



BBC World Service
19th CPC National Congress
Standing Committee of the Politburo
China's New Leaders

Robert Lawrence Kuhn

October 25, 2017

HOST: Let's speak to Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, a longtime advisor to China's leaders and the Chinese government, and the author of *How China's Leaders Think*. He joins us now from Beijing. And Dr. Kuhn I understand you were at the ceremony sitting in the front row. That's a very exclusive insight. Tell us what it was like.

RLK: It was very exciting. It was very majestic. The Great Hall of the People is a huge place and there were hundreds of news reporters from China and around the world. You're waiting there an hour and then suddenly the seven new members of the Politburo Bureau Standing Committee walk out on the stage. This specific hall is not a giant one so you're really right there.

HOST: But it's quite a spectacle by the sounds of it.

RLK: You're caught up in the nature of state power, the majesty of the event, but it's really quite significant because in China, the Communist Party rules the country, the Politburo rules the Party, and the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Communist Party is right at the very top. However, this year it's a little bit different because when "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era", this important new phrase, was enshrined in the Party Constitution, it made Xi a very different individual compared to the other members of the Standing Committee. He is now the overarching arbiter of political thought - so it's a position much superior to the other standing members, a position he did not have prior.

HOST: Now you know the Chinese leadership and I'm just wondering with the names I am looking at, one of the tweets here at the BBC World Twitter feed. It's presenting the six men on the new Standing Committee with the Chinese President's picture on top. These are now the most powerful men in China. Tell us about those names and were you surprised by the selection of any of them?

RLK: Yes so there are seven. Two were from the previous standing committee. President Xi or General Secretary Xi since we're using his party title, is certainly on top



and in a different category, as it were. And the number two is Premier Li Keqiang. The other five members are new and in the last few months everybody in the know pretty much knew who these people were going to be. It's a very competent group, a very highly experienced group. Frankly over the years, I have met privately and have had conversations with the five of the seven, so I can really speak firsthand about many of them. And these are individuals who have run major provinces or major cities like Shanghai, the GDP or population of which are the size of many European countries, some larger. So it's a very well-experienced group, it's very balanced politically — although internal party affiliations are often exaggerated by the foreign media (and more complex). Nonetheless there is balance – two are from Shanghai, two from the so-called Chinese Youth League, two are closer to President Xi. Of course, President Xi now is completely dominant in terms of his overarching authority.

HOST: It's interesting that you mention balance, Dr. Kuhn, because what we're not seeing are three main things really. We haven't seen or heard the name of a successor. There isn't any youth represented in that group. And there are no women. And I'm just wondering from your conversations with leading Chinese figures, why is that? Why aren't we seeing more women, young people, and also why wasn't a successor named?

RLK: Okay well those are a series of questions that are interdependent to some degree, but they really are independent. Let me take the one about a successor. First of all, the fact that Xi Jinping's name is in the constitution in one sense makes the concept of successors a really important question. The fact is that now the concept of successor is much less germane than it would have been in the past because even if there were a successor, for the rest of Xi Jinping's sentient life, he will be the supreme authority in China because he is, his name, and his way of thinking, and his philosophy, are all in the Party Constitution.

HOST: [interrupts] He'll be the reference.

RLK: ...the core of the party. He will be more than a reference. He'll be the overarching authority. Now, we still have the question about successor. We don't know that question, I'm just telling you that it is less relevant today than it would've been a month ago, and certainly a year ago when he was named Core. But the fact is that you are correct, there is no so-called sixth-generation person. There are some in the Politburo, but none in the standing committee. So there is clearly no obvious successor the way Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang were ten years ago. So there's no question that we don't know what will happen in 2022, what Xi will do, but I can assure you that as long as he's in physically good health it won't matter that much. He will still be in charge.

HOST: Many thanks, Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn – long-time advisor to China's leaders and Chinese government, and author of *How China's Leaders Think*.