

CHINA'S ZERO-COVID POLICY AND AUTHORITARIAN PUBLIC HEALTH CONTROL

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TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2022

CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE
COMMISSION ON CHINA,
Washington, DC.

The hearing was held from 10:02 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., via video-conference, Senator Jeff Merkley, Chair, Congressional-Executive Commission on China, presiding.

Also present: Representative James McGovern, Co-chair, Senator Jon Ossoff, Representative Michelle Steel, and Executive Branch Commissioner Lisa Jo Peterson.

Chair MERKLEY. Good morning. Today's hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China entitled "China's Zero-COVID Policy and Authoritarian Public Health Control" will come to order.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JEFF MERKLEY, A U.S. SENATOR FROM OREGON; CHAIR, CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA

Before we turn to the subject of this hearing, I'd like to announce that tomorrow the Commission will publish our annual report on human rights conditions and rule-of-law developments in China. This report once again marks the culmination of a year of work by the Commission's nonpartisan research staff to produce an extraordinarily detailed, comprehensive, and credible account of the situation in China. Just a huge thanks to the staff of the Commission for really incredible work.

The Annual Report outlines the systemic and often brutal efforts by the government of the People's Republic of China to censor, torture, and detain ethnic and religious minorities, critics of Chinese Communist Party policy, and advocates of basic rights. This past year, transnational repression has been a particular concern for this Commission, and the report details the tools used by Chinese authorities to reach into other countries to silence critics, to enhance control over diaspora communities, to conduct surveillance, and to force the repatriation of their targets.

Within China, the report documents evidence that top leaders directed the genocide in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, including policies of forced labor, sexual violence, and family separation. This year's reporting also shines a spotlight on the pervasive problem of violence against women, with high-profile cases showing the vulnerability of women across society. Meanwhile, coercive population control policies directed at ethnic minority populations

amount to eugenics, while the broader policies continue to intrude on families' decisions about whether, when, and how to have children.

Both at home and abroad, General Secretary Xi Jinping seeks to promote what he calls a "Chinese view of human rights." This report punctures that narrative. People in China and the diaspora communities around the world deserve the same fundamental human rights as everyone else. The 2022 Annual Report reflects the view of our Commissioners that the human rights abuse the report details requires a whole-of-government response by the United States and coordinated action with other countries.

In partnership with our newly appointed executive branch commissioners, which we are so delighted to have, I look forward to continuing to work across our government to advance the recommendations in the report so we can protect those fleeing persecution, those facing transnational repression, those fighting coercion, and those fearing the destruction of their culture. The Annual Report shows how the Chinese Communist Party seeks to dominate daily life and control how citizens live.

Nowhere has the intensity of this political and social control been more apparent over the last year than in the implementation of the draconian zero-COVID policy. As senior leaders staked the credibility of the Chinese Communist Party on this policy, authorities implemented disproportionately harsh public security measures, often using coercive quarantine controls that infringed on privacy rights, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, and due process. At the height of the Shanghai lockdown this spring, there were an estimated 373 million people under lockdown throughout China.

To enforce these lockdowns, authorities often tape up entrances and erect fences to prevent residents from leaving their homes. They sweep up residents of entire buildings for mandatory quarantine in makeshift facilities. They marshal the full power of the surveillance state to monitor, and often control, people's movements and health. They aggressively censor and detain critics of the policy, and they leave vulnerable populations unable to access medical care for other conditions.

As we will hear this morning, China's zero-COVID policy comes at great cost to fundamental rights and may be unsustainable or even counterproductive in protecting overall public health. Leading experts in public health, information suppression, and Chinese political leadership dynamics will help us better understand this policy, what it has meant for the people of China, and where it may go from here.

The testimony we'll hear recognizes that these policies have resulted in some protection of the population from the ravages of the virus the world has grappled with for nearly three years. Every country has wrestled with how best to protect public health from COVID-19. There are no easy answers, but we all have an obligation to protect basic rights. This hearing will help us understand a policy so central to what it means to live in China today.

I will now recognize Congressman McGovern for opening remarks.

STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES P. MCGOVERN, A U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM MASSACHUSETTS; CO-CHAIR, CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for convening this hearing on China's zero-COVID policy and its implications for human rights. I join the Chair in welcoming the announcement that the Commission's 2022 Annual Report will be published tomorrow. I encourage everyone to read it on our website. It is, once again, a well-organized and well-sourced accounting of the Chinese government's failure to meet its obligations under international human rights law. The report is the product of countless hours of diligent work by our research staff. I cannot praise them enough for their hard work on this report, and I cannot thank them enough for the effort they made to produce this excellent resource.

In addition to the tragedy of the 6.6 million deaths caused by the coronavirus globally, the pandemic has put a strain on societies and communities everywhere. Each of us has had to change our behavior for the good of ourselves, our neighbors, and our colleagues. The pandemic also creates challenges for human rights. The COVID-19 guidance issued by the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) acknowledges that emergency measures that may restrict human rights should be proportionate to the evaluated risk, necessary, and applied in a nondiscriminatory way, including having a specific focus and duration and taking the least intrusive approach possible to protect public health. It also asserts that respect for human rights across the spectrum, including economic, social, cultural, and civil and political rights, will be fundamental to the success of the public health response and recovery from the pandemic.

Through this lens, we are here to assess China's record. We have seen the videos of personnel in hazmat suits spraying disinfectant in public spaces, and of crowds rushing out of factories or amusement parks to avoid being locked down. We saw the images of the anti-Xi banner over the bridge in Beijing, and of lockdown protests in Lhasa, but there are thousands, if not millions, of stories of hardship and dissent that we do not hear, in part because of the Chinese government's censorship. We welcome our expert witnesses to help us understand the experiences of people in China under the zero-COVID policy.

We must know the names of the people who have suffered for reporting or speaking out about the government's policy. These include Zhang Zhan and Fang Bin, citizen journalists detained in early 2020 in connection with their efforts to document the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan. Xu Zhiyong, a civil society advocate, arrested and tried for criticizing Xi Jinping's handling of the pandemic. And Xu Zhangrun, a professor who was fired and had his pension suspended for writing about the failure of the government's response.

Lastly, I note that the Chinese government's zero-COVID policy has created food shortages. OHCHR's COVID-19 guidance notes that the pandemic has exacerbated food insecurity and urges governments to take urgent steps to meet the population's dietary needs. We have seen evidence that the lockdowns and draconian

restrictions have limited people's access to food. The banner on the Beijing bridge read in part, "We want to eat." China is a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which means it formally recognizes the fundamental human right to be free from hunger. The Chinese government is obligated, as a matter of human rights, to ensure that its pandemic response does not punish people into food insecurity.

Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to gaining a greater understanding of the situation from our witnesses, as well as recommendations for how the United States should respond.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Congressman McGovern.

Congressman Smith, are you with us? Did you want to make opening remarks? Okay, he is not on, so we're going to go ahead and I'm going to introduce our panel.

Yanzhong Huang is a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations and a professor and director of global health studies at Seton Hall University's School of Diplomacy and International Relations. He is the founding editor of *Global Health Governance*, the scholarly journal for the new health security paradigm, and has written extensively on the COVID-19 health pandemic and Chinese public health developments over the last 20 years.

Sarah Cook is research director for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House. She has published multiple reports on China's media influence operations and directs the *China Media Bulletin*, a monthly digest in English and in Chinese, on media freedom developments in China. She managed and wrote sections for Freedom House's recent report titled, "Beijing's Global Media Influence: Authoritarian Expansion and the Power of Democratic Resilience."

Rory Truex is an assistant professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University. His research focuses on Chinese politics and authoritarian systems. His current projects explore how Chinese citizens evaluate their political system, the relationship between media bias and credibility in non-democracies, and patterns in dissident behavior and punishment. In 2021, he received the President's Award for Distinguished Teaching, the highest teaching honor at Princeton.

Thank you all for joining us for this hearing. Without objection your full written statements will be entered into the record. We ask that you keep your oral remarks to about five minutes. We'll start with Dr. Huang.

STATEMENT OF YANZHONG HUANG, SENIOR FELLOW FOR GLOBAL HEALTH, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS; PROFESSOR, SETON HALL UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIPLOMACY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Mr. HUANG. Well, thank you, Senator Merkley, Congressman McGovern, and members of the Commission. I am honored to be invited to testify at this hearing on China's zero-COVID policy and authoritarian public health control. In the written testimony, I make three arguments on the human rights dilemmas in zero-COVID in China.

The first is that zero-COVID, despite being a seemingly quixotic pursuit of a COVID-free society, indeed shields most of the population from the virus. With nearly 20 percent of the world's population, China has recorded only 1.1 million cases. That accounts for 1.1 percent of the total COVID cases worldwide, and it registered about 5,000 COVID deaths. That is actually less than 0.5 percent of the U.S. mortality level. That extremely low level of infection and mortality appears to evince the government's "people first and life first," approach to COVID prevention and control.

But this leads to my second point. China's ability to slow the virus is achieved to the detriment of human rights and civil liberties. I believe Sarah and Rory are going to testify on that, so I'm not going to repeat what I say in the written testimony.

I want to highlight the third point—how zero-COVID compromises people's health and well-being. The prolonged and stringent implementation of zero-COVID nationwide has essentially created other second-order problems, especially when those lockdown measures impede access to food, health care, and other basic necessities. There's a study suggesting a significant decline in the utilization of health-care services after lockdown measures were introduced in the country. In cities under prolonged lockdowns, such as Xi'an, Shanghai, Jilin, and Urumqi, residents also faced shortages of food and other basic necessities.

By shielding the population from COVID-19, zero-COVID also has the unintended effect of sustaining the immunity gap between China and the rest of the world. Government data suggests that no more than a small fraction of 1 percent of the Chinese population acquired some level of natural immunity due to prior infection. Now, this places China in a unique situation of having only vaccine-induced immunity, and because of the low efficacy rate of the Chinese vaccines, of course, the antibodies generated by these vaccines have dropped to a level that is considered very low or even undetectable now.

So that immunity gap significantly increases the risk of the health-care system being overwhelmed by a rapid surge of cases, should policy relaxation occur. Paradoxically, it justifies the persistence of the zero-COVID policy regime. In the meantime, the single-minded pursuit of COVID prevention and control also means that other major public health challenges receive less attention and that very likely increased the overall disease burden in China. It is clear that prolonged and stringent school closures and stay-at-home orders, in combination with fear about COVID-19, have aggravated a mental health crisis in the country.

In addition, by discouraging or even denying people access to food, medicine, and care for other illnesses, the policy is expected to contribute to growing non-communicable disease burden, including diabetes, heart attacks, stroke, and cancer, which are the leading killers in the country. According to the dean of the School of Social Sciences at Tsinghua University, diabetes deaths have increased by 80 percent in the country. He also suggested that the harm to health caused by COVID-19 has been overshadowed by the second-order disasters associated with the stringent COVID control measures in China.

So to quickly wrap up, I want to acknowledge this huge effort and achievement China made in shielding its 1.4 billion people from COVID-19, and the widespread encroachment on privacy and civil liberties in the country. In the meantime, I want to argue that the proclaimed “people-first and life-first” approach in combating COVID-19 should be evaluated in light of the lack of commitment to addressing other major public health challenges in the country. Moving away from zero-COVID is the only wise approach to transcend this human rights dilemma.

I am aware that we will be asked about policy recommendations. For the sake of time, I will leave that for the Q&A. Thank you.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Doctor.

Now we’re going to turn to Ms. Cook.

**STATEMENT OF SARAH COOK, RESEARCH DIRECTOR FOR
CHINA, HONG KONG, AND TAIWAN, FREEDOM HOUSE**

Ms. COOK. Thank you very much, Senator Merkley, Congressman McGovern, and other members of the Commission. I’m really honored to be able to speak here today.

Nearly three years after the virus known as COVID-19 first appeared in Wuhan, as we just heard, the Chinese government is continuing large-scale lockdowns to try and contain its spread, but these lockdowns are also occurring in a country that is home to the most sophisticated multilayered apparatus of information control in the world. In my time today I’d like to share analysis on how these two dimensions of life in China, the government’s zero-COVID policy and its information control system, are intersecting.

