Hong Kong to 'trawl world for talent' in reboot attempt

Lee's speech offers blueprint for reversing exodus of talent

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's leader unveiled plans to resuscitate the business hub's fortunes on Wednesday, hoping to lure back international expertise after an exodus of talent-but he vowed no let-up in a political crackdown that has transformed the city. John Lee, a Beijing-anointed former security chief, gave a debut policy speech that prioritized the revival of an economy mired in recession and maintaining security while recognizing that many had left a city that serves as a gateway to China. "Over the past two years, the local workforce shrank by about 140,000," he said. "Apart from actively nurturing and retaining local talent, the government will proactively trawl the world for talent."

The former British colony has lately undergone its most tumultuous period since its 1997 handover to China. Huge and sometimes violent democracy protests three years ago were followed by a sweeping clampdown on dissent as well as some of the world's strictest coronavirus pandemic rules, many of which remained in place long after rivals reopened. The city, which only scrapped mandatory quarantine for international arrivals last month, has seen its deficit soar while the border with the Chinese mainland remains all but closed because of Beijing's strict zero-COVID rules.

Talent office

Lee's speech offered his blueprint for reversing that downturn, including a talent scouting office, a HK$30 billion ($3.8 billion) co-investment fund to attract overseas businesses and rules to make it easier to hire foreigners. The city will give preferential treatment to "top talent", described as people who earn HK$2.5 million or more annually and graduates from the top 100 universities around the world who have relevant work experience.

Even with investor-friendly measures, rebooting Hong Kong will be tough. Lee took office in July at a time of rising global interest rates, fears for China's zero-COVID economy, uncertainty sparked by Russia's Ukraine invasion and dents in Hong Kong's business-friendly reputation. The reaction from investors and analysts was lukewarm.

Hong Kong's stock exchange, which has lost more than a quarter of its value since the start of the year, closed down 2.38 percent on Wednesday. "The government still lacks the sense of crisis and understanding of the actual situation," public affairs commentator Derek Yuen told AFP, saying Lee's policy focused more on Hong Kong being a gateway to China and less on being a truly international business hub. "(Officials) may be aware of the competition from within the region like Singapore but they don't understand what makes other countries tick," he added. Baptist University political scientist Kenneth Chan said there was little to reassure foreign talent about Hong Kong's core values.

"For a lot of people who are looking at Hong Kong... it's a new era with a lot of uncertain elements, mostly political elements. They have to think very carefully before making the move and commit," he told AFP.

'Stability is the prerequisite'

After nearly three years, Hong Kong is gradually moving away from its version of China's zero-COVID policy, which failed to keep out the virus and has left the city internationally cut off. Authorities have axed the unpopular hotel quarantine for incoming travellers and loosened some social-distancing rules.

But the pace of reopening still lags behind regional rivals such as Singapore-which has gone on its own charm offensive to lure talent and has roared back as a global transport hub. Overseas arrivals to Hong Kong, for example, cannot enter bars and restaurants for the first three days and Lee's speech gave no details on a clear timeline to lifting all virus curbs.

Lee did stress that the government would press ahead with more national security legislation and possible new rules on "false information". "The development of Hong Kong allows no delay. Social stability is the prerequisite for our development, and we have to get rid of any interference," he said.

Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law on Hong Kong in 2020 after democracy protests the year before, flipping the city's once outspoken vibe. Most prominent local democracy activists either are in jail, are awaiting trial or have fled overseas while schools have been ordered to turn students into Chinese patriots. Lee's policy speech-which lasted two hours and 45 minutes-also included major infrastructure projects to boost the economy and plans to deliver more housing in a city with one of the world's least affordable property markets, something successive Hong Kong administrations have failed to tackle. —AFP

HONG KONG, China: Diners have lunch as Hong Kong's Chief Executive John Lee is seen on a tv delivering his first policy address in Hong Kong on October 19, 2022. — AFP

BERLIN, Germany: Empty shelves for certain products are seen in a Berlin supermarket on October 18, 2022. In the face of price increases imposed by food multinationals, some distributors choose to leave supermarket shelves empty. — AFP

Empty shelves as German supermarkets resist price hikes

BERLIN: German shoppers are increasingly finding empty shelves where their favourite Kellogg's cereal, Mars chocolate bar or rice brand used to be, as supermarkets square off against major food companies over price hikes. "Dear customers: we are sorry to inform you that we can't currently offer all the products of our supplier Mars GmbH," reads a note in a sparsely stocked aisle at an Edeka supermarket in central Berlin. With German inflation running at a record 10 percent, supermarket giants are pushing back against what they see as unreasonable price increases by some of the world's best-known brands.

