

## CRACKS IN THE GREAT WALL: ZERO-COVID PROTESTS AND THE REASSERTION OF POLITICAL SECURITY IN CHINA

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**ABSTRACT.** The protests of the zero-COVID policy in 2022, which led to the issuance of Ten New Measures in China, are an interesting political phenomenon to study. This phenomenon raises questions about the dynamics of China's political security during the zero-COVID policy period and how the government responded to the social pressures that arose. Applying political security theory that emphasizes national objectives, threat perceptions, and political freedom of action, this article analyzes China's political dynamics during that period. This article concludes that political security for a country is often realized through various actions justified to protect national interests and maintain social stability and harmony to strengthen political legitimacy. In maintaining political legitimacy during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese government demonstrated political security stability through issue framing strategies, mass mobilization, a punishment and reward approach, and optimization of the economic sector and nationalism. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of protests of the zero-Covid policy contributed as one of the supporting factors, but not a determining factor, in the change of Covid-19 policy in China. Thus, the dynamics that occurred did not indicate a change in the political system, but rather the political impact that emerged during that period.

**Keywords:** Zero Covid Policy; Chinese Government; Political Security; Chinese Government Capability

**ABSTRAK.** Terjadinya protes kebijakan nol Covid pada tahun 2022 yang berujung pada penerbitan Ten New Measures di Cina menjadi fenomena politik yang menarik untuk dikaji. Fenomena ini menimbulkan pertanyaan mengenai bagaimana dinamika keamanan politik Cina selama periode kebijakan nol Covid dan bagaimana pemerintah merespons tekanan sosial yang muncul. Dengan menggunakan teori keamanan politik yang menekankan pada tujuan nasional, persepsi ancaman, dan kebebasan tindakan politik negara, artikel ini menganalisis dinamika politik Cina selama periode tersebut. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa keamanan politik bagi sebuah negara sering kali diwujudkan melalui berbagai tindakan yang dijustifikasi untuk melindungi objek nasional serta mempertahankan stabilitas dan harmonisasi sosial guna memperkuat legitimasi politik. Dalam mempertahankan legitimasi politik selama pandemi Covid-19, Pemerintah Cina menunjukkan stabilitas keamanan politik melalui strategi pembingkaihan isu, mobilisasi massa, pendekatan hukuman dan penghargaan, serta optimalisasi sektor ekonomi dan nasionalisme. Sementara itu, fenomena protes kebijakan nol Covid berkontribusi sebagai salah satu faktor pendukung, namun bukan faktor determinan, dalam perubahan kebijakan Covid-19 di Cina. Dengan demikian, dinamika yang terjadi tidak menunjukkan perubahan pada sistem politik, melainkan lebih pada dampak politik yang muncul dalam rentang waktu tersebut.

**Kata Kunci:** Kebijakan Nol Covid; Pemerintah Cina; Keamanan Politik; Kapabilitas Pemerintah Cina

### INTRODUCTION

WHO officially announced on 11 February 2020 that Covid-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) was the virus that caused the spread of the odd case of pneumonia (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Before Covid-19 officially announced as pandemic in March 2020, its presence had already garnered international attention marked by WHO's notification of the virus on 30 January 2020 which was designated as a public health emergency of international concern (World Health Organization, 2020). As the number of Covid-19 cases continued to rise globally, and following statements made by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus as the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), the pandemic was recognized as a global health issue. Consequently, countries were encouraged to

establish autonomously preventive mechanisms and countermeasures to control the spread of the virus (World Health Organization, 2020). Therefore, after it was officially announced as a pandemic on 11 March 2020, countries gave their distinct responses as well as different treatments for this virus.

The delegation of handling this issue to the state level has certainly resulted in changes in approach, especially in the relationship between the state and society (Huang, 2010, 114). The state as the actor with the highest sovereignty has the authority to determine the absolute stance towards a "threat", especially not only to mitigate, but also to respond to existing phenomena. In the case of Covid-19, global health issues are a source of threat to a country, especially in terms of the existence of state components and the domino effect that occurs in other sectors, both military and non-military. Likewise, the Government of the

People's Republic of China (which will hereinafter be referred to as the Chinese Government). The Chinese government perceives Covid-19 as a disease that must be eradicated or eliminated (Burki, 2022). Therefore, since its inception in 2020, the Chinese Government has taken the initiative to implement a zero covid policy. This policy is a strategy to control and maximally suppress the number of Covid-19 by tracking the chain of spread, regulating the possibility of spread, and providing support during Covid-19 with the "Find, Test, Trace, Isolate and Support" method (Barcelona Institute for Global Health, 2020, 1). In the case of Covid-19 in China, the government implemented four focuses in implementing the zero covid policy, consisting of lockdown, procurement of tracer applications, mass Covid-19 tests, and quarantine (VOA News, 2022). The implementation of this policy had a significant effect as shown by the number of cases that never exceeded 150,000 starting from April 2020 until the end of the first quarter of 2022 (Worldometers, 2024). Reinforcing implementation of the policy, ministries in China are competing to issue regulations or news topics that can support the psychological side of society. News coverage during Covid-19 is dominated by news about medical treatments that can be taken, medical strategies, emergency assistance provided, guarantees provided by the government, economic progress, or assistance provided by companies (Wu et al., 2021, 8-11). Indicating significant progress by decreasing the number of infections and inpatients, the Chinese government finally officially relaxed the existing lockdown regulations (Burki, 2022). Despite the virus's mutating nature and evolving transmission patterns, the Chinese government continued to frame COVID-19 as a persistent national threat requiring strict eradication measures. As a result, the Zero-Covid policy was reinstated in response to the surge of the Omicron variant.

