

# **THE PACIFIC COP:** Australia's moment to shine

Outlining an ambitious COP31  
agenda globally, regionally, and  
domestically



**SMART  
ENERGY  
COUNCIL**

**September 2025**  
By Thom Woodroffe





The independent body for the Australian smart energy industry. We actively connect the smart energy industry across Australia, building momentum and unlocking barriers to a future built on renewables. Driven by our members from across the smart energy industry, we provide tailored solutions and practical help to meet their individual needs. We believe the world is changed by those who show up. We are a not-for-profit organisation, driven by our 1,000+ members from across the smart energy industry. Our members include Australian and international businesses of all sizes.

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**Thom Woodroffe** is a Senior International Fellow with the Smart Energy Council. A COP veteran, he played a role in securing the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, including helping to establish the High Ambition Coalition of progressive nations that was critical to its adoption. He has also worked as a chief of staff to a former Australian prime minister, for the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade in Washington DC, and helped forged a backchannel for US-China climate talks during his time at the Asia Society in New York. He studied diplomacy as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University.

**Email:** [thom@smartenergy.org.au](mailto:thom@smartenergy.org.au)



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# Foreword

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Two of my proudest achievements as the Secretary-General of the United Nations are the adoption of the Paris Climate Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, both of which were realised in 2015. They represented a monumental triumph of diplomacy and coming together for the good of our planet and its inhabitants.

Since these important achievements could have been derailed had we not achieved global consensus, they also set a high-water mark in international cooperation and multilateralism. The global community came together to demonstrate that their national interests are best secured by pursuing the common good.



A decade later, the Paris Climate Agreement has proven the test of time. The cycle of countries ratcheting up their ambitions repeatedly every five years or sooner remains the beating heart of the agreement, even if the collective ambition does not yet add up to anywhere near enough to deliver a safe climate future for all. And much more needs to be done to build the kind of climate resilience we need and to finance a just transition for all.

Holding the Presidency of a Conference of Parties (COP) – a key forum for dealing with perhaps the world’s greatest challenge of our generation – is a huge task. It is a task that comes with great responsibility to deliver the highest possible ambitions and to fully utilise the pathway presented by the Paris Climate Agreement.

Previous COPs have demonstrated varying degrees of success over the years, and I believe Australia has the potential to partner with its Pacific neighbours and be the kind of stewards of the international process for those whom climate change is a daily reality and desperately need the strong leadership.

Most importantly, we need to recognise that there is no Plan B because there is no Planet B, and there is not a moment to lose if we want to build a better future for all of us and future generations.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Ban Ki-moon'.

**H.E. Ban Ki-moon**

President and Chair of the Global Green Growth Institute  
8th Secretary-General of the United Nations

# Introduction

If Australia is ultimately successful in its bid to host the UN's COP31 Climate Conference in Adelaide in November 2026, and to do so in partnership with its Pacific neighbours, it may only have twelve months to pull off what will be the largest diplomatic event Australia has ever hosted, and the largest green trade fair anywhere in the world.

Thankfully, Australia has already got to work. In recent months, Cabinet agreed on a number of overarching themes and priorities for the COP, and the government remains in active dialogue with the Pacific about how its proposed partnership will work in practice. Likewise, Australian industry, civil society, and philanthropy are poised to make the most of what would be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to accelerate Australia's own transition to a decarbonised economy, and to fulfil its potential to be a renewable energy and green exports superpower.

## EMERGING THEMES FOR COP31

- Delivering the energy transition
- Building resilience and reducing risk
- Unlocking finance and investment
- Protecting our lands and oceans

## Crosscutting enablers:

- A focus on multilateral and collective action
- A focus on sub-national leadership and private sector activation
- A focus on partnership with indigenous peoples, and local communities
- A focus on ensuring that no one is held back, and no one is left behind

While there are some who are already questioning the cost, and whether the diplomatic push is worth the effort, they are inevitably missing the point.

As a joint report by the Smart Energy Council and the Climate Council found in 2024, the potential return on investment of hosting COP31 is at least double the cost of putting it on. The South Australian Government has also found that the immediate economic benefit for their state is likely to be half a billion dollars alone. Which is why it is little wonder 70 percent of Australians already support Australia hosting COP31 according to the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

But none of this will matter if Australia's bid is not secured, which is why the government must continue to throw everything at it.



**“COP31 will be bigger than Gather Round, LIV Golf, the Festival and Fringe all together.” ~ South Australian Premier Peter Malinauskas**



The nature of hosting a COP (or Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) puts Australia in the driving seat of global action on climate change and clean energy for at least a year.

Which is why, even with a short runway to prepare the hosting of COP31, it would be a waste to simply deliver a run-of-the-mill, path-of-least-resistance COP. Instead, and as the Minister for Climate Change & Energy, Chris Bowen, has rightly said, COP31 must be “an implementation COP” – perhaps better described as a “delivery COP” or an “action COP”.

But the point is that Australia will also need a centrally managed, whole-of-government, and whole-of-society mobilisation to make this a global, regional, and domestic success, including delivering for its Pacific neighbours in the process.

With Australia hopefully on the cusp of securing its bid to host COP31 in partnership with the Pacific, this report seeks to contextualise the agenda Australia will likely encounter as COP31 President, and highlights a number of ‘Idea Snapshots’ for the government’s consideration as to potential legacy outcomes from COP31 as planning inevitably enters its next stage.



