

In summits, those involved never get everything they want. The trick is to persuade your audience — particularly your domestic one — that you have got most of it.

At the end of a busy week, most participants in the G7, NATO and Biden-European Union meetings could go home legitimately claiming wins.

The only glaring difference of view was a Brexit issue between Britain and the EU on Northern Ireland (with US President Joe Biden siding with the EU). But that is principally an important Euro-Atlantic question, not a global one.

Biden came to the meeting looking good – with recent Pew polling showing a dramatic uptick since his inauguration in the way in which the United States is regarded internationally.

G7 participants and American allies were able jointly to celebrate that, after Trump, they were again singing roughly the same tune. And for most there was some light at the end of the COVID-19 tunnel. After the past three or four years, all this was good news.

Much media attention, particularly in this country, focused on the way the meetings dealt with China. The result was neither, as some suggested, a condemnation of Chinese behaviour, nor, as others argued, emblematic of mixed views about China. It was somewhere in between.

The G7 and NATO focused much more on China than in previous meetings and Biden undoubtedly got the Europeans' collective ear.

But the public statements by European G7 leaders on China were measured.

Understandably, the NATO communiqué put a sharper emphasis on Russia whose “aggressive actions” it termed a “threat” to Euro-Atlantic security.

The communiqué had plenty to say on China, but rather than referring to a Chinese “threat” stated that China posed “systemic challenges” to the international Rules Based Order.

China featured in Biden's meeting with EU leaders. However, the main bone of contention between the US and the EU on China, namely the EU-China investment agreement, was already on thin ice because of a row over criticism by the European Parliament of Chinese actions in Xinjiang.

Consequently, the meetings to some extent consolidated Western policy to constrain China.

That said, the US, the West and the Democratic Ideal did not measure up in dealing with the rest of the World.

Given COVID-19, the World — particularly the poorer part — is in bad shape. In pivotal and dramatic times, such as those in which we live, it is massive and generous gestures, not cautious ones, that have historic resonance.

The Marshall Plan after World War 2 and, in a narrower context, former Prime Minister John Howard's \$1 billion aid grant to Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami are examples.

This week's meetings had aspirational rather than visionary outcomes.

One of Biden's central assertions was that the West was in a contest, not with China per se, but “with autocrats and autocratic governments around the world, as to whether democracies can compete with them in a rapidly changing 21st century”.

But the G7 pledge to provide 870 million vaccine doses to the developing world over the next year lacked ambition, to put it mildly, given that the World Health Organisation estimates a global requirement of 11 billion doses.

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The Build Back Better World initiative was a bit of a flop. It is intended to compete for economic influence — particularly on infrastructure — with Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is supposed to focus on climate change, health, digital technology and gender equity and, to quote Biden, echo “values that our democracies represent and not autocratic lack of values”. But it lacks detail and financial commitment.

What of Australia in this mix?

Before he left Australia, Scott Morrison made a speech in Perth extolling liberal values and the liberal international Rules Based Order. This differed from his castigation of “negative globalism” at the Lowy Institute in October 2019.

The shift probably represents Morrison’s growing familiarity with the international environment and the radically different messaging coming out of Washington. It also makes a lot of sense. The democracies argue that competition with China is not just about armed force or economics, but about better governance.

As Morrison correctly states, Australia has in strategic terms become more prominent on the world stage than hitherto. This is not because we are suddenly better diplomats. It is because with the rise of China our alliance with the United States is more central to the latter’s strategic framework. It also is because the dire state of our relations with China gives us an international profile we would not otherwise have.

The corollary is that we now have a number on our back both in the international game on the liberal, democratic team. As such it behooves us, just as it behooves Biden’s America, to live up to the liberal international norms that we claim to espouse.

We do not have to do the repair work on our polity, which is Biden’s unenviable task. But we should ask ourselves how much longer we can avoid the carbon strictures which other democracies accept or whether closed borders are consistent with our self-image of an outward-looking trading nation.

We must accept that liberalism includes a measure of benevolence. An erstwhile generous nation, we have fallen dramatically behind in assisting the wellbeing and development of our neighbours.

We should lift our game where a paucity of spirit has impacted on the little things of democracy: our temporary ban on Australian citizens and permanent residents seeking to return from COVID besieged India; our sluggishness in according visas to imperilled Afghans; and the recent Biloela fiasco.

If we are to be effective members of the democratic crusade, we should ensure our own house is in order.

This article originally appeared in Asialink



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