

# President Biden's Visits to United Kingdom and Ireland Must Serve Prosperity and Peace

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

President Biden's visits to the U.K. and Ireland should avoid folksy mythologies and focus on deliverables, including in particular a U.S.-U.K. free trade area.

The origins and lessons of the Good Friday Agreement, which President Biden will commemorate, are poorly understood in the United States.

U.S. relations with the United Kingdom, like its diplomacy more broadly, should be based on respect for national sovereignty.

## Biden's Visit to U.K. and Ireland Comes at a Crucial Time

At a summit in San Diego on the AUKUS Pact in March, President Joe Biden confirmed that he would accept an invitation from U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to visit Northern Ireland. Though the White House has yet confirm the details of the visit, it is reported that the President will arrive in Belfast on April 11 and then travel to the Republic of Ireland for three days on April 13. The visit is closely linked to the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, but the President will miss a gathering of world leaders, including Prime Minister Sunak, former U.S. President Bill Clinton, and King Charles III, in Belfast a few days later for a formal commemoration of that anniversary.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5311>

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Visits to the Republic of Ireland are a tradition for U.S. politicians, and President Biden's Irish ancestry always made it likely that he would follow that tradition. But the timing of the President's visit is significant, coming as it does shortly after the U.K. concluded an agreement (the Windsor Framework) with the European Union that is intended to resolve some of the defects of the Northern Ireland Protocol that was part of the U.K.'s exit from the European Union (EU). Though it is not being accompanied by a visit to London, the President's trip has the appearance of being a sign of approval for that new agreement.

The Good Friday Agreement was indeed a landmark achievement, and it is worth celebrating. But it should not be mythologized or sentimentalized as U.S. politicians and others around the world so regularly do. Folksy rhetoric about Ireland is no substitute for remembering the realities of the Agreement or for recognizing that U.S. policy must be based on respect for the sovereignty of the United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is an integral part.

## The Good Friday Agreement Was Not Simply About Trying Hard

The Good Friday Agreement is commonly referred to as an example of peacemaking that offers lessons to the world. Too many people take away from the Agreement the false idea that extremely complicated and long-standing political, religious, social, and cultural divisions can be overcome if people simply try really, really hard. As President Biden put it in his remarks on March 17, 2023, during the visit by Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar to the U.S. Capitol, "Hard to believe, 25 years ago, this year, that the agreement was made.... [N]obody, I thought, thought [it] was possible.... But people never gave up."<sup>1</sup>

This might be called the try, try again school of peacemaking, which has spawned a school of conflict resolution based on the belief that negotiations without preconditions, or lacking any wider context, are what matters. While persistence in any endeavor is obviously valuable, this theory explains absolutely nothing about the actual Good Friday Agreement.

In reality, as authors John Bew, Martyn Frampton, and Iñigo Gurruchaga explain in their historically informed and comparative study *Talking to Terrorists: Making Peace in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country* (Hurst & Company, 2009), the context of the negotiations that led up to the Good Friday Agreement was all-important. Central to this context was the fact that by the time the Agreement was concluding, Britain had inflicted a military defeat on the Irish Republican Army. The Good Friday Agreement set a political capstone on that successful campaign and would not have been possible without it.

## The Good Friday Agreement Was Not Simply About the Island of Ireland

By the same token, American politicians—and others—all too frequently present the Good Friday Agreement as one that is fundamentally about promoting links between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. As Senator Susan Collins (R–ME) put it in 2021, the Good Friday Agreement sought to “promote peace and stability on the island of Ireland.”<sup>2</sup>

This understanding, too, is partial at best. The Good Friday Agreement (more formally, the Belfast Agreement) contains three main strands, including North–South institutions to support cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. But it also created East–West institutions to support cooperation between the U.K. and the Republic, and it did all of this within the overall context of establishing the principle of consent for Northern Ireland’s status as an integral part of the U.K.

American politicians are too often inclined to substitute hand-me-down understandings of Irish history, comfortable generalizations about the Good Friday Agreement, and folksy rhetoric about Ireland for actually understanding the ins and outs of the Agreement or the Northern Ireland Protocol. At times, this tendency becomes embarrassing, as exemplified by the President’s comment at a Friends of Ireland lunch on St. Patrick’s Day that he was not really Irish because he’s “never had a drink” and that he was surprised to find family members in Ireland who “actually weren’t in jail.”<sup>3</sup> But the broader problem is that trading on Irish stereotypes is just as unhelpful as failing to understand that the Good Friday Agreement was about a lot more than just the relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

## The Biden Visit Should Focus on Deliverables

If the Administration’s current approach continues, the President’s visit to Northern Ireland and the Republic is unlikely to produce much, if anything, of value. Ideally, the visit would kick off the final stage in the negotiation of a free trade area between the United States and the United Kingdom. These negotiations reached an advanced stage under President Trump, but since then—purportedly because of U.S. concerns over the fate of the Northern Ireland Protocol—momentum has stalled.