“A COP is a many-splendid thing... There's a lot of focus on the conference, which is fair enough, but actually you take office as the COP president on the first day of COP... there's an opportunity to be active all year, so it's not a two-week conference in Adelaide, it's a year-long presidency where Australia could continue to help shape the international conversation.”  
~ Minister for Climate Change & Energy Chris Bowen

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# The Global Context

## Inheriting the world as we find it and shaping it for the better



“The primary role of the COP President is to oversee a COP Summit, deliver a negotiated outcome, and then drive its implementation in the post-summit Presidency year.” ~ COP26 President Alok Sharma

Holding the COP Presidency puts Australia's hands on the wheel of the international climate and energy diplomatic process, technically from the first day of COP31 in Adelaide to the opening day of COP32 in Africa a year later. In reality, the eyes of the world will increasingly look to Australia to steer this process from the end of COP30 this November in Belém. For the two weeks of the COP itself, some have described it as taking on a trusteeship role for the international effort on climate, with the eyes of the world trained onto both the technicalities of the negotiations and how the COP deals with and responds to global events, including those that happen during the proceedings.

While in recent years the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process has internally popularised the idea of a **‘troika’** of the past, present, and future COP Presidencies working cooperatively in support of one another, the reality is that this remains a relatively nebulous governance concept.

Australia also does not have a deep diplomatic nor significant trading relationship with Brazil as the COP30 Presidency-designate, nor with Nigeria as the one country thus far with a stated interest in hosting COP32, which is slated to be held in Africa. That said, Australia does at least have the benefit of diplomatic missions in both Brasília and Abuja, and shared interests in different aspects of the green transition (Brazil is also an exporter of iron ore, and Nigeria is an emerging exporter of critical minerals, in particular lithium used in batteries).

Irrespective of the practical or political utilities of the ‘troika’, one part of the puzzle for Australia's potential COP31 Presidency should be to find ways to identify and deliver common threads and themes through the preceding and subsequent COPs, taking into account the particular priorities of each presidency, and that effective change in the UN process often takes several years of preparatory work to achieve. Australia's identification of land as a priority theme (as the natural extension of Brazil's prioritisation of forestry given COP30's location in the Amazon) is a welcome development. As is the connection this provides to both First Nations, as well as to the obvious importance of the oceans agenda for the Pacific.



In recent years, the technical negotiations within the UNFCCC have given birth to a complex alphabet soup of ‘**mandates**’, ‘**work programmes**’, and ‘**rule books**’ to take forward implementation of Paris. As the US-based Centre for Climate and Energy Solutions has found, in 2024 alone, an additional 29 mandates were established as a result of these negotiations. And their attempt to tabulate all of the existing mandates that exist in the UNFCCC process runs to nearly 200 pages.

This list of mandates and work programmes is a guide to the actual agenda items that Australia would inherit as COP President and be responsible for progressing or concluding in the technical negotiations. As it happens, that list is relatively small and largely focused on the completion of the so-called ‘Sharm el-Sheikh joint work on implementation of climate action on agriculture and food security’. This is also a reflection of the fact that COP31 is not a headline COP in the sense that COP3 in Kyoto was in 1997, COP15 in Copenhagen was in 2009, or COP21 was in Paris in 2015, where international agreements were forged (even if the outcome in Copenhagen fell far short of hopes and expectations). Or COP26 in Glasgow in 2021 which represented the end of the first phase of the Paris Agreement’s five-year cycle for the setting of successive national targets or Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), in the UN’s parlance.

More important, therefore, is to understand the COP landscape and broader geopolitical context that Australia would inherit in the wake of what is, or perhaps more importantly may not be, achieved at COP30 in Belém. For this reason, it is better to think of COP31 as a COP that will likely need to be agile and help “pick up the pieces” in the way that COP16 in Cancún did in 2010 following the collapse of the Copenhagen negotiations the year before, or how COP22 in Marrakech in 2016 on the back of the success in Paris had to still agree and design a process to agree its underpinning rules (as well as then ultimately to reaffirm global commitment to the climate challenge with the election of Donald Trump for the first time occurring during the actual negotiations).

*In that context, there are two things Australia can almost be certain will land in its lap in some way and therefore be a part of defining COP31 in the arc of history:*

**1.** The first is how it responds to what will be the **inevitable shortfall of the collective ambition of this third round of NDCs** due this year, which set the pace for the global effort to reduce emissions through until 2035. The UN’s 2024 ‘Emissions Gap Report’, which seeks to quantify the gap between these efforts and the temperature goal enshrined in the Paris Agreement (to keep average global temperature increases to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to strive to keep them below 1.5°C), found that the world was in fact on track to 3.1°C with existing policies, or 2.6–2.8°C in a best case scenario (if all current pledges were implemented).

This year's edition of the UNEP report, and a separate UNFCCC synthesis report compiling the latest round of NDCs, will be particularly sobering, not least due to the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement of the United States as the world's second largest emitter. Of even greater concern is evidence in some quarters that the 1.5°C temperature guardrail has already been breached, putting the wider effort into even starker focus.

The last time the world confronted such a stark shortfall in its ambition was at COP26 in Glasgow at the end of the Paris Agreement's first five-year cycle. At the time, the negotiations resolved on a call for every country to reconsider their level of their ambition over the coming year. And while none effectively did so (India had held back its NDC for other reasons, and a number of other countries were similarly also late in turning in their NDCs), this is the kind of mandate that Australia might need to address calls for given the shortfall likely to be highlighted at COP30.

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“Requests Parties to revisit and strengthen the 2030 targets in their nationally determined contributions as necessary to align with the Paris Agreement temperature goal by the end of 2022, taking into account different national circumstances.”

