Abstract
In the modern risk society, the general sense of collaborative governance is facing a profound crisis—poor governance efficiency due to the lack of authority. The paper introduces a case from China and finds a new mechanism in COVID-19 prevention and control which is called joint governance. Instead of the relatively equal status among multiple actors, joint governance is characterized by a dominant power forming alliances with other stakeholders. The political advantages that Beijing enjoys make it work. Our study suggests that joint governance is a new perspective of collaborative governance which brings politics back to administrative domains.

Keywords Joint Governance · Political Factors · Transboundary Crisis Management · COVID-19 · Beijing

Introduction
Over the last three decades, collaborative governance has become a new strategy for governments to replace some traditional forms of governance in policy making and implementation. The definition of collaborative governance is multi-actor cooperation between the governmental sectors and stakeholders of non-governmental sectors or among various departments within the government based on a common goal of realizing public interests (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Bingham,
According to this definition, the essential characters of collaborative governance are as follows: multi-actor participation in decision-making process, equal consultation among agents, high level of mutual trust and broad consensus on governance goals. However, it has some limitations when collaborative governance is used in reality (Bianchi, et al., 2021; Bingham, 2011; Huxham et al., 2000). The most noticeable problem is poor efficiency because of equitable distribution of public authority/leadership in all stakeholders (Purdy, 2012; Newman et al., 2004), which has gotten increasing attentions by many academics in the research area of trans-boundary crisis management (Boin et al., 2005; Boin & Rhinard, 2008; ’t Hart & Sundelius, 2013; Clercy & Ferguson, 2016).

The paper introduces joint governance, a new form of collaborative governance that one dominant actor forms an alliance with other stakeholders when facing the same problem. The definition of joint governance has four essential criteria: (1) self-centered. The dominant agent uses its’ political strengths to behave like a leader rather than a collaborator when it allies with other actors. (2) high degree of consensus. All actors face the same problem that cannot be solved alone, which motivates them to ally with each other. (3) shared responsibility. All actors must bear its responsibility in joint governance, while the dominant actor must undertake more risks. (4) all-round alliance. This characteristic includes three dimensions: vertically intragovernmental alliance; horizontally intergovernmental alliance; alliance between governmental sectors and non-governmental sectors. To describe the details of joint governance, we take a close look at Beijing, the capital of China, in COVID-19 prevention and control, and find that Beijing has successfully leveraged its political advantages to ally with multiple stakeholders including the central government departments, the surrounding governments at the same administrative level, enterprises and social forces within its jurisdiction. Due to joint governance, the epidemic situation in Beijing has always been under control even facing Omicron virus, which also makes Beijing a case more worthy of scholar’s attention.

Therefore, the research questions of the paper are as follows: what are the core characteristics of governance mechanism that Beijing applies to prevent and control COVID-19 and why is Beijing able to do so? To answer these questions, we have collected a large number of primary and secondary materials of Beijing over the past two years, including the number of confirmed cases and the death toll, typical events, news reports, official policies and academic papers. Besides, the method of individual observation is also used to further support our findings. All the collaborative researchers in this study have been living in Beijing during the period and have gained the first-hand experience of Beijing’s response to the epidemic. These personal experiences help us better understand the relevant materials collected.

The paper has two potential contributions: firstly, we use joint governance to describe the features of Beijing’s governance mechanism of epidemic prevention and control, which contributes to the existing literature of collaborative governance. Previous studies contend that the theoretical basis of collaborative governance is the theory of polycentric governance which believes that multi-subject participation, decentralization of authority and equality of status are keys to promote the efficiency of cooperation among multiple organizations (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Posthuma & Rossi, 2017). We suggest that
Joint governance is a special subtype of multi-actor governance. Secondly, the paper may also contribute to the research on transboundary crisis management. Current studies point out that transboundary crisis has become a new form of global challenge due to its nature of crossing geographical and functional boundaries. Scholars argue that an effective strategy to deal with transboundary crisis is to build a resilient emergency management system, which includes high levels of public communication and policy transparency, as well as public empowerment and public–private collaboration (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Boin & Rhinard, 2008; Boin et al., 2014). However, research on transboundary crisis management mainly focus on European cases with few attentions to other regions outside the EU. We would like to provide a case from China for research in this field.

