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**SCHRODINGER'S EMPEROR MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE
CLOTHES: CONTRASTING STRENGTHS
AND WEAKNESSES IN THE CHINESE
GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

by

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June 2023

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CONTRASTING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN THE CHINESE
GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a unique opportunity to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Xi Jinping. This normally closed system of authoritarian government has been forced to confront an intense challenge with a degree of openness rarely seen, and over the course of three plus years of fighting the virus the results have been decidedly mixed. The strength of the Chinese response in 2020 highlights the robust state capacity that the CCP in general, and Xi Jinping in particular, still command in China. However, both the successes of 2020 and the increasingly public and prolonged protests of 2021 and 2022 demonstrate the power of the citizens of China and their ability to influence the policies of the central government. This challenge is only exacerbated by ongoing disconnects between central and local Chinese government officials. Xi Jinping has demonstrated a willingness to use international health aid to achieve diplomatic goals, as well as being willing to harness international COVID criticism to reinforce Chinese nationalism and bolster his domestic standing. These factors point to potential challenges and opportunities ahead for United States foreign policy goals, as Xi feels pressure from within and faces increased skepticism abroad.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic Acid
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HSR	Health Silk Road
MRNA	Messenger Ribonucleic Acid
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
TCM	Traditional Chinese Medicine
U.S.	United States
VOA	Voice of America
WHO	World Health Organization

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I. INTRODUCTION

How does the Chinese government's response to COVID-19 reflect larger truths about the regime's qualities and overall stability? The initial Chinese government response reflected some of the unique capabilities of a powerful, authoritarian state, as evidenced by the draconian measures China was able to implement and inflict on their citizens with relatively little resistance (both internally and internationally). This was widely viewed at the time as having successfully confronted and limited the spread of the virus. However, their recent setbacks have also demonstrated some of the limitations inherent in the government's authoritarian structure, primarily the continued commitment to the "Zero COVID" policy espoused by Chinese President Xi Jinping, brutal extended lockdowns that have led to considerable local unrest, and a refusal to acknowledge the comparative underperformance of domestically produced vaccines.

China's efforts to contain COVID-19 have succeeded and failed to varying degrees, with the initial response (or lack thereof) and refusal to acknowledge the presence of the virus demonstrating the downsides of a personalistic authoritarian regime, while the subsequent total crackdown highlights the unique elements of state capacity in Xi's China. Since 2020, the picture has only gotten more complex, and there are further indications of the Chinese government's resilience and weakness in their ongoing response. To what extent are the successes and failures that the Chinese government has faced with COVID-19 a direct result of their government structure? If the setbacks are largely attributable to the Chinese government structure, can this then be used to draw larger conclusions about the flaws and potential instability of the Xi regime as a whole?

A. SIGNIFICANCE

There is little doubt that China promises to be one of the most important international foils to the United States (U.S.) and the international liberal order for the foreseeable future, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently declaring China "the

biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century.”¹ However, China’s flaws are not necessarily readily apparent to outside observers. With an iron grip over domestic media and continuing censorship of domestic internet services, the Chinese government has a unique ability to suppress unfavorable reporting, and this combination of opaque governance and a multi-decade stretch of tremendous economic growth has led many in the world to view President Xi as virtually all-powerful, certainly in the domestic sphere. Former President Donald Trump even referred to Xi as “the most powerful (Chinese) president in a hundred years.”²

At this point it seems clear that COVID-19 will be an ongoing problem which the world will face for the foreseeable future. Fully recognizing that it is still too early to declare any one country’s response to be an absolute success or a devastating failure, enough time has passed and there have been enough discrete periods in the evolution of the virus to analyze the Chinese response so far. Binning the response into two large periods of time, covering the initial emergence of the virus and the response throughout 2020, and contrasting it with the emergence in China of the Omicron variant and continuing through the end of 2022, my contention is that we see what appears to be a strong immediate response which becomes less effective over time. Given the widely held belief that Xi Jinping wishes to remain the president of China until 2035,³ might we be able to forecast similar struggles in the latter part of his reign? And is there evidence of some of these struggles already?

Importantly, in the context of this thesis, I am analyzing success against COVID-19 as the Chinese government being able to implement their intended policies, and those policies having the desired effect. One of the reasons to look at two broad time periods is

¹ Dan De Luce and Abigail Williams, “China Poses ‘Biggest Geopolitical Test’ for the U.S., Secretary of State Blinken Says,” *NBC News*, March 3rd, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-poses-biggest-geopolitical-test-u-s-says-secretary-state-n1259489>.

² David Shepardson, “Trump Praises Chinese President Extending Tenure ‘For Life,’” *Reuters*, March 3rd, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-trump-china/trump-praises-chinese-president-extending-tenure-for-life-idUSKCN1GG015>.

³ Katsuji Nakazawa, “Xi Jinping Sends Shock Waves with his 2035 Manifesto,” *Nikkei Asia*, August 6th, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/China-up-close/Xi-Jinping-sends-shock-waves-with-his-2035-manifesto>.

that Chinese policies have remained broadly similar, but their effects have changed considerably as facts on the ground have changed. Certain facets of the Chinese government's approach that were initially very effective in controlling the spread of COVID-19 have diminished in the face of more transmissible variants, and certain economic tradeoffs the government was willing to make and able to enforce in 2020 seemed much less viable in 2022. Conversely, some aspects of the government response have seen multiple changes in their impact. For example, the response of foreign governments has gone through multiple iterations of being both largely positive and largely negative.

The documented successes and failures in the Chinese approach to COVID-19 have been major stresses for the government. I demonstrate that they are indicative of greater structural factors, and that this helps to illuminate other areas in which some U.S. government and military leaders' public statements about the Chinese government do not necessarily match reality and point to useful ways to adjust U.S. foreign policy aims. This also helps to illustrate potential instability in the governing regime, which is useful for approaching future multilateral summits and attempting to peacefully resolve ongoing crises in the region and points of tension.

The initially tepid response by the Chinese government caused significant anger amongst the citizens of China. However, as COVID-19 became a global phenomenon, international displeasure towards the Chinese government led to a "rally around the flag" response which bolstered the government's standing domestically. Chinese leaders were also able to point to international praise and gratitude from some countries to burnish their domestic reputation and boost nationalist patriotism. Knowing that international criticism may aid an authoritarian regime in remaining in power, how might the U.S. adjust their strategic aims and messaging moving forward?

Given the outsized importance of China to global affairs in the coming decades, and the sheer breadth and depth of topics which will need to be addressed on the international stage, the United States and other global actors should strive to have as full a picture as possible of the actual strengths and weaknesses of the Xi regime. Diplomats and military leaders must be careful not to underestimate the Chinese government, but there is

also a risk of overestimating their power and influence that could lead to negative outcomes. This is why this thesis will look to analyze which specific aspects of the Chinese government responded well to COVID-19 (state capacity, centralization of power, media suppression and censorship) and which aspects responded poorly (local versus central government, international relations and messaging), and then look to extend those points to the larger global diplomatic landscape between China and the United States.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing research on the Chinese government's response to COVID-19 can be broken down into several broad categories, most of which have at least some overlap with discussions of the authoritarian government's resilience. These categories include overall state capacity, the centralization of power directly under Xi Jinping, the response of the central government versus local governments, government censorship and control of the media, and the international response and attempts at Chinese leadership on the global stage. While each of these categories presents unique challenges to researchers, there is one common and understandable flaw in the majority of the peer reviewed material that has been produced on the Chinese government's response to COVID-19: time. Specifically, most journal articles and book chapters are limited to the early months of the pandemic, or perhaps all of 2020, and the course of the virus and the Chinese response has changed significantly since then. Right now, most scholarship on the Chinese response to COVID-19 in 2021 and 2022 has necessarily been limited to contemporary reporting and some government analyses. While peer reviewed journalistic scholarship is ongoing, this thesis seeks to join the body of work being produced almost in real time to update early priors on the effects of COVID-19 in China.

Victor Shih sums up the early literature when he opens his chapter of *Coronavirus Politics* with “as of September 2020, China has had one of the most successful responses to COVID-19 in the world,”⁴ while as late as the summer of 2021 Jude Blanchette was offering a mea culpa, writing “many outside observers, myself included, initially believed

⁴ Victor Shih, “China's Leninist Response To COVID-19,” in *Coronavirus Politics: The Comparative Politics and Policy of COVID-19*, University of Michigan Press, 2021, 67.

that the party's inability to contain the outbreak of COVID-19 highlighted the weaknesses of China's system... [however] Beijing's iron-fisted approach to combating the virus has now become a point of national pride."⁵ It is worth pointing out that many authors have since softened their praise and begun to challenge their previous assumptions as to the effectiveness of Chinese government policies. While the final word on COVID-19 is not yet written, facts on the ground have changed significantly in the last twelve months, and this presents a unique opportunity to both expand the existing literature and capture the direct assessments of leading experts of government performance in the moment.

1. State Capacity

When discussing state capacity more broadly, some of the existing literature has highlighted the differing responses to COVID-19 by authoritarian and democratic governments around the world. Early in the pandemic, some mainstream media outlets produced articles boldly proclaiming that western democratic systems were not prepared to deal with the virus.⁶ However, recent scholarship has been more nuanced in its findings. Stasavage summarizes the consensus viewpoint by finding that neither "democracies or autocracies are unambiguously better at dealing with [COVID-19]" and that each form of government has "specific strengths and weaknesses when it comes to dealing with external emergencies."⁷ Alon, Farrell, and Li add that "democracies are not intrinsically inferior to authoritarians in crisis response,"⁸ and this finding is supported by Laishram and Kumar, who report that "the primary predictor of efficient pandemic management has less to do with a country's political regime... but more to do with the state's competence, readiness

⁵ Jude Blanchette, "Xi's Gamble," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 4 (2021): 2.

⁶ Song Luzheng, "Many Western Governments Ill-equipped to Handle Coronavirus," *Global Times*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1182661.shtml>.

⁷ David Stasavage, "Democracy, Autocracy, and Emergency Threats: Lessons for COVID-19 From the Last Thousand Years," *International Organization* 74, no. S1 (2020), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000338>.

⁸ Ilan Alon, Matthew Farrell, and Shaomin Li, "Regime Type and COVID-19 Response," *FIIB Business Review* 9, no. 3 (2020): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2319714520928884>.

and public trust.”⁹ Biondo et al. add an interesting wrinkle to the scholarship by performing a large scale simulation of different government responses. The result is that, while they find that democratic governments can be slower to come to decisions than authoritarian regimes, “in the long term, regimes collapsed to the same value... [and] emergency pressure... forces countries to be quick, taking solutions similar to those adopted by authoritarian countries.”¹⁰ Importantly, while various regime types have unique strengths and weaknesses, similar to Laishram and Kumar’s findings on state competence, Stasavage highlights the fact that “centralization of power allows for decisive action”¹¹ in authoritarian states, and in China this facet works in tandem with the robust overall state capacity, although chronic underinvestment has hurt health care capacity specifically.

Discussing the importance of Chinese state capacity writ large, Nelson finds that China’s healthcare system “remains ill-equipped to deal with the country’s aging population and rising incidence of chronic disease”¹² separate and apart from the unique impact of COVID-19. Per-capita healthcare spending pre-pandemic was low compared with other major economies,¹³ which is particularly concerning given that almost a third of Chinese citizens will be over the age of 60 by the year 2033.¹⁴ Scoggins highlights the importance of state capacity in the context of domestic law enforcement, but the key takeaway for COVID purposes is the importance of “a state’s institutional ability... for regime durability.”¹⁵ Broadly, COVID-19 represented an existential threat to the Chinese government’s survival if the government proved unable to protect its people, and Shih

⁹ Chinglen Laishram and Pawan Kumar, “Democracies or Authoritarians? Regime Differences in the Efficacy of Handling Covid-19 in 158 Countries,” *Indian Journal of Public Administration* 67, no. 3 (2021), 479–480, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00195561211042977>.

¹⁰ A.E. Biondo, G. Brosio, A. Pluchino, and R. Zanola, “Authoritarianism Vs. Democracy: Simulating Responses to Disease Outbreaks,” *Physica A* 594 (2022), 14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physa.2022.126991>.

¹¹ Stasavage, “Democracy, Autocracy, and Emergency Threats: Lessons for COVID-19 From the Last Thousand Years,” 1.

¹² Leyton Nelson, “China’s Healthcare System: Addressing Capacity Shortfalls Before and After COVID-19,” Congressional Publications, 2021, 1.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Blanchette, “Xi’s Gamble,” 3.

¹⁵ Suzanne E. Scoggins, “Rethinking Authoritarian Resilience and the Coercive Apparatus,” *Comparative Politics* 53, no. 2 (2021): 310, <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041521X15895755803929>.

points out that the long-standing problems in China's healthcare system meant that, at least initially, "the mobilization of the party-state could not make up for the shortfalls in China's medical insurance and social security system."¹⁶

One of the advantages of an authoritarian government system, however, is the ability to focus effort once a decision has been made by the ruling body without having to seek democratic approval, and Yang details how, once this pivot had been made, fighting COVID-19 meant "bringing the full force of the state to bear with minimal considerations for civil liberties."¹⁷ Detailing the initial response to the emergence of the virus, Shih exposes the volatility of state capacity in China. January 2020 saw severe test shortages and a completely overwhelmed treatment capacity in Wuhan, but by the end of the month Chinese firms were producing 600,000 test kits per day.¹⁸ In a similar display of raw state power and resources, in order to construct temporary treatment facilities "over ten thousand workers working twenty-four hours a day and a thousand trucks and construction machineries were deployed, allowing the completion of the hospital in ten days."¹⁹ Hu and Sidel also detail the increased response of domestic Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, however they find this was not a response to COVID specifically, but rather due to the increase of NGOs in the country more broadly in recent years.²⁰ Ironically, this generalized improvement in NGO prevalence and performance outside of the specific context of COVID may be an optimistic sign for China's larger healthcare issues in the future.

¹⁶ Shih, "China's Leninist Response To COVID-19," 68.

¹⁷ Xiangfeng Yang, "Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?" *The Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 132 (2021): 916, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1893557>.

¹⁸ Shih, "China's Leninist Response To COVID-19," 72–73.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ming Hu and Mark Sidel, "Civil Society and COVID in China: Responses in an Authoritarian Society," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 49, no. 6 (2020): 1175, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764020964596>.

2. Centralization of Power Under Xi

Assessments of Chinese President Xi Jinping's tenure vary wildly, with Blanchette summing up the state of the two main camps as believing either that Xi is "remaking the global order on terms favorable to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)" or "the anxious overseer of a creaky and outdated Leninist political system that is struggling to keep its grip on power."²¹ As with most such sharp dichotomies, the truth lies somewhere in the middle, and while Xi's "increasingly singular position"²² seems to close off certain paths to reform, China's response to COVID-19 also demonstrates the particular kind of power that can be wielded by an increasingly personalistic authoritarian government. Yang points out that the success of China's government generally relies upon "how Beijing utilizes its policy achievements"²³ specifically in regard to the economy and patriotic education, and COVID threatened both. The CCP's official response to the emergence of COVID-19 was slow, resulting in viral online protests from the citizenry, and prompting Xi Jinping to take ownership on January 28th, 2020, with a rare public statement that "I myself have been commanding [the efforts to control COVID]."²⁴ The nature of the highly centralized government structure means that for most highly coveted positions "partisan loyalty is prized over technical expertise" and, as a result, "a majority of top health officials across Hubei had no prior medical training."²⁵ Shih points out that, while the party machinery is extremely powerful and has a great deal of influence, the larger apparatus does not act unless and until the party center has mobilized.²⁶

While most authors have ultimately assessed that China's response to COVID-19 under Xi was largely a success, it is again important to consider the date of publication for

²¹ Blanchette, "Xi's Gamble," 1.

²² Ibid.

²³ Yang, "Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?" 916.

