



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXIII / 2022

Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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ISBN 979-12-5496-365-0 (Paper) ISBN 979-12-5496-366-7 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXXIII, 2022

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli Extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia

Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover.

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	abbonamenti@viella.it		www.viella.it	

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CHINA 2022: THE 20TH PARTY CONGRESS AND POPULAR DISCONTENT IN XI JINPING'S CHINA

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The most significant issue of 2022 in the People's Republic of China (PRC) was the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held from 16 to 22 October 2022. The outcome was unprecedented: after a decade in office, Xi Jinping was confirmed for a third mandate as the general secretary of the CCP. The other equally important phenomenon concerns China's COVID-19 control strategy and its impact on Chinese society. While seemingly unrelated, there is a link between these two important developments. Whereas in the first half of the year China's ability to lock down entire cities appeared to be a successful strategy to maintain consent and to prevent the spread of COVID-19 casualties on the Chinese territory, it was precisely the weaknesses and failures of the same zero-COVID policy that most challenged the newly confirmed leadership of Xi Jinping.

KEYWORDS – 20th National Congress; Xi Jinping; zero-Covid policy; protests.

1. Introduction

The most significant issue of 2022 in the People's Republic of China (PRC) was the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held from 16 to 22 October 2022. The outcome was unprecedented in China's political system: after a decade in office, Xi Jinping was confirmed for a third mandate as the General Secretary of the CCP. The intention to extend his time in power had already been announced in 2018; what is striking, however, is that political moves established by Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues at the end of the 1980s to decentralize power within China's political system – fixed terms of office limits, a mandatory retirement age, delegating authority from the Party to a government agency, and the holding of regular meetings of party institutions – seems to have vanished in the light of a political change that today appears irreversible. Remarkably, whereas one of the Deng regime's first needs was to re-establish the Party's legitimacy by acknowledging its errors [Fairbank 1987: 344], Xi Jinping's main imperative is instead to re-legitimize the CCP to serve as «the vanguard and guard of the Chinese state» [Allison 2017, 31 May]. At the same time, the selection of the new cadres appointed within the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) confirmed rumours, leaks and news made by China watchers and academics over the course of the last decade about Xi's intention to

eradicate any traces of factional opposition within the Party, but particularly against himself.

The other equally important phenomenon concerns China's COVID-19 control strategy and its impact on Chinese society. While in the majority of Western countries restrictions ended and life looked much like it did back in 2019, in China – the country in which the pandemic originated – lockdowns reached record levels in 2022. For instance, the Japanese financial holding company Nomura estimated that in April 2022 approximately 373 million people across 45 cities in China were under some form of lockdown because of the spread of the Omicron variant [*Kyodo News* 2022, 16 April]. However, the Chinese platform dedicated to the monitoring of Coronavirus cases, CCDC Weekly, ceased reporting data from the National Health Commission (NHC) on 17 November 2022 [Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2022]. This was due largely to the fact that at the start of November 2022 protests spread in China as citizens reacted with anger to «zero-COVID» policy. Immediately thereafter, protests were branded by international media as the new «White Paper Movement» (*baizhi xingdong*) or «Blank Paper Protests» (*baizhi kangyi*). Radio Free Asia, when reporting the spread of the protests, interviewed some Chinese citizens. Remarkably – and unlike what it is expected in a country where information is constantly under control - they were making reference to protests occurred outside Mainland China, from protesters in Hong Kong, holding up blank sheets of paper in 2020 while protesting against the National Security Law, to Russia, earlier in 2022, when protesters opposing the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine were arrested while holding up blank sheets as a form of protest [*Radio Free Asia* 2022, 28 November].

Though seemingly unrelated, these two important developments are actually linked. On 13 October 2022, on the eve of the 20th National Congress of the CCP, a physicist working at the Beijing Melon Network Technology Co., Ltd, Peng Lifa, – disguised as a construction worker – displayed two large banners on Sitong Bridge, Third Ring Road, Beijing, demanding the removal of Xi Jinping. One of the two banners read «We want food, not nucleic acid tests / Freedoms not lockdowns / Dignity, not lies / Reform, not Cultural Revolutions / Elections, not rulers / To be citizens, not slaves». The second banner read: «Boycott classes. Boycott work. Depose the traitorous despot Xi Jinping» [Carter 2022]. The *New York Times* defined Peng as «China's Protest Prophet» [Li 2022]. In *change.org*, the leading nonprofit petition website worldwide, the petition titled «Free Peng Lifa 彭立法, the banner hero against Xi Jinping and the 'zero-Covid' policy» received a total of 5,648 signatures ['Free Peng Lifa' 2022].¹ During an episode dedicated to the Sitong Bridge

1. Although the number of signatures was relatively low (5,648), the petition appears relevant as an indication of a rising public awareness of the problem. It was also an attempt to attract the attention of foreign observers, as the petition was addressed to petition was directed to Joseph R. Biden, Antony Blinken and Nancy Pelosi.

protests, the *Bu Mingbai Podcast* (不明白播客) – a Chinese podcast launched in 2022 by several journalists in order to encourage uncensored discussions among Chinese people about topics directly or indirectly related to contemporary China – reported that just hours after the incidents occurred, numerous Weibo and WeChat accounts were lost or deleted because of the reposting of the incident online. As a consequence, people reacted through the launch of a «toilet revolution», by writing for instance, the same slogans in public toilets [‘EP-023’ 2022]. While broadly and internationally covered by media, the protests did not last long: in mid-December the Xi Jinping administration announced the easing of the zero-COVID policy in parallel with the total re-opening of China, scheduled for January 8, 2023.

