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EAI COMMENTARY

No. 48 8 April 2022

# China Stands by Its Zero-COVID Policy As Omicron Rages on in Shanghai

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**S**hanghai, once a model city for its flexible yet efficient management of COVID-19, is now in full-scale lockdown due to the highly transmissible Omicron variant spreading among its 26 million residents. It has also become the largest single city to be locked down to date. Reported infections rose to about 20,000 on 6 April, after the financial hub had battled the new wave of pandemic for more than a month.

China is seemingly doubling down on its zero-COVID stance, despite grievances and fatigue among the people for the endless cycles of testing, quarantine and travel restrictions. China stands in sharp contrast to countries worldwide which are relaxing restrictions to live with an endemic COVID-19.

Since last year, China has begun to adopt a “dynamic zero-COVID” policy to replace its absolute zero-tolerance stance. A couple of reported infections will no longer trigger a lockdown of a whole city. Instead, lockdown measures targeted at specific communities rather than entire cities or provinces are applied promptly when more than two new cases are spotted in a community within 14 days.

In contrast to city-wide lockdowns, the more flexible prevention measures aim to strike a balance between disease control and enabling people to live normal lives. The reality was simply the inability of many provinces to keep the number of cases at zero unlike what they had done from 2020 to 2021. There is also the concern that the world’s second largest economy is currently facing strong headwinds amid geopolitical tensions and global supply chain woes; the government has to prioritise the stabilisation of economic growth.

The Shanghai model was once hailed by the Chinese public health community for its “scientific” and efficient way of curbing the pandemic, which allowed for both COVID-19 control and the

## EAI COMMENTARY

continuation of economic activity through early detection, frequent contact-tracing and targeted community lockdowns.

In September 2021, the National Health Commission even held a special conference in Shanghai to call on other provinces to learn from its cost-effective experience.

### **NO LONGER A MODEL CITY**

Zhang Wenhong, a prominent epidemiologist from Shanghai, became the face of China's COVID battle due to his clever analogies and frank messages to the public. As one of China's best-known medical experts during the pandemic, Zhang often advocated practical and flexible approaches to tackling the virus.

Yet his celebrity status came under scrutiny when, in July 2021, he called for long-term coexistence with the virus, deviating from the authorities' hardline zero-COVID approach. He came under fire for his views, with netizens even accusing Zhang of plagiarising a part of his PhD dissertation more than two decades ago.

He kept a low profile for a while but appeared in press conferences as head of Shanghai's COVID-19 expert team - until very recently. His absence after Shanghai announced the latest stringent lockdown measures indicates that his cost-effective approach has been abandoned by policymakers and replaced with the guideline of "fighting the virus at all costs".

With this lockdown, Shanghai has lost its status as a model for COVID-19 control. Even with the adoption of the dynamic zero-COVID strategy, the central leadership has shown it will not hesitate to lock down entire cities with rapidly rising COVID cases.

The Shanghai authorities began shutting down the western half of the city two days ahead of schedule on 30 March, while extending lockdown in some eastern districts on 1 April. Now the whole city is subject to indefinite restrictions.

It will be unrealistic to expect China to shift to "living with the virus" in a year when the Omicron variant is still raging and Beijing will be holding the 20th National Party Congress.

### **ZERO-COVID: THE COST**

Although it has become politically incorrect to question the government's zero-COVID policy in China, the country has to come to terms with the fact that the economic and social cost of locking down the entire Shanghai and other provinces could be extremely high.

Lockdown anger is growing and public unhappiness at lockdown measures may reach boiling point. On social media, people expressed frustration over access to medical care and complained about difficulties in purchasing food as delivery services became overloaded.

Some reported poor conditions in quarantine centres and questioned why those who tested positive but are asymptomatic must be quarantined. Others have voiced anger at the policy of separating COVID-19-positive babies and young children from their parents.

Tech giant Tencent took down two videos of a rare protest at a Shanghai housing compound trending on its WeChat microblogging and video publishing platform. The ramped-up censorship reflects China's determination to uplift its dynamic zero-COVID approach to a political height that disallows public dispute.

## EAI COMMENTARY

Lockdowns prolong supply-chain bottlenecks, intensify inflationary pressures and weaken domestic consumption. According to China's Everbright Securities, the country could see as much as 10 percentage points shaved off economic growth on a quarterly basis if zero-COVID is maintained.

Eurasia Group listed the continuation of China's zero-COVID policy as a top global economic risk of 2022. "Shipping constraints, COVID-19 outbreaks, and shortages of staff, raw material, and equipment – all more acute because of China's zero-COVID policy – will make goods less available", it wrote in January.

The Chinese authorities are well aware of the risks if people's demands are not addressed. However, mass protests, like in Belgium, the Netherlands or the United States, are highly unlikely in Shanghai or other provinces. Many Chinese citizens still back zero-COVID and see low case numbers as a source of national pride.

On the other hand, if the lockdown drags on, huge inconveniences and difficulties imposed upon people's lives and livelihoods may backfire and lead to widespread discontent. China's current logic is to contain the pandemic as quickly as possible, regardless of how high the short-term cost could be.

### **ZERO-COVID, MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?**

It may be unrealistic to eliminate COVID-19 entirely despite lockdowns and repeated testings, given Omicron's high transmissibility and the large number of asymptomatic cases.

Hong Kong has been pursuing the same dynamic zero-COVID policy as mainland China, but since the beginning of 2022, the Omicron surge has called the city's policy implementation into question.

The Asian financial hub logged tens of thousands of new cases daily in the peak of the wave, though it has since subsided to several thousand a day. However, the goal of zero-COVID remains out of sight.

Elsewhere in China, Jilin province was put under lockdown after 14 March, but the northeast province still reported 890 new cases and 1,300 asymptomatic cases on 6 April.

It is too early to tell whether China can effectively curb this wave of infections as it did in Wuhan in 2020.

However, when handling the pandemic, local officials are extremely stressed by the enormous political stakes in the run-up to the 20th National Party Congress, the Chinese Communist Party's once-in-five-year power reshuffling.

Promising cadres do not want their political careers derailed by the failures of pandemic control. They are prepared to go all out in their pursuit of zero-COVID regardless of the socioeconomic cost or their own mental health.

While Jilin, Shanghai and other places have been battling the latest wave of infections for about a month, frustration and fatigue are also on the rise among bureaucrats and medical workers. In cognisance of this, the Party's anti-corruption watchdog and its organisation department have been mobilised to evaluate the performance of cadres in the pandemic fight.

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Elsewhere, more and more countries have abandoned their zero-COVID policy in the face of the Omicron variant and its BA.2 sub-variant.

Although “living with COVID-19” is still a political taboo in China, the authorities would do well to adapt to this new normal with more flexible and humanised measures in consideration of people’s mental and physical health.

*Note: This commentary is adapted from a commentary by the same author at Channelnewsasia.com with the title “Commentary: Why China is doubling down on zero-COVID while Omicron spreads in Shanghai”.*

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