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Hong Kong

National Security Law

Robert Lawrence Kuhn

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HOST: Robert Lawrence Kuhn is a longtime adviser to the Chinese government. He has been awarded the Medal of Honor by President Xi Jinping. When I spoke to him earlier, I asked him, first, about that chap whom the Hong Kong police had arrested for displaying an independence flag. Why was that deemed such a threat to national security?

ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN: The four areas that are talked about — secession, subversion of state power, terrorism (local terrorism), and colluding or cooperating with foreign powers. All of those are very carefully chosen and all of which will be enforced. China went through a year of Hong Kong protests with uncertainty of how to handle it. Their image internationally was affected. But, more seriously, is that second category — that subversion of state power, where Hong Kong could be used as a base to undermine the political system of China.

HOST: Right. Right. I hear it. I hear that. But I just wondered why a man holding a flag that says Hong Kong independence is seen as such a threat to national security law.

KUHN: It is serious and it's going to be enforced. And the more they do that, the more Hong Kong people will start self-censoring, which is the primary object. China does not want to have tanks in the street and soldiers marching. That's not the point. They want to set a number of examples so that people will recognize it's in their own best interests not to violate these four areas.

HOST: Yeah, I mean, so you were very open about that. So self-censorship. People should understand. I mean, and indeed, as we've heard from the senior adviser to the Hong Kong government last year, anyone who conspires with foreigners. Well, it's a case of killing a few chickens to frighten the monkeys. Right?

KUHN: That's a good Chinese expression — I think that's apropos.

HOST: But isn't that chilling?

KUHN: From China's point of view, it would be more chilling to undermine the political system and cause chaos in China.

HOST: And a man holding a flag saying Hong Kong independence. Complete chaos in China?

KUHN: If the law is not taken seriously, and examples not made, nobody will take it seriously. [HOST: Right.] China was in a position for many months where it didn't do anything. And that was interpreted, as China sees it, as China being weak.

This law is passed. It is stronger than most people expected, in terms of its specification and the capacity to implement. And by arresting this one person — I take your word for it — it just making that example.

KUHN: And it is in China's interest for Hong Kong to prosper. And they want Hong Kong to prosper economically, and they want to impose a political stability in order to have economic prospering.

HOST: But really, I guess at the expense of democracy. Just to be clear about that.

KUHN: Absolutely correct — that there is a limitation of democracy in order to have economic vibrancy. That's the concept.

HOST: Even if the majority of Hong Kong people don't want that. I mean, I I've seen because....

KUHN: Absolutely. Because Hong Kong is viewed as part of China.

HOST: So the “one country, two systems” is completely over.

KUHN: If you look at exactly what's happening — I can appreciate why we would say that, but from China’s point of view, they would look at it as *protecting* one country, two systems. Now, the argument may be a little bit complex, but they look upon it as protecting those elements of the two systems, which can be done. Under the current condition, the feeling is that it is so undermining the one country that it has destroyed the “one country”, part of the “one country, two systems”. So this is an attempt to put back a balance so that the two systems — in China's interpretation of that — can make sense.

And the key element is an economic one, because China is developing its economy based on regional integration plans. There are three of them: one in the north, Beijing, Tianjin; around Shanghai (Yangtze River). And the big one is the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.

HOST: Robert Lawrence Kuhn: he's an adviser to the Chinese government, also commentator on Chinese affairs and he speaks to me from Southern California. You're listening to Newshour.