²⁴ Yang, "Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?" 921.

²⁵ Yang, "Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?" 920.

²⁶ Shih, "China's Leninist Response To COVID-19," 82.

these articles. Writing in December of 2020, Hu and Sidel find that “the party and the government have concluded that China’s policies in the COVID crisis have been a victory of China’s highly centralized political regime,”²⁷ while Yang found in February of 2021 that the government response to COVID was “widely believed to have won back the hearts and minds of millions [in China].”²⁸ A key goal of this thesis will be evaluating the strength of these claims in light of the ensuing two years, and the extent to which policies which largely succeeded in 2020 have been less effective against the updated situation in 2022.

3. Central Versus Local Government Response

As the largest country in the world by population, the size and geography of China presents some unique challenges to government administration. Rural counties account for only 55% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), despite occupying 90% of the country’s total landmass and holding 70% of the population.²⁹ Despite, or perhaps because of this disparity, Yang finds that local bureaucrats are “conditioned to be cautious to a fault” and “obsessed about preserving the status quo.”³⁰ A fear of reporting bad news to the higher levels of government and a sense of being constantly evaluated for their performance results in local bureaucracy being “often bedeviled by immobility,”³¹ and it is no surprise that “Chinese people almost always assign more credit to higher levels of authority at the expense of lower ones”³² given that the central government is the only force seen to be effective. While this may aid in Xi’s consolidation of power, it results in local officials feeling disempowered, and that feeling is not entirely unwarranted.

²⁷ Hu and Sidel, “Civil Society and COVID in China: Responses in an Authoritarian Society,” 1177.

²⁸ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 916.

²⁹ Rui Qi, Chenchen Shi, and Mark Wang, “The Over-Cascading System of Cadre Evaluation and China’s Authoritarian Resilience,” *China Information* 35, no. 1 (2021): 75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X20920514>.

³⁰ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 919.

³¹ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 919.

³² Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 926.

Shih points out that the Hubei Provincial People’s Congress meeting was held from 11–17 January, 2020, well after the central government was aware of the potential severity posed by COVID,³³ and almost certainly led to additional unnecessary infections, despite calls from some local officials to cancel the event.³⁴ Nelson argues that corruption in the field and a lack of expertise has led to a low level of public trust in the healthcare system writ large,³⁵ although Qi et al. describe attempts to circumvent some of the bureaucratic tangle between central and local governments by implementing a form of “over-cascading” cadre evaluations that allow provincial governments to directly evaluate counties, prioritizing institutionalization.³⁶ While they were initially largely kept out of the loop, Shih does give local civil institutions credit, saying that “China’s massive quarantine effort likely would not have succeeded to the same extent had it not been for the millions of neighborhood and village level committees.”³⁷

Hu and Sidel, however, find that NGOs and civil institutions succeeded largely in spite of, rather than because of, the central government. This is not to say that the central government has no impact, but merely to indicate that NGOs have broadly expanded apart from central planning. While acknowledging that at least some of the enormous number of volunteers during COVID-19 may have been coerced, and may be more indicative of “the resilience of state power rather than the rise of volunteers as a civil society force,”³⁸ they find that the coercive apparatus of the state has had large negative repercussions, with volunteers being more constrained in 2020 than they were in response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and being limited largely to providing in-kind donations to neighbors.³⁹ Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have served only to heighten the disparities

³³ Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 69.

³⁴ Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 79.

³⁵ Nelson, “China’s Healthcare System: Addressing Capacity Shortfalls Before and After COVID-19,” 6.

³⁶ Qi, Shi, and Wang, “The Over-Cascading System of Cadre Evaluation and China’s Authoritarian Resilience.”

³⁷ Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 81.

³⁸ Hu and Sidel, “Civil Society and COVID in China: Responses in an Authoritarian Society,” 1176.

³⁹ Hu and Sidel, “Civil Society and COVID in China: Responses in an Authoritarian Society,” 1177.

between the perceived efficiency and effectiveness of the central government, and the comparative inadequacy of local government in China. However, there is still a sizeable role for non-government actors at the local level, whether individual citizens or volunteer organizations.

4. Government Censorship and Media Control

Long before COVID-19 emerged, authoritarian governments have relied on censorship and control of the media to protect and enhance their rule. Moreso even than most other regimes, Qi et al. find that “for Chinese politicians, information means power,”⁴⁰ while Ma and Weiss report “autocrats increasingly relying on the media and disinformation to inoculate their societies and public discourse from the threat of democratic diffusion.”⁴¹ Yang also concludes that “in recent years more impressionable young people have gravitated toward state-sponsored nationalism and have the tendency to characterize any criticism of the party or the government as subversive.”⁴² When viewed through this lens, it is not surprising that the emergence and containment of COVID-19 prompted significant media censorship from the Chinese government.

In his reporting on the early days of the pandemic, Shih details how from December of 2019 to late January of 2020 Chinese officials pressured doctors not to report cases and to deny the possibility of human-to-human transmission.⁴³ Further evidence of questionable reporting includes the reported death toll in Wuhan increasing by almost 50% overnight in April of 2020, and by mid-February Chinese authorities had “rounded up 350 people around China for ‘spreading rumors.’”⁴⁴ In addition to attempting to control the information that was getting out of Wuhan, the Chinese government also retroactively

⁴⁰ Qi, Shi, and Wang, “The Over-Cascading System of Cadre Evaluation and China’s Authoritarian Resilience,” 74.

⁴¹ Shiqi Ma and Jessica Chen Weiss, “Strong State or Vulnerable Homeland: How Chinese State Media Sought to Combat Democratic Diffusion During the 2019 Hong Kong Protests,” *The Journal of Contemporary China* (2022): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2052442>.

⁴² Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 927.

⁴³ Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 68–69.

⁴⁴ Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 75.

scrubbed information that had managed to make it out. Hu and Sidel document instances of numerous news stories being removed, including some written by state media.⁴⁵ This is bolstered by reporting from Yang that doctors found difficulty entering cases into the early warning system, and in some instances their entries were deleted entirely.⁴⁶ In a particularly chilling and meta twist, the article that Yang referenced for the previous anecdote has since been removed as well, but an archived version is still available.

In addition to suppressing bad news, Yang finds that “the propaganda machine was fired up to motivate people with heroic tales of sacrifice and to praise the party’s prescient leadership.”⁴⁷ Shih sums up the role of censorship in the Chinese response when he writes “through its control of the media and arbitrary detention, the party largely succeeded in preventing the spread of not only information but also panic about COVID-19, thus largely preventing urban unrests.”⁴⁸ This finding contrasts sharply with the more recent public protests surrounding the draconian lockdowns in response to the Omicron variant of COVID-19.

5. International Response and Chinese Leadership Abroad

The worldwide spread of COVID-19 presented several interesting and contradictory opportunities for the Chinese government. The U.S. and other western countries oscillated between criticizing China’s initially slow response and refusal to share information with praising the forcefulness of government actions once the full weight of the state was brought to bear. For its part, China was able to leverage their state capacity for some international diplomacy gains, but mostly benefited by framing international criticism as attacks on China itself instead of the government and rallying nationalist sentiment in defense. China portraying foreign actors as hostile to rally domestic support is by no means a new development, and Ma and Weiss point out that in response to the

⁴⁵ Hu and Sidel, “Civil Society and COVID in China: Responses in an Authoritarian Society,” 1177.

⁴⁶ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 920.

⁴⁷ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 921.

⁴⁸ Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 67.

Hong Kong protests of 2019 “Chinese state-run media gradually leaned towards the side of portraying protests as unprecedentedly large-scale, violent, and supported by Western ‘black hands.’”⁴⁹ By framing the threat as coming from hostile foreign actors they demonstrate how “rather than showcasing the invincibility of authoritarianism to popular opposition, state media can emphasize the urgency of protecting national security and solving external threats.”⁵⁰ Yang points out that many predicted COVID-19, upon its emergence, could be “China’s Chernobyl,”⁵¹ and that international criticism resulted in a “pervasive sense of China under siege.”⁵² Perversely, international condemnations of the Chinese government’s performance may very well have helped to bolster that government’s resilience.

A similarly contradictory set of outcomes can be seen in other aspects of the international response. Hu and Sidel point out that “many of the largest Chinese foundations provided overseas aid to other affected countries” in an effort to build a “sense of global citizenship.”⁵³ However, the efficacy of this program is undercut by the documented instances of unscrupulous Chinese businessmen selling fake Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) abroad, prompting a significant backlash.⁵⁴ Nelson is quick to highlight the ethical issues around Chinese firms offering testing services to foreign countries without addressing “concerns that any data collected from these services may be used for genetic research in China in an undisclosed manner.”⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Ma and Weiss, “Strong State or Vulnerable Homeland: How Chinese State Media Sought to Combat Democratic Diffusion During the 2019 Hong Kong Protests,” 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 915.

⁵² Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 922.

⁵³ Hu and Sidel, “Civil Society and COVID in China: Responses in an Authoritarian Society,” 1179.

⁵⁴ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 922.

⁵⁵ Nelson, “China’s Healthcare System: Addressing Capacity Shortfalls Before and After COVID-19,” 8.

COVID-19 also proved to be a pivotal moment in the development of the Health Silk Road (HSR). Although the HSR had been a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for years, the emergence of the Coronavirus placed a much greater emphasis on China's efforts to export medical care and equipment around the world as part of ongoing international diplomacy efforts. Huang reports that as early as March 2020, Xi Jinping was extolling the virtues of the HSR to Italy's Prime Minister; by October 2020, China had distributed more than 179 billion face masks around the world, and by November 2021, the Xi regime had committed 1.6 billion doses of vaccines to more than 100 countries⁵⁶ (a fact which is particularly interesting given domestic resistance to Chinese vaccines). Cao lays much of the skepticism and criticism around the HSR at the feet of larger geopolitical wariness between China and the west,⁵⁷ but even to the extent one questions his objectivity as a researcher operating out of and with the approval of the government in Shanghai, Zoubir and Tran come to similar conclusions, determining that the HSR is largely responsible for the fact that China is now looked upon more favorably in large portions of North Africa and the Middle East than the United States is, and that most western criticism of the HSR is more about political influence than medical effectiveness.⁵⁸

The Chinese government also used speculative claims to hit back at international critiques, responding to references from the Trump administration to the "China virus" and the "Wuhan virus" by stating without evidence that American athletes may have introduced COVID-19 at the World Games in Wuhan in October, 2019.⁵⁹ International calls for China to provide reparations to other countries in response to COVID-19 reminded Chinese

⁵⁶ Yanzhong Huang, "The Health Silk Road: How China Adapts the Belt and Road Initiative to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *American Journal of Public Health* (1971) 112, no. 4 (2022): 567, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306647>.

⁵⁷ Jiahua Cao, "Toward a Health Silk Road: China's Proposal for Global Health Cooperation," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740020500013>.

⁵⁸ Yahia H. Zoubir and Emilie Tran, "China's Health Silk Road in the Middle East and North Africa Amidst COVID-19 and a Contested World Order," *The Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 135 (2022): 349, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1966894>.

⁵⁹ Yang, "Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?" 923.

citizens of the infamous Boxer Protocol,⁶⁰ and as countries around the world began to institute their own nationwide lock-downs in 2020, internet memes in China began to proliferate claiming that other countries were “copying China’s homework.”⁶¹ Ultimately, Yang concludes that while “China’s image reached a nadir around the world” in 2020, “Chinese leaders made a simple choice... to put a far greater premium on reinforcing [their] domestic base at a perilous time than international partnerships.”⁶² As is so often the case with China, we see that the first and most overriding concern of the government is regime survival.

C. HYPOTHESES

There are four hypotheses that I explore in this thesis. Collectively, I believe that they help illuminate the primary factors that led to the major decisions and consequences of the Chinese response to COVID-19 and can help shape our understanding of the Chinese government. For this thesis I am primarily evaluating success against COVID-19 as strengthening the Chinese government and the regime of Xi Jinping in the context of the government implementing their desired policies, and those policies having the desired results. This helps to evaluate how some strengths of the Chinese approach can become weaknesses over time purely through changing circumstances and an inability or unwillingness to update the government’s strategy.

Hypothesis 1: The most tangible examples of Chinese government success against COVID-19 have been a direct result of strong state capacity.

In examining the Chinese response to COVID-19 and the idea of authoritarian versus democratic responses in general, it is clear that there are some uses of government power that are significantly easier to implement with strong state capacity and the centralization of its authoritarian system. Instances such as mass testing and quarantine and

⁶⁰ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 926.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 925.

the construction of large hospitals in record time demonstrate the positive case for this hypothesis, while examples such as the public rejection of an attempted vaccine mandate show the limits of this approach. It is worth pointing out that for the purposes of this thesis I am not passing a judgment on whether coercive state policies such as mass quarantine are worth the corresponding loss of personal freedom or economic power, I am merely evaluating the extent to which the government was able to execute its stated goals as a direct result of strong state capacity. If this hypothesis is correct, we would expect to see measurable instances of robust production, testing, materials, and compliance rates in a relatively short time. If this hypothesis holds true for most of 2020, but becomes increasingly less relevant through 2021 and 2022, is this due to a lessening in state capacity, a change in the circumstances which makes state capacity a less effective tool, or both?

Hypothesis 2: The Chinese government has focused on centralizing power, preceding but also accelerating under Xi Jinping, resulting in weak lower levels of government and sometimes unrealistic central government demands. One inadvertent consequence is that some of the most significant failures of the Chinese response to COVID-19 have been due to weak local government institutions.

The sheer size and population of China make governance a challenge; however, there are unique shortcomings in local government structures that can be identified through their response to COVID-19. Ongoing attempts to centralize power have weakened lower levels of government administration and diminished the effectiveness of county level government infrastructure. Evidence of this hypothesis would include documented instances of the central and local governments openly disagreeing with one another, as well as cases where Chinese citizens ignored or countermanded the orders of local government and instead appealed directly to the central government. To the extent that the impact of local government has shifted in importance over time, how much of this is due to problems that cannot or should not be delegated to local government, as well as to increasing civilian unrest?

Hypothesis 3: Local institutions and civil society have been more directly impactful to the Chinese response to COVID-19 than the central government.

This hypothesis maintains that the local population, acting on their own and coordinating outside of the formal structures of government, have been more impactful in responding to and guiding the government response to COVID-19. The local population has been more impactful in part because of their acute interest in generating a more effective response given the severity of the virus, but also in response to the perceived weakness and failure of local government as described in the previous hypothesis. Conversely, this has also generated negative outcomes when the Chinese people forced the government to backtrack or change course from policies that might have been better at managing the spread and lethality of the virus (e.g., resisting vaccination and a vaccine mandate). There have also been significant misperceptions from outside observers as to the effectiveness of local unrest, which has enhanced the perceived mismatch between citizen and central government power. If this hypothesis is true, evidence to look for would include instances of the Chinese government having to reverse or backtrack on previous decisions in response to popular unrest, as well as documented cases of the citizenry organizing to provide for their own needs in lieu of a government response. Importantly, this is not to say that the citizens of China have more objective power than the government, per se, but more to highlight the degree to which the government is still responsible to and reacting to the will of the people, as well as showing areas in which civil society is addressing gaps and shortcomings in the government's response.

Hypothesis 4: International condemnation over the Chinese response to COVID-19 has helped strengthen the Xi Jinping regime because of increased nationalism amongst the Chinese population and backlash to foreign criticism. Conversely, the Xi regime has been able to point to instances of international praise and gratitude to help bolster their domestic strength practically and rhetorically. Both of these developments allow the Chinese government to view their response to COVID-19 as a success due to a strengthening of the Xi regime, irrespective of the actual results with the virus.

