

The world in brief, June 21st 2024



America will suspend deliveries of [air-defence interceptors](#) to other allies in order to rush more of the munitions to **Ukraine**. The country is under heavy bombardment by Russia, which is targeting its power stations. Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, has said that Ukraine needs at least seven more Patriot systems in order to defend itself against the Russian attacks. Romania announced it would send one such system to its neighbour.

Vladimir Putin, Russia's leader, signed several agreements with To Lam, his Vietnamese counterpart, during a two-day visit to Vietnam. The two countries pledged to co-operate on nuclear science and clean energy. [Mr Putin](#) said Russia and Vietnam shared an interest in "developing a reliable security architecture" in Asia. America, which criticised Vietnam's hosting of Mr Putin, dispatched a top diplomat to the country.

Japan imposed trade curbs on **China**-based companies accused of supporting Russia's war in Ukraine. Japanese firms will be blocked from exporting to the Chinese entities, which include a Hong Kong-based manufacturer that provides microchips for Russian

drones. Companies in India and Kazakhstan were also hit by Japanese sanctions. America has repeatedly complained that Chinese companies are boosting [Russia's war effort](#).

The Biden administration said it would ban the sale in America of antivirus software made by **Kaspersky Lab**, a [Russian](#) firm. Gina Raimondo, America's commerce secretary, said the Kremlin had shown it had "the intent to exploit Russian companies like Kaspersky to collect and weaponise the personal information of Americans". Kaspersky, whose American customers reportedly include state governments, blamed the "geopolitical climate and theoretical concerns".

Mark Rutte, the outgoing prime minister of the Netherlands, was confirmed as the next secretary-general of **NATO** after winning the endorsement of all the alliance's members. Klaus Iohannis, the president of Romania and Mr Rutte's sole competitor for the position, withdrew his candidacy. Mr Rutte will succeed [Jens Stoltenberg](#) in the role by October 2nd.

At least 1,000 people have now died in extreme heat during the [annual haj pilgrimage](#) to **Mecca** in Saudi Arabia. Temperatures reached 51.8°C. The *haj* forms one of the five pillars of Islam. The toll could be higher; Egypt formed a crisis unit after reports that at least 530 of its citizens had died. Many of those fatalities are thought to be of unregistered participants in the pilgrimage.

Hawaii reached a settlement with 13 youngsters who sued the state over its failure to curb [greenhouse-gas emissions](#). Under the agreement Hawaii will begin to decarbonise its transport system and will aim for carbon neutrality by 2045. This will in part be achieved by a \$40m investment in electric-vehicle infrastructure. Similar lawsuits, which appeal to plaintiffs' constitutional right to a healthy future, have been filed in several states.

Figure of the day: 68%, the proportion of energy in the universe that scientists believe to be “dark energy”, a mysterious entity.
[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.

The prodigal Son (almost) returns



After years of being punished for his high-risk bets on fast-growing technology firms, Son Masayoshi thinks he has found the focus of SoftBank Group's next big investment. At its annual general meeting on Friday, the founder of the tech-investing and telecom giant said that what had gone before was “just a warm-up” for his plans in artificial intelligence. Mr Son told shareholders that he was “born” to realise artificial superintelligence, technology that could be smarter than humans.

SoftBank's investment strategy—backing promising startups with a distant path to profitability—has, however, struggled against higher interest rates. It is estimated to have lost around \$14bn when [WeWork](#), an office-leasing company, collapsed.

In 2023 the company gained a reprieve from the successful IPO and strong performance of Arm, a British chip-design company, which SoftBank bought in 2016. But that did not prompt the return of the old Mr Son. He was once known for eccentric slideshows, which have been absent since 2022. Perhaps the eventual announcement of big new investments will bring them back.

Slow justice in southern Florida



Donald Trump, now a convicted felon, remains a defendant in [three pending criminal cases](#). In Florida, where the ex-president is [accused](#) of squirrelling away classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate, his lawyers have made numerous efforts to kill the prosecution's case. That is standard lawyering. Perhaps less standard is the way that the judge, Aileen Cannon, whom Mr Trump nominated to the bench, has handled the pre-trial squabbles.

On Friday she is due to hear arguments that the case should be dismissed because Jack Smith, the special counsel prosecuting it, was allegedly appointed unlawfully. Other judges have quickly rejected such motions in similar cases. But Ms Cannon has taken her time even with routine decisions. Last month she indefinitely delayed the trial, which had been due to start on May 20th. The glacial pace favours Mr Trump. He blasted his [trial in New York](#) as “rigged” and “disgraceful”. If he wins in November, he may not have to endure another.