~ COP26 Glasgow Climate Pact

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**2.** The second major issue that may spill over onto Australia's plate is delivery of the **‘Baku to Belém Roadmap’** to scale up climate finance flows to developing countries to US\$1.3 trillion annually by 2035. As the name suggests, this objective was agreed at COP29 in Baku, with the detail due to be agreed at COP30 in Belém. Notably, Minister Bowen co-facilitated the political negotiations on the roadmap in Baku, which has placed him in good stead internationally. It may see him take on a similar role in Belém, no doubt with further work to be done in the year that follows through to COP31.

For example, Fiji's Deputy Prime Minister Biman Prasad, recently called for an ‘Adelaide Consensus’ to emerge from COP31 in the form of a new pathway to help Pacific and other small states access climate finance.

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One of the best ways for any COP President to seek to address the shortfalls in the ambition of governments towards mandated and collectively agreed goals such as these has also been to champion cross-cutting initiatives outside of the technical negotiations and processes that seek to unlock additional action beyond what governments may be willing to commit to there.

Here is where the so-called **‘Action Agenda’**, overseen by two ‘Climate Champions’ appointed by the COP Presidency and COP Presidency-designate, also plays a key role, seeking to galvanise climate action by sub-national governments, corporations, civil society, philanthropy, and other actors to both support and build upon the commitments of national governments.



In doing so, Australia certainly needs to be careful not to simply reinvent the wheel of the myriad of government-to-government and multi-stakeholder initiatives that are already in play. As the World Resources Institute has found, around 90 such initiatives targeting mitigation currently exist in the COP ecosystem, with around 70 of these launched in the period of 2015 to 2023 alone. This has also fuelled the growing and broader disconnect between pledges and real-world implementation, as Minister Bowen has acknowledged in his recent public remarks. To their credit, the Brazilian COP30 Presidency has already proposed harmonising the Action Agenda into six priority areas.

But this also needs to be balanced with the reality that sometimes the establishment of a Presidency-led initiative is the best way to wield the influence and opportunity that comes with hosting a COP. The best approach is therefore likely to be one of rationalisation (building on Brazil's efforts) and focussing on supporting those initiatives, such as the **Powering Past Coal Alliance (PPCA)**, that continue to play an important role.

But strategic thinking should also apply to using one's own political capital towards development and realisation of a handful of flagship, transformational, initiatives that become the hallmark of the COP31 Presidency.



The PPCA and the **'Breakthrough Agenda'** which was designed to accelerate action in major emitting sectors were excellent examples of how the UK took such an approach at COP26, noting that a vehicle such as this would help unlock additional commitments (in the order of gigatonnes) beyond the strict NDC framework, and that this was also an area where the UK could seek to lead by example.

Similarly, their **Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs)** with a number of key developing countries also showed they were prepared to help with development aid and finance as well.



Perhaps the best platform Australia could have to address these challenges, but also to turn them into opportunities, as well as to leave its stamp on the world, will be to host a **signature world leaders' event** against the backdrop of COP31.

Since COP21 in Paris in 2015, it has become commonplace for COP hosts to convene a world leaders' segment as part of the annual two-week gathering. After the very challenging experience of COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, where leaders were invited to attend the final days to engage directly in the pointy end of negotiations, more recent COPs have tended towards a new rhythm whereby Heads of State & Government attend at the start (or very near the start) of the Conference, leaving Ministers and their senior negotiators to work through the detail of the final outcomes during the second week of the COP.

At milestone COPs such as COP21 in Paris in 2015 or COP26 in Glasgow in 2021, some 150 and 120 world leaders were in attendance, respectively.



While Australia should not expect attendance of that magnitude, it should nevertheless expect (and take advantage of) a widespread enthusiasm for leader-level engagement, using it to channel geopolitical support for an ambitious climate and energy agenda – something Australia's partners in the Pacific rightly expect.

This is all the more important in a world where the G7 and G20 are no longer going to tackle climate and energy matters to any great effect. In other words, demoting COP to a less-than-leader-level forum would be a missed opportunity that would not go unnoticed.

The bottom line is some form of significant leaders' engagement on home soil would also provide the biggest platform for Australia to deliver a set of ambitious, landmark outcomes in both the intergovernmental and public-private policy spaces, and to do so in parallel to the UNFCCC technical negotiations, which in the end requires consensus amongst 196 delegations.

As is the case with Belém, Adelaide will likely not have the capacity to host leaders in parallel to the COP. Nor does seeking to do so in the Pacific (notwithstanding Adelaide's distance from Australia's Pacific shoreline) best position Australia to use such a gathering for some of the larger sovereign outcomes highlighted throughout this report. But at the very least, Australia needs to give careful thought as to how the leaders of the biggest economies can engage in a focused way in support of its broader COP31 Presidency and desired outcomes, including through bilateral visits during 2026.

# Idea snapshot #1

## A new global rooftop solar push



Australia has the highest penetration of rooftop solar in the world, with roughly four million homes (or one in three eligible homes) now featuring panels. Australia also has a profound story to tell about our role in innovating the modern-day solar panel.

At present, the International Energy Agency (IEA) predicts 100 million households worldwide will have rooftop solar by the end of the decade.

A new push to go further and faster in pursuit of reaching hundreds of millions of households globally by 2035 – the end date of countries' latest climate and energy targets or NDCs – would go a long way to helping countries achieve their existing national targets, and the global target agreed at COP28 in Dubai in 2023 to triple renewable energy by the end of this decade.

