VIEWS

Da Zhigang

Cooler head means warmer China-ROK ties

Since Lee Jae-myung assumed office as president of the Republic of Korea in June 2025, there has been a significant shift in Seoul's foreign policy. Unlike the previous administration's "values-based diplomacy" which made it subservient to the United States, the Lee administration has adopted a pragmatic foreign policy that prioritizes national interests and strategic autonomy while maintaining diplomatic balance.

The pragmatism is most evident in how the Lee administration is handling relations with countries such as the US, China, Japan and Russia, alongside a renewed outreach to the Global South.

Though relations with the US continue to be of "primary importance", the Lee administration refrains from blindly following the US or taking sides among major countries.

Especially noteworthy is the rational and pragmatic shift in the ROK's approach to China. Lee regards China-ROK relations as "inseparable and destined", anchoring them in economic realism and developing friendly bilateral relations across political, diplomatic and commercial domains.

Three aspects are particularly significant. First, unlike the previous administration, which followed some big powers in interfering in the Taiwan question, the Lee administration has clearly stated that it respects China's core interests. By pledging not to intervene in the Taiwan question and rejecting its so-called "internationalization", Seoul has created an environment conducive to fostering political mutual trust between the ROK and China.

Second, Lee has rejected the "small yard, high fence" strategy aimed at containing China. On the very day he started his visit to the US in August 2025, he sent a high-level delegation to China. It was a clear message that the ROK will not ignore ties with China, and highlighted Seoul's diplomatic independence.

Third, the ROK is exploring ways to balance its ties with major partners. Between the alliance with Washington and the economic partnership with China, Lee is trying to find an effective path that can both strengthen the ROK's security while maximizing the benefits of cooperation with China. This approach injects stability, predictability and certainty into China-ROK relations.

Economic and trade cooperation between China and the ROK are both deep and resilient. Since diplomatic relations were established in 1992, bilateral trade has surged more than 50-fold — from $6.37 billion in 1992 to $328.08 billion in 2024. China has been the ROK's largest trading partner for 21 consecutive years. In 2024, the ROK surpassed Japan and regained its status as China's second-largest trading partner country. Trade volume between China and the ROK is widely expected to cross about $400 billion by the year of 2027.

Investment flow between the two countries is also thriving. The ROK has been investing in China's automotive, chemical and electronics sectors since the 1990s. In recent years, it started increasing investments in semiconductors, new energy vehicles, high-end manufacturing, fine chemicals, renewable materials and artificial intelligence.

Cooperation between the two countries has continuously upgraded. In particular, the China-ROK Free Trade Agreement has further advanced bilateral economic and trade relations, promoting the liberalization and facilitation of trade in goods and services and deepening bilateral cooperation in intellectual property protection and investment. With the second phase of negotiations over the FTA underway, fresh momentum is expected in emerging fields such as biopharmaceuticals, green energy, the silver economy and cross-border data flows.

High-level engagement has reinforced this trajectory. The interactions and the important common understandings reached between the heads of state of China and the ROK during the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Gyeongju further strengthened the foundation for cooperation. The influence of China-ROK ties goes beyond the bilateral level. Together, the two countries can help build a Northeast Asian economic circle and an inclusive and open Asia-Pacific economy for all.

Lee's ongoing four-day visit to China will inject new momentum in the bilateral ties. The promises to enhance the strategic cooperative partnership between China and the ROK will facilitate regional free trade talks and help maintain stability in Northeast Asia and resilience of the global supply chains.

LI MIN / CHINA DAILY

The author is a research fellow at the Institute of Northeast Asian Studies of the Heilongjiang Provincial Academy of Social Sciences and an expert at the China Academy of Northeast Revitalization.
The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Matthias C. Kettemann

Global AI governance essential in a divided world

Artificial intelligence is the new arena for global political conflicts. Once discussed primarily in terms of innovation and efficiency, AI is now framed in the language of sovereignty, security and geopolitical power. Governments increasingly speak of "AI sovereignty" and "data sovereignty" with the same gravity once reserved for territorial integrity or, more recently, energy security.

