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## What of education?

Once again, the education sector is proving to be a sore thumb for the state government which was grilled by the opposition on the floor of the House yesterday. Leader of Opposition, Dr. Mukul Sangma highlighted the fallout of many schools in Garo Hills not having enough teachers to cater to the needs of the children. It may also be noted here that most parts of Garo Hills fare quite badly year after year in the matriculation examination conducted by the Meghalaya Board of School Education. This is somewhat ironic considering that the MBOSE is itself headquartered in Garo Hills. That being said, Sangma pointed out that there are still many vacant teachers' posts in Garo Hills and asked what the government is doing to fill up these posts. Replying to this, Education Minister, Lahkmen Rymbui said that the recruitment process is on and that the government hopes to be able to complete this in the shortest time possible. He went as far as to say that if there are no issues which pup up, the government plans to finish this exercise within a month.

Interestingly, Rymbui also said that there are districts which have a shortage of qualified teachers which has affected the government's ability to fill up these vacant posts. This is a very pertinent point and needs some serious looking into.

It should also be noted here that this comes at a time when the teaching community is up in arms against the state government on the issue of pending salaries, an issue which keeps popping up from time to time. In this context, does the government realize that it is not presenting a very good picture to aspiring teachers who are bombarded by news every now and again about how teachers are suffering for no fault of theirs? With such a dismal picture being painted of the teaching profession in Meghalaya, how can the government expect the youth to opt for this noble career?

Apparently, the problems are not confined only to manpower. According to Gambegre MLA, Saleng Sangma, there are many schools in his constituency which are devoid of furniture. In the midst of all this, the Minister's sheepish reply is that the government will look into these issues. Looking at the sorry state of affairs as of now, it is crystal clear that the buck has to stop somewhere and that the people of the state will not be placated by such replies for much longer. It is high time that the government takes some very concrete action to address this problem which have a direct bearing on the future of the youth and the state as a whole.

# A black wall for Ukraine, and a black umbrella over Finland, Sweden

**Robinder Sachdev**

The last 15 days have been intense in view of the Russia-Ukraine war, and related happenings. As an analyst, I have been a panelist on a few TV channels in India to discuss these developments. Sometimes even 10-12 hours every day. There is so much that could be discussed, analyzed, and speculated.

It seems that there will be a conventional conflict between NATO and Russia - not possible to say when, but probably within the near to medium future in our lifetimes of present folks living on planet earth. And there is a probability, presently in the low teens, that this conventional conflict will spiral into a nuclear conflict (more on this NATO-Russia can be subject of a next column).

However, there might arise another scenario wherein nuclear weapons may be rattled within 3-6 months, in a different region of European theatre, as discussed below. As of today there are about 6-7 big picture scenarios of the future that are emerging from this conflict. In my column today, I shall restrict to 2 of these probable scenarios in the short term, 3-6 months.

1. The Black Wall - Some things have been clear from day 1 of the invasion. One of the things that is clear, and that makes eminent sense from the Russian point of view, is to create a Black Wall for the Ukraine of tomorrow, which will deny it access to the Black Sea (and Sea of Azov) - forever.

This Black Wall will be the boundary of a land corridor along the sea coasts of Ukraine. This zig-zag land corridor along the Black Sea coast, starting with Russia on the east of Ukraine, along the entire sea-coast of Ukraine till the south-west end of Ukraine, may range from 50 miles to 100-300 miles at places, and will stretch till Odessa and beyond, till the tail-end borders of Ukraine with Moldova and Romania.

Forget the fate of rest of Ukraine, this corridor would be converted into Russian territory. This will ensure that irrespective of the internal chaos and whatsoever happens inside a landlocked Ukraine, the Ukraine of tomorrow will be forever blocked from access to Black Sea (and Sea of Azov) - at the mercy of Russia.

