

The world in brief

Catch up quickly on the global stories that matter

The **Federal Reserve** left its benchmark interest rate unchanged, as expected, at a range of 5.25% to 5.5%. Jerome Powell, the Fed's chairman, said he was pleased with progress in bringing inflation down but did not indicate when rate cuts might begin. (Investors largely reckon June.) America's central bankers still expect to lower rates three times this year as growth slows, and markets soared on the news: the Dow Jones, S&P 500 and Nasdaq indices all hit record highs on Wednesday. Asian stocks also rose on Thursday morning, with Japan's Nikkei index reaching a new high.

Reddit priced its shares at \$34 a piece, valuing the social-media firm at about \$6.4bn, ahead of a listing on Thursday in New York. It will raise \$748m through the share sale, a rare bright spot amid a [lacklustre few years for public offerings](#). In 2021, when venture-capital money was free-flowing, Reddit was privately valued at \$10bn.

Two people close to **María Corina Machado**, **Venezuela's** leading opposition figure, were arrested for their alleged involvement in an anti-government conspiracy. Arrest warrants for seven more of her staffers were also announced. Last year [Ms Machado](#) won a primary election for president in a landslide. That spooked Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela's autocratic president. Ms Machado was swiftly barred from holding public office for 15 years.

Luís Montenegro, the leader of the centre-right Democratic Alliance, was asked to form a minority government in **Portugal**. Negotiations on forming a government were complicated by the strong showing in [elections earlier this month](#) of Chega, a far-right party. Chega won 40 out of 230 seats, but Mr Montenegro vows not

to work with them. However, his party will need either their backing, or the Socialists', to pass legislation.

Leo Varadkar unexpectedly resigned as **Ireland's** *taoiseach*, for both “personal and political reasons”. Mr Varadkar [first took the post in 2017](#), becoming Ireland's youngest prime minister. He then served as deputy prime minister between 2020 and 2022 before [returning to the top job](#). Ireland will hold a general election by the spring of 2025.

Canada said it would not approve new weapons-export permits to **Israel**, given the death toll in Gaza. Canadian law prohibits selling arms to countries that violate human rights or harm women and children. The government confirmed the export freeze on Wednesday after Canada's parliament earlier passed a non-binding motion urging the move. Israel's foreign minister said that history would judge Canada's actions “harshly”.

Neuralink, Elon Musk's startup, live-streamed a quadriplegic patient using the company's [brain implant](#) to control a mouse and play chess on a computer. The patient, a 29-year-old who was paralyzed below the shoulder after a diving accident, was also able to play “Civilization VI”, a video game, for eight hours using only his thoughts. Neuralink is one of several companies making progress in the field.

Figure of the day: 257%. The rise in the number of abortions carried out in New Mexico since 2020. [Read the full story](#).

In the run-up to America's presidential election, we've launched [The US in brief](#)—a daily update to help you keep on top of the political stories that matter. [Sign up here](#) to receive it as a newsletter, each weekday, in your inbox.



Photo: Alamy

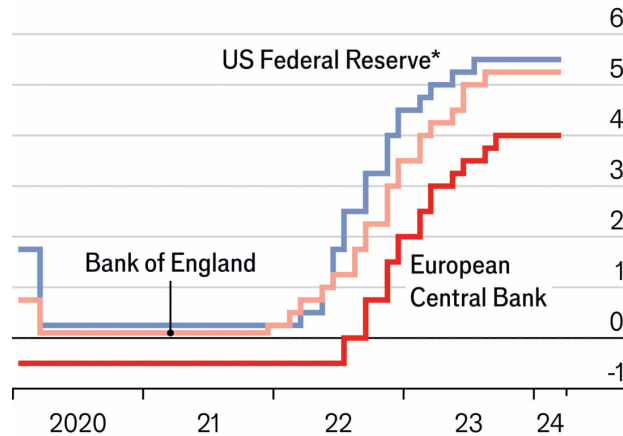
The Fed provides clarity

Start with what is all but certain: at its meeting on Wednesday, the Federal Reserve will keep interest rates unchanged. But beyond that, [investors](#) around the world will be on tenterhooks. One question is how Jerome Powell, the Fed's chairman, describes price trends. Inflation has turned up in recent months, which could delay the onset of rate cuts. But Mr Powell may suggest that the Fed is still on track to cut rates in June, as most investors currently expect.

