

TWO SESSIONS

PERSPECTIVE

Keep free trade stand, nation urged

China holds key to countering growing global 'backlash', top economist says

By **PRIME SARMIENTO**
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China, a champion of globalization and multilateral trade, needs to continue to take the lead in countering the growing backlash against free trade, according to a top economist.

Manu Bhaskaran, CEO of Centennial Asia Advisors, a research and advisory company in Singapore, said: "China is one of the world's biggest exporters and importers. This is why it has an important role to play in global trade issues."

According to the World Trade Organization, China is the world's biggest exporter and second-biggest importer. In 2017, the country's exports accounted for nearly 13 percent of global trade, while its

imports accounted for more than 10 percent.

"Bolder trade opening by China will contribute greatly to world trade," Bhaskaran said.

He welcomed the draft law on foreign investment being discussed at the current session of the National People's Congress, as it will further open up China's huge domestic market to foreign investors and other exporting countries.

China's advocacy of multilateral trade is crucial now that some countries are promoting unilateralism and trade protectionism, Bhaskaran said.

"The global backlash against trade opening has been a concern, and I fear that we will see more of this," he said.

The trade dispute between China and the United States, the world's

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Manu Bhaskaran, CEO of Centennial Asia Advisors in Singapore

two biggest economies, has dampened business confidence, curbed investment and slowed growth, especially in the more export-dependent countries, he added.

But Bhaskaran is optimistic that the future of global trade lies in multilateralism, despite challenges.

For one thing, the negotiations between the US and China will end the dispute and lead to a favorable deal, he said.

"The US and China appear likely to avert a trade war. This will clear up the immense uncertainty all over the world that has hurt business spending and slowed global growth."

More important, most countries will promote free trade and join international trade agreements, as studies have shown that trade has spurred growth in many developing economies worldwide, he said.

A report issued by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific last year showed that more-open trade has boosted the region's economies and lifted millions out of poverty.

Free trade pacts, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for

Trans-Pacific Partnership — which took effect on Dec 30 — "will help contain the worst of the protectionist trend we are seeing", Bhaskaran said.

The RCEP, which is still being negotiated, is described as a mega free trade agreement that covers a wide range of issues including trade, investment, economic and technical cooperation and intellectual property protection.

It is led by the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations — Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The other RCEP members are ASEAN's six partners in other free trade agreements — Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand.

These 16 countries account for about one-third of the world's GDP as well as almost one-third of trade flows.

Museum provides a story of success

I have written about the Palace Museum, also known as the Forbidden City, for nearly five years.

Situated in the heart of Beijing, the home to emperors from 1420 to 1911, it is the world's largest palace complex, covering more than 720,000 square meters.

Every year, I try to count the number of times I have been to the palace, but always fail. When colleagues meet me in the cafeteria at work, they often ask me if I have visited it recently, rather than whether I have eaten.

I am also frequently asked if I am bored with constantly visiting the palace.

Well, I am not. Each time I step into the red-walled compound, I find something new, thanks not only to the abundant collections and marvelous architecture but also to administrators' efforts to change the way museums are perceived.

During the ongoing session of the national political advisory body, Song Jirong, head of the restoration unit at the Palace Museum — naturally the world's biggest cultural relics restoration center, with 23 departments — said more such departments would be set up at universities.

Last year, the unit opened for the first time to visitors who made reservations, allowing members of the public to have a closer look at how ancient treasures regain their glitter at the hands of restorers. Song, who is also a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, aims to cooperate with universities to train more professionals with higher education to restore treasures.

Masters in the Forbidden City, a three-episode documentary first screened in 2016, highlighted the daily work of restorers. After it was shown, public interest in the work of restorers increased significantly. Some senior restorers, who had worked quietly in their office for decades, became stars overnight.

This reflects in a small way how the Palace Museum has been transformed in recent years from imperial home to a venue that people can really enjoy.

The Forbidden City, which celebrates its 600th birthday next year, is now enjoying what is probably its most prosperous time since the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) emperors left the throne.

As a reporter following cultural heritage, I am fortunate to record its revival, and I'm glad to have experienced a thriving time for Chinese museums.

Twelve members of the 13th CPPCC National Committee come from museum- or cultural heritage-related circles — the most ever.

Last year, the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council jointly released a national-level guideline promoting protection of cultural heritage and reforming its administration.

With the new Ministry of Culture and Tourism being established last year, such coordination has been given a better platform, and the importance of cultural relics has risen to a level that I have never experienced before.

Liu Yuzhu, director of the National Cultural Heritage Administration, and a national political adviser, said the 5,000-odd museums in China attracted more than 1 billion visits last year, and visitor numbers have annually risen by about 100 million in recent years.

When I spent three days lingering in the marvelous exhibition halls of the Smithsonian museums in Washington during a visit to the United States in 2011, I found that many parents took their children there during holidays. This led me to wonder if such a scenario could be repeated in China.

I just did not expect it to be realized quite so quickly.

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Wang Kaihao
Reporter's log

PEOPLE IN THE NEW ERA

Embrace big-picture thinking, grassroots deputies advised

By **CUI JIA** and **PALDEN NYIMA**
in Lhasa

National People's Congress deputies from the grassroots should not be shortsighted and must look at the bigger picture because their proposals will have a nationwide impact, Kelsang Drolkar, a deputy from the Tibet autonomous region, said recently in Lhasa.

"As a village Party chief, I know how central government policies can improve villagers' lives. I can also learn about the problems that can occur during the implementation of different policies," said Kelsang, 56, Party chief of Lhasa's Damar village.

"I will then carry out research to see if these problems are also happening elsewhere. If so, I will draft proposals that can help to contribute to policies, or even become the foundation for new ones."

