China's Holistic Approaches to Security: A Text-Mining Analysis of Shifting Priorities in COVID-19 Responses

Xiru Zhao and Yuji Uesugi

This article examines China's national security through the human security framework, using the government's response to COVID-19 in both the initial phase and Omicron phase as case studies. It aims to bridge the conceptual divide between China's and Western views on human security. The analysis reveals a shift in China's policies, from an economic-focused to a health-centered approach, involving a prioritization of public security over individual security and a community-focused people-centered strategy. These findings highlight China's emphasis on collective wellbeing, providing insights into the distinctive features of its governance during the pandemic and how national security is intertwined with human security in this context.

Keywords   China, COVID-19, human security, public security, national security

Introduction

The concept of human security underlines the importance of addressing non-traditional security threats. Beginning in December 2019, humanity suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing the significance of a human security approach in dealing with infectious diseases. The pandemic's impact on human security shaped its conceptual development. In February 2022, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) issued a special report entitled "New Threats to Human Security in the Anthropocene: Demanding Greater Solidarity," which added the concept of solidarity to the main pillars of the human security approach (UNDP 2022).

As reported on the World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 dashboard, up to December 23, 2023, a total of about 773 million COVID-19 cases had been reported worldwide. The People's Republic of China (hereafter China), the place of origin of the virus, ranked second globally with over 99.3 million

cases reported (WHO 2023a). The pandemic was first discovered in Wuhan, China, in November 2019 and later evolved with five main mutations identified as variant of concerns (VOCs), namely (in chronological order of WHO classification) Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta and Omicron (Hao et al. 2022, 3182). The Omicron variant was initially identified in November 2021 in Botswana and South Africa and was classified as a VOC by the WHO more swiftly than its predecessors (Jung et al. 2022, 3). Moreover, Omicron exhibited a substantially higher transmission rate compared to the prior four identified variants (Chatterjee et al. 2023, 167).

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Chinese government employed policies of "external prevention of importation and internal prevention of rebound" (Wang and Huang 2022) and "dynamic zero COVID" to protect the community from the threat of the virus. The dynamic zero approach refers to a strategy that, while adhering to the principle of preventing imported cases and domestic resurgence, aimed for swift and precise responses rather than zero infections. The policy sought to balance pandemic control with socio-economic development to the greatest extent possible. By implementing effective and comprehensive prevention measures, each outbreak was identified and extinguished as it occurred, rapidly cutting off transmission chains to ensure timely termination of each cluster and bringing the number of infections to zero, thereby achieving maximum effectiveness with minimal cost (Liang et al. 2022, 239). The border closure, lockdown, and quarantine policies postponed the proliferation of the pandemic and earned precious time for preventing high infection rates within the society (The Lancet Regional Health 2023). Thus, such a rigid policy in the beginning of the pandemic aimed at preventing and controlling the spread of virus can be evaluated positively.

This study suggests that China's approach to managing COVID-19 demonstrates a distinct interpretation of human security in which health security is a fundamental aspect, thus differing from the Western concept of human security. In short, this research asks, "How has China's policy changed from the outbreak of COVID-19 to the outbreak of Omicron?" The study further asks, "How has the Chinese government addressed the human security issues that surfaced during the pandemic?" To answer these questions, text mining analysis is used as the main research method to analyze the most frequently used nouns in the press conferences of the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of the State Council of China (JPCMSC) from the beginning phase of COVID-19 (February 2, 2020 to May 19, 2020) and the Omicron phase (January 2022 to January 8, 2023) to investigate change in China's domestic policies by categorizing the words in accordance with the human security perspective. Employing a text analysis, the study will investigate China's policy responses, highlighting shifts in its focus as the pandemic progressed.

This article seeks to explore China's national security through the lens of

human security. Specifically, it aims to bridge the gap between the Western concept of human security and its application in the Chinese context, using the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as an illustrative example. The research argues that the Chinese government's approach to managing COVID-19, from the initial outbreak to the Omicron phase, shifted its focus from economic considerations to public health priorities. Rather than emphasizing individual security, which is central to the concept of human security, the Chinese government prioritized public health security. This people-centered approach addressed collective wellbeing, often downplaying the importance of individual rights and security. Following this introduction, the article presents a literature review on China's national security, followed by an examination of China's COVID-19 policies. The subsequent section details the analysis of the data using text analysis of the JPCMSC press conferences in the two phases, leading into a discussion of the findings. The final section provides the conclusion.

