CANBERRA – It is easy to be skeptical about the kind of meetings that US President Barack Obama, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and a small army of other global and regional leaders swept through in China, Myanmar, and Australia this month. Multilateral summity lends itself to familiar gibes about wildly expensive photo opportunities, set-piece speeches endorsing pre-cooked lowest-common-denominator communiqués, and more time devoted to parading around in silly shirts than to policy substance.

But November’s three summits – the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing, the East Asian Summit in Naypyidaw, and the G-20 meeting in Brisbane – should have the skeptics eating their words. Each contributed substantially to the quality of global governance, as summit diplomacy ideally should, in three distinct ways: formal outcomes, useful byproducts, and positive atmospherics.

In Beijing, the major formal outcome – important after years of over-promising and under-delivering by APEC – was the new momentum generated for the Free Trade Agreement for Asia-Pacific as a complementary mechanism to the US-initiated Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). But the biggest news was the summit’s byproducts, especially the announcement by the United States and China of a joint agreement on targets for cutting greenhouse-gas emissions – a breakthrough that will transform the dynamics of the global climate debate.

Another important byproduct was China’s use of the occasion to launch its new regional investment bank and $40 billion Silk Road development fund. And the side meeting between Xi and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, designed to defuse mounting tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, contributed significantly to positive atmospherics.

The East Asia Summit, too, was more notable for developments on the sidelines than at the main event, notably Obama’s prodding of both the host government and its iconic opponent Aung San Suu Kyi to fulfill Myanmar’s human-rights obligations, particularly toward the oppressed Rohingya minority. But the summit itself featured useful discussions on a wide
range of sensitive economic and security issues, including the South China Sea, and helped consolidate its evolving status as the Asia-Pacific region’s premier policy dialogue forum.

The Brisbane Summit’s signature achievement was to leverage the just-announced US-China emission target into formal G-20 support for “strong and effective action to address climate change.” The G-20’s stance represents a powerful challenge to the rest of the world to reach a global agreement at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris in December 2015. (All of this dismayed Australia’s conservative host government, which had fought to prevent the issue from even being raised; the Australian public, however, was delighted, and promptly knocked down Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s approval rating in post-summit polls for this and other embarrassments.)

Other formal outcomes of the G-20 meeting were agreements – backed by more policy detail than most commentators had expected – to stimulate global growth. In particular, the leaders focused on investment, trade, competition, and efforts to bring more women into the workforce; the fairness of the international tax system; and how to target corruption. They also stated their commitment to fight the Ebola crisis.

Other byproducts of both the Beijing and Brisbane summits were some usefully clear messages to Russian President Vladimir Putin regarding the unacceptability of his Ukraine adventures (though Abbott’s message was more diplomatic than the “shirtfront” entertainment he promised); accelerated bilateral agreements (for example, a long-awaited Australia-China free trade treaty); and a deserved boost for Obama, following his party’s mid-term election drubbing a few days earlier.

All three of November’s meetings show that multilateral summits – at least when well prepared and properly conducted – can and do add value to global and regional governance in a number of ways.

First, such meetings can set the policy agenda on crucial economic and security issues, from which participating leaders will be embarrassed if they backslide – even if, as is often the case, agreement has been wrung out of them by strong peer pressure. Some commentators have dismissed the growth target established in Brisbane – an additional 2.1% over five years – as facile posturing. But achieving growth is largely a matter of having the political will to make the right social and economic policy choices – precisely what the G-20 summit was designed to mobilize.
Second, summits can be an antidote to inertia. The pressure of looming deadlines, with the need to produce “deliverables” both for the formal meeting itself and the usual surrounding buzz of bilateral engagements, often force agreement on important but contentious issues that would otherwise remain indefinitely unresolved.

Finally, multilateral summits can achieve things that meetings of lesser political mortals cannot. Leaders bring a broader perspective than any portfolio ministers can, and they usually have much more authority to make decisions and commit resources on the spot.

Last, but by no means least, summits build mutual trust and confidence among their participants, particularly if they are repeated at regular intervals and include ample time for one-on-one and small-group exchanges. There are pathological exceptions to every rule, and sometimes familiarity does indeed breed contempt. But personal relationships are the lubricant on which both domestic and international policymaking depend, and multilateral summity of the kind we have just witnessed is the most cost-effective way to develop and sustain them.

There is plenty in today’s international environment to cheer the skeptics and doomsayers. But maybe, just for once, they should acknowledge that, with the successive APEC, East Asia, and G-20 summits, pessimism has had a bad month.
