

# WHAT CAN CHINA'S DELAYED "TWO SESSIONS" TELL US ABOUT ITS COVID-19 "NORMALIZATION" POLICY?

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## Summary

Every year Chinese and international analysts watch closely as China's "Two Sessions" take place in Beijing. These annual sessions of the national legislature and a separate national advisory body normally take place in March, but this year have been delayed due to Covid-19 and will open, respectively, on 22 and 21 May. In this first briefing of our Two Sessions series, we explain their significance and what they might tell us about the Chinese government's current policy on Covid-19. The Sessions, and the Government Work Report delivered by the Premier at the start, are not simply ceremonial events or platforms for communicating a political narrative. They are also functional institutions that are part of the government policy cycle. The Government Work Report communicates not only to session attendees and a broad domestic audience, but to government departments, officials and civil servants, meaning its content is largely substantive and actionable not empty and rhetorical. We expect the Government Work Report to signal that all government bodies must incorporate prevention and control into their policies going forward. We predict that it will also stress the "normalization of epidemic prevention and control," and make clear that rather than "relaxing" or "getting back to normal," continued vigilance and active measures against Covid-19 are vital. Overall, we expect this year's Two Sessions to send a strong message that though there have been successes in tackling the pandemic, there is no room for complacency.

## Background to the Two Sessions

"Two Sessions" (*lianghui*) is shorthand for the meetings of two political bodies, held in parallel every year. One of those bodies is the National People's Congress (NPC), the Chinese legislature and technically the "highest organ of state power." The other, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), is a consultative body and is not technically part of the government. Given its importance in the government cycle, we focus mainly on the NPC session.

In a typical year, the Two Sessions last for around ten days and take place in Beijing. The NPC session involves around 3,000 NPC "delegates" travelling from all over the country to the capital. Among the main items on the NPC session agenda — which will be finalized by a "Presidium"<sup>1</sup> formed just before the Sessions open — are "plenary meetings," attended by all NPC delegates (CPPCC members can usually sit in, but in an advisory capacity). Smaller breakout sessions are held for delegations to deliberate on reports and matters of state. The CPPCC works in a similar way, with its own full and breakout sessions, though its members can only "discuss" and "offer views on" and do not "deliberate" and "pass" the reports on the work of different government bodies.

One task at the Sessions is for delegates to deliberate on and approve work that has been, and will be, done on their behalf. When the NPC is not in session (i.e. for most of the year) it is the NPC Standing Committee (a smaller permanent body of around 175 people) that takes charge of many of the NPC's legislative and other powers and duties. At the Two

Sessions, the head of the NPC Standing Committee<sup>2</sup> reports to NPC delegates on how that work has been carried out and on plans for work over the coming year. The delegates deliberate on and approve this work report. A similar setup is in place for the CPPCC, though as an advisory body its role is not comparable to that of the NPC.<sup>3</sup>

But the usual "to-do" list at the Sessions is much longer than this. The NPC has the constitutional role of approving the national budget and the national plan for economic and social development. In recent years, it has usually been at the Two Sessions that the NPC fulfils these roles. The State Council (the national government executive) is also, constitutionally, meant to answer to the NPC and report to it on its work. This is why, at the Sessions, key bodies from the executive branch of government, including the State Council (represented by the Premier, currently Li Keqiang), the Ministry of Finance, and the National Development and Reform Commission, as well as the Supreme People's Court and Supreme People's Procuratorate, present reports on their work to the NPC delegates. The Premier's delivery of the Government Work Report is a highlight, draws a broad domestic audience, and is watched closely by international analysts.

A common refrain in international reporting on the Two Sessions is that because key decisions are made in advance and the real power rests with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Sessions are largely ceremonial. But this is not entirely accurate and obscures the Sessions' substantive implications. They play a key role in the Chinese government's policy

<sup>1</sup> The Presidium is created to "host" the Session. It makes important decisions, e.g., on what gets onto the agenda and which legislative proposals get discussed, giving it significant control. The NPC Standing Committee is meant to draft list of Presidium members before the Session to be "deliberated on" by the delegations, though in practice influencing this list is among the ways the Chinese Communist Party influences the Sessions (see Guo, Sujian "The party-state relationship in post-Mao China" *China Report* 37, no. 3 (2001): 301-315).

<sup>2</sup> Currently Li Zhanshu, who also sits on the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, which is the highest body of the Communist Party.

<sup>3</sup> On paper, the NPC is constitutionally very powerful. Even in practice it is much more than a "rubber stamp." The CPPCC is essentially just advisory and enables the CCP, which already dominates the NPC, to exercise "leadership" over, while listening to the views of, people from different sectors and small, non-governing parties.

cycle. They are the culmination of long periods of preparation from lower levels all the way up, and once they are over the guidance contained in the Sessions' main reports will be put into practice via policy documents from the provinces and actions from government ministries. They give structure to the rest of the policy cycle, acting as the focal point around which that cycle rotates.