During the second implementation of the policy, the Chinese government encountered several obstacles such as food shortages (Dyer, 2022, 1), forced separation of family members due to centralized quarantine (Kanthor, 2022), absence of care and attention given to vulnerable groups (Zhan et al., 2022, 6), and culminated in an apartment fire in Xinjiang on 24 November 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The apartment fire in Xinjiang marked a critical turning point in public discontent, resulting in 10 deceased victims and 9 injuries (Law, 2022). The tragedy intensified criticism of the prevailing policy framework, as restrictions were perceived to have potentially hindered timely rescue operations. Thus, in November 2022, Chinese people filled

the streets to peacefully protest the government regarding the policy that had been in effect since the beginning of 2020. Unlike previous demonstrations that were primarily directed at local or provincial authorities, these protests were perceived as challenging the central executive leadership, marking the most significant such instance since the 1989 Tiananmen incident (Hale & Penafuerte, 2022). This phenomenon was also supported by political intent as several signs expressed their disappointment with Xi Jinping and asked him to step down after his third leadership appointment (Hale & Penafuerte, 2022). It should be underlined that China is an authoritarian state that strictly regulates public opinion and other voices. This centralized system of government leaves little room for people to express their opinions, especially towards the central government.

Within such a constrained public sphere, state narratives play a dominant role in shaping public discourse and political perceptions. This informational environment may contribute to comparatively high levels of expressed trust in government institutions. According to Edelman's survey reports (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021), a global organization that conducts trust barometer surveys, China always ranks in the top three in terms of their "trust in government". In Edelman's 2018, 2019, and 2020 reports, China itself ranked first in their trust in government consecutively despite the Covid-19 in 2020. While survey-based measures of trust in authoritarian contexts warrant careful interpretation, the consistently high rankings reported by Edelman suggest a notable pattern of expressed institutional confidence. Therefore, the event of public protests of the zero covid policy implemented by the Chinese Government in November 2022 is interesting to discuss.

Despite the lessons of the SARS outbreak, scholarship by Huang (2010), Gostin & Ayala (2017), and Malik et al. (2021) suggests that the Chinese government failed to institutionalize a "people-centric" health security framework. This lack of policy integration resulted in a rigid framework that prioritized state control over social welfare, eventually triggering widespread social disruption and dissent. As documented by Burki (2022) and Ge (2023), these tensions manifested in "soft protests" ranging from public mourning for whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang to digital critiques of policies neglecting vulnerable populations. While Weiss (2013) notes that such expressions of dissent can threaten an authoritarian regime's legitimacy, the specific mechanisms of state response remain under-examined. This research addresses this gap by

analyzing how the Chinese government navigated the tension between global health security and its political security during the Zero-COVID era. By examining the state's use of counter-narratives and enforcement to restore societal trust, this study reveals how the regime maintains its political legitimacy through the strategic management of conflict resolution.

Guided by Inoguchi's political security framework, this study asks: How did the Zero-COVID mass protests influence China's political security, particularly in relation to national objectives, threat perception, and the state's freedom of action? By situating the protests within these three dimensions, this research seeks to explore how zero covid protest interacts with regime legitimacy, stability, and the state's capacity to maintain policy autonomy. Rather than presuming institutional erosion or consolidation, the study examines how political security is articulated, challenged, and managed in an authoritarian context.

## METHOD

Methodologically, this research utilizes qualitative data to capture a comprehensive view of the objects of study, ranging from societal behavior to political motivations (Harahap, 2020). The applicability of this method is essential for translating complex social dynamics into a cohesive narrative, providing the flexibility needed to interpret the evolving state-society relationship during the pandemic. The research examines official government statements, press conferences, policy documents, and media reports related to the Zero-COVID mass protests. These sources include both Chinese domestic outlets and international media to capture variations in narrative framing and state response. Supporting the research, we used the definition and framework provided by Takashi Inoguchi. Although there are other intriguing thinkers such as Buzan et al. (1998) and Williams (2008), Inoguchi (2003) expands the discussion by offering a broader perspective on political security.

Inoguchi stated that political security is a form of behavior that gets permission and justification that allows actors to pursue and achieve national objectives that are protected from threats that mainly come from external sources, whether they are still potential or have become a reality for national actors in world politics (Inoguchi, 2003). However, through Buzan's, Williams' and Inoguchi's views on political security at the state level of analysis, we can underline the similarities between them; that political security is closely related to other sectors that can

threaten a state both from internal and external sources. Meanwhile, feeling "safe" according to the notion of political security based on the three refers to legitimacy, social order, and national objectives. Inoguchi in his article entitled Political Security: Toward a Broader Conceptualization said that in International Relations, a political threat comes from a psychological construction that causes a tendency to conceptualize "us" and "them" so that threats are often considered as something external. Meanwhile, derived from the definition of political security offered earlier by Inoguchi, he concluded that there are three components in political security, consist of (1) the presence of national objectives (the goals of a state), (2) the potential/existence of the presence of a threat which is mostly interpreted as an external threat, and (3) Pursuing and achieving freedom of action (Inoguchi, 2003).

This article examines how the Zero-Covid policy protests may affect political security in China through a state-level analytical perspective. To guide this analysis, the study adopts Takashi Inoguchi's political security framework, which emphasizes national objectives, threat perception, and the freedom of political action. The framework is particularly relevant because it takes a nation centric approach and recognizes the continuous interaction between internal and external threats within an anarchic international system. In addition, Inoguchi refers to freedom of political action as the state's ability to formulate, justify, and implement policy decisions independently within an anarchic international system while maintaining the internal stability necessary to preserve its strategic autonomy.

The analysis is conducted deductively, using Inoguchi's framework as the conceptual guide. Through systematic examination of textual and audiovisual materials, the study identifies recurring themes and patterns related to legitimacy, stability, and political authority. To enhance the validity of the research, this study applies methodological and data triangulation by cross-referencing official government documents, domestic media reports, and international sources within the same period. Based on these dimensions, a structured coding scheme was developed to examine how political security is expressed and debated across different narratives. While this approach improves analytical consistency, the study also recognizes several limitations, including the potential bias found in both state-controlled narratives and external media representations. Although cross-verification helps reduce these risks, the findings remain interpretative in nature, which is common in qualitative research.

