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In the mind of Mr. Xi

“What’s in the minds of the dictators?” we asked recently, because China and Russia’s behavior has been doing plenty of damage to the global economy. Our answer was a guess that at least one thing buzzing around in the minds of Mr. Putin and Mr. Xi was, “Oops. How do I get out of this mess?” The next couple of weeks shone no more light on Mr. Putin’s thinking; but they certainly did on Mr. Xi.

Blunders have consequences. They always come home to roost, eventually; and of all political leaders, history shows us that dictators make more catastrophic blunders than anyone else. That makes sense. It is the nature of a dictator to feel himself more immune to the consequences of mistakes, and to feel incapable of making mistakes in the first place. People tend to feel that way when they have big egos and surround themselves with “yes” men.

Mr. Xi checks all those boxes—but amazingly, he’s had his nose rubbed in his biggest blunder, “Zero Covid”, by someone he certainly holds in contempt: the common man (and woman) of China. Somehow, despite China’s Orwellian system of informers, cameras, social scores and thugs dressed up as Covid Lockdown enforcers, a shocking number of ordinary Chinese took their lives in their hands, over the past few weeks, and stood up against Mr. Xi’s Lockdown Mania . . . and Mr. Xi himself, pretty often. At Outlook we suspect this was the last thing in the world Mr. Xi imagined might happen. It was the last thing in the world every Western “expert” thought might happen. But it happened anyway . . . and shocked Mr. Xi into doing something about his blunder.

Exactly *what* he did also shone a light on “What’s in his mind.” He did two things: first, he made a show of dropping “Zero Covid;” second, he sent his secret police after every protestor they could find. He was startled enough by the mass protests to begin backing off “Zero Covid,” because China’s common people scared him; and he was scared enough to make damned sure it doesn’t happen again. Bullying and terror are the tools of every dictator, and Mr. Xi is surely using them . . . but quietly, while his media trumpets the Lockdown Ease.

China’s action won’t by itself be the salvation of the global economy . . . but it will do it a lot more good than if Mr. Xi hadn’t had this fright, courtesy of his own people. Like it or not, China is an engine of the world economy. Three years of Zero Covid stagnation and Supply Chain Chaos, courtesy of China, have hurt companies and consumers all over the world. Until the last few weeks, it was a coin toss whether Mr. Xi would admit his blunder and do anything to fix it. Dictators rarely do such things. But now he has; and no matter the cautious tip-toe (in reality) toward “Lockdown Relaxation,” it looks pretty likely—as we peer into the fog swirling in Mr. Xi’s head—that China’s slow march back toward economic growth will keep trudging.

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