

Congressional-Executive Commission on China  
Hearing on China's Zero-Covid Policy and Authoritarian Public Health Control

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## Introduction

Thank you to Chair Merkley, Co-chair McGovern, and the Members of the Commission for the opportunity to join the discussion today on China's zero-Covid policy.

At the CCP's recent 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi Jinping defended China's "dynamic zero-Covid policy," highlighting "tremendously encouraging achievements in both epidemic response and economic and social development" in "the all-out people's war" against the virus.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese government is in its third year of a zero-Covid strategy, and the economic and social costs of extended lockdowns and quarantines are leading many to question the sustainability of its approach.

Why has China's dynamic zero-Covid policy persisted as long as it has? What are the political dynamics underlying this policy, and what is the outlook moving forward?

In my remarks today I will argue that there are four key political forces that create significant inertia around China's zero-Covid policy: the initial popularity and success of zero-Covid; campaign dynamics and the personal involvement of Xi Jinping; the ability to use zero-Covid as cover for increasing surveillance and control over the population; and the industry that has emerged around enforcing zero-Covid.

These forces for inertia are counterbalanced by two forces for policy change: the detrimental effects of zero-Covid on the Chinese economy; and the growing dissatisfaction among the Chinese population with lockdowns and quarantines. The likelihood of Xi Jinping changing course on dynamic zero-Covid depends on how well the CCP regime can manage these costs.

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<sup>1</sup> Low De Wei, "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Speech at China's Party Congress." *Bloomberg*. October 18, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-18/full-text-of-xi-jinping-s-speech-at-china-20th-party-congress-2022>

## Political Factors Underlying the Zero-Covid Policy

1. *Zero-Covid as Performance-Based Legitimacy* – China’s Covid story has distinct chapters, and most of them have been positive for public perceptions of the Chinese Communist Party. After bungling the initial Covid outbreak in December 2019 and January 2020, the Chinese government managed to bring Covid under control by March. Concurrently, Western governments, notably the United States, failed to contain the virus and saw widespread casualties and dysfunction at various levels of government.

In that period, China’s zero-Covid policy was viewed as a resounding success, both at home and abroad, and studies suggest the CCP experienced a tangible boost in regime support during that time.<sup>2</sup> Political legitimacy in China is built on how the system performs, and beginning in 2020, Covid cases became a core metric on which performance was measured. Survey data also suggests that Chinese citizens in general appear willing to tolerate intrusions into their personal privacy and civil liberties in the name of preserving social order.<sup>3</sup>

The biological realities of the omicron variants have made zero-Covid untenable in the long term. The government is now pursuing a strategy of “dynamic zero-Covid,” which, to quote nationalist commentator Hu Xijin, “is not really about pursuing zero infections at all times, it is about continuing to keep the epidemic situation under control.”<sup>4</sup> But even this more moderate approach seems unsustainable given the infectiousness of the virus.

Chinese citizens’ perceptions of China’s Covid strategy have only recently appeared to shift. The Shanghai lockdown in the spring of 2022 saw food shortages, inhumane quarantine practices, and obstacles to accessing basic medical care. Lockdowns continue to ebb and flow throughout the country, bringing significant costs to the economy and adding uncertainty to everyday life. During the last few months, at any given time there are dozens of major cities under some form of lockdown, with hundreds of millions of people affected.<sup>5</sup> A number of tragedies have gone viral on Chinese social media, illuminating the absurdities of dynamic zero-COVID. These stories feature citizens locked down in inhumane conditions, often without proper access to food, loved ones, or medical care.

