

# Interview: Belt and Road Forum transition from blueprint to roadmap -- U.S. expert

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Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, a prolific U.S. expert on China issues, gives exclusive interview to Xinhuanet, in Beijing, capital of China, May 14, 2017. (Xinhuanet/Wang Hanlin)

by Tamara Treichel

BEIJING, May 16 (Xinhua) -- The two-day Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation has just concluded, with some 1,500 guests from over 130 countries attending, among them Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, a prolific U.S. expert on China issues.

Kuhn, who has written and edited more than 25 books and is a much sought-after commentator on China, had some

compelling things to say about the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to build a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along the ancient trade routes.

The forum was the fourth event on the Belt and Road Initiative Kuhn attended, and he has been following the initiative's progress closely since it was first proposed in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping. He sat down with Xinhua on the sidelines of the forum to speak about this historic event.

Kuhn called Xi's keynote speech at the opening of the forum on Sunday "a grand vision for the Belt and Road."

"This is a change of the Belt and Road from theory and preliminary ideas, from a blueprint to a roadmap, from ideas on paper to projects on the ground," he said, adding that Xi put the initiative in its historical context of East meets West on the Silk Road and showed how much the world needed the Belt and Road Initiative to combat poverty and extreme inequalities that breed instability.

However, Kuhn stressed that the Belt and Road Initiative was not charity by any means. "It is not foreign aid, which is good at times, but it is often not sustainable," he said.

"The Belt and Road starts at the foundation, and builds infrastructure, so it enables the host countries, the developing countries, some very poor countries, to be able to develop their own economies ... You can't develop an economy without a foundation of infrastructure," he said.

He found the cooperation potential under the Belt and Road Initiative especially appealing. "He (Xi) showed that people who have differences in geography, race, religion, ethnicity, different views can work together for common development. But it needs to start with infrastructure."

The expert was especially impressed that China "is making a creative, proactive effort" with this initiative.

As Kuhn was listening to Xi's speech, he was pondering the potential challenges the Belt and Road Initiative faces in its implementation, a topic he is particularly interested in exploring.

"You have to start with a vision, but unless you appreciate all the challenges, the difficulties, it's going to have problems in the future," the expert said.

When asked how other countries can better benefit from China's wisdom and solutions, Kuhn said the countries would derive a dual benefit.

The first benefit would be the projects themselves, which would provide the "desperately needed" infrastructure for an economy to grow and become integrated into the global economy.

The second one would be the "more subtle benefit" of China's reform and opening-up experience that other countries could learn from, for example how to avoid pollution.

The expert also had a lot to say on how the initiative would help the world recover from the economic sluggishness.

"I think you have to look at the Belt and Road Initiative in the long term. I think it's a mistake to try to say the Belt and Road is going to have an immediate benefit," as haste makes waste where infrastructure projects are concerned.

"Infrastructure projects are not measured in years, they are measured in decades," Kuhn said.

"You need to understand the Belt and Road in terms of the real economic matching between risk, reward, investment and return. And it's not short term," he said.

Kuhn remarked on the large turnout at the forum, which underscores the initiative's importance. "The world is collectively agreeing to build infrastructure, recognizing all the challenges involved, and I think that is the most important element that we have here, the results of which we will see over time," Kuhn said.

He suggested that think tanks would play a role in guiding the initiative in the right direction.

The expert also addressed a common misconception about the Belt and Road Initiative, which has been occasionally compared to the Marshall Plan that provided aid to Europe after World War II, or chequebook diplomacy. By contrast, the Belt and Road Initiative is truly win-win, he argued.

"Belt and Road is not foreign aid, which is giving charity ... it is truly win-win. The benefit of win-win is that it's sustainable," Kuhn said, adding that China has been open about the fact that the initiative would benefit its own country as well.

What's more, in Xi's speech at the forum, the Chinese president said that China has neither the intention of interfering in other countries' internal affairs nor would it export its own social system or model of development. Kuhn agreed with that approach.

While implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, participating countries need to respect each others' local cultures and governmental structures while at the same time applying the highest international standards, he suggested.

In sum, "the forum is a milestone in a big transition" from theory to "a major world commitment led by China" to promote global connectivity.

"This makes the commitment absolutely definitive," Kuhn said.

KEY WORDS: [Belt and Road](#)

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