

Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission
Hearing on Challenges from Chinese Policy in 2022: Zero-COVID, Ukraine, and Pacific Diplomacy

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Questions Addressed:

1. What are some of the key social and political constraints shaping China's zero-COVID policy? How does China's zero-COVID strategy fit into CCP doctrine and political objectives?
2. What does the policy suggest about the CCP's political time horizon and level of confidence? Does it demonstrate prioritization of short-term control over long term stability, or a willingness to take short-term damage in pursuit of long-term objectives?
3. Describe the association of the zero-COVID strategy with General Secretary Xi Jinping and its relevance to the upcoming 20th Party Congress.
4. How would you characterize the coordination and implementation of the Zero-COVID policy within China's bureaucracy? Have we observed tensions in center-local relations, bureaucratic infighting, or evidence of meaningful dissent within Party ranks on the issue?
5. What impact do you expect the considerable public unhappiness surrounding the COVID-19 situation to have on regime security and stability?
6. How has the CCP tried to control information flows about its Zero-COVID policy? How is it managing domestic and international scrutiny? What are the most reliable sources of information coming out of China on the COVID-19 situation? What are their strengths and limitations?
7. To what extent has Beijing used the COVID-19 pandemic to innovate new methods of social control? How do you expect this to shape Beijing's long-term capabilities in this area?
8. The Commission is mandated to make policy recommendations to Congress based on its hearings and other research. What are your recommendations for Congressional action related to your testimony?

Hearing Co-Chairs Commissioner James Mann and Commissioner Randall Schriver, members of the Commission and staff, thank you very much for your invitation to testify on China's zero-COVID Policy. It is indeed a pleasure and privilege to present my views before the Commission.

I. Evolution of the Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy

The prevailing dynamic zero-COVID - or dynamic clearing - policy adopted by the Chinese leadership derives from its experience of dealing with the pandemic since January 2020. The core constituents of the policy can be traced back to the central leadership's initial response to the novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan in December 2019. After a period of early confusion and mismanagement, on January 23, 2020, the Chinese central government announced an unprecedented lockdown of the city. This was followed by a series of lockdowns across other cities and provinces. As of February 20, 2020, assessments indicated that around 760 million Chinese, approximately half of the country's population, were facing residential lockdowns of varying intensities.¹ The purpose of these lockdowns was to "control the source of infection, block transmission and prevent further spread."²

Even at this early stage the Chinese government was clearly cognizant of the economic costs of lockdowns. On February 17, 2020, the State Council's Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism called for region-specific and tiered measures to be adopted in order to ensure "an orderly return to work and normal life."³ Subsequently, guidelines were issued calling on low-risk regions to resume full production, while those deemed as high risk were asked to monitor the health situation first. In practice, this differentiated and tiered approach has since proven challenging to implement. In large part, this is because of the central leadership's mixed messaging – as it has advocated policy goals that are fundamentally in friction with each other – and local officials' perceptions of Beijing's political priorities.

Starting with Xi Jinping, by and large, central authorities have repeatedly emphasized that the priority is to contain the spread of the virus and reduce the impact on people's lives and health. This must be done while minimizing social and economic costs. It is worth noting that despite framing the problem as such, the Chinese leadership did not eschew setting annual GDP targets for 2021 and 2022. While achieving the 2021 target

¹ Raymond Zhong and Paul Mozur, "To Tame Coronavirus, MAO-Style Social Control Blankets China," The New York Times, February 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/business/china-coronavirus-lockdown.html>.

² "Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)," World Health Organization, February 28, 2020, [https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/report-of-the-who-china-joint-mission-on-coronavirus-disease-2019-\(covid-19\)](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/report-of-the-who-china-joint-mission-on-coronavirus-disease-2019-(covid-19)).

³ "White Paper on Fighting Covid-19 China in Action," The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, June 8, 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cehr/eng/gdxw/t1786877.htm>

was never going to be a serious challenge owing to the base effect, meeting the 2022 target has presented local officials with difficult choices.

In the end, while local officials technically have had autonomy in tailoring policies to suit local conditions, worried about potential political and disciplinary consequences owing to outbreaks, they have tended to prioritize containment over all else. For instance, in May 2022, Bloomberg's assessment of data released by state media and Communist Party disciplinary authorities showed that more than 4,000 officials in relation to some 51 local Covid outbreaks.⁴ This situation has often led to excessive restrictions, which have subsequently been the subject of frustration by the public and censure by central officials. A measure of the structural nature of this challenge is that even as of February 2022, the National Development and Reform Commission was calling on local governments to avoid arbitrary lockdowns and was pushing back against unauthorized closures of public places like restaurants, supermarkets and tourist sites.⁵ Then, in April 2022, the State Council was warning local authorities against unauthorized blocking of expressways, ports, docks, railway stations and airports.⁶

Since 2020, lockdown measures have been accompanied by steps to expand healthcare capacity through the construction of makeshift hospitals and quarantine facilities. Mass testing has been conducted across cities and towns with even small outbreaks. Technological solutions have been deployed for close contact tracing. Mandatory health codes have been used to track and control people's movements and access to public spaces. Special permits have been used over time to ensure the smooth transport of goods, particularly essential goods. Grassroots party groups have been mobilized in order to enforce restrictions and provide support in meeting people's needs for essential supplies. These measures, with varying degrees of effectiveness, continue to be deployed at present too, as evident in the case of the recent outbreaks in Shanghai and Hong Kong.

In contrast, quarantine for inbound and outbound travelers was tightened in late February 2020, with the entry of foreign visitors eventually being suspended a month later.⁷ Foreign travel policy, however, has subsequently eased, although connectivity is still nowhere close to what it was prior to the pandemic. In this sense, the People's Republic of China continues to be an outlier when compared to most other countries. Nevertheless, over the past few months, the Chinese government has opened new

⁴ "Neighborhood Covid Enforcers Keep Large Parts of Shanghai in Lockdown," Bloomberg, May 24, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-23/shanghai-easing-stalls-over-resistance-of-neighborhood-enforcers>.

⁵ Dennis Normile, "China Quietly Plans a Pivot from 'Zero COVID,'" Science.org, March 1, 2022, <https://www.science.org/content/article/china-quietly-plans-pivot-zero-covid>.

⁶ Xinhua, "China Stresses Smooth Freight Transport amid Pandemic," China Daily, April 11, 2022, <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/267404>.

