

Australian Outlook

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"Long COVID" or a New Turn? Chinese Politics in the Post-Pandemic Era

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The mark left by the Chinese government's COVID-19 policies is still visible today, despite the silencing of protests. While there is no stomach to force change from the government, nor is there any desire to return to the way things were.

The Chinese government ended the controversial “zero-COVID” policy in late December 2022. A zero-COVID policy had been enforced nation-wide since the initial 2019 pandemic outbreak to minimise the case numbers to as close to zero as possible. To achieve this ambitious zero transmission target, strict public health measures, mass testing, lockdowns, and quarantines were adopted by local governments. While implementing the zero-COVID policy, the Chinese government reported lower case and mortality numbers than many Western countries.

According to a Chinese National Health Commission's data release on 1 December 2022, there were 5,233 cumulative deaths nationally (compared with over 1 million US death toll at the same time). While data is uncertain and often anecdotal, the abrupt end of the zero-COVID policy in China may have cost 1.41 million deaths between December 2022 and February 2023 (although a Chinese State Council press conference only reported 59,938 deaths between 8 December 2022 and 12 January 2023).

The pandemic has had significant short and long-term impacts on politics across the world. Public Health policies and technocratic elites have been challenged and de-legitimised, bogus facts and conspiracy theories have proliferated across social media, work-life patterns have been modified, and economic models upon which monetary and fiscal policies are premised are in need of reconsideration. In China, from strictly enforced zero-COVID to its sudden abandonment, the pandemic has had noteworthy, and potentially long-lasting impacts.

The Chinese government's policy competence has been brought into focus. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) demonstrated its tremendous capacity to mobilise resources across the state as it initially fought to contain the outbreak in Wuhan and through the national zero-COVID policy which included extensive electronic and personal monitoring of individuals and their movements. The CCP and Chinese government received national accolades for maintaining low case numbers in 2021-2 when the COVID cases abroad skyrocketed. Nevertheless, the continuation of harsh lockdowns and zero-COVID policy, even after treatments became more efficacious and vaccines more available, became increasingly unpopular through 2022. Due to the frustrations that came with extreme lockdowns, protests erupted in some major Chinese cities in November 2022, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Jinan. These protests were initially triggered by a deadly apartment fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang, where fire extinguishment efforts were significantly slowed by blocked entrances and locked doors set to comply with local zero-COVID policy. Arguably, this popular dissatisfaction with the zero-COVID policy led to its abandonment, but the abrupt policy reversal shift has been widely criticised domestically for the government's lack of preparation and inadequate response measures to deal with the sudden increase in cases and deaths.

The consequences of some public health measures also caused public anger and have been deemed as ill-conceived. For example, while many other countries rolled out the vaccine among the older population first, the Chinese government prioritised people aged 18-60 and only rolled out the vaccine for people 60 years old and above from March 2021. As a result, many elderly residents had not received their first doses when COVID restrictions were abruptly lifted, resulting in grave life loss. The end of zero-COVID policy also brought an immediate burden to the Chinese medical system in early 2023, causing overloaded hospitals and treatment delays that were exacerbated by a shortage of healthy medical staff members. In my communication with some Chinese urban residents, they expressed that they "did not necessarily oppose the lift of extreme lockdown, but were very disappointed that the government did not have a well-thought out plan."

Adding to public frustration, the post-pandemic recovery of the Chinese economy has not yet fully materialised. As a result of extreme lockdowns, trade disputes, and other strategic concerns, many of China's major trading partners, such as the United States and Europe, have diversified supply chains and reduced their dependence on Chinese exports. Many foreign companies, such as Apple, have withdrawn some of their investment from the Chinese market due to the political uncertainty that has been magnified during the pandemic years. Domestically, indebted local governments, a dangerously leveraged property sector and falling house prices, high unemployment rate (particularly among youth), and inflation have weakened consumption and slowed production and investment.

These public concerns have presented challenges to the CCP's legitimacy that has largely been based on economic performance and the delivery of public goods. In response, the CCP has sought to expand and re-ground its legitimacy beyond policy performance. President Xi Jinping spoke in June 2023 on the continuity and unity of the Chinese civilisation, which he said, "fundamentally defined our own path that the Chinese nation must follow." Drawing on the "only continuing, uninterrupted civilisation in the world," Xi advocated for a "true appreciation" of the "necessity, cultural heritage and unique advantages" of taking the "Chinese path," implying a divergence with liberal values. This "civilisation legitimacy"

may be particularly targeted at the younger generations who have experienced growing national wealth and strength on the one hand, and inequality and societal discontent on the other. The search for civilisation legitimacy is further complemented by Xi's call for a "high-level of self-reliance and strength" domestically to support national development.

Such rhetoric, however, may not be enough to distract the people from the disruption caused by the government COVID response. Between December 2022 and January 2023 the striking death toll among the older population, especially in age care, caused public anger at the state's failure to protect elderly people. In an eastern Chinese city with a metro population of 1.25 million, approximately 20 percent of residents in an age care centre died of COVID-related medical issues in the first ten days after the ending of zero-COVID. The funeral homes in Nanjing were overwhelmed with large intakes, and many families had to seek funeral services outside this capital city. Perhaps understandably, there has been a growing societal concern about the ability for elderly residents' to obtain medical care in China, where the quality of health service varies largely across localities. The government has responded by promoting filial duties in lieu of senior care and public health investment.

Inequality and the widening wealth gap was also manifested in the lockdowns. The widely publicised food shortage in Shanghai, for instance, was not evenly spread across the population. According to my correspondence with a few Shanghai residents during 2022 lockdown, poorer neighbourhoods had to "purchase whatever poor-quality food available" while wealthier communities "managed to organise steady, abundant, and nutritious food supplies through their own social and business connections." The awareness and frustration toward inequality, in addition to the dim view of employment and housing, continues to brew in the post-pandemic China, especially among the younger generations.

The long-term impact of the pandemic will depend upon whether the Chinese Government and the CCP adequately addresses the economic and social problems that have been laid bare by the pandemic years. Included in these efforts will be a dose of Chinese patriotism and nationalism, fed by Chinese social media and directed at outside states and events. At the same time, the dramatic expansion of various surveillance and control measures during the zero-COVID policy and its continued use in the future is likely to make governmental control more efficacious in the coming years.

While there remains a large reservoir of goodwill in the populace towards the CCP and the Chinese government, there will likely be an increasing wariness among the people in the short term as they recall the abrupt policy shift from zero-COVID to mass reopening without any transition period. Nevertheless, contrary to some political observers, the pandemic has neither led the Chinese population to significantly question the CCP's legitimacy nor signalled a return to a pre-pandemic "business-as-usual."

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