

Violence spreading

Haiti's prime minister to resign as gangs run rampant in capital

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Elderly make beeline for niche destinations

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Age of individuality

Modern couples opt for personalized, cost-effective wedding ceremonies

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Envoys of art



Staff members carry a painting to be packed at the Palace of Versailles near Paris in France on Monday. More than 70 exhibits will be shipped from the palace to China as the Palace Museum and the Palace of Versailles jointly host an exhibition in Beijing from April to June, focusing on exchanges between China and France. This year marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. GAO JING / XINHUA

Beijing's efforts seen as key to resolving crisis

Country's shuttle diplomacy gradually receives wide recognition, experts say

By ZHOU JIN
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Despite the stalemate in the Ukraine crisis and the gloomy prospects for peace, efforts to build consensus through face-to-face dialogue, as well as ending hostilities through political means, remain crucial, as highlighted by China's recent diplomatic practices.

Li Hui, the Chinese government's special representative on Eurasia affairs, concluded on Tuesday an 11-day shuttle diplomacy trip that took him to Russia and the European Union headquarters in Brussels, as well as Poland, Ukraine, Germany and France.

It was the second time within a year that the Chinese diplomat made such a trip to the region. The latest trip came at a time when the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has headed into its third year, and global expectations are high for an early achievement of peace.

Paving the way for ending the conflict and starting peace talks was the focus of Li's shuttle diplomacy, and he reiterated during the trip China's support for hosting, at a proper time, an international peace conference that would ensure the equal participation of all parties.

China's mediation endeavor is timely and significant, as the crisis has caused global damage and is very likely to escalate, observers said. They also said that the visit has shown China's responsibility as a major country and its willingness and ability to play a balanced and rational role regarding the crisis, and that such a role is what Europe expects.

Zhao Huirong, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies, said Li's trip reflects that China hopes to hear the voice of various parties involved in the conflict and address their concerns, in order to bridge differences. It also shows an open attitude as well as a continuity of China's policy concerning the crisis, she said.

When giving a briefing on Li's visit, Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said on Tuesday that great importance was attached to the visit, and "China's efforts to promote peace talks were appreciated by various parties". He said China sincerely hopes that

all parties concerned will demonstrate the political will to cool down the situation and make joint efforts toward an early cease-fire and the establishment of a balanced, effective and sustainable European security framework.

The prolonged conflict has brought multiple impasses and challenges for Russia and Ukraine and other countries regarding military, politics, energy and food prices.

Zhao, the researcher, said the crisis has severely undermined global security, adding that security has become a major concern for many countries, especially those in Europe.

There is a trend that various forces are engaged in bloc confrontation, she said, warning that accelerated arms races and increased defense budgets are not conducive to regional and global stability and peace.

Such a trend is the result of the security balance between Europe and Russia being destabilized, and the security threat to Europe has risen sharply, said Jian Junbo, deputy director of the Center for China-Europe Relations at the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University.

As more people begin to worry about a possible lose-lose outcome, they are ready to create conditions to explore a reliable way out of the crisis, Jian said.

With Beijing's ongoing efforts, such as helping to resolve the humanitarian crisis, issuing an impartial and objective position paper and sending its diplomats for mediation, the EU has gradually realized that Beijing is actually playing a "unique and irreplaceable" role regarding the crisis, he said.

Stefan Wolff, a professor of international security at the University of Birmingham, wrote in a recent article that the West is increasingly in need of an "offramp" from the conflict. He told ThePaper.cn, a Shanghai-based news portal, in an interview that while Europe and China may not see eye-to-eye on all issues regarding the Ukraine crisis, they share a sense of urgency about ending the conflict.

It is important for dialogue between Europe and China to continue, he said, adding that Li's visit is an important element of keeping this dialogue alive and allowing China, the EU and its member states to explore possible ways forward.

Exec: Apple Inc to expand R&D presence, investment

By MA SI
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Apple Inc is expanding in China with new applied research labs, in a fresh move to tap into the country's manufacturing and research and development prowess to make the best products, a senior executive of the company said on Tuesday.

The move means that Apple is the latest multinational company to seek growth opportunities in China amid its innovation boom, as the nation sharpens its focus on nurturing new quality productive forces.

Experts said China remains a magnet for foreign high-tech

investment, and multinational companies' enthusiasm to expand their local R&D presence reflects the appeal and vitality of the world's second-largest economy amid external uncertainties and challenges.



Isabel Ge Mahe

Isabel Ge Mahe, vice-president and managing director of Apple Greater China, told China Daily: "We have already invested 1 billion yuan (\$139.4 million) into an applied research lab in China. And with the new expansion plan, our investment will continue growing."

She said that Apple will establish a new applied research lab in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, later this year, deepening cooperation

and strengthening testing and research capabilities for its products.

Meanwhile, the US tech company is enhancing the capabilities of its Shanghai applied research lab to support the reliability, quality and material analysis of all of its product lines.

"We choose to have the two labs in China, because of the country's manufacturing prowess and local suppliers' strong presence," she said.

Apple has R&D centers in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Suzhou, Jiangsu province, and its R&D workforce in China has doubled over the past five years.

"They play a crucial role in Apple's product innovation," she added. "The investment shows our long-term commitment to the Chinese market, and will inject new

vitality into local innovation and supply chain development."

Apple, which has been in China for over three decades, is scheduled to open its eighth store in Shanghai next week. As a result, it will have 47 stores on the Chinese mainland, second only to the US, and this comes amid intensified competition with Chinese smartphone makers such as Huawei Technologies Co.

Bai Ming, a researcher at the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, said Apple's latest investment "speaks volumes about China's appeal to foreign companies despite geopolitical uncertainties and global subdued investment sentiment".

See *Investment*, page 3

Summit shows Australia looks to profit from engagement with ASEAN

WORLD WATCH
By Daryl Guppy

when China is deploying more solar panels in its grid annually than are installed in total by the rest of the world.

The address by Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong also stumbled around the concept of ASEAN centrality and the role played by the global rules-based order. Her speech was all about the importance of the rules-based order. Later she stressed "the importance of ensuring that international law continues to operate and be respected and observed, particularly in the South China Sea and the region".

However, Malaysia and Indonesia, and other countries with significant Muslim populations, might reflect on Australia's silence on the allegations of war crimes in Gaza, and Wong's rapid suspension, without evidence, of funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

"We face destabilizing, provocative and coercive actions including unsafe conduct at sea and in the air," Wong said in a speech during the Maritime Cooperation Forum of the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Melbourne,

Australia is struggling with its green energy transition at a time

See *Summit*, page 3

CHINESE STREET DANCE CRAZE SHAKES UP THE WORLD

Joyful and exuberant, new phenomenon goes viral online and provides better understanding of nation's pop culture

By YANG HAN in Hong Kong and YANG WANLI in Bangkok



When YJIN, a leading dance influencer in South Korea, saw the *kemusan* dance challenge trending online, she immediately decided to film videos of her own.

With her sharp and fluent moves, YJIN's dance videos have received more than 20 million views since being posted in mid-December and are among the most popular in South Korea.

Kemusan means "subject three" in Mandarin, and there are several theories on the origin of the name. A professional dancer with more than 20 years' experience and the content creator of the "Fast Dance Official" YouTube channel, YJIN

said the strong beats and repetitive moves of *kemusan* dance, also known as Haidilao Naruto dance in South Korea, make it easy for anyone to follow.

"The interesting hand gestures, which look like the *ninja* Naruto (from the Japanese manga series of the same name), also trigger people's desire to follow the dance moves," YJIN said.

The viral Chinese street dance has become an internet sensation, attracting billions of views in China and overseas.

See *Kemusan*, page 2

Fast-breaking meal



A Palestinian family sits down for *iftar*, the fast-breaking evening meal, among the rubble of a damaged house in Deir al-Balah, Gaza, on Monday, the first day of Ramadan. ALI JADALLAH / GETTY IMAGES



INSIDE
Clean energy fueled China's economic growth in 2023
Global Views, page 13

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Newstand prices:
US \$1 Canada C\$1
UK 1.5 EU 1.6
Kenya 50 Kenya Shilling
Asia Pacific: Thailand 120
thb; Philippines 120 php; Myanmar 2000 kyat;
Japan 210 yen; Dubai 10 dirham; Pakistan 300 rupee

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Despite being considered “vulgar” by some, videos of employees at the Chinese hot pot chain Haidilao dancing the *kemusan* to entertain customers gained popularity last November on social media platforms such as Douyin, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter).

Since then, people from various dance backgrounds, both professional and amateur, have flooded social media with short videos showing them twisting and jerking their limbs, flicking their wrists and swinging from side to side to the catchy beats of the Chinese song *Yi Xiao Jiang Hu*, or Laugh at the World.

Global phenomenon

According to videos on social media, multiple World Latin American dance champion Joanna Leunis performed the *kemusan* at the World DanceSport Federation GrandSlam in Shanghai last December.

Elsewhere, dancers from a Russian ballet troupe took a curtain call and sprung into the *kemusan* after a Swan Lake performance in Northeast China's Liaoning province in December, while South Korean boy band Enhypen did the dance during their Macao concert in January.

The reason behind *kemusan* going viral is partially due to the influence of Haidilao as a global brand, said Chen Lou, associate professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore.

“They incorporated this viral dance into their dance routine and made it more widely known to people overseas via social media and offline,” said Lou.

There are many theories on the origin of the *kemusan* dance and its name.

The term *kemusan* refers to subject three of China's driving test, the practical road driving skills test for obtaining a license. One explanation circulating online is that a young man did the dance after passing his driving test so people named the dance *kemusan*.

Another explanation circulating online is that the dance routine was first performed by people attending a wedding in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. Some netizens joked that everyone born in Guangxi needs to pass three subjects in their lives — singing folk songs, eating rice noodles, and dancing.

A village boy named Xiao Ming from Sichuan province claimed Douyin to be the original choreographer of the *kemusan*. His dance videos have attracted 6 million followers and nearly 80 million likes.

The large number of videos and their wide circulation makes it difficult to trace the origin of the dance. However, to young people following the trend, this is no longer important as they just see *kemusan* as a way to de-stress and share happiness.

The right moves

In a 30-second tutorial video, YJIN demonstrates how to easily learn *kemusan* and many of her followers left comments saying that they have successfully mastered the dance.

“The most important point of the dance is to press the tiptoes and heels properly and move from side to side like a tumbler,” said YJIN.

However, YJIN warned people should be careful dancing *kemusan* as they might sprain their ankles or knees if they try to imitate the moves without paying attention to the right techniques. “People who want to try the dance should not force their ankles to twist unnaturally,” said YJIN.

In Thailand, people are enjoying *kemusan* both online and offline. In popular Haidilao branches in Bangkok, some diners liked the catchy dance so much that they joined the staff in performances.

The accompanying song, which sounds like a mix of disco beats and



Pamela Reif, a German fitness influencer, posted a video of herself dancing the *kemusan* on Dec 21 on Bilibili, a video platform. BILIBILI

Above right: A dancer dressed in a South Korean hanbok performs the *kemusan*. TIKTOK
Bottom left: A young woman in Italy performs the dance. FACEBOOK

Viral dance becoming widely known overseas

traditional Chinese folk songs, has also been widely embraced by Thai college students.

During February's Lunar New Year celebration, nearly 60 students from Silpakorn University in Bangkok dressed up in the traditional attire of some Chinese ethnic groups and performed the *kemusan* dance. The dance was an instant sensation online in Thailand.

On TikTok, one *kemusan* video by a Thai girl using an account named Poppok9 has been viewed more than 167,000 times.

Vachirapol Prommalikit, a sophomore at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, said the “subject three” dance has been popular in Thailand for some time.

“I saw it for the first time on TikTok and was taken by its beat,” he said. “After learning the song's name, I researched it online and found many young people performed the dance and some had even developed their own styles.”

Unique style

Vachirapol said the “subject three” dance has a unique style as the moves change rapidly and it

requires good physical coordination to follow the actions, such as swinging the knees sideways, a rapid series of hand actions, or fast twisting of the wrists.

Thailand has songs similar to the mesmerizing ones used in *kemusan*. “I think this music style is welcomed by young people, in particular, due to its fun elements and liveliness,” he said.

Vachirapol's classmate, Supasan Chaipanit, tried to master the dance after being attracted by its fun moves and popularity.

“It's not easy to perform the dance well, although most of the moves are easy to follow. But still, it is not difficult to perform a short part of it, even for those who have never learned dance before. Everyone can enjoy the dance. I think that's the charm of the ‘subject three’ dance,” Supasan said.

In Singapore, students at the Canadian International School (CIS) put on sunglasses and dressed in red shirts to perform *kemusan* during Chinese New Year celebrations.

Charlotte Hewson, marketing and communications manager of CIS Singapore, said a group of stu-

dents initiated the idea after seeing the videos online. “(They) thought it would be a fun way to continue the many Lunar New Year festivities and celebrations that take place within the school that bring our community together,” said Hewson.

Lou, from NTU, said the students' dance showed that they want to be part of a cultural trend. “It also denotes their cultural identity,” Lou added.

Peh Lei Xi Crystal, a part-time Zumba instructor and dance teacher in Singapore, combined *kemusan* moves with Zumba in a fitness routine.

“I first saw the video on TikTok and I thought the music has a strong Chinese style,” said Peh. “At first I did not like the music, but after listening to it a few more times and seeing the dance moves, I began to think it is interesting.”

Peh said many of her students, particularly the younger generation with Chinese ancestry, liked the dance after she introduced it to them.

“Recently, I also shared the music with a group of Malay Singaporeans. The reaction was nice but it seems that they did not know what the ‘subject three’ dance is,” said Peh.

Noting that about 70 percent of Singapore's population is ethnically Chinese, Peh said it is easier for people to accept popular trends from China like *kemusan*.

Peh said the power of short video platforms, the dissemination by overseas Chinese, and the simple dance choreography are reasons why the *kemusan* dance can take the world by storm.

Emotional release

The dance has been widely spread via social media in the form of short videos.

“The *kemusan* dance itself is a lot of joy and fun that can be recognized by people worldwide. Young people, in particular, can find in the dance a free and delightful way to express themselves in a positive way,” said Yu Haiqiu, director of Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences' Thailand Research Institute.

“The dance meets the emotional needs of many people and helps release their feelings. Some *kemusan* dance videos have been performed in public places, which shows the attitude of young people who want to be independent and are not afraid of others' opinions,” Yu said.

Yu attributed the global popularity and mass participation in *kemusan* to its free and easy style.

“It's not hard to learn and get everyone engaged. Some people have even developed their own style of *kemusan* to make the performance unique and personal,” she added.

Younger generations, especially those born after the 1990s and 2000s, are more deeply involved with the internet and social media, Yu said.

“The internet helps to bridge the geographical gap and gives individuals a stage to express themselves. Everyone has a chance to be under the spotlight, and dancing is one of the ways to perform,” she said. “This *kemusan* dance trend helps to bring people from around the world with different backgrounds even closer, which is very encouraging.”

Veronika Saraswati, convener of the China Studies Research Unit at the Jakarta-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, said the “subject three” dance is an energetic and enjoyable dance that is inspiring togetherness, cooperation and harmony.

“Therefore, many people love it,” she said.

Besides the “subject three” dance, Saraswati said other areas of Chinese popular culture such as TV dramas are also growing in global popularity.

“Popular culture is a window for people around the world to understand Chinese culture comprehensively,” said Saraswati. “China's great achievements in advanced technology and innovation benefit and support these cultural works.”

Ellis Ng in Singapore and Jin Mengzhe in Bangkok contributed to this story.

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A Japanese youth performs *kemusan* on the street. YOUTUBE

A dancer from Russia tries the *kemusan* dance. DOUYIN

TOP NEWS

UN meeting addresses issues facing women

A delegate from China shares experiences of nation on gender equality at annual session

By MINLU ZHANG
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A delegate of the Chinese women's association on Tuesday shared the nation's experience in achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls during the annual United Nations meeting focused on women's issues.

The 68th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which started Monday and will run to March 22, is an annual meeting to address the inequalities, violence and discrimination against women.

"Improving mechanisms and continuous investment are the core conditions for achieving gender equality," said Huang Xiaowei, vice-president of the All-China Women's Federation, sharing China's experience and progress at a ministerial round table on the priority theme of the CSW.

"To ensure the fruits of economic and social development benefit a wider range of women more fairly," the main approaches include developing national and local action plans, establishing a well-coordinated interdepartmental mechanism and increasing diversified inputs that benefit women, said Huang.

Huang, who is also the vice-chairperson of the National Working Committee on Children and Women under China's State Council, said at a CSW side event on closing the gender gap in education, that China "regards educational equity as the basic goal and policy of modernization".

China has "developed strategies and measures to eliminate gender gaps at all levels of education", and "ensures the equal right to education for girls and women", said Huang.

"As the world undergoes significant changes not seen in a century, the global cause for women faces tremendous challenges but also harbors new opportunities," Huang noted at the general discussion of the CSW.

Under such context, China calls for building a foundation for women's security, said Huang.

That can be done by "further

improving laws and policies, increasing the supply of resources, strengthening public services, eliminating prejudice, discrimination and violence against women, cracking down on violations of women's rights and elevating the protection of women's rights to the will of the country and internalizing it into social behavioral norms," she said.

"We should enhance education for girls and women, promote women's employment and entrepreneurship, support women's economic empowerment, ensure women's equal participation in high-quality development and national governance, help women overcome livelihood difficulties and developmental gaps, and thus injecting new vitality into sustainable development," said Huang.

To address women's current issues, China also calls for building a bridge for global cooperation, she said.

"Strengthen exchanges and cooperation in areas such as poverty reduction, food security, pandemic response and vaccines, and the digital economy," Huang said, calling for increasing financial and technical support for women in developing countries, narrowing the development gap, and making women's goals an early achievement of the UN's 2030 Agenda.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday emphasized that at the current rate of change, legal equality for women could take 300 years to achieve, as could ending child marriage.

He told a UN commemoration that over two-thirds of those killed and injured in Gaza are reportedly women and girls.

"Today is the first day of Ramadan. ... I am appalled and outraged that conflict is continuing in Gaza during this holy month," Guterres said Monday at the opening of the CSW.

President of the General Assembly Dennis Francis said on Monday that 1 out of every 10 women lives in extreme poverty. According to the UN, about 10.3 percent of women around the world today live in extreme poverty, and they are poorer than men.



Huang Xiaowei, vice-president of the All-China Women's Federation, shares China's experience with gender equality at a sideline event Tuesday of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women meeting, which runs to March 22. MINLUZHANG / CHINA DAILY

Investment: Nation also a 'key source of innovation'

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Apple is not alone in expressing its strong confidence in China as an innovation hub. French industrial and tech company Schneider Electric SE established a string of research institutes in China in 2023, including a digital power distribution R&D center, an automation R&D center and an AI innovation lab.

Pan Helin, co-director of the Digital Economy and Financial Innovation Research Center at Zhejiang

University's International Business School, said, "As China beefs up its tech clout, more foreign companies will build R&D centers in the country, showing that China is not just a market, but also a key source of innovation."

In 2023, China's R&D investment exceeded 3.3 trillion yuan, up 8.1 percent year-on-year, and funding for fundamental research reached 221.2 billion yuan, an annual rise of 9.3 percent, according to the Ministry of Science and Technology.

Raging fire



Black smoke billows on Monday from a supermarket that caught fire in Mosbach, Germany. It was not known if anyone was injured in the incident. Surrounding buildings and parking lots were evacuated immediately. MARCO PRIEBE/AP IMAGES

Pakistan, China vow to elevate ironclad ties

By XU WEI
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Pakistan and China are planning more high-level exchanges and steps to take their relations to even greater heights, Islamabad's top envoy to Beijing said, with the recent election of Pakistan's new leadership fueling expectations for fortified bilateral cooperation going forward.

Pakistani Ambassador to China Khalil Hashmi said in an exclusive interview with China Daily that the two nations are "resolved to further bolster high-level exchanges, instill additional substance to the already robust bilateral relations, and further fortify the ironclad friendship in the face of a complex geopolitical and regional milieu".

Hashmi noted that President Xi Jinping was the first foreign leader to send a congratulatory message to both President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of Pakistan "in a matter of a few hours" after the announcement of the election results, a diplomatic gesture underscoring the strong ties between the two neighbors.

In his messages, Xi underlined his readiness to work with the two leaders in carrying forward the traditional bilateral friendship and advancing pragmatic cooperation in various sectors.

Sharif wrote in a post on social media platform X that he wished to extend sincere gratitude to the Chinese president for congratulating him on his reelection. "Look forward to working with him to further strengthen Paki-

"We have a solid foundation to further expand our relations in economy, trade, investment, industry, science and technology, tourism, education, media and culture."



