

BBC Radio
BBC Radio 5 Live
Hong Kong Protests - China
Robert Lawrence Kuhn
August 14, 2019

BBC HOST (Dotun Adebayo, well known BBC host and personality): Robert Lawrence Kuhn is a long-time adviser to China's leaders and multinational corporations. He is also the author of *"How China's Leaders Think"* and the host of "Closer To China". Robert, how is China's leader, President Xi Jinping, viewing these increasing volatile protests in Hong Kong?

RLK: Hi, Dotun. Good evening from New York. I got back from China a few days ago. There was an interesting change in June. For several months, there was almost no coverage in the Chinese press and then suddenly it became very serious. Because it is a very serious situation — and what we see is a tension between several of the critical "goods" that are important to China and China's leadership. On the one hand is stability, which is needed for economic development, and rule of law, which is essential for social development and which China has been promoting dramatically.

RLK: And on the other side is the "One Country Two Systems" principle which has been sacrosanct in Hong Kong and which China eventually would like to apply to Taiwan — which is a very important part of the Chinese rejuvenation and political structure. So, you have a tension between these two, because the "One Country Two Systems" principle would have the Hong Kong government totally in charge and with no intervention by Beijing. The way I put it is this: Beijing will make the absolutely minimum interventions necessary — the absolutely minimum — but still not allow any of three "red lines" — any one of three red lines to be crossed.

First, is any movement towards independence or quasi independence.

Second, is Hong Kong being used as a base to undermine China's political system.

Third, is relentless chaos, which would undermine Hong Kong's economy and bring a halt to Hong Kong's way of life, its help of the mainland in its reform and opening up.

RLK: Hong Kong is now part of what's called the "Guangdong Hong Kong Macao Greater Bay Area" coordinated development zone. which has a GDP of \$1.7 trillion — that's 12 percent of China's entire GDP. If the Greater Bay Area were a country. it would be just out of the top 10 in the world. Moreover, it's the engine with which China looks to reform and transform its economy.

Hong Kong is critical to that economic engine. And so you have this tension between the two: the need for stability and rule of law and respect for "One Country Two Systems". And so far, China is restraining and allowing the Hong Kong government, the Hong Kong police, to do all the do all the work.

But, as you see, the rhetoric from China is escalating and it's getting to the point.... Yesterday, they used the word "terrorism" for the first time, which is an ominous word, that some of the protesters are terrorists. You've seen this escalation really over the last week. And so, we're watching hour by hour to see what happens.

BBC HOST: How should we interpret that use of the word "terrorism", as they used it just yesterday, wasn't it?

RLK: Yes, exactly. It's ratcheting up the rhetoric. You know, China is not fooling around. Once again. it has the high principle of this "One Country Two Systems". And so, the Chinese government will do everything it can to support the local government. And my guess is that they're encouraging the police to become more aggressive. We just had a court decision in Hong Kong, an injunction, allowing the police to forcibly remove the protesters.

I mean, if this were happening in New York at LaGuardia Airport or at Heathrow , what would our local governments and our police do here?

RLK: On its surface, the turmoil is very disruptive to the daily lives of the people in Hong Kong. But yet there are issues that are resonating with a good part of the population. So, the Hong Kong people themselves have their own internal tension. So, we have tensions on both sides, and we hope it doesn't degenerate into what people talk about as "the fog of war", where incidents happen and they're misinterpreted on both sides. It's a volatile situation.

BBC HOST: I'm looking at those three red lines that you mentioned and it's a fairly open to interpretation. It's open to interpretation whether the protest amounts to a call for independence from Beijing.

RLK: Well exactly. And this is this is a critical point. Very few of the protesters were actually saying that — they are saying they want concessions, in terms of protesters who have been jailed, they want them released. They want a change in how they characterize the protesters. They want the Extradition Bill, which was the initial cause of this, or at least the proximal cause (there are deeper causes of course that go way back), they want that Bill affirmatively withdrawn. It has sort of been in this netherworld, not being pursued but not completely dead either, what protesters think are kind of "weasel words" where they cannot be 100 percent sure that it's dead. They want the Bill dead.