Countries like India would stand to benefit most from such an initiative, aligned with its proud history of global leadership on solar as the originator and host of the treaty-based International Solar Alliance (ISA), launched in the context of COP21 in Paris in 2015. Countries in Southeast Asia also stand to benefit, with rapidly growing electricity demand and air pollution concerns driving a search for opportunities to alleviate grid congestion and to reduce their reliance on coal and gas. Such an initiative is also a useful opportunity for Australia to build cooperative tissue with China, given its role as the world's largest manufacturer of solar panels, and the opportunity to support related goals across the Pacific (see Idea Snapshot 4).

*With thanks to the Global Solar Council and the Sunrise Movement for their inputs.*



# Idea snapshot #2

## Building on the Global Methane Pledge



Global methane emissions are responsible for about 0.5°C of current warming and cost the world roughly US\$1 trillion per year in climate-related damages. Oil and gas, agriculture, and waste are the main sources, yet abatement remains cost-effective: the UN estimates cutting 45 per cent of methane emissions by 2030 could avoid 0.3°C warming, and is largely possible with the use of existing technologies.

Helping begin to move the current voluntary Global Methane Pledge towards a more solid future framework that could potentially be ratcheted up over time, for example with binding reduction trajectories, standardised satellite-based monitoring, and finance for rapid deployment in lower-income countries, could become a major legacy of COP31 in a number of years.

A potential first step would be seeking to evolve the overall global pledge into a collection of nationally determined targets for reducing methane, perhaps even included as part of a country's updated NDC. Early wins in oil and gas (leak detection, vent fixes), landfills (methane capture), and livestock feed interventions could also demonstrate rapid, low-cost climate impact.

Supportive partners might include the EU, Canada, and key Middle East oil exporters, who have previously signed the Pledge, along with developing nations seeking finance and technical assistance. By creating an independent verification mechanism, linking reductions to tradeable methane credits, and embedding it within national climate plans, COP31 could deliver both near-term climate impact and co-benefits for air quality and energy security. Such an approach could set a template for deeper sectoral climate efforts, reinforcing multilateral cooperation on fast-acting pollutants.

*With thanks to the Global Methane Hub for their inputs.*

## Idea snapshot #3

### Greening critical mineral supply chains



Australia is a leading global supplier of lithium, nickel, and other raw materials essential for the clean energy transition, with exports of these critical minerals now worth tens of billions of dollars annually. Demand for low-carbon, high-standard, and diversified supply chains is rising in Europe, Japan, Korea, and other manufacturing hubs.

Against the backdrop of COP31, Australia has an opportunity to demonstrate a fully decarbonised, end-to-end supply chain for batteries and other clean energy technology – from renewable-powered mining and processing – underpinned by independent, credible lifecycle assessment and verification. Anchoring the model in robust international standards – such as EU taxonomy efforts and consolidated mining standards – would differentiate it from existing ESG claims and position it as a true market-shaping instrument for “green minerals”.

To unlock premium value, such a supply chain needs structured markets where buyers recognise and reward low-carbon minerals. Linking this effort with platforms that convene suppliers and off-takers could help establish the demand pull and ensure long-term commercial viability. A pilot initiative, potentially aligned with existing critical minerals cooperation frameworks, could demonstrate feasibility and set benchmarks for replication across other trade partnerships.

Beyond Australia, this approach could serve as a bridge for emerging economies, such as Nigeria, which has ambitions to develop its own battery and industrial materials sector and is currently the only contender from the Africa Group to host COP32 in 2027. By demonstrating how a sovereign can structure green mineral value chains, Australia can offer a practical pathway for other mineral-rich countries to develop low-carbon supply chains, strengthen industrial policy, and participate in global climate markets. This extends the strategic, geopolitical, and climate value of Australia’s leadership in critical minerals, while helping to build partnerships across the Global South.

*With thanks to the Geneva Platform for Resilient Value Chains for their inputs.*

# The Regional Context

## The pillars of a meaningful Pacific partnership and chasing the gigatonnes in Asia



“Next year we hope a COP31 hosted by Australia and the Pacific helps give you (the Pacific) that platform, and we will stand with you in demonstrating the urgency of this crisis to the world.” ~ Foreign Minister Penny Wong

Australia is bidding to host COP31 in partnership with the Pacific. This would be the first time the COP has been held in the Pacific region, the first time in more than a decade (since COP20 in Lima in 2014) it has been held south of the Equator, and the first time in almost two decades (since COP13 in Bali in 2007) that it has been held anywhere in the Asia Pacific. By necessity, addressing the particular and urgent needs of one of the world’s most climate-vulnerable regions must be paramount to COP31 preparations and thinking.

One particular priority for the Pacific will be seeing progress towards the full capitalisation of the **Pacific Resilience Facility (PRF)**, a Pacific-led regional financing institution designed to support community-level resilience to climate change and natural disasters.

The PRF was first agreed to during the 2023 Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in Rarotonga in November 2023. At this month’s PIF meeting in Honiara, a draft treaty will be considered for adoption. Tonga has already been chosen as the physical home for the new facility.



Australia pledged AU\$100 million (~US\$68 million) to the facility during COP28, and others including Saudi Arabia (US\$50 million), Japan (US\$3 million), and the United States under the Biden administration (US\$5 million) have also made commitments towards its objective of reaching US\$500 million by 2026, and ultimately US\$1.5 billion. This will remain an omnipresent priority for the region in the period ahead.

Likewise, the region that terms itself ‘the Blue Pacific’ will naturally want to see the **climate-oceans nexus** elevated as a priority – a key part of one of the four general themes the government has already identified. From an Australian vantage as the region’s biggest island, this is natural terrain to champion, and is likely to feature heavily at the 2026 Pacific Islands Forum meeting to be hosted by Palau.