For one thing, Chinese officials have gone to great lengths to restrict the information available to the Chinese public and the international community about the conditions in lockdown areas. Traditional media and investigative reporting have been censored, such as an article by *Caixin*, a widely respected business publication, about hidden deaths in Shanghai’s largest nursing home. On social media, China-based tech platforms have censored videos, posts, and articles related to lockdowns and problems like food shortages, including simple search terms like “buying vegetables” in Shanghai.

One heartbreaking target for censorship has been accounts of non-COVID lockdown deaths. Examples of seemingly preventable deaths due to lockdown measures rather than a disease itself include late-term miscarriages of pregnant women denied hospital entry, a three-year-old boy dying from carbon monoxide poisoning, and a bus crash en route to a centralized quarantine center. These cases have been posted online and sparked public outcry but were then censored themselves. Posts about COVID-19 lockdowns in ethnic minority regions like Xinjiang and Tibet, where reports of starvation have emerged, have been subject to censorship and other forms of manipulation.

Directives were issued to “internet commentary personnel” in early September to engage in content-flooding efforts on Weibo aimed at drowning out quotes about the lockdown in Xinjiang with lifestyle and cooking posts, while the platform deprioritized hashtags on Tibet. Of course, the Chinese security services have also detained and prosecuted outspoken citizens. In September, Xinjiang police reportedly detained four Han Chinese internet

users accused of “spreading rumors” and over 600 residents who defied lockdown orders to protest the lack of food.

Long-term democracy advocate Guo Quan was tried last September for inciting subversion after he published articles criticizing the government’s response to the pandemic. In January, citizen journalist and Falun Gong practitioner Xu Na was sentenced to eight years in prison for sending photos about restrictions in Beijing to an overseas Chinese language website, one of the longest known sentences to date for sharing COVID-19-related information. The extended lockdowns in Shanghai and other cities have prompted more experts within China, including top medical professionals, law professors, and financial analysts, to raise objections to the human and economic costs of the government’s zero-COVID policy, with some calling on their leaders to consider less rigid alternatives, but they too have encountered censorship.

Nevertheless, there are cracks in Beijing’s information control. The fact that I’m able to put this testimony together with detailed examples demonstrates that the information the Communist Party would prefer disappeared still circulates inside and outside China, often thanks to ordinary Chinese citizens and at great sacrifice. During the Shanghai lockdown, Chinese users went to extraordinary lengths to circumvent censorship, keep content online, and find avenues for freer expression. Various initiatives have also kept deleted content alive outside the Great Firewall.

Resentment related to lockdowns has also translated into real-world protests. A new Freedom House project, the China Dissent Monitor, documented 40 cases of Chinese citizens protesting COVID-19 restrictions since June. They include protests with hundreds of participants, not only in Shanghai but also in Hubei, Liaoning, and Gansu provinces, and an online hashtag movement, featuring hundreds of thousands of posts.

At least some of these outcries have yielded results at the local level, including policy adjustments or official accountability. In 9 of the 40 China Dissent Monitor cases mentioned, some form of concession was documented, such as local officials lifting burdensome travel restrictions on commuters. Looking ahead, however, it remains highly uncertain how much such pressures will trickle up to a nationwide change in policy. All the while, the censorship apparatus evolves and expands.

My written testimony includes several recommendations, but to conclude my oral testimony, I just want to reiterate the importance of raising the names of imprisoned free expression activists in meetings with Chinese counterparts, and to recognize three of the individuals that Congressman McGovern also mentioned, who are facing perilous legal and health conditions in custody after being jailed for reporting on commentary related to COVID-19. Zhang Zhan, a female citizen journalist who’s serving a four-year prison sentence. Fang Bin from the first days of the pandemic in Wuhan. Fang is also a Falun Gong believer and was tortured during previous imprisonment. And Xu Zhiyong, a prominent rights lawyer and democracy advocate who has suffered years of reprisals and abuse due to his activism. He was tried just a few months ago, but his sentence has yet to be announced.

All three are courageous individuals and symbolic figures for the broader array of Chinese citizens yearning for greater free expression and government accountability. Any lenience shown to them thanks to international pressure will have wider ranging repercussions. Thank you very much.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Ms. Cook, and thank you for the excellent work of Freedom House in highlighting human rights conditions around the globe.

Now we're going to turn to Dr. Truex. Welcome.

STATEMENT OF RORY TRUEX, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Mr. TRUEX. Thank you to Chair Merkley, Co-chair McGovern, and members of the Commission for the opportunity to join the discussion today. I also want to thank the members and the staff of the CECC for all their hard work on human rights. I personally have benefited from the political prisoner database. I use that in my own research, and it's been very helpful for our field in understanding the nature of human rights abuse in China today.

I wanted to focus my remarks on the political side of the story and try to understand the main factors that underlie the policy and why dynamic zero-COVID has persisted as long as it has. I would say the first reason has to do with what we would call performance-based legitimacy. It's important to remember, as Dr. Huang alluded to, that China's COVID story has distinct chapters, and many of them have been very positive, actually, for public perceptions of the CCP.

After bungling the initial outbreak in December and January, the Chinese government did manage to bring COVID under control by March. Concurrently, Western governments, and notably the United States, failed to contain the virus and saw widespread casualties. This fact was repeatedly highlighted by the Chinese 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.

This support might be waning in recent months due to the human costs of zero-COVID quarantines and lockdowns, as Ms. Cook alluded to, but it is also important to remember that in general Chinese citizens seem to support the political system. Other data we have also shows that Chinese citizens appear willing to tolerate intrusions into their personal privacy and civil liberties, with the end of preserving social order. So even today, we would be wrong to assume that zero-COVID has no support in Chinese society. In fact, the opposite may well be true, as uncomfortable as that is for us.

The second key dynamic here is that zero-COVID should be understood as a political campaign. This is a style of governance that was more common, of course, 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 targets, falsify data, and engage in performance to show their zeal to central leadership. It's also difficult to reverse the course of a campaign, as it is tied personally to the Party leader who will lose stature in the system if the policy were to fail. If I were to say, as a political scientist, what the principal weakness of the Chinese political system is, I would say that this is one of them—the ability to change course can be quite constrained. All of these dynamics are present in China's current zero-COVID policy.

I would also emphasize that the new CCP leadership lineup announced that the 20th Party Congress privileged Xi loyalists that faithfully implemented zero-COVID. Namely, Li Qiang, who was the Party Secretary of Shanghai, and Cai Qi, who was the 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 will have a strong vested interest in maintaining the perception that it has been a success.

Third, and I won't belabor this point because I thought Ms. Cook did an excellent job outlining these dynamics, but it's also important to remember that zero-COVID has been a cover to expand political control. And it's given local governments the justification to collect more and more information on the Chinese population and expand the reach of the surveillance state. Chinese citizens in most areas have a health code tied to their mobile devices, and the ability to move freely in many places is tied to having a green screen indicating a negative test result and no known exposure. Individuals' whereabouts are tracked through their mobile devices, and this information can be used to identify people with COVID exposure 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. We know that certainly under Xi Jinping, political control in China has become addictive. Moving forward, there was initial optimism that China would relax zero-COVID after the 20th Party Congress, but instead, Xi Jinping appears to have 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.

The new measures announced this past Friday suggest a more pragmatic approach to COVID management, but not the elimination of the zero-COVID approach itself. I would say, just from my own perspective, 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. If it is rolled back, that roll-back will be very incremental and not abrupt. I will conclude my remarks there. I do have some policy recommendations that I hope I get to raise, but I will end my remarks there. Thank you.

Chair MERKLEY. Well, thank you very much. There are a lot of things to inquire about in all three of your reports.

We have with us Lisa Jo Peterson from the executive branch. This is the first time, we believe, in about a decade, that we've had a member online from the executive branch. Lisa Jo Peterson, I

would like to afford you the opportunity to go first, if you would like.

Secretary PETERSON. Thank you very much. Very happy to be here. My apologies, but I did arrive a few minutes late so my question may have already been covered. We are particularly concerned about reports that zero-COVID policy has had a disproportionately negative impact on predominantly minority communities, including in Xinjiang. Can any of the three speak about ways in which they may have observed the policies being implemented differently across the country? Are there specific groups that you see the PRC treating differently, including Tibetans, who we know were severely impacted by the Lhasa lockdown?

Mr. HUANG. Well, I can talk about the impact of the policy, how it could vary across population groups. I don't really know much about Xinjiang, but I know that migrant workers—of which there are approximately 300 million in China—low-income households, and small businesses are hit particularly hard by zero-COVID, especially the lockdown measures. Also, it varies across these groups by disease. There's a nationwide survey suggesting 60 percent of the diabetes patients experienced food or medication shortages during the quarantine period in 2020 in China.

We know that China has the world's largest diabetes population. It's 141 million adults. This implementation of zero-COVID exacerbated the problem of inequality. More recently, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued a notice to provide one-time funding to those migrant workers who lost their jobs because of the COVID control measures and the college graduates who had difficulty in finding jobs.

Ms. COOK. I can speak a little bit to some of the minority communities. I think what you see is, some of the same lockdown measures—and I haven't looked specifically at particular announcements being imposed in Xinjiang and Tibet, but I think what happens there is in general the governance is so much harsher, and the incentives are so much stronger, I think, for some of the points that Professor Truex made, as to not allow any wiggle room for anything and so the role of the security state becomes stronger. As brutal as the Chinese security apparatus is throughout China, again, there's just so much more practice and tolerance of harsh measures in these regions, as well as tighter censorship, that I think even if on paper it's the same policy, once it's implemented there, the more systemic disrespect for human rights becomes stronger.

There's also the element of how much more dangerous any form of dissent is there, because there it's just crushed so harshly—any small thing. I think one thing that's interesting is that you do see not only the minority populations in those regions but also the Han Chinese in those regions being detained for sharing information. We've seen this in other cases—Han Chinese living in Urumqi writing about things happening there and then being sentenced to long prison terms, so I think you do see it affecting a wider range of residents.

Then the other thing I've seen, in terms of other parts of China, is that the Falun Gong community is, of course, very severely persecuted throughout China. They've also set up this underground

system of information sharing, often more related to things about their faith, about the persecution of the community, but during COVID, you saw that being mobilized to share information about the state of affairs in lockdown regions. Then you start to see members of that community being detained and prosecuted, even on different legal charges than they usually get prosecuted on, because it's more related to that freedom of expression and sharing of information, unrelated to, say, the religious community itself. So I would say that's also one thing that you saw.

I'll stop there. I don't know if there's anything that Professor Truex wants to add.

Mr. TRUEX. No, I don't have anything to add.

Chair MERKLEY. Secretary Peterson, is there anything else you wanted to inquire about?

Secretary PETERSON. I wanted to follow up just a little bit on Professor Truex's comment about the political campaign and see if he could just dig a little deeper on ways that the PRC is using disinformation and misinformation in this campaign, and using those tools to hinder international journalists or other concerned parties.

Mr. TRUEX. I would say when we think of a campaign, at least in terms of studying the Chinese political system, we often think about the difficulties of information flow vertically, and so when Xi Jinping is announcing a war on COVID, of course local-level officials are going to be incentivized to suppress data about COVID cases. And so I think we all acknowledge that the number of COVID deaths is underreported. The number of COVID cases is underreported. We don't quite know to what degree.

Actually, I wonder what Dr. Huang has to say about that. That's a key dynamic in a campaign, that people at lower levels in the system feel unwilling or unable to reveal bad information. I would also say that COVID itself has been another form of political cover for the Chinese government to make it difficult for foreigners to go to China. People like me, I used to go to China every year. I haven't been in three years. Basically the entire foreign academic, student, and journalistic communities are barely going to China at all. We are trying to make conclusions about this country from Princeton, New Jersey, or New York, or wherever we are, and that has been a major issue.

In my policy recommendations, I do talk a lot about how we can potentially use this moment—we saw Biden and Xi have a meeting yesterday—as a way to reopen people-to-people exchange. Getting Americans back in China, I think, will be critically important.

