

**Developing a vibrant partnership between
China, Europe and the Mediterranean -
The role of Malta and its Parliament**

**Address by Hon. Michael Frendo
Speaker of the House of Representatives, Parliament of Malta
at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies
Shanghai, China,
September 2012**

Excellencies, Distinguished guests,

1. My visit to you today as President of the Parliament of Malta forms part of a string of constant and regular exchanges of State and political visits between Malta and China since the establishment of diplomatic relations on 21 January 1972. This particular visit comes at a moment of great historical significance, therefore, as this year 2012, marks the fortieth year (40th) of strong and fruitful relations between our two countries.
2. Ours is more than a dynamic relationship; it is a truly strong and sound friendship cemented in historically proven mutual support and trust. Malta and China have signed thirty-five (35) agreements¹ - almost an agreement yearly - since our former Prime Minister Dom Mintoff, who passed away only a few weeks ago, arrived on his opening visit to China on the 2nd of April 1972.
3. Symbolic of the depth of our relationship is the fact that today, Valletta, Malta's capital city, hosts a China Cultural Centre, set up in September 2003, which was the first-ever in the Mediterranean area and the fifth of its kind in the world.

¹ Malta signed 35 agreements with China, 17 of which since the year 2000, and 6 of which only in 2009. A list of agreements between Malta and China may be view on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Treaty Series: <http://www.foreign.gov.mt/default.aspx?MDIS=4210>

4. Former Premier Dom Mintoff's vision in establishing early relations with China provided Malta with the opportunity of receiving industrial and infrastructural assistance which China generously offered at that time, prompting him to comment later that: **"The Chinese people helped us when they were poor. It should be made clear that the Maltese are grateful that the Chinese people rendered their assistance when Malta needed it."**²
5. Since 1972, successive Maltese governments shared between the Partit Nazzjonalista (Nationalist Party) and the Malta Labour Party following eight distinct general elections, have consistently worked at keeping these relations with China at the best of levels basing them always on mutual respect in spite of the such a significant difference in scale and political and social systems between the two countries.
6. Notwithstanding the different policies and political beliefs of the political parties represented in Parliament in Malta, there has been a consensus between both sides of the House of Representatives on the importance and centrality of furthering Malta's relations with China.
7. This consensus is noticeably marked by national agreement on the adherence to the one-China policy, and, within the context of EU-China relations, agreement on the removal of the arms embargo and on the endorsement of market economy status for China.
8. We follow closely, as part of our foreign policy priorities, EU-China relations and we are currently closely monitoring the decision of the European Commission to launch an anti-dumping investigation into importation of solar panels and key components from China. We support the approach, also shared by China and now also the European Commission, that both sides should do everything possible to avoid this issue developing into a "trade dispute" and to seek to resolve it through consultation and cooperation naturally while respecting the rule of international law.

² Reno Calleja, Mintoff "Kull kariga li kelli taht gvern Laburista nafha lilu", 2 ta' Settembru 2012.
<http://www.torca.com.mt/oldarticles/article42720.html>

9. This parliamentary consensus on the importance of relations with China has also generated a constant exchange of parliamentary diplomacy between our two countries. These exchanges have been on the increase particularly in the last two decades.
10. In fact, the first inter-parliamentary visit between China and Malta in recent years dating back to 1994 was followed by a number of other meetings spread over the subsequent years. I am honoured today to be heading this delegation as Speaker of my country's Parliament. I believe that the parliamentary dimension to the relationship between Malta and China grows with importance with this visit which constitutes parliamentary diplomacy between our two countries, a diplomacy which complements State-to-State diplomacy.
11. Clearly, in our relationship we have taken heed of the Chinese proverb, which states: **“Be not afraid of growing slowly; be afraid of standing still.”** Our relationship is certainly not standing still: it is dynamic, strong and continually developing into a multi-level relationship which is not limited to State-to-State and Government-to-Government relations but has grown to parliamentary, business and civil society relations in both our countries.
12. One final word to illustrate the solidity of the Malta-European Union relations: during my visit to China as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malta in 2007, I had the opportunity to show the strength of Malta's commitment to the one-China policy and why, in my view, China should view Malta as its best and most trusted friend in the European Union.
13. A one-China issue arose in that year at the OIE, the World Organisation for Animal Health. In the final analysis the European Union member countries voted together in favour of China's position of achieving full rights for the People's Republic of China while designating Taiwan as “Chinese Taipei”. However, the story behind the scenes was very different as, initially, the EU member states had been divided in their views with Malta and only one other country favouring supporting the Chinese position. The change in position of all the other EU countries illustrates that, whatever your size, once you are

around the decision-making table and have solid arguments in your position's favour, you can be a catalyst, as Malta was on that occasion, in successfully turning round the results of the meeting.³ Malta showed itself to be a reliable and trusted friend, and a credible interlocutor, for China within the EU.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,

