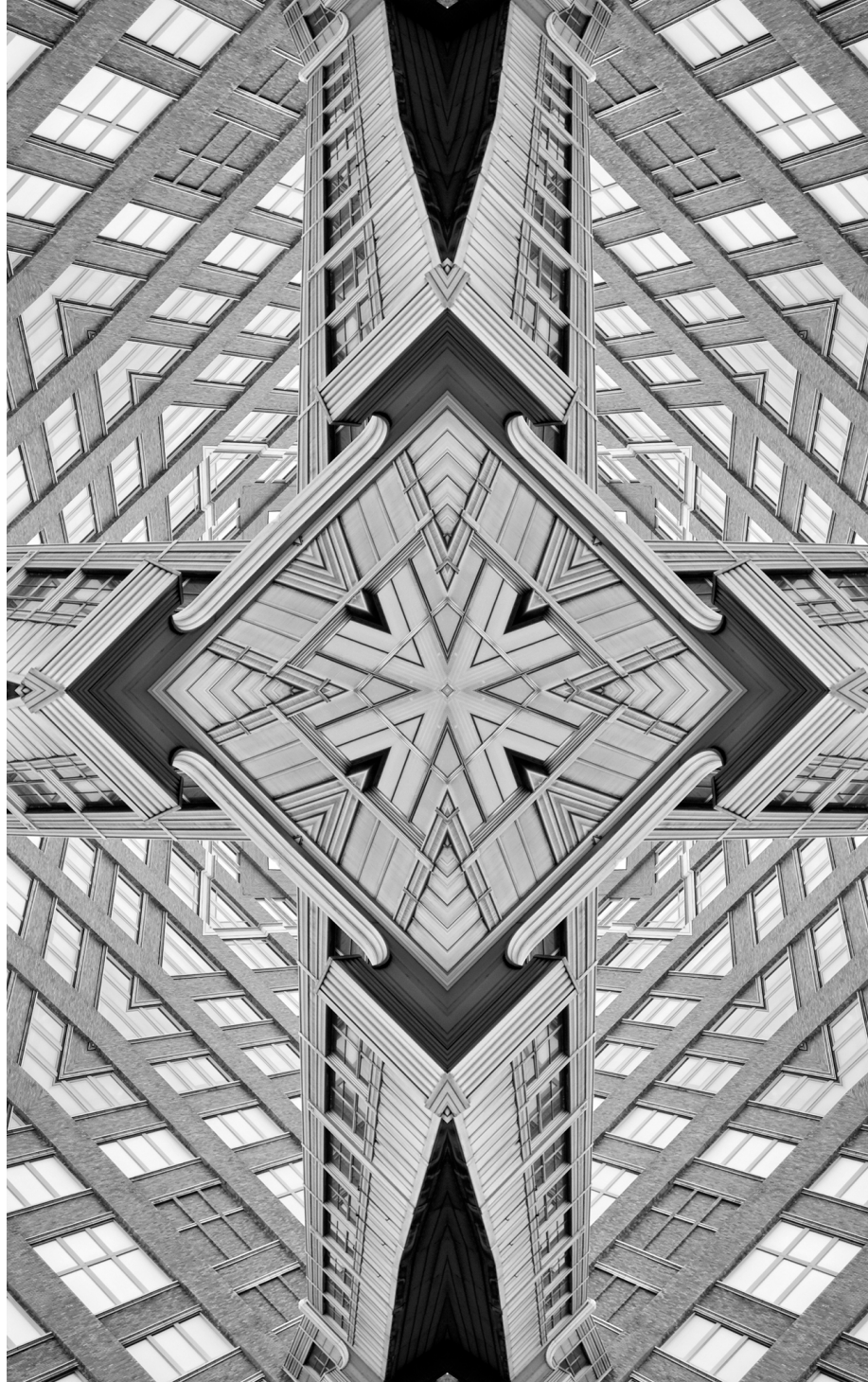


Issue

Brief

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The Xi Plan: The Political Factors Driving China's COVID-19 Strategy

