

# The world in brief

Catch up quickly on the global stories that matter



Photograph: AFP via Getty Images

**Russia** attacked **Ukraine** with missiles and drones, killing one person and injuring at least 23 others in the cities of Kyiv and Kharkiv. The strike left 6,000 buildings in the capital without heat. Ukraine's foreign minister said that the “cynical” attacks were aimed at the “[negotiation table](#)”; they came as Russia, Ukraine and America began a second day of talks in Abu Dhabi.

The **Pentagon** released its **National Defence Strategy**. The document, published every four years, claimed America had squandered its military advantage by upholding “cloud-castle abstractions” like the “rules-based international order”. It demanded that allies assume greater responsibility for their own defence and reiterated America's right to access “key terrain” such as the Panama Canal and [Greenland](#). It said America would strengthen its Indo-Pacific presence to deter China.

**Sir Keir Starmer** called **Donald Trump's** claim that non-American NATO troops stayed “a little off the frontlines” in Afghanistan “insulting and frankly appalling”. Britain's prime minister suggested an apology was due. Some 457 British troops died while [serving in Afghanistan](#) between 2001 and 2021. Mr

Trump made the remarks during an interview in which he again questioned NATO's willingness to defend America.

Thousands of protesters braved arctic temperatures in **Minneapolis-St Paul** to demand the withdrawal of immigration officers from the twin cities. Organisers claimed that 50,000 people marched through the streets and that hundreds of businesses closed in support. Since December 3,000 federal ICE agents have deployed to the cities—[dwarfing](#) the scale of previous efforts in Chicago, Charlotte and New Orleans.

**China's** defence ministry said it was investigating Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli, two high-level military officials. Mr Zhang, until now one of Xi Jinping's most trusted military advisors, is the most senior general to be targeted since the president began his [campaign](#) to root out corruption within the People's Liberation Army. Both men are charged with “serious violations of discipline”—usually shorthand for graft.

The **price of silver** rose above \$100 per troy ounce for the first time. It is already up by more than 40% this year. Meanwhile **gold** hovered close to \$5,000 per ounce, also a record. In recent months investors have rushed to [the precious metals](#), which are seen as safe-haven assets, amid uncertainty over geopolitics and trade.

**Japan's yen** recorded its biggest gains since August, strengthening by 1.6% against the dollar. Markets were energised by reports that the Bank of Japan had run so-called rate checks with other banks, signalling a possible intervention to prop up the currency. The yen made smaller gains earlier in the week on reports that the bank's monetary authorities [favoured raising interest rates](#).

*On January 21st, a verdict was delivered for Yamagami Tetsuya, the man who murdered Japan's longest-serving prime minister, Abe Shinzo. On our narrative podcast, “[The Weekend Intelligence](#)”, our*

*Japan reporter explores the strange aftermath of the assassination —and how it upended a nation.*

**Word of the week:** *Ecce Mono*, Spanish for “Behold the Monkey”, coined online after Cecilia Giménez’s botched restoration of Ecce Homo turned Christ into an internet meme. [Read the full story.](#)

*In which year did Castro seize control of Cuba? Test your knowledge with our [latest history quiz.](#)*



Photograph: EPA

## The reality behind Trump's Gaza plan

In Davos this week Donald Trump unveiled his “[Board of Peace](#)”, a club of world leaders and alternative to the United Nations. Then his son-in-law and envoy, Jared Kushner, took to the stage to present a glossy slide-show on “New Gaza”. Complete with an airport and shiny high-rises on the Mediterranean coast, this is the Trump administration’s vision of the future of the war-ravaged enclave. The reality on the ground is that the strip remains destroyed, cut off from the world and divided between a Hamas regime and Israeli occupation.

It is unclear when Israel will allow the new “technocratic” government appointed to run [Gaza](#) to enter the strip—and whether that body will have any real powers to manage civilian affairs. There are no dates or details for the planned disarmament of Hamas, deployment of a new security force or further withdrawals by Israel. All of those steps are crucial before reconstruction can begin—let alone anything resembling the Kushner Plan.



