THE SPANISH GAME

Eight elite chess players gathered in a palace in Madrid this month for an international summit of sorts. They were playing for the glory and the future of chess. By *Oliver Roeder*

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SARATTA CHUENGSATIANSUP

Police cars swarmed Madrid, their two-tone sirens dopplering loudly down Calle de Atocha and Paseo del Prado, the city's major axes. With the Nato summit in town and war raging on the continent, flag-bearing motorcades ferrying commanders-in-chief and televisions shouting incessant news alerts, the Spanish capital had taken on a paramilitary feel. But the Policía Nacional struggled to navigate down Calle de las Huertas, which was congested by a determined throng. The crowd stood strategically near an intersection, clutching Sharpies and chessboards, steely looks in their eyes. They surrounded each approaching vehicle, peering through tinted windows, searching for their targets. Naturally, the crowd drew the interest of passers-by, who joined the congregation, attracting more interest still.

"¿Qué está pasando aquí?"

"Es un gran torneo de ajedrez."

The assembled mass was catching glimpses and collecting autographs of eight of the strongest chess players in the world, masters of our species' canonical war game. The players were slowly arriving at Palacio de Santoña, a 16th-century palace in the Barrio de las Letras in the centre of Madrid, nestled among narrow brick streets. As fans surrounded the taxis, often, instead of a grandmaster, a befuddled tourist emerged. *Bienvenido a Madrid*.

At stake was the game's highest title, which has been held by fewer than a dozen people in the modern era. Elite chess, even in 2022, operates on something like a feudal structure. The world champion sits by, basking in his reign, while a series of grandmaster vassals fight each other for a chance to dethrone him. Through an intricate procedure of qualification every two years, eight grandmasters earn a place in the Candidates Tournament. It was this octet arriving at the palace. The winner of the Candidates earns the right to challenge the sitting champion in a lengthy one-on-one match for the world title. The Candidates, therefore, is the most important chess tournament in the world.

I arrived in Madrid at the same time as US President Joe Biden (separate flights). He was bound for a summit to confer with Johnson and Macron, Scholz and Sánchez, Erdoğan and Niinistö, and other dignitaries of the military alliance. "We condemn Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in the strongest possible terms," they said in a joint statement. I was bound for the *palacio* to consider battles of another sort. In many ways, the chess here would be geopolitics in miniature: tactics and strategy, threats and bluster, international conflict, elections, sanctions. And with a week of play remaining, it was a two-horse race. Ian Nepomniachtchi of Russia sat in first. Fabiano Caruana of the US chased him in second.

One enters the Palacio de Santoña through enormous wooden doors and a stone foyer, and turns to face a grand marble staircase, richly carpeted and flanked by frescoes and statuary. Light streams in through a stained glass ceiling and shimmers off golden fixtures. Up those stairs, in a decadent auditorium, beneath a painted ceiling, grandmasters Miguel Santos and Jose Gascón provided live, Spanish-language commentary. In a room that could easily hold a hundred, perhaps two dozen spectators in gold velvet chairs listened attentively. The players had arrived and quickly began to play in a closed room down the hall. Fluency wasn't necessary to catch the assessments of the various chess positions unfolding.

"Tan sólido."

"Muy loco."

"Super complicado."

At this level, a chessboard is a particle accelerator, powerful and productive, spitting out ideas from a violent clash. There are only so many ways to say "boom".

The Candidates is a double round robin; 14 rounds take place over 18 days, each player facing each other with both the white and black pieces. Nepomniachtchi, the solidly built Russian, was facing Teimour Radjabov, the ruggedly handsome Azerbaijani. Caruana, the sparrow-like American, battled Jan-Krzysztof Duda, the young, clean-cut Pole (no relation to the Polish president). Ding Liren, the greatest player in the history of China, played Richárd Rapport, the beguiling and creative Hungarian. And Hikaru Nakamura, the American speed-chess specialist and YouTube personality, played Alireza Firouzja, a baby-faced, 19-year-old French-Iranian prodigy.

Fittingly for this international summit, chess is at home in Spain. The game has undergone dramatic changes in its 1,500-year history, some of them instigated here. For example, one theory holds that the queen, the most powerful piece in the modern game, got those powers in honour of Isabella of Castile. She rises in bronze monuments above Madrid. And the 16th-century priest Ruy López de Segura, from the south-western hills of this country, authored an influential treatise on the game, *Arte del Juego del Axedrez*, expounding on the best opening moves. Centuries later, the Ruy López opening, also known as the Spanish Game, remains a prominent strategy. "Among many games, chess in particular is more effective than any other in many ways," López wrote in 1561. "It is a game of science and seems not to be a dishonest pastime."

