



Protests in China Hand the U.S. an Opportunity. Will We Take Advantage?

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With his “zero COVID” policy spurring China’s largest anti-government protests in more than three decades, Xi Jinping now faces the challenge of maintaining his legitimacy not just at home but abroad.

At home, China’s most powerful leader since Mao Zedong confronts the same dilemma that strongmen always face: whether to ease his tight-fisted policy in hopes of assuaging public anger, or crack down more harshly in order to reinforce his authority. Either option runs the risk of fueling more protest.

Abroad, Xi confronts the challenge of continuing to expand China’s influence around the world—as he has relentlessly sought to do since assuming power a decade ago—at a time when his COVID policy and ensuing protests are shaking the global economy and attracting international condemnation.

Meanwhile, China’s turmoil provides an opportunity for Washington to strengthen its global position vis-à-vis Beijing. President Biden and congressional leaders of both parties should forcefully support the right of China’s people to protest peacefully and, more broadly, promote freedom and democracy at a time when Xi is peddling his form of authoritarianism as a more effective model of governance.

In essence, Washington should use this opportunity to help convince developing nations and restless populations around the world that they can build a more peaceful and prosperous future through U.S.-style freedom than China-style authoritarianism. That’s no different than what Washington did vis-à-vis Moscow at similar moments during the Cold War.

At home, Xi faces the same dilemma that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei face. While anti-government protests in their countries are driven by different grievances, all three are struggling to walk a fine line by addressing the grievances to a limited extent while maintaining their iron-clad rule.

In China, the government this week relaxed some COVID rules and – perhaps even more striking for an authoritarian regime that continues to consolidate power – acknowledged that the rules have caused “problems” for people. Beijing’s city government is removing gates that prevented people from entering infected apartment developments, mass testing requirements are ending in Guangzhou, and some businesses are reopening while public bus service is restarting in the Xinjiang region.

Nevertheless, the regime also is reaffirming its “zero COVID” strategy while curbing protests. Police are mobilizing at the sites of planned protests, using messaging apps and other tools to track down organizers, checking cell phones to find protest participants, and summoning protesters for questioning.

But, while modern communication tools empower authorities to curb protest, they also offer opportunities for participants to bypass restrictions and launch other kinds of opposition. People are sharing videos of protests and arrests, protesters are holding blank sheets of paper to mock restraints on free speech, and others are communicating on social media groups that evade the government's online censorship.

Whether the coming days will bring more protest or more government control is anyone's guess. History, however, shows that sometimes even the smallest act of defiance can trigger big change. It was, after all, the protest of a lone fruit peddler in Tunisia that toppled a longstanding dictator there and sparked the Arab Spring in the wider region.

History shows something else: protests and their impacts are contagious. As political scientist Samuel P. Huntington demonstrated in his day, democratization around the world tends to come in "waves," as would-be democrats in one country give those in other countries the intestinal fortitude to move forward. That protests are continuing in Russia and Iran is another reason not to pooh-pooh the protests in China.

Whatever happens on the home front, China's COVID-19 policy and protests are challenging its influence overseas.

Battered by lockdowns, China's economy is now growing by less than 4 percent a year—much slower than in recent years. Concern that China's slowing economy and domestic turmoil will drag down the world's economy is lowering the prices of key commodities, with "oil and grains hitting significant multi-month lows" this week.

Along with its economy, China's image is taking a beating in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Saudi Arabia's state-run Al-Arabiya network slammed China in an video story, while the state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation aired an interview with opinion leader Thembisa Fakude, who condemned Beijing's draconian health policy.

Such condemnation could prove particularly important because, under Xi, China has been seeking to burnish its reputation, and nourish its influence, far from home by investing heavily in roads and other infrastructure.

For Biden, China's protests and crackdown offer an unexpected opportunity to make clear, more forcefully than he has so far, that the United States continues to support the aspirations of those around the world who want to live in freedom and democracy.

To be sure, some U.S. officials would hesitate to do so, fearful of ruffling feathers in Beijing. Around the world, however, Xi is promoting the notion that China is on the rise while the United States is in decline. If we want to live in a freer world, we should not sidestep the challenge—or ignore the opportunity that China's COVID missteps has presented.

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