

China's Xi Jinping Has No Easy Way Out ***John Feng - Newsweek***

Anti-government protests that broke out across two dozen Chinese cities last week combined frustrations about China's COVID-19 rules, its stagnant economy and the stifling censorship of both topics online. For the first time, they also presented an open and collective challenge to President Xi Jinping's zero-COVID policy, a national strategy inextricably linked to his political legitimacy.

In mid-October, China's pandemic performance helped justify Xi's norm-breaking third term as leader of the long-ruling Communist Party. The pageantry took place as an estimated 200 million of China's 1.4 billion people were in lockdown. As of late November, more than double that number were still living under restrictions, according to economists at Nomura.

Collective action is common in China, but rarely is it about the central government. More often than not, isolated groups rally for labor rights, dispute land use or publicly out corrupt local officials. However, the recent political unrest, which included slogans calling for Xi's resignation, would have concerned Beijing, for whom state security—that is to say, regime safety—comes first.

The discontent continues to test the vast security apparatus China's president has built in the past decade. An increased police presence in protest hotspots, coupled with the country's already highly regulated information environment, is allowing authorities to identify vocal individuals and preempt further action.

Yet simple inventiveness keeps the chatter alive on the Chinese internet, where messages are written in code and videos are distorted to circumvent China's powerful censorship algorithms.

Suisheng Zhao, a politics professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver, expects scattered demonstrations to continue, but they are unlikely to reach a nationwide scale that might trouble the government or seriously threatened the regime.

"That's exactly why they have survived, because they are spontaneous, isolated and not well organized," he said.

Police deployed to major popular centers may have been ready to use violent measures to suppress the discord, but it wasn't necessary in the end—most groups dispersed in the early hours of Monday. If the protests were to reach a scale and level of organization similar to those in Hong Kong in 2019 and 2020, Zhao told Newsweek, the government would likely take decisive action.

It wouldn't matter whether the grievances were about COVID, censorship or economic reforms. "That's exactly Xi Jinping's style. He will not see these people as making reasonable demands. He will see these people as anti-government," he said. "But if they are not threatening enough, they may tolerate it for a while. When they become a threatening force, they will crack down."



Epidemic control workers wear PPE to prevent the spread of COVID-19 as they guard in an area with communities in lockdown on December 1, 2022, in Beijing, China. Kevin Frayer/Getty Images© Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

As the rest of the world learns to live with milder COVID strains, [China's](#) insistence on snuffing out every outbreak appears increasingly out of step. The week of the demonstrations, the Communist Party's top newspaper, the People's Daily, was still compelling the public to have faith in zero COVID, which Xi himself has said strikes the best balance between public health and the economy.

"One of the likely reasons why China pursued a zero-COVID policy is that it did not believe the country could handle the mass infection and death rates that could result from exiting zero-COVID strictures," said Sheena Chestnut Greitens, an associate professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin.

"Beijing may think that as concerning as this week's protests are, the instability that would have resulted from pursuing a shift away from zero COVID would be worse," she told Newsweek. "That calculus is subject to change as events unfold, but in the past Xi Jinping has spoken negatively of officials who hastily reverse course after a mass incident, which places a barrier to 'backing down' at this point."

Xi Jinping's Dilemma

When Shanghai locked down 25 million people in April during a record surge since overtaken by its current outbreak, Jörg Wuttke, president of the [EU Chamber of Commerce in China](#), compared the country's newfound woes to a game of whack-a-mole. There were two things Xi couldn't change, Wuttke said—his zero-COVID policy and his [friendship with Vladimir Putin](#).

China's pandemic response is so tied up with Xi's personal legitimacy that changing course could de-legitimize his power, said Zhao. "It would be very difficult for him to accept that. In fact, the [Communist Party](#) has never admitted any mistakes about the policy, and it will never."



People show blank papers during a protest against China's zero-COVID policy on November 27, 2022, in Shanghai. HECTOR RETAMAL/AFP via Getty Images© HECTOR RETAMAL/AFP via Getty Images

The dilemma, Zhao observers, lies in Beijing's fusing of campaign-style politics with the country's anti-epidemic struggle. "Since this policy is a typical communist mobilization campaign, it's very difficult to demobilize Chinese society. It could also damage the legitimacy of the Communist Party."

It is not certain that Xi has a clear public health objective in mind, a point where his government can declare victory over the virus and return to normalcy. Experts say Xi is [shunning the advice](#) of both medical professionals and economists.

Zhao believes it was simply important for Xi to maintain sociopolitical stability before and after the [20th party congress](#). "In fact, I would say that Xi Jinping's objective is to use this pandemic control as an instrument for social control."

Last month, Xi chaired a meeting of top party officials to review "dynamic zero COVID." The session resulted in a 20-point optimization plan that sought to curb the excessive controls by reducing contact tracing and shortening on-arrival quarantine. But the central directive remained the same: to prevent the collapse of the health care system and [mass deaths](#).