China's National Security

Security is a multifaceted concept with varied meanings, dimensions, and inter-pretations, consistently holding a prominent place in global security discourse. Traditionally centered on protection from external military threats (King and Murray 2001, 587), the scope of security has expanded to include human rights, economic stability, environmental sustainability, drug trafficking, epidemic control, crime prevention, and social justice (Ullman 1983, 133; Baldwin 1997, 7). The concept of non-traditional security emerged in response to evolving societal challenges, including infectious diseases, and technological advancements (Upadhyay 2016, 288; Gianluca 2014, 699). This broader understanding of security underscores the interdependence of different sectors and the necessity for comprehensive strategies to ensure the wellbeing of diverse populations.

The notion of human security emerged following the end of the Cold War, reflecting a shift from traditional ideas of security due to increasing dissatisfaction (Henk 2005, 93). This signifies a transition from an exclusive focus on military interests to a broader conceptualization of security that focuses on economic, health, food, environmental, personal, community, and political perspectives (Owens 2012, 547; United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security 2016). The people-centered approach involves addressing the needs of vulnerable groups in a comprehensive and humanitarian manner, which aims to support people mainly in developing countries in coping with natural disasters, infectious diseases, violent conflict, and other potential threats that prevent them from securing lives (Wang 2004). The "freedom from want," "freedom from fear," and "freedom to live in dignity" are emphasized within the domain of human security (Acharya 2001, 443) to focus on the human rights of individuals (Fukuda-Parr and Messineo
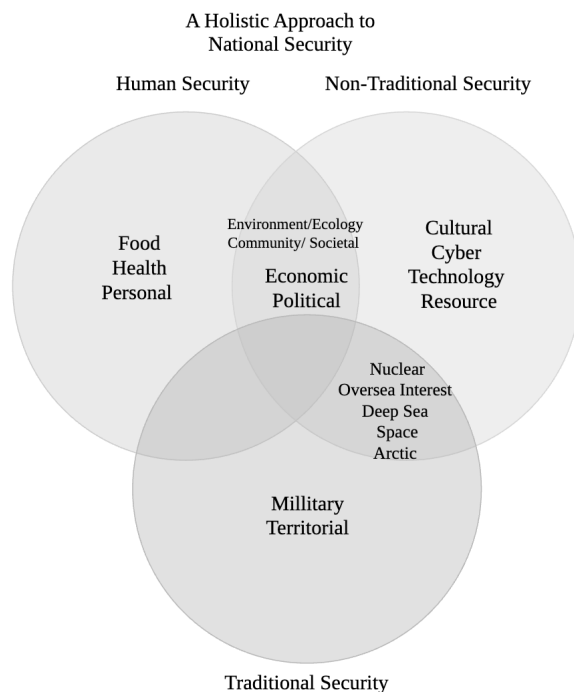
2012, 8).

Scholars have long argued that human security is a liberal and Westernized concept that does not fit the context of China (Uesugi and Richmond 2021a, 436; Uesugi and Richmond 2021b, 422). In the case of China, the concept is translated as *renlei de anquan,* or even *ren de anquan*, which neglects the individual by only focusing on humanity as a whole (Breslin 2015, 248). The Chinese government leaders or official spokespersons have rarely used the term "human security" in their official statements. Instead, China has coined the term, "a holistic approach to national security," which conceptually encompasses both national security and human security. According to the Ministry of State Security of China's National Security Law (2015),

> "National security" means a status in which the regime, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development, and other major interests of the state are relatively not faced with any danger and not threatened internally or externally, and the capability to maintain a sustained security status.

Xi Jinping expanded the concept of national security in his speech at the first meeting of the Central National Security Commission in 2014. He stated that China must "adhere to a holistic approach to national security, take people-oriented security as the purpose, political and economic security as the foundation, military, cultural, and social security as the guarantee, and the promotion of international security as the basis, and blaze a national security path with the Chinese characteristics" (*Xinhua News Agency* 2014). Within the "holistic approach to national security" proposed by Xi Jinping, there is both traditional security and non-traditional security that integrate a total of sixteen security fields, which include political, territorial, military, economic, cultural, societal, technological, cyber, ecological, resource, nuclear, space, deep sea, and Arctic security and safeguarding overseas interests. A holistic approach to national security integrates various existing security paradigms to provide a comprehensive understanding of national security. This approach encompasses traditional security dimensions, such as territorial integrity and military defense, alongside non-traditional security concerns, including technological advancements, cyber threats, and human security aspects like economic stability and societal wellbeing (Greitens 2021). This integrative framework represents a novel and comprehensive security concept, as defined by the Chinese government, to address both international and domestic security challenges (Yu 2024, 39). By adopting this holistic perspective, the approach aims to effectively navigate the complexities of modern security landscapes and ensure the protection and stability of the nation in a multifaceted and interconnected world, while overlooking the attention to individual members in the nation.