Khalil Hashmi, Pakistani ambassador to China

stan-China ironclad friendship and for high-quality development of CPEC as flagship of BRI," he wrote, referring to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Pakistani envoy stressed that ties between China and Pakistan, as iron brothers and all-weather strategic cooperative partners, have weathered many storms and achieved many milestones. "They continue to grow from strength to strength."

"We have a solid foundation to further expand our relations in economy, trade, investment, industry, science and technology, tourism, education, media and culture," Hashmi said.

He highlighted the significance of the year 2023 in bilateral ties, as both sides celebrated the solid

progress achieved in the first decade of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

As the development of the CPEC is transitioning to its second phase in 2024 and beyond, Hashmi said both nations "remained committed to jointly building corridors of economic growth, livelihoods, innovation, green development and inclusivity, infused with high-quality development".

The economic corridor has transformed Pakistan's infrastructure and energy landscape, contributed to significant socioeconomic progress, and laid the foundation for accelerated economic growth, industrialization and more jobs, the envoy said.

The CPEC, which is a landmark project of the Belt and Road Initiative that includes a variety of infrastructure projects such as roads, railways and oil and gas pipelines, has created a total of 236,000 jobs and built 510 kilometers of highways for the South Asian country, according to the Chinese embassy in Pakistan.

As China's strategic partner on both the bilateral and multilateral fronts, Pakistan has also been actively engaged with China in promoting and forging ahead with President Xi's vision of a community with a shared future for mankind.

Pakistan, one of the earliest members of the Group of Friends of Global Development Initiative, has been an active partner with China in promoting the landmark initiative, as it aligns well with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, Hashmi said.

The Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the BRI "represent a global road map for a more prosperous, harmonious and peaceful world", he said.

Mushahid Hussain Sayed, the founding chairman of the Pakistan-China Institute and chairman of Pakistan's Senate Committee on Defence, said that with the country's new government taking office, the biggest impact will be "on taking CPEC forward with renewed vigor, plus enhanced bilateral trade and stronger diplomatic coordination on key issues".

He highlighted the significance of the commitment from President Xi on the bilateral ties.

"As President Xi rightly pointed out, with the world confronted with accelerated changes unseen in a century, the strategic significance of China-Pakistan relations has become more prominent," he said.

"Pakistan-China relations remain solid and substantive, irrespective of any changes in the region or a change of governments, as these are based on mutual interests reinforced by supporting each other's core interests," he added.

The Pakistani senator also highlighted the significance of greater cooperation with China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

"Both countries oppose any new Cold War, any zero-sum game mindset, or hegemony of any kind, and support an international order based on the UN Charter and international law, with no double standards on any issues," he said.

Summit: Australia puts its interests first in region

From page 1

without naming China, although it was clear that is where her finger was pointing. She also did not acknowledge that it is Australia and the United States that persist in conducting provocative near-to-shore freedom of navigation exercises that they themselves would not tolerate if undertaken by China close to their shores.

Her comments also begged the question of who are the "we" she talked about. Southeast Asia has peacefully coexisted for centuries with China, long before Australia and the US existed. The long arc of history shows that ASEAN was influenced socially and culturally by China. It is a foolish rejection of history to suggest this is somehow a new phenomenon and therefore a so-called threat that needs to be countered by ASEAN.

Malaysian Prime Minister

Southeast Asia has peacefully coexisted for centuries with China, long before Australia and the US existed. The long arc of history shows that ASEAN was influenced socially and culturally by China. It is a foolish rejection of history to suggest this is somehow a new phenomenon and therefore a so-called threat that needs to be countered by ASEAN.

Anwar Ibrahim made it very clear that if Australia and the US "have problems with China, they should not impose it upon us. We do not have a problem with China".

Both Albanese and Wong referenced a report titled "Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040", written by Nicholas Moore, Australia's special envoy for Southeast Asia. The report supported increased engagement in ASEAN because, in large part, there was money to be made from the growing middle class.

The report made scant mention of the Belt and Road Initiative and the role it is playing in ASEAN's cooperative development, which is perhaps why Australia launched the Southeast Asia Investment Financing Facility, as if it were a major contribution to the region. The fund is designed to assist Australian businesses to tap into grow-

ing demand for renewable power in the region between now and 2050, so it is more about profit than cooperation.

The comments from Australian leaders fell short on the ASEAN concept of cooperation and assistance, but were strong in pushing for ASEAN to follow a Western agenda in the region and making room for Australian businesses to profit from the region.

The concept of ASEAN centrality was paid lip service in an attempt to disguise the carpetbagging approach to regional engagement in which Australia's interests come first.

The author is an international financial technical analyst and a former national board member of the Australia China Business Council. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

CHINA

Soaring prospects

Students release balloons during a coming-of-age ceremony at Shandong Experimental High School in Jinan, Shandong province, on Monday. More than 1,200 senior high school students exchanged letters and gifts with their parents, symbolizing their transition into adulthood.

HUANG ZHONGMING
/ FOR CHINA DAILY



Breakthrough sets stage for next-generation high-yield rice

Researchers decode genetic puzzle, paving the way for global food security

By LI LEI
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A group of rice researchers in Beijing have decoded the genetic puzzle behind the vexing trade-off between the average size of rice grains and their maximum number on rice ears, paving the way for next-generation super high-yield varieties, according to a study published in Science on Friday.

The discovery heralds a major revolution in rice breeding since hybrid rice was rolled out half a century ago and helped curb hunger globally, experts said.

The negative correlation between grain size and their total number has long impeded progress toward higher-yield varieties, as increasing the grain size would decrease the number of grains.

Researchers from the Institute of Crop Sciences of the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, led by

Tong Hongning, had looked to clustered-spikelet rice, a wild variety in which multiple grains grow together on a single stem, assuming it bears the linchpin to tipping the balance. After years of research, the scientists managed to clone the key gene responsible for the clustered-spikelet, and unraveled how a plant hormone, brassinosteroids, can be manipulated through genetic engineering to bolster grain number without compromising size.

Clustered-spikelet rice has intrigued global plant researchers for almost a century. However, the gene responsible for its formation had never been pinpointed, Tong said.

Trial planting data showed that varieties developed through Tong's method produce 11.2 percent to 20.9 percent more yield depending on where they were planted.

"We also found the hormone played a similar role in pepper, suggesting a broader role of the hormone in controlling multi-spikelet phenotypes in nature," he said.

Cao Yongsheng, a vice-president of the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, said rice research has two major milestones: dwarf rice breeding and hybrid rice breeding. It counts on the mining of important genes, such as that of the clustered-spikelet rice, to score another breakthrough in output.

"Rice is a staple for over half of the global population. With the increasing global population and decreasing arable land, improving rice yield is significant for ensuring global food security," he said.

Cao said that progress in basic agricultural science research is the driving force behind agricultural innovations, and is the bedrock for China to achieve high-level self-reliance in the sector.

Technologies such as gene editing, synthetic biology and digital intelligence are transforming farm-

ing and intensifying technological competition, he added.

Qian Qian, one of the Science paper's corresponding authors and an academician at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, said scientific progress contributes 63 percent of agricultural output value in China and has strengthened national food resilience.

"Our agriculture is already at the forefront of the world on many fronts," he said, adding that China is the absolute leader in rice breeding.

Qian, a deputy to the 14th National People's Congress, the top legislature, which met in Beijing recently, said the country's agricultural breakthroughs are built upon work by generations of tech workers.

"Scientists, represented by Yuan Longping (the father of hybrid rice), have overcome the global challenge of hybrid rice, providing the most solid foundation for solving China's food problems," he said.

"Hybrid rice has allowed us to stand on an equal footing with the world."

Push for more parental care leave gathers pace

By WANG XIAOYU
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Zhang Da found his parents were less involved in familial and social gatherings and talked slowly when he returned home from Xi'an, Shaanxi province, to spend the Spring Festival holiday with them in mid-January.

"It just hit me that my parents were getting old, and I felt a stronger sense of responsibility and an intense feeling that I needed to accompany them more often," the 28-year-old said. "My father also fell sick last year and now needs me to take care of him."

However, like a number of regions in China, Shaanxi only grants paid parental care leave to employees from one-child families. "I have siblings so my employer would not easily allow me to take time off work," he said.

The dilemma confronting Zhang is starting to receive increasing attention from authorities as China strives to meet the demand for senior care in a rapidly aging society.

"I have siblings so my employer would not easily allow me to take time off work."

Zhang Da, an employee in Xi'an, Shaanxi province

China had about 297 million people aged 60 and older — 21.1 percent of its population — by the end of last year. The elderly population is forecast to reach 400 million, and exceed 30 percent of the total, by around 2035, according to official estimates.

In response to a netizen's online suggestion, the health commission in Zhejiang province said late last month that when it revises local population and family planning regulations it will consider extending parental care leave to workers who are not the only child in their families.

The online suggestion said that being filial to parents and accompanying them is a basic moral principle and policies should not differ on the basis of the number of children in a family.

The provincial health commission acknowledged the necessity of expanding eligibility for such leave.

"We also encourage employers to offer care leave for workers whose elderly parents are hospitalized or cannot live by themselves due to illness," it said.

In reply to a similar online request, the civil affairs bureau in Beijing said in late January that setting up parental care leave is imperative.

"With the deepening aging trend in the city, elderly care has become a difficult problem for all and should be emphasized and dealt with proactively," it said.

"Granting parental care leave is one active measure to tackle the aging trend. Currently, there is no national law or regulation related to it but we see it as an imperative task based on practical demands."

Nationwide, several regions allow

paid parental leave for workers with siblings.

In Tianjin, people from a one-child family are entitled to 20 days of paid parental care leave a year and those who are not an only child are given 10 days.

The province of Guizhou grants seven days' paid leave for employees with siblings, compared with 15 days for those who are the sole child.

One concern of local authorities is that such leave has an impact on labor costs.

Health authorities in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region said previously that the establishment of any paid leave should take into consideration the rights of workers and the labor costs of employers.

Feng Wenmeng, a researcher with the Development Research Center of the State Council, told People's Daily that honors could be bestowed on businesses that provide parental care leave.

Local governments could also consider giving tax deductions to employers who implement parental care leave, he said.

Rescue work rewarding for female volunteer

By LI MENGHAN
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By turning her passion for outdoor sports into a commitment to volunteerism, Su Qin, one of the few female rescue team leaders, has successfully carried out several hundred missions at home and abroad over the past decade.

In 2003, Su stepped into the realm of outdoor sports, where she met a member of the Blue Sky Rescue Team, a professional nongovernmental volunteer rescue organization in China, and found a way to practice her helpfulness and caring. Upon formation of the Hefei rescue team in 2012, she became a member and, three years later, she was selected team leader.

"The majority of the initial team members were outdoor enthusiasts, given their wilderness survival and escape skills were suited for rescue operations," the 44-year-old said.

She recalled a rescue in a mountainous area of Anhui province in July 2020, where she found floodwaters reaching a depth of 8 meters and furniture floating on the second floor of a building.

"When evacuating the residents, an elderly person rushed out and lisped that his bedridden spouse was still at home. When our team member carried the elderly woman from upstairs to the lifeboat, he was completely drained of energy," Su said.

However, Su said although tired, they had a sense of accomplishment when seeing "the eyes of the trapped shining upon seeing us". That feeling mirrored hers from the previous night, when she led the underwater search and rescue operations. Despite the dangerous conditions, including slippery rocks, frigid temperatures and low visibility, she found fulfillment when completing the task and hearing the public express their gratitude.

As one of the 89 female members in the Hefei rescue team — representing about one in five members — Su said that except for physical strength, she found no disparity in rescue capability between males and females. She added that at times, females can take advantage of their smaller body size and composure.

Last year, when two 7.8 magnitude earthquakes hit Türkiye on Feb 6, the team launched an emergency rescue response. Within one day, more than 100 members from across the nation had set off for the disaster-stricken areas, with Su serving as chief coordinator. "After flying for more than 10 hours, we arrived at the site and



Su Qin during a flood rescue mission in Lujiang, Anhui province, in July 2020. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

saw a tortured city, prompting everyone to carry out rescue operations as quickly as possible. As the debris became increasingly narrow toward the bottom, only our petite female rescue workers could continue the operation," she said. "Within a single day, I experienced more than 100 aftershocks, with the largest measuring a magnitude of 6.4.

"I'm frequently asked if I'm scared. My answer is definitely yes. When danger approaches, fear is a natural response for anyone, but once at the rescue site, I'm too busy to dwell on fear."

At work, Su is a successful businesswoman running an outdoor supplies store. She devotes much of her leisure time to being a considerate rescue team leader, taking the lead to conduct disaster relief work, but that sometimes means she can spend less time with her family.

On Feb 7, two days before Chinese New Year's Eve, Su was about to go to bed when she received a phone call saying a 77-year-old woman had been missing for over 10 hours. More than 20 family members had been searching outside for nearly eight hours, but they still had no clue where she was, and the dropping temperature exacerbated the situation.

Su's husband helped her pack a bag and inform other volunteers. Twenty team members were gathered within 30 minutes to start a search. After two hours using surveillance, road patrols and infrared drone searches, the elderly woman was found 30 kilometers from her home.

"The moment her children saw her, they hugged her tightly with tears rolling down their faces," Su said. "All the efforts are worthwhile, and it is the best Chinese New Year's gift for us."

She said she feels grateful and lucky for her family's support of her dream.

"I will devote the rest of my life to voluntary causes," Su said. "Even when I become too old to participate in front-line rescue work, I will continue to provide backup support."

Wave hello



A woman takes a photo in an art installation imitating ocean waves at a commercial square in Kunming, Yunnan province, on Tuesday. The artwork was made from eco-friendly straws. LIU RANYANG / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

Adviser maps out strategy to beat West's tech blockade

By YAO YUXIN
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To break free from the West's "tech stranglehold", China needs to reform its assessment of talent, bolster synergies between industry, academia and research, and nurture a fertile ground for innovation, a national political adviser said.

Liu Zhongfan, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and an academician at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, emphasized the need for innovation

in evaluation metrics, arguing that merely tallying the number of published articles or awards won is insufficient.

"Relying solely on quantitative data will absolutely fail to identify the best talent," he said.

Liu cited his own field of research, graphene, as an example. Statistically, China appears to be far ahead, with approximately 91,900 graphene patent applications, accounting for 72.2 percent of the global total — 10 times more than the United States, which ranks second.

However, he questioned the actu-

al amount of innovation represented by the domestic numbers.

"This is a microcosm of China's high-tech industries and is not limited to graphene alone," he said.

The blind pursuit of efficiency and quantity, where everyone rushes in, only leads to significant dispersion and waste of resources, which does not help in addressing the "choke point" challenges faced by the high-tech industry, he added.

Liu said that is where basic research comes into play. He said fundamental research should be guided by interest and curiosity,

embracing free exploration that cannot initially define its utility or guaranteed outcomes, and was not something that can be planned.

Such free exploration was how revolutionary concepts like relativity and quantum mechanics came to be.

However, Liu said he had recently observed a worrying trend, with an excessive emphasis on major research programs, key projects and talent initiatives increasingly squeezing out funding for free exploration.

"While it might not be necessary

to say that basic research should be bolstered, at the very least a certain proportion of resources should be reserved for such endeavors," he said.

To achieve technological breakthroughs, it is also essential to enhance collaboration between research and development institutions and enterprises to advance the commercialization of R&D outcomes, Liu said, adding that insufficient collaboration remained a weakness.

"Enterprises are the main drivers of innovation," Liu said.

He said the easing of technological "bottlenecks" ultimately hinges on enterprises, which means the solution is the creation of a fair and

competitive market environment that allows more enterprises to grow and thrive.

In response to the United States' technological suppression, China should more actively engage in international exchanges and cooperation, Liu said.

"As long as we have something superior, they will be willing to collaborate with us," he said.

"We should adopt a more liberal, bolder and open-minded approach to reaching out globally."



Online Watch the video by scanning the code.

CHINA

Mainland app assists Taiwan residents

Tailutong helps fulfill daily, employment needs of compatriots who come to Fujian

By HU MEIDONG in Fuzhou and ZHOU HUIYING

Since its official launch in 2017 in Pingtan, Fujian province, a mobile app called Tailutong has provided great convenience and benefits to Taiwan people in Fujian, the so-called first home for compatriots and businesses from the island.

Initiated by a private cloud service enterprise based in Fujian, the app is the first digital platform designed to aid Taiwan compatriots on the Chinese mainland. Since its launch, it has expanded from offering public services such as information about the Fujian government, document processing and financial assistance to more lifestyle-oriented services such as the ability to book travel between the mainland and Taiwan, and arrange package deliveries across the Taiwan Strait.

On Feb 20, the third working day after the Spring Festival holiday, Gao Yanhong in Taiwan received a call from Lin Lanfang, the customer service manager of the app.

"Lin told me that the business license I applied for online before the Spring Festival had been processed," Gao said. "I was really surprised by their efficient service."

With the resumption of transportation services between Fujian and Taiwan early last year, Gao decided to open a cross-Strait trading company in Pingtan, hoping to expand her business based on the beneficial policies the city offers.

"In the past, when Taiwan people applied for business licenses on the mainland, they had to provide various supporting documents on site," she said. "Not long ago, a friend recommended the Tailutong app to me. After submit-

ting an application and paying a guarantee deposit, the license request can be submitted in a few seconds, so people can trust the app to assist in applying for a business license on the mainland. It's really convenient."

According to Lin, the app receives hundreds of service orders from Taiwan compatriots every day, the most being applications to various government departments for things such as business licenses, travel permits and professional qualification certificates.

"After receiving the orders, the app's customer service staff will assist them in collecting the required materials and then submit the applications online according to the requirements of different departments," Lin said. "For departments that have not yet launched online services, the customer service staff will personally coordinate with them."

The app can now be downloaded from the mobile app market in Taiwan and has become a resource for Taiwan residents who want to learn more about the mainland.

So far, the app has accumulated over 2.3 million downloads and has directly served over 400,000 Taiwan compatriots.

The app also focuses on providing more personalized and refined services to meet the daily and employment needs of Taiwan people.

In July 2022, the app launched express delivery services from the mainland to Taiwan, and in March 2023, it began offering such services from Taiwan to the mainland.

"At present, we have reached cooperation agreements with multiple express delivery companies in Taiwan and on the mainland, with over 30,000 express

service points capable of real-time order receiving," said Liu Xiangdong, who heads Tailutong. "Based on the needs of Taiwan compatriots, we have launched various internet services through resource integration, such as booking joint ferry and flight tickets."

"We also provide free shuttle services during their trip, helping them save time and money, and eliminate the trouble of queuing at ticket windows," he added.

Users can pay for the tickets in both renminbi and new Taiwan dollars.

As of now, over 10,000 Taiwan people have purchased the combo tickets via the app, and over 100,000 parcels have been sent to customers on both sides of the Strait.

With the rapid development of digital technology, there are increasingly more digital service platforms like Tailutong that cater to Taiwan compatriots. For instance, the Minzheng-

tong app and the eFuzhou app have both launched a "Taiwan Compatriot Service Zone", providing services such as policy interpretations, qualification approvals and the ability to apply for documents.

Various industries have also introduced many professional digital products. For example, the High People's Court of Fujian established the first cross-Strait judicial service network and mobile app on the mainland.

In addition, Xiamen Bank has launched the first online automated approval credit consumer loan product exclusively for Taiwan compatriots.

Various online service platforms and WeChat public accounts have also launched channels for Taiwan youth to apply for entrepreneurship and employment subsidies.

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New campus in Xiong'an a display of education integration

SHIJIAZHUANG — During their winter vacation, students at an elementary school in Xiong'an New Area, about 100 kilometers southwest of Beijing, were seen reading in the school library, writing calligraphy, singing in classrooms and playing games on campus.

They were enjoying the free winter vacation childcare service offered to students whose parents were too busy to look after them.

The Xiong'an campus of Beijing's prestigious Shijiahutong Elementary School opened last autumn, becoming the first primary school to open in Xiong'an as the highly anticipated "city of the future" is finally taking shape. On April 1, 2017, China announced plans to establish the Xiong'an New Area in Hebei province to relieve Beijing of functions nonessential to its role as the nation's capital and advance the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region.

In less than seven years, Xiong'an has been transformed from a blueprint into a reality, and it is being built at a rapid pace.

"Our students are the children of the builders of Xiong'an, and the school is obligated to relieve the workers of their worries by taking care of their children during the winter vacation," said Wang Ying, vice-principal of the school's Xiong'an campus.

Last October, authorities in Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei jointly signed an action plan to boost the coordinated development of edu-



An aerial view of the Xiong'an campuses of Beijing No 4 High School and Beijing's Shijiahutong Elementary School in Hebei province last month. Both schools welcomed their first students in September. MU YU / XINHUA



A teacher gives an English class for students at the Xiong'an campus of Shijiahutong Elementary School in September. ZHU XUDONG / XINHUA

cation in the region. Under the cooperation mechanism, schools in the three areas are encouraged

to engage in personnel exchanges and resource sharing in areas such as digital education.