The world chess champion is Magnus Carlsen, 31, of Norway. He's held the title since 2013, has ranked No. 1 in the world since 2011 and lays a strong claim to being the greatest chess player ever. He's the closest thing the game has to a celebrity; with strong-jawed good looks, he's modelled alongside Liv Tyler and appeared on a Cosmopolitan sexiest-man list. It's Carlsen, demigod of the modern game, "Mozart of chess", whom the eight Candidates were striving to dethrone.

But Carlsen is bored. He is, evidently, so lonely at the top of this game that he may not even bother defending his title. He had said that he would only play if Firouzja, forerunner of the next generation, won the Candidates. Perhaps it was an old ploy, like a prizefighter refusing to box, holding out for a bigger purse. Perhaps he was tired; the world championship, its format and the preparation it demands are a lengthy grind. Perhaps he was having a laugh. Perhaps he was trying to write history, orchestrating, at worst, a transfer of the mantle to a new wunderkind. Or perhaps Carlsen is truly happy with his achievements, content with life beyond chess. Whatever the reason, he is not like other chess players. "We are miserable," Anish Giri, a top player, told Chess.com, referring to mere mortal grandmasters. "Carlsen is beyond that."

No one but Carlsen knew if Carlsen would play, and that uncertainty hung over the Candidates and its toiling miserables like a noxious fog. In a sense, it was unclear what they were all playing for. What good is winning the Candidates if the champion

then simply steps aside, like a matador dodges a bull? By rule, if the reigning champion declines to defend his crown, the first- and second-place Candidates play for the world title.

There are metapolitics governing chess politics. The world championship and the Candidates fall under the auspices of Fide (pronounced fee-day), chess's international governing body. For more than two decades, until 2018, Fide was run by a Russian named Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, the former president of the Republic of Kalmykia. Ilyumzhinov is on record saying he's been abducted by aliens and that chess is "a gift from extraterrestrial civilisations". He was sanctioned by the US in 2015 and barred from entering the country for his financial support of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.

Nowadays, Fide is run by a Russian named Arkady Dvorkovich, a former deputy prime minister who chaired the organising committee for the 2018 Fifa World Cup. About the war, Dvorkovich told Mother Jones magazine, "My thoughts are with Ukrainian civilians." He was later quoted in Russian media saying that "the main thing is that a solid peace and a more just order will finally be established on our planet, where there's no place for Nazism or the domination of some countries over others", apparently adopting the Putin line that Ukraine needed to be "denazified". When asked by chess24.com, a popular news site, if he was close with the Kremlin regime, he said, "I was before 2018, but not after that. I can call, but I don't use it."

Chess has long been a proud Russian national sport, right up there with hockey, ballet and novel writing. Soviet players dominated the game in the 20th century, comprising a string of world champions interrupted only briefly by American Bobby Fischer at the height of the Cold War in 1972. But while one Russian was leading the Candidates, another famous Russian was missing from Madrid. Sergey Karjakin, who challenged Carlsen in 2016, was banned from chess for six months for his public support of Russia's invasion into Ukraine. A Fide disciplinary commission found that his statements "damage the reputation of the game of chess... The likelihood that these statements will damage the reputation of Sergey Karjakin personally is also considerable." His absence opened a spot for Ding, the Chinese world No. 2.

There will be a Fide presidential election in August. Ukrainian-born Andrey Baryshpolets is running on a ticket with Carlsen's coach, Peter Heine Nielsen, a Danish grandmaster. Baryshpolets circulated a petition arguing that "the Russian Federation has been using Fide as a soft power to whiten its reputation. It continues to do so amid its military aggression against Ukraine."

The world championship is slated for early next year. No dates or host city have yet been announced.

