

After the compromise: Australia's COP31 blueprint for the Pacific

POLICY BRIEF

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Key findings

- Australia's COP31 compromise with Türkiye, which allows Antalya to host this year's global climate summit, secures Canberra's control of official negotiations but weakens its influence over the wider summit, where practical decisions are made.
- The Pacific-hosted pre-COP is a critical opportunity to build political momentum ahead of COP31 by convening selected global leaders and placing Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in a visible leadership role to secure high-profile support for Pacific climate priorities.
- Australia can still deliver meaningful outcomes for the Pacific by aligning regional priorities with those of other climate-vulnerable countries, exercising ambitious leadership through the President of Negotiations, and redirecting hosting-related resources towards climate action in the region.

What is the problem?

Australia's bid to co-host COP31 with Pacific Island countries was built around a clear objective to elevate Pacific climate concerns and use the spotlight to deliver for one of the world's most climate exposed regions. That objective is now at risk. After more than three years of negotiations, Australia conceded hosting rights to rival bidder Türkiye. While the Australian government retains a formal role in negotiations, and a pre-COP meeting will be held in the Pacific before the main summit, much of the agenda-setting power that shapes political momentum now sits with Türkiye. Without deliberate intervention, Pacific priorities risk being pushed to the margins.

What should be done?

Australia should position the pre-COP as a convening moment for selected global leaders, using it to align Pacific priorities with those of other climate-vulnerable countries and set clear expectations for COP31. As President of Negotiations, Australia's climate minister should keep those priorities on track, including by engaging Türkiye early to shape the Action Agenda where possible, and by steering talks towards outcomes on adaptation finance, oceans, and the energy transition. Australia should back diplomacy with delivery by redirecting a portion of the resources it was prepared to spend on hosting COP31 towards climate action in the Pacific. Targeted investment in climate-resilient hard infrastructure through the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific, alongside funding for Pacific-led initiatives and soft policy support, would demonstrate that Australia's climate leadership extends beyond hosting rights. Together, these steps would allow Australia to convert a compromised hosting outcome into a meaningful COP31 that still delivers for the Pacific.

Introduction

After prolonged talks, the largest annual climate summit (Conference of the Parties or COP) will this year be hosted by Türkiye, with Australia presiding over the official negotiation process. The outcome reflects an unusual compromise. When Australia expressed its intent in 2022 to host COP31, it proposed a co-hosting arrangement with the Pacific Island countries, arguing that the 2026 summit should foreground the concerns of the world's most climate-vulnerable states. Had it succeeded, it would have been the first United Nations climate summit to be held physically in Oceania.

That vision initially gained traction. Switzerland withdrew its bid, publicly acknowledging the strength of Australia's case and the importance of centring on Pacific concerns.¹ However, Türkiye also expressed their intent to host COP31. But while Australia secured broad backing within its UN negotiating bloc,² including support from major G7 countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and Germany,³ under UN rules, host selection requires consensus within those blocs. Türkiye refused to withdraw, with the issue persisting across major diplomatic meetings, including the UN General Assembly in 2025.⁴ Facing a deadline and with no sign of Türkiye abandoning its bid, Australia agreed to a compromise.⁵

Under this arrangement, Türkiye will host the major summit in Antalya and lead the Action Agenda — the part of COP outside official negotiations focused on voluntary pledges, initiatives, and mobilisation of non-state actors such as cities, businesses, and civil society. In recent years, the importance of the Action Agenda has grown, with much of the visible progress at COPs occurring in this space through the facilitation of investment and deal-making.⁶ Australia, represented by the Honourable Chris Bowen MP, Minister for Climate Change and Energy, will assume a newly created role as President of Negotiations at COP31, responsible for managing draft texts and guiding decision-making.⁷ The pre-COP meeting, a diplomatic gathering before the actual summit, will be held in the Pacific rather than in the host country. While the summit location and presiding country have differed previously, this is the first time since the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change entered into force in 1994 that hosting and negotiating authority have been formally split.