The Premier's Government Work Report is sometimes misconceived as simply a platform for the Chinese leadership to relay a politically motivated CCP narrative to a passive and inactive audience. But the Government Work Report's combination of functions dictates that it cannot be, and usually is not, used in such a simplistic way. As a document issued (with NPC approval) by the government executive, it also differs significantly from documents issued by the Party. Party documents tend to contain more content on, for example, "ideology and political thought," while this government report contains more actionable content on specific policy domains such as social welfare or fiscal policy. If we look to the Government Work Report for insight into the Chinese government's current policy on Covid-19, we need to bear in mind its role in the government system to avoid overlooking or misinterpreting key elements of its message on the pandemic.

### Unusual delays caused by Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has delayed the NPC's annual session by over two and a half months. This is the first time in decades it has not been held in March. Since the mid-1980s, when the policy cycle settled into a predictable rhythm after the Cultural Revolution, the NPC session has been held every year in March. Since 1998, the Government Work Report that begins the NPC session has been delivered by the incumbent

<sup>4</sup> Political science professor Wu Guoguang has written about the interplay between formal and informal institutions in the Chinese system, explaining why ceremonial formal institutions should still be taken seriously as parts of the political system. See Wu,

Premier without fail on 5 March. This year, in contrast, the 2020 NPC session begins on 22 May.

This matters because the establishment of regular timings for the Sessions back in the 1980s and 1990s, influenced the entire government system, which came to operate to the same annual rhythm. As the start-of-year marker in the national policy calendar the Sessions have a substantive role in that cycle. In other words, whether the NPC's status as "highest organ of power" is nominal or not, its session is still the crux of the cycle both symbolically and practically. <sup>4</sup> Given its constitutional status and the formal functions that stem from it, only once the NPC has signed off on top-level decisions — whether pre-determined by the CCP or not — can they begin to feed into and shape government priorities and schedules for the coming year's policy. In the same vein, its Government Work Report, which we turn to next, is no static, antiquated or one-dimensional tradition that can be dismissed as detached from the workings of policy and the economy.

### Interpreting the Government Work Report

The Government Work Report (GWR) is a highlight of the Two Sessions and is one of the first places analysts look for insights into government policy for the year ahead. This report is usually delivered to NPC delegates and CPPCC members in the form of a speech by the Premier, but it is also televised in full, streamed live online, and communicated via hard copies, e-copies, and, since 2017, scannable QR codes that enable access via popular social media platforms. Though it is delivered as a speech, it is far from just that. It does not start and end with its delivery by the Premier in the Great Hall of the People on the first day of the NPC.

Guoguang *China's party congress: Power, legitimacy, and institutional manipulation*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

In practice, it has a complex combination of functions. First, it functions as the focus of a long drafting process through which the national government gains feedback on drafts from provinces and ministries, as well as input from others such as business leaders and experts from different fields. This process typically takes between 3 and 5–6 months.<sup>5</sup> Second, once it has been delivered at the Two Sessions, it functions as a practical document that conveys fairly concrete guidance to government departments and officials. Third, it functions as a way for the government to communicate with a broad domestic and international (multilingual) audience; and, fourth, it technically functions as the means by which the national government executive reports to the legislature — the *de jure* highest government body.

It is this combination of functions that means it cannot be used by the Premier, the CCP, or anyone else as a platform to simply convey a political narrative to Chinese citizens without considering how this would affect the GWR's other, very real, functions. For instance, hypothetically, even if the CCP leadership<sup>6</sup> wished to claim a grand victory in the battle against Covid-19 to the general public, it could not do so through the GWR without inadvertently signalling to government officials using it as a guide to action that they can relax measures against the pandemic. Similarly, it cannot spout platitudes for a foreign audience without considering its function of communicating to ministries and commissions that will put its principles into practice. Attention to this kind of tension in the role of the GWR should inform our analysis and help us avoid making misleading assumptions about to whom it is communicating what.

In practical terms, if the GWR is to deliver on each of those functions in one document of

less than 40 pages, its content must be carefully structured and worded. This makes the GWR dense in content and a fascinating document to analyse. In a typical year, the GWR combines an overall tone — motivational, exhortative, or perhaps measured — with broad general principles or "requirements" for government to follow (like "pursue high-quality development," "keep major economic indicators within an appropriate range" and "pursue three battles against risk, poverty and pollution"). Underneath and in keeping with these come principles for specific policy domains (for example "monetary policy will remain prudent and be eased or tightened to the appropriate degree") which in turn is followed by specific, concrete policies. A large proportion of the report is made up of lengthy matter-of-fact passages of concrete content setting out the government's aims, tasks, policies and initiatives for the coming year.