If the first two hypotheses largely point to indications that might seem to weaken or undermine the image of the Xi Jinping regime, this hypothesis provides an explanation for any apparent strengthening of the regime that has occurred over the last three years. This allows for the dual possibilities of positive coverage providing a propaganda win and

generating feelings of patriotism, as well as negative coverage resulting in a “rally around the flag” effect. Separate from any central government propaganda or censorship, primary evidence for this would be public statements or demonstrations from citizens that indicate increased loyalty or favorability towards the central government, as well as statements by foreign citizens or governments praising the Chinese response. It is worth acknowledging this may be difficult to isolate from concerns of government influence.

D. THESIS OVERVIEW

The primary design of this thesis is a single case study focusing specifically on China and the Chinese government’s response to COVID-19. I have chosen not to contrast China with another country’s response both because China is a singular entity in terms of size, government structure, and impact of the virus, as well as to allow enough time and space to fully evaluate the Chinese response on its own merits. The Chinese response to COVID-19 has gone through multiple stages, highlighting both strengths and weaknesses of the regime which can illuminate larger facets of the overall government.

For the initial body of the thesis, I focus primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles and government reports that have had sufficient time to analyze the Chinese response in 2019 and 2020. As the thesis shifts focus to 2021 and 2022, I rely more on contemporaneous international reporting and scholarly articles to provide updated information and a sense of how the government is handling the COVID pandemic and the general sentiments amongst the Chinese population. The first body chapter covers the initial emergence of the virus and the reaction in China from 2019–2020, while the second body chapter covers the emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant and subsequent developments in 2021 and 2022. The conclusion presents the main findings and examines their implications for the strengths and weaknesses of future Chinese governance both at home and abroad.

This thesis builds on existing literature surrounding the Chinese response to COVID-19, but provides important updated context based on recent developments, as well as attempting to isolate which factors have been most important in determining the shape of the country’s response as a whole. The body chapters proceed in chronological order in

the interest of readability and coherence; however, I further sub-divide the body chapters into critical time periods and begin and end each of these sections with a brief overview of their relevance. I evaluate the relative power demonstrated by whom was able to exert influence over the direction of Chinese COVID policy amongst the major groups of the central government, the local government, and the citizenry. As such, this thesis is less about “success” against COVID-19, and more about the relative power dynamics at play in China that have been revealed by the Chinese response to COVID-19.

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II. COVID-19 EMERGES: WUHAN AND THE INITIAL OUTBREAK, 2019–2020

A. INTRODUCTION

On November 17th, 2019, a 55-year-old resident of the Hubei Province in China first reported symptoms of a respiratory illness.⁶³ The Chinese government (and the world) did not know it at the time, but this would later be identified as the first known case of the novel Coronavirus, COVID-19. In the ensuing weeks and months, the scale of the virus would explode onto the world writ large, but even in the early stages there were significant impacts to the Chinese government and population. While many reviews of the Chinese government's handling of COVID-19 in 2019 and 2020 have emphasized a broadly successful campaign to contain the virus and its effects, isolating smaller periods of time helps highlight a more nuanced assessment, and test several of the identified hypotheses in this thesis.

This chapter will show that the initial period of the virus' outbreak was characterized by repression and denial from the central government, and confusion amongst the local governments about how to react. With many government careers having been made and broken during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic, local officials were in many cases hesitant to act out of fear of being blamed, and this helps to highlight the weakness of local levels of governance relative to the central government in China, as well as the overall tensions between the two. The second period of the government response is more of a clear success from the CCP's perspective, highlighting rapid action and a total mobilization of state capacity to contain the virus, coupled with a reliance on strong local non-governmental organizations. This period also demonstrates the variations in the response to the virus seen within China, and some of the more belligerent local populations help to foreshadow eventual widespread unrest as "Zero COVID" continued into 2021 and 2022.

⁶³ Susan Lawrence, "COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020)," Congressional Publications, May 13, 2020, 13.

Finally, the later portion of 2020 demonstrates the CCP's pivot to controlling the message internationally, with a combination of medical and financial aid carrots and strident "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy sticks that sought to punish anyone who criticized the Xi regime. While many contemporary analysts viewed China's response to COVID-19 as largely successful at the end of 2020, there are several key elements of unrest that help demonstrate what could (and did) unfold across 2021 and 2022. Those developments will be covered more fully in Chapter 3.

B. EMERGENCE OF THE VIRUS, NOVEMBER 2019–JANUARY 2020

The initial emergence and spread of COVID-19 in China was badly mismanaged, and this in large part highlights the effects of hypothesis two and some of the conflicts between the central and local governments resulting from increased centralization under Xi and the existing power structure. As doctors in Wuhan became aware of an increasing number of cases and sought to bring further attention and assistance to the matter, the central government initially downplayed the issue and tried to stifle reporting about the cluster of cases. The central government was discussing the virus and its impacts internally in early January but allowed for large events and gatherings to continue without publicly acknowledging the potential risks. While this could be explained by a desire not to unnecessarily alarm the public, the decision not to inform local government figures points to a disconnect between the two groups and highlights the ongoing friction at different levels of government.

Even now, the Chinese government disputes exactly when and where the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 emerged, but there are multiple reports of cases of pneumonia in the Chinese city of Wuhan of unknown origin starting in December of 2019.⁶⁴ As doctors in Wuhan tried to report their findings and gather more data on the emerging outbreak, the central government entered what Victor Shih has termed the "information repression phase,"⁶⁵ seeking to limit the amount of exposure and coverage that the cases received. The Huanan Wholesale Seafood Market was first identified by the

⁶⁴ Shih, "China's Leninist Response To COVID-19," 68.

⁶⁵ Shih, "China's Leninist Response To COVID-19," 67.

government of Wuhan on December 30th, 2019, in a memo to hospitals that was leaked online within 12 minutes of being sent,⁶⁶ and yet while the market was officially closed for cleaning on January 1st, 2020, the central government did not make any public statements about the virus at the time. On the same day, the Wuhan police arrested eight doctors who had privately expressed concern to friends and family and labeled them as “rumor purveyors.”⁶⁷

The World Health Organization (WHO) first publicly acknowledged the growing case count in a tweet on January 4th citing “a cluster of pneumonia cases,”⁶⁸ while Xi Jinping has publicly stated that he demanded “prevention and control of the novel coronavirus pneumonia” at a Politburo Standing Committee meeting on January 7th, 2020.⁶⁹ However, there was no public acknowledgement of the virus in contemporary reports of the meeting, and the ongoing Wuhan Municipal People’s Congress was allowed to continue without taking further precautions or being apprised of the situation. Additionally, on January 18, 2020, Wuhan held an annual celebration known as the “ten thousand families banquet,” despite the Wuhan Health Commission acknowledging just three days earlier that “human-to-human transmissibility could not be excluded.”⁷⁰

This apparent incongruity can realistically be explained by one of two outcomes. Either the central government knew the severity of the virus and intentionally withheld that information from local government officials, or Xi and others retrospectively changed their real-time assessments once the virus became a more serious global concern. To be fair to the Chinese central government, the latter explanation is something that several western governments also engaged in over time, and it was not immediately clear just how great the threat of COVID-19 would be. But what reasons would the central government have

⁶⁶ Lawrence, “COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020),” 15–16.

⁶⁷ Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 68.

⁶⁸ Lawrence, “COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020),” 21–22.

⁶⁹ Lawrence, “COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020),” 24.

⁷⁰ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 918.

for intentionally withholding information from their own people? One potential explanation is that the period between January 7, 2020, and January 23, 2020, is “the busiest traveling time for China” with 290 million migrant Chinese workers leaving their largely urban and coastal city jobs to return to much more rural areas for the Lunar New Year.⁷¹

By delaying acknowledgment of the virus, and, significantly, any associated lockdowns, government leaders were able to ensure that the population was more dispersed, reducing population density in city centers and lessening the strain on a weak existing healthcare infrastructure. This delay, however, undoubtedly resulted in significant additional spread of the virus, leading to more cases and more deaths. If the Chinese central government was aware of the potential severity of COVID-19 (and an early version of a *Lancet* article warning of the “pandemic potential” of the virus suggests they were⁷²), they prioritized government control and an orderly response over informing their people and allowing them to make their own health decisions. This hesitancy on the part of the central government left local party members uncertain of how to proceed and unwilling to act independently. This central-local disconnect filtered down to non-political government officials as well. When challenged as to why they had not made more forceful recommendations in the early days of the virus, a member of a national team sent to Wuhan responded that they “were instructed to only offer advice because local authorities were supposed to take the lead.”⁷³ As Shih points out, “as long as the party center did not reveal a strong preference for fighting the epidemic, local officials did not do much on their own initiative, and the epidemic proliferated without much hindrance.”⁷⁴

In the early weeks of the pandemic, the Chinese central government exercised strict censorship over the information that was allowed to leave Wuhan. Doctors who tried to

⁷¹ Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 71.

⁷² Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 70.

⁷³ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 918.

⁷⁴ Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 79.

enter cases into a digital early warning system found that their entries had been deleted,⁷⁵ while the lab that performed the sequencing of the COVID-19 Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) was issued a gag order.⁷⁶ Strict controls over social media and draconian censorship laws allowed the government to minimize, but not eliminate, the public spread of fear and anger. The highly centralized government provided incentives for local politicians to underreport or downplay bad news, and the central government prioritized their own ability to control the population and enact their desired strategy before ever publicly acknowledging the threat posed by COVID-19.

This highlights a central tension in governing a country as vast and diverse as China with as firm a grip as the CCP seeks under Xi. An inability to directly control every local official leaves room for significant variation in how they choose to respond to central government directives and which elements to highlight. At the same time, the lack of clear guidance coming from the top left local officials paralyzed and fearful of misinterpreting ambiguous guidance. The most important factor for local officials was self-preservation, and the result was a lack of leadership in the initial response to COVID-19.

C. BELATED GOVERNMENT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT, JANUARY 2020 – APRIL 2020

While the initial response by the Chinese government was centered around suppressing and obfuscating information coming out of Wuhan, when Xi Jinping did finally pivot to actively managing the virus, the result was swift and robust. Demonstrating the central government's control over China's infrastructure and the organs of the state, lockdowns and quarantines were initiated that largely helped to contain much of the spread of COVID-19 within China's borders. This supports the hypothesis that many of the tangible successes in containing COVID-19 were a direct result of the strong central government and overall state capacity in China. The state also significantly expanded a

⁷⁵ Yang, "Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?" 920.

⁷⁶ Yang, "Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?" 919.

weak healthcare infrastructure in order to accommodate the rapid growth in cases from the transmission that already occurred.

On January 18th, a National Health Commission arrived in Wuhan to help manage the response to the virus, led by Dr. Zhong Nanshan, who had become famous in China during the SARS epidemic of 2002 for providing frank press conferences directly to the public and insisting on an alternate course of treatment which had initially been controversial within the government, but ultimately dramatically lowered the mortality rate in China.⁷⁷ On the same day, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar briefed President Donald Trump for the first time, reflecting a growing international awareness of the seriousness of COVID-19.⁷⁸ Two days later, on January 20th, Dr. Nanshan first briefed China's State Council on the findings of the National Health Commission's trip to Wuhan and, later that day, was interviewed on national television, announcing to the majority of Chinese citizens for the first time that "there is definitely human-to-human transmission" and that "the disease is still at its starting stage and is in a growth period," thus marking the central government's shift towards a more robust response to the virus.⁷⁹

One of the first signs that China's central government was taking the situation more seriously came with the announcement of 136 new cases in Wuhan after they had publicly declared no new cases for over a week.⁸⁰ On January 25th, at a meeting of the Chinese Politburo Standing Committee, Xi made two pivotal announcements which would help shape and guide the government's response moving forward. He announced that "preserving life is the highest priority" and that "all infected will be concentrated in designated containment facilities,"⁸¹ laying the groundwork for China to prioritize

⁷⁷ Yang, "Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?" 915.

⁷⁸ Lawrence, "COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020)," 31.

⁷⁹ Lawrence, "COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020)," 32–33.

⁸⁰ Shih, "China's Leninist Response To COVID-19," 71.

⁸¹ Shih, "China's Leninist Response To COVID-19," 72.

containing the spread of the virus over preserving their economy and planting the seeds of what would grow into the Zero COVID policy. By the end of the same day, every province in China except for Tibet had upgraded their public health alerts to the highest level in the Chinese system.⁸² As part of their ongoing efforts towards controlling the messaging, on January 27th the mayor of Wuhan publicly acknowledged “having failed to disclose information ‘in a timely manner,’”⁸³ while official case counts were still significantly underreported, peaking outside of Hubei on January 30th at 875 new confirmed cases.⁸⁴ Recognizing the public anger at his slow initial response, on January 28th President Xi Jinping told the head of the WHO, “I myself have been commanding and deploying [the efforts to contain COVID-19].”⁸⁵ By this point it had become important for Xi to be seen as managing the virus directly, as there was growing anger amongst the citizenry.

While Xi was making important rhetorical shifts in approach, physical changes to the state infrastructure were already in motion. Two 1,000 bed facilities began construction in Wuhan before any government contracts were signed, and more than “ten thousand workers working twenty-four hours a day” were able to complete the facilities in only ten days.⁸⁶ At the height of their constructive capacity, the Wuchang mobile cabin hospital was built in only 29 hours, something which the state was quick to champion to the people as a sign of Chinese superiority.⁸⁷ This is an interesting example of the flexibility that was possible because of the strong state capacity and central authority, with construction companies able to proceed before securing any written assurances, confident that the government’s authority would be backed up with funds and support when necessary. This

⁸² Lawrence, “COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020),” 37.

⁸³ Lawrence, “COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020),” 38.

⁸⁴ Lawrence, “COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020),” 42.

⁸⁵ Yang, “Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?” 921.

⁸⁶ Shih, “China’s Leninist Response To COVID-19,” 72–73.

⁸⁷ Ralph Litzinger and Yanping Ni, “Inside the Wuhan Cabin Hospital: Contending Narratives During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *China Information* 35, no. 3 (2021): 347, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X211030869>.

also allowed the Chinese construction firms to skip several safety and labor concerns that would be present in more unionized western states.⁸⁸

At the same time these larger projects were under construction, China was rapidly accelerating the production of smaller items needed to fight the virus. In early January, there were reports of test shortages in Wuhan, however, by the 26th there were at least thirty Chinese companies producing 600,000 test kits per day.⁸⁹ These raw materials were matched with the sudden and compulsory mobilization of thousands of doctors and nurses, many from the military, who were routed to Wuhan and other emerging hot spots.⁹⁰ China's strong material capability paired with their strong centralization of authority allowed for an unprecedented response to the problem, once the central government chose to act.

This dramatic demonstration of state capacity was matched with an equally impressive display of population control, as Wuhan and fourteen other cities in Hubei entered a more than two-month quarantine which prevented the free movement of tens of millions of Chinese citizens for 76 days.⁹¹ In addition to this quarantine enforced by local party committees, the government enacted a stay-at-home policy for almost the entirety of China's 1.3 billion people for between four and eight weeks across the country.⁹² This policy was aided by the indefinite extension of the Lunar New Year holiday, keeping students and migrant workers in their rural hometowns and preventing significant inter-state migration. Once again, the state turned to already existing neighborhood and village committees to enforce these orders, allowing them to enact sweeping changes across the country virtually in real-time. This supports the hypothesis that local, quasi-governmental institutions and civil society have been as or more important than the central government in managing China's response to COVID-19. It is also important to point out that there were diverse responses across different parts of China, some of which will be highlighted

⁸⁸ Shih, "China's Leninist Response To COVID-19," 73.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Shih, "China's Leninist Response To COVID-19," 74.

later, helping to emphasize the challenges for the central government in trying to enact uniform policy across a country of 1.4 billion people.