The trade-off in favor of political stability means some of the public's bolder calls, including a complete reversal of Beijing's mass testing and quarantine protocols, are unlikely to be met. In the meantime, officials running under-resourced municipalities like Urumqi, where a [deadly apartment fire](#) sparked last week's protests, are more likely to turn to swift and harsh limits to avoid blame for a major outbreak.

On Tuesday, Cheng Youquan, a supervisor at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, shifted some of the [anti-lockdown](#) responsibility onto localities where the protests took place. "The recent problems highlighted by the public are not directed at epidemic control and prevention itself, but rather focus on simplistic,

excessive, and one-size-fits-all prevention and control measures," Cheng told a weekly briefing in Beijing.



Protesters and police gather during a rally against China's strict zero-COVID measures on November 28, 2022, in Beijing. Kevin Frayer/Getty Images© Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

China's pandemic response has become too politicized, observers say, and the public policy questions plaguing the implementation of Xi's zero-COVID guidance are directly concerned with perceived [incentives and rewards](#) in the country's party-state hierarchy.

Many believed Li Qiang, the former Communist Party secretary of Shanghai, would lose his chance at promotion after botching the city's weeks-long lockdown with [indiscriminate restrictions](#). But when the party announced its list of top leaders in October, he ranked second only to Xi, putting him on course to replace Li Keqiang as premier next spring.

"The problem now is mostly at the local level. They are afraid of implementing the central government's so-called 20 measures because they are afraid to be blamed for an outbreak," said Zhao, the professor of Chinese politics.

"The Chinese system leaves very, very little room for local governments to do anything in between two extremes, either a complete lockdown or a complete unlock," he said. "When the system works well, it's fantastic. When it makes a mistake, it is multiplied many, many times."

A Spring Exit?

Having spurned a number of possible off-ramps to exit zero COVID—the Winter [Olympics](#), the Shanghai lockdown and the recently concluded party congress—Xi may be aiming for a reopening next spring, some believe. At a political gathering known as the "two sessions," which typically takes place in March, Xi is expected to retain the presidency, formally extending his status as China's paramount leader.

Xi has already traveled outside China twice this year, including for a maskless [face-to-face meeting](#) with President [Joe Biden](#) in Bali that was widely watched in China. If

zero COVID remains and he travels again—Moscow's top envoy in Beijing has suggested a [state visit](#) to Russia—it could send the same contradictory signals that stoked anger last weekend. Still, others argue the timeline for reopening is overly optimistic.

China could continue refining zero COVID without giving up its fundamental pattern of control. While it may never publicly admit the policy is a mistake, Beijing is signaling a willingness to recalculate its cost-benefit analysis after the recent public opposition.

For two days in a row, Sun Chunlan, China's lockdown czar and one of its vice premiers, has told health officials that the country now possesses the know-how and therapeutics to address the prevalent Omicron variant, which she said was less likely to cause disease. She also highlighted China's above 90 percent vaccination rate, which together "create conditions to further optimize prevention and control measures," she said.

Readouts of her meetings did not include any references to "dynamic zero COVID" or risks to society. Her messaging about the virus's potency was in stark contrast to [Beijing's official line](#) just weeks ago, when public health conditions in China remained much the same.

China's National Health Commission said Thursday it recorded 36,061 new COVID infections on November 30, a third straight drop after days of record cases that reached 40,347 on November 27. Critical patients and deaths remain extremely rare. Outbreaks in Beijing reached an all-time high despite tight restrictions.

The Chinese capital accounted for roughly 15 percent of all new cases in the country, but officials said the city would begin allowing certain positive cases—the elderly or pregnant—to isolate at home, reportedly on the condition that they agree to have a magnetized sensor and alarm fitted to their door.

The southern manufacturing hub of Guangzhou, which accounted for about 18 percent of China's cases, [lifted lockdowns](#) in multiple districts on Wednesday following two weeks of on-and-off protests.

Separately, China's national health authority announced a new vaccine drive to raise shots among those over 80, only around 40 percent of whom have received a booster. Here, too, the months-long campaign would be delegated to localities, which had previously tried to increase uptake, without success, by offering incentives such as money and food.

It is unclear whether China can maintain its slow release, which is balanced against the public's impatience. A significant shift in its zero-COVID policy would have to be measured in its persistence on loosening even as the mortality rate rises nationwide. Public health experts say China is yet to establish the triage protocols or create the hospital capacity necessary for a sustainable reopening.

The true political impact of the recent protests may never be known, and Beijing would never say. "In the long term, it will be important to understand how these

events shape Xi Jinping's approach to internal and national security," said Greitens, the political scientist.

"He's spent years investing in and establishing a system aimed at [prevention of instability and unrest](#), and now faces multiple local points of failure in that system. It's unclear what happens after prevention fails—I suspect we're about to find out," she said.