However, these sources will help the research to find common threads and support the argument of the relationship between political security and the zero covid policy protest event. The research question is addressed by explaining how the 2022 zero covid policy protests impacted the political security dynamics of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Zero Covid Policy and the Phenomenon of Protest in China

On June 7, 2020, the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China published a Chinese Defense White Paper titled "Fighting Covid-19: China in Action." This document contains a timeline of the spread of the Covid-19 virus in China and how the government has been able to tackle it with applicable policies. In addition to describing the timeline and policies, this document also highlights the preventive measures and successes achieved through the implemented policies by the government, including reducing the daily virus rate to single digits within two months and being able to maintain Hubei Province, where Wuhan City is located,

as the epicenter of the virus within three months (China's State Council Information Office, 2020). For analytical purposes, this article categorizes the timeline of China's Covid-19 response into three stages: **Early Response and Policy Formation, Policy Implementation, and Policy Adjustment and Aftermath.** (Table 1)

The introduction of the Zero-Covid policy illustrates the strong central authority of the Chinese Communist Party leadership under Xi Jinping. As the General Secretary of the Party and the country's top political leader, Xi Jinping played a central role in defining Covid-19 as a critical national issue that required strict containment measures and should be eradicated. His firm stance on Covid-19 as a threat also justified the mobilization of resources, which would later lead to any legal action taken by the government to achieve the concept of "secure" from this threat.

Therefore, Xi Jinping mobilized the resources of the country at his disposal, including relevant ministries and institutions. The presence of centralized instructions through a top-down approach has enabled all state institutions to move under the same command: under Xi Jinping's vision, favor, and control. Due to the harmony of command and

**Table 1. Covid-19 timeline and zero covid policy in China**

Early Response and Policy Formation	
December 2019–January 2020	The first case of pneumonia was reported by Hubei Provincial Hospital to the Wuhan Jiangnan Center for Disease Prevention and Control, which then issued an emergency notification to the Chinese Ministry of Health. In response, the government sent a team of experts to investigate the case and advised the public to wear masks in public spaces. Under the coordination of the China CDC and several research institutions, pathogen research was conducted while continuing to provide updates to the WHO, regional organizations, and relevant regions such as Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. Once the pathogen was identified, the Wuhan Health Department and the Chinese Ministry of Health published guidelines for handling the virus. Research institutions in China began distributing test kits for detecting the disease to local hospitals. The Ministry of Health also held a national teleconference and sent epidemiologists to investigate the possibility of human-to-human transmission. On January 20, Xi Jinping ordered the strengthening of efforts to deal with the virus, emphasizing the protection of public life and health, transparency of information, and increased international cooperation.
Policy Implementation	
January 2020–February 2020	On January 23 <sup>rd</sup> , 2020, movement in and out of Wuhan was officially closed by land and maritime routes, as well as access to airports and railway stations. At the same time, Xi Jinping announced the concept of a war on the virus with four main principles: staying confident, coming together in solidarity, adopting a science-based approach, and taking measured measures. This policy was supported by the deployment of 346 medical teams consisting of 42,600 health workers and 965 public health workers, as well as the deployment of military personnel to Wuhan. The Chinese government also implemented a response strategy with four main steps: (1) early detection, (2) early reporting, (3) early isolation, and (4) early handling. Less than a month after the policy was implemented, February 18 <sup>th</sup> , the number of recovered patients exceeded the number of new infections. A day later, Xi Jinping held another meeting with the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee to emphasize that epidemic monitoring would continue alongside economic and social recovery efforts.
Policy Adjustment and Aftermath	
February 2020–May 2020	Provinces in China began to ease regulations, followed by China's State Council proposing guidelines for the resumption of work for the public. Hubei Province reopened in March, followed by Wuhan in April 2020. Following the issuance of guidelines for the resumption of work, China's State Council again issued guidelines on an ongoing basis. This underscores the return of China and its people to normal activities as before.

Source: (China's State Council Information Office, 2020)

this holistically planned concept, the desired results can be seen quickly and generate public satisfaction. Therefore, the concept of absolute command in handling Covid-19 in China has had a positive impact and helped strengthen China's political security in terms of legitimacy and public trust in agencies, institutions, and the government itself. Notably, this comprehensive single command approach is supported by Xi's efforts to make Covid-19 a security issue that everyone perceives in the same way. The published white paper document also includes that the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia will be classified as class B in the People's Republic of China's law on the Prevention and Management of Communicable Diseases, but its handling will be included in Class A where its handling provides an official legal basis for mass quarantine (CGTN, 2024). Consequently, this holistic approach is justified by the mobilization of considerable resources and the implementation of binding policies that are impartial and significant. It is evident that, according to CGTN (2024), This policy also proved to be one of the most effective measures for slowing the spread of the virus, which led to its implementation nationwide.

Far from merely reinforcing internal political security, this strategic framework also allowed China to demonstrate its leadership in coordinating international responses to Covid-19 by the establishment of the WHO–China Joint Mission on Covid-19, which consisted of 25 experts from China, Japan, Germany, South Korea, Russia, Nigeria, Singapore, the United States, and the World Health Organization itself. This joint prevention was formed to conduct a nine-day field visit to Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Wuhan. This is done to continue to convey the message of Chinese diplomacy to the international stage regarding the prevention, control, and management of Covid-19 China's State Council Information Office (2020).

Entering 2021 after China's success in suppressing the spread of the virus, Chinese people have a normal life and are even free to travel to shopping centres or restaurants (Uretsky, 2022). However, the government came up with a new dynamic zero covid policy to tackle the new variant virus (Uretsky, 2022) and was even put under greater pressure than before to tackle the existing Omicron wave (CGTN, 2024). With the approaching 2022 Winter Olympics Games held in Beijing (Feng, 2022) and the Nanjing Outbreak phenomenon causing contagion to other regions (BBC, 2021), measures to tighten policy implementation were intensified. The four focal activities adopted by China's zero covid policy; lockdown, procurement of tracer applications,

mass Covid-19 testing, and quarantine (VOA News, 2022) continue to be enforced. Therefore, people who have a good perception of the government's policy in tackling the Covid-19 virus are starting to be pushed by the restrictions in the social and economic fields. This is also the reason zero covid policy protests occurred to criticize the policy launched by Xi Jinping after the triggering event occurred; the apartment fire in Xinjiang that claimed victims. The second period of policy implementation did not signify better conditions as the previous one and it was worsened by the accident caused by the restriction of policies that were deemed infeasible, unreliable, and irrelevant policies.

