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The New York Times

THE WEATHER
Today, partly to mostly sunny, chilly, high 36. **Tonight**, patchy clouds, cold, low 25. **Tomorrow**, mostly sunny, continued chilly, light winds, high 36. Weather map, Page B8.

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Trump Will Face an Iran More Fragile and Resolute

Hobbled Allies and Hastened Nuclear Arms Effort Shape Region’s New Reality

By DAVID E. SANGER

President-elect Donald J. Trump will encounter an Iran that is suddenly far more brittle than it was during his first administration, its leadership more uncertain, its nuclear program more exposed and vulnerable to attack.

That new reality has touched off an internal debate about how his administration should approach Tehran: with an openness to negotiations, or with an attack on its nuclear enrichment program — overt or covert, or perhaps initiated by Israel.

Or, as many suggest, a round of “coercive diplomacy” that leaves Tehran to choose a negotiated disassembly of its nuclear capability, or a forced one.

The urgency of the issue was underscored on Sunday by Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s national security adviser, who told Fareed Zakaria of CNN that with Iran’s main proxies weakened or eliminated, “it’s no wonder there are voices saying ‘Hey, maybe we need to go for a nuclear weapon right now.’”

He added that he had discussed the “real risk” of an Iranian bid for the bomb with the Trump national security team and with the Israelis.

In interviews over the past two weeks, American and foreign officials have said that the menacing dance over Iran’s nuclear future could take a dramatic turn in the next few months. That assessment came after the U.N.’s top nuclear inspector warned that Iran was accelerating its enrichment of

near-bomb-grade uranium.

Iran’s new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, and Mr. Trump have voiced a willingness to negotiate a new nuclear deal, though neither has said a word about its terms.

But both men know that the military balance has shifted — and that Iran’s capability to strike back at Israel through its proxies, and even its own missile fleet, has been vastly diminished. So while the opportunity for diplomacy has not been greater in six years, neither has the possibility of a preemptive strike.

In public comments, Mr. Trump’s aides have promised a renewed “maximum pressure” campaign that concentrates on cutting off Iran’s oil revenue by leaning on China, the largest purchaser of sanctioned Iranian oil shipments.

“The change you’re going to see is more focus on Iran,” Michael Waltz, whom Mr. Trump has designated as his national security adviser, said in November on CNBC. “Maximum pressure, not only will it help stability in the Middle East, but it’ll help stability in the Russia-Ukraine theater as well, as Iran provides ballistic missiles and literally thousands and thousands of drones that are going into that theater.”

Mr. Sullivan did not discuss the specifics of his conversations with Israel. But current and former Israeli officials have publicly debated whether to seize the moment. Yoav Gallant, the Israeli defense

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DANIEL BEREHULAK/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Sectarian Friction in Syria

Christians in Damascus protesting Tuesday after a Christmas tree was burned by masked men, creating a sense of unease. Page A9.

A Mother’s Race to Beat a Genetic Time Bomb

By VIRGINIA HUGHES

Linde Jacobs paced back and forth across her bedroom, eyeing the open laptop on the dresser and willing the doctor to appear. Her husband was dropping off their older daughter at school. Their younger daughter was downstairs, occupied by a screen. Linde wanted to be alone when she learned whether she carried the family curse.

Linde’s mother, Allison, had died just four weeks before, after a mutant gene gradually laid waste to her brain. In her 50s, Allison transformed from a joyful family ringleader into an impulsive, deceptive pariah. She drove like a maniac in cul-de-sacs. She pinched strangers, shoplifted craft supplies and stole money from her daughter.

Now, on this morning in September 2021, Linde would find out if she had inherited the same vile genetic mutation.

She had a bad feeling. She and her mother had been so alike. Allison had been a physical therapist, and Linde was a nurse. They were both doers — taking charge, mending wounds, planning theme parties. They were both chipper and a bit unfiltered, easy to a smirk or a four-letter word.

She probably gave me this, too, Linde thought.

The doctor finally popped up on the computer. Wasting no time on pleasantries, she shared her screen and zoomed in on one line of the laboratory paperwork: POSITIVE.

Linde was 33. Within about two decades, in all likelihood, her daughters would watch her become selfish, manipulative, reckless — the opposite of everything she’d taught them to be. Like Allison, Linde would turn into some-

Mutation That Slowly Lays Waste to Brain

one hard to tolerate, let alone love.

And more insidious: Her girls and her two sisters each had a 50-50 chance of carrying the mutation. There was no cure for this disease, called frontotemporal dementia, nor even any treatments.

Soon, Linde’s husband, Taylor, pulled into the garage and opened the car door. He could hear her sobbing.

They loaded the 3-year-old into the car and went for a long drive around their Minneapolis suburb.

Linde looked at Taylor. “I don’t want you to feel stuck with me,” she said.

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MIKE KAI CHEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Linde Jacobs inherited a condition that causes frontotemporal dementia. She fears that her two daughters could have it, too.

Word of Mouth That Let Loose Drone Frenzy

This article is by Michael Wilson, Alyce McFadden and Tracey Tully.

It was a dry and cool Wednesday evening outside the Army’s Picatinny Arsenal in New Jersey, a longtime military installation that once made the bombs and shells that led to victory in World War II. A contractor there knocked off work and decided to wait out rush hour traffic. He picked up some takeout from Wawa, parked outside a nearby wildlife preserve and settled in to watch an episode of Joe Rogan’s podcast on his phone. Then he saw a flash in the side mirror.

