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## Article

# Geopolitics of the South Pacific and Opportunities for India

Maitrayee Shilpa Kishore

### Abstract

*Several major powers --the US, Japan, France and Australia --are refocusing their attention on the South Pacific and are increasingly cooperating bilaterally and multilaterally with Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and with each other to prevent China from becoming the PICs' most important partner and provider of foreign aid. This presents India, which has stayed away from the region so far, with an opportunity to expand its footprint in the region in order to fulfil its vision of inclusive, sustainable growth for all countries in the Indo-Pacific. This paper, after exploring the various paths for cooperation, concludes that India's current momentum in the South Pacific needs to be sustained, if not increased, for it to emerge as a credible maritime power in the Indo-Pacific.*

### Introduction

The South Pacific has traditionally been conceived as the backyard of western powers such as Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States. Due to their small populations, economies and landmasses Pacific Island countries (PICs) have been consigned to the margins of strategic geography. However, developments in the last two decades necessitate a relook at the way other powers see their relations with Pacific Islands Countries and their role on the international stage. India is not one of the traditional powers that has a presence in the South Pacific, but the changing power dynamics in this region offer India the opportunity to partner with other countries and establish a presence in Oceania.

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An initial paper on this theme emphasising the strategic importance of India's ties with the Pacific island countries and the need for enhanced policy focus was carried by the National Security in August 2019. Please refer to Sundaramurthy, A. (2018) Looking Further East: India's Engagement with the Pacific Island States. National Security. (Online) 1 (1), pp. 124-145. <https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/aug-2018-national-security-vol-1-issue-1-ASundaramurthy.pdf>

Most of the countries in the Pacific are characterised by their small size, population, and economies that are import dependent and lack diversity. According to classifications adopted by the World Bank and the Commonwealth of Nations, these countries can be categorised as Small Island Developing States (SIDS) based on the criteria of population, landmass and GDP. After the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), these countries got control of very large Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Typically, the EEZs of Pacific island countries are hundreds of times larger than their landmass. This gives them control over a substantial amount of marine resources like fish stocks, minerals and fossil fuels. Furthermore, these countries have also taken the lead in international forums to advocate for measures to combat climate change, switch to renewable resources and adopt sustainable development practices.

Since the region is economically fragile and frequently affected by natural disasters, it is heavily dependent on aid which paves the way for the politics of aid or chequebook diplomacy. Traditionally, very few countries were involved in providing aid to this region, but as its importance grows, an increasing number of regional and extra-regional players are looking to enter the field. One of the most important factors in the renewed interest in this region is also China's aggressive foray into the Pacific, where some say it has ambitions to set up military facilities.

In India's narrative of the Indo-Pacific, this region has largely been ignored while India focuses on strengthening ties with countries that are geographically closer and have been traditionally part of India's diplomatic efforts. However, if India is to fulfil its vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and establish itself as a credible power in the Indo-Pacific, it needs to step up its presence in this region. This paper argues that the current political climate is best suited for India to increase its engagement with the region, bilaterally and in collaboration with other partners like Australia, Japan, France, the US and New Zealand that already have a footprint in the region. India needs to capitalise on existing relationships (such as those with Fiji and Papua New Guinea) and expand its diplomatic, economic and maritime presence in the region. This can be done by increasing the number of diplomatic representatives, financing bilateral and multilateral projects, organising regional and sub-regional exercises and events, actively participating in regional organisations and cultural and educational exchanges through people-to-people contacts.

**...the current political climate is best suited for India to increase its engagement with the region, bilaterally and in collaboration with other partners...**

These relationships will be mutually beneficial and help to promote regional cooperation on climate change, technological and scientific exchange and strengthen India's ties with its other partners like Australia, Japan, France, New Zealand and US.

### SIDS in the Pacific

The Pacific Ocean is home to fourteen PICs scattered over an area comprising around 15% of the earth's surface. Though the landmass of these islands is extremely small, due to the large exclusive economic zones (EEZ) that they control, the countries now refer to themselves as "big ocean states" rather than small island states.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the fourteen states, there are also territories controlled by the United States, France, Chile and New Zealand. Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the largest of the states in terms of population and landmass, followed by Fiji, which is home to just under a million inhabitants. Kiribati is the smallest state with a landmass of about 811 square kilometres spread amongst thirty-three small islands; however it has the 12<sup>th</sup> largest EEZ in the world.<sup>2</sup> This diversity in terms of population, geographical location and landmass has shaped the external relations of the PICs and the way external powers interact with them.