Figure 1. A Holistic Approach to National Security

A Holistic Approach to
National Security

Human Security   Non-Traditional Security

Environment/Ecology
Community/ Societal

Food
Health
Personal

Economic
Political

Cultural
Cyber
Technology
Resource

Nuclear
Oversea Interest
Deep Sea
Space
Arctic

Millitary
Territorial

Traditional Security

Source: Authors.

Figure 1 illustrates China's comprehensive approach to national security, which integrates traditional security, non-traditional security, and human security. This holistic framework is employed by the Chinese government to address a wide spectrum of security concerns. Traditional security focuses on military and defense capabilities to protect state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Non-traditional security encompasses emerging threats such as cyber-attacks, terrorism, and environmental degradation, requiring adaptive and multifaceted responses. Human security, meanwhile, emphasizes the protection of individuals from chronic threats like hunger, disease, and repression, highlighting wellbeing and dignity. Through this expanded notion of security, China's approach aims to ensure stability for both the state and its people, fostering societal progress. However, as indicated in Figure 1, "personal security" is translated as *renmin anquan*, which refers to the collective concept of people security rather than individual security. The government continues to prioritize public security, which emphasizes collective welfare over individual rights.

    The advent of COVID-19 compels people to reexamine the conceptualization of security since the virus threatens human security on a global scale. Various dimensions of human security have been extensively addressed in the context

of COVID-19, including food security (Swinnen and McDermott 2020, 27), economic security (Cavallo and Forman 2020, 144), and most importantly, health security. Advanced military-oriented states often fared poorly in responding to the COVID-19 crisis, while those with a broader approach to national security, balancing military spending with public welfare, demonstrated more effective pandemic mitigation (Newman 2022, 433). The holistic approach to national security advocated by Xi Jinping is similar to "human security" in that the state pursues and promotes development based on the fundamental interests of the people (Hu 2011, 17), although it did not specifically mention health security or other security perspectives when facing pandemics. The pandemic revealed that the Chinese government struggled to translate economic expansion into concrete benefits and enhanced security for the population (ibid., 18). The Chinese government's commitments, while not explicitly labeled as human security and differing in some aspects from its holistic approach to national security, nonetheless align with the emphasis on international cooperation and collective development within UNDP's (2022) action framework for human security.

China's COVID-19 Policies

Since the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003, the Chinese government has enacted the "Regulations on Preparedness for the Response to Emergent Public Health Hazards" policy (National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China 2014). This initiative aims to establish a swift and efficient epidemic emergency response mechanism, enhancing response capabilities to minimize the impact of public health emergencies to the greatest extent possible (Liu, Yue, and Tchounwou 2020, 2304). COVID-19 bears both similarities and differences with SARS. Given the absence of specific treatments and preventive measures for COVID-19, the Chinese government prioritized traditional public health outbreak response strategies, including isolation, quarantine, social distancing, and community containment (Wu and McGoogan 2020, 1340). It lock-downed Wuhan and major cities in Hubei Province from January 23, 2020, to April 8, 2020, which bought time for medical facilities to manage the rising caseload of critical care patients (Lau et al. 2020).

After China's strict lockdown response in Wuhan, the pandemic response transitioned to "normalized control" from April 2020. The domestic COVID-19 situation in China was generally characterized by sporadic cases, with occasional small-scale localized outbreaks that were swiftly and effectively contained. The overall trend of the pandemic response remains positive, although there remains a continuous consolidation of efforts. As a result, there has been rapid recovery in both societal and economic aspects of daily life (Liang et al. 2022, 240).

Starting from August 2021, the Chinese government started the dynamic

zero policy under the overall strategy of "external prevention of importation and internal prevention of rebound" (Shi et. al. 2023, 1381). The government defined its dynamic zero policy as "the rapid detection of outbreaks and the swift implementation of measures to interrupt sustained community transmission" (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022). Dynamic zero prioritized the utmost protection of people's lives and health while minimizing the pandemic's impact on the nation's overall economic and social development (Liao 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic officially began at the end of 2019, when a cluster of unknown pneumonia cases was diagnosed in Wuhan, Hubei Province in China. On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared that COVID-19 constituted a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) that required international responses (WHO 2020). On May 5, 2023, with the "Statement on the Fifteenth Meeting of the IHR (International Health Regulation) Emergency Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic," the WHO declared the end of COVID-19 as a PHEIC, a status that had lasted for more than three years (WHO 2023b). The timeline of the pandemic's progression varied across regions and countries due to factors such as border controls, quarantines, and other pandemic-related measures.

