

A nation bogged by pitiful pessimists



Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed is an architect and a professor, a Commonwealth scholar and a fellow, Woodbadger scout leader, Baden Powell fellow, and a Major Donor Rotarian.

NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

YOU have perhaps heard the tale of these two neighbours. On learning that the son of the man living next-door got admitted to college, the grouchy sceptic said, "He'll not pass". But, he did. So, the doubter observed, "He'll not get a job". A few months later, the qualified son got a job. Now what? With a three-line frown across his forehead, the cynic observed gravely, "He'll not get his salary". At the end of the month, his pay was duly disbursed. "You guys are fools," said the serial loser, "He was not paid in full". "But indeed, he was." "Some of the notes are surely counterfeit."

"He was paid through a bank account." "That bank will go bust."

"It's a nationalised bank with over 50 years of solid reputation." "Haven't you heard of Sri Lanka?"

You can almost not beat the pessimists, and there are some pathetic ones around us.

In the context of the last 50 years, they began by questioning the ability of our freedom fighters with "*kissu hobe na*", and are unabated till now by wondering whether southern Bangladeshis will ever switch from launch to railway when Padma Bridge is completed.

In the meantime, they had derided Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's resolve to go ahead with the 6.5km crossing after the World Bank had withdrawn funding against false (unproven in five years) claims of corruption.

Another case to study in human (mis) behaviour is scoffers being uptight before a flight. "I heard they are always delayed". Once airborne and on time, the worrywart will moan, "There will surely be delays on our return flight". Why so? "*Arrey dosto,*

they do not have enough aeroplanes". That flight too was on time. Now what? "Well, we were plainly lucky this time."

Some of these sad guys will find everything wrong with a would-be groom. His body colour (how awful?) will not match with Pinky. He should have been a shade taller; how will Sitara wear heels? I heard he has a short temper; poor Moutushi!

When it was explained that the bride is perfectly okay with the guy's everything, the grumbler goes on, "I detest his father". On inspection it was revealed that the guy had a fling for someone in that family he abhors. It did not work out. Thank heavens!

The most recent cause for joy among the unhappy Bengalis, fanned by the opposition vote bank, is of course Sri Lanka. Unfortunate though the islanders are, their economy was hugely dependent on the tourism sector, which made a nosedive under Covid.

The enemies within Bangladesh have always grossly underestimated the potentiality, tenacity and determination of Bangladeshis. Throughout the pandemic, even under selective lockdown, our export-oriented garment and knit factories have remained in operation. Earning has been steady, despite which without any rhyme or reason, a selfish lobby is trying to spread panic and fear. Fortunately, not many people have the time to pay heed to their groans of despair, read frustration.

You may have noticed too that, deviating from past party-political partisanship, there are now several top-notch party henchmen and the lesser ones behind bars or undergoing trial. That could not stop the chronic critics, who are largely convinced that these are just showmanship.

When news breaks out of a corruption case and high-level perpetrators are named, they will say, this is nothing but eyewash. *Amra ki bujhi na?*

After the big fish politician is arrested, the suspecting critics are sure he will be out on bail. No sooner is a bail denied, they are the source of a rumour that no



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

When news breaks out of a corruption case and high-level perpetrators are named, they will say, this is nothing but eyewash. Amra ki bujhi na?

trial is in the offing. The lengthy trial is again considered (by the know-alls) as only a means to let the powerful political parasite off the hook.

The news of his long sentence is viewed as *tamasha* because the Appeal Court will surely set him free. But, no! The honourable jurists have signed, sealed and delivered him seven years of imprisonment. Now what? "Oh, surely he will end up in hospital!" grumble the moaners. They are finally right. Most politicians, charged with criminality, first try to take refuge in the plea that they are victims of political harassment. Failing which there is always the comfort of a bed at PG.

From time immemorial, there is an immense amount of negative thinking in our society that has been crippling our nation. What is the way out of

this quagmire of unconstructiveness? Easy-peasy, as it may be obvious, but the answer is not "positive thinking".

We need to cultivate tolerance, accept each other despite our political differences, which is prevalent in any country and is a health indicator of modern citizenship. It does not help to oppose for the sake of opposition; childish, you could say. We have to shun jealousy, assuming that praising the good work of an opponent will further the latter's career. So be it, for the sake of the country and the people. Let us educate ourselves to be happy for the success of others at all levels, personal, among groups, and nationally. For the other side shall do likewise, hopefully. If not, let us be the good guys. And, the magic will rub on, hopefully.

Playing games in Nato, Turkey eyes its role in a new world order



Dr James M Dorsey is a senior fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute, and adjunct senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

JAMES M DORSEY

NATO'S spat over Turkish opposition to Swedish and Finnish membership is about more than expanding the North Atlantic military alliance. It's as much about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's immediate political goals as Turkey's positioning itself in a new 21st-century world order.

On its surface, the spat is about Turkish efforts to hinder support for Kurdish ethnic, cultural, and national aspirations in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq and a crackdown on alleged supporters of a preacher who lives in exile in the United States. Turkey accuses the preacher, Fethullah Gulen, of instigating a failed military coup in 2016.