Mr. HUANG. A quick followup to Professor Truex's comments. I agree with him about the lack of exchange during the COVID era because the restriction measures actually are contributing to the misinformation and disinformation efforts. You know, that could happen on both sides in terms of the origin of the pandemic, and in terms of the severity of the disease, so I would strongly recommend that we reach out to the Chinese side and start a dialogue on how to reopen the people-to-people exchange and eliminate those unnecessary restriction measures.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you. Thank you very much. We are so delighted that Lisa Peterson was able to join us. She is the Principal

Deputy Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, an absolutely critical part of the State Department's work. We're pleased to have you this morning.

I'm going to turn to some questions now, and then we'll turn to Congressman McGovern. I want to start, Dr. Huang, with my understanding of how China is locked into zero-COVID. As I was listening to testimony, I was really hearing that, first, there's almost no immunity for people having been sick, because the policy has been highly effective, with a very low percent of the Chinese population getting COVID, so they don't have natural immunity. Second, that the Chinese vaccines have been very ineffective and have not created much resistance to the disease, so if COVID gets going, it could spread very rapidly in a very devastating fashion.

Third, that General Secretary Xi has made this a big point that he's emphasized directly, and so there's a lot of his reputation wrapped up in the success of this. And that all three of those things—from the scientific side, the possibility of COVID raging very quickly without the immunity or good vaccines, and from the political side, the reputation of the government—suggest that this policy will endure for some time. Have I summarized it correctly, or do you want to modify my understanding?

Mr. HUANG. Well, absolutely, Senator Merkley. You are absolutely right. I think China is now sticking to zero-COVID in part because of its concern about the worst-case scenario if they choose to open up. Because of that immunity gap, you're going to see a more rapid surge of cases nationwide that is going to overwhelm the country's health-care system, that is going to lead to mass die-offs; that is an outcome not acceptable to the Chinese leaders in part because of concerns about social and political stability.

Second, since President Xi himself is personally tied to zero-COVID policy, abandoning that policy would undermine his own personal stature, even the political legitimacy of the regime. Also, because COVID response has been framed as a competition between two political systems, abandoning the policy would be tantamount to admitting failure in that competition.

Chair MERKLEY. Well, thank you very much. That's very helpful in understanding the situation. I want to turn to Ms. Cook. You talked about the information control system, and how capable the Chinese government is of controlling what people hear. If I heard you right, you said one of the factors that is rather suppressed is the amount of food shortages in Xinjiang. I'm not sure, but you may have said that starvation is a challenge in Xinjiang. Can you elaborate on that a bit, our best understanding of how bad the shortage of food is?

Ms. COOK. Yes. I mean, this is really based on, I think, some reporting from Radio Free Asia, reporting from groups like the Uyghur Human Rights Project. And I think from the bits that you see coming out in terms of reports of the inability to go out to get food. Exactly what the scale is is very difficult to know. But I think just the example I gave of the fact that hundreds of people actually took to the streets in Xinjiang over food shortage, and the kind of security environment and reprisal they know they're going to face for doing that, I think can really speak to the desperation that people there are facing.

I think that's just one way that we have a sense—I mean, you see tidbits of examples, reports, you know, people tweeting. There are so many people in the Uyghur diaspora community, of family who are saying, if they are able to communicate, that they're hearing how little food there is, or there was. I'm not quite certain what the current status is. The bits of information that get out can sometimes come with a lag. But that's one thing that I would say there.

It did sound like, again, because there's so little room to try and negotiate with local officials, that some of those resources that people in other parts of China have been able to use in order to get some leniency from local officials are just much more absent in Xinjiang.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you. If we have time for a second round of questions, I want to come back to several of the things, including the use of content flooding, that you discuss in your testimony, to try to distract people from the challenges that are going on.

Dr. Truex, you noted that China has used their zero-COVID as a cover for increasing surveillance and control and also to keep foreigners out, including foreign scholars such as yourself, and that you haven't been able to go for three years. How has China handled the issue of Chinese students returning from overseas?

Mr. TRUEX. I would say those students are subject to the same quarantine measures as other international visitors. Up until a few days ago, that was about 10 days, and at some times during the pandemic, even longer than that. And so that alone has presented a significant barrier to people. International flights, during much of the pandemic, were also prohibitively expensive. Just from my own anecdotal experience, I would say the flow of our Chinese students back to their home country has been slowed significantly by zero-COVID, but I wouldn't say that that population has been necessarily singled out or treated any differently than any other type of visitor.

Chair MERKLEY. Are scholars able to go to China if they're willing to endure that 10-day quarantine?

Mr. TRUEX. Yes, absolutely. Yes, and we're starting to see that more and more. I would say some academics are beginning to go back to China and conduct research. The research climate in China has significantly worsened in the last three years. It's getting more and more difficult to do the type of fieldwork that gives us the deep understanding of the political and social dynamics there, but yes, people are starting to go back.

There are two levels of concern. One is COVID and zero-COVID quarantines, lockdowns, but there are also concerns about basic researcher security. The detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor did cast a shadow over our community, and the willingness of the Chinese government to detain foreigners for political reasons was very worrisome to many people in our community. So I would say there are two levels of concerns. Recent data by *ChinaFile* suggests that roughly 50 percent of foreign China scholars have pretty significant reservations about traveling to China, given both of those concerns at this stage.

Chair MERKLEY. Well, thank you. My time has expired. When we come back for a second round, if we have time, I'm going to ask

you to clarify something that you had mentioned about the measures announced last Friday.

Let me now turn to Congressman McGovern.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you. You each speak to food shortages and inadequate medical care as a result of zero-COVID restrictions. As a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, China is obligated to protect the right to food and the right to health of its citizens. Dr. Huang, your testimony suggests that authorities have traded off the population's overall health status in order to achieve a low COVID infection rate. Each of you speaks to the way the government promotes this as a success in propaganda narratives. Looking ahead, from an analytical standpoint, how does the expert community measure China's policy in terms of health outcomes? Is there any way to engage objectively with China's scientific community? I open that up to anybody, or all of you.

Mr. HUANG. Well, absolutely. I do believe that this actually highlights the necessity for us to engage with Chinese scientists, researchers, scholars, even the Chinese public health officials, in having a dialogue over issues of public health, lack of access to healthcare, and how to improve social and economic rights. Such conversation unfortunately came to a halt after 2018, and now I think it's time to resume it.

We could start from something that is less politically sensitive, like the conversation over non-communicable diseases and mental health. We could expand later to other more sensitive issues, including human rights. This is not to prevent or discourage the United States from responding effectively to challenges in other fields but to evince sincerity and commitment that the current overture seems to be lacking, and giving China a continued stake in the improvement of human rights in the country.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Dr. Truex or Ms. Cook, do you have anything you want to add?

Mr. TRUEX. I do not, no.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. All right. Dr. Huang and Dr. Truex, China's refusal to accept foreign-aid vaccines and rely on less effective domestic ones has put China's citizens in an immunity gap with the rest of the world. To what extent is this driven by the leadership wanting to be seen as resisting foreign influence as a core message? I mean, are we seeing a case where that message is counterproductive?

Mr. TRUEX. I can offer an initial answer. I think there's a nationalism component here. To admit that Chinese scientists failed to design a vaccine as effective as their Western and American counterparts would be tantamount to admitting some sort of inferiority in the scientific enterprise, which has been core to Xi Jinping and core to the CCP for the last 10 to 15 years. So I think a lot of it is just sort of nationalism and patriotism, and a reluctance to accept. I think there's also a dynamic where, because the U.S. Government has been, you know, very combative with Xi Jinping and with the CCP, there's certainly a little bit of bad blood and, perhaps for that reason, an unwillingness to ask for a helping hand.

Mr. HUANG. I would add also that in addition to the technical nationalism, I think the zero-COVID mentality also explains why Chi-

na's reluctant to receive U.S. mRNA vaccines. As we know, zero-COVID policy cannot tolerate any infections, but even the best vaccines cannot guarantee 100 percent protection. The mRNA vaccines cannot provide 100 percent protection, and that makes the zero-COVID policy more justifiable—that is, the use of non-pharmaceutical measures to shield the population from the virus and create a COVID-free society.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Did you want to add something, Ms. Cook?

Ms. COOK. Yes. I was just going to add—and this relates to what Professor Truex was saying about the political campaign nature of this, and some of the ways in which disinformation internally in China has been a part. Back in March, there was actually a campaign on Weibo to amplify a certain hashtag that made it sound like Moderna had actually made the coronavirus. It got 1.86 billion views. You have those kinds of narratives, in addition to all of the disinformation related to conspiracy theories surrounding Fort Detrick, that, again, adds to this difficulty of reversing course—so I just wanted to mention that intersection as well.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you.

Dr. Truex, you recommend reestablishing people-to-people exchanges and funding research in international education programs centered in China. We heard similar recommendations from witnesses at our April hearing on minority languages and the September hearing on religious freedom. This makes sense to me, but how do we promote such people-based engagements without falling victim to a stigmatization that engaging with anything Chinese is somehow subversive?

Mr. TRUEX. I think this is about being realistic and highlighting the value of people-to-people exchange. I think it's important for American national security to have Americans going to China, studying Chinese, and learning about the country. Conversely, and this is perhaps more controversial to say, it is also in our interest to have Chinese citizens coming here, studying at our universities, perhaps assimilating and becoming part of our expert corps. I believe Dr. Huang himself was formerly a Chinese citizen and is now our country's most renowned expert on COVID-19, so I would say we need to acknowledge the benefits of people-to-people exchange. I know that's a difficult statement to make right now, given the security relationship, but I think it's critically important.

In terms of the Fulbright Program, for me these are easy wins for us. This is an important program. It's produced a lot of very important China experts over the years and if we're looking for ways to stabilize the U.S.-China relationship while still acknowledging strategic competition, these are relatively straightforward measures that we can take that I think will be beneficial to both sides.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you very much. I think I'm out of time. I yield back.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much.

Now we're going to turn to Congresswoman Hartzler. Congresswoman Hartzler, are you with us? If not, then I believe that Congresswoman Steel is up next.

Representative STEEL. Thank you so much and thank you to all the witnesses. The CCP's zero-COVID policy has caused endless lockdowns and human rights violations. Hospitals refused patients

who had serious medical needs, and citizens could not leave their own homes. Yet the CCP continues to claim their policies are successful. That's not what we've seen in this, so to all the witnesses, question one is: The CCP has a long history of suppressing its own people. We have seen many ways and we have been told the CCP is prohibiting religious gatherings. Is COVID being used by the CCP to pose threats? And how can we shed more light on these violations of basic human rights?

Mr. HUANG. Thank you, Congresswoman Steel, for the question. I think you're right. The evidence suggests that zero-COVID measures have been used to facilitate government suppression. We have found that under the guise of preventing the spread of COVID, many religious venues have closed. Some of those groups, including the government-sanctioned churches, are now allowed to reopen, but most family churches continue to have difficulty holding worship services and prayer meetings. I think our future dialogue with China should be paired with great and continued support for civil-society building and good governance in the country.

Representative STEEL. So how are we going to let the whole world know exactly what's going on? The CCP is very closed and it's very hard to know. That was the reason that I sent a letter out too, actually, right before the Olympics. We sent it out to all these big corporations that sponsored the Olympics saying, Let's use your platform and just a little bit of that advertising money to let the whole world know what's going on in China, but it seems like it's not really working. So how can we do that, and just stop these violations of basic human rights?

Ms. COOK. I would just say that—and maybe this is a bit more optimistic—it's so important to be putting pressure on American companies and others to do more, but in the recent research that my team did on Beijing's global media influence in 30 countries, on the one hand we found that the CCP is investing billions of dollars to get its propaganda all over the world, but we also found that there's a lot of resilience, especially in democratic societies, and especially editors in local media, in Peru, in Kenya, in Senegal, using newswires, especially from American news companies but also, say, from the BBC, to actually cover what's happening in Xinjiang, the protests in Hong Kong.

Maybe it seems like a small thing, but it really makes a difference. When you look at public opinion sentiment, a lot of people around the world do see through some of the CCP propaganda. In the 30 countries we looked at, views of China and the Chinese government declined in 23 of them just in the last few years. That's actually really different from just 5 or 10 years ago. I think there's a lot more that can be done to make sure that especially journalists in countries around the world have the resources, have the knowledge, have some of the language skills Rory talked about, not only to report about what's happening in China, but about the way in which corruption and things like that are happening in their own countries.