Despite fleeting moments of apparent normality, important questions remain unanswered. One is whether the protests occurred as a contestation following the conditions of millions of people living in lockdown for the previous three years, or as a «window of opportunity», to dare to protest for something bigger: political change in the PRC. The spread of protests towards the end of the year inevitably reignited a debate about political contestation and change in contemporary China, among Chinese citizens – particularly those living abroad – as well as within the international community. Whereas in the first half of the year China’s ability to lock down entire cities appeared to be a successful strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19 casualties on the Chinese territory, it was the same strategy (and its mismanagement) that proved to be the main cause of popular discontent, through what can be defined as a real «boomerang effect». The weaknesses and failures of the zero-COVID policy became manifest worldwide in the second part of the year, challenging precisely the newly confirmed leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping. In this regard, three main considerations should be made when assessing the linkage between authoritarian politics and popular discontent in contemporary China in the light of the zero-Covid policy. The first concerns the framing potential of health issues in Chinese politics and society. As compared with the West, healthcare was not, originally, a matter of major concern for the Chinese population although its relevance has become evident in the public eye. The second is about capital mobilization among urban populations vis-à-vis (potential) dangerous repression. The fact that for the first time in decades, students dare to protests at universities and on the streets of intensively populated cities cannot be underestimated, as government crackdown on the protests was more difficult to manage. Third, in the light of such events, CCP’s response appeared to be constrained between prioritizing the Party’s legitimacy and a costs-benefits analysis to assure its survival, which, however, was not without the risk of dangerous concessions [Hurst 2022, 5 December].

This essay reviews the major political and economic events which took place in the PRC in 2022 by exploring two major developments: the 20th Party Congress and the COVID-19 situation. Following this introduc-

tion, the second section covers China's domestic politics with a focus on the two major events: the National People's Congress (NPC) and the 20th Party Congress. The third section offers a general overview of China's economic performance for the year under review. The fourth section of the essay further elaborates on China's zero-COVID policy with a focus on the protests that occurred between September and December 2022, as well as the governmental response. The fifth and concluding section briefly elaborates on China's domestic reactions to one of the most striking events to occur in 2022; Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed analysis of Chinese public opinion towards the war in Ukraine. However, the ongoing conflict stands as one of the clearest examples in international affairs showing that Chinese leaders are mindful of public perceptions and of their performances on the world stage. To this extent, not only public opinion can shape China's foreign policy, but it is key for political legitimacy, by ensuring a responsiveness mechanism while avoiding rebuffing the public which could be politically costly [Li 2022]. Afterall, if not based on direct political participation, the legitimacy of the Party, even in Xi Jinping's authoritarian China, must guarantee excellent performances and results, be they economic, foreign policy, or both.

2. *Party and politics*

2.1. *The National People's Congress*

The year 2022 began with a very well-known political event in China – the National People's Congress (NPC).² The NPC is China's highest legislative body that meets once a year, usually in March. For the year under review, the 5th Session was held from 5 to 11 March, while its Standing Committee (NPCSC) held a total of six sessions (from 33rd to 38th). In parallel with the annual meeting of the NPC was the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. These two events – taken together – were labelled «Two Sessions» (*Lianghui*).

The NPC agenda covered a total of 10 topics: 1) deliberation on the 2021 government work report; 2) review of the report of the 2021 Development Plan and the draft of the 2022 Development Plan; 3) review of the 2021 Central and Local Budgets and draft of the 2022 Central and Local Budgets; 4) draft amendment to the Local Organic Law; 5) draft conclusion on the NPC Election Decision; 6) deliberation on a draft regarding Hong Kong Election measures; 7) deliberation on a draft regarding Macao Election measures; 8) deliberation on the work report of the NPCSC; 9) deliberation on the work report of the Supreme People's Court; 10) deliberation on the work report of the Supreme People's Procuratorate.

2. The NPC shall not be confused with the NPC of the CCP.

The Work Report of the NPCSC substantially represents the most important document regarding the future trajectories of the Chinese economy. Overall, China's government Work Report in 2022 recognized China's economic challenges and risks, with Premier Li Keqiang announcing the need to strengthen the implementation of a prudent monetary policy, while GDP growth for the year 2022 was estimated at 5.5% [*Xinhua* 2022, 5 March]. However, it should be noted that the world economic recovery struggled with the global outbreak of COVID-19 and that the PRC was no exception. In this regard, data concerning China's GDP growth were denied by the World Bank, as the DC-based institution cut China's expected growth for 2022 to 2.7%, down from 4.3% in June 2022 [*Al Jazeera* 2022, 20 December].

