



Washington Examiner

Biden Under Pressure to Deliver Stronger Response to Chinese Protests

Naomi Lim

November 30, 2022

President Joe Biden has been put in an uncomfortable position by the protests that have broken out in China over Chinese President Xi Jinping's "zero-COVID" policy weeks after the pair's first in-person meeting of Biden's term.

Biden, who has framed his foreign policy as democracy vs. autocracy, is now being tepid in his response to the protests in China after his meeting with Xi this month on the sidelines of Indonesia's G-20 leaders summit eased tensions between himself and China's most powerful strongman since Mao Zedong.

Although the so-far peaceful protesters in China are at the mercy of their own government's "internal security apparatus," their presence is significant given Xi only recently secured an unprecedented third term as Chinese Communist Party general secretary and, therefore, as president, according to former Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell.

"Compared to the 1989 Tiananmen [Square] protests, which were not confined to Beijing, but in many big cities, the protesters were primarily college students, [though] workers joined in later," Stilwell told the *Washington Examiner*. "The reaction to zero COVID is much more widespread thanks to greater ease of sharing information — there were no cellphones in 1989 — as well as government policies that negatively impact Chinese citizens throughout the country."

"Beijing has left itself few options," the Vandenberg Coalition advisory board member warned.

Cato Institute defense studies senior fellow Eric Gomez advised Biden and his administration to "tread very carefully" and "not go further" than they already have regarding China's protests in such cities as Beijing, Chengdu, Shanghai, and Wuhan, sparked by the apartment building fire deaths last week of 10 people in Urumqi, Xinjiang, because their doors had reportedly been barricaded closed as part of the COVID-19 lockdown. The western province, home to China's ethnic minority Uyghur population, has been locked down for three and a half months. The CCP denies the accusations.

"U.S.-China relations just had a floor put under them at Bali after many years of freefall," Gomez said. "Stronger support by the Biden administration would be a big risk for the United States to take if Beijing interprets support as an effort to overthrow the regime."

Gomez downplayed descriptions of the COVID-19 protests as "Tiananmen Square 2.0," a reference to China's crackdown on pro-democracy activists in which the People's Liberation Army is estimated to have killed hundreds to thousands of people. Instead, he contended Xi has other options "for dealing with dissent, short of sending the military into the street" as crowds holding blank white pages of paper to represent censorship repeated, "We don't want lockdowns, we want freedom!"

It is still very difficult to tell what the protests in China will turn into, if anything," he said. "The major throughline of the protest seems to focus on how Beijing has handled the pandemic rather than being a call for fundamental reform or a change in leadership. I realize that some protesters have called for Xi Jinping to step down, but thus far, they appear to be in the minority."

China's protests coincide with protracted unrest in Iran after the Sept. 16 death of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini, 22, in Tehran while she was in the custody of the regime's morality police for allegedly not completely covering her hair. The demonstrations also coincide with Biden and his administration's abandonment of his democracy vs. autocracy message during the U.N. General Assembly last September and this month's trip to Asia.

White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters Monday it is "a moment" to underscore Biden's stance on free assembly and peaceful protest, in addition to reiterating that "a lockdown is not a policy that we're going to support here."

"We've done that and will continue to do that, whether it's people protesting in Iran or China or anywhere else around the world," he said. "Nothing has changed about the president's firm belief in the power of democracy and democratic institutions and how important that is."

But Kirby's rhetoric, which did not condemn China's detention of protesters and reporters, can be compared to the administration's more critical language concerning Iran as Biden pursues "guardrails" for his relationship with Xi and cooperation on issues like climate change.

"We're speaking out over and over again and raising awareness and making sure that those brave women and citizens are lifted up as they are really fighting for their basic rights," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during the same briefing of Iran.

Republicans are unencumbered by Biden and the administration's political and diplomatic constraints, Gov. Ron DeSantis (R-FL) denouncing China's COVID-19 policies "as draconian" and arguing they should "go to the ash heap of history."

"President Biden needs to express clear American support for the brave Chinese protesting against their totalitarian regime instead of trying to appease the CCP," Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) added on Twitter.