

Chinese politics & policy

Chinese cities ease Covid restrictions following nationwide protests

President Xi Jinping acknowledged public discontent with lockdowns in closed door meeting with EU officials



Several Chinese cities have eased testing requirements © Jade Gao/AFP/ Getty Images

Eleanor Olcott in Hong Kong and **Tom Mitchell** in Singapore 6 HOURS AGO

Chinese cities accelerated the loosening of zero-Covid restrictions over the weekend, building expectations that Beijing could ditch the pandemic policy that has kept the country isolated for nearly three years and battered the economy.

Several Chinese cities have eased controls, even as Covid continues to circulate. China reported 31,824 infections on Sunday for tests taken the previous day, a slight decline from Saturday as testing requirements were reduced.

Shenzhen and Shanghai scrapped the requirement for commuters to present PCR test results to travel on public transport, following similar moves by Tianjin, Chengdu and Chongqing. Some apartment complexes in Beijing indicated to residents over the weekend that if they test positive they could quarantine at home rather than at a centralised quarantine facility, marking a significant relaxation of the curbs.

China's top-level leadership body, the politburo standing committee, has not made a formal announcement on its stance towards the loosening of restrictions. Even so, President Xi Jinping appears to be steering the policy shift, according to people familiar with the matter.

During a closed-door meeting with European officials on Thursday, Xi acknowledged the protests that rocked cities across the country last weekend, according to two

European officials with knowledge of the talks.

Xi told European Council President Charles Michel, the first western leader to visit China since the protests erupted, that “frustrated” students were driving the protests after three years of zero-Covid. The contents of the meeting between Xi and Michel were first reported by South China Morning Post.

Rising anger at China’s zero-Covid restrictions spilled over into a wave of nationwide discontent last weekend, as residents in cities including Shanghai and Wuhan took to the streets. A fire in [Urumqi](#), in which 10 people died, became the focal point for the widespread anger at the human cost of the policy.

The Chinese leader added that the Omicron strain currently driving the nationwide outbreak is less lethal than previous variants, but officials are worried about [low vaccination rates](#) among the elderly. Beijing is now belatedly trying to restart its stalled vaccination campaign.

Only around 40 per cent of people aged 80 or older have had three shots, the dosage required for Chinese vaccines Sinopharm and Sinovac to achieve high levels of protection against Omicron.

Authorities in Beijing have taken a more conservative approach than other cities. Most restaurants and bars are closed, and the 48 hour testing requirement for workers entering office buildings remains.

Economists are warning that China’s economy will not experience a fast rebound even if officials accelerate measures to open the country up. Alicia García-Herrero, chief economist for Asia Pacific at research firm Natixis, said that “China is bound to grow barely half of what the government promised for 2022”, pointing to the 5.5 per cent GDP target for growth.

She said the “factors behind China’s structural deceleration are still intact”, including a property crisis, an ageing population and decreased productivity, which will continue to weigh on the country’s economic outlook even if restrictions are dropped.

Additional reporting by Ryan McMorrow in Beijing

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