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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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18.10.2022

Chinese Communist Party congress convenes amid slowing economy and war threats

The 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) opened yesterday in Beijing with a speech from President Xi Jinping. The congress is likely to conclude with the installation of Xi as CCP general secretary for a third term—a break from the two-term norm established after the death of Mao Zedong.



Chinese President Xi Jinping waves as he leaves the opening ceremony of the 20th National Congress of China's ruling Communist Party, Sunday, Oct. 16, 2022. [AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein]

The congress takes place amid a rapidly escalating US-led military build-up and aggressive confrontation with China, as well as an economic slowdown and mounting domestic social tensions. The gathering is being closely watched by the ruling elites in the US and internationally for any signs of internal divisions that can be exploited.

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Xi spoke in the most general terms of the party's need to navigate "abrupt changes" in the international situation and to be ready to weather "high winds and dangerous storms." He made no direct reference to the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine or indeed to the US, which just imposed potentially crippling bans on the export of advanced computer chips and chip-making equipment to China.

In a pointed indirect reference, however, Xi declared: "China ... resolutely opposes all forms of hegemony and power politics, opposes the Cold War mentality, opposes interfering in other countries' domestic politics, opposes double standards." The comments reflect a recognition in the CCP leadership that the US is determined to use all means, including military, to prevent China from challenging American global domination.

Just as the US goaded Russia into invading Ukraine, so Washington is seeking to provoke China into using military force to integrate Taiwan with the Chinese mainland. The Biden administration, following Trump, has increasingly undermined the One China policy under which the US de facto recognised Beijing as the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan.

By strengthening US political and military ties with Taipei, Biden is threatening to bring the island, which is strategically and economically vital for China, within Washington's sphere of influence. The US calculates that a war with Taiwan can be exploited to weaken and destabilise China, as Washington has done with Russia in Ukraine, as part of its broader ambition to dominate the Eurasian landmass.

Xi said China was seeking "peaceful reunification" with Taiwan, but would "not exclude the use of force as a last resort." In a barely-veiled criticism of the US, he added: "Resolving the Taiwan question is a matter for the Chinese, it is a matter that must be resolved by the Chinese." While the US media cast the comments as "aggressive," the remarks were a rather bland restatement of China's longstanding position in the face of ongoing US threats and provocations over Taiwan.

On domestic issues, Xi defended China's record on suppressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Beijing is under considerable pressure from the US and other major countries to end its public health restrictions and adopt the murderous "let it rip" policy of other governments. To do so in China would result in millions of deaths and many more cases of debilitating long-COVID.

Xi hailed the success of the "all-out people's war on the virus," which had "protected the people's health and safety to the greatest extent possible." He gave no indication that the

government intends to relax its “zero-COVID” policy that has come under fire in social media commentary reflecting the frustrations of sections of business and middle-class layers hostile to the restrictions.

Last week, in a rare public protest, two large banners were hung from a bridge in Beijing opposing the zero-COVID policy and calling for the removal of “dictator and national traitor Xi Jinping.” One of the banners declared: “Say no to Covid test, yes to food. No to lockdown, yes to freedom.”

However, China’s COVID policy, based on widespread testing and contact-tracing, vaccination, targeted lockdowns and the isolation of those infected, has been widely supported in China despite inconveniences and bureaucratic excesses. It has demonstrated that the virus could be eliminated if such measures were implemented internationally.

Significantly, Xi made no criticism of the criminal character of the herd immunity policy implemented by governments in the US and elsewhere. As it manoeuvres on the international stage, the CCP has no intention of campaigning for an international strategy of elimination. Rather, even as the US imperialism intensifies its aggressive confrontation, Beijing is still seeking an accommodation with Washington.

After presiding over four decades of capitalist restoration, the CCP continues to attempt to dress up its pro-market program under the fraudulent banner of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” It does so to claim the heritage of the 1949 Chinese revolution, which is still broadly viewed as a huge progressive step forward for working people. Having abandoned socialism in all but name, the CCP has rested on the claim to be looking after the people’s welfare and cannot afford to be seen to be allowing millions to perish from COVID-19.

Sustained high economic growth over decades has lifted most Chinese out of absolute poverty but has also opened up a huge social divide between rich and poor. China’s growth has now plunged amid a mounting international crisis of capitalism compounded by the COVID pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia. The Chinese economy also has been hit by US trade tariffs and economic sanctions, imposed under Trump and maintained and widened under Biden.

The latest World Bank forecast for China’s growth in 2022 is just 2.8 percent—the lowest in decades and well below the 8 percent level that the CCP regards as essential for low unemployment and social stability. In July, the official unemployment rate, which only covers urban areas, was 5.4 percent, but the youth jobless rate hit a record of 19.9 percent.

The mounting economic problems and social crisis are leading to growing social tensions that will inevitably erupt in the not-too-distant future.

Behind the façade of party unity, the social tensions also will be expressed in factional infighting within the CCP. The elevation of Xi as the indispensable “core” of the party and government and the endless promotion of “Xi Jinping thought” enshrined in the party constitution at the last congress is a sign of weakness, not strength. The regime is relying on a political strongman in a bid to hold the party together in the face of mounting threats, both of war abroad and economic and social crisis at home.

For his part, Xi has sought to consolidate his position through a sweeping anti-corruption campaign that has investigated millions of officials and removed or sidelined key rivals and threats. Over the past decade, Xi has strengthened his grip on government through the appointment of powerful leading small groups to oversee all areas of government policy. He is also chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission. As a result, few surprises are likely. After the CCP’s week-long congress, held largely behind closed doors, Xi is likely to be re-elected as party general secretary and will retain the post of Chinese president at the National People’s Congress next March.

World Socialist 17.10.2022