Case Analysis and Empirical Findings: How Joint Governance Works?

Different from the territorial jurisdiction of most administrative regions and from the collaborative governance of mutual benefit and risk sharing among multiple agents, Beijing’s practice of COVID-19 prevention and control shows obvious characteristics of leverage. As a local government, Beijing has leveraged the support and influence of many departments of the central government, which continuously introduced favorable policies. Beijing has also leveraged the governance resources of two neighboring provincial-level regions—Tianjin and Hebei—to make contributions or even sacrifices for Beijing. Outside the government’s system, state-owned enterprises have poured massive resources into Beijing and a large number of volunteers have been mobilized and organized. As Fig. 1 shows, in the mode which is called “joint governance”, individuals and organizations of different sectors serve Beijing without bargaining, which significantly expands and strengthens the power and efficacy of Beijing in epidemic prevention and control.
control, far beyond the average level of local government and beyond its own daily state of governance.

**Political Leverage from the Central Government**

On February 21, 2020 (8 days after Wuhan’s lockdown), Beijing established a joint prevention and control coordination mechanism for strict entry of the capital under the leadership municipal party secretary and the mayor with 14 central ministries including public security, transportation, civil aviation and railway, etc., laying the organizational foundation for a series of follow-up anti-epidemic measures.

In terms of preventing the risk of imported cases, the joint activities between Beijing and central ministries are mainly reflected in the diversion of international passenger flights to Beijing by the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC). Data showed that Beijing saw 95 imported cases in six days from March 18 to March 23 and its first domestic case associated with imported cases on March 23, indicating that there was a huge risk of local outbreaks caused by foreign cases. On the same day, the CAAC required all international passenger flights bound for Beijing to enter the country from 12 designated cities, known as “first points of entry”. The move made an immediate effect on the reduction of imported cases. As of April 15, only 36 cases were reported in Beijing with the average daily number dropping to 1.57.

In terms of preventing the risk of domestic cases, the joint governance between Beijing and central ministries has also played an important role. When serious clustered cases occurred in other regions, Beijing was able to coordinate timely with relevant central ministries to restrict or prevent people from those regions to enter the capital. For example, after the outbreak of the epidemic at Nanjing Lukou Airport in July 2021, China Railway Corporation immediately imposed restrictions on passengers departing from 23 stations including Nanjing and suspended the sale of tickets to Beijing. In December 2021, a cluster of imported cases of Omicron virus strain were reported in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province. In accordance with the joint prevention and control mechanism of the capital, Beijing and the central railway department jointly suspended the sale of tickets from Ningbo to Beijing.

In addition, Beijing has received special support from central government in many aspects of epidemic prevention and control. For example, after the clustered outbreak in Xinfadi market on June 11, 2020, Beijing had traced the source of the transmission chain with 24 h through epidemiological investigation and big data monitoring with the assistance of the National Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). On June 18, 2020, the chief epidemiologist of the CDC attended the press conference in Beijing and announced that the outbreak in Xinfadi market had been brought under control. Another example is to promote coronavirus vaccine project, Beijing’s biopharmaceutical industry base established a special work team to actively coordinate with relevant central ministries for guidance and acceptance check to assist Sinovac to complete the preliminary procedures within only 25 days and the construction of the vaccine production workshop with a capacity of 100 to 300 million doses in 100 days. In order to ensure the transport of emergency supplies to Beijing, on January 13, 2022, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of
Public Security and the State Post Bureau jointly required that vehicles with permits should pass through quickly in accordance with the principle of “no necessity, no blocking”.

**Alliance with Surrounding Provinces and Cities**

From the perspective of geographical location, the only province and city adjacent to Beijing are Tianjin and Hebei. In recent years, with the deepening coordination of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei area, the three provinces and cities have become increasingly close in policymaking, economic development, personnel exchanges and other aspects. As the central city of this area, Beijing has taken the initiative to form a cross-regional joint governance of epidemic prevention and control with Tianjin and Hebei, which has become a “key move” to strengthen its capabilities in epidemic surveillance and early warning, risk control, material support and economic recovery.