14. Appropriately, in his paper on ancient Chinese and Mediterranean empires, Walter Scheidel, professor of Classics and History at Stanford University in California, reminds us that **“2000 years ago, up to one-half of the human species was contained within one of two political systems, the Roman empire in western Eurasia (centred on the Mediterranean Sea) and the Han empire in eastern Eurasia (centred on the Central Plain of Northern China).”**⁴

15. Realities from then have changed but nonetheless, these two regions remain of strategic importance to each other. Professor Antonio Maccanico in his preface to the book by Professor Gianfranco Elia Valori, entitled “La Via della Cina, Passato, presente e futuro di un gigante della storia”⁵, launched in Malta in a joint seminar between the Parliament of Malta and the Embassy of Italy, aptly states: “La Cina guarda al Mediterraneo perche’ e’ interessata alle risorse africane ove investe senza risparmi attraverso il suo fondo sovrano che dispone di duemila miliardi di dollari per assicurarsi approvvigamenti di materie prima, risorse energetiche, prodotti alimentari, fondamentali per dare continuita’ al suo sviluppo. Questo interesse cinese conferisce centralita’ al Mediterraneo.....”⁶ (China looks towards the Mediterranean because it is interested in African resources in which it is investing without restraint through its sovereign fund which has two thousand billion dollars to assure itself of a supply of raw materials, energy resources, food products, which are

³ The vote was taken on the 25th May 2007. I happened to be on an official visit to China meeting the Foreign Minister in the morning while the EU meeting was still in progress and then meeting with the State Councillor for Foreign Affairs in the afternoon. In the interim period of time the EU common position had been taken.

⁴ Scheidel, Walter, *The Stanford Ancient Chinese and Mediterranean Empires Comparative History Project* (article), 2005-2012.

⁵ Giancarlo Elia Valori, *La via della Cina, Passato, presente e future di un gigante della storia*, Rizzoli, First Edition, 2010

⁶ *Ibid*, at p6

fundamental to give continuity to its development. This Chinese interest confers centrality to the Mediterranean...”

16. More than that, the centrality of the Mediterranean to EU-China relations also derives from the fact that there is no Europe without the Mediterranean and no Mediterranean without Europe. Europe and the Mediterranean are one region and the success of the new realities on the Southern shores of the Mediterranean is important to a stronger Euro-Mediterranean region with which China can engage in a multi-polar world. The defeat of extremism, and the triumph of realistic moderation, in the Euro-Med area and in the Arab world - and we are witnessing even now, the tragic results, as in Benghazi last week, of when there is political exploitation of the religiously-inspired anger on the Arab street – is a goal which is also important to a China that has to remain alert at all times to the dangers of a certain type of militant political Islam.

17. Extremism is the other side of the coin of extreme poverty, of large sections of the population which live without hope of a better future. In this regard, and in the light of the need for it to re-establish a linkage with the new revolutionary political groupings of the Arab spring, in my opinion, China could be looking to assisting the development of these countries as they try and attract more foreign direct investment in a post-dictatorship scenario based on the rule of law and greater transparency. One way of achieving this could be the setting up of a Fund for Mediterranean Development, contributing to economic revival and success of the emerging new democracies, and providing direct benefits for the peoples of North Africa, an important component of the African continent and of the Arab World.

18. Such a Fund can be hosted in the Mediterranean region itself building on the fact that one of its most trusted friends, Malta, is rapidly developing into an important regional financial centre and therefore the platform for many funds whether of a development nature or not.

19. On a Parliamentary level, in engaging with the whole Mediterranean region, there is an opportunity for members of the People’s Congress to practise

active parliamentary diplomacy by developing relations with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) an Assembly that brings together all the countries in and along the Mediterranean Sea and its shores. Hosted in Malta, the Secretariat of this Mediterranean Assembly coordinates the work of parliamentarians from more than 25 States of the Mediterranean littoral. It is a multilateral point of reference that China should not bypass in developing its relations with this region which, in the words of former French President Nicholas Sarkozy is the place where not just the fate of Europe will be decided but also the future of the world. In his famous Tangier speech, which remains the basis for the Union for the Mediterranean he states:

“It is Mediterranean (peoples) who will decide whether or not the civilizations and religions will wage the most terrible of wars. It is the Mediterranean (peoples) who will decide whether or not the North and South are going to clash, It is the Mediterranean peoples who will decide whether or not terrorism and fundamentalism will succeed in imposing on the world their violence and intolerance. It is here that everything will be won or everything lost. Here will be taken a vital decision on the future of Europe and the future of Africa.”⁷