Most spectators at the Candidates never see the players playing chess, at least not in person. So sensitive are the players to distraction, and so demanding of attention is their game, that they play in a sort of quarantine. The venue proved an effective barrier against all rumblings of the world outside; neither the Nato summit nor the war beyond were hot topics. The hallways leading to their sanctum were always closely guarded, and signs lining the corridors ordered "*silencio*". ▶

AT THIS LEVEL, A CHESSBOARD IS A PARTICLE ACCELERATOR, POWERFUL AND PRODUCTIVE, SPITTING OUT IDEAS FROM A VIOLENT CLASH. THERE ARE ONLY SO MANY WAYS TO SAY 'BOOM'

◀ Nevertheless, devotees streamed into the palace, up the gilded stairway and through stately rooms. The commercial advertising on display spoke to a transformed game – from stodgy old pastime to rising e-sport and grist for the content mill. At a ChessKid booth, staffers were discussing outreach efforts to "mommy bloggers". Chessable was hawking its online education service, which includes, for example, a $250 video course on the intricacies of the Spanish Game. Anna Cramling, a 20-year-old internet personality with grandmaster parents and 217,000 followers on Twitch, was live streaming, walking backwards to face her cameraman. She's a de facto spokesperson for modern chess, boosted by *The Queen's Gambit* mini-series on Netflix and the pandemic's idle hours. "What is up, everybody?" Cramling said. "Like, I'm literally at the place where the players are going to be coming in just a few minutes."

I was extended an invitation into the inner sanctum where the games are played by a Fide official. I was asked to put my phone in a lockbox before passing through a heavy curtain and a glass door. The room was surprisingly small, and sparsely populated – only the players, me and my Fide minder, and a couple of arbiters from Fide, immaculately suited. On the arbiters' table sat a thick stack of scoresheets, on which the players write down every move played using something called algebraic notation, and a pile of spare chess clocks. Time was ample but strictly controlled. Candidates get two hours for their first 40 moves, an hour for the next 20 and 15 minutes and 30 seconds a move for anything after that.

The room was deathly quiet, only the hum of air-conditioning and the occasional creak of very old floor. (I'd already been scolded for taking a work call two floors above the playing room. At some tournaments, players sit in a soundproof glass cage.) And it was incredibly bright; a metal lattice on the ceiling supported many powerful lights. They illuminated the subtly high-tech chessboards and pieces, with electronic sensors embedded inside, which broadcast their positions live to the world.

A large black backdrop had been installed behind the four players' tables, covering what appeared to be a bucolic hunting mural. It displayed the tournament's sponsors, most prominently Chess.com, El País and Scheinberg Family, the last of which includes the billionaire founders of PokerStars, an online card room. Chess.com, a news site which also hosts online games, wielded an outsize influence over the proceedings, dominating the press corps, producing broadcasts on site and conducting official postgame interviews. (Many pizzas were delivered to the pressroom one afternoon; while helping myself to a slice I was told, curtly, "That's Chess.com's.")

The players came in a bold palette of dress-shirt hues, blues, purples, pinks. (Only one woman, Judit Polgár, has ever played in the Candidates, most recently in 2007.) They sat in high-back (very high-back) office chairs which were the butt of many jokes at the tournament. The players aren't constrained to their chairs; they can wander around, observe each other's games, grab snacks, use the toilet. This wandering happens often, and it's not uncommon for neither player to be sitting at a given game. With blazers hung on the backs of the tall chairs, this sometimes gave the impression of a match taking place between two invisible competitors. In a dim, private side room, suitable for breaks and nervous pacing, a TV displayed the live positions of the games. Players would wander in, becoming illuminated solely by the blue glow of their own chess.

Placards were affixed to each table with players' Elo ratings – a statistical calculation quantifying a player's strength (Caruana = 2783, Nepomniachtchi = 2766) – and their national flags, except for Nepomniachtchi, who played under the generic Fide flag. (Its motto: *Gens una sumus*, we are one people.) The grandmasters moved their pieces with the nimble and elegant motions of a concert pianist. And while they could easily play their games blindfolded, chess positions being like language to them, their eyes darted around the board like a hawk's at altitude. Occasionally they closed their eyes, searching, it seems, for a higher dimension of thought. There is also a near-universal tendency to fiddle with captured pieces.

After a few minutes, my Fide minder left the room, leaving me alone with the Candidates. I stayed for another half-hour, staring at the pieces and the players. Occasionally, they stared back at me. It was an uncomfortably zoological experience. Worse, as the players got stuck deep into complex middlegames and endgames, clinging to positional edges and pawns like a free-solo climber clings to a ledge, their clocks ticking and tournament lives on the line, it was like watching people being tortured.

