

# China's success taming virus could make exit strategy harder

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A resident holds up a tube and swab to get tested at a nucleic acid test station in Beijing, China, Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. The sweeping "zero-tolerance" policies that China has employed to protect its people and economy from COVID-19 may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan

The sweeping "zero-tolerance" strategy that China has used to keep COVID-19 case numbers low and its economy functioning may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the pandemic.

Most experts say the coronavirus around the world isn't going away and believe it could eventually become, like the flu, a persistent but generally manageable threat if enough people gain immunity through infections and vaccines.

In countries like Britain and the U.S., which have had comparatively light restrictions against the omicron wave, there is a glimmer of hope that the process might be underway. Cases skyrocketed in recent weeks but have since dropped in Britain and may have leveled off in the U.S., perhaps because the extremely contagious variant is running out of people to infect. Some places already are talking about easing COVID-19 precautions.

China, which will be in the international spotlight when the Beijing Winter Olympics begin in two weeks, is not seeing the same dynamic.

The communist government's practice throughout the pandemic of trying to find and isolate every infected person has largely protected hospitals from becoming overwhelmed and staved off the deaths that have engulfed most of the world.



A sweeper wearing a mask to protect from the coronavirus walks past displays promoting winter sports in Beijing, China, Thursday, Jan. 20, 2022. The sweeping "zero-tolerance" policies that China has employed to protect its people and economy from COVID-19 may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan

But the uncompromising approach also means most people in China have never been exposed to the virus. At the same time, the effectiveness of China's most widely used vaccines has been called into question. New studies suggest they offer significantly less protection against infection from omicron, even after three doses, than people get after booster shots of the leading Western vaccines.

Together, those factors could complicate China's effort to get past the



pandemic. Experts say if the country of 1.4 billion people were to relax restrictions, it could face a surge similar to what Singapore or Australia experienced, despite a highly vaccinated population.

"China's susceptibility to outbreaks is likely to be more because most people have not been exposed to the virus due to the stringent measures that were put in place, thus lacking hybrid immunity, which is supposed to prove better protection than vaccination alone," said Dr. Vineeta Bal, an immunologist at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research.



Residents wearing masks to protect from the coronavirus waits in line at a nuclei test station in Beijing, China, Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. The sweeping "zero-tolerance" policies that China has employed to protect its people and economy from COVID-19 may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the

pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan

"It is risky for China to reopen right now because omicron is spreading globally, and even if the variant doesn't cause major illness, it'll spread like wildfire," she added.

Dali Yang, a professor who studies Chinese politics at the University of Chicago, said, "It's a big challenge, for leaders, especially their rhetoric on saving lives. How do you justify opening up and then having tens of thousands of people dying in the process?"

Chinese President Xi Jinping has cited China's approach as a "major strategic success" and evidence of the "significant advantages" of its political system over Western liberal democracies.

The world's most populous nation was the only major economy to grow in 2020, and it accounted for a fraction of global deaths and infections.

As part of the country's tough-minded strategy for keeping the virus at bay, residents in Chinese cities must display their infection status on a government-monitored app to enter supermarkets, offices or even the capital.



A delivery man pulls a cart load of goods at a mall in Beijing, China, Thursday, Jan. 20, 2022. The sweeping "zero-tolerance" policies that China has employed to protect its people and economy from COVID-19 may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan

But weeks ahead of the Olympics, omicron is testing this approach with outbreaks in the southern province of Guangdong, as well as Beijing.

Organizers of the Olympics announced they will not sell tickets locally and will allow only select spectators in. Foreign fans are not allowed.

Authorities have also asked people to not visit their hometowns around the Lunar New Year at the start of February, a move that will dampen spending during China's most important family holiday. And the major



city of Xi'an in the west and parts of Ningbo, a busy port south of Shanghai, are under lockdown.

With the Communist Party gearing up for a major meeting this fall, at which Xi is expected to be appointed to a third term as party leader, China is unlikely to relax its policies in a major way any time soon.

"If the numbers from COVID start to skyrocket to big levels, then this will reflect badly on his leadership," said Willy Lam, an expert on Chinese political leadership at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.



Residents wearing masks to protect from the coronavirus walks near decorative lights on a tree in Beijing, China, Thursday, Jan. 20, 2022. The sweeping "zero-tolerance" policies that China has employed to protect its people and economy from COVID-19 may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the

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Residents wearing masks to protect from the coronavirus walks near decorative lights on a tree in Beijing, China, Thursday, Jan. 20, 2022. The sweeping "zero-tolerance" policies that China has employed to protect its people and economy from COVID-19 may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan





Residents wearing masks to protect from the coronavirus walks past decorations at a mall in Beijing, China, Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. The sweeping "zero-tolerance" policies that China has employed to protect its people and economy from COVID-19 may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan



A woman wearing a mask to protect from the coronavirus walks past a coat of armour displayed outside a restaurant in Beijing, China, Friday, Jan. 21, 2022. The sweeping "zero-tolerance" policies that China has employed to protect its people and economy from COVID-19 may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan





A woman wearing a mask to protect from the coronavirus walks past a globe shaped wire sculpture in Beijing, China, Saturday, Jan. 22, 2022. The sweeping "zero-tolerance" policies that China has employed to protect its people and economy from COVID-19 may, paradoxically, make it harder for the country to exit the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan

China relies heavily on its own [Sinovac](#) and [Sinopharm](#) vaccines, along with several others made domestically. It has not approved the Pfizer shot, even though a Chinese company bought distribution rights in 2020.

Instead, the focus is on developing China's own mRNA vaccines, like the Pfizer and Moderna formulas. One such vaccine is in late trials.

Another option for China may be to track how the virus is evolving and



put off opening its borders until it becomes even milder. But it's anyone guess when or if that might happen.

"What will the next variant be? How serious will it be? You can't tell," Bal said.

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