The latter has a long history of leadership on oceans conservation and sustainable use, dating back to the establishment of the first shark sanctuary in 2009, one of the world's largest marine sanctuaries in 2019, and then becoming the first country in the world to ratify the UN High Seas Treaty in 2024. It is entirely reasonable to expect that next year's PIF, including its gathering of development partners, may prove a useful staging ground for any oceans initiatives developed in anticipation of COP31, taking the regional up to the global level.

Australia will also need to give careful thought to, and track closely, global developments related to the recent **landmark International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on climate change**, initially conceived by young Pacific law students and ultimately championed in the UN General Assembly by the Government of Vanuatu and its diplomatic allies. The landmark outcome is both a source of pride for those in the region who made it happen, as well as a source of renewed hope that this will result in meaningful new commitments and imperatives to act, not least in relation to the transition away from fossil fuels.

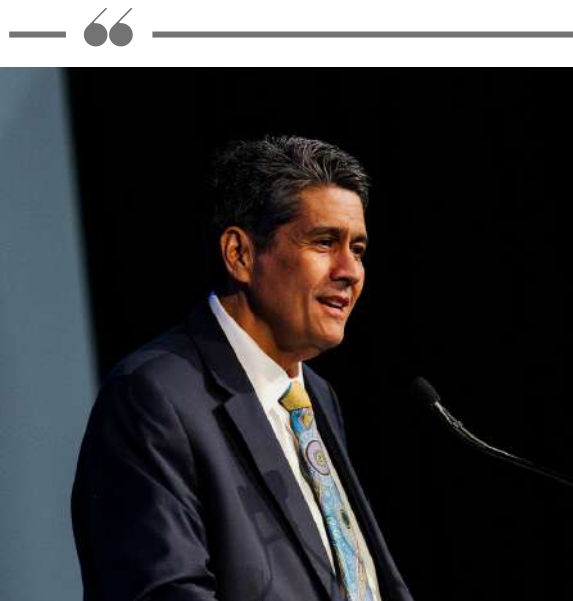
While prosecution of the bid to host COP31 remains ongoing, Australia and its Pacific island neighbours have begun to work in a detailed way on **governance arrangements for their proposed partnership**.

At an operational level, the current PIF 'troika' (Tonga, Solomon Islands, and Palau) are likely to play a key role in the day-to-day decision-making on the partnership with Australia. But at a higher level, some of the more concrete ideas out in the public domain (including in a keynote address by President Whipps of Palau to Smart Energy 2025 in Sydney in April) have included:

**1. The appointment of a Pacific 'Co-President'** working alongside the formal COP31 President (a high-profile role overseeing the negotiations and as a figurehead of the process, usually the host country's relevant minister). Others, including the COP Universities Alliance, have also called for this. While technically there can only be one formal COP president, there is nothing to stop appointment of a collaborator, even without the same procedural authority. Rather than diluting any perceived procedural importance of an Australian president, it could in fact do the reverse – provide him/her with a powerful ally from the highest levels of a vulnerable country that is able to join them for key meetings, including to broker compromises or help to forge progress at sensitive points of the COP.

**2. For there to be a Pacific 'Climate Champion'**, in addition to the Climate Champion role mandated under the Paris Agreement. As mentioned earlier, this role exists to oversee the so-called 'Action Agenda', which seeks to galvanise and coordinate action from subnational governments, corporations, and other actors.

In addition to this mandated role, Australia is likely also to follow recent precedent by appointing a ‘Youth Champion’, as well as potentially some thematic champions. While the Pacific should rightly help to identify the Champion from the region, it is worth noting the existing pool of ‘Pacific Political Climate Champions’ established in 2021 as an initiative of the PIF Secretariat, from which such an individual might naturally be drawn.



“There should be early moves to appoint Pacific co-leads for key positions in the COP31 process, such as the formal presidency role as well as ‘climate champions’ who seek to drive new climate commitments from the private sector, regions, cities and local governments.” ~ Palau’s President Surangel Whipps Jr.

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**3. For the annual ‘Pre-COP’ gathering** to be held in the Pacific. This is a ministerial gathering of 30–40 countries usually held a month or so before the COP itself, often held in another city or sometimes another country (such as in 2021 when the UK hosted COP26 in Glasgow in partnership with Italy, and the Pre-COP was held in Milan). The most logical location for such a gathering would likely be Fiji, given its internationally connected air routes, the presence of the PIF Secretariat, and the highest concentration of foreign diplomatic missions and international agencies of any capital in the region.

Occasionally, as was the case in 2015 in the lead-up to COP21 in Paris, a series of similar ministerial-level preparatory meetings are convened, which could provide an opportunity for other locations to be considered.

**4. For there to be a specific Pacific-focused initiative or package** as a landmark or legacy outcome from a ‘Pacific COP’, for example a commitment to a new package of finance and institutional support towards delivering a pathway for the Pacific to become the first 100% renewable energy region in the world. The Pre-COP could be positioned partly as a donor conference to rally international support for for a signature outcome like this.



## MAJURO DECLARATION FOR CLIMATE LEADERSHIP

"Climate change has arrived. It is the greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of the peoples of the Pacific being of the peoples of the Pacific and one of the greatest challenges for one of the greatest challenges for the entire world." ~ 2013 Pacific Islands Forum Majuro Declaration for Climate Leadership

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The bottom line is Australia's desire to host COP31 in partnership with the Pacific presents an enormous and perhaps unparalleled opportunity to demonstrate the government's strategic intent to be the partner of choice for the region, by showing real delivery on the most consequential – and, in many cases, existential – issue for the region.