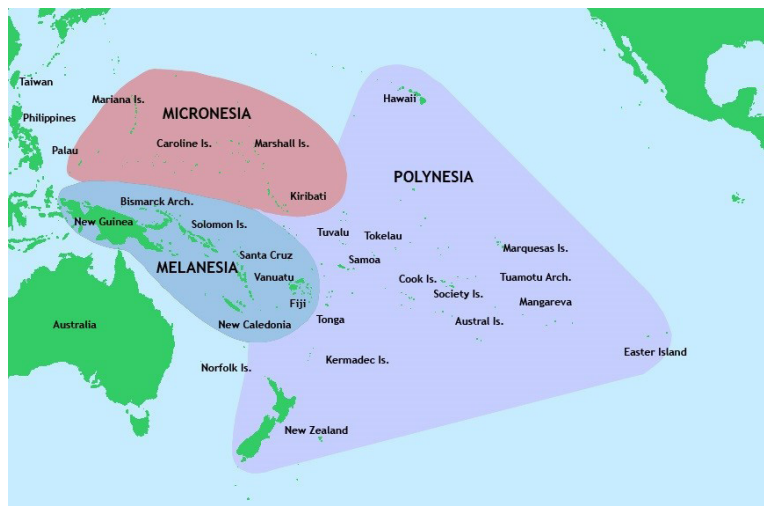
**Table 1: The Population, GDP, Landmass and EEZs of Pacific Island Countries**

| COUNTRY                           | POPULATION<br>(est. July 2018) | GDP (in billions<br>est. 2017) | GDP per<br>capita USD<br>(PPP) | LAND (sq<br>km) | SIZE of EEZ<br>(sq km) |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| <b>Melanesia</b>                  |                                |                                |                                |                 |                        |
| Fiji                              | 926,276                        | 8.629                          | \$ 9,800                       | 18,274          | 1,282,978              |
| Papua New Guinea                  | 7,027,332                      | 30.17                          | \$ 3,700                       | 452,860         | 2,402,288              |
| Solomon Islands                   | 660,121                        | 1.33                           | \$ 2,200                       | 27,986          | 1,589,477              |
| Vanuatu                           | 288,037                        | 0.72                           | \$ 2,700                       | 12,189          | 663,251                |
| <b>Micronesia</b>                 |                                |                                |                                |                 |                        |
| Palau                             | 21,516                         | 0.274                          | \$ 14,700                      | 459             | 603,978                |
| Federated States of<br>Micronesia | 103,643                        | 0.34                           | \$ 3,400                       | 702             | 2,996,419              |
| Kiribati                          | 109,367                        | 0.227                          | \$ 2,000                       | 811             | 3,441,810              |
| Marshall Islands                  | 75,684                         | 0.196                          | \$ 3,600                       | 181             | 1,990,530              |
| Nauru                             | 9,692                          | 0.16                           | \$ 12,300                      | 21              | 308,480                |
| <b>Polynesia</b>                  |                                |                                |                                |                 |                        |
| Cook Islands                      | 9,038                          | 0.29                           | \$ 16,700                      | 236             | 1,830,000              |
| Niue                              | 1,618                          | 0.1                            | \$ 5,800                       | 260             | 390,000                |
| Samoa                             | 201,316                        | 1.137                          | \$ 5,700                       | 2,821           | 127,950                |
| Tonga                             | 106,398                        | 0.59                           | \$ 5,900                       | 717             | 659,558                |
| Tuvalu                            | 11,147                         | 0.42                           | \$ 3,800                       | 26              | 749,790                |

Source: *Strengthening the U.S.-Pacific Islands Partnership* p.4

The countries in the Pacific are divided into three ethno-geographic subregions of Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Melanesia, covering an area of 10,00,000 square kilometres, lies in the Southwestern Pacific and includes Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, the French territory of New Caledonia and the Indonesian region of Western New Guinea<sup>3</sup>. This region has over 13 million inhabitants, most of whom live in PNG and Fiji. Because of its geographical proximity and large economy, Australia has a significant influence in the region and is the main source of political and economic assistance.<sup>4</sup> Polynesia is the region that includes New Zealand and lies to the east of Melanesia. Tonga, Tuvalu, Samoa, Niue and Cook Islands are part of this region, along with territories of New Zealand, France, Chile, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.<sup>5</sup> New Zealand, despite not being one of the Small Island Developing States, considers itself a part of this region and is generally accepted to be the main partner for most other PICs in Polynesia. Micronesia is the region lying to the north of Melanesia and includes Kiribati, Nauru, the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, the Marshall Islands and territories of the United States. The US has Compacts of Free Association<sup>i</sup> with the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau and the Marshall Islands. Apart from Kiribati and Nauru which have closer relations with Australia and New Zealand, the United States is the dominant power in the rest of Micronesia and has several military installations there.