Epidemic surveillance and early warning are the key link in crisis management system and can nip the emergency in the bud. For the prevention and control of infectious diseases, the capability of surveillance and early warning means the early detection, the early reporting, the early isolation and the early treatment, especially the former two. By the exchange of epidemic information in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei area, the joint governance mechanism has improved Beijing’s capability of surveillance and early warning. When the epidemic occurs in any part of the three, the local CDC will immediately notify the other two places and try its best to avoid the spread of cases by exchanging flow information and sharing of travel tracks of close contacts through local big data centers and government resource platforms.

Imported risk is the Achilles heel of epidemic prevention and control in megacities because of the high population mobility. The consequent high risk of imported case needs to be controlled by joint governance mechanism. The high intensity of local prevention and control in Tianjin and Hebei, especially the control of highway access to Beijing, has blocked the risk of the spread of the epidemic from neighboring areas. This is fully reflected in the relevant statements of “making a good political moat for the capital” in the speeches of major party and government leaders in Tianjin and Hebei.

Material support is not only related to public health security in the process of fighting against the epidemic, but also affects people’s cooperation and support for the policies of epidemic prevention and control. Thus, Tianjin and Hebei have made great contributions to Beijing’s material supplies. For example, during the outbreak in Xinfadi market in the summer of 2020, Tianjin & Hebei coordinated a supply of more than 1,000 tons of vegetables to Beijing. Hebei set up a special fund of 50 million yuan for supply protection, which provided corresponding subsidies for some products in short supply in Beijing.

Coordinating epidemic prevention and control with economic and social development is one of the biggest challenges facing every local government. The cooperation in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei area has provided a lot of convenience for the economic recovery in Beijing. First, the exchange of health information in
Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei area provides convenience for commuters around Beijing. When the epidemic first broke out in early 2020, commuters around Beijing were required to be quarantined and observed for 14 days. This policy was later adjusted to allow people to enter Beijing with a negative nucleic acid certificate within 48 h and a green code of “Beijing health kit”. Second, the coordination among governments in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei area has provided targeted services for enterprises to resume work and production, and the problem of “breakpoints” in regional industrial and supply chains has been effectively resolved. Third, the ports and sea transportation in Tianjin and Hebei have opened a new transportation channel for the resumption of work and production.

Cooperation with Enterprises and Social Forces

The participation of multiple agents is origin meaning of the word “governance”. The government, enterprises and social entities have all made significant contributions to the epidemic prevention and control in Beijing. However, in joint governance, the roles of enterprises and social forces (especially volunteers) are not only participants in the general sense, but more subordinate under the leadership of political parties and governments.

According to media reports, by September 2020, a total of 256,000 volunteers in Beijing had participated in the services of publicity of epidemic prevention and control, psychological counseling for vulnerable groups, etc. Many of these volunteers were mobilized through the CCP’s organizational system. In the first half of 2020, a total of 74,000 officials were dispatched to serve in communities, and 189,000 incumbent party members were mobilized to help fight the epidemic. Following the outbreak in Xinfadi market, Beijing launched a second round of mobilizations by government officials and employees of state-owned companies to serve voluntarily in communities. The participation of a large number of volunteers strengthened Beijing’s comprehensive capabilities of governance at the community level, especially the capabilities of epidemic surveillance and early warning and material support.

Enterprises, especially state-owned companies, have also shown strong support to epidemic prevention and control in Beijing. During the outbreak in Xinfadi market, state-owned companies responded quickly and carried out actions at all costs in the construction of nucleic acid testing laboratories, the construction of a big data system for epidemic surveillance, and the provision of medical supplies and daily necessities. Some of these companies are directly controlled by State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, whose administrative level are equal to those of Beijing’s deputy leaders. Their support for the epidemic prevention and control in Beijing is comparable to the nationwide mobilization of “Wuhan defense battle” in early 2020. Besides, it is worth mentioning that Beijing has seized opportunities and made full use of the support of the central government and its own industrial foundation to promote the research of nucleic acid testing reagents and vaccines and to develop the biopharmaceutical industry. It not only provides an important material guarantee and scientific and technological
support for China’s disease prevention and control, but also played a significant role in stimulating the economic recovery of Beijing.

