



BBC World Service

BBC Newshour

COVID-19 – WHO

China-US Disputes

Robert Lawrence Kuhn

May 18, 2020

BBC HOST - JAMES COOMARASAMY: Joining us now is Robert Lawrence Kuhn, who is a commentator and author on China and based in the United States. He has advised and worked with China's leaders in Beijing for more than 25 years. Welcome to the program. Now, you're a long-term adviser. How would you advise the current Chinese leadership to avoid being drawn into a bitter political dispute with America?

ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN: That's a critical question at this time when it is critical for the United States, Europe and China to work together to control the coronavirus. If we go back to the early stages, which I followed very carefully, President Xi Jinping and leadership talked about the need for being open and transparent and for recognizing that there needs to be improvement in the original healthcare system.



KUHN: They talked about error correction, improving information collection and decision making. What happened after that, when there were attacks from Donald Trump and others, is that China had an adverse reaction.

And then that created all the international diplomacy, the wolf worriers, the threats, the mask diplomacy, where China insisted on getting credit for what it was doing — and that had a hugely negative backlash. Hopefully, China will learn that lesson and can be more confident in what it really did right.

If you follow what happened, China, the leadership, they didn't know what was going on. The chief epidemiologist, Zhong Nanshan — like Anthony Fauci in the U.S. — has said that there was a cover-up in Wuhan in the early stages. He has said that over and over again, and he said it again recently. And so that is China's position. There were mistakes made.

BBC HOST: But has that narrative gotten out, though? Has it been rather lost in the original cover-up?

KUHN: No! That's the problem. The problem is that what China has said from the beginning, that there was there was a cover up on a local level. It wasn't at the level of national leadership, but that was done. And people were fired because of it. But because there was this negative reaction from people in the West — and in today's social media this becomes highly exaggerated — and China felt the need to fight back in order just to satisfy their own nationalistic domestic issues. So, I think, having said that, that was the problem.

BBC HOST: So, having gone down that path. I mean, can they can they walk back from that?

KUHN: Yes.



BBC HOST: Or are they now inevitably engaged in this sort of social media battle?

KUHN: China needs to be confident in what it did and what it's doing. It did release the genome as quickly as possible. It did release a lot of information as soon as they knew it — after that initial cover up at the local level.

President Xi just gave a speech at the WHO and if you just sense the tone of it, you can see, I hope, a shifting of its diplomatic approach.

BBC HOST: And what he's offered is he's offered large amounts of money as well, hasn't he? I mean, is this now how China can frame this? That they can say, look, we are taking a global view of this? And look, the United States is attacking the WHO?

KUHN: China is definitely a major supporter of the WHO — and even though maybe at the initial stages the WHO did follow what it thought was China's approach in terms of human transmission (for a few days). There were mistakes made.

China needs to have the confidence in its system to know that it should be totally open and transparent — the way leadership has said it should be. That's the only way out of this.

To have the “Wolf Warrior” diplomats and to demand praise for participation in helping other countries is clearly not the way to go. Certainly not in the modern world.

KUHN: I think China is learning that lesson. And if you look at all the things that China is doing, it is really remarkable how quickly they contained the Corona virus. And that is because of the system. We see the same thing in poverty alleviation.

BBC HOST: I'm afraid we have to wrap it up there. That's all we have for this edition of [BBC] Newshour. Goodbye.