

• Home / Opinion / Global Lens

The next world order will be built on systems capacity

By Abdulwahed Jalal Nori | China Daily | Updated: 2026-10-09 08:49

f X in +



MA XUEJING/CHINA DAILY

For much of modern history, international order was understood as something states negotiated.

They signed treaties, built alliances, created institutions and competed to influence global rules. Power was measured through territory, military strength, capital and diplomatic influence. But the foundations of power are changing.

As the world moves toward 2050, the decisive question may no longer be who writes the rules, but who possesses the capacity to build the systems on which those rules depend. The next world order will emerge not only from diplomatic agreements, but from factories, laboratories, power grids, digital networks, universities, ports and supply chains. The future will increasingly belong to those capable of constructing it.

This is more than another adjustment in the balance between major powers. It changes the meaning of sovereignty itself. A country can possess a flag, a government and a seat at international institutions while remaining dependent on technologies, energy, critical materials or infrastructure controlled elsewhere.

Formal sovereignty does not necessarily produce strategic autonomy. By 2050, autonomy will increasingly depend on whether societies can keep essential systems functioning, respond to disruption and create new capabilities when existing ones become obsolete.

The weaknesses of the old globalization model are already visible.

For decades, efficiency encouraged production to move wherever costs were lowest. This generated extraordinary growth, but also intricate dependencies.

Pandemics, conflicts, energy disruptions and trade restrictions have shown how quickly economic interdependence can become strategic vulnerability.

The answer is not isolation. No major economy can, or should, produce everything itself. The real objective is strategic agency: having enough productive capacity, technological knowledge and diversified partnerships to retain meaningful choices when circumstances change.

This creates a new form of competition. It is not simply a race for markets or technological supremacy, but a race to build. Artificial intelligence requires data centers, electricity, advanced chips and skilled researchers. Electric vehicles require batteries, minerals, manufacturing and charging infrastructure.

Renewable energy requires grids, storage and industrial supply chains.

Even the digital economy rests on physical foundations. The more technologically advanced the future becomes, the more important the ability to build and maintain physical systems becomes.

China offers an important illustration of this transition. Its rise as a manufacturing powerhouse was initially associated with scale, efficiency and abundant labor.

Its next phase is increasingly about moving toward higher-value production and integrating manufacturing with technological innovation. Electric vehicles, batteries, renewable energy, robotics, telecommunications and artificial intelligence are becoming parts of a wider industrial transformation.

The significance lies not in any single sector, but in the ability to connect research, engineering, manufacturing, infrastructure and markets into an ecosystem capable of innovation and scale.

That capability may ultimately matter more than technological leadership alone. A country can invent a technology but depend on others to manufacture it. Another can possess factories but lack the research base to upgrade them. The stronger position belongs to economies that can repeatedly move from knowledge to production and from production to scale. By 2050, the ability to turn ideas into functioning systems may be one of the clearest measures of national power.

Asia is approaching this transition at a critical moment. Its extraordinary economic rise was built partly on inexpensive labor, export manufacturing and integration into global markets. That formula is changing. Aging populations, rising wages, automation and technological competition are forcing Asian economies to reconsider what will drive growth after the era of cheap labor. The next Asian transformation will depend increasingly on productivity, human capital, technological capability and the ability to build sophisticated industrial ecosystems.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations stands at the center of this transition. Its opportunity is to move beyond being primarily an assembly base and become a more capable producer of technologies, components, services and knowledge. This requires more than attracting foreign investment. ASEAN should develop a regional productive-capacity strategy identifying industries in which member states can build deeper capabilities in research, design, manufacturing and services. It should also strengthen regional supply chains so production is distributed across complementary capabilities rather than competing for the same low-value activities.

Energy should be treated as strategic infrastructure. Southeast Asia's electricity demand will rise sharply as manufacturing, electrification, data centers and digital services expand. ASEAN should accelerate the construction of regional grids, increase renewable energy generation and storage and facilitate cross-border electricity trade. The objective should be an energy system capable of powering the region's digital and industrial transformation without replacing one form of external dependence with another.

