



OPINION / VIEWPOINT

CPC leadership, commitment and mobilization drive China's success: Robert Kuhn

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Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn is investigating poverty alleviation work in Daijing village, Huishui county, Qiannan Bouyei and Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Southwest China's Guizhou Province. Photo: Courtesy of Dr. Kuhn

Editor's Note:

"Though the CPC's 100-year history has not been linear, there has been a vision, a dedication to bring about that vision, and a commitment to policies required to make it happen," said Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn (Kuhn), chairman of The Kuhn Foundation and recipient of the China Reform Friendship Medal (2018), expressed to the Global Times his views on why the Communist Party of China has been able to go through the past century with quite a number of remarkable achievements. Why could the CPC turn the tables for China's destiny? How does the party keep dynamic? Kuhn

believes that "Essential are long-term policy commitment and a commitment to make changes, fine or broad, based on real-world feedback."

GT: The Communist Party of China (CPC) was founded in 1921 three years after the end of World War I. The CPC has led China through various wars and the West's suppressions that aimed to isolate the country. It then took China to reform and open-up, which has resulted in the country's remarkable prosperity. What is your take on the CPC's success to repeatedly turn the table for China's destiny indicate?

Kuhn: It has been a privilege and a pleasure to have spent more than 30 years not only observing China but also participating with China as the largest population on earth undergoes the greatest transformation in history.

I have given deep thought over the years as to what has brought about China's developmental miracle? Consider eleven principles.

1. A people who work long and hard to improve the lives of their families and the destiny of their country.
2. The prioritizing of economic and social development over ideological rigidity.
3. A one-party-leadership system (what is called "the multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the CPC") that enforces political stability and media control and encourages economic development and social enhancement.
4. A one-party-leadership system that is structured in hierarchical administrative levels - central government and five levels of local government: provincial, municipal, county, township, village).
5. A one-party-leadership system that prioritizes selection, education, training, monitoring and inspection of key personnel, inculcating a high degree of administrative and managerial professionalism.
6. A one-party-leadership system that solicits, and pays attention to, expert opinion, whether in the Party or not, as exemplified by the increasing influence power and social pressure of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.
7. A one-party-leadership system that solicits, and pays attention to, public opinion.

8. The setting of long-term goals, mid-term objectives, and short-term policies that are monitored and modified continuously; policies that need long-term commitment have long-term commitment.

9. A way of thinking that experiments and tests before implementing and rolling out.

10. A one-party-leadership system that provides checks and balances via anti-corruption institutions

11. A one-party-leadership system that is willing to admit and correct errors.

In early February 2020, soon after Wuhan was locked down, I went on record in the media, international and Chinese, expressing confidence that China would contain the escalating epidemic. I based my confidence not on prophetic gift but on China's success in alleviating extreme poverty, which I had been following for years. I saw a revealing parallelism between China winning the war to control the contagious coronavirus and China winning the war to eradicate extreme poverty. The common root was the leadership and organizational capacity of the Communist Party of China that celebrates its 100 anniversary this year.

The structural similarities between anti-pandemic and anti-poverty campaigns are striking: CPC leadership, General Secretary Xi's commitment, CPC mobilization.

First, the operational leadership of the CPC - not just giving directives and making pronouncements, but implementing programs and operating projects through the CPC organizational structure - central government and five levels of local government (provincial, municipal, county, township, village).

Second, the commitment of Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee - who sets an example that leaders and officials must follow. Almost everywhere Xi goes, he stresses poverty alleviation and encourages Party officials to visit impoverished areas regularly and interact with poor people directly. Xi has made the remarkable statement: "I have spent more energy on poverty alleviation than on anything else." I know no other national leader who has made such an assertion. Similarly, during the pandemic, when Xi visited hospitals and spoke with frontline workers, the whole country got the message.

Third, the mobilization capacity of the CPC - commanding the country's resources in personnel and materials. To contain the epidemic, China's mobilization was unprecedented in global health history: locking down Wuhan and neighboring cities,

60 million or more people; house-to-house temperature checks; the CPC's grid management system of social control; postponing the return to work after the Lunar New Year break of hundreds of millions of travelers; recruiting major companies, state-owned enterprises and the private sector, for support and logistics; assigning "sister" relationships between strong provinces and hard-hit cities in Hubei, a strategy long employed in poverty alleviation between eastern and western provinces and cities.

Similarly, the success of China's targeted poverty alleviation campaign, bringing about 100 million people out of abject poverty since 2012, included the complete relocation of millions of poor farmers from remote mountainous villages to newly constructed urban and suburban residences.