The Work Report in 2022 also identified eight major tasks for the year under review: 1) achieving stable macroeconomic performance; 2) attaining job security; 3) achieving internal consumption and market vitality; 4) implementing innovation-driven development strategy; 5) expanding domestic demand and promoting regional development and new urbanization; 6) boosting agricultural production; 7) achieving the stable growth of foreign direct investment; and 8) developing green and low-carbon, people's well-being, and social governance [The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022]. Some of these major tasks are indeed key priorities in China's domestic politics as is, for instance, unemployment. In August 2022, China's urban youth unemployment rate was unprecedented, having reached a peak of 19.3%. However, the problem is not simply the number itself, but rather, the far more complex economic, political, and social consequences behind it: the stark competition that is on the rise in Chinese society, burnout reactions increasingly common among young people, structural imbalances in the labor market [Bram 2022, 16 August]. To some in fact, the growth of unemployment rate in China could prove dangerous to the point of weakening the Party's *eudaemonic legitimacy* – the legitimacy that in a regime is justified by successful economic performance and effective provision of economic benefits to individuals in society [Feng 1997]. The growth model that China pursued during the last 10 or 20 years is in fact more and more often put into question by millions of young Chinese. The new trends and discourses emerging in and percolating through the Chinese Internet show increasing dissatisfaction among China's young population, as evidenced by the spread of terms such as «involution (*nei juan hua*)», «lying flat (*tang ping*)» or «letting it rot (*bai lan*)» [Bram 2022]. Remarkably, the Chinese leadership is aware of such weaknesses which Xi Jinping labelled «the principal contradiction» facing Chinese society nowadays, namely, «the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life» [*Xinhua* 2017, 20 October]. Such maxim, in parallel with the two centenary goals, is an important concept for the New Era terminology introduced by the Chinese President Xi Jinping since the 19th Party Congress. However, besides further stressing the relevance of the «dialectical ma-

terialism» often embedded within the Chinese political discourse, the concept achieved very little in defining China's practical road map to economic growth and growing economic inequalities within society.

2.2. *The 20th Party Congress*

The 20th Party Congress of the CCP was held from 16 to 22 October 2022. There are two levels of analysis when studying the meaning of the 20th Party congress, namely, major changes in the Party structure (personnel) and the documents produced at and by the Congress (with a focus on policymaking and ideology). As mentioned, the 20th CCP Party Congress was the most important political event in China for the year under review. The outcomes of the Congress were many: from the (expected) concentration of power in the hands of the Chinese President Xi Jinping to an intensification of public dissent within and outside Mainland China, up to a further squeeze on the Taiwan issue [Bush *et al.* 2022].

With regard to the Party's structure, the most important outcome was the re-election of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the 20th Central Committee of the CCP during a session over which Xi himself presided, and which was attended by 203 CCP members and 168 alternate members. The seven members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau were also elected: Xi Jinping, Li Qiang, Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang and Li Xi. The need to strengthen Xi's leadership is evident here: besides him and Wang Huning (Xi's close ally and China's most important political theorist), all other new members of the PBSC are envisioned as being part of Xi's faction. Li Qiang, took office as China's Prime Minister in March 2023. He was already well known in the news because of his position as former Zhejiang Governor and his unsuccessful management of COVID-19 policy in the Shanghai area. The majority of international media outlets justified Li Qiang's appointment because of his proximity with Xi Jinping, but he does possess substantial leadership experience, having governed the three most important provincial economies in China: Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Shanghai ['Li Qiang' 2022]. Zhao Leji is also considered to be close to Xi Jinping and made his political fortune as Party Secretary in the Chinese province of Qinghai, when its GDP tripled, and it succeeded in achieving rapid economic growth ['Zhao Leji' 2022]. Cai Qi is considered to be one of Xi Jinping's most trusted confidants. From 2017 to 2022 he served as the CCP Secretary in Beijing. Ding Xuexiang served as Xi Jinping's Chief of Staff in 2007 and 2013 [Goh 2022, 23 October]. He has never served as a Provincial or Municipal Party Secretary nor as a Minister in the State Council and for this reason his policy preferences remain substantially unclear ['Ding Xuexiang' 2022]. Li Xi served as Party secretary of Liaoning and Guangdong. He was one of the main supporters of two important projects signed by Xi: the Maritime Silk Road project and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Bay Area, China's potential Silicon Valley.

In light of the names considered above, commentators and political analysts conclude that President Xi Jinping has been able to appoint many loyalists into the top positions within the Party's core apparatus, with very limited space left to political opposition [CSIS 2022, 28 October]. This is a very different situation from the one depicted by Andrew J. Nathan back in 2003, when China's political regime was «in the middle of a historic demonstration of institutional stability» [Nathan 2003]. Between 2002 and 2003, the transition from the third generation of leadership, headed by Jiang Zemin, to the fourth, headed by Hu Jintao, was orderly, peaceful, timely, and stable [Nathan 2003: 7]. These were the years in which the selection of Party cadres within the new Politburo was made by consensus within the old Politburo only, and where political power between factions was transferred and shared through a stable and informally accepted norm-bound procedure in Chinese politics [Nathan 2003].³ Twenty years later, not only has institutional stability vanished, but after decades of collective leadership, Xi Jinping is returning China to personalistic leadership [Shirk 2018]. However, the academic literature on this point diverges with regard to how leadership succession also resulted in institutional instability. For instance, Victor C. Shih maintains that, since Mao's era, decades of «coalitions of the weak» laid the groundwork for complete domination by princelings over the other two major factions (the Chinese Youth League and the Shanghai faction).⁴

