

AN ALBANIAN DIPLOMAT REMEMBERS

China and Albania in Recent Decades, With an Eye on the Belt & Road Today

Feride Istogu Gillesberg's interview with Ambassador Hajdar Muneka is prefaced by her introduction of the Ambassador and his book. She is Albanian and is the Vice President of the Schiller Institute in Denmark.

Hajdar Muneka, has been an Albanian career diplomat, China scholar and journalist for Albania National Radio and TV (1979-1991). Born on March 20, 1954, Mr. Muneka's diplomatic career began in 1991, as first secretary at the Albanian embassy in Beijing. In 1997 he became Albania's ambassador to China, from which posting he was also responsible for Albania's relations with other Asian countries, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, Singapore, and New Zealand. He was also Albania's ambassador to Malaysia from 2001 to 2006.

His book relates how the Chinese Cultural Revolution came about; the tensions between China and the Soviet Union that led to the split between those two countries; how China and Albania were each other's only ally for a period; how China emerged from the Cultural Revolution, while Albania remained stuck in its ideology; and how China not only pulled itself out of this dark time of the Cultural Revolution, but began a process of reforms for the economic development of the whole nation.

The publication of this book is timed well. This is the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Albania and China—a relationship that has reflected a



The Light and Shadow Sides of a Friendship that Surprised the World: History, Memories, Analysis and Reflections by an Ambassador

by Hajdar Muneka. Published in Albania, September 2019, 508 pages. Not available in English.

special bond, a bond that needs to be reestablished with full dedication, especially from the Albanian side.

China and Albania's special relationship began in 1956. When the Soviet Union broke diplomatic ties with Albania in 1961, Albania's only ally was China, and, for a time, China's only ally in Europe was Albania. The paradox is that despite all the problematic elements of the Cultural Revolution, China helped Albania to develop its economy. Chinese ships unloaded grain, rice, oil, sugar, and chemical fertilizers in Durres, and China invested in Albanian mines, hydro-electric projects, agriculture, and infrastructure.

For its part, Albania played an important role in getting the People's Republic of China recognized as a full member of the United Nations in October 1971. China was very grateful to Albania for this effort. The author writes that because of this, Albania gained something that you can't buy with money—the love and re-

spect of the Chinese people. Albanian culture, music, and film were promoted in all of China. Albania was, and even still is, in some ways, much bigger in the awareness of the Chinese people, than the size of the nation would justify.

The disintegration of the special relationship between Albania and China started when China began reaching out to the U.S., leading to U.S. President Nixon's visit to China. Enver Hoxha's Albanian regime saw this as treason to the Chinese Maoist ideology. Hoxha began attacking China very openly.

Mr. Muneka came back to Albania's capital Tirana from his studies in Beijing (1973-77) during the tensions between the countries. He had lived through the end phase of the Cultural Revolution in China and per-

sonally saw China’s shift toward the reforms of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” which paved the way for the start of economic development for the people.

It was unfortunate for Albania that the Hoxha government was completely stuck in its own ideology. While China began the process of reforms to open up to the world, and achieve economic development for all, Albania isolated itself even more, and was left with no allies at all. Albania cut itself off from the rest of the world. Albania survived with the help of the economic reserves they had received from China, but they did not last very long.

Today, when we look at China and its enormous economic development, it is time for Albania to see, with new eyes, the possibilities that lie in cooperation with China.

Interview: China, Albania and the Belt & Road

EIR: You studied the Chinese language in Beijing, from 1973 to 1977, and became fascinated by the ancient Chinese culture, by philosophers such as Confucius, and by the country’s history. Can you explain to us what moved you?

Hajdar Muneka: China seems like a big ocean. The further you go, the deeper and more enigmatic it becomes. I had the fortune of becoming part of the Chinese ocean since I was a teenager.

I realized that the Chinese love their history, which is very rich, and somewhat unique. Even though Confucius lived over



Hajdar Muneka, Ambassador of Albania to the People’s Republic of China, 1997-2000.