In practice, civil unrest and localized dissent are far from a novel phenomenon in the Chinese political landscape. However, the rest of the world knows that the last protest by the Chinese people against their government ended with a death toll that was never exposed, the Tiananmen Protests of 4 June 1989 (BBC, 2021). The protests demanded economic and political reforms, reduced corruption, censorship and restrictions on human rights (Amnesty International, 2024). In the evening of 3 June 1989, the Chinese government officially dispatched heavily armed troops and armed vehicles to "clear" the protesters in Tiananmen (Amnesty International, 2024). After the dispatch of the troops, the protesters were also unfairly dealt with in the form of imprisonment, detention, torture, and even execution under the pretext of "counter-revolutionary" (Amaranggana & Patnistik, 2024). In 2017, according to Sir Alan Donald's statement as the British Ambassador to China, the total casualties of this event reached 10,000 people (BBC, 2021). Since then, Tiananmen has become a banned topic, censored, and even buried for generations to come. With this ban, public discussion or anyone who discusses it will be subject to actions such as human rights lawyer and activist Chow Hang-tung being arrested in Hong Kong (Amnesty International, 2023). Despite this, protest activities are normal in China (Henry, 2023). However, Henry (2023) states that protests are usually directed at local governments or certain agencies, not directly at the General Secretary of the CPC as the central government. (Table 2)

In the case of the Zero Covid Policy Protest, something interesting happened when there was a banner displayed on Beijing's Sitong Bridge on 13 October 2022 that read "*bu zuo nucai, zuo gongmin*" or we don't want to be slaves, but we want to be people. This coincided with the day Xi Jinping was consolidating power and conferring his third term at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of

**Table 2. Types of Protests in China**

1999	The Falun Gong protests in April 1999 were echoed by practitioners of Falun Gong (a spiritual group) over the violence one of its members had received a few years earlier. Subsequently, the Chinese government eliminated the movement by calling it a “cult”. Intimidation and persecution were carried out by a specialized unit called the 610 Office where many Falun Gong practitioners were arrested and imprisoned during the protests.
2008	The protests in Sichuan Province concerned the construction of an unsafe school that collapsed when an earthquake struck the region. The central government decided to investigate the matter, but in the end declared that the deaths of the students due to the collapsed building were due to natural causes.
July 2009	Protests by Uyghurs, the majority Muslim ethnic group in China, in Xinjiang erupted due to the issue of Han migration incentivized by the Chinese government and protests of widespread economic and cultural discrimination. Nearly 200 people were killed, and the Chinese government is still holding ethnic Uyghurs in reeducation camps.
December 2009	International activists, foreign governments, and the Chinese public are protesting the detention of Nobel Peace Laureate and democracy advocate Liu Xiaobo. Liu Xiaobo helped draft a petition for basic human rights called Charter 08. Despite this, Liu remained detained for 11 years and died in prison in 2017.
2011	The first pro-democracy protests in Tunisia and then the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa had the effect of calling for protests in China through online platforms. State media claimed the activities were a “disruption of the age-old order” and said that foreign media mocked the protests as “performance art”. More than 100 activists on online platforms such as blogs and Twitter (now X) were put under surveillance, arrested, or put under house arrest. From this point on, the words “performance art” were often used to avoid offence.
2012–2015	Since Xi Jinping’s ascension as China’s General Secretary, controls on freedom of speech have increased, plus controls on NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) through the Foreign NGO Law. However, this has not dampened the spirit of the feminist movement in China, which is known for promoting women’s rights in China and taking to the streets. The government has responded with slanderous campaigns, shutting down gender groups in universities, and censoring online discussions about gender and women’s rights. In 2015, five prominent people from the movement were arrested and detained.
2016	Hundreds of retired members of the Chinese military have protested to the government for better benefits and budget cuts. The government responded by giving an ambiguous statement.
2018	The large number of detentions of protesters led them to appoint human rights lawyers. However, the Chinese government went on a crackdown, interrogating and detaining nearly 250 lawyers. The wives of 4 detained lawyers-Li Heping, Wang Quanzhang, Xie Yanyi, and Zhai Yanmin-protested against the government by shaving their hair. The four lawyers were released.
2019–2020	The New Citizen Movement is a Chinese activist network founded by legal expert Xu Zhiyong in 2012 to support the promotion of government transparency and expose corruption. The lawyers and activists were targeted by the government in 2019 after attending an informal event discussing the country’s civic and current affairs. Legal expert Xu was sentenced to 14 years in prison in April 2023.

Sources: (Amnesty International, 2023) and (Maizland & Baumgartner, 2022).

China. The banner contains a list of disappointments in the form of lockdowns, authoritarianism, and food shortages (Henry, 2023). It was followed by the Foxconn factory protest where many employees fled due to forced quarantine and not receiving bonuses (Henry, 2023), and culminated in the peak event when apartments in Xinjiang caught fire (Human Right Watch, 2023) and people's disappointment with the tightening of policies that became more pressing every day, hampering the evacuation process (Law, 2022). People taking to the streets and carrying the A4 white paper used during the protests provided a new symbol for resistance especially to end the strict zero covid policy. This white A4 paper is used as an action against censorship activities carried out by the Chinese Government so that this protest is often known as a white paper protest (Davidson, 2022). Yicheng Huang, an exiled protestor now living in Germany, told Deutsche Welle Media that our Chinese Government is more afraid of the white paper movement than the Tiananmen Incident because the protest targets Xi Jinping's authoritarian regime directly (Li, 2024).

