Can the Metro Rail be a Great Equalizer?

THE GRUDGING URBANIST

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The inauguration of Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) Line-6 has been full of symbolism. If Padma Bridge signalled a new era of regional connectivity, Dhaka's MRT begins a new chapter in the history of Bangladesh's urbanisation.

A "new" type of urban mobility comes to fruition in the month of the country's emancipation, thanks to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's unwavering commitment to the country's modernisation. The PM was MRT's first passenger, and its first operator was Mariam Afiza, a chemistry graduate from Noakhali Science and Technology University.

On the first day of metro rail's public operation, I witnessed long lines at Agargaon Station in the wee hours. People wanted to be part of a historic journey between Uttara and Agargaon, a short 11.73 km distance, but a giant leap for the nation. This is a catalytic moment, a time for jubilation.

But it is also a time to be cautious in our expectations and optimism. The key question before us now is: will the metro rail live up to its promise? Will it mitigate Dhaka's paralysing traffic congestions? If it does, wonderful. Money spent well. But if it doesn't, why? What will have gone wrong?

There should be a robust policy conversation on post-MRT Dhaka and its promises and perils, so that we can calibrate future investments in our cities.

The UK-based global consultancy Halcrow Group undertook a study on mass rapid transit in 13 developing countries and concluded that cities in those countries witnessed very little reduction of traffic congestion after the introduction of metro systems. But this doesn't have to be Dhaka's case. Dhaka could take preemptive measures to put MRT on a path to success.

Whether an infrastructure like the newly minted metro rail has the capability, on its own, to be a solution to a problem as socially complex as traffic congestion must be considered. What else needs to be done to harness the full potentials of the metro rail to reduce traffic jams and bring some discipline on the roads? Will the middle class or the upper class sacrifice their mobile castle – the personal automobile – to embrace the idea of mass transit, abandoning their class ego and entrenched sense of social status? How do we encourage all economic classes to use the metro rail as their commuting option? Does the metro rail have the potential to create a culture of social equity in the city?

According to JICA, once completed, Dhaka's six metro lines will carry 5.2 million people per day. That is over 25 percent of Dhaka's current population.

If, hypothetically speaking, 30,000 personal cars lift off the streets of Dhaka everyday due to widespread public use of the metro rail, imagine the benefits from the reduction in traffic congestion, carbon dioxide in the air, and of related urban pathologies like noise, stress, and disorientation. Imagine, also, how people will be showing up at work or to school on time and how much time will be saved every day. This saved time could be spent in more productive ways, taking the country to new heights of prosperity and progress. Consider how "late Latif" could be a (denigrated) character of the past.

Riding public transit is a lifestyle. This lifestyle develops with a combination of civic culture, social equity, voluntary sacrifice of personal comfort, a community-oriented desire for city mobility, and carbon-reducing environmental awareness, among other things. Championing this lifestyle would require massive social campaigns.

The success of the metro rail will be contingent upon a host of other related factors: people's willingness to adapt to a lifestyle based on public transit; affordable train fare; easy accessibility to metro stations; user-friendliness of the metro station; metro rail's integration with other modes of transportation and relationship to the city's land-use pattern; transportation options between home and metro station; parking options around metro station; pedestrian infrastructure like footpaths leading to metro stations; gender sensitivity; the quality of transit-oriented development around metro station; and, last but not least, whether the status-conscious middle-class would sacrifice its love of personal cars to embrace mass transit as its mobility choice.

All of the above have created the basic urban DNA of metropolises like New York, Boston, London, Paris, Madrid, Hong Kong, Seoul, Tokyo, and Singapore, among other cities. Having visited all these cities, I realised how the metro system creates discipline in urban mobility, punctuality as a life philosophy, social equity (that anybody can access the metro rail irrespective of economic and social status), and psychological comfort (that you can reach any point in the city without getting lost).

A metro transit system may create the foundation of a humane city.

As the metro rail becomes part of urban life in Dhaka, it cannot be thought of as a one-dimensional infrastructure, unrelated to the social patterns, norms, and cultures of the city and other forms of "soft" infrastructure like footpaths, or "paratransit" like carpools or shared rides from home to station. The metro rail is much more.

There should be comprehensive planning in which MRT is seen as one piece of the urban-mobility puzzle.

How are the metro stations integrated with public and private bus lines? Will there not be traffic congestion around the station during peak hours in the same way schools create massive traffic clots during morning rush hours? To mitigate this common problem, cities around the world typically seek to cluster high-density housing around transit stops, so that people can simply walk to the metro station, decreasing the reliance on any carbon-emitting vehicles. People should have abundant affordable housing options around MRT stations.