2,500 years ago, his philosophy is so present in the daily life of the Chinese, that it gives you the impression that he is still alive. That is also the case with other scholars of this nation. For centuries, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu has served as an orientation compass for dozens of dynasties, and, still today continues to be applied. The particularities of Chinese culture are embodied in their art, sport, food, medicine, everywhere. Many things have now changed, but when I first came to China as a student, I got the impression that everything had a Chinese seal stamped on it, and the impact of the cultures

of the world was very tiny.

EIR: China has lifted some 700 million people out of extreme poverty in the last 30-40 years, and the national goal is to wipe out all extreme poverty in China by the end of this year. That should be a driver for poor nations, such as Albania, to join with China in the Belt and Road Initiative. Is it possible to get Albania to join?



Confucius statue at the Confucius Temple in Beijing, China.

Hajdar Muneka: China is among the few countries in the world that has inherited extreme poverty. Defeating poverty has been the main battle of the Chinese government since the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The current government has been the most successful in this cause, even though the objective of reaching the aim this year, as announced, is very difficult, but not impossible. If accomplished, it will be the next Chinese wonder. In terms of their determination to reach that objective, no other nation (especially my nation, Albania) can compare with China—not only



DoD

U.S. Marines in Kosovo in 1999 as part of the NATO-led Operation Joint Guardian.

because the Chinese people have extraordinary financial and human capacities, but also due to their professional skills, dedication and accountability. During recent years, this has been highlighted, even more, by their zero tolerance for corruption.

The participation in the Belt and Road Initiative by many countries, especially the relatively poor ones like Albania, is a golden opportunity for their development. But this demands a serious commitment, and even financial contributions by participating nations. As indicated by this initiative, China offers a lot, but each nation must contribute seriously, with its full capacities, in its own development. The Chinese train goes with extraordinary speed. The winner is that nation that manages to build a train station for this train in its own country.

EIR: Looking at Albania today, and at the economic paradigm shift that has occurred in China, is Albania ready for a new special relationship with China, based on that new economic paradigm?

Hajdar Muneka: Any country that wants to prosper economically would like to have close relations with China. Because of the very special relationship in the past, Albania has a great advantage over other countries. Today's China is led by a generation of leaders who still have special feelings for the former friendship

between our two countries. A clever Albanian leadership would take advantage of this fact, also because the Chinese, by nature, stand out for having respect and consideration for friends, and they are well known for their long memory. Unfortunately, this fact has not been properly used by those who run Albania. It is not just about the current Albanian leaders, but for all of them during the last 30 years.

Albania Fought for China at the UN

EIR: You were ambassador to China during the tragic Kosova war. This was a time when you worked hard to rebuild the Albanian-Chinese relationship. Out of the blue, Macedonia . . . established ties with Taiwan, and NATO bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. You describe this period of tension in your book, when Beijing was under pressure. It is clear that China does not think in geopolitical terms, but, on the contrary, is more focused on how to solve problems. Would you like to say something about this aspect?

Hajdar Muneka: That was one of the most difficult periods during my career as a diplomat, but, at the same time, a very impressive one. Even though I was officially representing Albania, and not Kosova, we have the same flag, the same nationality. In the Chinese press, they usually don't speak about the Kosovars, but about the Albanians from Kosova. I had to work hard to explain to the Chinese authorities that the Albanians were not terrorists, but victims of Serbian terrorism. Thanks to my modest contribution, I am very happy to say, the Chinese government never became a barrier to the advancement of the Kosova process. The bombardment of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade was, naturally, a punishable act, which complicated the situation. The American administrations did apologize for this later on.

I would like to highlight here that even though China has not yet recognized the independence of Kosova, which is closely related to its internal situation, Beijing has opened a mission in Prishtina, and there is considerable trade between the two countries.

I am sure this barrier will be overcome as soon as Belgrade recognizes the independence of Kosova.

You mentioned the unwarranted mistake that Macedonia made in recognizing Taiwan at the end of



FAIR

The Chinese Embassy in Belgrade after U.S. bombing.

the 90s, breaking its relationship with China. That was an adventure by some people in the leadership of that country, closely related to their personal interests. At that time, there were rumors that Albania would take the same step. I have guaranteed the Chinese officials that my country is never going to make such a big mistake. Regardless of the change of the ruling system in Albania during the last decades, our position regarding the existence of one China has not changed, and will not change in the future. I want to remind you that Albania had been one of the main countries that fought for the return of China to the UN, and the exclusion of Taiwan from the organization.

