



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

The Blinken Visit: Diplomacy in Action

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US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Indian EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar at the joint press conference in New Delhi, July 28, 2021. Source: Twitter/@SecBlinken

US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar in discussion at Hyderabad House, July 28, 2021. Source: Twitter/@MEA

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By

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The Blinken Visit: Diplomacy in Action

by

Hemant Krishan Singh and Lalit Kapur

Introduction

The visit of US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken to New Delhi on July 27-28, 2021, from atmospherics to substance, confirmed the forward momentum of the India-US comprehensive and global partnership. It signalled that bilateral relations are strong, diversified, consequential and mutually reinforcing, as both countries and the world continue to face the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategic convergences between the two nations have grown, and are being increasingly directed towards practical outcomes that can deliver stability, peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. These include a mutual interest in "deepening the Quad as a collaborative platform".

The broad scope of Dr. Jaishankar's discussions with Secretary Blinken was reflected in their joint press availability, with COVID-19 response and vaccine cooperation, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad, and regional security issues, in particular the situation in Afghanistan, occupying centre stage.

Bilateral Relations Advance

It is of considerable significance that bilateral relations have transitioned well with the change in the US administration. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Joe Biden have spoken numerous times and participated in summits of the Quad, G7 and Climate Leaders. External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar and Secretary Blinken met in person for the fourth time.

EAM Jaishankar made specific mention of "our growing cooperation in an increasingly multi-polar world"¹, while identifying peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, democratic stability in Afghanistan, deepening of the Quad as a collaborative platform and key contemporary challenges like terrorism, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and resilient supply chains as focal areas. Secretary Blinken affirmed that "There are few relationships in the world that

¹ Opening Remarks by External Affairs Minister at the delegation level talks with Secretary of State of the United States of America, July 29, 2021, https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34071/Opening_Remarks_by_External_Affairs_Minister_at_the_delegation_level_talks_with_Secretary_of_State_of_the_United_States_of_America

are more vital than the one between the United States and India,"² and that "We believe this partnership will be critical for delivering stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, and for showing the world how democracies can deliver for their people"³.



US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Indian EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar at the joint press conference in New Delhi, July 28, 2021. Source: Twitter/@SecBlinken

On the pandemic front, both sides expressed appreciation for each other's support at the time of crisis: the US for the aid and assistance India provided in the early days of COVID-19 when US hospitals were overwhelmed, and India for the exceptional support provided by the US during the second wave of the pandemic earlier this year, as well as for keeping the raw material supply chain open for vaccine production in India. Secretary Blinken announced that the US government would provide an additional \$ 25 million to support vaccination efforts across India, strengthen vaccine supply chain logistics, address misinformation and vaccine hesitancy, and help train health care workers. This was in addition to more than \$ 200 million contributed by the US government earlier.

² Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar at a Joint Press Availability, July 28, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-indian-external-affairs-minister-dr-subrahmanyam-jaishankar-at-a-joint-press-availability/>

³ Ibid

Secretary Blinken also highlighted the need for India and the US to address secondary consequences by fuelling economic recovery. For this, he laid emphasis on the continued growth of bilateral trade and the removal of barriers that stand in the way of greater investment and deeper commercial ties. Calling attention to this critical but still underperforming aspect of the relationship, he said, "If we create the right conditions for more trade and investment and innovation, there is really no limit to what our private sectors can achieve together". Follow up on the Indian side will deliver dividends when bilateral trade talks resume later this year.

Indo-Pacific and the Quad

The Indo-Pacific lies at the heart of India-US strategic convergence: a shared vision of a free, open, inclusive, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, underpinned by adherence to international law, rules and norms and ensuring safety and freedom of navigation and overflight, unimpeded lawful commerce and the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes. Translation of this convergence into practical outcomes has been advancing since the convening of the first Quad leaders' virtual summit on March 10, 2021. The Jaishankar-Blinken meeting provided an opportunity to review progress in preparation for the in-person Quad summit likely in October this year.

The main outcome was the clearest to date articulation and congruent definitions of the purpose of the Quad.

