

Chinese government's new COVID policy causes public concern as infections rise

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22 November 2022

Since the Chinese government promulgated its new “Twenty Articles” policy of relaxing COVID-19 restrictions on November 11, the government’s move away from its zero-COVID policy has triggered confusion and unease throughout the population.

Although the government still claims to adhere to a zero-COVID policy, the relaxation of measures such as mass testing, contact tracing and quarantine protocols in the “Twenty Articles” clearly signals the beginning of a policy shift.

At the same time, a rapid increase in the number of infections, after nearly three years in which zero-COVID policies have repeatedly suppressed transmission in the world’s most populous country, has caused uncertainty and public discussion.

The “Twenty Articles” include restrictions on the ability of localities to issue lockdowns, as well as a shortening of quarantine times for close contacts of people infected with COVID-19, a loosening of travel restrictions to and within China, and the ending of contact tracing for secondary contacts.

Although serving as a national guiding policy, the “Twenty Articles” were first thoroughly implemented in Shijiazhuang City, the capital of Hebei Province. Shijiazhuang, a city of 11 million people near Beijing, became the initial testing ground for the reopening policy.

China’s ruling class and many media outlets were the first to trumpet this signal, with statements even comparing the policy shift to “the liberation of Shijiazhuang in 1947” during the civil war against the Kuomintang of General Chiang Kai-shek.

Even according to official data, the number of cases rose considerably after the easing of restrictions. On November 9, Shijiazhuang reported just 59 asymptomatic cases, but by November 13, the figure

had jumped to 3 new confirmed cases and 541 asymptomatic cases, before declining for three consecutive days.

Many media outlets focused on this uncommon “achievement.” This was opposed and ridiculed on social media, however.

One comment on social media warned: “Don’t deceive yourself. Now that the testing is cancelled, this data will naturally drop. But this false data is meaningless.” Another said: “Eighty percent of my family members are infected, but you say that the data has dropped by 80 percent. For the first time, I feel that the pandemic is so close to me.”

At the same time, the Shijiazhuang Municipal Government issued a “letter to all residents” stating that “everyone” was firstly “responsible for their own health.” While the letter claimed that this “is not relaxing the epidemic prevention,” the public response indicated a lack of trust in this statement.

Contrary to media claims, Shijiazhuang does not seem to have become a scene of “consumption recovery driving economic recovery.” A restaurant owner said on social media: “Since the opening, the restaurant’s turnover has plummeted. Our people are not fools, they will not take risks of infection by going out to eat.”

At the same time, a parent of a primary school student reported: “On the first day of school resumption, only two of the 52 students in the class came to school.”

According to media reports, face masks and Lianhua Qingwen capsules in many pharmacies have been out of stock. Lianhua Qingwen capsules are a Chinese patent medicine that is believed to relieve fever symptoms.

A rapid rise in the number of infections then poured

cold water on the previous media excitement. Whereas on November 16 just 182 new cases of asymptomatic infections were added, by November 20, according to the Hebei Provincial Health Commission, two new cases were confirmed in Shijiazhuang with 639 asymptomatic infections. While still comparatively low, the figures point to the danger of an explosion in the number of infections.

When Shijiazhuang authorities announced the cancellation of normal PCR testing, residents expressed uneasiness and fears that this would accelerate infections. “Even if a test site is needed, it should not be Shijiazhuang,” one wrote. “It is absurd and irresponsible to suddenly relax all measures when the number of infections is rising rapidly. This is by no means scientific.”

Due to the rapid increase in cases, the Shijiazhuang City Epidemic Prevention and Control Headquarters issued a notice on the evening of November 20 stating that nucleic acid testing would be conducted in multiple urban areas of the city for five consecutive days.

The notice said it was necessary to “concentrate efforts to control the pandemic in key areas and curb the spread of the epidemic as soon as possible.” This was needed to achieve “dynamic zero COVID” on the social level, “to protect people’s lives and health to the greatest extent, and minimise the impact of the epidemic on economic and social development.”

The notice declared that residents in high-risk areas should strictly stay at home and residents in other areas should stay at home in principle. Residents should not go out or gather unless necessary, and minimize the flow of people, except for staff involved in urban operations, market supply guarantees, public services and epidemic prevention and control.

The notice also stated that in order to meet the daily needs of residents, each family could arrange for one person to go out for two hours a day, with a 24-hour PCR test certificate, to purchase daily necessities.

The lack of clarity on the government’s position has caused further confusion. According to the information on the internet, there is reason to believe that many cities have restarted lockdown policies in high-risk areas. The Baiyun District of Guangzhou City also announced a five-day lockdown on Monday. Guangzhou, home to more than 18 million people, is one of the Chinese cities most affected by the current

pandemic.

But the implementation of relevant policies is being largely communicated verbally through vague language. A blogger described the situation. “I asked friends who work in the public sector in Beijing and Shijiazhuang, and none of them knew what to do, and there was no clear policy, so they could only guess.” This post received widespread approval.

Despite widespread public perception that the new policy has failed, the current official explanation is that local governments are making policy adjustments based on the “Twenty Articles.”

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bureaucracy is clearly facing a dilemma. It confronts huge economic pressure from global and domestic big business for the scrapping of the zero-COVID policy on the one hand, but, on the other, growing public alarm over signs that the pandemic is rapidly expanding.

According to official data, on November 21 China had 2,225 new confirmed cases and 25,902 new asymptomatic infections—a total of 28,127—up from a near-record 27,095 the previous day.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned on November 18 about the disastrous implications of the CCP’s policy shift: “If the situation in mainland China does spiral out of control, it would be a world-historic tragedy. China is home to 1.4 billion people, one-sixth of the world’s population.”



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