### **Chinese Political Process, Stability and Legitimacy**

China's political system is characterized by a single-party structure dominated by the Communist Party of China (CPC). This institutional arrangement is crucial for understanding how the Chinese government maintains political stability and political security. By centralizing authority within the Party, the CPC oversees key state institutions, including the State Council, the military, the courts, and legislative bodies, allowing the Party leadership to coordinate policy and control political narratives across multiple levels of governance (BBC, 2025). The system is highly hierarchical, with power concentrated at the top of the Party leadership under Xi Jinping as General Secretary. Within this structure, the Politburo Standing Committee functions as the central decision-making body responsible for shaping major political and policy directions in China (Congressional Research Service, 2025). This centralized political structure enables the Chinese leadership to mobilize state institutions and society in a coordinated manner, which plays an important role in maintaining the legitimacy and authority of the Party leadership. By consolidating political authority within a unified command structure, the government can align national policy agendas and coordinate actions across different sectors of society. This coordination allows the state to shape public perceptions and encourage collective mobilization toward nationally defined objectives, thereby reinforcing the political

legitimacy of the Party and sustaining the dominance of the CPC in national governance.

Holbig and Gilley (2010) wrote that China has been able to maintain the legitimacy of its government over time through legitimacy supported by several factors; (1) economic performance, (2) patriotism, (3) ideology, (4) culture, (5) governance, and (6) democracy. On another occasion, Reilly (2004) said that China has relied on its legitimacy on two pillars since the 1980s comprising the economy and nationalism. Building upon the legitimacy frameworks identified by Reilly (2004), Holbig & Gilley (2010) and Zhongyuan (2022) further illustrate how the CCP maintains its role as a singular power center. This centralized governance is instrumental in aligning national interests with the party's long-term survival. We can combine the statements of Zhongyuan (2022) and Reilly (2004) which illustrate that China uses nationalism and economics to be able to form an output of legitimacy which ultimately makes the formation of trust, credibility, and capability of the Chinese Government towards the society itself. This can be reflected in Xi Jinping's eagerness to pump up the economy, illustrated by the increase in China's Gross Income which grew by 49% from 2013-2019 (Statista, 2024), as well as Xi Jinping's surveillance efforts to maintain the stability and control of the Chinese Communist Party through nationalism framing such as the 2017 NGO Law (Tenzin, 2022). However, as Holbig & Gilley (2010) argued, there are also factors that must be maintained to gain stable legitimacy such as the culture and ideology that Xi Jinping has brought to the party during his time in office. Carrying the same spirit of the Chinese revolution as Mao Zedong, Xi Jinping proved the phrase "Make China Great Again" by adapting and adjusting the ideological values he wanted to convey to the existing socio-economic situation. This can unite various classes with one identical political thought. Under the ideological framework of the "China Dream," Xi Jinping articulated a comprehensive vision for national transformation. As categorized by Chinese Posters (2013), this vision comprises five core pillars: (1) national rejuvenation aimed at restoring China's historical prominence; (2) multidimensional strength across political, economic, diplomatic, and military sectors; (3) socio-moral cultivation to build a "civilized" state; (4) social harmony to ensure class stability and national unity; and (5) environmental sustainability under the "Beautiful China" initiative.

For China, political legitimacy is a very important factor to ensure the sustainability of party power. The existing legitimacy will form voluntary

cooperation to obey and trust the existing government (Zhai, 2023). In his article, Zhai (2023) said that the Chinese government successfully proved that legitimacy does not only come from voting as the west does, but can be from Confucian traditions, state-led nationalism, government policies, and the performance of the economy. Therefore, the Chinese government's efforts to continue to foster public trust, especially using narrative approaches through speech acts or media control, are highly emphasized. The use of inclusive narratives or discourses where the government includes the word "society" is one that is often done to create collective awareness of the creation of a policy or attitude based on common goods. This is then what makes the "affixing" of the word democracy in China also created.

On 2 November 2019, Xi Jinping first stated that "Chinese people's democracy is a democracy with a thorough process" (Zhongyuan, 2022), followed by framing the management of critical issues such as handling Covid-19 in China in 2020. In a document published by the Information Office of the Chinese State Council: "Fighting Covid-19: China in Action" stated that the fight against Covid-19 is a people's war against the virus China's State Council Information Office (2020). This can be one of the strategies to reduce political turmoil if this effort fails. Due to the use and positioning of the people as a "joint war" metaphor, this metaphor places the government and the public on the same crisis issue sheet, thus encouraging a strong legitimacy output that convinces the public that the government is doing this solely for the common good. Despite the disappointment of Dr Li's death as a Covid-19 whistleblower (BBC, 2021), the framing of Covid-19 as a "health issue" and "public interest" prioritized through the people's war on virus led the Chinese Government to successfully maintain its domestic political stability through a public framing to support the implementation of Chinese Government policies. In the 2nd part of the Chinese white paper document, Xi Jinping as General Secretary and Leader of China will act as the central command and inject "solidarity" and "confidence" to achieve the main goal of "prioritizing people's health and lives". The injection serves as a patriotism factor that can maintain the legitimacy of the government at that time. In addition to making patriotism the first gate to frame China's crisis management in the face of Covid-19, Xi Jinping also reinforced other legitimizing factors such as economic and social. The International Department of the Central Committee of the CPC (2020) stated that on 25 January 2020, which coincided with the Lunar New Year, Xi Jinping chaired a meeting with

the Politburo Standing Committee to discuss efforts to prevent and control Covid-19 and that it must be the responsibility of the government to be able to protect its people. By making a statement that the government will take responsibility and ensure that people can celebrate the New Year, Xi Jinping fosters a sense of "trust" by assuring the functioning of the government at a critical time. Based on documents from China's State Council Information Office (2020), when the recovery and discharge rates of Covid patients first scored higher than the confirmed positive patients nationwide on 18 February 2020, the next day Xi Jinping immediately chaired a meeting with the Politburo Standing Committee to follow up on the economic and social aspects of concern in Covid-19 prevention. This was done to reinforce the economic and social foundations in shaping the political legitimacy of the Chinese Government. The goal of this policy focuses on being able to return people's lives to normal after the data shows positive numbers. In this case, the focus of the policy has causality with each other. When life returns to normal, China's social and economic needs are met. This certainly benefits both parties. People can regain the "freedom" to mobilize and carry out their activities including working, receiving salaries, gathering with family or friends to fulfil themselves both materially and non-materially. On the other hand, if the social and economic aspects return to normal, it also benefits China because it can prevent greater losses because the economy must stop due to Covid-19. To avoid the economic and social conflicts that occur and to focus the crisis management efforts on health issues, the Chinese government classified Covid-19 at level B in the Law on Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases but applied level A to its handling (China's State Council Information Office, 2020). This gives the government full authority to enforce mandatory quarantine and control price increases in the market (China's State Council Information Office, 2020). In addition to this, in handling Covid-19, there is a massive narrative framing of China's achievements and censorship to filter public information and opinions about this policy (Zhai, 2023).

