

CHINA'S PANDEMIC SHIFT: THE END OF DYNAMIC ZERO-COVID

Johannes Nordin

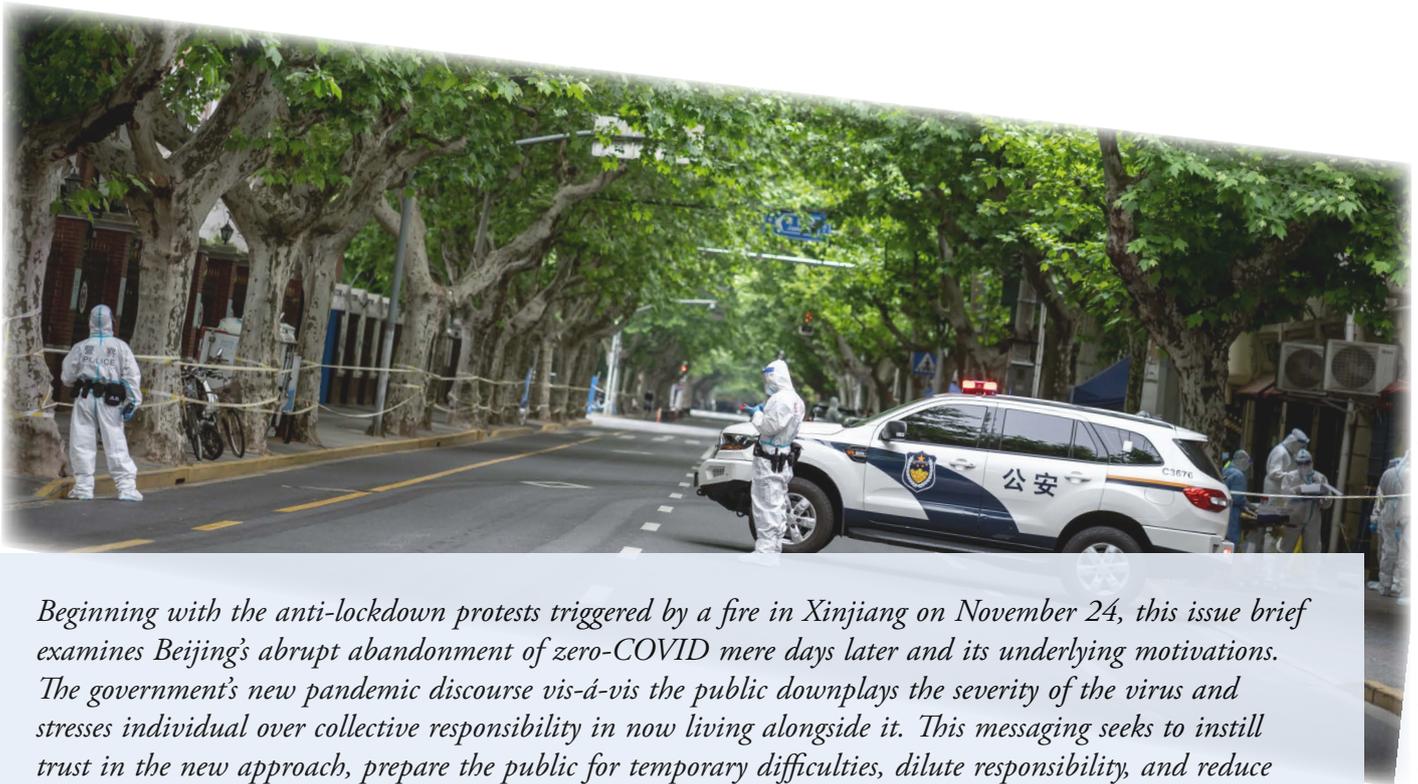


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Beginning with the anti-lockdown protests triggered by a fire in Xinjiang on November 24, this issue brief examines Beijing's abrupt abandonment of zero-COVID mere days later and its underlying motivations. The government's new pandemic discourse vis-à-vis the public downplays the severity of the virus and stresses individual over collective responsibility in now living alongside it. This messaging seeks to instill trust in the new approach, prepare the public for temporary difficulties, dilute responsibility, and reduce impending strain on public health resources while also characterizing the new approach as a calculated next step in fighting the pandemic. Yet, China's new pandemic strategy is not without key challenges and significant risks in the year ahead—both for public health and Xi Jinping's already imperiled pandemic leadership legacy.

