

CHINA: Zero-Covid protests don't threaten Xi but may accelerate policy shift

- Protests against the zero-Covid policy have emerged in at least ten cities, with some protests broadening to include opposition to "dictatorship" and demands for democracy, free speech, and human rights.
- The protests are highly unlikely to threaten President Xi Jinping's political status or the Communist Party's grip on power, given the party-state's strong security apparatus, which has spent years preparing for this kind of scenario.
- But the protests could prompt party leaders to accelerate China's exit from zero-Covid, even though this decision would lead to a surge in infections, hospitalizations, and deaths for which the health system is not fully prepared.

When health authorities announced 20 measures on 11 November to reduce the burden of zero-Covid on economic activity and daily life, we [noted the risk](#) that such incremental loosening could bring about a worst-case scenario. By enabling the spread of more transmissible variants, the 20 measures risked forcing an eventual re-imposition of harsh lockdowns from which the measures were intended to provide relief. This worst-case scenario has now become a reality. China reported 40,052 locally transmitted infections on 27 November, a record high.

The immediate trigger for the recent protests was public outrage over a deadly apartment fire in Urumqi, where lockdowns allegedly trapped residents inside the building and hindered access by firefighters. But the more fundamental factor is public exhaustion with zero-Covid and disappointment that the 20 measures did not lead to a more dramatic shift away from lockdowns.

Minimal threat to political stability

Contrary to foreign perceptions, public protests in China are not rare. Protests over a local land dispute, an incident of police misconduct, or pollution from a local factory are common. The recent zero-Covid protests are highly unusual, however, because a single issue — zero-Covid — has sparked protests in multiple cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Some protests expanded beyond opposition to "dynamic zero" to encompass calls for democracy and free speech, as well as opposition to "dictatorship." In this respect, the protests carry echoes of the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement, which (contrary to the name) involved protests around the country.

Despite these echoes, which undoubtedly make party leaders nervous, there is little sign that the protests pose a significant threat either to President Xi Jinping's political position or to the Communist Party's grip on power. The party-state has spent 15 years building up a sophisticated domestic security apparatus designed to respond to so-called "sudden public incidents." This bureaucratic term refers precisely to the kind of incidents that have occurred in recent days.

Every level of government and many other large institutions have response plans in place. The central government provides general protocols, while local governments and universities — where many of the recent protests have occurred — iterate specific plans based on those guidelines. These plans are now apparently being executed. After protests on Saturday that were allowed to proceed relatively unimpeded, police were out in force in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities on Sunday and Monday.

Signposts of the unthinkable

Though dramatic political consequences from the recent protests are highly unlikely, they cannot be ruled out. Signs that Xi's grip on power were slipping might first emerge online. Censors are working vigorously to delete protest videos and other expressions of political discontent. But if censors were suddenly to dial back these efforts, this shift could be a sign that propaganda authorities are no longer united behind Xi and/or the dynamic zero.

If such a retreat from repression were mirrored on city streets, with police allowing protests to rage with minimal interference, this pullback would offer even stronger evidence that at least some party leaders hope to see Xi weakened. Another signal of political instability would be if protests grew larger and draw in broader swathes of the population. Though information is sketchy, most recent protests appear to involve fewer than one thousand people, and students are the main participants.

Choosing between bad options

Rather than a leadership change, a more plausible outcome from the recent protests is that party leaders accelerate their exit from zero-Covid. [Our previous forecast](#) was that a decisive exit from the policy would only begin after the National People's Congress in March 2023, once inhalable vaccines and effective therapeutics are more widely available. Though we are not yet adjusting that forecast, the likelihood of an earlier exit has increased.

China's leadership now faces a choice between two bad options. The first is to double down on zero-Covid, which would require an escalation of both lockdowns and political repression. Even this option might still fail to suppress the current wave of infections, given the transmissibility of the latest variants.

The alternative is to let go of the rope, allowing the virus to rip through the population, which by some estimates could lead to as many as 112mn symptomatic cases, 2.7mn admissions to intensive care, and 1.5m deaths over a three-month period. Beyond the public health consequences, this option would fuel a perception that Xi has reversed course abruptly in response to public pressure, which Xi's enemies at home and abroad would interpret as a sign of political weakness.

Muddling towards an exit

What comes next is highly uncertain, but one plausible scenario is that China's leadership opts for a version of the second scenario above that doesn't require acknowledging any mistakes.

This approach would involve exploiting the ambiguity inherent in the 20 measures. [Our interpretation](#) was that the overall policy objective of dynamic zero — to bring daily new cases back down to near-zero — remained in place, while the 20 measures simply aimed to make the policy more sustainable. But another plausible reading was that the 20 measures were a first step towards exiting dynamic zero. Financial markets and some local governments seemed to adopt this latter interpretation. Following the 20 measures, two provincial capitals, Shijiazhuang and Zhengzhou, moved aggressively to loosen Covid-19 controls before reversing course, apparently under central government pressure.

Looking ahead, Beijing might quietly signal to local governments that the Shijiazhuang approach is now acceptable. This approach opens a pathway to exit dynamic zero over a three-to-six month period. In this scenario, local governments would scramble to ramp up vaccinations among the elderly and prepare overflow hospitals to deal with the inevitable surge in cases.

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Gabriel Wildau

Managing Director
+1 (347) 714-4962
gabriel.wildau@teneo.com

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