



BBC World Service

BBC WEEKEND

Vaccine Nationalism
Biden China Policy
China Domestic Policy
Hong Kong / HSBC
Closer To Truth
Vaccine Skepticism

Robert Lawrence Kuhn

January 30, 2021

On January 30, 2021, Robert Lawrence Kuhn was on the BBC World Service “WEEKEND” for two hours, with another guest and the BBC host, Celia Hatton. Throughout the program, which presented many diverse topics, Kuhn had many short comments.



KUHN PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

BBC HOST, CELIA HATTON: I am joined today for two hours on BBC World Service Weekend by our panel guests: Loretta Napoleoni, Italian-born economist and author; and Robert Lawrence Kuhn, international corporate strategist, investment banker and commentator on China based in the US.

BBC HOST: Robert Lawrence Kuhn, let's speak about your career, because you've changed hats a few times. You began as a neuroscientist — but we don't even mention that when we introduced you today.

ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN: Neuroscience, and science in general, really are the foundation of everything that I do. I had this naive notion when I was young that I could understand existence through physics or philosophy. And then suddenly I thought that, no, everything we know comes from our brain. So, if we can understand how our brains work, we could understand everything. And of course, that was naïve.

KUHN: But I was trained in science and science has really been the foundation of everything that I've done. I went into investment banking and corporate strategy, and then in the late 1980s, because I was trained as a scientist and I was an investment banker, I was invited to China — not by my own choosing, just by the capriciousness of the cosmos — to advise the Chinese government on the reform of its science industry.

And as a result, while I was doing my investment banking and building a company in mergers and acquisitions, I would go to China — just for fun. I had no idea that China would be the important country and participating in world affairs as it is now. And to make a long story short, over the last 30 years, especially over the last 20 years after I sold my merger and acquisition company, I've been focused on China, Chinese politics.

KUHN: I'm a commentator. I've written two books on China: the first, the biography of the former president Jiang Zemin, and the second book on "*How China's Leaders Think*," which focuses on President Xi



Jinping. And I'm very pleased to be a regular commentary on BBC World Service, my favorite media.

But I also should mention that my life passion has continued to be science and philosophy. And I have this U.S.-based public television / PBS show called "*Closer To Truth*", which is also a YouTube channel where these concepts are presented.

BBC HOST: We are going to be speaking about *Closer To Truth* a little bit later in the program. It's a pleasure to have you on the program. This is your first time featuring on weekends. So thank you for joining us.

VACCINE NATIONALISM

BBC HOST: What's your take on this [competition between countries over the vaccine, including hoarding], I mean, who's to blame? Was this fight inevitable? And how do we solve it?

KUHN: First of all, no one on Earth will be safe until everyone on Earth will be safe from this novel coronavirus. Second, we have to recognize that individual nations in the world are properly intended to take care of their own citizens first, and that nations working together figure out in the marketplace of the global environment how they work together. So there are these two tensions involved. Because it's natural for individual countries to take care of their own.

KUHN: From the corporate point of view, let's realize where we were. It was it was a less than a year ago scientists decoded the DNA of the novel coronavirus and figure out what it was. We didn't even know about it [COVID-19] until roughly a year ago. And so it's remarkable how much has been achieved by diverse companies doing things [developing vaccines] in different ways.

And so the tension that we feel is where {, on the one hand,} we must inoculate the entire world, and yet while enormous progress has been made, we recognize that each individual entity, whether it's a company or a country, will each have its own priority.



And so in that tension, we should have a positive attitude and thank everybody for doing what they did.

BBC HOST: But if it's each country to its own, wouldn't smaller countries just naturally get squeezed out, wouldn't we?

KUHN: Yes, that's right. But remember the first thing I said: Big countries have to recognize that they will never be safe until everyone is safe. So they have a natural need for their own self-protection to help countries that can't do it themselves. So it's that tension that we're dealing with..

BIDEN CHINA POLICY

BBC HOST, CELIA HATTON: As I mentioned, we have two guests with us throughout the program. They are Loretta Napoleoni. She's an Italian born author and economist. And Robert Lawrence Kuhn. He's a corporate strategist, investment banker and a commentator on China based in the U.S.. Robert, you're not a politician or a career diplomat, but you're one of the very few Americans outside those fields to have close ties with the Chinese leadership.

I want to pick your brain a little bit. The new U.S. President, Joe Biden, has pledged to set a new tone in the relationship with Beijing, but also to deal with China's human rights abuses by uniting U.S. allies to counter China. Do you think that strategy will work?

ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN: First of all, China is the one policy where the Biden administration tracks the Trump administration — with several differences. First will be a focus on multilateral coordination with allies. Second will be an increase in human rights focus, which was not a concern of the previous administration. And third, I think broadly, strategically, that the Biden administration will seek to set a standard of stability and predictability as opposed to capriciousness and impulsiveness, which former President Trump actually thought was an asset.

The predictability of the Biden administration will be appreciated in Beijing, although some of the specifics obviously will not.

CHINA DOMESTIC POLICY

BBC Host: What's the mood in Beijing right now? A lot of Western countries are increasingly sounding the alarm on Xinjiang, on Beijing's treatment of weaker Muslims. There's a general agreement that Beijing is carrying out genocide. What are you hearing?

KUHN: No doubt there is concern about the global approach to China. President Xi Jinping in his Davos speech made several points in terms of wanting macroeconomic policy coordination. He talked about abandoning ideological prejudice and promoting peaceful coexistence and developing an international community for a shared future.

These are ideas that China puts forth, but the concern about international approaches to China are actually dwarfed by what's happening in China domestically. I think we in the West don't perceive that in China, for example, the biggest thing right now is the achievement, as they would see, of the so-called moderately prosperous society, 小康社会 [xiaokang shehui], of which the prime characteristic, in addition to doubling the GDP of 2010 in 2020 and income per capita, is the eradication of all extreme poverty in China. It is a number that could be eight hundred, eight hundred and fifty million people.

This today in China is the most important thing. Now in terms of the economy going forward, Chinese leaders are talking about a "dual circulation" economy. That's an odd phrase. But what it means is that China is going to look more domestically to be sure its own science and technology, so that the country's development is immune from the kind of targets that the U.S. has set on Chinese technology.

BBC HOST: Indeed, you've mentioned the two big parts of the Chinese government's agenda, you know, tackling extreme poverty, yes, and encouraging domestic consumption. But do those two parts of the government's agenda really matter when, A, there's a still extreme inequality in China? And, B, can the government really choose to ignore increasing international concerns about what's going on in Xinjiang? Does it have the luxury of simply turning in on itself and ignoring what the U.N. and others are saying?

KUHN: China has very particular red lines. It had a red line in terms of Hong Kong where it would not tolerate Hong Kong moving towards independence or economic chaos or using Hong Kong as a base to undermine the political system of the mainland. And so, whereas much of the entire world condemned the National Security Law and the implementation of it and various arrests of pro-democracy leaders, that made no difference whatsoever. And frankly, the vast majority of the Chinese people, even the educated and high-level people who were in universities, people who would criticize the government for many aspects, they actually support the governmental approach, both in Hong Kong and in Xinjiang. There is great support among the Chinese people for the policies that the government has.

BBC HOST: True, but there's also there's a lack of an independent media to discuss those two issues. We will, Robert, be returning to the issue of Hong Kong later on in the program.

CLOSER TO TRUTH

BBC HOST, CELIA HATTON. Hello, you're listening to Weekend from the BBC World Service. I'm Celia Hatton with us for the rest of the program until 830 GMT are our guests, Loretta Napoleoni. She's an Italian born author and economist. We're going to be hearing from her in a few minutes time. And Robert Lawrence Kuhn. He's an international corporate strategist, investment banker and a commentator on China based in the U.S.

Robert, you also have a long running television show that looks at some of life's big questions. Can you tell us about it?

ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN: Sure. "*Closer To Truth*" is my life passion. I'd say it's my "night job", but it's really what consumes me for my kind of intellectual life. It focuses on three areas: Cosmos, Consciousness and Meaning. And the best way to describe it would be just to give you some of the titles of the shows — which are also on YouTube — in each category.

KUHN: For example:

In Cosmos, what would an infinite universe mean?



Is the universe fine-tuned for life and mind?

And our favorite? Why is there something rather than nothing? What is nothing? Why is there anything at all?

In Consciousness, can the brain alone produce consciousness, our inner awareness?

What maintains our personal identity? Because every few years every molecule in our bodies change. So how are we the same?

And then in the Meaning category, we deal with philosophy of religion; for example:

If God exists, and if God knows the future, how can we have free will?

And also, if God exists, is God in time like we are or somehow outside of time?

These are some of the questions we asked leading philosophers and scientists.

And the thing I always point out is that it's not "*Closer To The Truth*", it's "*Closer To Truth*" without the "the".

BBC HOST: Interesting. If you could pick one episode, one conversation you've had, that really changed how you saw things, what would it be?

