

# US orders non-emergency staff out of Shanghai consulate as a provocation against Zero-COVID policy

**Benjamin Mateus**  
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In what amounts to a provocative maneuver by the United States to snub China's comprehensive response to their worst COVID-19 outbreak since the start of the pandemic, the US State Department ordered all non-emergency US consulate staff and their families to depart from Shanghai amid a massive effort to contain the community spread of infections.

On Tuesday, a reporter asked State Department spokesman Ned Price, "Can you speak to the decision and particularly that it was based on the COVID restrictions, or do you view them—China says they are based on science—so, do you view them as onerous, as severe as a violation of folk's freedom of movement, or anything like that?"

Price affirmed that the order was given was due to the spread of COVID-19 and the restrictions that have been imposed. He said, "This reflects at its core our assessment that it is best for our employees and their families to temporarily reduce in-country staffing as we deal with changing circumstances on the ground."

It is not the scale of infections that has troubled the State Department and White House. The recent super-spreader events involving high-ranking Senate and Congress members have demonstrated that pandemic controls have become a meaningless concept in Washington. Regarding restrictions and supply shortages, Price admitted that the Beijing Consulate is assisting with these efforts. It would be preposterous to assume that the staff in Shanghai is remotely in want of any food or medical attention.

The mandatory evacuation is, in short, a calculated political maneuver to discredit Chinese authorities at a moment when all efforts are being employed to contain the outbreak of the highly contagious Omicron BA.2 subvariant that has swept across the globe. Counterfactually, the White House could have supported Beijing's efforts or remained silent altogether. This is neither a wartime scenario, nor are the consulate staff in any immediate or existential danger.

Commenting on this development, Chinese Foreign

Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian forcefully stated during yesterday's press briefing:

First, China's anti-epidemic policy is based on science and works effectively. We have every confidence in bringing the new wave of COVID-19 under control in Shanghai and elsewhere. Many foreign nationals, including US citizens in Shanghai, are pulling together with the people of Shanghai in solidarity to combat the virus and overcome the current difficulties.

Second, competent Chinese authorities and local governments have always provided foreign diplomatic and consular personnel in China with assistance and convenience to the maximum extent possible for their fulfillment of duties pursuant to international conventions and under relevant policies. The line of communication between China and the US also remains open.

Third, we are strongly dissatisfied and firmly opposed to the US politicizing the issue of personnel departure and using it as a tool. We have made solemn representations with the US side. The US should immediately stop attacking China's anti-epidemic policies, stop politically manipulating the epidemic and stop smearing China.

These high-level maneuvers are underway as Shanghai public health officials have begun to stabilize the situation and are attempting to ease harsh restrictions where appropriate.

On Monday, authorities reported a significant decline in new COVID-19 cases across the megacity of over 25 million people. After posting a high of 26,087 COVID cases on April 11, the next day the daily case count had dropped to

23,381. Overall, across mainland China, new cases declined by almost 3,000 to 24,659, including in Jilin Province when it was the epicenter of the outbreak in early March.

While day-to-day fluctuations will occur, there appears to be a declining trajectory of the outbreak in Shanghai as a result of the strict lockdowns imposed in late March. When cases began rapidly climbing in Shanghai, Beijing demanded the financial hub embrace Zero-COVID after they had taken a somewhat looser “mitigationist” approach, which allowed the virus to become more entrenched throughout the city.

Chinese Vice Premier Sun Chunlan was dispatched to tour Shanghai during the initial phases of its lockdown, urging unswerving adherence to China’s anti-epidemic policies. She noted during her tour of the city, “It is an arduous task and huge challenge to combat the Omicron variant while maintaining the normal operation core functions in a megacity with a population of 25 million.”

Shanghai has undergone three rounds of citywide testing to locate every infection. Presently, strict lockdowns have been lifted for about 4.8 million residents, who live in the suburbs of Shanghai, and 500,000 within the city’s precautionary areas where zero positive cases have been reported for over 14 days. According to a Shanghai-based newspaper, these include “10,323 local communities, villages, companies or sites [that] have been categorized as precautionary areas, where residents are allowed to walk out from their neighborhoods.”

However, 15 million people remain under a strict lockdown order in neighborhoods where positive cases had recently been reported. They will remain under lockdown for another seven days, then follow another week of “health observation.” There are close to 2,700 controlled areas where no positive cases have been identified in the past seven days, encompassing nearly 2 million residents who have greater mobility within their communities.

Since March 1, 2022, Chinese health officials have registered more than 325,000 COVID-19 cases, with the vast majority asymptomatic. Shanghai has had more than 10,000 cases per day for more than 10 consecutive days. During a press conference on Tuesday, National Health Commission spokesman Mi Feng said that although it appears that cases have been effectively contained, case rates remain high, and it will still require some time to emerge from the outbreak.

The steady containment of BA.2, the most infectious and immune-resistant variant of SARS-CoV-2 to evolve so far, is compelling. Repeatedly, capitalist world governments have criminally accepted “living with the virus” and allowing a significant portion of their population to become infected, hospitalized and die. But in China, the virus is once again being brought to heel, underscoring the capacity for countries to halt the trajectory of infections.

The experience in China once again shows that it is entirely possible to eliminate SARS-CoV-2 in ever-widening geographic areas. The false, unscientific claim that the virus is endemic is belied by the struggle of Chinese health authorities, who continue to have huge popular support in the working class.

On Monday, Dr. Mike Ryan, head of the Health Emergencies Programme at the World Health Organization, for the first time spoke out against the use of the term “endemic” to describe SARS-CoV-2, saying, “Endemic disease requires strong control programmes to reduce infections, suffering, and death. So, just changing from pandemic to endemic is just changing the label, which doesn’t change the challenge we face.”

Meanwhile, South Africa has confirmed two additional Omicron subvariants known as BA.4 and BA.5. Regarding this development, Dr. Tulio De Oliveira of CERI in South Africa tweeted, “New Omicron BA.4 & BA.5 detected in South Africa, Botswana, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, and the UK. Early indications that these new sublineages are increasing as a share of genomically confirmed cases in South Africa.” He added, “No cause for alarm as no major spike in cases, admissions or deaths in South Africa.”

These new subvariants are problematic because they contain the addition of an amino acid at the L452R receptor-binding domain of the spike protein. The mutation was present in the Delta, Kappa, and Lambda variants and is associated with increased infectivity and virulence, making the discovery of these versions extremely troubling.



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