Residents' committees occupy a unique position in Chinese society. Small, local groups of 10 to 16 people represent the lowest level of organized, administrative functions to most Chinese citizens in their day-to-day activities, and yet the committees are very explicitly not a part of the government. Prior to the pandemic, these committees often had very little direct interaction with the public, but after the emergence of COVID-19, they became an essential component of the CCP's response strategy. Along with thousands of community volunteers, ultimately 140,000 committee members were tasked with monitoring the citizens of Wuhan and Beijing, which amounted to more than 35 million people.⁹³ While this is merely one example, the same process was being repeated at every level across the country. As the primary link between citizens in lockdown and the larger government apparatus, the committee members had two primary functions: the provision of services, and the direct surveillance required to maintain the strict COVID protocols put in place by the central government.

A quick look at the sheer scale of the numbers involved (roughly 250 people for each committee member) makes it clear that these policies could not be enacted by force alone, and much of the success of China's COVID policy in 2020 was the result of the willing cooperation of many of the citizens. As an example, committee members set up a WeChat function for residents to take their own temperature and report it to the committee daily in order to monitor for signs of an outbreak.⁹⁴ Of course, not all citizens were eagerly compliant, and the committee members often had to be the dispute mediator of last resort, especially over scarce supplies and limited hospital bed availability. As Yang et al. have reported, this level of direct interaction and shared adversity led to interesting emotional developments. In Wuhan, where the virus was spreading most rapidly and supplies were stretched to the breaking point, committee members often had to serve as a sort of counselor

⁹³ Zhenjie Yang, Guilan Zhu, Linda Chelan Li, and Yilong Sheng, "Services and Surveillance During the Pandemic Lockdown: Residents' Committees in Wuhan and Beijing," *China Information* 35, no. 3 (2021): 425. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X211012822>.

⁹⁴ Yang, Zhu, Li, and Sheng, "Services and Surveillance During the Pandemic Lockdown: Residents' Committees in Wuhan and Beijing," 430.

or therapist for worried citizens, assuaging their fears and appealing to a sense of shared duty to the country. In Beijing, by contrast, the primary concern of committee members was ensuring that citizens took measures designed to stamp out the virus, and as a result had to use much harsher and more fear inducing language.⁹⁵ The comparatively hostile response from local society in areas further from the epicenter and true threat of COVID-19 foreshadowed the eventual anger of Chinese citizens in response to total lockdowns in 2021 and 2022. Ultimately, there can be little doubt that China's strong sense of community and local ties to one another were instrumental in allowing the central government to enact strict COVID control policies, but as with most countries there were widely varying levels of support amongst the populace for these measures.

While Chinese state capacity provided the material needs to fight the virus, local organizations and the Chinese people themselves helped to bolster the country psychologically. The Chinese social media platform Douyin was used by many citizens to document their lives under lockdown and share short videos widely (similar to TikTok). What is interesting is that, contrary to earlier videos that leaked out of hospitals in Wuhan showing crowded hospitals with dead or dying patients lining the hallway, most of the videos on Douyin created during the lockdown demonstrated “boundless energy, forms of play, dance, movement, and the performativity of life in the midst of a death zone.”⁹⁶ Although Litzinger and Ni question the degree to which government censorship of the platform may have limited videos only to those that were optimistic and patriotic in nature, there seems to be strong evidence that many of the pandemic's most popular users arose at least initially out of relative anonymity, rather than government selection. Regardless of their curation, videos from the Wuhan cabin hospitals clearly struck a chord with the Chinese people, generating 860 million likes within only 15 days.⁹⁷ This demonstrates the strong sense of nationalist pride inherent in much of the Chinese populace, especially in

⁹⁵ Yang, Zhu, Li, and Sheng, “Services and Surveillance During the Pandemic Lockdown: Residents’ Committees in Wuhan and Beijing,” 433.

⁹⁶ Litzinger and Ni, “Inside the Wuhan Cabin Hospital: Contending Narratives During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 348.

⁹⁷ Litzinger and Ni, “Inside the Wuhan Cabin Hospital: Contending Narratives During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 352.

regards to the country's response to COVID-19 up to this point, although harsher methods were used by the government to tamp down some of the more critical citizens. While the CCP at least had the ability to provide for the material needs of the people, much of China's resilience in the face of COVID-19 is a testament to the citizens of China themselves.

D. DEVELOPING STATUS QUO, APRIL 2020–DECEMBER 2020

While slow to react to the initial emergence of the virus, China's robust state capacity and strong central government allowed for a rapid and robust pivot once controlling COVID became a priority. Shih demonstrates how the Leninist structure of the CCP allows for directives from Xi Jinping to immediately and totally supersede any previous orders or local laws, allowing for dramatic changes in policy in a relatively short period.⁹⁸ This factor, coupled with a robust local party infrastructure to carry out these policies, allowed for the Chinese government to significantly limit the spread and severity of COVID-19 within a few short months. One of the clearest signs that China felt they had turned a corner with COVID-19 came at the end of April, when the government announced a date for the previously postponed Two Sessions meeting to take place in May.⁹⁹ In four short months China had gone from suppressing the existence of the pandemic to feeling comfortable enough with their control to hold a large government gathering. China's robust response was not without consequences, however, as first quarter GDP in China fell by 6.8 percent,¹⁰⁰ the first of several indications that the CCP was prepared to accept an amount of economic stagnation in order to help contain the virus. Similarly, the decision to wait to initiate a lockdown until just prior to the Lunar New Year not only helped limit the strain on urban healthcare infrastructure, it also crippled much of the factory workforce in the major cities, which relied on "an 'epic-scale' flow of rural migrants."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Shih, "China's Leninist Response To COVID-19," 78.

⁹⁹ Jane Li, "The Surest Sign that China Thinks COVID-19 is Under Control: Its Biggest Political Shindig is Back," *Quartz*, April 29, 2020, <https://qz.com/1847710/china-signals-covid-19-success-sets-two-sessions-meeting-date/>.

¹⁰⁰ Kaj Malden and Suzanna Stephens, "Cascading Economic Impacts of the COVID-19 Outbreak in China," Congressional Publications, April 21, 2020: 3.

¹⁰¹ Malden and Stephens, "Cascading Economic Impacts of the COVID-19 Outbreak in China," 8.

As China's response to COVID-19 and the official government position ramped up, so too did the censorship and suppression the government used to shape their domestic message to the people. On February 2nd, a directive went out to media outlets throughout the country instructing them "not to publish negative coronavirus-related articles."¹⁰² Users of the popular messaging app Weibo reported mass deletion of Coronavirus related messages each night.¹⁰³ In late February, Dr. Nanshan made international news by suggesting that COVID-19 might not have originated in China.¹⁰⁴ Weeks later, Zhao Lijian tweeted a conspiracy theory which accused American athletes of having brought COVID-19 to China, despite public assertions to the contrary by doctors in China who had treated the athletes for malaria.¹⁰⁵

At the same time that China was attacking international adversaries, the government was trying to promote their own international status and bolster Chinese nationalism. On March 20th an article was posted by Xinhuanet News which listed positive comments from various international partners from Argentina to Zimbabwe, all expressing sentiments in support of the claim that the international community "believes that the efforts of the Chinese government and people to fight the epidemic are fruitful and encouraging."¹⁰⁶ In addition to sending concrete aid abroad in the form of PPE, the CCP also used the opportunity to promote Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), including materials on TCM in shipments to Iran and Italy.¹⁰⁷ Even the Voice of America (VOA) produced an article marking the end of the lockdown in Wuhan which described it as "a

¹⁰² Tracy Wen Liu, "China's Second Wave of Coronavirus Censorship is Here," *Foreign Policy*, July 7, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/07/china-virus-censorship-death/>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Yang, "Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?" 923.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Liu Xiaodong, "The Results of China's War against the 'Epidemic' have Injected Confidence into the World's Fight against the Epidemic," *Xinhua News*, March 20, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-03/20/c_1125744079.htm.

¹⁰⁷ Litzinger and Ni, "Inside the Wuhan Cabin Hospital: Contending Narratives During the COVID-19 Pandemic," 355.

model for countries battling the coronavirus around the world,”¹⁰⁸ something which angered the Trump administration enough that they felt compelled to chastise the VOA.¹⁰⁹ The CCP also distributed more than 500,000 kits of PPE to Chinese students studying abroad in 20 countries, highlighting posts the students made on social media in response to “effusively express their gratitude and pride for their home country.”¹¹⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the government elected not to highlight posts from the students complaining about the difficulties they were having getting home.

In addition to highlighting international praise to their people, the Chinese government also sought to harness the power of the citizens themselves in unique ways. Florian Schneider has discussed the CCP’s efforts to combine in the minds of the public the ideas of “nation, state, and [the struggle against the] virus.”¹¹¹ In early 2020, a part of the propaganda arm of the CCP put out a call for citizens to submit art depicting the “people’s war against the epidemic,”¹¹² and published the top results in the *People’s Daily Online*. This domestic sharpening of patriotism, however, was not only encouraged by the government, but also grew naturally from the citizens. In response to a Danish cartoon depicting the Chinese flag with COVID particles instead of stars, Chinese social media users immediately began creating versions of the Danish flag which mocked Denmark’s performance in World War II and highlighted the speed with which they had surrendered.¹¹³ Many of the citizens of China have been well conditioned to view any attack on the state or the nation as an attack on themselves.

¹⁰⁸ “China’s Virus Pandemic Epicenter Wuhan Ends 76-Day Lockdown,” *Voice of America*, April 7, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/a/science-health_coronavirus-outbreak_chinas-virus-pandemic-epicenter-wuhan-ends-76-day-lockdown/6187130.html.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Lum and Matthew Weed, “President Trump Criticizes VOA Coverage of China’s COVID-19 Response,” Congressional Publications, April 28, 2020.

¹¹⁰ Litzinger and Ni, “Inside the Wuhan Cabin Hospital: Contending Narratives During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 356.

¹¹¹ Florian Schneider, “COVID-19 Nationalism and the Visual Construction of Sovereignty During China’s Coronavirus Crisis,” *China Information* 35, no. 3 (2021): 316, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X211034692>.

¹¹² Schneider, “COVID-19 Nationalism and the Visual Construction of Sovereignty During China’s Coronavirus Crisis,” 306.

¹¹³ Schneider, “COVID-19 Nationalism and the Visual Construction of Sovereignty During China’s Coronavirus Crisis,” 311.

This period also saw significant developments in the international response to COVID-19. Initially, some western governments, and in particular U.S. President Donald Trump, praised China's handling of the virus. On January 24th, President Trump tweeted "China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!"¹¹⁴ Five days later, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo spoke with a member of the Chinese Politburo on the phone and "expressed appreciation for China's timely response to U.S. concerns after the outbreak of the epidemic."¹¹⁵ On January 30th, President Trump said at a rally that "maybe we've never had a better relationship [with China] and we ['re working with them very closely on the Coronavirus."¹¹⁶ This contrasts significantly with the tone taken by U.S. personnel later. On May 6th, Secretary of State Pompeo stated, "China is still refusing to share the information we need to keep people safe."¹¹⁷ As international calls grew for a further investigation into the virus' origins, the Chinese government retreated into a strategy that Yang describes as "denial, deflection, self-congratulation, and proactive defense."¹¹⁸

The CCP pursued a two-pronged approach in their dealings with the international community, in some instances prioritizing carrots such as increased medical aid to struggling countries to help burnish the CCP's global image, and in other cases emphasizing an aggressive response to international criticism via their brand of "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, wielding it as a stick to punish those countries who spoke out, even about topics unrelated to the virus. As an example of the former, China delivered PPE, diagnostic tests, ventilators, and 224 billion surgical masks to more than 150 countries between March and December 2020.¹¹⁹ As an example of the latter, in late April China

¹¹⁴ Lawrence, "COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020)," 37.

¹¹⁵ Lawrence, "COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020)," 41.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Lawrence, "COVID-19 and China: A Chronology of Events (December 2019-January 2020)," 11.

¹¹⁸ Yang, "Domestic Contestation, International Backlash, and Authoritarian Resilience: How Did the Chinese Party-State Weather the COVID-19 Crisis?" 924.

¹¹⁹ Eduardo Missoni, "Expectations on the Health Silk Road after the Pandemic," in *China After COVID-19*, edited by Alessia Amighini, LediPublishing (Ledizioni, 2021): 98.

“threatened to withhold medical aid from the Netherlands for changing the name of its representative office in Taiwan to include the word Taipei.”¹²⁰ In many ways this only aligns with previous Chinese foreign policy and a desire to stoke nationalist fervor domestically with a pugnacious diplomatic stance abroad.

Western countries were not above some finger pointing themselves, with one row being caused over a German newspaper’s demand for \$160 billion in virus reparations from the Chinese.¹²¹ U.S. President Trump further upped the rhetorical ante by threatening to sue the CCP for up to “\$10 million for every American death.”¹²² While this was, even at the time, a relatively empty threat, in some ways it played into Xi Jinping’s hands, allowing him to cast international condemnation as further proof that he alone could look out for the interest of the Chinese people. This supports the hypothesis that international criticism has actually helped strengthen the Xi regime. In the fast-moving early months of the virus, tensions were high, and international relations could pivot within the span of weeks, as when France went from exchanging medical supplies with the Chinese to harshly criticizing the CCP after a Chinese diplomat suggested that France had “deliberately left their older residents to die in nursing homes.”¹²³ This also helps illustrate some of the early trends which would be codified in the Zero COVID approach, especially an explicit contrast of the superior approach of China and the Chinese government when contrasted with failing western governments around the world, not least of all in terms of caring for the elderly amongst the population. Xi was able to push for even greater centralization of power as long as he could plausibly argue that the facts on the ground supported the benefits of his methods to control COVID-19.

As the Chinese government’s reaction to the virus continued to evolve, the latter part of 2020 represented a new, more manageable status quo from the perspective of the CCP. From the denials and repression of the early days to the sudden and forceful action

¹²⁰ Steven Erlanger, “Global Backlash Builds Against China Over Coronavirus,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/03/world/europe/backlash-china-coronavirus.html>.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

of the state between February and April, May 2020 onwards started to seem more controlled, especially in contrast to the rest of the world's growing difficulty dealing with the virus. As Julie Bowen pointed out at the time, "since the initial months of 2020, the CCP has leveraged its ability to bring the epidemic under control at home – and the failure of other countries to address it effectively abroad – to reinforce nationalist sentiment and portray China's political system as possessing superior advantages in responding to crises."¹²⁴ China's successes, especially when contrasted with the rest of the world's struggles, helped bolster Xi Jinping's nationalist credentials amongst the populace and seemed to confirm the benefits of the CCP's particular brand of personalistic Marxist-Leninist governance.

Importantly, even as cases were decreasing and restrictions were lifting, the government remained vigilant and prepared to act if necessary. After the lockdown was lifted in Wuhan, local committee members were tasked with executing a total test of the population to find any remaining unreported cases. The scale of the undertaking was massive, but through a combination of the state's resources and the people's will, around 10 million tests were conducted between May and June 1st, resulting in the discovery of a mere 300 asymptomatic infections.¹²⁵ Once again, the government relied on local organizations and citizen led efforts to find and disrupt potential outbreaks.

The CCP was also prepared to reinstitute lockdowns if necessary, as evidenced by an outbreak in Beijing which occurred in mid-June in the Xinfadi wet market. The response was "a complete lockdown of 12 communities near the market and mass testing of over 11 million residents across Beijing,"¹²⁶ resulting in the discovery and treatment of 335 new cases. Even though China had exited the acute phase of the initial pandemic, strong state capacity and the concentration of power in the central government to enact dramatic,

¹²⁴ Jeroen de Kloet, "COVID-19 in China: Imagination and Deep Mediatization," *China Information* 35, no. 3 (2021): 268, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X211051057>.

¹²⁵ Yang, Zhu, Li, and Sheng, "Services and Surveillance During the Pandemic Lockdown: Residents' Committees in Wuhan and Beijing," 433.

¹²⁶ Yang, Zhu, Li, and Sheng, "Services and Surveillance During the Pandemic Lockdown: Residents' Committees in Wuhan and Beijing," 425.

society-wide changes overnight would remain a powerful weapon against the virus, for better or for worse.