Much of the action in the room was inscrutable, though the temptation to engage in pseudoscientific body-language analysis was strong. It seemed easy to tell how Caruana was playing. When things were going well, he perched above the board, perfectly still and alert. When they weren't, he fidgeted, shifting from perch to perch. This day, Caruana was shifting. Nepomniachtchi, meanwhile, was unflappable, both in chess performance and demeanour. "I'm just trying to keep my head calm and not let any emotions drive me," he'd said before the game. "I'm just trying to do my job, more or less."

It was much noisier the following day, when the grandmasters Robert Hess and Daniel Naroditsky, now the chess columnist for The New York Times, and the international master Almira Skripchenko were busy rehearsing for the day's live Chess.com broadcast. Their studio, on the third floor of the palace, was cramped and crowded but well equipped and seemed technologically capable of covering a national election or global disaster. Chess.com swag was gaffer-taped on the walls, and many enormous monitors displayed chess positions, ready for detailed analyses. I was told that the team had hired a sports producer with Super Bowl experience to plan the event.

Flanking the chessboards on the analysis screens were simple diagrams, bearing some resemblance to a skinny thermometer, one portion filled in white and another black. It wasn't just the great Carlsen that lorded over these proceedings, but also The Machine. Chess-playing computer programs, known as engines, are incomprehensibly better than the best humans these days. They analyse every position in the tournament in real time, filling the thermometer depending on who they calculate is doing better. The Machine dictates much of the commentary; as the thermometer ticks this way or that, so does the tenor of the conversation. The Machine also directs the players' preparation, vetting their hypotheses and helping them hone potent repertoires of opening moves. ▶

The Grand Masters

Magnus Carlsen (top) is current world champion. The eight men vying to unseat him clockwise from top left: Alireza Firouzja, Hikaru Nakamura, Jan-Krzysztof Duda, Fabiano Caruana, Ian Nepomniachtchi, Teimour Radjabov, Ding Liren and Richárd Rapport

◂Just four of the 14 games remained. The commentators took their seats in large white armchairs and ran through that day's script and storylines with producers in between mic checks.

First: "We'll go over yesterday's results. The recap is primarily the Alireza game."

Alireza Firouzja had lost yet again, committing three inaccuracies, two mistakes and one blunder against Nakamura. He was now well out of the running, and the possibility of a juicy, intergenerational Carlsen-Firouzja championship was gone. The consensus around the palace was that this would be a teachable moment for the youngster and that he'd be world champion – one day.

Next: "Then obviously Fabiano and Ding, they're both vying for second place."

The world Nos. 3 and 2 had slipped behind Nepomniachtchi and would play each other that afternoon. Both needed either a miraculous comeback or to claim second place and qualify for the world championship by default.

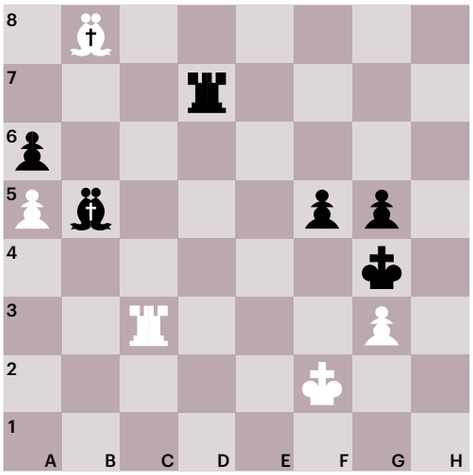
There was also some hot gossip in the studio. Naroditsky, a very strong player himself, had spent the previous night playing hundreds of games of bullet chess – frantic, one-minute-long contests – online against Firouzja. The commentator and the contestant played until after 5am. It was an unusual turn of events, Firouzja apparently distracting himself from a disappointing chess tournament by playing a lot more chess. That afternoon, as Firouzja continued to struggle, Naroditsky said, "He just doesn't have his head screwed on right today." A bit unfair, if you ask me. Carlsen got wind of the affair and needled the 19-year-old player on Twitter. It was hard to blame Firouzja too much, considering the youthful indiscretion in question was playing too much speed chess.

An hour later it was time to go live. Most live sports commentary is descriptive. *De Bruyne, over to Foden, inside to Sterling*. Chess commentary, on the other hand, is largely subjunctive, hypothetical explorations of what might happen if a player moves here and the other there and so on. *Now here's what could happen if that rook were to come to a3*. Football can be appreciated as a smooth series of prima-facie aesthetic moments, while chess is experienced as a discrete series of opaque speculations.

