



# China's sudden reopening sits awkwardly with its long-held zero-Covid narrative

There were signs the government would shift gears but the abrupt reversal needs attention

**Chen Gang**

We are all still recovering from the shock and awe of China's sudden rollback of its long-held zero-Covid policy.

Much ink has been spilled about the country's staggering reversal and the reasons galvanising the U-turn. But few have examined the challenge faced by China in reconciling the chasm between this latest move and the narrative that people were fed over the past three years to withstand the hardships of zero-Covid in the name of public health.

That awkward conundrum is coming into sharper focus as infections surge, vital drugs run out and hospital intensive care unit wards fill up across the country.

The picture is puzzling because, technically, no senior Chinese leaders formally announced the

conclusion of the zero-Covid policy. Instead, central and local governments ceased testing and quarantine measures abruptly in more than a dozen cities, after the State Council announcement in early December that rules would be eased.

## THERE WAS A PLAN

Was the change really that unexpected and startling? Although widespread protests have been cited as the catalyst for the about-turn, there were preceding signs suggesting the country was exploring gradually loosening restrictions and attempting to find a face-saving climbdown.

Rumours that China could switch gears after the milestone 20th Party Congress in October fed speculation as commentators parsed Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech for signs.

And almost right on cue, in his political report then, Mr Xi had

notably restrained praise for the achievements of a policy aimed at suppressing a virus at all costs. He also refrained from discussing the future prospects of continuing zero-Covid and left open the door for adjustments. This change in rhetoric seemed subtle but was picked up by watchful observers, insiders and Chinese citizens attuned to the modus operandi of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

In September, Mr Xi took pains to signal that China was ready to re-engage with the world by travelling to key regions. On his first visit abroad since the pandemic, Mr Xi attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Uzbekistan. He then attended the Group of 20 summit in Bali and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Bangkok in November, followed by a series of summits in Saudi Arabia.

Mr Li Zhanshu, chairman of the National People's Congress, visited Russia, Mongolia, Nepal and South Korea in September, while Mr Han Zheng, Executive Vice-Premier, came to Singapore

for a bilateral council meeting. Provincial governments in Hainan, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Sichuan also sent their business delegations to other countries to secure trade and investment contracts.

The anguished demonstrations may have fast-tracked plans and forced a hasty and uncoordinated exit. But this growing confidence that China could strike a middle path away from zero-Covid and stimulate its economy, afforded by a gradual opening up of diplomacy and international travel, may have been a sign that the country would have otherwise gingerly opened up.

But pulling the levers so quickly meant less time to react and less ability to manage the narrative. The government also made a strategic blunder in not urging vaccine uptake among the elderly and vulnerable groups earlier.

The Chinese government also, unfortunately, ruled out imports of more effective Western mRNA vaccines – given concerns over the national security implications of increasing reliance on Western countries – as an option in its

preparedness for living with the virus.

## MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

Reconciling the drastic change in policy with the previous zero-Covid narrative of stoically enduring hardship to suppress an insidious virus can seem like an impossible mission.

Over the past three years, the Chinese population has been reminded of the country's exceptionalism by state media – that the draconian approach had proved a resounding success in arresting the spread of a deadly virus and saving millions of lives. A year ago, the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention even cautioned about a flood of 630,000 daily cases, with such warnings amplified by the daily broadsheets, if China were to follow Western economies like the United States and Britain in relaxing rules.

Dissent was stemmed by fearful mobs. Infectious disease experts demurred from voicing opinions questioning national policy. Dr Zhang Wenhong, a prominent

Shanghai epidemiologist who spoke out against harsh lockdowns, was viciously attacked online for his views.

And so, most Chinese accepted the pain and sacrifice of constant testing and sudden lockdowns. Taking the deal of endemic living with Covid-19 in the same way many other countries have would be tantamount to sending loved ones to their deaths.

Yet now, how does a pernicious virus so dangerous that it cut China from the world and threatened quarantine for weeks suddenly become as mild as the common flu? Can symptomatic people really return to work instead of requiring isolation at dedicated facilities? And if so, were the caution, testing and lockdowns all for naught?

And as Covid-19 burns through the population, crematoriums fill up and flu medication runs out, an unprepared and frightened population will be searching for answers.

Chinese officials must find a way to resolve these contradictions and mixed messaging. At stake is public trust, which has already seen an erosion of 8 percentage points in the past two years, the Edelman Trust Barometer shows, and the CPC's long-term authority.

## TACITUS TRAP?

The Chinese government, indeed, faces a daunting task of sustaining its credibility and finding a narrative that bridges the gaps between rhetoric and reality.

But the challenge may be overstated and public angst exaggerated. Many Chinese citizens are buoyant about the economic prospects of the reopening. Online searches for popular overseas destinations reportedly increased tenfold within half an hour of the announcement that China would be dropping quarantine requirements for international travel this week, with many people searching for outbound group tours during the Chinese New Year holiday season in late January.

Many Chinese citizens see the end of zero-Covid as the proverbial light at the end of a long, exhausting and harrowing tunnel. Public frustrations over the mindless, repeated testing and lockdowns over the past three years have been brewing, evident in the grievances over the zero-Covid policy that fuelled large protests in many Chinese cities in November.

People are feeling the effects of an economic slowdown, as an ailing property market, an embattled tech sector and Covid-19 lockdowns at ports, factories and residences over the past three years take their toll on employment prospects and incomes.

The Chinese economy looks doomed to miss the official growth target of 5.5 per cent for 2022. Testing 70 per cent of the population every two days would also cost China US\$370 billion

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# Reorder ties between state and society

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(S\$495 billion), or 2.2 per cent of its 2021 economic output, Goldman Sachs estimated in May. For now, state media has cast the shift away from zero-Covid as a stressful but well-considered exit, paving the way to economic recovery. Dire warnings about the virus' fatality have disappeared, replaced by expert views that the Omicron variant is generally mild, and testing and quarantine are not needed any more.

Such changes in the public

narrative, although aimed at supporting the about-turn in policy, however, cannot fully close the logic gap, particularly as infections surge and deaths pile up in the weeks and months ahead.

Chinese officials would do well to pay attention to communications going forward to tackle inconsistencies and address these contradictions or face the Tacitus Trap.

In ancient Rome, the historian

Tacitus describes a situation where the government has lost all public confidence and credibility such that it earns public criticism and scorn with every word and action, regardless of whether decisions proved correct.

As a term popularised by Professor Pan Zhichang from the School of Journalism and Communication at Nanjing University in 2007, the Tacitus Trap was used as a concept by President Xi himself to highlight

to local officials the importance of preserving the CPC's credibility in order to protect its legitimacy and position of authority in society in 2014.

The Tacitus Trap demands greater transparency, better communications and consultation, and a reordering of state-society relations to provide pressure vaults for which public feedback can inform needed policy adjustments, instead of officials centralising

decision-making and insulating it entirely from public opinion.

Indeed, where much has been said about the dangers for China of the middle-income trap and the Thucydides Trap, perhaps the hasty exit from zero-Covid illustrates the one existential threat its leaders must face.

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