Food multinationals argue that their manufacturing costs have risen on the back of soaring energy and transport costs, in part because of the war in Ukraine. But retailers in Europe's top economy say they are protecting customers' purchasing power at a difficult time, and that price hikes of up to 30 percent in some cases are overblown. "Many international brands are trying to take advantage of inflation to charge excessive prices in order to increase their profits," an Edeka spokesman told AFP, calling Mars's price demands "unjustified".

Edeka and its rival Rewe, two of Germany's biggest supermarket chains, have stopped getting delivery of around 300 products from the Mars company, known for its Twix and Snickers bars, Ben's Original rice packets and Whiskas cat food. They have also used the supermarket showdown to push their cheaper, own-brand products as alternatives.

Coca-Cola court battle

Mars for its part blames the "volatile context" and "inflationary pressure". Thomas Roeb, a retail expert at the Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University of Applied Sciences, said the battle of the brands was not new, and that items get pulled every year in spats between supermarkets and food companies. "But this time it has gone a little less unnoticed, because Edeka and Rewe are affected at the same time," Roeb told AFP. At the Edeka in Berlin the absence of pet food, a sector where Mars dominates, is particularly glaring.

In a nearby Rewe, the rice aisle is half empty.

The cereal section is looking bare, too, after Rewe failed to reach a compromise with US company Kellogg's-which according to German media was asking almost 30 percent more for its popular breakfast food. Similar price wars are raging with other brands.

In some stores, tea and coffee products by Jacobs Douwe Egberts are missing from shelves. Discounters Aldi and Lidl aren't stocking Danone, the world's largest yoghurt maker.

Edeka and Coca-Cola are fighting out their row in court, with the supermarket appealing a recent ruling saying the drinks giant was within its rights to stop deliveries over the dispute.

'Tastes the same'

"Food, drinks and even hygiene products are missing," said Leana Kring, 24, outside a supermarket on Berlin's Karl-Marx-Allee boulevard. The supermarket woes add more strain for German consumers, who are already bracing for a grim winter amid high inflation and a deepening energy crisis following Russia's cutoff of gas supplies. The German economy, usually a driver of European growth, is forecast to tip into recession next year.

A Rewe spokesman told AFP that supermarkets don't want to see shoppers "unnecessarily penalised" during "these difficult times". But the retailers have also seized the opportunity to promote their store-brand products, which have grown in popularity as Germans try to watch their pennies.—AFP

Stocks stumble as inflation concerns offset earnings

LONDON: Major stock markets stumbled Wednesday, as lingering concerns over sky-high inflation offset positive earnings. In a sign of the uphill struggle in the battle against soaring prices, UK inflation jumped back above 10 percent last month. London's FTSE 100 shares index steadied and the pound fell following the data-and as Britain's under-fire Prime Minister Liz Truss faced a grilling in parliament.

Foreign exchange traders were keeping tabs also on whether the dollar would reach 150 yen, which would be a fresh high for 32 years. Japan's currency is being hit hard as the country's central bank holds off from hiking interest rates, in sharp contrast to its peers the world over which are aggressively hiking borrowing costs to try and cool decades-high inflation.

Asian stock markets diverged after Wall Street ended higher for a second session running Tuesday, heartened by forecast-beating results from Goldman Sachs and Johnson & Johnson.

They came on the heels of better-than-expected reports from banking giants Citi, JP Morgan and Wells Fargo. Traders were given an extra boost by news that Netflix gained more than two million subscribers in July-September.—AFP

CISCO gold sponsor of 9th e-Government Forum

KUWAIT: The "9th e-Government Forum" and its accompanying technology exhibition will begin next Sunday, 23/10. The opening ceremony commences at 6.30 pm at Al-Baraka Hall in Crowne Plaza Hotel .

This came in a press release issued by Cisco, the enterprise networking and security leader. CISCO unveiled its plan for a global, cloud-delivered, integrated platform that secures and connects organizations of any shape and size. The company is designing the Cisco Security Cloud to be the industry's most open platform, protecting the integrity of the entire IT ecosystem - without public cloud lock-in.

"With the complexity of hybrid work, continued acceleration of cloud adoption, and the ever-advancing threat landscape, organizations are looking for a trusted partner to help them achieve security resilience. We believe Cisco is uniquely positioned due to its scale, breadth of solutions and cloud-neutral business model to meet their needs," said Jeetu Patel, Executive Vice President and General Manager of Security and Collaboration at Cisco. "Cisco is already delivering upon key tenets of our cloud platform vision. We're excited to increase our innovation velocity to truly deliver on the vision of the Cisco Security Cloud."