While the arrangement dilutes the political leverage that an Australia–Pacific partnership was meant to deliver, it does not remove the opportunity to shape outcomes altogether. Pacific Island countries have long exerted outsized influence in the UN climate system,⁸ including by helping secure the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal, bringing Loss and Damage to global attention,⁹ as well as advancing climate accountability beyond the COP process, including through the International Court of Justice advisory opinion request.¹⁰ COP31 should be used to amplify that leadership.¹¹

The potential of the pre-COP in the Pacific

The pre-COP is now the strongest lever for foregrounding Pacific priorities at COP31. The two-to-three-day ministerial-level meeting ahead of the main summit, attended by around 35 countries, will bring together environment ministers, senior negotiators, and other key stakeholders. While unlikely to attract the same global attention as the main negotiations, it offers a rare opportunity of concentrated diplomatic focus on the region and a chance to shape the agenda early.

Although modest in scale, pre-COP meetings are consequential because they set expectations for the negotiations that follow. They provide a forum for ministers and senior officials to signal priorities, narrow differences, and establish the broad contours of agreement before positions harden.¹² Hosting the pre-COP would give Pacific leaders direct access to decision-makers who might otherwise engage with the region only briefly during the main summit. Used strategically, it could ground COP31 in the lived realities of climate vulnerability. Holding the pre-COP in Fiji, with a leaders' event in Tuvalu, one of the most climate-exposed countries globally, provides an excellent point of departure.¹³ Alongside this process, Palau will host a dedicated climate event at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting in August, reinforcing the region's diplomatic visibility in the lead-up to COP31.

Australia and Pacific partners should consider inviting selected global leaders to the pre-COP and positioning Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in a visible leadership role to build high-level political support for Pacific priorities. The Australian government must present a united position, signalling the pre-COP is central to global progress on climate action and a missed opportunity for those absent.

Early signals suggest that finance for Small Island Developing States will be elevated at COP31, with Antalya expected to host a platform for pledges to the Resilience Facility (PRF), a Pacific-owned mechanism designed to channel finance directly to community-level resilience.¹⁴ The PRF is an important institutional innovation and deserves international backing, particularly to reach its initial capitalisation target of US\$500 million.¹⁵ But narrowing the focus of the pre-COP to a single funding vehicle would limit the opportunity at hand. The sums involved, while meaningful for the region, are modest in global terms, and the Pacific's interests and needs extend far beyond one mechanism.

Instead, greater and more meaningful impact would be achieved by using the pre-COP to set expectations for the Antalya negotiations and build a broader coalition behind a small number of priorities where Pacific leadership is strong and global alignment is possible. Pacific Island countries are among the most exposed to climate impacts globally.¹⁶ Intensifying cyclones and floods, salinisation of fertile land, and sea-level rise forcing communities to relocate are not future risks. They have long been a reality. Political leaders are able to experience the region's physical vulnerability first-hand.

To maximise this potential, Australia and the Pacific should frame the pre-COP as part of a wider climate-vulnerable country agenda. By linking Pacific priorities to those of other Small Island Developing States and climate-exposed developing countries, the meeting would more likely attract global leaders, broaden political support, and strengthen negotiating leverage.

This means, while the agenda should be tightly focused, it must not solely speak to the Pacific and inadvertently exclude other climate-vulnerable regions. For instance, pursuing a shared agenda that also speaks to climate-vulnerable African nations — where Türkiye's trade and diplomatic engagement is expanding¹⁷ — could help win broader endorsement from the COP31 leadership and diplomatic support from developing countries outside the Pacific sphere of influence. Similarly, countries in Southeast Asia that are climate affected will require support for a successful transition to renewable energy. Priorities should therefore be multi-faceted and include predictable adaptation finance at scale, reforms that make climate finance faster and easier to access, progress on the energy transition alongside the reduction of fossil fuel usage, and stronger action on ocean-related concerns.

Narrowing the adaptation finance gap

For most climate-vulnerable developing countries, adaptation is the main line of defence for protecting lives and livelihoods from growing impacts. Yet the adaptation funding gap is widening.¹⁸ At COP30 in Brazil, developed countries agreed to pursue efforts to at least triple adaptation finance by 2035, signalling renewed political recognition of the scale of need.¹⁹ But the harder task is maintaining momentum and converting commitments into predictable public finance.