Plus this region is rich in minerals, base metals and industrial infrastructure (Ukraine provides 70 per cent of global supply of neon gas - critical to the making of semiconductor chips), logistics linkages of railroads, and ports, including Odessa, the giant hub of shipping and ship-making. This is a rich region overall, will contribute to the Russian economy, and also create global leverage and supply-chain choke-points for neon gas, palladium (also to make semiconductor chips), wheat, and sunflower oil, among others.

It may be worth deploying Russian forces to own this region.

What happens inside the remaining territory of a landlocked Ukraine is a very different matter. In this region, there may be urban civil war, political chaos, puppet regimes of Russia, or Russia-hating elements that hold power in the next years or decades - but Russia would have created a Black Wall for Ukraine for all times to come.

2. Black Umbrella over Finland, Sweden - One of the last remaining non-NATO countries that share its border with Russia is Finland. Plus Sweden is one step removed from Finland, and is a non-NATO country, thus far.

Both these countries now desire, and public opinion is growing inside both of them, to join NATO. In past months and weeks, some NATO countries have already expressed their support for Finland and Sweden to join NATO.

Now, if Russia thinks that NATO, US expansionism is threatening Russia (and that is the primary reason why it has gone to war with Ukraine), then of course the moves and statements from Finland and Sweden should be cause of great worry in the Kremlin.

In the background of dark enmity and a proxy war in Ukraine with US and NATO that is radically fracturing and redefining the European security structure and global geo-politics, logic indicates that Russia will want to deny NATO expansionism in Finland, Sweden.

What could Russia do to ensure that Finland and Sweden do not join NATO? Will it warn both of them to not go down this path? Or, will Russia stand-by passively and in the next few years Finland and Sweden both become NATO members?

The "Black Umbrella" scenario posits that in view of signals emanating from Finland, and Sweden, Russia may first warn both these countries to remain neutral, and to drop any of their NATO aspirations immediately. Russia may demand a written treaty from both these nations, to this effect. Essentially the same terms as were dictated to Ukraine are NATO membership. Finland, a small country of about 6 million people, and a defence budget of about \$ 6 billion, is puny compared to Russian conventional forces. So is Sweden, though it is buffered by Finland in between. Thus a Russian warning could make them both halt, change their track.

The question is - what happens if Finland and Sweden ignore Russian warnings, and persist in their NATO admission process? Will Russia assemble forces on the Finland border, and threaten brinkmanship? Or, will it march to Helsinki? With a drumbeat rolling in the background about reports from Russia, about nukes pointed at Helsinki and Stockholm.

Prime Minister Sanna Marin of Finland will have to make some choices. Soon.

Finland and Sweden do not have NATO cover yet, so

it can be assumed that NATO will not put its soldiers on the ground to defend them. (Note: well, NATO could move an emergency resolution, and come to the aid of Finland, Sweden, and then it becomes a NATO-Russia war.

Or, NATO could accomplish a fait accompli in next few days, weeks, with secret activity under a special fast-track process, and one fine morning very soon surprise the world, by announcing that Finland and Sweden are full-fledged members of NATO alliance, from that moment on.)

Barring the surprise announcement of Finland and Sweden as NATO member countries, Russia may not need to marshal too large a force at the Finnish border to pose a dire and real threat to Finland. Sure, Russian forces will be stretched in Ukraine, but at the same time it could deploy some small, reasonable numbers on the Finnish border, and inform that its threat must be taken seriously.

Combine with some military and strategic nuclear exercise in North-West Russia, or in the Baltic Sea. Then give a 48 hour notice to both countries to sign a treaty of neutrality. Or face war. Will Finland and Sweden acquiesce to Russian demands, and live under the "Black Umbrella" of a Russia dictated foreign policy, or will Finland fight back? Finland may have no choice.

The US and NATO will certainly be upset, but what can, will it do? Will it tip-over and go to war with Russia, in support of a non-NATO country? And risk a nuclear conflagration with Russia?

