BIRTH CONTROL TO BIRTH PROMOTION?  
CHINA’S POPULATION POLICY AT A CROSSROADS

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Executive Summary

1. China’s population policy has undergone some landmark changes. Since 1 January 2016, all Chinese couples have been allowed to have two children, which marked an official end to the Chinese state’s one child policy since the late 1970s.

2. The effect of both the “One-Singleton Two-Child” and “Two-Child” policies has thus far been limited. The public’s response has been lukewarm: many couples opted not to have a second child.

3. The initial overall birth rate of the new “Two Child” policy adopted in 2016 expanded to 1.295% from 1.207% in 2015, but declined to 1.243% in 2017 and further to 1.094% in 2018. However, the second birth in the total number of birth had grown significantly from 39.8% in 2015 to about 50% in 2018.

4. The effect of the new population policy is closely linked to the new “fertility culture” of contemporary Chinese society. Due to the economic pressure of childrearing and the changing view of family, China’s young couples are less willing than the previous generations to have many children.

5. Facing an alarming decline in birth rate, fast population ageing and the limited effect of the relaxation of birth control policy, the Chinese government has taken steps to boost young couples’ desire to have more children so as to sustain the nation’s demographic and socioeconomic development.

6. Following the example set by other industrial countries, some local governments have announced measures under the “two-child” framework and started to subsidise childcare for families with a second child.

7. At the national level, though the Chinese government has yet to implement specific regulations to increase the birth rate, two recently passed measures, namely, tax deduction and banning gender discrimination practices in recruitment, might indirectly provide some incentives for families to have more children.
8. An alternative approach is the more active intervention from the government. Due to the arguably limited impact of policy incentives, various social campaigns that focus on influencing citizens’ reproductive decision have already been launched by some local governments.

9. To date, China’s policymakers are seemingly inclined to create favourable conditions for young couples to have more children. They also face increasing pressure to take more direct measures to tackle the declining birth rate. In the years to come, whether the Chinese government is able to balance the needs of the nation and citizen’s private right remain a big question mark.