"Emphasis on the gargantuan profile of Asia's emissions has frequently overshadowed the scale of the region's real economy progress on climate." ~ **High Level Policy Commission on Getting Asia to Net Zero**

While many eyes will be focused on the Pacific dimensions of COP31, perhaps the biggest opportunity for Australia to forge consequential outcomes measured in gigatonnes of avoided emissions will be in **Asia** – by far Australia's greatest trading region.



The geopolitics of the COP negotiations also mean that forging cooperative initiatives and deals in Asia will be important for creating the right conditions for many big emitters to engage positively and constructively on the proposed COP31 agenda and themes, and to help navigate any tricky diplomatic moments an Australian presidency will inevitably be called upon to resolve.

Put simply, focused Asian regional engagement will help Australia with the overall mission to enhance its political and diplomatic capital, an essential asset and objective for any incoming presidency. This will necessarily involve the COP President designate and his/her diplomatic support team travelling widely for consultations in the period leading up to the COP, taking the time to be in listening mode as well as to socialise potential approaches and outcomes. Such investment of time may prove critical during any “end game” moments during what can become an incredibly emotive, personal, and theatrical diplomatic process.

"My Pacific colleagues see great value in pursuing a signature new initiative to make the Pacific the first region in the world to become 100%-powered by renewables, both on our islands and through local use of electrified vessels. To shape this initiative, I will host Pacific leaders here in Palau in August 2026, and we can work towards a Pre-COP31 gathering elsewhere in the region to channel international resources towards this win-win-win outcome."

~ Palau's President Surangel Whipps Jr.



“Steelmaking value chains are also responsible for 7 to 9 per cent of global emissions. Achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement will require the decarbonising of steel value chains, presenting an opportunity for Australia and China to progress our long-term economic interests.” ~ Prime Minister Anthony Albanese

# Idea snapshot #4

## 100% Renewable Energy for the Pacific



The total installed electricity generation capacity across the Pacific Island countries is estimated to be in the order of 1,500 to 2,000 megawatts (MW), both on and off grid. This regional aggregate is only slightly larger than the COP31 host city of Adelaide's peak electricity demand. About half of this regional measure is from Papua New Guinea alone due to the country's heavy mining and industrial demand.

Based purely on data, the Pacific Islands would appear have the potential to become the first region in the world to be entirely powered by renewable energy, delivering huge gains socially and economically. However, as a region, the Pacific also faces a unique set of challenges with respect to their energy systems as a result of geographic dislocation and dispersion, small population sizes, and a heavy reliance on imported and costly fossil fuels which can eat up between 10 and 25 percent of their GDPs.

A new Australian-championed donor effort, likely requiring a new or redesigned regional finance mechanism or institution, could help to map a more simple and effective pathway. By some estimates, even achieving a 50 percent penetration of renewable energy in the Pacific, would help to save 620 million litres of diesel a year, avoid 1.66 million tonnes of carbon emissions, and save these small island developing states around US\$930 million in savings per annum, thereby helping them to service existing debt and to otherwise allocate finance towards important infrastructure-related priorities.

Such an initiative might also learn from the JETPs the UK Government helped to corral with a range of developing countries in the lead up to COP26 in Glasgow in 2021.

*With thanks to Island Minds and The Pacific Project for their inputs.*

## Idea snapshot #5

### Making green iron a reality with China



Australia exports roughly one billion metric tonnes of iron ore annually, which in turn delivers around two-thirds of the country's overall export revenue. More than 80 per cent of this iron ore goes to China, which is five times more valuable than all other export markets combined (including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan). At the same time, steel production accounts for around 7 to 9 percent of global carbon emissions.

As The Superpower Institute has found, if green iron replaces iron ore as Australia's primary export, it could generate up to \$386 billion annually by 2060. At present, Australia's iron ore exports currently total around \$120 billion a year.

Decarbonising this supply chain is acutely in both Australia and China's interests, including in the context of China's ambitions to reach carbon neutrality by 2060. Given the shared experience with solar power innovation, there is also a powerful historical rationale and narrative for a China-Australia green economy partnership, not least to help depoliticise low-carbon supply chains and expand their scope more generally.

Prime Minister Albanese's second visit to China in July 2025 represented a watershed moment for a new cooperative partnership to potentially take root, bringing together (as he did) Australian iron ore miners with Chinese steel manufacturers and with the launch of a new Policy Dialogue on Steel Decarbonisation. The challenge now becomes to make this partnership a commercial and sustainable reality, including through appropriate reciprocal incentives, flows of investment and alignment of regulation and taxonomy. COP31 presents the perfect backdrop to land and showcase such a deal, while also creating a platform for China's overall participation and engagement in a successful COP31.

It is also important to note that Brazil is the second largest exporter of iron ore to China, accounting for some 20 to 25 per cent of their supply (compared to the 60 per cent sourced from Australia). This may therefore also be another useful cooperative bridge with the Brazilian COP30 Presidency.

*With thanks to The Pacific Project, Climate Energy Finance, and the Asia Society's China Climate Hub for their inputs.*



## Idea snapshot #6

### Shifting the market for Australia's LNG exports



Australia is the world's second-largest exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), supplying more than 20 percent of global trade and serving as a cornerstone of energy security for Japan, Korea, and increasingly China. Revenues from LNG exports are worth tens of billions of dollars annually, with Japan alone purchasing nearly one-third of Australia's output.

