

SPOTLIGHT

Beyond 500 Billion Yuan: How Ningbo's Foreign Trade Is Shifting and Adapting

By Zhao Yu

On May 13, Ningbo released its foreign trade data for the first four months of the year. Total imports and exports reached 501.7 billion yuan, up 6.3% year-on-year. In April alone, foreign trade grew 6.9%.

By category, overall export growth remained steady, while trade in higher-value segments showed stronger momentum. Exports of electric vehicles, lithium-ion batteries and photovoltaic products—the "new three"—continued to expand rapidly, while imports of high-tech products also recorded notable gains.

Against a backdrop of geopolitical uncertainty and rising trade protectionism, the data suggests Ningbo's foreign trade is entering a phase of structural adjustment, with new growth drivers gaining prominence. This is a transformation that would take time to unfold.

According to Ningbo Customs, Ningbo's export value grew by 4.8% year-on-year in the first four months, up 2.3 percentage points from the first quarter, narrowing the gap with the national average growth rate.

For some exporters, however, external pressures remain acute. An export manager at a home appliance company said shipping costs to the Middle East have doubled, forcing some customers to cancel or delay orders. "In March, our export volume was cut in half," the manager said.

An electromechanical exporter described similarly weak demand in Europe and the US, after spending a month visiting clients. "Inventory turnover in Europe is particularly sluggish."

Official data reflects this uneven recovery. In the first four months, Ningbo exported 196.09 billion yuan of electromechanical products, up just 4.2% year-on-year.

By contrast, exports of the "new three" continued to expand rapidly. During the same period, shipments reached



Ningbo Zhoushan Port. [Photo by Wu Mengkai]

21.75 billion yuan, up 144.2% year-on-year. Electric vehicles rose 223.6%, lithium-ion batteries 45.2%, and photovoltaic products 129.7%.

On April 25, at Ningbo Zhoushan Port, thousands of new Chinese-made vehicles were driven onto the ro-ro vessel Haitie Xiamen via a dedicated ramp, bound for Brazil and other markets. Around 15,000 vehicles were shipped that week, marking a short-term peak in outbound cargo. A Ningbo Customs official said the city's foreign trade is increasingly supported by the cost competitiveness and technological strength of renewable energy products, helping cushion external volatility.

At the same time, diversification of export destinations is ongoing, with emerging economies becoming an important source of growth. In the first four months, Ningbo's trade with ASEAN reached 76.91 billion yuan, up 14.4%, while trade with Africa rose 15.5% to 31.98 billion yuan.

Seasonal demand is also shaping production cycles. Ningbo Huige Outdoor Products Co., Ltd. has increased output ahead of peak barbecue

grill season, now producing 200 to 300 units per day, with growing orders from emerging markets. "Our export value exceeded 200 million yuan in the first quarter, up more than 10% year-on-year," said Mao Bibo, the company's deputy general manager.

Transformation takes time, but the external environment remains complex and uncertain, with little sign of near-term improvement. According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), recent conflict in Iran has driven a sharp increase in fuel prices, which have remained elevated. The spillover effects along global supply chains are pushing up production and transport costs, adding further downward pressure on global merchandise trade.

"Every situation has two sides. The tougher the environment, the more we need to identify opportunities within it," said Chen Xuqin, chief expert at the Ningbo East China Sea Economic Research Institute.

Against a backdrop of mounting external challenges, how Ningbo's foreign trade can address structural weaknesses, maintain momentum, and

identify new growth space has become a key focus. In the view of Wu Weiqiang, director of the Institute of Economics at the Municipal Academy of Social Sciences, Ningbo's ability to sustain steady growth and remain above the 500 billion yuan mark reflects a structural advantage in its manufacturing base. "A strong industrial foundation, well-formed upstream and downstream supply chains, and efficient logistics are not easily replicated," Wu said.

Chen noted that, from a longer-term perspective, Ningbo's comparative strengths in manufacturing remain clear. He suggested a combination of short- and long-term measures, guided by four priorities: stabilizing, expanding, exploring and optimizing.

In the short term, targeted support policies could help firms address immediate pressures. Over the medium to long term, Ningbo should better align with national strategies, expand multimodal transport such as sea-rail intermodal services and China-Europe freight trains, make fuller use of underground storage facilities such as the Beilun oil de-

pots for bulk commodities, and build a more diversified energy security system.

