

Catch up: Pentagon shake-up; Hamas releases hostages



Donald Trump fired General Charles “CQ” Brown as chairman of the joint chiefs of staff and said he would replace people in five other senior positions, in an unprecedented shake-up of the Pentagon. Mr Trump is cracking down on those he blames for [pushing diversity, equity and inclusion policies](#). The Pentagon [was already braced for sweeping cuts](#) to its budget and staff.

Hamas released six hostages in the final part of the first phase of its ceasefire agreement with Israel. In return Israel is expected to free 602 [Palestinian prisoners](#). Israel’s army confirmed that a body repatriated on Friday was that of Shiri Bibas, another of those abducted on October 7th. The militant group had failed to return her remains on Thursday with those of her two young children.

Sergei Ryabkov, **Russia’s** deputy foreign minister, said American and Russian officials would meet again within a fortnight to discuss ending the war in **Ukraine**. A first meeting took place—without Ukraine or its European allies—in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday. On Friday Donald Trump said Ukraine’s president,

[Volodymyr Zelensky](#), and Russia's, Vladimir Putin, should “get together” to end the war. Mr Trump has been fiercely critical of Mr Zelensky in recent days, while making friendly overtures towards Mr Putin.

New Zealand said that the **Chinese navy** had fired live rounds in international waters near the country, having conducted a similar drill in the sea between New Zealand and Australia on Friday. Three Chinese naval vessels have been stationed near Australia's shores since last week. New Zealand's prime minister, Christopher Luxon, said that his country was “shadowing and tracking” the fleet.

Emmanuel Macron, France's president, said he was trying to assemble a “blocking” majority to thwart a [trade deal](#) between the European Union and six Latin American countries. The EU and Mercosur, whose members include Brazil and Argentina, finalised the trade text, which would reduce tariffs on goods traded between the two blocs, on December 6th. Mr Macron worries that it would negatively affect French farmers.

Berkshire Hathaway reported that its operating profits jumped by 71% in the fourth quarter of 2024, to \$14.5bn. Its full-year earnings rose by 27%, to \$47.4bn. Warren Buffett's investment firm was buoyed by increases in investment income at its insurance businesses (up to \$4.1bn in the fourth quarter, from \$2.8bn a year earlier) and profits from insurance underwriting (up to \$3.4bn, from \$848m).

The man who [attacked Salman Rushdie](#) at a literary festival in upstate New York in 2022 was found guilty of attempted murder. Hadi Matar stabbed [Sir Salman](#) several times, blinding him in one eye. He faces up to 32 years in jail. The author has been the target of assassination plots since 1989, when Iran's supreme leader [issued](#) a *fatwa* against him.

Word of the week: *guang gun*, a Chinese term meaning “bare branches”, used to describe unmarried men who are unable to continue their family line. [Read the full story.](#)

Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow?



Donald Trump's looming abandonment of Ukraine is worrying America's friends and allies in Asia, none more so than Taiwan. The notion of "[Ukraine today, Taiwan tomorrow](#)" is even more alarming.

The threat from China may focus minds. Admiral Samuel Paparo, the head of America's Indo-Pacific Command, warns that [China's wargames](#) around Taiwan are "rehearsals", and has sounded the alarm over the readiness of American forces: "our [munitions] magazines run low".

But China hawks are divided over the Trump administration's [abrupt about-turn](#) in Europe. Some think that doing less in Europe would lead to America doing more in Asia. Others worry that America would simply do less everywhere. Mr Trump has thus far not shown much of his hand in the Indo-Pacific. Military trade-offs are becoming starker as America's arsenals are depleted. Its munitions shortage in Asia is caused, at least in part, by its support for Europe.

A pact to “unite the right” in Britain



[Nigel Farage](#), the omnipresent leader of Britain’s Eurosceptic populist fringe, thinks he is on the verge of an electoral breakthrough. “We are going to win the next general election and save our country,” he told an audience at CPAC, a conservative gathering in America, on Thursday night.

Reform UK, the party Mr Farage leads (and the successor to his UK Independence Party and Brexit Party), is top of the polls, at 27%, according to YouGov. The struggling Conservative Party is only third. Further polling suggests voters are more likely to regard Reform as trustworthy, strong and purposeful than the Tories.

All this is contributing to talk of an electoral pact between the Tories and Reform to “unite the right”. Both Mr Farage and [Kemi Badenoch](#), the Conservative leader, insist that won’t happen—but a lot can happen before the next general election, most likely to fall in 2028.

Signs of generative life



Artificial intelligence has already proved that it can solve long-standing problems in science. In 2024 the inventors of AlphaFold, an AI model capable of predicting three-dimensional protein structure, [received the Nobel Prize for Chemistry](#). But much has happened since AlphaFold's public release in 2020. Using ever-improving sequencing technology, scientists have collected large data sets across biology that are ripe for exploitation. AI itself has progressed, too.

This week a massive new model for biology, named Evo 2, was released. It was made by the Arc Institute, a Californian research organisation, Stanford University, and Nvidia, a chip-maker. Rather than proteins, the model is trained on more than 128,000 genomes from bacteria, fungi, plants and animals, including humans. The model allows researchers to generate new genomes that look passably life-like and to assess the outcome of mutations. It is early days yet, but a vision of what AI could achieve in biology is starting to take shape.