While smaller, geographically dispersed anti-lockdown protests have broken out continuously throughout the pandemic in China, the demonstrations in late November to early December 2022 reached unprecedented proportions—at the time amounting to the largest non-state-sanctioned demonstrations since the protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989. A mere month prior, 49 Chinese cities, representing over a third of the population and two-fifths of GDP, had still been in partial or complete lockdowns.¹ Seeking to nip the protests

in the bud, authorities issued a drastic course correction for its longstanding “dynamic zero-COVID” policy, with a swiftly ensuing media reframing of the pandemic strategy, albeit with significant risks ahead in 2023.

The Anti-Lockdown Protests

The trigger for the protests on November 24 was a fire in a high-rise building in Ürümqi, Xinjiang province, which killed 10 people. The incident was followed by intensive speculation on social

media on whether ongoing pandemic restrictions had been a factor in delaying the authorities' slow response and if some of the buildings' inhabitants had been locked inside to prevent the spread of COVID-19.² Many citizens in Ürümqi had, at the time, lived through lockdowns that had continued for over 100 days.³ Although local authorities eased some restrictions within 48 hours, protests swiftly spread throughout the city and over 20 other cities, including Beijing and Shanghai, as well as overseas.⁴ Merely the latest occurrence in a long series of negligence from local authorities,⁵ the tragedy struck a chord with people throughout China, as many could envision themselves in the same situation, having lived similar realities.

Demonstrations over COVID controls spread swiftly, soon morphing into more general expressions of public discontent,⁶ including against censorship. At a vigil in Shanghai, some in attendance held up empty blank papers, indirectly referencing the criticisms they cannot express openly—a symbolic action that soon came to be closely associated with the protests.⁷ During on-campus demonstrations at Tsinghua University—Xi Jinping's Alma mater in Beijing—students chanted slogans related to freedom of speech and some sang the socialist international. There also circulated videos of anonymized protesters in Shanghai explicitly calling for Xi's personal resignation.⁸ Meanwhile, in parallel to the protests, violent riots were ongoing at Foxconn's factories in Zhengzhou,

where workers had been placed in so-called “closed-loop” management so that factory output would not be impacted.⁹

In the fire's aftermath, social media activities were so intense that authorities struggled to keep up with censorship tools. For instance, a hashtag on Weibo that highlighted the student protests at the Communication University of China (CUCN) received over 180 million views on November 26 before it was blocked.¹⁰ There were also livestreams of the protests uploaded to foreign social media platforms that normally are blocked in China but can be accessed with the right software. Leaked directives from China's Cyberspace Administration on November 29 show that authorities had initiated a “level 1 Internet Emergency Response” to limit censorship-evading tools and simultaneously encouraged local authorities to avoid unnecessary propaganda about the fight against COVID.¹¹ In parallel, there was also a mobilization of state-run social media accounts to drown out mentions of protests online.¹²

By the turn of the week, several universities announced that the rest of the semester would be held online, sending students from other provinces home to limit further escalation.¹³ While the largely decentralized protests still lacked unified goals, authorities were well aware of how university campuses can become a breeding ground for channeling discontent, as they were for the student-led movement that occupied Tiananmen Square in 1989. Before being censored, student groups at Peking- and Tsinghua University notably published signed letters with specific demands regarding pandemic restrictions and censorship.¹⁴ The historical parallels were accentuated when former President Jiang Zemin passed away on November 30, as the 1989 protests took place during the grieving period of General Secretary Hu Yaobang.¹⁵

On November 29, China's Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission pledged to “resolutely combat the illegal and criminal acts that disrupt

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the social order according to law,¹⁶ albeit without mentioning the protests that authorities sought to avoid formally recognizing. Security authorities quickly accelerated efforts to stamp out and discourage demonstrations, deploying large numbers of patrolling police units in major cities, including Shanghai and Beijing, to track down, question, and detain demonstrators.¹⁷ Yet, even as the protests gradually dispersed, health authorities soon announced an unmistakable course correction on pandemic restrictions.