Last semester, students on the Xiong'an campus of the Shijiahutong Elementary School interacted with teachers during livestreamed courses provided by the Beijing campus through an online platform.

Wang said teachers in Xiong'an participate in collective lesson preparation, offline training and seminars with their peers in Beijing, thus ensuring that students in both places enjoy the same quality of education.

During the winter vacation, Hebei University hosted a training course for teachers in Hebei, inviting more than 60 experts from prestigious universities in Beijing to give lectures. More than 30,000 primary and secondary school principals and high school teachers from Baoding,

Hebei, participated in the training both online and offline.

The Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region boasts a large number of prime colleges and universities, as well as an abundance of high-end research talent. The coordinated development of the region is expected to promote the sharing of educational resources and bridge gaps in the development of education.

Over the past decade, more than 200 primary and secondary schools in Beijing and Tianjin municipalities have established cooperative education ties with more than 200 schools in Hebei, while 15 Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei vocational education alliances and 22 university alliances have been established.

XINHUA

4-yr-old HK artist wins Wildlife Day contest

By CHEN LIANG
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Young people from across the world, including a boy from Hong Kong, were recognized for their artistic talent at the annual World Wildlife Day 2024 International Youth Art Contest on March 5.

This year marked the sixth edition of the contest hosted by the International Fund for Animal Welfare, a conservation organization, in partnership with the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, or CITES, and the United Nations Development Programme.

With his piece depicting a den of snakes, 4-year-old Isaac Alvin Lam from Hong Kong won first prize in the traditional art category, while 18-year-old Noh Sangeun from Singapore took top honors in the digital art category for his piece featuring cranes.

Both winners were recognized as part of the official United Nations' World Wildlife Day celebrations, which were held on March 3.

Mao Yanjun, a 15-year-old teenager from the Chinese mainland, was also selected Best in Age in the Age 15-18 category in this year's contest. Mao was also the champion at the fourth World Wildlife Day International Youth Art Contest in 2022 for his piece *Return Home*.

The winners were selected from a record 3,000-plus entrants from 141 countries and regions.

Under this year's theme "Connecting People and Planet: Exploring Digital Innovation in Wildlife Conservation", entries featured species that benefit from technology such as camera traps and tracking devices.

"This was a record-breaking year for global submissions, and the talent displayed in the art pieces is extraordinary," said Danielle Kessler, the United States director with the IFAW, who congratulated all participants.

"The world's biodiversity is sadly disappearing at alarming rates, and the passionate submissions gathered from around the world reinforce a dedication to wildlife conservation from future generations, which is exactly what the world needs. It is an honor to continue hosting this global contest that provides them with a platform for such expression."

CITES Secretary-General Iyona Higuero said, "It is uplifting to see so many young people, from so many countries, recognize the value in partnerships and technology to conserve and protect imperiled species."



The work that Isaac Alvin Lam from Hong Kong won first prize in the traditional art category at the World Wildlife Day 2024 International Youth Art Contest. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

XINHUA

South Korean entrepreneur crafts success amid push for coordinated growth

For Kim Jun-bum, an entrepreneur from the Republic of Korea who lives in Beijing, China presents an ideal opportunity to pursue his dreams.

Having spent many years living in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, Kim has witnessed its coordinated development and progress firsthand.

"In recent years, I have been to many places in China due to my entrepreneurial pursuits," he said. "Driven by Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei province, which are close to Beijing, are experiencing great advancements."

Kim first came to China about 13 years ago. He studied at Peking University and enrolled in Chinese language classes. After graduating, he established a company in Beijing's Zhongguancun area, known as "China's Silicon Valley", to help more foreigners start businesses in China.

In recent years, he has focused on business related to economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and the ROK.

As a key national strategy of China, the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has not only brought real convenience to the work and life of Chinese and expats but has also injected a strong impetus for regional economic development and provided more opportunities for Chinese and foreign youths who come here to work and start businesses, according to Kim.

Kim, who majored in management, launched his business in China in 2019.

"Thanks to the innovative local entrepreneurial policy, not only was my company registration process simplified, but rental costs were also reduced," he said. "With the support of local authorities in Zhongguancun and Beijing, I also obtained an entrepreneurial visa."

With the increasing internationalization of Beijing's business environment and the advancement of coordinated development in the region, more and more foreigners want to start businesses in

the region, Kim said.

"We now provide consulting services to foreign startups and entrepreneurs by holding entrepreneurship seminars and serving as keynote speakers. We explain the policy advantages of different regions, encourage foreign startups to come to China and help foreign entrepreneurs settle into incubators and establish businesses," Kim explained.

"In my eyes, Zhongguancun is the 'center of Chinese startups'. Here, I feel the vibrant vitality of innovation," he added.

As a whole, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region has deeply promoted the coordinated development of science and technology innovation, and cooperation between upstream and downstream industries in their industrial chains continues to strengthen. By the end of 2023, the number of branches established by Zhongguancun enterprises in Tianjin and Hebei had exceeded 10,000.

The high-speed train journey from Beijing to Tianjin takes

about half an hour, while driving to Hebei takes just over an hour. This coordinated transportation infrastructure has added significant advantages to the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region.

One of the landmark projects for regional coordinated development, Beijing Daxing International Airport has provided Kim with firsthand experience of the convenience of such travel.

"Passengers can complete check-in and baggage check-in procedures at city terminals such as Caoqiao, making travel more convenient," he said.

What has further impressed Kim is the continuous optimization of Beijing's role as the nation's capital in recent years. It has striven to address urban challenges, resulting in cleaner and more pleasing surroundings, he said, adding that these efforts have also propelled the development of Tianjin and Hebei.

With the development of China's digital economy in recent years, new technologies and

XINHUA

WORLD

Whole-process people's democracy applauded

By XU WEIWEI in Hong Kong
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The label "autocracy," which some in the West place on China's system of government, is not fair, and China's whole-process people's democracy greatly promotes consultation with the people at all levels for people-focused scientific decision-making, said Colin Mackerras, emeritus professor at Griffith University.

Mackerras said the just-concluded annual two sessions of the National People's Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference are important events in exercising China's whole-process people's democracy which is yet to be understood and embraced by the outside world.

"This year marks the 75th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, and (the meetings) will be more important than ever," he said.

Mackerras spoke about how China's democracy works, noting the public's participation, consultative decision-making and people-focused mechanisms.

The CPPCC is highly participative and contributes hugely to consultations between the government and people, resulting in the effectiveness of China's democracy and governance, Mackerras said.

He noted that CPPCC's composition includes representatives of parties other than the Communist Party of China and that the members comprise people from various walks of life, including workers, intellectuals, diplomats, health workers and so on.

Both the NPC and the CPPCC National Committee and their local branches have promoted Chinese-style democracy everywhere, while proposals of deputies and advisers go to the government departments for eventual action.

Noting that whole-process people's democracy has gained traction, Mackerras said it's a process in which the leaders consult with ordinary people through various ways, including direct discussions and social media.

He cited a Xinhua report that said that at the end of June 2022, Chinese cadres and leaders gathered



Colin Mackerras

8.54 million online opinions on China's then-forthcoming 20th Communist Party of China National Congress. The report noted that people had submitted numerous constructive ideas and

suggestions.

China's system of government is a form of democracy, and the popular confidence in government is high, Mackerras said.

Emphasis on consultation

Whole-process people's democracy greatly promotes consultation with the people at all levels. It puts the emphasis on consultation at all levels and on effective and stable governance, helping improve the lives of people.

The popular impression in the West is that China is a one-party state, in which only the CPC has any involvement in government, but that is not the case, Mackerras said.

While it is true that the CPC exercises leadership in the country, there are eight other parties that have representatives in government bodies. Therefore, China is not a one-party state, Mackerras said.

Since the days when the Communist Party of China ran bases during the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45), "the Party has developed a system of democracy featuring consultations between the Party and the masses of ordinary people," he said.

The Edelman Trust Barometer 2022 survey, based on feedback from over 36,000 respondents from 28 nations, found China at the top of the list for people's trust in government.

Mackerras said that confidence in the future, including the economic future, is far better in China than in the Western democracies, and in particular better than the levels in the US and Britain.

In political and social terms, the US is currently more divided than ever and is beset with many other problems, Mackerras said.

Flight fright



The LATAM Airlines Boeing 787 Dreamliner plane is seen on the tarmac of the Auckland International Airport on Tuesday. The plane suddenly lost altitude midflight a day earlier, dropping violently and leaving at least 50 people injured by what officials described as a "strong movement" on the plane traveling from Sydney to Auckland. Investigators on Tuesday seized the flight recorder to ascertain the cause. BRETT PHIBBS / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

China to drive global growth, experts say

Confidence voiced over nation's ability to achieve 5% GDP goal set for this year

By PRIME SARMIENTO in Hong Kong and WANG XIAODONG in Nairobi

China will remain a key driver of global economic growth, with analysts expressing confidence that the world's second-biggest economy is on track to hit its 5 percent GDP target this year.

Chinese Premier Li Qiang announced this year's GDP target when he delivered the Government Work Report at the opening meeting of the annual session of the country's national legislature on March 5.

Zheng Shanjie, director of the National Development and Reform Commission, said the goal is achievable via enhanced efforts. Zheng said in the March 6 news briefing that China has the confidence, capabilities and conditions to meet the economic and social development targets for this year.

Lawrence Loh, director of the Centre for Governance and Sustainability, NUS Business School, National University of Singapore, said China's GDP target is "realistic", and that the government's plan to boost domestic consumption and develop emerging industries will serve as growth levers.

"These levers are well within the control of domestic economic policies and are thus achievable," Loh said.

Loh predicted China will "go even stronger in opening up markets and investments for foreign participation". He said external trade will augment internal measures to boost the Chinese economy toward the next phase of growth. He also cited China's development of green technology and that the country has reached "a significant momentum in spearheading technological advances" in renewable energy.

"China is the global driver of (renewable) energy," Alicia Garcia Herrero, chief economist for Asia Pacific at Natixis, told China Daily. She said China leads the world in solar panel manufacturing and battery production.

Commerce Minister Wang Wentao said at the same news conference that China will encourage the trade-in of consumer goods, including automobiles, household appliances and home furnishings to bolster consumption.

High potential

He added that from 2013 to 2023, the proportion of per capita consumption expenditure directed toward services increased by 5.5 percentage points. Wang said the potential for further growth in service consumption "remains immense in the foreseeable future".

Wang said there are positive

signs in exports and imports despite a challenging global trade environment. He said trade activities boomed during the Spring Festival while the trade recovery that started in September 2023 is expected to continue.

Oh Ei Sun, a senior fellow at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, said China has to do even better than the 5 percent GDP growth, as it is "the main engine for not only the region but the world".

"Neighboring countries are all eagerly waiting for the spillover effect from China's economic growth. To do that, China has to redouble its efforts in both stimulating domestic consumption and further encouraging entrepreneurship," Oh said.

"The report on the work of the government clearly shows Beijing's efforts to continue pursuing higher-quality economic growth and appropriately increase economic output," said Dennis Munene, executive director of the China-Africa Center at the Africa Policy Institute.

"China's economic achievement is good for the global community. China's continued economic success is not enclosed within its borders," Munene said. "China has helped to transform economies of both developed and developing countries through the offer of global public goods."

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Briefly

CHINA Angolan president to pay a state visit

Angolan President Joao Lourenco will pay a state visit to China from Thursday to Sunday at the invitation of President Xi Jinping. According to Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin, Xi will hold a welcome ceremony and banquet for Lourenco. The two heads of state will hold talks and jointly attend the signing ceremony of cooperation documents. The four-day trip will also bring Lourenco to Shandong province. "We believe that the Angolan president's visit will give a new boost to the all-round and in-depth growth of China-Angola relations and further advance our friendly cooperation," Wang told a daily news briefing on Tuesday.

RUSSIA Military transport aircraft crashes

An IL-76 military transport aircraft crashed in Russia's Ivanovo region, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday. All eight crew members and seven passengers onboard died, the TASS news agency reported. The aircraft crashed as one of its engines caught fire during takeoff, said the ministry, adding that a commission of the Russian Aerospace Forces is on its way to the Ivanovo airfield to find out the facts. Search operations for black boxes are underway, the report said.

SOUTH ASIA Indian troops begin Maldives pullout

India has begun withdrawing military personnel operating surveillance aircraft in the Maldives after the president ordered them to leave, local media reported on Tuesday. The Mihaaru newspaper reported that 25 Indian troops deployed in the southernmost atoll of Addu had left the archipelago ahead of March 10, the official start of the withdrawal. Following talks with New Delhi, the two sides had agreed to complete the withdrawal of 89 Indian troops and their support staff from the nation by May 10.

HUNGARY Trump won't 'give a penny' to Kyiv: Orban

Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban has asserted that former US president Donald Trump told him during a meeting that he would "not give a penny" to the conflict in Ukraine. Orban traveled to Florida on Friday to meet his "good friend" Trump, Agence France-Presse reported on Monday. Orban has frequently expressed hope for the Republican's return to power. "He has a very clear vision, which is hard not to agree with. He says the following: first of all, he will not give a penny in the Ukraine-Russia war," Orban said. Trump's team did not immediately comment.

CHINA DAILY—XINHUA—AGENCIES



A woman holds a placard during a pro-euthanasia demonstration near the National Assembly in Paris in January. DIMITAR DILKOFF / AFP

Macron takes steps to legalize assisted suicide

By EARLE GALE in London
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France plans to legalize assisted suicide for adults facing certain death because of illness.

President Emmanuel Macron made the announcement to the French newspapers La Croix and Liberation, saying he will put forward the legislation needed to protect people who help others die, as long as that assistance complies with strict rules.

Macron said the law will offer people with painful terminal illnesses "a possible path, in a determined situation, with precise criteria, where the medical decision is playing its role" and that the change was needed "because there are situations you cannot humanely accept".

His announcement followed the release of a government report last year that was the culmination of a long consultation process and included studies of French citizens' views. The report concluded that most people in the nation now support end-of-life options.

Macron said the new law will only apply to people with incurable illnesses who doctors believe will die in the "short- or middle-term" and who are in "intractable" physical or psychological pain.

They will also need to be able to make their own informed decision on whether to end their life, so people with severe psychiatric conditions

and neurodegenerative disorders such as dementia will be excluded.

Some religious leaders in the traditionally Catholic country have criticized the proposed law, as have some healthcare workers who say they may now be asked to do things they disagree with.

Macron "has with great violence announced a system far removed from patients' needs and health workers' daily reality, which could have grave consequences on the care relationship", the associations for palliative care, cancer support and specialist nurses said in a statement.

Accusing the government of aiming to save money with the plan, they said that greater resources for palliative care, rather than assisted dying, would fulfill patients' demands to "die with dignity".

The proposed legislation will be debated and reviewed in Parliament during a period likely to last several months that will start with the bill being presented in April, and ramp up with the bill's first reading in the National Assembly on May 27. The law is unlikely to come into force before next year.

As all forms of assisted dying are currently illegal in France, many citizens with painful terminal illnesses have been traveling to private clinics in Switzerland to end their lives. Assisted suicide is also legal in Portugal.

Agencies contributed to this story.

Biden's budget plan highlights divisions ahead of polls

WASHINGTON — US President Joe Biden unveiled an ambitious \$7.3 trillion budget proposal, with an aim to convince the public that he can run the economy better than his predecessor Donald Trump.

But the budget is almost certain to be dead on arrival in the sharply divided US Congress ahead of national elections later this year.

Instead, the 2025 budget serves as a blueprint of the administration's policy priorities, and highlights the sharp divisions between Democrats and Republicans ahead of Biden's likely rematch with former president Donald Trump in November.

In a speech in Washington on Monday before the proposals were published, Biden touted the US economy as a "great comeback story".

The \$7.3 trillion budget plan contains a number of populist measures proposed previously — without success — including a 25 percent minimum tax rate for the wealthiest people in the United States, and a hike in the corporate tax rate from 21 to 28 percent.

It includes plans to strengthen social spending programs, such as restoring a popular child tax credit, and allocates almost \$260 billion to

"build or preserve" 2 million housing units, according to a statement from the White House.

In line with Biden's previous proposals, the 2025 budget would ensure that "people making under \$400,000 will not pay a single penny more in taxes", Biden's budget director Shalanda Young told reporters on Monday.

Under Biden's plan, the deficit over the next decade would be \$3 trillion lower than under its current trajectory, according to White House estimates. However, the national debt — currently at \$34.5 trillion — would continue to increase.

The reduction to the deficit would be paid for through increased taxes for the wealthy and corporations, and by "closing tax loopholes and cutting wasteful spending on Big Pharma, Big Oil, corporate jets and other special interests, and cracking down on wealthy tax cheats", according to the White House statement.

While many of the policies in this budget proposal are popular with the Democratic base, they face stiff opposition from Republicans as well as more moderate Democrats and independents in Congress,

underscoring the challenge the administration now faces.

"The price tag of President Biden's proposed budget is yet another glaring reminder of this Administration's insatiable appetite for reckless spending and the Democrats' disregard for fiscal responsibility," Republican leaders, including House Speaker Mike Johnson, wrote in a statement posted to X.

"Biden's budget doesn't just miss the mark — it is a road map to accelerate America's decline," they claimed.

Given the stalemate between Republicans and Democrats over the current budget — which has yet to be fully adopted — Congress is highly unlikely to pass anything resembling Biden's proposal by the end of the current fiscal year on Sept 30.

Wish list

With elections looming, in which all seats in the House of Representatives are up for grabs, along with the presidency, the divisions between the two parties are only likely to grow in the coming months.

Consequently, Monday's budget proposal reads as more of a wish list of progressive policy proposals for

the campaign trail than a long-term plan for funding the US government.

Meanwhile, Biden clashed with Trump over healthcare and social benefits on Monday as Biden visited another battleground state in November's election.

Trump said in an interview on Monday that he would back cuts to social spending. "There is a lot you can do in terms of entitlements in terms of cutting," Trump told CNBC.

Biden hit right back in an event in the northeastern state of New Hampshire, accusing Trump of backing measures that would favor wealthy people. "The bottom line is, he's still at it," said Biden.

Biden accused Trump of wanting to cut taxes on the rich and said his economic and social policies had sparked an "American comeback".

Biden branded Trump a threat to democracy, referring to the former president's refusal to acknowledge his 2020 election defeat.

Impeached twice while in office, Trump now faces four criminal indictments, including two for trying to overturn the election result four years ago.

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

WORLD

AI cooperation to drive Africa development

Continent can leverage expertise from China in digital transformation: Experts

By RADING GERRO
in Nairobi, Kenya
For China Daily

Artificial intelligence can be a promising area for China-Africa cooperation to help African countries tap their potential for economic development, industry insiders said.

Paradigm Initiative, a Pan-African nonprofit organization that promotes digital inclusion, terms AI as the magic bullet that will help the continent add value to its vast mineral resources for economic growth.

Sani Suleiman Sani, programs officer at Paradigm Initiative, said China has been a key strategic partner for most African states in areas such as trade, science, technology and infrastructural development, and AI can also be an area where China can provide support.

"We need to unlock AI potential which requires strategic partnerships and careful consideration of ethical concerns. China can support this journey through collaborative research, capacity building, and infrastructure development."

Sani added that African states seeking fruitful AI partnerships with China should focus on strategic dimensions such as digital infrastructure projects, new-generation mobile communication networks and meaningful connectivity technologies, digital education, and digital governance capacity, as well as the development of AI tailored for local African problems.

Data from PwC Research reveals that by 2030, AI industry globally will be worth nearly \$16 trillion.

Chris Otundo, CEO of Brighter-Monday Kenya, a recruitment firm with a presence in the African continent, said that Africa needs to be strategic to reap dividends from the sector.

"Our governments should strengthen partnerships with global players, including China and other AI-developed nations, to foster knowledge exchange and technology transfer. We can work with China in establishing innovation hubs and incubators that sup-

port AI-driven innovation and development," Otundo said.

He said African states need to allocate more funding toward the growth of the AI industry. "We must be able to allocate a reasonable percentage from our budget in a bid to grow the AI industry in the African continent and there is no other way out of this because either we get it right or forget about it."

Ehud Gachugu, project director of Ajira Digital and Youth Employment under the Kenya Private Sector Alliance, said AI collaboration between Africa and China can help the continent solve many of the challenges it faces in the traditional sectors.

Vibrant ecosystem

"China's AI industry is characterized by robust research and development, massive investments, and a vibrant ecosystem of startups and tech giants, which present a wealth of opportunities for African nations to leapfrog traditional barriers and accelerate their development agenda," said Gachugu.

He pointed out that by fostering collaboration between Chinese AI firms, African startups, and academic institutions, synergistic ecosystems can emerge, fostering knowledge exchange, skills development, and technology transfer.

"Through incubators, accelerators, and joint research initiatives, African innovators can leverage Chinese expertise to develop AI-driven solutions tailored to local challenges."