Fiscal pressures across advanced economies are growing, with global development budgets shrinking. In 2025, official development assistance was projected to fall by up to 17 per cent on the previous year, with an uncertain outlook for the future.²⁰ At the same time, donors are placing greater emphasis on mobilising private capital.²¹ While private finance has a role in supporting climate mitigation, it is mostly ill-suited for adaptation projects, as it rarely

generates financial returns. However, for most climate-vulnerable countries, adaptation depends on grants and highly concessional finance.

Access barriers compound the financing shortfall. Many climate-vulnerable countries face complex accreditation requirements, fragmented funding windows, and high transaction costs when seeking support from multilateral climate funds.²² These barriers are magnified in small administrations such as those in the Pacific, and intensified by rising debt burdens, where countries must service liabilities while financing recovery from increasingly frequent and severe climate shocks.

COP31 should therefore advance the work under the “Baku to Belém Roadmap to 1.3T”²³ — a strategic, collaborative plan initiated at COP29 and reinforced at COP30 to mobilise US\$1.3 trillion annually in climate finance for developing countries by 2035. This work should include implementing commitments that serve the climate-vulnerable country agenda and a focus on reforms that make access to climate finance faster, simpler, and more reliable.

Ocean issues go beyond conservation

The Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Samoa in 2024 culminated in the Apia Commonwealth Ocean Declaration, underscoring the environmental, economic, and geostrategic importance of ocean-related issues to Pacific Island nations.²⁴ With its pristine ecosystems and vast biodiversity, the ocean sits at the centre of Pacific identity and culture. Climate change, among other degrading factors, threatens to disturb this balance. Recent initiatives, including the One Ocean Partnership, which aims to catalyse US\$20 billion by 2030 for regenerative seascapes,²⁵ and the Belém Ocean Declaration,²⁶ signal growing momentum that must be sustained and expanded on. For instance, successful in various countries such as Ecuador, Belize, Seychelles,²⁷ the Bahamas,²⁸ and Indonesia,²⁹ debt-for-ocean-conservation swaps — in which a nation’s debt is restructured by creditors in exchange for commitments to invest the savings into climate resilience — should be more widely promoted as vehicles for both marine protection and sovereign debt reduction.

Other climate-driven shifts, such as warming waters and extreme rainfall, are also eroding the economic foundations of Pacific Island nations. The region’s livelihood, including food security and economic revenue, is heavily reliant on fishing and tourism.³⁰ However, a climate-related change in tuna migration patterns, for example, threatens both the fishing industry and government revenues tied to access agreements.³¹ If current trends continue, some small island economies could lose up to US\$140 million annually by 2050, and up to 17 per cent of annual government revenue.³²

Rising sea levels and receding land, in some cases, may jeopardise sovereignty as well as the continuity of statehood, posing fundamental challenges to the rights of existing Exclusive Economic Zones.³³ In addition, climate displacement and migration — voluntary, involuntary, within national borders, or trans-boundary — have become realities in the Pacific and other low-lying countries, necessitating dignified solutions for human mobility. These solutions remain largely underdeveloped and disregarded in global climate diplomacy. With Türkiye still developing the pillars of the Action Agenda, the pre-COP offers a chance to elevate ocean issues on the global stage, focusing on statehood and sovereignty, preservation of livelihoods, and displacement solutions. In that respect, Australia is a leader, having together with Tuvalu pioneered the Falepili Union treaty, an agreement with climate migration pathways and recognition of continuity of statehood even in the face of irreversible climate change impacts.³⁴

Holding the line on fossil fuels

COP28 in 2023 marked a historic breakthrough, with countries agreeing to transition away from fossil fuels for the first time in the history of the UN climate regime.³⁵ But subsequent summits have shown how fragile consensus remains. At COP29 and COP30, efforts to strengthen the language regressed, and fossil fuels were ultimately omitted from COP30's final decision text. This diplomatic retreat reflects a wider development across many parts of the world where fossil fuel investment gains renewed momentum.

Through developing a voluntary roadmap towards a fossil fuel phase-out pursued outside the formal negotiating track where consensus rules routinely blunt ambition, Brazil's COP30 presidency sought to push back on this trend. More than 80 countries have endorsed the initiative.³⁶ This reflects a broader shift within the global climate system: when universal agreement stalls, progress increasingly comes through coalitions of the willing.

