

**Opinion**

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# China's Real Covid Crisis Is Yet to Come

Chinese leaders can claim enviable success in tamping down the pandemic using massive lockdowns but they're going to struggle to return the country to normalcy.



The country's Covid-zero policy is unsustainable. *Photographer: Nicolas Asfourj/AFP/Getty Images*

By [Nancy Qian](#)

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Nearly two years after the first cases of Covid-19 emerged in China, authorities are still locking down whole metropolises after detecting handfuls of infections. The country's strict "Covid zero" policy has been effective: With a population of around 1.3 billion, it has recorded only around 125,000 cases and less than 6,000 deaths. No other large nation can claim to have fought the pandemic so successfully.

The tools China has wielded thus far, however, will be less useful in the post-pandemic period. In fact, unlike their counterparts elsewhere, Chinese leaders may find returning

the country to normalcy even harder than fighting the virus.

Sticking to a “Covid zero” policy forever will be near impossible. Sooner or later, as other countries open their borders, China will face pressure to relax internal and external controls on movement. Cases will surely rise when that happens – and it’s likely they will rise even faster than elsewhere, despite high Chinese vaccination rates.

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Why? For one thing, China’s homegrown vaccines – the only ones currently available to most people on the mainland – are only around 66% effective. It’s unclear whether the government will make more effective mRNA vaccines developed in the United States and Europe widely available, or when Chinese scientists will be able to make a successful version of their own.

Even if they do manage that feat, there remains the challenge of repeatedly inoculating hundreds of millions of people year after year. Epidemiologists expect Covid-19 to mutate over time like the flu and most countries, including China, are not accustomed to offering annual flu vaccinations. Administering a round of new boosters every year is much more expensive and logistically difficult than delivering basic vaccines – say, for measles – that only need to be injected a few times during a person’s life.

Japan’s recent experience gives a hint of what could be in store for China. Both countries

are densely populated and share broadly similar social customs with respect to person-to-person contact. Both have aging populations. Vaccinating for the flu is uncommon in both nations.

The Japanese vaccination rate surpassed 60% over the summer and much of the country was placed under emergency restrictions. Even so, the Delta variant triggered a violent outbreak. During its worst month, Japan suffered around 600,000 infections and 1,800 deaths in a population of around 128 million. If Delta or another variant were to course through China at the same rate, the country could see more than six million cases and nearly 20,000 deaths within a month.

Indeed, Chinese mortality rates might be even higher, given the country's less-developed healthcare sector. In 2019, China had only around four hospital beds per 1,000 people, whereas Japan had 13 – the world's highest proportion. Similarly, China had 3.5 ICU hospital beds per 100,000 compared to Japan's 13.5.

Chinese leaders may find it especially hard to deal with any significant spike in cases and deaths. Their success thus far has spared Chinese citizens from having to accept the same Covid risks others around the world have. After continued propaganda praising its control of the pandemic, the regime's legitimacy now partly rests on maintaining near-zero infection rates. Leaders will be tempted to respond to any outbreak by closing borders and imposing harsh lockdowns once again.

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But economic headwinds will make that more challenging than before, if not outright impossible. Problems such as growing income inequality and a rapidly aging population loom larger now that overall economic growth has declined from the phenomenal 10% annual rates of the 1990s and early 2000s to what economists forecast to be around 3% to 5% by 2030. Recent mass power outages, the Evergrande crisis and the sharp drop in China's third-quarter growth rates have highlighted urgent vulnerabilities in the economy. The country may simply not be able to afford to cut itself off from the world again.

For two years now, the pandemic has naturally diverted the attention of the government and citizens alike from some fundamental economic challenges. Like Covid-19, however, those problems haven't disappeared – and can't be ignored forever. If they don't want their Covid “victory” to become pyrrhic, Chinese leaders should start tempering the expectations of their populace and preparing them for the very real trials and tradeoffs to come.

*This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.*

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