The Chinese government classified the COVID-19 pandemic as a Class B infectious disease (under the regulations of its Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Law) that was subjected to prevention and control measures akin to those of a Class A infectious disease, and it started daily reporting of new cases on January 20, 2020. On June 7, 2020, the State Council Information Office released a white paper titled "Fighting COVID-19 China in Action" to reveal China's domestic information and statistics in dealing with COVID-19 in the beginning phase, including the Wuhan outbreak. The beginning phase of COVID-19, which was initiated in Wuhan, began at the end of December 2019 and continued through to June 2020. The Chinese government concluded this phase by stating:

> China has succeeded in turning the situation around. In little more than a single month, the rising spread of the virus was contained; in around two months, the daily increase in domestic coronavirus cases had fallen to single digits; and in approximately three months, a decisive victory was secured in the battle to defend Hubei Province and its capital city of Wuhan. With these strategic achievements, China has protected its people's lives, safety, and health, and made a significant contribution to safeguarding regional and global public health (State Council Information Office 2020).

The success in this phase did not mark the end of the pandemic within the country. The virus itself started to mutate and evolve in the global environment. As the most prevailing variant, Omicron was first documented in multiple countries in November 2021 (WHO 2023c). In mainland China, Omicron was first identified on December 9, 2021 (National Health Commission of the People's

Republic of China 2022), and the first domestic case of Omicron was diagnosed in Tianjin on January 8, 2022 (*BBC News* 2022). The government proactively disseminated virus-related information and implemented robust measures, including daily PCR (polymerase chain reaction) testing and localized lockdowns to manage the virus on a relatively small scale to protect the public. The term public represents a collective concept, contrasting sharply with private, which emphasizes the rights of individual members. The Omicron period ended on January 8, 2023, when the regulation and control of the virus was downgraded to Class B according to the Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Law. This announcement marked the end of the dynamic zero policy, and the government stopped tracking and regulating COVID-19. After that day, the Chinese government no longer released or documented the number of infections and there remains no official data or information released on social media. The last press conference was held on February 27, 2023.

This research aims to compare the Chinese government's responses in two distinct phases: the initial phase (the onset of the pandemic) and the Omicron phase (the later stages of the country's efforts to manage the virus). In both phases, the Chinese government implemented stringent measures to address the health crisis, yet it also exhibited distinct emphases and different approaches in each phase.

Methodology

The research for this study was conducted with the text mining method using the software Weiciyun (https://www.weiciyun.com). Weiciyun is an online software designed for Chinese text that supports word segmentation and word frequency counting and analysis. The authors conducted a comparative analysis of China's COVID-19 policies during the initial phase and the Omicron phase, examining the evolution of policy priorities under the human security framework. This investigation was based on the assumption that China's COVID-19 policies shifted from the initial phase to the Omicron phase.

The text mining data was collected from the press conferences conducted by the JPCMSC (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022). The JPCMSC, a national platform established by the state under the National Influenza Pandemic Preparedness and Response Plan overseen by the National Health Commission, served as the central government's coordinating platform for addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

A total of 209 text transcriptions from the press conferences were analyzed and the top twenty most-used words were selected as the themes of the policies. The press conferences during the beginning stage began on February 2, 2020, and ended on May 19, 2020. As for the Omicron phase, the press conferences started

in January 2022 and ended on January 8, 2023, when the government officially announced it would manage COVID-19 through measures typically applied to Class B infectious diseases. This research was predominantly conducted in Chinese, primarily because comprehensive translations of the press conferences' transcripts are unavailable. The English equivalents of these words are provided by the authors in the appendix, along with the original Chinese characters.

On January 20, 2020, Xi Jinping issued significant directives regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the paramount importance of prioritizing the safety and health of the populace (*Xinhua News Agency* 2020). The JPCMSC, as the official agency coordinating the response, disseminated all COVID-19 policies and notifications to the public and functioned as the guiding entity. The agency released protocols for the prevention and control of novel coronavirus infections, along with various notifications concerning measures like traffic restrictions. The press conferences served as the authoritative platform for journalists and the public to receive the latest government policies, delivered in a top-down manner. In the early stages of the pandemic, press conferences were held daily, sometimes even more than twice a day, to provide frequent updates on pandemic-related information. During the Omicron phase, on the other hand, the frequency of these conferences decreased to three or four times per month, depending on the prevailing circumstances, such as the number of patients and the evolving scenario.