However, the lack of a better regulatory framework is a major bottleneck for the growth of the AI industry in the African continent, according to experts.

"Most African countries ... rely on data protection laws and other 'soft laws' to regulate AI. These laws often predate significant AI advancements and may not adequately address the unique risks and opportunities presented by the technology," said Sani.

The writer is a freelance journalist for China Daily.

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Regional leaders of the Caribbean Community hold an emergency meeting on Haiti in Kingston, Jamaica, on Monday. ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS / REUTERS

Haiti PM resigns after Jamaica summit

KINGSTON, Jamaica — Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry announced on Tuesday that he would resign once a transitional presidential council is created.

"The government that I am leading will resign immediately after the installation of (a transition) council," Henry said in a video address. "I'm asking all Haitians to remain calm and do everything they can for peace and stability to come back as fast as possible."

Regional leaders of the Caribbean Community held an emergency summit in Jamaica on Monday to discuss the framework for a political transition and provide urgent humanitarian assistance to residents.

On July 7, 2021, the then-president of Haiti, Jovenel Moise, was assassinated. Henry then took over as acting leader, promising to organize presidential elections.

Haiti was scheduled to hold elections before Feb 7 this year. But those elections failed to materialize, leading to social unrest.

Since late February, multiple gang organizations in Haiti have launched attacks on public facilities in the capital Port-au-Prince, demanding the resignation of the prime minister.

The conflict left the 74-year-old prime minister stranded in Puerto Rico, while regional leaders called for a swift transition.

A senior US official said Henry was free to remain in Puerto Rico or travel elsewhere, though security in Haiti would need to improve for him to feel comfortable returning home. The official said the resignation had been decided on Friday.

Henry is set to be replaced by a presidential council that will have two observers and seven voting members, including representatives from a number of political coalitions, the business sector, civil society and one religious leader.

The council has been mandated to quickly appoint an interim prime minister.

The leaders discussed the political transition, which the United

States had urged last week to be "expedited" as armed gangs sought to topple his government.

Earlier on Monday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the council would be tasked with meeting the "immediate needs" of Haitians, enabling the United Nations security mission's deployment and creating security conditions necessary for free elections.

Haiti declared a state of emergency earlier this month as clashes damaged communications and led to two prison breaks after Jimmy Cherizier, or Barbecue, a leader of an alliance of armed groups, said they would unite and overthrow Henry.

The UN estimated that more than 362,000 people have been internally displaced, half of whom are children, and thousands have been killed in the overall conflict, with widespread reports of rape, torture and ransom kidnappings since 2021.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Japan's LDP under pressure over scandal

By JIANG XUEQING in Tokyo
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The Japanese government is facing intense pressure over fears of corruption and financial misconduct as a civil group of Japanese citizens called on it to target lawmakers of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party over a slush fund scandal.

All contributions received from political parties for policy activities — as well as donations received from individuals, support groups and other political organizations for political activities — should be classified as "business income" and subject to taxation, according to a statement by the Alliance to STOP the Impermissible Acts of Slush Fund and Tax Evasion by the LDP.

It said it is waiting for a response from the National Tax Agency after submitting a petition to the agency on Thursday.

Many LDP lawmakers are accused of tax evasion connected to political fundraising events, while there are also allegations that several LDP factions redirected funds from ticket sales back to some of their lawmakers and stored them in illegal slush funds.

With no record of the payments in the financial statements of the

factions or their members, the lawmakers would have evaded income tax on the funds.

Takakage Fujita, president of the alliance, said the slush fund practice is a clear violation of the Political Funds Control Act, and the submission of the petition is an action taken in response to the anger of the Japanese people.

"It's shameful to make false financial reporting, taking advantage of the lack of penalties for lawmakers," Fujita said.

The alliance called on citizens nationwide to join a criminal complaint filed last month with the Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office against 10 LDP lawmakers.

Revenue underreported

According to an earlier report by Kyodo News, the LDP's internal investigation showed that the ruling party's largest faction is believed to have underreported revenue from its fundraising events to reimburse its members for more than a decade.

The recipients used the funds for social gatherings, personnel expenses, vehicle purchases and other purposes, the report said.

Naohiko Hasegawa, one of the lawyers representing the complainants, urged the tax authorities to

thoroughly investigate the case and handle the situation properly.

"If the money the lawmakers received was originally considered to be political funds, it should be used for politics," Hasegawa said.

Shigeaki Koga, a policy analyst and a former official at Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, said the issue remains shrouded in mystery.

"Over a considerable period, and with a large number of lawmakers involved in similar schemes, they've received undisclosed funds ... The public is very angry about this," Koga said.

Additionally, the deadline for tax filing is approaching. Ordinary citizens and small business owners are facing strict taxation, having to keep meticulous records and file taxes down to the last yen, while the actual rules of operation for politicians are very lenient. The stark contrast has multiplied the public anger, Koga added.

"The slush fund scandal has a very significant impact. It's not just about the LDP losing trust; it's about the trust in party politics and the entire parliamentary system in Japan being shaken," said Akira Yamada, a professor of the School of Arts and Letters at Meiji University in Tokyo.

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Controversial citizenship law in India draws flak

NEW DELHI — India moved on Monday to implement a 2019 citizenship law that has been criticized as discriminating against Muslims, weeks before Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks a rare third term for his government.

Passed in December 2019, the Citizenship Amendment Act, or CAA, mainly aims at providing citizenship to migrants belonging to six communities, namely Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, and Christians, who had entered the country before Dec 31, 2014 for religious reasons.

Modi's government did not implement the law following its December 2019 enactment as protests and sectarian violence broke out in New Delhi and elsewhere.

Rights groups and Muslim groups say the law, combined with the proposed National Register of Citizens, could discriminate against India's 200 million Muslims, the world's third-largest Muslim population.

Some fear the government might remove the citizenship of Muslims without documents in some border states.

A home ministry statement said the law would remove legal barriers to citizenship for refugees, giving a "dignified life" to those who have suffered for decades.

"Many misconceptions have been spread" about the law and its implementation was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it said.

The government denies it is anti-Muslim and says the law is needed to help minorities facing persecution in Muslim-majority nations.

It says the law is meant to grant citizenship, not take it away from anyone, and has called the earlier protests politically motivated.

Modi swept to power in 2014 and has consolidated his hold since with a focus on growth, welfare economics, boosting infrastructure and aggressive Hindu nationalism.

Opinion polls suggest he will win a majority in a general election that will be held by May.

Motivated by election

The main opposition Congress party said Monday's announcement was motivated by the approaching election.

"After seeking nine extensions for the notification of the rules, the timing right before the elections is evidently designed to polarize the elections, especially in West Bengal and Assam," Congress spokesperson Jairam Ramesh said on X.

In Chennai, protesters took out a candlelight march on Monday and shouted slogans against the law.

In Assam, protesters burnt copies of the law and shouted slogans on Monday night.

The opposition Communist Party of India, which rules the southern state of Kerala, called for statewide protests on Tuesday.

"This is to divide the people, incite communal sentiments and undermine the fundamental principles of the Constitution," Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said in a statement.

"This move to stratify Indian citizens who have equal rights, must be opposed unitedly."

AGENCIES—XINHUA

Inflation persists as Fed mulls cuts, and stocks rally anyway

By HENG WEILI in New York
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While the Federal Reserve expects to cut interest rates this year, and the stock market is anticipating that, inflation so far has refused to go along.

Consumer prices in the US rose 3.2 percent for the 12 months ending February, a slight increase over the 3.1 percent figure in January, according to the US Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics in its monthly Consumer Price Index (CPI) report released Tuesday. Analysts had expected inflation to remain at 3.1 percent.

The all-items-less-food-and-energy index rose 3.8 percent over the last 12 months. The energy index decreased 1.9 percent for the 12

months ending February, while the food index increased 2.2 percent over the last year.

Ahead of the CPI report, Fed Chair Jerome Powell told Congress in his semiannual monetary policy report last week that, "We will carefully assess the incoming data, the evolving outlook and the balance of risks," adding that the Fed "does not expect that it will be appropriate to reduce the target range until it has gained greater confidence that inflation is moving sustainably toward 2 percent."

The Fed follows a different measure than the CPI — the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) index — which is maintained by the Commerce Department. The Fed prefers that this index not rise above 2 percent; it was at 2.4 percent in

January. The next PCE report will be released on March 29.

Still, US stocks finished sharply higher on Tuesday, with the S&P 500 registering a record-high close as the consumer price data failed to discourage investors' hopes of interest rate cuts in the coming months.

"Investors have gotten comfortable with the notion that it's not about when the Fed will lower rates but rather by how much, and a delay — whether it happens in May like many were initially hoping or in September — ultimately doesn't matter," said Oliver Pursche, senior vice-president and adviser for Wealthspire Advisors in Westport, Connecticut.

Investors are expecting three rate cuts this year, but Tuesday's report "is likely to instill less confidence at the Fed that inflation is fast approaching

its 2 percent target," said Barclays US economist Pooja Sriram, to The Wall Street Journal.

"The February consumer price index will not instill more confidence among the Federal Reserve members that inflation is on a sustainable path toward their 2 percent objective," said Ryan Sweet, chief economist at Oxford Economics, to MarketWatch.

The fed funds rate has remained at 5.3 percent since July, a more than two-decade high. Since March 2022, the central bank has raised interest rates 11 times — from a range of 0.25-0.50 percent that month to the current range of 5.25-5.5 percent.

"If inflation seems more entrenched than we think it is, the first thing we would do is keep rates where they are for an extended period of time," said Minneapolis Fed

President Neel Kashkari, in a Journal interview.

"What does it mean when stocks are trading UP as inflation data is starting to look consistently bad?" posted "KKGB Kitty" to 173,000 followers on X. "It means that market participants believe the Fed is bluffing and it will implicitly settle for a HIGHER inflation target and go ahead and cut rates while disinflation has stalled above official target."

One number that stood out in Tuesday's CPI report was motor-vehicle insurance, which was up 20.6 percent year over year.

"Insurance of various different kinds — housing insurance, but also automobile insurance, and things like that — that's been a significant source of inflation over the last few years," Powell said to Congress last week.

"The classic example is that, you know, a (car) bumper used to be a cheap replacement part, and it's no longer that way because you have advanced sensors in there — that makes it quite an expensive proposition," said R.J. Lehmann, a senior fellow at the International Center for Law and Economics, a nonpartisan research center, to The New York Times.

The average cost of full-coverage car insurance in the United States rose to \$2,543 in 2024, up by 26 percent over the last year, according to bankrate.com, a personal finance website.

Bankrate calculated that with a national median household income of \$74,580 according to the US Census Bureau, Americans spend 3.41 percent of their income on car insurance.

Agencies via Xinhua contributed to this story.

BUSINESS

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MNCs seek opportunities in high-tech, green areas

By MA SI
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Inspired by China's latest promise at the two sessions of sustaining its high-standard opening-up, multinational companies have said that they are looking at abundant opportunities in areas such as green development, artificial intelligence and 5G.

Ma Jun, president of Volvo (China) Investment Co Ltd, said: "Having been in China for over 30 years, Volvo Group has seen how reforms and opening-up have changed the country. We appreciate China's commitment to openness as the global economy deals with new challenges."

According to her, green development has also boosted China's economy in recent years. Volvo Group's sustainability strategy and mission, she said, are fully aligned with China's dual carbon goals.

"We are committed to leading the industrial transition toward electrification globally, using our experience as a Global Sustainable Transport Innovation Alliance founding member to provide sustainable transport and infrastructure solutions for China and the world," Ma said.

According to her, Volvo has extended its research and development efforts in Jinan, Shandong province, where it has combined its electrification technologies from Europe with the needs of Chinese customers by introducing industry-leading electric products. The company's collaboration with local banks in green financing is another example of how it is supporting China's green transition.

China's sharpened focus on new quality productive forces at the two sessions is also of great interest to them, foreign companies said.

Fang Ying, president of Ericsson China, said communication technology is a key element in fostering the growth of new quality productive forces, adding that communication itself is a new productive force that is constantly evolving and improving.

"China has made world-renowned economic achievements in the 40 years or so following the country's reform and opening-up. It is normal to move from a phase of rapid development to steady development, and does not lead to the conclusion that China's economy has already peaked," Fang said.

Compared with other indus-

tries, China's communications industry opened up relatively early, and Ericsson is the only large multinational communications equipment vendor that has participated throughout China's entire mobile network construction from 1G to 5G, he said.

"Currently, China has built a world-leading 5G network. In the future, Ericsson also hopes to continue to maintain the R&D capability in China and contribute to the development of China's mobile communication industry, continue to introduce its global resources and successful practices into China, and also promote China's achievements in R&D to the world," Fang said.

Joe Bao, managing director of KONE Greater China, said, "We anticipate that the mid-term and long-term growth drivers for China will include domestic consumption, digital manufacturing and the transition to carbon neutrality. These drivers present new investment opportunities for our company."

Bai Ming, a researcher at the Beijing-based Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, said China strongly appeals to foreign companies because of its big market, efficient supply chains and growing innovation prowess.

Jason Juang, HP senior vice-president and managing director of HP Greater China, said: "We are excited about the growth potential and opportunities in China from the government's increasing focus on digital transformation, sustainable development, and nurturing of tech talent. China is one of our biggest and most important markets globally."

HP has been operating in China for more than 40 years and remains deeply committed to the country, he said. "We are focused on developing new solutions for our customers and contributing to the country's industrial progress and development."

A prime example of HP's robust industry ecosystem in China is its presence in Chongqing. "Since establishing our manufacturing base there in 2008, we have produced over 400 million personal computers. Additionally, our PC R&D Center is operational. It will both drive innovations for customers and contribute to the transformation of local supply chains by teaming up with our technology ecosystem in Chongqing," Juang said.



An employee works on an auto components production line in Fuzhou, Fujian province.

WANG WANGWANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

New focus boosting global supply chains

Industry lauds thrust on high-end manufacturing

By ZHONG NAN
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China's focus on developing the high-end manufacturing sector and new quality productive forces will strengthen the world's industrial and supply chains, despite a grim and complex global environment, said industry leaders and business executives on Tuesday.

In a rapidly evolving global economy, strategic emerging industries, representing the direction of a new round of technological revolution and industrial transformation, are set to enhance new quality productive forces and foster innovation, they said.

As the world grapples with challenges like climate change, resource scarcity and technological disruptions, China's commitment to advancing high-end manufacturing, including electric vehicles, machine tools, solar panels, energy storage equipment and the next-generation vessels, is not only reshaping its own economic landscape but also making the global economy and supply chains greener and diversified, said Ye Dingda, chief economist of the Beijing-based China Machinery Industry Federation.

Chen Shihua, deputy secretary-general of the China Association of Automobile Manufacturers, said that one of the key areas where China is expected to make substantial contributions is the realm of electric vehicles and battery technologies.

With the global automotive industry undergoing a significant

shift toward electrification, China's advancements in battery technology and manufacturing are set to play a crucial role in cutting the carbon footprint of transportation and enhancing energy efficiency across the world, Chen said.

This sentiment is in line with the latest data from the Beijing-based association. China exported 822,000 automobiles in all, including EVs, during the January-February period, up 30.5 percent year-on-year.

China's ongoing green transformation has also created business opportunities for multinational corporations operating in the country. Ramesh Singaram, president and CEO for Asia at the gas power unit of GE Vernova, a United States-headquartered energy solution and services provider, said that a complementary approach combining gas and renewable power generation is the most effective and sustainable way for China to achieve its dual carbon goals.

"Gas power generation, with its inherent flexibility and low emissions profile and the versatility of pumped storage, which offers excellent adjustable performance, is poised to become indispensable components of China's power system," he said, adding that with more than 4,000 employees in over 10 offices and manufacturing sites in China, the company will introduce more solutions and products in the country.

Despite facing strong headwinds, including the US restrictions on exporting lithography machines for chipmaking to China through third-party channels and the European Union's initiation of an anti-subsidy investigation targeting Chinese EVs, business leaders said that China's push for

innovation in information technology is unwavering.

Particularly in areas like 5G, artificial intelligence and the internet of things, these factors are expected to revolutionize the way companies in the manufacturing sector operate and interact with consumers.

These technologies are not only driving the development of the manufacturing sector and smart cities, but also enabling more resilient and responsive supply chains, said Zhang Zhiyong, chairman of China Tower Corp Ltd, a Beijing-based mobile communication infrastructure company that runs almost all of China's telecom towers.

Highlighting the importance of new quality productive forces aimed at emerging and future-oriented industries, Zhang said that integrating the development of a manufacturing powerhouse with the digital economy and industrial informatization is essential.

China Tower, a State-owned enterprise, is implementing innovative tasks in strategic emerging industries such as the next generation of mobile communications, computing power networks, 6G and satellite internet.

"China's strategic emerging industries and future industries are set to offer numerous opportunities for cross-border collaboration and innovation," said Chu Xiangyin, a professor of supply chain management at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing.

By leveraging its strengths in manufacturing, technology and sustainability, China is well-positioned to make significant contributions to global industrial and supply chains, ultimately driving economic growth and environmental progress both domestically and internationally, Chu said.

Aramco mulls expansion on China demand

By ZHENG XIN
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Saudi Aramco, the world's largest oil and gas producer, is looking at further opportunities to invest in China, where oil demand has been robust and is growing, according to the company's top executive.

Aramco has been ramping up its presence in China, the world's largest crude oil importer and the second-largest crude oil consumer, in a series of refining and petrochemical deals, some of them with crude offtake agreements attached.

"In the early part of 2024, demand has been healthy and is growing in China," Amin H. Nasser, president and CEO of Aramco, said on a media call following the announcement of its full-year 2023 financial results, which revealed the second-highest-ever net profit at \$121.3 billion.

Nasser further said Aramco was currently looking at fresh opportunities for investment in China, where refineries are among the most fully integrated and have the highest conversion rates.

Nasser said he expected the global oil market to remain healthy throughout 2024, putting demand for 2024 at 104 million barrels a day as against an average of 102.4 million barrels in 2023.

"We expect it to be fairly robust," he said.

Luo Zuoxian, head of intelligence and research at the Sinopec Economics and Development Research Institute, said China, with a stable economic recovery, sound long-term economic prospects and improving business environment, will remain a key growth engine for the world economy as well as a valuable destination for foreign direct investment.

Multinational energy companies' expansion in the energy sector in China is expected to strengthen their position as leading contributors to the country's green transition, Luo said.

The scale of the industrial footprint and China's demand growth present significant opportunities for multinational energy companies like Aramco, he said.

The collaboration between Aramco and China's energy industry is mutually complementary and sets an exemplary precedent for future collaboration between China and petroleum-exporting countries, he said.

In Aramco's view, demand for petroleum products in China is recovering robustly, especially in the transport and petrochemical sectors, driven by robust demand for chemicals. So, the company has been actively expanding its downstream presence in China to support the country's energy security while facilitating its green transition.

Aramco announced last year its partnership with Norinco Group and Panjin Xincheng Industrial Group to develop a major refinery and petrochemical complex in Northeast China's Liaoning province. It has also completed the acquisition of a 10 percent stake in Rongsheng Petrochemical Co Ltd in Zhejiang province.

Wang Lining, director of the Oil Market Research Department, the Economics and Technology Research Institute, China National Petroleum Corp, said China has attracted several international companies, including BASF and Aramco, to invest in China, either through joint ventures or wholly owned projects.

Market competition in China's high-end petrochemical products industry will be further encouraged by the diversification of the domestic petrochemical market, which in turn will facilitate global economic stability and development, he said.

Aramco aims to grow its gas production by 60 percent by 2030 from the 2021 levels.

Discussions are also ongoing for a tie-up with French carmaker Renault and China's Geely for a 15 percent to 20 percent stake in their joint venture for combustion and hybrid engines, Nasser said.

Briefly

Progress made on conduit project

State-owned builders are working on an interconnective conduit project in Huaian's Lianshui county, Jiangsu province, to facilitate links between local highways and the Changchun-Shenzhen Expressway, a major national north-south expressway. According to China Railway 24th Bureau Group Corp, its builders have recently begun constructing the conduit project

with a focus on the first pillar of a highway bridge within the project.

PBOC adds liquidity via reverse repos

China's central bank conducted 10 billion yuan (\$1.41 billion) of seven-day reverse repos at an interest rate of 1.8 percent on Tuesday. The move aims to keep liquidity in the banking system reasonable and ample.

XINHUA - CHINA DAILY

Experts: AI will boost stock market

By SHI JING in Shanghai
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The global artificial intelligence surge, both technologically and investment-wise, combined with China's emphasis on new quality productive forces, will boost AI-related A-share performance, which in turn will drive up associated indexes this year, said experts.

While the benchmark Shanghai Composite Index shed 0.41 percent on Tuesday, A-share AI companies registered an average share price increase of 1.15 percent. With this, share prices of these AI companies have jumped nearly 19 percent since Feb 19, when trading resumed after the Spring Festival holiday.