⁷ "Announcement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Immigration Administration on the Temporary Suspension of Entry by Foreign Nationals Holding Valid Chinese Visas or Residence Permits," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China, March 26, 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceis/eng/lsfw/fwxx/t1874167.htm>.

international routes and quarantine requirements for travelers have been halved.⁸ Premier Li Keqiang's remarks in July promising to increase international passenger flights "in an orderly way" are indicative of potential further easing in the months ahead.⁹ However, the caveat of policy change being calibrated under the premise of "ensuring safety against COVID infections" is worth keeping in mind. In essence, a broad-based return to normal exchanges with the outside world is unlikely in the near future.

Evidently, the stated and revealed objective of the Chinese government's response to COVID-19 since 2020 has been to completely stamp out new infections. This was the original necessary condition that needed to be met for the lifting of restrictions. The Chinese leadership, led by Xi Jinping, have often described the pandemic as a "crisis and major test" for the Chinese system of governance. The threat of mass infections overwhelming the healthcare system and leading to high death rates – which could in turn result in economic and social instability, eventually undermining the Communist Party's ruling legitimacy – has been a key part of the political and policy calculus. The framing of the containment effort as a "people's war" in February 2020 underscored the existential nature of the challenge from the perspective of the Chinese leadership.¹⁰ Consequently, for much of the past two years, the key goal of the zero-COVID policy had been to ensure zero infections.

For instance, outbound traffic restrictions and all health checkpoints on highways across Hubei, except Wuhan, were removed on March 25, 2020. This was done roughly after two weeks of no new cases being reported across the province. Likewise, after a brief surge in COVID-19 cases in Beijing in June-July 2020, the outbreak was only formally deemed as being under control after no new infections were reported for nearly two weeks. The Xinfadi market, which was the epicenter of the outbreak in Beijing, resumed partial operations as late as mid-August, well over a month after Beijing was declared free of new infections.

This approach by and large continued through the following year. This was the case despite the large-scale deployment of vaccines. In fact, in 2021, Chinese officials were categorical that vaccination was not an alternative to containment measures, arguing that vaccines were not a "talisman."¹¹ That said, some adjustments were being made in terms of policy implementation. For example, health authorities sought to improve

⁸ Nick Yang, "China Adds International Flights after Relaxing Covid-19 Controls," South China Morning Post, July 5, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3184222/china-adds-international-flights-after-relaxing-covid-19>.

⁹ Xinhua, "Premier Vows Further Efforts to Deepen Opening-Up," The State Council People's Republic of China, July 20, 2022, https://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/202207/20/content_WS62d811e2c6d02e533532e42d.html.

¹⁰ "White Paper on Fighting Covid-19 China in Action," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China, June 8, 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cehr/eng/gdxw/t1786877.htm>.

¹¹ "China Hunkers Down as Delta Reaches Nearly Half The Country," Bloomberg, August 5, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-05/china-hunkers-down-as-delta-reaches-nearly-half-the-country>.

targeting of lockdowns to narrow clusters and enhancing the speed of testing in order to contain outbreaks within a period of two weeks as opposed to the previous four-to-six-week timeline.¹²

This trend of broad persistence with specific adjustments continues to be evident at present too. For instance, responding to the COVID-19 outbreak earlier this year, the Shanghai government initially eschewed a city-wide lockdown.¹³ Instead, it experimented with brief, targeted action focussing only on affected neighborhoods.¹⁴ However, with infections rising, the government soon turned to what was seen as a tried and tested playbook of a city-wide lockdown,¹⁵ mass and repeated testing, and imposing strict quarantines and setting up makeshift medical facilities for treatment and quarantine. In doing so, measures – such as grouping regions and units together under three risk categories to allow for “appropriate activity”¹⁶ and issuing whitelists to ensure that economic activity related to critical sectors and enterprises¹⁷ would remain uninterrupted – were adopted to limit social and economic costs. Despite these measures, Shanghai’s GDP economy contracted 13.7% year-on-year in the second quarter of 2022, with urban unemployment surging to 12.5%.¹⁸

However, what is more significant from a long-term perspective was the critical shift that was made to the definition of the core objective of the dynamic zero-COVID policy. As argued earlier, the primary marker of success for the policy over the past two years had been to completely extinguish outbreaks. This was a prerequisite to the gradual easing of restrictions. However, more recently, in light of the particular transmissibility, pathogenicity and lethality of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 and its sub-variants and keeping in mind the rising economic costs, the goalpost appears to have been shifted. In

¹² Person, “China Ends 2021 with Worst Covid Week since Taming Original Epidemic,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, January 1, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/chinas-xian-enters-10th-day-covid-lock-down-cases-persist-2022-01-01/>.

¹³ “Shanghai Says No Lockdown for Now, Tells Bankers to Work at Home,” Bloomberg, March 15, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-15/shanghai-urges-bankers-to-work-from-home-rules-out-lockdown#xj4y7vzkg>.

¹⁴ Agence France-Presse, “Shanghai Rules out Full Lockdown despite Sharp Rise in Covid Cases,” The Guardian, March 26, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/26/china-shanghai-rules-out-full-lockdown-despite-sharp-rise-in-covid-cases>.

¹⁵ Agence France-Presse, “China's Shanghai to Impose Phased Lockdown to Curb Covid Outbreak,” NDTV, March 27, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/chinas-shanghai-to-impose-phased-lockdown-to-curb-covid-19-outbreak-2846394>.

¹⁶ Person and David Stanway, “Shanghai Eases Lockdown in Some Areas despite Record Covid Infections,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, April 11, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/shanghais-covid-infections-rise-city-looks-get-moving-again-2022-04-11/>.

¹⁷ “Companies on Shanghai's First Whitelist Resume over 80% Production: Official,” Global Times, April 30, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1260679.shtml>.