Instead of simply glorifying MRT as the ultimate panacea for the city's chaos and congestion, there must be robust social campaigns to develop what I would call city-dwellers' "socio-urban capital," a combination of behavioural transformation toward civic mindedness, propensity for a low-carbon lifestyle, walkability, and the public's willingness to shift from personal automobiles to mass transit.

City people's socio-urban capital can be increased by a combination of social movements, popular advocacy, people-centric urban design (for instance, an integrated footpath system), and a safe, attractive, and accessible public transit.

If the Agargaon Station serves as a model for other stations, it is a bit disappointing.

Architecturally, the station could have been more sensitive to the tropical climate by being open to natural light and air at the ticketing level. The entrance to the station is not inviting. Instead of the collapsible gate – with its intimidating, colonial-era-government-building-mentality – there could have been a more invitingly modern and secure entrance option.

Before I end, I would like to talk about a potential, transformative contribution of the metro rail, one beyond its core objectives to ease mobility and reduce traffic congestion on Dhaka roads.

The metro rail promises to reduce the city's rampant class disparity. If you look around a bit critically, socio-economic class divides are inscribed on every aspect of Dhaka's social geography, creating polarising spatial experiences all around. The divides of Gulshan-Badda, public vs private hospitals, private vs *shorkari* schools, air-conditioned bus vs tempo, the impoverished pedestrian on dangerous sidewalks vs the affluent passenger in personal car – all create a city of entrenched class divisions.

The metro rail has the potential to be a great equalizer. Anybody can get on it by paying for the ride. The corporate executive and the peon can sit side by side. It is a great feeling and the sign of a humane city that treats all its citizens with respect and equity.

Dhaka's 21st century social transformation may begin from the seed of the metro rail.

PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

Chronicles of the Ukraine war: When might it end?

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SAYEED AHMED

"Whoever rules the Eastern Europe will rule the Heartland, whoever rules the Heartland will rule the World Island, and whoever rules the World Island will rule the world!"
– the"Heartland Theory" of Sir Halford Mackinder (1861 –1947).

The lure of the Eurasian Heartland

Polish-born Zbigniew Brzezinski, the US National Security advisor under President Jimmy Carter, in his 1997 book, "*The Grand Chessboard*," wrote: "Ukraine is an important space on the Eurasian chessboard, the control of which is supposed to make a domination over the world possible." He identified Ukraine as the state deserving the US' strongest geopolitical support, adding: "While Ukraine's independence affects the nature of Russia's state itself, it is for the US the critical state among key Eurasian geopolitical pivots."

Two decades before that, Moscow got stuck in the Afghan quagmire, which resulted in the breakup of the Soviet Union and the ascendency of the US as the sole superpower.

Washington must control Ukraine if this coveted status is to continue, a strategic goal which is driving everything that is happening in Ukraine today.

US manoeuvres in Kyiv

Fast forward to September 2013. Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), wrote in *The Washington Post*: "Ukraine is the biggest prize." He argued, echoing Brzezinski, that if Ukraine could be drawn into the Western camp, "Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

NED is a US NGO, founded in 1983 and funded by the US Congress, has since been dispensing money to organisations in foreign countries where the governments needed to be toppled. That included Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and, of course, Ukraine. NED proved that the best approach is a combination of covert and overt operations.

In February 2010, a narrowly contested general election made Viktor Yanukovych Ukraine's new president. Observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) reported that the vote was an "impressive display" of democracy and there was no evidence of irregularities.

Having a difficult choice to make between the European Union (EU) and Russia, Yanukovych suspended the ongoing talks for joining the EU in 2013. This triggered street protests, followed by his impeachment and a subsequent election in 2014, implementing what columnist David Ignatius termed "The New World of Spyless Coups" in an article in *The Washington Post*.

Petro Poroshenko became the next president. His "Army. Language. Faith." campaign was openly against Russia: the army to fight the Russian-backed separatists in the Donbass region; the Russian language to be removed from Ukraine; and the Ukrainian Orthodox Christian church to be separated from its old faith-based ally, the Russian church.

Poroshenko followed through on his election promises and ordered brutal military operations against the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the CIA had been secretly conducting an intensive training programme for Ukraine's elite special operations forces since 2015. Douglas London, a senior officer in the CIA, published an article on the day following the Russian invasion titled "The Coming Ukrainian Insurgency: Russia's Invasion Could Unleash Forces the Kremlin Can't Control."

The choreographed rise of Zelensky

In Kyiv's political scene, Volodymyr Zelensky was still an unknown face.

In 2015, Zelensky began a TV show called "Servant of the People" in which he played Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko, a schoolteacher who woke up to find that his rants against corrupt politicians had gone viral, making him the president. Aired by a TV network belonging to oligarch Igor Kolomoisky, the show turned him into a national hero.