Thus in the next 3-6 months, a Black Umbrella scenario may cover Finland and Sweden. Or, otherwise it will be a war that could suck in NATO along with a rapid spiral to nuclear sabre rattling. Given the stretch of Russia's conventional forces in Ukraine, it may not be out of place to speculate that Russia will resort to a nuclear threat to halt Finland and Sweden from joining NATO.

This has become a dog-eat-dog world in Europe, and will define the security architecture of Europe in this century. Russia has put Europe to notice, all gloves are off, and Russian red lines are now being linked - with a bluff, bluster, or reality of nuclear Armageddon.

Oh, a minor addendum to the above scenario. There will be still one more last remaining country on the Russian border that is contemplating joining NATO, i.e., Georgia.

Georgia is a poor, former Soviet Republic, many miles and minds away from Europe as compared to Finland, Sweden which are globally seen as pure-blooded European nations, and an integral part of the 'West'. Russia will gain more heft and revenge against NATO when it delivers a counter-punch to the West by targeting Finland, Sweden, rather than targeting Georgia. Georgia can be tamed later.

## Understanding Womens' Day through different voices

**Varalika Mishra**

Lalitha Kumaramangalam, Senior BJP leader, Women's Equity activist, champion & mentor; Former Chair of National Commission for Women (2014-2017); Director, India Foundation, Cancer Victor, TED talk speaker says, "The celebration of Womens Day is indeed important. However to make it a day only about women, in today's day & age, defeats the purpose of equity & inclusion that are the cornerstones of empowerment. We must also include men in this celebration, particularly those who have supported, facilitated and stood by us in this long, difficult fight. The sisterhood is indeed wonderful, but we need our supportive brothers too."

International Women's Day is celebrated every year on March 8, to commemorate the cultural, political, and socio-economic achievements of women. International Women's Day was first celebrated in 1911. The aim of the day is to spread the message of gender equality and promote a better society where there is no gender bias.

### Women ought to be respected and celebrated daily

"The force behind every job done, whether by a man, woman or child, is the strength, compassion & support of a woman. Be it a househelp coming to clean your home & cook meals or a man going to work without wondering how the little baby would be looked after in the cozy confines of his home or even a child merrily demanding "kuch achha to eat"... it's all done either by a woman herself or with the support & love of one for the other. This is not to say that men are anyway less. This is to say that women like anyone else do their part in society, as well. Every task done cannot simply be measured by the remuneration one gets in hands an individual, but it most certainly can be measured by the remuneration earned by the entire family, because someone chose to "Hold the Fort, Until You Were Gone". Every woman need not go in for a corporate job, become a doctor, or an entrepreneur to gain respect, of having made a mark. Yes, a worthy, equal, without an prejudice, opportunity must always be given to everyone to choose their path, without calling one career lesser/better than the other. A househelp chopping vegetables, allowing you to get some time off your hands to do yoga, is as respectable a person as a doctor giving you a Co-vaxin shot. A tatter covered woman on a construction site is supporting her husband earn more, as much as the woman going to work to increase the income of the house or even the one who stays home to look after little kids and aging parents.

Each one in their own way... makes a mark!!!

It's everyday that women around us...our mothers, sisters, teachers, househelps, bankers, vegetable sellers, and so many more who aren't even seen... make our lives run on auto-pilot, so smoothly. Let's just take a moment to realize this, sink it in & remember that Every Day Is Women's Day," says Yukti Aggarwal Mahajan,

Educator, Army wife, mother, feminist.

"Women are the strongest member of any family. They are far more stronger than men in dealing with adversities. My mother was a supreme example. Why just one day. Every day in every walk of life is a Women's Day," says Vijay Lokapally, Former Deputy Editor, The Hindu, Author, Consulting Editor, Sportstar.