Australia should approach direct reference to fossil fuel outcomes at COP31 pragmatically but with deliberate effort. The objective should remain ambitious with a universal agreement where possible. Where consensus is unattainable, Australia should work with the Pacific and like-minded partners to broaden uptake of serious political commitments, such as the Belém Ocean Declaration, that reinforce the direction of travel from the majority of countries and constrain backsliding. It will be equally important to keep discussions going on the supply of fossil fuels, an area where it will be much harder domestically for Australia to make commitments due to political headwinds on home soil.

President of Negotiations

As President of Negotiations, Australia's climate minister will occupy an influential role in the COP process. The position carries responsibility for steering draft texts, managing ministerial consultations, and controlling the final stages of decision-making when ambition is most at risk of being diluted. While it does not guarantee ambitious outcomes, it provides an opportunity for real influence that Australia should utilise to its advantage.

To that effect, early engagement with climate-vulnerable and like-minded countries in the lead-up to the pre-COP and building coalitions around shared priorities will be key as opposition to ambitious climate goals is likely to be strong. During the main summit, Australia must use steadfast and determined steering to ensure pre-COP commitments are followed through. This will require leadership that balances developed country agendas and developing countries' diverse needs while protecting Pacific priorities. Australia should also engage early with the host, Türkiye, to shape the Action Agenda where possible, ensuring that grant-based or highly concessional adaptation finance, reduction of fossil fuel usage, and ocean priorities are visible in headline initiatives and pledges, not just confined to negotiating rooms.

The planned high-level pledging ceremony for the Pacific Resilience Facility is an important event and should go beyond a fundraising effort. Framed properly, it can showcase Pacific leadership and institutional innovation through its self-sufficient funding model that delivers sustained, effective, and local-level climate finance.

Backing diplomacy with delivery

In preparing its bid, Australia signalled a willingness to spend substantial public resources to host COP31. Unofficial estimates suggested total costs of between AU\$1–\$2 billion.³⁷ Some of this would have been offset by the economic activity associated with hosting tens of thousands of delegates, including through tourism, accommodation, and services estimated at around AU\$500 million.³⁸ While funding was not formalised through budget processes, the government would have had to mobilise it after the bid was secured. But these caveats do not change the central argument. Australia demonstrated political intent to mobilise large sums for a single climate summit.

Rather than letting that ambition dissipate with the withdrawal of the hosting bid, Canberra should redirect it towards Pacific climate initiatives, sending a strong signal of intent. Even modest investments in climate-resilient infrastructure such as ports, roads, energy systems, coastal protection, water infrastructure, and early-warning systems can have transformational impacts in the Pacific.

The problem in the region is not a shortage of viable adaptation projects. It is the absence of predictable, long-term financing at a time when adaptation needs are rising and concessional finance is becoming scarcer. Redirected resources could help narrow this gap and give substance to longstanding calls for adaptation finance that is accessible, reliable, and scaled to need.

Australia already has established channels to support these investments. Its foreign aid program provides grant financing, while the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) can blend grants and loans, including through its dedicated climate window, the Pacific Climate Infrastructure Financing Partnership.³⁹ Indeed, the AIFFP's climate focus has demonstrated its value by targeting Pacific priorities and the unique challenges they face. In Tuvalu, for example, the AIFFP is supporting large-scale land reclamation and coastal protection in response to chronic flooding and sea-level rise.⁴⁰ For low-lying atolls already experiencing loss of territory, such investments are essential to protect communities, critical infrastructure, and sovereign territory. Scaling up similar investments across the region will require greater and more predictable financing, particularly in grant form.

Although the Australian government recently announced a AU\$550 million injection into the AIFFP, it is unclear how much will be directed to climate adaptation. Given the emphasis on digital infrastructure and the Australia–Pacific Climate Partnership's historical focus on renewable energy, adaptation may struggle to claim a meaningful portion.⁴¹ Either way, the amount would fall

well short of what is needed to address the Pacific’s growing adaptation finance gap, even if grant-based. An additional financial injection would ensure that investments are effective and expand Australia’s capacity to finance large-scale “hard” adaptation projects that remain significantly underfunded across the region but are critical for delivering durable resilience on the ground.⁴² This approach would also allow Canberra to lead by example, redirecting what it was initially prepared to spend on hosting COP31 into tangible climate-resilient investments and moving early to set the pace for others.