As a result, observing an elite chess tournament is an exercise in vicarious anticipation, of wondering what a player will do and then trying to understand what they did. But you're not them, and you'll never fully understand. On top of that, the viewer has The Machine, so the viewer knows the right answer and wonders if the player has it, too. The experience is a sort of player-viewer-Machine love triangle.

Inevitably, given the nature of live broadcast and downtime in games, viewers are treated to lengthy discursions into the manner and frequency with which the players drink water or tea, or the meaning of bouncing legs and shuffling feet. Streams like this are the primary way fans experience the modern professional game; tens of thousands were watching at any given time. But occasionally, as in Caruana's 11th game, after six hours of quiet speculation, of bloodless if bellicose manoeuvring of little wooden statues, all decorum evaporates. The fabric of a chess game is easily torn. Most games between top players end in draws, so it's subtle mistakes that steer a game to a loss. Seconds after Caruana moved his bishop, both Hess and Naroditsky audibly gasped, more than once.

"Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh!" said Hess.



"Oh my God!" screeched Naroditsky. "He put it on the worst square!"

The octet of Candidates had been preparing for six months or more. In addition to the glory, there is healthy prize money: €48,000 for first place, €36,000 for second, €24,000 for third and €3,500 for every half-point scored. They hired coaches and "seconds", chess's aides-de-camp who sharpen their strategic lances and make sure arrows are stocked in their tactical quivers. They withdrew to secluded locations with their teams and their laptops, running their engines on high-powered clusters in the cloud. After this arms race, the Candidates is a war of attrition and, as the tournament wore on, the fatigue became obvious and mistakes more common. Rapport, for example, was asked how a previous game had gone. "I don't know," he said. "I don't really care any more." He was half-joking at most.

The prospect of playing elite chess, a game with far more possible positions than there are atoms in the universe, is daunting at best, especially doing so every day for weeks. "For – how should I say – normal people, it's not so easy," said Radjabov after a particularly grinding game. He'd briefly delayed the press conference to check a tricky position from the game on his phone.

The American Caruana had already started showing cracks. After a promising first half in which he'd won three games out of seven with no losses, he'd dropped two games out of the next three.

In Round 11, Caruana and Ding opened in the Spanish Game, working their way through its subspecies the Morphy Defence, the Closed Ruy López and the Anti-Marshall. (Chess players, like taxonomists, love to name things.) By the 15th move, the position on the board had never before appeared in any high-level game. Despite centuries of accumulated play and study, grandmasters can still quickly find themselves in uncharted territory.

Caruana showed early initiative, invading deep into enemy territory with his knight and bishop, but Ding's defences held. Whatever subtle advantage there was swayed between the two, as minor pieces were slowly traded. All the while, Caruana pushed a pawn slowly up the board, eventually promoting it to a queen. For an incredible moment, Caruana had two queens. But they were only useful as a distraction from Ding's terrifying attack on his king. All the queens were liquidated by Move 68, and the game transformed from blitzkrieg to skirmish. Six hours in, on the 75th move, it was Caruana's turn in the pictured position (left), an intricate endgame; he controlled the white pieces versus Ding's black pieces. Caruana was now down a pawn and clinging on for a draw.

Caruana moved his bishop from b8 to c7. It was this move that prompted the gasps and yelps. The Machine's thermometer plummeted; Caruana had lost, even if he didn't know it quite yet. This move allowed Ding to move his black rook over to e7 and then, unimpeded, down to e2, where it was protected by his bishop and put Caruana in check. Caruana had no choice but to move his king down, removing crucial defence from his white pawn. That pawn was now hopeless and would, in a handful of moves, fall. (This is all very easy for me to write in retrospect, of course, with The Machine by my side.) Ding finished the job, and Caruana resigned a few moves later.

Meanwhile, the Russian was running away. After Caruana's loss, Nepomniachtchi had opened a yawning 1.5-point lead over the field with three rounds to go. He quickly consolidated this edge the next day, securing a draw in a famous line in the Spanish Game against Nakamura that lasted only about eight minutes, making for a very short day at the office.

I also needed a break and decamped from the palace to tour Madrid. But chess is hard to escape. It is a Petri dish of metaphor, able to capture and cultivate whatever one pleases: art, science, sport, politics, war. The eight marble muses on pedestals in the Prado, I thought, could plausibly represent the eight grandmasters, or maybe the eight pieces in formation on a board's back rank. Checkerboard patterns appeared wherever I went, on sidewalks and restroom floors, in fountains and gardens. And hey, I thought in a particularly loopy moment, doesn't that suffering horse in "Guernica" in the Reina Sofía look an awful lot like a knight?