After the easing of regulations in 2020, China was hit again by a massive wave of Omicron variant Covid-19 in 2022. This has led to the re-activation of the existing zero covid policy in society, even stricter than before. With the pressure to reach "0", economic and social disruption began to occur in society. According to an article written by Zhai, a nurse had to die from asthma and could not prove her negative test results so she could not receive hospital treatment. Not only that, there were also fatalities

who had heart attacks and could not leave due to their home areas undergoing quarantine. This was followed by the forced separation of the vulnerable and their guardians during the quarantine. In fact, on 19 September 2022, 27 people with unproven test results died in a bus accident that was used to transport them to the government quarantine facility. This successive series of events was blamed on the tightening of the policy. This frustration culminated in a fire in Xinjiang in November 2022 before protesters filled the streets of China on a massive scale and took place in several provinces to highlight this frustration (Zhai, 2023). In response to this dilemma, the Chinese government chose to rebuild the people's trust in the party and its leaders. To smoothen the political stability of the Chinese government in 2022, the strategy was to be transparent about the infection rate as well as news that showed the government's support for economic and social recovery. This was used to close the "hole" created by the multidimensional effects so that the Chinese public would be focused on health alone (framing the issue as a health issue). The government also fosters nationalism in its public policy campaigns to foster a sense of patriotism in the people and support the party's real goals. Uniquely, the Chinese government managed to apply the concept of "democracy", which serves not only to encourage and motivate the internal mobilization of the public towards the government's policy to get rid of the virus as soon as possible but also involves other actors besides the government itself in handling this case. Characterized by various actors in the fields of research, health, and society (China's State Council Information Office, 2020), Xi Jinping uses the same method as Mao Zedong did; *the Patriotic Public Health Campaign Tradition* by embracing the concept of people's war on viruses. So, how can China finally emphasize this to non-state actors and not provide a gap for political turmoil on the issue? by framing China's "people's war on virus" and emphasizing the goal of "returning to normal life" and public media control. With this, all parties involved focus on tackling the health issue with the realization that the security crisis is a shared responsibility and a "shared war" which, if realized, will be a "shared victory".

### Threatening Presence for China

In Andrew and Scobell's (2012) book, China's security perspective can be categorized through four leading aspects; (1) their own home or within the country, (2) neighbors or countries adjacent to China, (3) regional systems around or tied to China, and (4) the rest of the world globally (beyond the

Asian perspective). These four aspects are divided based on the priorities implemented by the Chinese Government and how they may directly affect China's security. In 2019, China published a white paper document titled *China's National Defense in the New Era*. In a review published by Anthony H. Cordesman (2019) as Former Chairman Emeritus for Strategy at CSIS, he wrote down some of his views on China's security perspective from the white paper. Cordesman (2019) said in his review that China perceives ASEAN and Asia as a platform to spread its "peace" mission through cooperative and organizational efforts with the goal of strengthening peace. In addition, in this white paper, China also perceives threats to its country that consist of Taiwan, Tibet, Turkestan. These are three regions that are considered separatist and will threaten border disputes. Previously, China was known for its offensive military approach to national security matters. However, in the 2019 white paper, it stated that the PLA (People Liberation Army) still lags far behind other military prowess, in which case China declared that its military is "defensive". China considers its geopolitical superiority due to its history, economy, culture, and military strength. Later, this is how China perceives itself in international relations (Swaine & Tellis, 2000). In the same book, Swaine & Tellis (2000) wrote that the quest for hegemony for China is a "mission" to achieve universal acceptance of increased power, status and influence for China for China's own legitimacy. In the time span until before Covid-19, the Chinese Government still placed traditional threats as the focus considering that it even made the economic pillar as its source of legitimacy. In addition, based on historical values, China, which had experienced the age of humiliation, always ensures that this does not happen in the future again. Therefore, the focus of security still revolves around traditional security even though non-traditional security issues have begun to enter the realm of International Relations to become the concern of state actors.

Therefore, when China brings the concept of war on viruses to non-traditional health issues, in an interview conducted by moderator Stephanie Desmon and Amesh Adalja as a Senior Researcher at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, Adalja said that China's actions to be able to eliminate the virus to the point of zero or zero covid policy are impossible and denounce the virus itself biologically. This is because the Covid virus comes from the same 30% originality as the flu virus. Therefore, the desire to 100% eliminate this virus is considered impossible and instead he suggested that the strength

of immunity begin to be built in the community or society. This strength will encourage people to adapt to the existing virus with the help of prevention tools that are provided and accessible (masks, test kits, etc.). Adalja also added that people cannot be “conjured” to be ready for a virus that did not exist in early and mid-2019. China cannot lock people up and instantly return to 2019 when the Covid-19 virus did not exist (Adalja, 2023). However, since this “inaction” came to fruition, the first time the Covid-19 policy was eased and people were allowed to go about their normal activities, China’s economy has experienced a rapid increase of 18.3% compared to last year despite the pandemic (Gębska & Krukowska, 2022). After facing more than a year of leniency and feeling free from the virus, the reactivation of the policy began to emerge as public unrest.

