

Speech by CE at South China Morning Post China Conference: Southeast Asia 2025 (English only) (with video)

Following is the video speech by the Chief Executive, Mr John Lee, at the South China Morning Post China Conference: Southeast Asia 2025 today (February 17):

Your Excellency Minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz (Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry of Malaysia), officials and friends from ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and around the world, Ms Catherine So (Chief Executive Officer of South China Morning Post), Ms Tammy Tam (Editor-in-Chief of South China Morning Post), distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon. I am pleased to join you today, virtually, at this remarkable conference in Kuala Lumpur.

For that, I am grateful to the South China Morning Post for organising the China Conference: Southeast Asia, and for putting a prime spotlight on the substantive roles played by China, our country, and Southeast Asia in shaping the global agenda, now and long down the road.

To that end, you have heard today from His Excellency Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, as well as a wealth of senior governmental, business and financial leaders and decision-makers from Malaysia, throughout ASEAN and around the world.

For the next few minutes, allow me to speak about Hong Kong – about the role we play in working with our country and in connecting with member states of ASEAN and far beyond.

Long a "super connector", Hong Kong takes pride in creating value for traditional and emerging markets. We are the natural bridge for ASEAN business looking to Mainland Chinese markets and opportunities. We are, as well, the conduit for Mainland businesses looking to explore overseas opportunities, whether in ASEAN, the Middle East or elsewhere.

Indeed, the Mainland and ASEAN are our two largest trade-in-goods partners, with total trade value reaching US\$619 billion and US\$165 billion respectively last year.

We are home to about 2 600 offices with parent companies on the Mainland, up 20 per cent over 2023 totals. Last year, too, some 730 offices with parent companies in ASEAN maintained an office in Hong Kong. That's an increase of about 10 per cent year on year.

And I am confident of continuing growth in the coming years, given the

ASEAN-Hong Kong, China Free Trade Agreement and related Investment Agreement, as well as the recently signed amendment to the Agreement on Trade in Services of CEPA – the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement.

The new CEPA Agreement introduces service-sector liberalisation measures, making it easier for Hong Kong suppliers, and international companies with offices in Hong Kong, to do business on the Mainland.

As you know, CEPA is nationality neutral, so I encourage ASEAN companies to enjoy Hong Kong's world-class professional services and, in doing so, make full use of CEPA in accessing the Mainland market.

Alongside strong business ties with ASEAN, our people-to-people bonds are long-standing and mutually rewarding.

Since assuming office, in July 2022, I have led high-profile Hong Kong delegations to seven of the 10 ASEAN countries. Nearly 90 co-operation agreements between Hong Kong and ASEAN countries have been signed over that period – and in so many areas, from economic and trade matters to innovation and technology, cultural exchange, education and more.

And I am committed to building on our gratifying ties.

We have relaxed the criteria for nationals of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam applying for multiple-entry visas to Hong Kong. We have, as well, extended their validity period from two to three years.

We will also provide self-service immigration clearance for invited ASEAN-country visitors participating in business, development and related activities in Hong Kong.

And for ASEAN and other non-Chinese residents working in Hong Kong and wishing to travel to the Mainland, the multiple-entry visas have been extended for up to five years, making Mainland entry from Hong Kong fast and efficient.

And to make our ASEAN friends feel at home in Hong Kong, we are compiling a list of restaurants offering halal food, while encouraging hotels and other establishments to provide appropriate worship services.

There's more. We're making it easier to communicate with ASEAN business. In addition to our Economic and Trade Offices in Singapore, Jakarta and Bangkok, we are working with the Malaysian government to establish a trade office in Kuala Lumpur.

Allow me to thank ASEAN member states for their staunch support of our accession to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the world's largest free trade agreement. I count on leaders like your good selves to support Hong Kong's accession bid.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you all the best of business, health and well-being in this auspicious Chinese New Year – the Year of the Snake.

Thank you.