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Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is seeking to promote a political model with centralisation and one-party rule at the core to achieve economic growth and stability. This brief assesses the extent to which the CCP's policymaking mechanisms and internal politics have influenced China's strategy to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

During a teleconference with more than 100,000 bureaucrats in May 2022, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proclaimed that the challenges China had faced in recent months were “greater” than those experienced in 2020 when the coronavirus outbreak was first reported.¹ Soon after the outbreak in Wuhan in 2019, some experts likened China’s initial mismanagement of the situation to the Soviet Union’s handling of the Chernobyl nuclear plant accident in 1986. The Chernobyl disaster led to widespread protests in the Soviet Union, which played a role in its eventual demise; in 2020, at the height of the lockdown in Wuhan, many debated if the contagion would bring down the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).² In June 2020, China’s State Council (its cabinet) announced that while the pandemic had posed a crucial test for the country’s governance system, the CCP’s ability to contain the spread was an important achievement.³ The Chinese state media publicised the swift creation of healthcare infrastructure, underscoring the CCP’s narrative that its superior governance model was primarily responsible for the feat.⁴ It also bolstered the CCP’s claim that autocracies have a better record of delivering results than democracies. Yet, from Li’s evaluation of the situation in 2022, this victory appeared to be short-lived.

China’s approach to tackling the pandemic, as pushed by President Xi Jinping, came to be known as ‘zero-COVID’. This strategy was focused on identifying and quarantining each person afflicted with the virus and those the individual had come into close contact with. To this end, there has been countrywide efforts to mass test people and lock down cities and regions to stop the spread of the virus.⁵ Countries that had initially emulated China’s zero-COVID strategy, such as Australia and New Zealand, eventually ditched the approach after more infectious variants emerged.⁶ But factors such as China’s internal narrative about its political system being superior to the West and its policymaking structure that emphasises a ‘point-to-surface’ approach (where the apparent success of a policy in a targeted area leads to it being applied provincially or nationally) made it tough for the CCP to suddenly abandon this strategy.

In November 2022, largescale protests broke out in Beijing, Shanghai, and other major cities, with demonstrators calling for an end to the restrictions imposed under the zero-COVID strategy.⁷ There were two key reasons for this: first, the economic outlook remains glum, with some with China saying that the country may not meet its 5.5-percent growth target this year, a likely outcome of the zero-COVID strategy;⁸ and second, social acceptance of the pandemic

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curbs has diminished since the strategy was first introduced nearly three years ago, and a series of accidents (such as the fire in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang province, in November that killed 10 people⁹) have heightened fears related to being locked indoors.

Following the demonstrations, the CPC moved to relax several curbs that were perceived as obstructive. For instance, many urban centres discontinued the requirement for negative COVID-19 tests to use public transport or access public venues,¹⁰ and there were some suggestions of using rapid antigen tests and permitting isolation at home for those with mild infections, instead of at quarantine centres.¹¹ Still, it would appear the CCP remains focused on promoting its political model, with centralisation and one-party rule at the core, to achieve economic growth and stability.¹² This brief examines how the party's policymaking mechanism and politics have influenced its strategy to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policymaking and Political Factors

The nature of China's policymaking mechanism has had a key role in shaping its strategy to tackle the coronavirus outbreak. In democracies, policies are a result of public debate and are influenced by multiple factors, such as political opposition, civil society, and the media. In the Chinese autocratic system, the party-state formulates policies and seeks legitimacy through its outcomes. For instance, the Government Work Report, read out by China's premier at the sittings of the National People's Congress, is a report card of the regime's success elucidated through statistics. This shows that even in an autocracy, in addition to using coercion to enforce policies, the political executive must still 'convince' its citizens.

