

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue had its origins in efforts to deal collectively with the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, an effective use of soft power.

Since then the Quad has grown haphazardly into a regional vehicle for the United States, Japan, India and Australia to make common cause against China.

Given the raucous bleating of the Trump administration, any suggestion in recent years that the Quad was an instrument of soft power would correctly have been met with derision.

Not so now. Although the paperwork emerging from the first Quad summit did not have the poetic verve suggested by the communiqué title, The Spirit of the Quad, the summit documentation was interesting in its emphases.

About a quarter of the communiqué was devoted to proposed regional efforts to deal with COVID-19. Equally important in practical terms, the three-page White House media fact sheet devoted two pages to pandemic issues and half a page each to climate change and critical and emerging technology.

Make no mistake. The Quad is about China. But China was only mentioned elliptically in summit documents.

The main summit message was that the Quad countries would, on a meaningful scale, assist other regional countries to manage the biggest economic and health challenge of our times. It was not about how united we would be in resisting Chinese depredations.

This is intelligent politics.

US Secretary of State Tony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will meet their Chinese counterparts in Alaska on March 18. The Americans are doing the right thing by their allies by visiting Tokyo and Seoul first. But they have also avoided harsh Quad messages that might have compromised a first step towards a possible future dialogue with China.

More important in the longer term, through its assistance pledge to the region on COVID-19 and a genuflection in the communiqué to ASEAN centrality, the summit recognised that it is in south-east Asia where the Quad must compete with China for hearts and minds.

This is where soft power re-emerges as a Quad policy vehicle.

The concept of soft power, first promulgated a generation ago by the Harvard professor Joseph Nye as the capacity “to persuade and influence without coercion”, was widely accepted as a key component of the West’s victory over the Soviet empire.

The ingredients of soft power include governance, societal values, education, technology and wealth (when employed non-coercively). Because these ingredients are integral to national reputation, they can achieve outcomes purely by example. (America will be more respected under Joe Biden than it was under Donald Trump.) However, soft power qualities such as education and medical skills can also be deployed as policy tools.

Since the end of the Cold War, the validity of soft power theory has been questioned with the rise of authoritarianism, confused by a plethora of organisations using different criteria to measure soft power, and relegated by the views of Trump and his ilk in America and elsewhere that soft power is for sissies.

Biden seems to have come to a different conclusion – not that soft power alone will beget American strategic success, but that it is a necessary complement to hard power. Some have described the fusion of the two as “smart power”.

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With erroneous judgment and regrettable timing, the Australian government concluded in October last year that following the onset of the pandemic, a review process of soft power mandated by an earlier Coalition government “should not continue as it was no longer as relevant to the significantly changed global environment”.

We must not get behind the game here. Biden understands the soft power concept. In the past few years, Japan has been skilful in deploying soft power in south-east Asia and has emerged repeatedly in surveys in that subregion as its most trusted external partner.

According to the same surveys, India enjoys no such trust. But in the particular context of the systems required to mass-produce medication, remember this is a country that can organise and administer in a matter of weeks gatherings of tens of millions of pilgrims – and can repeatedly organise fair elections for its 1.4 billion population.

Australia has cut its external assistance roughly in half over the past few years. It is now time, for both strategic and humanitarian reasons, to be generous again. It would, for example, be a pity if having taken up a reasonable share of the Quad’s COVID-19 package for the region, we were to employ the legerdemain of redeploying existing assistance funding – thereby robbing Peter to pay Paul.



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