

# The world the G7 forgot about

by John McCarthy

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At global summits, nobody gets 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 at the G7, the NATO summit, and Joe Biden's meetings with European Union leaders could go home legitimately claiming wins.

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

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

G7 participants and US allies were able jointly to celebrate the fact that after the Trump years 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 at previous meetings](#), and Biden undoubtedly had the Europeans' collective ear. But the public statements by European G7 leaders on China were measured.

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

The communique had plenty to say on China, but rather than referring to a Chinese “threat”, it stated that China posed “systemic challenges” to the rules-based order.

China featured in Biden’s meeting with EU leaders. However, the main bone of contention between the US and the EU, 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.

So the meetings to some extent consolidated Western policy to constrain China.

On Russia, [Biden’s summit with Vladimir Putin](#) achieved no breakthroughs, but brought glimmers of improved stability to the bilateral relationship.

That said, the United States, the West and the democratic ideal did not measure up in dealing with the rest of the world.

The poorer parts of the world are in bad shape after the pandemic. And it is massive and generous gestures, not cautious ones, that have historic resonance.

The Marshall Plan after World War II and, in a narrower context, [John Howard’s \\$1 billion gesture 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 is 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”.

### **Lack of ambition**

But [the G7 pledge](#) to provide 870 million doses to the developing world over the next year lacked ambition – to put it mildly – given the World Health Organisation estimates [a global requirement of 11 billion doses](#).

The [Build Back Better World \(or B3W\) 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. 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, Scott Morrison made a speech extolling liberal values and the liberal rules-based international order. [This was very different to castigating “negative globalism” at the Lowy Institute in October 2019.](#)

This 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.

### **A number on Australia’s back**

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 US is more central to the latter’s strategic framework.

It is also because the dire state of our relations with China gives us an international profile we would not otherwise have.

So we now have a number on our back, both in the international game and on the liberal-democratic team. As such it behoves us, just as it behoves Biden’s America, to live up to the liberal international norms 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 that other democracies accept, or whether closed borders are consistent with our self-image of an outward looking trading nation.

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

And we should lift our game where a paucity of spirit has affected the little things of democracy : the temporary ban on Australian citizens and permanent residents [seeking to return from India](#) because of COVID-19 ; our sluggishness in [offering visas to imperiled 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.

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