



Amanpour on CNN

President Xi Jinping, China, Term Limits

Robert Lawrence Kuhn – March 5, 2018

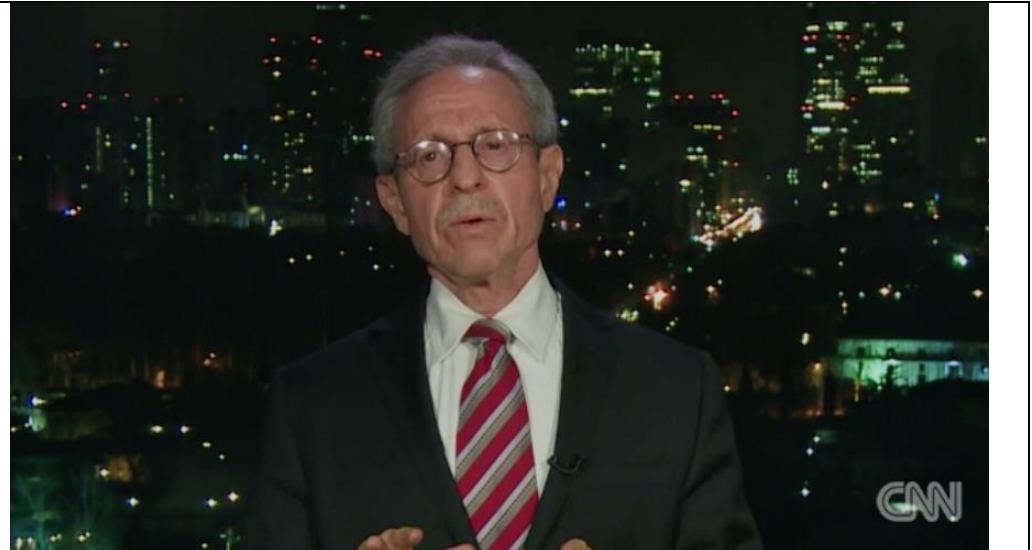
HOST: When it comes to trade, one country more than any other has been the target of Trump's rhetorical wrath, and that's China. But my next guest tells me that the promised tariffs won't bother China much, as we've been discussing. In any way, they in China are dealing with much more important things, like the proposal for the rubber stamp Party Congress which starts its new session today to change the Constitution, and lift all term limits on President Xi Jinping, effectively making him president for life. Now, I've been talking to Minxin Pei: he's a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College in California, and to Robert Lawrence Kuhn, who is the author of *How China's Leaders Think*, and he is the host of a show on the government-run CCTV news channel in Beijing. Gentlemen welcome to you both. Let me start by asking you, Robert Lawrence Kuhn there in Beijing. From the Chinese government perspective, these tariffs that the president of the United States has announced, how much does it concern Beijing?





RLK: Well certainly it's a concern, but I would call it a minor annoyance as opposed to something extremely serious. They have a lot on their plate here. The last thing they want is a trade war with the U.S., but they have to react. If the U.S. does something, there has to be something that they will do in retaliation. They will ratchet it down. They will signal, as you do, that they do not want to accelerate this, but to save face and to be appropriate, they'll have to match it.

HOST: To you Minxin Pei, how do you see this playing out?



MP: If the investigations find China at fault, or guilty of some practices, then the US has a wide range of options to punish China on a trade front. And if these things happen, then US-China trade war will take place. Another thing I want to say is that US-China relations have turned a corner. This is a relationship that has headed toward a long period of confrontation, and adversarial relationships. So what is going to happen on the trade front is part of a much larger picture of geopolitical rivalry, if not competition.



HOST: Of course, this is happening in the atmosphere of the announcement last week that the term limits are going to be lifted on the presidential terms, and that this is going to be ratified this week, which could lead to President Xi being in office for life. Is that what you expect, and why this change? There were very clear term limits that the past few presidents have adhered to.

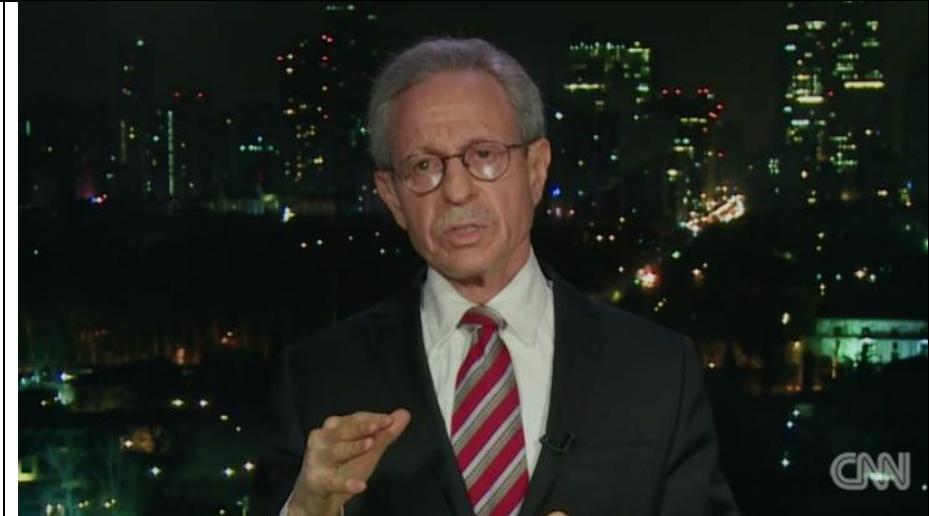
RLK: The event itself is less important than it seems. When Xi was appointed Core of the Central Committee of the Party, and of the whole party as they say, in October 2016, when he was made, that effectively undermined the traditional collective leadership and put him in a much superior position. But this announcement, what it does, the intended consequences, is make it clear that he is going to be the one to see through his grand vision for China 2050 and China 2035.





