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Widespread Protests over Zero COVID Policy

Robert Lawrence Kuhn, November 29, 2022



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HOST: Robert Lawrence Kuhn is a commentator and author on China. He is based in the United States. He has worked with China's leaders in Beijing for more than 25 years. Welcome to the program. It would seem from what we're hearing there today, that Beijing has been stunned by the size of the protest. Maybe we're starting to see a softening of the Zero COVID policy.



ROBERT LAWRENCE KUHN:

China's leaders, led by President Xi Jinping, have the challenge of minimizing COVID cases and deaths — which are partially due to the less than fully effective vaccines and the low vaccination rate — with optimizing people's lives and of course optimizing the economy. Therefore, to do that, they need stability.

And the protests that have occurred are being approached in a very nuanced way with multiple levels of action. You've mentioned some of them. Large numbers of police on the street — not a crackdown, but a recognition that they are there.



KUHN: Secondly, explanations that take what had been 20 new regulations to give more flexibility and to make sure that there are not overly coercive activities to lock people in buildings or excessive lockdowns. These directives are now in place and being put in place. In addition, there'll be a few individuals who will be looked for, the so-called ringleaders. We saw a similar approach in Hong Kong.



BBC HOST: That is the interesting thing. I mean, some of these people were wearing masks and they don't know how the police have identified them. But as I say, they do have face recognition in China. They spent billions on it. Presumably, then, we're not going to see the scale of the crackdown because they'll just be going door to door lifting people.

KUHN: Well, I don't think that that's an accurate way to look at it. I think for the vast majority of people, nothing will happen — and we will see some modest changes. We're not going to see a wholesale change in the Zero COVID policy because the assumption is that if that occurred now, with less than fully effective vaccines and a low vaccination rate, you would have a surge of cases and deaths. And President Xi Jinping has said that saving people's lives is his first priority.



KUHN: So, the approach to the protests will be a recognition of the impact, yet understanding the full necessity of maintaining the Zero COVID until the vaccine rate and the quality of the vaccine improves as well as these other measures: putting the police on the street, targeting individuals who might be the ringleaders.

That's their approach. It's a real challenge, and I think the Chinese leaders are doing the best they can under the circumstances.

BBC HOST: Marianne, do you think that the United States has a role to play in this?