In general, with the help of the central government, the surrounding provinces and cities, enterprises and social forces, Beijing leverages the political powers, human and material resources outside itself, which have strengthened its capabilities in epidemic surveillance and early warning, imported risk control, material support and economic recovery. As a result, Beijing can balance multiple governance objectives, including public security, economic growth and people’s welfare. The mode of joint governance has distinct characteristics and is significantly different from other megacities in China. Shanghai was once well-known for “balanced governance” dominated by science (Gao, 2022), but hardly compared with Beijing in leveraging external resources. Table 1 summarizes the stages and measures of joint governance in Beijing. How to grasp the characteristics of joint governance theoretically is the topic to be discussed in the next section.

Joint Governance: A New Perspective of Collaborative Governance

Transboundary Crisis and Governance Dilemma of Megacities

Modern society is increasingly characterized as a “risk society” (Beck, 1992). Anthony Giddens believes that modernity leads to the emergence of risks and further accelerates the accumulation and amplification of risks. When the potential risks of modern society accumulate to a certain extent, they will quickly turn into crises and cause huge impacts on the whole society (Giddens, 1991). Crisis refers to “an event that poses a serious threat to the core values and basic framework of a social system and requires rapid decision-making under time pressure and uncertain conditions” (Rosenthal et al., 1989). Among many crises, transboundary crisis is increasingly becoming the main manifestation of modern social crisis. The so-called transboundary crisis refers to a crisis type that has the nature of crossing the boundary of time and space and the boundary of public policy (Boin, 2019). As a result, the governance of transboundary crisis often goes beyond the disposal scope of a single local government and requires the joint participation of multiple entities.

In addition to the cross-boundary nature of the crisis, the size of cities also affects the difficulty of crisis governance. In China, megacities are defined as those with a permanent urban population of 10 million or more. By this measure, there were seven megacities in China (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Chongqing and Chengdu) by the end of 2021. Due to the characteristics of large population density, high spatial aggregation, intensive industrial groups, rich network resources and high level of internationalization, megacities are often faced with huge risks of crisis management. Once a public crisis occurs, megacities are more likely to suffer from negative impacts on personnel, economy, city image and other aspects, posing great challenges to the credibility of local governments (Yu, 2021).

It is obvious that the COVID-19 is a transboundary crisis. Under the double superposition of cross-boundary nature and urban scale, megacities are faced
Table 1 The stages and measures of joint governance in Beijing

| Stages and Measures | Duration            | Joint Governance Mechanism |
|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Wuhan-linked cases  | Jan 2020 to Mar 2020| Joint prevention and control coordination mechanism for strict entry of the capital |
| Diversify the risks of imported cases | Apr 2020 to May 2020 | Traffic control into Beijing; joint epidemiological investigation; allocation and supply of materials for people's livelihood |
| Clustered outbreaks in Xinfadi market | Jun 2020 to Jul 2020 | Strengthened traffic control into Beijing as soon as an outbreak occurs; information exchange and sharing |
| The normalization of epidemic prevention and control | Aug 2020 to Mar 2022 | With Tianjin and Hebei; mutual recognition of commuter policies in surrounding areas of Beijing; resumption of work and production in cross-regional industrial supply chains |
| The Omicron BA.2 variant related cases | Apr 2022 to present | State-owned enterprises have invested in the production of epidemic prevention materials; more than 100,000 volunteers are mobilized to the front lines of communities |

Note: The table outlines the stages and measures of joint governance in Beijing, starting from the initial outbreak in Wuhan and extending to the Omicron BA.2 variant related cases. Each stage is characterized by specific joint governance mechanisms that aim to prevent and control the spread of the epidemic.
with the governance dilemma of dynamic balance of multiple objectives, such as maintaining public security, promoting economic development and ensuring people’s welfare (See Fig. 2). First, the larger the city, the greater the risk and its social amplification effect, and the more severe the test of governance capability. Policy makers need to consider what can be done to achieve “dynamic zeroing” in their jurisdictions at a lower cost. Second, policy makers in megacities often face a dilemma: if they want to contain the epidemic early, strict measures (such as requiring home quarantine, restricting business activities, etc.) must be adopted, but those strict measures may conversely interfere the normal market order or block economic activities. Third, given the large population and its complex composition, megacities may also face the problem of livelihood deficit, which has been fully demonstrated in Shanghai through the Omicron epidemic in the first half of 2022.