The Security Cloud will provide an integrated experience for securely connecting people and devices everywhere to applications and data anywhere. With unified management, the open platform will provide threat prevention, detection, response, and remediation capabilities at scale. Cisco has been on the journey toward the Security Cloud for some time and is sharing additional progress with new innovations across its security portfolio.

Secure access

Ushering in the next generation of zero trust, Cisco is building solutions that enable true continuous trusted access by constantly verifying user and device identity, device posture, vulnerabilities, and indicators of compromise. These intelligent checks take place in the background, leaving the user to work without security getting in the way. Cisco is introducing less intrusive methods for risk-based authentication, including the patent-pending Wi-Fi fingerprint as an effective location proxy without compromising user privacy. To evaluate risk after a user logs in, Cisco is building session trust analysis using the open Shared Signals and Events standards to share information between vendors. Cisco unveiled the first integration of this technology with a demo of Cisco Secure Access by Duo and Box.

Secure Edge

To radically simplify how organizations connect and protect users, things, and applications, anywhere, Cisco is excited to introduce Cisco+ Secure Connect Now, a unified Secure Access Service Edge (SASE) solution. Cisco+ Secure Connect Now is a turnkey offer available in several countries that allows customers to quickly deploy SASE and ease day-to-day operations through a cloud-managed platform. The as-a-service subscription is optimized for value and managed through a unified dashboard.

Jeetu Patel

Secure operations

Cisco added a new Talos Intel On-Demand service offering custom research on the threat landscape unique to each organization. To help accelerate incident detection and response, Cisco announced enhancements to Cisco Secure Cloud Analytics with its ability to automatically promote alerts into SecureX and map those alerts to MITRE ATT&CK. This follows the general availability of SecureX device insights to aggregate, correlate, and normalize data about the devices in their environment, and the integrations of Kenna and Secure Endpoint to better prioritize vulnerabilities. Cisco also introduced the Secure Firewall 3100 Series, designed for hybrid work with a new encrypted visibility engine that uses artificial intelligence and machine learning to detect hidden threats.

Simplification

Cisco is introducing simplification across the portfolio with the new unified Secure Client. Streamlining how administrators and users manage endpoints, half of Cisco Secure agents, including AnyConnect, Secure Endpoint, and Umbrella, will be unified by mid-year 2022, with additional agents to be added over time. This follows the new cloud-delivered Secure Firewall Management Center, which is enabled through the Cisco Defense Orchestrator and unifies cloud and on-premise firewall management.

Idled plants fuel German angst about de-industrialization

HAMBURG: The familiar plume of smoke no longer billows from one of the two chimneys at ArcelorMittal's massive steelworks in Hamburg's harbor. Soaring energy prices have forced operators to partially idle the plant, adding to fears that Germany's industrial companies, the backbone of Europe's biggest economy, are facing an existential threat. Germany is already bracing for a recession as the energy crisis triggered by Russia's war in Ukraine takes its toll, with the government on Wednesday forecasting a contraction of 0.4 percent in 2023.

But some economists say the long-term impact could run far deeper and see entire manufacturing sectors trim production or relocate to countries where running costs are lower, fundamentally reshaping Germany's industrial landscape. In Hamburg, the 530 workers at the ArcelorMittal steelworks have been placed on reduced hours since early October.

"Gas plays a crucial role in the (iron ore) reduction process" carried out at the plant, said Uwe Braun, CEO of ArcelorMittal Hamburg. But the energy bill has risen "seven-fold" since Russia's February invasion of Ukraine, he told AFP at the site, where activity was subdued and helmet-clad workers were spread out around the imposing 1970s steelworks. The steep price increase made it unaffordable to continue business as usual at the site, which on average consumes two terawatt-hours of gas and one terawatt-hour of electricity per year-enough to power a medium-sized city. Similar steps to curb production have been taken at other European sites operated by ArcelorMittal, the continent's biggest steelmaker.

In a September statement announcing the cost-saving measures, the company blamed the "exorbitant" rise in energy prices and weaker demand as the global economic outlook darkens.

Germany in recent decades managed to avoid the waves of de-industrialization that hit other European countries. Industrial production remains a pillar of the country's economy and accounts for around 22 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), compared with around 13 percent in neighboring France.

"Germany's business model in a nutshell is buying cheap energy from Russia, raw materials and intermediate products... make some outstanding cars and machines... and export them" to the United States and China, said LBBW bank economist Jens-Oliver Niklasch. "Now, some of the tiles on the roof are broken," he told AFP. —AFP