Throughout 2020, even as caseloads decreased and deaths from COVID-19 dropped dramatically, the Chinese government maintained strict controls over the people, prohibiting foreign tourists from coming into the country and preventing Chinese citizens from leaving, all while continuing harsh quarantine requirements around cases of the virus. Jeroen de Kloet pointed out in the moment how “for the time being, the regime has once again proven itself to be very resilient, turning a crisis into an opportunity for strengthening popular support,” however, “it remains a fragile balancing act.”¹²⁷ This balancing act would come to define the next two years, as Xi Jinping tried to manage his desired Zero COVID policy with domestic and international backlash, key political milestones, and significant economic headwinds. One of the challenges in asking your citizens to trade some of their freedoms in exchange for security is that it only works if you can actually provide that security. The apparent successes of 2020 would continue to evolve in subsequent years, and even in an authoritarian country like China, the government still had to worry about popular support.

E. CONCLUSION

The first fourteen months of COVID-19 in China encompassed several distinct periods. The initial emergence of the virus was heavily suppressed and ignored initially by the central government, and local failures and inadequacies in the system helped to highlight the breakdown and systemic issues between local and central government in China. The censorship of doctors and citizens trying to spread information about the virus helped lay the groundwork for much of the mistrust that would follow in the international response, and the delayed response certainly led to the virus being more difficult to contain, both in China and around the world.

However, once the central government did spring into action, the robust state capacity and authority held under Xi Jinping was wielded quickly and efficiently. The state

¹²⁷ Kloet, “COVID-19 in China: Imagination and Deep Mediatization,” 268.

provided the material support necessary in the form of hospitals, tests, and PPE, but the state also executed the non-material aspects of COVID control in their gameplan. By harnessing positive social media stories and restricting what information was delivered to the rest of the country about the state of the virus and the effects of the government's policies, the CCP was able to maintain broad support domestically for drastic changes to how everyday Chinese citizens lived their lives. More importantly, by having the political will and authority to enact mass quarantine and lockdown, the CCP essentially ground the country to a halt, largely minimizing the spread of COVID-19 to the rest of the country at the expense of significant economic slowdown and restriction of civil liberties. That this tradeoff seems to have been largely successful in the moment may have helped shape Xi's thoughts on a Zero COVID policy moving forward.

Finally, as China entered the summer and largely exited the (first) acute phase of the pandemic their attention shifted to international diplomacy, both positive and negative, as well as harnessing domestic nationalism. As Chinese quarantines and lockdowns were ending, the rest of the world was beginning to grapple with the full reality of what COVID-19 would mean in each individual country. In some cases, this allowed China to appear as a savior, exporting medical supplies, advice, and personnel to countries in need as a form of Health Silk Road diplomacy. In other instances, this took the form of angry recriminations from foreign leaders and publications, blaming China for existence of the virus and demanding justice, if not explicit reparations. The CCP used these western critiques to bolster nationalist sentiment and further draw an explicit "us versus them" mentality amongst the citizenry. It is little wonder that as China left behind 2020, many outside observers felt that their handling of COVID had been among the best of any country in the world, and the CCP's power generally, and that of Xi Jinping specifically, seemed stronger than it had ever been.

There were, however, important signs that domestic and international opinions might change dramatically in the months and years ahead. The different local responses within China demonstrated the challenges to the central government in establishing and maintaining a unified response. As Zero COVID requirements became more onerous and the rest of the world began to loosen their restrictions, the Chinese populace would become

increasingly hostile to the Xi regime's tactics. This increased frustration would also start to show cracks in the firmament of domestic Chinese nationalism, which would only be enflamed by the inability of the regime to seek outside help (for example by using more effective, western developed vaccines) or modify the Zero COVID approach. While the warning signs for all of these developments were clearly visible by the end of 2020, they remained, for the moment, only one of several potential outcomes for the regime.

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III. COVID-19 EXPANDS: LOCKDOWNS, VARIANTS, AND INCREASING UNREST, 2021–2022

A. INTRODUCTION

To the extent that the Chinese government ended 2020 claiming something close to victory over the Coronavirus, almost everything that could go wrong over the next two years did. The emergence of new variants combined with ineffective vaccines and low vaccination rates to cause dramatic spikes in case and death counts in China. At the same time, Xi Jinping's commitment to the Zero COVID policy resulted in draconian lockdowns that went on for months at a time in areas that reported even just a few cases. As the years wore on, with no apparent end in sight, civilian unrest boiled over amongst the Chinese populace, resulting in massive demonstrations against the government and its COVID policies which started in the spring and summer of 2022 and peaked at the end of the year.

At the same time, most major countries around the world were relaxing their own policies, opening up socially and economically as vaccination rates grew and the global population became more accustomed to living with the virus. While new variants wreaked plenty of havoc in other countries around the world, nowhere else experienced the same degree of lockdown as China. What had initially been pitched by the CCP as the superiority of the Chinese approach to controlling the virus came to be seen by the citizens of China as intolerable, and by the end of 2022 Xi Jinping was forced to relax many of the key components of his Zero COVID policy in the face of public unrest. While Xi was able to solidify his control of the party at the 2022 Party Congress, he entered 2023 facing rising case counts, an active and resistant citizenry, multiple economic headwinds, and robust international criticism.

Many of the hypotheses that explained the strength of the CCP's response in 2019 and 2020 came to demonstrate some of the party's weaknesses in 2021 and 2022. While the party still commands tremendous state capacity in terms of their ability to quickly manufacture health care infrastructure and institute rigorous quarantine policies when desired, this state strength was insufficient to produce effective vaccines or encourage sufficient vaccination. Many of the communication breakdowns between local and central

government officials from 2019 and 2020 continued in 2021 and 2022, leading to excessively cautious lockdowns that the citizens of China grew increasingly unwilling to bear. Local institutions and the Chinese people themselves continued to demonstrate tremendous resiliency, but in many instances were operating in spite of the CCP, rather than in support of them. And while international condemnation continued to be spun by Xi Jinping to bolster his own nationalist support, the effect was weakened considerably by the citizens of China witnessing the rest of the world open up. International efforts at global health diplomacy were effective in specific instances, but the aggressive stance of some Chinese diplomats also served to harden western attitudes towards the CCP.

Rather than pointing to one specific instance which caused the population of China to turn against the regime en masse, there was a gradual accumulation of smaller events which grew over the course of 2021 and 2022, finally erupting at the end of 2022. Some key focal points of civil discord were the lengthy lockdown in Shanghai during the spring and summer of 2022 and the building fire in Xinjiang at the end of 2022. While the ultimate outcome for China and the world regarding COVID-19 remains unknown, at the start of 2023 it seems clear that the coronavirus revealed just as many weaknesses in Xi Jinping and the CCP's approach to governance as it did strengths.

B. MULTIPLE LOCKDOWNS AND THE ARRIVAL OF DELTA, 2021

2021 began with various concrete demonstrations of the ongoing power of the state in China and of Xi Jinping's ability to both harness that capacity and to channel it towards his own goals. In early January of 2021, the CCP acquiesced to global pressure to allow a WHO team to visit Wuhan to conduct further investigations into the origins of COVID-19. The Chinese government, however, strictly controlled the access of the WHO team, and refused to share with them data from early COVID cases, frustrating the WHO members.¹²⁸ Despite the obvious censorship and limits on the WHO team's ability to perform their job, the ultimate report produced still proclaimed that "a laboratory origin of

¹²⁸ Jeremy Mark, *China's Faltering "Zero COVID" Policy: Politics in Command, Economy in Reverse*, Atlantic Council, 2022, 8.

the pandemic was considered to be extremely unlikely.”¹²⁹ Almost immediately there was profound international skepticism, and all major players were able to cite the report to reinforce their priors. China-hawks in the United States claimed that the CCP were clearly hiding vital evidence and the report was relatively worthless, while Xi Jinping and the Chinese government held up the WHO’s work as proof that they bore no blame for the origins of COVID-19. Ultimately even the WHO had to backtrack somewhat on their work, saying in July that limited access to data and locations made the report unreliable.¹³⁰ China naturally rejected calls for further WHO investigations as being purely political,¹³¹ and all sides retreated to their respective camps. The same nationalist elements that had bolstered Xi’s domestic reputation in 2020 were now serving to isolate China on the international stage.

As 2021 continued, the domestic situation in China worsened. The arrival of new variants, such as Delta, resulted in multiple outbreaks throughout the country, and Xi’s commitment to Zero COVID meant draconian lockdowns that resulted in significant suffering by the people. After a cluster of cases was detected in Xi’an in December 2021, the city of 13 million people was locked down for more than three weeks.¹³² Citizens were only allowed to leave their residences for mass testing and were unable to shop for food or other necessities themselves. As one independent Chinese journalist mused in a since deleted social media post, “in a large city of 13 million people, is it possible to depend on grassroots staff/volunteers to deliver food to the door in short periods of time?”¹³³ While China’s citizen volunteers had been the heroes of the government’s 2020 response, even they were stretched to the breaking point by the CCP’s harsh lockdowns and unrelenting virus control measures.

¹²⁹ Pitman B. Potter, “China and COVID-19: Alienation and Its Discontents,” *Asia-Pacific Issues* 151 (2022), 4.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² John S. Van Oudenaren, “A Bitter Winter: Omicron Tests the Limits of China’s Zero-COVID Approach,” *China Brief* 22, No. 1 (January 2022): 2.

¹³³ Ibid.

Despite these brutal steps, Xi Jinping and the CCP sought to use their domestic control of state media to convince Chinese citizens of the superiority of their methods. Towards the end of the year the Chinese media agency Xinhua contrasted the almost three quarters of a million deaths in the United States with the fact that “the Chinese mainland has not reported a single death since January” and was quick to add that most outbreaks that did occur “were caused by imported cases.”¹³⁴ This reframing of the superiority of the Zero COVID policy would grow increasingly less palatable to Chinese citizens as the years wore on, and the repressive state capacity that had proved so useful during the early days of the pandemic would only become more and more unpopular with the people as the strategy showed no signs of waning.

Another area where the CCP was able to claim victory in 2021 was the economy. 2020 had understandably cratered the Chinese economy (along with that of much of the world), and China’s GDP growth in 2020 slowed to 2.2 percent.¹³⁵ By contrast, Chinese GDP in 2021 expanded more than 8 percent, resulting in celebratory remarks about having the best of both worlds like those made by Chinese researcher Liu Xiang, who wrote “protecting lives will always be a priority, and it is acceptable that the economy is sacrificed more or less when necessary.”¹³⁶ Statements like this belied the fact that China’s economic growth was driven largely by the opening up of the rest of the world, while domestic consumption in China failed to rebound to earlier levels.¹³⁷ China had more or less successfully managed to resume manufacturing goods for the wider world, but its economic growth was driven almost entirely by its export economy, leaving the CCP vulnerable to economic coercion from other major powers.

On the international front, China was quick to promote their vaccine diplomacy, especially early in 2021, before many western vaccines were widely available. The Xinhua news agency loudly trumpeted Indonesian President Joko Widodo receiving the Chinese

¹³⁴ Van Oudenaren, “A Bitter Winter: Omicron Tests the Limits of China’s Zero-COVID Approach,” 4.

¹³⁵ Mark, *China’s Faltering “Zero COVID” Policy: Politics in Command, Economy in Reverse*, 10.

¹³⁶ Mark, *China’s Faltering “Zero COVID” Policy: Politics in Command, Economy in Reverse*, 10.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

produced Sinovac vaccine in January 2021.¹³⁸ In the following months, China provided millions of doses of their vaccine to multiple Latin American countries.¹³⁹ This led to an accusation by Taiwan in April that the People's Republic of China (PRC) was leveraging "vaccine diplomacy" to try and coerce Paraguay, one of the few countries to officially recognize Taiwan as an independent country, to cut off diplomatic ties with the island nation, which China has long considered to be a part of the mainland.¹⁴⁰

There were other, more subtle instances of coercive health diplomacy from the CCP. One instance of apparent (though denied) quid pro quo occurred when Brazilian government figures went to China for a meeting with the telecom giant Huawei. Huawei had been all but locked out of a bid to build Brazil's new 5G network as of late 2020, but with the death toll rising, Brazilian officials asked if Huawei could help them procure vaccines. China quickly sent doctors, oxygen machines, medical software, and, yes, vaccines to Brazil to help. In short order it was announced that Huawei would indeed be eligible to enter a bid to build the new network.¹⁴¹ China was not afraid to use their newly produced vaccine as both carrot and stick in their ongoing efforts at international COVID diplomacy, and a report from the International Federation of Journalists seemed to confirm the validity of this strategy, arguing that "countries that received China's COVID-19 vaccines were more likely to support the narrative on China's speedy response against COVID-19 and less likely to support the Western narrative."¹⁴² In some ways, at least, international influence for China could be bought through global health diplomacy, either voluntarily or coercively.

Xi Jinping also used increased international pressure to bolster domestic nationalist sentiment and outrage towards the west. In July of 2021, at the 100th anniversary of the

¹³⁸ Mark, *China's Faltering "Zero COVID" Policy: Politics in Command, Economy in Reverse*, 8.

¹³⁹ Ernesto Londono and Leticia Casado, "Brazil Needs Vaccines. China is Benefiting." *New York Times*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/15/world/americas/brazil-vaccine-china.html>.

¹⁴⁰ "Taiwan Accuses China of 'Vaccine Diplomacy' in Paraguay," *BBC News*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56661303>.

¹⁴¹ Londono and Casado, "Brazil Needs Vaccines. China is Benefiting."

¹⁴² Yanzhong Huang, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and China's Global Health Leadership," *Council on Foreign Relations Special Report No. 92* (January 2022): 12.

CCP, Xi forcefully proclaimed that “the time in which the Chinese nation could be bullied and abused by others was gone forever... we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us.”¹⁴³ China also continued to promote the superiority of their response to those of western nations, arguing that the “heroic” efforts of the Chinese demonstrated a better system than that of its international competitors.¹⁴⁴ Even as this story became increasingly untenable over 2021 and 2022, Xi and the CCP were committed to the idea that the Chinese response had been more than worth any unfavorable tradeoffs. As the Council on Foreign Relations described the evolving situation, in 2020 China used global health diplomacy “to extend its influence and soft power in the hopes of staking a stronger claim for global leadership,” but through 2021, “realities and perceptions have moved increasingly against China.”¹⁴⁵ This was in part due to the increasingly overt quid pro quo inherent in the CCP’s international efforts as less than one percent of China’s international medical aid came in the form of donations,¹⁴⁶ but was also the result of a growing assessment that China’s response had not been as positive as was assumed in 2020, and the increasingly held view that Zero COVID was as undesirable as it was “unsustainable.”¹⁴⁷

At the same time, Chinese diplomats still engaged in belligerence and hostility towards western governments, especially the United States. In the midst of a surge in cases in the United States, Chinese diplomat Li Yang tweeted, “America is coming back! Yes, thanks to a series of political manipulations, America is coming back at almost the peak of its epidemic!”¹⁴⁸ Xi Jinping used the pandemic to drive further isolation of Chinese citizens, severely limiting travel into and out of the country, and telling young party

¹⁴³ Potter, “China and COVID-19: Alienation and Its Discontents,” 2.

¹⁴⁴ “China Calls its ‘Heroic’ Handling of COVID-19 Proof of its Wisdom,” *The Economist*, October 17, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/china/2020/10/17/china-calls-its-heroic-handling-of-covid-19-proof-of-its-wisdom>.

¹⁴⁵ Huang, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and China’s Global Health Leadership,” vi.

¹⁴⁶ Huang, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and China’s Global Health Leadership,” 15.

