

Opinion **Chinese politics & policy**

China's self-isolation is a global concern

Beijing's zero-Covid policy is damaging international business and global governance

GIDEON RACHMAN



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The most important invited guest at COP26 did not show up. As president of China, Xi Jinping leads a country that emits more carbon dioxide than the US and the EU combined. But, unlike other world leaders, Xi did not give a speech to the climate summit. Instead he submitted a [written statement](#) of less than 500 words for the conference website.

Xi's dismissive attitude to the climate talks was not so much Middle Kingdom as middle finger. But the Chinese leader's refusal to travel to Glasgow for COP26 — or to the G20 summit in Rome, before it — is part of a broader pattern of national self-isolation.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, China has installed one of the world's [strictest systems](#) of border controls and quarantines. Foreigners or Chinese citizens entering the country must go into strict [quarantine](#) for a [minimum](#) of two weeks. Extra controls apply if they enter Beijing, where the leadership resides.

This system has in effect made it impossible for foreigners to visit China without staying for several months, or for most Chinese people to travel abroad. Xi himself has [not left China](#) for almost two years. The last time he saw a foreign leader in person was at a meeting with the president of Pakistan in Beijing in March 2020. Xi's

normality, China's self-isolation is increasingly anomalous.

The effects on international business are already apparent. China continues to trade and invest with the outside world. But business ties are [fraying](#). Foreign chambers of commerce in China report that international executives are leaving the country and not being replaced. [Hong Kong](#)'s role as a global business centre has taken a battering.

China's leadership may actually welcome some of these developments. Yu Jie, a fellow at Chatham House in London, argues that the pandemic has allowed Xi to accelerate down a path where he was already heading — towards national self-reliance. That policy began well before the pandemic, with the "[Made in China 2025](#)" campaign, which promoted domestic technology and production.

But with Covid-19, an emphasis on economic self-sufficiency has become a much broader inward turn — with dangerous implications for China and the world. China's extraordinary rise over the past 40 years was triggered by Deng Xiaoping's embrace of "reform and opening" in the 1980s. Deng saw that the isolation of Mao Zedong's [Cultural Revolution](#) had led to poverty and backwardness. He was humble enough to realise that China could learn from the outside world.

The current mood in China is very different. [Rana Mitter](#), professor of Chinese history at Oxford, points to a danger that "closed borders will lead to closed minds". After 40 years of rapid growth, China is self-confident.

The Chinese media portray the west, and the US in particular, as in inexorable decline. The Chinese government believes that the country is well ahead in some key technologies of the future, such as [green tech](#) and artificial intelligence. Beijing may believe that the world now needs China more than China needs the world.

Pandemic control has also become closely entangled with the political legitimacy of Xi and the Communist party. The official death toll in China is under 5,000, compared with [750,000 deaths](#) in the US. The Xi government argues that while the US prates about human rights, the Chinese Communist party has actually protected its people.

But China's zero-Covid policies now risk becoming a trap. As the outside world transitions towards living with low levels of the disease, contact with foreigners may

discovery of a single case of Covid.

These kind of draconian policies are now causing some public [debate](#) in China. But controls are unlikely to be relaxed any time soon. This week the Communist party is holding a meeting that is preparing the ground for Xi to extend his period in power at a vital party congress in November 2022. The Chinese will not want to take any political risks before then. After the congress, China will be heading into winter when the disease can spike. As a result, many experts think that China's zero-Covid policy — and the sealed borders that go with it — will extend well into 2023.

By that stage, China will have been in self-imposed isolation for more than three years. The Chinese and world economies are likely to suffer as a result, and so will global co-operation.

Yet the biggest and most intangible effect may be on the Chinese people. It is much easier to believe that foreigners are dangerous and decadent if you never meet them. When China eventually opens up, the world may encounter a much changed country.

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