ASEAN also needs a regional technology and skills compact. Rather than allowing every member state to compete separately for scarce talent, governments could pool research funding, establish shared centers for artificial intelligence, robotics, advanced materials and green technologies, and expand cross-border technical training.

Cooperation with external partners, including China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the United States and Europe, should strengthen these regional capabilities rather than substitute for them.

Foreign investment should also be judged differently. The key question should not only be how much capital enters ASEAN, but what capabilities remain after the investment arrives.

Future investment policies should place greater emphasis on local supplier development, research partnerships, technical training and technology diffusion.

This would help ASEAN move from hosting production to developing the capacity to design and upgrade it.

Finally, ASEAN should preserve strategic pluralism. Building regional capability does not require choosing between major powers.

ASEAN can work with multiple partners while avoiding excessive dependence on any single technological or economic ecosystem. Its strategic advantage should be diversified interdependence: enough external cooperation to accelerate development, combined with sufficient domestic and regional capacity to preserve choice.

This could also redefine China-ASEAN cooperation. The most valuable partnerships will increasingly be measured not simply by trade volumes or infrastructure spending, but by whether they create durable capabilities.

Cooperation in advanced manufacturing, renewable energy, artificial intelligence, education and research could help both sides move from conventional interdependence toward a more resilient model of shared development.

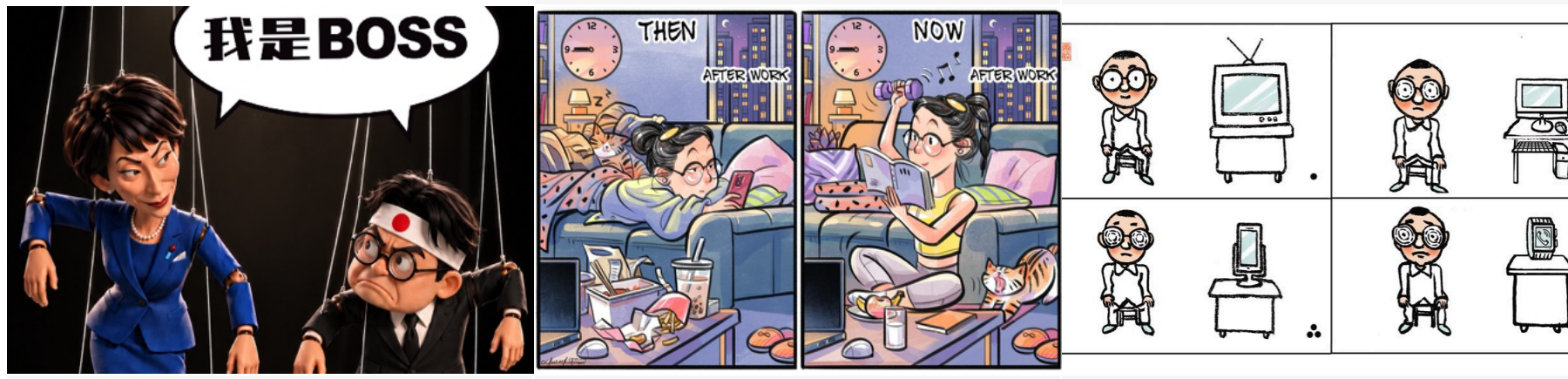
By 2050, power may belong not to those who command the world, but to those who possess the capacity to create what comes next. The deepest divide will be between strategic agency and dependency. Those who build their futures will shape history; those who depend on others may inherit futures they never chose.

The author is an assistant professor at the International Islamic University Malaysia.

The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

If you have a specific expertise, or would like to share your thoughts about our stories, then send us your writings at opinion@chinadaily.com.cn, and comment@chinadaily.com.cn.

Cartoons



BACK TO THE TOP