He also called for expanding trade in services and the city's shift from a major goods-trading hub to a stronger services-trade hub, using supply chain resilience to mitigate geopolitical risks.

"Diversifying the structure of foreign trade is a gradual process," Wu said. He noted that it remains to be seen whether current fluctuations reflect short-term adjustments or deeper structural change. Once geopolitical tensions ease, competition between maritime and overland transport will still come down to cost and transit time. "In the end, transformation depends on technological innovation and the development of new productive forces."

Wu also recommended deepening engagement with emerging markets, including Belt and Road partner countries, ASEAN and Central and Eastern Europe, to reduce reliance on any single market. He added that strengthening hinterland connectivity into the Yangtze River Delta and inland regions, and raising product value through technological upgrading, would further improve resilience. ■

BRI Students Take Part in Kelp Harvest in Ningbo

By Jin Lu

International students from Belt and Road Initiative countries took part in a kelp harvesting activity at an aquaculture farm at Tianfei Lake in Fenghua District, Ningbo, on the morning of May 17, experiencing firsthand coastal village life during the busy growing season.

The students, from countries including Iran and Sudan, worked alongside local farmers under the guidance of an experienced kelp grower, Yang. Bending down to reach floating ropes, they pulled up bundles of dark green kelp from the water.

Glossy strands of kelp drifted at the water's surface under the morning sun, drawing repeated reactions of surprise from the students. "It's so big and slippery. I've never seen fresh kelp like this before," several participants said.

Zeina Saeed, a student from Sudan, said the hands-on work was more demanding than expected. After harvesting a few bundles, she was visibly out of breath but remained enthusiastic. "It's a very interesting and memorable experience," she said.

The activity was part of the "Walking with Chinese Modernization" exchange program for Chinese and international youth, jointly organized by Ningbo University and local youth authorities. Iranian student Marjan Ebadi, who has studied in Ningbo for more than two years, said she had long been curious about kelp harvesting after first trying cold shredded kelp last year. "I'm very happy to finally experience it myself," she said.

Following the harvest, students visited a kelp drying site, sampled local seafood, and toured the surrounding fishing village. Rows of sun-dried kelp stretched across drying racks, forming part of the coastal landscape alongside distant hills and moored fishing boats.

University officials said they would continue to strengthen cooperation with local communities to create more hands-on learning opportunities. The village, they added, has become a regular destination for international students seeking to engage with Ningbo's coastal culture and rural life.

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Ningbo Manufacturers Score Early with FIFA World Cup Drinkware Orders

By Lu Xinyan

With the 2026 FIFA World Cup in North America approaching, manufacturers in Ningbo are already seeing a surge in orders for football-themed drinkware months ahead of the tournament.

At Ningbo Aikewei Technology Co., Ltd., the showroom shelves are lined with everything from ceramic mugs and plastic bottles to stainless steel vacuum flasks.

"From late October last year to around April this year, exports of World Cup-themed drinkware reached nearly 180,000 units," said Qiu Chunmiao, the compa-

ny's export manager. Most orders were shipped to the United States and Mexico. The company currently offers seven themed designs, including ceramic mugs and collapsible football-shaped silicone bottles.

While the products themselves may appear straightforward, Qiu said the biggest challenge lies not in manufacturing, but in achieving precise color consistency.

International clients typically provide Pantone color codes rather than physical samples, requiring the company to match colors exactly across different materials such as plastic, ceramics and stainless steel.

Whether reproducing the red-and-blue stripes of a football jersey or the details of a club crest, even slight color differences are considered unacceptable.

Qiu recalled that the company went through five rounds of prototyping to accurately reproduce one football club's signature color, repeatedly adjusting the ratio of pearlescent powder and color pigments used in spray coating. Each adjustment affected gloss, adhesion and the way the color appeared under different lighting conditions.

Founded in 2019, Aikewei has expanded rapidly in the sports merchandise market.



World Cup-themed water bottles. [Photo by Zhang Ziqi]

Much of the company's success can be attributed to its intense attention to detail.

The company now supplies vacuum flasks, ceramic mugs, luggage tags and electronic accessories to European

football clubs and North American sports agencies. According to Qiu, individual orders regularly exceed 10,000 units, helping push the company's annual order value beyond \$18 million.

