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Understanding China's Governance Is Vital – Robert Kuhn's Media Briefing on the 19th CPC National Congress

By staff reporter LU RUCAI

ROBERT Kuhn is a successful entrepreneur, bestselling writer, and TV anchor, but he is probably best known as an “old China hand.” In the past decade or more, Kuhn has taken on the responsibility of introducing modern-day China to the world.

The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) convenes on October 18 in Beijing. Shortly ahead of this grand event, Kuhn was invited to give a briefing to overseas media outlets stationed in China as well as those from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan on his thoughts about the conference, and President Xi Jinping's governance concepts.



Robert Lawrence Kuhn, chairman of the Kuhn Foundation, is a China expert. Dong Ning

“I have a deep respect for China, and am a friend of the country,” Kuhn said. He hopes to present to the world exactly how Chinese leaders think and the circumstances whereby their decisions are made.

Kuhn spends more than a third of the year in China, carrying out field research. He consequently has ample opportunities to talk to officials at different levels. Despite complicated circumstances, Kuhn believes he can introduce the true China to the world in an objective way. Although no easy task, he is nevertheless willing to give it his best shot.

China's Goals

Kuhn observed that China now stands at a new starting point towards building socialism with Chinese characteristics. As to exactly what stage China has reached, Kuhn can think of plenty of ways of defining this, but that which gives the best understanding of the country, he believes, is: Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, China arose as an independent country; with Deng Xiaoping at the helm, the country became more affluent; and under Xi Jinping, China is growing stronger. This explanation, Kuhn said, is rational, and in conformity with the contemporary history of China.

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Chinese Dictionary:

Kuhn holds that the CPC should carry on the positive results of the Party's administration through history. This is why the Party reiterated at the 18th National Congress the Two Centennial Goals: successfully complete the process of building a moderately prosperous society by the time the CPC celebrates its centenary in 2021; and build China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious by the time the People's Republic of China celebrates its centenary in 2049.



Children frolic in a playground emblazoned with socialist core values in Nanling Village of Shenzhen, Guangdong Province.

To achieve the first goal, China needs to eradicate poverty, Kuhn said. This is expected to be fulfilled through the current on-target poverty alleviation campaign.

The Two Centennial Goals set an agenda for the coming 30 years. The first is expected to be realized before the next CPC National Congress; while the roadmap for the second goal will be charted at the 19th National Congress.

With regard to the development goals, Kuhn emphasized the effectiveness of one-party rule in ensuring the consistency of policies, which is vital for the country's development.

New Governance Concepts

Kuhn reiterated on many occasions what a challenge analyzing for Westerners the thoughts of Chinese leaders constitutes, as the policies themselves are hard for them to understand. In endeavoring to explain, he adopted a neutral stance, yet was still misinterpreted as voicing his personal views.

Kuhn habitually reads large quantities of Chinese leaders' written works and speeches, in order to note any changes in their stances. He also carries out regular exchanges with officials at various levels, as well as people in academia, to stay informed about the latest social changes. In 2015 he co-hosted the China Central Television program Closer to China with R. L. Kuhn, where he spoke with decision-makers from various fields, so presenting different facets of Chinese society.



[New judges of the Supreme People's Court of China vow loyalty to the Constitution on May 24, 2017.](#)

As to Xi Jinping's *The Governance of China*, Kuhn said the book presents Xi's political philosophy and way of thinking, and is symbolic of his emergence as strong political leader. In Kuhn's opinion, the Four-pronged Strategy, also known as the "Four Comprehensives," is one of the core thoughts of Xi's governance. The strategy encompasses four targets, namely, building a moderately prosperous society, pursuing an expanded in-depth reform agenda, implementing a comprehensive framework for promoting the rule of law, and launching an all-out effort to enforce strict Party discipline.

Foreigners often dismiss the political aphorisms of China's leaders as simplistic sloganeering, but in doing so they miss the opportunity to enrich their understanding of the realities of China, Kuhn said. Each of the "Four Comprehensives" has a specific nature expressed by a distinct linguistic definition. "Moderately prosperous society" is a goal; "deepening reform" is a means; "rule of law" is a principle; and "strict Party discipline" is an action or state of affairs. Moreover, each has been a major policy in itself, suggested and supported by previous leaders for many years: "moderately prosperous society" since 2002; "reform" since 1978; "rule of law" since at least 1997; and "Party discipline", in a sense, since the Party was founded in 1921.

Kuhn believes these four targets are expected to be realized in a "comprehensive" way, signifying that they should be understood at a higher level and under the backdrop of the new normal. For example, Kuhn said, the building of a comprehensive moderately well-off society means that every single Chinese person will benefit from social development, as it would make no sense if several millions of people were to carry on living below the poverty line. To realize deepening reform, rule of law, and strict Party discipline, it is necessary to unshackle society from previous interest blocs.

Furthermore, Kuhn believes that the issues highlighted at the 19th National Congress will also include the five key concepts for development – a theoretical guideline proposed by Xi Jinping, the Belt and Road Initiative, and how China and the rest of the world interact.

China's Role in the World

Kuhn believes that understanding the reasons why Xi Jinping is at the core of the CPC Central Committee is the key to comprehending Xi's thoughts on national governance and China's development. Xi's core position was formally affirmed at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee held in October 2016. "In the domestic and global contexts, China is confronted with enormous challenges, including overcapacity, pollution, social injustice, regionalism, terrorism, and geopolitical conflicts, among many others," Kuhn said. Tackling these issues requires intra-Party unity and solidarity, along with consistent and institutionalized policies.

The 9th BRICS Summit was held in Xiamen this year. In Kuhn's opinion, China is integrating with the world more deeply, and such multipolar mechanisms as the BRICS carry considerable importance. "China's contributions to mechanisms like the G20 and BRICS have reflected the changes in its foreign affair strategies," Kuhn said. "These positive changes are expected to be maintained, for they are not only beneficial to China's economic progress, but also helpful in resolving global problems."

Kuhn deems the BRICS mechanism as a test bed for new global governance. "China's GDP is six percent higher than the total of that of the rest BRICS nations. However, each country has an equal share and equal say in the New Development Bank." In other words, China enjoys the

same voting rights as other members regardless of its considerable economic weight. At the same time, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank works in a similar way. “So, this is the message that China has sent to the world.” Kuhn interprets this message as characteristic of China’s participation in global governance.

“The world’s most populated country and second largest economy, China has clearly shown its cooperation aspirations.” According to Kuhn, President Xi has envisioned a great target for the country. “He encourages China to be a global citizen and to be proactive in taking on its responsibility in various issues – from peacekeeping to anti-piracy operations,” Kuhn said.

What’s more, Kuhn praised the Belt and Road Initiative as a great project which the world needs. He suggests that China be more open and straightforward in presenting exactly how the initiative will benefit the country, in order to avoid misunderstandings due to ambiguities.

Over the years, Kuhn has discussed China-related topics through various media channels, and has published several books about China. For instance, *How China’s Leaders Think: The Inside Story of China’s Past, Current and Future Leaders*, which examines China’s reform and opening-up policy and Chinese leaders’ ideologies, has captured wide attention from readers in the West. What’s more, his TV series *Closer to China with R. L. Kuhn* has facilitated a better understanding of the CPC’s theories, policies, and administration, which from his point of view is a prerequisite to fully apprehending China’s development.

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