Zero-COVID Policy in Flux

After a conference with pandemic experts on November 30, Vice-premier Sun Chunlan—China’s COVID Czar—signaled that the fight against the pandemic had reached a new phase. Without even mentioning the official “dynamic zero-COVID policy,” Sun said Omicron’s weakening pathogenicity and China’s over 90 percent vaccination rate together were laying the groundwork for carefully adjusted and continuously optimized pandemic responses.¹⁸ The statement thus signaled some continuity with prior policy. Yet, high-ranking officials also criticized the lockdowns’ implementation at the local level,¹⁹ where lower-ranking party cadres, pursuing career advancements or fearing reprimand for perceived indolence,²⁰ were incentivized to err on the side of overzealously implementing top-down directives. A double-edged sword, this unintended central-local policy dynamic undermined centralized control of policy execution while also allowing top authorities to scapegoat lower-level administration.

In the following days, local authorities eased restrictions in many major cities. On November 30, lockdowns were lifted in over half the districts in Guangzhou:²¹ Instead of the increased restrictions seen a week prior, officials were now being ordered to scale down PCR testing.²² In parallel, authorities in Chongqing allowed certain vulnerable groups to quarantine at home.²³ Moreover, from December 5, commuters in Beijing and at least 16 other cities were allowed to use public transport without showing a negative PCR-test. While restrictions remained for

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many public areas, such as offices, schools, and bars, the demands for PCR tests were also relaxed for grocery stores, residential neighborhoods, and Beijing International Airport.²⁴

When the Politburo gathered on December 6, there was no mention of the pandemic restrictions beyond two calls to coordinate better and optimize epidemic prevention.²⁵ Ahead of the meeting, China’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) issued a stern warning following reports that some regional authorities had resisted the new guidelines amid growing infections.²⁶ The following day, China’s National Health Commission (NHC) published a list of 10 new anti-pandemic measures. These included: administrative delineation of high-risk areas to specific buildings or households rather than entire residential neighborhoods; a formal removal of obligatory PCR-testing and proof of electronic health codes with some exceptions; at-home quarantining as a general rule and shortened quarantine periods; accelerated vaccinations of the elderly; obligatory reopening of schools without COVID spread; and strict bans on broad restrictions on people’s movement outside of high-risk areas and limitations on accessibility to emergency exits.²⁷

Alleviated pandemic restrictions were foreshadowed weeks prior, indicating at the least a partly premeditated policy shift. It held great symbolic value when Xi, who had gone to extreme lengths to self-isolate throughout the pandemic, interacted more freely with other global leaders during his first

international travels since 2019.²⁸ More concretely, Hong Kong officials had traveled to Beijing to share reopening advice in early November,²⁹ just before the Politburo unveiled 20 new pandemic prevention and control measures. These new guidelines introduced more detailed risk categories to minimize the number of people in quarantine or under health surveillance and reduced quarantine periods and infection tracing. Moreover, while reaffirming “dynamic zero-Covid,” the new guidelines warned against “one-size-fits-all” approaches and excessive policy measures that impede economic and social development.³⁰ Released in the wake of the 20th Party Congress three weeks earlier, underwhelming official growth statistics presaged an economy on track for the second-worst performing year in decades.³¹ Thus, the lockdowns were not only fueling public unrest but also increasingly jeopardizing the government’s growth targets—a central source of output legitimacy.

While authorities have framed China’s reopening as the next phase in a carefully calculated government-led policy,³² the breakneck speed of developments in late November to early December suggests policymakers had little space left for maneuvering. As the protests erupted, when Vice-premier Chunlan still called on officials to decisively contain the outbreak,³³ reported infections had already surpassed the surging numbers that preceded earlier months-long lockdowns in Beijing and Shanghai.³⁴

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Even as authorities scaled down PCR testing, stopped recording asymptomatic infections, and later ended daily data reporting, the total count of active confirmed infections ballooned further from 35,616 to 43,158 between November 29 and December 9.³⁵ The “zero-COVID” policy could thus no longer effectively contain the virus, ultimately ending not despite but rather because of the explosion of infections, well underway even before the restrictions ended.³⁶ Moreover, any attempts to return to stricter lockdown regulations would conflict with the Politburo’s most recent guidelines and fuel the extraordinary displays of public discontent and instances of civil disobedience. Authorities were thus under significant pressure to change course abruptly and rebrand official policy before its apparent shortcomings became unmistakable.

