issue for primary-level communities to address was how to make it more convenient for the more vulnerable and elderly to receive treatment.

Thanks to the efforts from both State and local authorities, it is no longer a major concern for the public.

At a community health center in Shanghai's Huangpu district, despite it being late at night, doctors, traditional Chinese medicine practitioners, recovery and reha-

ilitation services as well as nursing services were still available to the elderly as part of the night clinic.

"We are trying to ensure that more elderly people can receive treatment on their doorstep," says an official with the local health administration, adding that efforts were also underway to curb respiratory diseases at elderly care institutions.

Data from the National Health Commission showed that in the first half of 2023, the country's basic health services benefited 89.88 mil-

lion elderly people aged 65 and above, a 40-percent year-on-year rise.

Digital elderly care services are also playing a bigger part, as a QR code for medical insurance is now available to 130 million people aged above 60, who have already activated it.

At Yanda Golden Age Health Nursing Center in Yanjiao, North China's Hebei province, which neighbors Beijing, over 5,000 elderly people have access to smart mobility aids that make using toilet and taking a bath much easier.

One of the pilot units for the coordinated development of elderly care across the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, the center enjoys subsidies from Beijing for elderly care facilities, and the nearby Yanda Hospital allows patients to use both Beijing's and Hebei's medical insurance systems.

According to Lu Changlin, a former head of the hospital, in a bid to help more elderly people enjoy the rest of their lives, it is committed to combining medical care and nursing to explore a new method of elderly care services in China.

For that purpose, the first State-level standard on home nursing for the elderly was released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in October 2023 to further standardize, normalize and professionalize at-home elderly care services.

"A positive view on the elderly should be upheld to facilitate a healthy approach to aging, and carve out a path to respond to the aging population," says Wang Haidong, head of the elderly health department of the NHC.

“A positive view on the elderly should be upheld to facilitate a healthy approach to aging, and carve out a path to respond to the aging population.”

Wang Haidong, head of the elderly health department of the National Health Commission

XINHUA

CULTURE



If Tong Jun were alive today, he'd celebrate the reopening of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, anticipated to be completed this December, with particular gusto.

The roughly 850-year-old landmark that was engulfed in flames five years ago was a favorite of the late architect and scholar. While traveling in France, he wrote about his love for this Gothic building in a diary entry dated May 23, 1930: "Notre-Dame is the most interesting. Its interior has an extraordinarily mystical atmosphere, which is accentuated by those beautiful stained-glass windows, making one feel his heart tremble. It's the best experience I've ever had."

He hailed the marvel again in another diary entry three days later, after visiting Chartres Cathedral, which he believed didn't have the same mystique.

"Everyone likes Chartres, but I prefer Notre-Dame," Tong wrote.

Tong is recognized as one of 20th-century China's "four great architects", alongside Yang Tingbao, Liang Sicheng and Liu Dunzhen. All four were trained both in China and abroad, and blended Western and Chinese practices and philosophies.

Tong's diaries bear witness to his extensive travels through a dozen countries in Europe from May to August 1930, during which he visited and sketched famed buildings.

A selection of the drawings, watercolors, diaries and photos recording that journey are on show at *A Leisurely Stroll From the East to the World*, an exhibition at the Art Museum of Beijing Fine Art Academy that runs through to Feb 26.

The works were shown several times last year to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Tong's passing, including at Southeast University in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, where he taught for years, and in Shanghai, where many of his designs were built.

'Grand Tour'

After finishing his studies at Tsinghua University, Tong went to the University of Pennsylvania in the United States, the institution that helped cultivate modern

China's first generation of architects, including Tong, Yang and Liang. Tong obtained his bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Pennsylvania.

After graduating in 1928, he worked at two firms, including that of the prolific architect Ely Jacques Kahn in New York City. Two years later, he left the job to travel in Europe, tracing the "Grand Tour" route.

The Grand Tour emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries as a popular tradition among European aristocrats, who used their wealth and leisure time to travel the continent to explore natural landscapes, art and architecture as part of their education. The practice expanded to other social classes in the late 18th century as tourism became more affordable. In particular, young artists and architects, including those from other continents, viewed it as an ideal way to enrich knowledge, widen vision and inspire future work in their respective fields.

Tong's itinerary included Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy, according to a map he drew en route. He painted, wrote about and photographed magnificent classical and modern buildings, and the cultures that generated such architecture.