Yet LNG markets are beginning to shift. Japan and Korea – historically the most reliable long-term buyers – are committed to net-zero targets and are accelerating investment in renewables, hydrogen, and ammonia. China, while still expanding its gas use, has also pledged to peak carbon emissions before or “around” 2030 and to reach carbon neutrality by 2060, raising questions about long-term trajectories for fossil fuel demand and use.

This transition presents a strategic dilemma: how does Australia seek to maintain lucrative energy partnerships with key regional allies while at the same time seeking to align its export profile with Asian decarbonisation pathways? Options include leveraging existing LNG infrastructure for low-carbon hydrogen or ammonia exports, establishing certification systems to verify emissions intensity, and incentivising buyers through carbon-neutral LNG cargoes backed by credible emissions reductions along the supply chain.

Ultimately, the replacement fuels are most likely to be green hydrogen and green ammonia – fuels already prioritised by Japan and Korea in their energy transition strategies. Here, LNG can be repositioned not as a competitor, but as a bridge – with ports, pipelines, and shipping channels adapted over time to carry and support hydrogen and ammonia trade at scale. COP31 could provide a platform to showcase how Australia is working with its key markets to recast LNG trade into a foundation for clean fuel exports, sustaining economic partnerships while also driving the shift to net zero.

# Idea snapshot #7

## Accelerating the idea of an ASEAN Power Grid



**“One of the things that Singapore doesn’t have is space. Now the opportunity that is there for us to use the best solar resources in the world, to have solar panels producing power not just for Australia domestically, but potentially exporting that power as well, is enormous.” ~ Prime Minister Anthony Albanese**

ASEAN’s ten economies represent nearly 700 million people and the world’s fifth-largest economy. With energy demand set to double by 2050, sustaining rapid growth will only be possible through a transition to affordable, reliable, and low-carbon power, the most cost-effective and resilient way to meet rising demand and to support a globally competitive economy. Unlocking ASEAN’s immense renewable potential, particularly solar, hydro, and wind, requires not only national policy settings, but deeper regional energy integration and cross-border interconnection.

For decades, the idea of an ASEAN Power Grid (APG) has been an aspirational goal. Now, under the mandate of ASEAN leaders and institutions, the vision is becoming operational. The ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE) has been tasked with preparing a high-ambition scenario for the ASEAN Energy Outlook 9 and an accompanying technical, institutional, and financing roadmap. This process can unlock investment, enable large-scale renewable deployment, and build a coherent regional system that strengthens competitiveness, resilience, and energy security.

To support this effort, something like an ‘ASEAN Power Grid Accelerator’ could play a catalytic role in realising the region’s potential.

Such an accelerator could help build bankable project pipelines, deploy risk-mitigation tools to lower the cost of capital, mobilise blended and institutional capital at scale, and channel financing into priority corridors and sectors. By addressing real barriers to investment – high cost of capital, currency risk, fragmented regulation – the accelerator could translate ASEAN’s vision into implementable, financeable projects that deliver development gains.

Geopolitically, advancing an integrated ASEAN grid bolsters regional aspirations for deeper economic integration and energy security while reinforcing ASEAN’s collective leverage in a shifting global order. Australia’s long-standing ambition to export solar power to Singapore illustrates the appetite for cross-border energy trade, but a broader ASEAN framework multiplies the benefits, turning the region into a hub of clean, reliable power that supports industrial growth and secures global supply chains. Institutions like the newly established Renewable Energy Council for the Asia Pacific (RECAP) and even a new Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC)-style regional vehicle could provide catalytic public-private finance, while global investors seek reliable green power off-take. An Asian Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) could eventually reinforce such integration, ensuring that clean power drives competitiveness rather than imposing trade risks.

*With thanks to the Renewable Energy Council for the Asia Pacific, Climate Energy Finance, The Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment, and the Australian Sustainable Finance Institute for their inputs.*

# The Domestic Context

## An opportunity, but also a litmus test



"South Australia is already a world leader in renewable energy and decarbonisation, and hosting COP31 would firmly put our state on the global map." ~ South Australian Premier Peter Malinauskas

Even if it is a sign of a very mature and vibrant democracy "chomping at the bit" to make the most of it, it is somewhat ironic that there has been more focus around the domestic opportunities lying with Australia's potential hosting of COP31 than there has been about the global agenda of such an important international gathering. This is certainly unique in the context of previous incoming COP Presidencies, as is the domestic political opposition to the Australian Government's bid.

For his part, Minister Bowen has made clear he wants COP31 to help not only showcase to the world the Pacific's plight and leadership, but also **Australia's ongoing and determined energy transition**. On the latter, Adelaide as a host city makes perfect sense. It is the renewables capital of Australia, with South Australia expected to soon achieve 100 percent renewables, and the state offering itself as a potential staging ground for Australia's green industrial transition.

Australia as a whole also has a good story to tell on its renewable energy rollout especially with the share of renewables in the National Electricity Market (effectively covering the populous eastern seaboard) having gone from around 34 percent when the Albanese Government was first elected in 2022, to around 46 percent at the end of 2024 – in line with the commitment governments made at COP28 in Dubai in 2023 to triple renewable energy capacity and double energy efficiency improvements by 2030.

At the same time, Australia still has an enormous challenge in front of itself to decarbonise its economy, in particular its **trade balance sheet**. The UNFCCC's inventories only account for emissions on the basis of where those emissions are in fact emitted. However, if exported emissions were included, Climate Analytics has found that Australia would be the second worst GHG polluter in the world – behind only Russia. This fact is not lost on the international community – especially the Pacific – nor domestic civil society, and Australia risks being labelled tone deaf if there is not a serious effort to address this issue, ideally in concert with other countries, in the context of COP31. Worse, it could seriously undermine Australia's ability to achieve other outcomes at the COP, with many political voices in the region already making clear that additional action by Australia must be a pre-requisite.