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<sup>2</sup> Wu, Cary. “Did the pandemic shake Chinese citizens’ trust in their government? We surveyed nearly 20,000 people to find out.” *The Washington Post*. May 5, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/05/did-pandemic-shake-chinese-citizens-trust-their-government/>

<sup>3</sup> Su, Zheng, Xu Xu, and Xun Cao. “What Explains Popular Support for Government Surveillance in China?” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*. 2021. <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.psu.edu/dist/e/11338/files/2020/09/Support-for-Government-Surveillance-in-China-April-19-2020-Manuscript.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Koetse, Manya. “Victory or Perseverance? Visions of China’s ‘Dynamic Zero’ Covid Future.” What’s On Weibo. November 8, 2022. <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/victory-of-perseverance-visions-of-chinas-dynamic-zero-covid-future/>

<sup>5</sup> Gan, Nectar and Shawn Deng. “Chinese Cities Rush to Lockdown in Show of Loyalty to Xi’s Zero-Covid Strategy.” CNN. September 5, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/05/china/china-covid-lockdown-74-cities-intl-hnk>

2. *Zero-Covid as a Campaign* – Given the emerging failures of the dynamic zero-Covid approach, why does it persist? China’s “war on Covid” can be understood through the lens of campaign-style governance, which was more common in the Mao era but has seen a resurgence in a different form under Xi Jinping. In a campaign, the core leader announces a vague, ambitious policy goal, and lower-level officials are left to fill in the blanks and implement policies to achieve the goal as best they can. This approach is often problematic, as lower-level officials struggle to achieve unreasonable targets, falsify or suppress data and information, and engage in performative measures to show their zeal to central leadership.<sup>6</sup> It is also difficult to reverse the course of a campaign, as it is tied personally to the Party leader, who would lose stature in the system if the policy were to fail. All these dynamics are present in China’s current zero-Covid policy.

It is also noteworthy that the new CCP leadership lineup announced at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress privileged Xi loyalists that faithfully implemented zero-Covid, namely Li Qiang (Party Secretary of Shanghai) and Cai Qi (Party Secretary of Beijing). Li Qiang is now the second ranked CCP member and is slated to take over the office of Premier. This means that the new Politburo Standing Committee is in some sense tainted by the zero-Covid policy, and it will have a strong vested interest in maintaining the perception that it has been a success.

3. *Zero-Covid as Political Control* – Zero-Covid has given local governments the justification to collect more information on the Chinese population, expanding the reach and scope of the growing surveillance state.<sup>7</sup> Chinese citizens now have a health code tied to their mobile devices, and the ability to move freely is tied to having a “green screen” indicating a recent negative test result and no known exposures. Individuals’ whereabouts are tracked through their mobile devices, and this information can be used to identify people with potential Covid exposures through close contact. Public health is thus a cover for the Chinese government to collect and analyze information on people’s movements, health, and social networks, and in turn use that information to control their behavior. This is consistent with the broader development of “techno-authoritarianism” under Xi Jinping and his tendency to push the system towards ever-greater levels of social control.<sup>8</sup>

4. *Zero-Covid as Industry* – According to some estimates, the Chinese government will spend roughly \$52 billion on “testing, new medical facilities, monitoring equipment and other anti-COVID measures,

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<sup>6</sup> See Ding, Iza. "Performative Governance." *World Politics* 72.4 (2020): 525-556 and Kung, James Kai-Sing, and Shuo Chen. "The Tragedy of the Nomenklatura: Career Incentives and Political Radicalism During China's Great Leap Famine." *American Political Science Review* 105.1 (2011): 27-45.

<sup>7</sup> McCarthy, Simone. “Under Xi Jinping, zero-Covid is accelerating China’s surveillance state.” *CNN*. October 20, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Kynge, James and Sun Yu. “China and Big Tech: Xi’s Blueprint for a Digital Dictatorship.” *Financial Times*. September 7, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/9ef38be2-9b4d-49a4-a812-97ad6d70ea6f>

which will benefit as many as 3,000 companies.”<sup>9</sup> This includes diagnostic and pharmaceutical companies, but also surveillance companies and camera manufacturers, which have installed thermal imaging cameras throughout many cities. In certain cities, construction companies have been tasked with building hospitals, temporary medical facilities, and testing kiosks. China’s “zero-Covid industrial complex” is vast and touches a number of different sectors, creating a powerful private sector constituency with a vested interest in perpetuating zero-Covid.<sup>10</sup> Some Chinese analysts have raised concerns that this interest group could mislead the public and misguide public health policy.