The spat may also be a play by Nato's second-largest standing military to regain access to US arms sales, particularly upgrades for Turkey's aging fleet of F-16 fighter jets as well as more advanced newer models of the F-16 and the top-of-the-line F-35.

Finally, playing the Kurdish card benefits Mr Erdogan domestically, potentially at a time that the Turkish economy is in the doldrums with a 70 percent inflation rate.

The battle over perceived Scandinavian, and mainly, Swedish support for Kurdish aspirations involves the degree to which the United States and Europe will continue to kick the can down on the road of what constitutes yet another Middle Eastern powder keg.

Mr Erdogan announced this week that Turkey would soon launch a new military incursion against US-backed Kurdish fighters in northeast Syria. Erdogan said the operation would extend the Turkish armed forces' areas of control in Syria to a 30-kilometre swath of land along the two countries' shared border.

"The main target of these operations will be areas which are centres of attacks to our country and safe zones," the Turkish president said.

Turkey asserts that the US-backed People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian militia that helped defeat the Islamic State, is an extension of the PKK. The PKK has waged a decades-long insurgency against Turkey, home to some 16 million Kurds. Turkey, the United States, and the European Union



PHOTO: REUTERS

have designated the PKK as a terrorist organisation.

Erdogan charges that Sweden and Finland give the PKK sanctuary and is demanding that the two countries extradite the group's operatives. Turkey has not officially released the names of 33 people it wants to see extradited, but some were reported in Turkish media close to the government.

Swedish media reported that a physician allegedly on the list had died seven years ago and was not known to have had links to the PKK. Another person named was not resident in Sweden, while at least one other is a Swedish national.

Swedish and Finnish officials were in Ankara this week to discuss Turkey's objections. Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson insisted as the officials headed for the Turkish capital that "we do not send money or weapons to terrorist organisations."

Conveniently, pro-government media reported the day the officials arrived that Turkish forces found Swedish anti-tank weapons in a cave in northern Iraq used by the PKK. Turkey recently launched Operation Claw Lock against PKK positions in the region.

Erdogan's military plans complicate Swedish and Finnish accession to Nato. The two Nordic states slapped an arms embargo on Ankara after its initial

Turkey's Nato gamble is a game of high-stakes poker, given that Russia is as much a partner of Turkey as it is a threat.

incursion into Syria in 2019. The Turkish leader has demanded the lifting of the embargo as part of any deal on Swedish and Finnish Nato membership.

A renewed incursion that would cement Turkey's three-year-old military presence in Syria could also throw a monkey wrench into improving relations with the United States due to Turkish support for Ukraine and efforts to mediate an end to the crisis sparked by the Russian invasion.

Turkey slowed its initial incursion into Syria after then US President Donald J Trump threatened to "destroy and obliterate" Turkey's economy.

The State Department warned this week that a renewed incursion would "undermine regional stability."

Revived US arms sales would go a long way to cement improved relations and downplay the significance of Turkey's acquisition of Russia's S-400 anti-missile system, even if Turkey's opposition to Scandinavian membership will have a lingering effect on trust. The United States expelled Turkey from its F-35 programme in response to the acquisition.

This week, Erdogan appeared to widen the dispute in Nato after Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis lobbied the US Congress against military sales to Turkey. "Mitsotakis no longer exists for me. I will never agree to meet him,"

Erdogan said. He said that Mitsotakis' lobbying violated an agreement between the two men "not to involve third countries in our bilateral issues."

The US arms sales would also impact Turkish Russian relations, even if Turkey, in contrast to most Nato members, will continue seeking to balance its relationships and avoid an open rift with Moscow or Washington.

"Russia's geopolitical revisionism is set to drive Turkey and the West relatively closer together in matters geopolitical and strategic, provided that Turkey's current blockade of Sweden and Finland's Nato membership bid is resolved in the not too distant future," said Turkish scholar Galip Dalay.

Turkey's Nato gamble is a game of high-stakes poker, given that Russia is as much a partner of Turkey as it is a threat.

Nato is Turkey's ultimate shield against Russian civilisationalist expansionism. Russian support in 2008 for irredentist regions of Georgia and annexation of Crimea in 2014 created a buffer between Turkey and Ukraine and complicated arrangements between Turkey and Russia in the Black Sea.

Nevertheless, Erdogan risks fuelling a debate about Turkey's membership in Nato, much like Prime Minister Victor Orban's opposition to a European embargo of Russian energy has raised questions about Hungary's place in the EU.

"Does Erdogan's Turkey Belong in Nato?" asked former US vice-presidential nominee Joe Lieberman and Mark D Wallace, a former senator, in an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal. Unlike Finland and Sweden, the two men noted that Turkey would not meet Nato's democracy requirements if it were applying for membership today.

"Turkey is a member of Nato, but under Mr Erdogan, it no longer subscribes to the values that underpin this great alliance. Article 13 of the Nato charter provides a mechanism for members to withdraw. Perhaps it is time to amend Article 13 to establish a procedure for the expulsion of a member nation," Lieberman and Wallace wrote.

The two men implicitly argued that turning the tables on Turkey would force the complicated Nato member back into line.

Adding to that, prominent Turkish journalist and analyst Cengiz Candar cautioned that "giving into Ankara's demands amounts to letting an autocrat design the security architecture of Europe and shape the future of the Western system."