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## The Pacific Imperative: India's Strategic Awakening to South Pacific Geopolitics

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### ABSTRACT

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An especially important geopolitical battleground region in the 21st century has been the South Pacific Island Region, as the major powers of the world, such as China, the United States, Australia and India compete to have influence over the 14 of the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). In this article, the author studies changing geopolitics of the South Pacific, analysing the situation with strategic interests of the major powers and their consequences in the foreign policy and security interests of India. The paper examines the extension of the Indian Act East policy and the Belt and Road Initiative, (BRI) expansion into the Pacific by China and the reaction of the conventional powers such as Australia and the United States. Due to a thorough examination of diplomatic activity, economic cooperation, and security solutions, this paper shows how the South Pacific has been considered part of the greater Indo-Pacific strategy of India. These results imply that India should use more active and persistent methods of engaging the Pacific Islands to offset the presence that China increasingly takes up in the Pacific and also facilitate stabilisation and sustainability of the Pacific. The article forms the conclusion that the success of India in the Pacific will be determined by how it will present authentic partnership in dealing with climate change, sustainable development, and regional security issues of the Pacific Island countries.

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## Introduction

The South Pacific Island Region is made up of 14 sovereign Pacific Island Countries (PICs) which are widely distributed over vast oceanic areas; the region has docilely changed the status quo of being an international political backwater in the South Pacific to that of an intense great power contest. The transformational reflects the wider shift to the Indo-Pacific as the main geopolitical arena of the globe, where well-established and emerging powers will engage in the power rivalry, resource acquisition, and strategic positioning.

The strategic nature of the region can be summarized by the following factors: the location of the region on some of the most important sea routes among Asia-to-Americas, the vast Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), holding valuable marine and mineral resources, the importance of this region in global climate-related dynamics, and the position in broader Indo-Pacific security architecture. In the case of India, a rising power with global aspirations the South Pacific offers one more challenge as well as an opportunity as India tries to increase its traditional influence into new spheres of influence and counter the increased Chinese influence in the region.

The mentioned article focuses on the geopolitical processes in the South Pacific that are difficult to comprehend and their consequences in terms of foreign policy, security interests and the regional strategy of India. The research inquiry will tackle three main questions as the evolution of geopolitics in the South Pacific over the recent years, how, and why. What are the important contributors towards great power rivalry in the area? And what can India do to re-engage Pacific Island Countries to the benefit of both countries strategic interests, as well as to the stability and growth of the region?

## 2. The Geopolitical Landscape of the South Pacific

### 2.1 Geographic and Strategic Context

The South Pacific is a large marine area inclusive of about one third of the planet surface area which has 14 independent sovereign island states: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Although these countries are of a relatively small size both in terms of land mass and population, they have huge EEZ with a total area of more than 30 million square kilometres of ocean.



The high strategic importance of this area is associated with its location between the widely used shipping lines that provide access to around 60 percent of the entire world maritime trade. The area is also located at the pick of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, which is highly important when it comes to an overall Indo-Pacific policy. In addition, the dispersed character of these islands provides several strategic choke points along with possible power projection centres in the Pacific.

## **2.2 Traditional Power Structures**

Traditionally, geopolitical order in the South Pacific was controlled by the former colonial powers and the allies of this region. Historical connections, aid dependence and security treaties sustained the leading power of Australia and New Zealand. The United States nurtured a lot of influence by having territories in the region and partnerships related to security, whereas France left control of its Pacific territories.

Such traditional order was defined by rather steady relations and Pacific Island Countries were largely in line with institutions and values of Western democracy. The hegemonic role of Australia in the region was largely tolerated with the view that this was reinforced by high amounts of aid programs and security assistance. These traditional relationships were strengthened in a regional multilateral arrangement called the Pacific Islands Forum that was formed in 1971.

