

BBC World News TV – China’s Syria Policy

March 28, 2012



Robert Lawrence Kuhn, international corporate strategist, investment banker, China political and economics commentator and expert on the China business market.

Mishal Husain, Host: Let’s turn to the diplomatic side of things and take a moment to look at what Kofi Annan achieved in China, a country that had been very opposed to internationalizing the Syrian crisis. Mr. Annan has now left Beijing with approval for his peace plan and with the Chinese Foreign Ministry pledging their continued support.



HONG LEI
Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman

Hong Lei, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson: China is happy to see that the Syrian government has accepted the Six Point proposal of special envoy Annan and believes it will be conducive to the political settlement of the Syrian issue. We hope the Syrian government and relevant parties in Syria will honor their commitments.



DR ROBERT KUHN
Advisor to the Chinese Government

Mishal Husain, Host: Live in New York now is Dr. Robert Kuhn, who’s an advisor to the Chinese government and author of the book, *“How China’s Leaders Think.”* Mr. Kuhn, tell us what changed in the thinking of the Chinese leadership on Syria.



SYRIA UPRISING
Syria accepted proposed UN-Arab League plan on Tuesday

Robert Lawrence Kuhn: Nothing has changed, and that’s the point. China is thrilled with Syria’s acceptance of Kofi Annan’s Six Points because China found itself in an awkward situation. China and Russia were the only major countries in the world that didn’t support the UN resolution on Syria. All the countries of the West, the entire Arab League, were on the other side. China was in a terrible diplomatic position, and therefore, Syria’s acceptance of Kofi Annan’s plan is very much a positive development for China. In fact, Annan’s plan is very similar in approach to what China had proposed sometime ago.



SYRIA UPRISING
Ban Ki-Moon: Syria should implement plan ‘immediately’

China has no real stakes in this game. It’s almost an all-lose situation, no matter what they do. You have to understand China’s position. China is very much against the dethronement and regime change of those individuals who are deemed to be anti-West. Some in China still look at politics as a zero-sum game. If Assad is anti-West, that puts America, Europe, off-balance, otherwise occupied, so they’re less concerned about China’s core issues of Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, South China Sea. And so people in China feel – not everyone, but some – that these anti-Western régimes are actually beneficial strategically to China.



SYRIA UPRISING
China urged all parties in Syria to co-operate with plan

There is another reason that China opposes regime change. China believes that any international intervention across international borders is a very bad precedent, because at some future time, it could be used against China.



Mishal Husain, Host: So, essentially, the Chinese leadership looked at this peace plan and thought that there is nothing in this that's too dangerous, in terms of setting a precedent for internationalizing a dispute?



Robert Lawrence Kuhn: Sure, because it did not call for regime change. That is the most important factor. China has really no great motivation to support Syria. They don't sell arms to Syria. They don't get oil from Syria. China would like to see this conflict resolved in a peaceful way, but yet, not in a way that encourages regime change. China felt tricked by what happened in Libya. They gave permission in the Security Council for a no-fly zone and saw that changed into armed intervention which resulted in regime change. They didn't want that to happen in Syria.



Mishal Husain, Host: And, clearly, the Libyan experience looms large for all parties. I just want to imagine this scenario—it's not so hard to imagine: We've got the Assad government signed up to a peace plan that includes ending violence, but clearly that's not what's happening right now. If the other members of the Security Council could then go to China and say, "Look, he's not abiding by what he said he would do." Then does that cause a rethink, a more interventionist attitude, from the Chinese?



Robert Lawrence Kuhn: I think it would put them in a very difficult position because they still have those two fundamental things they're concerned about. They do not like to see the demise of anti-West leaders and they're worried about setting a precedent for international intervention. But yes, continuing Syrian armed attack would put them in a position where they might have to support more aggressive responses.



Mishal Husain, Host: Okay, and what about some of the language that's been used to criticize China and Russia and their stance on Syria? I'm thinking particularly of Hillary Clinton when she called opposition to the last Security Council resolution, "despicable." Do you think that had some kind of effect? Because it was always a high-risk strategy, diplomatically.



Robert Lawrence Kuhn: Well, generally, international public pressure on China can be counterproductive. Chinese leaders, especially in a year of leadership transition, cannot be seen to be "soft" on the West, or as submitting to external pressure. So public beratement of China, generally, will work against getting a resolution. But in the deep heart of leadership conversation in China, they do not want to be seen as a roadblock, they do not want to thwart the development of international peace and prosperity. China, indeed, wants to become part of the solution to the world's problems, not an obstacle, and certainly not an additional problem. That's why this issue has been so thorny to China. No matter how they touch it, they feel like they're going to get stuck.



Mishal Husain, Host: But, for instance, what the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has put forward about the targeting of children... Does that make things more awkward for the Chinese leadership?



Robert Lawrence Kuhn: It certainly does. China's leaders know for a fact that to support or not to support the UN under these conditions where children are being killed puts China in an awkward international position. It puts them against the Arab League and virtually every country in the world. They don't want to be that way. They used to be that way in the 1950's and 60's, but China has changed dramatically.



China sees itself as a bulwark of peace and prosperity and stability, and wants to be seen that way among all countries. And so these conflicts pit two of China's strategic interests against this grand vision, and that's what causes the difficulty. Both sides here are very strong—on the one hand, the desire to help ensure stability as a great nation of the world, which indeed China is; and on the other hand, these deep-seated, perhaps archaic, but still deep-seated, strategic interests of not wanting to eliminate anti-Western forces, because it would then put additional pressure on China's core interests, and of not wanting to set a precedent for international intervention.



Mishal Husain, Host: Okay, Robert Kuhn, thanks very much for joining us today from New York.