**Collaborative Governance: The Theoretical Basis of Transboundary Crisis Management**

Due to the cross-boundary nature of the COVID-19 crisis, the traditional territorial jurisdiction mechanism is often unable to respond effectively. On the one hand, COVID-19 is a major public crisis which requires the joint participation of the government, the market and the society. On the other hand, there is a high possibility of spillover effects from the outbreak in megacities. In view of this, it is an effective path for the epidemic prevention and control in megacities to build a transboundary crisis management mechanism based on the theory of collaborative governance.

Generally speaking, there are three types of transboundary crisis management mechanisms: the coordination of government-market-society sectors, the coordination of horizontal and vertical governments, and the coordination among multiple agencies within a single government (Zhang, 2021). For example, in 2013, six central ministries including the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the National Development and Reform Commission jointly issued *The Implementation Rules of the Action Plan for Air Pollution Prevention and Control in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region and its Surrounding Areas*, based on which a coordination group was formed.

![Fig. 2](image) The triangle dilemma of epidemic prevention and control in megacities
established. It is one of the earliest fields of transboundary crisis management mechanisms (Liu and Peng, 2015).

Collaborative governance is a new theory evolved from polycentric governance theory, which has attracted extensive attention from academic circles in recent years. The concept of “collaboration” was first proposed by H. Haken, a German theoretical physicist, and originally meant “mutual coordination and interaction”. The concept was later taken by social scientists and refers to “a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more organizations based on common goals” (Mattessich, 1992). “Governance” means the use of authority to maintain order and meet the needs of the public within a given area (Yu, 1999). The goal of governance is to improve the welfare of people and finally achieve “good governance”. Therefore, collaborative governance can be defined as a multi-actor relationship of cooperation between the governmental sectors and stakeholders of non-governmental sectors or between various departments within the government based on a common goal of realizing public interests (Bingham, 2020). The preconditions of collaborative governance are as follows: multi-actor participation in decision-making process, equal consultation among agents, high level of mutual trust and broad consensus on governance goals (Emerson et al., 2012).

To be specific, when it comes to transboundary crisis management, the realization of collaborative governance needs to meet the following conditions: (1) Diversification of governance subjects. The subjects involved in transboundary crisis management include not only a certain level of government, but also governments at the same level and the upper or lower levels, as well as many social organizations (such as NGOs, private enterprises, communities and families). (2) Diversity of governance authorities. The power of decision-making is not controlled by a certain level of government but scattered among various subjects. In other words, all parties involved have the right to express their views and the right to vote in decision-making process. (3) Equality of status and voluntary cooperation. Each subject is in a relationship of equality and mutual assistance, and the communication among them does not rely on coercive power but establishes a partnership based on consultation and dialogue. (4) Common goal and agreement to achieve that goal. All subjects have a high degree of consensus on eliminating public crisis and are willing to contribute to this end (Danahue, 2004).

Joint Governance: A Solution to the Lack of Authority in Collaborative Governance

Although collaborative governance can improve the efficiency of transboundary crisis management in megacities, it also has some limitations in practical situations. For example, megacities like Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Chongqing and Chengdu are more inclined to adopt the collaborative governance mechanisms of government-market-society sectors and multiple agencies within a single government, rather than the coordination of horizontal or vertical governments. Shanghai, on the other hand, has established a joint prevention and control mechanism with its neighboring Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces but is limited to screening and transport of overseas entry.
The main reason for this phenomenon is the lack of authority in collaborative governance. Studies show that cross-regional collaboration is more difficult than the coordination among sectors within one city (Wang and Zhang, 2019). It is because that governments of different regions may have different opinions on leadership attribution, benefit distribution, governance goals, responsibility sharing, mutual trust and other aspects, leading to many obstacles in the coordination and cooperation of cross-regional governance. For example, the air pollution control in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei area faces problems such as legal barriers, development gaps, and unequal allocation of power and responsibility (Du, 2018). In epidemic prevention and control, the lack of authority limits the maximization of crisis management efficiency in megacities.