Paraphrasing Dr. Jaishankar, the Quad is designed to meet the challenges to stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and is engaged in collaboration on a host of issues, including COVID-19 response and climate action, connectivity and infrastructure, maritime security and HADR, counterterrorism, cyber and digital concerns, education and reliable supply chains. In addition, the Quad is focused on observance of international law, which benefits the region and the global community. India has long held the view that the Quad is not an Asian NATO⁴.

In Secretary Blinken's words, the likeminded countries of the Quad are working collectively on issues which have a real impact on the lives of their peoples, including COVID-19 response, post pandemic economic recovery, climate crisis, maritime security and infrastructure, and doing so in ways that ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Importantly, he also stated:

⁴ Ibid.

“What the Quad is not is a military alliance, it is not that. Its purpose is, again, just to advance cooperation on regional challenges while reinforcing international rules and values that we believe, together, underpin peace, prosperity and stability in the region. And of course, we’re doing that as well in cooperation with other countries, with ASEAN, and other likeminded partners”⁵.

Translation of the Quad agenda into outcomes on the multiple common challenges outlined above cannot be construed as confrontational and will be broadly welcomed, including by ASEAN. However, the test will come if and when Quad convergences on issues such as national sovereignty, adherence to international law and peaceful resolution of disputes are to be enforced. China’s wilful disregard for international law, as evidenced from the Himalayas to the South and East China Seas, continues; China has also laid out its red lines. At some stage, the Quad members may have to collectively do the same, without which China will not be deterred from its salami-slicing strategy and creeping alterations of the status quo that cannot be reversed. That step will also require the consideration of an integrated Quad security coordination architecture.



US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and India’s External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar in discussion at Hyderabad House, July 28, 2021. Source: Twitter/@MEA

⁵ Ibid

It will thus be some time before the Quad members can sufficiently demonstrate the potential of their partnership and their resolve to stand up for a rules based order to convince smaller nations, both in South East Asia and in the Indian Ocean. However, they are doing well to grow this conviction by cooperation on the easier common challenges first, leaving the more difficult issues for later.

Afghanistan

On Afghanistan, it is useful to recall the background. Two days after the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud on September 9, 2001, Al-Qaeda operatives hijacked four commercial airlines and crashed them into the World Trade Centre towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. A week later, President George W. Bush signed Public Law 107-40⁶, authorising the use of the US Armed Forces against those responsible for the terror attacks. A bombing campaign against the Taliban began on October 07, 2001, with the first wave of regular US troops arriving in Afghanistan on October 19, 2001. Two months later, the Taliban surrendered Kandahar and Mullah Omar fled the city, to continue a guerrilla offensive, while Osama bin Laden escaped into Pakistan, aided by the surprising tactical choice of using Afghan rather than US forces in the ground offensive on his Tora Bora hideout. An interim government was set up with Hamid Karzai as its head and an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) established by the UNSC.

On April 17, 2002, President Bush evoked the Marshall Plan that revived Western Europe after WWII, when he said, “By helping to build an Afghanistan that is free from this evil and is a better place in which to live, we are working in the best traditions of George Marshall”⁷. It is this objective and not that of punitive retaliation or vengeance that has guided his successors. “Nation building” was both pursued, albeit with military means or through the prism of western constructs, and disavowed when failure loomed.

As the US withdraws all its forces from Afghanistan nearly two decades later, it must be acknowledged that it US has failed to deliver peace, stability and governance. The rationalisation offered by President Biden, of having achieved the objective of vengeance, will find few takers, particularly in Asia where memories will be shaped by the US abandonment of Taiwan, South Vietnam, Iraq, Syria and now Afghanistan, among others. Developing nations, where the

⁶ Public Law 107-40, 107th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>

⁷ The US War in Afghanistan 1999 – 2001, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>

ideological battle between democracy and authoritarianism is being watched closely, will wonder if the China model does not work better.

While the US desire to end a “forever war” is perfectly understandable, the flip-flops in US policy present an unedifying picture. In 2017, the previous administration announced that the US was there to stay as long as it takes, only to reverse course and negotiate a near unconditional withdrawal agreement with the Taliban, according them with political legitimacy behind the back of the Afghan government, entirely unmindful of preserving the democratic and societal gains of the past 20 years or preventing the likelihood of civil war.