20. The historical, geographical, cultural and demographic significance of both China and the Mediterranean is undeniable, indelible and intertwined. These two spaces had, and continue to have, complementary, albeit distinct, characteristics. The Silk Road, extending 6,500 kilometres, at the time of the Han Dynasty, and centuries later Marco Polo's and the Venetian Empire trading links, tied China and the Mediterranean in a network of interlinking trade routes across the Afro-Eurasian landmass that connected East, South, and Western Asia with the Mediterranean and European world, as well as parts of North and East Africa. Trade on the Silk Road was a significant factor in the development of the civilizations of China, India, Persia, Europe and Arabia. Although silk was certainly the main Chinese export, many other goods were traded, and various technologies, religions and philosophies, also traveled along the Silk Routes. It was preceded by the incursion of the empire

⁷ <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/President-Sarkozy-on-Mediterranean,9743.html>. Website of the Embassy of France in the United Kingdom. Speech at Tangier, Morocco, on the 23 October 2007

of Alexander the Great into Central Asia, reputedly as far as Kashgar in Chinese Turkestan at around 200 BC. In fact, this is also recorded by the Greek historian Strabo who wrote "**they extended their empire even as far as the Seres (China) and the Phryni (Tarim Basin)**"⁸."

21. Like the Silk Road, come the sixteenth century, sea-based trading routes and coastal trading posts morphed with ease into channels of communication, linking pathways, exchanging philosophy, calligraphy, science, and medicine, history in a process of mutual cross-fertilization.

Excellencies, Distinguished guests,

22. In the same way that, as we have illustrated, it continues to contribute to the growth of EU-China relations, Malta also continues to be close to North Africa and to the Arab world not only through its proximity but also on the cultural sphere as the only European Union member state that speaks an Arabic-based language with which its people, predominantly Catholic, pray to "Alla". After joining the European Union, the Malta initiative launched in 2006 successfully resulted in the first ever meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the member countries of the European Union (together with the Commissioner for External Affairs and the High Representative of the Council) and those of the member countries of the League of Arab States (together with the Secretary-General of the Arab League and his secretariat). The meeting took place in Malta under joint Maltese-Saudi Arabian-Slovenian chairmanship in February 2008.⁹

23. In the recent Libyan conflict Malta played a humanitarian role which is far greater and much more significant than its size proving that it is strategic position and not territory that, at times, is the determining factor in international affairs. Successfully carrying out the function of an interlocutor does not depend on size or population but on positioning and on the cultural

⁸ Geographically located at the westernmost tip of China, bordering Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, India and Pakistan, and Chinese Tibet.

⁹ The 2nd EU-LAS Meeting is scheduled to be held in Cairo this November (2012).

versatility characteristic of the Maltese who, for millennia, have navigated along the North-South cultural fault line of the central Mediterranean.

24. The new realities of North Africa and the Middle East, with all their threats and weaknesses, some of which we are already witnessing, require new approaches and a new network of friendships with new actors on the political power scene. In this context, China needs to forge new friendships and new alliances in order to continue to steer in a Sea which remains of strategic importance to its goods, resources and investments.
25. Once more, in this aftermath to the Arab Spring, the Maltese-Chinese relationship can be put to good use for the benefit of both parties. This region has been rocked, and now the expectations of the populations of these countries are much higher than ever as they demand the economic fruit of their revolutions and a better quality of life for their citizens.
26. Malta has been among the first to engage with Libya and Tunisia in particular after the revolutions and these close ties will be further strengthened when early next month Malta will host the first post-Arab Spring Heads of State Summit of the Western Mediterranean Forum better known as the 5+5, a grouping of five member states of the European Union, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Malta and the five states of the Maghreb Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauretania. In this context, one should also note that the old 'Gaddafi' initiative of expanding the 5+5 to a 6+6 with the inclusion of Greece and Egypt has outlived the violent death of the former Libyan leader.
27. Of course, the strength of the Maltese-Chinese relationship of trust and solidarity was amply illustrated during the Libyan conflict, when over five thousand Chinese were evacuated by fast catamaran to Malta on their way home to China in the midst of the fighting. The Maltese simultaneously provided medical assistance and care to the insurgents, particularly in besieged Misurata and in Benghazi, while serving as the port of refuge for some fifty thousand evacuees over a period of a few weeks, for whom Malta also provided medical and other care and transport and logistical support. This was a case of a friend in need is a friend indeed.

