

# Shared values

India and the U.S. have a lot in common,

but it is the differences that need attention

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's day-visit to Delhi this week was heavy on discussions and understandably light on deliverables. The visit, the third by a senior U.S. official of the Biden administration, was meant to prepare the way for more substantive meetings in Washington later this year, including the U.S.-India "2+2" of Foreign and Defence Ministers, the Quad summit of its leaders, and a bilateral meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Joseph Biden. Public statements by Mr. Blinken and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and readouts, indicate that most of their conversations are focused on Quad cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Afghanistan, and in discussing the state of democracy and rights. On the Quad, they showed full convergence. On Afghanistan, Mr. Jaishankar said that there were "more convergences than divergences" on the common positions that there is no military solution to conflict, and that neither country would recognise a Taliban regime that takes Kabul by force. However, the divergences are more troubling for India, given that the fallout of the U.S. withdrawal will mean a less secure region. The U.S. continues to engage the Taliban in talks for a power-sharing arrangement, despite the Taliban leadership's refusal to enforce a ceasefire, and stop attacks against civilians in areas they take over. The militia is also trying to squeeze trade and financial supply chains to the Afghanistan government. Perhaps the greatest worry for India is the U.S.'s refusal to hold Pakistan to account for having given shelter to the Taliban, as this will only embolden Islamabad if the Taliban advance in Afghanistan. New Delhi tiptoed around the U.S.'s announcement of a new "Quad" with Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan on connectivity, but this is another cause for worry.

On the subject of democratic freedoms, both sides maintained there were "shared values". However, Mr. Blinken began his meetings with a "civil society roundtable" wherein internal Indian issues such as minority rights, religious freedoms and curbs on the media and dissent were discussed, making it clear that these were important areas for the Democrat administration. In his rebuttal to a question about the "backslide" in India's democracy, Mr. Jaishankar had a three-pronged response, reiterating that the same standards apply for the U.S. and India, that policies that have come in for international criticism such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the Article 370 amendment, and anti-conversion laws were part of the Modi government's attempt to "right historical wrongs", and that freedoms cannot be equated with "lack of governance". Despite the attempt from both sides to paper over the cracks, this is an issue that they will grapple with in the future even as they build upon the strong "Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership" that the world's oldest and most populous democracies continue to share.