RLK: This great, modern, socialized nation that they say is going to be prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful (if I got it all right). And so Xi wants to be the one to make that happen, and in the short term to deal with the specific problems that China has -to breakthrough interest groups and to let anybody know if they can think they can wait him out until the next term, they're wrong because they can't.

HOST: Well then let me put that to Minxin Pei. I mean what Robert Lawrence Kuhn has just said sounds all very benign and very much in the greater interest of China and that it's no real big deal. How do you see it from your perch in California there teaching government?



MP: It is quite a big deal. In fact, Mr. Xi signaled his intention to break the term limits in October last year when he did not appoint a successor. First of all, this will really mess up the Party's own term limit systems throughout the system. Let's remember that this is the term limit applies not just to top person in the Chinese party state. It applies to everybody who is something in that system. So if the top leader does not have term limit, how are you going to persuade people throughout this hierarchy to retire after two terms? So there's likely to be a lot of confusion, resentment, afterwards. The other downside I see is that it is now all his show. If he can deliver he will become China's most effective leader. But if he cannot deliver in the next five, ten years, then it will be his whole responsibility.

HOST: So let me ask you, The Economist in its cover article, this latest one, basically says the West got it wrong. They bet wrong on China.





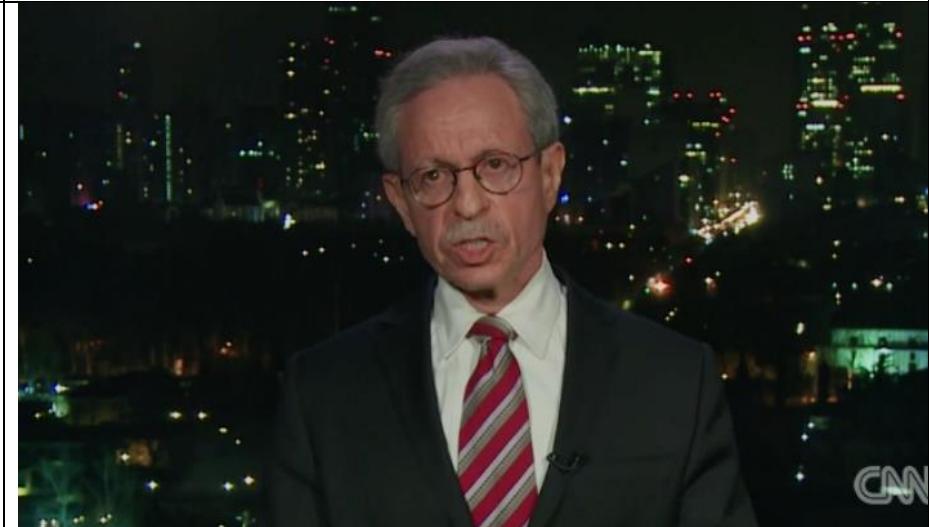
HOST: They believe it was going to move incrementally towards a more pluralistic political system and to a market economy, a much more open economy. But they're also saying that with this decision, China moves from autocracy to dictatorship. So how would you sum up the type of leadership we're about to see?

MP: I don't care what kind of title you call Mr. Xi or what kind of label you apply to China. All we want to look at is the policies President Xi has been pursuing, or the direction in which China is moving. I will say if we look at the last twenty-five years for roughly about ten fifteen years China was more or less moving in the right direction.



MP: The society was opening up, the economy was becoming more liberalized and engagement with the West. With the rest of the world was also moving in the right direction. You cannot say this about China for the last ten years, or especially for the last five years, when Chinese society is becoming more closed. Politics is much more repressive. And its foreign policy is creating a lot of tensions with the rest of the world. So if you look at those things then you really have to ask that question: did the West get China wrong? Or is the direction China is moving in both been good for China or for the rest of the world.

HOST: Robert Lawrence Kuhn, you clearly disagree.





RLK: Well first of all, I do think this is a big deal. We need to look at this in a more fine-grained manner. People seem to do it very coarse grain in terms of the political controls and political stringencies that have been put on society, but you have to look at other things too. You have to look at the anti-poverty campaign where, under Xi Jinping, roughly the final hundred million people (will be brought out of poverty), there are about thirty million more to go. By 2020, there won't be any more extreme poverty in China. You have to look at Rule of Law which is underappreciated in the West - what is being done. It's not being done to supersede the Party, the way in the US system, but for ninety-nine percent of the people, the control of the courts is now away from the local party. Also, reform in the system in terms of the economy.