Kelsang has worked in the village in Tibet's regional capital since 1979, and has witnessed Damar's transformation. In 2017, the last 26 of the village's 636 households were lifted out of poverty.

Many people have also moved into new homes.

As soon as villager Gyalo's family moved into their new home in July, they put up flags with Tibetan Buddhist scriptures on the roof, hoping they would bring good luck.

Kelsang said while visiting Gyalo's home, "The houses are new, but we have ensured that Tibetan traditions have been passed on."

Gyalo, 60, said: "We all know Kelsang is an NPC deputy. She can pass on our messages to the central government."

Like many villages in China, Damar is going through the urbanization process.

Kelsang said proudly: "I am planning to set up five companies

for five groups of villagers this year so they can run businesses of their choice, such as restaurants and handicraft workshops to make more money."

She said she has noticed that more support policies are available for low-income residents in rural areas than for their urban counterparts.

Such an imbalance will affect poverty alleviation work, so she is determined to raise the issue at the annual session of the 13th National People's Congress, which opened on Tuesday.

"At the national level, government bodies have always attached great importance to providing feedback on proposals from NPC deputies, and they are all very timely. What's more, NPC deputies can question the work of regional governments," Kelsang said.

On Feb 1, she and other NPC deputies visited the Tibet Regional People's Hospital after being told that people could not understand some of the signs written in Tibetan because they had not been translated properly.

The hospital also rents parking spaces to people shopping in a nearby mall, leaving patients fewer places.

"These may seem like small things, but they are urgent issues to the public, which may lose trust in the government because of things like this," Kelsang said.

The group forwarded the complaints to the hospital's head, and all the problems were solved within two weeks.

"We will carry out more visits like this and question more department heads in the future to exercise our power, so that people's interests can be protected," Kelsang added.

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NPC deputy Kelsang Drolkar (left) visits the home of a villager in Damar, Lhasa, Tibet autonomous region. ZHU XINGXIN / CHINA DAILY

Meeting the media



NPC deputies (from left) Zeng Guangan, Dong Mingzhu and Li Li answer questions from reporters at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Friday. KUANG LINHUA / CHINA DAILY

Two sessions reveal solutions to poverty, and the path to innovation

I have seen Beijing's skies turn from gray to blue.

I have witnessed China's poverty alleviation miracle come true.

And I have experienced how Chinese technology has changed lives throughout the country and the world.

Such transformations have become apparent to me as I have traveled to every province as a journalist over the past 12 years, and have attended the annual sessions of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee since 2017.

I have been struck by how the outcomes of the two sessions emanate from the Great Hall of the People to become real and dramatic changes throughout the country.

I was heartened when Premier Li Keqiang said that the government would ramp up efforts to tackle the smog that often blotted out the skies in the country's north when delivering the Government Work Report at the 2017 two sessions.

Beijing's average PM2.5 — the most hazardous kind of air pollution — dropped by 20.5 percent the following year. This was a change I could see from my window — leaden skies increasingly turned cobalt blue.

The Ministry of Ecology and Environment also announced at the two sessions last year that the government would undertake a three-year campaign to improve air quality.

This means we will enjoy a sunnier future, in every sense.

But perhaps the most dramatic transformation I have seen has been China's poverty alleviation.

The country has hoisted about 800 million people out of extreme poverty in the past four decades. That is 70 percent of all people stricken with dire poverty on our

planet. And China plans to eliminate extreme poverty by 2020.

I spent much of the past 12 years exploring poverty solutions in inhospitable places such as Guizhou province's karsts and the prairies of the planet's "third pole" — the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

I have witnessed an almost unbelievable transformation in the nomadic communities on Qinghai province's frigid highlands, where I started a volunteer initiative eight years ago.

At first, we brought solar panels to schools without electricity, and computers to classrooms. Then our volunteer work shifted toward university scholarships and surgeries for children with disabilities.

That was because the government built the infrastructure and equipped classrooms, rapidly progressing toward bringing the schools in isolated areas up to the same standards as those in developed coastal metropolises.

A growing number of herders today even use smartphones.

It has been incredible to witness how technology is transforming every corner of the country, and especially how mobile internet is changing everyday life.

Not only does China's e-commerce increasingly bring goods into remote rural communities, it also allows them to sell to the people throughout China and the rest of the world.

And in China's urban areas, nearly every good or service — no matter how niche — has become available with a few finger taps in the past few years.



Erik Nilsson
Expat's view

China's high-tech manufacturing increased by an average of 11.7 percent annually during the five years before 2018, according to last year's Government Work Report. The report also stated that the contribution to economic growth from technological advances increased from 52.2 to 57.5 percent during that period.

Areas with remarkable progress include big data, artificial intelligence and the internet of things.

I recently visited big data centers in Guizhou, which has long been one of the country's poorest provinces because of its karst terrain. But the government has turned its topography from a bane into a boon by taking advantage of the fact that such seismically and climatically stable geology is ideal for hosting the hardware for storing data.

The province's data economy expanded by 37 percent in 2017, and the value that it will add is forecast to account for 30 percent of Guizhou's GDP by next year.

I recently rode in a driverless car developed in Shanghai, where I was also nearly run over by a robot in an automobile factory. While the machine did not hit me, the realization of how China's smart manufacturing is advancing did.

I also underwent a rehabilitative tai chi routine taught by a virtual instructor guided by the internet of things in Wuxi, Jiangsu province. I look forward to covering this year's two sessions and being on the ground as history is made.

I am excited to see firsthand how the decisions made during this year's two sessions will continue to transform every corner of the country — and the world — in the years to come.

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