Results

Among the 209 press conference transcriptions, there are 150 transcriptions from the beginning phase and 59 transcriptions from the Omicron phase. The top twenty most-used nouns are listed in Table 1. The word "epidemic" is the main theme of the press conferences, and the words "question," "scenario," "journalist," "nation," "measures," "personnel," and "severe infection" are used frequently in both the beginning and Omicron phases, while some of these words (like "question" and "journalist") relate to the setting of the press conferences and do not have specific values.

One major difference between the two phases is the appearance of the term "vaccine," reflecting that during the Omicron phase, vaccines were already available and prioritized by the Chinese government for the "elderly" population. Another difference noted in the words used indicates that in the beginning phase the priority was to prevent and control the virus, whereas in the Omicron phase the priority shifted to include the treatment of "patients" with "severe infection" while continuing to protect the most vulnerable population, that is, "elderly" people.

Another important finding is that in the beginning phase, the term

Table 1. Top Twenty Most-Used Nouns and Their Frequencies in Both Phases

Beginning phase top 20 nouns	Frequency	Omicron phase top 20 nouns	Frequency
epidemic	5,904	epidemic	3,981
case of illness	3,157	vaccine	1,485
enterprise	2,676	measures	1,321
question	1,984	journalist	1,147
scenario	1,798	personnel	1,139
journalist	1,630	risk	1,088
nation	1,565	scenario	1,043
measures	1,534	virus	974
patient	1,446	focus	905
everyone	1,363	nation	904
personnel	1,332	crowd	899
pneumonia	1,134	question	826
policy	1,065	severe infection	819
focus	1,039	elderly	808
nationwide	1,014	district	706
severe infection	961	patient	686
medical	916	mutation	632
hospital	901	perspective	599
supplies	899	infected person	598

Source: Authors.

"enterprise" was used 2,676 times to indicate the Chinese government's emphasis on economic security, whereas this term disappeared from the top twenty list in the Omicron phase. This disparity could be explained by a shift in policy emphasis from economic security and community security to health security and personal security.

These initial findings were further scrutinized by an additional analysis that examines the words used within the contexts in which they were used. The purpose of doing so is to reveal any other terms that seem to have no significance when looking at them without their specific contexts. However, when examined in context, such words could shed light on the characteristics of China's COVID-19 responses in the two distinctive phases, and thus have implications for an understanding of the evolution of the concept of human security.

Discussion

Transition of the Government's Policy

The transition in China's policies from an economic-focused approach to a more health-centered strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant development, reflecting deeper shifts in the government's broader governance priorities. In the early stages of the pandemic, China's initial response emphasized a balance between managing the immediate public health crisis and stabilizing the economy, which faced severe disruptions due to nationwide lockdowns and restrictions. However, as the pandemic progressed, particularly during the emergence of the Omicron variant, there was a clear shift in policy focus, with the government increasingly prioritizing public health over economic concerns.

In the beginning phase, China's response was shaped by a dual imperative: controlling the spread of the virus while mitigating the economic impact of pandemic-related restrictions. The word frequency data from this period reveals a strong focus on economic stability, with terms such as "enterprise" and "supplies" frequently appearing in government communications. These terms indicate that the state placed considerable emphasis on ensuring the continuity of business operations and maintaining the flow of essential goods, reflecting the central role that economic stability played in the government's early response. The appearance of words like "nationwide" further underscores the government's reliance on broad, top-down measures aimed at protecting both public health and the economy on a macro scale.

However, this initial emphasis on economic management coexisted with a parallel concern for managing the health crisis. Terms such as "epidemic" and "case of illness" frequently appeared, indicating that the government was also focused on containing the virus and preventing widespread outbreaks. Despite this, economic security was tightly interwoven with health measures, as the government sought to strike a balance between safeguarding public health and minimizing economic disruption. This approach reflects China's long-standing governance model, in which economic growth and stability are seen as fundamental components of national security (Wang and Minzner 2015, 340).

