

The 30th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of North Macedonia

Dr. Johnny Hon, Skopje, 5th October 2023

Your Excellency Ambassador ZHANG Zuo

Distinguished colleagues from North Macedonia and China

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is my honour to join with you at this important and timely function to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of North Macedonia and to promote the bilateral economic and trade cooperation and the cultural exchange between our two countries.

I was last in this beautiful country several months ago and it is a pleasure to be back. I am back so soon because I see such great potential for the development of mutually beneficial relations between this country and China, and especially with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the Greater Bay Area of which it forms an intrinsic part.

Macedonia is a small country, but it occupies a huge place in history. Some 2,500 years ago, Alexander the Great created one of the greatest empires in history, stretching from Egypt to India, before reaching the age of 30. He left a lasting cultural imprint on three continents, through territories that were destined to become key routes of the ancient Silk Road. It would be fascinating to speculate, as some historians have done, as to what might have been the impact had Alexander directly encountered China's ancient civilization. The fact that we meet today in the Aleksandar Palace itself attests to the lasting place that this great historical figure occupies in your country's civilization and the sentiments of your people.

China and North Macedonia are far apart from each other geographically, but our peoples share a long history of friendship and our hearts are close. We differ in size and in political system, but our economies are highly complementary and we have a shared interest in development to secure a better life for our people.

Already, back in 2009, the World Bank ranked North Macedonia as the fourth "best reformatory state" out of 178 countries. You have an open economy, with trade accounting for more than 90% of GDP in recent years, and pragmatic policies to attract foreign direct investment and promote the development of small and medium enterprises.

As part of the overall development of our bilateral relationship, I think this makes Hong Kong and the Greater Bay Area your natural partner.

Formed by the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macao, together with nine municipalities on the mainland, the Greater Bay Area has a population of more than 86 million.

In 2022, its GDP stood at 1,779.7 billion US dollars. It accounts for 37% of China's exports and 12% of China's GDP.

To give you some further idea of its scale, its economy is almost the same size as that of South Korea and bigger than Australia's. It is home to three of the world's top 10 container ports and to five major international airports.

The industrial development zones within the Greater Bay Area focus on R&D and on such emerging industries and high-end sectors as the Internet of Things, AI, hydrogen technologies, cleantech, healthcare and biotech. All these, I believe, can synergise with North Macedonia's development, and especially with its young and well-educated population, allowing for leapfrog progression within the context of the fourth industrial revolution.

Hong Kong can be at the heart of this unique partnership. It is the most open and international city within the Greater Bay Area. Indeed, it is one of the most open economies in the world and one of its greatest financial centres. Its many other attractions include as an aviation hub at the heart of the most dynamic centre of global economic growth, its role as a trade centre, and its renowned professional services, especially in the legal, accounting and arbitration sectors. Hong Kong remains your best gateway to the mainland and its vast potential, not least by joining with Hong Kong companies in three-way collaborations with mainland partners.

With the inspired leadership of our new Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu, Hong Kong is not only open for business. It is increasingly turning to prioritise not simply traditional partners, but also key emerging markets, as seen in the high powered delegations he has already led to Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, in South East Asia, and to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the Middle East. I hope that one day fairly soon we might also be able to welcome him here in Skopje.

I also hope that more tourists from both Hong Kong and the mainland can find their way here, particularly to enjoy eco and cultural tourism along with the beauty of Lakes Ohrid, Prespa and Dorjan.

North Macedonia became an official candidate for accession to the European Union as far back as 2005. Many reports indicate that enlargement is once again back on the EU's agenda. We always respect the choices made by the North Macedonian people and I look forward to having another good friend in the EU.

Once again, thank you for the invitation. Personally, I am very bullish about North Macedonia and look forward to working with you all as we go forward.

Dr. Johnny Hon

05/10/2023