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Xi Jinping and the New Politburo Standing Committee Robert Lawrence Kuhn - October 26, 2017

HOST: The author of *How China's Leaders Think: The Inside Story of Past, Current and Future Leaders*, Robert Lawrence Kuhn is a longtime advisor to the Chinese government. He comes to us once again from Beijing. We talked this time yesterday. Good to have you back. And we discussed yesterday what we would learn about that lineup of the standing committee. It hadn't been revealed at that point that we spoke, but we now know and is it correct to say the most significant thing is no sign of a leader in waiting?

RLK: I think the most significant sign is who the people are and how they relate to each other. It's a group that actually respects traditional norms.

RLK: There was thought that Wang Qishan, for example, might violate norms by being on the Standing Committee after the traditional retirement age and that's not the case. There is balance among the member in terms of their geographies, even their political affiliations within the party which internally are important. Two are from Shanghai, two are from the Communist Youth League - one is actually from Shanghai and the Youth League as well but he's really from Shanghai - two have a long relationship with General Secretary Xi. And then of course General Secretary Xi has the overarching power as everyone says - and that is correct and will be correct for a long time to come.





HOST: Absolutely, well certainly but breaking precedent by not having a young leader coming up behind him and we discussed this yesterday. The transfer of Mr. Xi will remain in power for many more years to come, perhaps revive the position of party chairman and stick around indefinitely.

RLK: There's no question about the power and longevity of Xi. I would put it a little differently. I'd say that it is not even necessary for him to have the party chairmanship or any particular title because of his overarching power by having his name associated with "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" - that whole phrase is now in the Party Constitution. Moreover, he already had the designation of "Core" of the Party.

RLK: So those two elements - name in Constitution and Core - are totally overarching over any particular title. That said, not having a younger member of the Standing Committee who is an obvious candidate for future leadership, prevents there being a separate power center that could undermine what Xi wants to do. So the fact that Xi will be there until, potentially, the mid-2030s is very real. I think now we should shift our attention to what Xi Jinping wants to do. We need to look at the policies he is putting forth, and see what they mean for China and for the world.

HOST: And I want to touch on that in a moment, but given this power and position afforded to him in the constitution no less, I mean where is room for discussion?





HOST: If not dissent at least a little difference in opinion when those who don't agree with him basically, because he's in the constitution, are against the communist party. They can leave or they can put up with it, no middle ground or perhaps question?

RLK: This is a very interesting point and it goes to the party concept of what they call democratic centralism and collective leadership. When Xi was appointed Core about a year ago, which was a very significant move, the party also said it was reaffirming collective leadership. Now that seems on its surface an oxymoron, contradictory, but in the Chinese system it was not, and it's good to understand why.

RLK: Xi has overarching decision making power which he didn't have before he was made 'core'. But he is obligated under the system to respect the system - if he continues to do so, and I certainly expect he will - to really listen to all of the opinions of the senior leaders, certainly the people in the standing committee. And to conduct substantial research, reviews with experts, and polling and iterative kinds of research that they do for all their major documents. So he is obligated to do such serious consultation under the party system. Now can he subvert it the way Mao did? I don't think that's really possible even if he tried and I don't think he will do that. So it's a combination of him now having the absolute power, no question about it, but still respecting party norms of how they go about the research and decision-making process.

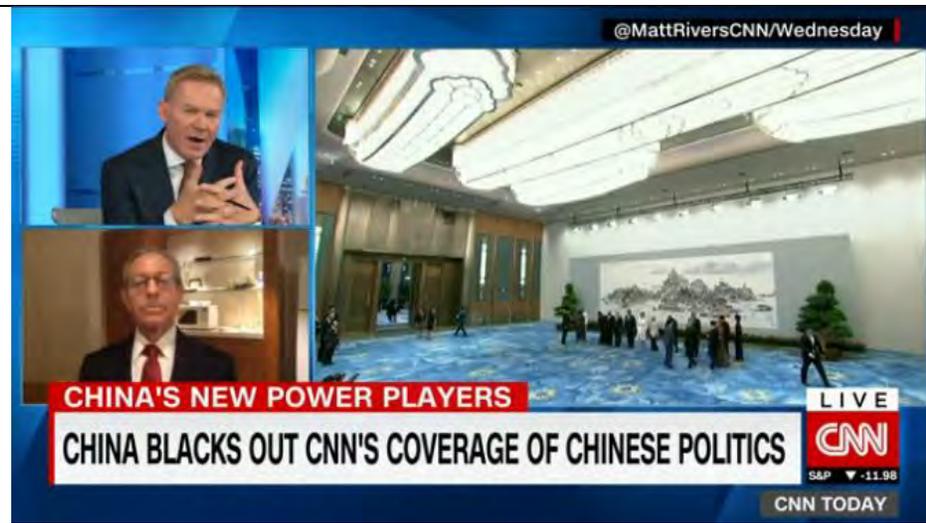




RLK: Now this will not mean overt dissent from the media. Certainly, that has been suppressed and will arguably for the foreseeable future continue to be. But in the inner circles, he is obligated to continue to seek guidance and get alternative opinions.

HOST: Speaking of the media you just reminded me of something and we were having a lovely conversation yesterday. I don't think either of was being particularly rude or anything. And let's put up the video because you and I were chatting about, just regular Chinese politics and what was happening and this was what happened in our office. We were shut down by the censors in the middle of our conversation. What does that say about how things are going to be run?

RLK: China is extremely sensitive during this particular time of the 19th CPC National Congress. They do that for all national meetings but this is probably the most central time. All elements of media are under strictures. Who knows at what level decisions are made? But even internet connections this week have been terrible because of extreme censorship. I expect that will lessen in the future. But it is endemic of the situation and we will all learn to live with it. As I said, there's a larger picture here about what Xi is going to do in terms of his people orientation, rejuvenating China, comprehensively deepening reform, and strengthening rule of law.





RLK: We have to wait and see how that strengthening of reform and strengthening of rule of law is going to turn out.

HOST: Indeed. I do have one final question because Mr. Trump is heading that way in a matter of days really. What does Mr. Xi make of Donald Trump? Donald Trump thinks they're best buddies. What do you think Mr. Xi makes of Donald Trump?

RLK: Before Trump came into office I know very specifically there were various think tanks that were engaging in various scenario planning on how to deal with Trump and his vicissitudes.

RLK: And the conclusion was to let it play out, don't react to virtually anything, and treat the U.S. just like it did in normal times. And so I think that will be the approach. It'll be very straight forward. China won't react to the highs or lows. It'll treat the protocol at a very high level. And I think based on Trump's personality that he will react well to that. The substance that comes out of that, whether it's North Korea or trade, will have to wait. We could be quite skeptical about the substance of the results, but I think the form will look good.

HOST: It's going to be fascinating. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, great to have you on again. Appreciate your insights. Thank you.