The global AI boom serves as one major impetus, especially after ChatGPT's creator Open AI released text-to-video generator Sora on Feb 16. Nvidia, the major supplier for Open AI's graphics chips, saw its shares hit record highs, overtaking Amazon and Google's parent compa-

ny Alphabet in terms of market value. Zhang Yidong, chief global strategist at Industrial Securities, said the global AI phenomenon will not only buoy the US bourse, but also drive up the value of A-share tech companies, thus helping boost A-share performance in general.

More importantly, China promised in this year's Government Work Report to launch an "AI plus" initiative to accelerate the technology's commercial applications. Meanwhile, new quality productive forces, which have been emphasized in the report, also include emerging industries such as AI, computing and humanoid robots. All these suggest an increasing focus on industrial investment, said analysts from Guotai Junan Securities.

Liu Chenming, chief strategist at GF Securities, said AI will serve as a major force empowering industries' intelligent digitalization in China. The application of AI technologies will help improve

total factor productivity and the country's structural transformation and upgrading. This is also in line with this year's Government Work Report which calls for high-quality development, he said.

Ethan Wang, head of investment strategy for wealth management at Standard Chartered China, said A-share investors should pay particular attention to AI applications in China given the country's advantages in application scenarios in internet and big data modalities, as well as the commercialization of innovative technologies. Specifically, device makers integrating AI services and the commercial use of AI in business scenarios will churn out the most investment opportunities in China, Wang said.

Analysts from Kaiyuan Securities suggested A-share investors search for opportunities related to animation along with film and television companies, especially those possessing well-established intellectual property, as the appli-



A view of the booth of Nvidia during an expo in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. LONG WEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

cation of multimodal AI will significantly improve their efficiency and reduce costs.

Opportunities can also be found among semiconductor firms as iteration in AI foundation models will drive up computing demand, said experts from China International Capital Corp Ltd.

Li Zhan, chief economist at China Merchants Fund, said that technological innovation will be the major investment theme in China for

many years to come. Industries which are supported by favorable industrial policies and the country's resources will generate the most investment opportunities, among which AI is included.

Experts from UBS Global Wealth Management's Chief Investment Office believe that AI will be the fastest growing tech sector globally over the next decade, with the possibility of it growing into the largest tech sector in 10 years' time.

BUSINESS

Guizhou gears up in computing

Province eyes stronger capacity to keep pace with explosive growth in demand

By FAN FEIFEI in Beijing and YANG JUN in Guiyang

Guizhou province in Southwest China will take further steps to speed up the construction of computing infrastructure and intelligent computing center clusters, with a key focus on artificial intelligence technology, as part of a broader push to develop new quality productive forces, a political adviser said.

Computing power is a key part of new quality productive forces for bolstering the high-quality development of the digital economy, said Jing Yaping, a member of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the country's top political advisory body.

Jing, who is also director of the Big Data Development Administration of Guizhou province, said that at present, demand for computing capacity, especially intelligent computing, is witnessing explosive growth along with technological

breakthroughs in AI-powered large language models.

She said the province will make efforts to improve the scheduling, allocation and utilization efficiency of computing power, nurture a batch of professional computing power operators, and promote the application of computing power in fields like industry, education, finance, transportation and healthcare.

A greater drive is needed to press ahead with the building of intelligent computing centers, enhance the operational efficiency of data centers, and upgrade and optimize key network infrastructure such as 5G base stations, she added.

China recently unveiled an implementation plan to accelerate the construction of a national computing power network. The plan, jointly released by the National Data Administration and four other central government departments, said the country will form a preliminary comprehensive com-

puting power infrastructure system by the end of 2025.

According to the Government Work Report for this year, China will step up research and development, and application of big data and AI, launch an AI Plus initiative, and build digital industry clusters with international competitiveness.

Often dubbed China's big data hub, the mountainous province of Guizhou is China's first national big data comprehensive pilot zone, and it has been promoting the big data industry as the backbone of its high-quality social and economic development.

Jing said the province has sped up the building of basic systems for data, such as introducing a series of policy measures in the market-oriented allocation of data elements, management of government data resources and circulation and trading of data, as well as bolstering the high-quality supply of data, in a bid to unleash the massive value of data elements.

The Global Big Data Exchange in Guiyang has been a pioneer in propelling the flow and trading of data resources across the country. So far, the exchange has attracted 899 data

merchants, with an annual transaction value surpassing 2 billion yuan (\$278.7 million), she added.

Ma Ningyu, deputy Party secretary and mayor of Guiyang, and a deputy to the 14th National People's Congress, said the city has built a national computing power cluster and an independent and controllable computing service system.

It will, he added, continue to improve computing scale and the scheduling and operating level of computing power.

The proportion of digital economy in the city's GDP surpassed 50 percent in 2023, he said.

As the core area in national big data comprehensive experimental zone, Gui'an New Area of Guiyang boasts abundant computing power, data resources and application scenarios, Ma said.

To seize the opportunities from fast-developing artificial intelligence technology, he stressed the need to bolster industrial application of AI-powered large language models by providing high-performance computing power and high-quality data and accelerating the

construction of LLM training platforms, as well as propel the digital transformation of enterprises.

China launched a megaproject involving the construction of eight national computing hubs and 10 national data center clusters in 2022, indicating that its work to channel more computing resources from the country's eastern regions to its lesser developed yet resource-rich western regions is in full swing.

Guizhou is among eight national computing hubs, with Gui'an New Area labeled as one of the 10 national data centers.

Most of China's computing infrastructure is distributed in eastern regions, while western regions have the potential to foster the development of data centers and meet the needs of data computing in eastern regions, said Yu Xiaohui, a member of the 14th CPPCC National Committee and head of the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology.

Yu said implementation of the east-data-west-computing project is conducive to optimizing the allocation of national computing power, utilizing green energy in the western regions and improving the energy efficiency of data centers.

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HK housing transactions rebound on eased rules

By OSWALD CHAN in Hong Kong oswald@chinadailyhk.com

New and secondhand home sales in Hong Kong soared in the first 10 days of March, as property buyers and investors took advantage of the cessation of residential property market tightening measures by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government.

Figures from Hong Kong real estate agent Midland Realty showed that new residential unit transactions in the city between March 1-10 skyrocketed 25 times to 1,660, compared to 64 deals during the same period of February.

Regarding the secondhand housing market, the March 4-10 period recorded 137 transactions for the city's 35 major housing estates, 18 percent higher than the previous week, marking the highest level in nearly two years.

Sammy Po, CEO of Midland Realty's residential home business, predicts that new and secondhand home transactions in Hong Kong in March will reach 3,500 and 5,000, respectively.

Eric Tso, chief vice-president of mReferral Mortgage Brokerage Services, said the removal of various stamp duties has driven the pace of housing sales among Hong Kong residents with mainland backgrounds and mainland customers entering the market.

"Among the mortgage application cases referred by us, the number of these two types of customers has increased significantly by 3.4-fold compared to the period before the scrapping of the cooling measures," Tso said.

He added that as the government's talent attraction program will encourage more high-end talent coming to Hong Kong for work and settling down, this will become an important driving force for the future growth of the Hong Kong property market.

The Hong Kong SAR government announced that no special stamp duty, buyer stamp duty or new residential stamp duty are payable for residential property transactions, effective from Feb 28 when the 2024-25 Budget was unveiled. Sellers and buyers of residential properties, however, are still required to pay *ad valorem* stamp duties at Scale 2 rates, from HK\$100 (\$12.8) up to 4.25 percent of the consideration.

Since 2010, the HKSAR has introduced a raft of property market tightening measures to cool down the sizzling housing market, with notable moves in November 2010, October 2012, February 2013 and November 2016.

According to figures compiled by Ricacorp Properties, during the week-end of March 9-10, there were 21 transactions recorded in Hong Kong's top 10 benchmark housing estates, compared to 31 the previous weekend.

"After the abolition of the tightening measures, some homeowners are optimistic about the market outlook, so they are deciding to increase prices, which contrasts with buyers' desire for bargains. As buyers and sellers are engaged in back-and-forth negotiations, this has slowed the pace of transactions," said Ricacorp Properties CEO Willy Liu.

Joseph Tsang, chairman of Jones Lang LaSalle in Hong Kong, expects that after the scrapping of tightening measures, home sales will increase significantly by 10 percent to 15 percent in 2024, but home prices will fall 10 percent this year due to high interest rates and a weak economy.

"Abolishing the extra stamp duties for investors and overseas buyers could breathe new life into Hong Kong housing sales, including at leading developers Sun Hung Kai Properties, CK Asset and Henderson Land, which plan to bring new residential projects to market in March," said Patrick Wong, senior real estate analyst at Bloomberg Intelligence.

According to government figures, the average residential property transaction number was 3,584 per month in 2023, representing an annual decline of 4.5 percent.

Land Registry data showed that the number of agreements for sale and purchase of residential building units was 2,375 in February — before the announcement of the end of cooling measures — about 32 percent lower than January.

Experts call for more efforts in robotics

By WANG KEJU and WUYONG

China should use targeted measures to develop its robotics industry further, focusing on key areas such as cutting-edge foundational technologies, the localization of critical components and enhancing the performance of overall applications, in order to stay competitive beyond its domestic market, said national legislators and industry analysts.

China has become a critical driving force for bolstering the development of the global robotics industry, said Zhang Jin, a deputy to the 14th National People's Congress and president of Liaoning province-based Siasun Robot and Automation Co, one of the largest robotics firms in the country.

The company has made big strides in autonomous robot controllers and validated servo motors and drivers. By demonstrating the capabilities and reliability of domestic industrial robot components, the company is helping to strengthen the country's position in the global robotics market, said Zhang.

Siasun has been conducting research and development of high-speed, high-load and high-precision industrial robot systems, so as to sharpen its competitive edge, Zhang added.

The industrial robot market in China experienced steady growth in 2023, with sales reaching 316,000 units, representing a year-on-year increase of 4.29 percent, according to a report released by



A Siasun employee conducts tests on a set of robotic arms at a production facility in Shenyang, Liaoning province, in August. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

the Gaogong Industry Research Institute.

A notable shift in market share between domestic and foreign manufacturers was seen last year. For the first time, domestic industrial robots accounted for more than half of the market, reaching a share of 52.45 percent, according to the report.

China has achieved a significant milestone in the industrial robot industry by developing a complete supply chain and achieving breakthroughs in core components, said Lu Hanchen, director of the institute. With the ability to control costs,

enhance product competitiveness, and foster collaboration between upstream and downstream partners, domestic industrial robot companies are well-positioned to dominate the market, Lu added.

In terms of functionality, domestic brands have shown remarkable progress, and their advantages lie in user-friendliness and the level of intelligence embedded in their products, Zhang said.

He added that hundreds of Siasun's robot models have been sold to over 40 countries and regions, serving more than 3,000 multinational corporations worldwide.

However, a lack of high-end applications is a crucial bottleneck hampering the industry's progress.

High-end applications, such as those in the semiconductor industry, require specialized robots capable of operating in vacuum environments. These robots play a vital role in ensuring the reliability and efficiency of manufacturing processes in sensitive industries, Zhang said.

Liaoning province's role as the cradle of China's robotics industry, coupled with its inherent advantages in academia, research, computing

infrastructure and application scenarios, positions it as a stronghold for innovation in the robotics sector, Zhang said.

Going forward, it is imperative to support the establishment of a national technology innovation center in the northeastern region of China, so as to create an ecosystem that fosters collaboration and synergy among different elements of the innovation ecosystem including industry, funding and talent, Zhang added.

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Industrial IoT key to digital transition

By LIU YUKUN liuyukun@chinadaily.com.cn

More policy support is expected to address weaknesses in the development of the industrial internet of things (IIoT), with an emphasis on market-driven forces, product maturity and ecosystem construction, to boost the digital transition of manufacturing, said an executive.

Liu Jiang, a deputy to the 14th National People's Congress and chairman of Sichuan Changhong Electronics Holding Group Co Ltd, said concrete measures are expected to strengthen data governance, promote technological upgrades in data sharing and refine market mechanisms for a more efficient use of data and healthier development of the IIoT market.

Meanwhile, Liu said efforts should be made to facilitate cross-sector collaboration and industrial convergence, encouraging deep cooperation among platforms to create a complementary, mutually



Liu Jiang

beneficial IIoT ecosystem.

The remarks came after this year's Government Work Report underscored the importance of building a modern industrial system, promoting digital transition of the manufacturing sector and accelerating the mass application of IIoT.

"The intelligent transformation of manufacturing is an inevitable path to drive high-quality development of the sector. Digitization serves as a distinctive feature of the new industrialization which the government is currently promoting and a crucial direction for an upgrade of the manufacturing sector," said Tang Dongsheng, a member of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and vice-chairman of the CPPCC Foshan

committee in Guangdong province.

China's IIoT has entered a new stage of large-scale development with a market scale expected to reach 1.35 trillion yuan (\$188 billion) by 2023, propelling related industry investments exceeding 170 billion yuan, said the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. Meanwhile, the number of listed companies in the IIoT sector has continued to grow for seven consecutive years, reaching a cumulative total of 300 by the end of last year.

However, IIoT development still faces challenges in the advancement of integration between the digital and real economies. For instance, there is room for improvement in some companies' data collection processes and data quality. Some companies need to broaden data application scenarios, and certain procedures such as confirmation of legal rights of owners of digital assets need further refinement.

To address these challenges, Liu suggested establishing unified data



The booth of Sichuan Changhong Electronics Holding Group Co Ltd is seen during an expo in Shanghai in April. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

collection standards and processes to ensure data accuracy and consistency. Efforts are also needed to develop a data quality assessment system to strengthen data quality management. Furthermore, it is important to expand data application scenarios and continue to refine rules and standards for smoother trade of digital products and digital assets.

In recent years, Sichuan Changhong Electronics Holding Group Co Ltd has successively upgraded and transformed 65 factories worldwide into intelligent facilities. Moreover, the company has established Sichuan's first national-level cross-industry IIoT platform, empowering eight industries and nearly 100 enterprises for digitalization.

BUSINESSFOCUS

Elderly make beeline for niche destinations

Airline travel picks up amid offseason as prices typically drop in March

By ZHU WENQIAN

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When Hong Jianyi, a 70-year-old retiree from Beijing, and his family went on a holiday to Iran in late January, it was an experience that exceeded all his expectations.

Hong remembers being hugely impressed by Iran's rich history and its friendly people during his trip, which came before the Spring Festival holiday rush began.

A growing number of sophisticated travelers, mostly elderly Chinese, are venturing far out of the country this spring, heading to niche destinations such as Serbia, Morocco and Tunisia, benefiting from lower hotel and flight rates after the Chinese New Year break.

Prices of hotel rooms and flight tickets to popular tourist destinations have dropped by nearly 40 percent in March, considered off-season for travel, compared with the Spring Festival period, according to Qunar, a Beijing-based online travel agency.

For tourists aged above 55, the average flying distance exceeds 1,200 kilometers this month, over 30 percent farther than last year, Qunar has found.

The proportion of the elderly among all outbound travelers has nearly rebounded to over 9 percent, close to pre-pandemic levels, Qunar said.

"March is suitable for spring outings, but it has been an offseason for travel for many years. This year, more travelers have embarked on their journeys in March, especially for outbound trips," said Xiao Peng, a researcher at the big data research institute of Qunar. "The increase in passenger volumes indicates strong demand, and the falling prices of flight tickets and hotels have significantly stimulated demand."

"The booking volumes of outbound travel by elderly consumers have surged compared with the same period last year, indicating that the capacity of outbound flights and overseas receptions has gradually recovered, and elderly Chinese are showing a strong willingness to spend," Xiao said.

A large number of elderly Chinese born in the 1960s are tech-savvy. Online bookings and languages are not barriers for them, and more than 80 percent of such elderly customers travel without being accompanied by their children, Xiao added.

The number of travel bookings by children and students under the age of 25 has declined, while the growth in bookings has been most significant for middle-aged and elderly travelers, Qunar said.

Thanks to visa-free policies for Chinese visitors, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore rank among the top five overseas destinations in terms of flight booking volumes in March, and the number of Chinese



Volunteers offer senior-focused services at Chongqing West Railway Station in February. SUN KAIFANG / FOR CHINA DAILY



A staff member (right) hands out souvenirs to Chinese tourists at a Ferrari-branded theme park in Abu Dhabi in February. XINHUA



Chinese tourists receive a warm welcome on arrival in Budapest in March 2023. XINHUA

travelers who booked flight tickets a few days in advance has significantly increased, Qunar said.

More flights

Airlines are launching more flights to Southeast Asia to satisfy the growing travel demand.

Guangzhou-based China Southern Airlines launched its first direct flight — an Airbus A321 aircraft — connecting Beijing Daxing International Airport and Singapore on March 7.

The route, three times a week initially, will turn into daily trips from March 31. Following the launch of the new route, China Southern now operates 45 weekly flights between China and Singapore. The carrier said it will continue to increase its

international flight capacity by launching and resuming more international flights.

In January, China and Thailand signed an agreement on permanent mutual visa exemption, which became effective on March 1. Earlier, the visa exemption policy between the two countries had been temporary.

Now, a one-way flight ticket to Bangkok from domestic cities such as Shanghai; Guangzhou, Guangdong province; and Chengdu, Sichuan province all carry price tags of around 600 yuan (\$83) each. Flights departing between 6 am and 9 am are popular among this set, given the cheaper prices, Qunar said.

This year, Thailand will hold various events across the country to celebrate Songkran, the world's largest

water festival, with a total of 21 days of celebration and revelry from April 1 to 21.

"Fun and interesting festivals are becoming a benchmark for tourism, and featured activities will help drive local consumption," Xiao said.

In China, the period between April 13 and 15 is better known as the water splashing festival and is also the New Year period for the Dai ethnic minority, when people splash water on each other to send and receive blessings.

Many travelers have booked their flights to Xishuang Banna Dai autonomous prefecture in Yunnan province in advance, and the booking volume has doubled compared to the same period of 2023.

This year, there are more flights

from various cities within the country to Xishuang Banna, and the average price of flight tickets has fallen by about 30 percent.

Most of the domestic tourists are from Shanghai, Chongqing, Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, Changsha, Hunan province, and Guangzhou, Guangdong province, according to Qunar.

As the grandest traditional event of the Dai ethnic group, the water splashing festival is celebrated in various places in Yunnan, such as Mangshi, Pu'er, Ruili, and Lincang.

Some tourists prefer to explore rich folk customs and experience the festive atmosphere in small towns, and the booking volumes of hotels in such places have

jumped 40 percent from the same period last year, Qunar found.

After the frenetic travel rush during the Spring Festival, the market is expected to embrace a long window during which one can travel by avoiding holiday peaks.

On some popular domestic routes, the prices of flight tickets could be lower than train tickets. For instance, the price of a one-way flight from Beijing to Sanya, the tropical island of Hainan province, could be lower than 400 yuan, said Tuniu Corp, a Nanjing, Jiangsu province-based online travel agency.

By the end of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) period, more than 100 million healthy elderly Chinese — who have strong purchasing power — are expected to travel frequently. Sales of the elderly tourism market are forecast to hit 1 trillion yuan, according to a projection by the China Tourism Academy.

Tourist spots that can meet diverse and personalized demands will become sought-after and desirable among travelers.

Cities that utilize factors such as modern technologies, culture and art may also become popular tourist destinations, said Dai Bin, president of the China Tourism Academy.

"The increasingly personalized travel demand from Chinese consumers has provided travel agencies with more business opportunities and potential for innovation. While boosting consumer confidence, it is expected to significantly promote the recovery and growth of the Chinese economy and the global tourism market," Dai added.

Fueled by visa-free policies, Viking charts big plan for inbound cruise tourism

By ZHU WENQIAN

Viking Cruises is planning to introduce multiple inbound cruise routes for foreign visitors this fall, providing them options for sightseeing in China, and contribute to the high-quality growth of inbound tourism in the country, the Norwegian cruise line operator said.

China will adopt a visa-free policy for Switzerland, Ireland, Hungary, Austria, Belgium and Luxembourg on a trial basis, starting March 14.

In late November, China announced a 15-day visa-free policy for short-term stays of citizens from France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Malaysia, and the number of inbound foreign visitors has grown steadily since.

Fueled by a strong recovery in China's tourism market, Viking plans to launch four inbound routes of 10 to 20 days. The voyages will be operated by *China Merchants-Yidun*, the first Chinese-flagged luxury ocean cruise ship.

These routes will stop at cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Hong

Kong, as well as smaller cities such as Fuzhou, Fujian province and Wenzhou, Zhejiang province. Some ports in China will receive international tourists for the first time, the company said.

"We will become the first cruise liner to provide inbound routes within China for international travelers. As one of the countries with the richest cultural heritages, China's splendid culture has attracted tourists from all over the world," said Torstein Hagen, chairman of Viking Cruises.