¹⁸ “Corrected-Shanghai Economy Contracts 13.7% in Second Quarter - Stats Bureau,” Reuters (Thomson Reuters, July 15, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-economy-shanghai-idINB9N2Y9010>.

essence, this has meant that zero-COVID no longer implies zero infections. This shift had been part of the public discourse, particularly among the scientific community, months before it became stated policy.¹⁹

In early May, Shanghai officials informed that if the number of new daily infections in a district accounted for less than 1/100,000 of the total number of people in the district for three consecutive days, then it would be deemed that the district had basically curbed community transmissions.²⁰ Also, if the number of new daily infections fell to zero for three consecutive days, then too the district would be deemed to have achieved no community transmission. Subsequently, officials appeared to suggest achieving the zero-COVID status merely required a decline in new infections and no new infections outside the quarantined areas for three days in a row.²¹ By this metric, Shanghai was deemed to have achieved zero community transmission as on May 17, 2022, allowing for a gradual reopening. The adoption of this new definition of zero-COVID was later confirmed in a People's Daily commentary, which explained that dynamic zero-COVID does not imply the pursuit of zero infections. Rather, it refers to identifying and eliminating infections, with the aim of preventing the spread of the novel coronavirus in the area of the outbreak and to other areas across the country.²²

These changes are important indicators to understand the future direction of China's COVID-19 containment efforts. It is likely that the definition of zero-COVID will further be relaxed as priorities shift after the 20th Party Congress. However, the emergence of a new COVID-19 variant with higher transmissibility, higher lethality or greater immunity evasion ability could result in tighter restrictions persisting. In either case, given the massive testing infrastructure that has been built, certain elements of the zero-COVID policy will in all likelihood sustain regardless for the foreseeable future.²³

¹⁹ "China's scientists are looking for a way out of the zero-covid policy." The Economist. March 12, 2022.

<https://www.economist.com/china/2022/03/12/chinas-scientists-are-looking-for-a-way-out-of-the-zero-covid-policy>

²⁰ "Shanghai Achieves Phased Results in Latest Battle against Omicron with 6 Districts Basically Registering No Community Transmissions," Global Times, May 1, 2022,

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202205/1260706.shtml>.

²¹ See, "Transmission Risk Curbed Effectively in Shanghai, No New Omicron Variants Detected," Global Times, May 11, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202205/1265342.shtml>. Also see, 上海市实现社会面清零- People's Daily, May 18, 2022,

http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-05/18/nw.D110000renmrb_20220518_6-01.htm

²² "我们的防疫措施是最经济的、效果最好的 (人民观点) People's Daily, July 14, 2022,

http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-07/14/nw.D110000renmrb_20220714_1-05.htm.

²³ Jiaying Li, "China's Online Maps Now Dotted with Covid-Testing Booths," South China Morning Post, May 23, 2022,

<https://www.scmp.com/tech/tech-trends/article/3178833/chinas-online-maps-dotted-covid-testing-booths-testing-becomes>.

This should not obscure the fact that there has been significant debate over how the zero-COVID policy must evolve going forward.²⁴ While the challenges related to public health and social stability continue to be important considerations, the economic situation also seems to be weighing far more heavily on the minds of the leadership. This is discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section.

For the moment, it is worth keeping in mind that in his comments in early April 2022²⁵, then at a Politburo Standing Committee meeting in early May²⁶, and eventually during a visit to Wuhan in June, Xi has appeared to lean in favor of tighter controls, indicating greater willingness to bear economic costs.²⁷ In May, state media reporting had Xi calling for the need to resolutely fight “any attempts to distort, question or dismiss China's anti-COVID policy.” In Wuhan, he warned against the “tendency to lower the guard, grow weary of the fight, or slacken prevention and control efforts,” arguing that “temporary impacts on the economy” were acceptable in order to protect “people’s lives and health.” At the same time, however, he did call for “utmost efforts” to be made “to promote steady and sound economic development.”

Official commentaries since then have echoed that language, tying together these different policy objectives and impulses within the Party into a coherent narrative. A set of three commentaries published in the People’s Daily in July 2022 argued that the dynamic clearing policy comprises three “indispensable goals,” i.e., controlling the pandemic, ensuring the normal life of ordinary people and ensuring the necessary economic and social operations,²⁸ and balancing between these three goals is not an “either-or ‘single-choice question.’”²⁹ What is needed is to improve the speed and precision to ensure differentiated and targeted prevention, while keeping the wheels of the economy churning, because “the economy and society are a dynamic circulation system, which cannot be suspended for a long period of time.”³⁰

²⁴ Agence France-Presse, “China could move away from zero-Covid strategy ‘in the near future,’ top scientist says,” HKFP, March 1, 2022.

<https://hongkongfp.com/2022/03/01/china-could-move-away-from-zero-covid-strategy-in-the-near-future-top-scientist-says/>. Also see, Weijie Guan and Nanshan Zhong, “Strategies for reopening in the forthcoming COVID-19 era in China,” in National Science Review, Volume 9, Issue 3, March 2022. <https://academic.oup.com/nsr/article/9/3/nwac054/6564385>

²⁵ Varma, KJM. ‘Xi defends China’s zero-COVID policy amid Shanghai lockdown to curb sharp spike in cases,’ Press Trust of India. April 8, 2022.

<https://theprint.in/world/xi-defends-chinas-zero-covid-policy-amid-shanghai-lockdown-to-curb-sharp-spike-in-cases/907962/>

²⁶ “China will surely win anti-COVID war in Shanghai, with time-tested epidemic control policy: top leadership.” Xinhua. May 6, 2022.

https://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202205/06/content_WS62747913c6d02e533532a4de.html

²⁷ “Xi Inspects Wuhan, Stresses Sci-Tech Innovation, COVID-19 Control, Community Management,” Xinhua, June 20, 2022,

<https://english.news.cn/20220630/2d8dfd7007ea4bd7b3c3a2ae52236a01/c.html>.

²⁸ “不断提高疫情防控科学性精准性(人民观点)” People’s Daily, July 15, 2022,

http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-07/15/nw.D110000renmrb_20220715_1-05.htm.

²⁹ “统筹好疫情防控和经济社会发展工作(人民观点)” People’s Daily, July 18, 2022,

http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-07/18/nw.D110000renmrb_20220718_1-05.htm.

³⁰Ibid.

II. Factors Impacting the Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy

As it did back in 2020, the Chinese leadership continues to view the COVID-19 pandemic as primarily a public health challenge. At the same time, it appears to be extremely sensitive to the social, political, economic and geopolitical consequences of its response to this challenge. Consequently, the policy's persistence and evolution are products of several factors. At the heart of all of this are concerns about large-scale outbreaks undermining the Communist Party of China's governing legitimacy.