RLK: There are many very specific things that are going on that are very good for China's development. So it's important to look at both sides. The political side, which I agree with what Minxin said - but there are many other positive things going on. China is a complex society. It now has one leader and as we've said, he will be responsible for the successes and the failure. There's no place else to look.

HOST: What I'd like to do now is play you a piece of tape, some sound, that was taken from President Trump addressing Republican donors over the weekend.





TRUMP SOUNDBITE: "Don't forget China's great and Xi is a great gentleman. He's now president for life. President for life. No, he's great. And look he was able to do that. I think it's great. Maybe we'll have to give that a shot someday."

HOST: So Minxin, do you think President Trump was joking or how do you read and analyze what President Trump said?

MP: Well I think on the surface he was obviously joking, but it certainly reflects some kind of admiration he has for strong leaders in non-democratic system, and this is consistent with his past rhetoric, past behavior, toward strong men in non-democratic systems. So I'm not surprised.

HOST: And Robert Lawrence Kuhn, how do you think that is being digested by President Xi and the leadership there?

RLK: Well I don't think they take President Trump's comment too seriously. Trump may have been joking but he is obviously envious. I think one has to be wary if one is in China if the only prominent person that gives applause to this new policy is Trump. So China is not going to be motivated one way or another by what Trump says. They have their own approach.

HOST: If this is all so "hunky dory", why then do you think President Xi or the leadership, whoever it is, went so heavy handed after this announcement last week?

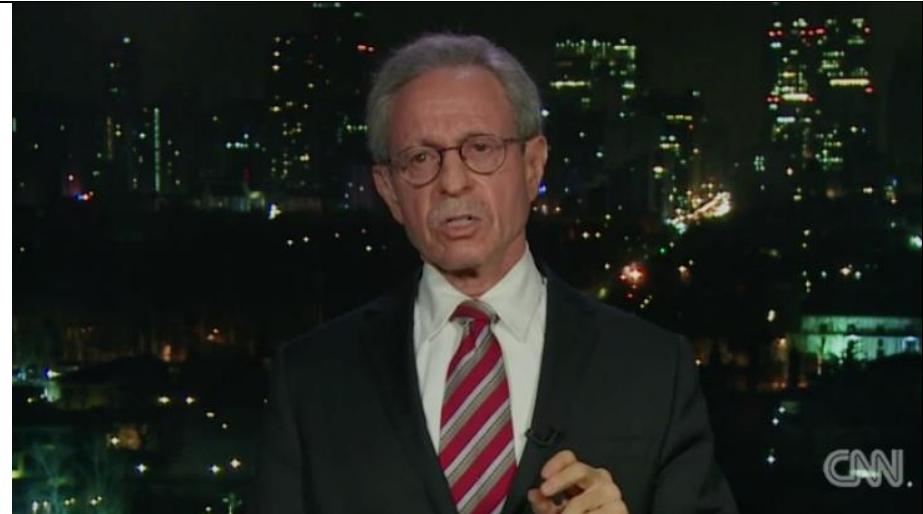




HOST: I mean banning references to Winnie the Poo because some people think his shape looks like that famous cartoon bear. Banning references to the letter N. You know all of these kinds of things that just bolster what's been going on which is an increasingly repressive, increasingly anti-dissent, and an increasing collective, rather an increasing surveillance state. Why go through banning those kind of, what we think is silly?

RLK: What I'm saying does not say that everything is "hunky dory." What I am saying is that there are two big sides to this picture. One are the accomplishments that can happen, which a high percentage of the Chinese people support. And the other side are the unintended consequences which is the brittleness of the system.

RLK: China is super sensitive to anything that affects its leaders or the party, and will jump. They're very sensitive to what happened to the old Soviet Union. They've studied that very carefully, and they will be extremely repressive to anything that threatens the system. And it's an experiment to see if that is possible. If you can have such absolute control and eliminate dissent and put anybody who has a kind of dissent in prison or whatever, and restrict the media. And to do that the same that you're promoting innovation. In the work report of the government today there were two or three major sections on innovation. It was one of the biggest changes that China wants to do in terms of universities and science and technology and freeing up businesses and eliminating red tape and bureaucracy. So there's a huge program to focus on innovation.





RLK: Can you do that at the same time you're having this political control that you've described correctly. That is an unknown experiment. It's the first time it has been tried.

HOST: Just to sum up, what is your most concern about Xi and his latest moves, Minxin.

MP: My concern is that Xi has bet a great deal of his political capital on a very hard line, nationalistic foreign policy that does not take into account the interests of the U.S. - and this policy has really put China and the U.S. on a collision course, and whether he can walk back from that policy. Of course, he has enough political power to walk away from that policy but he will also pay a huge cost, so we are all waiting to see if he can make some strategic adjustment right now to avoid getting into a long-term conflict with the U.S.

HOST: Meixin Pei in California, Robert Lawrence Kuhn in Beijing, thank you both so much for joining us on this really important day.