**Figure 1: Subregions of Oceania**



Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pacific\\_Culture\\_Areas.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pacific_Culture_Areas.jpg)

The geographical isolation from the rest of the world, climate and topography, vast distances amongst territories and low population have created significant challenges

i. Compacts of Free Association is a term used for the agreement between the United States and the three Pacific Island Nations – The Federated States of Micronesia, Palau and the Marshall Islands. The US signed the COFA with Micronesia and the Marshall Islands in 1986 and with Palau in 1994. Under this agreement, the United States provides the three states with economic assistance and defence and allows their citizens unrestricted access to the US in return for exclusive access to the lands of the three states for strategic purposes.

for this region. The PICs lack irrigated arable land and most other natural resources, their economies are import dependent, resulting in high prices for goods and services that are very susceptible to fluctuation. Though the large EEZs have endowed these states with considerable marine resources, including the world's largest tuna fisheries, the lack of capacity to regulate the EEZ and monitor the fish stocks have resulted in this region having some of the highest illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing rates in the world<sup>6</sup> worth around \$600m annually.<sup>7</sup> Frequent natural disasters and the lack of fresh water further increases the dependency of PICs on other states. Climate change, which these nations see as an existential threat<sup>8</sup>, has greatly aggravated these issues with frequent droughts, coral bleaching, rising sea levels and tropical cyclones being the main causes of ecological and economic damage. This makes PICs reliant on aid from other large powers that operate in this region – particularly Australia, New Zealand, the United States, China, Japan, Taiwan and France.

### Importance of Pacific SIDS

Like most other small states, the PICs are also dependent on external players, but they have many assets that makes them indispensable to other powers and gives them agency in conducting their foreign relations. Till the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Pacific was considered as a backwater for the United States and its allies – UK, Australia, New Zealand and France and there was no competition for strategic influence in this region, which was considered unimportant and firmly under the influence of the West. Barring a few instances during the Cold War when Soviet overtures to PICs rattled the United States and its allies into actively courting cooperation from these small states, the region remained “a tranquil backwater where essentially passive U.S. interests required little attention.”<sup>9</sup>

**The South Pacific islands are in a strategically vital space that serves as the bridge between the Pacific and Indian Oceans.**

However, since China turned its attention to this region in the late 2000s, the traditional powers in the South Pacific have refocused their attention on these states to strengthen existing relations and ensure continued cooperation. The South Pacific islands are in a strategically vital space that serves as the bridge between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. There are several military bases controlled by the US, Australia, France and the UK as well as listening posts, missile testing stations, etc.

The vast EEZs of the PICs also contain some of the world's last remaining healthy wild tuna stocks. Foreign-based commercial offshore fishing licences are a major source of revenue for these countries and about 1200 foreign vessels operate in their waters.<sup>10</sup>

However, since the PICs lack the technology and human resources to fully fish their own waters, they catch around \$600 million worth of tuna annually, as opposed to foreign fishing vessels that are able to catch over \$2 billion worth of tuna in the same waters.<sup>11</sup> Though the EEZs of most of the PICs have not yet been fully surveyed for seabed minerals, it is estimated that they have deposits of a variety of minerals including rare earth elements, precious metals like gold, platinum and silver and nodules containing cobalt, copper, iron, lead, manganese, nickel, zinc and phosphorites.<sup>12</sup> Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Cook Islands have conducted or are currently undertaking promising mineral exploration projects in national waters<sup>13</sup> and licences for exploration and mining of the seabed have been granted to state and private players by some countries like PNG and Kiribati.<sup>14</sup> Cooperation between PICs and other powers who operate in the region to sustainably utilise these marine resources is a substantial opportunity to increase engagement with PICs.

In addition, though the PICs have not been at the centre of the foreign policies of most major countries, they are valuable allies in international forums like the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) where each member country has one vote. This has been an especially important factor for the People's Republic of China (China) and the Republic of China (Taiwan) who have been wooing the countries to recognise one as the legitimate sovereign state while withdrawing diplomatic recognition from the other. Today, of the seventeen states that recognise Taiwan, six are PICs and most others are small developing states in the Caribbean and South and Central America. However, these states, especially Palau, have been valuable allies for Taiwan as they have repeatedly spoken out in favour of Taiwan at diplomatic forums.<sup>15</sup>

### **Traditional Powers in the South Pacific**

The Southern Pacific region has been decolonised and most countries maintain relations with larger powers due to a colonial history. France, Japan, the UK and the US have relations with PICs due to their colonial past while Australia and New Zealand have maintained close ties with PICs due to their geographic proximity.

