

What is “Dynamic Zero Covid”?

DM Chiu, February 3, 2022

There seems to be some confusion about what “Dynamic Zero Covid” (動態清零) means. When our Chief Executive (CL) was asked, she admitted that she did not come up with this term and could not give a definitive explanation, but this is a requirement for achieving quarantined-free travel to mainland, a wish for many Hong Kong people.

In the press or social media, many commentators interpret “Dynamic Zero Covid” (DZC) as “Pursue Zero Covid no matter what” (ZCNW). In other words, it may be impossible to stop the emergence of some Covid cases (due to various low-probability loop holes), but as Covid cases are discovered, stop it at all cost through contact tracing and needed level of lock-down. Zero Covid is always achievable if strict enough lock-down is practiced, at least theoretically. This may indeed be the current message from mainland authorities, on what DZC means.

Another logical interpretation or even better definition of DZC is to “Adapt Zero Covid strategy according to the situation” (AZCS). In other words, the degree of Zero Covid you achieve has to adapt to and depend on the situation - what you can afford to do by fiscal budget, is allowed to do by law, and is wise to do according to balancing the interests of society as a whole – as the virus mutates. Consider for example if the prevailing Covid virus mutates to a form that is no more harmful than a flu, and it is costlier to stop it than a flu, wouldn't the best government policy be to treat it just like past practices for flu? Note, the contention here is not that Omicron is just like a flu, which some experts do suggest; but the hypothetical case is used to argue AZCS is a better (more correct) interpretation of DZC than ZCNW. It would not be surprising that the mainland authorities will one day adopt this interpretation for DZC as well.

As a slightly academic aside, actually there are two broad options for adapting Covid defense strategies: (1) Optimize Defense against Covid, in consideration of costs, benefits and constraints (e.g. hospital capacity); and (2) Pursue Zero Covid as much as you can reasonably afford (costs of contact tracing, social distancing and border control). Option (1) is very hard, as you have to put a (relative) price on all kinds of things, such as human life, economy and so on. I think some (very few) governments try to practice Option (1) to some extent, for example UK, Denmark and Singapore. They would abandon testing, contact tracing, social distancing and/or border control selectively, if it is deemed the benefits are more than social costs, and if they can gain social agreement in the approach. How well they are doing is up to debate. Option (2) can be thought of a special case of Option (1) when cost of human life is set arbitrarily high. I think most countries practiced Option (2), including mainland China. The difference is just that the costs (for contact tracing, social distancing and border control) are different for different countries, resulting in the mainland still able to work towards Zero Covid, while most other countries are forced to relax contact tracing and social distancing policies as their costs become unmanageable. In

current policy debate, both Option (1) and (2) are considered “Live with Covid” (LWC) policies, so I am essentially saying LWC can also be considered a form of DZC, in the liberal sense. Ironically, after you lose your battle against Covid, you achieve herd immunity and you are relieved from the burden of combatting Covid anymore.

Judging from CL’s personality, it is hard to believe that she does not know what DZC means. It is more likely that her policy is to practice (Option 2) of AZCS, but it is politically sensitive and difficult to spell that subtle difference between AZCS and ZCNW out. If not careful, she may jeopardize the opportunity for an agreement for quarantine-free travel to China for Hong Kong citizens. These days, various political opportunists are pushing the government to strictly copy mainland policies, or even suggesting deviation from ZCNW violates national security. It is thus understandable that even CL has to admit she cannot explain her own policy.