A second focus will be on the Fed's quarterly outlook. In December [the central bank indicated](#) that it would make three-quarter-point rate cuts this year. The debate now is whether it may signal somewhat less easing or project that short-term rates will settle at a higher level in the long run than previously thought. This would reflect a belief that the economy may require slightly tighter policy conditions on an ongoing basis to avoid overheating.

What happens next?

Central-bank benchmark interest rates, %



*Upper limit

Sources: Haver Analytics; LSEG Workspace



Photo: Alamy

Tencent's poor play

China's massive consumer-oriented internet companies have had a [rough few years](#). On Wednesday the biggest of the bunch, Tencent, posted disappointing revenue growth for the fourth quarter of 2023 but said it would double its stock buybacks in 2024. The results cooled market enthusiasm, which had been raised in November when the Shenzhen-based company posted higher-than-expected revenues from advertising and international gaming.

Investors will now turn their focus to the challenges facing the company in the year ahead. One concern relates to processing online payments, which are a large part of Tencent's business. China's dreary economic outlook may continue to hurt consumer spending, constraining the group's income. Another threat could come from overseas. Chinese internet companies, such as TikTok, are coming under fire in America. That has not yet hurt Tencent's sales of games to customers abroad, an important source of its growth. But it should be a source of anxiety for the company.



Photo: Reuters

BioNTech looks beyond covid

The German biotech firm that developed one of the world's first covid vaccines (with Pfizer, an American pharma giant) reported its annual results on Wednesday. With demand for its covid jabs waning, sales in 2023 were \$4bn, down by more than three-quarters compared to a year earlier. The company expects the [slide to continue](#) in 2024. BioNTech's market value has fallen by more than 75% from its peak in August 2021.

In response, the firm is exploring ways of using [mRNA technology](#), the basis of the vaccines, to treat other diseases. In April it will share data from clinical trials of its cancer therapies at the annual

gathering of the American Association for Cancer Research. These include a vaccine targeting non-small cell lung cancer and therapy for pancreatic cancer.

Although most of its non-covid treatments are still in their early stages of development, good results from the trials would give investors—and patients—hope.



Photo: Reuters

Australia's tricky truce with China

China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, visited Australia on Wednesday for meetings with his counterpart, Penny Wong, and the prime minister, Anthony Albanese. This is Mr Wang's first trip down under since 2017. Relations later soured. Australia banned Huawei from its 5G network and demanded an inquiry into the origins of covid. China responded by restricting imports of Australian goods.

But Mr Albanese of the centre-left Labor Party, in office since 2022, has sought to [improve relations](#). China has lifted most of the trade restrictions. It is expected to end high tariffs on wine in the next few weeks. But debate rages in Australia about how friendly it should be with China. In February its top spy said that a former politician [had been recruited](#) by a Chinese espionage ring. Mr

Wang will encourage pro-China sentiment by meeting Paul Keating, a former Labor prime minister who criticises Australia's "anti-China" stance and its alliance with America. China is no longer [bullying](#) Australia, but it hopes to exploit its divisions.



Photo: EPA

Past is prologue at the Whitney Biennial

In the art world fortunes are made by [galleries](#) and auction houses. But reputations are made by museums, particularly in marquee shows like the Whitney Biennial. The 81st exhibition opens on Wednesday in New York.

Every two years the show makes an argument about what is most important in American art. This year's offering, subtitled "Even Better than the Real Thing", promises to grapple with AI and contemporary conversations about gender and sexuality. But only two works (by an artistic duo) explicitly engage with AI and little new is said about identity. Strikingly, current events—from Ukraine to Gaza to the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump—go virtually unmentioned. The biennial looks less like the future, and more like the past.

But there is excellence, too—particularly a room-sized installation by Suzanne Jackson, an American artist. Wraithlike sheets of painted acrylic hang from masts like limp sails and will deform with gravity. Ms Jackson is literally stretching the tradition of painting in new ways.



Daily quiz

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 [\[email protected\]](#). We'll pick randomly from those with the right answers and crown three winners on Saturday.

Wednesday: Which Greek island, the largest in the Dodecanese, was ruled by the knights of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem from 1310 to 1522?

Tuesday: Which actress, who won an Oscar for Moonstruck, was a cousin of a Democratic Presidential candidate?

Nature is a book of many pages and each page tells a fascinating story to him who learns her language.

A. E. Douglass