This is one policy direction of the previous US administration that President Biden could have but did not reverse.

The Achilles heel of the India-US relationship has long been India's Af-Pak arc of crisis, not least as this directly impacts India's vital concerns in securing itself against Islamist extremism and cross-border terrorism. This hiatus has re-emerged, despite the brave face put up by both sides at the Jaishankar-Blinken joint press availability suggesting that they see Afghanistan largely in the same light. EAM Jaishankar made it clear that Afghanistan's “independence and sovereignty will only be ensured if it is free from malign influences”; peace negotiations must be taken seriously by all parties; unilateral imposition of will by any party will not be democratic and can never lead to stability; the gains of Afghan civil society must be preserved; and Afghanistan must never become a source of terrorism or refugees⁸. Secretary Blinken offered mild assurances that the US would continue to remain engaged in support of the Afghan people and regional stability.

As EAM Jaishankar observed, the US withdrawal will have consequences and “in diplomacy you deal with what you have”⁹.

As the Taliban offensive in Afghanistan gains ground, troubling questions continue to arise. There is every indication that the Taliban objective is military conquest followed by subjecting the entire country to their medieval worldview¹⁰. The possibility of civil war and accompanying chaos looms large. As one commentator put it, “If civil war returns to Afghanistan, it will be

⁸ Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar at a Joint Press Availability, July 28, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-indian-external-affairs-minister-dr-subrahmanyam-jaishankar-at-a-joint-press-availability/>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ ‘Deeply Troubling’ in Afghanistan, July 29, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/deeply-troubling-in-afghanistan-taliban-antony-blinken-11627596442>

primarily because the US and its allies lacked the political capacity to target their assistance towards building a functioning state¹¹.

However, perhaps all is not yet lost. As observed by President Ashraf Ghani, the US withdrawal also represents an opportunity for the Afghan people to achieve real sovereignty¹². If his National Defence and Security Force can stem the tide, the legitimacy of the Taliban and their justification for continuing the conflict will both come into question. Continued funding and material support of the ANDSF, as committed by both the US and NATO, will be critical.

Democratic Societies

Adherence to universal values of pluralist democracy, human rights and the rule of law has been the cornerstone of the natural affinity between the world's oldest and most populous democracies. At the same time, a vocal and unremittingly hostile segment of the US progressive commentariat and media have long vitiated the climate and prospects for India-US relations by attacking PM Modi and the BJP for espousing "Hindu nationalism" and diluting civil rights and democratic freedoms in India. Their project of derailing India-US ties pre-dates PM Modi's assumption of office and has now gathered steam as "woke" US liberal elites hold sway over political and cultural discourses which are centred around democratic rights and atonement for systemic racism. Unsurprisingly, the Blinken visit was preceded by strident demands that Modi's India should be held to account.

A change in India's approach towards such activism has been evident since EAM Jaishankar cancelled a scheduled meeting with US lawmakers after they refused to exclude Rep. Pramila Jayapal, a progressive flag bearer, in December 2019. Jaishankar plainly said that he had no interest in meeting her because of her criticisms on Kashmir despite not having a fair understanding of the situation there¹³.

Briefing the press before the Blinken visit began, US Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, Dean Thompson, reportedly stated that

¹¹ Sanjib Baruah, "The Predicament of Ashraf Ghani", Indian Express, August 02, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-predicament-of-ashraf-ghani-7433683/>

¹² Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's Moment of Risk and Opportunity, in "America's Longest War: Two Decades in Afghanistan", <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/anthologies/2021-05-14/americas-longest-war>

¹³ Nayanima Basu, "Win over those who disagree – Jaishankar rebuff to Pramila Jayapal evokes mixed response", December 20, 2019, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/win-over-those-who-disagree-jaishankar-rebuff-to-pramila-jayapal-evokes-mixed-response/338420/>

human rights would be raised, while observing that “we firmly believe that we have more values in common on those fronts than we don’t”¹⁴. The riposte from an unnamed Indian official involved with the planning of the Blinken visit was quick and precise: “Issues such as human rights and democracy are universal and extend beyond a particular national or cultural perspective. India is proud of its achievements in both domains and is always glad to share experiences. As a long-standing pluralistic society, India is open to engaging those who now recognise the value of diversity”¹⁵. This was a polite but unmistakable warning against grandstanding by the US side.