The factors discussed below include:

- Perceptions of the policy's efficacy and efficiency
- Public health and social stability-related concerns
- Scale of vaccination and perceptions of the protection provided by vaccines
- Short-term economic costs and perceptions of long-term economic implications
- Xi Jinping's personal linkage with the "people's war" to contain the pandemic
- The narrative around the policy being a demonstration of the Chinese Party-state system's moral, organizational and operational superiority

The Chinese leadership's persistence with the zero-COVID policy is, in part, driven by the perceived efficacy and efficiency of the policy. This was amply evident in the official narrative during the recent outbreak in Shanghai. In mid-April, pieces in the media argued that the zero-COVID policy was the best choice for Shanghai, while warning that wavering from adhering to the policy would result in soaring infections and exact a higher social and economic price.³¹ By mid-May, the official narrative emphasized that the improvements in the city were a direct result and demonstration of the scientificity and effectiveness of the dynamic zero-COVID policy.³² This was subsequently affirmed by Shanghai Party Secretary Li Qiang in his work report to the 12th Congress of the municipal party committee in late June, where he hailed the central leadership's epidemic prevention and control approach as "completely correct."³³

Chinese officials, analysts and media commentaries have also repeatedly pointed to the remarkably low death toll in the country to argue for the superiority of the dynamic zero-COVID policy. Officially, as of July 22, 2022, the Chinese mainland reported just 5,226 COVID-19-related deaths.³⁴ Of course, this number is likely the product of serious undercounting of the actual death toll.³⁵ The Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource

³¹ "齐心协力，尽快实现社会面清零的目标 (人民论坛)" People's Daily, April 12, 2022,

http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-04/12/nw.D110000renmrb_20220412_3-04.htm.

³² 第003版, "实践证明我们的防控措施科学有效 (人民论坛,)" People's Daily, May 13, 2022,

http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-05/13/nw.D110000renmrb_20220513_1-03.htm.

³³ 李强：我们打赢了大上海保卫战, Beijing Daily, June 25, 2022.

<https://bj.bjd.com.cn/5b165687a010550e5ddc0e6a/contentShare/5b16573ae4b02a9fe2d558f9/AP62b68abde4b0c2cdf0a33c20.html>

³⁴ "July 23: Daily Briefing on Novel Coronavirus Cases in China," National Health Commission People's Republic of China, July 23, 2022, http://en.nhc.gov.cn/2022-07/23/c_86060.htm.

³⁵ Andy Lin, "China's Covid Death Data Obscure True Impact of Omicron, Experts Say," Financial Times, April 17, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/45f4b975-443f-44b7-92b8-5d2417491015>.

Center estimates that COVID-19 has led to over 14,600 deaths in the mainland.³⁶ If one were to assume that is the case or even take a 10-fold increase to the number, it is still much lower than the reported deaths in democracies like the US, India and the UK. What is also evident is that after the initial outbreak in Wuhan in 2020, the dynamic zero-COVID policy has generally managed to limit the scale of infections and prevent a run on medical and healthcare resources.³⁷

Statements by Chinese officials and state media commentaries indicate a persistent anxiety that shifting away from the dynamic zero-COVID policy could result in a rapid surge in deaths and a spiraling public health crisis. There is clearly a fear of a healthcare crisis leading to a social stability crisis, which would be politically damaging particularly as the Party prepares for its 20th Congress later this year. The official readout of the Politburo Standing Committee meeting on May 5, 2022 argued that China's large elderly population, unbalanced economic development and insufficient healthcare resources make it difficult for the country to relax COVID controls.

*“Relaxation will undoubtedly lead to massive numbers of infections, critical cases and deaths, seriously impacting economic and social development and people’s lives and health,” the meeting concluded.*³⁸

Likewise during his visit to Wuhan in June, Xi was categorical that:

*“if China had adopted the ‘herd immunity’ policy or a hands-off approach, given its large population, the country would have faced unimaginable consequences.”*³⁹

This anxiety is in part driven by the large population of the elderly and children in the country, who are believed to be vulnerable to severe infections. If one is to accept the low official number of COVID-19 infections in China, it follows that fewer people would have developed natural immunity to the virus. Moreover official data, as of late July, informs that 89.7% of China's total population and 84.5% of elderly population have received the whole course of vaccination.⁴⁰ This refers to the two-dose course and not boosters. As of late June, data show that only around 60% of people aged 60 and above in the mainland had received a booster shot.⁴¹ Meanwhile, officials have also expressed concern about the efficacy of Chinese vaccines, which are largely based on the original

³⁶ “China - COVID-19 Overview,” Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, accessed July 2022, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/china>.

³⁷ This is a subjective view based on available reporting, which has been constrained due to tightened restrictions on the press in China.

³⁸ “中共中央政治局常务委员会召开会议 习近平主持会议,” The State Council of the People's Republic of China, May 5, 2022, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-05/05/content_5688712.htm.

³⁹ “Xi Inspects Wuhan, Stresses Sci-Tech Innovation, COVID-19 Control, Community Management,” Xinhua, July 30, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220630/2d8dfd7007ea4bd7b3c3a2ae52236a01/c.html>.

⁴⁰ 第002版, “坚决防止出现规模性疫情 (国务院联防联控机制发布会)” People's Daily, July 22, 2022, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-07/22/nw.D110000renmrb_20220722_2-02.htm.

⁴¹ Jun Cai et al., “Modeling Transmission of SARS-COV-2 Omicron in China,” Nature News (Nature Publishing Group, May 10, 2022), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-022-01855-7>.

virus strain.⁴² Research into vaccines to address new strains is currently underway, as is the development of a Chinese mRNA vaccine. However, large-scale rollouts are not imminent.⁴³

Two studies are important to note in this context. First, a November 2021 study by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that China was “not ready to embrace ‘open-up’ strategies, warning that a policy of co-existence with the virus could threaten a “colossal outbreak which would almost certainly induce an unaffordable burden to the medical system.”⁴⁴ Another assessment published in May 2022 by researchers at Fudan University warned that if left unchecked, the spread of the Omicron variant could lead to a “tsunami” of cases, overwhelming the country’s healthcare system, which is characterized by very low capacity when compared with Western developed economies⁴⁵ and even regional countries like Singapore, South Korea and Japan.⁴⁶ Consequently, the study warned of large-scale deaths estimated at around 1.6 million.⁴⁷

Official media commentaries have reiterated this argument, referring to the dynamic zero-COVID as the “inevitable choice” for China.⁴⁸ For instance:

“If the prevention and control policies such as ‘herd immunity’ and ‘lying flat’ are adopted, a large number of people will be infected in a short period of time. This will result in a large number of severe cases and deaths, leading to a run on medical resources, which will eventually lead to unbearable losses in terms of people’s lives and property, with unimaginable consequences. From a practical point of view, it is precisely because we have insisted on dynamic clearing that we have been able to ensure extremely low morbidity, mortality and hospitalization rates, so that the masses can be protected to the greatest extent.”⁴⁹

In addition, some of these pieces have made the case that the dynamic zero-COVID policy was not simply the most practical choice but also a morally superior one, when compared to approaches advocated and being adopted by other, particularly Western

⁴² “Current Measures Effective for Variants,” China Daily, July 22, 2022, <https://www.ecns.cn/news/2022-07-22/detail-ihcakxsi6139261.shtml>.