### Early insights into Covid-19 policy in the Government Work Report

Viewing the GWR as a complex institution rather than as a simple standalone speech helps us to parse its content and avoid obfuscating assumptions. For some content there is not necessarily one "correct interpretation" (existing research shows Chinese political discourse sometimes to be instrumentally ambiguous),<sup>7</sup> but there are things we can pay attention to in order not to miss important content. We combine this understanding with observations on two provincial-level government work reports (from Yunnan and Sichuan provinces) that were also delayed by Covid-19 to suggest what we can look out for in the national GWR.

This year's GWR is likely to be structurally atypical. We can already see structural changes in the government work reports of Yunnan and Sichuan that may be applied in

<sup>5</sup> This is significantly longer when there is an administration change, which happens every five years, when the Report reviews the previous five years rather than the past year.

<sup>6</sup> The CCP undoubtedly, indeed openly, influences the Two Sessions and the GWR.

<sup>7</sup> See Schoenhals, Michael (1992) *Doing things with words in Chinese politics: Five studies*. Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley.

the national GWR (this is detailed in the second of our Two Sessions papers). Both of those provincial reports add content on Covid-19 in their first pages, the former by adding a paragraph, the latter by adding a whole section. This happens rarely in government work reports, especially at the national level and would merit attention if were to be the case in the national GWR.

We can already predict the overarching requirements on Covid-19 that the GWR will set out for government to adhere to. Familiarity with the wording and structure of previous GWRs alerts us to a set phrase which has appeared consistently in GWRs over the past few years: "to do a good job of government work (this year) ...."<sup>8</sup> This is then typically followed by overarching principles or requirements. On 15 May 2020, as an important step in the process of the GWR's preparation, the CCP Politburo (the highest ranking 25 Party leaders) met to discuss it. The official news report on that meeting used that same set phrase on "doing a good job of government work" followed by two clear requirements: "combine planning for epidemic prevention and control and economic and social development" and work "under the precondition of normalising epidemic prevention and control."<sup>9</sup> Both of these requirements, which act as an umbrella under which all other requirements sit, make epidemic prevention and control inseparable from government work to revive the economy or address social needs.

Both the Yunnan and Sichuan provincial government work reports also included this "combined planning" as an overall requirement. If, as we expect, this appears with similar clout in the national GWR, it shows us not only how seriously the Chinese government continues to take Covid-19 but that it expects the entire government system to recognize and act on that judgement.

Another key concept we expect to see in the GWR is that of "normalizing epidemic prevention and control." This is central to the Chinese government's current discourse on the epidemic. Unlike the discourse in some countries, which focuses on "lifting," "easing" or "removing" restrictions or "getting back to normal," Chinese policy stresses the idea that Covid-19 prevention and control measures should, for the period ahead, be adapted to become a normal part of government work, carried out *in combination with* economic and social development. "Normalized epidemic prevention and control" features in both Yunnan's and Sichuan's government work reports. Yunnan's report, for example, calls for "preparing fully for worst case scenarios, putting watertight emergency response plans in place and strengthening trial runs" and "strengthening joint cooperation on epidemic prevention and control with neighbouring countries."

Finally, if the national GWR is like those provincial work reports, it will set out serious, concrete, targeted prevention and control measures, and stress concern both about transmission coming in from outside and domestic rebounds. Perhaps most importantly, it will leave no room for complacency about the pandemic going forward.

<sup>8</sup> "做好(今年)政府工作".

<sup>9</sup> "统筹推进疫情防控和经济社会发展工作，在常态化疫情防控前提下." See Xinhua News, 15 May 2020, "中共中央政治局召开会议 讨论政府工作报告 中共中

央总书记习近平主持会议" (CCP Central Committee Politburo Holds Meeting to Discuss the Government Work Report, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping Hosts the Meeting).

### Key points

- This year's "Two Sessions" will likely send a clear message that though there have been successes in tackling the pandemic, there is no room for complacency.
- We expect the Government Work Report to announce the overarching requirement of "combining planning" on epidemic prevention and control with that on economic and social development, signalling that all government bodies must incorporate prevention and control into their policies going forward.
- The Government Work Report will also likely stress the "normalization of epidemic prevention and control," sending a clear message that, rather than "relaxing" or "getting back to normal," continued vigilance and active measures against Covid-19 are key.

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### The project

Covid-19: Understanding Chinese Government Containment Measures and their Societal Impacts

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