Opinion

How nationalism and xenophobia drive China's 'zero-COVID' policy

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After the end of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s 20th National Congress on October 22, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz paid a visit to China in early November. He was the first G-7 leader to visit China since the COVID-19 pandemic. At the Xi-Scholz meeting, China made a 'concession' to Germany by agreeing to approve the use of BioNTech's COVID vaccine for foreigners living in China, but not for its 1.4 billion Chinese people. Why foreigners only? Why would any country distribute an internationally acclaimed COVID-19 vaccine to non-local people only?

This small example is one part of a larger trend: the intensification of xenophobia and nationalism in China after the outbreak of COVID in December 2019. This development will have lasting implications for China's foreign policy. Would a post-COVID China still be committed to the policy of opening up to the world?

Xenophobia can be understood as 'a strong feeling of dislike or fear of people from other countries' or in short a 'fear of foreigners.' This xenophobic fear of foreigners is shown in the Chinese narratives about the sources of infectious viruses and in the Chinese practices of screening foreign visitors when they are about to enter China.

In March 2020 China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, a 'wolf warrior' diplomat, threw out a conspiracy theory by claiming that the virus causing COVID-19 was imported into China by the US Army in the 2019 Military World Games, held in October that year in Wuhan. In the following November Chinese state media promoted an Italian study, which also suggested that COVID-19 might have circulated in Lombardy in northern Italy in September 2019, three months before the outbreak in Wuhan.

This narrative of foreigners as vectors for infection is not limited to COVID-19, either. In September 2022 when China confirmed its first case of monkeypox, its chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Wu Zunyou, provided five recommendations for the public. The first recommendation is: 'Do not have skin-to-skin contact with foreigners.'

Stigmatisation and discrimination against foreigners living inside China are prevalent. For example, Africans living in the southern city of Guangzhou have been forced into quarantines or labelled as dangers to the country's health.

While the world has re-opened after two years of travel restriction due to COVID-19, China still maintains very strict public health measures domestically and a stringent quarantine policy. Visitors to China need to go through a set of highly complicated and time-consuming procedures, which no other countries requires. First, they need to submit a Health Declaration Certificate (HDC) to a Chinese embassy or consulate after getting a visa. To get the HDC, they must do one PCR test (prior to November 13 2022, two tests were required). On

arrival, they must enter a so-called '5+3' quarantine involving five (previously seven) days in a centralized facility, followed by three days at 'home' before obtaining a green QR health code. This draconian quarantine for international arrivals treats people outside China as potential threats to its national security, breeding a mutually exclusive nationalist feeling of 'us' vs. 'them.'

Nationalism is a collective identity that the members of a nation have and the actions they take in seeking to achieve self-determination and sovereignty. After gaining political independence and sovereignty, nationalism entails mobilization of a state's population to make them identify with that state strongly. This mobilization often exhibits xenophobia and ethno-nationalism, which give rise to a fear and suspicion of, or hostility toward, foreigners, in addition to a belief in the greatness of one's nation.

Chinese ethno-nationalism has been fuelled by Chinese government propaganda. Government officials have not only praised China's response to the virus as evidence of the superiority of Chinese communist rule; more dreadfully, they have also tried to shake off the commonly understood origin of COVID-19 and whipped up their national pride and a hatred of foreigners by claiming that the coronavirus was brought into China from the United States or Italy and that foreigners were carriers of monkeypox, too.

Techno-nationalism, another form of nationalism, is also on the rise since COVID-19. Even though scientific research demonstrated that Western mRNA COVID-19 vaccines are more effective than Chinese homemade inactivated vaccines in preventing death in elderly people, China has refused to import mRNA vaccines. Instead, Beijing is sponsoring domestic development of its own mRNA vaccines, although it is less than promising.

To aid domestic industry, China requested Moderna hand over the core intellectual property behind its COVID-19 vaccine if the company wants to sell its vaccine to China, but Moderna has rejected China's request. The huge Chinese internal market is protected for the growth of China's nascent indigenous pharmaceutical industry and closed to foreign companies. That is why BioNTech's vaccines will be available to foreigners only.

This techno-nationalist policy is in line with Xi's ten-year development plan, known as 'Made in China 2025.' In 2015 China unveiled the Made in China 2025 policy, singling out 10 sectors, mainly high-tech industries, as 'core' areas to develop. To increase Chinese companies' competitiveness and leadership in global production and supply chains, Beijing has subsidized its state-owned enterprises involved in the 2025 initiative to develop and purchase Western businesses and acquire their technology.

Chinese nationalism and xenophobia are mutually reinforcing of each other. The fear of foreigners and nationalist sentiment are fuelled and inflamed by official narratives that deadly viruses come from outside, Chinese governance is better than and superior to the Western model, and Chinese vaccines are better than Western ones. They serve to justify Beijing's refusal to approve the use of Western mRNA vaccines for Chinese people and unwillingness to let foreigners travel to China as freely as the pre-COVID period.

Politically, China's zero-COVID policy is also framed as a competition between China's authoritarian system and Western democracy. Xi has allegedly urged Chinese officials to 'grasp clearly the grand trend that the East is rising while the West is declining' in the post-COVID world. The contrast between 'Chinese order' and 'Western chaos' has also been made in official narratives.

Seen in this perspective, China's zero-COVID policy is a function of its domestic politics. As such, the political stakes are high. In that sense, today's China recalls the Mao era in the 1960s when politics was in command and anti-foreignism (against both the Soviet Union and the United States at that time) was used to help Maoists in their quest for power, rendering economic and human costs as secondary concern. Ideological orthodoxy has already surpassed policy pragmatism under Xi's reign.

The recent mass protests against restrictive lockdowns in many Chinese major cities, including Shanghai and Beijing, demonstrate that Xi's non-evidence-based COVID-19 policy, which primarily blames the outside world for China's health woes, cannot deliver the goods to the people. However, while the central government is not prepared for reconsidering the zero-COVID policy, it has used this White Paper Revolution as an opportunity to incite still more xenophobia. The core symbol of the White Paper Revolution originated outside mainland China; protesters in Hong Kong and Russia have held blank or white paper in their demonstrations.

Zhao Lijian of China's Foreign Ministry on November 28 blamed 'forces with ulterior motives' on social media for linking a deadly apartment fire in Xinjiang's Urumqi to strict COVID-19 measures. While responding to the protests, police searched people's mobile phones for 'foreign' social media apps, framing that the unrest was instigated by 'foreign hostile forces.'

BBC journalist Ed Lawrence, a foreigner, was beaten and kicked by Shanghai police and taken away in handcuffs. Zhao on November 29 accused the BBC of having a 'disreputable history of smearing and attacking China' and asked if BBC journalists 'report news or fabricate news.'

In sum, there are grounds for concern as to whether Dengist pragmatism still prevails in today's China's policymaking and whether China is still committed to opening up to the world. We cannot rule out the possibility of a state-orchestrated 'Chexit,' China's exit or decoupling from the world, when the CCP is inflaming nationalism and xenophobia. Will China pursue a nationalist self-reliance policy like that in the Mao era? How much will China welcome foreign trade, investment, professionals, and information in the post-COVID world?

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