⁴³ Eleanor Olcott, “New Covid Variants Threaten China’s Mrna Vaccine Hopes,” Financial Times, July 7, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/1ce91ee9-5e74-40db-80ec-fc2cbe97533d>.

⁴⁴ Yuan Zhang et al., “On Coexistence with Covid-19: Estimations and Perspectives,” China CDC Weekly, December 3, 2021, <https://weekly.chinacdc.cn/en/article/doi/10.46234/ccdcw2021.245>.

⁴⁵ “Why It’s So Hard for China to Exit Covid Zero,” Bloomberg, March 8, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-07/hard-for-china-to-exit-covid-zero-with-unprepared-hospitals>.

⁴⁶ “China’s ‘Zero-Covid’ Strategy Will Ease but Not End in 2023,” The Economist Intelligence Unit, July 4, 2022, <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1212247504&Country=China&topic=Economy&subtopic=Forecast&subsubtopic=Policy%2Btrends>.

⁴⁷ Jun Cai et al., “Modeling Transmission of SARS-COV-2 Omicron in China,” Nature News (Nature Publishing Group, May 10, 2022), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-022-01855-7>.

⁴⁸ “坚持就是胜利,” People’s Daily, April 15, 2022, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-04/15/nw.D110000renmrb_20220415_4-01.htm.

⁴⁹ “我们的防疫措施是最经济的、效果最好的 (人民观点) People’s Daily, July 14, 2022, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-07/14/nw.D110000renmrb_20220714_1-05.htm.

developed countries, such as living with the virus or relying on herd immunity. Choosing to live with the virus, one of the recent pieces in the People's Daily argued, demonstrated a "disregard for science, a contempt for the complexity and difficulty of the fight against the pandemic, and an extreme irresponsibility when it comes to the people's right to life and health."⁵⁰ Consequently, officials and media commentators have claimed that in making the choice to adhere to dynamic zero-COVID, the Communist Party of China was being true to its inherent identity as the vanguard of the people and governing philosophy of being people-centered.

This argument is not entirely new. It builds on a narrative that has been carefully constructed and propagated ever since February 2020.⁵¹ Soon after the lockdown of Wuhan, the Party-state propaganda apparatus began emphasizing Xi Jinping's command over the situation, the Party's focus on saving lives and the heroic nature of individuals who had contributed to virus containment. Official commentaries and analyses praised Xi's "personal" and "decisive" leadership as being critical to China's success in containing COVID. During his visit to Wuhan in March 2020, Xinhua referred to Xi as the "commander-in-chief" and the "man of the hour."⁵² Another state media article, at the time, praised him for his "pure heart like a newborn's that always puts the people as his number one priority."⁵³ This glorification of Xi's leadership has persisted. For instance, a front page article in the People's Daily on June 17, 2022, praised Xi's courage and perseverance in leading the pandemic containment effort, the cause of economic development and for coordinating developmental and security interests.⁵⁴ An earlier piece in May 2022 hailed his "superb political wisdom, extraordinary leadership skills, profound philosophical thinking and effective scientific methods" in stabilizing the overall situation facing China.⁵⁵

Other commentaries and writers have claimed that China's pandemic containment results had demonstrated the advantages of the Chinese system.⁵⁶ China's containment and work resumption successes have been compared with the "inefficient and ineffective" management of Western countries, arguing that this demonstrated that the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics had displayed "strong political leadership, social appeal, mass organization and resource deployment" capabilities.

⁵⁰ "实践证明我们的防控措施科学有效 (人民论坛,)" People's Daily, May 13, 2022, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-05/13/nw.D110000renmrb_20220513_1-03.htm.

⁵¹ For a detailed study, see Manoj Kewalramani, *Smokeless War: China's Quest for Geopolitical Dominance* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt. Ltd., 2021).

⁵² "Xi Focus: Moment of Truth: Xi Leads War against Covid-19," Embassy of the People's Republic of China, March 10, 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceca/eng/zqgw/t1754238.htm>.

⁵³ Chun Han Wong, "Beijing Portrays President Xi Jinping as Hero of Coronavirus Fight," *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, March 8, 2020), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/beijing-portrays-president-xi-jinping-as-hero-of-coronavirus-fight-11583678054>.

⁵⁴ "勇毅笃行 长风万里," People's Daily, June 17, 2022, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-06/17/nw.D110000renmrb_20220617_1-01.htm.

⁵⁵ "重要之年看开年," People's Daily, May 13, 2022, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-05/13/nw.D110000renmrb_20220513_1-01.htm.

⁵⁶ "推动制度优势更好转化为治理效能 (深入学习贯彻习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想)" People's Daily, July 21, 2022, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-07/21/nw.D110000renmrb_20220721_1-11.htm.

China's success in comparison to "chaos" in the West, writers have argued, was nothing short of a "miracle in terms of economic development and social stability." Xi's September 2020 speech at the obviously premature celebration of the triumph in pandemic containment echoed these themes.⁵⁷ He said that China had achieved a "heroic feat in humankind's fight against disease," with the system clearing an "extraordinary test of history." In doing so, it had demonstrated the strengths of the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, through extraordinary organizational, mobilization, planning and coordination, and implementation capabilities. In making this case of systemic and moral superiority, Chinese officials and media have compared Chinese infection and fatality data with those of Western developed countries, particularly the United States. They've argued that unlike the Communist Party of China, which put people's lives and safety first, American politicians have prioritized "political self-interest" and "short-term economic interests" along with the "interests of capital" above the safety of public health and people's lives when it comes to dealing with COVID-19.⁵⁸

The framing of the pandemic as a profound once-in-a-century event which has brought changes that are intertwined with the shifts in the geopolitical balance of power along with constant references to Xi's personal leadership and systemic comparisons indicate that ensuring low rates of infections and deaths is a legacy issue for Xi Jinping. Therefore, this is not something that one should expect him to ease up on in order to simply pursue economic growth targets. For instance, during his visit to Wuhan in June 2022, Xi seemed to soften the expectations with regard to the annual growth targets, calling on officials to "strive for a *relatively good performance* in this year's economic development." That said, performance legitimacy cannot be maintained if economic development, employment and livelihood concerns are unmet.