In November 2025, some 900 policymakers and industry leaders gathered at the summit on European Digital Sovereignty but couldn't deliver meaningful new initiatives. This is not surprising because AI sovereignty is, in essence, impossible.

Even so, countries continue to believe that control over data, algorithms and computing infrastructure is a determinant of national influence. This sovereignty race raises a troubling question. In seeking to secure their technological futures, are countries inadvertently fragmenting the global cooperation on which AI's long-term benefits depend?

The fear of a fractured AI world is no longer hypothetical. We can already see the outlines of competing technology blocs. Export controls on advanced chips, restrictions on cross-border data flows, divergent regulatory regimes and competing standards for "trustworthy AI" are hardening into structural divides. Just like the splintering of global internet rules, AI risks becoming governed by incompatible technical, legal and ethical frameworks.

There are powerful reasons for fragmentation. AI systems are dual-use technologies, critical not only for economic competitiveness but also for military, surveillance and intelligence capabilities. States worry — often with good reason — that dependence on foreign AI infrastructure or datasets creates strategic vulnerability. The response has been a turn inward: data localization, national cloud infrastructures, domestic large language models and public funding programs framed as sovereignty projects.

Global Lens

In a fragmented world, the most influential actors in the long run will be those who can bridge divides, not deepen them.

China's emphasis on secure data governance, the European Union's push for "digital sovereignty" through regulation, and the United States' use of export controls to protect its technological edge all reflect the same underlying logic: AI is too important to leave to global market forces alone.

A world divided into rival AI blocs would be inefficient and ultimately less safe. AI systems do not respect borders: models trained in one country are deployed in another; datasets are globally sourced; harms caused by algorithmic bias and disinformation spread transnationally.

Fragmentation would not eliminate these risks, but would make them even harder to manage by reducing transparency and shared oversight. The question, then, is not whether countries should protect their interests, but how they can do so while preserving space for cooperation.

One way forward is to distinguish between strategic control and operational openness. It's reasonable if countries insist on domestic control over critical infrastructure, sensitive datasets or national security applications. But there is little justification for fragmenting areas where cooperation clearly serves collective interests, such as AI safety research, standards for robustness and interoperability, environmental impacts of computing or governance of frontier models with systemic risks.

The global AI safety summits point to both the potential and the limitations of this approach. While such forums acknowledge that certain risks, such as loss of human control or large-scale misuse, are shared, they remain largely voluntary and politically cautious. Declarations are easier to pass than institutions are to build.

A deeper problem is the institutional vacuum. Existing global governance structures are ill-suited to AI. Traditional treaty-making is slow, while AI development moves at extraordinary speed. Many international organizations lack technical expertise, clear mandates or political backing. Meanwhile, standard-setting bodies, where much of the real governance happens, are dominated by a small group of countries and firms, reinforcing perceptions of imbalance.

Geopolitical mistrust compounds the difficulty. In an era of strategic rivalry, cooperation is easily framed as a concession, and transparency as a risk. Even basic guardrails, such as information sharing about powerful models or common definitions of systemic risks, become contentious issues.

Here, a Chinese proverb offers guidance: "Lookers-on see more than players". So while the players — diplomats and policymakers — may be lost, the watchers — academics and AI experts — have a crucial role to play. They must guide debates, identify risks and chart pathways forward that protect rights while enabling innovation.

History reminds us that sovereignty and cooperation are not opposites. Arms control regimes, environmental treaties and global trade rules all emerged from periods of intense competition. They succeeded not because countries abandoned sovereignty, but because they recognized that uncoordinated action would leave everyone worse off. Cooperation is an exercise of sovereignty, not its antithesis.

AI governance requires a similar reframing. The question should not be "Who controls AI?" but "Which aspects of AI require shared rules to prevent collective harm?" and "Which systemic risks should we address and mitigate together?"