To others, the fact that Xi Jinping was successful in assuring the strength of his own faction for a third mandate proves that, contrary to the theory of balance factionalism applied to Chinese politics, factional power politics within the CCP, rather than being on the wane, dominates the party [Choi *et al.* 2021]. Rather, Xi Jinping has been able to strengthen his faction by promoting more of his clients than his two predecessors, and the two other factions were not closed enough to counterbalance the rise of princelings' networks within Chinese politics and society [Choi *et al.* 2021]. As such, one should recognize the complexities of the inner workings of the leadership, which goes well beyond the allocation of posts to single individuals within a certain faction and explains the selection of the seven members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau (see above). As Cheng Li remarkably showed, Xi's inner circle is far more complex than usually portrayed by international media and is composed of three important associations or networks: 1) native-place associations, that is, the so-called Shanghai-gang, including the iron triangle in the PBSC; 2) Xi's longtime

3. To Fewsmith, however, the fact that the fourth generation headed by Hu Jintao was ready to take over did not mean that the lingering influence of Jiang Zemin and his ageing third generation disappeared simultaneously [Fewsmith 2003].

4. According to Shih, in the context of authoritarian politics, leaders often prefer to preserve their power from internal challenges, rather than making recourse to institutional development and crisis management. Hence, they prefer very junior or historically tainted officials to be part of the ruling coalition of China [Shih 2022].

friends formed through school ties; and 3) Xi's protégés from the provinces and cities in which he served as a top leader, and in which he cultivated an important web of political relationships [Li 2016: 302].

In a nutshell, to deeply comprehend how the structure and dynamics of the leadership of the CCP evolved since Xi Jinping took power in 2012, it is not enough to look at CCP's major institutional events from an organizational point of view: it is necessary to also devote particular attention to how leadership selection and promotion occur at the provincial and local levels.

Leadership selection within China's military was also part of the 20th Party Congress and the new lineup of the Central Military Commission (CMC), China's highest military and operational decision-making body, was also unveiled: Zhang Shenmin, Liu Zhenli, Li Shangfu, He Weidong, Zhang Youxia, Miao Hua. The CCP maintains strict control over the CMC. For instance, the fact that no civilian has been named CMC Vice Chairman is a sign that the CCP has not yet selected a successor to Xi Jinping; Xi Jinping was CMC Vice Chairman from 2010 to 2012, while Hu Jintao served as CMC Vice Chairman from 1999 to 2004 [*ChinaPower* 2022, 25 October].

In relation to the ideological-political sphere, a total of five documents was published by the State Council Information Office as an output of the Congress: 1) full text of Constitution of CCP; 2) full text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP; 3) full text of resolution on Work Report of 19th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI); 4) full text of resolution on 19th CCP Central Committee Report; and 5) full text of resolution on Party Constitution Amendment. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on the full text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (herein the Report) [State Council Information Office 2022].

The Report – in its English version – consists of 64 pages in Word format. In its essence, it is a summary of the speech that Xi Jinping gave on the first day of the congress. The Report makes reference to the country's major tasks for the years ahead: building a high-standard socialist market economy, modernizing the industrial system, advancing rural urbanization across the board, promoting coordinated regional development, and improving trade and investment cooperation, though it provides no substantial information on how the related policies will also be implemented [State Council Information Office 2022a]. Furthermore, although major challenges listed in the document seem to pertain to the country's economic development, the reference to the ideological context that must be strengthened in line with the Party's interests is particularly evident. For instance, the Report stresses the relevance to the Chinese political system of the so-called «whole-process people's democracy» (*guocheng renmin minzu*). As it reads in the SCIO website, the formula «whole-process people's democracy» possesses a specific meaning to the CCP. Precisely, it is a concept made of two key phrases: 1) the phrase *whole-process* means

that «the people engage in democratic elections, consultations, decision-making, management, and oversights according to the law»; 2) the phrase *people's democracy* means that «the Chinese people participate, in accordance with laws and in various ways and forms, in the governance of the state, economic, cultural, and social affairs» [State Council Information Office 2022b]. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of free elections (except at the local level) in Mainland China, neither participation in political affairs is mentioned in the SCIO definition. Besides official definitions provided by Chinese state media, the formula «whole-process people's democracy» has its roots in Marxism-Leninism and it stresses the historical roots of so-called «socialism with Chinese characteristics» [Chen 2021]. At the same time, the urgency for a new narrative underlying the Chinese vision of the very idea of democracy, and often opposed to that of the West and the United States, is also the result of China's growing ambitions to provide an alternative to the democratic principles and governance of the West, in part as a result of the US-China growing rivalry. And yet, China's democracy was also criticized by the very candidates and voters participating in grass-roots level elections, by questioning for instance, the real opportunities for participation at the county and township level in China [South China Morning Post 2021, 4 December].