It was a nice surprise to see that the pushback also works, and it's really global. It's not just in the U.S. or Australia, and I think that's one thing that I hope is helpful to keep in mind.

Representative STEEL. I really hope so, too. My second question is: We've been told that the CCP is using COVID to increase their surveillance on their citizens now. You know, they are moving from the gatherings to citizens. How concerned should we be about this? And what are the long-term implications for the citizens of China if the CCP continues this surveillance system? It's just amazing that they see who's moving to where. I mean, just cameras all over. So how are we going to do this?

Mr. TRUEX. I can offer an initial answer to that question, which I appreciate. I would say one of the things that I'm most concerned about is this move toward a state that has what we might call perfect information on its own citizens—not only information about their social networks, their spending, their online speech, their whereabouts, but now about their health and even DNA in some instances. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to understand why that's problematic in the hands of an authoritarian government. So I think we are headed in that direction, of sort of an Orwellian panopticon, and I'm not someone who exaggerates a lot in this area; I do think it's a very real concern.

The implication will be that political contention in China will become harder and harder for Chinese citizens. Even protesting will become very difficult, let alone the sort of mass-scale protests or revolution that could potentially spur political change. I think in some sense we could say that the CCP is one of the most sophisticated repressive regimes in human history. And it will continue in that direction.

You mentioned in your earlier question what can be done. I think one of the most important things we can do as the U.S. Government or civil society or universities, is document what's happening. Document what's happening through Chinese voices, empowering Chinese voices of the dissident community, minority communities that have been oppressed. And we can't be irrationally optimistic that we will be able to change the direction of Chinese domestic politics. I think this really comes down to Xi Jinping and the people around him, and I'm not optimistic for the next 5, to 10, to 15 years, but at the very least, we can document what's going on, and I think that's important in and of itself.

Representative STEEL. Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman, my time is up. I yield back.

Chair MERKLEY. Well, thank you very much, Congresswoman Steel. I don't believe that Congresswoman Hartzler has joined us, so if that's the case, I'm going to start a second round of questions. If anyone arrived that I haven't seen, feel free to alert me.

I want to start with this conversation about the question of advocating for journalists who have been imprisoned. And this issue is one where I'd like to get the Freedom House perspective, since you're recommending that we do that. If you could share how effective it is for Americans to advocate for journalists who have been imprisoned? We worry sometimes that they may be further mistreated for being associated with the West as we advocate for them. Or has it been effective?

I have this perspective that goes back to 2011, when a group of 10 senators went to China. Hu Jintao was general secretary, and the foreign journalists were saying, you know, We have so much

more freedom, we can now report on environmental issues. One journalist told me about going to examine a new factory, and they were bragging about their environmental controls, but she went around to the back of it and found a pipe with all the chemicals just sitting there, putting all the chemicals directly into the river. But it was okay; she could report on that.

There was a lot of reporting on dyes and places where fabrics are developed, doing damage to rivers. There was positive coverage of labor activists who were saying, We need to improve working conditions. That all has changed with General Secretary Xi, and so just your insights on the press and Xi's willingness to change how the press is treated, because I don't see that he has much willingness at all to change how the press is treated. I'd love to hear a more positive interpretation.

Ms. COOK. I absolutely agree with you, I think, in terms of the top-down evaluation and also in terms of conditions for foreign correspondents—some of the restrictions that Professor Truex mentioned about scholars talking to people who are foreign correspondents in China—you know, COVID-19 has also affected how much they're able to get out to Shanghai, or Beijing, or to come back, if they're about to get out there.

I think with regard to people who are already in custody, especially further along in the kind of prosecutorial process, honestly, in most cases, with the exception of places where family members have preferred to keep it quiet, but in those cases, you wouldn't see the kind of attention and documentation that some of the cases that I've mentioned get—or the political prisoner database of the Commission gets—you wouldn't see that kind of attention.

In most cases, once someone's gone through that process, the international attention tends to help. It used to be that they could get released. That's much rarer now, in Xi's China, but it helps protect them. It helps them get medical care. It gets their family in to see them. It gets those lawyers in to see them. Sometimes it gets them out on medical parole. And it can save people's lives, even if it doesn't get them out.

I think the other thing I would say, in terms of reasons we really emphasize this point of raising the subject of prisoners with counterparts at all levels, is because if you give a list to Xi Jinping, maybe that'll have effect, but less likely, but if you go to a provincial governor or CCP Party Secretary who's coming to the U.S. for a trade deal, and you say, Look, I know there are these three people who are in custody in this prison in your province, and I'd like to know, A, what their status is, because a lot of times we just don't know what it is, and B, I'd like you to see if they can be released.

You know, again, the local officials are dealing with all kinds of incentives, but a lot of times they may be more susceptible to international pressure, and it can make more of a difference. So that would be one thing I would say.

Chair MERKLEY. Great. I always love to advocate for folks. We want to make sure it has a positive impact. But the other part of the question—and I want to ask for more comment—is there really any willingness to lighten the oppression of the press in China? Ev-

everything I'm hearing about information control suggests not in the near future, at least.

I did want to turn to you, Dr. Truex. I believe your recommendations encouraged foreign delegations to go. Do you have any sense of how many of the senators on this Commission, the eight senators on the Commission, would actually be allowed to go to China and travel to various provinces that they might request to visit? Would we even be allowed into China?

Mr. TRUEX. I think that's an open question. I think you probably would. I've personally been involved in a delegation a few years ago through the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. And I think it's important to remember, when one goes on a delegation like that, you are seeing the China that the CCP wants you to see, so things can become very scripted. The interactions are very controlled. We shouldn't have delusions that we're going to have free access to Xinjiang, or Tibet, or some of these other places. I think that's important to acknowledge.

But I would say even those kinds of highly controlled situations, the sort of political theater around those interactions, can be informative. As long as one goes in with the right lens and understanding what you're getting out of that type of exchange, I think it can still be valuable. My sense would be, who knows? I think on the Chinese side there probably would be some appetite for rebuilding some relationships, but that depends on elite politics. And I'm not really a party to that.

Chair MERKLEY. Right. You've mentioned that there were measures announced last Friday related to COVID. Can you bring us up to date on what those were and how those might change the course slightly?

Mr. TRUEX. Dr. Huang, could you do a better job of that than me, or do you want me to give it a try?

Mr. HUANG. You go ahead. [Laughs.]

Mr. TRUEX. Well, basically, 20 measures were announced this last Friday that amounted to a slight relaxation of some of the quarantine and lockdown practices. For example, the time of quarantine once you enter into China has been reduced. I believe it's down to four or five days, plus three days at home. They're also going to stop tracing contacts of contacts, so they're going to kind of pare down contact tracing in terms of the exposures. Instead of doing second-order exposures, they're just going to limit the first-order exposures, so a slightly more pragmatic approach to COVID that was going to be rolled out throughout the country. There was, in my sense, an overreaction to this, and people are interpreting that this is the end of zero-COVID. I would say this is a very small, incremental step and it shouldn't be overinterpreted. But Dr. Huang, I think you are the expert here.

Mr. HUANG. Well, I agree, because if you look at all this—the Politburo Standing Committee meetings and the followup measures, the objective is to optimize zero-COVID, not to abandon it. It's important to point out that at the local level, the incentive structure has not been changed. The local government officials are still held accountable for the COVID situation in their jurisdiction, so if anything bad happens, it's their responsibility, and they could lose their jobs.

I also believe that if there's some real change happening, it may not come from the very top. It's very likely from the bottom up; the local government officials do not have the money to sustain the policy, and the local residents are so frustrated with zero-COVID that the two might even "collude" to push for real change from the bottom.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you. Thank you for sharing that information, and the way you phrased it—optimizing zero-COVID rather than ending it.

We have been joined by Senator Ossoff. The Senator was on the Senate floor with baby Eva yesterday. I rushed over too late—I'm told by a minute—to see baby Eva, but congratulations on your healthy, beautiful little girl. We'll turn it over to you, Senator Ossoff.

Senator OSSOFF. Well, thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I'm sure that we can arrange a meeting between you and Eva at a time convenient for the baby.

Chair MERKLEY. I would love to do that.

Senator OSSOFF. We will get our schedulers working on that. Thank you for convening this hearing.

Ms. Cook, I would like to ask you a few questions about the state of press freedom within China, and also the repressive tactics that the CCP uses to shape and control reporting external to China. Could you please characterize, Ms. Cook, what evolution you've seen in the state of press freedom, repression of reporting, and the external repression tactics during this COVID era and, if possible, as it relates to the CCP's zero-COVID policy?

Ms. COOK. Sure. Press freedom in China was bad before COVID. There was very little space already under Xi Jinping over the past decade. Some of the opening you saw previously was for investigative reporting. I think one thing we saw in the early, early days is that actually a lot of what we know about what happened in Wuhan now is because of reporting by not only citizen journalists but some media outlets, professional outlets in China. After censorship and other reprisals, that's pretty much been closed very much and so the full apparatus that the Communist Party uses to not only suppress coverage, but guide—they call it guiding—and manipulate information to push certain content through the media ecosystem and online has just continued to be refined and advanced.

One small tactic I'll mention is you just see more of the manipulation of the hashtags and the trending hashtags on major platforms, like Weibo, and then to really drive certain points related to COVID, related to the United States, to be honest, related to conspiracy theories, disinformation, whatever it is they want to push. Then you can see that there is manipulation surrounding that or other ways that you see elite censorship directives to indicate that manipulation. So I think that's one newer tactic that certainly affects what people can do.

The other is the shuttering of WeChat accounts. People in China who actually need their WeChat account now to survive and have their health code and things like that displayed, or other types of checks and information on their mobile phone in China, can get it shut down or suspended temporarily because they express some

views that the Chinese government doesn't like. We're now seeing people write handwritten apologies to the Chinese company that runs the platform in order to try to get their accounts reinstated. So that's also one intersection in China.

Outside of China, it's interesting, because the CCP has really been on the defensive, not only because of what's happened with regard to COVID and the early coverups in Wuhan, but also what's happened in Hong Kong during the same period of time, the horrific atrocities happening in Xinjiang. They've been trying to be more aggressive on the propaganda side but also in terms of trying to suppress local coverage.

In this latest report, published in September, we did case studies in 30 countries. We found in 24, evidence of some kind of censorship being applied to China-related coverage. In about half, it was coming through a Chinese official or a Chinese diplomat. In 17 of the countries, it was actually coming through a local actor. You would see a local government official trying to suppress news coverage related to China, a local media owner telling reporters not to report about something either related to something happening in China or some kind of local activities, investments, Huawei or things like that.

I think that's where you see the intersection between the broader investment that the Communist Party has made in political influence globally starting to translate into the domestic incentives that certain actors have to either support propagandizing CCP talking points or suppress certain types of coverage. So I would say that was one notable finding that came out of that research.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you, Ms. Cook. I'd like to ask you this second question and then turn to Mr. Huang as well on the same subject. In Tibet, in Xinjiang, we've seen some of the most restrictive, ostensibly COVID-related, lockdowns in the past year. Of course, these regions are home to minority populations that already face massive repression and surveillance. How has this long-standing pattern and practice of surveillance and repression interacted with the new COVID regime to change conditions in those areas?

Ms. COOK. That's a good question. With lockdowns elsewhere, you see these waves. Certainly in terms of the general reduced travel that you see within China from one region to another, because of zero-COVID generally you've seen reduced travel. When the lockdown comes, there is that additional intensification and securitization that is even more extreme than what you would see in other parts of China. That creates a situation in terms of people being less inclined to dissent or to protest and gain concessions than what's possible in other parts of China. That bottom-up pressure creates even more severe conditions.

For example, there was one report that Radio Free Asia had about a single day in one region of Xinjiang, in Ghulja, that has a long history of horrific suppression of the Uyghur community, where there were 22 reported deaths unrelated to COVID, either because of other medical conditions or because of starvation. That just may be one snippet of what we can know about what's happening, but you do see, as in other areas, that what's happening, and the repression, and the restrictions, and the impact on people's

lives in other parts of the country just become further amplified in these regions.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you. Mr. Huang, I've got about 25 seconds remaining. Over to you on the same question, please.