In China, the efficacy of any policy and the associated political discourse has typically centred around one indicator alone.¹³ The CCP has justified its zero-COVID policy on the premise that it enabled its billion-plus citizens to live relatively normal lives. Until October 2022, the country is said to have logged nearly one million COVID-19 cases (or .07 percent of the 1.4 billion population) and about 5,000 deaths.¹⁴ In comparison, the US, with a population of 331 million, saw over one million deaths, and the CCP has used this to rationalise the continuation of its policy.¹⁵ Notably, some in China have also dismissed the West's approach of 'living with the virus' by saying it will annihilate the labour force there in the long run.¹⁶ In the run-up to the 20th edition^a of the CCP's National Congress, which deliberates over the country's future policy trajectory, the state-run *People's Daily* criticised "some nations that opted to live with the virus despite a massive death toll" and termed the zero-COVID policy as "scientific", adding that China "prioritised people's lives despite the economic damage".¹⁷

In a run-up to the National Congress, Liang Wannian, head of the Epidemic Response and Disposal Leading Group, under the National Health Commission, acknowledged that there was public expectation for doing away with the zero-COVID strategy. But he stressed that China first needed better vaccines and treatment methods, or relaxing these curbs would pose many risks and overwhelm the medical system, hampering the ability to treat other ailments and causing more deaths.¹⁸

a Held in Beijing between 16-22 October 2022.

Policymaking and Political Factors

American scholar Jeremy Wallace, who studies authoritarianism in China, argues that the CCP's use of quantification as a tool to convince people makes it appear accountable, and helps communicate the merits of policy through comparisons and easily understood yardsticks. Significantly, this also benefits the CCP elites who create the policies under evaluation, by reinforcing their 'success'.¹⁹

Chinese policymaking embraces an experimental approach. Under the 'point-to-surface' approach, policies are first tested in smaller areas and, if successful, may be implemented in a province or nationwide. If the policy fails, its adverse effects are contained in a limited area, with no major implication on wider social stability. After failing to respond to the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, Xi adopted the zero-COVID strategy, and its success in containing the spread of the virus in 2020 meant that it came to be seen as the "correct" approach to apply nationally. Since 1980, Beijing has rolled out 630 pilot projects, only about half of which have then been implemented nationally.²⁰ Indeed, some scholars have credited the point-to-surface approach for Communist China's resilience vis-à-vis fraternal regimes worldwide.²¹

“The CCP has justified its zero-COVID policy on the premise that it enabled its billion-plus citizens to live a relatively normal life, and limit the death toll.”

Since his rise to power, Xi has attempted to dilute the long-held norms of factional power-sharing within the CCP. The CCP now places a premium on political loyalty. In an article in the *People's Daily*, Chen Xi, head of the party's Organisation Department, wrote that loyalty is the most important political quality and the chief yardstick for selecting party workers, and that "if they fail to pass the loyalty test, then they fail the selection process and will not be chosen, no matter how capable they are".²² This would ensure only loyalists would hold party positions and be promoted.

At the same time, Xi has also moved to purge dissent among the retired cadres. The General Office of the Central Committee issued a set of regulations calling for all party departments to ensure that retired cadres and party members "listened to the party and follow the party", warning that "violations of disciplinary rules should be dealt with seriously".²³ Historically, China's leaders focussed on balancing rival factions and only certain party elders were permitted to criticise policies, without it appearing as revolt.²⁴ This mechanism provided a safety net for the political system and allowed for policies to be modified or a course correction.

The CCP's internal narrative has also impacted its management of COVID-19. After an initial setback following the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, the CCP advanced the narrative that the pandemic had been contained successfully by the second half of 2020 due to its superior governance model.²⁵ As the Chinese economy recovered rapidly by the first half of 2021 and western economies slumped, Xi became exceedingly confident and Chinese society's mood was uplifted. Indeed, the "third resolution on history," adopted at the sixth plenary session of the party's 19th Central Committee in November 2021, contains repeated mentions of "confidence in the system".²⁶

Ahead of the CCP's 20th National Congress, where Xi sought—and secured—a third term as the country's top leader, China factored the 'success' of its zero-COVID policy as his political achievement.²⁷ Consequently, lower-rung officials want to be seen as implementing Xi's signature policy completely, and this has meant that 87 of China's top 100 cities by GDP have imposed some form of quarantine restrictions in 2022.²⁸