In this light, another formula, «deliberate authoritarianism», may be more appropriate with reference to China's political system. Precisely, a regime style that makes common use of authoritarian deliberation and in which legitimacy builds on decision makers' ability to legitimate their decisions by relying on politics that generate persuasive influence at the societal level [He and Warren 2017: 156]. As such, the Report calls for improving the system of institutions through which the people run the country, by suggesting, in particular, that deputies to people's congresses should strengthen ties with the general public. Furthermore, consultation procedures and mechanisms should also be implemented, by reinforcing the role of the CPPCC as a specialized consultative body between the Chinese civil society and decision-makers. Yet, the Report also makes explicit reference to consolidating and developing «the broadest possible patriotic united front» to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, which includes the following three major aspects: 1) taking a distinctively Chinese approach to handling ethnic affairs; 2) promoting the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation and must adapt to Chinese socialist society; and 3) improving the work related to Chinese nationals overseas to give shape to a powerful joint force for advancing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. In addition, the Report also mentions the role of intellectuals who are not Party members to provide better political guidance on theoretical and political issues [State Council Information Office 2022: 35].

In this regard, what also emerges from the report is that in the Xi Jinping era, patriotic education goes beyond Party-building practices, being understood by CCP leaders as a major force against old national threats such as religious extremism and foreign intrusion. Although the PRC is officially an atheist state, religious control has become an important priority for Xi Jinping's agenda. For instance, in 2021 the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) issued the Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy to implement surveillance over the five tolerated religious groups in China – 1) the Buddhist Association of China; 2) the Chinese Taoist Association; 3) the Islamic Association of China; 4) the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement; 5) and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. Article 3 of the Measures requires clergy loyalty to the CCP, while Articles 6 and 12 prohibit religious extremism and foreign infiltration using religion [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2021].

Regarding the management of Chinese nationals overseas, it is worth mentioning the report released in September 2022 by Safeguard Defenders, a human rights NGO founded in late 2016 in Madrid. The publication, titled *100 Overseas. Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild*, reveals the establishment of at least 54 police-run overseas police service centres across five continents through which the PRC, rather than using international police or judicial cooperation mechanisms, is controlling Chinese overseas nationals [Safeguard Defenders 2022]. Among the most criticized methods used by Chinese unofficial police corps overseas are involuntary returns consisting of threats to family in China, targeting victims in foreign countries, and kidnapping abroad. Chinese transnational policing is the «international version» of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign launched back in 2012 and consists of two main pillars: Operation Fox Hunt and Operation Sky Net. The first was launched in 2014 under the Ministry of Public Security with the objective of capturing international fugitives accused of financial crimes. The latter is an expansion of the former and it was launched in 2015, under the CCDI, to catch economic fugitives abroad. According to data released by the Spanish NGO, around 230,000 suspects of fraud and telecom fraud were successfully persuaded to return to China, but this would have happened without regard to international law and by violating the territorial integrity of third countries [Safeguard Defenders 2022].

Last but not least, while concluding the section dedicated to China's domestic politics, it seems important to mention an event that occurred in 2022 concerning one of China's most famous leaders of the past, Jiang Zemin. About a month after the conclusion of the 20th Party Congress, on November 30, 2022, PRC's former President, Jiang Zemin, died from leukaemia. On December 6, 2022, Xi Jinping addressed his eulogy from the Great People's Hall in Tiananmen Square [*Xinhua* 2022, 7 December].

3. *The economy*

In relation to China's economic performance for the year under review, it is necessary to consider four main (interlinked) trends: 1) the status of China's economic recovery; 2) trade; 3) investment; 4) consumption.

According to data adjustments made within the «China Economic Update» published by the World Bank in 2022, China's predicted GDP growth was 2.7% – half of government's estimates for 2022 (5.5%) [World Bank Group 2022]. Major international media outlets attributed China's economic slowdown largely to the uncompromising zero-COVID policy implemented by the government, which had the objective of keeping cases as close to zero as possible [Bloomberg 2022, 22 December]. At the same time, when assessing the impact of the zero-COVID policy on the Chinese economy, the individual containment policies implemented by the government to deal with the pandemic should also be considered. In particular, full-scale lockdowns across major Chinese cities and mobility restrictions from early 2022 caused a draconian fall in retail sales. Ironically, it seems that it was precisely the alternation of limited lockdowns and random re-openings that increased China's stagnant consumption [Garcia Herrero 2022]. With regard to available data, it was estimated that in September 2022 there were 33 cities and 65 million people in China under some sort of lockdown, in parallel with as many as 103 cities across 26 provincial-level regions reporting COVID cases [Caixin Global 2022, September 5].

The China Economic Work Conference (CEWC) was also held from 15 to 16 December 2022. The event is one of the country's most important meetings for discussing China's economic policies and agenda. At the conference, the government reiterated that China's number one priority was to keep economic stability [The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022]. Among other envisioned measures there were a proactive fiscal policy and a prudent monetary policy. The meeting also stressed the confirmation of a new model of development paradigm [The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022]. The concept is strictly associated with the Dual Circulation Strategy. More specifically, as explained in an opinion article released in *Qiushi* – China's political theory journal edited by the CCP – this new development paradigm consists in considering the domestic market as «the mainstay», while the domestic and foreign markets must reinforce each other [*Qiushi* 2021, 2 November]. Finally, some other domestic priorities mentioned at the CEWC were housing conditions and rural revitalization. However, future objectives at the international level included the joining of two paramount Free Trade Agreements (FTAs); the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (an initiative now led by Japan), and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement – virtually signed in 2021 by Chile, New Zealand and Singapore [The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022].