## **2.3 Emerging Challenges to Traditional Order**

The historical distribution of power started to encounter threat in the eve of XXI century when new players appeared in the regional arena. The development of China as a huge economic power was accompanied by their increasing interests in the Pacific because of their needs in the resources, and motivations of a strategical and global influence. This emerging situation has essentially shifted the regional balance of forces as well as produced new prospects and challenges to all the stakeholders.

## **3. China's Pacific Strategy and the BRI Expansion**

### **3.1 Strategic Objectives**

The interest in Pacific Island Countries is a major change in the geopolitics of the region in which China participates. The multi-objective of the Pacific strategy of Beijing is to secure sea channel access to trade and energy imports, lack of access to sea and mineral resources, creating partners with strategic links to



assist in the policies of China in global conferences, and developing the chain of possible strategic assets to compete in the long-term against the United States and its allies.

PICs are part of the Belt and Road Initiative of China and this has given Beijing a detailed roadmap in dealing with the Pacific. BRI provides China with an opportunity to provide infrastructure construction, economic collaboration as well as the technological cooperation many Pacific Island Countries take a liking to due to its development requirements and underdeveloped supply of external financing sources.

### **3.2 Economic Engagement and Infrastructure Development**

Economic activities between China and Pacific Island Countries have surged ever since 2006, when it became an annual event to hold China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in Beijing. Chinese funding and investment in African countries bordering it have risen exponentially and most of that money is directed at infrastructure construction such as ports, airports, telecom systems and government structures.

Included are the upgrading of Vanuatu and Solomon Islands ports, building of government buildings in various countries and extensive development of telecommunications infrastructure. Such projects usually have favourable financing conditions and generate dependencies that boost the Chinese influence on the policy decisions made by recipient nations.

### **3.3 Diplomatic and Political Influence**

Economic influence by China in the world has paid off diplomatically in a big way. Quite a number of Pacific Island Countries have changed their diplomatic relations to mainland China when it comes to Taiwan including Solomon Islands and Kiribati in 2019. It has emerged as one of most important characteristics of cross-strait relations and geopolitics in the region.

Something that goes beyond any form of official relations it has is Beijing being supportive of Chinese stands in international organizations, agreement on matters of human rights as well as territorial disputes and collaboration on climate change and policies on sustainable development. This is increasing political influence that has caused fears among traditional powers over the shifting regional balance.

## **4. Responses from Traditional Powers**

### **4.1 Australia's Pacific Step-up**



Australia has taken action with the current realization that China is posing a major challenge to its influence by implementing its policy at the Pacific, which was first termed as the Pacific Step-up, now known as Pacific Engagement Visa program and expanded engagement with the Pacific. The initiative is the most ambitious diplomacy and economic outreach of Australia to the region by decades, comprising greater aid, more security collaboration, and novel diplomatic efforts.

Among the Australian responses is the creation of new diplomatic postings, enhancement of the bureaucratic and defensive ties with the Pacific Maritime Security Program, and establishment of substantial augmentation of development aid. Australia-Pacific Infrastructure Financing Facility, launched in 2019, is specifically designed to offer alternative funding to projects in the region and other parts of the world.

#### **4.2 United States Re-engagement**

Another area that has drawn the attention of the United States is revived interaction with Pacific Island Countries. The National Security Strategy of the Trump administration precisely discerned the necessity to build partnerships in the Indo-Pacific in which Pacific Island Countries should be added. This approach has been followed by the Biden administration, which underlines the necessity of advancing democratic institutions and challenge authoritarian powers.

The initiatives in rebuilding diplomacy with key US include giving new diplomatic missions, diversifying the engagements in regional forums and non-security cooperation. As part of an effort to revive its Pacific strategy, the US has also tried to synchronize their approach with allies, especially Australia, Japan, and New Zealand: in the US official planning, the Quad and bilateral partnerships are applied.

#### **4.3 Other Regional Actors**

Japan has been consistent with their involvement with the Pacific Island Countries through Pacific Island Leaders Meeting (PALM) process which was established in 1997. The Japanese strategy is focused on sustainable development, disaster risk, and cooperation on maritime security. New Zealand, countries of the European Union also pursue their traditional involvement in the form of such assistance programs and diplomatic partnerships.