In the event, the visit witnessed both sides handling this issue with maturity and diplomatic tact. Blinken began his day with a round table discussion with civil society, including a constitutional jurist, representatives from the Inter-Faith Harmony Foundation of India, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Bahá’í Foundation, the Christian Coalition for Health, the Tibetan House and a Sikh organisation. His opening remarks touched on shared values and the fundamental tenets of democracy, while lauding India’s “free media, independent courts, vibrant, free and fair electoral system – the largest expression of free political will by citizens anywhere in the world”¹⁶.

This theme was repeated at the joint press availability, where Secretary Blinken said, “As two of the world’s leading democracies, we take seriously our responsibilities to deliver freedom, equality and opportunity to all of our people. And we know we must constantly do more on these fronts. Neither of us has achieved the ideals that we set for ourselves. Part of the promise of democracy is the constant striving for better”¹⁷. He reiterated US admiration for the steadfast commitment of India’s people, from different backgrounds and faiths, to democracy, pluralism, human rights and fundamental freedoms, identifying

¹⁴ Briefing With Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Dean Thompson and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Daniel Benaim on the Secretary’s Upcoming Travel to India and Kuwait - United States Department of State, July 23, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/acting-assistant-secretary-for-south-and-central-asian-affairs-dean-thompson-and-deputy-assistant-secretary-for-near-eastern-affairs-daniel-benaim-on-the-secretarys-upcoming-travel-to-india-a/>

¹⁵ Blinken Visit: India Reacts Strongly To Human Rights Concerns Raised by US”, July 26, 2021, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-blinken-visit-india-reacts-strongly-to-human-rights-concerns-raised-by-us/389447>

¹⁶ Opening Remarks at a Civil Society Roundtable, July 28, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/opening-remarks-at-a-civil-society-roundtable/>

¹⁷ Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar at a Joint Press Availability, July 28, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-indian-external-affairs-minister-dr-subrahmanyam-jaishankar-at-a-joint-press-availability/>

this as one of the ways in which the US defined India. The object of the discussion was pitched as learning from each other, and not preaching.

On his part, EAM Jaishankar made three observations: first, that the quest for a more perfect union applies to India as much as to the US and indeed to all democracies; second, it was the moral obligation of all polities to right wrongs when they have been done, including historically, and many of the decisions and policies objected to in the past fell into that category; and third, freedom could not be equated with non-governance or lack of governance. In other words, freedom cannot be used as license to disregard the bounds of democratic governance.

A US commentator had advised that the Biden Administration could bolster India's democracy better by listening, not lecturing¹⁸. That advice has visibly been acted upon. The issue will not, however, die down. Vested interests have already characterised Blinken's discussion as an "admonishment" of India's democracy, even while describing the admonishment as "mere pretence"¹⁹. Diplomacy on both sides will have to keep larger goals in mind and avoid being sidetracked by this shrill debate that is in fact so much part of the democratic freedoms both nations enjoy. Pursuit of ideological goals must not cloud realist and pragmatic considerations of statecraft.

Conclusion

Divergences in the perspectives and world views of India and the US will remain, such as on Af-Pak policies and aspects of India's relations with Russia like the S-400 acquisition, on which the prospect of CAATSA sanctions remains. But perfect accord is never possible even between allies, leave alone between partners. This will remain the case as India continues its advocacy of an evolving "multipolar, democratic and diverse world order".

There are also growing uncertainties generated by US domestic trends, along with continuing questions in Asia regarding US credibility, which will bear watching.

However, what is of greater consequence is that India and the US must not drop the ball on the broad convergence of their strategic interests, and the advantages of regarding each other as partners of choice. As both countries

¹⁸ Alyssa Ayres, "How Biden Can Bolster India's Democracy", *Foreign Affairs*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-07-26/how-biden-can-bolster-indias-democracy>

¹⁹ Blinken's India Trip to Secure India to America's Chariot, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2021-07/30/content_10068668.htm

move towards the in-person Quad summit and the bilateral 2 + 2 meeting later this year, their diplomats will have the opportunity to further shape a “defining” relationship of the 21st century.



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