¹⁴⁷ “WHO Chief Says China’s Zero-COVID Policy is not ‘Sustainable’,” *CNBC*, May 10, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/11/who-chief-says-chinas-zero-covid-policy-is-not-sustainable.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Mark, *China’s Faltering “Zero COVID” Policy: Politics in Command, Economy in Reverse*, 8.

officials that the “world is undergoing changes unseen in a century,” and that “national rejuvenation has entered a critical phase.”¹⁴⁹ While Xi’s nationalist rhetoric may have bolstered his domestic support in some circles, his severe travel restriction policies served to further isolate China from the global economy and community, and increased the potential blowback if Chinese citizens were to decide that other countries were, in fact, managing the virus better than the CCP.

While China had some of the most aggressive response measures to COVID-19 seen worldwide, they were by no means the only country to attempt to eradicate the virus through something approaching zero transmission. However, 2021 saw the CCP as the last government still attempting total control, with otherwise strict measures in Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore significantly loosened.¹⁵⁰ By the end of 2021, even the CCP was forced to concede to at least some small degree that Zero COVID needed to be adjusted to more accurately reflect the reality of the situation. While stopping short of challenging the policy directly, the emergence of the Omicron strain in December forced government officials to alter their metrics for success against the virus, publicly stating that “dynamic clearance [the official name for the Zero COVID policy] and zero infection are not the same thing.”¹⁵¹ While this was a significant change from the regime’s rhetoric up to this point, it was merely a precursor of some of the challenges the CCP would face in the coming year.

C. OMICRON, SOCIAL UNREST, AND POWER CONSOLIDATION, 2022

2022 was largely a monument to the CCP’s insistence on sticking with the Zero-COVID policy, despite much of the rest of the world opening up and resuming some form of a new normal. As lockdowns grew increasingly strict relative to other countries and the Chinese citizens saw no end in sight, the people grew increasingly frustrated with the government response and voiced their anger via widespread protests in the spring and

¹⁴⁹ John S. Van Oudenaren, “China Closes its Windows to the World: When Will they Reopen?” *China Brief* 22, No. 10 (May 2022): 2.

¹⁵⁰ Huang, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and China’s Global Health Leadership,” 12.

¹⁵¹ Van Oudenaren, “A Bitter Winter: Omicron Tests the Limits of China’s Zero-COVID Approach,” 4.

summer, culminating at the end of the year. Rather than a sudden change in government behavior being the cause of the shift, it was more so the CCP's commitment to maintaining the same strategy they had all along and failing to pivot to vaccination or a more robust healthcare infrastructure nationwide. At the same time, China's flagging economy in 2022 provided less flexibility for international BRI and global health diplomacy and left Xi Jinping less able to defend the draconian Zero COVID policy he had previously maintained.

If the unsung heroes of China's COVID response in 2020 had been the Chinese citizens themselves, the brutal lockdowns of 2021 and 2022 helped demonstrate the dangers of ignoring the needs of those citizens for too long, and the limits to their patience with the Zero COVID policy. The CCP mobilized a large portion of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to help administer their COVID response, but even the thousands of soldiers that were initially deployed to Wuhan represented less than 10% of the personnel onsite to assist in the effort, and analysts found that the PLA's "information sharing was poor" and that the "communications infrastructure was lacking."¹⁵² China's comparatively minimal COVID cases and deaths in 2020 were made possible in large part by the efforts of quasi-governmental village committees and the willing sacrifices made by large portions of the populace. As Zero COVID dragged on, however, and other countries around the world began to open up, China's citizens became increasingly upset with extended lockdowns that would be put in place over relatively minimal new case counts. As one citizen put it, "we might not die from COVID-19, but we might die from COVID-19 restrictions."¹⁵³ Chinese youth, in particular, despaired of ever leaving the Zero COVID regime, lamenting

¹⁵² Heidi Holz and Brian Waidelich, "Rx PLA: The PLA Medical System's Role in China's Efforts to Fight COVID-19," *Center for Naval Analyses*, April 2022, iii, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2022/04/rx-pla-the-pla-medical-systems-role-in-chinas-efforts-to-fight-covid19#:~:text=The%20PLA%20provided%20COVID%2D19,frequently%20delivered%20by%20PLAA F%20aircraft.>

¹⁵³ Tracy Wen Liu, "Young Chinese are Despairing of a Zero-COVID Future," *Foreign Policy*, October 24, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/24/young-chinese-zero-covid-future/>.

that they now lived in an “abnormal” state.¹⁵⁴ These feelings would only grow throughout the year.

2022 began with no significant improvement in China’s control of COVID cases, as one million Chinese citizens were placed in lockdown on January 3rd in Yuzhou after only three cases had been detected.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, a Eurasia Group Report produced at the end of 2021 listed the potential failure of China’s Zero COVID regime as “the number one global risk of 2022.”¹⁵⁶ Even if Xi wanted to begin opening up and pivot from a policy of keeping the virus out to one more centered around a mass vaccination campaign, the Chinese government had recently been made aware that their domestically produced vaccine was largely ineffective against the Omicron variant,¹⁵⁷ and Xi’s commitment to a heavily personalized form of power prevented him from seeking more effective vaccines from western nations he had, up to this point, largely derided. In addition to the widespread suffering caused by the lockdowns, there were also acute cases of Chinese citizens being denied emergency medical care due to lockdown orders. One particularly searing case in January 2022 required “a rare admission of official culpability”¹⁵⁸ by the Chinese government after a woman suffered a miscarriage due to not being able to receive timely treatment. While these were individual stories, they contributed to an ever-growing sense of discontent amongst the Chinese people. The robust state capacity to control the virus in 2020 was now being used to isolate the people and silence dissent, serving to further foster resentment towards the government that would only grow throughout the year.

As much of the rest of the world seemed to be opening back up and learning to live with COVID-19, China’s lack of natural or vaccine provided immunity led to some of the biggest outbreaks they had faced throughout the pandemic. In early March 2022, Hong

¹⁵⁴ Ako Tomoko, “Zero COVID in China: Young People Give Up on an ‘Abnormal’ State,” *Nippon*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00821/>.

¹⁵⁵ Van Oudenaren, “A Bitter Winter: Omicron Tests the Limits of China’s Zero-COVID Approach,” 2.

¹⁵⁶ Huang, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and China’s Global Health Leadership,” 13.

¹⁵⁷ Van Oudenaren, “A Bitter Winter: Omicron Tests the Limits of China’s Zero-COVID Approach,” 3.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

Kong for several days had “the highest COVID-19 mortality rate in the developed world.”¹⁵⁹ Highlighting the extent to which China’s fortunes had turned by 2022, in May “Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proclaimed that the challenges China had faced in recent months were ‘greater’ than those experienced in 2020.”¹⁶⁰ Zero COVID might have been a viable strategy in a more isolated world, but with the high levels of globalization and travel of the 21st century, mutated virus variants were impossible to keep out of China as the years continued, and the population that had been largely spared the worst of the virus in 2020 was merely delaying their exposure.

One of the most severe outbreaks in China to date was a 2022 surge in Shanghai lasting for months, which was so severe that CCP officials tried to “block footage of citizens discussing the dismal conditions of the lockdown” on the internet.¹⁶¹ Initially scheduled to only last until the start of April, the months long lockdown was China’s largest in more than two years and ultimately continued until June.¹⁶² Almost immediately there were reports of food shortages,¹⁶³ entire neighborhoods being locked down with little or no notice, and deaths resulting from unrelated medical issues due to an inability to receive care at the overwhelmed hospitals of Shanghai.¹⁶⁴ These issues predictably led to confrontations between an increasingly frustrated and marginalized local population and the overmatched police,¹⁶⁵ with videos of encounters and widespread protest being shared

¹⁵⁹ Craig Singleton, “Surging COVID-19 Cases Undermine Xi’s Governance Narrative,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/03/15/surging-covid-19-cases-undermine-xis-governance-narrative/>.

¹⁶⁰ Kalpit A. Mankikar, “The Xi Plan: The Political Factors Driving China’s COVID-19 Strategy,” *ORF Issue Brief No. 597* (December 2022): 3.

¹⁶¹ Edward Lucas, Ben Dubow, James Lamond, Jake Morris, Corina Rebegea and Vera Zakem, “Post-Mortem: Russian and Chinese COVID-19 Information Operations,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, May 26, 2022, 16.

¹⁶² “Shanghai Covid: China Announces Largest City-Wide Lockdown,” *BBC*, March 27, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-60893070>.

¹⁶³ “Shanghai: Residents ‘Running out of Food’ in Covid Lockdown,” *BBC*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-61019975>.

¹⁶⁴ John Liu and Paul Mozur, “Shanghai’s Lockdown Tests Covid-Zero Policy, and People’s Limits,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/29/world/asia/china-shanghai-covid-lockdown.html>.

¹⁶⁵ “China Covid: Clashes in Shanghai Over Lockdown Evictions,” *BBC*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-61117528>.

on social media.¹⁶⁶ One estimate of lost GDP put the cost of the continuing lockdowns in Shanghai at almost 30 billion dollars per week.¹⁶⁷ While the CCP were eventually able to reopen the city, the harsh lockdown had served as a focal point of Chinese outrage at the continuing commitment to Zero COVID and the perceived ineptitude of local government to enact such sweeping restrictions imposed from the central government. Videos of protest had been shared throughout the country, and citizens were increasingly comfortable making their anger with the government known. One of the hazards of staking the story of their success to Chinese state capacity was the CCP's inability to pivot their strategy and allow their citizens a modicum of the freedoms they observed around the world. In this way, what had been a strength of the Chinese response became a weakness.

While the CCP had been able to claim some economic success in 2021 as a whole, with a relatively robust 8.1% GDP growth,¹⁶⁸ the picture became much more complicated in cities that were suffering under extended lockdowns. As of late December 2021, basic staples such as cabbage had soared in price more than 400% in Xi'an.¹⁶⁹ By March of 2022, Zero COVID lockdowns in major Chinese cities accounted for almost 40% of China's GDP,¹⁷⁰ with Shanghai alone (5% of GDP¹⁷¹) having been locked down for almost two months. While Xi Jinping continued to set an official GDP growth target of 5.5% as late as March of 2022,¹⁷² the actual second quarter GDP figure came in at an anemic 0.4% as a result of all the lockdowns,¹⁷³ and analysts predicted the annual number

¹⁶⁶ Zeyi Yang, "WeChat Wants People to Use its Video Platform. So They Did, for Digital Protests," *MIT Technology Review*, April 24, 2022, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/04/24/1051073/wechat-shanghai-lockdown-protest-video-the-voice-of-april/>.

¹⁶⁷ "How Long Will Shanghai's Lockdown Last?" *BBC*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-61023811>.

¹⁶⁸ Alecia Garcia Herrero, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and China's Economic Slowdown," *China Leadership Monitor* 74 (Winter 2022): 1.

¹⁶⁹ Van Oudenaren, "A Bitter Winter: Omicron Tests the Limits of China's Zero-COVID Approach," 3.

¹⁷⁰ Alicia Garcia Herrero, "China's 'Dynamic Zero-COVID' Policy is Straining an Already Weak Global Economy," *China Brief* 22, No. 10 (May 2022): 16.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Garcia Herrero, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and China's Economic Slowdown," 6.

¹⁷³ Garcia Herrero, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and China's Economic Slowdown," 3.

for 2022 would be less than half of CCP goals.¹⁷⁴ By the end of the year, even government officials and Xi Jinping himself had to soften the language around their economic efforts, bowing to the reality of the situation Zero COVID had wrought.

Official Chinese statistics reported that as of August 2022, youth unemployment levels had reached a record 20 percent.¹⁷⁵ Alongside this economic hardship, the CCP aggressively promoted the upcoming Olympic games in Beijing, forcing “tens of millions” of citizens to quarantine for weeks in order to ensure the games went off without a hitch. While the Olympics themselves were a largely positive international media story for Xi Jinping’s government, the juxtaposition with the suffering of China’s people was hard to miss.¹⁷⁶

China’s long heralded BRI project was also hammered by the effects of COVID-19, although to what extent is difficult to assess with official CCP data. Despite a near total lockdown in 2020, Chinese officials reported that international BRI investment had grown 12%, while an independent analysis from outside firms determined that it actually shrunk 62%.¹⁷⁷ This disparity in reported and observed numbers has continued, albeit to a much lesser extent, and it is difficult to determine where the truth lies. While analysts believe CCP foreign investment peaked in 2017,¹⁷⁸ it may be too early to tell, however this would point to another weakness in Xi Jinping’s international economic profile.

By the end of November 2022, more than 65 million people were reported to be under lockdown in China.¹⁷⁹ Three years into the existence of COVID-19, local Chinese officials remain overly cautious, as many have been fired after cases emerged in their

¹⁷⁴ Garcia Herrero, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and China’s Economic Slowdown,” 6.

¹⁷⁵ Alexandra Stevenson, “China Says It Will Do More to Vaccinate Older People Against Covid,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/29/business/china-covid-vaccinations.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Van Oudenaren, “A Bitter Winter: Omicron Tests the Limits of China’s Zero-COVID Approach,” 4.

¹⁷⁷ Derek Scissors, “China’s Overseas Investment Remains Stuck in the COVID Mud,” *American Enterprise Institute*, January 18, 2022, 3, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Chinas-Overseas-Investment-Remains-Stuck-in-the-COVID-Mud.pdf?x91208>.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Stevenson, “China Says It Will Do More to Vaccinate Older People Against Covid.”

cities.¹⁸⁰ Once again, the disconnect between the local and national government figures allows for the CCP and Xi Jinping to claim that their guidance is not being followed, but this lack of empowerment at the local level has led to worse (or at least more strict) outcomes for China's citizens. The end result is that in 2022 87 of China's top 100 cities by GDP enacted some form of quarantine restriction on their cities,¹⁸¹ with local officials afraid to be seen as insufficiently committed to Zero COVID. In addition to current officials, Xi also cracked down on former party officers ability to critique the government. Party member Chen Xi wrote in an article for the *People's Daily* that "loyalty is the most important political quality and the chief yardstick for selecting party workers," which was coupled with a new order from the Party General Office which sought to ensure that former party members "listened to the party and followed the party."¹⁸²

Xi was also hemmed in by his own personal accumulation of power and the status he has achieved. At the most recent Party Congress in October 2022, Xi Jinping received an unprecedented third term as Party Secretary and took his place among revered Chinese leaders like Mao Zedong. However, this level of personal power also has its risks. Despite the obvious downsides of Xi's COVID Zero policy, and the seeming inevitability of its eventual end, retired professor Cai Xia said, "for Xi, backtracking would have been an unthinkable admission of error."¹⁸³ For all of his personal power, Xi Jinping had inexorably tied his legitimacy to the success of the Zero COVID strategy he espoused.

An official change in strategy was made doubly difficult by the extent to which Xi had tied not only his own power and status, but also that of China as a whole, to the superiority of the Chinese approach. Having committed so thoroughly to Zero COVID and eliminating the virus completely, any attempts to loosen those restrictions would not only weaken the argument about the importance and efficacy of the Zero COVID policy but would also inevitably lead to a spike in case counts and deaths, diminishing China's stature

¹⁸⁰ Stevenson, "China Says It Will Do More to Vaccinate Older People Against Covid."

¹⁸¹ Mankikar, "The Xi Plan: The Political Factors Driving China's COVID-19 Strategy," 7.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Stevenson, "China Says It Will Do More to Vaccinate Older People Against Covid."

relative to other countries' responses around the world (at least as defined by the CCP). In the run-up to the recent CCP National Congress, an article in the *People's Daily* decried "some nations that opted to live with the virus despite a massive death toll."¹⁸⁴ As one commentator put it, "the only way out of this eternal twilight struggle is to abandon the... narrative that China alone of all countries was mighty enough to defeat a highly contagious respiratory virus through state capacity and strength of will."¹⁸⁵ And perhaps the greatest tool that countries around the world have used to loosen restrictions and open up their economies, vaccination, has been sorely underutilized in China.