### **5. India's Pacific Island Engagement**



### **5.1 Evolution of India's Pacific Policy**

The participation of India in the Pacific Island Countries has changed a lot since introduction of the policy of the Look East by the Indian government in the 1990s renamed to Act east policy. This policy began as a Southeast Asia-cantered policy but has over time evolved to abridge the overall Indo-Pacific region, comprising Pacific Island Countries.

There are a number of strategic reasons that underlie India Pacific involvement: the necessity to counter the increasing strength of China in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, the necessity to develop relations that would support Indian ambitions of becoming a great power, and the necessity to formulate a great Indo-Pacific strategy that would include the Pacific Island Countries that command massive maritime areas.

### **5.2 Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC)**

FIPIC was created in 2014 during which India achieved a mark in its outreach to Pacific Islands. This regional scheme unites India, and 14 Pacific Island Countries in discussing common grounds in terms of political and economic, and development questions. The FIPIC summits occur every two years and have become a vehicle through which India gets to explain its vision of Pacific partnership and make new announcements.

India has declared different cooperation plans through FIPIC in terms of providing scholarships to the Pacific Island students and conducting capacity building programs and sustainable development plans. This is also an opportunity that the India has used during the forum to exchange its professionalism in information technology, pharmaceuticals and renewable energy.

### **5.3 Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance**

India has a development cooperation with Pacific Island Countries with the focus on technical assistance, capacity building, and knowledge sharing. Within the Pacific Islands the ITEC program has offered training to hundreds of Pacific Island officials in a wide range of areas including governance, information technology and sustainable development.

There is also a field where India has contributed its help like solar energy development, water management, and healthcare. Expansion of India Stack digital identity platform to Pacific Island



Countries indicates a new model of development partnership where India will deploy its expertise in technology.

#### **5.4 Economic Engagement and Trade Relations**

The financial interaction between India and the Pacific Island Countries is at an embryonic stage yet it holds prospects in the future. The levels of trade have been comparatively low since they reveal the geographical distance and lower economic compatibility. Nonetheless, there are opportunities in the pharmaceuticals, information technology services and renewable energy technology.

The increased focus by India on the blue economy in sustainable marine resource management is compatible with those of the Pacific Island Countries. Fisheries management, marine bio technology and ocean research can become areas of mutual economic cooperation.

### **6. Strategic Implications for India**

#### **6.1 Security Considerations**

The changing geopolitical aspects of the South Pacific are of great meaning to the security interests of India. The increased Chinese activity in the region, whether it presents operational and military facilities as well as capabilities of intelligence gathering could impose the security setup in the wider Indo-Pacific region which would be very critical to the strategic interest of India.

The prospect of Chinese military bases in the Pacific would serve as the capacity of power projection to an additional level that could influence the balance of power in the Indo Pacific. This issue has prompted India to enhance its domestic security alliances and view ways of how to contribute to the regional security structure.

#### **6.2 Economic and Resource Implications**

The huge EEZs the Pacific Island Countries have access to hold large mining and seas resources that may be more significant as the world continues to experience resource rivalry. The ability to access these resources and negative effects of monopolization of the same by competing powers is a powerful economic interest to India.



Theresa trade and energy security of India is impacted by the location of the region along the main sea lanes. Any interference with Pacific shipping channels is likely to bring dire consequence to the economy of India and therefore stability in the region is a pivotal concern.

### **6.3 Diplomatic and Multilateral Implications**

The countries of Pacific Islands, though possessing small populations, have their weight in the votes in the international organizations which takes on great importance in the multilateral forums. They can influence positions that India takes on different international issues, including climate change, international law, UN Security Council reform.

Development of strong relations with the Pacific Island Countries will thus facilitate its wider aims in terms of international relations and its desire to gain more leverage in international governance. It is especially crucial at the time when India is trying to gain entry to the UN Security Council as its permanent members and greater participation in other international organizations.