EIR: At the end of your book, you present a review of Chinese history, which is important for Western countries—the U.S. and Europe—as it shows that China is a peaceful country, going back at least 2,000 years in its history. The Chinese seek to solve problems by peaceful means, even if that means in a pragmatic way. Can you elaborate that point?



Public Domain

Mao Zedong

respect back, so that they can enjoy a calm existence. Their famous leader Mao Zedong has concentrated this philosophy in a wise saying, “If you do not offend me, I will not offend you. If you offend me, I am obliged to

react.” Anyway, Chinese people are very pragmatic. So much so, that you could believe that pragmatism was born in China. This has also made them talented negotiators. When they talk about the art of war, they do not mean the use of weapons, but the victory achieved without firing a single bullet—a victory attained by peaceful means, through parley.

A Step Toward Understanding China

EIR: Do you have any concluding words for our international readership?

Hajdar Muneka: After a 47-year relationship with China, I have come to the conclusion that the biggest problem the people of the world have today, is their lack of knowledge about China and the Chinese people. Thousands of books about China are in circulation around the world. Some of them are written by authors who have

Hajdar Muneka: In its five-thousand-year history, China has gone through extraordinary developments, but also through drastic declines. It is worth noting that the Chinese have not waged predatory wars, as well as not sending out any army to occupy other lands. Quite the contrary, they were sometimes attacked and occupied by other powers. Even when they were extremely powerful, they preferred to stay at home. I have to mention that the Great Chinese Wall was built to defend China from attacks by outsiders. This is part of the Chinese philosophy as cleverly and skillfully described by the scholar Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*.

knowledge about the country and its people through documents and archives. Some from translations from other languages, but very few directly from Mandarin. After translation, Chinese literature is very difficult to understand for a foreign reader, with its genuine breadth and depth of expression.

In explaining the lack of knowledge about China, there is one more reason I would like to mention. For a long time, the rest of the world left China quiet, in her sleeping stance, perhaps just because of Napoleon Bonaparte's old saying, "China is, in fact, a sleeping giant. Let her sleep, for when she wakes, she will move the world." They don't want to awaken the sleeping giant. The reality is that China never slept. Not even during its darkest period of the Cultural Revolution. From difficulties, it emerged even stronger. Because in the deepest consciousness of any Chinese person is patience, and confidence in the future. They make long-term plans.

While most people think about today's life, the Chinese are more concentrated on the future. Suffice it to recall that the plan for the modernization of today's China was designed 40 years ago. Now, they are working for the decades to come.

Since I studied and attended to Chinese developments for nearly half a century, I thought that the China that has been created inside of me should be brought out to others, with the same content as I have known. I want to tell everything I know about the country and its people. During my stay in China as a student, and as a diplomat as well, I represented a small nation, but, for a certain time, Albanians were almost the only foreigners entering China. The Chinese considered us as part of a different world, the non-Chinese world. What we did, or how we performed, was not just an Albanian message for the ordinary Chinese people. In us they saw the other world, the one



cc/Jorge Láscar

The Great Wall of China.

which, for many of them, was almost undiscovered.

Without doubt, the 21st Century is China's century. The Chinese have a huge population. Therefore, they make giant and safe steps forward. The better we know them, the more we can profit from them. I hope that with my new book, *The Light and Shadow Sides of a Friendship that Surprised the World*, I will help all those who are interested in taking one step forward

towards knowing China. My book is an invitation to dive into the Chinese ocean, full of enigmas and curiosity, but, also, with plenty of challenges. There is also a clear message in it: Very soon China will be the most developed economy in the world. For this reason, it should not be ignored, but taken seriously, in all of its capacities. The Asian giant has already awakened from the lethargic century.

EIR: Congratulations on your book, and thank you very much for this interview. I hope that your book will soon be published in English and Chinese, so that non-Albanian speakers can benefit from your unique insights.



cc/663highland

Statue of Sun Tzu in Yurihama, Japan.