Local officials across China are incentivised with potential promotions to achieve policy priorities, which has impacted the COVID-19 vaccination strategy. China is facing a major demographic challenge, with a rapidly ageing population and shrinking workforce due to the decades-long one-child policy (although this has since been replaced). The pandemic has exacerbated the demographic crisis, with an estimated two million people said to have postponed or shelved plans to have a child.²⁹ China's decision to not push for its senior citizens to be vaccinated is an outcome of its pro-natalist approach. For example, while vaccines covered nearly 90 percent of Shanghai's 25 million population, the corresponding figure in the above 60 years age bracket was 62 percent in early 2022.³⁰ China appears to have chosen to vaccinate its youth, believing that an immunised working-age population would kickstart the economy after lockdowns. Nevertheless, following the November 2022 protests, the state began to expedite its vaccination programme for the elderly, setting a target to cover 90 percent of those over 80 years (numbering 36 million in 2020) with at least one dose by the end of January 2023.

Internal tussles

Ahead of the 20th National Congress, Li became more assertiveness on the impact of China's COVID-19 policies on its economy and society. In May 2022, at a symposium that had many government officials in attendance, Li stressed the need to reconcile COVID-19 control measures with economic and social development.³¹ He told officials to take action to revive the economy, while pointing towards high unemployment and slow economic growth rate.³² These statements were construed as some form of pushback against Xi's zero-COVID policy, which has faced increasing public backlash.³³ Indeed, a recent study on the economic costs of the strategy estimated that a month-long complete lockdown in China's four largest cities—Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenzhen—would reduce their real GDP by 61 percent and dent the national real GDP by 8.6 percent (or a loss of US\$152 billion of GDP, based on the country's 2021 GDP figure).³⁴

There is an unwritten compact in China that the people are expected to forgo their rights for rapid economic development facilitated by the CCP. With more than 10 million students set to graduate in 2022, the competition for jobs will intensify.³⁵ This raises the prospects of high unemployment, which could depress China's growth in the long run. Researchers at Peking University have

already warned that China's unemployment rate could touch 2020 levels—estimated to be 92.66 million, or about 12 percent of the working population—under the current COVID-19 policies.³⁶ Importantly, rising joblessness was one of the triggers for the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, and this still makes the CCP anxious.

Li was also at odds with Xi over pandemic management in 2020, when he supported the setting up of street stalls in public places and its potential to create employment amid the pandemic, a concept the CCP's *Beijing Daily* termed as “unhealthy and uncivilised”.³⁷ Li's plan was in contrast with Xi's approach to evict hawkers from large cities such as Beijing to maintain hygiene and security. Even as the state-run media praised Xi for lifting 100 million people out of poverty, Li countered the narrative with a news conference on the sidelines of the sitting Chinese parliament by highlighting that nearly 600 million people earned less than RMB 1,000 (about US\$142), which was insufficient to rent a room in many urban areas.³⁸

On the other hand, Xi termed the coronavirus outbreak a battle and gave a clarion call to wage a struggle against the policy's critics.³⁹ In May 2022, the Politburo Standing Committee, consisting of the CCP's top leadership, resolved to oppose distortions and doubts over the zero-COVID strategy. In the wake of protests by students in May 2022 in the capital, the Central Military Commission issued a notice urging the rank and file to study a recently released volume of Xi's thoughts on strengthening the armed forces.⁴⁰ Xi also attempted to rally the youth by urging them to “confront difficulties” and “overcome hardships”, with the state-run media pushing the slogan ‘persistence is victory’ (*jiānchí jiùshì shènglì*).⁴¹ This indicates that ahead of the 20th Party Congress, he saw an incentive to rally people by continuing COVID-19 controls.