Additional funding for the Pacific Resilience Facility could be another option. Australia has already committed AU\$100 million, but the facility has struggled to mobilise major donors.⁴³ A further modest contribution at the pledging ceremony could convince others to donate. And because the PRF will focus on small, community-led projects often overlooked by larger funds, scaling up support would complement Australia’s bilateral infrastructure financing.

But Australia should also broaden its overwhelmingly regional approach by redirecting investment through established international climate finance mechanisms. That should include stronger backing of multilateral funds, particularly the Green Climate Fund (GCF). The GCF delivered record Pacific project approvals in 2025 and is beginning to play a larger role in the region.⁴⁴ Yet Australia pledged just AU\$50 million over four years at the last replenishment cycle in 2023 at COP 28, a modest sum relative to Pacific needs and Australia’s stated climate ambitions.⁴⁵ History shows that a larger pledge can bring more influence within the GCF and help unlock greater global funding to the Pacific, where navigating complex multilateral systems remains a persistent constraint.⁴⁶

Linking an increased pledge to practical reforms, such as shifting towards a formula-based allocation system to better target vulnerable countries, would deliver tangible gains for the Pacific while reinforcing Australia’s credibility as a serious global climate actor.⁴⁷ It would demonstrate that Canberra’s engagement is anchored in long-term resilience and development, not just the commercial opportunities associated with hosting COP31. Similarly, the Adaptation Fund and the Global Environment Facility both have strong track records in the Pacific and offer additional channels for delivering concrete outcomes. With the Global Environment Facility entering a new replenishment cycle, there is a timely opportunity to scale up financial support for the region. Both funds are also complementary to the GCF as they focus on the environment and biodiversity and smaller adaptation and disaster resilience projects, respectively.

Policy support and sponsorship are other options to consider. Small administrations, such as those in the Pacific, face disproportionate barriers to participation in global negotiations, including the cost of travel and limited administrative capacity. Targeted support to enable participation would help ensure Pacific voices are present across negotiation streams.

Recommendations

Australia should treat the Pacific-hosted pre-COP as a strategic political moment, not a technical precursor. Canberra should work with Pacific Island governments to anchor the agenda in the lived experience of climate impacts, bringing leaders and ministers from other climate-vulnerable countries along. It should use the meeting to establish clear political signals that carry through to the main negotiations in Antalya. By linking Pacific priorities to those of other Small Island Developing States and highly climate-exposed developing countries, the pre-COP can be used to broaden the constituency behind issues and build the numbers needed for negotiating leverage. Here, a united position and concerted effort for engagement from the Australian government are crucial.

Australian climate minister Chris Bowen should then use his role as President of Negotiations to keep that agenda on track. This requires early coalition-building with climate-vulnerable and like-minded partners, firm control and strong leadership of draft texts and ministerial consultations, and a clear strategy to prevent drifting ambition. Australia should engage Türkiye early to influence the Action Agenda where possible to ensure that Pacific priorities are reflected in headline initiatives and pledges, not only in negotiating rooms.

Australia should prioritise outcomes where Pacific leadership is strong and global alignment is achievable. On finance, that means protecting grant and highly concessional adaptation funding and pushing reforms that reduce friction on access and speed up delivery for small and capacity-constrained states. On oceans, it means focusing on livelihoods, conservation efforts, and state continuity in the face of sea-level rise and climate shocks to build on Pacific-led work. On fossil fuels and the energy transition, Australia should pursue ambitious universal and agreed language in decision texts where possible but also strengthen coalition-based commitments through the wider uptake of serious political declarations. This will limit backsliding and keep pressure on major emitters.

Finally, Australia should back diplomacy with delivery. Canberra should consider transforming the original willingness to fund COP31 into tangible climate action in the Pacific by supporting climate-resilient infrastructure and energy resilience through mechanisms such as the AIFFP, complemented by additional support for Pacific-led financing such as the PRF and an increased contribution to the GCF. Doing so would reinforce Australia's credibility and standing as a preferred partner in the Pacific, demonstrating that Canberra's engagement is anchored in long-term, holistic commitment.

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