Nowhere else could such mega-projects work like they worked in China. And the reason they worked is because the Party-led system works for mega-projects. Going beyond the great good of poverty alleviation and pandemic containment, understanding how the CPC accomplished both provides insight into the CPC's governance structure and organizational capabilities. This is especially important at this time of heightened awareness of China's increasing role in international affairs and the increasing sensitivities to it.

Those who recognize China's unprecedented success in both pandemic control and poverty alleviation must also recognize its causal relationship to China's overall Party leadership, and a strong, command-down, Party-led government. While all political systems have trade-offs, and while achieving national objectives is indeed an advantage of China's Party-led system, it is not the only criterion for evaluating systems. There are challenges as Chinese society becomes more dependent on information and innovation. This is why continuing reform, opening-up, and system improvement are needed.

GT: The CPC uses the system of democratic centralism. In your opinion, what's the difference between the CPC and the Western parties that adopt an election system?

Kuhn: The CPC, the Party, is a "work in process." It will always be, and that is its strength. For the world to understand the China, it must understand why the CPC asserts that its continuing political leadership is optimum for China's development. One key is the Party's adaptability, stressing experimentation and testing new policies. But the CPC, as the perpetual ruling party, has a higher obligation to enhance standards of living and personal well-being, which includes reform, rule of law, transparency in government, public participation in governance, increasing

democracy, various freedoms, and human rights. President Xi states that the CPC should be governed by standardized rules and procedures that are open to public oversight. Only by adapting continuously, focusing on real-world issues, can the Party construct a truly prosperous society that is sustainable.

The Party-led system involves effective feedback mechanisms, which in turn can help fuel innovation and energize improvement. Real-time monitoring of results effects changes. The Chinese government uses scientific polling to get a sense of what people think. So, even though there are no elections in the Western sense, there is a good deal of feedback from different constituencies. For example, when officials are nominated to new positions, there's often a period of time for feedback from colleagues, subordinates and bosses. And when new policies are considered, scientific polling assesses opinions and attitudes of those who would be affected.

Moreover, the work reports of Party leadership at Party congresses every five years, and the work reports of the government at the National People's Congress each year, reflect a great deal of input and suggestions from all relevant officials, experts and constituencies. These work reports are not just what top leadership puts together for form and ceremony. No, they are drafted by many teams, and feedback and opinions are solicited from numerous officials and experts; the documents circulate iteratively many times during the six to eight months or more of the drafting period.

These work reports are exceedingly important in the Chinese system; for the government, they assess the achievements of the past year and set the plans for the next year; for the Party, it's the past five years and next five years, respectively. So there is this intricate and extensive feedback between experts and officials over many months, plus various in-field research and polling.

Understanding the process of drafting the work reports of the Party and the government is a good way to understand how China's system works. If one simply states that China is a 'perpetual Party-led government', it sounds rigid and aloof. In fact, the drafting of the work reports tells a different story. When one sees how the Party operates, including this monitoring, this polling, this feedback, one begins to see how the Party implements change based upon the real world.

GT: The US and other Western countries have repeatedly attacked the CPC and launched groundless sanctions on the party's members. However, such moves have increased Chinese society's support for the CPC. By being so aggressive with offensive moves, what has the West misjudged?

Kuhn: There are major misunderstandings and miscommunications between China and the US and other Western and developed countries, which have worsened in recent years. It is not a simple story and simplistic explanations mask real issues.

Though the CPC's 100-year history has not been linear, there has been a vision, a dedication to bring about that vision, and a commitment to policies required to make it happen. This way of thinking exemplifies Xi Jinping's leadership. To take one example, an important one, Xi makes the remarkable statement: "I have spent more energy on poverty alleviation than on anything else." I know no other national leader who has made such an assertion. And his example, drives officials at all levels to do the same.

GT: Despite China adopting a political system that is different from the West's, the CPC has always been people-centered. The Chinese government's handling of COVID-19 could be a justification. From your observation, how does the CPC manage to motivate itself to bring the Chinese people the best it can?

Kuhn: China's development, primarily since the beginning of reform and opening-up, is perhaps the most sustained developmental success story of any country on Earth. If one looks at almost every aspect of real life, Chinese people have higher standards of living and more personal freedom than at any other time in their long history. Moreover, China's vast population is finally free from widespread famine, pestilence, homelessness, illiteracy, political mass movements and other social scourges.