France has had and continues to have a strong presence in the Pacific, though it is not highly visible. It was one of the countries that colonised the Southern Pacific till the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and retains some territories and military bases there even today<sup>ii</sup>. As part of the European Union (EU), it provides development aid to the region and is also part of the humanitarian partnership FRANZUS with Australia and New Zealand. Despite its historical and developmental footprint, French strategic influence in the region is declining. President

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ii. New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, and Clipperton Island are the islands that France currently controls in the South Pacific.

Macron has sought to remedy this by announcing partnerships with India, Australia and Japan to redirect French resources to Asia, stimulate economic growth and re-establish its relevance in the Pacific.<sup>16</sup> Countering the growing Chinese presence with the help of partners who are also wary of the Asian giant is the strategy that France intends to follow.<sup>17</sup> This gives India the opportunity to leverage its economic, military and diplomatic ties with France and could serve as its point of entry into the South Pacific.

The United States is the other dominant power in this region and maintains military bases in Guam and American Samoa. It also has a close relation with The Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Palau through a compact association.<sup>18</sup> According to calculations by the Lowy Institute, the development aid by the US to PICs in 2016 was around \$63 million, falling behind that of Australia (\$798 million), New Zealand (\$192 million), Japan (\$180 million) and China (\$113 million).<sup>19</sup> However, Michael Walsh (2019)<sup>20</sup> argues that the US does far more in the region that does not fall under the narrow category of aid. This mainly concerns economic and other assistance given to independent states that have a Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the US and spans areas like immigration exemptions, educational grants, defence support and access to federal aviation, disaster, postal, and weather programmes and services. This ensures that the US remains a key player in the region.

Japan occupied some territories in the South Pacific during the Second World War and since then has maintained its relations with PICs, particularly the states in Micronesia. Today, it is the third largest donor to PICs with a total of \$874 million spent on over 850 projects since 2011.<sup>21</sup> It has a close cooperation with the United States and has been increasingly verbose in countering the Chinese rhetoric in the region by pointing out in various speeches and other official documents the strings that are attached to Chinese investments.<sup>22</sup> Japan also has strong ties with Taiwan and the two countries have jointly invested in some projects in Oceania much to China's chagrin.

Australia, the regional giant is by far the most important traditional player in Oceania and is also the largest provider of aid to PICs. Since 2011, it has committed over \$10 billion and spent more than \$6.5 billion on about 5000 projects mainly in the health and transport sector.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, New Zealand is also a significant donor for the region and has spent \$1.2 billion on over 1200 projects. These states also have a diverse trade and investment portfolio in Oceania. Both Australia and New Zealand began their relationship with PICs through colonisation and control and are still accused of being overly paternalistic in their foreign relations with PICs.<sup>24</sup> Due to this impression, Pacific countries, led by Fiji have made efforts to establish forums that exclude Australia and New Zealand to prevent these countries from "throwing their weight around".



There is a consensus amongst scholars studying PICs that Australia's estrangement with Fiji following the Fijian coup of 2009 marks a change in its Pacific diplomacy. While Australia sought to ostracize Fiji on global forums to underline its opposition to the coup, Fiji saw this as an attempt to meddle in domestic politics and took the opportunity to welcome China as a partner. Since then, China has made concerted efforts to go beyond the diplomatic rivalry with Taiwan and build robust relations with PICs to establish its footprint in the South Pacific – a strategically vital region that is also home to military bases of most Western powers.

### China in the South Pacific

The competition between China and Taiwan for diplomatic recognition meant that China has had to pay attention to the PICs since 1949, but it is only in the last decade, that it has widened and deepened its engagement with these small island nations. Since 2011, it has committed around \$6.5 billion in loans, of which it has already spent \$1.47 billion on 227 projects across the 14 PICs. Chinese economic activity is mainly concentrated in the larger economies of PNG, Fiji and Samoa with transportation and communication sectors being the largest recipients. It has also been expanding its diplomatic presence in the region and currently has missions in seven PICs. This diplomatic and economic push into the Pacific is changing the strategic landscape of the Pacific and poses new challenges to the traditional powers.<sup>25</sup>

