

# China eases Covid measures, cutting quarantine and scrapping flight bans

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China announced the relaxation of some of its hardline COVID-19 restrictions on Friday, a day after authorities had vowed to stick to a zero-tolerance virus approach despite mounting economic damage.

The country is the last major economy welded to a strategy of stamping out COVID flare-ups as they occur, through a combination of snap lockdowns, mass testing and lengthy quarantines.

Top leaders had pledged to stick "unswervingly" to the policy, which has forced business closures, roiled international supply chains and weighed heavily on growth.

But a notice from the country's disease control agency on Friday said the Politburo Standing Committee—the seven-man apex of power in China—met Thursday to rubberstamp limited relaxations.

According to the notice, the quarantine period for inbound travellers will be cut from 10 days to eight, consisting of five days in a state isolation centre and three days at home.

It said that travellers would only be required to show one negative COVID test within 48 hours of boarding flights to China, a reduction from two tests.

## **Relaxing strict policies**

The new rules single out "important business personnel" and "sports groups" as examples of privileged groups permitted to skip quarantine as long as they remain in a virus-secure "closed loop" for the duration of their stays.

# Covid-19 current confirmed cases in mainland China

Govt. data As of Nov 11



Map showing current cases of the Covid-19 around mainland China.

The notice said that a so-called "circuit breaker" mechanism on inbound flights would be abolished, bringing an end to a policy that saw temporary cancellation of flight routes if a certain proportion of passengers tested positive.

Now scrapped is the requirement to identify and isolate "secondary close contacts"—those who may have come into contact with infected people.

A domestic COVID risk system has been reduced from three tiers to two, with areas to be labelled as either "high-risk" and subject to curbs, or "low-risk" with minimal restrictions.

People travelling from high- to low-risk areas will be required to undergo seven days of isolation at home, instead of staying in centralised facilities.

Places will be defined as "low-risk" if they record zero new infections for five successive days.

Workers in "closed-loop" environments where exposure to COVID is higher—such as cabin crews, airport staff and quarantine hotel personnel—will undergo shortened quarantines, the notice said.

Chinese stocks listed in Hong Kong soared on Friday following the news, with the Hang Seng's China Enterprises Index up nearly eight percent in afternoon trading.



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The wider Hang Seng Index was also up 7.5 percent.

"I believe this will have a very positive impact on the market and boost investor confidence, but the actual effects will also depend on how the policies are enforced at the local level in the next few months," said Henry Gao, associate professor at the Singapore Management University.

China's foreign ministry on Friday downplayed the perceived loosening of restrictions, emphasising that domestic outbreaks are still "severe".

"China has introduced these measures to make our prevention and control more scientific and precise. It doesn't mean we have relaxed containment or are even giving up altogether and 'lying flat'," spokesman Zhao Lijian said at a routine briefing.

## 'Unswerving' commitment

China has reopened far more slowly than most other countries, a move that has kept infections to a minimum.

The country has recorded just over 5,200 COVID deaths, compared with more than a million in the United States.



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ups as they occur.

But pandemic fatigue has begun to set in as the onerous curbs show little sign of letting up, with grinding lockdowns of the kind that hit Shanghai earlier this year sparking isolated public protests.

And the economic impact has been so severe that analysts now expect China to miss its stated annual growth target of around 5.5 percent by a wide margin.

Adding to the difficulties are shifting and sometimes contradictory demands from Beijing, which incentivise local governments to carry out extreme measures.

China's top leaders have repeatedly vowed not to waver from the zero-COVID policy, but officials have also criticised heavy-handed enforcement such as excessively bureaucratic local curbs.

Friday's notice added to the chorus, "strictly forbidding" pre-emptive or overly lengthy lockdowns, unapproved school closures and arbitrary suspensions of work and traffic.

It vowed to "speed up" COVID booster vaccination coverage, especially among the vulnerable older population and boost reserves of antiviral treatments.

China recorded 10,535 new domestic cases on Friday, the vast majority of which were asymptomatic, according to the National Health Commission.

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