



BBC World Service

Hong Kong Protests - China

Robert Lawrence Kuhn

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Host: To view the Hong Kong Protests from Beijing's perspective, Robert Lawrence Kuhn is long-term advisor to China's leaders and multinational corporations. He received the China Reform Friendship Medal, China's highest award, given by President Xi Jinping. He is the author of "How China's Leaders Think".

RLK: One needs to understand the importance of Hong Kong to China. There are two economic reasons and two or maybe three political reasons. Economically, Hong Kong has been the world's window to China, has facilitated China's grand reform and opening up, one of the greatest economic developments, perhaps the greatest economic development, in history — but that is less important today, frankly, because of the rise of Shanghai, Shenzhen, and other cities in China. However, what's called the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area coordinated economic development, is exceedingly important. It's the mechanism by which China will transform its economy from dependent upon labor and cheap goods to high quality. It's exceedingly important.

RLK: Politically, Hong Kong exemplifies the 'one-country, two-systems' strategy that China has employed and hopes in the future, of course, to apply to Taiwan, a very dicey issue. It also reflects China's national pride and it is a signal of China's soft power in the world. So all of this together makes Beijing very careful to abide by the original rules which supports the local Hong Kong government.

RLK: However, there are two significant red lines, pardon the pun, a crossing of which will not be tolerated. Number one is any move towards quasi-independence or any separatism. This is a very big deal in China. They just published a white paper, "China's National Defense in the New Era," and separatism, whether it's in Tibet or Xinjiang or Hong Kong or Taiwan, has been elevated in importance. So this is critical. The second red line is chaos and riots. China says that stability is critical for development, that stability is critical. They certainly don't want to encourage any activity that would allow

violence against the rule of law or undermine the economic development, and with the worry that could spread to the mainland, if they're not vigilant.

Host: So how close do you think red lines are to being crossed then, when civil servants are saying that they will join in a city-wide strike in Hong Kong on Monday, for example?

RLK: It is becoming serious. If you track the approach of the Chinese media over the last several months as this has been developing, initially, it was not reported at all. It just was blank. Then media became very critical as the violence and the riots in Hong Kong, as they called them, were occurring and to where now it is disrupting the economy. The government hopes that the people of Hong Kong, the government of Hong Kong, will be strong enough to overcome this for their own good. But ultimately if they can't, China will do whatever it has to do. And the way I say it is this: China will do the absolute minimum in terms of intervention, either with words or beyond words, that they have to do. But they will do whatever they have to do to protect those core interests.

Host: But if it comes to military action and some kind of crackdown on protestors in Hong Kong by troops from Beijing, it would be done right in the glare of the international media. Would they possibly risk that?

RLK: It is absolutely the last thing that they would do, they've been questioned about this. They say that the purpose of the military — and you can read that white paper, it just came out, it's very, very clear on all these topics — the purpose of the military is to safeguard China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. So that's a signal. At the same time, they say that they have absolute faith in the Hong Kong government, they do not want Carrie Lam to resign, that would be giving into protesters. They're supporting her and her government very strongly, supporting the police, encouraging the people, for their own sake, to stop the violence. But they're looking at it very carefully. So, no move is off the table.

Host: And in a few words, because we're coming to the end of the program, how realistic an option do you think democratic self-rule is for Hong Kong?

RLK: As close to zero as one can estimate.

Host: You don't think it'll happen?

RLK: I do not. I don't think that's in China's interest. Whether it's in Hong Kong's interest is a question of great debate of course. But that type of change, which is what I would call a move towards quasi independence, is what China will not allow.