

## Catch up: Rubio tests Russian seriousness; Starmer ponders British peacekeeping troops



Marco Rubio, America's secretary of state, said that "the next few days" will show whether Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, is serious about peace in **Ukraine**. Mr Rubio confirmed that he would meet Sergey Lavrov, his Russian counterpart, in Saudi Arabia this week. Mr Rubio appeared to contradict America's **Ukraine** envoy, Keith Kellogg, saying that Ukraine and Europe would, in fact, be given a seat during any "real" negotiations.

**Discombobulated** European leaders will meet in Paris on Monday. Ahead of the meeting, **Sir Keir Starmer** said he was "ready and willing" to send British soldiers to Ukraine once a peace deal is reached, the prime minister's first concrete allusion to deploying ground troops. Sir Keir said peacekeeping forces were crucial to deterring Mr Putin.

A busy Mr Rubio also met Binyamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem. Afterwards **Israel's** prime minister praised Mr Trump's "bold

vision” for Gaza, which includes America [taking over the territory](#), and said that the two leaders are working in “full co-operation”. Mr Netanyahu declared that he could “finish the job” on Iran and thwart its nuclear ambitions.

**Japan’s** GDP grew by an annualised 2.8% in October-December, topping analyst expectations and marking the third consecutive quarter of expansion. [The economy](#) was buoyed by rising consumer spending on home appliances and capital investment on new semiconductor plants. Nominal GDP surpassed ¥600trn (\$4trn) for the first time in 2024.

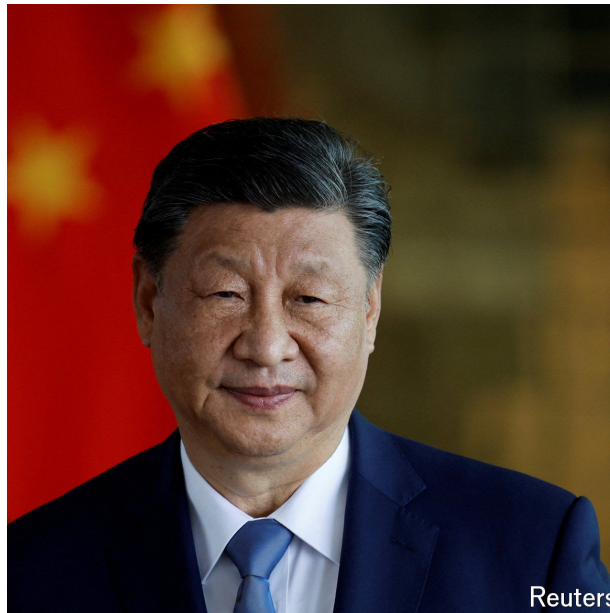
M23 soldiers marched into the centre of Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu and the second-largest city in eastern **Congo**. It is unclear whether the rebel group, which is backed by neighbouring Rwanda, controls the whole city. In January it [took Goma](#), the largest city in North Kivu, an adjacent province. The United Nations’ refugee agency claims that the insurgency has displaced 350,000 people.

**South Korea** blocked new downloads of [DeepSeek](#), China’s flagship artificial-intelligence model. Last week, the country’s spy agency accused the Chinese firm behind the chatbot of “excessively” collecting personal data, and criticised its dubious responses to politically sensitive questions, whether on the Tiananmen Square massacre or the origins of [kimchi](#). Taiwan, Australia and Italy have also imposed restrictions or launched investigations into DeepSeek.

“Conclave” was named the best picture at the **BAFTAs**, Britain’s most prestigious film awards. The [papal drama](#), which stars Ralph Fiennes, took four awards in total. “The Brutalist”, a movie about a Hungarian architect and Holocaust survivor, was the night’s other big winner. The BAFTAs are the last of the big film awards before the Oscars.

**Figure of the day:** 40%, the share of Germans who say Friedrich Merz—leader of the Christian Democrats and the probable next chancellor—is suitable for the job. [Read the full story.](#)

# Will China unleash its businessmen?



When Jack Ma, the founder of e-commerce giant Alibaba and China's top entrepreneur, came under state scrutiny in 2020, the country's business elite took notice. So did investors around the world. The signal to private industry was clear: businesses would be subservient to the state, and to President Xi Jinping's agenda. The crackdown on private enterprise contributed to China's tech industry losing more than \$2trn in value. Combined with a slow post-covid recovery and a real-estate crisis, that left China's [economy in the doldrums](#).