**China has been upfront about the strings that are attached to Chinese aid with the Chinese ambassador to Vanuatu explaining that the recipients of aid are expected to support China's position in the UN while stating that "there is no free lunch".**

China has traditionally engaged in chequebook diplomacy with its smaller partners, mainly to get them to switch allegiances from Taiwan to China. In the recent past, five countries have switched to recognising China and have received generous aid and investment packages in return<sup>iii</sup>. But Chinese interest in the Pacific has moved beyond its competition with Taiwan. China now sees aid as a long-term engagement to enhance its status and position in global politics.<sup>26</sup> According to Searight, Harding, and Tran (2019), China has been upfront about the strings that are attached to Chinese aid with the Chinese ambassador to Vanuatu explaining that the recipients of aid are expected to support China's position in the UN while stating that "there is no free lunch".<sup>27</sup>

Despite these strings, PICs have been eager to avail of Chinese help due to the western countries' long history of paternalism. Western powers have been known to invest in sectors that they believe need the most investment as opposed to China's willingness to

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iii. \$50 million was pledged to Burkina Faso when it recognised China in 2018 while \$146 million was promised to Sao Tome and Principe in 2016 for the modernization of its international airport and construction of a deep-sea container port.

invest in any sector the PIC deems necessary. Neither does China suffer from the handicap of dealing with a messy colonial past.

China is currently focusing only on developmental loans but especially alarming for the other powers is the possibility of a Chinese military facility coming up in the South Pacific in collaboration with one or more PICs. In 2018, there were reports that the Lugainville wharf in Vanuatu, which was

**...especially alarming for the other powers is the possibility of a Chinese military facility coming up in the South Pacific in collaboration with one or more PICs.**

being funded by China, could be used as a permanent location for Chinese naval vessels.<sup>28</sup> The close proximity of this location to Australian and American waters triggered urgent discussion within these countries and serves as a template for a plausible situation in the future. Though China currently denies any intention of building bases in the South Pacific, it has stated its willingness to conduct security ties under the aegis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in this region.<sup>29</sup> For an emerging

power like China, military bases in the Pacific are not just important for their strategic value but are also opportunities in diplomatic posturing. Due to the long geographic distance between China and the South Pacific, its willingness to build bases and position assets there signal its commitment to expand beyond its immediate neighbourhood and its willingness to defy the wishes of status-quo powers.<sup>30</sup>

The speed with which China has established and deepened relations with PICs has been astounding, but over time, it too faces resentment due to its policies in the Pacific and elsewhere. This presents opportunities for India and other traditional Pacific powers to capitalise on the discontent and offer credible alternatives to the Chinese juggernaut.

The most prominent concern is the fear amongst smaller economies of falling into a Chinese debt trap, like Sri Lanka did leading to China seizing an entire port for 99 years. According to a CSIS report, "the International Monetary Fund has already warned that Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu all have serious debt repayment burdens and significant debt to China". Though China has indicated that it is willing to modify repayment schedules to assuage these fears, the Prime Minister of Tonga expressed his concern, saying "if it happened in Sri Lanka it can happen in the Pacific."<sup>31</sup> The Chinese insistence on bringing its own labour to work on projects it is funding is also a cause for resentment as locals perceive this as a lost job opportunity.<sup>32</sup> Chinese fishing vessels too are an object of major concern. The state-subsidised fishing vessels compete with local fishing communities, deplete fish stocks and are suspected to engage in Illegal Unregulated Unreported (IUU) fishing. Chinese fishing fleets also serve as a cover for intelligence gathering to spy on US bases and missile testing sites in the South Pacific.<sup>33</sup>

China has been accused of using its economic relations to threaten or coerce its smaller partners as in the case of Palau. Between 2010 and 2015, Palau saw a 100-fold increase in Chinese tourists which was a major boost to Palau's economy. In 2017, however, Palau was banned as a tourist destination by China, causing the tourist number to drastically drop as a way of pressurising Palau to withdraw its recognition of Taiwan.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, since Chinese relations with PICs rely overwhelmingly on elite-to-elite diplomacy, elections have frequently brought uncertainty about the allegiances of the new leaders, thereby reducing the efficacy and reliability of Chinese aid, which is not the case with traditional allies.<sup>35</sup>

The island states of the South Pacific have categorically refused to see their cooperation with major powers through the lens of western competition with China and have demanded that their agency over their foreign policy be adequately acknowledged.<sup>36</sup> The presence of multiple competing large power in the Pacific has enhanced rather than diminished the agency PICs possess. Like most small states, PICs play powers against each other to achieve their interests and in this way, "China's presence is undoubtedly democratising the Pacific by widening access to international finance".<sup>37</sup> India's entry into the foray, thus, will augment the choice of PICs and increase the number of alternatives from which they can choose.