While Senators John Thune (R–SD) and Chris Coons (D–DE) have recently introduced legislation to promote these negotiations,<sup>4</sup> the Biden administration entirely omitted the U.K. from its 2023 trade priorities, focusing instead on initiatives in the Indo-Pacific and Kenya.<sup>5</sup> With the

United Kingdom having just gained entry into the world's largest trade pact, the Pacific Ocean-centered CPTPP,<sup>6</sup> the U.S.'s failure to do more than run talking-shops with the U.K. is only causing it to lose valuable trading opportunities and further damage the U.S.'s position as the world's leading democratic power.<sup>7</sup>

In practice, the Biden Administration is not avoiding a trade deal with Britain because of concerns about Britain's relations with the EU. It is simply not doing trade deals with anyone, Britain included. At the same time, by relentlessly proclaiming its fixation on the fate of the Northern Ireland Protocol and its reverence for the Good Friday Agreement, the Biden Administration has done a good deal of damage to the political institutions in Northern Ireland that were established by the Agreement.

The dilemma is that the Agreement recognizes the reality that Northern Ireland is part of the U.K., while the Protocol required the U.K. to treat Northern Ireland as though it was an island apart. This was done to placate the EU, which valued the integrity of its Customs Union (and wanted to punish the U.K. for voting for Brexit) far more than it valued the Good Friday Agreement, of which it now poses as a defender and even (falsely) a progenitor. The EU, not the U.K., was the one that threatened to create the so-called hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and it was the political institutions and people of Northern Ireland who were sacrificed on the EU's altar because of the restrictions that the Protocol created on trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

The worst thing the President could do in Northern Ireland and the Republic is to continue to side unreservedly with the EU. The White House's statement on the Windsor Framework that a way should be found that "protects Northern Ireland's place within the UK's internal market" is a welcome break from this tendency, but this spirit has been lacking in U.S. policy under the Biden Administration, which has manifested a good deal more interest in hectoring the U.K. than it has in putting pressure on the EU to respect the Good Friday Agreement's recognition that Northern Ireland is indeed part of the U.K.<sup>8</sup>

The Windsor Framework is untested and has faced strong criticism from within the Conservative Party.<sup>9</sup> It may not succeed in resolving the dilemma that prompted its negotiation. If it does not, it will have to be replaced or renegotiated. In that case, the U.S. attitude should be based on respect for the sovereignty of the United Kingdom, which includes Northern Ireland. No other approach is compatible either with the Good Friday Agreement or with the broader U.S. interest in supporting democratic national sovereignty.

## What the President Should Do

The President should:

- **Avoid making Northern Ireland's problems any worse.** That means avoiding the usual U.S. half-truths about the Good Friday Agreement, such as describing it as an agreement that is only about and between Northern Ireland and the Republic or implying that it was simply the result of trying really hard. It means emphasizing the importance of re-establishing Northern Ireland's governing institutions, which have been badly damaged by the EU's vindictive approach. Finally, it means not describing the Irish (in Northern Ireland or the Republic) as drunks and criminals. This should not be a hard bar to meet, though the President and the U.S. have regularly failed to clear it in the past.
- **Finish serious negotiations with the U.K. for a comprehensive free trade agreement.** The U.S. is missing the boat on trade with the United Kingdom, while the U.K. now has the widest and most comprehensive array of liberalized trading arrangements with the world. For years, U.S. politicians have implied that the U.S. was holding off because of its concerns about the U.K. and the Northern Ireland Protocol. According to the President himself, that problem has now been resolved. If that is indeed the case, there is now no reason for further delay on the final negotiations that are needed to complete a U.S.–U.K. free trade agreement.

## Conclusion

U.S. politicians like to visit Ireland. Though the Irish lobby in the U.S. is not what it once was, Ireland retains a sentimental significance to a good number of Americans. Sentiment is a fine thing, but it is no reason to rely on mythologies and half-truths about the Good Friday Agreement, or—even worse—on the EU's destructive desire to sacrifice the Agreement that it pretends to value on the altar of its Customs Union. If that dispute is now indeed in the past, the U.S. should get a move on itself and finish the negotiations for a free trade agreement with the United Kingdom.

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## Endnotes

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