One of the major failings of the CCP throughout the Coronavirus pandemic has been its failure to encourage or coerce a higher vaccination rate among its population. Indeed, given the general view of the power of the party and the state in China, it is surprising that there have not been mandatory vaccination drives, or more effective appeals to nationalism and civic duty. In July 2022, Beijing attempted to implement a de facto vaccine mandate, only to be forced to reverse course and rescind the measure one day later.¹⁸⁶ In some ways, this calls into question just how powerful Xi Jinping's hold over the average Chinese citizen truly is. By the end of November 2022, only a reported 40 percent of Chinese citizens over the age of 80, the highest risk individuals, had received a booster shot to help defend against newer COVID variants, and fewer than two thirds had received any vaccine at all.¹⁸⁷ In many ways, China has been a victim of their own success. Relatively limited COVID outbreaks in 2020 resulted in overconfidence both from the citizens and from the government, with little push to be vaccinated from either side. Early COVID success was doubly damning to the people of China, as it left few citizens with natural immunity from having had earlier, less virulent strains of the virus. But just as we live in an increasingly globalized economy, so too is China unable to wall themselves off

¹⁸⁴ Mankikar, "The Xi Plan: The Political Factors Driving China's COVID-19 Strategy," 5.

¹⁸⁵ Noah Smith, "China's Pivot is a Bit of a Mess," *Noahpinion*, November 25, 2022, <https://www.noahpinion.blog/p/chinas-pivot-is-a-bit-of-a-mess>.

¹⁸⁶ Yanzhong Huang, "The Short-Lived COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate in Beijing," *Think Global Health*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/short-lived-covid-19-vaccine-mandate-beijing#:~:text=On%20July%207%2C%20Li%20Ang,libraries%2C%20museums%2C%20and%20cinemas>.

¹⁸⁷ Stevenson, "China Says It Will Do More to Vaccinate Older People Against Covid."

completely from the different variants and evolutions the virus has undergone around the world. As has been the case multiple times, what appeared in 2020 to be strength of the Chinese response requires a more nuanced evaluation at the close of 2022.

In late November 2022, all of the various sources of discontent amongst the Chinese populace seemed to converge in a story surrounding a building fire in the western province of Xinjiang. While Chinese officials denied it, rumors circulated on social media that the victims had been locked in the building due to COVID quarantine restrictions, and that if nothing else COVID measures had hampered emergency response crews and led to the death of ten Chinese citizens in the blaze.¹⁸⁸ While the fire may have been the immediate cause of the protests, they quickly took on a life of their own, becoming the largest and most lasting protests China had seen in decades. While the protests had ostensibly begun over Zero COVID policies, the demands of the protestors quickly grew to encompass general frustrations, with some protestors shouting for “democracy and rule of law” and “freedom of expression.”¹⁸⁹ Fearful of government crackdowns, many held up blank sheets of paper to express general frustration with the status quo. Others were less concerned with being captured by government forces, with anger boiling over into video of protestors ripping down barricades in Wuhan, the original site of the virus’ outbreak.¹⁹⁰ China attempted to minimize international coverage and awareness of the protests, in part by flooding Twitter with spam messages designed to crowd out posts from and about protestors,¹⁹¹ but the damage was largely already done, and Xi Jinping’s control over the Chinese populace seemed to be at one of its lowest points in his reign.

Ultimately, the CCP was able to quell the protests and restore order, but it was clear to Xi Jinping that something needed to be done. While Xi initially committed to staying

¹⁸⁸ Chris Buckley, Vivian Wang, Chang Che, and Amy Chang Chien, “After Deadly Blaze, Surge of Defiance Against China’s Covid Policies,” *New York Times*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/27/world/asia/china-covid-protest.html>.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Joseph Menn, “Twitter Grapples with Chinese Spam Obscuring News of Protests,” *The Washington Post*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/11/27/twitter-china-spam-protests/>.

the course, stating that some disagreement amongst the people was “only natural,”¹⁹² and with the CCP’s Standing Committee having vowed to “unswervingly adhere”¹⁹³ to the Zero COVID policy, a few short weeks later the party had almost completely reversed course.¹⁹⁴ Without announcing the official end of Zero COVID, December saw the Chinese government dramatically relax restrictions on movement and testing. Some citizens were shocked by the almost overnight disappearance of government testing sites, with one citizen summing up the pivot by posting on social media that “the ability to control is different from the ability to govern.”¹⁹⁵ Throughout the month China continued to open up further, with many citizens celebrating the return of freedoms they had longed for for almost three years. By the end of 2022, even Xi Jinping had to acknowledge that China was now in a “new phase” of the pandemic.¹⁹⁶

Unfortunately, those freedoms came with rapidly rising case counts and deaths for a newly exposed and relatively under-inoculated population, as “the rapid rollback of the Zero COVID policy [appeared] to have proceeded in a largely ad hoc manner.”¹⁹⁷ While the CCP recognized the unsustainability of Zero COVID, they had failed to take advantage of the years of minimal spread it had provided to build up a robust vaccination campaign, or Chinese health care infrastructure more generally. With the government having largely abandoned many smaller towns and cities, citizens were forced once again to turn to each

¹⁹² “Xi Warns of Tough Covid Fight, Acknowledges Divisions in China,” *Bloomberg News*, December 31, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-31/xi-says-tough-challenges-remain-in-new-phase-of-covid-response>.

¹⁹³ Joe McDonald, “China Promises Change but Sticks to Severe ‘Zero COVID’ Plan,” *AP News*, November 10, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/health-china-beijing-xi-jinping-shanghai-99f8d855c4158edea30ba61bfa9b6f2e>.

¹⁹⁴ Chris Buckley, Alexandra Stevenson, and Keith Bradsher, “From Zero Covid to No Plan: Behind China’s Pandemic U-Turn,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/19/world/asia/china-zero-covid-xi-jinping.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Li Yuan, “With ‘Zero Covid,’ China Proved It’s Good at Control. Governance is Harder,” *New York Times*, December 26, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/26/business/china-covid-communist-party.html>.

¹⁹⁶ “Xi Jinping Acknowledges ‘New Phase’ of Pandemic After China Halts ‘Zero-COVID,’” *Democracy Now*, January 3, 2023, https://www.democracynow.org/2023/1/3/headlines/xi_jinping_acknowledges_new_phase_of_pandemic_after_china_halts_zero_covid.

¹⁹⁷ John S. Van Oudenaren, “History and Heritage: As COVID Misery Mounts, Xi Looks to the Past for Lessons and Legitimacy,” *China Brief* 22, No. 23 (December 2022): 3.

other, establishing help groups via WeChat and other social media to share fever medications and other supplies to those who became newly ill.¹⁹⁸ While many believe the CCP have suppressed the true numbers, there is little doubt that by the end of the year a COVID-19 virus that had been largely controlled was now spreading throughout the country, leading many to ask what the purpose of the lockdowns and quarantine measures was in the first place.

D. CONCLUSION

Virtually all of the elements which had made China's response to COVID-19 appear to be such a success in 2020 were reversed in 2021 and 2022. The state capacity which had been so instrumental in developing PPE and quarantine facilities was unable to produce a highly effective vaccine, in large part due to an unwillingness to accept western assistance and western-produced Messenger Ribonucleic Acid (MRNA) vaccines, which had been demonstrated to be more effective. Nor was the government capable of inducing sufficient quantities of the citizenry to receive the vaccine, owing to a combination of over-confidence on the part of especially older Chinese due to the party's branding of Zero COVID and the superiority of the CCP's approach to the pandemic, as well as, for some citizens, a distrust of the government produced vaccine. The centralization of power under Xi Jinping which had allowed for him to appear as though he were in complete command during the initial response led to overly cautious local officials who enacted and extended punishing lockdowns over fear of falling out with the powerful central government.

The everyday citizens of China were still able to band together to assist each other in providing for cases of illness or poverty resulting from the pandemic, but in this case, they were doing so largely in spite of, rather than in support of, the Chinese government. And while Xi Jinping was still able to rally his nationalist base by antagonizing foreign governments, large swaths of the populace watched as the rest of the world significantly opened up to a new normal, and this served as merely another flashpoint for long-simmering tensions between the people of China and the CCP. One flashpoint was the 2022

¹⁹⁸ Yuan, "With 'Zero Covid,' China Proved It's Good at Control. Governance is Harder."

World Cup, watched with anger and confusion in China, which led one online commentator to ask if the tournament was being played “on the same planet” as China.¹⁹⁹ While the Zero COVID policy had initially been broadly popular, even maintaining a 68.4% public approval rating as late as April, 2022, by December it had become net unpopular with a fed-up citizenry.²⁰⁰ Xi Jinping once said in a 2013 speech that the performance of the government “can only be judged by the people.”²⁰¹ If the experience of 2021 and 2022 are any indication, the people’s judgement has been harsh indeed.

¹⁹⁹ Kerry Allen, “Zero-Covid China Asks: Is World Cup on Another Planet?” *BBC*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-63735923>.

²⁰⁰ Ilaria Mazzocco, “Governance by Data: How China’s Party-State Keeps Its Pulse on the People,” *Big Data China*, December 21, 2022, <https://bigdatachina.csis.org/governance-by-data-how-chinas-party-state-keeps-its-pulse-on-the-people/>.

²⁰¹ Yuan, “With ‘Zero Covid,’ China Proved It’s Good at Control. Governance is Harder.”

IV. CONCLUSION

This chapter begins with a summary of the findings of the two main body chapters of the thesis, evaluating the hypotheses tested individually. It then seeks to apply the lessons learned from those hypotheses to a larger understanding of the CCP as a whole. Finally, it addresses the current western narrative and approach regarding China as a great power and geopolitical threat, and uses the lessons learned from the CCP's handling of COVID-19 to suggest greater humility and a shift in approach regarding U.S. foreign policy.

A. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This paper set out to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese government in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has presented a fairly public account of how a closed authoritarian system operates, and as such can provide a more nuanced accounting of the Chinese government's performance than is usually possible. I will now evaluate each of the hypotheses individually and discuss their relevance to broader issues.

Hypothesis 1: The most tangible examples of Chinese government success against COVID-19 have been a direct result of strong state capacity.

This hypothesis certainly bore true in 2020. After initially minimizing and downplaying the virus, once the CCP shifted to a whole of government response, the results were impressive. Widespread lockdowns which were much more severe than those in most western countries coupled with tremendous construction of healthcare infrastructure and PPE manufacturing to quickly contain and minimize the spread of COVID-19 to large parts of China. The speed with which the central government could organize and deploy resources, often bypassing permitting requirements in a manner that would have been difficult in more liberal western governments, demonstrated one of the advantages of the CCP's governance structure.

The strengths and potential of state capacity proved more limited in 2021 and 2022. Government efforts to create an indigenous vaccine were less effective than foreign

counterparts, and CCP commitment to a “Made in China” approach prevented them from seeking outside assistance. These weaker vaccines coupled with a relative failure to organize and implement an effective vaccination effort to become one of the key factors leading to major outbreaks of the virus in 2021 and 2022, as new mutated strains spread more rapidly amongst the population. These demonstrations of the limits of state capacity also point to the importance of the citizenry and local organizations, as will be discussed later.

Hypothesis 2: The Chinese government has focused on centralizing power, preceding but also accelerating under Xi Jinping, resulting in weak lower levels of government and sometimes unrealistic central government demands. One inadvertent consequence is that some of the most significant failures of the Chinese response to COVID-19 have been due to weak local government institutions.

This hypothesis holds true throughout the pandemic and highlights one of the key divisions within the CCP’s governance structure. From the very beginning of the outbreak, many local officials seemed left out of key decisions, and as the central government’s guidance became more strict and yet simultaneously more nebulous, local officials often appeared paralyzed out of fear. This fear also led to local officials hiding or misreporting certain information to the central government.

Qi, Shi, and Wang have demonstrated the degree to which this is not a bug, but rather a feature for the central government, allowing them to blame local officials for anything that goes wrong by saying they failed to implement the CCP’s guidance correctly.²⁰² This has provided cover for the CCP and resulted in most Chinese citizens expressing more confidence in Xi Jinping than their local leaders, but one of the consequences is that local governance has been inefficient and slow to react to changing circumstances. This became even more evident throughout 2021 and 2022, as local leaders would enact massive lockdowns out of fear of appearing too weak against COVID-19 to the central government.

²⁰² Rui Qi, Chenchen Shi, and Mark Wang, “The Over-Cascading System of Cadre Evaluation and China’s Authoritarian Resilience,” *China Information* 35, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X20920514>.

Hypothesis 3: Local institutions and civil society have been more directly impactful to the Chinese response to COVID-19 than the central government.

Returning to the earlier hypothesis regarding state strength, it is difficult to overstate the degree to which successful lockdowns in 2020 depended upon largely volunteer, quasi-governmental citizens' groups in civil society for their implementation. Even with the CCP's massive resources, the sheer size of China's population necessitated a significant degree of cooperation and buy-in from the populace. The degree of cooperation certainly varied based on location and degree of perceived risk from the virus, but by and large the CCP's successes in the early stages of the pandemic were driven by local responses and citizen engagement. This success would not have been possible without the strong state capacity the CCP has built, but the two sources of strength are distinct entities, and each was equally important to Chinese efforts.

This degree of popular support and buy-in for the government is an extremely valuable resource for the CCP, but 2021 and 2022 demonstrated the extent to which it is exhaustible. Continuing lockdowns over minimal case counts, coupled with a lack of clear direction from the central government that made it appear that the Zero COVID strategy might continue indefinitely, helped to turn large swaths of the public against the COVID policies of the CCP. These concerns were only magnified as large portions of the rest of the world proceeded to open up and adapt to the new reality of living with COVID-19. The result was massive popular unrest and protests across the country, forcing a rare reversal of policy by the CCP, and helping demonstrate a potential weakness of the government.

Hypothesis 4: International condemnation over the Chinese response to COVID-19 has helped strengthen the Xi Jinping regime because of increased nationalism amongst the Chinese population and backlash to foreign criticism. Conversely, the Xi regime has been able to point to instances of international praise and gratitude to help bolster their domestic strength practically and rhetorically. Both of these developments allow the Chinese government to view their response to COVID-19 as a success due to a strengthening of the Xi regime, irrespective of the actual results with the virus.

In many ways, this hypothesis has also remained consistent throughout the last three years. While, as discussed, many citizens have become disillusioned with the COVID policies of the CCP, there is still a significant ability for Xi Jinping to mobilize nationalist sentiment amongst a large portion of the population in response to western criticisms. One important caveat that bears watching is any decrease in the CCP's ability to engage in BRI or HSR diplomacy abroad, based on the negative impacts of COVID on the Chinese economy. The Chinese economy is difficult to fully measure from the outside, and many analysts have been predicting a slowdown since well before the pandemic, but any significant blows to GDP and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) will negatively impact the coercive economic potential of the CCP internationally.

B. EXPANDING COVID LESSONS TO THE CCP MORE BROADLY

In many ways, the strengths and weaknesses of the CCP in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic are also reflective of larger truths about the strengths and weaknesses of the regime as a whole. The ability of the government to initially repress and minimize news about the outbreak is in line with the Chinese government's overall control and censorship of media, both domestic and international. Once the party decided to confront COVID, centralized power and control over robust state capacity allowed for a rapid pivot in approach. Importantly, however, once the Zero COVID strategy had been settled on and committed to, it became difficult for the CCP to publicly change course or acknowledge any errors. This implies that the CCP has something akin to "first mover advantage," which is to say the ability to react to new circumstances more quickly and nimbly than other western, more liberal governments, but that the centralization of power is a double-edged sword, making it more difficult for the government to abandon or radically alter existing policies and course trajectories. In democratic governments, if a state policy is broadly unpopular or viewed as no longer effective, the citizens can vote in a different government who can switch course without necessarily losing face themselves. While the citizens of China can (and often do) make their concerns known with public protests, there is no equivalent accountability mechanism in China to public elections.