As the pandemic evolved and the Omicron variant emerged, China's approach shifted toward a more health-centered strategy. The word frequency data from the Omicron phase highlights this transition, with health-related terms such as "vaccine," "risk," and "mutation" becoming more prominent. The increasing frequency of "vaccine" indicates the central role that mass vaccination campaigns played in the government's strategy for managing the pandemic. This shift represents a departure from the early focus on economic resilience and marks the beginning of a more sustained emphasis on managing the public health dimensions of the crisis. The focus on vaccination suggests that the government began to prioritize long-term health management as the key to controlling the

virus and ensuring the overall stability of society.

The emergence of terms like "risk" and "mutation" during the Omicron phase also signals a growing recognition of the pandemic as a dynamic, long-term challenge that requires continuous monitoring and adaptation. The frequency of these terms indicates that the Chinese government became increasingly focused on managing the evolving biological threat posed by the virus, particularly as new variants like Omicron emerged. This focus on risk management highlights the government's shift from a reactive crisis response to a more proactive, health-centered strategy aimed at preventing future outbreaks and protecting public health in the long-term.

The shift in China's COVID-19 policies from an economic-focused approach to a health-centered one can be partially attributed to the mutation of the virus, which fundamentally altered the nature of the policy response. As the dataset indicates, terms like "mutation" (632) and "virus" (974) gained prominence during the Omicron phase, reflecting a heightened governmental awareness of the evolving biological threat. The emergence of new variants, such as Omicron, introduced greater unpredictability into the pandemic, forcing a recalibration of state strategies. In contrast to earlier stages where the primary concern was containing the virus and stabilizing the economy, the appearance of these terms suggests that the mutation of the virus necessitated a more dynamic, health-focused approach. Variants like Omicron presented challenges, such as increased transmissibility and potential vaccine evasion. This is evidenced by the rising frequency of terms like "risk" (1,088) and "crowd" (899), indicating a shift towards localized, community-specific responses to contain outbreaks. The virus's ability to mutate into more transmissible and potentially more dangerous forms required China to move beyond broad economic protections and focus more directly on biological security, ensuring the stability of the public health system in the face of an evolving threat.

In contrast, the vaccination process, while vital to the public health response, appears to have had less impact on the overall shift in policy direction. The term "vaccine" (1,485) emerges with significant frequency during the Omicron phase, suggesting the centrality of vaccination in the government's strategy. Despite widespread vaccination efforts, the data implies that the emergence of new variants, capable of partially evading vaccine-induced immunity, necessitated ongoing public health interventions beyond the vaccination process itself. This can be interpreted as the government recognizing that, although vaccination helped mitigate severe cases of the disease, it was insufficient on its own to fully eliminate the threat posed by the virus. Thus, China's policies continued to emphasize non-pharmaceutical interventions—such as quarantine measures, health surveillance, and localized lockdowns—over complete reliance on vaccination to contain the spread. The shift towards risk management and surveillance suggests that while vaccination was a crucial tool, it did not

fundamentally alter the state's focus on aggressive virus containment strategies. This indicates that the policy response evolved more in reaction to the mutating nature of the virus than in response to the success of the vaccination campaign.

Public Security over Personal Security
In both the beginning and Omicron phases, the dominance of terms like "epidemic," "case of illness," "measures," "patient," and "personnel" suggests that the government was primarily concerned with the overall control of the epidemic to safeguard public health on a broad scale. The priority was to ensure that the virus was contained and that healthcare and state resources were mobilized to protect the population as a whole.

In the beginning phase, the high frequency of words like "epidemic" (5,904), "case of illness" (3,157), and "nation" (1,565) shows that the government's focus was on the immediate health crisis. This collective response was meant to shield the entire society from the effects of the outbreak, often through large-scale, top-down measures like mass quarantines, lockdowns, and strict public health guidelines. Terms like "nationwide" (1,014) and "measures" (1,534) highlight the unified and centralized approach. The Chinese government employed strict policies aimed at containing the virus quickly and efficiently. Individual considerations, such as personal freedoms, rights, or privacy, were often subordinated to the broader collective goal of halting the spread of the virus.

In the later Omicron phase, while "epidemic" remains a high-frequency term (3,981), there is also a shift to words like "vaccine" (1,485), "measures" (1,321), and "risk" (1,088). This suggests a transition to risk management and mass vaccination programs aimed at protecting public health rather than focusing on individual choices about vaccination. The emergence of terms like "crowd" (899) and "district" (706) indicates that local governance and crowd control became priorities. By targeting high-risk populations and regions, the government continued to emphasize public security as a whole rather than providing space for individual decision-making or freedom of movement.