Despite the assurances by PICs, traditional powers are wary of Chinese activities and this provides India its most important opportunity to establish a presence in the South Pacific. Recent political developments indicate that the South Pacific is back on the agendas of traditional powers. The 2018 election in Australia saw both sides of the political spectrum promising to refocus their priorities on the Pacific and reinvigorate existing relations with PICs in collaboration with its allies.<sup>38</sup> Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison made the Solomon Islands his first foreign visit and also promised a \$175 million investment there.<sup>39</sup> In the same vein, Australia, the US and Japan have initiated a trilateral project along with Papua New Guinea to explore Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) in its EEZ. They plan to fund similar projects in Palau and the Solomon Islands. The rhetoric surrounding these projects clearly indicates a will to counter Chinese influence in the islands.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Taiwan's Prime Minister Tsai Ing-wen has sharply turned towards the Indo-Pacific by establishing an Indo-Pacific Section in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and undertaking track II dialogues with Indo-Pacific countries including India as part of her effort to engage in "creative diplomacy".<sup>41</sup> The United States too has urged regional powers to step up their role in the South Pacific as part of an "informal division of responsibility" between the US and its allies.<sup>42</sup> The US's shift from Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific signals a greater space available to India as a partner of the United States.

## Opportunities for India

Since independence, the South Pacific has been peripheral to India's foreign policy interests and it has maintained nominal relations with these island countries. Due to physical distance and economic constraints, India still does not have a very robust relation with PICs. Currently, India has just two diplomatic missions – a High Commission in Suva (Fiji) and one in Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea)-- to serve the entire region. Since 2011, India has spent around \$32 million in the region, mostly as aid to Fiji and has committed around \$101 million more, most of it to Papua New Guinea. This is around 30 times less than the aid given by other major actors like China, the US, New Zealand and the EU.<sup>43</sup> So, while China has "preferential access to the economy" of the PICs and Australia, France, New Zealand and the US have the advantage of geographical proximity, India standing alone, starts at a distinct disadvantage.<sup>44</sup>

Though confined to the side-lines of Indian foreign policy, the importance of Pacific SIDS needs to be recognised and policies need to be put in place to improve India's relations with these fourteen island countries. On an ideological level, since the PICs are part of India's conception of the Indo-Pacific, they are by definition, important partners in implementing its vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) as well as achieving other goals like promoting the blue economy, combating climate change and encouraging the use of renewable sources of energy. PICs are especially active in international forums to speak out against human-induced damage to the maritime domain and will prove to be valuable allies in India's fight against climate change. Conversely, the backing of a large state like India would be a significant step towards mitigating environmental damage that threatens the very existence of the PICs.

**India also has a direct interest in preventing the establishment of any Chinese defence facility in this region.**

As discussed in earlier sections, the South Pacific also houses the military assets of most major naval powers making it a strategically vital region. For India, it could serve as the gateway to access the larger Pacific Ocean for trade and defence purposes. As it expands its space research capabilities, these islands could prove to be crucial bases where India can set up ground stations and observation posts. Fiji already supported India's 2013 Mars orbiter mission, which was launched from the South Pacific Ocean and India could look to other countries for collaboration as well.<sup>45</sup> India also has a direct interest in preventing the establishment of any Chinese defence facility in this region as it would give China a foothold from where it could threaten India's access to important trade routes in Southeast Asia.

Additionally, it could also diminish the ability of India's partners to operate from their bases in the South Pacific.

As India is an aspiring maritime power, going beyond its immediate neighbourhood and establishing relations with the islands in the South Pacific would show India's commitment to its goals and project India as a reliable partner and a major regional power. However, India stands to gain materially as well. Since the PIC's economies are dependent on foreign trade, Indian businesses can explore new markets in the South Pacific. Partnerships with the island countries to jointly survey and map the EEZs for seabed minerals, fish stocks and fossil fuels is another mutually beneficial avenue. India is already looking into such projects in the Indian Ocean with SIDS like Seychelles, Mauritius and the Maldives and an analogous model can be applied to the Pacific SIDS. Trilateral or multilateral projects with PICs and India's other partners like Australia, Japan, France and the US are also avenues that need to be explored. In addition, PICs, despite their size, are extremely valuable allies in international organisations where each state has a single vote. They have proved to be invaluable for states like China and Taiwan and could be indispensable to legitimising India's actions internationally and for attaining India's long-term goals like a permanent seat in the Security Council.