In 2018, Zelensky abruptly announced that he wants to run for the presidency and began his campaign with his newly formed party called, curiously enough, "Servant of the People." Riding on popular sentiment, Zelensky became president in April 2019 with a massive mandate from 73 percent of voters. The same Kolomoisky had recruited Hunter Biden, US president Biden's son, to serve the board of his gas company. Hunter Biden also provided important linkage between Ukrainian dealmakers and the US administration.

In October 2021, the Pandora Papers exposed that Zelensky had received USD 41 million for his election funds from Kolomoisky.

Zelensky's voters gave him three tasks: 1) establish peace in the Donbass, 2) provide economic betterment, and 3) provide a non-corrupt government. But soon he made securing Donbass his top task adding to it Crimea that Russia annexed in 2014. In August 2021, Ukraine formed the Crimean Platform whose stated goal was to "put an end to the occupation of Crimea."

Why Ukraine is important for Russia

The relationship between Ukraine and Russia is long and complex.

The inhabitants of present-day Ukraine enjoyed an autonomous status in the 17th century when Russian Empress Catherine the Great (1729–96) abolished it. In 1917, the empire collapsed, and Ukraine became independent, which the Bolsheviks later turned into a state. The Crimean Peninsula, until then a part of Russia, was transferred to Ukraine in 1954. In 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved, and Ukraine became an independent country. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea.

Historically, Russia has long held Ukraine to be a part of its sphere of influence. But Ukrainians have always tried to move away from Russia, which Moscow vehemently objected to.

In this context, the Ukraine war is shaped by Russia's historical desire to become a Eurasian power. In Russia's struggle against Europe, Ukraine is a central piece without which it cannot remain a superpower.

Russia steps into the trap

Thus, the stage was set for Russia to invade Ukraine, for which CIA-trained operatives were ready and waiting. With an anti-Russia president enjoying huge popularity, the political stage was also set, and it only needed Russia to start a full-scale invasion, which would justify the West's economic and military onslaught against Russia.

On February 20, OSCE reported a surge in the number of explosions in east Ukraine, indicating escalation of military activities. Four days later, Russia walked into the CIA-laid trap, beginning the devastating Ukraine war which soon reached a stage where there is no end in sight. If President Putin had any expectations of a swift victory, that has also evaporated.

Moscow's Afghan adventure had broken up the Soviet Union. Will Russia break up again? However, Washington also needs a sizeable enemy to keep Europe in control.

The current war has brought back Nato with full force, which French president Macron had once termed "brain-dead." Therefore, a total dissolution of Russia is perhaps not the objective, but only the fall of Putin and installation of a more compliant ruler in the Kremlin. However, instead of being compliant, Moscow could also get closer to Beijing.

Meanwhile, the war is not going to end until Washington's goals are achieved, however long that takes.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Stylish
5 Wrong
10 Circle spokes
12 Astronomer's find
13 Labor group
14 Full of energy
15 Cattle call
16 Cheep
18 Resentful
20 Verb for you
21 Methods
23 Eastern path
24 Revolver, perhaps
26 Third person
28 Pricing word
29 Fill up
31 LAPD alert
32 Roadside eyesore
36 Animal, informally
39 Marrying words
40 Newscaster Couric
41 Ready for sleep
43 Calendar entry
44 "Alfie" star
45 Hardly wordy
46 EI —

DOWN
1 Cake bit
2 Asian capital
3 Blockhead
4 AFL affiliate
5 Purple berry
6 Shed feathers
7 Copy
8 Quite a few
9 Sound system
11 Distraught
17 Sardonic
19 Binary base
22 Like Swift stories
24 Lead astray
25 Satellite
27 Track act
28 Bundle
30 Hearty quaff
33 Leg bone
34 Perfect places
35 Western contest
37 Mint containers
38 Head, to Henri
42 Snooze

4-14
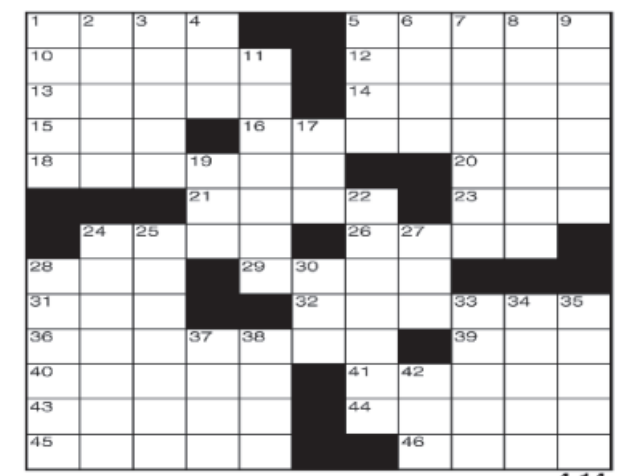
WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS

H	E	A	R	T	S		R	E	A	M
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