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"We have only one planet and countries share one world. To do well, Asia and the world could not do without each other," Xi said in a speech titled Towards a Community of Common Destiny and a New Future for Asia.

"We should, through efforts towards such a community for Asia, promote a community of common interest for all mankind," he said.

Three years ago, Xi urged countries in the region to maintain respect for each other while working toward win-win cooperation and common development.

He called for an even closer community between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); an East Asia Economic Community for ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea; a free trade cooperation network in Asia; and the conclusion of negotiations on an upgraded China-ASEAN FTA and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, to advance economic integration in Asia.

Xi also promised to promote regional financial cooperation, explore a platform for exchange and cooperation among Asian financial institutions, and advance development between the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and multilateral financial institutions.

"Asia belongs to the world. For Asia to move towards a community of common destiny and embrace a new future, it has to follow the world trend and seek progress and development in tandem with that of the world," said Xi.

Asia has since emerged a leader of free trade at a time of rising protectionism.

The Boao Forum for Asia was created to provide business, economic and political leaders a platform to share their thoughts on urgent issues faced by the region.

Delegates range from government officials to CEOs, media personalities and top names in academia.

This year's delegates include Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, Pakistani Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund Christine Lagarde.

"The opportunity to engage and exchange ideas with this prominent group of leaders on issues of concern to Asia is a great privilege," Tan Eng Chye, president of the National University of Singapore and a forum delegate, told *China Daily Asia Weekly*.

"I look forward to hearing the ideas, views and thoughts of the government, business and thought leaders attending the Boao Forum on issues such as the trade relationship between the United States and China, the situation on the Korean Peninsula, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, as well as educational reforms in Asian universities," said Tan.

Philippine President Duterte's presence is expected to further



A logo of the Boao Forum is displayed at a garden in Boao, South China's Hainan province, on March 31. The theme of this year's forum is An Open and Innovative Asia for a World of Greater Prosperity. IMAGINECHINA

FORUM:

Prominent leaders set to tackle pressing regional, global issues

enhance the development of ties between the two countries. Foreign Minister Wang had earlier said that China-Philippine relations have "entered their best period in recent years".

Similar to the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, Switzerland, the Boao Forum has been held each year since 2002.

Over the conference's four days, discussion and events will be divided into four categories: Globalization & the Belt and Road Initiative, An Open Asia, Innovation, and Reform.

About 60 discussion sessions will take place in total, with symposiums focusing on the Guangzhou-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, infrastructural development in the Xiongan New Area, and strategies for pursuing an ecological civilization.

"This year's Boao Forum takes as its theme An Open and Innovative Asia for a World of Greater Prosperity, ideals that my own organization, the Asian Development Bank, greatly shares. I am participating directly in two sessions — on globalization and testing the city cluster model," said Stephen Groff, vice-president of the Asian Development Bank.

"I am looking forward to hearing leaders from government, business and academia share their visions on these and other pressing issues facing this dynamic region and the wider world."

But it is not just discussions that

the delegates are excited about.

Sabrina Lin, vice-president at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and a delegate at the event, hopes the forum will provide important alliances for educational institutions.

"As one of the region's top universities, with its founding mission and focus on research and innovation in science and technology, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology plays an important role in achieving an 'open and innovative Asia' with leading research, and through fostering innovative thinking and entrepreneurial culture," Lin said.

"Through increased regional interaction we seek to create synergy among government, industry, business and academia to promote advancement and success for Asia."

Lin said her institution has more than 300 partnerships globally, with the university usually taking the place of a founding or active member in these alliances, including the newly formed Asia Universities Alliance.

This puts it in a good position to "facilitate an exchange of ideas and technology, and to enable innovation through diversity".

Lily Sheng, managing partner of brand and communications at Deloitte China, expressed hopes that her firm's involvement will "contribute to driving the sustainable development of the Asia-Pacific economy and witness together even more

remarkable achievements ahead".

The Belt and Road Initiative is a central focus of side events related to the forum's topics.

A photography exhibition highlighting the natural scenery, culture and people along the Silk Road will get under way. It looks at China's contributions to the world over the past 700 years and represents the role of the Belt and Road in promoting common prosperity.

Yili Group, a State-owned dairy company, will host a talk on how the Belt and Road accommodates the dairy industry's plans for innovation and providing quality nutrition for the next generation.

Sok Siphana, an adviser to the Cambodian government, will present a Cambodian Belt and Road project related to the development of the industry for cassava, a staple crop in many developing countries.

The showcases suggest the Belt and Road's rapid progress is already paying dividends.

As Xi has said, the initiative is "not meant as rhetoric" and represents "real work that could be seen and felt to bring real benefits to countries in the region".

Terence Foo, co-managing partner at the Beijing office of law firm Clifford Chance, told *China Daily Asia Weekly* that with the Belt and Road, "China is taking a leading role to meet the region's infrastructure needs".

"Developing economies such as Thailand, Indonesia and Pakistan are expected to benefit from increased Chinese investment," he added.

The goal of the forum is clear and has not changed since Xi's 2015 speech.

"China proposes that a conference of dialogue among Asian civilizations be held to provide a platform upon which to enhance interactions among the youth, people's groups, local communities and the media and to form a network of think-tank cooperation, so as to add to Asian people's rich cultural life and contribute to more vibrant regional cooperation and development," Xi said at the time.

While calls for change are pressing, Xi is realistic about the challenges ahead for an open and innovative Asia.

"The cause of peace and development of mankind is as lofty as it is challenging. The journey ahead will not be smooth sailing, and success may not come easily. No matter how long and difficult the journey may be, those who work together and never give up will eventually prevail," said Xi.

"I believe that as long as we keep to our goals and make hard efforts, we will together bring about a community of common destiny and usher in a new future for Asia," he added.