RLK: In addition, many are calling for the resignation of Carrie Lam, the CEO / chief executive of Hong Kong. And that's probably an anathema to Beijing because the feeling is that you give in to violence and protests and now even the word terrorism — if you're giving into that, then you are encouraging that. That's a traditional approach that most government take to terrorism. If you give in to kidnapping, if you pay ransoms, you're just encouraging more of the same. So, that is the concern right now — Beijing is very strongly supporting the current government.

Some people say that some sort of a modest concession by the Hong Kong government would allow this situation to ratchet down, while clearly some of the protesters would like Beijing to intervene militarily, because then that would sort of be a "Rubicon that is crossed", which might [those few protesters think] kind of put the whole question [of Hong Kong's status] into uncertainty. But I don't think that's anywhere near the majority: I think the majority want to live their lives in the economic comfort of Hong Kong — traditionally, Hong Kong has been one of the best places in the world to do business. It's always been number one or number two in the world.

RLK: And people benefit from that [Hong Kong's success] and they want to continue benefitting from that. But many do want their freedoms protected over the long term and they've seen certain erosions of that. And then this Extradition Bill was the catalyst that brought all this to the fore. But the violence is undermining, actually, some of the some of the demands, or some of the sympathies, that the protesters have, because everybody is being unpleasantly affected by it.

BBC HOST: Yeah. Again it's open to interpretation, isn't it, whether Hong Kong is being used as a base to undermine the viability of the Chinese political system.

RLK: Sure. I think that's a very valid point. There is certainly increasing rhetoric within China. You see it on social media, not just on the government-controlled media — people who believe that to be the case and they believe that American officials, local consulate people, or CIA agents, are stirring the people up.

You know, for almost every charge there is some justification, but there are many different factors that are going on here. I think you have to stretch credulity pretty far to say that this is caused by the CIA, but nonetheless that is the "meme", if you will, that is circulating in China.

Nationalism is on the rise. National is on the rise all over the world, which is a very troubling fact. China is certainly not immune.

BBC HOST: I think it's safe to say that what's been happening at the Hong Kong International Airport in Hong Kong in last couple of days is relentless chaos. You know, I just wonder, because all these things are open to interpretation, I just wonder what the trigger will be in deciding the angle: "This is no longer tolerable."

RLK: That's the big question. I think I'd like to frame it in the other way around. What would it take, on the other hand, to give some sort of face-saving mechanism to the government and offer some kind of concessions and a cooling down period for everyone. So, if we can ask both sets of questions, I think that would help us at least to have a framework for understanding what's happening. I think there are some kinds of concessions that the majority of the people would accept.

And I think it's probably short of Carrie Lam resigning. I think there are some things that could be done — something said, maybe some of the people arrested released on an amnesty — which for most of the people would satisfy them. Nothing will satisfy a [certain] group of people. I don't know how big the group is, but it's not just a handful. It's a lot of people. Nothing will satisfy them. They want to cause the chaos because they're looking to see if that can have some sort of an ultimate triggering point, catalyzing some kind of Hong Kong independence in one way or another from China. That will not happen. China will not let that happen. No leader of China could sustain his position if he would allow Hong Kong to split off in any way. So, China's very chary to allow anything close to that.

RLK: Now, on the other side, what would it take to make the final trigger? Obviously, if there's some very violent clashes that are leaving people dead. I think another trigger would be if the police, for example, refused to carry out laws or orders from the government to have some sort of a removal [of the protesters]. So, if the police look like they're defecting, so to speak, I think that could be a trigger. You know, we like not to think about the bad triggers. We like to think about the good triggers, but wisdom tells us we better do both.