In our case, Beijing has developed a new mechanism of joint governance on the basis of collaborative governance, which effectively solved the lack of authority in transboundary crisis management. It must be pointed out that the theoretical basis of this mechanism does not go beyond the scope of collaborative governance. It can be seen as a new form of collaborative governance theory in a specific period, a specific region and a specific field (such as crisis management). However, in practice, there are some characteristics of joint governance, which make it different from the general sense of collaborative governance. Firstly, the most prominent feature of the joint governance mechanism is “self-centered” in the dimension of leadership attribution. Secondly, the establishment of joint governance mechanism often requires a high degree of consensus. Thirdly, joint governance mechanism can effectively reduce the coordination cost and realize the sharing of power, responsibility and benefit. Finally, the joint network not only covers the traditional collaborative governance mode, but also include the linkage of governments at the same level and the linkage of central-local governments, forming an omni-directional integrated governance pattern.

The four characteristics of joint governance are based on distinct political factors. Beijing’s joint governance has accomplished the combination of three dimensions: the combination with the central government to set up a joint prevention and control coordination mechanism for strict entry of the capital, the combination with neighbors to establish a joint prevention and control mechanism for the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, and the combination with enterprises and social forces within its jurisdiction. Practice has proved that the joint governance mechanism has not only helped Beijing go through several epidemic waves since the beginning of 2020, but also achieved a dynamic balance among multiple objectives. More importantly, it has overcome the lack of authority in collaborative governance, leaving a profound impact on the upgrading of governance capacities and the reshaping of the central-local relationship and state-society relationship.

Discussion: Political Factors Underpinning Joint Governance

Political Capital

The most important reason for Beijing to adopt joint governance is that as the capital city of China, Beijing has some political capitals that no other cities can match. First,
China is a unitary state. This form of political organization gives Beijing higher bargaining power than other local governments in the process of interacting with the central government. Although in unitary or federal countries, the capital city is the seat of the central government which undertakes state functions. However, as the former is characterized by centralization and the latter by checks and balances, the political status of the unitary capital is much higher than that of the federal capital.

Second, in addition to the unitary political organization form, the regime type of China is often classified as authoritarian state, which means a lower level of democracy and rule of law. When democracy and rule of law are relatively absent, the political process is more likely to be disturbed by non-institutional factors. As the capital city of China, Beijing provides office space for many central government ministries and commissions, which makes it easier for leaders of Beijing to get closer to the core of the state power and have more opportunities to develop personal relationships with leaders of the central government. This kind of first-mover advantage gives Beijing the chance to bypass formal institutional constraints and influence the central government’s policy through informal mechanisms.

Third, top leaders of Beijing enjoy a higher political status than other government officials of the same rank. China is a party-state ruled by the Communist Party of China (CCP). The political status of government officials is divided not only by the administrative level, but also by the ranking of status in CCP. The administrative level corresponds to the party status in general, so in most cases, the administrative level can distinguish the political status of government officials. However, when government officials are of the same administrative level, the key factor determining their political status is their party status. Beijing’s party secretary has a higher political status than some major leaders of central ministries or leaders of neighboring provinces and cities. According to public sources, CAI Qi, the current secretary of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee, is a member of the 19th CCP Central Committee and the Political Bureau, indicating that CAI Qi has entered the highest level of power in CCP, while most major leaders of central ministries are not in that position.

**Political Support**

Another key factor that enables Beijing to unite central ministries and neighboring provinces and cities is that the policies of epidemic prevention and control adopted by Beijing are supported by the top leaders of the central government who provide the political endorsement for the joint governance in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei area. One of the main difficulties facing joint governance activities is how the initiator establishes its leadership authority without its jurisdiction. Despite Beijing’s top leaders have a higher political status than most major leaders of central ministries or leaders of neighboring provinces and cities, because of the limitation of its jurisdiction, Beijing has no administrative power over various agents in Tianjin and Hebei. Under this circumstance, political support of the top provides a strong impetus for Beijing to break through the above institutional constraints. President Xi Jinping stressed that the governments of Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region should establish a
working mechanism for joint prevention and control of COVID-19 in a research activity in Beijing as early as February 10, 2020 (twenty days after Wuhan’s lockdown). And on 16 February 2020, three local governments officially signed and published *The Working Mechanism for Joint Prevention and Control of Novel Coronavirus Infections in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region* to detail the above requirements of President Xi. In Chinese political context, top leaders’ demands usually have the importance as soft law, and local governments need to firmly obey and implement these demands. It is the president’s support for joint governance policy that enables Beijing to take the lead in the process of epidemic prevention and control in Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region.