That shift in strategy and tone allows space for plurality in values and systems, while still anchoring cooperation in pragmatic precaution. For China and other major AI players, this is also an opportunity. Leadership in AI governance today is not only about technological capability, but about institutional imagination. In a fragmented world, the most influential actors in the long run will be those who can bridge divides, not deepen them.

The author is inaugural professor of innovation, theory and philosophy of law and head of the Department of Theory and Future of Law at the University of Innsbruck in Austria. He also leads research programmes at the Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society in Berlin and the Leibniz Institute for Media Research in Hamburg, Germany.
The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Kang Bing

The author is former deputy editor-in-chief of China Daily.
kangbing@chinadaily.com.cn

How Beijing CBD rose from nondescript to noteworthy

A report released in November ranks Beijing's Central Business District sixth in the world, an impressive jump from ninth place in 2017. The ranking, compiled by global consultancy firm EY and the Urban Land Institute, is the sort of thing I usually don't lift my eyelids to because I suspect their authoritativeness. Rankings are based on indicators, and selecting different indicators could lead to different results. But this report caught my attention because it played up Beijing CBD and I have witnessed its growth in the past four decades.

When I came to Beijing in the early 1980s, I used to pass the intersection of Dabeiyao on my way to work, either on my bike or on the way to the bus stop. What is now the center of Beijing CBD was then an industrial area with factories producing four-wheelers and machine tools, and a huge freight yard piled with timber near the railway that sliced through the East Third Ring Road. Nobody could have imagined that this area would one day become the center of a world-class CBD.

When reporting assignments took me to New York and Tokyo in the 1980s, I was fascinated by the skyscrapers of Manhattan and Marunouchi. That's when I got to know that CBD stands for central business district and that such areas have a high concentration of the headquarters of the world's biggest and richest companies. Having a bird's-eye view from atop a CBD skyscraper was a must for tourists in New York and Tokyo in those days, while the three letters were still alien to most Chinese, including me.

It is difficult to figure out how many CBDs there are in China because business districts are not an administrative concept.

Did Beijing's city planners intend to turn Dabeiyao into the capital's CBD? I guess not. They could not have been so prophetic. The transformation happened quietly, and almost accidentally. In 1990, the 209-meter-high Jingguang Mansion rose in the district. It remained Beijing's tallest building for nearly a decade before fancy hotels and office buildings started coming up along the East Third Ring Road, dwarfing the Jingguang Mansion.

According to the EY report, spread over 7 square kilometers, the Beijing CBD is now home to seven Fortune Global 500 corporate headquarters and 11 unicorn enterprises. It boasts a complete industry chain and a dynamic innovation ecosystem. A few years back, I tried to locate the bus stop I once used in Dabeiyao but failed to find the spot. All past memories — the crowded bus stop, the factories and the stream of bikes — can only be seen in my dreams now, for better or for worse.

A prosperous and lively CBD has now become a standard configuration of first-tier or even second-tier cities in China. The CBDs in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Guangzhou rank 13th, 14th and 22nd respectively worldwide, according to the EY report. They must be closely followed by the ones in Shenzhen and Chongqing.

It is difficult to figure out how many CBDs there are in China because business districts are not an administrative concept. But at least 60 cities in the country claim they have CBDs, some even insisting they have more than one. Unless a city applies to the Ministry of Civil Affairs to officially change the name of a place, local people are free to call a cat a cat — or even a cat a dog. In fact, many people believe that CBD stands for China Beijing Dabeiyao. And it sounds fine.

People are free to call a cluster of businesses their CBD if that sounds fashionable, but when it comes to building a CBD, local decision makers should be cautious.

More than 10 years ago, a second-tier city not far from Beijing started building its CBD. Hundreds of families were moved out of a residential area to make way for two landmark skyscrapers as Phase One of a grand vision. But when the first skyscrapers failed to attract enough tenants, investment stopped flowing in and the area turned into a junkyard. It has taken the local government lot of effort and money to compensate the residents who were moved out 10 years ago with the promise that they would get new apartments within two or three years.

The lesson is clear. Turning an area into a CBD is something the market should decide rather than a local government. The best the government can do is to give it a push when the time is right.