In both phases, the absence or low frequency of terms associated with individual rights, personal freedoms, or privacy suggests that personal security—in the sense of protecting individual freedoms—was not the central concern. Instead, the focus was on public security, defined broadly as the safety, stability, and health of society at large. Unlike Western governments, which often balance public health measures with individual rights (e.g., freedom of movement, privacy, or personal decision-making), the Chinese government has consistently placed public security ahead of personal security. The frequent use of terms such as "measures," "policy," and "supplies" in the beginning phase shows how the government instituted broad policies affecting entire populations, with little consideration for individual preferences or rights. These policies often came in the form of strict lockdowns, mandatory quarantine, and surveillance to enforce

compliance. The appearance of words like "nation" (1,565 in the beginning phase and 904 in the Omicron phase), "personnel," "patient," and "focus" underscore the government's commitment to a public security model that prioritizes the welfare of the majority over individual freedoms.

In the Omicron phase, the rise of terms like "risk," "virus," and "crowd" reflects a continued emphasis on managing the public's exposure to the virus rather than addressing individual concerns about freedom or privacy. Measures like mass vaccination, localized lockdowns, and the monitoring of crowds (e.g., public transport, gatherings) were prioritized to prevent outbreaks, even if they restricted personal freedoms.

The Chinese government's COVID-19 response reflects a strong preference for public security over individual security, as shown by the word frequency data from both phases. From the beginning, broad, national policies were implemented to protect the public health, social stability, and economic wellbeing of the population at large, even at the expense of individual rights. As the crisis evolved into the Omicron phase, the government shifted to a more risk-based, localized approach, but the core principle remained the same: the needs of the collective—whether in terms of health security or social order—were placed above individual freedoms. The rise of terms associated with risk management, media control, and crowd control shows that the state continued to prioritize social stability and public security, viewing it as essential for managing the pandemic and maintaining its political legitimacy.

Ultimately, China's approach to COVID-19 policies underscores its belief in a collective, people-centered model of security, where the state acts as the guarantor of the public good, often at the expense of individual rights and personal freedoms. The term "people" refers to a collective assembly of individuals, without regard for the individual human rights of each member that constitutes it.

People-Centered Approach (Yirenweiben)

The frequently used terms initially highlight China's people-centered approach to security. The strict dynamic zero strategy implemented by the Chinese government aimed to protect the population from potential infectious diseases. However, from a Western perspective, this strategy is perceived as a means to limit individual freedoms and restrict normal social activities.

Among the nouns listed in Table 1, many may not be fully understood in isolation of their context. For example, the word "scenario" is very descriptive, and we cannot know the actual meaning of the words without the specific context. Therefore, we employed the Weiciyun software to examine the five words that appeared before and after each noun to gain a deeper understanding of their meaning within their specific contexts (see Table 2 and 3).

Through a specific semantic analysis, we have placed these words within the comprehensive framework of human security to observe the specific responses

Table 2. Beginning Phase High-Frequency Descriptive Words in Context

Descriptive words in beginning phase	Previous words	Following words
scenario	pandemic, back to work, related, connected, actual	enter, thank you, in progress, pandemic
measures	take, prevent and control, control, prevent, perspective	thank you, implement, increase, include, make sure
personnel	entry, unemployed, extremely poor, quarantine, entry and exit	gather, take action, movement densely populated, entry
focus	prevent and control, work, assure, increase, district	district, community, enterprise, location, medical
supplies	medical, epidemic prevention, prevention and control, prevention and protect, emergency	assure, transportation, export, protection, needs

Source: Authors.

Table 3. Omicron Phase High-Frequency Descriptive Words in Context

Descriptive words in Omicron phase	Previous words	Following words
measures	prevent and control, optimization, take, control, regulate	implement, thank you, optimization, include, requirement
personnel	risk, enter, quarantine, movement, close contact	movement, gather, quarantine, take action, concentrated
risk	transmission, infection, death, pandemic, severe infection,	personnel, district, thank you, crowd, judgment
scenario	related, vaccine, mutation, actual, pandemic	please, thank you, in progress, again, especially
perspective	prevent and control, death, save, better, treatment	work, take again, step further, exert, consider

Source: Authors.

of the Chinese government in dealing with the pandemic. The objective is to observe variations in the Chinese government's emphasis on pandemic control during different stages, as publicly communicated through press conferences. These observations are listed in Table 4.