Following the Spring Festival holiday this year, the main source countries for inbound visitors included the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Singapore and Russia, said the China Tourism Academy.

Viking said the four new inbound routes will only target international visitors whose native language is English. Those routes will showcase China's folk arts, history and culture to foreign visitors and combine them with local delicacies and English tour guides.

For the 20-day tour, the trip will start and conclude in Beijing, and stop by inland cities such as Chengdu, Sichuan province; Lhasa, and Xian, Shaanxi province. The inland itineraries will be operated by flights, it said.

Dai Bin, president of the China Tourism Academy, said China's magnificent mountains and rivers, splendid culture, and high-quality economic and social development are increasingly strong attractions for people across the world.

"Following the comprehensive recovery of inbound tourism, China also needs to prepare for a series of services for foreign visitors, including tour guides in different languages, catering, accommodation, and retail," Dai said.

Meanwhile, after China optimized its COVID-19 response measures, the demand for cruise trips from Chinese travelers has been growing steadily. International and domestic cruise operators are bullish about the long-term prospects of the cruise tourism market in China.

China's first domestically developed large cruise ship, the *Adora Magic City*, carrying more than 3,000 tourists, embarked on its inaugural commercial voyage from Shanghai to Kagoshima, Japan, and Jeju, South Korea, on Jan 1.

During this year's Spring Festival holiday, cruise tourism in Shanghai continued to be popular. The Shanghai border inspection authorities inspected a total of four inbound and outbound cruise ships, handling over 21,200 inbound and outbound passenger trips.

Besides, US cruise line operator Royal Caribbean International plans to launch cruise trips from Shanghai to multiple Japanese destinations on four to seven-night trips in late April. The ship, custom-designed for Chinese travelers, is the sole mega-size international luxury cruise liner operating in Asia.

"Luxury cruise ships serve as captivating landmarks in coastal international metropolises, promoting cultural exchanges between China and other countries, and bolstering Shanghai's position as the Asia-Pacific



China Merchants-Yidun, the first Chinese-flagged luxury ocean cruise ship, docks in Shanghai in March 2023. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

cific international cruise hub," said Liu Zinan, senior vice-president and chairman of Asia at Royal Caribbean Group.

"It will also help with stimulating demand within related industries, generating employment opportunities and income, and carrying signif-

icant socioeconomic importance," Liu said.

This year, the global cruise tourism market is expected to witness 35.7 million passenger trips, exceeding the pre-pandemic level seen in 2019, the Cruise Lines International Association projected.

COMMENT

Editorials

Manila's ill-judged course leaves it exposed to its mercenary buccaneers

United States Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo is visiting the Philippines in a bid to foster a tighter economic bond with the US' Southeast Asian ally, which has been assigned a significant role in Washington's "Indo-Pacific" geopolitical strategy.

Manila seems happy to oblige as it apparently hopes to not only exploit its security partnership but also boost its economic ties with the US. But Manila is also aware of its comparative disadvantages — among which are its high energy costs — when it comes to competing for US investments with its Southeast Asian neighbors. After all, it is not the only country that the US is encouraging to be an active participant in its "Indo-Pacific" strategy. Raimondo and her entourage will also visit Thailand after the Philippines.

Decision-makers in Manila are not so naive as to think they hold all the cards. So they have come up with a plan that they assume may kill two birds with one stone. Since Manila wants to exploit its defense partnerships to generate more trade and investment, Philippine Ambassador to the US Jose Manuel Romualdez said of Raimondo's visit that Manila is inviting US companies to jointly explore energy resources in the South China Sea.

And it is not just the US that Manila is hoping to bribe in this way to support its territorial appropriation in the South China Sea. As Romualdez said, "We're working closely with our allies, not only the US but also Japan and Australia."

This may seem a great idea to Manila as it appears to hold the promise of quenching the Philippines' long-standing thirst for energy, bring down its energy costs, and thus improve its chances of success in the competition for foreign direct investment; while at the same time forging closer security partnerships to bolster its overreaching ambitions in the South China Sea. However, in the cold light of day Manila's formula for energy procurement can be seen to be nothing more than a badly drawn design to attract carpetbaggers to its acquisitive schemes.

The Philippines' desire for better energy supplies, not only to meet its growing everyday needs, but also to fuel its aspirations for foreign direct investment, is legitimate and understandable. This is especially true as the Malampaya natural gas field, the country's most important energy source at home, is expected to run dry by the mid-to-late 2020s. Long-term reliance on imports has been an outstanding bottleneck for the Philippines' plans to improve its domestic environment for foreign investment. And the South China Sea is believed to be home to an estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped oil. Manila has previously made tentative moves to lure in foreign enterprises to carry out exploration and development on designated offshore blocks, but by and large met with a cold shoulder, because everyone knew the risks of drilling at those contested locations.

Responding to a question about the Philippine ambassador's remarks, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin on Monday said the South China Sea issue is one between China and some member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which China is working to resolve via negotiations with the countries directly involved. He urged the countries concerned not to rope in countries from outside the region to intervene in the disputes as that risks creating destabilizing volatility in the region. They should be aware that China will resolutely uphold its sovereignty, territorial integrity and maritime rights and interests.

The Philippines and its allies are "moving in a calculated way," according to the Philippine ambassador. But this in no way mitigates the risk of conflict if it amounts to infringement on China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The calculation has a flaw in the ledger as the potential risks are greater than the imagined rewards. Although the negotiations on joint exploration stalled last year, that was the right course of action. Manila should rechart its approach to the South China Sea issue if it wants a meaningful long-term solution to its energy needs.

US 'performance' politics fuels crisis

Michael Fakhri, UN special rapporteur on the right to food, has hit the nail on the head. Speaking of the United States' recent food aid measures for the Palestinians in Gaza at a meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva last week, he said they were a "performance" for a domestic audience in the US with the presidential election coming up.

That's the only rational coherent interpretation for these aid announcements, he said, because "from a humanitarian perspective, from an international perspective, from a human rights perspective," the aid is "absurd in a dark, cynical way," given the US' military aid to Israel continues.

No wonder Fakhri tried to remind the world in the Geneva meeting that Israel is destroying Gaza's food system as part of a broader "starvation campaign," as Tel Aviv is weaponizing its control of the food aid to the Palestinians in Gaza.

At least 30,800 Palestinians have been killed and over 72,298 injured amid mass destruction and shortages of necessities, according to Palestinian sources. Meanwhile, the Israeli military has pushed 85 percent of Gaza's population into internal displacement amid acute shortages of food, clean water and medicine, while 60 percent of the enclave's infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed, according to the UN.

The hypocrisy of the Joe Biden administration when it comes to food aid to the Gaza refugees is also evidenced by it wearing the same pants with Tel Aviv in obstructing the functioning of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in Gaza, and it insisting that Israel be in charge of inspecting and controlling all aid to the refugees, which actually takes the form of Israeli trickle irrigation, leaving the majority of Gaza's 2 million residents in a state of quasi famine.

The absurdity of the US providing humanitarian aid to one side while providing weapons to the other exposes the self-serving callousness at the heart of US politics, in which human suffering, whether at home or overseas, is simply collateral damage for the partisan struggle.

The two parties' divergent attitudes toward the ongoing Ukraine crisis, another instance of US-orchestrated geopolitical carnage, is a further telling illustration of the "performance" politics that now prevails in the US, with the two parties vying to make it an issue for their electioneering.

With the Republicans holding a military aid package hostage to immigration action on the country's southern border, the Biden administration is packaging support for Israel's "self-defense campaign" as a means to advance the US' geopolitical interests in the Middle East against the backdrop of its broader agenda targeting Iran and Russia.

The protraction of the Gaza and Ukraine crises would be regarded as spillover effects of the US' incorrigible partisan struggle.

Both parties in the US should show they retain some humanity by opposing and condemning Israel's acts against civilians and international law. They should set aside their one-upmanship and call on Israel to stop its military operations as soon as possible and do everything possible to prevent a more devastating humanitarian disaster unfolding.

Likewise the two parties should stop trying to gain political advantage from the bloodshed in Ukraine and instead try to play a constructive role in securing a political settlement to the crisis, which has already caused immense direct and indirect suffering.

There is a lot of talk in Washington about morality. Those in Congress would do well to act on Schopenhauer's observation that compassion is the basis of morality.

Luo Jie

For Palestine



For Israel



Opinion Line

Kishida government gets jittery once again, as Biden-Trump clash hots up

As a Biden-Trump contest is becoming increasingly clear in the US presidential elections, the Fumio Kishida government is in touch with the Donald Trump camp to explore Trump's policy toward Japan.

Considering the unequal relationship between Japan and the US, it is not surprising that Japan is hedging its bets on the US presidential election. Japan is so firmly tied to the US chariot that it must keep a close eye on changes in US politics. In the 2016 US election, then Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe bet on Hillary Clinton winning. Till a few days before voting, the Japanese side was in touch with the Clinton camp to finalize dates for an Abe-Clinton "summit", even exploring the possibility of making Abe the first foreign head of state to hold talks with

"President Hillary Clinton".

So, when Trump won, it came as a shock to many Japanese officials. After Biden won the US election in 2020, the Japanese media wasted no time in listing the so-called similarities between then Japanese prime minister Yoshihide Suga and Biden, including the fact that both do not drink alcohol, both love sweets and that both had, in the past, worked as "number two" in the government.

Four years ago, because of the Abe government's close ties with Trump, Tokyo worried that the Biden administration would alienate Japan after taking office. Four years later, it is again afraid of being seen as being too close to Biden and so offending Trump.

On the one hand, Japan worries that

Trump will ask it to pay for a larger share of the US military presence in Japan. On the other hand, it is worried that Trump's tariff policy will cause new shocks to Japan's foreign trade.

However, what worries Japan the most is that it may be "abandoned" by the US in its China policy. Japan is worried that if Trump returns to power, the US may change Japan's four years of strategic deployment in the Asia-Pacific region against China, and that the US may change its provocative stance on the Taiwan question.

Japan's diplomacy always follows the baton of the United States. That is undoubtedly a great irony since Japan aspires to become a normal country.

— BEIJING NEWS

Some still need to know more about Xinjiang

At a time when discussions about China's Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region are often laced with political prejudice in Western countries, University of Cologne professor Felix Wemheuer's interview with Julius-Maximilians-University of Würzburg professor Bjoern Alpermann on the former's YouTube channel is of certain interest.

Their discussion was mainly about Alpermann's 2021 book *Xinjiang: China and the Uyghurs*, which has debunked "research results" of another German, Adrian Zenz, who became famous for claiming there is "forced labor" and "genocide" of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang without once having set foot

there or providing even a shred of evidence to corroborate what he was claiming. In the interview, Alpermann said Zenz's work lacks proof of "forced labor" and even junked the term "genocide" Zenz had used.

By saying so, Alpermann has simply pointed out how baseless Zenz's lies are. But his own claims of "cultural genocide" of the Uyghurs in the region hold no water, either.

From 2000 to 2020, the Uyghur population has grown from 8.34 million to 11.63 million, at an annual growth rate of 1.67 percent, much higher than the 0.83 percent average of all ethnic minorities in the country. By 2020, the number of mosques in Xinjiang

reached 24,400, meaning there was one for every 530 Muslims there. The United States has less than one-tenth of the number of mosques in Xinjiang.

Ironically, Alpermann was one of the three principal investigators of the EU-funded project "Remote Ethnography of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region", which is a prejudiced piece of work, which claims "labour exploitation and rights violations" in Xinjiang without providing any evidence. Xinjiang is a good research topic, but some scholars still need to learn more about it to get a true picture of Xinjiang.

— ZHANG ZHOUXIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Charges of port cranes threatening national security groundless

Although ZPMC has issued a statement rebutting the finding of a probe by US lawmakers last week that the cranes made by it for US ports threaten the United States' national security, the Shanghai-based crane maker's claims of innocence will likely fall on deaf ears.

The investigation by the House Committee on Homeland Security and House select committee on China found that among more than 200 Chinese-made cranes installed at US ports and related facilities, some of the cranes contain communications equipment with no clear purpose or record of their installation.

The US investigators found that the equipment installed "on more than one occasion" on the ZPMC cranes — cellular modems that can be used for remote communication — were not documented in any contract between US ports and Chinese crane maker ZPMC.

The cellular modems, as Mark Green, the Republican chair of the House Homeland Security Committee, said in a statement to the media, can allow Beijing to "not only undercut trade competitors through espionage, but disrupt supply chains and the movement of

cargo, devastating our nation's economy".

The Joe Biden administration last month announced plans to invest \$20 billion in new US-made port infrastructure, including US-made cranes. But that is viewed as a political gesture linked to the US president's reelection campaign as that input is thought to be far from enough to replace the Chinese-made cranes, which account for nearly 80 percent of the cranes used at ports in the US.

What should be pointed out is that even if having modems embedded in the port cranes' operational systems "physically bypass" the ports' traditional IT security defenses, the US side has not found any evidence that the security opening has been tapped by hackers from any country.

Also, as the US admits, a lot of machinery in the maritime and oil and gas sectors has such hardware as cellular modems that technicians use for remote maintenance, which actually guarantees the automation of the machinery.

The US investigators also acknowledged that when US port personnel went to China to inspect the cranes, the modems were already installed, which means the US port technicians were well aware of the existence of these devices on the cranes from the very beginning.

Nor have any instances been found "of malware or a Trojan-Horse-type software" being installed on the modems or other crane equipment, as John Vann, head of the US Coast Guard Cyber Command told lawmakers last month when the US Coast Guard raised security concerns over the Chinese-made port cranes. The just-concluded probe of the US lawmakers has also failed to find any evidence in that regard.

And what the US lawmakers did not mention is that the core intelligent parts of the Chinese-made port cranes are mostly made up of components from related companies in Germany, Sweden, the Republic of Korea and Japan, which also account for the majority of the remaining 20 percent of the port cranes in the US. To prove the objectivity of their probes, the US investigators should also determine whether these port cranes made for the US are also installed with the same kind of communications equipment that supposedly threatens the US' security. Otherwise using the worst-case scenario to smear Chinese-made port cranes, which actually have a clean track record of ensuring the efficient operation of the US' giant port system these years, seems the only purpose of their claim.

— LIYANG, CHINA DAILY

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COMMENT

Zhang Monan

Claim of slowing FDI reflects statistical bias

Of late, there has been a lot of talk about large-scale disinvestment by foreign companies in China. In the face of the complex international environment, it's crucial to objectively assess the situation and take necessary measures to attract foreign investment to China.

Data from the State Administration of Foreign Exchange show China's direct investment liabilities in its balance of payments stood at \$33 billion last year, the lowest since records for quarterly outflow began in 1998. However, data from the Ministry of Commerce show that in 2023, the number of newly established foreign-invested enterprises nationwide increased by 39.7 percent year-on-year, with the actual use of foreign investment amounting to 1.14 trillion yuan (\$158.65 billion), a historical high despite a decline of 8.0 percent year-on-year.

The two sets of data show significant differences. The Ministry of Commerce data on foreign direct investment (FDI) is more internationally comparable. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development keeps the records of direct investment in different countries and publishes the World Investment Report every year which analyzes the annual global direct investment data and trends. The UNCTAD data on China's inbound direct investment comes from the Ministry of Commerce, so the UNCTAD figures would better reflect the overall changes and trends.

In fact, the decline in FDI inflows, which began in 2023, is a global phenomenon. In recent years, factors such as anti-globalization, protectionism, major countries' "reshoring" moves, geopolitical conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic and the US Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes have accelerated the diversification, regionalization, "near-shoring" and "friend-shoring" of global industrial, supply and value chains, which has had a huge impact on global trade and international division of labor.

In particular, the "tide-of-the-US-dollar" effect caused by the Fed's interest rate hikes over the past two years has curbed the inflow of capital in emerging economies. The UNCTAD data show that the net FDI inflow in Mexico and India turned negative in the first three quarters of 2023, similar to the situation in China.

According to the latest data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in the first half of 2023, the global net FDI inflow fell by 30 percent year-on-year. Among developed economies, France, Germany, Japan and some other countries

saw a decline of up to 60 percent year-on-year in the cumulative net FDI inflow in the first three quarters of 2023. According to OECD statistics, the net FDI inflow in the European Union fell by 86 percent in the first half of 2023 compared with the same period in 2022, while China saw an 80 percent year-on-year decline.

The decline in the use of foreign investment under the balance of payments framework should not be misinterpreted as foreign disinvestment, because of two reasons. First, the decrease in the profits of foreign industrial enterprises leads to reduced reinvestment of profit. Second, the decline is related to the changes in the exchange rate differentials.

Over the past two years, the significant interest rate hikes by the Fed have led to a further inversion of the interest rate differential between China and the United States, a factor which must be taken into consideration before arriving at a relatively objective conclusion.

China's use of foreign capital in 2024 is likely to be more complex, and the task of stabilizing foreign investment remains arduous. But overall, the opportunities outweigh the challenges, and given the many favorable conditions, China is likely to attract and utilize

more FDI in 2024.

China's sustained and stable recovery is the basis for attracting more FDI. Due to favorable factors such as optimization of macro-economic policies, sustained momentum in the manufacturing industry, and consumption recovery, several international organizations or institutions have forecast that China's GDP growth will be between 4.5-4.8 percent in 2024. However, China set a growth target of around 5 percent for its economy in 2024, which means it will continue to contribute handsomely to global economic growth. Plus, foreign-funded enterprises are confident about the prospects of the Chinese economy's high-quality development.

Besides, China is expected to issue a series of policy measures to further improve the business environment and promote high-level opening-up. At the end of last year, the State Council, China's Cabinet, issued the "Opinions on Further Optimizing the Business Environment to Increase Attractiveness to Foreign Investment". The document provides detailed guidelines and planning, including promotion of enterprise operations, and fiscal and tax support, and proposes to gradually ease market access for foreign investment,

ensure foreign-invested enterprises participate in government procurement activities in accordance with the law, and establish and improve the system of roundtable conferences for foreign-invested enterprises.

Also, the pace of aligning Chinese laws and rules with global economic and trade laws and rules continues to accelerate. Last year, the State Council issued a document to facilitate institutional opening-up, which is aimed at aligning Chinese and international rules in areas such as competition policy, intellectual property rights protection, cross-border data transmission, and environmental standards, and will create a regulatory environment in line with global standards for global capital.

Judging from the above factors, the inflow of FDI into China, especially in its high-tech manufacturing sector, is expected to usher in a new round of higher-level growth in 2024, and China's absorption and utilization of foreign capital will enter a new stage of high-quality development.

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JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

Jin Ying

Stronger global monitoring for Japan's toxic water release

The Japanese government recently announced that International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Grossi has been invited to visit Japan from Tuesday to Thursday. The invitation raises many questions because the Japanese government has been discharging the nuclear-contaminated water from the damaged Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean by claiming it had got the "green light" to do so from the IAEA.

Despite the opposition from neighboring countries and the international community as a whole, Japan has proceeded with its discharge plan, and has already released 23,000 tons of contaminated water into the ocean. Japan's plan for fiscal year 2024 includes releasing another seven rounds of the radioactive water, totaling about 54,600 tons. This decision has ignited a debate on the complex composition of the contaminated water, the limitations of the purification process, and the potential risks it poses to the marine environment and human health.

The nuclear-contaminated water contains more than 200 types of radioactive nuclides, all of which cannot be removed, as Japan's advanced liquid processing system (ALPS) is designed to remove only 62 types of these nuclides. Worse, the ALPS has not been effective in removing even those 62 types of nuclides from the radioactive water.

About 70 percent of the water treated by the ALPS still does not meet the discharge standards, as it retains radioactive nuclides such as carbon-14, iodine-129, cesium-137 and strontium-90. This raises concerns about the safe-

ty of discharging the nuclear-contaminated water into the ocean, especially given its potential impact on marine ecosystems and human health.

By discharging the contaminated water into the ocean, Japan has not only violated international radiation protection norms and the 1972 London Dumping Convention but also failed to fulfill its global obligations to protect and preserve the marine environment. The potential impact of this decision extends beyond Japan's borders, violating the principles of international cooperation and environmental protection, and affecting the global community.

Moreover, the discharge of the radioactive water presents economic and scientific challenges. While it is commonly believed to be the least expensive disposal method, Japan's decision overlooks the need for huge amounts of resources by front-end operations to, for example, curb the use of underground water and facilitate the treatment of the contaminated water by the ALPS.

Additionally, the associated costs of addressing secondary crises and compensating the affected stakeholders have far exceeded initial estimates, highlighting the financial burden of this approach. For instance, Japan initially estimated the cost of discharging the radioactive water to be 3.4 billion yen (\$23 million). However, as of now, the related expenses have exceeded 129 billion yen, with further escalations expected in the future.

The decision to discharge the contaminated water into the ocean is not scientific. But the Japanese government claims that discharging the contaminated water into the ocean is necessary to clear space for the decommissioning work at the damaged

Fukushima nuclear power plant.