Recognising the importance of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific SIDS, the Modi-led government has made efforts to increase engagement with them, consistent with its Act East policy and focus on the Indo-Pacific. The most significant step came in the form of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), a multilateral summit between India and the fourteen Pacific Island states which was inaugurated in Fiji in 2014.<sup>46</sup> China followed closely on India's heels by organising Xi Jinping's visit to Fiji just two days after Modi concluded his and convening a similar forum of Pacific Island leaders.<sup>47</sup> The BJP-led government also established the India-Pacific Islands Sustainable Development Conference (IPISDC) to address the issues of clean energy, climate change and marine pollution. India has expressed its commitment to the SIDS Accelerated Modalities Of Action (SAMOA) Pathway<sup>iv</sup>. India is also trying to become a member of the politically and economically influential Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), of which Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea are part.<sup>48</sup>

While the ongoing efforts of the Indian establishment have brought it closer to the PICs, the momentum needs to be sustained. India has gained disrepute for delaying the executions of promised projects and such incidents should be scrupulously avoided in the Pacific. There are many more avenues that need to be explored bilaterally and multilaterally to ensure that the relationship becomes durable.

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iv. For further information on the SAMOA pathway, please refer to <http://www.sids2014.org/index.php?menu=1537>

Going forward, India possess a significant advantage over other powers – it does not suffer from the burden of a negative perception amongst the PICs. Traditional powers like Australia and New Zealand are viewed with suspicion due to their history of colonisation

**India's approach should be one that mixes bilateral partnerships with PICs with multilateral ones that include other large powers but give primacy to the needs of the island countries.**

and interference in domestic politics of the island countries. Similarly, France meted out brutal treatment to its Pacific colonies and is currently dealing with a pro-independence movement in New Caledonia. The US carried out repeated nuclear tests on its Pacific territories which are today independent states and speak out against this unfair treatment. China too is seen as a country that readily uses coercive tactics with smaller

partners and there is also a cultural disconnect with the people of the PICs. By contrast, India has cultural ties with countries like Fiji and is not seen as a coercive power and thus it does not need to circumnavigate a negative rhetoric when it engages with the PICs.

### **Bilateral and Multilateral Cooperation in the South Pacific**

While this clean slate and a relatively non-aligned foreign policy gives India a wide margin in terms of which PICs and powers to engage with, Patrick Walsh (2017)<sup>49</sup> cautions against looking at the Pacific solely through the lens of the traditional powers. Since PICs are wary of the powers' overbearing approach, India's total alignment with their position may estrange it from the PICs who are pushing to find their own voice through regional institutions that keep out larger powers. Instead, India's approach should be one that mixes bilateral partnerships with PICs with multilateral ones that include other large powers but give primacy to the needs of the island countries. Climate cooperation is one such avenue where India has a similar stance to that of other Pacific countries and the EU, Japan and New Zealand.

As it engages bilaterally with the island countries, its policy needs to be one of prudence. Though India cannot outdo major donors like Australia, China, Japan, US and New Zealand, it has much to offer. Learning from Taiwan's engagement with its allies in the South Pacific, India should invest in sectors that are of vital importance to the people of the PICs. Sectors like agriculture, water management, industry and health are areas where foreign investments directly touch the lives of people. Though less visible, investment in these sectors would help build better people-to-people contacts and offset the financial disadvantage.<sup>50</sup> Capitalising on its soft power by virtue of being a large, inclusive, multicultural democracy, Indian projects should make it a point to portray these principles in all interactions with PICs to build lasting bonds that go beyond the material contributions.