BBC HOST: To what extent do the events of 30 years ago, Tiananmen Square, inform how Beijing will approach what's going on in Hong Kong today, because you know the protesters — let's be real now — they did connect their protests to that, because this uprising or whatever you want to call it in Hong Kong was predicated, was it not, on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests, 30 years ago, June the 4th. I wonder whether that plays on the minds of President Xi and his colleagues, whether it's a line not to cross or whether it's something that informs the decisions that they're going to make now?

RLK: I think it would be a mistake to make an analogy too closely to the June 4th 1989. I'm sure there are many people in the protest group who do that. I think there are so many differences between what Hong Kong is and what that event was that. June 4 was a spontaneous event of students — Hu Yaobang died — and people were just dealing with the kind of local things at the time. Hong Kong is much more complicated, if you think about it in terms of the economy, in terms of China's economy and China's whole political relationships.

RLK: In fact, what's helpful to do — maybe I can do it quickly — is to describe why Hong Kong is so important to China. There are actually five reasons: two economic and three political.

The first economic reason: it's the way companies have done business in China, with a completely independent judiciary and legal system that people and companies would have confidence in. That's actually less important today with the rise of Shanghai, Shenzhen and other cities in China. Hong is still important, but not as important.

The second economic reason, which I mentioned, is important: this “Guangdong Hong Kong Macau Greater Bay Area” coordinated development or regional integration plan, which is needed by China to reform and transform its economy, make it more modern, make it more high quality. So, Hong Kong is exceedingly important economically for that reason.

RLK: Politically, I mentioned that the “The Country Two Systems” principle is sacrosanct. China wants to apply it eventually to Taiwan so they don't want to violate that....

BBC HOST: It's a reductio ad absurdum.... “One Country Two Systems” — it doesn't make sense.

RLK: Well, sometimes in politics, you say things that don't “make sense” in order to bridge gaps that seem unbridgeable. That's the brilliance of politics. I wish we had some people like that who could do it with Brexit. I don't seem to see it from this side of the Atlantic. [*Laughs*]. You have an issue and you have an absolute gap between people, then you figure out how you can bridge the gap.

When the U.S. spy plane was shot down [and had to land in] China in 2001, and the Chinese said it was spying, and the US said it was in international waters, eventually they came to some agreement — and there was slightly different wording in the Chinese translation and the English translation but it was with diplomacy — they got it out and they put the thing behind us. Was there inconsistency? Sure as hell there was — but it got it done.

RLK: And I think that the “One Country Two Systems” is a very clever idea to bridge what seems to be an unbridgeable gap. How you interpret that — it's an “interpretation” as you were saying earlier — and that is exactly right. How do you do that? It's complicated.

RLK: By the way, the other political reasons why Hong Kong is important to Beijing — I just want to get these on the table because they are important.... The second political reason is that Hong Kong does represent the reclamation of Chinese historical integrity and dignity after its so-called century of humiliation and oppression at the hands of... you know, thank you UK, British Empire and other Western powers, and then eventually Japan. Hong Kong symbolizes the return to China's grandeur.

RLK: And the third political reason is China's image in the world, which is really important to China. How China governs and manages. And so all of these reasons — two economic and three political — are in the pot. So, it's much more complicated today than it was in 1989 when China was wasn't involved in the world at all; it had almost no serious economic participation. Today China's is the leading trading partner to virtually every country on Earth (not every, but almost every country) and is deeply involved. And so all of these interdependent factors are there today, when they've never been before.

RLK: So, you know, you need the wisdom of Solomon here.

BBC HOST: Robert, from what you say, it's better off that we stay out of it. [BBC HOST and RLK *laugh*]. We could argue that.

RLK: Concentrate on Brexit, my friend!

BBC HOST: Yeah, we've got enough problems of our own.

BBC HOST: [*Laughs*] And Robert, thank you very much.

RLK: It's a pleasure, Dotun.

BBC HOST: Thank you. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, the long-term adviser to China's leaders and multinational corporation. He is also the author of "*How China's Leaders Think*" and BBC HOST of "*Closer to China*".