An unusual world record



On Saturday 3,000 people will gather to dip bread in what may go down in history as the world's biggest cheese fondue. The organisers of the event in Les Rousses, a French ski resort, call it a "technical and gastronomical feat". (During one attempt at the record in America the mixture curdled—more fondon't than fondue.) They will melt 2,039 kilograms of cheese to challenge a record set in Switzerland in 2009.

The Alpine dish, usually melted down with alcohol and best enjoyed among groups, originated as a way to reuse scraps of various cheeses. The [Swiss cheese lobby](#) promoted it as a symbol of national unity after the second world war. In 1964 the dish was showcased at the World's Fair in New York; by the 1970s fondue parties had become all the rage in America. The communal comfort food retains its kitschy appeal. Tesco, Britain's biggest retailer, says demand for baking cheese shows no signs of dipping. In fact it says sales have increased six-fold since the pandemic.

Profile: Kirill Dmitriev, investment-fund boss and Putin's point man



It looked less like a peace parley and more like a business negotiation. On February 18th, [when the Kremlin's men met Donald Trump's diplomats](#) in Saudi Arabia, Kirill Dmitriev set out (perhaps exaggerated) numbers. American companies, he said, had lost \$324bn by leaving Russia after the start of the war in Ukraine. Why not come back? His message found receptive ears. The 49-year-old stood out from the grizzled diplomats who made up the rest of the Russian delegation. But from [Vladimir Putin's](#) perspective, he had good reason to be part of it: Mr Dmitriev has been cutting deals for more than a decade.

Mr Dmitriev got his start in California, where he earned a degree from Stanford University, then worked at McKinsey, a consultancy, and Goldman Sachs, a bank. In 2000 he graduated with an MBA from Harvard Business School. On his return to Russia that year, he put his corporate credentials to use in the country's burgeoning financial sector. Mixing with elites opened doors. So did his marriage to Natalia Popova, a friend of Mr Putin's daughter, who gave him an in with the Kremlin.

In 2011 he convinced Russia's leaders to set up the Russian Direct Investment Fund. He has run it ever since. The RDIF is an unusual state-backed fund. It works more like a private-equity firm, seeking out foreign investors to partner with the Kremlin on joint ventures inside Russia. Mr Dmitriev was soon back in America, schmoozing Wall Street bigwigs. For a while, investors were smitten, but the love-in didn't last. After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, sanctions made it harder to attract Western capital. But Mr Dmitriev was able to find non-Western sources of cash. Money flooded into the RDIF from Asia and the Gulf.

Mr Dmitriev is more than just a money man. In recent days he has established himself as Mr Putin's main envoy to Mr Trump's circle. When Russia released Marc Fogel, an imprisoned American teacher, in exchange for America's release of Alexander Vinnik, a cyber-criminal, on February 11th, Mr Dmitriev was busy behind the scenes. In Saudi Arabia Mr Dmitriev helped to turn talks about peace into a meeting about money, giving the event a surreal air. In doing so, he was playing to the proclivities of Mr Trump. It turns out both sides can practise the art of the deal.

Weekly crossword



We now publish an interactive edition of our crossword, allowing you to enter and check the answers, and see explanations, instantly. Try it [here](#). Or, if you prefer to do things the old-fashioned way, use the grid below.

Our crossword has two sets of clues, one for seasoned cruciverbalists and the other for less experienced solvers. Both give the same answers, all of which feature in articles in this week's edition of *The Economist*.

Cryptic clues

- 1 down Crazy: a hostile man has an enigmatic smile (3,4,4)
- 1 across Thanks, I want endless state (6)
- 2 across Impossible to get right country (6)
- 3 across Any fool remembers Irvine starts Californian continent (6)

Factual clues

- 1 down What most of the Louvre's visitors are there to see (3,4,4)
- 1 across Disputed island state (6)
- 2 across One of the countries which saw a large increase in the

price of food in January (6)

3 *across* The continent that's home to "Generation Hustle" (6)

Email all four answers, along with your home city and country, by 9am GMT on Monday to crossword@economist.com. We will pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners in next week's edition. And please send any thoughts you may have about the new interactive version to the same address.

The winners of this week's quiz



The Economist

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

David Harris, Powell River, Canada

Anand Mahajan, Mumbai, India

Jan van der Burg, Delft, The Netherlands

They all gave the correct answers of James Madison, “Africa” (by Toto), “Iron Man”, Lieutenant, and Stanley Kramer.

The theme is films for which Meryl Streep received an Oscar nomination: “The Bridges of Madison County”, “Out of Africa”, “The Iron Lady”, “The French Lieutenant’s Woman” and “Kramer vs Kramer”.

The questions were:

Monday: Which future US President wrote the Federalist Papers, along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay?

Tuesday: Which 1980s soft rock hit features the line “Sure as

Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus above the Serengeti”?

Wednesday: Tony Stark is the real name of which Marvel super hero?

Thursday: What rank did Columbo, played by Peter Falk, hold in the Los Angeles police force?

Friday: “The Defiant Ones” and “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”, two of the earliest Hollywood movies to tackle racial issues, were directed by which person?

Art is anything you can get away with

Andy Warhol