On the one hand, political support of top leaders stems from the high priority given to COVID-19 prevention and control by the top decision-making level of the central government. This priority can be attributed to lessons learned from the SARS epidemic. Since the Spring Festival of 2003, SARS first broke out in Guangdong province and quickly spread across the country. Beijing became the second hardest-hit area next to Guangdong. Due to the lack and delay of real information, the central government underestimated the severity of SARS and overestimated the ability of Guangdong and Beijing to fight the epidemic. It was not until April 2003 that the central leaders began to realize the severity of SARS and take actions to strengthen the supervision and control over local governments (Hongyi, 2004). One of the lessons that top leaders have learned from SARS is the necessity for the central government to intervene in the early stages of a public health emergency. After 17 years, when COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan city, President Xi chaired a meeting of Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee and made arrangement for epidemic prevention and control on the first day of the Spring Festival.

On the other hand, political support of top leaders also stems from the President’s high trust in Cai Qi, the Party Secretary of Beijing. This trusting relationship between the upper and lower political leaders has laid a solid political foundation for Beijing to obtain the authorization of the central government. In China’s political ecology, local officials will have more opportunities to obtain political resources if they can establish a personal relationship or even a protective relationship with the superior leaders (Ma, 2022). Cai Qi is a former subordinate of President Xi and the two have high overlap in time and space from their political resumes. In epidemic prevention and control, the trust of top leaders empowers Beijing to have more discretionary space and provide strong political backup for Beijing to take the lead in promoting joint governance with the central ministries and neighboring provinces and cities.

**Political Responsiveness**

In addition to vertical and horizontal government-to-government cooperation, the joint governance mechanism during the epidemic is also manifested as the cooperation between Beijing municipal government and enterprises and social forces. The driving force behind this kind of “government-led, market-oriented and socially-coordinated”
governance is not political capital or political support from the top, but the high level of political reputation that Beijing municipal government has accumulated. Different from the government response based on the principal-agent relationship in western countries, the responsiveness in China’s political system is mainly reflected in the initiative of government officials to collect and respond to social demands (Su & Meng, 2016; Meng et al., 2017). In the absence of a high level of democracy and rule of law, local government’s initiatives to respond to the society are an alternative to institutional change. This alternative can greatly improve social expectations of the government and mobilize the enthusiasm for political participation (He & Warren, 2011; Hsu, 2009).

The high level of political responsiveness aroused the enthusiasm of enterprises and social forces to cooperate with the Beijing municipal government in epidemic prevention and control. On the one hand, Beijing has long established a formal channel of 12,345 citizen service hotline, which provides an effective way for enterprises, social organizations and citizens to reflect their demands. Meanwhile, Beijing also introduced measures of governance reform centering on “immediate response” mechanism since 2019. The reform integrated more than 100 governmental affairs hotlines into one, laying an organizational and technical foundation for the government to collect and respond to people’s demands. The “immediate response” mechanism has played an important role in COVID-19 prevention and control. According to statistics, in the early days of the outbreak, Beijing recruited more than 500 operators for hotlines and kept 24 h available. In 2020 alone, the 12,345 citizen service hotline received more than 1.65 million pieces of complaints and requests about the epidemic, with a resolution rate of 93.75% and satisfaction rate of 94.18%.

On the other hand, Beijing also actively uses cyberspace to expand the channels for the expression of social demands. The “Message Board for Leaders” of the People’s Daily is an influential online platform for political inquiry in China. It was established in August 2006, providing convenience for Chinese netizens to express their demands, reflect their problems and make suggestions to the government. At present, most local government officials in China have opened their own sections under the message board with assistants responsible for collecting and sorting out netizens’ appeals. According to statistics from People’s Daily Online, In the first half of 2022, Beijing residents were the most active on the “Message Board for Leaders” with 10.2 cases per 10,000 people. Meanwhile, the Beijing municipal government also had the highest response rate of 9.3 cases per 10,000 people.