Photograph: Reuters

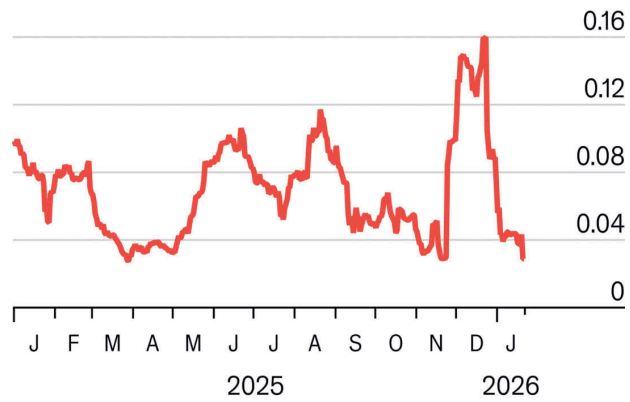
## **Putin's troops are dying for barely any Ukrainian land**

Russia, Ukraine and America are holding trilateral talks this weekend. Much is at stake: the front lines in Ukraine are once again at a near standstill and 2025 was probably the deadliest of [the war](#) so far. Four years on from the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, between 1m and 1.4m Russians have been killed or wounded, our estimates suggest. Tens of thousands of Ukrainians, including many civilians, have also died.

Vladimir Putin, Russia's leader, has little to show for the carnage. His forces control 20% of Ukraine, up from 7.2% before the invasion. But almost all of that extra land was seized in the initial stages of the war: since November 2022 just 1.5% of Ukrainian territory has been [taken by Russia](#), and no large city has fallen. Whether another big offensive is in the offing this year is not clear. For now, Mr Putin continues to inflict havoc on Ukrainian infrastructure and civilians using drones and missiles.

## A deadly grind

Change in Russian-controlled area as % of total Ukrainian territory, past 30 days



Sources: Institute for the Study of War;  
AEI's Critical Threats Project; *The Economist*



Photograph: Alamy

## A job hunt turns insidious

How far would you go to get a job? That is the central question in “No Other Choice,” a South Korean satirical thriller released in Britain this weekend. Written and directed by Park Chan-wook, the film follows You Man-su (Lee Byung-hun, who starred in the [“Squid Game” series](#)), a middle-aged executive whose orderly life suddenly unravels. The protagonist is unexpectedly fired from his plum job at the paper factory where he has worked for 25 years. After a year of humiliating unemployment, he devises a plan: he will apply for a job, and murder all of the rival candidates.

Adapted from “The Ax”, a novel by Donald E. Westlake, Mr Park’s grisly farce is ingenious, outrageous fun. But even as the twists and dead bodies pile up, the film is always sympathetic towards its homicidal anti-hero. One can almost believe that he has no other choice.





Photograph: Alamy

## Reaching new heights in Taiwan

Climbing up a skyscraper, with the occasional glimpse down, can be a stomach-turning experience. But not for Alex Honnold. This weekend—rain allowing—the veteran American climber will attempt to reach the top of the Taipei 101 tower, one of the tallest buildings in the world, without any ropes or safety gear—a practice known as free solo climbing. His 508-metre ascent will be broadcast live on Netflix, albeit with a ten-second delay.

Mr Honnold rose to international fame after becoming the [first person to climb El Capitan](#), a 900-metre vertical wall in California's Yosemite National Park, without ropes. The feat was the subject of "[Free Solo](#)", an Oscar-winning documentary from 2018. After long dreaming of climbing a skyscraper, he received rare permission to tackle the 101-floor building that has only once previously been climbed, with ropes, by Alain Robert, a Frenchman, as part of its opening festivities in 2004. If successful, Mr Honnold could claim the biggest urban free solo in history.





Photograph: Getty Images

## Weekend profile: Mark Rutte, Europe's Trump-handler

Mark Rutte may well be Donald Trump's favourite European. The NATO [secretary-general's](#) lavish, and sometimes ludicrous, flattery of the American president—whom he called “Daddy” at a summit last year—is easily mockable. But the sucking up has been successful: this week, he talked Mr Trump down from his threats to seize [Greenland](#), a feat few could achieve.

That may not surprise the Dutch, who know him as the Netherlands' dominant politician from 2010 until 2024. An agile debater, he turned the centre-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (vvd) into the Netherlands' last big political party and became the country's longest-serving prime minister.

The youngest of seven children in a middle-class family in The Hague, Mr Rutte wasn't always so slick. He was a politics nerd in high school and studied history at Leiden University before spending a decade at Unilever, an Anglo-Dutch foodstuffs conglomerate. In 2002 Gerrit Zalm, the then-finance minister, recruited him to be deputy minister for labour and social affairs. The vvd's members made him party leader four years later.

His career as prime minister was shaped by struggles with the populist firebrand [Geert Wilders](#), a former vvd MP who had quit the party to found the anti-immigrant Party for Freedom (pvv). Mr

Rutte's first cabinet in 2010 relied on support from the PVV. It fell in 2012, when Mr Wilders backed out of a commitment to support budget cuts. Mr Rutte said he would never trust the PVV leader again.