A near term test of Australia's ambition, and one that will certainly channel reaction fairly or unfairly in the context of Australia's COP bid, is the Government's pending decision on its own **2035 NDC**, due later this month. Hopefully, Australia's hosting of COP31 can also be transformational insofar as it fully and finally helps to end the decades-long political "climate wars". Including through demonstrating to sceptical parts of the Australian public the depth and breadth of international action to address climate change, as well as the importance of Australia's own contribution and its influence on other major emitters. The overall narrative should also underscore that the transition to renewable energy is profoundly in the interests of everyday Australians, including in remote and regional Australia, and especially in the face of ongoing cost of living challenges.

Finally, ensuring that efforts to help build a skilled workforce particularly across the region and to ensure mutual and multilateral recognition of clean tech products and services will also go a long way to breaking down trade barriers and helping Australian industry.



## Idea snapshot #8

### **A national moratorium on new fossil fuel approvals, expansions, or extensions**



Australia remains one of the world's largest fossil fuel exporters, with coal and LNG exports worth well over AU\$200 billion annually. New approvals across the Galilee Basin, the Scarborough and Barossa gas projects, and the North West Shelf directly contradict the ambition needed to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement and expose Australia to growing reputational and geopolitical risk.

Calls from the international community and civil society will only grow louder in the context of Australia's hosting of COP31, especially its desire to do so in partnership with the Pacific, where several countries have helped to gather momentum in behind proposals for a new Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. Australia will need to match these growing calls in some way with an equally profound response.

Australia has an opportunity – and a responsibility – to signal that it will transition away from its heavy economic reliance on fossil fuels as its major export. At the same time, the economic reality is that production cannot be shut down overnight. A credible transition requires a staged approach, but with clear waypoints.

A moratorium on new exploration and expansion approvals could be a vital first step: it would halt further locking in of high-emissions projects, set a benchmark for staged reduction, and demonstrate to both domestic constituencies and international partners that Australia is serious about aligning its exports with a zero-carbon future.

Such a moratorium also allows capital, policy, and technical resources to be redirected toward green trade, critical minerals, renewable energy, and clean hydrogen exports, sectors where Australia can lead globally. It also helps to balance economic stability with climate responsibility, ensuring a just transition and social safety nets for workers and communities.

COP31 provides the stage to translate global scrutiny into action, showing that an energy-exporting nation can pivot from fossil fuel dependence to climate leadership. By starting with a clear moratorium, Australia can set the tone for a credible, staged, and measurable pathway away from fossil fuel expansion, securing both its international credibility and its domestic legitimacy in the urgent global race to net zero.

## Idea snapshot #9

### Leveraging the 'Green Zone' as a domestic deal-making bonanza



For Australia to fully reap the rewards of hosting COP31, it needs to create a platform for both large sovereign deals, as well as for the Australian clean tech industry to maximise the benefit through a bonanza of commercial dealmaking.

COPs now have both a 'Blue Zone' for accredited delegates (where formal negotiations take place and the national/international pavilions are located), as well as a nearby 'Green Zone', which lies outside the UN's high-security zone, but allows a very open and accessible separate space for corporate exhibiting and interaction.

This 'Green Zone' should be re-conceptualised to enhance its potential to be a genuine "deal making zone", including through the use of the latest technological tools, a curatorial hand with the assistance of relevant agencies (such as AusTrade), and through a greater physical and substantive connection to the COP that increases the overall and perceived importance of the space.

Doing so would powerfully drive home the economic benefit to Australia of hosting what is not only a significant diplomatic event, but also the largest green trade fair in the world.



**"It's also a massive trade fair and trading opportunity and I think we bring a perspective as a country, which is very clearly, traditionally, a fossil fuel country, to talk about the opportunities of transition, both for fossil fuel exporters and importers."**

~ Minister for Climate Change & Energy Chris Bowen

# Conclusion

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We know from history that Australian environmental diplomacy can make a pivotal difference on the world stage. And despite the refrain, Australia can “punch above its weight”. In other words, when Australia applies its minds and diplomatic might to something, its leadership can even influence the biggest countries and economies in the world.

Whether it be the international ban on mining in Antarctica that the Hawke Government forged in 1991, or even in hindsight the advocacy of the Howard Government for quantifiable emissions reduction targets. Similarly, the Rudd Government was instrumental in originally proposing at COP15 in Copenhagen the idea of what went on to become NDCs, and co-led the establishment of the Cartagena Dialogue for Progressive Action that helped the Paris Agreement ultimately emerge from the ashes. As well as Australia’s role in Copenhagen in first proposing the idea of a temperature guardrail as the Turnbull Government went on to support in Paris.

COP31 will require a whole-of-nation mobilisation led by the Prime Minister down if it is to similarly make a difference. But Australia owes it to future generations and to its neighbours in the Pacific to do just that.



**“Prime Minister Albanese now has the chance to show the Pacific – and the world – that Australia is ready to lead, at COP31 and beyond.” ~ Former UNFCCC chief Christiana Figueres**





“Hosting a COP is  
an Olympic-sized  
opportunity for Australia  
and the Pacific.”

~ **John Grimes**


CEO, Smart Energy Council


Founder & CEO, Renewable Energy Council Asia-Pacific (RECAP)





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 [smartenergy.org.au](http://smartenergy.org.au)

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