From an economic development prism too, Xi's primary argument, which has been largely echoed across the Party-state ecosystem, has been that dynamic zero-COVID remains the best policy option. In saying this, one would be remiss in not reiterating that there exist policy debates around this proposition, which have led to redefinition of goals and tweaks in implementation, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, addressing the Politburo Standing Committee meeting in late March, Xi reiterated an oft-repeated claim that ever since COVID-19 response measures were enforced on a regular basis, China had "led the world" in both economic performance and pandemic response.⁵⁹ The rapid recovery in economic activity following the historic slump in 2020 and comparison to other major economies appear to have reinforced this view. This

⁵⁷ Xi, J. 2020. 'Speech at the National Commendation Conference for Fighting the Novel Coronavirus Pandemic'. 9 September. Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20201105055549/http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2020-09/09/nw.D110000renmrb_20200909_1-02.htm

⁵⁸ "新冠肺炎死亡超百万，一场不该出现的'国家悲剧'(钟声)" People's Daily, May 16, 2022, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-05/16/nw.D110000renmrb_20220516_6-03.htm.

⁵⁹ "XI Requires Swift Containment of Latest COVID-19 Outbreaks," Xinhua, March 18, 2022, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2022-03/18/content_78115150.htm.

argument, along with Xi's comments in Wuhan in June 2022 about the dynamic zero-COVID policy having "temporary impacts on the economy," are indicative of the view that brief, targeted controls containing outbreaks early result in lower economic costs than choosing coexistence with the virus.

Proponents of this view argue that pandemic containment is a necessary condition or a "powerful guarantee" for future economic growth and stability. They also claim that it is important to take a long-term view on economic development. From this viewpoint, the pandemic had provided a "stress test under actual combat conditions" for China's industrial and supply chains, and if one were to assess the "essential nature of the situation," it would be clear there was now an opportunity to strengthen "competitiveness and risk prevention and control capabilities."⁶⁰ This can be achieved by focussing on building the new development pattern through investments in technological and industrial transformation, advancing the development of a unified national market, focussing on high-quality Belt and Road cooperation and pursuing self-reliance and supply chain diversification.

Meanwhile, others, such as Premier Li Keqiang, appear to be proponents of the need for "striking a balance" between reviving the economy and containing outbreaks⁶¹ by adopting "more targeted and well-calibrated" control measures.⁶² Over the past few months, Li has repeatedly emphasized the need to support enterprises and stabilize prices and employment, as part of the immediate steps that are required to address the economic fallout of the dynamic zero-COVID policy.⁶³ In doing so, he has called on local officials to act with a "sense of urgency"⁶⁴ and demanded that they "place stabilizing growth in a more prominent position."⁶⁵ The official readout of the State Council's Executive Meeting in May, which announced the 33 measures to stabilize the economy, quoted Li as saying that "without a certain level of GDP growth, stable employment cannot be realized."⁶⁶ The meeting also committed that "freight logistics will be kept smooth. Restrictions on the passage of trucks from low-COVID-risk areas will be lifted and all undue height limits and arbitrary charges scrapped. Non-local drivers of

⁶⁰ "重要之年看开年," People's Daily, May 13, 2022,

http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2022-05/13/nw.D110000renmrb_20220513_1-01.htm.

⁶¹ Wei L., and Spegele, B. "WSJ News Exclusive | China's Top Two Leaders Diverge in Messaging on Covid Impact," The Wall Street Journal (Dow Jones & Company, May 26, 2022), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-top-two-leaders-diverge-in-messaging-on-covid-impact-11653486508>.

⁶² "Premier Vows Further Efforts to Deepen Opening-Up," State Council People's Republic of China (Xinhua, July 20, 2022), https://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/202207/20/content_WS62d811e2c6d02e533532e42d.html.

⁶³ "Chinese Premier Urges Efforts to Stabilize Employment, Safeguard Livelihoods," Xinhua, June 29, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220629/1eddba2494114abb99ef6b536a322223/c.html>.

⁶⁴ Xie Jun, "China Ups Ante in Tackling Economic Challenges, as Premier Li Urges Speedier Policy Support," Global Times, April 11, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202204/1259049.shtml>

⁶⁵ "Chinese Premier Stresses Need to Implement Policies to Stabilize Economy," China Internet Information Center (Xinhua, May 26, 2022), http://www.china.org.cn/business/2022-05/26/content_78237592.htm.

⁶⁶ "China to Take Steps to Stabilize Economic Activity, Bring Economy Back to Normal Track," Xinhua, May 24, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220524/3039cf6ed99743258621e6bd4052bb87/c.html>.

passenger and cargo vehicles will have equal access to free COVID testing as local residents.”⁶⁷ The fact that these issues were referenced in the readout implies that these are difficulties being encountered at local levels in terms of how the dynamic zero-COVID policy is being interpreted and implemented.

That said, in the final analysis one must be cautious in overinterpreting the differences in emphasis on short-term and long-term priorities and preferences of policy tools as significant dissent within the party ranks or a meaningful challenge to Xi’s authority or the persistence of the dynamic zero-COVID policy. It is perhaps much more useful to think of this from the viewpoint of contestation over specific policy measures and political jostling for positions among individuals and groups ahead of the 20th Congress to be able to influence different policy domains.

A framework based on the three pillars of *faith, fear and fruits* is perhaps a useful tool in understanding this dynamic.

a. *Faith*:

