

Reaffirming unity, multilateralism

Suzhou meeting of APEC trade ministers provides platform to show support for WTO rules

By DARYL GUPPY

The 32nd Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation trade ministers' meeting in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, convened at a critical time, when many businesses and organizations fear that the rules governing the global trading environment are fraying. The fears have been compounded by the unrest in the Strait of Hormuz, which has exposed the fragility of international rules and the vulnerability of global supply chains.

Focusing on major economic and trade issues in the Asia-Pacific, the meeting in Suzhou on May 22 and 23 formed an important part of this year's APEC cooperation process and provided a platform for determined action to support the multilateral trading system based on the World Trade Organization rules.

The meeting aligned with the theme of the APEC "China Year", "Building an Asia-Pacific Community to Prosper Together", which emphasizes openness, innovation, and cooperation.

According to China's Ministry of Commerce, the major focus of the APEC trade ministers' meeting in Suzhou was on strengthening regional cooperation amid slowing global growth and increasing trade uncertainty. Such regional cooperation can provide a counterbalance to the disruptions in the trade environment.

The Suzhou meeting allowed the APEC middle powers and

smaller economies in the Global South to focus on supporting the basis of international trade. Reaffirmation of a common unity and determined support for multilateral solutions over unilateral action will send a message to the forces disrupting global trade. The proposals from the

Suzhou meeting will help set the agenda for the future of trade relations within the APEC region.

The catalyst for distraction is the security of oil and product supply chains from the Middle East. Although the media focus is on oil supplies, the impact of obstructions in the Strait of Hormuz is far more diverse, including disruptions to the supply of agricultural fertilizer, feedstocks for plastic production, and the specialist gases required for semiconductor and other industries.

These are important supplies whose disruption has the potential to trigger social dislocation, but it is important that they do not detract from the strategic issues that the APEC meeting in Suzhou also needs to consider. These include a cluster of trade development issues and the broader question of support for the international trade environment.

Li Chenggang, China's international trade representative with the Ministry of Commerce and



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vice-commerce minister, highlighted this strategic task when he noted that China will work with all APEC members to promote consensus on building an open and predictable regional and multilateral economic and trade order.

The emphasis on an "open, predictable and multilateral economic and trade order" provided the basic logic for the Suzhou meeting. Reaching consensus on this objective would further enhance APEC's status.

Consensus would signal a commitment to supporting multilateral solutions and rejecting unilateral diktat. Such consensus would explicitly deny arbitrary orders or settlements imposed by a superior authority, which are typically without negotiation or consent.

It is this multilateral framework that will enable and empower the trade ministers' discussions on deepening cooperation in emerging sectors, including the digital economy, green development, and

supply-chain resilience. These objectives are only achievable by creating a more open, stable, and predictable trade environment.

Support for these objectives is consistent with China's long-term support for the United Nations, as demonstrated by the four global initiatives

China has put forward.

These initiatives are designed to help reform the international governance systems and promote a community with a shared future. They address global challenges through cooperation, development, and enhanced multilateralism with the UN at the center.

APEC is consistent with these proposals because it strengthens regional economic and trade cooperation amid slowing global growth and increasing trade uncertainty.

Moreover, one of APEC's most important gatherings of the year can prove decisive by reaching a key consensus to observe multilateral unity and reject the path of balkanization and fragmented self-interest.

As a member economy of APEC, Australia places great importance on stable and positive trade performance with other APEC economies. In 2024, bilateral trade in goods between China and

Australia reached \$211.27 billion, marking an 85.6 percent increase from 2015, and accounting for 24 percent of Australia's total foreign trade.

According to the "China Business Environment Brief" released by the China-Australia Chamber of Commerce, 70 percent of Australian companies view China as their top investment destination, with half planning to expand their presence there. China's vast market of 1.4 billion people, with a growing middle-income group, has a strong demand for high-quality Australian food, health products, and services. This is a "big pond" that no forward-thinking business can afford to overlook.

The APEC trade ministers' meeting in Suzhou presented a fresh opportunity for China-Australia cooperation. In the future, there can be deeper collaboration to optimize trade structures and promote trade diversification, fully leveraging the APEC cooperation mechanism to inject lasting vitality into the economic prosperity and stability of the Asia-Pacific region.

The author is an international financial technical analysis expert and a former national board member at the Australia China Business Council. The author contributed this article to China Watch, a think tank powered by China Daily. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Mindset: World can move on from costly zero-sum game

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But that world is gone. The US and China are among each other's largest trading partners. Their factories, their universities, and their capital are bound together at every level. To bring the zero-sum map into this relationship is to navigate a new century with an outdated zero-sum mindset.

Actually, China and the US have more common interests than differences.

The cost of the zero-sum habit is real. When every gain for the other side is marked as your defeat, cooperation starts to look like surrender. A sensible compromise looks like a betrayal. Problems that two serious governments could solve together are left to rot, because to solve them would be to

let the other side win.

But almost none of the great problems of our time are zero-sum. Instead, consider: A stable climate, a generation in Africa or South Asia lifted out of poverty and into school and decent health, and a bigger global economy to share. None of these has a winner and a loser. The whole world rises together, or it does not rise at all.

I have worked across Asia for decades, and I can tell you plainly that China, India, and much of the continent do not instinctively reach for the zero-sum lens. It is a Western habit. Habits can be unlearned.

Iran shows what unlearning it would make possible. Set the reflex aside and look only at the interests

on the table. Everyone wants the Strait of Hormuz kept open. No one gains from a wider war.

If the zero-sum map is the wrong one, the right one can be drawn. This is some substance I would read into President Xi Jinping's call for a "constructive strategic stability" relationship. The stability of that order rests on institutions. It is the patient construction of the channels through which a misunderstanding can be disarmed before it ever becomes a war.

So, the real question in Beijing was never who won the better deal. It was whether two great powers can set down the old map. More than half a century ago, former US president Richard Nixon, secretary of state Henry Kissinger and the then Chinese

leaders, Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai, began the diplomacy that ended an era of hostility. The week changed the world. I would ask people to remember how it was done. By refusing to pretend the differences away, the two sides made the common ground they did find believable. That is what optimism without naivety looks like.

That is the spirit this moment asks for. The summit in Beijing can become a new start, followed by a meeting in Washington later this year.

Standing in Beijing in 1972, Nixon raised his glass and borrowed a line from one of Chairman Mao's poems: So many deeds cry out to be done, he said, and always urgently. Ten thousand

years are too long. Seize the day, seize the hour.

More than 50 years later, with the climate, with artificial intelligence, with the security of the world's energy, none of which either nation can solve alone, the hour presses again.

Beijing's success and Washington's success need not come at each other's expense. Each can be the making of the other. That is a truer description of the world than the zero-sum story the West has told itself for far too long.

The author is the chair of the Europe-Asia Center and the former undersecretary-general of the United Nations. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.