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## Setting the course

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Ten years after the reversion of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, the state of the former British colony continues to draw a mixed and uncertain debate. While economic growth has seen a steady rebound and led to a general feel-good factor in Hong Kong, many discomfoting questions remain about the pace and scope of political reform. Beijing's unilateral interpretation of the timetable for universal suffrage, in particular, has delayed the course to democratisation ad infinitum, and concerns about civil rights are growing.

In recent years, the leadership of the special administrative region has struggled to strike the right balance between expanding political reform and preventing Hong Kong from embarking on radical change.

Looking ahead, democratisation faces a rocky road. The United States, with a vested interest in Hong Kong's prosperity and stability, should remain attentive to how that future unfolds. In 2003, when the Hong Kong government decided to push for the enactment of national security legislation provided for by Article 23 of the Basic Law, it was a clear indicator that Beijing was flexing its muscles to influence Hong Kong's domestic political agenda. Many feared the legislation would place additional, and unnecessary, restrictions on individual liberties, religious freedom and freedom of speech.

Shortly after Donald Tsang Yam-kuen assumed the chief executive post, the constitutional taskforce committee recommended a package of electoral reforms that, while encouraging, did not amount to significant democratisation.

In December 2005, it thus came as little surprise when the pan-democratic camp - after mobilising up to a quarter of a million protesters to hit the streets demanding a timetable for direct elections - rejected the government's limited proposals for reform. This left the larger question of universal suffrage, as guaranteed in the Basic Law, unresolved. After the dust had settled, Beijing extended a gesture of goodwill in October 2006 when it was rumoured that President Hu Jintao would present a road map for greater democracy during his first visit to the city, for the 10th anniversary of the handover.

However, the optimism was short-lived. When legislator Alan Leong Kah-kit, a leading member of the pro-democracy Civic Party, managed to receive enough support for

nomination by the Election Committee and ran against Mr Tsang, it apparently unsettled Beijing.

Prior to the election in March, several mainland leaders voiced concerns about whether Hong Kong was adhering to the Basic Law, including vice-chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee Cheng Siwei's blunt admonition that the city "risked being marginalised" if it did not stop "messaging around" with politics.

Then, Wu Bangguo, the NPC's chairman, set off a firestorm this month, when, commenting on implementation of the Basic Law, he bluntly reminded the SAR of the limits to its autonomy, saying it "only has as much power as authorised by the central government". Whatever the intent, coming ahead of what was already expected to be a heated debate on the forthcoming green paper on political reform, the comments raised concerns about Beijing's intentions, and reignited support for the pan-democrats.

What do these developments mean for Washington? Hong Kong has long been regarded as one of the freest and most vibrant economies. Its reputation as a leading port and financial centre in the region stems from a strong foundation of the rule of law, the respect for intellectual property rights, and an effective monetary policy - attributes that the United States would like to see strengthened in mainland China's developmental take-off.

Moreover, given the close connections to the mainland, Hong Kong is well-positioned to play a positive role in China's development through social, cultural and educational interactions, and exchanges between it and mainland institutions at both official and unofficial levels.

Continued prosperity, stability and progress in Hong Kong's democratic development are widely viewed as consistent with US interests in more politically open and like-minded societies around the world. But US concern towards Hong Kong in the recent past has been uneven at best, and steadily lagging at worst. The chief executive election, for example, drew limited attention in Washington. As Hong Kong stands at the crossroads in democratic development, Washington's renewed attention should be encouraged and sustained.

Mr Wu's comments may have finally put Hong Kong back on Washington's radar. In a recent speech marking the 10th anniversary of the SAR, US Consul-General James Cunningham said Hong Kong should "set out on the path towards governance strengthened by popular elections", and the sooner the better. He added that the city "is ready for not just political reform, but ready for universal suffrage".

The course of democratisation in Hong Kong - whether it retreats or advances - will depend first and foremost on choices made in Beijing. Nevertheless, Washington and the international community can have some influence on those choices, and should remain attentive to the political developments in Hong Kong.

This is not only because supporting democracy is a fundamental principle of US foreign policy. Most importantly, Beijing's choices in Hong Kong will indicate its sincerity for political reform, and whether China is ready to assume a greater role as a "responsible stakeholder" in world affairs.

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