Flip-flops


Xi's report to the National Congress in October 2022 warned of risks due to black swan and grey rhino events, and urged China to “withstand high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms”, thus creating a heightened threat perception to justify COVID-19 controls.⁴² However, there were renewed worries with statistics released after the 20th Party Congress showed that China's GDP grew by 3.9 per cent in July-September quarter, indicating that the economy may not be able to fulfil its growth target of 5.5 percent in 2022.⁴³

This necessitated signalling to the people that China's COVID-19 controls would be "optimised", making them "more targeted" and "science-based".⁴⁴ On 11 November 2022, important changes to China's stringent zero-COVID measures were unveiled: cutting down quarantine time for international arrivals to five days; ending the practice of cancelling international flights when several flyers from previous flights tested positive on arrival; and reducing the duration those who come in close contact with an infected person have to spend in central quarantine, from seven days to five days.⁴⁵

However, as cases began to increase in mid-November, a *People's Daily* article warned that there was a largescale rebound of the pandemic and that adherence to zero-COVID policy was necessary to combat it.⁴⁶ It repeated the standard line that "persistence is victory" and that the CCP had the resolve to implement the policy until the pathogens could be completely vanquished, indicating that the new measures were aimed at reducing the economic impact of the policy but that lockdown measures had not been renounced. Additionally, on 17 November, Guangzhou city said that the construction of quarantine facilities to house nearly 250,000 people to fight surging outbreaks was underway.⁴⁷ On 21 November, Shijiazhuang, a provincial capital in North China with a population of 11 million, reintroduced mass testing and asked its residents to stay home.⁴⁸ Around the same time, Beijing's educational institutions began to conduct classes online, and residents in many districts were asked to limit their movements as the city's COVID-19 cases soared.⁴⁹

Just as cities began relaxing the curbs in the aftermath of the protests, there was a drastic change in the messaging on the severity of the pandemic. Seemingly in a bid to dial down the fear factor, the CCP-owned *Beijing News* published accounts of people who had been afflicted with COVID-19 and had since recovered.⁵⁰ However, an article published on 29 November in another CPC-affiliated newspaper, *Zhejiang Daily*, argued that local officials had wrongly interpreted zero-COVID in some places, which had led to some draconian measures that had distorted the original intent of the policy.⁵¹ This contradicted the stance taken by the *People's Daily* days before that the CCP and Xi determined the policy's implementation.⁵²

Economic woes and the mounting human costs of COVID-19 mitigation measures sparked widespread public anger that led to the protests in November 2022. In September, a road mishap turned the focus to some of the unpleasant aspects of the curbs. Nearly 30 people died after a bus transporting people from Guiyang (the capital of Guizhou province) to a quarantine centre toppled.⁵³ As the journey had been arranged in the dead of night, it sparked speculation regarding the motives.⁵⁴ On 1 November, a three-year-old child died in Lanzhou city, which was under lockdown, due to the unavailability of medical services.⁵⁵ In the aftermath of the fire in Urumqi in late November, in which at least 10 people died,⁵⁶ social media posts suggested that the barriers and grills placed to curb movement had hampered the firefighters' access and rescue operations. In the wake of the protests, the Beijing city government outlawed the barricading of building gates and entry points to residential blocks in high-risk areas, mandating that passages should remain accessible for transporting patients and emergency escape and rescue requirements.⁵⁷ Importantly, this shows that political considerations remain the priority for the CCP leadership.

China's initial success in combating the pandemic was attributed, ironically, to the lack of freedoms in the country, and it gave rise to a notion that autocracies had the edge in combatting a pandemic.⁵⁸ The CCP has been working on marketing its party-state development model in developing nations on the premise that this is the quickest way to achieve economic growth and stability.⁵⁹ Its initial victory against COVID-19 was an inflection point in promoting its governance model, as evidenced by the CCP and World Political Parties Summit in June 2021, which was attended by leaders of more than 500 political parties from over 160 countries.⁶⁰ But the current situation in China in the wake of widespread public discontent over its zero-COVID policy has shown the limitations of its governance model. 

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