



### Protests by Chinese Students and Tensions ahead of June Fourth

Kawashima Shin

Executive Director of Research, Nakasone Peace Institute

Professor, Graduate School, The University of Tokyo

China's "zero-COVID" policy has caused a number of problems, and finally instructions were issued in Shanghai to effectively restore the city to its original state. In May 2022, however, preparations for the lockdown were underway in various locations in Beijing and Tianjin, and protests erupted even at universities in these cities, where students live in dormitories.

In China, the academic semester ends in May and June. The protest movement at Tianjin University and other universities raised questions about how exams are administered and included students' demands to be able to return home after final examinations. However, the universities were slow to comply with this demand by students who strongly insist on their right to return home. Since the beginning of this year, the students have been confined to the university for an extended period of time and had high hopes for their "homecoming." Having been confined up to that point, the students' frustration is now exploding. In addition, because employment prospects of fourth-year students are extremely poor, there is high anxiety in the universities.

One reason that universities and the government adopted such a strict policy was concern about the spread of COVID-19 from large cities under the zero-COVID policy, but there was another factor influencing this approach in May 2022. That is Tiananmen Square on June 4. In Chinese universities, the administration becomes somewhat tense around June 4. There was an effort to prevent any mass student activity around this anniversary. Of course, foreign "guests (activists)" and others were also warned against involvement in any activities at Chinese universities during this period. The universities must have been aware of the need to tighten control over students, even if these warnings were related to COVID-19. However, it turned out that protests took place even during this period of vigilance. It is reported that the protests at Tianjin University were aimed at overthrowing formalism and bureaucracy. Such language, which expresses opposition to being bound by systems and rules and their over-interpretation and not taking measures appropriate to the current situation, could lead to anti-government movements. That is why tensions remain high in Chinese universities until around June 4.

In 2022, the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party will be held in China. There, the extension of the Xi Jinping regime will be decided, but it is by no means a predetermined course without obstacles and barriers. There are multiple barriers in the form of systems and conventions. In

addition to criticism of the zero-COVID policy, the stalling economy, and the difficulty of finding work, there have been protests at universities. The Xi Jinping regime, which is planning to extend its regime, will have to focus not only on COVID-19 but also on stabilizing public sentiment and getting the economy on a recovery track by autumn 2022. While the war in Ukraine is certainly important, China will have to focus on stabilizing its domestic politics for the time being.

*This commentary was originally published in Japanese on June 1, 2022.*