KUHN: You know, each one has its own richness. People ask me, are you "closer to truth" now after 20 years of doing this? And I can say I'm closer to understanding the *questions* and not necessarily the answers. Because I see the diversity of opinion both from a cultural and from a religious perspective, from science versus religion. People have very different kinds of views, but they all reflect on the human condition. And the more we understand the questions, the more we will see the commonality that all of us on who are human beings on planet Earth have in common.

And I think that's one of the things that I've come to see, is that that the commonality of people who are fascinated by these questions knows no boundary: not in education, income, race, ethnicity, countries — peoples from all over the world have these same passions.

BBC HOST: All right. Thank you, Robert.

HONG KONG / HSBC

[Kuhn comments after two stories: (i) a report on HSBC CEO Noel Quinn testifying before UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee on succumbing to CPC pressure in Hong Kong; and (ii) a long interview with Ted Hui, the exited Hong Kong legislator whose accounts were frozen by HSBC.]

BBC HOST: Let's broaden this conversation a little bit and look at the imposition of the National Security Law on Hong Kong, Robert Lawrence Kuhn: You've defended the Security Law, saying it's needed for the stability of Hong Kong. Can you explain your position on that?

KUHN: Yes, but that is not accurate, actually. What I do is I explain how the Chinese leaders think about it, as opposed to what I think about it. And there is sometimes "no air" between the two and sometimes it's a "great wind" between the two.

Regarding Hong Kong, China has three 'red lines' that they imposed on Hong Kong. First is that Hong Kong could not move towards independence in any way. It has to respect that it is part of China. Second, [severe] economic disruption through protest would cause economic problems. And third, Hong Kong being used as a base to undermine the political system of the mainland. And last year, China was pushed and made a decision to impose that law.

It is what it is, and it's supported by the Chinese people and certainly by the vast majority of the Chinese leadership.

BBC HOST: This was China pushed on that, though. Do you think they really had no choice but to impose it?

KUHN: Well, they had no choice because they set their own criteria — and on their criteria, with the three things that from I said, and from their point of view, all three of them were violated and therefore they had to pick the way to do it. But people thought they might send tanks into the streets. They didn't do that, but they imposed this National Security Law, which had great support throughout China.

KUHN: Just to comment on HSBC, because I really feel sorry for them. They were in a “no win” position. They're caught between this growing tension between China and the West. Last year, for example, HSBC was accused by Chinese social media of being complicit in trapping the Huawei CFO, Meng Wanzhou, when she was detained in Canada. So these are just manifestations of the decoupling in many senses between China and the West. And it's a it's a troubling situation. And each element has to be analyzed in its own in its own particularities.

KUHN: And Hong Kong in particular, is a great symbol in China of China's re-emergence. And, you know, Xi Jinping has made the Chinese dream, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people — and it has to involve Hong Kong. And so it's part of their national strategy and national image.

VACCINE SKEPTICISM

BBC HOST: Robert, is vaccine skepticism really a big problem? Or is this a declining trust in institutions?

KUHN: Declining trust is absolutely the problem. The world needs to respect science. It is absolutely astonishing that forty-seven percent of the US population is skeptical of vaccines. The reason is that there is a fertile soil for conspiracy theories, leveraged by social media.

It's a problem all over the world. In the US, [the conspiracy theories proclaim,] vaccines can make you sick; they cause autism; the “deep state” uses vaccines to insert nanobots to turn you into a liberal — the last I joke, of course, but the problem is real. Respecting science worldwide is essential for human progress.

BBC HOST: OK, thank you very much.



PANDEMIC PERSONALLY

BBC HOST: Now up to the end of the program, let's turn back to our guests, first, Robert Lawrence Kuhn. There was bird watching in New York. Are there any other crazes you've spotted that you never could have predicted before the pandemic?

KUHN: Well, I have to tell you, I'm a little bit sour because I love to play table tennis and would play two or three times a week at my favorite club in New York. And I haven't been able to do it.

And so I've been doing more weightlifting and winding up with a lot of joints that are hurting. So, you know, I have this kind of bad attitude towards the pandemic.

BBC HOST: OK, Robert, maybe you need to leave the house and go spot some owls.

KUHN: Yeah, maybe I should take up bird watching. It'll be easier on my joints.

Online for One Month

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w172x7d8q528trz> 28:58 starts intro; 41:20 vaccine nationalism

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w172x7d8q528yj3> 7:35 on Biden/China and China; 26:49 on CTT; 41:35 on Hong Kong and HSBC

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w172x7d8q529287>