

Will there be peace?

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AS the prospects of peace in South Asia become brighter, one waits with bated breath to see the outcome of the recent initiatives in the region. There have been so many false dawns that it is difficult not to feel sceptical.

Didn't we see the promise of peace emanating from Tashkent in 1966, Simla in 1972, Lahore in 1999 and Agra in 2001, which all came to nought? Each time we were told in a burst of euphoria that it was to be different on that occasion, only to find ourselves back to square one before long.

One may well ask: how is one to believe that 2004 is really going to be any different? The only logical answer to this question would be: because a large number of Pakistanis and Indians now realize that there is no alternative to peace if they are to survive. Today the threat of annihilation is real, given the nuclearization of the two major states of the subcontinent.

Besides, the statements of their leaderships have been quite alarming when they declared while on the brink of war that they would deploy their nuclear weapons if need be. Because of their geographical proximity, the two countries can ill afford to resort to the strategic doctrine of a balance of terror as has been suggested by some quarters. A nuclear conflagration, even if accidental, would be suicidal, irrespective of who starts it.

The need of the hour is to create a climate of peace so that neither of the two governments is tempted to engage in brinkmanship as a foreign policy tool to achieve its political goals in external relations. Brinkmanship is a risky game to play by states armed with nuclear weapons.

Hence for the sake of their own survival, moderate elements in the government of India and Pakistan feel they must not squander the chance for peace - the last one, in Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee's words - which has presented itself today. This is not the time to look back to the past and allow the distrust and animosities of the gone decades to shape their future course of action. But will the hawks allow it?

There are positive forces operating in favour of peace this time. The threat of a nuclear war and

out by many observers of the Indian political scene that the ruling BJP benefited by not holding up the Hindutva card in its electoral campaign. Its peace overtures to Islamabad were carefully timed and designed to win over the electorate.

The BJP's win in three states has been massive while in Delhi the incumbent Congress Party managed to stay on in power, albeit with a reduced majority. Although peace with Pakistan was not a campaign issue, it was there as a backdrop contributing to what the *Hindustan Times* described editorially as "the feel good factor". The *Times of India* observed that Mr Vajpayee has shown courage in opting for his "third and final attempt to seek peace with Pakistan against the rabid instincts of the BJP's hardcore supporters". These are straws in the wind and the political parties can be expected to take up the peace platform more forcefully in the general elections in September next year.

In Pakistan the democratic forces are not so strong. But the press, in spite of its constraints, has begun to challenge the government's conventional foreign policy position directly. The private TV channels have refused to toe the official line. As popular pressure for peace builds up, independent analysts have begun to advocate a rethinking of the Kashmir policy.

One can only laud the moves towards normalization that are in the offing. Land, air and rail links are to be restored. Prime Minister Vajpayee is to visit Islamabad for the Saarc summit next month. Pakistan has said that the dialogue with India is to be resumed soon. All this augurs well for their confidence building exercise which one hopes will be sustained steadily and concertedly.

Now that India has agreed to address the Kashmir dispute in a bid to end the insurgency in the valley, one hopes that the two sides will approach it with a degree of pragmatism. Pakistan's

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all its horrors have paradoxically created a thrust towards conflict resolution. This has caused the voice of sanity, which had been muted before, to assert. Now that it is being articulated all over South Asia a government would ignore at its own peril.

The convention of the Pakistan-India Forum for Peace and Democracy, which is being convened in Karachi this weekend, reflects the opinion of not just the 500 delegates from all walks of life. It will be the collective voice of millions in both countries who now feel that enough is enough. It is time to halt the warmongering of the governments.

Although it amounts to the pro-sanity unarmed civil society confronting the forces of authority armed to the hilt with their missiles and weapons of mass destruction, it is felt that the number of rationalists has grown and has managed to moderate the governments' policies by championing the cause of peace, human rights and democratic freedoms.

It may be reading too much into the results of the last week's elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh, to describe them as a key indicator of the common man's thinking on peace. True it was the upswing in the national economy, the failure of governance in these Congress-ruled states and the focused style of BJP's electioneering that paid dividends for Mr Vajpayee's party But it has also been pointed

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initiative in ordering a ceasefire on the Line of Control in Kashmir has proved to be a positive development. We do not know if this has had any impact on the level of violence in the valley. But one hopes that the dialogue New Delhi has concurrently announced with the Hurriyat Conference will be given a chance. It could provide a framework for talks in which at a later stage Pakistan could also be associated.

Admittedly, this is not how Islamabad envisaged the dispute to be taken up and resolved. But it seems to be the only way in which the Kashmir dispute can be brought to the negotiating table after India had dubbed it for decades as a "domestic issue". A complicating factor has now been injected into the already complex situation by the split in the APHC with each faction claiming to be the real one which enjoys the support of the Kashmiris.

India has been talking with the Hurriyat led by Maulana Abbas Ansari because it has a moderate stance and is willing to negotiate with New Delhi. The headline Gilani group which stands for an armed struggle has received Pakistan's unofficial backing. This is unfortunate because it makes a political settlement more difficult and substantiate India's charge that Islamabad is instigating militancy in the disputed state. It also locks the two sides in a confrontation by proxy.

One hopes Pakistan will extricate itself from this critical situation as fast as it can. If it doesn't, it will be challenging international opinion. Moreover, there is need for both sides to be mindful of the changing pattern of international politics in the region as well as at the global level. The events of the last two years have changed the paradigms of international relations. No state can hope to resist pressures from outside or isolate itself on the ground that it will not brook interference in its internal affairs. Most importantly, the use of force to resolve disputes is increasingly being resisted by the international community.

These are matters of higher politics which have to be taken note of. But they have caused the very fundamental issue of economic development, poverty eradication and social progress to go by default. These might appear to be very mundane to our rulers and the intelligentsia but they are basic to man's existence.