Liu Xiao, a curator of the Art Museum of Beijing Fine Art Academy, says the drawings and watercolors from the tour on show are not some sketches created quickly to show others he'd made the trip. Rather, they show the solid discipline Tong had received to become a qualified architect, empowered by thought and an aesthetic taste to consolidate his understanding of architecture from different periods.

Building legacies

An exhibition shows how architect Tong Jun's journeys of discovery constructed new links between East and West, **Lin Qi** reports.



Top from left: Renowned architect Tong Jun's works, on exhibition, include *A Night View of Bridge of Sighs, Venice, Karl-Marx-Hof Public Housing, in Vienna, Notre-Dame Cathedral, in Paris, and Gloucester Cathedral, Britain. Above:* Another of Tong's works *A Day View of the Bridge of Sighs, Venice*. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

It wasn't hard for a trained architect like him to depict those buildings in a professional manner. But he was also able to capture their souls and distinctive auras."

Tong Ming, professor of architecture at Southeast University

Tong learned oil painting at an early age and exhibited his works while at Tsinghua College.

At the University of Pennsylvania, he studied a curriculum that emphasized training in architectural techniques and the integration of architecture with all art forms, including painting, poetry, music and sculpture. He was taught to be an architect with aesthetic discernment.

"These artworks are displayed in the order of the countries he toured that year and juxtaposed with diaries mentioning the architecture he saw on the way," Liu says.

"This allows the audience to feel Tong's accumulation of cultural understanding, insights and research."

Tong Jun's grandson, Tong Ming, who's a professor of architecture at Southeast University, says the tour was one of his grandfather's "most glorious" life chapters.

"It wasn't hard for a trained architect like him to depict those buildings in a professional manner. But he was also able to capture their

souls and distinctive auras," Tong Ming says.

"He shows us how architecture's evolution shapes the way our world looks."

Chinese gardens

The exhibition also pays tribute to Tong Jun's pioneering role in the study, introduction and revival of classical Chinese gardens in modern times.

After returning to his homeland in the 1930s, he mostly worked and lived in Jiangnan — the southern region of the Yangtze River's lower reaches — where he surveyed and mapped many centuries-old private garden houses.

He completed the groundbreaking *An Introduction of Chinese Gardens in Jiangnan* in 1937.

And he authored *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China* in 1983, the year he passed away, in English to introduce Chinese gardens' beauty and philosophy to the world. Tong Ming later translated it into Chinese and published a bilingual book.

Excerpts from the books, Tong Jun's manuscripts, and drawings and photos of the gardens are also on show.

Liu, the curator, says that after Tong Jun strolled through Europe's history and cultures, he returned home, where he went on to dig into his mother culture's roots. He rendered his studies of Chinese gardens with new perspectives grounded on his education in the US and experiences in Europe. And he traced Chinese architecture from the past to the modern world.

Tong Ming says: "He told the world that once you understand Chinese landscape paintings, you will understand Chinese gardens, too, because they're three-dimensional versions of Chinese landscape paintings."

"The flowerpots, plants, fish pools and rocks are not only works crafted to decorate the gardens. They also ... reveal people's feelings about the world. These gardens are ideal spiritual havens conceived by ancient Chinese."

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Dancing through a classical painting

HONG KONG — As a group of dancers wearing turquoise costumes and towering hair buns moved to a traditional Chinese melody, they appeared as if they had just stepped out of an ancient scroll painting of a Chinese landscape.

The *Poetic Dance: The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*, a dance drama presented by Beijing-based China Oriental Performing Arts Group, made its debut in Hong Kong on Friday, igniting the enthusiasm of dance drama fans.

It tells a story closely related to *A Panorama of Mountains and Rivers* housed in the Palace Museum in Beijing. The masterpiece of traditional Chinese landscape painting is characterized by its use of blue and green. It has a history of nearly 1,000 years and is said to have been painted by the 18-year-old genius Wang Ximeng during the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

The drama is set at a time when the painting was to be exhibited upon Wang's finishing strokes.

By fully devoting himself to the study of the painting, a museum researcher steps into Wang's inner world, accompanying him during those precious moments when the young painter was making his greatest efforts. Through this experien-

tial journey, the researcher explores the combination of chance and necessity that led to the unique emergence of the painting, interpreting the sentimental bonds between national cultural relics of the past and people in modern times.