Remarkably, there are other important reasons to illustrate the decline of the Chinese economy, including the crisis of the property market, climate change, and the fact that China's tech titans are losing investors due to the regulatory crackdown launched back in 2021 [BBC 2022, 5 October]. According, for instance, to the China-Britain Business Council, the crisis of China's real estate sector resulted from a mix of different causes; the failure to regulate the industry sufficiently while it was booming, and the lockdowns during the COVID pandemic, which prevented potential buyers and visitors making offers on properties [China-Britain Business Focus 2022, 1 September]. Unsurprisingly, the year 2022 was also a difficult year for China's tech sector. Following China's actions against monopolistic practices of Internet tech-giants in 2021, two important measures taken by the Cybersecurity Administration of China (CAC) took effect in September 2022. Precisely, in order to implement data security management previously announced through the Cybersecurity Law (CSL), the Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL) and the Data Security Law (DSL), the Measures for Security Assessment of Outbound Data Transfer, and the Guide to the Application for Security Assessment of Outbound Data Transfer were also established [Guo *et al.* 2022].

In conclusion, new and old factors must be considered to explain the performance of the Chinese economy in 2022. As Barry Naughton reminds us, since the start of China's period of «reform and opening up» in 1978, market-oriented system reforms and openness to the outside were China's two prominent features of policy orientation. However, there is no shortcut for China's path to development, and to talk of any specificities of the Chinese economic model is too simplistic and abstract as a concept [Naughton 2021]. Similarly, it is an undeniable fact that China's economy has been beset by a long list of economic problems, the post-COVID recovery being just one. While the Xi Jinping administration pledged to revive internal consumption and to support the private business sector, a critical point is the fact that while external rebalancing simply deals with the nexus external versus internal demand, internal rebalancing implies different structural reforms, including a shift from investment to consumption on the demand side; a transition from industry to services on the supply side; a reduction of credit intensity and improved allocated efficiency [Zhang 2016].

4. COVID-19 and its impact on chinese society

4.1. The spread of protests as a response to anti-COVID measures

The zero-COVID policy in China almost bankrupted the country. This has been considered as the main explanatory variable behind the spread of protests that erupted in different regions and cities across China between September and November 2022. Nonetheless, it should be noted that social pro-

tests in China are not the exception but the norm. For instance, in a book published in 2018, Teresa Wright argues that popular discontent in China is related to several issues and affects different social groups, from workers to environmentalists, from dissidents to ethnic minorities [Wright 2018]. And according to the *China Labour Bulletin*, from January 2015 to December 2017, there were 2,595 construction worker protests in China with the highest concentration found in Henan, Guangdong, Shandong, Hebei, and Sichuan [*China Labour Bulletin* 2018]. Environmental activism in China also comes with a long-standing tradition. In 2012, for instance, Chinese people clashed frequently with the government and the police creating social disorder, with *Nature* reporting on 1,000 environmental protests only in the eastern city of Qidong, Jiangsu province [Gilbert 2012]. Despite protests being a common phenomenon in China, the most striking feature of COVID-related protests occurring in 2022 was that no one could have foreseen their occurrence, although it was clear that many Chinese were suffering the zero-COVID policy.

Before providing details on the events regarding COVID protests for the year under review, three observations can be made. First, the extreme intransigence of the zero-COVID policy can be attributed to the marked increase in social control following Xi's promulgation of the comprehensive national security concept, resulting in a transformation of security's management in China [Chestnut Greitens 2022]. In a nutshell, dissatisfaction in China mounted within a context in which strict measures around societal control seemed to have degenerated well before the start of the pandemic.

Second, the zero-COVID policy's fall from grace in the eyes of the Chinese population resulted from the waning trust in the slogan widely promoted by the Xi Jinping administration «people first, life first» (*renmin zhishe shengming zhishang*) [*People's Daily* 2021, 29 December]. In this regard, while it is true that the number of victims in China during 2022 appeared rather low – particularly when compared to Europe and the United States – strict lockdowns, such as that of Shanghai in April, with stories of desperation about the lack of food and supplies, questioned the rhetoric of Xi's slogan that people must be put first [Kwan 2022, 8 April]. Third, intergovernmental relations between central and local governments vis-à-vis health governance practices not only affected public reactions differently across China, but it also affected the very governance through which the same zero-COVID policy was implemented across the country. For instance, in contrast to what it is expected within an authoritarian context, the management of the pandemic during the first phase of the disease – the outbreak in Wuhan from January to March 2020 – included *de facto* an institutional mobilization occurring at different levels; from the Hubei Provincial government to the Wuhan municipal government to the central public health technocrats [Ran and Yan 2021]. While public outcry against non-transparency in COVID policies puts the central government under pressure, data showed that local officials and central public health technocrats did not always adhere to the

same strategies while implementing central government's guidelines [Ran and Yan 2021].