Mr. HUANG. Well, absolutely. When we talk about the implementation of zero-COVID in China, personally I don't think they're targeting a particular ethnic minority in the implementation of the policy. I think those draconian measures are being more strictly pursued in some regions in China, more likely because the local governments there are not so experienced in dealing with COVID. You know, the lack of state capacity basically led them to rely on more heavy-handed measures, like suppression of press freedom. There the people's voices are barely heard, and that is very different from the situation in cities like Shanghai or Guangzhou.

Senator OSSOFF. Thank you so much, Mr. Huang, Ms. Cook, and Mr. Truex for your testimony. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Senator Ossoff.

We're turning to Co-chair McGovern, followed by Secretary Peterson, and then to Congresswoman Steel.

Co-chair McGovern.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Well, thank you. Dr. Truex and Ms. Cook, the banners hung on the bridge in Beijing in late October made international headlines, and understandably so. It's not every day that you see "Traitor Xi Jinping" displayed publicly in China. How much can we reliably extrapolate from this? You testified to positive perceptions of the Party's performance. How much space is there for citizens to push back against government policies that they don't like in ways that we cannot observe from here? Can zero-COVID help us understand counterpressure within their system?

Mr. TRUEX. I can make an initial answer. I think it's a great question. From our perspective—I do a lot of work on public opinion data in China, and we should always be careful when we measure public opinion in China on surveys because there's always a concern that Chinese citizens might be afraid to reveal how they really feel, even in a survey setting, so anything I say should be taken with that grain of salt.

Nevertheless, the data does suggest that Chinese citizens in general express very, very high levels of support for the central government, and much lower levels of support for the lower levels of government. The central government—Xi Jinping, the Politburo Standing Committee—is viewed as sort of virtuous, and then sort of these incompetent, venal local governments. That's the general kind of narrative, I would say, from the public opinion data.

People do feel comfortable expressing dissatisfaction, though, in different policy areas. Historically the environment and corruption back in the Hu Jintao era were the number one and two issues for Chinese citizens. Inequality is also a major concern. I would say that that dissatisfaction with specific policy areas doesn't necessarily mean that Chinese citizens seem to be voicing preferences for democracy or Western multiparty democracy. Again, there's nothing in the data that suggests that group in the population. They may well exist, but I tend to be of the belief that China's po-

litical education system—which teaches citizens to love the Party and love the regime—is quite effective in the long term.

That’s not to say there isn’t dissent. And I think the example you referenced, the so-called Bridge Man, which came out a few weeks ago, is important. We never quite know the level of dissatisfaction in China. I think we can observe protests; it’s telling. I believe there was a protest in Guangzhou a few days ago where people were overturning police cars. That’s not something we see every day. We can observe these visible protests that give us a hint as to where people are at.

Also, the overseas population is important. In response to the Bridge Man banner, even at Princeton University and many universities across the country and the world, there were similar protests and banners put up by the overseas Chinese students, which doesn’t always happen. My personal assessment would be that I think there is waning support for zero-COVID. It is exerting a kind of legitimacy cost for the regime.

I would also caution us in the sense that I do not think that this is something that necessarily threatens the regime in terms of regime change. There’s a Western tendency to presume that the CCP is always on the brink of collapse, but we’ve been wrong on that for about 30 years now, so I think we need to be cautious with that interpretation.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you. Ms. Cook, to you. Do you have anything to add?

Ms. COOK. Yes, I would just point to this new project, actually, some of my colleagues are working on, called the China Dissent Monitor. It’s basically a database they’ve created of incidents of protest and dissent in China. I think what they’ve found really echoes what Professor Truex was saying, in that relatively few protests or acts of dissent target the central government. It’s much more common for it to target the local government or companies, but they do get concessions.

The data and the cases they collected just since June of protests in multiple different provinces related to zero-COVID restrictions, people gained concessions in nine of those. Those were mostly against local officials putting some kind of restriction on commuting, on movement, or some other kind of extreme measure that was causing serious hardship.

They ended up backing off, actually, after there was some kind of—usually it was a real-life protest. In some cases, it was more of an online protest, so I think that’s partly what Chinese people are navigating at the grassroots level, where there can be serious reprisals and people get arrested, but it’s not a completely lost cause if you’re trying to get some kind of change or even accountability at some hospitals, and things like that, at the local level.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you.

Dr. Truex, you say that lockdowns continue to ebb and flow throughout the country. Can you give us a sense of where the decisions are being made? Are decisions on which cities are locked down made by the central government, or are municipal officials making decisions with guidance from the center? If the latter, to what extent does zero-COVID reflect the maximalist dynamic that we’ve seen in implementation of policy in other areas? I’m thinking

of the strike hard campaigns of Tibet and Xinjiang, where local officials are incentivized to be as hardline as possible to please their superiors.

Mr. TRUEX. My understanding is that a lot of the major decisions for a given area are made by the local government. So for a given city, it would be by the municipal government, namely the Party Secretary and the mayor of that locality, certainly in coordination with higher levels of government, but I think they have a fair amount of leeway in what they do. I think your point is astute, in that this gives rise to that performative dynamic that I was outlining earlier, in the sense that certainly at the beginning of the COVID outbreak, and even in the last six months, no official wants to be seen as too light on COVID.

In fact, we observe the opposite. Li Qiang, who was the Party Secretary of Shanghai, who oversaw the debacle that was the Shanghai lockdowns, was rewarded and is now the number two-ranked leader in China. I think that's quite telling. My sense is that moving forward, given where we're at with the economy and the kind of biological realities of COVID and the fact that it will likely overwhelm the system at some point, there might be some innovation at lower levels of government to try to implement slightly more relaxed measures. They are balancing COVID versus social stability and the economy. These lower level officials are trying to maximize across these multiple dimensions, and driving COVID down to zero might not always be the most productive avenue moving forward.

My guess is that we're going to see some experimentation at lower levels of government, but to date, it has been a lot of that kind of maximalist, performative governance that you alluded to, yes.

Co-chair MCGOVERN. Thank you very much. I yield back.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much, Co-chair McGovern.

We now turn to Secretary Peterson.

Secretary PETERSON. Thanks very much. Just a quick followup on protest actions among the diaspora. Have you seen evidence of reprisals against the people in the diaspora when they undertake these actions?

Mr. TRUEX. I personally have not to date. I think a lot of these actions are very anonymized. What I'm observing on campuses across the country and the world is the placement of posters. Those are usually done under cover of night, and they're done anonymously. We aren't observing, at least I haven't seen much in the way of mass protest by Chinese students or citizens against Xi Jinping or against zero-COVID, which would lead to more direct reprisals. In our field we talk about the repertoire of contentions. The way people protest and the way they voice their discontent is a function of the repressive environment. I think overseas Chinese citizens are quite astute. They know that this is the way to make their voices heard and known in a relatively safe way.

Secretary PETERSON. Thank you very much. I yield the remainder of my time.

Chair MERKLEY. Thank you very much.

Okay, we're going to wrap up. I really appreciate very much the expertise of each of the witnesses—Dr. Huang from the Council on

Foreign Relations, Ms. Cook from Freedom House, and Dr. Truex from Princeton University, you've really helped to inform the dialogue in America about the conditions of the zero-COVID policy and very many related pieces of the puzzle. We appreciate it.

The record will remain open until the close of business on Friday, November 18th for any items members would like to submit for the record or additional questions for our witnesses. And with that, our hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:30 a.m., the hearing was concluded.]

A P P E N D I X

PREPARED STATEMENTS

PREPARED STATEMENT OF YANZHONG HUANG

INTRODUCTION

On May 13, 2022, after the U.S. crossed the one million marker in Covid-related deaths, China's foreign ministry spokesperson contrasted the gruesome situation with that in China and asked "Who is mouthing the empty slogan of human rights and who is actually putting people first?" He went on to proclaim that "The answers are self-evident":

In the spirit of putting people and life first, the Chinese government gives priority to people's life, safety and health. It follows the "dynamic zero-COVID" policy and adopts targeted and science-based protocols for the most effective COVID-19 containment at the lowest cost possible. Any anti-COVID measure comes at a cost to the economy and society. But it is only temporary and worthwhile compared to priceless and irretrievable lives.

This "people first, life first" approach is officially used to legitimize its nearly three-year campaign against Covid-19. Under the so-called "dynamic zero-Covid" policy, heavy-handed government intervention measures, including mass PCR testing, mandatory quarantines, aggressive contact tracing, and city-wide snap lockdowns, have been undertaken to cut the local transmission chain and eliminate Covid cases as soon as they flare up. In hindsight, the seemingly quixotic pursuit of a Covid-free society shields most of the population from the virus. Nevertheless, stringent and persistent implementation of zero-Covid not only raises concerns over human rights and civil liberties violations, but also has the unintended result of putting people's overall health and well-being in harm's way, thereby undermining the rights to develop and survive, which the government considers the core of human rights.

HOW ZERO-COVID PROTECTS PEOPLE'S HEALTH

Measured by the number of Covid infections and mortality, China is by no means one of the most successful in the world. With nearly 20 percent of the world's population, China has recorded only 1.1 million cases, accounting for 1.1 percent of total Covid cases worldwide. Most of the infections occurred in Wuhan in the spring of 2020 and Shanghai in the spring of 2022. It registered 5,226 Covid deaths—most of them occurred during the Wuhan outbreak in the spring of 2020—which is less than 0.5 percent of the U.S. mortality level and almost negligible compared to the 6.61 million deaths worldwide. While the U.S. continues to register more than 300 daily Covid deaths, there have been no new reported Covid-19 deaths in China for more than six months. In this way, China is largely spared the so-called long-Covid—new, returning or ongoing symptoms—which, according to a Brookings report in August, affect 16 million people of working age in the U.S. The extremely low levels of infection and mortality appear to evince the government's "people first and life first" approach in Covid prevention and control.

CONCERNS ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

China's ability to slow the virus nevertheless is achieved to the detriment of human rights and civil liberties. Zero-Covid policy has been imposed from the top down without any institutionalized negotiation with the people who are directly affected by the policy. Like enforcement of birth control policy in the 1980s, enforcement of zero-Covid is largely backed up by coercive means, although the government also relies on propaganda to persuade people to buy its narrative on the need to sustain the policy structure. Snap lockdowns and the extensive use of AR codes and "the pop-up window" enable the government to restrict people's mobility at will. People are forced to be tested regularly in order to access public transportation and other public venues. While infected people, no matter how mild their symptoms are, are immediately isolated and treated in designated hospitals, their close contacts and secondary close contacts are sent—often against their will—to designated places for 7-day quarantine.

The human rights woes are often amplified with the application of "one-size-fits-all" and "cengceng jia" (i.e., the imposing of additional targets and requirements at every lower administrative level). After one Covid case is identified, residents in the entire building would be sent to quarantine centers.

In order to justify these draconian measures, the state and social media outlets have consistently highlighted the danger of Covid-19. The fear of being infected and suffering from its health and non-health consequences led to widespread stigmatization of infected people and their close contacts in China. A person who happens to be infected worries about not only the potential severe symptoms but also the harassment and cyberbullying associated with the leak of private information. Driven by the coronaphobia, some Chinese companies publicly reject job seekers who recovered from Covid or had been quarantined. Early this month, fears about Covid and poor living conditions led to an exodus of workers from Foxconn in Zhengzhou, the world's largest iPhone factory.

Violation of privacy and civil liberties is also exacerbated by the widespread use of invasive surveillance techniques to monitor and track people's movements. While many liberal democracies, including the U.S., use virus tracking apps, and Chinese people appear to acquiesce to handing over personal data for pandemic control, the unprecedented use of such technologies by an untransparent authoritarian regime has led many China watchers to suspect that zero-Covid may provide a proof of concept for an Orwellian state seeking to control every aspect of social life in China. Already, the health code system has enabled the government to have combined access to personal information including people's Covid test results, their mobile phone location tracking, their government issued ID number, and their vaccination status.

The surveillance state is so omnipresent and efficient that a resident who just purchased anti-fever medicine from a local pharmacy could receive a government notice next day asking them to be tested for Covid.

