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Co-existing with COVID-19

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In the 20th century, there were four influenza pandemics which developed into a new version of the flu that continued to circulate in the world for decades; at least two of them have evolved into seasonal-flu strains found today. Scientists postulated that common cold viruses are likely to have originated from previous pandemics. History also shows that, in the transition from pandemic to endemic, the total elimination of viruses in the past appears to be the exception rather than the norm. Smallpox is the only human virus ever removed from the face of the Earth in 1980 after a long and sustained vaccination campaign.

For the ongoing coronavirus, some experts in the West argue that it is the time to start conceptualising COVID-19 as an endemic and co-existing with it given that it is likely to evolve into an endemic disease. Many countries in the West with high vaccination rates are transitioning from a zero-tolerance strategy for COVID-19 (also known as ‘elimination strategy’) to a COVID-19 co-existence strategy (also considered as a ‘mitigation strategy’). Transitioning to a ‘mitigation strategy’ has its own challenges.

In the case of China, a ‘mitigation strategy’ would need to emphasise reducing death rates rather than infections as there is a need to persuade a risk-averse public on its merits. In the United States, mitigation efforts are concentrated on mass vaccinations but is challenged by non-vaxxers’ pushbacks. A Hong Kong virologist points out that mass media reporting has also added to the fear of a mitigation strategy, noting that Chinese state media (amongst others) depicted the coronavirus in a fearful manner. Singapore, a global leader in COVID-19 mitigation, appears to have taken a moderate approach. Since June 2021, Singapore has followed a strategy of ‘living with COVID’ against the backdrop of fully vaccinated individuals dining in groups of five in restaurants, households/workplaces receiving a designated number of guests and re-opening to specified countries.

The Beijing leadership has reinforced its zero-tolerance approach in managing a more infectious Delta variant proliferation. China's zero tolerance policy includes comprehensive containment measures that are considered effective like mass vaccinations/testing, quarantining of positive and suspected individuals, strong lockdowns of risky regions like parts of Guangdong province. Former Chinese Health Minister Gao Qiang argues that such

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international eradication of COVID-19 should be the end goal before opening up to the rest of the world.

An economist by training, Gao does not accept expert views of the disease turning into a seasonal flu-like endemic. He prefers to see the pandemic as a fight between humans and the coronavirus and his views are published by *People's Daily* and on the website of government-affiliated think tank China Health Economics Association where he serves as a general counsel. In a website article, he blasted the laissez-faire approach to the pandemic and insisted that China should continue to remove COVID-19 through continued mass vaccination and strict control mitigation, especially at the borders.

Chinese critics based outside China cited cultural reasons for adopting a zero-COVID strategy. Some opined that 'losing face' is a factor if they turn to the mitigation approach the Chinese authorities have associated with the West. There is also an ideological element to the maintenance of the zero-tolerance policy. The initial COVID-19 outbreak in Hubei province was mitigated by lockdowns that lasted months and involved mass testings. Chinese President Xi Jinping praised the zero-tolerance strategy as evidence of Chinese superior political system in comparison with liberal democracies in the West.

Followers of this narrative also fear the fast-spreading nature of the Delta variant. Cleaning staff of one of China's most transited airports were the first to be infected with the Delta variant, which soon proliferated to more Chinese provinces. The origin of the spread was traced back to a passenger from Moscow with the Delta variant on board Air China Flight CA910, which arrived at Nanjing airport on 10 July 2021. The cleaners caught the virus while clearing the trash. State media highlighted lapses at Nanjing airport where local authorities opined that the deplaning cleaners did not observe anti-COVID procedures/protocols.

China appeared to be the only major country that was able to stop the Delta variant from spreading widely amongst its populace. Experts blamed the spread on citizens letting down their guard with less mask-wearing and more mass gatherings. There is extra caution implemented for certain groups, such as the elderly and those with immune deficiency diseases who will be at higher risk of serious complications. Given the existence of such fast spreaders, the establishment in China is rolling back any notion of virus co-existence.

Other reasons for not adopting a virus co-existence policy are the lower effective rates of Chinese-made vaccines and fewer intensive care unit (ICU) beds per capita in China. The 20th National Party Congress and the Winter Olympic Games taking place in 2022 are two important events that Beijing does not want to risk having outbreaks. Symbolically, it is much safer politically to continue with the zero-tolerance strategy that has worked so well for China in keeping the infection cases at bay. Beijing is determined to host the Games well and not permit large-scale infections in China and to prevent its infection to sportspersons from participating countries.

When the Delta variant struck, residential sectors in Nanjing were quarantined to contain the virus spread; in Henan's capital Zhengzhou, health bureaucrats were let go after floods were followed by a COVID-19 outbreak despite specific instructions from President Xi to avoid the outcome. In response to the infectious Delta variant, Chinese technocrats are banking on the zero-tolerance policy; some observers in the West opine that any easing of restrictions may only occur after China's 20th National Party Congress which is expected to take place in October 2022. This prolonged closure is a concern for some sectors in East Asia. For example, foreign students from the East Asian region may not be able to return to Chinese universities

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to continue with their studies and East Asian countries dependent on Chinese tourism may also be affected.

The full force of the law is implemented on ordinary citizens opposing this narrative. On 11 August 2021, law enforcement officers detained an individual for commenting on a news article on Chinese attempts at coronavirus co-existence. Virus co-existence advocates like ranking Chinese epidemiologist Zhang Wenhong became the target of nationalists on social media for what they perceived as following the Western medical establishment. Against the backdrop of the Delta infectious variant, Zhang incurred the wrath of the nationalists when he indicated that there is a need to co-exist and live with COVID-19. His was a minority view in China expressed in the public domain. Some moderate anti-nationalist Weibo users pushed back against criticisms of Zhang by highlighting a historical period when scientists, scholars and cultural workers were shamed and attacked by the Red Guards for their views.

The Delta spread compelled China to accelerate its vaccination programme, but Zhang argues that transmissions are still possible after full vaccination, albeit at a slower pace with fewer deaths. Nationalism may be a powerful force to compel the authorities to override their own experts. Chinese opinion maker, literary scholar and professor in the Chinese Department of Peking University Zhang Yiwu opines that densely populated China is not suitable for the mitigation strategy as vaccines could not stop infections completely.

Some moderate observers and experts are urging for a rethink on extreme measures of COVID-19 elimination and to move towards a staged, phased, gradualist or incremental system of mitigation. Outside China, there are politicians who adopted a middle path in opening up some areas. For example, Hong Kong tourism sector lawmaker Yiu Si-wing argues that, even with a zero-infection approach, China could have comparatively more flexible policies for virus-absent areas that would allow, for example, Hong Kong to reconnect with selected provinces like Guangdong.

However, the confidence that the country has in its COVID-19 mitigation runs strong amongst Chinese sceptics of the virus co-existence narrative. With relatively few deaths since the Wuhan outbreak and a recovering economy (China was the only major economy to grow in 2020), some in China may not feel the need to change their strategy. Finally, Zhang Wenhong spent 21 days in social media silence before he aligned his views with the majority narrative on his Weibo account, recanting his earlier argument for China to coexist with the virus.

Ultimately, the verdict is still out as to whether the co-existence narrative, nationalistic zero-tolerance perspective or the middle path moderate views will become the winning formula in this fight against the powerful invisible enemy of the COVID-19 coronavirus. Some experts foresee a policy division in the world, with countries split between those adopting a zero COVID-19 strategy and those favouring a pro-mitigation strategy. For medical experts, the pace of global vaccination will most likely shape coexistence with COVID-19 in the near term.

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