

Many in Hong Kong Fear Greater Integration with Mainland China



A mainland Chinese couple pose for photographs at a viewing deck before the skyline of Hong Kong island across the harbour, Feb. 16, 2019.

The ruling Chinese Communist Party is moving ahead with greater integration between the former colonial cities of Hong Kong and Macau and the rest of China, amid fears that ever-closer integration — including streamlined extradition procedures — could further erode traditional freedoms and human rights protections.

China's cabinet, the State Council, published a lengthy blueprint on Monday setting out its plans to integrate 11 major cities in the Pearl River Delta region, including Hong Kong, Macau, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Zhuhai.

Strategically, the plan positions Hong Kong as a financial center that will raise funds for China's "Belt and Road" infrastructure plan, drawing on the economic strength of the mainland Chinese cities.

The plan for 2022-2035 will "support Hong Kong and Macau to integrate into China's overall development," according to a copy published on the State Council website.

"[It will] enable compatriots from Hong Kong and Macau to share the historic responsibility of national rejuvenation ... and the prosperity of the motherland," it said.

It said the Pearl River Delta region — with an economy valued at some 10 trillion yuan in 2017 — would play an important role in the "Belt and Road" project linking China to crucial strategic resources and markets.

"Hong Kong, Macau and the nine cities of the Pearl River Delta have the same cultural homogeneity, close kinship, similar folk customs and complementary advantages," according to the plan, which will seek to build a large-scale and "world-class" conurbation there.

“Further close exchanges and cooperation between the mainland and Hong Kong and Macau will provide more opportunities for economic and social development ... and maintain long-term prosperity and stability in Hong Kong and Macau,” it said.

Beijing will be pursuing a coordinated development strategy that will boost infrastructure links, green development and innovation in the region, the plan said.

“By 2022, ... cooperation between Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau will be more extensive ... and the level of interconnection and interoperability will be further enhanced,” it said, adding that “cultural exchange activities” would have become more frequent.

However, many in Hong Kong fear too much integration with mainland China.

Loss of status feared

Civic Party leader and lawmaker Alvin Yeung said closer integration could lose Hong Kong its status as a free port and separate trade jurisdiction in the eyes of the international community.

Yeung said the plan’s insistence on cutting-edge technology as part of the region’s economic integration could heighten such concerns in the eyes of members of the U.S. Congress.

“I am very worried about that, but also about mainland Chinese companies using Hong Kong to turn themselves into Hong Kong companies, and using their Hong Kong-registered status to acquire various technologies, giving rise to international concern,” he said.

“This would harm Hong Kong’s interests in the long term.”

Meanwhile, Ivan Choy, a senior politics lecturer at the Chinese University of Hong Kong said that greater economic ties were not the only likely outcome of the plan.

“It could mean that there is greater assimilation ... and all I can say is that I hope that Hong Kong’s core values would be respected, rather than distorted,” Choy said.

"I hope that they won't force us to accommodate them," he said.

Hong Kong chief executive Carrie Lam welcomed the plan, however.

"The development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area is a national strategy personally devised, personally planned and personally driven by President Xi Jinping," the city's government said in a statement on Monday. "It is a key development strategy in the country's reform and opening up in the new era."

"The Hong Kong SAR Government will fully seize the opportunities brought about by the development of the Greater Bay Area," it said.

And Lam's second-in-command Matthew Cheung said China's promises of autonomy and a separate legal jurisdiction for Hong Kong following the 1997 handover would be kept, under the "one country, two systems" framework, however.

"[Regional] development won't weaken one country, two systems ... It is obvious to anyone that Hong Kong is the most open city in the country, and it has the rule of law," Cheung said.

Rendition to mainland

However, the city's government is currently mulling plans to allow the executive rendition of criminal suspects to China at Beijing's request.

Pro-democracy group Demosisto said the changes were an attempt to make it easier for China to "entrap" Hong Kong citizens who raised their voices in dissent against Beijing's policies.

"The Hong Kong government's proposition to change a current law is an attempt to prepare to entrap oppositional voices for China, and is a step towards judicial integration and eroding Hong Kong's legal system, allowing Hong Kong citizens to be subjected to an autocratic Court," the group said in a Feb. 17 statement on its Facebook page.

It said citizens of Taiwan and other countries could also be placed in jeopardy by the proposed changes, should they travel through Hong Kong, should Beijing decide that it wanted to accuse them of a crime.

“Hong Kong should not hand over suspects to places that do not meet the standards of international human rights law, let alone to a legal system that is completely different from our own,” the statement said, pointing to the arrests of several Canadian nationals on Chinese territory since the arrest of Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver on Dec. 1, 2018.

It also cited the cross-border detentions of five booksellers — including a Swedish and a U.K. national — wanted for selling books banned in mainland China to customers there, despite the fact that their actions were entirely legal in Hong Kong.

Currently, suspects must be wanted for a crime that is an offense in both jurisdictions, and to a list of 46 serious crimes including murder, assault and sex offenses.

“Permitting a major criminal to stay in Hong Kong not only marks a violation of justice but also poses risk to public safety here,” the city’s Security Bureau said in recent statement, proposing that suspects could be arrested on the basis of a certificate issued by the city’s chief executive instead. Judicial challenges would be available under the new system, but it was unclear whether there would be time for a suspect to initiate them.

But critics say China — the most likely jurisdiction to use the system — lacks any judicial independence, paving the way for human rights abuses, should Hong Kong change the rules on extradition.

The World Justice Project in 2017/18 ranked China’s justice system 75th out of 113 countries, while Hong Kong came 16th.

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