



HOW BIDEN CAN MAKE THE MOST OF HIS PACIFIC ISLANDS TRIP

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Later this month, President Biden is [scheduled](#) to make an official visit to Papua New Guinea while en route to the Quad Leaders' Summit from the G7 Leaders' Summit. The visit is being hailed as the [first time](#) that a sitting American president has ever visited a Pacific island country. It also builds on three prior events attended by senior leadership figures.

In 2018, former Vice President Mike Pence [visited](#) Papua New Guinea to attend the APEC CEO Summit. At that event, he [highlighted](#) the value of multi-billion dollar investments made in Papua New Guinea by ExxonMobil. He [declared](#) that the United States would partner with Australia and Papua New Guinea on Lombrum Naval Base. And he [promised](#) that the US government would protect the sovereignty and maritime rights of Pacific island countries.

Last July, incumbent Vice President Kamala Harris [addressed](#) the 51st Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting. In her remarks, she [acknowledged](#) that the Pacific Island Countries have not received the diplomatic spotlight that they deserve from the US government. She also [delivered](#) a commitment to strengthen the partnership between the United States and the Pacific island countries.

Last September, Biden hosted the US-Pacific Island Country Summit, where participants jointly issued a [Declaration on the US-Pacific Partnership](#). Separately, the Biden administration [published](#) a formal roadmap for how to implement the commitments made on the American side. This coincided with the release of a [Pacific Partnership Strategy](#) as an addendum to the [Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States](#).

During the upcoming visit, the Biden administration will seek to further strengthen the partnership between the United States and the Pacific island countries. This will start by putting Papua New Guinea on the list of [Presidential Travels Abroad](#). But, it will not end there. This trip will need to be about much more than a touch and go on a runway in Port Moresby.

The Biden administration will need to make this trip worth the risks. That will require President Biden to deliver on multiple commitments in the space of only a few hours. That will present its own challenges.

There are a lot of upstream dependencies and downstream uncertainties. The Biden administration will therefore need to be prudent in their selection of deliverables.

Here are four options they are likely to consider:

First, Biden should have a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Marape of Papua New Guinea. Assuming the negotiations will be concluded, that meeting would provide an opportunity to sign [new defense and surveillance cooperation agreements](#) between the United States and Papua New Guinea. That would mark an important bilateral win.

Second, Biden should have a joint meeting with Palau President Surangel Whipps Jr, Marshall Islands President David Kabua, and Micronesian President David Panuelo. Assuming the negotiations will be concluded, that meeting would provide [an opportunity](#) to announce the Compact of Free Association agreements between the United States and the freely associated states. That would enable the next phase in the renewal process to kick-off prior to the [debt limit X-date](#) and the summer recess for the United States Congress.

Third, Biden should have a multilateral meeting with the member states of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). That meeting would not only provide an opportunity for all parties to [attest](#) to the broadening and deepening of regional cooperation on priority issues such as climate change, economic recovery, maritime security, environmental protection, and international security. It also would present a platform for the PIF member states to independently observe that the US government is making progress against the [Roadmap for a 21st-Century US-Pacific Island Partnership](#).

Of course, not all commitments can be fulfilled through bilateral and multilateral meetings. The American public tends to exhibit [limited knowledge](#) about geography, foreign policy, and the world. It also appears to be [uncertain](#) about the economy and [impatient](#) with the ongoing war in Ukraine. There is a risk that such sentiments could endanger the billions of dollars that the United States government intends to spend on a revised diplomatic and military posture in the Pacific islands region. The Biden administration will need to mitigate that risk.

This presents the fourth option. The Biden administration should try to use the setting to their advantage. The American public may have severe gaps in their knowledge about Papua New Guinea, but many Americans know about the region through war stories about places like [Bismarck Sea](#) and Guadalcanal.

Some even have personal memories involving family members. President Biden is one of them. He reportedly had two uncles who were [based](#) in Papua New Guinea during World War II. The Biden administration could try to leverage these historic [battles](#) and personal memories to persuade a wider audience of the myth that America is a [Pacific nation](#).

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.