Social unrest was created due to the Chinese government’s re-tightening of policies on society. Although only a few were exposed to Covid-19, the government still requires mass tests every three days and implements a quarantine policy for one city. This has led to unrest fueled by uncertainty. The government’s repressive measures coupled with the uncertainty of the timeline of this policy triggered the thoughts of people who wondered “until when will they have to undergo this policy after almost a year of relaxation?” (McDonell, 2022). In his article, Donell (2022) states that the Chinese government itself is indeed stubborn to fight the virus because of its view as an “external threat” to Covid-19. The Chinese government cited the arrival of airline passengers from other countries as the reason why Covid-19 was carried and developed in China. The unrest that occurred in the community then turned into actions carried out by the community as a form of response to the existing unrest, such as the Foxconn factory incident (McGregor, 2022), the emergence of terms in Chinese social media to avoid censorship with content criticizing the government, and the culmination of the Xinjiang apartment fire (Human Right Watch, 2023). In fact, China’s biggest concern during Covid-19 was centered on social hardship in society due to the government’s efforts to maintain people’s trust in the government. If it does not materialize or run smoothly, it is seen as an obstacle for the Chinese Communist Party, especially its General Secretary, Xi Jinping, to create the first consecutive three-year presidential ascension in Chinese history after the law implemented by Deng Xiaoping (McDonell, 2022). In addition, when the zero covid policy was enacted for the second time, the economy did not improve and even GDP growth slowed down by 4.3% due to Omicron (McDonell, 2022). The

character of Omicron, which is different from the previous virus, means that the same policy cannot be applied to different viruses. Notably, Covid-19 is a new threat to China, which was originally oriented towards traditional security. Therefore, the readiness of the state to respond to issues that are relatively “new” labelled as threats will certainly affect the capabilities of the Chinese Government in the eyes of the public. When the government applies the concept of “defeat” which should not be appropriate considering that this issue is different from traditional security issues, it shows China’s lack of readiness in dealing with this non-traditional issue. Apparently, non-traditional issues can be a source and support for little ripple that can disrupt traditional security in a country. Therefore, covid fatigue began to flare up among the Chinese people and various questions and unrest finally culminated during the Xinjiang Fire Incident where people finally took to the streets and protested government policies, including censorship activities symbolized by HVS A4 paper.

### **Chinese Government Capacity in Political Security: Independence and Stability**

China’s decision to embrace the concept of socialism in running its state life certainly forms the factors of independence and stability for China. According to Bao (2024), this is important to underline because in a country that embraces the ideology of socialism, maintaining ideological cohesion is very important because the state will be formed from unity and harmony between social classes. Therefore, anything that causes ideological conflict within the state will threaten its political legitimacy. So far, in responding to protests in China either against institutions or local governments, the state’s response to protests has been categorized into three forms. These responses are; (1) accommodation, where the government fulfils the demands of the protest issues raised, (2) repression, in the Chinese Government, acts of repression can be physical and non-physical. Physical in the form of violence aimed directly at protesters while non-physical will focus on detention, imprisonment, and economic sanctions, (3) tolerance, this occurs when the government allows protests to occur (Bao, 2024). Under Xi Jinping’s leadership in 2013-2019, the regime increased surveillance and repressive measures to quell protest activities in China and maintain political stability. Hence, the role of state capabilities in channeling and handling protests to achieve political stability (Chen, 2020). Chen said in his article that over the past two decades (2013-2019), the Chinese people who have contributed to protests have varied

widely. They range from students, private workers, industrial workers, farmers, etc. They protested with increasingly confrontational methods due to social disillusionment rooted in frustration, grief, and tension caused by rapid economic growth.

Xi Jinping's leadership is characterized by a rigid adherence to the "Four Confidences" (Zhai, 2023). By institutionalizing confidence in China's unique path, theory, system, and culture, Xi reinforces the ideological boundaries of the state, effectively utilizing these pillars to consolidate political security and resist external ideological influence. Therefore, in political practice, efforts to maintain political stability and independence, he will imply the practice of socialism where anything that is considered disruptive, different, and causes differences or conflicts will be considered a "threat". This has also shaped the culture in Chinese society to always abide by the decisions and policies of their government for the sake of good intentions and maintaining social harmony. One of these leadership cultures was passed down by Mao Zedong where he always said, "if they follow orders from above, then they will win the war and defeat the enemy" (Chai & Mason, 2022). In Chen's (2020) article, In order to tackle dissent in society and maintain its political stability, the Chinese Government implements a *weiwen* (stability maintenance) system through providing financial incentives, strict surveillance, or even crackdowns on protesters. Government repressive measures can never be seen as simply "more" or "less". Repressive measures tend to be selective and always have a composition that combines repression, tolerance, and facilitation (Tilly: 1978, Chen: 2020). Ultimately, how the Chinese government turns the issue of protest and action itself into something bearable depends on the capacity of the government itself (Chen, 2020). Since the orientation of handling protests in the Xi Jinping era is more towards aggressive actions (Chen, 2020), to channel the protest activities, the option of executing protests in social media becomes a tool for protesters to reduce the probability of repression and increase the probability of success by taking advantage of existing narratives (Yang, 2016). To address this, the Chinese government also launched the Law on National Security and Cybersecurity, which established a new state department, the State Information Office. This agency will be tasked with providing legitimacy and information for government technology to collect and monitor the situation across the country (Chen, 2020). Technology also helps the government to not only monitor but minimize direct violent confrontations and identify public grievances. Therefore, according to Chen, the strict surveillance

under Xi Jinping's leadership is supported by the growth of increasingly sophisticated technology that facilitates the government's surveillance of social unrest that has the potential to become a "threat" (Chen, 2020).

At the beginning of the implementation of the zero covid policy, the Chinese government gained enormous trust among its people. In addition to the culture that Mao Zedong had passed down from his leadership characteristics as written by Chai & Mason (2022), they also categorized this public trust into three factors comprising self-interest, conscious disregard for transparency, and nationalist pride (Chai & Mason, 2022). Trust based on these three factors results in compliance and a sense of voluntariness to follow the policies set by the government. The government's response to this public health emergency is then interesting because at the beginning of its emergence the government became very sensitive and defensive about the existing issues such as the detention of Dr Li, while when Covid-19 was officially declared, the government's attitude showed a change back. He et al. (2020) said that the duality in the Chinese Government's response to the public health crisis is divided into two rounds; (1) passive and non-transparent at the beginning of the spread; (2) strong and integrated response during the public health campaign. This is also supported internationally by WHO as being "instrumental in China's response to Covid-19" (He et al., 2020). To strengthen policy coordination and application, the Chinese government implemented a system of rewards and punishments for local officials to encourage policy implementation in each region. The reward given is in the form of a promotion and the punishment is to be released from the position currently held (He et al., 2020). According to He et al.'s research, there were at least 8 officials who received promotions for their good performance and 6 officials who resigned due to their performance from February-April 2020. This tactic of punishment and reward is also used by the Chinese Government to stabilize central politics. According to (Chai & Mason, 2022) the Chinese Government will delegate the blame to local officials to provide a distinction that the central government is a caring and competent government in contrast to corrupt and incompetent local officials.