### Women's day is not merely about shopping vouchers or gifts

The paradox of celebrating one day as women's day might seem absurd for some people considering the ground reality

of rise in domestic violence cases - especially during the pandemic, rape cases, trafficking of women. "Covid-19 pandemic affected women population more than men in several areas, but at the same fighting against Covid more diversely as 70 percent of the health workforce is made up of women who are often frontline health workers. There has been high spike in crimes against women during this pandemic, like domestic violence, sexual harassment, so there is direct and deadly effect of pandemic on women mental health," says Syed Mujtaba, Child Rights Lawyer, Mental Health activist in Kashmir.

In day to day lives women are denied their basic rights or opportunities and they are hardly respected as citizens or human beings. Though such celebrations may have symbolic appeal in raising the awareness about the women's issues, merely commemorating women's day in a fashion of distributing gifts or giving free shopping vouchers does not contribute to the elimination of patriarchal culture. Endowing gifts on a particular day neither empowers women nor draws attention to their accomplishments or does anything to reduce struggles they face in their daily lives; neither does it remind the givers of those gifts to challenge the status quo. "Women's day is not about product discounts that is given to women to show their consumption nature rather it is a day to celebrate their powers, their duties which they administer and for all the sufferings and mental pressure they take that remains unrecognised till date," says Dr smita Agarwal, Assistant professor, department of Political science University of Delhi. "I think people need to be reminded that if we are celebrating women on a particular day, it is so much more than just shopping discounts and deals etc. Substantial change is needed in society. It still needs a lot of work to be a safe space for women where they can thrive as individuals (not just someone's mom, sister, wife etc.) and that should always remain the focus," says Mannat Kahai Singh, Practicing Advocate at Delhi High Court.

### Gender Equality is the need of the hour

For the year 2022, the UN given theme is "Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow", which aims to recognise women who are working to build a more sustainable future. When people of all genders have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities, we can term that gender equality. Considering the past struggles of women and how difficult it has been for women to establish that position in society, women's day can be a reminder for the history of past struggles and how empowerment needs to be nurtured from all genders. Everyone is affected by gender inequality - women, men, trans and gender diverse people, children and families.

"The wait has become longer...From 99.5 Years to 135.5 years. According to WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2021, another generation of women will have to wait for gender parity. Every year on March 8th - International Women's Day - the world reaffirms its commitment to women empowerment. Yet, there still remains a stark contrast between roles, privileges and status of men and women. Partially because we have seen this as a one sided issue and not a problem of 'balance.' It is time perhaps, to consider achieving a balance where both sides work in tandem towards a shared objective. We, at IPE Global believe in creating a more equitable and balanced world and, pride ourselves for being a woman-friendly organisation where people's capability is not judged through a prism of gender but by virtue of their innate potential and hard work. Let us together pledge for Gender Equality today for a Sustainable Tomorrow," says Ash-

wajit Singh, Founder and Managing Director of IPE Global Group, a social sector consultancy firm in South Asia.

"In the 21st Century women are going to lead the way and help uplift humanity. We have many such examples of powerful women leading the way. We will continue to shine and inspire a lot many. If you are a woman and have been given an opportunity that women before you weren't given then I feel it is your responsibility to make use of that opportunity and empower other women as well. This way there we will breakthrough all the glass ceilings and make our way to manifest our greatness," says Himani Gupta, Co-Creator of Self Series. It is a platform which enables people to manifest their greatness through tools and techniques taught in Pranik Healing - a community for all those who are looking for self development tools.

"Women's Day for me is a celebration of our ability to rise above every social dogma that has marginalised us to date. This day stands testament to the fact that through decades of raising our voices in demand for equity and inclusion, we have set a path for the future generations to follow as active feminists," says Swapan Deep Kaur

Assistant Professor and Co-Founder of Tatava Connect "I feel if women's day is celebrated, there should be a men's day too - which never gets enough attention. Everyone's contributions should be counted, when we talk about equality men should be recognised too. Since in general that doesn't happen - I'm not too attached to women's day. Having said that, each gender has their own part to play in the society and I feel women are associated in bringing open emotions into the society in the form of giving birth to children," says Prerna Batra, Interior Designer.

