

Forum deepens ties, promotes trade

Delegates discuss common welfare of Asian countries, economic development and innovation

By PAN MENGQI in Seoul
panmengqi@chinadaily.com.cn

As the global economy continues to encounter uncertainty and headwinds, government officials and business leaders from Asia vowed at the Boao Forum for Asia Seoul Conference to further deepen cooperation and stay committed to pushing for common development.

The two-day forum kicked off on Nov 19 in South Korea's capital. It attracted more than 800 delegates from government, industry and academic institutions to discuss the common welfare of Asian countries and their economic development under the theme of An Open and Innovative Asia.

But many participants warned at the forum that the escalating trade protectionism would pose a huge threat to the global economy.

These voices came as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) gathering held from Nov 17 to 18 failed to issue a joint statement for the first time in its 25-year history, reflecting the global trend of protectionism and unilateralism.

In his opening speech, forum chairman and former United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon said the current global situation is a "crisis". He called upon all Asian nations to cooperate in tackling the global uncertainties of trade protectionism and isolationism.

"For the first time, the gathering of APEC leaders in Papua New Guinea ended without all parties agreeing on a final declaration. This shows how serious the damage of protectionism is to the world economy," said Ahn Ho-young, president of the University of North Korean Studies, in a parallel discussion held during the forum.

Ahn said the worsening tensions between the major powers of the world have caused a negative impact on the entire Asia-Pacific region. He warned that all related parties should discuss ways to improve relations and seek cooperation and have better awareness of the advantages of free trade and accelerate the reform of the World Trade Organization.

Li Yong, a research fellow at the World Association of Productivity Science, said economic globalization is an inevitable trend of historical development, and regional cooperation is an important part of economic globalization especially when some are trying to overturn the trend of globalization.

In the context of the anti-globalization trend and the resurgence of protectionism in recent years, the momentum of regional economic cooperation in Asia has not



Participants at the Boao Forum for Asia Seoul Conference, which took place in the South Korean capital from Nov 19 to 20, pose for a group photo. The event was themed An Open and Innovative Asia. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY



More than 800 delegates from government, industry and academic institutions attended the two-day event.

decreased, Li said. He cited the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), ASEAN Plus Three (which comprises the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as well as China, Japan and South Korea) and the proposed China-Japan-South Korea free trade agreement as evidence of Asian regional cooperation attempts.

In addition, economic cooperation requires solid political trust and regional tranquility. Li said the good news is that the region now enjoys an increasingly favorable condition.

According to him, Asia has been a closed region because of similar cultural backgrounds. And more frequent meetings and dialogues like the Boao Forum can improve mutual understanding and give an opportunity to find common ground among Asian nations.

Choi Seok-yong, a veteran South Korean negotiator on trade, said bilateral exchanges between China

and South Korea have been on a positive trend in recent years, which will not only benefit the two but hopefully will be an example for regional cooperation in Asia.

"Economic and trade relations between the two countries are the stabilizers and boosters of the diplomatic ties and will play a vital role in regional prosperity," Choi said, adding that China has become the biggest trading partner and overseas investment market for South Korea, while South Korea is the fourth biggest trading partner of China.

"In the first five months of 2018, the trade volume between the two economies topped 808.8 billion yuan (\$117 billion), up 9.2 percent year-on-year."

In the first four months of 2018, China attracted \$1.43 billion in direct investments from South Korea, up 61.7 percent on a yearly basis, he added.

Regarding China's newly announced tariff cut in the amended Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement, which covers imports from South Korea, Chung Tong-soo, a senior counsel at South Korea's Yulchon corporate law firm, said the reduction will enhance cooperation between the two countries in the high-tech and medical equipment sector.

As 2018 marks the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening-up and also the 10th anniversary of the establishment of a strategic partnership between China and South Korea, Beijing and Seoul are expected to use this event to foster new and greater opportunities for economic and trade cooperation between the two nations, as well as the rest of Asia, the Boao Forum organizer said in a statement.

As a key player in Asia, China, while pursuing its own development, has contributed its wisdom and opportunities to propel regional countries toward shared prosperity.

China has made clear that it is open to other parties joining the drive to promote growth through increased connectivity or dovetailing their own development plans with the BRI, with such efforts already producing tangible benefits to people in the region, said Wang Yong, Chinese state councilor.

He said China is a firm supporter of multilateralism and commits itself to working with its Asian partners to promote global trade and build an open world economy.

The Chinese government attaches great importance to the Boao Forum

for Asia, which has been seen since its establishment in 2001 as a dialogue platform dedicated to promoting common development through the regional integration of the Asian economy.

And the consensus-based cooperation in Asia continues to grow fast, even against the backdrop of rising trade protectionism, Wang added.

China plays an especially important role in the drive to enhance regional infrastructural connectivity. The approach partly derives from its own development experience, as infrastructural development, sometimes far ahead of its development in other respects, often proves to have led the way.

In April, China unveiled a package of measures aimed at giving foreign investors greater access to its markets, including better protection of intellectual property rights, a significant reduction of tariffs on imported vehicles, and an end to restrictions on foreign ownership in the financial sector within three years.

At the first China International Import Expo in November, China not only offered overseas traders direct access to its domestic markets, but also demonstrated its commitment to further opening-up.

Looking ahead, the Boao Forum's board said it hopes countries in the region will uphold the spirit of openness and cooperation, and join hands to facilitate regional economic integration and safeguard multilateralism as well as the rule-based global trading system to ensure common development.