After China's success in dealing with the Covid-19 virus at the beginning of its spread and easing, this policy was finally implemented again strictly in 2022 due to Omicron which caused the number of Covid-19 in China to increase. The drastic changes to the freedom gained for more than a year

by the Chinese people certainly had a big impact on the confidence in the credibility of the Chinese Government. When the prolonged lockdown was re-imposed in Shanghai in spring 2022, support for those who opposed the control measures began to rise on social media and in everyday life (Chai & Mason, 2022). According to Chai & Mason, this public divergence concerns the key to public compliance and trust. This key works when government policies are in line with their interests. Therefore, the difference in public response at the beginning of Covid-19 and the implementation of the zero covid policy in 2022 has also led to different opinions. As far back as December 2022, there were 23 protests spread across 17 cities in China. These protest centers included Beijing as the capital, Shanghai as the country's financial center, and various university centers; Peking University, Tsinghua University in Beijing, and Communication University of China, Nanjing (Dotto & Shveda, 2022). In response to the protests, the Chinese government faced an urgent situation where at the time of the demands, Xi Jinping was just about to be sworn in as the government for the third consecutive term (McDonell, 2022), China had just conducted diplomacy that demonstrated the country's capabilities through the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics (Tello & Vergara, 2024), and the economy was under pressure, especially the disrupted supply chain (Bradsher et al., 2022). China's economy, which was still progressing between 2019, 2020, and 2021, experienced a shock by showing only 0.5% growth in 2022 (Statista, 2024). As a country that derives most of its gross income from investment and export activities, a shock to economic growth is certainly a sign of concern for the spillover effect on the economy.

In the end, 7 December 2022 after the protests that occurred in November 2022, referred to as Wednesday's turn in policy, the Chinese Health Committee conveyed some changes that will occur in the existing Covid-19 control policy in China; (1) Lateral tests (antigens) will replace the role of PCR when there is a condition that requires people to be able to show their test results. PCR is still needed for some places such as schools, hospitals, and nursing homes, (2) Lockdown will be applied as necessary to a narrower target location and will not be applied to a full city, (3) Lockdown times identified as high risk, must be dissolved after 5 days when there are no more Covid cases in the vicinity, (4) Schools will remain open with full student attendance as long as there is no outbreak spreading on campus or school, and (5) Prohibition to block doors and emergency exits during a fire. This also coincides with the Lunar

New Year (January 2023) where it is expected that the economy will return to normal to create stability again (Mao, 2022).

From this phenomenon, when there is a difference of opinion in the public and it concerns moral legitimacy, the Chinese government will not implement repressive actions. On the contrary, the government will work together to respond and fulfill the demands of the people. Despite the phenomenon of protests that focused on criticizing Xi Jinping for stepping down from the Chinese government as well as protests due to censorship in the country, the government eventually stabilized and demonstrated its capability and independence without the need for a political revolution. Despite the small ripple among the protesters, the Chinese government fulfilled the demands related to social justice and morality and ignored the demands for political reform. This is what happened when the Zero Covid Policy protests were held. Moving on from the culmination of the turning point of the protests, the apartment fire in Xinjiang, people were outraged that the incident took the lives of other people. Therefore, although there have been previous protests or events that lead to resistance with political intonations, this protest still has an outline on morality where the Xinjiang fire became a turning point event. Therefore, the measures implemented by the Chinese government also focus on the downgrading of policies and the reintroduction of concessions to existing policies as a fulfilment of the heavy demand for social justice and morality. Protests are not a little ripple factor that fuels upheaval or movement, but a little ripple among other big ripples. In the end, whether there are protests, the Chinese government still considers the loosening of policies due to the impact on the country, especially in the economic field. Therefore, the political dynamics that occur are not the dynamics of the political system, but the political impact that exists in that time span. In fact, after the series of protests that occurred against China's policies towards Covid-19, China still placed the top position in various aspects, especially economics and politics in the Edelman Trust Barometer survey in 2022 (Edelman Survey, 2022) and 2023 (Edelman Survey, 2023). It even saw a 1-point increase in its citizens' belief column that "my family and I will be better off in five years" in 2023 (Edelman Survey, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, it safe to say that the protests of the zero covid policy coincide with China's economic distress where it is experiencing stagnation and the threat of

a crisis that has the potential to cause more losses, Xi Jinping's interest in being able to rise for three consecutive terms, and China's efforts to regain its image in the international community. Therefore, the government finally took the accommodating path towards the protests. This is certainly not explicitly applied as an accommodative action to the demands of the protests, especially protests with political indications. The Chinese government compensated by filling the "gap" desired by the people on a moral and social basis so that other demands could be "considered" to have been fulfilled in full. If we look at the three indicators that describe China's political security, then from this conclusion, researchers can conclude that China can still maintain its national objectives by ensuring the system, stability, and legitimacy of the party remain on top despite the many new pillars that contribute to it. Furthermore, Covid-19 as a threat was also successfully framed into a common threat and China's maneuvers towards non-traditional security can be said to be fast in adaptation and passionate during Covid-19. Finally, in reflecting China's independence and stability, it must be admitted that China has a good defensive mentality in its society and government. Starting with the implementation of a policy that seemed "contradictory" at the beginning of its appearance to the international community and then bringing the first success among other countries, the Chinese government and society proved that China's leadership and government credibility can be relied on even though its methods are at odds with the ways carried out by other countries. Until the policy backfired on the Chinese people themselves to fight against the government, the Chinese government was able to embrace the people with a political process that only relies on output process and performance-based legitimacy. This proves that the entire Chinese government can act independently and confidently to maintain the stability of the Communist Party in the eyes of the public, strategic partners, and the world.

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