

Beijing's delta barricades an echo of 1970s Berlin

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China's response to the delta variant is to cancel events in the capital and put up neighbourhood barricades, but there's a Dad's Army element to the enforcement.

It feels as if COVID-19 is lapping at the city gates. Nanjing is locked down for mandatory testing of its entire population. Wuhan, where it all began, is under severe restrictions. Stories of outbreaks are coming from different parts of the country – Chengdu in the far south-west, Dalian in the north-east, Tianjin near Beijing.

Beijing has isolated cases – but if it is the delta variant, [can they be isolated?](#) In contrast to the almost blanket coverage of COVID-19 in Australia with daily, seemingly endless, self-indulgent press conferences by premiers and occasionally the Prime Minister, in China information is scarce and selectively released. Social media is the go-to source, but reliability is always in doubt. Secrecy serves no one's interests.

Daily it emerges that meetings and events have been cancelled. It is not known if this indicates a flare-up of infections or whether it is precautionary. The Beijing Film Festival has been cancelled. Major companies have closed office blocks and require staff to work from home. Roads are much less congested than usual, which makes living in the city more bearable.

The August skies are clear and blue, reminiscent of the Olympics 13 years ago. Then, factories in Beijing and neighbouring Hebei Province were shut for weeks, and trucks and cars within the city were heavily restricted.

Over the years, Beijing has made great progress in cleaning up the city and improving air quality. One of the factories shut during the time of the Olympics was the Capital Iron and Steel Works, Shou Gang. Today it produces culture, not steel, being a new arts precinct among Beijing's many such districts.

Over the past weekend, the village where I live was progressively shut down without notice or warning. It is also an arts district, just off the airport

expressway and next to the fifth ring road, not far from the much more famous 798 Art Zone. The [dissident artist Ai Weiwei's](#) studio and home is just 200 metres down the road from my yard.

Abandoned since he was chased out of Beijing to take up residence first in Germany and now Portugal, it is desolate, but the knot of security cameras still stares at his front gate. Once, a bicycle was left outside the turquoise gates every day with its white basket full of fresh colourful flowers as a sign of hope.

At the end of my street outside Ai Weiwei's block, unannounced, a two-metre-high blue steel barricade appeared. This was highly inconvenient as the better local restaurants were just a short walk from home. It brought back the feeling I experienced as a 21-year-old in 1975 in East Berlin, looking at the wall slicing off roads and tram lines, rendering them useless at the whim of an authoritarian power.

By Sunday, the half dozen or so entrances and exits to the village were barricaded. Only one point of entry and one point of exit remain. On entering the village everyone must now have their temperature checked and check in with their QR code; hopefully it shows up green. A little bell then pings on your phone, even though, curiously, my phone is always on silent.

It has caused great confusion for visitors because the Didi (China's Uber) maps haven't caught up with the new traffic conditions. Despite all this, the restaurants in the village are still busy. My lunch party of 10 ate and drank happily and returned home after lunch to spin vinyl disks dating from a much more carefree time.

The measures being taken to restrict movement and activities do not suggest that a Sydney-like outbreak is imminent, but they do create a sense of foreboding that Beijing and other parts of China could be on the cusp of something serious. Daily cases averaged 103 new infections over the past few weeks.

China's [vaccination rates with the locally made vaccines](#) are high. According to Oxford COVID-19 Response Tracker, 1.8 billion doses have been administered to date. If each dose went into an arm, that would be 64 per cent of the population vaccinated with two doses. At the current weekly rate of 17.3 million, 75 per cent will be vaccinated with two doses by August 27. Australian modelling suggests 70 per cent is sufficient for herd immunity.

The Chinese government is likely to want to achieve even higher rates of immunity. All attention now will be focused on the [2022 Winter Olympics in](#)

[February](#), which must be a success. Chinese observers were in Tokyo, of course, to study how to stage a [global sporting event in the time of COVID-19](#).

China is an extraordinarily risk-averse country, notwithstanding its brilliant, courageous, private entrepreneurs. For officials in the Communist Party, government, and state-owned enterprises, few rewards are available on the upside for risk taking, but penalties and punishments are heavy on the downside. This results in behaviour that over-interprets the slightest gestures, let alone edicts, from the centre.

COVID-19 [responses, accordingly, are heavy-handed](#). Better to disrupt people's daily lives unnecessarily with impunity when they have no avenue to complain, than risk being held accountable for a breach in the anti-COVID-19 dyke. Hence the barricades thrown up in my village without warning or consideration for the convenience of residents.

An element of Dad's Army exists, however. It is not crisp, heel-clicking discipline. The chaps in uniform manning the check points are casual in their attitude. They serve long hours. Temperatures are checked, wearing of face masks outside is irregularly enforced, and for some curious reason it is enough usually for one person in a group to show their green QR code while others fumble to bring theirs up on their smartphones.

It is no comfort to observe that life in Beijing is much freer and open than what it seems to be in Sydney now. High vaccination rates, notwithstanding the probable relatively low efficacy of the Chinese vaccines, are likely to ensure that remains so, together with the Dad's Army of enforcers.

Geoff Raby was Australia's ambassador to the People's Republic of China, 2007-11. His book, [China's Grand Strategy and Australia's Future in the New Global Order](#), was published on 3 November by MUP. He is also an Associate of China Matters.