While it is never easy to precisely assess how much genuine buy-in Xi has managed to elicit from party cadres, there is significant information to suggest that he commands tremendous ideological influence. For instance, at least, 70% of the current effective central party regulations have been issued during Xi’s reign.⁶⁸ This is a measure of the expansion of his authority over the past decade. More critically, it is worth noting that a significant number of these revisions have taken place within the framework of the Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, which emerged as the party’s guiding ideology following its 19th Congress in 2017. The Two Establishments – which refers to the establishments of Xi’s authority as the core of the Central Committee and the whole party and the establishment of his political doctrine as the party’s guiding ideology – outlined in the third history resolution adopted at the 6th Plenum of the 19th Central Committee in November 2021 further underscored this. It is imperative to not underestimate the significance of this ideological shift as mere rhetoric. In Leninist systems, ideology comprises programmatic and epistemological elements, which inform governance at all levels. Outright challenges to the party’s guiding ideology, therefore, can be a recipe for systemic instability. Finally, since October last year, there have been several leadership changes at the provincial levels. A significant number of the new provincial party chiefs are reported to have close ties to Xi or are connected to known Xi allies. Articles and statements by several of these individuals lavishing praise for Xi, particularly since the 6th Plenum, are also worth noting.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ 中国共产党党内法规体系. People’s Daily. August 4, 2021.
http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2021-08/04/nw.D110000renmrb_20210804_1-01.htm

b. *Fear:*

Of course, one can question the genuineness of these statements. How deeply do these individuals truly believe that Xi Jinping is the “beacon,” “compass” and “helmsman” guiding the party – the People’s Leader, who deserves to be the core? Given the opacity of the Chinese system, making such an assessment is a fraught exercise. However, the hagiographic writings of senior party leaders indicate either the lack of broad political will to push back against Xi or that the political cost of such an effort is believed to be extremely high and, therefore, unviable. In his study on Chinese politics, Joseph Fewsmith explains that in Leninist systems, control over critical positions within the party apparatus is critical to a leader’s power.⁶⁹ Viewed from this prism, Xi continues to enjoy unparalleled authority within the system. Over the past 10 years, he has structurally concentrated power. His control over the party’s ideological, propaganda, security, organization and disciplinary organs appears to be as firm as ever. Therefore, where faith may be lacking, fear is likely to yield desired behavior.

c. *Fruits:*

Finally, performance legitimacy, as mentioned earlier, has been key to the Communist Party of China’s narrative justifying its continued rule. This was amply evident in the Party’s year-long history campaign last year, which culminated in the third history resolution in November 2021. To quote from that document:

“Over the past century, the Party has led the people in forging ahead persistently, opening up the right path to national rejuvenation. China has moved from a state of disunity and division to a high level of unity and solidarity, from weakness and poverty to strength and moderate prosperity in all respects, and from suffering invasion and bullying to becoming independent, self-reliant, and confident. China has completed a process of industrialization that took developed countries several centuries in the space of mere decades, bringing about the two miracles of rapid economic growth and enduring social stability. Today, the Chinese nation is a thriving nation standing tall and firm in the East.”⁷⁰

In other words, delivering tangible developmental and security outcomes or fruits, have been a key aspect of the Communist Party’s pitch to the Chinese people. A number of actors are involved in this process, jostling for power and influence, and evidently there have been significant misgivings of late. The Chinese economy is under increasing pressure. China’s external environment has become much more challenging than it was 10 years ago. State-owned enterprises have grown stronger at the cost of the private sector. Anti-monopoly efforts have led to significant losses for consumer technology firms. Efforts towards building a unified national market are likely to adversely impact

⁶⁹ See, Joseph Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics*. (Cambridge University Press., 2021)

⁷⁰ *Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century*. Adopted at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on November 11, 2021

vested local interests, given that the stated goal is to remove local protectionism market segmentation.

In the context of the dynamic zero-COVID policy, there is evidence, most prominently in Shanghai and Beijing, of public frustration with repeated lockdowns, limitations with regard to access to public spaces, repeated testing, and policy uncertainty. Among local officials, there is also likely to be significant frustration with regard to the increasing challenges of pursuing policy objectives that increasingly appear mutually incompatible. In managing these challenges with regard to fruits, the leadership appears to have used different tools at narrative and policy levels. For instance, at a narrative level, it has focussed on high infection rates and fatalities in the West to serve as a negative example for the Chinese public that might be frustrated with the zero-COVID policy. Another narrative example was Shanghai Party Secretary Li Qiang publicly acknowledging and thanking the city's population for their "sacrifice" in dealing with the outbreak.⁷¹ At the policy level, meanwhile, there are adjustments that have been made to respond to public criticism. The reversal of the decision to impose vaccine mandates for access to public places in Beijing in July is one such example.⁷² Another example is the acceleration in issuing of local government bond quotas for 2022 and enhancing infrastructure spending.

Viewed from this framework of the three pillars of *faith*, *fear* and *fruits*, it appears that the dynamic zero-COVID policy is on firm ground when it comes to the first two pillars. Contestation and experimentation with regard to fruits will likely continue, leading to adjustments and uncertainty.

III. How has the CCP tried to control information flows about its Zero-COVID policy? How is it managing domestic and international scrutiny? What are the most reliable sources of information coming out of China on the COVID-19 situation? What are their strengths and limitations?

Throughout the course of the pandemic, the Communist Party has used several soft and hard measures to control the narrative around the origins of COVID-19 and its policies. Taken together, these measures have led to significantly diminished transparency, with Party-state media outlets and the official narrative dominating the information ecosystem.

The soft measures refer to selective – and generally uncritical – coverage of the pandemic situation across Party-state media outlets, the framing of the central leadership as being responsive and in control, pointing to Western developed countries' pandemic responses as negative examples, and the co-option of the experiences of ordinary people into positive stories of the Party and community's response to a

⁷¹ Yang Meiping, "Shanghai Party chief thanks people for pandemic efforts, outlines future." June 25, 2022, <https://www.shine.cn/news/metro/2206257181/>

⁷² "Beijing Scraps China's First Vaccine Mandate in Abrupt Reversal," Bloomberg, July 8, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-08/beijing-revokes-first-ever-vaccine-mandate-after-public-outcry#xj4y7vzkg>.

calamity. Let me explain the last of these in further detail. In February 2020, more than 300 Party-state media journalists were deployed to report on the outbreaks in Wuhan and Hubei. The decision came following a directive by Xi during a leadership meeting on February 3, calling on the media to tell “the moving stories of how [people] on the front line are preventing and fighting the virus, telling the story of how China is combating the virus and showcasing the unity of the Chinese people in the face of the virus.”⁷³ These stories were eventually published as a compilation by late February.

Writing as Wuhan reopened in April 2020, political scientist Maria Repnikova described this trend of narrative appropriation succinctly, explaining that “China’s propagandists are skillfully incorporating into their storytelling some of the positive sentiments and plotlines that circulate among the public.”⁷⁴ In other words, the Party-state media narrative has consistently focused on nationalism, mobilization, organization and rejuvenation of the nation, while highlighting individuals whose heroic deeds embody the strengths of China’s socialist system. Key aspects of this narrative setting have also involved actively comparing infection rates and death tolls with Western countries, particularly the US, to those in China and leveraging positive coverage by foreign publications and analysts to reinforce the correctness and superiority of Chinese policies.

