

Xi Jinping handed unprecedented third term as China's president

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Coronation sets up Xi, who has overseen consolidation of power, to become modern China's longest-serving head of state

Xi Jinping has been handed an unprecedented third term as president, capping an ascent in which he has become China's most powerful leader in generations.

In a carefully choreographed ceremony in Beijing, Xi held up his right fist and placed his left hand on a red leather copy of China's constitution. In the oath – beamed live on state television across [China](#) – he vowed to “build a prosperous, strong, democratic, civilised, harmonious and great modern socialist country”.

The appointment by China's rubber-stamp parliament comes after he was handed in October another five years [as head of the Chinese Communist party \(CCP\) and the military](#) – the two more significant leadership positions in Chinese politics. Friday's appointment as the head of state is a ceremonial addition to Xi's iron grip on power.

The 69-year-old has faced challenges including mass protests over his [zero-Covid policy](#) and its subsequent abandonment in which [countless people died](#).

Those issues have been avoided at this week's National People's Congress (NPC), a closely watched event in which, over the next two days, Xi's ally [Li Qiang](#) will also be appointed as premier, putting him in charge of managing the world's second largest economy.

The NPC on Friday passed [reforms to government institutions](#) unveiled earlier this week, including an overhaul of China's science and technology ministry in the face of what one NPC deputy described as foreign attempts at “containment and suppression” of the country's rise. Other reforms included the formation of a financial regulatory body and national data bureau.

The beginning of China's new political term also saw the former vice-premier Han Zheng elected as vice-president, and Zhao Leji, the former chief of the party's top anti-corruption commission, as parliamentary chair. Both are members of China's highest political decision-making body, the politburo standing committee. The election process, carried out at the Great Hall of the People at Beijing's Tiananmen Square, lasted about an hour.

Beijing also unveiled during the parliamentary meeting a growth goal of “around 5%” – one of its lowest in decades – as well as a modest increase in defence spending.

Xi's reelection is the culmination of a remarkable rise from a relatively little-known party apparatchik to the leader of a global superpower.

For decades, China, scarred by the dictatorial reign of Mao Zedong, has eschewed one-man rule in

favour of a more consensus-based, but still autocratic, leadership. That model imposed term limits on the largely ceremonial role of the presidency, with Xi's predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao relinquishing power after 10 years in office.

Xi has torn up that rulebook, abolishing term limits in 2018. His coronation this week sets him up to become modern China's longest-serving head of state, and will mean Xi will rule well into his 70s and, if no challenger emerges and his health endures, even longer.

But the beginning of his unprecedented third term comes as the world's second-largest economy faces major headwinds, from slowing growth and a troubled real estate sector to a declining birthrate. Relations with the United States are also at a low not seen in decades, with the powers sparring over everything from human rights to trade and technology.

Xi is caught between trying to support China's strategic partner Russia in its invasion of Ukraine and trying to rebuild ties with Europe to help get the country's economy back on track.

So far China's support for Russia has been political, but US officials have said they believe China is considering sending arms to Russia. Many analysts think that is unlikely because of the economic sanctions China would face.

In a speech to delegates at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which runs alongside the NPC this week, Xi criticised Washington's "containment, encirclement and suppression of China".

China, he said, must "have the courage to fight as the country faces profound and complex changes in both the domestic and international landscape".

Xi has made it clear that he considers reunification with Taiwan a priority for his legacy, and has not ruled out the use of force. Last month William Burns, the head of the CIA, [said](#) he knew "as a matter of intelligence" that Xi had ordered the army to be ready to invade Taiwan by 2027.

But Russia's war in Ukraine demonstrates the difficulties of attempting a military takeover of a hostile neighbour. And China faces more challenges in Taiwan than Russia does in Ukraine : 100 miles of ocean and President Joe Biden's commitment to respond militarily if China attempts an invasion.

Xi will make a speech on Monday before the annual parliamentary session closes, as China faces multiple challenges including an economy hobbled by three years of Covid curbs and worsening relations with the west.

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P.-S.

• The Guardian. Fri 10 Mar 2023 09.05 GMT :
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/10/xi-jinping-handed-unprecedented-third-term-as-chinas-president>

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