An exam controversy roils India



There has been no honeymoon period for [India's new government](#). On Friday the opposition led a nationwide protest against irregularities in a state-run exam that have infuriated students. The test can change lives: this year 2.4m took the exam to clinch one of 110,000 spots at medical colleges. But when results were announced a fortnight ago, an unprecedented 67 students had full marks.

The apparent improvement in performance sparked lawsuits and allegations of cheating. India's testing agency denies the charges, instead blaming the unusual scores on "grace marks" awarded to students affected by delays in sitting exams. Last week the Supreme Court cancelled the "arbitrary" compensatory marks and said their recipients should be allowed to retake the test. That did little to quell anger, especially as other controversies are surfacing: this week the education ministry cancelled an exam for teaching jobs at universities over concerns that its "integrity may have been compromised".

Japan's inflation conundrum



For a quarter of a century, a combination of deflation and near-zero inflation troubled Japan's economy. No longer. Core consumer-price inflation has now been above the Bank of Japan's target of 2% for two years. May's figure, released on Friday, remained above the target, at 2.5%. The weak yen, down to around 160 to the dollar from 140 at the turn of the year, is driving up import costs, hitting consumers.

That all puts pressure on the BoJ to further tighten its monetary policy. In March it raised short-term interest rates for the [first time in 17 years](#), but it has not moved since. Raising rates again would begin to increase the cost of funding Japan's enormous public debt. The government's debt-to-GDP ratio is about 260% in gross terms—a consequence of years of dismal growth. As speculation about another rate hike by the BoJ mounts, eyes will also be on Japan's legislators, who could reportedly finalise their latest fiscal plan by Friday.

Joni Mitchell's overlooked music



[Joni Mitchell](#) is both hailed as one of the great singer-songwriters and under-recognised for her finest work. Her brilliant folk-based albums up to the mid-1970s are cherished and vastly influential. “Blue”, released in 1971, has perhaps inspired more female musicians than any other record.

Yet relatively scant attention is now paid to her work in the years after this period, when—with typical restless invention—she left the folk idiom behind to become perhaps the foremost jazz crossover artist of that time. Reissued on Friday as “The Asylum Albums (1976–1980)”, this series of records lives entirely within its own realm. It starts with the rich and mysterious “Hejira” and culminates in the extraordinary live set “Shadows and Light”. Ms Mitchell’s recent return to public performance, after long struggles with ill health, offers an opportunity to reconsider her genius in full.

Daily quiz

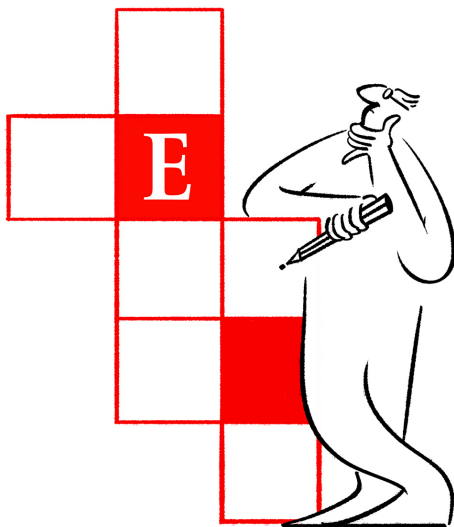


We will serve you a new question each day this week. On Friday your challenge is to give us all five answers and, as important, tell us the connecting theme. Email your responses (and include mention of your home city and country) by 1700 GMT on Friday to QuizEspresso@economist.com. We'll pick randomly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

Friday: Which drug baron was the founder of the Medellín cartel?

Thursday: Jackie, Tito, Jermaine, Marlon and Michael were the members of which musical group?

The winners of last week's crossword



Thank you to everyone who took part in our weekly crossword, published in the weekend edition of Espresso. The winners, chosen at random, were:

Amelia Cheng, Coquitlam, Canada

Ivan Grabowski, Westwood, MA, America

Martyn Abbott, Heckington, England

They all gave the correct answers of [motherhood](#), [Miami](#), [Elon](#) and [Dalit](#). Check back tomorrow for this week's crossword.

68%

*The proportion of energy in the universe that scientists believe to be “dark energy”, a mysterious entity.
Read the full story.*

The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him.

Niccolo Machiavelli