The first COVID-related incident occurred on September 18, 2022, when 27 Chinese citizens were killed in a bus crash in southwest China's Guizhou province. The incident was not directly related to Covid-related restrictions; however, it was considered by a vast majority of Chinese public opinion the first in a long series showing the dramatic drawbacks of the rigid anti-epidemic measures adopted by Chinese authorities. Then, on September 27, dozens of people took part in a protest in the southern Chinese tech hub of Shenzhen – in Shawei, a neighbourhood in Futian district. With a population of more than 18 million people, three districts were put in lockdown all at once, for just 10 infected cases – Futian, Luohu and Longgang – but with another 15 districts marked as medium risk, thousands of residents were only allowed to walk within their housing compounds [*The Standard* 2022, 28 September].

In October things were no better and protests increased in number and intensity. In the days before the 20th National Congress of the CCP, banners with explicit political meaning were hung from Sitong Bridge, Hainan district, Beijing. Unlike other protests, here the reference was made directly to the Chinese political leadership, as well as to President Xi Jinping, and the illiberal dimension of the Chinese political system – accused of not allowing Chinese citizens to freely select rulers and decision-makers. In mid-November, violent protests related to the zero-COVID policy also occurred in Guangzhou, when crowds of people crashed through barriers and marched against the Chinese police force. Protests occurred mainly in the Haizhu and Tianhe districts [*Euractiv* 2022, 30 November].

Among the worst instances, however, there was the protest that erupted in Urumqi, Xinjiang, which was, indeed, the event sparking the anti-COVID wave of protests across the whole country. For the year under review, it is well known that the city of Urumqi experienced one of the longest lockdowns in China: over 100 continuous days. On November 24, 2022, a fire broke out in a residential tower block. As reported by Radio Free Asia, the victims in the Urumqi fire that sparked protests were all Uyghurs [*Radio Free Asia* 2022, 2 December]. Yet, the number of people who lost their lives is not very clear: while the official number released by Chinese authorities reported 10 dead Uyghurs, the Canada-based organization Uyghurs Rights Advocacy Project (URAP) issued a statement about the fire, strongly condemning the death (or 'massacre') of 44 Uyghurs [Uyghurs Rights Advocacy Project 2022, 28 November]. Also worthy of note is URAP's strong condemnation of China's zero-COVID policy as a tool used by the Chinese government to target and control Uyghurs [Uyghurs Rights Advocacy Project 2022, 28 November].

In the aftermath of the Urumqi fire, on November 26, Shanghai residents gathered in Wulumuqi Road – the Chinese name for Urumqi Road –

to mourn victims of the tragedy. Initially, in the day after the event, mourners in Shanghai lit candles and laid flowers. However, as the hours wore on, protests began to mount, underlying the frustration of the Chinese population with the anti-COVID measures. For instance, protesters were wearing face masks with '404' written on them, «referring to the recurring online censorship in light of various epidemic-related incidents».⁵ On the second day of the protests, on Sunday, November 27, a wave of analogous demonstrations spread to different cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Wuhan, Lanzhou, Nanjing [*The Guardian* 2022, 28 November]. On the same day, expressions of dissent were also manifested in Chinese universities: Tsinghua and Peking University in Beijing, Nanjing Tech University, Wuhan University, out of a total of 79 institutions reportedly affected by unrest caused by long-running lockdowns and restrictions [*Times Higher Education* 2022, 28 November]. Although the mobilization must be interpreted as a reaction to COVID restrictions, it is worth mentioning that many demonstrators possessed common characteristics; young, disillusioned people in their twenties, mostly students, but also recent graduates without a job [*The New York Times* 2022, 10 December].

To conclude, by observing the anti-lockdown protests in China in 2022, it is possible to identify three major trends characterizing the spread of discontent: first and foremost, the deterioration of the Chinese economy as a direct cause of the zero-COVID policy; second, the accumulated mental and physical deterioration of Chinese society; and third, the vague and increasingly missed synergy between the local and central governments in China regarding to how deal and implement zero-COVID measures.

4.2. *From zero to no-COVID policy*

Rather than focusing just on the events related to the COVID-19 protests, it is also necessary to mention some of the possible causes and outcomes, including the evolution of the zero-COVID policy enforced by the Chinese leadership through the course of the year. On December 27, 2022, the State Council's Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism Press Conference was held in Beijing. On that occasion, Mi Feng, NHC Spokesperson, announced a new phase in China's fight against the Coronavirus [National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2022]. Among the decisions announced during the conference, it figured out that the one taken by the State Council earlier on (namely, the prevention and control measures for Class A infectious diseases stipulated in the Law of the PRC on the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases) would no longer be applied to the Coronavirus disease. More practically, the downgrade made by the NHC for the Coronavirus from a Class A to Class B disease meant that quar-

5. 404 is the error code given when a page on the Internet can no longer be found [Koetse 2022].

antine for people entering China was no longer required, with an end to sealed control of COVID-19 cases and the designation of high-risk areas.⁶ As reported by the Chinese Center for Disease and Control Prevention, it should be noted that on 11 November 2022, China had already announced a partial optimization of COVID-19 rules, among which was a reduction of the quarantine period for incoming travelers from 8 to 10 days, the request of one negative nucleic acid test for inbound travelers 40-hours before their departure instead of two, as well as the discontinuation of isolation regulations for inbound travelers after finishing the required quarantine period at their first point of entry [Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2022]. Following this, on 15 November 2022, was the issue by the NHC of an official circular letter announcing a suite of 20 new measures to further optimize the country's COVID-19 control policy also from a national point of view, from the optimization of pandemic control measures at schools to the implementation of COVID-19 measures in companies and industrial parks, but particularly the avoidance of «excessive anti-Covid measures».⁷