Nepomniachtchi won the Candidates Tournament with a round to spare; he wouldn't lose a single game. For the first time, as Nepomniachtchi emerged from the sanctum and walked down the hall, the auditorium filled with applause. He smiled and clutched his hands to his chest in thanks. "I don't feel anything," Nepomniachtchi said. "I feel like I'm extremely tired. It's an insanely difficult tournament." He was asked if he had anything to say to Carlsen. He made an obscure reference to chess positions and said nothing else on the matter.

In 2021, Nepomniachtchi failed spectacularly in the world championship in Dubai, blundering repeatedly to hand the title to Carlsen for continued caretaking. But he exhibited none of those careless tendencies in Madrid. If Nepomniachtchi were to win the world championship, he'd join other great Russians – Vasily Smyslov, Boris Spassky and Garry Kasparov – who won first world titles on second attempts.

Chess, like every other sport, has been navigating its way through the war in Ukraine. Wimbledon, for example, which was running concurrent with the Candidates, had banned all Russian players. In March, Nepomniachtchi signed an open letter with some other Russian chess notables: "We oppose military actions on the territory of Ukraine and call for an early ceasefire and a peaceful solution to the conflict through dialogue and diplomatic negotiations."

DOWN A PAWN AND CLINGING FOR A DRAW, CARUANA MOVED HIS BISHOP FROM B8 TO C7, A MOVE THAT PROMPTED GASPS AND YELPS... CARUANA HAD LOST, EVEN IF HE DIDN'T KNOW IT QUITE YET

Shortly after the Candidates, Karjakin, the banned Russian, doubled down on his pro-war stance, writing on Telegram to "shed light on the vicissitudes of Russian chess". He lambasted the "anti-Russian" views of those, like Nepomniachtchi, who opposed what Karjakin called the "special operation". He dismissed the open letter as Nepomniachtchi's "ticket to western events... Nepomniachtchi's victory shouldn't mislead anyone," he continued. "Russian professional chess has been in decline lately."

Nakamura suspected that the world champ Carlsen and his bluster were "full of, um, baloney – let's put it that way". He added, "He's done a bit of trolling, as well." In what certainly seemed like an act of trolling, Carlsen turned up in Madrid towards the end of the Candidates. He took on all comers in speed chess on a sweltering afternoon in El Retiro Park. Then he was gone, headed to Las Vegas to play in the World Series of Poker, where he busted out on the first day.

While in Madrid, Carlsen met with Dvorkovich, the Fide president, El País reported, and agreed to play – if the world championship format was changed. Carlsen has long called for alterations to the championship match, to include faster games alongside the slower, "classical" ones. That would move the match-ups closer to the modern game as it is played online and lessen players' dependence on The Machine and their memorisation of its lessons. In response to a report suggesting he might play, Carlsen tweeted: "Fake news."

On July 20, on a podcast for his sponsor Unibet, Carlsen announced, apparently for real this time, that he was out. "I am not motivated to play another match," he said. "I simply feel that I don't have a lot to gain, I don't particularly like it, and although I'm sure a match would be interesting for historical reasons and all of that, I don't have any inclination to play and I will simply not play the match." Only two previous world champions did not defend their titles: Alexander Alekhine, because he died, and Bobby Fischer, who disappeared from public life.

The Nato delegations had since left town, back to their sovereignty and domestic concerns, having "endorsed a new Strategic Concept" and "set a new baseline for our deterrence and defence posture". The Candidates remained in the palace, even after Nepomniachtchi had clinched the title. There was another round to go, another four games of chess to be played, new strategic concepts and defence postures to be tested. Ding finished strongly to secure second place and will play Nepomniachtchi, in a China-Russia world championship.

I watched the final games from the pressroom in a forgotten high corner of the palace. I noticed that an extra chair, the exact high-back model the Candidates had been sitting in, was stashed there. Before I left, I took a seat. I imagined what it might be like to be a grandmaster, to manipulate the positions of little wooden statues just so for money and glory, to fire up this particle accelerator in search of new discoveries, to speak an ancient game like a mother tongue. I leaned back and thought it all remarkably comfortable. I closed my eyes. FT

Oliver Roeder is the FT's US senior data journalist and author of "Seven Games: A Human History" (WW Norton)