However, by claiming the release of the contaminated water into the ocean is a "preparatory step" for decommissioning, Japan has not only revealed its simplistic linear mindset but also prompted the international community to question its real intentions, especially given the unknown timeline and feasibility of the decommissioning process. True, the disposal of nuclear-contaminated water is intertwined with the decommissioning of the reactor and the post-accident cleanup, but a comprehensive systemic approach should be adopted to do so.

The international community has responded to Japan's release of the contaminated water by advocating stricter monitoring and regulatory requirements. But the existing monitoring arrangements have limitations, including unreasonable dilution, lack of transparency, and insufficient international review and monitoring. To address these shortcomings, the IAEA should play its due role of reviewing Japan's actions and establishing a long-term international cooperation mechanism for monitoring the developments.

The discharge of the Fukushima nuclear-contaminated water is a matter of global nuclear safety and marine ecological protection. As a crucial intergovernmental organization managing nuclear affairs, the IAEA should play a more proactive and constructive role in strictly supervising Japan's actions and establishing a global cooperation mechanism for monitoring the radioactive water. And some key criteria must be met to make this mechanism successful.

To begin with, it is essential to define the objectives and primary principles

of international monitoring cooperation, which is to minimize the negative impacts of the radioactive water discharge into the ocean on humans and the environment, with the primary principle being risk prevention in order to better protect the environment and human rights. Institutions should view the discharge of the radioactive water from a comprehensive and strategic perspective, and continuously review and evaluate the suitability of the disposal method.

Also, to ensure the objectivity and fairness of the monitoring process and results, the participation of other countries, especially Japan's neighbors and the Pacific island nations, should be considered while appointing monitoring inspectors and other monitoring personnel, based on nationality, region, profession and other factors.

Besides, the disposal of the nuclear-contaminated water into the sea and the post-accident cleanup are a long-term endeavor. Therefore, institutions should formulate detailed monitoring plans, including specific issues such as the types of isotopes to be monitored, the frequency and scope of the radioactive water release, reporting on the developments and other pertinent details, based on thorough discussions at experts' meetings. This will ensure the credibility and authoritative status of the international cooperation mechanism for monitoring the nuclear-contaminated water, including its release into the ocean.

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Maya Majueran

China a true diplomatic power for Global South

The Lowy Institute recently published the 2024 Global Diplomacy Index, which is an interactive tool that maps the world's most significant diplomatic networks. The index allows people to see where these countries and regions have invested in diplomacy, how they compare to each other in terms of their global diplomatic footprints, how their diplomatic networks have evolved over time, and where they seek to exercise those networks to expand influence.

As per the 2024 GPI, China is the world's largest diplomatic power, with a wider presence across the globe than the United States. Beijing had a total of 274 diplomatic posts, while Washington had 271, according to the report. Regionally, China has a heavier presence in geopolitically contested Africa (60:56 posts), East Asia (44:27), the Pacific island countries (9:8) and Central Asia (7:6) than the US. As for the US, it leads in Europe (78:73), North and Central America (40:24) and South Asia (12:10). Both countries have an equal number of posts in the Middle East (17) and South America (15).

This shows China has emerged as a formidable player in the Global South. Turkey and India, too, have rapidly expanded their diplomatic networks across the world, with Turkey rising to 3rd place on the index and India to 13th.

The success of China's diplomacy can be attributed to its Chinese characteristics, style and ethos, and its goal of promoting the well-being of all by building a community with a shared future for mankind. Another factor in China's favour is that, as a member of the Global South, it always stands on the side of developing countries.

China believes all countries, regardless of size, should be treated as equals in a multipolar world, and should be able to exert their influence, while it rejects hegemonism and power politics. It also believes that true democracy should be promoted in international relations, the United Nations Charter should be adhered to by all countries, and multilateralism should be upheld.

The geopolitical landscape has changed drastically in recent years, with the world witnessing the rise of new and diverse global powers capable of wielding influence in both the global market and the global governance system.

China has been reiterating that it will always try to become self-reliant but will fulfil all its international responsibilities as a responsible major country. It has also been reiterating that it will always uphold fairness and justice, help build an equitable and orderly multipolar world and uphold the equality of all countries.

The China-brokered rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March last year led to the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the two Middle East countries after seven years, which was a diplomatic victory for China. Since then, things have changed for the better in Middle East diplomacy, as evident in Syria's readmission to the Arab League in May 2023 after a 12-year suspension.

China released documents titled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis" in February 2023 and the "Position Paper of the People's Republic of China on Resolving the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict" in November 2023.

China's position on the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine conflicts that they should be peacefully resolved, along with the West's double standard on the Gaza crisis, has further widened the Western world's gap with the Global South. As a result, more and more countries, especially those in the Global South, to ensure their future is in their own hands, demand that international rules be written together by all countries, global affairs be jointly handled and development benefits be shared by all.

The US and its Western allies have for long been trying to impose Western values and political system on other countries in the name of promoting democracy and protecting human rights, and even bullying emerging market and developing economies to take sides.

In contrast, China has always advocated and pursued win-win cooperation. Indeed, win-win cooperation is the core principle of China's diplomacy. China's diplomatic moves in 2023 show that it really wants to restore lasting peace across the world by helping end conflicts, contributing to global development, and improving the existing world order.

China also advocates that conflicts be resolved through dialogue, which gains added importance in the face of the more than two-year-old Russia-Ukraine conflict and the five-month-long Israel-Palestine conflict that has claimed more than 30,000 Palestinian lives, the majority of them children and women.

The geopolitical landscape has changed drastically in recent years, with the world witnessing the rise of new and diverse global powers capable of wielding influence in both the global market and the global governance system. The Global South, emerging as a key player in international relations, is no longer reluctant to say how world affairs should be run so it can get its due benefits.

Like it or not, the US and its Western allies have to heed the Global South concerns, and take measures to address them by reforming the global financial architecture and improving the global governance system. Otherwise, the Global South, with BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, will lead the charge to reform the global financial structure and improve the global governance system. And China, with its unique diplomacy, will provide the leadership to the Global South in this noble cause.

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GLOBAL VIEWS

DJOOMART OTORBAEV

Debt-for-environment swaps: Solution for vulnerable countries

According to the latest report by the World Bank, developing countries spent a record \$443.5 billion servicing their government-guaranteed debt in 2022.

In light of the current situation, several developing countries are increasingly considering trading their national debts for promises to address climate change and preserve the environment. The question is whether this practice can be implemented worldwide or if there is a need for alternative methods to both finance debts and facilitate the transition to a more sustainable, eco-friendly economy.

Last year, the government of Ecuador implemented an innovative green deal with the support of private bank Credit-Suisse and the US Development Bank. Under this deal, the government refinanced \$1.6 billion in bonds at a reduced interest rate and issued so-called blue bonds (debt instruments that finance the protection of critical clean water resources, as well as marine and ocean-based projects) in exchange. The cheaper loan will result in annual savings of approximately \$12 million, which will be used for conservation efforts in Ecuador's Galapagos Islands. Belize, home to the longest coral reef in the Western Hemisphere, has implemented a project that helped the country to reduce its external debt by 10 percent of its GDP.

Several developing countries such as Gabon, Sri Lanka, Cape Verde and Laos are in the process of developing debt restructuring programs, similar to the ones mentioned.

Many developing nations are confronted with the challenge of repaying their debts while also taking action to combat climate change. Many depend on exports of primary resources, such as fossil fuels or timber. However, those

resources are crucial for both carbon sequestration and biodiversity conservation. Some countries are paying their creditors more than 13 times what they spend on climate action, despite natural catastrophes caused by climate change having the potential to severely impede or even halt their economic development.

According to the OECD, developing countries will require approximately \$2.4 trillion annually to tackle the issue of climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change also suggests that annual climate finance for developing countries should increase by four to eight times by 2030.

However, wealthy nations have no serious plans to assist them in reducing their carbon emissions. At last year's COP28 in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, they only agreed to offer \$400 million through a new "loss and damage" fund. Meanwhile, developing nations are estimated to lose around \$400 billion each year due to climate change.

Generating additional funding for sustainable development is possible by obtaining new loans. In fact, in 2020, 71 percent of government climate finance was procured in this manner. Over 50 of the poorest developing nations are facing the risk of defaulting on their debts, which could lead to virtual bankruptcy. This includes 28 of the 50 countries in the world that are most vulnerable to climate change. Even though these countries make up only 3 percent of the global economy, they account for more than half of the people living in extreme poverty.

The escalating sovereign debt crisis results from inadequate macroeconomic management in most recipient countries and global external shocks from the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing major conflicts and climate-related disasters. These

adverse developments have hindered worldwide economic growth and resulted in increased borrowing costs. Consequently, the debt load on many impoverished nations is rapidly growing.

Yet debt swaps, a method gaining popularity among donors and recipients, has some drawbacks that must be considered. One of the main concerns is the high transaction costs involved in implementing the mechanism, and this approach only postpones the debt problem and does not offer a permanent solution. There is also a lack of effective methods so far to monitor the environmental benefits expected from the programs.

Implementing the debt-for-environment swap mechanism will face difficulties due to the diverse range of public and private creditors involved. Moreover, some recipients may try to avoid default or debt write-offs to preserve their credit ratings and continue to access markets. It is important to note that not all countries facing financial difficulties will opt for radical debt restructuring.

Business as usual will not stop the climate crisis. Wealthy countries that have achieved high living standards for centuries by polluting the environment and extracting resources from developing countries must lead the process of cleaning up the mess they have created. Although the world's rich countries have not yet provided climate finance on the scale needed, it is not too late to act.

During COP28 held last year, the governments of Colombia, Kenya and France jointly proposed the formation of a Global Expert Review on Debt, Nature and Climate. This review aims to evaluate the impact of debt on the ability of low- and medium-income countries to tackle climate change by preserving nature, adapting to climate change, and decarbonizing their economies.



MAX XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Many nations believe that addressing the debt and climate crises in tandem presents a more promising solution than dealing with them separately.

In Charles Darwin's words: "... in the long history of humankind (and

animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed".

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QI QIN AND LAURI MYLLYVIRTA

Powering growth

Clean energy fueled China's economic growth in 2023

In 2023, China's clean energy sector significantly propelled the nation's economic growth, contributing an unprecedented 11.4 trillion yuan (\$1.6 trillion), up 30 percent year-on-year to its GDP, and capturing the largest slice of the investment growth. The "new three" — solar panels, electric vehicles and batteries — were the primary beneficiaries of the investments. Our analysis adopts a broad definition of "clean energy" sectors, including renewables, nuclear power, electricity grids, energy storage, EV, and railways. These are technologies and infrastructure needed to decarbonize China's production and use of energy. Notably, the clean energy sector's growth coincides with a decline in the real estate sector for the second consecutive year. This shift not only positions clean energy as crucial for China's energy transition and climate goals, but also elevates its importance within the broader economic and industrial landscape.

China's clean energy surge hasn't solely been driven by policy pronouncements. Instead, it has stemmed from a unique confluence of policy signals, economic realities and strategic investment choices. While the 2060 carbon neutrality goal provided clear direction, the actual growth has significantly outpaced expectations. This remarkable acceleration can be attributed to several key factors.

First, the government's intensified regulation of the real estate sector, previously a powerful economic engine, created a void that needed to be filled. Clean technology, aligned with national environmental goals and benefiting from relaxed financial restrictions, emerged as a viable alternative. This shift was further fueled by local governments seeking new ave-

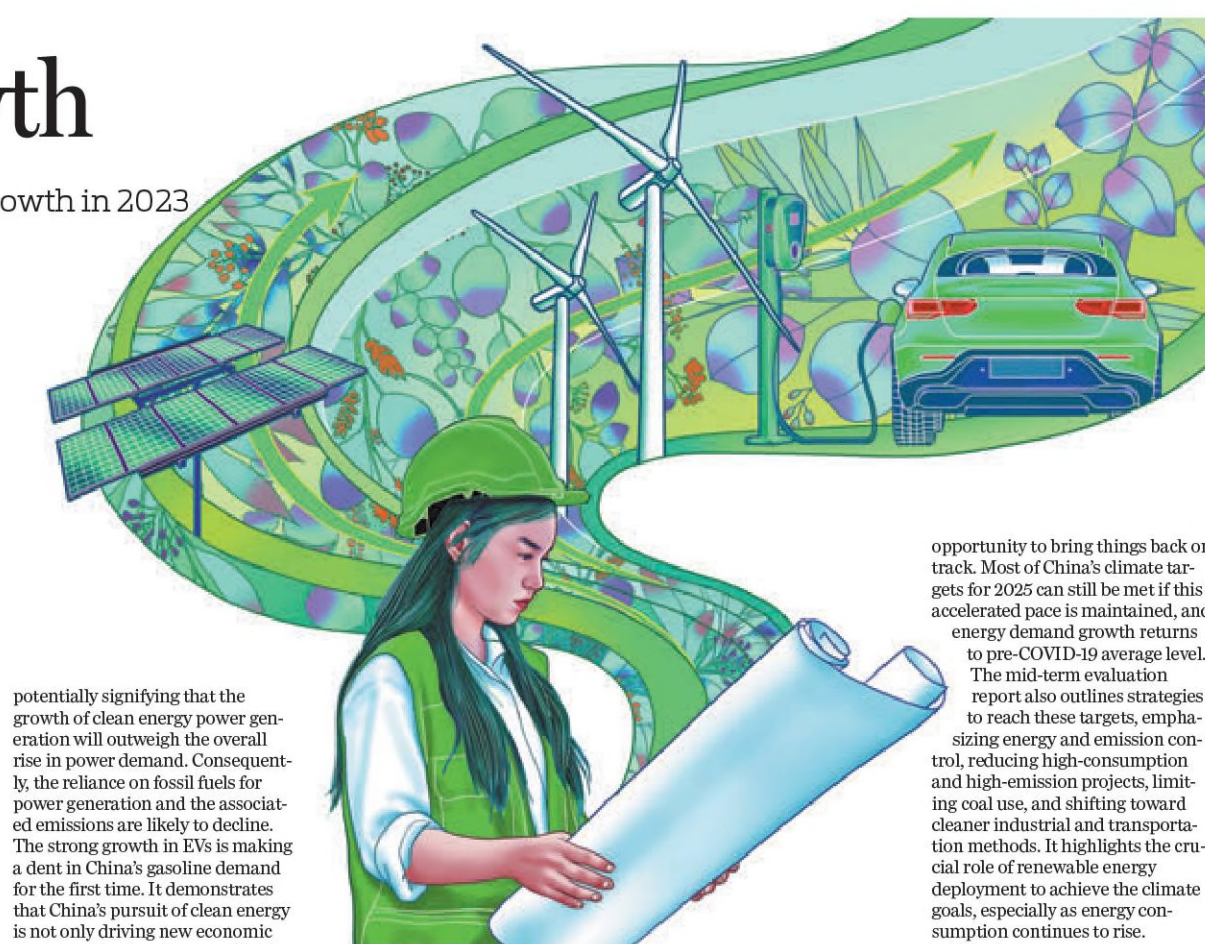
nues for growth amid shrinking real estate revenues. Clean energy fits the bill, aligning with central government priorities and offering responsible investment opportunities.

Second, financial support has played a crucial role. The easing of financing constraints for private companies has allowed them to tap into the clean energy sector. This shift has been further amplified by local governments offering substantial support and convenience such as complete infrastructure for manufacturing facilities.

Third, market dynamics have also contributed significantly. The declining costs of clean energy, driven by technological advancements, aggressive industrial policies and diversified supply chains, have made renewables increasingly competitive with fossil fuels. This, coupled with the overall economic landscape, has created a strong market pull for continued investment in the sector.

Driven by ambitious environmental goals and evolving economic priorities, China's clean energy sector has undergone a remarkable transformation, which has significant implications for both China and the world.

For China, the pivot to the clean energy sector necessitates steady growth in areas such as renewable power installations and EV deployment. Continued clean energy expansion at the current pace, coupled with a return of energy demand to pre-COVID-19 levels, presents the strong possibility of China's carbon dioxide emissions peaking well before 2030. In 2023, there was a noteworthy development as the clean energy sector's expansion began to align closely with the trajectory of the country's power demand growth. This subtle shift marks a crucial turning point,



JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

potentially signifying that the growth of clean energy power generation will outweigh the overall rise in power demand. Consequently, the reliance on fossil fuels for power generation and the associated emissions are likely to decline. The strong growth in EVs is making a dent in China's gasoline demand for the first time. It demonstrates that China's pursuit of clean energy is not only driving new economic opportunities, but also contributing to the climate goals.

China's clean energy boom positions it as a global leader in the world energy transition. This leadership is helping the world move faster toward using renewable energy by making it cheaper and easier to adopt. The dramatic price drops of solar panels and batteries, driven by China's manufacturing boom, have made renewable energy more accessible and economically viable, potentially accelerating the global shift toward a zero-carbon energy system. Moreover, China's escalating investment in renewable energy projects abroad, coupled with its pivotal role in the supply of clean technologies, demonstrates a

strategic approach to shape global energy transition policies. This highlights the global energy economy's reliance on collaborative efforts to achieve a sustainable future.

The clean energy sector investment boom has been built on China's investment-led economic model. While new clean energy technologies offer potential for expansion, eventually new sectors will need to attract investment, or China's investment-led economic model will require transformation.

China's dominance in global clean energy supply chains also

presents a dilemma for other nations: leverage China's low-cost technologies or diversify and develop their own competitive supply chains, potentially further driving down global prices.

By the end of 2023, China's National Development and Reform Commission's mid-term evaluation report for the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) revealed that China's progress in reducing energy consumption and CO2 emissions per unit of GDP didn't meet expectations. Yet, the record-breaking expansion of clean energy and electricity storage in 2023 provides an

opportunity to bring things back on track. Most of China's climate targets for 2025 can still be met if this accelerated pace is maintained, and energy demand growth returns to pre-COVID-19 average level. The mid-term evaluation report also outlines strategies to reach these targets, emphasizing energy and emission control, reducing high-consumption and high-emission projects, limiting coal use, and shifting toward cleaner industrial and transportation methods. It highlights the crucial role of renewable energy deployment to achieve the climate goals, especially as energy consumption continues to rise.

China's clean energy boom presents both opportunities and challenges. It can help to achieve climate targets, drive economic growth, and reshape the global clean energy landscape. China's efforts provide valuable lessons and opportunities for the world as we collectively navigate the path toward a more sustainable future.

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Z WEEKLY

All about Gen Z

Z WEEKLY

College students weigh in on AI education and campus policies

By CHEN XUE
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Lei Jun, an NPC deputy and CEO of Xiaomi, proposed the integration of AI-related courses into China's nine-year compulsory education system during this year's two sessions, held from March 4 to 11. The question arises: do you agree with his suggestion?

In a special episode of China Daily's *Youth Power*, titled "Exploring the Two Sessions with Gen Z", college students are sharing their perspectives on motions, suggestions, and proposals raised in the two sessions.

Zhang Letian, a sophomore at Nanjing University (NJU) in Jiangsu province, stressed the importance of introducing children to AI at a young age to protect them from emerging threats like AI-powered scams. "Without adequate AI literacy, people would become vulnerable targets for fraudulent activities," he said.

However, Yang An, a doctoral student at the University of Science and Technology of China (USTC) in Hefei, Anhui province, warned against overlooking AI's potential to disrupt job markets. "The automation of data collection may significantly reduce the demand for ordinary workers, potentially impacting their employment opportunities," he explained.

Ye Jiawen, a graduate student at NJU, also raised concerns about the challenges involved in implementing such courses. "From developing teaching materials to training teachers and procuring experimental equipment, it requires considerable resources, which might limit its nationwide promotion," she said.

Regarding the proposal on opening up university campuses and removing restrictions on public access, as submitted by Zhu Tongyu, a CPPCC member and vice president of Shanghai Medical College, Fudan University, students also hold different opinions.

Li Xu from USTC welcomed the proposal, highlighting the significance of universities as hubs of intellectual and cultural exchange. "University campuses foster long-term interaction between students, faculty, and residents, nurturing a spirit of sharing," he said.

Li also emphasized the importance of an open campus environment for students' personal growth. "Students living in the ivory tower of universities may lack exposure to real-world experiences. A more open campus environment provides them with the opportunity to engage with society and better understand it."

Zeng Zheng, a sophomore at NJU, echoed support for an open campus but raised concerns about potential drawbacks. "Allowing prospective students to visit early can offer them a glimpse into university life. However, we must consider the impact on current students' academic and living conditions with an increased flow of people," he said.

Another proposal concerning college students, submitted by Liu Yonghao, a CPPCC member and chairman of leading agricultural company New Hope Group, suggests establishing special funds to encourage university students to return to their hometowns for employment and entrepreneurship.