But times change, and new questions arise. How to involve citizens more in the process of governance and the oversight of government, like through social media and public polling? What's the relationship between the ruling party and rule of law? How to balance the need for social stability with the importance of access to information in a knowledge-based economy?

Although socioeconomic progress is never consistently linear, and there are always setbacks, China's long-term sustained development reflects the long-term consistency of policy that characterizes the Party-led system of governance. Because the Party's leadership is in perpetuity, built into the Constitution, the system is very different from the Western model. All political systems have trade-offs, of course, but one benefit of China's Party-led system is that those kinds of programs that require long-term commitment can have long-term commitment. Party leadership can commit to policies of multiple years and even of multiple decades. For example, President Xi's "targeted poverty alleviation" campaign, which required about eight years to eradicate all extreme poverty - would go well beyond election cycles in other

countries.

Other massive programs that demand this long-term continuity include Rural Vitalization; the South-to-North water diversion project; healthcare system reform; and most recently a multi-decade plan for scientific and technological self-sufficiency and leadership.

One process that China's Party-led system has used repeatedly is prototyping "test cases" - for example, the original special economic zones like Shenzhen and Xiamen. These areas were experiments, allowing foreign capital and expertise, differential wages, and other concessions.

But China didn't say: "Oh, such a great idea - let's open up the whole country." No, that would have been dangerous. It took until around 1984 before leadership could concur that this reform and opening-up policy of the special economic zones was really working, so that then it could be implemented broadly. This principle of prototyping, monitoring and modifying is an expression of Party leadership.

In recent years, free trade zones, beginning with the pilot in Shanghai and then, after three years in testing, dozens of others, including the entirety of Hainan province, shows how the principle is being applied. Essential are long-term policy commitment and a commitment to make changes, fine or broad, based on real-world feedback.

GT: Most officials in the Chinese governments are CPC members. In your personal experience of interacting with them, what of their characteristics has impressed you the most?

Kuhn: China has a long history of recruiting its best and brightest into public service, a sophisticated process that the CPC has adapted for contemporary times. Not well known in the West, the CPC's Organization Department is responsible for selecting, educating, training, monitoring, assessing and promoting Party and government officials - and when necessary, for demoting or firing them. The process is rigorous, quantitative and continuous - with increasing transparency and broad-based participation. Training is intense and career-long. Rules of workstyle and personal behavior are firmer. Regulations reject extravagance and reduce bureaucratic meetings and "empty talk." Training campaigns stress strictness in morals, power and self-discipline, and honesty in decisions, business and behavior. For over 32 years I've been meeting Chinese officials at all levels - and, in general, Chinese officials are some of the most competent administrators anywhere.

Some years ago, when I posed a question to a senior provincial official about the living conditions of residents during a fact-finding trip tracking the country's development, the answer proved unforgettable. He had on the tip of his tongue the specific percentage of people in his province who were not drinking clean water. It was down to the 10th of a percent and he knew the specific county where those people lived. This exemplifies the high-level professionalism in governance that the Party system has developed.

GT: You have been to China various times since late 20th century. Why can China maintain dynamics to develop when the certain developing countries are slowing down their steps? What's the CPC's role in this regard?

Kuhn: I have been to China over 200 times since my first visit in January 1989 and I follow world affairs closely. I start with an undeniable truism: All systems of governance have trade-offs. The benefits of a system with a single leading party include the capacity to implement critical policies rapidly and assure that strategies which require long-term commitment have long-term commitment. The costs or dangers of a system with a single leading party is that society is much more dependent on the quality of its leaders, and much more vulnerable to their vicissitudes and excesses. There are trade-offs too in stricter public regulations. Going forward in the "new era," the CPC faces challenges: effecting economic reform and transformation and guiding social development and transition, while at the same time, improving transparency and checks-and-balances, and building institutions that are self-correcting.

GT: The US has demonized communism and socialism. Yet why have socialist thoughts upheld by Bernie Sanders won a large number of supporters in the US? What's your take on such a trend?

Kuhn: I am of the view that political philosophies that developed in the 19th and earlier centuries are, in the 21st century, not relevant at best and counter-productive at worst. "Socialism" as a political term of art is used in different ways by different people and different countries in different historical contexts, such that to analyze properly all the expressions and exemplifications of what the term Socialism means would require a rather large book. I suppose I could write such a book, if I had the time and the inclination, but I have neither. Suffice it to say that I am perfectly content to allow those who want to use the term "Socialism" to use it as they see fit, but simple comparisons among different usages are misleading.

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