Such concerns are not groundless. In June, local governments in Zhengzhou, Henan province tampered with health codes of bank run victims turned protesters so that they were denied access to all public venues and transport and even subject to mandatory quarantine. Evidence also suggests that zero-Covid measures facilitated government crackdown on the nascent civil society. Under the guise of breaking up illegal gatherings to prevent the spread of Covid, many religious venues are closed. While government sanctioned churches are allowed to reopen when zero-Covid measures ease up, most family churches continue to have difficulty holding worship services and prayer meetings.

HOW ZERO-COVID COMPROMISES PEOPLE'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Prolonged and stringent implementation of zero-Covid nationwide has also created other second-order problems. Lockdown measures, for example, impede access to food, healthcare and other basic necessities. A study conducted by Chinese scientists found a significant decline in the utilization of healthcare services after lockdown measures were introduced in China. Chinese media reported a number of cases where people have died after being denied timely medical treatment for their non-Covid related illnesses. In cities under prolonged lockdowns, such as Xi'an, Shanghai, Jilin and Urumqi, residents also face shortages of food and other basic necessities.

The impact on people's livelihood varies across population groups, exacerbating the problem of inequity. Migrant workers (approximately 292.5 million in China), low-income households and small businesses are hit particularly hard by the lockdown. Occasionally local governments offered them small loans and subsidies, which appeared to be too little and too late. According to a nationwide survey, 60 percent of diabetes patients experienced food or medication shortages during the quarantine period in 2020 in China (which has the world's largest diabetes population—116 million adults), which was much higher than those without diabetes.

By shielding the population from Covid-19, zero-Covid has the unintended result of sustaining the immunity gap between China and the rest of the world. No more than the small fraction of one percent of the Chinese population acquired some level of natural immunity due to prior infection. This places China in a unique situation of having only vaccine-induced immunity. Because of the low efficacy rate of Chinese vaccines, however, the antibodies generated by these vaccines have dropped to a level that is considered low or even undetectable. The immunity gap significantly increases the risks of the healthcare system being overwhelmed by a rapid surge of cases after policy relaxation, which paradoxically justifies the persistence of the zero-Covid policy regime.

Single-minded pursuit of Covid prevention and control also means that other major public health challenges receive less attention, which very likely increases the overall disease burden in China. It is increasingly clear that prolonged and stringent school closures and stay-at-home orders, in combination with the fear about Covid-19, have aggravated a mental health crisis in China. A national survey taken

in 2020 found that 35 percent of respondents suffered from mental disorders including anxiety and depression. In addition, by discouraging and even denying people access to food, medicine and care for other illnesses, the policy is expected to contribute to growing non-communicable disease burden, including diabetes, heart attacks, stroke, and cancer, which are the leading killers in China.

According to Peng Kaiping, dean of the School of Social Sciences at Tsinghua University, diabetes deaths have increased by 80 percent in China, where 840,000 people died of diabetes annually before the pandemic. He also suggested that the harm to health caused by Covid-19 has been overshadowed by the second-order disasters associated with the stringent Covid control measures in China.

In addition, zero-Covid's devastating impact on China's economy is taking a heavy toll on people's livelihood. Over 460,000 Chinese firms were closed in the first quarter of 2022 alone. The widespread business failures might explain why the youth unemployment rate is so high (close to 20 percent). The economic slowdown threatens to put working class and migrant workers at risk of falling back into poverty, which prompts the central government to provide one-time relief funding to "families or individuals whose basic life is in temporary difficulties due to the epidemic."

CONCLUSION

Mike Ryan, head of WHO's health emergencies program, once said that all pandemic control actions should "show due respect to individual and human rights." As far as human rights in China are concerned, there is a huge perception gap between China and the West. Critics of China's human rights tend to focus on individual political and civil liberties in the country, while the Chinese government prefers to talk only about the strides it has made in achieving collective social and economic rights, such as increased access to healthcare and elimination of absolute poverty. In appreciation of the equal status of both types of rights, this testimony acknowledges the huge efforts and achievements of China in shielding its 1.4 billion people from Covid-19 and the widespread encroachment on privacy and civil liberties in the country. In the meantime, it also suggests that the proclaimed people-first and life-first approach in combating Covid-19 should be evaluated in light of the lack of commitment to addressing other major public health challenges. Preliminary evidence seems to suggest that the extremely low level of Covid infection and mortality may be achieved to the detriment of people's overall health status, which undermines the government narrative on its human rights achievements. Moving away from zero-Covid is the only wise approach to transcend this human rights dilemma.

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF SARAH COOK

INFORMATION SUPPRESSION AND DISSENT IN CHINA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT'S ZERO-COVID POLICY

Senator Merkley, Congressman McGovern, and other members of the commission, thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

Nearly three years after the virus now known as COVID-19 first appeared in Wuhan, the Chinese government is continuing a strict, even draconian, policy to try to contain its spread. While this approach undoubtedly helped stem the spread of the virus and save lives in China during the early months of the pandemic, its inflexible persistence in the face of less dangerous but more transmissible variants has brought significant costs to the Chinese economy, people's health and well-being, the free flow of information, and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) own legitimacy. Since March, at least 45 cities across China with populations totaling 373 million people¹—more than the entire population of the United States—stretching from Shenzhen in the south to Jilin Province in the north have faced full or partial lockdowns.²

These lockdowns are occurring in a country that is also home to the most sophisticated and multi-layered apparatus of information control in the world. Freedom House's latest edition of *Freedom on the Net*, a global assessment of internet freedom published last month, found that the Chinese government was the worst abuser of internet freedom for the eighth consecutive year.³ This apparatus of information

control has been intimately intertwined with the Chinese authorities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic from its inception.

So, how are these two dimensions of life in China—the government's Zero-COVID policy and its information control system—intersecting?

Three aspects of information suppression over the past year are notable, drawing on incidents and analysis from Freedom House's *China Media Bulletin* and other research:

1. Suppressing news reporting of COVID-19 outbreaks and lockdowns in China

As occurred in Wuhan in the early days of the pandemic, one key target of censorship or other reprisals, is news and information related to new outbreaks or conditions in locked-down areas.

Restricting traditional media and investigative reporting. Chinese news outlets are subject to continued censorship directives from the CCP dictating what they can and cannot report on. On rare occasions when journalists have deviated from state guidance to report more independently on an outbreak, their work has been censored. Caixin, a widely respected business publication with a reputation for investigative journalism, released a long investigative report on April 2, 2022, about hidden deaths at Shanghai's largest nursing home; the article was later deleted by censors.⁴ An April 1 article about the hospital by the state-owned English-language outlet Sixth Tone was also deleted.⁵

Authorities have also attempted to dictate how media should report on the lifting of lockdowns. For example, as lockdown restrictions in Shanghai began to lift at the end of May, a leaked censorship directive published by the US-based *China Digital Times* website suggested that local media were prohibited from writing about the end of the restrictive two-month period in the city on grounds that it was never declared in the first place.⁶ "Unlike Wuhan, Shanghai never declared a lockdown, so there is no 'ending the lockdown,'" according to the leak. Instead, the media were told to clarify that "static management-style suppression" was lifting only in certain districts.

Social media censorship. As Chinese citizens have turned to social media and other online tools to share information and register complaints about lack of food or other problems in locked-down areas, many have found their messages being censored and their accounts being temporarily or permanently suspended. According to the latest *Freedom on the Net* assessment, nearly three years into the pandemic, COVID-19 continues to be one of the most censored topics on the Chinese internet. In Shanghai, for example, after residents turned to social media to protest a lack of food⁷ and the authorities' handling of the crisis,⁸ China-based tech platforms censored related videos, posts, and articles, and some authorities told residents not to post "pandemic-related messages online."⁹ The social media platform Weibo began censoring the search term "buying vegetables in Shanghai" as complaints over food shortages grew.¹⁰

"Content flooding" and hashtag manipulation to drown out Xinjiang, Tibet complaints. This fall, regions with large populations of ethnic minorities such as Xinjiang and Tibet have experienced severe, lengthy COVID-19 lockdowns, accompanied by reports of starvation.¹¹ These areas are typically subjected to harsher censorship than other parts of China, rendering it even more difficult for information about events on the ground to emerge. Yet people in these regions have posted their frustrations and fears online, resulting in censorship and arrest of both minority and Han residents.¹² Censors have not only tried to delete certain content but also to manipulate information in other ways. According to a leaked directive published by *China Digital Times*,¹³ previously trained "internet commentary personnel" were ordered in early September to engage in "content flooding" efforts on Weibo, aimed at drowning out posts about the lockdown in Ili prefecture in Xinjiang with lifestyle and cooking posts, and other innocuous material.¹⁴ A week later, netizens in Lhasa began begging social media users to "please pay attention" to harsh lockdown measures and poor medical care amid a wave of positive COVID-19 cases there.¹⁵ Weibo responded by deprioritizing a hashtag on Tibet.

Prosecution of whistleblowers and critics. The Chinese security services have supplemented these measures with detentions and prosecutions of outspoken citizens, including members of ethnic and religious minorities, who have tried to share information with audiences within and outside China about conditions in the country. In March 2021, retired professor Chen Zhaozhi went on trial in Beijing for posting online that the "Wuhan pneumonia is not a Chinese virus, but Chinese Communist Party virus."¹⁶ Chen, who suffers from a number of illnesses, was denied bail. As of June 2022, he remained in detention.¹⁷ In September 2021, human

rights activist Guo Quan was tried for “inciting subversion” after he published articles criticizing social injustice, corruption, and the government’s response to the COVID–19 pandemic.¹⁸ In November 2021, a man in the Ningxia region was detained for nine days after he sent a meme to a group on WeChat complaining about the local COVID–19 control measures.¹⁹ In January 2022, citizen journalist and Falun Gong practitioner Xu Na was sentenced to eight years in prison for sending photos and information about COVID–19-related restrictions in Beijing to an overseas Chinese-language website for publication online, one of the longest known sentences to date for sharing pandemic related information.²⁰ In August 2022, a teacher in Lhasa was arrested for posts on WeChat and Weibo documenting harmful aspects of how the city’s harsh COVID–19 lockdown had been implemented.²¹ And in September, Xinjiang police reportedly detained four internet users accused of “spreading rumors,” and over 600 people who defied lockdown orders to protest the lack of food.²²

2. Suppressing information about public outcries over Zero-COVID policy implementation

As lockdowns have affected an ever-expanding number of Chinese citizens, some of whom have faced life-or-death challenges due to the lockdown policies rather than the virus itself, the CCP regime and its censors have had to contend with large-scale public outcries and taken actions to silence them.

Food shortages. During a stringent lockdown in Xi’an that began on December 23, 2021 and encompassed 13 million people, residents of the city turned to Weibo to express anger about food shortages.²³ The hashtag #DifficultToBuyFoodInXian received over 370 million clicks by January 2, 2022. Two days later, Xi’an officials banned residents from posting about the pandemic,²⁴ and placed three individuals in detention for up to seven days on charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” an offense commonly used in free expression cases, in response to their complaints on WeChat.²⁵ During the Shanghai lockdown that stretched from late March into May 2022, an undated video from a housing compound in Minhang District showed residents protesting outside against COVID–19 measures, saying “we want to eat” and “we want freedom”; the social media platform WeChat censored the clip, claiming it violated the terms and conditions of usage.²⁶

Non-COVID lockdown deaths. With almost each lockdown, there have emerged public outcries related to residents who died seemingly preventable deaths as a result of the strict COVID–19 measures rather than the disease itself. Examples include late-term miscarriages of pregnant women denied hospital entry,²⁷ heart attacks,²⁸ or deaths from a bus crash en route to a centralized quarantine center.²⁹ These cases have been posted online and circulated within and outside China, but often then subject to censorship. One recent such tragedy occurred just weeks ago in Zhengzhou in Henan province. A three-year-old boy whose neighborhood had been locked down since early October died from carbon monoxide poisoning after police reportedly refused to allow his father to take him for emergency medical care.³⁰ The case and the father’s account blaming Zero-COVID policies for “indirectly killing” his son sparked heartbreak, anger, and street protests. But within days his posts had been censored,³¹ as were hashtags and other comments grieving the young boy’s death.³²

3. Suppressing medical professionals’ and other elites’ questioning of the Zero-COVID policy

The extended lockdowns in Shanghai and other cities have prompted more citizens to raise objections to the human and economic costs of the government’s Zero-COVID policy, with some calling on their leaders to consider less rigid alternatives that might still spare many lives. The prominence, diversity, and number of people who have encountered censorship for trying to engage in such a rational discussion are significant.