The symbolic shift away from zero-COVID reached its zenith on December 13, when Vice-premier Chunlan instructed officials to “shift from prevention and control of infection to medical treatments.”³⁷ The final blow came on December 26 when authorities announced the downgrading of COVID-19 to a Class B Disease from January 8, thus ending quarantines for international travelers and designations of high-risk infection areas.³⁸

New Pandemic Messaging

In the discursive shift away from zero-COVID, authorities have sought to pursue two parallel goals to maintain Party legitimacy and salvage Xi Jinping’s pandemic leadership. First, there was a need to glorify both past and present policy, justifying the occasionally excessive but overall correct pandemic strategy as having paved the way for reopening. For instance, the flagship newspaper *China Daily* declared, “Beijing readies itself for life again”³⁹ and later published a 12,000-word-long commentary praising the government’s pandemic handling.⁴⁰ Media also widely reported Premier Li Keqiang’s maskless December 10 meeting with foreign dignitaries at Mt. Huangshan, where Li said an “open China welcomes visitors from around the

world.”⁴¹ Second, authorities sought to make the still-wary public⁴² more comfortable with living alongside the virus and also accept greater personal responsibility in facing hardships that might follow. To this end, prominent state news agencies have highlighted, for example, vaccine efficacy among the elderly, how Omicron is not scary, and widely quoted CDC adviser Zhong Nanshan’s coining of the harmless-sounding “coronavirus cold (新冠感冒).”⁴³ Hu Xijin, former *Global Times* Chief Editor, notably wrote that he was willing to take the risk of getting infected if lockdown restrictions no longer impacted young people’s lives and jobs—sentiments unheard of mere weeks prior.⁴⁴

Neither health authorities nor news agencies have denied the surge in infections, which beyond increasingly flawed statistics, can be inferred from various proxy variables, including Beijing’s 16-fold week-on-week visitor increase to fever clinics and rationing of fever medicine.⁴⁵ Officials instead openly signaled that many, if not most, Chinese may get infected in the coming weeks and months. Xiaofeng Liang, deputy director of China CDC, and former CDC deputy director Feng Zijian have said the first wave might infect around 60 percent of the population at its peak, over 800 million people.⁴⁶ A leaked memo later revealed NHC experts estimated up to 248 million people had been infected in the first 20 days of December.⁴⁷

In addition to being impossible to suppress on such a scale, public knowledge of the infection rates serves to incentivize participation in the government’s fast-tracked vaccination drive. It also signals the transition from collective to individual responsibility in living with the virus,⁴⁸ as authorities can no longer meaningfully prevent its’ spread and increasingly must ration limited health resources. To this end, local authorities urged infected people to quarantine at home to conserve ICU beds, with Beijing officials even urging the public not to use emergency medical hotlines unless severely ill.⁴⁹ While NHC health authorities claim to have increased ICU beds per 100,000 citizens

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from four to ten since 2019,⁵⁰ they are unevenly distributed across China and still inadequate for a full, uncontrolled outbreak.

Challenges for 2023

Going into 2023, the Party needs to balance multiple competing priorities as it steers through the rocky post-zero-COVID reopening period. Central challenges ahead include boosting vaccination rates, handling the resumption of large-scale pre-pandemic migration flows, kickstarting the economy, and—all the while—at a low enough economic and social cost to retain legitimacy for the overall pandemic approach since 2020.

While China has a high vaccination rate by international standards, ranking ahead of the U.S. and most EU countries,⁵¹ only two-thirds of the population over the age of 80 had received their first dose by November.⁵² China’s vaccination process initially prioritized working-age people, ensuring critical sectors of society could return to normalcy quickly while buying time to observe vaccines’ potential side effects. However, the authorities’ initial vaccine skepticism came to remain among the elderly, who for long could rely on the now-swiftly fading safety provided by zero-COVID. According to *Caixin Global* and *South China Morning Post*, regional health officials have been given the ambitious target for 90 percent of people over 80 to have received at least one dose by January end.⁵³ Boosting vaccination rates is especially urgent, as seven out of ten deaths during the 2022 Hong Kong outbreak were unvaccinated adults over 60 years old, with a 20 times higher mortality risk than those fully vaccinated.⁵⁴ With roughly

40 percent of China's elderly population living in intra-generational households,⁵⁵ transmission in broader society cannot easily be avoided with self-imposed isolation.