A light rising straight up from the tree line and toward the arsenal. He started recording. Could it have been a plane?

Or was it a drone?

And so began what seems to be the origin story of the ongoing drone saga. The contractor called in his sighting to his superiors on Nov. 13, and others followed quickly, first throughout the county, then the rest of New Jersey, then into neighboring states.

Countless people have reported mysterious hovering objects dotting the night skies and posted blurred images — a white light, a black background — on social media. Every day, for weeks. Drones. Drones?

Small drones. Drones big as vans. Blinking, stationary, speeding and zipping and buzzing.

Jeffrey Parker saw them outside his Vineland, N.J., apartment building. He was barefoot, checking the mail, and there they were: three lights flying low and slow.

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DAVE SANDERS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Bath & Body Works releases 250 new fragrances every year, and holiday shoppers are crucial for the mass-market olfactory giant.

At This Fragrant Time of Year, A Holiday Hit Smells Like Pink

By JORDYN HOLMAN

On a Thursday evening not long before Christmas, as tourists and the after-work crowd started filling up a Bath & Body Works store near Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan, a woman walked up to a table piled with products labeled “Perfect in Pink.”

She dabbed lotion on her hands and sprayed a mist in the air, called over to the man she was shopping with and had him smell. She grabbed a few bottles of Perfect in Pink body cream, stuffed a pink, bow-shaped makeup bag under her arm and headed to the checkout line.

One small data point for the retailer’s big holiday bet.

Every year, Bath & Body Works releases 250 new fragrances, but it puts its muscle behind just a few, including Perfect in Pink, that it expects might carry the holiday shopping season.

This is a crucial time of year for most retailers, but Bath & Body Works, which sells some \$7.4 billion of lotions, perfumes and candles each year, especially benefits from the gift-giving imperative of the season.

In 2023, the company, the mass-market stalwart of scent purveyors with 1,850 stores in the United States and Canada and 510 more in over 40 other countries, reaped 66 percent of its total net income toward the end of the year. Some of its customers shop there only during the holidays.

“People come in not because they ran out of their scent,” said Simeon Siegel, a retail analyst at BMO Capital Markets, but because “it’s time for ‘Tis the Season.’ Just like people walk in to get

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A Tough Nut to Crack: Separating Tchaikovsky From the Kremlin

By ANDREW HIGGINS and JENNY GROSS

VILNIUS, Lithuania — Unimpressed by the substitute for Tchaikovsky’s “Nutcracker,” the mother and her young daughter left at the intermission, a small protest over a decision by the opera house not to perform the Russian composer’s Christmas classic.

“Everything about ‘The Nutcracker’ is much better — the music, the dance, the story,” said Egle Brediene, 38, hurrying out of the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theater this past week after the first act of a replacement ballet composed by an Italian.

Lithuania, an unwavering supporter of Ukraine in the war waged by Russia, set aside Tchaikovsky and the holiday favorite two years ago after declaring a “mental quarantine” from Russian culture in a gesture of solidarity against the aggressor.

That stirred grumbling by theatergoers, but their annoyance had largely calmed — until a new government took power in Lithuania this month and a newly installed culture minister announced that he liked listening to Tchaikovsky. There was no reason, the minister,

Artistic Solidarity Irks Some in Lithuania

There was no reason, the minister,

Sarunas Birutis, said in a radio interview, to be “afraid that after watching a Christmas fairy tale we will become pro-Kremlin.”

His remarks prompted fury from ardent supporters of Ukraine and applause from lovers of Russian music, igniting a bitter debate, largely one between generations, about whether culture and politics can be separated at a time of war.

Many in the art world oppose

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Retire? They’d Rather Jump.

These skydiving seniors are taking their golden years one 12,500-foot leap at a time.

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Federal Oversight of Police

President Biden promised sweeping efforts to reform law enforcement. Time is running out for action.

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INTERNATIONAL A4-9

City’s Close-Up Has Its Critics

The Catholic Jubilee in 2025 is expected to draw 32 million visitors to Rome, but residents rue soaring housing costs and changes to the city’s character.

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Putin Ally’s Overture to West

Belarus’s president keeps arresting his foes, but some wonder if a raft of pardons is a bid to ease sanctions.

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SPORTS B6-10

From Steeler to Woodworker

When a former N.F.L. lineman started building furniture, he didn’t expect it to become his new career.

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BUSINESS B1-5

Amazon Drones Prepare to Fly

A recent look at a robot air delivery program in Arizona left Kevin Roose impressed, but skeptical.

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A Dystopian Hit Returns

The global success of “Squid Game” in 2021 took Netflix by surprise. This time, it’s ready for the frenzy.

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The Breakout Stars of 2024

From a stalled Scottish comic to an influencer who wants to stream from space, 10 people who caught our eye in the arts this year and held it amid much competition.

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An Actor’s New Scene

The “Home Alone” star Daniel Stern has built a social media following documenting life on his farm. “What a crazy way to walk through life,” he said, “to be a little part of people’s lives.”

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OPINION A18-19

Rachel Louise Snyder

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FOOD D1-8

America Is Dusted With Sugar

A combination of economics, taste and the post-Covid restaurant landscape is making this a great time for new bakeries in smaller cities.

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