As the dance drama is poised to embark on its global tour this year, choreographers Zhou Liya and Han Zhen say that the success of its performances in Hong Kong has instilled a powerful sense of confidence in their journey of sharing the richness of Chinese culture with audiences worldwide.

"Having watched the drama, I can only say that words fall short in describing its beauty," Hong Kong resident Chiu Laan said with excitement after the drama's debut on Friday night.

Chiu said she was mesmerized by the performance ever since the dance drama appeared in 2022 at China Central Television's Spring Festival Gala, a popular annual TV show in China to celebrate the most important festival of family reunions for the Chinese.

For three consecutive days, the Hong Kong Cultural Center was bustling with enthusiasts of the dance drama, much like Chiu. Some were dressed in traditional Chinese

attire, while others even traveled by airplane to Hong Kong just for the show.

"In Hong Kong, it is not common to see a dance drama become so popular," says Ngai Suk-ye, chief manager of the cultural presentations section at the Leisure and Cultural Services Department of the Hong Kong special administrative region.

"As confident as we are in the dance drama, the overwhelming response (of fans) is far beyond our expectations," Ngai says, adding that in the initial round of ticket sales, over 4,000 tickets for the three performances were sold out within a few hours. Two additional shows were added, and tickets were also quickly snatched up.

"With the widespread acclaim, anticipation for this performance has been mounting among people in Hong Kong," Ngai says.

The immense popularity of the dance drama in Hong Kong has taken Zhou and Han by surprise.

"Through this performance, we hope that young friends would be inspired to visit the Palace Museum in Beijing and discover the source of inspiration for this dance drama in person, the painting *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*," Han said on Friday afternoon.

For Han, performing in Hong Kong is a milestone for the dance drama as it is also the debut of its brand-new version.

The production team discovered during their earlier research that stages in Hong Kong, like most of those worldwide, tended to be smaller compared to those in the mainland.

So, the production team decided to make proportional reductions in set design and props while ensuring the content of the script remained unchanged.

The dance artists are also prompted to adapt to the changes. Just hours before the premiere in Hong Kong, the entire acting team was still in rehearsals.

"We have to adjust the amplitude of our movements and get familiar with the new stage as soon as possible," says Meng Qingyang, the lead actress in the dance drama.

Their efforts paid off on Friday evening. As the curtain came down on the stage, the theater erupted in thunderous applause and jubilant cheers.

With the triumph in Hong Kong as a starting point, the whole team is looking forward to sharing this artistic beauty with the global audience, Han says.

Since its premiere at the National



Meng Qingyang (center standing) leads *The Poetic Dance: The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* during its debut in Hong Kong on Friday. XINHUA

Grand Theater in Beijing in 2021, the dance drama has toured 50 cities across China with nearly 400 shows.

"The most important reason why the dance drama became so popular is that maybe it has awakened the audience's identification with traditional Chinese culture at a certain moment," Han says.

Over the past year, Hong Kong has witnessed a remarkable surge in the popularity of traditional Chinese cultural performances, with the special exhibition of the Hong Kong Palace Museum showcasing new archaeological discoveries at the Sanxingdui Ruins site in Sichuan province and the *Tan Dun WE-Festival* immersing audiences in vibrant ethnic culture.

"The common reason for the pop-

ularity of these works is their use of modern techniques to interpret traditional culture," Ngai says, adding that this approach has effectively bridged the gap between audiences, especially the younger generation, and traditional culture.

Ngai says that Hong Kong is developing as an East-meets-West center for international cultural exchange, and performing arts groups from the mainland seeking to go overseas often prefer to come to Hong Kong first, while foreign groups wishing to enter the mainland also often choose to start their performance tours here.

"Hong Kong serves as a gateway for both inbound and outbound cultural exchanges," says Ngai.

XINHUA

LIFE

A rhythmic heartbeat echoes beyond the dimly lit stage and throughout the theater. As the lights brighten, a company named Shakespeare Holdings comes into view. They're working on a unique project: crafting emotionally supportive electronic plants inspired by female characters from Shakespeare's plays.

This sets the scene for the play, *Shakespeare's Garden*. Despite the name, it's not a tale about Shakespeare's love life or his female characters as a group. Instead, it delves into the intersection of technology and emotions.

