**SCMP Article**

**Joint checkpoint protests belong to bygone era**

The controversy over planned joint checkpoints at the West Kowloon express rail station reflects deep, long-term divisions in Hong Kong.

On the face of it, the argument is about locating mainland officials at the Hong Kong end of the rail link. The Basic Law bars mainland authorities from operating and exercising mainland laws in Hong Kong territory. So the government plans to lease out the space in the terminal as a “mainland port area”.

To supporters of the idea, it is the obvious practical arrangement – convenient to passengers and efficient in terms of administration and system design.

To opponents, the proposal looks unconstitutional, or at least twists the Basic Law’s original intent to ensure Hong Kong’s autonomy. Furthermore, some suggest it could be a precedent for Hong Kong to lease other areas where mainland officials could enforce mainland laws, such as protest sites.

Speaking on the radio last week, former Democratic Party leader Martin Lee Chu-ming recalled his role in drafting the Basic Law. At that time, he said, the idea of leased Hong Kong territory where mainland laws apply would have been unthinkable. However, the Basic Law drafting began in 1985, and the final law was adopted by Beijing in 1990. The world, especially the mainland, was a very different place then. Those of us who remember travelling to the mainland 30 or even 20 years ago will know how much has changed.

China’s per capita gross domestic product was lower than India’s in 1990. Even the relatively prosperous major cities were grey, with limited infrastructure and few modern goods in the stores. People mostly rode bicycles and wore clothes that Hong Kong residents would laugh at.

As the handover approached, many in Hong wanted to keep this backward mainland at a distance. One major concern was the possibility that impoverished people would flood across the border.

Another was law and order. Shenzhen was considered lawless and even dangerous. It was also very cheap. The low costs drew Hong Kong investment and, by the 1990s, Hong Kong had exchanged its factories for higher-value services supporting mainland manufacturing. From 1993, eight years after the Basic Law drafters had first assembled, mainland state companies have been on our stock market.

Another decade and a half has passed. If anything, the changes have been even more rapid. China’s per capita GDP has gone up close to 20-fold since 1990, over five times that of India in the period. Mainland cities today are full of cars, high-rises, metros and malls. Mainland companies, private as well as state-owned, account for about 63 per cent of the Hong Kong stock market by value. Mainland investors, skilled workers and tourists are on the move worldwide.

During the last few decades, Hong Kong worried about rivalry from Singapore, then Shanghai. More recently, commentators have voiced concerns about being overshadowed by Shenzhen – which has become China’s tech hub. These fears may be too pessimistic. Mainland cities do not rival Hong Kong’s core strengths, like its institutions and clusters of international expertise. But they have certainly become modern economic powerhouses.

Many businesses here see opportunities in the Pearl River Delta and beyond. In the years and decades ahead, new industries and markets are likely to develop on the mainland. New flows of trade, investment and people will involve Hong Kong.

In the 1980s, many Hong Kong people would have seen easier cross-border links as unnecessary, even alarming and risky. But it is now 2017, and many of us are looking ahead to the 2020s and 2030s. Opposition to co-location seems to belong to another era.

I realise that many opponents of co-location sincerely fear rising mainland influence. Political disputes and events in Hong Kong have worsened divisions and reduced trust, especially in recent years.

But at the same time, economic and social trends clearly point to closer cross-border ties. That includes convenient access to the national high-speed rail network. Surely we can tell the difference between a threat to our legal system and freedoms, and an obvious way to improve transport connections?