## Projecting Forward

There was initial optimism that China would relax its zero-Covid policy after the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, but instead Xi Jinping used that moment to defend the policy, seemingly doubling down on the approach. The financial markets are eager for a change of course, and we are seeing rumors coming out of China to this effect. But if the Chinese government were planning on shifting course, it would undertake a number of easily observable preparatory measures: 1.) a renewed vaccination campaign focused on elderly citizens; and 2.) a media campaign that more accurately depicts the risks of Covid and prepares citizens mentally to accept life with the endemic virus. These preparations alone would take several months. As of the writing of this testimony, we have observed neither of those measures, which would suggest dynamic zero-Covid is here to stay, in the medium term at least. It is best not to underestimate the stickiness of this policy, which could very well be in place in some form for many months or even years to come.

In terms of the political implications for the regime and Xi Jinping, in the authoritarian politics field we tend to focus separately on the risks of elite threats (coup d’etats) and mass threats (revolutions). At the elite level, the results of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress suggest that Xi has further solidified his control of the Party, as evidenced by the dominance of his faction in top leadership bodies. Any policy divisions about zero-Covid that remain are likely to be minimal, and certainly would not engender an elite split or instability that would threaten Xi Jinping or the broader regime. At the mass level, it is important to remember that the CCP enjoys a relatively robust reservoir of support among the population. Trust for the central government is particularly high.<sup>11</sup> Most Chinese citizens appear to broadly support the system even when dissatisfied about specific policy areas. We may observe protest and unrest in certain geographic areas, but it is unlikely zero-Covid would produce the type of collective action needed to truly threaten the regime.

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<sup>9</sup> Baptista, Eduardo. “Zero-COVID, Big Money: China's Anti-virus Spending Boosts Medical, Tech, Construction.” *Reuters*. May 29, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/zero-covid-big-money-chinas-anti-virus-spending-boosts-medical-tech-construction-2022-05-29/>

<sup>10</sup> “China’s Zero-COVID Industrial Complex.” *The Economist*. May 14, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/business/2022/05/14/chinas-zero-covid-industrial-complex>

<sup>11</sup> Manion, Melanie. "A Survey of Survey Research on Chinese Politics: What Have We Learned." *Contemporary Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies*. 2010. 181-199.

## Policy Discussion

One of the overlooked downsides of China's zero-Covid approach is that it has completely gutted opportunities for foreigners to travel to China and learn about the country. Deep knowledge of China and Chinese is a critical resource for the U.S. government moving forward, and we face a significant asymmetry with our Chinese counterparts, who tend to have better language skills and more intimate knowledge of American politics and society. Many of our core Chinese language programs in China have moved elsewhere, and the Fulbright program has been terminated. The flow of American students, journalists, academics, businesspeople, and officials traveling to China has slowed to a trickle. This could have long-term negative effects on U.S. national security and foreign policymaking. We may well be losing the next generation of China experts.

It should be a priority of the U.S. government to rebuild the foundations of people-to-people exchange with China. At a time when government-to-government relations have soured, the dense fabric of ties between individual Chinese and American citizens can prove to be a stabilizing force. Universities should rebuild academic ties with Chinese institutions in areas not core to national security, like the social sciences and humanities. The U.S. government should fund research and international education programs centered on China. Congresspeople and their staffers should be traveling to mainland China through formal and informal delegations. We should be pushing for American journalists to regain access to China, and to be protected and fairly treated in the process of reporting.

With the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the midterm elections in the rearview mirror, there may be a brief moment where tensions between the two countries can be meaningfully reduced. The U.S.-China relationship can and should be stabilized, even if it remains on a footing of broader strategic competition.

Thank for the opportunity to join this panel. I look forward to the discussion.