Medical professionals. Medical professionals remain a key target for censors, as they have been since the start of the pandemic. Indeed, the suppression of health experts’ speech in late 2019 and early 2020 may have denied the country and the world an opportunity to contain the virus at the outset.³³ Yet the practice continues. In early April, Zhong Nanshan, the country’s top respiratory disease specialist, published an English article in the *National Science Review* that offered suggestions on how China could reopen “in an orderly and effective manner” in the coming months.³⁴ While it acknowledged the effectiveness of policies to date, the article warned that the strict Zero-COVID policy approach “cannot be pursued in the long-run.” A Chinese version was quickly censored,³⁵ and during the night of April 20–21, state media flooded Baidu search-engine results with items that partially quoted

Zhong expressing support for the existing strategy and downplaying his remarks on the need to gradually open up.³⁶ On May 10, World Health Organization (WHO) director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who had previously praised the Chinese government's pandemic response, remarked that China's strategy was "not sustainable" in the face of the virus's easily transmissible Omicron variant.³⁷ Almost immediately, as clips and references to the comment circulated online, censors descended on his remarks, suppressing his image, name, related hashtags, and even UN-affiliated accounts on Weibo and WeChat.³⁸

More grassroots health workers have also been silenced. In early April, Dr. Miu Xiaohui, a retired infectious disease expert, attempted to calculate how many people with diabetes might have died because of the lack of medicine and treatment during Shanghai's lockdown, reaching an estimated figure of 2,141. The blog post outlining his calculation and suggestions for managing the pandemic—through a stronger focus on vaccination campaigns and home isolation, for example—was deleted.

Law professors. Tong Zhiwei, a law professor in Shanghai, published an online essay arguing that authorities were acting illegally when they took extreme measures such as forcing uninfected neighbors of infected individuals into collective quarantine.³⁹ Tong also pointed out that Shanghai had never actually entered a state of emergency per law. His article was deleted, his verified Weibo account was then banned from posting, and a hashtag of his name was censored. While the shuttering of an outspoken intellectual's Weibo account silences their criticism, the closing of a WeChat account can significantly impede daily life. On February 3, days after his sixth WeChat account was shut down, Peking University law professor He Weifang handwrote a letter of protest to parent company Tencent.⁴⁰ He said the account shutdowns made daily activities like "transport, shopping and public health code screenings impossible," and violated his civil rights. He once had over a million followers on Weibo before leaving the platform in 2013 amid a government crackdown on liberal-leaning intellectuals.⁴¹

Financial analysts and entrepreneurs. As the negative repercussions of the Zero-COVID policy on China's economy have become more evident, financial analysts have also been swept up in the attempt to stifle debate. Hao Hong, a Hong Kong-based market strategist, was censored after he published a series of commentaries on social media platforms that predicted a gloomy trajectory for China's economy.⁴² On April 30, his Weibo account, which had three million followers, was shuttered, and his WeChat account was suspended. The Weibo accounts of at least three other chief economists and fund managers have been suspended in recent months for "violating laws and regulations."⁴³ In another case in late May, Weibo banned the account of the head of Trip.com, one of China's largest online travel agencies, for commenting on the COVID-19 lockdown's impact on Chinese people's life expectancy.⁴⁴ The apparent purge fits a long-standing pattern in which warnings of problems for the Chinese economy are smothered despite growing evidence of a downturn.

Cracks in Beijing's information controls

Despite the robust resources being invested by the Chinese government to control what news and information reaches Chinese citizens and the wider world about conditions in locked-down areas, the regime and its apparatus are not omnipotent. Indeed, the fact that I am able to put this testimony together with detailed examples demonstrates the extent to which information that the CCP would prefer disappeared is still circulating inside and outside China, often to the credit of ordinary Chinese citizens and at great sacrifice.

Online dissent. During the Shanghai lockdown in particular, Chinese users went to extraordinary lengths to circumvent censorship, keep critical content online, and find avenues for freer expression. There was a national outcry after Shanghai implemented a policy to remove COVID-19-positive children from their uninfected parents,⁴⁵ with videos and related hashtags garnering tens of millions of views.⁴⁶ Podcasts have also emerged as a less censored space where women, in particular, shared their daily hardships during the lockdown.⁴⁷

Creative solutions for voicing displeasure have included piggybacking on officially sanctioned hashtags. On the evening of April 13, tens of thousands of angry comments were posted to a hashtag criticizing human rights in the United States, which was artificially ranked second by the Weibo platform.⁴⁸ Users exploited the hashtag to highlight the lack of rights protections in China and express frustration with the Chinese government. Many of the posts garnered hundreds of likes and shares, although by 4 a.m. the censors had moved in to delete them.

Content preservation. Another collective outpouring of anguish came in the form of a six-minute video compilation of key incidents from the Shanghai lockdown,

titled “Voices of April.”⁴⁹ The video deluged WeChat groups and was constantly reposted and forwarded even as censors tried to remove it. People made new versions of it upside down,⁵⁰ embedded in cartoons, or with painted still images designed to evade censorship algorithms.⁵¹

Various initiatives have countered censorship within the Chinese internet by keeping other deleted content alive outside the Great Firewall. A compilation of 200 cases of people who died as a result of the lockdown itself rather than COVID-19—from denial of medical care, hunger, or suicide, for example—was posted to Airtable, a blockchain-based database platform. Overseas bilingual websites like *China Digital Times* (CDT)⁵² or What’s on Weibo,⁵³ along with the Twitter accounts of individual journalists and researchers, have captured, archived, and translated posts like many of those cited above.⁵⁴

Offline dissent. Resentment related to lockdowns has also translated into real-world dissent, including solo and group protests. One recent example that made international headlines was when a Beijing man lowered two banners over a city bridge, shouted slogans, and lit a fire on October 13 in protest of the government’s COVID-19 policies, and demanded freedom and dignity for Chinese people.⁵⁵ Slogans on the banners included: “*No covid test, we want to eat. Remove dictator and national traitor Xi Jinping.*” Occurring days before the CCP’s all-important Party Congress opened on October 16, the “Bridge Man” protest was an act of defiance directed at Xi Jinping as the architect of the Zero-COVID policy, just as he was set to be anointed to an unprecedented third term as CCP chief. The demonstration was met with rapid censorship and the deployment of police and minders across the capital,⁵⁶ but not before sparking attention on social media, international news headlines, and expressions of solidarity by Chinese students at college campuses around the world.⁵⁷

“Bridge Man’s” protest, while striking, was not an isolated act of public dissent against Xi’s COVID policies. A new Freedom House project, the *China Dissent Monitor*, documented 40 cases of Chinese citizens protesting COVID-19 restrictions between June and October 2022. They include protests that drew hundreds of people to the streets not only in Shanghai, but also in Hebei, Guangxi, Liaoning, and Jiangsu provinces, and online hashtag movements featuring hundreds of thousands of posts.

Official concessions. In at least some instances, public outcries and news coverage appears to have contributed to policy adjustments or official accountability, at the local level. In Xi’an, several officials were punished and two hospitals temporarily closed down over tragedies—like miscarriages and a heart attack death—during the month-long lockdown from December 2021 to January 2022.⁵⁸ In nine of the 40 *China Dissent Monitor* cases mentioned above, some form of concession was also documented, including local officials lifting burdensome travel restrictions on commuters following street protests.

Looking ahead

Throughout the summer and early fall, many observers were cautiously optimistic that after the 20th Party Congress in mid-October, the Chinese government might transition away from the Zero-COVID policy. Unverified rumors in early November of a change in policy prompted a jump in the stock market from investor excitement at the prospect, further fueled by remarks by epidemiologist Zeng Guang that he believed conditions for opening were “accumulating.”⁵⁹

Such hopes appear to have been unfounded. During the Party Congress, Xi reiterated his commitment to the policy and state media have praised it as one of his key achievements, rendering too rapid a reversal a potential blow to his legitimacy.⁶⁰ Days after Zeng’s comment, Chinese health officials repeated their dedication to the Zero-COVID policy.⁶¹ More broadly, the rhetorical shifts, legal changes, and vaccination campaigns that experts have said would be prerequisites to any significant shift remain notably absent.⁶²

So long as the lockdowns continue, the cycle observed in major metropolitan areas like Xi’an, Shanghai, and Lanzhou of logistical problems, non-COVID medical tragedies, and overall citizen frustration spurring outcries and even protests are likely to continue as well. All the while, the censorship apparatus continues to expand and evolve.

Regardless of when the Zero-COVID policy ends, the lockdowns, censorship, and citizen responses are likely to have long-term effects, not only for families who suffered untimely deaths or other traumas due to the restrictions. It seems clear that this historic and tragic episode in the lives of millions of people will not be easily forgotten, even if much of the digital evidence is hastily obscured. Interest in emigrating from China is reportedly on the rise, while reflections published by Shang-

hai residents underscore a disappointment with Chinese state media's obvious lack of coverage of the problems surrounding the lockdown.⁶³

Meanwhile, a sense of solidarity and community has also arisen surrounding both offline mutual-assistance efforts and online outbursts of collective anger, which itself pokes a hole in the CCP's tactics of atomizing dissent. As one netizen commented in response to the US human rights hashtag hijacking: "So many posts to like. This is the true voice of the people. Let's commemorate tonight. . . . Maybe tomorrow it's gonna be songs and dances again, but at least we know that we are awake."⁶⁴

Recommendations

Consistently raise press freedom and political prisoners as part of bilateral engagement:

- Consistently raise the issues of press freedom and internet freedom in China publicly and in private meetings with Chinese counterparts, including at the highest levels. Stress that universal rights like free expression apply to China.
- Urge the release of imprisoned journalists and free expression activists. Experience demonstrates that consistently raising individual prisoner cases can result in improved treatment in detention, lighter sentences or, in rare cases, release from imprisonment. In addition to others listed in this testimony, there are three notable detainees jailed for reporting or commentary related to COVID-19 who are facing precarious legal and health conditions in custody. Their names should be raised at every opportunity and updates on their treatment and well-being requested. If traveling to China and to a relevant province, US officials should request to meet with these and other prisoners:
 - **Zhang Zhan:** Zhang is a citizen journalist sentenced to four years in prison in December 2020 for reporting related to COVID-19, including videos taken in February 2020 from Wuhan, the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak.⁶⁵ She is being held in Shanghai's Women's Prison. Under public pressure to grant her a medical release,⁶⁶ after she lost a significant amount of weight in custody, the authorities reportedly improved conditions for Zhang.⁶⁷ The latest known update on her condition was in February 2022. (Zhang is case 2020-00175 in the CECC's Political Prisoner Database)
 - **Fang Bin:** Fang is a citizen journalist who gained international attention for videos taken of corpses at hospitals in Wuhan in the first days of the pandemic.⁶⁸ After two years of efforts to locate him, including by Zhang Zhan, activists reported in February 2022 that he was being held at Jiang'an District Detention Center in Wuhan.⁶⁹ His case was reportedly submitted for prosecution on charges of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble."⁷⁰ In addition to being a citizen journalist, Fang is reportedly a Falun Gong believer⁷¹ who had been tortured during previous detentions for his faith.⁷² The latest known update on his condition was in February 2022. (Fang is case 2020-00140 in the CECC's Political Prisoner Database)
 - **Xu Zhiyong:** Xu is a prominent rights lawyer and democracy advocate who has suffered years of reprisals and abuse due to his activism.⁷³ After completing a four-year prison term on politically motivated charges, Xu resumed meetings with other human rights defenders in China. He was detained in Guangdong on February 15, 2020 following a nationwide effort to track him down. Shortly before his arrest, he published a scathing letter calling for Xi Jinping to resign over his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁴ Xu was tried on June 22, 2022 in Linshu County People's Court in Shandong Province for "subversion of state power," but no sentence has been announced.⁷⁵ He has reported being tortured in custody and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that his detention is "arbitrary". (Xu is case 2005-00199 in the CECC's Political Prisoner Database)

Support civil society initiatives that counter censorship:

- Funding should be made available to quickly enhance the server capacity of circumvention tools facing increased demand from China during moments of crisis or political turmoil. During these circumstances, the number of Chinese people seeking uncensored information typically spikes. At least year's Summit for Democracy, a Multilateral Surge and Sustain Fund for Anti-Censorship Technology was established. Congress should work with the administration to determine whether this fund could be used for rapid responses and to support groups that develop and disseminate tools to enable users to securely access blocked websites, including from mobile phones.