Characters like Ophelia, Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth take center stage. They are intertwined into the 24-hour life of an employee, known as A, at Shakespeare Holdings. The play explores the mix of classic and modern elements, workplace realities and childhood traumas, and the contrast between vivid human emotions and emotionless electronic plants.

Ultimately, it delves into deep reflections on self, soul and creation.

Shakespeare's Garden premiered at the end of December at the small theater of the National Theatre of China in Beijing as part of the 16th Beijing International Youth Drama Festival in 2023.

This debut work is helmed by young director Nie Jingzhu, with a cast of talented young actors, including Zhang Yamei, Wang Yao, Li Chenyang and Wang Linsan. The script was written by up-and-coming playwright Huang Bing, while various aspects like stage design, music, lighting, multimedia, costumes and makeup were handled by a team of talented young artists.

Nie jokes that: "Perhaps even Shakespeare had a team akin to the Shakespeare Holdings. I'm fortunate to have an outstanding team of individuals, each excelling in their respective artistic fields. It's the synergy of our talents and mutual support that has brought forth this captivating stage presentation."

The play is divided into three parts, each featuring a key female character from Shakespeare's works: Ophelia, Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth.

Huang noticed these women are in many ways unique but share similar fates.

"We found that, no matter how significant their roles or distinct their personalities, Shakespeare's female characters exist somewhat isolated from the main theme onstage," she says. "They stumble through the plot until the final curtain falls."

The play portrays the challenges and conflicts that arise when machines attempt to simulate the complex workings of human emotions, exploring the intricacies of the human mind.

According to Nie, the various female characters in Shakespeare's works face different challenges leading to their tragic outcomes. Unlike the grand tragedies of ancient Greece that focus on the downfall of the powerful, Shakespeare's characters feel more like real people, prompting contemplation on human nature.

"Our focus is on Shakespeare's female characters set against the backdrop of the artificial intelligence era," the 43-year-old director explains.

"During this time, artificial beings learn rapidly through technology but lack emotion and appear cold. We use extreme human emotions to teach them to



Electric agenda puts emotion center stage

An innovative play blends conceptions of Shakespeare's female characters and explorations of virtual human development, **Li Yingxue** reports.



feel. What happens when an artificial being, filled with Shakespearean drama and experiencing human emotions, comes to life?"

Huang emphasizes that the play's essence isn't in finding answers but in how people choose to embrace differences.

"It's about treating Shakespeare's text as tangible material and seeing women's emotional journeys as natural processes of change and creation, rather than a flaw in need of correction," she says.

The most significant challenge for the performers in *Shakespeare's Garden* is grappling with the question, "Who am I?"

The characters in the drama lack names and much of a past, and are identified only by labels like A, B, C, D, or such roles as "woman" or "ghost". Most don't even have complete storylines.

From the very first rehearsal, the six actors have been explor-



Top left: The plot of the drama *Shakespeare's Garden* unfolds in a company named Shakespeare Holdings. **Top right:** The company is working on a project that produces emotionally supportive electronic plants inspired by female characters from Shakespeare's plays. **Middle:** Zhang Yamei (left) plays A, an employee at Shakespeare Holdings. **Above:** The characters in the drama are identified only by labels like A, B, C, D, or roles like "woman" or "ghost".

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

ing their characters' identities and pondering the interplay of body and soul. Onstage, they shift between being cold and heartless to outbursts of intense passion. Through these powerful performances, the audience witnesses the struggle between body and soul, revealing the complex realities of lives with or without emotions.

Zhang Yamei, who plays A, remembers facing challenges during rehearsals. She constantly worked on making the somewhat unclear lines understandable and memorizing them until they became second nature, so that she gradually connected with and understood her character.

The stage setting and multimedia presentation reflect Nie's strong personal style.

Theater critic Cui Lei believes Nie has designed the visual elements of the play with simplicity and precision.

"The multimedia visuals expand the theatrical space," Cui explains. "The costumes and props predominantly use white, black and red, creating a futuristic sense of artificial intelligence along with a coldness arising from the disconnection between body and mind."

Previously, Nie was a well-known theater poster designer. She graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, specializing in visual communication. She organized poster installation art exhibitions in Beijing in 2017 and 2019, and her work has been displayed at prestigious events like the Florence Biennale and the Venice Architecture Biennale.