**Political Trust**

In epidemic prevention and control, the effective implementation of policies formulated by the government depends on the willingness of the public to comply with these policies. If the public is willing to cooperate with the government policies, the government will be more likely to use the people’s power to control the epidemic in a short time (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020; Fancourt et al., 2020). In the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, physical methods such as wearing masks, social distancing, reducing the frequency of gatherings, quarantining at home, and collecting travel codes are effective means of suppressing the spread of novel coronavirus.
As the technology matures, nucleic acid testing and vaccination have become technological means in addition to physical means. However, the effectiveness of those measures varies widely by country. People in some western countries are reluctant to follow government policies and even against policies of quarantine and vaccination through demonstrations. In China, there are few social protests against the government policies. Most Chinese people voluntarily wear masks, maintain social distance and cooperate with nucleic acid testing and vaccination.

The main reason for this phenomenon is the high level of political trust that Chinese people have in their government. People in many western countries do not have a high level of political trust in their central government (Ronald, 1997; Nye & Joseph, 1997), leading them to doubt the legitimacy of government policies about the epidemic. In contrast, Chinese people’s high level of political trust in the central government is strongly linked to traditional Chinese culture. Under the influence of Confucianism, worship and obedience to power have become one of the main reasons for the majority of Chinese people to trust their government (Shi, 2001). Although Chinese people’s political trust shows a hierarchical pattern of “strong in the central, weak in the local”, the political trust in local governments various significant by region (Cary and Wilkes, 2018). In general, governments in economically developed areas such as Beijing enjoy a higher level of political trust (Lyu & Li, 2018). In the process of epidemic prevention and control, Beijing made full use of political trust to mobilize a large number of volunteers to participate in the front-line work.

Conclusion: A Double-Edged Sword to Bring “Politics” Back

Reviewing the process of COVID-19 prevention and control in Beijing in the past two years, the study finds that Beijing has constructed a joint governance mechanism based on the leverage from the central government, the alliance with surrounding provinces and cities, and the cooperation with enterprises and social forces. As a result, its governance capabilities of epidemic surveillance and early warning, risk control of imported cases, material support, economic recovery and development are strengthened, achieving a dynamic balance among multiple governance objectives. The reason that Beijing makes joint governance possible is mainly due to the political factors—political capital, political support, political responsiveness, and political trust—that empower it to overcome the lack of authority in collaborative governance. The key difference between joint governance and collaborative governance is the relationship among multiple participants. Under collaborative governance, the participants are roughly equal; while under joint governance, there is a dominant power which is obviously above the others.

Joint governance is a double-edged sword to the governance under the epidemic. On the positive side, joint governance constitutes an extension to the theory and practice of collaborative governance. It is important to distinguish between two sets of concepts: firstly, compared with the general sense of collaborative governance, joint governance emphasizes more on the centralization of power, which means there is a power center instead of diversified and loose alliance. It is not a subvert of collaborative governance, but a beneficial attempt to carry out collaborative governance in
transboundary crisis and emergencies. Secondly, joint governance does not mean to go back to the traditional mode of territorial jurisdiction. Although the power is concentrated in certain regions or in certain periods of time, local governments still need to give play to their own subjective initiatives, divide their functions according to different resource endowments, and explore countermeasures in line with local conditions facing the complex and changeable situations. Only in this way can the “joint force” be greater than the simple sum of their respective dispersed forces.

However, with the long-lasting impact of COVID-19 and the normalization of crisis management, the negative side of the politicization of epidemic prevention and control slowly rises to the surface. It is alarming to the possibility of a new “totalitarianism” which may damage the legitimacy of a regime in the long term. In fact, the cost of joint governance can be higher than its benefits. For instance, the surrounding provinces and cities of Beijing are in a relatively weak position in the process of joint governance. They cannot and should not bear the cost alone because it does not accord with the principle of equality and proportionality. In the long run, unequal and disproportionate relationships in transboundary governance will erode social solidarity and threaten political stability.

The greatest contribution of joint governance to the theory of collaborative governance is to bring “politics” back to the administrative domains. Politics and administration are supposed to be dichotomized since The Study of Administration of Thomas Woodrow Wilson. The former lays stress on legitimacy while the latter put more emphasis on efficiency. From this point of view, joint governance is an art of balancing and trade-off. Future studies of transboundary crisis management must have a composite perspective of politics and administration. This argument applies in crisis as well as in normal times.

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