

Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the Malta-China Business Forum, 8 March 2019

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends.

It is a pleasure to once again welcome all of our friends from the Chinese business community, and also all the members from the Maltese business community, at the opening of this Business Forum.

From the outset, I would like to thank Madam Sophie Chen and Mr Michael Bianchi, together with my Office led by Mr Karm Briffa, for the intense preparations, and facilitating this business forum.

This is an excellent opportunity for us to build on our strong legacy of bilateral relations, which began in 1972, when former Prime Minister Mintoff was the second Western leader to visit the People's Republic of China, and Malta given the same warm welcome as any other big economy.

China immediately committed itself to support Malta, at a time when unemployment was at an all-time high, by directly investing in a considerable number of manufacturing enterprises. China provided job opportunities for thousands of workers, and also helped advance the industrial development of the Maltese Islands.

This is a period in our history which will never be forgotten, however, I believe that we must go even further, to keep strengthening the established relations between our countries, and to take the connections between our respective countries and business communities to a new level of effectiveness.

I am convinced that this Business Forum will provide ample opportunities for all of you, to find the right business collaborations and partnerships, and which, I am convinced, will bear the desired fruit.

Governments are excellent enablers and facilitators, however, it is people in business and entrepreneurs, who bring the necessary creativity and innovation, to create potential partnerships and collaborations.

As you are all aware, over the past years Malta has been registering significant economic growth.

According to the latest Economic Forecast, published by the European Commission, economic projections for Malta are, and I quote, “very positive... with strong GDP growth, which is set to continue.” End quote.

In fact, Malta consistently registers amongst the countries with the highest GDP growth in the European Union, with growth of 5.4 per cent at the end of last year.

Furthermore, Foreign Direct Investment in Malta increased by almost 1 billion euros, in the second quarter of 2018, and the average for FDI, in Malta, was 2 billion euros from 2003 until 2018.

To realise the extent of this success, one must analyse the data in proportion, by taking into consideration Malta’s GDP for 2018, which was 13 billion euros.

Let me also reiterate my government's statements, made during the 10th Session of the Malta-China Joint Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation, that the location of Malta makes it ideal, to form part of the 'One Belt, One Road' policy of China.

Undoubtedly, there is a strong economic complementarity between Malta and China, and Maltese authorities are confident that the Chinese vision for global business has the potential to positively impact the economies of many countries.

There is a strong legacy of successful Chinese investment in Malta over the decades, including various manufacturing factories, the Red China Dock, the Breakwater, and most recently, the collaboration between Shanghai Electric Power and Enemalta.

Furthermore, Malta is one of the founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Therefore, it is clear that the relationship between our countries and our authorities is already firmly built, upon a foundation of mutual trust and respect.

I am convinced, and I know that you share my conviction, that Malta is an essential partner in the trade links that we can strengthen, together, between Asia, Europe, and Africa, by creating faster and more stable sea route networks.

In this regard, let me also speak about the investment that we are already making in Africa. Malta has always had a particular connection with the African continent, due to our geographical proximity and also, our cultural links with the countries of North Africa.

Therefore, the Maltese are ideal collaborators and facilitators to develop deeper relations with the emerging prosperity and development of Africa.

For this reason, let me mention Global Africa, which is one initiative which has been undertaken by Malta, as part of our national investment in the peace and prosperity of Africa.

I am proud to be a patron of Global Africa, which was launched in Malta during the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly at the end of the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The Global Africa initiative has created a space for policy dialogue, cooperation, and exchanges, on topics of social, political, and economic development in Africa.

As we all know, the number of young people under the age of 25, in Africa, numbers over 60% of the African continent's total population, and presently, African young people of working age make up 19% of the global population.

Moreover, by 2050, one in four people in the world will be Africans.

In this context, let me commend the foresight of the President of China, who reiterated at the opening of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, last September, plans for Chinese investment in Africa which amount to 60 billion dollars.

Therefore, I believe that we must all make it our business to invest in the African continent, and I believe that in this context, Malta's geo-strategic position makes it an ideal asset, to create the necessary hub for further Chinese investment in Africa.

China is well known for its pragmatic approach to global affairs, and this approach is shared, in many ways, by the Maltese.

As UNIDO Goodwill Ambassador, and Champion of the Third Industrial Decade for Africa, I have had first-hand experiences of the great desire that exists among the countries of Africa, for respectful collaborations and partnerships.

Moreover, on a bilateral level, despite their geographical distance, Malta and China have created a close historical relationship. Over the last four decades, we have forged stronger agreements in diverse sectors, including investment, tourism, education, and culture.

China is one of Malta's largest trading partners, and this is reflected in the fact that commercial interests between China and Malta are so

varied, and I am pleased to say that the trade deficit between us has narrowed.

Furthermore, the flourishing tourism industry in Malta has benefitted from increased visitors from China, including students who come to the Maltese Islands to learn English as a foreign language, at our many excellent schools.

This is a perfect indication of the growing friendship that is taking root between our respective peoples, because I believe that tourism is so much more than an economic operation. It is also an opportunity for person-to-person connections, and therefore, leads to greater openness and contact.

Let me also take this opportunity to reaffirm my government's support for the ongoing dialogue between China and the European Union. We must be constructive in our endeavours, and keep channels of communication open, because we are both hardworking and resilient peoples.

This is why I believe that we must keep up the excellent momentum, which has been achieved so far between our countries, to open the doors of opportunity, dialogue, and cooperation.

Let me once more extend my government's invitation, for the business communities of both our countries to take advantage of the many opportunities that exist between us.

All of these developments make it clear that we have already done a lot of good work, to pave the road for prosperous collaborations between our nations.

Now is the time to take that potential, which has been so clearly identified, and to go even further.

I must also highlight another area, in which Malta is distinguishing itself as a world leader, and which will be of interest to Chinese businesses.

All of you are entrepreneurs and business owners, with the vision to recognise that blockchain technology is the path of the future.

As you know, Malta is leading this revolution in the digital economy.

Furthermore, last year my government passed important new laws which regulate the blockchain industry, thereby creating confidence for both business owners and service users.

Malta is now in the process of creating a regulatory framework in the sector of Artificial Intelligence, which will surely create added benefits, since this area of technological advancement is becoming more prominent, every day.

Alongside our focus on emerging technologies, Malta's geo-strategic potential is immense, due to my country's unique position in the Euro-Mediterranean Region.

This is paralleled by China's leadership in Asia, and its impressive role and influence in the international community.

[Finally, let me share a story with you, that was brought to China from Europe, by a group of Buddhist monks.

In the oldest version of this story, a tiger threatens to eat a little mouse, which had woken the tiger from his sleep.

The mouse apologised, saying that it poses no real threat and that it might even be useful to the tiger in the future. The tiger laughed and went back to sleep.

A little while later, the sleeping tiger was netted by a hunter. Hearing the tiger growl, the mouse appeared and bit through the ropes, thereby freeing the tiger.

This story reminds us that nobody is so small, or so great, that we cannot benefit from sustainable and respectful friendships with one another.]

It is only by making the fullest use of our respective abilities, talents, and potential, that we will create a stronger, more peaceful, and more prosperous world.

Thank you for your attention.