Another concern is the lower efficiency of China's domestically produced vaccines compared to longer-lasting Western mRNA vaccines, requiring more booster shots to reach comparable effectiveness.⁵⁶ Multiple Chinese medical companies, including CanSino Biologics, Stemirna Therapeutics, CSPC Pharmaceutical Group, and Abogen Biosciences, have been in the process of setting up factories for mass production of domestically developed mRNA vaccines in recent months. However, the long-awaited vaccines have yet to complete all relevant trials, leaving it uncertain when and if they will become available.⁵⁷ Moreover, the list of approved vaccines has not been significantly updated to maintain effectiveness against newer COVID variants, prompting CDC health advisers to urge a fast-tracked approval process for updated vaccines.⁵⁸

Even as the first wave may already be peaking in some metropolitan regions, the looming spread to the countryside could constitute an even more acute challenge. The national health system will be under particular stress during the Chunyun (春運) travel rush surrounding the Chinese New Year

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on January 22, when tens of millions of workers migrate to their home provinces, including rural villages with more limited health infrastructure. Though authorities have issued guidelines to boost countryside medical services and, in some cities, discourage workers from undertaking the journey,⁵⁹ there is no legal basis for preventing the travel, which is projected to surge to near pre-pandemic levels.⁶⁰

Officially counting only deaths caused directly by pneumonia and respiratory failure,⁶¹ China's crude mortality rate is underinflated and has drawn criticism from the World Health Organization.⁶² While it remains unclear to what extent increases were COVID-related rather than induced by staff shortages, there were anecdotal reports of backlogs at Beijing crematoriums already in mid-December, supported by satellite imagery showing dramatic increases in activity.⁶³ With only a few dozen officially registered deaths in December, this growing disparity with the surging infections has fueled discussions even among journalists about the accuracy of official data. For instance, a CGTN reporter inquired about the low death count and reports of overloaded funeral homes, prompting NHC expert Wang Guiqiang to note ongoing efforts to adapt classification methodology,⁶⁴ with the CDC later pledging to publish excess mortality data.⁶⁵ As the actual mortality rate swiftly climbed, authorities were under mounting pressure to produce more credible numbers, lest they erode already jaded public trust from supporters and detractors alike. In mid-January, the NHC announced there had been 59,938 COVID-related deaths at hospitals between December 8 and January 12, of which 5,503 fatalities were directly caused by COVID-induced respiratory failure.⁶⁶ The latter figure doubles China's official death count under previous methodology, albeit still excluding the unknown fatalities outside hospitals.

Early studies modeling China's mortality rate for 2023 in light of the reopening have not yet been peer-reviewed. It is also notoriously tricky to extrapolate

statistics between countries and contexts, including Hong Kong, which offers mRNA vaccines and has a more robust health infrastructure than much of inner China. Still, initial estimates generally put overall deaths from COVID-19 in the range of hundreds of thousands to 1-2 million, largely conditional on the vaccination drive's success.⁶⁷ Irrespective of the final casualty toll, authorities will likely underscore how the crude mortality rate will be much lower than in many developed countries, including the U.S., which has over a million COVID-related deaths with less than a quarter of China's population. Nevertheless, the overarching question ahead will not be whether ending zero-COVID was incorrect or untimely, but rather to what extent citizens feel the prolonged lockdowns were worth the ultimate cost, given just how much time authorities had to prepare for China's inevitable reopening.

Finally, while steering through the transitory reopening period, the Party will urgently seek to restart economic growth, weighed by lockdowns, a debt-ridden property sector, record-high youth unemployment, and contracting manufacturing activity.⁶⁸ Thus far, December statements and readouts from the People's Bank of China, the annual Central Economic Work Conference (CEWC), and Xi Jinping's New Year's Eve speech appear to imply a more pragmatic line for 2023,⁶⁹ with growth and boosted consumer spending outlined as top priorities.⁷⁰ Yet, though the zero-COVID lockdowns' economic straitjacket has been withdrawn, it remains to be seen how direly the initial wave of overextended hospitals and spiking work absences will impinge these efforts.

Author –

Johannes Nordin is a Junior Research Fellow at ISDP's Asia Program. He holds a BA in Political Science and Economics, and completed his Master of Science in International and European Relations at Linköping University, following an internship at ISDP's Korea Center in 2019.

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