- Support efforts to monitor, preserve, and recirculate censored content within China, including news articles and social media posts related to COVID–19 and lockdown conditions that have been deleted by censors.
- Support research and outreach initiatives that inform Chinese audiences about the censorship and surveillance apparatus, imprisoned journalists and online activists, the regime’s human rights record overall, emerging protests, and how democratic institutions function. Existing studies and surveys have shown that netizen awareness of censorship often yields a greater desire to access uncensored information, assist a jailed activist, or take steps to protect personal communications.
- Pass legislation focused on advancing press freedom globally and with regard to China. Freedom House would particularly urge consideration of two bills with broader relevance: the Global Press Freedom Act (S. 204) introduced by Senators Brian Schatz (D–HI) with support from Todd Young (R–IN) and the International Press Freedom Act (S. 1495), introduced by Senator Tim Kaine (D–VA) with support from Senator Lindsey Graham (R–SC). Both are bipartisan bills that would help prioritize press freedom within U.S. foreign policy, including in China. They would create an office focused on press freedom in the Department of State, and S. 1495 adds special visas and funding for journalists at risk.

Apply targeted sanctions:

Impose targeted sanctions, such as travel bans and asset freezes, on individual Chinese officials involved in serious abuses against those who have exercised their right to free expression. Closely monitor conditions in Xinjiang and Tibet. Apply targeted sanctions to officials in regions where international human rights crimes are being committed against ethnic and religious minorities and may be amplified by restrictive COVID–19 policies. Sanctions should be coordinated with partners and imposed multilaterally.

Respond vigorously to violations affecting U.S. citizens and journalists:

React with strong and immediate diplomatic action (press statements, phone calls, meetings, letters) to any violations of media freedom or free expression involving U.S. citizens or media outlets, including detentions in China, violence against foreign correspondents, restrictions on visas and media access, and efforts by Chinese diplomats to interfere with press freedom within the United States.

[Footnotes appear on the following pages.]

Notes

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PREPARED STATEMENT OF RORY TRUEX

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 20th 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.¹ 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.

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.² 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.³

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."⁴ 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

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⁴Koetse, 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/>

lockdown, with hundreds of millions of people affected.⁵ 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.

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.⁶ 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 20th 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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, which will benefit as many as 3,000 companies.”⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 20th 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

⁵ 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>

⁶ 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.

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

⁸ Kyngé, 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>

⁹ 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/>

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

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 20th 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.¹¹ 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.

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 20th 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.

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

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SENATOR MERKLEY

Good morning. Today's hearing of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "China's Zero-COVID Policy and Authoritarian Public Health Control" will come to order.

Before we turn to the subject of this hearing, I'd like to announce that the Commission will publish our annual report on human rights conditions and rule-of-law developments in China tomorrow. This report once again marks the culmination of a year of work by the Commission's non-partisan research staff to produce an extraordinarily detailed, comprehensive, and credible account of the situation in China. Just a huge thanks to the staff of the Commission for really incredible work.

¹¹Manion, 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.

The Annual Report outlines the systematic and often brutal efforts by the government of the People's Republic of China to censor, torture, and detain ethnic and religious minorities, critics of Chinese Communist Party policy, and advocates of basic rights. This past year, transnational repression has been a particular concern for this Commission, and the report details the tools used by Chinese authorities to reach into other countries to silence critics, to enhance control over diaspora communities, to conduct surveillance, and to force the repatriation of their targets. Within China, the report documents evidence that top leaders directed the genocide in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, including policies of forced labor, sexual violence, and family separation. This year's reporting also shines a spotlight on the pervasive problem of violence against women, with high-profile cases showing the vulnerability of women across society. Meanwhile, coercive population control policies directed at ethnic minority populations amount to eugenics, while the broader policies continue to intrude on families' decisions about whether and when to have children.

Both at home and abroad, General Secretary Xi Jinping seeks to promote what he calls a "Chinese view of human rights." This report punctures that narrative. People in China and the diaspora communities around the world deserve the same fundamental human rights as everyone else.

The 2022 Annual Report reflects the view of our commissioners that the human rights abuses the report details require a whole-of-government response by the United States and coordinated action with other countries. In partnership with our newly appointed executive branch commissioners, who we are so delighted to have, I look forward to continuing to work across our government to advance the recommendations in the report so we can protect those fleeing persecution, those facing transnational repression, those fighting coercion, and those fearing the destruction of their culture.

The Annual Report shows how the Chinese Communist Party seeks to dominate daily life to control how citizens live. Nowhere has the intensity of this political and social control been more apparent over the last year than in the implementation of the draconian zero-COVID policy. As senior leaders staked the credibility of the Chinese Communist Party on this policy, authorities implemented disproportionately harsh public security measures, often using coercive quarantine controls that infringed on privacy rights, freedom of movement, freedom of expression, and due process. At the height of the Shanghai lockdown this spring, there were an estimated 373 million people under lockdown throughout China. To enforce these lockdowns, authorities often tape up entrances and erect fences to prevent residents from leaving their homes. They sweep up residents of entire buildings for mandatory quarantine in makeshift facilities. They marshal the full power of the surveillance state to monitor—and often control—people's movements and health. They aggressively censor and detain critics of the policy. And they leave vulnerable populations unable to access medical care for other conditions.

As we will hear this morning, China's zero-COVID policy comes at great cost to fundamental rights and may be unsustainable or even counterproductive in protecting overall public health. Leading experts in public health, information suppression, and Chinese political leadership dynamics will help us better understand this policy, what it has meant for the people of China, and where it may go from here.

The testimony we'll hear recognizes that these policies have resulted in some protection of the population from the ravages of the virus the world has grappled with for nearly three years. Every country has wrestled with how best to protect public health from COVID-19 and there are no easy answers. But we all have an obligation to protect basic rights, and this hearing will help us understand a policy so central to what it means to live in China today.

PREPARED STATEMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE MCGOVERN

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing on China's zero-COVID policy and its implications for human rights.

I join the Chair in welcoming the announcement that the Commission's 2022 Annual Report will be published tomorrow. I encourage everyone to read it on our website. It is, once again, a well-organized and well-sourced accounting of the Chinese government's failure to meet its obligations under international human rights law.

The report is the product of countless hours of diligent work by our research staff. I cannot praise them enough for their hard work on this report and the effort they made to produce this excellent resource.

In addition to the tragedy of the 6.6 million deaths caused by the coronavirus globally, the pandemic has put a strain on societies and communities everywhere. Each of us has had to change our behavior for the good of ourselves, our neighbors, and our colleagues.

The pandemic also creates challenges for human rights. The COVID-19 Guidance issued by the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights acknowledges that emergency measures that may “restrict human rights should be proportionate to the evaluated risk, necessary and applied in a non-discriminatory way, [including] having a specific focus and duration, and taking the least intrusive approach possible to protect public health.”

It also asserts that “respect for human rights across the spectrum, including economic, social, cultural, and civil and political rights, will be fundamental to the success of the public health response and recovery from the pandemic.” Through this lens we are here to assess China’s record.

We have seen the videos of personnel in hazmat suits spraying disinfectant in public spaces, and of crowds rushing out of factories or amusement parks to avoid being locked down. We saw the images of the anti-Xi banner over the bridge in Beijing, and of lockdown protests in Lhasa. But there are thousands, if not millions, of stories of hardship and dissent that we do not hear, in part because of the Chinese government’s censorship.

We welcome our expert witnesses to help us understand the experiences of people in China under the zero-COVID policy.

And we must know the names of the people who have suffered for reporting or speaking out about the government’s policy. These include:

- **Zhang Zhan** and **Fang Bin**, citizen journalists detained in early 2020 in connection with their efforts to document the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan;
- **Xu Zhiyong**, a civil society advocate, arrested and tried for criticizing Xi Jinping’s handling of the pandemic; and
- **Xu Zhangrun**, a professor who was fired and had his pension suspended for writing about the failures of the government’s response.

Lastly, I note that the Chinese government’s zero-COVID policy has created food shortages. OHCHR’s COVID-19 Guidance notes that the pandemic has exacerbated food insecurity and urges governments to take urgent steps to meet the population’s dietary needs. We have seen evidence that the lockdowns and draconian restrictions have limited access to food. The banner on the Beijing bridge read in part: “We want to eat.”

China is a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which means it formally recognizes the fundamental human right to be free of hunger. The Chinese government is obligated, as a matter of human rights, to ensure that its pandemic response does not push people into food insecurity.

Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to gaining a greater understanding of the situation from our witnesses, as well as recommendations for how the United States should respond.



**United States House of Representatives
Congressional-Executive Commission on China**

“Truth in Testimony” Disclosure Form

In accordance with Rule XI, clause 2(g) of the Rules of the House of Representatives, witnesses are asked to disclose the following information. Please complete this form and attach it to your written testimony and it may be made publicly available in electronic format.

1. Date of Hearing:

2. Hearing Title:

3. Your Name:

4. Organization, organizations, or government entity you are representing:

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False Statement Certification:

Knowingly providing material false information to this commission, or knowingly concealing material information from this commission, is a crime (18 U.S.C. 1001). This form may be made part of the hearing record.

Witness Signature

Date

Witness Biographies

Yanzhong Huang, Senior Fellow for Global Health, Council on Foreign Relations, and Professor, Seton Hall University School of Diplomacy and International Relations

Yanzhong Huang is a Senior Fellow for Global Health at the Council on Foreign Relations, where he directs the Global Health Governance roundtable series. He is also a professor and Director of Global Health Studies at Seton Hall University's School of Diplomacy and International Relations, where he developed the first academic concentration among U.S. professional international affairs schools that explicitly addresses the security and foreign policy aspects of health issues. He is the founding editor of *Global Health Governance: The Scholarly Journal for the New Health Security Paradigm*. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Huang has written extensively on Chinese public health developments of the past twenty years, including his most recent book *Toxic Politics: China's Environmental Health Crisis and Its Challenge to the Chinese State* (Cambridge, 2020) as well as earlier research on the 2002 outbreak of SARS ("The SARS Epidemic and Its Aftermath in China: A Political Perspective," 2004) and the impact of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria on the spread of HIV/AIDS and TB in China (see, e.g., *The Diplomat*, 19 April 2014). Dr. Huang received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. Dr. Huang previously gave testimony at a 2013 Congressional-Executive Commission on China hearing entitled "Food and Drug Safety, Public Health, and the Environment in China" and a 2003 roundtable entitled "Dangerous Secret: SARS and China's Health Care System."

Sarah Cook, Research Director for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, Freedom House

Sarah Cook is Research Director for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House and has published multiple reports on China's media influence operations. She directs the *China Media Bulletin*, a monthly digest in English and Chinese providing news and analysis on media freedom developments related to China. Ms. Cook also has expertise on religious freedom in China. Ms. Cook recently managed and wrote sections for "Beijing's Global Media Influence: Authoritarian Expansion and the Power of Democratic Resilience," Freedom House's analysis of China's media influence in 30 countries, which was released in September 2022. Her comments and writings have appeared on CNN, in *The Wall Street Journal*, and in *Foreign Policy*. She has given testimony before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China many times over the years.

Rory Truex, Assistant Professor of Politics and International Affairs, Princeton University

Rory Truex is an Assistant Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University. His research focuses on Chinese politics and authoritarian systems. His current projects explore how Chinese citizens evaluate their political system; the relationship between media bias and credibility in non-democracies; and patterns in dissident behavior and punishment. He received his undergraduate degree from Princeton in 2007 and Ph.D. in political science from Yale in 2014.

