Dubai is just like Hong Kong on steroids

Earlier this month, I joined a delegation led by Financial Secretary John Tsang Chun-wah with more than 30 leaders from finance, information and communications technology, which visited Dubai and Tehran to explore new business opportunities arising from the Belt and Road Initiative. I was the only university sector delegate.

Dubai today is the most populous city of the UAE and has become a business center and transport hub of the Middle East. Its economy is no longer oil-based and is now mainly in construction, manufacturing, trade, transport. It has more than 20 free zones, industry specific, offering lower taxes to foreign investors.

Dubai Internet City houses well-known global IT firms such as Google and IBM, and the city is also keen to develop tourism, aiming for 20 million visitors per year by 2020. The Belt and Road Initiative will bring much benefit to the city, too.

As an international board member of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia, I go to the region once a year and I usually transit via Dubai. A number of Hong Kong enterprises have businesses in the city, and during this visit, we visited the kickoff ceremony of a Lifestyle Expo that showcased products from Hong Kong, as well as many innovation and technology initiatives, including startup centers and co-working spaces. In my view, Dubai is Hong Kong on steroids. Like Hong Kong, Dubai is a financial center of the surrounding region, with economies based on tourism, construction and shopping, and transportation hub.

In fact, its city leaders had used Hong Kong as a model several decades back when it was planning the city. It tries to do everything that Hong Kong does — but much more, better, bigger, taller and faster.

Dubai has the highest building in the world in Burj Khalifa, the busiest airport in the world, and the biggest shopping mall one can find. It is more international than HK in some sense — the expats outnumber the locals, and they populate both ends of the income spectrum.

By 2020, the UAE wants to send a spaceship to Mars — their ambition simply knows no boundaries.

This visit was my first to Iran. Tehran is more modern than I expected — especially for a place that has been under economic sanctions from the developed world for over a decade. People are warm and friendly.

The capital city gives me an impression that is similar to China in the early 80's. With the nuclear agreement and the lifting of economic sanctions, I feel that the people are ready for fuller engagement with the rest of the world. Leaders we meet are all eager to engage with us in all forms — be it trade, financial investment, business know-how and products. With fledging free trade zones such as Kish Island on the Persian Gulf that requires no visa to get to, Iran is in prime position to benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative.

In addition to the official proceedings, I managed to meet with representatives from two universities: Sharif University of Technology and Amirkabir University of Technology, where we discussed plans for student exchanges and research collaboration. HKUST has some 20 full-time research postgraduate students from Iran.

By chance, my wife and I play host family to HKUST's only full time undergraduate student from Iran, who recently won an academic research award.

Since 2012, we have had a dual PhD program with Sharif University, and for my visit to the two universities I was guided by Hamed, the very first graduate from this program. Sharif is one of the most selective universities in Iran; it is the pick for the country's top high school graduates, and a lot of its faculty received their education from top US universities.

I left Tehran with the impression that Iran will be poised for a major economic takeoff. Like Shenzhen, the city has a wealth of young people who are eager to make their mark, and the city is enlisting all the help it can from the international community. The potential is waiting to be tapped—and that time may come sooner than later.

The US Election Day took place during my visit and I had the interesting experience of watching it in my hotel room in Tehran, on CCTV, with BBC and CNN blocked. With Trump as president, there will be uncertainty in Iran's economic future, but I am cautiously optimistic after seeing what I saw.