What other countries can learn from China's lockdown policies

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Pitting authoritarianism against democracy has become common during the pandemic, with the former [often being painted](#) as a more effective regime type in handling COVID-19. The Chinese Communist Party's

own narrative [promotes a version of this argument](#), equating China's success in keeping cases and deaths low with the "superiority" of its political system. This is in spite of [successful containment](#) by some democracies.

But arguing that the world should ignore regime type and instead focus on learning from China's policies is problematic—it depends on the assumption that policies can simply be grafted from one political system into another. Introducing policies from a different type of regime requires adapting those policies to fit the systems they are absorbed into.

China's lockdowns are an important example. They have succeeded in controlling transmission because they have [followed a clear logic](#), underpinned by the nature and characteristics of their political system. To learn from China's lockdowns, we need to understand both the logic behind them and the importance of the context in which they took place.

Lockdown in Wuhan

Wuhan's lockdown began on January 23 2020. At 2am, with no [public debate](#), authorities [ordered](#) that at 10am all [public transport](#) both inside and going in and out of the city must stop. Then came orders to [stop online car-hailing](#), [close the tunnel](#) under the Yangtze (which cuts through the city) and [ban motor vehicle](#) use. The city was forced to a halt.

But the logical result of stopping transport was that government itself had to provide alternatives. It [ordered districts to supply transport](#) for transferring patients and [requisitioned taxis](#) for community use.

Having stopped movement, the government turned to building hospitals and requisitioning facilities exclusively for COVID-19 patients. It was then able to begin dividing up its population. It [stipulated four categories](#)

[of people](#) to be separated from the rest: confirmed cases, suspected cases, people with symptoms for whom infection couldn't be ruled out, and contacts. The first subset was sent for treatment, the latter three to centralized [isolation](#) facilities.

This was paired with measures to restrict the movement of everyone outside the four categories. Nationwide, to facilitate compliance, the government called on community workers and volunteers to set up 24-hour checkpoints at neighborhood entrances to register anyone entering or leaving. This formed a two-pronged approach: a collective effort that successfully restricted citizens' movements, alongside the government casting a wide net to root out and treat or isolate every last person deemed as a transmission risk.

These measures demanded mass mobilization, involving countless residents, community workers, Party members, local [militia](#), and staff drafted in from government and state-owned enterprises. Swiftly organized teams staffed checkpoints, couriered supplies and went from door to door asking people about their movements and health.

All of this—the unapologetic sweeping categorisation of people, the mass mobilization, the supplanting of citizen choice with government-supplied alternatives and relocation of people deemed as a transmission risk—drew on the existing core capacities and well-practiced methods of the Communist Party and its government. Its logic made sense to a society well acquainted with this system of government.

Hebei: same logic, new methods

This same logic is now being applied in very different circumstances in Hebei, a province neighboring Beijing. Three core elements of that logic are restricting movement, compelling but also enabling compliance, and rooting out anyone viewed as a source of risk.

The Gaocheng district of Shijiazhuang—a city of more than 11 million people which takes in both rural and urban areas—is [at the center of a new outbreak](link). All people and vehicles there have been banned from leaving. The provincial court [has warned](link) that anyone failing to cooperate may be criminally prosecuted. Meanwhile a second city, Nangong—home to half a million people—has [notified](link) citizens that leaving home is prohibited and rule breakers will be detained.

While the logic remains the same, isolation policy is evolving: who is isolated—and how they are isolated—has changed. The government is building [makeshift mass isolation facilities](link) for anyone who could, conceivably, be infected. Since rural areas lack sufficient facilities such as hotels to requisition, to prevent the virus spreading within villages and individual households, isolation centers are being built from scratch.

Instead of isolating only contacts, secondary contacts are now isolated too. Shijiazhuang has found [986 new cases](link), and yet in Gaocheng, [authorities ordered 15 entire villages](link) – more than 20,000 people—to relocate into "centralized isolation."

This applies and stretches the principle of "isolating everyone who must be isolated," [described by an expert](link) from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention as part of a package central to China's success. "Everyone" in Gaocheng's case has meant anyone from a village with at least one case. Only villages with zero cases were allowed to isolate at home.

Authorities have [just announced](link) the adoption of this isolation model nationwide. Local governments must make anticipatory plans for requisitioning enough buildings for contacts and secondary contacts. In [rural areas](link), they must prepare to build large-scale isolation facilities.

Learning by reflecting

As countries face new lockdowns, China's successful actions prompt reflection on our own approaches. Under Chinese policy, mandatory isolation includes everyone conceivably infected, and mandatory centralized isolation seeks to cut the risk of within-household infection.

China's control methods combine population categorisation, the dynamic capacity to find possible infections, strict compliance, and government coordination of everything from where a person isolates to how they access food. These methods rely overwhelmingly on system-wide mobilization, with Chinese citizens playing a key role. At the core of China's response is replacing citizen choice with government command and organization.

In the UK, however, a premium is placed on public debate along with individual choice and responsibility. For policies to be taken from China, they would have to be adapted to fit this context. If Britons are to be asked (not compelled) to isolate, they must be financially able to do so. At-home isolation must be facilitated by clear, consistent, accessible guidance to help limit the risk of within-household infection. And, if centralized isolation is to be considered, discussion is needed on how to support people to comply.

Reflecting on a year of lockdowns, there may be something to be learned from China. But a good place to start is in recognizing that for policies to be successful, they need to follow a coherent logic and fit the political system in which they are being used.

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