28. This goodwill is now a resource that requires maximisation: and one way of doing that, within the context of Malta-China relations is to explore how Malta can best serve as a stepping stone for Chinese companies wishing to expand their business in North Africa and the Arab world. That logic of course also applies northwards with regard to Malta serving as a platform for Chinese business in the European Union: the benefits are not only fiscal as enhanced by the new Double Taxation Agreement that came into operation between Malta and China in January of this year but also political and economic in that Malta is a country that has proven to be stable for forty years in its relations with China and its people.

Excellencies, Distinguished guests,

29. The document outlining the Strategic Objectives of Malta's Foreign Policy¹⁰ states that Malta's geopolitical relevance can be harnessed to maximise on political as well as economic benefits. Geographic location, history, culture and economic relations are principal elements which have determined Malta's geopolitical relevance as a European and Mediterranean island State over the ages. Membership of the European Union has added to this strength. Malta's cultural versatility acquires greater meaning and value in the exercise of enhancing dialogue and cooperation in the Mediterranean Region. As a small country and a historic meeting place for reconciliation and dialogue, Malta is known as a friendly face among its Southern Mediterranean neighbours, and as such, Malta is perceived as a trusted interlocutor, and a voice sensitive to their new realities. Furthermore, Malta's strategic position in the Mediterranean and its close and friendly relations with its immediate neighbouring countries continue to provide it with opportunities for trade and investment in all directions.

¹⁰ One of my projects after being appointed Foreign Minister of Malta in 2004 just after Malta became a member of the European Union was to set out the Strategic Objectives of Malta's Foreign Policy with the aim of Malta retaining its own foreign policy agenda also within the context of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The document delineating Malta's Foreign Policy Objectives was launched in 2005 after it had also been submitted for discussion in draft by the Foreign and European Affairs Committee of the Maltese Parliament. It remains unchanged till today. See www.foreign.gov.mt Strategic Objectives of Malta's Foreign Policy.

30. Malta continues to expand its distinguishing diplomatic role in the Mediterranean this year not only by hosting the 5+5 Summit of Heads of State and Government (5-6th October), but also by hosting the 7th Plenary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (12-13th October). In the light of the events which took place around the Mediterranean in 2011 and continue to this very day with the ongoing turmoil in Syria, the hosting of these two events in Malta becomes all the more relevant in the search for solidarity, development, peace and stability in the Mediterranean.

31. The Mediterranean is not only the gateway to Europe but also the gateway to Africa. This perspective deserves even more our consideration when set against major issues arising in the horn of Africa, not least the issue of Somali piracy hindering the flow of shipping from China as from elsewhere and forcing China to react with patrols by its navy in that part of the Indian Ocean. Maltese registered ships, and Malta now is the seventh largest maritime flag in the world and the largest maritime flag in Europe, are also beneficiaries from China's role in policing these seas. This is another area where we can further develop our cooperation to our mutual benefit: China needs to have safe seas for navigation by ships carrying its good to Africa, the Mediterranean, Europe and beyond; Malta needs to do its utmost to provide security and monitoring for its shipping register.

Excellencies, Distinguished guests,

32. The Malta of today is very different from the Malta of forty years ago. This is also true of the reality of China today and of the global context within which our relationship has grown. We therefore need to take our relationship to new levels matching the strong political ties with mutually fruitful economic investment in a win-win situation. Our economic relations are underdeveloped and need attention. The engagement with our University, intellectuals and strategic thinkers needs to be fired up with renewed enthusiasm. China and Malta should ensure that there is representation from each country in each other's think tanks; we need to engage in discussing future relations between China, Malta and Europe and the Mediterranean, in charting out the paths

which need to be travelled if we are to preserve peace and to further development which defeats extremism and violent militantism.

33. I find encouragement from the fact that lately a strong delegation from the four-hundred year old University of Malta led by the Rector came to China to explore how best to further joint research and development, exchange of students and professors and working together generally in the academic world.

34. We should explore how best to develop what could be termed 'Track Two' discussions between our seasoned senior politicians and those of China, and between our Academies such as the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomacy in Malta and the Foreign Affairs Institute in Beijing and this august Shanghai Institutes for International Studies.

35. There is need for us to come together, from different world perspectives, to share in the germination of the ideas which have to govern our future, building on our past, developing and growing our cooperation and trust, and engaging in frank open debates on areas of common interest and of strategic importance to our countries and the future generations of our peoples.

36. Let us commit today to carry out this structured dialogue at the level of parliamentarians, business people, academics and civil society and to give our own contribution to furthering a vibrant partnership between China, Europe and the Mediterranean and to ever-deepening relations between the Republic of Malta and the People's Republic of China

Thank You.

Dr Michael Frendo LLD LLM(Exon) MP
Speaker, Parliament ta' Malta

michael.frendo@parlament.mt