But there could be some light at the end of the tunnel. Mr Ma and a few other top company leaders met with Mr Xi on Monday, according to media reports. That marks a watershed moment, sending a strong signal to ordinary entrepreneurs: the Communist Party has remembered that China needs private business and capital to help pull the country out of its economic funk.

# Europe seeks a united front on Ukraine



America's behaviour in the past week has shaken Europe. First Pete Hegseth, America's secretary of defence, declared that the superpower could not be counted on as the "primary guarantor" of European security. Then Donald Trump reached out to Vladimir Putin, his Russian counterpart, to discuss an end to the war in Ukraine without consulting Ukraine or Europe's leaders. And J.D. Vance, America's vice-president, mounted an attack on Europe in a speech in Munich on February 14th. America, Europe's steadfast ally of 75 years, is [looking unreliable](#).

On Monday some of Europe's leaders will meet in Paris to decide how to handle Mr Trump and his Ukraine diplomacy. There are already signs that fear of American abandonment will spur Europe's leaders to increase defence spending. That may encourage the transactional Mr Trump, who has long complained about European freeloading, to preserve America's commitment to the defence of Europe. But if America withdraws its protection, bigger and better European armies will be needed.

# Marco Rubio in the Middle East



Donald Trump's plan to take over Gaza and oust its Palestinian population is casting a pall over Marco Rubio's first Middle East trip as America's secretary of state. Jordan and Egypt, both American allies and traditional stops, didn't make the itinerary. Mr Rubio appears to be skipping a planned stopover in Qatar. And visits this week to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will probably be acrimonious. Saudi Arabia's former intelligence chief has predicted that Mr Rubio will get "an earful".

Mr Rubio met Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, on Sunday, where he said that Hamas "cannot continue as a military or governing force". That—and the shipment of American-made bombs, blocked by the previous administration, that arrived in Israel—increased fears that a ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian Islamist group may fall apart. Saudi Arabia will host representatives of other Arab states this month. They are reportedly hastening to devise their own plan for Gaza.



# The EU prepares for Trump's tariffs



The first salvo of Donald Trump's tariff wars targeted Canada, Mexico and China. Then a scattershot of steel and aluminium tariffs hit everyone. The next barrage—reciprocal tariffs—seems aimed in part [at Europe](#).

The idea sounds reasonable: American tariffs will equal those that trading partners impose on America. (Though this would violate World Trade Organisation rules, and cause all kinds of practical problems.) But Mr Trump seems to be retaliating against European policies that go well beyond tariffs. Top on the list is VAT, which EU member states apply to goods sold within their countries but not, Mr Trump complains, to the EU's exports. Tech regulation and digital-services taxes also rankle.

Figures to be published on Monday will probably show that the EU's trade surplus with America stayed high in December 2024. The month before it was €18.7bn (\$19.6); in 2023 it averaged €13bn. Mr Trump will add the new number to his grievances.

# Does more education lead to less sex?



America has a sexual “degree divide”. Between 2002 and 2023, 25- to 35-year-olds with a bachelor’s degree had sex 11% less often than the average adult of the same age, *The Economist* [has calculated](#). Those with a graduate degree had sex 13% less frequently. Even after controlling for age, drinking habits, employment, health and marriage status, getting a sheepskin is associated with a 7-8% drop in the frequency of sex, on average.

Young people are having less sex than did earlier generations at their age. But common explanations—from technological distractions to young adults staying longer in their parents’ homes—do not explain why graduates specifically are having less fun between the sheets.

It could be that they spend more time working and taking care of children. Or that better-educated women have fewer eligible suitors. Some experts even think that traits that contribute to excellent performance in the classroom may lead to worse performance in the bedroom. Sorry, bookworms.



# Daily Quiz



*The Economist*

We will serve you a new question each day this week. On Friday your challenge is to give us all five answers and, as important, tell us the connecting theme. Email your responses (and include mention of your home city and country) by 1700 GMT on Friday to [QuizEspresso@economist.com](mailto:QuizEspresso@economist.com). We'll pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners on Saturday.

**Monday:** Which future American president wrote the Federalist Papers, along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay?

**Where they have burned books, they will  
end in burning human beings.**

*Heinrich Heine*