Nonetheless, the Chinese leadership was well aware from the start that in order to deal with the explosion of the Omicron variant in China, and its impact on the Chinese public opinion, a change of policy was not sufficient; a new official narrative was also necessary. On 9 December 2022, Zhong Nanshan, China's famous epidemiologist, expressed his views on Coronavirus prevention and control during a Q&A session with journalists in Guangzhou. When asked how serious the new Omicron variant was, and how to deal with it, Professor Zhong assured journalists that not only had Omicron rarely been seen as a danger invading the lungs, but that it seldom caused death. As such, he maintained, the most serious and urgent task for Chinese people was to get vaccinated and to strengthen immunization in this new stage of epidemic prevention [People's Government of Yongfeng County Jiangxi Province 2022]. Remarkably, only a year earlier, in 2021, Zhong Nanshan was a major supporter of China's zero-COVID strategy, which he considered to be a necessary and relatively low-cost strategy, particularly when compared with COVID's (mis)management in the West [Menegazzi 2022:42].

For the year under review, official data on the number of Coronavirus deaths in China present important differences compared with the previous year. In 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported 131,315

6. To be more precise, since 9 January 2020 COVID-19 has been classified as a Class B disease – a class including among others HIV and H7N9 bird flu. Nevertheless, notwithstanding this classification, it was decided that COVID-19 management would be the same of a Class A disease, that is, similar to bubonic plague and cholera.

7. To consult the full list of new measures, see for instance, 'Graphics: China's 20 new measures for optimizing Covid-19 response', *CGNT*, 15 November 2022.

confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 5,699 deaths [Menegazzi 2022].⁸ In 2022, the same organization signaled a total of 10,982,185 confirmed cases with 34,280 deaths confirmed. Therefore, according to data released by WHO in 2022, the number of COVID-19 deaths in China increased by approximately 600% [WHO 2022]. To some extent, data were also confirmed by Chinese authorities. At the start of January 2023, Jiao Yahui, Head of the NHC's Medical Affairs Department, affirmed that China had recorded 59,938 COVID-related deaths between December 8, 2022 and January 12, 2023, although of these deaths only 5,503 would have come from respiratory failure caused by COVID infections [CNN 2023, 15 January]. However, as remarked by other journalists and commentators, the most striking question that remains is why China ended its zero-COVID policy so abruptly, given that it was an important element of Xi Jinping's political legacy [Yu 2023, 11 January].

5. Conclusion

In 2022, Jin Canrong, professor and associate dean, School of International Studies, Renmin University, published and endorsed numerous posts on his Weibo account reporting statements made by Lavrov – the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – on the Ukrainian War. In March 2022, a month after the start of the conflict, Cui Hongjian, Director of the Department of European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies in Beijing, declared that as soon as the war started, Russophobia spread widely across Europe, thus preventing European countries from thinking clearly about their strategic interests at stake [Cui 2022, 18 March]. These are just two of the numerous comments showing the views of elites in China about the war in Ukraine. In reality, consonance with the feelings of academic elites as well as citizens concerning China's foreign and domestic politics stands as a cornerstone to the CCP's legitimacy [Cerny 2022, 25 November]. According to the US-China Perceptions Monitor, which conducted a survey of Chinese public opinion regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 75% of respondents agree that supporting Russia in Ukraine is in China's national interest, whereas roughly 60% of respondents support China mediating an end to the conflict [US-China Perception Monitor 2022, 19 April]. According to another survey, in 2022 Chinese opinion concerning Russia was still intended in positive terms, with the Russian Federation being the most positively perceived country as opposed to the United States, which was the most negatively perceived [Turcsanyi *et al.* 2022]. The debate over the issues

8. These were alarming data also compared to neighboring countries, including Japan [Wallace and Pugliese 2022].

of regime legitimacy as linked to, or reliant on, citizen feelings is central in order to understand the relevance of public opinion in China. The proponents and supporters of the liberal democratic model emphasize that, in the absence of a multi-party system, fair elections, a firm separation of power, etc., the role of public opinion in affecting decision-making is limited, if it exists at all. However, there is little doubt that a solid foundation of popular support is key to ensure the regime's stability, avoiding the potentially dangerous construction of an alternative public discourse concerning how political affairs are to be managed in contemporary China [Chu 2013].

Conventional wisdom suggests that public opinion is irrelevant to the Chinese government. However, the spread of the protests in light of the zero-COVID policy – and the subsequent decision by the Chinese government to abruptly relax its related restrictions – showed the world that even within China's authoritarian context, the CCP's legitimacy also relies on the support of the Chinese citizens. The degree to which Chinese leadership is constrained by Chinese public opinion in its decision-making process and policy implementation remains an open question. Nevertheless, the way in which Chinese leaders manoeuvred their position on the COVID issue with respect to citizen opinion provides important lessons for how it might respond to future legitimacy crises caused by other aspects of domestic and international turmoil.

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