The primary objective of this effort, which continues at present, is to shape a favorable perception of the leadership’s response to the pandemic. The external dimension of this effort has also included efforts to highlight China’s sacrifice, the resilience of its economy and governance system, and its generosity. The sacrifice narrative was in part a response to early criticism of the delayed response to the outbreak in Wuhan. Beijing argued that its unprecedented decision to lock the city down was an unparalleled sacrifice to benefit the world. The narrative around economic and systemic resilience has been targeted at foreign businesses and governments in an effort to ensure enterprise and investor confidence. The generosity narrative, meanwhile, revolves around the supply of pandemic-related goods to other countries, either through aid or commercial exports. The primary objective of these efforts has been to shape the perception of China as a responsible major power that remains open and is *the* engine of global economic growth.

The hard measures refer to denial of access, censorship, coercive legal action against critics and the use of disinformation. The annual reports published by the Foreign Correspondents Club of China in 2021 and 2022 paint a grim picture of how the Chinese government has used the pandemic to significantly frustrate the work of journalists in the country. The 2021 report talked about the expulsion of journalists, weaponization of visas, harassment and intimidation along with the use of new surveillance systems and

⁷³ Li, J. 2020. ‘China is Dispatching Journalists to Tell the Coronavirus Story It Wants Its People to Hear’. Quartz, 6 February, <https://qz.com/1798070/chinaseeks-to-create-positive-media-coverage-about-coronavirus/>

⁷⁴ Repnikova, M. 2020. ‘Does China’s Propaganda Work?’. The New York Times, 16 April. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/opinion/china-coronavirus-propaganda.html>

strict controls on movement – implemented for public health reasons – to control foreign journalists.⁷⁵ The 2022 report details how the Chinese government has used strict pandemic measures as a reason to delay approvals for new journalist visas, shut down reporting trips, and decline interview requests. In essence, “covering China is increasingly becoming an exercise in remote reporting,” the report said.⁷⁶

Limiting access, however, is merely one of the coercive measures in the Chinese government’s toolkit. In promoting its own sanitized, state-sanctioned collective memory of the pandemic, the Chinese government has used censorship and coercive instruments of the law to impose a sort of selective amnesia. Since the start of the pandemic, several regulatory measures have been adopted, strengthening online censorship, and a large number of articles and social media posts expressing dissent or alternate viewpoints have been taken down. Citizen journalists like Zhang Zhan⁷⁷ and archivists linked to the Terminus 2049 project⁷⁸ have been sentenced for violating the law. In a recent assessment, Sarah Cook, Research Director for China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan at Freedom House, has documented how views of medical professionals, grassroots health workers, online influencers and scholars were censored during the Shanghai outbreak earlier this year.⁷⁹ Even remarks by the World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on the unsustainability of the zero-COVID policy came under the scanner by censors.

Finally, throughout the pandemic, Chinese officials and media have engaged in disinformation campaigns around the origins of the novel coronavirus and the pandemic responses of other countries. In particular, there has been significant focus on the impact of the pandemic in the United States, with Party-state media framing the issue from the prisms of racial and economic inequality and a failure to protect the human rights of American citizens. What’s further troubling from a public health perspective are the findings of a 2021 European Union study of Chinese and Russian disinformation

⁷⁵ Media Freedoms Report 2020: ‘Track, Trace, Expel: Reporting on China Amid a Pandemic’, FCCC, March 10, 2021, <https://fccchina.org/2021/03/10/media-freedoms-report-2020-track-trace-expel-reporting-on-china-amid-a-pandemic/>

⁷⁶ Media Freedoms Report 2021: ‘Locked Down or Kicked Out’, FCCC, January 31, 2022. Available at: <https://fccchina.org/2022/01/31/media-freedoms-report-2021-locked-down-or-kicked-out/>

⁷⁷ Wang, V. 2021. ‘Chinese Citizen Journalist Sentenced to 4 Years for Covid Reporting,’ The New York Times, October 8. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/28/world/asia/china-Zhang-Zhan-covid-convicted.html>

⁷⁸ Davidson, H. 2022. ‘Detained, missing, close to death: the toll of reporting on Covid in China’, The Guardian, January 4. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/04/detained-missing-close-to-death-toll-reporting-covid-china>

⁷⁹ Cook, S. 2022. ‘China’s Censors Aim to Contain Dissent During Harsh COVID-19 Lockdowns’, The Diplomat, May 18. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/chinas-censors-aim-to-contain-dissent-during-harsh-covid-19-lockdowns/>

campaigns around the pandemic.⁸⁰ The study documents how Chinese and Russian media and officials have been pushing misleading narratives sowing doubt around the safety of Western vaccines, while also accusing the West of perpetuating a global vaccine divide that hurts developing countries.

IV. To what extent has Beijing used the COVID-19 pandemic to innovate new methods of social control? How do you expect this to shape Beijing's long-term capabilities in this area?

This has not been an area of my research. However, as the findings of the Foreign Correspondents Club of China's report referenced above and the recent scandal around officials in Henan tampering with the health code system to prevent angry bank customers from traveling to Zhengzhou show, the system lacks transparency and is ripe for abuse.

V. The Commission is mandated to make policy recommendations to Congress based on its hearings and other research. What are your recommendations for Congressional action related to your testimony?

1. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years has highlighted the need for greater transparency and multinational cooperation with regard to public health challenges and bio-security. In this context, the US government must continue to remain engaged with the WHO and it must engage the Chinese government too, pressing for greater transparency in disease and health reporting along with free access for journalists, international experts and researchers. ***At the same time, it is critical for the US to work more closely with like-minded partners on addressing future health security challenges. Therefore, I recommend that the US government pursue the establishment of a Pandemic Research Hub and the development of a Public Health Intelligence Sharing Network within the Indo-Pacific, nestled within the Quad framework.***
2. China's dynamic zero-COVID policy is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. Lockdowns of varying intensities and policy uncertainty will, therefore, continue to adversely impact business continuity across a range of sectors. Consequently, the global economic recovery is likely to remain stymied in the near term owing to supply chain shocks. This impacts not just the broader American economy but also enhances critical sector vulnerability. ***Therefore, I recommend that Congress continue to work with the US government to build supply chain resilience through on-shoring, near-shoring and friend-shoring with like-minded partners, particularly with regard to critical sectors.***

⁸⁰ EEAS Special Report: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the COVID-19 Pandemic (Update December 2020 - April 2021). Available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic-update-december-2020-april-2021/>