

# Health experts warn of impending public health crisis as China quickly adapts itself to herd immunity policy

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Vice Premier Sun Chunlan's comments on Wednesday about the "mildness" of Omicron and the need to move away from the strict public health measures that kept infections and deaths from COVID-19 to an enviable minimum in China amount to the death knell for the Zero-COVID policy.

It was more than just ushering in less stringent measures, not based on any scientific merits, with the empty promises of keeping the virus in check. Fundamentally, every country that lifted their elimination strategy quickly passed through a (rhetorical) mitigation posture and then succumbed to the herd immunity policy, seeing bodies pile high as they shifted to prioritizing the economy. Unless there is a swift reversal, China too will undergo these shocks to its population in the course of the next several weeks as COVID-19 begins its massive assault.

Immediately after Sun's open declaration of needing a new strategy for the pandemic, at least a dozen cities across China let loose their measures over the weekend to contain the virus, scrapping the frequent and mandatory testing that characterized previous responses to surges of COVID-19 infections.

According to the *Global Times*, cities like Zhuai in China's Guangdong province and Chongqing municipality have been urged by health authorities not to conduct nucleic acid (PCR) tests unless necessary.

Other regions will allow people testing positive for COVID-19 to quarantine at home, to alleviate the financial burden on the community's health care resources. However, this will create a situation in which families and their elders will now be exposed to COVID-19 and create new vectors of transmission that were previously checked.

Although COVID-19 cases continue to be at pandemic highs, China only registered 32,824 new cases on Sunday. The rapid abandonment of mass testing means that the health authorities are quickly losing sight of the true scale of infections and where they are being transmitted. And like

their counterparts in the West, they are taking a defensive position with respect to these dangerous shifts in public health policy.

Respiratory expert Dr. Wang Guangfa of Peking University First Hospital told the *GlobalTimes*, "I don't take current adjustments as a 'lying flat' move nor a complete opening-up. [But] we have optimized our epidemic control measures in line with the characteristics of the virus variant, striking a new balance between epidemic control and social and economic activities."

Striking a note of compromise, he added, "But it's unlikely that we'll walk out of the pandemic in a short time during this winter as many countries are facing similar resurgences."

Weekly global COVID-19 cases have been climbing for four weeks straight, from 2.3 million to 3.0 million, or nearly a 25 percent rise. COVID-19 deaths have hovered at around 9,000 per week. Across Europe, the Americas and the Western Pacific, cases have been climbing with the winter surge of infections that has brought with it the influenza and RSV viruses that had been kept in check for the last two years.

In the US, COVID cases are up 24 percent over two weeks, with more than 51,000 new cases. Admission to hospitals and ICUs are also on the rise. Deaths, which are a lagging indicator, are at around 250 per day. It is striking, however, that hospitalization for the elderly has jumped dramatically since the Thanksgiving week. At the current rate, hospitalizations for those over 70 will most likely be the third highest across the three years of the pandemic.

The seven-day average of cases in Brazil is around 27,000 cases per day. On December 1, the country registered 280 deaths, with a seven-day average of 90 per day. Last week, Anvisa, Brazil's equivalent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with the Ministry of Health, reissued a mask mandate in light of the rising cases, even for travelers inbound from other countries.

Though the news for Europe is mainly on influenza and RSV and its impending impact on the health system, COVID-19 cases across Northern Europe, including France and Germany, have seen weekly rises. France added another 390,000 cases in the last seven days, up 27 percent from the previous week.

The director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said on Friday, “We are much closer to being able to say the emergency phase of the pandemic is over, but we’re not there yet.” Though the director-general noted that nearly 90 percent of the world’s population had some level of immunity against SARS-CoV-2, either from infection or vaccination, he added, “Gaps in testing ... and vaccination are continuing to create the perfect conditions for a new variant of concern to emerge that could cause significant mortality.” In particular, the elderly population is the most vulnerable.

These comments raise significant concerns for the Chinese working class as well as the world’s population, despite attempts by the *New York Times* editorial board to see in the small protests among students in various Chinese cities something tantamount to mass uprising of the population against the authoritarian Stalinist regime.

They dare not even attempt to characterize the differences in the protests between workers at Foxconn and garment workers in Guangzhou who demand humane treatment and appropriate support in the face of the difficulties associated with pandemic measures and the baseless cries of affluent layers of students for freedom from public health measures to contain a deadly pathogen. As infectious disease experts have noted previously, COVID-19 is first and foremost a community disease.

In this regard, the *Times* has been a valuable instrument of bourgeois rule and a critical factor in ushering in the let it rip policy that has characterized the US and world response to the pandemic. Based on the *Economist*’s estimates, excess deaths are approaching 21 million, or three-fold higher than official COVID-19 deaths. Close to 5.6 million of these occurred during the Omicron phase of the pandemic. In the US alone, more than 120,000 have died from COVID in the last nine months.

The implications for China, whose population is immunologically naïve, are grave. Even as the *Times* applauds the shifts in the CCP’s pandemic response, an opinion piece published in the same issue by Yanzhong Huang, a global health expert on China, provides immediate context to the dangers of pursuing their new strategy.

After acknowledging in his opening paragraph that China “has spared the country the death rates suffered by other major countries,” Huang concludes by stating, “But a nationwide outbreak at this point could be dire. If one-

quarter of the Chinese population is infected within the first six months of the government letting its guard down—a rate consistent with what the United States and Europe experience with Omicron—China could end up with an estimated 363 million infections, some 620,000 deaths, 32,000 daily admissions to intensive-care units and a potential social and political crisis.”

Indeed, many in the mainstream press who previously decried the Zero-COVID strategy as punishing and too stringent are now offering sobering accounts of the risks of lifting these measures.

Reuters, in an article bluntly titled, “How many people might die if China loosens COVID restrictions,” offered three estimates.

Head of the CDC in Guanxi province, Zhou Jiatong, referenced a study published in *Shanghai Journal of Preventive Medicine* last month that mainland China could face more than 2 million deaths if COVID restrictions were lifted like they were in Hong Kong earlier this year.

A frequently cited paper in *Nature Medicine*, a collaborative report between US and Chinese scientists, estimated that around 1.55 million Chinese people could perish if China lifted its “tough Zero-COVID policy” without any safeguards in place like bolstering vaccines, access to treatments and health care resources. They forecast that at the peak of the infections, demand on intensive care would be more than 15 times capacity.

Another study by the British scientific information and analytics company Airfinity placed the range between 1.3 to 2.1 million deaths if China were to lift its Zero-COVID policy. They wrote, “Mainland China has very low levels of immunity across its population. Its citizens were vaccinated with domestically produced jabs, Sinovac and Sinopharm, which have been proven to have significantly lower efficacy and provide less protection against infection and death.”

However, no estimates can be provided to the global impact of allowing the virus to run rampant across China and boomerang back into the international community, having further modified its immune-evasive capacity and perhaps developed an even more lethal variant that can backfire against the world’s population.



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