The Chinese government's responses to the pandemic notably lack military and traditional security-related terminology. While China maintains a collective view of national security, its approach to the pandemic has been distinctly focused on non-traditional security and human security issues. This inclination is evident in the government's emphasis on the health and wellbeing of the population

Table 4. Human Security Perspectives and High-Frequency Words in the Beginning and Omicron Phases

Human Security Perspective	Beginning Phase	Omicron Phase
Economy	enterprise, personnel, supplies, scenario	N/A
Food	N/A	N/A
Health	epidemic, scenario, case of illness, measure, patient, pneumonia, severe infection, medical, hospital, supplies	measure, epidemic, vaccine, severe infection, patient, mutation, infected person, personnel, risk, scenario, perspective
Environmental	N/A	N/A
Personal	N/A	N/A
Community	everyone, nationwide, focus, personnel	crowd, elderly, district
Political	nation, policy	nation

Source: Authors.

rather than on conventional security measures. The absence of military and traditional security language in pandemic discourse underscores this orientation. Instead of framing the pandemic as a threat requiring conventional security responses, the Chinese government has prioritized public health and safety. This approach aligns with the principles of human security, which emphasize protecting individuals from critical and pervasive threats to their health and wellbeing.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant health crisis that prioritized people's lives and personal security, often to the detriment of other existing health perspectives. This singular focus on the immediate threat of COVID-19 has resulted in the neglect of other critical health issues, including mental health and chronic diseases that were prevalent long before the pandemic. The crisis has underscored the pitfalls of a narrow health strategy that fails to address the broader spectrum of public health needs. Importantly, this issue is not unique to China; it applies globally. Many countries have similarly concentrated their efforts on combating the virus, thereby revealing the limitations of their healthcare systems and, consequently, the need for a more holistic approach to public health that balances the immediate demands of a pandemic with the ongoing needs of their populations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has analyzed China's conceptualization of national security through the human security framework, using the Chinese government's response to COVID-19 as an illustrative case. By examining the interplay between China's approach and the Western concept of human security, this study bridges the conceptual gap between these differing perspectives. This analysis has provided insights into the distinctive features of China's governance during the pandemic, highlighting how national security and human security intersect in the Chinese context.

The findings reveal three significant aspects of China's response to COVID-19. First, the shift from an economic-focused to a health-centered policy represents a crucial change in governance priorities, likely driven by the virus's mutation. Second, the analysis underscores the Chinese government's emphasis on public security as part of national security, rather than prioritizing individual security. Concepts like "freedom from fear," "freedom from want," and "freedom to live in dignity" were notably absent from official policies, reflecting the prioritization of public security over personal liberties.

Third, the people-centered approach adopted by the Chinese government during the pandemic demonstrates a form of human security focused on community rather than individual security. Here, the term "people" refers to humanity as a collective, rather than addressing individual rights. This approach highlights the Chinese government's prioritization of collective wellbeing and national stability, reinforcing the distinction between Chinese and Western interpretations of human security. Overall, the article contributes to a nuanced understanding of how China integrates national and human security within its broader governance framework during a global health crisis.

Appendix

Original Chinese Text for Beginning Stage	English Translation for Beginning Stage	Original Chinese Text for Omicron Stage	English Translation for Omicron Stage
疫情	epidemic	疫情	epidemic
病例	case of illness	疫苗	vaccine
企业	enterprise	措施	measures
问题	question	记者	journalist
情况	scenario	人员	personnel
记者	journalist	风险	risk
国家	nation	情况	scenario
措施	measures	病毒	virus
患者	patient	重点	focus
大家	everyone	国家	nation
人员	personnel	人群	crowd
肺炎	pneumonia	问题	question
政策	policy	重症	severe infection
重点	focus	老年人	elderly
全国	nationwide	地区	district
重症	severe infection	患者	patient
医疗	medical	变异	mutation
医院	hospital	方面	perspective
物资	supplies	感染者	infected person

Source: Authors.

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Xiru Zhao is a PhD candidate at Waseda University, Japan. Her research focuses on China's non-traditional security, COVID-19, and China's policies. She is author of "Navigating Diplomacy: A Text Analysis of Sino-American Public Diplomacy and the Resolution of Saudi-Iranian Tensions" (*Journal of Area Studies*, 2024) and "Japan's Border Measures during COVID-19: How the Crisis Shaped 'Others' to Protect the 'Stability of Self'" (*International Relations*, 2024). Email: zhao34x@fuji.waseda.jp

Yuji Uesugi is a professor at Waseda University, Japan. His research focuses on peacebuilding and human security. His publications include "Evaluating Security Sector Reform in Timor-Leste: The Triad Hybridity Nexuses" (*Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 2021). Email: uesugi@waseda.jp