Throughout his tenure Mr Rutte pulled the VVD to the right on immigration, to keep his voters from drifting to the PVV, while forming coalitions with the centre and centre-left. His governments were broadly pro-business, pro-climate and pro-European, but fiscally frugal and tough on immigration and asylum. He balanced that with his regular-guy image: he rode to work on a bicycle, and took time off every Thursday to teach a social-studies class at a high school.

But his attempts to look tough ultimately proved his weakness. In 2019 reports emerged that a government crackdown on supposed benefits fraud had roped in thousands of innocent citizens, mainly with immigrant backgrounds. The ensuing controversy chipped Mr Rutte's teflon coating. In 2023 he broke up his own cabinet. When that move proved unpopular, he stepped down as leader of the VVD.

That NATO still offered him the job was no surprise. Though a manoeuvrer in domestic affairs, Mr Rutte is a resolute Atlanticist and foe of Vladimir Putin, as well as a firm European. At NATO he has turned his extraordinary political gifts to cultivating an audience of one: Donald Trump. Many Europeans find his strategy embarrassing. But his success in persuading Mr Trump to drop his threat of tariffs over Greenland suggests it is working. As he began to address the World Economic Forum in Davos, the American president looked out searchingly across the hall: "Is Mark here? Yes! Hi, Mark!"



Illustration: Sandra Navarro

## The winners of the week's quiz

Thank you to everyone who took part in this week's quiz. The winners, chosen at random, were:

Amelia Powell, Atlanta, Georgia, America

Jos Aarts, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Samuel Onyoso, Nairobi, Kenya

They all gave the correct answers of: Christopher Lee, Jonathan Pryce, Christopher Walken, Donald Pleasance and Telly Savalas.

The theme is that they all played Bond villains: Lee was Scaramanga in "The Man with the Golden Gun", Pryce was Elliot Carver in "Tomorrow Never Dies", Walken was Max Zorin in "A View to a Kill", and Pleasance and Savalas played Ernst Blofeld in "You Only Live Twice" and "On Her Majesty's Secret Service" respectively

The questions were:

**Monday:** Which actor, who appeared in many Hammer horror movies, gave his autobiography the title of "Tall, Dark and Gruesome"?

**Tuesday:** Which actor played Pope Francis opposite Anthony Hopkins as Pope Benedict XVI in “The Two Popes”?

**Wednesday:** Which actor won an Oscar for best supporting actor as a traumatised Vietnam veteran in “The Deer Hunter”?

**Thursday:** Which actor played the psychiatrist who treats Micheal Myers in the first Halloween film?

**Friday:** Which actor is best known for playing Kojak in the 1970s TV series?

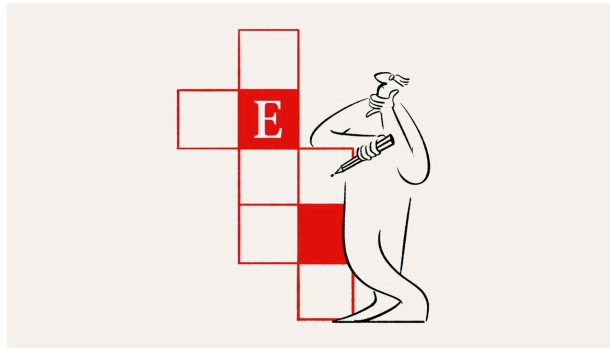


Illustration: The Economist

## Mini crossword

We publish a new interactive edition of our crossword daily, allowing you to enter and check the answers and see explanations. Try it [here](#).

There are two sets of clues, one for seasoned cruciverbalists and the other for less experienced solvers. Both give the same answers.

### Cryptic clues

*1 across* - Gold messenger from France has unexpected hue (6)

*2 across* - Drag viols intermittently to fancy Swiss resort (5)

*3 across* - Just a small change to the empire reveals who's really in charge (6)

*1 down* - At first our union's annual gala attracted dozens of unexpected guests, overwhelming unequalled African city (11)

### Straight clues

*1 across* - According to Jeannette Winterson, this is not the only fruit (6)

*2 across* - The site of the World Economic Forum, a conference (5)

*3 across* - The person calling the shots in cricket (6)

*1 down* - The capital of Burkina Faso (11)

Email all four answers, along with your home city and country, by 9am GMT on Monday to [\[email protected\]](#). We will pick three winners at random and crown them in Tuesday's edition.

*A fanatic is one who can't change  
his mind and won't change the  
subject.*

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***Winston Churchill***