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President Xi Taiwan Speech

Robert Lawrence Kuhn

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BBC HOST: President Xi Jinping of China has made a speech which scared the horses and some courses, saying that the people of Taiwan are to accept that it must and will be reunited with China. He reiterated Beijing's call for peaceful unification on a 'one country, two systems' basis, but he also said that China reserved the right to use force to achieve this unification. It may be a reaction to a speech on Wednesday by the Taiwanese President Tsai, who said, "I want to reiterate that Taiwan will never accept 'one country, two systems'." And she went on to say the vast majority of Taiwanese public opinion also resolutely opposes 'one country, two systems' and it's the Taiwan consensus. Well Dr Robert Kuhn is the author of a number of books on China, including "How China's Leaders Think: The Inside Story of China's Past Current and Future Leaders". And he recently met President Xi at a ceremony where he received the China Reform Friendship Medal. Hello Dr Kuhn.

RLK: Good evening from New York. I have been here for a few days , just back from China. Very interesting speech. I look forward to discussing it.

BBC HOST: Well, I'm very, very interested and tell us what struck you then about President Xi's speech. Was it a reaction speech? Was he making this speech because President Tsai went out on a limb - and talk to us hopefully as she did - about Taiwan maintaining its independence?

RLK: No, Reacting is not the motivation for President Xi's speech. It might have been in his mind as he and his staff drafted it, but that's not the motivation. This was the 40th anniversary of a positive change in the relationship between the Mainland and Taiwan. This was a very natural speech. China leaders, in general,

would be unlikely to react with a speech in response to anything that any other country would say. China has its own agenda and its own ways of doing things. What to me is interesting is that if you look at the instant commentary by the many pundits, some of whom are friends, this speech has more diversity in terms of the initial analysis — where some people think it's more aggressive than previous speeches and others think it's a more conciliatory than other times that President Xi has spoken. I think there are elements of both here that causes us to do some further analysis. On the positive side President Xi did emphasize — and I think we need to emphasize — that peaceful reunification is absolutely the most important thing. He said Chinese do not fight Chinese. But he held open the option of using force, which every leader of China has always done. Leaders in the past have said to keep open the option of force counterintuitively reduces the likelihood of using force.

BBC HOST: So we're not wrong to focus on this sentence where he says, "...we make no promise to give up the use of military force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means."

RLK: Yes, but that is no change from anything said by Chinese leaders since I've been following China for 30 years; every leader has said that, maybe in slightly different words. What is new, which may be new, corroborating your concern, is some statements that said — I paraphrase — "you know, we can't let this go from generation to generation" — because the truth to tell, that was the attitude of previous leaders: to keep the status quo, to let time solve it one way or another. But President Xi to make that comment is to me a little bit different. He's setting a timeline. As we know, President Xi is not subject now to term limits. So I would think that he and his vision for what China's "national rejuvenation" means, which is what he has set as the banner for his legacy in term of leadership. He talked about the Chinese dream and a good part of the Chinese dream is this national rejuvenation. Xi is now setting that the reunification with Taiwan under 'one country, two systems', which Xi stresses, includes respecting the people's property rights, religious rights, judicial rights. I mean, he spelled those out too, which are, which are positives, which are definitely part of the carrot. But for him to really go into history as his vision for China's national rejuvenation, the Taiwan issue has to be solved.

BBC HOST: What about the relationship with Taiwan and the United States? Because here we've got the Taiwanese representative to the United States and Washington on the first of January saying that the diplomatic ties as well, not diplomatic, but that the relationship with the United States is good, you know, as strong as it's been for years he says.

RLK: I think that's true. And I think part of the motivation for that is the increasing distrust and problems between the US and China across a broad front. The headline may be the trade war, but disputes go much deeper and broader than that. And it has changed fairly dramatically in the last couple of years. So where there's a general consensus in the US among large majority who have always been pro-China, who sought to help China's development and so-called peaceful development, peaceful rise, now the feeling is that the trajectory that we're on is not good for the US and has to be changed. So even though the large majority of the experts in Washington who deal on China issues do not agree with the way President Trump operates in general and specifically with tariffs (which they think is all wrong), but none of them or very few of them will argue that Trump is wrong in confronting China. So, there's this general disappointment among many that this type of confrontation or dealing with China in a different way is long overdue. And part of that change in attitude would be a natural reaction to support Taiwan in a more aggressive way. On the other hand, Taiwan worries that President Trump could treat a Taiwan as just a 'trading chip'. And if Trump thought it would help him negotiate with China, he would use it. And if he thought it would help to discard Taiwan, he would do it.

BBC HOST: Just to pick up on what you were saying there. Really we're not wrong to see some kind of a sea change in American attitudes to China right now. The foreign policy establishment is no longer saying, well, you know, let a thousand flowers bloom or whatever they were seeing for the last 20 years.

RLK: And it's not just the foreign policy community. It is also the business community, which has always been the strongest supporter in China attitudes and the American Chamber of Commerce in China has become 75 percent negative. It is more difficult to do business in China. So it's a concatenation of things all coming together. I'm choosing to be optimistic and the reason I am is I think that both President Xi and President Trump have a lot on their plates, very different things on their plate. China has very significant economic issues, financial risk with significant debt. President Xi has made a real commitment to eliminate all — all! — extreme poverty in China by 2020, which would be, cumulatively, roughly 800 million people. There are 30 or so more million to go. Tremendous focus. Xi has put his tremendous energy on poverty alleviation. Staking his credibility. Also on anti-pollution and deleveraging. Xi's international program called the 'Belt and Road' to build infrastructure in developing countries is a huge agenda. And the trade war is a real annoyance, especially because it becomes broader than that. President Trump obviously has an election coming up. The stock market won't treat the economic volatility and uncertainty kindly and that will affect the economy and threaten a recession. So each side has no incentive to make this go on. So I'm hopeful. But frankly, even if you see a

respite and a trade deal, unfortunately I think we've passed a certain trigger point and that it may not ever go back to where it was. I think there's a sober realization that even if we have a deal, this relationship between the US and China is now for the long foreseeable future into, if not a confrontation, at least a wary eyeing of each other and a recognition that the other side is my problem.

BBC HOST: And how does this play into the one sort of military manifestation, which is American warships going through disputed waters in the South China seas to fly the flag.

RLK: That's certainly part of it. I would say in prioritizing sensitive issues that Taiwan itself is the biggest. I've heard this from Chinese generals": the Taiwan issue is the one that could really erupt in a hot war, an exchange of things we don't like to exchange. Whereas the South China Sea is dangerous, it's probably more controllable. So we don't expect any lessening of what the US will do with its freedom of operations movements. China will continue to dispute those and use boats to maybe threaten to ram American ships. There's another issue here being played out: nationalism in China, as it is in all countries, is a very high motivator of public opinion. And I don't think we can discount that because China doesn't have a multi-party elections. We tend to think that China is a dictatorship, but it really isn't. It is a different system for sure, but it is very subject to public opinion and very sensitive to it. And on the issue of Taiwan, Chinese public opinion is extremely nationalistic. And so we have a complete divergence — between Taiwan, where the percentage of people who would like reunification under any circumstances is probably, I don't know, 15, 20 percent, and most of those would say not even now — and in China it's 80, 90 or more percent of the people feel that force is justified because it's the final step in...

BBC HOST: Mao's vision isn't it?

RLK: That's China's century of humiliation. It's the last piece that needs to be redressed.

BBC HOST: Well Dr. Kuhn, you've given us a lot to think about. Thank you so much for your company.

RLK: It's a pleasure. And we'll keep following. China won't be going away.

BBC HOST: Thank you.