Another major opportunity exists in the renewable energy sector. India has repeatedly shown its commitment to promoting the use of renewables internationally by founding the International Solar Alliance and by signing agreements to partner with many countries in Europe, Southeast Asia, North America and Oceania.<sup>51</sup> The most notable ones being with the small island nations of Fiji and Seychelles in the fields of solar energy, bio energy and small hydro energy.<sup>52</sup> Fiji, which possess vast untapped geothermal energy resources due to its location on the volcanic “Ring of Fire”, is the ideal partner with which India can further develop technologies to harness this resource. Similarly, Kiribati, Vanuatu and the Marshall Islands are working towards increasing their use of off-grid solar photovoltaic systems<sup>53</sup> and technology sharing with India, which produces solar energy at one of the cheapest rates in the world, would help reduce their reliance on fossil fuel imports. Food and water security is another area where the PICs are facing severe problems, experiencing frequent droughts, floods and cyclones that have, at times, necessitated water to be flown in from neighbouring countries.<sup>54</sup> Indigenous fuel-independent desalination technologies such as Low Temperature Thermal Desalination (LTTD) should be shared with PICs to improve water security. This would also enable India to test the new technology under various climatic conditions and improve it in partnership with the island countries.<sup>55</sup> Sustainable energy and combatting climate change is especially salient since the PICs have been uneasy because of Trump’s reluctance to take this problem seriously and the US withdrawal from international agreements to combat climate change. This has created space for other countries, especially India, Japan and Taiwan to step in and provide viable alternatives in terms of expertise and funding.

India’s track record of aiding developing countries in the Indian Ocean region such as Sri Lanka, Mozambique, the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius to build coastguards, survey EEZs and enforce maritime law and environmental safety standards make it a strong contender for partnerships with PICs. Furthermore, the Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard (ICG) also have an excellent relationship with their Australian counterparts, making the South Pacific a natural area for multilateral cooperation. ICG’s success in tackling marine pollution and coastal clean-ups along with its proficiency in Search and Rescue (SAR) and Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR) makes it a valuable partner for PICs that have extremely large EEZs and face problems like IUU fishing, marine pollution and dumping. Similarly, the Indian Navy regularly cooperates with the French, Australian and American navies and the Japanese Self Defence Forces. Holding regular exercises and an increased presence in the South Pacific in coordination with these navies would help orient India to a relatively unknown environment.<sup>56</sup>

Leveraging its relationship with France, India could also look to cooperate with the European Union, especially on projects in the water, sanitation and energy sectors, where the EU is currently funnelling 24.5% of its total aid to the Pacific.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, as a member of the Commonwealth, of which nine PICs are also part, India should step up its interaction with these states, especially on issues related to climate change. In the Commonwealth, action groups on various marine environment related issues are led by Pacific island countries like Vanuatu (marine plastic pollution) and Fiji (ocean and climate change) while Mauritius, Seychelles and Belize lead several others.<sup>58</sup> By contributing to the efforts of these groups, India could foster a closer relationship with PICs. India is also a dialogue partner in the Pacific Islands Forum along with the US, Japan, France and Germany. Here too, avenues for bilateral and multilateral cooperation could be explored.

## Conclusion

India's deepening relationship with the South Pacific countries is a mutually beneficial process – in terms of strategic, economic, diplomatic and ideological facets. As a new player in the region, India does face some disadvantages as compared to traditional powers and China, but it also has significant advantages in the form of a clean slate and no burden of negative perception and the attraction of its soft power by virtue of being a multicultural society, like many of the island states. Though it cannot currently divert large amounts of financial resources to the South Pacific to compete with traditional powers in terms of volume of aid, it can engage with the PICs more meaningfully in areas that are of most concern to them. Keeping in mind that the PICs are wary of an overbearing or interfering attitude as shown by other powers in the past, India should steer clear of such actions and make the developmental priorities of the PICs the guidebook it uses to direct its aid and investment. India needs to massively step up commercial engagement with this region, especially with the larger economies – Papua New Guinea and Fiji – which will become stepping-stones to establishing a presence in the markets of other smaller islands.

The Chinese entry in this region has changed its strategic dynamics. Chinese projects here are highly visible affairs and it is pushing to overcome cultural disconnect by establishing Confucius Institutes in the South Pacific, encouraging tourism and educational exchanges. This push into the region has alarmed western powers and while the PICs have explicitly stated that they do not want aid to the South Pacific to be seen in terms of competition between China and other powers, this remains the dominant narrative that drives the actions of the traditional powers. PICs are thus getting to choose from a variety of possible donors rather than being under the thumb of a single regional hegemon.



For India, the competition of traditional powers with China and their refocused strategy to maintain influence in the South Pacific provides excellent opportunities to undertake multilateral cooperation and achieve a two-fold objective. On one hand, it would improve India's relations with the PICs as the presence of the traditional powers will be gateways for it to approaching the island countries, and on the other, it would help strengthen India's ties with its partners – Australia, Japan, France and the United States. However, India should be careful as to not lose this momentum lest it should miss the opportunity provided by the favourable political situation in the South Pacific. As an aspiring maritime power based in the Indo-Pacific, expanding its presence to the South Pacific would indicate its commitment to this objective and make India a more credible regional partner.

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