

China battles to contain Omicron outbreaks

Peter Symonds
25 March 2022

The current spread of COVID-19 cases in China is continuing, driven by the highly infectious Omicron strain and even more contagious BA.2 variant of Omicron. The public health measures taken by Chinese authorities appear to have largely contained multiple outbreaks in major cities over the past three weeks, with the national total of daily infections running at around 4,000 and 5,000. These are by far the highest figures since the initial COVID outbreak in the city of Wuhan in 2020 was suppressed.

The latest report from China's National Health Commission recorded 1,366 new cases of confirmed infections and another 3,622 new asymptomatic cases on March 24 nationally. While the focus of attention has been on a major outbreak in the northeastern province of Jilin, the latest concerns are with Shanghai, which by some estimates is China's largest city, and a major manufacturing and financial centre.

According to the National Health Commission, Shanghai identified only 27 new symptomatic cases on March 24 but a large number of asymptomatic cases—1,582—across a number of the city's districts, the highest being 489 in Minhang district. Two weeks ago, the total number of cases in Shanghai was less than 100. As in other cities where outbreaks have occurred, authorities have rapidly instituted mass testing, contact tracing and the isolation and treatment of confirmed cases, as well as the lockdown of neighbourhoods most at risk.

The US and international media are responding to the latest surge in China with a deluge of propaganda aimed at blackening Beijing's dynamic zero-COVID measures and pressing for China to adopt the criminal "let it rip" policy that has led to a million deaths in the United States alone.

An article published yesterday by the British-based *Guardian* entitled "Frustration with COVID response grows in China as daily cases near 5,000" was typical.

It drew together a series of disparate complaints and criticisms expressed on Chinese social media—from concerns over access to food and other essentials and frustration over testing, to a trending topic on Weibo, China's equivalent of Twitter entitled, "Why can't China lift safety measure just like foreign countries?"

The *Guardian* failed to make the obvious distinction between criticisms over deficiencies in the overall zero-COVID policy, which is overwhelmingly supported by the population, and those who are pushing for its complete overturn—a relatively small social layer of sections of business and the upper-middle class.

The article highlighted the death of a nurse who attempted to gain treatment for acute asthma, claiming that she had gone from hospital to hospital only to be turned away. In fact, the tragedy occurred when the nurse went to the hospital where she worked, only to find that the emergency department was closed for disinfection due to the pandemic. She was taken to a nearby hospital and later died.

The central focus of Western media coverage, alongside adding another prong to the demonisation of China, is an underlying concern about the economic impact of pandemic lockdowns on global supply chains and the global economy more broadly. As the world's largest manufacturer and second largest economy, China not only produces goods for many of the world's largest corporations but its economic growth is a significant driver for global economic growth.

CNN for instance last week cited estimates by Goldman Sachs analysts that a four-week lockdown of 30 percent of China could reduce its gross domestic product (GDP) by around 1 percentage point. It also referred to Nomura analysts who predicted that the zero-COVID strategy would make it hard for Beijing to achieve its 5.5 percent growth target for 2022. Lower growth in China would only contribute to the economic turmoil produced by the pandemic globally, now

compounded by supply chain disruptions caused by the escalating war in Ukraine.

The Chinese Communist Party leadership (CCP) has adhered to its zero-COVID policy for more than two years—successfully suppressing the initial Wuhan outbreak and subsequent outbreaks, which have all been associated with infections that have entered from outside China, including the latest Omicron variants. The strategy stems in large measure from widespread popular support rooted in the sentiment arising from the 1949 Chinese revolution that people’s social needs should take priority. The CCP, which has presided over four decades of capitalist restoration, is deeply fearful of any social opposition and continues to promote itself as the defender of people’s welfare.

The CCP regime, however, is undoubtedly under considerable pressure to dispense with its zero-COVID policy not only from the Western media, global investors and corporations, but from powerful sections of business within China, as well as upper-middle class layers who regard public health restrictions as an intolerable imposition on their lifestyles.

Chinese President Xi Jinping gave the first indication that the government could shift its policy when he reportedly told a meeting of the CCP’s Politburo Standing Committee that China must “strive to achieve the maximum prevention and control at the least cost, and minimize the impact of the epidemic on economic and social development.” The committee is China’s top decision-making body.

While deliberately vague and ambiguous, Xi’s comments appear to have opened up a broader public debate among the country’s health experts, including in Shanghai. Unlike other cities previously hit by significant COVID outbreaks, Shanghai has not implemented a city-wide lockdown at this stage, even though infection numbers continue to climb.

Wu Fan, a member of the Shanghai government expert panel on COVID-19, is cited on a *South China Morning Post* twitter video as saying on March 20 that the city did not have the luxury of imposing a full lockdown. “Shanghai is irreplaceable to China’s economy... If the whole city stood still for a week or 10 days, it could be beneficial to curbing the pandemic. But the loss would be unbearable for small businesses and ordinary people,” he stated.

On Tuesday, the chief government epidemiologist

Liang Wannian insisted China must “not waver” and stick to its plan, while waiting for a range of things to happen: outbreaks to ease overseas, the virus to mutate to become less dangerous, and better treatments and vaccines to become available.

In a Weibo post on Thursday, Shanghai epidemiologist Zhang Wenhong said maintaining a normal life should be stressed as much as the “dynamic zero-COVID” policy. He called on authorities to ensure people’s livelihoods, alleviate the pressures on hospitals and protect private businesses while fighting the COVID outbreak.

“These problems exist and we should not avoid them,” Zhang said. “In the future fight against the epidemic, we must solve these problems one by one. Otherwise, success against the outbreak will mean less.” Zhang last year came under fire for comments hinting that China needed a long-term strategy for coping with the pandemic.

The public discussion in China, however, is a far cry from the homicidal “herd immunity” policy adopted by governments around the world. Commenting last week on the huge COVID surge in Hong Kong where public health restrictions have been eased, Zhang declared that an opening up approach would be disastrous for China. He called for a “moderate and sustainable” lasting strategy once the current outbreaks have been contained.

The Western media commentary is pressing China to adopt the “live with the virus” policy that conservative estimates suggest would mean the death of over a million Chinese citizens this year alone. While media pundits speculate on why China has not adopted such a policy, the real question is why governments around the world have not learnt from the methods successfully employed in China to suppress the pandemic. Putting profits ahead of lives has led to the preventable death of millions and the emergence of more infectious and dangerous variants that now threaten an even greater catastrophe.



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