The failures of local government and the reliance on the support of the people throughout the pandemic indicate some of the limits of the central government's ability to manage and control power throughout the country as a whole. The former may be useful to Xi Jinping as a way of diverting popular unrest onto local officials, but the two combine to make the domestic situation in China potentially more precarious than is commonly reported in western media. Again, this is largely due to CCP censorship and repression of reporting, making it difficult for analysts to properly assess the state of the populace in China. These factors indicate that the central government may have to focus more on domestic concerns in the near future than their international ambitions, which would significantly impact pursuit of U.S. foreign policy goals.

This potential source of domestic weakness combines with increasing nationalism and isolation amongst elements of the Chinese populace to create a very combustible situation. Even though Chinese foreign policy has often been viewed as rational and calculating, if Xi Jinping senses a softening of his domestic support coupled with an inevitable economic downturn and a weakness in growth, this could lead him to feel trapped into engaging in foreign policy maneuvers out of an attempt to satisfy and solidify his nationalist base, regardless of whether or not they are his preferred actions. While there are any number of avenues such a maneuver could take, the most pressing and concerning right now is the status of Taiwan.

Just as Xi and the CCP are facing significant domestic concerns, multiple current²⁰³ and former²⁰⁴ top U.S. military officials have warned of an imminent clash with China over Taiwan, most measuring the timeline for such a conflict as being within the next five years. Paired with repeated commitments to defend Taiwan militarily from U.S. President Joe Biden,²⁰⁵ the stage is set for an increasingly perilous period in Sino-American relations, where even a minor miscalculation could lead to military conflict. If the U.S. views a rising China as an existential threat to its existence (or, at least, its global dominance), this may be a calculated risk worth taking. But what if the lessons learned from this analysis of the CCP's handling of COVID-19 indicate that the widely held perception of Chinese dominance is wrong?

²⁰³ Caitlin McFall, "Air Force General Predicts War with China in 2025: 'I Hope I Am Wrong'," *Fox News*, January 28, 2023, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/air-force-general-predicts-war-china-2025-i-hope-i-am-wrong>; Demetri Sevastopulo, "China Threat to Taiwan Highlighted by Ukraine War, Warns U.S. Admiral," *Financial Times*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/28b96d50-de47-4fa3-add1-df7ba4331f1f>; "U.S. Must Prepare now for Invasion of Taiwan: Admiral," *France 24*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221020-us-must-prepare-now-for-china-invasion-of-taiwan-admiral>; Bill Gertz, "Navy Intel Chief Warns the U.S. is Naïve About Threat from China," *Washington Times*, February 27, 2023, [https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/feb/27/navy-intel-chief-warns-us-naive-about-threat-china/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CI'm%20going%20to%20be,average%20American%20is%20on%20China;Oliver Parken and Tyler Rogoway, "Extremely Ominous Warning About China from U.S. Strategic Command Chief," *The Drive*, November 6, 2022, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/extremely-ominous-warning-about-china-from-us-strategic-command-chief>.](https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/feb/27/navy-intel-chief-warns-us-naive-about-threat-china/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CI'm%20going%20to%20be,average%20American%20is%20on%20China;Oliver Parken and Tyler Rogoway, 'Extremely Ominous Warning About China from U.S. Strategic Command Chief,' The Drive, November 6, 2022, https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/extremely-ominous-warning-about-china-from-us-strategic-command-chief)

²⁰⁴ Ken Moriyasu, Tomoyoshi Oshikiri, and Maya Shimizu, "Ex-U.S. Admiral who Warned of 2027 Crisis to Visit Taiwan Next Week," *Nikkei*, January 26, 2023, [https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/Ex-U.S.-admiral-who-warned-of-2027-crisis-to-visit-Taiwan-next-week#:~:text=Indo%2DPacific-,Ex%2DU.S.%20admiral%20who%20warned%20of%202027,to%20visit%20Taiwan%20next%20week&text=Former%20head%20of%20the%20U.S.,Taiwan%20as%20a%20private%20citizen;Interview:U.S.AdmiralWarnsAgainstU.S.-ChinaWarinBest-Seller,"*The Asahi Shimbun*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14362039>.](https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/Ex-U.S.-admiral-who-warned-of-2027-crisis-to-visit-Taiwan-next-week#:~:text=Indo%2DPacific-,Ex%2DU.S.%20admiral%20who%20warned%20of%202027,to%20visit%20Taiwan%20next%20week&text=Former%20head%20of%20the%20U.S.,Taiwan%20as%20a%20private%20citizen;Interview:U.S.AdmiralWarnsAgainstU.S.-ChinaWarinBest-Seller,)

²⁰⁵ Kevin Liptak, "Biden Vows to Protect Taiwan in Event of Chinese Attack," *CNN*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/21/politics/taiwan-china-biden-town-hall/index.html>; Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Peter Baker, "Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan if it Faces a Chinese Attack," *New York Times*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/23/world/asia/biden-taiwan-china.html#:~:text=TOKYO%E2%80%94President%20Biden%20signaled%20on,rising%20tensions%20in%20the%20region>.

C. BEWARE ‘THE PERICLES TRAP’

Ever since Graham Allison published an article warning of potential military conflict between the United States and China,²⁰⁶ the “Thucydides Trap” has become shorthand for the inevitability of a violent clash between the two states. But an in-depth analysis of the situation between the United States and China today, as we currently find ourselves in “the decisive decade,”²⁰⁷ leads me to believe that military conflict is not only avoidable, it is far from the biggest geopolitical headwind in Sino-American relations. The true battle for the next decade will be over economic superiority via trade and financial instruments. To that end, the best lesson that Thucydides provides us comes from an oration by Pericles: “I am more afraid of our own blunders than of the enemy’s devices.”²⁰⁸ Put another way, I am much less worried about Chinese aggression for its own sake than I am about a cornered China on the decline feeling forced into military action out of defensiveness and domestic concern.

Much has been made of the dominance of China on the world stage in recent years. But the lessons of the CCP’s handling of COVID-19 help to demonstrate some flaws in this perception. Those same lessons can be applied to the broader U.S. approach to foreign policy with China and help to shift U.S. strategy and goals. I will now draw out lessons from this thesis and apply them to broader themes regarding the CCP under Xi Jinping.

COVID Lesson 1: The CCP has tremendous state capacity, but even this raw capability has its limits, as demonstrated by COVID-19. The Chinese economy was already slowing down, and COVID has only accelerated this trend.

Reduced to its simplest form, the original argument of the “Thucydides Trap” centers around a line from Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War in which he writes “the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta,

²⁰⁶ Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?” *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

²⁰⁷ Demetri Sevastopulo, “Joe Biden Warn U.S. Faces ‘Decisive Decade’ in Rivalry with China,” *Financial Times*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/c9011130-a119-40d5-beb9-a09e7faff2e1>.

²⁰⁸ Thucydides, Robert Strassler, and Richard Crawley, *The Landmark Thucydides : a Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 1.143.1.

made war inevitable.”²⁰⁹ Allison goes on to conclude that “based on the current trajectory, war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than recognized at the moment,”²¹⁰ focused on the idea of a rising China causing a fearful United States to lash out in an attempt to protect our hegemony. But COVID-19 helped demonstrate that China is not as unquestionably ascendant as it may have previously appeared, and indeed may already have passed its economic peak.

The Chinese economy already faced significant headwinds prior to the appearance of the virus, and these concerns have only been exacerbated by multiple years of pervasive lockdowns. China’s economy is so dependent upon exports that “the China boom is therefore heavily reliant on the free transnational flow of investment and good.”²¹¹ This helps explain one of the reasons why COVID has been so devastating to the Chinese economy. Not only was domestic consumption hamstrung by lockdowns and quarantines, but this also severely limited China’s ability to export goods to the rest of the world.

In an increasingly globalized world, the often U.S.-promoted values of free trade worked to China’s benefit, but if the modern world sees an increase in “friend-shoring” and protectionism,²¹² this may significantly diminish China’s economic weight even further. Additionally, China finds itself encountering the same problems that confront many middle-income countries, and “rising inequality is widely considered a serious challenge to both social stability and the economic reform process under Xi Jinping.”²¹³ Ultimately, China may be forced to choose between autonomy and independence with a limited reach, or global influence that involves sacrificing at least some international sovereignty and control. The experience of the Chinese economy throughout COVID-19

²⁰⁹ Thucydides, Strassler, and Crawley, *The Landmark Thucydides : a Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.6.

²¹⁰ Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?”

²¹¹ Ho-fung Hung, *The China Boom: Why China Will Not Rule the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 83, <https://doi.org/10.7312/hung16418>.

²¹² Bryce Baschuk, “What Does ‘Friend-Shoring’ Mean for Trade in a Less-Friendly World?” *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/what-friend-shoringmeans-for-trade-in-a-less-friendly-world/2022/06/22/5c3d4f30-f1e3-11ec-ac16-8fbf7194cd78_story.html.

²¹³ Marc Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction* (Taylor and Francis, 2019), 58, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429437908>.

tells us that we may not have as much to fear from Chinese state capacity as has been previously theorized.

COVID Lesson 2: COVID-19 demonstrated Xi Jinping’s willingness to harness international criticism for his own domestic benefit, as well as being willing to take scorn from foreign country to bolster Chinese nationalist domestic sentiment. If the United States wishes to push back against China, legitimacy amongst friends and partners must be a priority in multilateral forums.

As multiple countries around the world clamored for more openness and access to Chinese data and facts on the ground, Xi Jinping closed ranks and adopted a Zero COVID approach which explicitly extolled the virtues of the Chinese system over all others. But just as COVID could not be dealt with by individual countries, but instead required a recognition of the global transmissibility and response, so too do China’s aims on the international stage require multiple partners around the world to be viewed as a legitimate alternative to the western order. Especially in the economic realm, the United States should be wary of exploiting our own advantages too much, and thus driving away former allies.

As Norloff et al., have demonstrated, “where security scholars point to a decline in U.S. influence, scholars of global monetary politics see continued U.S. dominance” and “the crises of the last decade have actually reinforced the centrality of the U.S. dollar and American financial power in the international system.”²¹⁴ In the two years since their comprehensive review was published, the case for the continued dominance of the United States in international financial markets has only grown stronger. This dominance has only been reinforced by a weakening Chinese economy and reduction in FDI as a result of COVID-19. Xi has demonstrated a willingness to use economic leverage and global health diplomacy to achieve political goals (such as the recent move from Honduras to no longer recognize an independent Taiwan), but the weakening economy both limits his ability to make these international appeals and requires the CCP to turn more of their attention

²¹⁴ Carla Norrlof, Paul Poast, Benjamin J Cohen, Sabreena Croteau, Aashna Khanna, Daniel McDowell, Hongying Wang, and W Kindred Winecoff, “Global Monetary Order and the Liberal Order Debate,” *International Studies Perspectives* 21, no. 2 (May 1, 2020), 109, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekaa001>.

inward to shore up domestic support. To the extent that COVID has demonstrated that the CCP's major priority is regime survival, the United States should adopt a more inclusive, less antagonistic international approach to diplomacy. To return to the warning of Pericles, the greatest threat to the ongoing dominance of the United States is that America itself will come to be seen as acting illegitimately or against global interests, not that China will surpass the United States in financial markets or influence.

COVID Lesson 3: The ongoing friction between local and central government leaders highlights the willingness of Xi Jinping and other key members of the CCP to prioritize their own political survival over the long-term health of the country.

Dovetailing with the previous lesson, COVID-19 has demonstrated the degree to which Xi Jinping's primary goal is his own political survival. This has also been documented by Hveem and Pempel, who report that many analysts believe "Chinese leaders will prioritize national security and prestige above economic interests."²¹⁵ If this is the case, then instability due to COVID-19 and a potential economic downturn may only help to guide a favorable U.S. foreign policy in the years ahead. This is doubly true given that the CCP's experience with COVID-19 has demonstrated some of the fault lines in their political system, and the degree to which local governance is often disconnected from central leadership, and more than willing to obscure or misreport facts on the ground to avoid falling out of favor.

If COVID-19 has demonstrated that the primary goal of Xi Jinping is his own survival and power, then other areas become much more fungible as bargaining chips on an international stage. And if the domestic political situation is more unstable and less orderly than previously believed, then the CCP may be more focused internally than externally for the foreseeable future. If Chinese foreign policy truly represents a more realist view, than U.S. diplomats can offer rhetorical or symbolic concessions that allow Xi Jinping to market them as a win to his nationalist domestic audience, while preserving and even further enshrining the existing liberal world order.

²¹⁵ Helge Hveem and T.J. Pempel, "China's Rise and Economic Interdependence," in Robert S. Ross and Jo Inge Bekkevold, eds., *China in the Era of Xi Jinping: Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 197.

COVID Lesson 4: The importance of the Chinese people should not be underestimated. Even without direct democratic representation, COVID demonstrated both the additional power China's dedicated population provides to the CCP, as well as the potential the Chinese government faces for backlash with unpopular decisions. Any efforts at diplomacy must account for what the local reaction is likely to be.

Much has been made of the CCP's control over the citizens of China. But COVID-19 demonstrated resoundingly the power and importance of the Chinese people themselves. Those citizens can be an asset, as seen in 2020 when the Chinese people largely adhered to strict COVID policies out of a mixture of patriotism and faith in the government's leadership. But they can also be a liability, as seen in the mass protests and unrest of 2021 and 2022.

The United States' approach to foreign policy with China should take both of these lessons into account. In the best-case scenario, the United States could broker a face-saving compromise that allows Xi Jinping to deliver a rhetorical win to the people (for example, a firmer commitment to the "One China Policy" and peaceful reunification) without materially altering the international status quo. In a more dangerous outcome, Xi Jinping's saber-rattling and wolf warrior diplomacy could lead to an even more nationalist populace that demands a more aggressive foreign policy response from the CCP. COVID-19 has demonstrated the power of the people in both directions, and the United States would be wise to consider the desires of Chinese citizens in our foreign policy dealings with China moving forward.

D. A HISTORICAL PRECEDENT

On February 22nd, 1946, George Kennan sent "The Long Telegram," laying out a strategy to confront the threat of communism and the Soviet Union. In this and subsequent articles Kennan described the basis for containment, the crux of which was that "the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies."²¹⁶ While

²¹⁶ George Kennan, "The Long Telegram," accessed through *Teaching American History*, February 22, 1946, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/the-long-telegram/>.

Kennan most likely did not think it would take more than four decades, ultimately his prescription proved to be impressively prescient. While there are many differences between the Cold War era Soviet Union and the modern CCP, a similar strategy is called for today, and the differences should only make such a strategy more effective.

The Chinese government and economy are much more enmeshed in the international system than the Soviet Union ever was, even after the relative isolation of the COVID period. China has demonstrated a desire to participate in and exert influence through existing international bodies and is trying to curry favor with third-party countries via BRI and other investments. Rather than lecturing foreign governments about the theoretical dangers of “debt-trap diplomacy” America must “offer positive alternatives to a China-centric political and economic model without cornering [foreign] governments into an ‘us or them’ proposition.”²¹⁷ If the American model truly is superior to the Chinese model, these trends should present themselves and win out over time, and in that context, the greater fear is a miscalculation or act of aggression which leads to a war that neither side wishes to see.

Ultimately, predicting the future is a difficult proposition. COVID-19 has demonstrated several of the strengths of the Chinese government, but also highlighted important weaknesses which were previously unrecognized or underreported. No one can say for certain if there will be military conflict between China and the United States in the future, but avoiding it in the present should be of the utmost concern, and the sudden and world-changing appearance of COVID-19 should be more than enough to argue for a little humility when it comes to prognostication. To that end, I am more afraid of our own blunders than of the enemy’s devices.

²¹⁷ Ted Piccone, “China and Latin America: A Pragmatic Embrace,” *Global China Series*, Brookings Institution, 2020, 6, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/china-and-latinamerica-a-pragmatic-embrace>.

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