Yang expressed optimism about the proposal, citing the challenges faced by students when traveling between big cities and their hometowns during peak seasons like Chinese New Year. "If we can find better job opportunities in our hometowns and have a good platform for starting businesses, wouldn't that alleviate this problem?" he said.

In contrast, Xu Chuanhe, a sophomore at NJU, expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of this proposal. Drawing from his experience of growing up in an economically underdeveloped area, Xu doubted that any incentive could persuade him to return to his hometown instead of staying in big cities like Nanjing.

"Rather than setting up special funds to support talents returning to their hometowns, it would be better to, for example, establish career advancement channels so that college graduates can envision their future trajectory, perhaps five or ten years down the line," he suggested.



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Fostering cultural awareness and academic exchange

Motions, suggestions, and proposals in the 2024 two sessions emphasize cultural preservation, educational exchange, and global cooperation to foster youth empowerment and nurture cultural understanding for international harmony.



From left to right: Du Wei, dean of the graduate school at Guizhou Minzu University, Guizhou. He Yingchun, vice principal of No 1 Middle School in Sunan Yugur autonomous county, Gansu. Yang Yuni, head of the Yuni Cultural Heritage Center in Honghe Hani and Yi autonomous prefecture, Yunnan. Dylan Walker, a China Daily reporter. Huang Huachun, vice principal of Chongzuo High School in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. Sui Guohua, vice-chair of Guangxi's regional government. Xu Guangwen, principal of Shenyang University of Chemical Technology, Liaoning. Gao Jinhui, principal of Peizheng Middle School in Macao. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

By LI XINRAN
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The National People's Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, known as the annual two sessions, were held in Beijing from March 4 to 11 this year. They are convened to gather and deliberate on motions, suggestions, and proposals from deputies and members representing the people, and then convey them to relevant departments for review and action, ensuring that the voices of the people are heard.

"A well-rounded suggestion proposed by a deputy must stem from thorough research and truly reflect the needs of the public. It should also consider aspects that existing policies have yet to address," said Du Wei, an NPC deputy and dean of the graduate school at Guizhou Minzu University in Guiyang, Southwest China's Guizhou province, during her conversation with China Daily journalist Dylan Walker.

One of the suggestions put forward by Du this year focuses on the Village Basketball Association, or Cun BA, and the promotion of ethnic cultures. During these village basketball games, both on-site and online viewers can enjoy performances of singing and dancing by ethnic groups, in addition to participating in the sport itself.

The increasing popularity of Cun BA underscores the growing demand for spiritual and cultural enrichment in rural areas. This demand is also echoed by a suggestion made by Huang Huachun, an NPC deputy and vice principal of Chongzuo High School in South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

"The improvement of education in border areas of Guangxi has always been the theme and focus of my research and suggestions. With the support of the country and local governments, we have made significant progress," said Huang. "From my research, I have found that students in these areas are eager to learn traditional local instruments. However, there is a significant issue with the teaching staff, as they lack the necessary skills for quality musical education."

Huang acknowledged that more and more young teachers have come to work in border areas, bringing vitality and positive impacts to students. "Cultural classes such as art and music stimulate students' creativity and imagination. Furthermore, they help stu-

Youth is a crucial phase in everyone's life. I hope our youth are willing to explore and never lose faith in their goals and themselves."

Du Wei, an NPC deputy and dean of the graduate school at Guizhou Minzu University

dents learn more about their own cultural identity, facilitating their integration into society in the future," Huang added.

Yang Yuni, a Gen Z member of the CPPCC and head of the Yuni Cultural Heritage Center in Honghe Hani and Yi autonomous prefecture, Southwest China's Yunnan province, also emphasized the importance of cultural education in her suggestion.

"The Hani Terraces are an intangible cultural heritage with a history of over 1,300 years. The songs and dances derived from this agricultural culture are unique and magnificent," Yang said. "I founded this center with the hope of preserving and promoting our traditional culture, strengthening Chinese national community consciousness among our children, sharing our culture, and connecting our younger generation with the rest of the world."

Yang's focus on promoting national community consciousness resonates with He Yingchun's proposal during the two sessions. Since children are the future builders of the country, it's crucial to strengthen their sense of national community consciousness from an early age, said He, a CPPCC member and vice principal of No 1 Middle School in Sunan Yugur autonomous county, Zhangye, Northwest China's Gansu province.

"We encourage our students to offer suggestions that reflect their unique perspectives as teenagers, taking into account local circumstances. They will also have opportunities to interview me, a member of the CPPCC," said He. "Through active participation, we aim for them to gain a deeper understanding of our consultative mechanism and the principles of

people's democracy."

Gao Jinhui, a CPPCC member and principal of Peizheng Middle School in Macao, also highlighted the importance of experiential education.

"One of my proposals focuses on patriotic education and its integration into Macao's education system. In addition to classroom learning about the Chinese mainland, we would also organize field trips for students to experience firsthand. Without such experiences, how can patriotism be deeply rooted?" he said.

Gao also pointed out that there are various aspects that Macao and other cities in China can learn from each other, such as the efficient public transportation in the Chinese mainland and Macao's adaptation of STEM education.

According to Xu Guangwen, a CPPCC member and principal of Shenyang University of Chemical Technology in Shenyang, Northeast China's Liaoning province, mutual learning is also important on a global level. "Established in 1952, our university has a long history of international collaboration, welcoming international students since 1956, and establishing academic partnerships with universities in Japan and Russia," he said.

The primary focus of Sui Guohua, a CPPCC member and vice-chair of Guangxi's regional government, is also international exchange in education, more specifically, on China-ASEAN education cooperation and international talent cultivation.

According to her, by the end of 2022, the number of students studying in both directions between China and ASEAN had surpassed 280,000. Among all the international students studying in China, ASEAN students constituted 20 percent. "Nevertheless, we still face a shortage of high-quality international talents equipped with cultural confidence, global thinking, cross-cultural communication, and multilingual skills," she said.

Sui believes that in the face of unprecedented global changes, countries need to unite, cooperate, trust, and respect each other. Young people should become "civil ambassadors" and shoulder the mission of promoting mutual understanding and friendly exchanges between different countries and regions.

Du also expressed aspirations for the young people of China. "Youth is a crucial phase in everyone's life. I hope our youth are willing to explore and never lose faith in their goals and themselves."

Z WEEKLY

Redefining weddings in the age of individuality

Modern couples opt for personalized, eco-friendly, and cost-effective weddings, redefining marriage with unique twists and meaningful experiences, **Meng Wenjie** reports.

Xu Lizhen, 29, had previous experience serving as a bridesmaid at a friend's wedding and visited two wedding expos. She learned firsthand how complex and expensive a traditional wedding can be.

So, when she and Hou Naibin, 34, tied the knot last year, they opted for a simple and relaxed ceremony in Hou's hometown of Yingkou, Northeast China's Liaoning province.

They chose not to hire a professional makeup artist or prepare elaborate wedding attire, sparing themselves the hassle of early morning makeup sessions and outfit changes. Instead, Hou donned his work suit while Xu wore a red dress provided by the wedding venue.

During the ceremony, they shared a video documenting their journey to various cities across China over the past six months since their marriage registration. For example, at the Wulanhada Volcano Geopark in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, the couple, with Hou dressed as an astronaut and Xu in her wedding gown, took a series of photos titled "Elope to Mars". In the photos, the two joyfully present the double-happiness symbol, which consists of two *zi* (joy) characters joined together.

"The wedding itself may seem simple, but we put a lot of effort into the preparation. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event, so I didn't want to settle for a cookie-cutter, assembly-line wedding," Hou said.

According to Wang Yichen, 31, a wedding planner at WOX! wedding studio, an increasing number of young people are opting for simple and easygoing weddings.

With nine years of experience in the industry, Wang has planned nearly 300 weddings. She said that when she first entered the industry in 2016, the trend of simplifying wedding traditions was relatively niche. However, out of the 20 to 30 weddings she coordinates annually today, 95 percent of them are simple and intimate affairs.

In traditional weddings, it's common to invite many guests. Wang still remembers that in the first few years of her working as a wedding planner, grand banquets were a staple of many Chinese weddings. The couple's friends typically constituted only a small proportion, with the majority being relatives and family friends, often numbering several hundred in total.

"Currently, the weddings we plan typically have around 100 guests, and many weddings have only around 50 guests," Wang said. "A lot of young people would rather turn weddings into get-togethers with old friends."

Recently, 29-year-old bride Xiong Ying and her 30-year-old groom Peng Zhegong added a delightful twist to the age-old wedding procession. In January, this couple from Wuhan, the capital city of Central China's Hubei province, arrived at their wedding venue aboard a bus — yes, a bus.

Unlike traditional weddings that often involve a fleet of luxury vehicles to escort the couple to the wedding venue, this unconventional choice, dubbed the "Happiness Bus", stands out. Painted mainly in red, a color symbolizing various positive meanings in Chinese culture, the bus is tailored specifically for weddings.

"I was inspired by the wedding bus services shared by other couples on Xiaohongshu. After



Top left: Niu Yajie (left) and her husband in the Hobbiton Movie Set in New Zealand. **Top right:** Peng Zhegong (central left) and Xiong Ying (central right) on their wedding bus with friends. **Above:** Hou Naibin (left) and Xu Lizhen (right) at the Wulanhada Volcano Geopark in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

learning that Wuhan also offers a similar service, we decided to opt for it," Xiong said.

So far, the topic of "wedding bus" has garnered over 1.84 million views on the Chinese lifestyle-sharing platform Xiaohongshu.

In traditional weddings, the ceremony typically begins with the groom, along with the groomsmen, traveling to the bride's house in the early morning.

After they arrive, they'll have to pass the "door games" — a

series of challenges designed by the bridesmaids — to get in and see the bride.

Yet, processes like this usually require a significant amount of time, and newlyweds must rush through breakfast to promptly head to the wedding venue at an "auspicious" time.

However, with a wedding bus capable of accommodating over 20 people, door games can be conducted onboard the bus. While on the way to the wedding venue, the couple and their

young friends can also enjoy a delightful and relaxed mobile party.

Cut to the chase

Wang highlighted an innovative wedding format known as the "3 No's" ceremony, which involves no escorting, no bridesmaids or groomsmen, and no marriage witnesses, also widely known as a "minimalist wedding". The specific elements omitted can vary based on personal preferences.

in Queenstown in the South Island of New Zealand, there happened to be a yacht on the lake with a group of local young people having a party. They noticed Niu and her husband taking wedding photos and intentionally turned the yacht toward them, waving and loudly wishing them a happy marriage.

"Encountering such warm blessings in a foreign country was a novel experience," said Niu.

Having a wedding trip was also a decision made after considering economic concerns. According to Niu, a medium-sized wedding may require up to 200,000 yuan (\$27,808) in Shanghai.

Although guests attending weddings often give "red envelopes" as a wedding gift, Niu mentioned, "in 80 percent of cases, the red envelopes received by the couple cannot even cover the cost of hosting the wedding". This is why the couple chose to allocate the wedding budget to their own experiences — taking a trip.

Break the mold

According to Wang, changes in societal attitudes are mirrored in the wedding industry.

For example, more and more young people are embracing sustainable environmental concepts. In the weddings Wang planned, a significant number of couples requested that the flowers used for decoration be arranged into small bouquets and distributed to guests after the wedding, instead of being discarded outright.

Traditional well-wishes for fertility are also losing their popularity. *Zaoshengguizi* (looking forward to the birth of a new baby), for instance, used to be the most prevalent wedding blessing. "One bride I spoke with chose to remain child-free, so she firmly expressed her preference not to receive any blessings resembling *zaoshengguizi* at the ceremony," said Wang.

Instead, people are steering toward happiness. Take the bouquet toss tradition as an example. It's transitioning from wishing the recipient to find their ideal partner to simply wishing them happiness. At Xiong and Peng's wedding, Xiong tossed a bunch of lettuce instead of a bouquet, because lettuce, or *shengcai* in Chinese, sounds like the word "making a fortune".

"When everyone was scrambling for the lettuce, the atmosphere was lively and joyful," Xiong said.

Even the definition of marriage itself is changing. "Marriage used to be perceived as the bride joining the groom's family. Nowadays, however, couples are more inclined to view marriage as the union of two individuals, the establishment of a new family," Wang said.

"For me, getting married didn't drastically change my life because we had always gotten along well and trusted each other," said Xu. "I don't think getting married will make anything different from our regular outings, travels, or movie nights. The wedding is simply the icing on the cake."

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Z WEEKLY

From the ring to the screen

Zhang Guiling, the retired boxer starring in the film *YOLO* shares her journey from athlete to actress, reflecting her dedication and passion for boxing.

By GUI QIAN
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Director and actress Jia Ling's film, *YOLO* (You Only Live Once), captivated audiences across China during this year's Spring Festival. The movie reaches its pinnacle during the final boxing match, where a professional female boxer faces off against Jia, leaving a lasting impression on the viewers.

For the boxer herself, the journey from practicing the sport to starring in a movie has been nothing short of remarkable.

The boxer is Zhang Guiling, a 26-year-old from Longling county in Baoshan, Southwest China's Yunnan province.

As a retired member of China's national boxing team, she was recommended by a boxing coach to take on the role in *YOLO* in October last year.

"When I went to Foshan, Guangdong province, for filming, Jia had slimmed down and had been learning boxing for some time, mastering basic moves," Zhang said, recalling her first encounter with Jia. "I felt nervous playing against her. In the first month, I sparred with her daily, but I couldn't treat her as a real opponent."

During the filming, Jia insisted that Zhang fight for real, emphasizing the need for authenticity.

"Jia is a dedicated person, and I admire her for this. She personally helped me with my mental preparation and relieved my pressure. She told me, 'You're being too gentle with me. Just let go,'" Zhang recalled.

Zhang adhered to this advice and threw punches fiercely, but the filming process was not as smooth as she had anticipated. Despite her experience in boxing, she was a novice in the realm of acting. In addition, challenges such as positioning and lighting led to multiple retakes. As a result, it took the crew over half a month to complete the scenes where she confronts Jia.

The most memorable moment for Zhang during filming was the second round of the boxing match. "I could hear my punches, one after another. 'Bang, bang, I can't forget it to this day,'" she said.

"It was so clear to see Jia's pained



Zhang Guiling, a retired member of China's national boxing team, stars as a boxer in the movie *YOLO*, which was released on Feb 10. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

facial expression from a first-person perspective. When the filming was called to a stop, I rushed over to hug her, and I cried. The doctor said that I had given Jia a mild concussion. 'How could I hit her so hard?' I thought to myself. 'Many people must hate me for that.'"

Zhang was amazed and proud that Jia managed to take the full force of her hits, knowing the strength behind her punches as a professional boxer. At 170 cm tall and boasting an arm span of the same length, Zhang is known for her aggressive boxing style.

In 2011, Zhang stood out in an athletics competition in Longling and was enrolled in the youth amateur sports school of Baoshan at the age of 13. Having no concept of what boxing was at that time, she began formal practice in 2012 under her teacher's guidance.

Just one year later, Zhang was selected for the Yunnan provincial boxing team. Her first career highlight came in 2015 when she won the National Youth Boxing Championship. After that, she continued to earn more honors at the Yunnan Provincial Games and the National

Boxing Championship, which helped her join China's national boxing team in 2017. Then for two consecutive years, she secured gold medals in the women's 60 kg category at the National Boxing Championship.

Recalling her days of training, Zhang said there were many doubtful and critical voices at the beginning, such as "why should a girl learn boxing" and "you don't look like a girl". But one unique characteristic about her is that once she steps into the ring, she becomes completely focused and devoted.

Regarding the confrontational nature of boxing, injuries were common, and getting bruised and swollen were only two of the lightest injuries.

Now, Zhang still suffers from the damage inflicted when she faced off against a male boxer at the age of 16. "He threw a punch, and my ears kept ringing, but I didn't realize I was injured. It was only after the doctor examined me that I found out my eardrum had been punctured. My nasal bridge is now flat because it was broken and never properly healed," she said.

Zhang's parents are both ordinary farmers, but they have always respected her choice and supported her quietly. "However, after attending one of my matches in person in 2014, they dare not watch my matches again," she said.

After five years of training and competing with the national team, Zhang retired in November 2022 and chose to embark on a new "track". She returned to Yunnan and opened a boxing club in Yiliang county, Kunming, the capital of Yunnan.

Now that the movie is bringing more attention to both boxing and herself, she plans to open a branch in downtown Kunming.

"Boxing is a very stress-relieving sport. I hope that more people can understand and fall in love with it and improve their physical fitness through it," she said.

Besides teaching boxing, Zhang still trains for about one hour every day to maintain her competitive level. She also goes for a run with club members at 6:30 every morning.

"For me, boxing is not just a sport. It is a way of life," Zhang said.

Student entrepreneur revolutionizes Braille display

By TAN YINGZI
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Li Cheng, 20, a college student and engineering enthusiast from Southwest China's Chongqing, is making waves by turning his entrepreneurial dreams into reality.

Leveraging his knowledge, insights, and empathy, Li has invented a groundbreaking Braille dot display tailored for the visually impaired community.

Named "Argus", the first batch of the Braille dot display is expected to be released this summer. The company Li founded, Chongqing Wujie-QH Tech Co, is now valued at approximately 20 million yuan (\$2.78 million).

While sighted people use screens, such as those on iPads or Kindles, for reading, the visually impaired rely on "dot displays" to read through touch. Currently, literate visually impaired individuals depend primarily on printed Braille books for reading.

China has around 18 million visually impaired people, with 23.5 percent under the age of 30, according to the China Disabled Persons' Federation.

"The market demand is huge," said Li. He emphasized that once mass-produced, Argus could be a groundbreaking tool that can enhance literacy among the visually impaired, improve reading efficiency and scope, and enrich their spiritual lives.

"In the meantime, when the power of science and technology is combined with humanistic care, we are able to create a display that people can actually afford," he added.

According to Li, traditionally, core technical operations for similar devices utilize piezoelectric ceramics to convert electric signals into physical signals. However, this material is mainly imported and, therefore, very expensive.

In the past year, Li's team managed to reduce costs by 40 percent after rounds of trials and failures, and successfully reconstructing an actuator that overturns the previous physical approach to the electromagnetic approach. The first-generation Argus is priced between 8,000 to 10,000 yuan, with plans to introduce a more affordable entry-level version with basic functions.

Born in Shaoxing, Zhejiang province, Li dreamed of becoming an engineer since childhood. "I even

fantasized about using the electronic waste collected from my dismantled electronic products to make a humanoid robot," he said.

Li has won numerous national and municipal-level engineering prizes and applied for seven invention patents. In 2020, he was enrolled in the Robotics Engineering Institute at Chongqing University. His talent and dedication earned him recognition under China's National Elite Institute of Engineering program, which was initiated by the Ministry of Education and the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration of the State Council in August 2022.

With the support of the program, Li's project was officially launched in October last year, with a team of eight collaborating on various aspects of the product's development — its structure, electronics, overall assembly, design, private domain operations, and user research.

Li said his idea for Argus dated back to the end of his freshman year in 2021 when he was attending an XbotPark summer camp — a sci-tech-innovation-themed camp initiated by Li Zexiang, who is dubbed the "Father of DJI", the world's lead-

ing drone unicorn. One day, when he was reading a novel on his phone, a question struck his mind: "How do visually impaired people read?"

His curiosity led to research on the topic, including gathering information from websites and social media, and interacting with visually impaired people, who provided crucial insights about their daily challenges.

"Li is a very cheerful leader. The work atmosphere here is very relaxed and we exchange ideas often," said 22-year-old postgraduate student Fu Wenke, who is Li's college mate and joined Li's team in September last year. "With maturity, stability, and systematic approach, Li clearly maps out our goals and we are confident in what we are doing."

The team's efforts have been bolstered by Zhu Xiaoming, a 38-year-old software technician with years of experience. As a visually impaired individual himself, Zhu's input has been invaluable in ensuring that Argus meets the needs of its users.

"Despite being in the early stages of development, Argus has shown unique features in function, sense of touch, and responsiveness in displaying Braille," Zhu said. "It is a tool that can help people like me, who



Left: Li Cheng, a student at Chongqing University, is doing research with a microscope. DENG RUI / CHINA DAILY Middle: A prototype of Argus, a Braille dot display designed by Li's team. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

lack visual input, to learn more in multiple scenarios."

Currently, the program has received a 500,000-yuan seed investment from Mingyue Lake International Intelligent Industry Science and Technology Innovation Base, which is promoted by Li Zexiang and Chongqing Liangjiang New Area, the third national development zone in China after Shanghai Pudong and Tianjin Binhai. It has also secured 20 million yuan in an angel-round

financing from a Shenzhen-based investment firm.

Looking ahead, Li plans to dedicate three to five years to further refining Argus. Overseas promotion is also scheduled for next year, with aspirations to integrate the core technology — high-density tactile sensing — into augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR) applications and potentially develop household companion robots, with the aim of improving people's lives.