## **7. Challenges and Opportunities for India**

### **7.1 Geographic and Logistical Challenges**

India has huge constraints in conducting engagement with the Pacific Island Countries in a successful manner related to the geographic distance and connectivity problems. However, unlike China that possesses many ports and territories conveying to Pacific or Australia, which is geographically close, India has to overcome significant logistical challenges to sustain engagements.

Practically, there are limitations on direct transportation connections, high prices of traveling and trading, and small size of Pacific Island economies, all of them pose obstacles to more serious India-Pacific Island relationship. The challenges cannot be solved without any new solutions and long-lasting efforts.

### **7.2 Competition with Major Powers**

This is the scenario of an indulgence by India in Pacific Islander activity that addresses itself to heavy competition with China and difficulties of a combination of power with the conventionally established groups such as Australia and the United States. Such a competitive scenario necessitates that India has to



differentiate its stand without any duplication of efforts or conflict over certain objectives with like-minded partners who are trying to attain some common goals.

The issue will be how to identify a niche that capitalizes on the India specific opportunities and nurture on the greater regional interests of enhancing democracy, sustainable development and regional stability.

### **7.3 Limited Resources and Competing Priorities**

Though India is increasing its development assistance budget it is still not as large as the budget in countries such as China or more traditional donor countries such as Australia. This limited resource will demand that India be calculative with how it approaches this resource and instead look at areas with the greatest impact and comparative advantage.

India has competing priorities within its immediate neighbourhood and other parts of its strategic interest. Coordinating two competing interests and ensuring sustained interaction with Pacific Island Countries is difficult and has to be done with strategic planning and allocation of resources.

### **7.4 Opportunities for Partnership**

In spite of these difficulties, there are huge potentials in India finding serious associations with the Pacific Island Countries. The experience of India about democratic governance, sustainable development as well as technology innovations offers important knowledge that the Pacific Island Countries can draw.

Other promising sectors are renewing nuclear energy exploitation, information technology implementation, pharmaceutical collaboration, and the frugal use or maintenance of marine products. The increasing technological expertise and familiarity of India with the idea of frugal innovation may offer some solutions that are especially appropriate in the Pacific Island settings.

## **8. Climate Change and Environmental Diplomacy**

### **8.1 Shared Vulnerabilities**

Climate change is an opportunity and a challenge that India and Pacific Island partnership can work on. India and Pacific Island Countries have a lot in common concerning their vulnerabilities to the effects of



climate change, which means having the natural incentives to collaborate and join the forces in international climate negotiations.

Pacific Island Countries are some of the most exposed to sea-level rises, catastrophic weather effects and ocean acidity. India, the country with a long coastline and high numbers of population which is reliant on climate-sensitive industries, also experiences most of these vulnerabilities, which provides room to collaborate with regard to adaptation and resilience building.

## **8.2 International Solar Alliance and Renewable Energy Cooperation**

India can take the lead in setting up the International Solar Alliance and this will give both sides a firm point of departure in relation to meaningful collaboration, not only in respect to renewable energy development. A large percentage of the Pacific Island Countries have to spend high amounts of money on energy because they rely on fossil fuels that are being imported, and this has opened up the avenue to solar and other alternative types of renewable energy resources.

India has a record of mass scale implementation of solar and the advancement towards renewable energy manufacturing capacity is making it favourable to assist the Pacific Island Countries towards their moves of sustainable energy systems. Such collaboration would bring about developmental as well as diplomatic advantages to India.

## **8.3 Climate Diplomacy and International Negotiations**

International cooperation on the here-to-foreign courses of climate change is also another common concern. Pacific Island Countries have also been outspoken on the need to have ambitious climate action and India has also focused on notions of equity and common but different responsibilities.

A mutual point of agreement on climate diplomacy would improve India in global negotiation, especially to elevate the efforts and demands of Pacific Island Countries, in their quest to get more climate money and adaptation funding.

