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Analysis

China's easing of Covid curbs does not solve Xi Jinping's dilemma

Saturday 3 December 2022, by [GRAHAM-HARRISON Emma](#) (Date first published: 3 December 2022).

Loosening controls further could spark a devastating outbreak, but tightening the rules again could trigger unrest

At the end of October, [Xi Jinping](#) had secured his position as China's most powerful leader in decades, his grip on the country cemented by a norm-breaking third term in office.

At the end of November, he faced the most [widespread protests](#) China had seen in decades, mostly focused on Covid restrictions but also featuring unprecedented calls for Xi to [step down](#).

It was an extraordinary juxtaposition of political authority and vulnerability within the space of a month, and one that no one inside or outside the country had foreseen.

China's hi-tech surveillance network and punitive laws make anonymous protest almost impossible and the cost of coming on to the streets extremely high. Security forces equipped with facial recognition and other artificial intelligence software can comb through footage of protests. They have apparently started turning up at the homes and colleges of some who take part.

Beijing clearly recognised the fury and frustration that drove these public demonstrations, because it has [responded with concessions](#). Across the country, authorities have lifted controls that were deployed with zealous conviction as part of Xi's personal commitment to zero Covid.

Citizens in some cities have suddenly found they can catch a bus, get on the metro or enter a mall without needing a recent negative PCR test, while elsewhere those potentially exposed can avoid lockdowns or serve quarantine at home.

This loosening offers only a very temporary solution to the dilemma that China's leader now faces, however. And it is one that his ruthless accumulation of personal power will not help him solve.

If Xi allows further easing of controls, China risks being plunged into a devastating national Covid outbreak that would probably claim tens of thousands of lives at best - hundreds of thousands at worst - and temporarily overwhelm a patchy health system.

After nearly three years of isolation from the world and from Covid, China's population is extremely vulnerable to the disease, with almost no natural immunity. A [lacklustre vaccination programme](#), using domestic vaccines that are not as effective or long-lasting as those developed in the west, has not done enough to bolster those defences.

Just two-thirds of people have had a booster shot, and less than half of over-80s. The government is

pushing to address this but Covid is likely to spread at a rate that outpaces even China's impressive mobilisation abilities. That could in itself cause a popular backlash.

Yet if Xi reverts to heavy-handed attempts to eradicate Covid, the unrest could begin again. It could also be a trigger for anger about other grievances, in a country beset by perhaps the most serious array of political and economic challenges in a generation.

Growth has slowed, against a backdrop of the global financial crisis and Chinese Covid-related isolation. The tech sector has been hamstrung by US chip sanctions. Unemployment has soared, with one in five young people out of work in cities, while overall the population is [ageing fast and may soon start to decline](#), leaving those young people who do have jobs responsible for supporting a ballooning cohort of retirees.

The property sector, into which so many poured their life savings because of a shortage of other investment outlets, is [in crisis](#).

China's leader has not publicly acknowledged the demonstrations, but reportedly spoke about them in a meeting with the visiting European Council president, Charles Michel, on Friday. He told the EU delegation that those who turned out were mostly "frustrated students", the [South China Morning Post](#) reported. He described Omicron as less deadly than Delta, which diplomats interpreted as paving the way for further easing of restrictions.

This may ultimately be a sign of confidence. The security apparatus has largely headed off further demonstrations this week, flooding protest sites before crowds could gather and seeking out for intimidation those who attended last week.

Xi has a firm grip on the military, after stacking the top ranks with loyalists. Ultimately, if a deployment of brute force is required to stay in control, there is no reason to think Xi - who has presided over a campaign of extraordinarily harsh repression in the Xinjiang region - would have any compunction about deploying it, even if he and other leaders would prefer to use other methods.

"Xi and the party will face a lot of headwinds," said Steve Tsang, the director of the Soas China Institute in London. "But short of a perfect storm, the chance is that Xi should be able to keep things under control.

"Xi is trying to use intimidation, actual or implied, to deter people from protesting or organising themselves in way that may pose challenges to the party state, and then seek to remove some of the sources for such protest. But he also has a backup, which is to use force, at various levels, to repress."

Neighbouring North Korea, an isolated, impoverished fortress country, was [referenced by some protesters](#) as the future they wanted to avoid. However, it may offer another lesson for China's communist leadership - that dictators do not necessarily require a thriving economy, or public support, to stay in power if they have tight control over their country and a monopoly on use of force.

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P.S.

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