Nie had a strong connection to theater before directing her first play and served as the graphic visual director for such events as the Beijing Youth Drama Festival and the Wuzhen Theatre Festival.

"Designing posters for plays is like staging a performance on paper, turning paper into a stage. It's a three-second art and needs to capture the essence of the play in that short time, encouraging the audience to step into the theater and buy tickets," she explains.

"The theater has always been incredibly captivating for me. It's a blend of various contemporary art forms — design, acting, directing, lighting, music, stage design and visual arts."

In April last year, she organized a metaverse theater festival that brought together tech companies working on metaverse, AIGC (AI generated content) and virtual human development. The event aimed to explore how theater arts could merge with technology.

In July last year, she decided to create a play and started collaborating with Huang on the script.

"The way the script is brought to life changes every day. Sometimes, a single image sparks new ideas, serving as a clue to gradually develop the storyline," Nie says.

"Transitioning from two-dimensional to three-dimensional creativity is quite challenging. What used to involve solving just two or three issues now requires addressing more than 20 or 30. However, I find this challenge has brought me a unique experience and a renewed sense of enjoyment."

She felt a bit nervous and unsure about directing a play for the first time. Encouragement from renowned theater director Meng Jinghui helped her approach the challenge more confidently.

"Meng told me: 'You don't need to overthink what the final outcome of this play will be. It's a culmination of the books you've read, the people you've met and the various experiences you've had,'" Nie recalls.

"As a creator, there are times when I feel like I have nothing new to say to the world. However, with *Shakespeare's Garden*, I get to express what I truly want to say," Nie says about her initial inspiration when stepping into directing.

"Whether it's real people or these 'electronic plants', both can become soulless shells. Exploring how to break free from the constraints of language, classics, instructions and trauma, and allowing the body to have a real soul — these are some of the themes I want to delve into with this play," she adds.

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Walking in a winter wonderland

As winter draws in, there are many across the country who flock to the south of China with its warmer climate and pristine beaches.



Michael Rhys Card
Second Thoughts

However, there are those more daring with their travel plans who head north looking for snowy adventures in the icy climates of Northeast China. In particular, an increasing number of tourists have been drawn to the frosty delights of Harbin, known as the Ice City.

Harbin, whose name is said to originate from a Manchu word that

means "a place for drying fishing nets", sprung up from a small rural settlement along the Songhua River to become one of the largest cities in Northeast China and capital of Heilongjiang province.

The city flourished with the arrival of the Chinese Eastern Railway, which connected it to the outside world and in particular the Russian Empire. This paved the way for Harbin's future development of its unique culture where East meets West.

The city has evolved from being known as the fashion capital of China in the 1920s and is now famed for its ice and snow festivals that have become renowned across the globe. These attract thousands of vis-

itors, with sculptors traveling from all corners of the world to showcase their talents and a variety of winter-themed activities and sports.

Though these festivals may be the highlight of any trip to Harbin, the city still has much more to offer, from its traditional European-style architecture to its more modern buildings, such as the Harbin Grand Theatre and arguably the city's most famous landmark, the Saint Sophia Cathedral, built in 1907. The unique cuisine, including Harbin-style smoky-savory red sausage, *guo bao rou*, or sweet-and-sour pork and kvass, a fermented cereal-based drink, can all be sampled along Zhongyang Street with its baroque and

Byzantine facades.

Yet it is a park outside the city that offers perhaps the most unique experience. Volga Manor, situated outside the suburbs of Harbin, is a 600,000-square-meter homage to the city's Russian influences, with 30 buildings and a replica ship constructed on the site since 2007. Named after the Volga River in Russia, the park aims to reproduce the historical role that Russian architecture and culture have played in Harbin by re-creating classic buildings, art and cuisine that sit alongside more modern attractions, such as sledding and snowmobile rides. The pinnacle of the park is undoubtedly a replica of St. Nicholas Cathedral, a building that sat in the center of Harbin before it was destroyed in 1966.



One of the many buildings at the Volga Manor Park in Harbin.

MICHAEL RHYSCARD / CHINA DAILY

olas Cathedral, a building that sat in the center of Harbin before it was destroyed in 1966.

While winter may be the prime time to visit Harbin, the city has plenty to offer all year round and its

individual charms make it a must-see spot no matter the weather.

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