"I have always maintained that socialisation is the biggest handicap not just in Indian society but also around the globe. This year, as the International Women's Day theme is #breakthebias, I would like to go a step further and call it 'Breaking the Bias', a term which in my opinion signifies the need to evolve ways and means at individual as well as state levels to continuously break all the inherent stigmas, handicaps & biases that are a direct result of rampant socialisation prevalent even in the remotest of corners. There is a need to bring about a change in the reference points used by women in their decisions making processes starting from the grass root level," says

Jahnvi Sharma, Advocate Supreme Court of India & Co-founder The Virtual Lawyer.

"Women's day is a day when all women resonate with the idea that we are already "complete" as humans. We expect our counterparts, the men, to understand this and deal with us accordingly. If we women wish to speak in unison, we should first integrate collectively. This requires inclusion and social cohesion as the first step. Fundamentally, it has to begin from the woman herself. Break the stereotypes and biases and liberate yourself now," says Supriya Rajmohan, an educator, author and a student counsellor by profession.

To conclude, one can say, it is important to remember the struggles that women have endured over the years to fight for their rights and opportunities and it is still a long battle. Nonetheless, women need to be appreciated, empowered, supported daily and not merely on one particular day. Gender equality needs to be established where every human being can freely live their life with dignity and respect. Equal opportunities need to be provided to every individual regardless of their class, caste or gender.

## 1 in 5 women investing for the first time

**Ianslife**

Scripbox, leading digital wealth manager, conducted the third edition of their annual survey, to understand the qualitative aspects of women's investing habits and financial goals. The survey highlights a growing trend of women taking greater control of their money, accelerated by the economic impact of the pandemic.

Women are proactively seeking to educate themselves on money matters, reveals the survey. Nearly 30 per cent of women share that they had sought to educate themselves on personal finance during the pandemic. Thirty per cent of them rely on digital investment platforms for information on financial planning and investing, 20 percent depend on friends and family and 15 percent refer to articles on personal finance.

Seventy per cent of women (60 per cent in 2021) have said that they are either independently managing their own money (32 per cent) or are actively involved in financial decision-making with their spouse (38 per cent). Compared to last year's survey, there is an 11 percent uptick in the number of women who are independently managing their expenses today.

Independence in financial decision-making has led to a sense of personal empowerment in women. This is promoting positive action. Forty-four per cent women say they prioritised creating a financial plan; 40 per cent say they committed to saving more, while 23 per cent increased their investments. One in five women (22 per cent) have started to invest for the first time amidst the pandemic. Prudence has been the order of the day, with only less than 10 per cent of women resorting to revenge shopping.

Despite these strides taken with investing their money, women continue to be cautious with their savings. Mutual Funds is the most preferred investment instrument and is the choice of 22 per cent of women surveyed, followed by Shares and Gold. 34 per cent of women prefer to put their money in a mix of traditional investment options like fixed deposits, recurring deposits, PPF and savings account.

"The survey highlights a progressive reduction in gender role gaps and increased independence in women with wealth management. With an increase in awareness and interest in financial planning and wealth creation, we are witnessing a positive shift in investment preferences, goals, behaviours and mindsets. Women are motivated to save and invest and take control of their financial journey now more than ever. As a digital wealth manager, our aim is to help investors make these informed decisions that allow them to achieve their life goals," said Atul Shinghal, Founder and CEO at Scripbox.

Long term life goals continue to be a priority. Saving for retirement (20%) and for children's education (20%) emerged as the most important financial goals for women across India. While women under 35 years wish to make more money as their next financial goal, women over 35 years have said that they would prefer to create an emergency fund.

"The simple truth is that being in control of your own money, means you're in control of your own life. Investing, just like any other skill, needs to be developed. It's encouraging to see women bring their natural predisposition to action to this important area of their life. Only positive things can come from this change!" said Neela Kaushik, Founder and CEO, GurgaonMoms & a Community Specialist & Columnist.