## **9. Future Prospects and Strategic Recommendations**

### **9.1 Enhancing Institutional Frameworks**



India ought to look at bolstering frameworks of institutionalization on Pacific Island outreach past FIPIC. One of them would be to have permanent diplomatic presence in the major Pacific Island Countries, intense Pacific Island desks in concerned ministries and develop specialized expertise on the Pacific Island affairs in the foreign policy apparatus of India.

Institutional relationships could be developed as well through regular high-level visits, growth of parliamentary exchange as well as people-to-people relationship which leaves long-lasting support to long-term partnering.

## **9.2 Leveraging Technology and Innovation**

There are possibilities of new ways of approaching the Pacific Island by India with the increasing technological strength. Such digital connectivity solutions, telemedicine programs, distance learning initiatives, and e-governance applications can offer good services and also signify the leadership position of India in the area of technologies.

The expansion of India digital public infrastructure to Pacific Island Countries has a promise to establish new types of collaboration taking advantage of India relative strengths and meeting the demands of the Pacific Island development.

## **9.3 Coordinated Approaches with Like-minded Partners**

Ways in which India can take the coordinated approach with the like-minded nations should be sought, namely, Australia, Japan, and the United States. This coordination would allow the concentrations of efforts to be as effective as possible and exclude any repetitions or complementary strategies.

Multilateral or trilateral cooperation programs would allow the exploitation of comparative advantages of each partner and show the joint interest in the development and security in the Pacific Islands.

## **9.4 Sustainable Development Focus**

The solution to these issues affecting the small island developing states must be incorporated in India working towards sustainable development in the Pacific Island engagement. This would be through blue economy, sustainable tourism development, reduction of disaster risk and adaptation to climate change.



The emphasis on sustainable development is not just about meeting the priorities of the Pacific Islanders but also about meeting the development experience and expertise of India, which can accordingly play a very fruitful role in partnership and sharing of experience.

## 10. Conclusion

South Pacific Island Region is an area that has a critical implication in regard to Indian strategic interests and foreign policy goals based on its geopolitical characteristics. With the intensification of the great power competition in the Indo-Pacific, Pacific Island Countries now have become critical players since their partnerships and alignments will play a major role in the balance of power and stability of the region.

The increasing Chinese influence into the region following the Belt and Road Initiative has disrupted the old balance of power and presented new problems to the old powers. The reacting nature of India that we have seen with the formation of organizations such as FIPIC and increased representation of the Pacific Islands can be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the region as strategic, but a lot more needs to be done to develop viable and mutual relationships.

The impediments that India has to encounter in engagement with Pacific Islands are notable as they can be summarized as geographic distance, lack of resources as well as tough competition with other prominent rising powers. Nevertheless, there seems to be a possibility of India building unusual partnerships with other countries, exploiting its technological skills, developmental experience, or common vulnerability to climate change.

To succeed in the Pacific, there will need to be a long-term dedication, new and inventive ways (strategies), and close collaborations with likeminded partners. India needs to transition away vulcanism approach to design holistic initiatives so that the priorities of the Pacific Island are met and at the same time boost the strategic interests of India.

The moves are risky. The geopolitical setup of the Pacific Island Region will change larger Indo-Pacific phenomena, international maritime security and international form of governance. The potential of India to establish fruitful relations with Pacific Island Countries will represent a significant challenge on its capacity as a rising power, and as an actor capable of carrying on its Indo-Pacific strategy.



The South Pacific poses a challenge as well as an opportunity as India seeks to move on with the future. Engaging Pacific Islanders with hard feelings, sustainability, and strategic thinking, India will be able to establish regional stability as well as pursue its own interest on the global landscape that is growing increasingly complex and competitive. It is time to put in place long-term, end-to-end engagement before other alliances take root and partnership opportunities are missed.

One way of determining the success of India Pacific Island engagements will boil down to the capacity to provide real partnerships that support true needs and priorities of the Pacific Island Countries and establishing the required trust and confidence needed to work together on strategic games. This entails learning to see the Pacific Island points of views, honouring their sovereignty and agency and adding value to their development and security goals.

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