

# Looking and Acting Beyond East: India's Tryst with the Pacific Islands Countries (PICs)

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## Abstract

*The Indo-Pacific is vital to India's security and prosperity. Given the changed strategic landscape in the region owing to the ongoing major power rivalry, India must be proactive in the region. This paper examines India's strategic interests in, and dealings with, the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) since 2014, within the conceptual framework of India's 'crisis-time global leadership' and shouldering of a balancer role in the region. It also looks at the concerns and expectations of the small island nations from India within the Indo-Pacific geostrategic context. Today most of India's engagement with the region is confined only to developmental projects, and the nature of these engagements should be revisited and reworked if India wishes to play the role of a security-provider in the region which is imperative for India's global leadership ambition. Taking advantage of a sizable Indian diaspora in the South Pacific nations, India can exercise its soft and hard power within the diplomatic framework of its Act East Policy – the next frontier to be added to the diplomatic strategy. This paper suggests that, India has to take the South Pacific small island nations into confidence and make them stakeholders in the India-designed maritime security architecture.*

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Pacific Island Nations, Act East Policy, Crisis-time global leadership of India.

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been significant interest in increasing engagement with India within Oceania which covers the southern Indo-Pacific stretching between Hawaii, Japan, and New Zealand. Particularly the 14 small island nations<sup>7</sup> in the South Pacific region “look to India to take a greater lead in resolving the great challenges of our time.” (Fiji Government, 2015). Reciprocally, India has reached out to island nations with development assistance, without a consolidated South Pacific strategy but as an extension of its Look East Policy until 2014. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s decision to visit Fiji in November 2014 marks the beginning of a new era in India’s engagement with the region. Today, many view India’s engagement with the small island nations as India’s “strategic foray into the Indo-Pacific,” (Singh, 2014; Mohan, 2014) while others argue that India, as the Indian Ocean littoral, is a natural player in the Pacific whose coastline stretches to the Indian Ocean.

Whatever the rationale, the Indo-Pacific is vital to India’s security and prosperity. Given the changed strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific owing to major power rivalry along with a fluid world order (some view it as ‘world adrift’) (The Takshashila Institution, 2021) imperative for India to play a consistent role in the region as part of its ambition to become a global player. Meanwhile, the geopolitical stock of the South Pacific, impacted by maritime competition between the USA and China, has increased India’s strategic orientation towards the region. Besides, India’s strategic interest in the South Pacific has India-driven reasons: firstly, while pursuing its ambition as a global leader, India’s maritime strategy and blue water presence must extend beyond the Strait of Malacca to establish itself as a naval power in the wider Asia Pacific region; secondly and as a corollary of the first, Pacific island nations are ‘India’s far flank’ and a logical expansion of its Look East/Act East policy supplemented by wider maritime outreach; thirdly, the imperative of revival of historical cultural and maritime ties between the South Pacific Islands and India, which goes back to the Chola dynasty’s link with the Polynesians; and lastly, taking advantage of the presence of ‘persons of Indian origin’ and the sizable Indian diaspora in the South Pacific island nations, India can exercise its soft power for such a projection and garner support for positioning at UNSC for permanent membership.

Officially, India “does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a club of limited members nor as a new theatre for geostrategic contestation. It includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it aimed at Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).” (Embassy of India Moscow, 2021) Until now India has never intended to extract economic or strategic benefits from the small island countries and therefore kept most of its engagements developmental in character. Shouldn’t this consideration be revisited given the unfolding geopolitical scenario, where China is planning to expand its military bases in, and security pacts with, countries like Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Tonga, etc.?

Given its historical linkages and cultural affinity with the small Pacific Island Countries (PICs), also known as Large Ocean States (LOS), for many centuries, India’s outreach to the South Pacific region is viewed as a logical step forward in its Act East policy. But to deconstruct the imperative of India’s engagement with the

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<sup>7</sup> The 14 island nations include the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

South Pacific nations, one needs to introspect beyond the Look East/Act East framework which emphasizes that the Pacific stretches to the Indian Ocean, and India as the Indian Ocean littoral is a natural player in the Indo-Pacific region. This article examines India's strategic interests in and dealings with the PICs since 2014, within the conceptual framework of India's 'crisis-time global leadership' and shouldering of the balancer role in the region amidst major power rivalry. It also enquires about the concerns and expectations of the small island states from India within the Indo-Pacific geostrategic context.

## Deconstructing the Traditional Narratives

Largely, three geopolitical narratives are advanced to frame India's foray into the Indo-Pacific including the South Pacific region. First, the Pacific region is the next frontier of the Act East policy; India should transform it into an 'Act Indo-Pacific' policy (Dey, 2020) at a time when the global centre of gravity is shifting towards this region triggered by Chinese expansion and the US' Pacific rebalancing (Motulalo, 2013). Second, India has to expand its naval presence based on expanding its 'blue water' strategy in the Pacific with the aim to become a maritime power in the wider Asia Pacific as a counter-weight to Beijing's expanding military profile in the South Pacific. Third, India's aspiration to play a larger role in global affairs requires it to engage with every region of the world, particularly the Pacific Island nations. These countries not only contribute significantly to shaping the legitimacy of international institutions but could also play a crucial role in supporting India's bid for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

From the perspective of strategic and national interests, these three narratives sound realistic but do not confirm India's promise to the PICs of a "partnership of equals driven by similar aspirations" (PM India, 2015). PM Modi's assurance to the leaders of PICs during the FIPIC Summit in Jaipur in August 2015—that India will "remain very sensitive" to their concerns in international forums as well as "shape bilateral cooperation in accordance with their needs and priorities"—seems prudent." (PM India, 2015) China's offer of a "Common Development Vision" (*The Economic Times*, 2022) and attempts to get involved in the security, economy, and politics of the South Pacific failed to achieve a consensus in the region (*Al Jazeera*, 2022). A five-year action plan for China's involvement in the security, economy, and politics of the South Pacific did not receive an endorsement from the South Pacific countries even though China has signed Belt and Road cooperation MoUs with all 10 PICs. Therefore, the argument—"the Pacific Islands could stand to gain greater flexibility as they deal with Beijing and Washington by looking into deeper development partnership with New Delhi" (De Mullan and Prasad, 2021)—needs to be revisited. India's greater presence and role may be an enabling factor as India has no peer rivalry in the region and has friendly relations with the US. But any hot pursuit of India's strategic interests in the South Pacific will not remain unopposed.

Also, the PICs have not wholeheartedly embraced the "Indo-Pacific" construct yet; they are rather concerned about the geostrategic competition being recast under this rubric (Taylor, 2018). In September 2018, the Prime Minister of Samoa Malielegaoi in a lecture at the Lowy Institute expressed that "the renewed vigour with which a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy' is being pursued leaves us with much uncertainty. For the Pacific, he fears, there is a real risk of privileging the 'Indo' over the 'Pacific'." (Taylor, 2018) It is clear that the Pacific Island Countries do not want to be treated as pawns in some strategic game being played out in the Pacific and the wider Indo-Pacific; rather they "sought to develop a collective pan-Oceanic identity and to capture their collective identity and common interests. Environmental and human-security issues loom much

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larger for them than military ones do.” (Taylor, 2018) Therefore, India’s strategic presence in the Pacific may not be enthusiastically welcomed by them because they may be vulnerable but are not really powerless, and not in the backyard of any state. They may welcome Indian Navy’s goodwill visit to the Pacific Islands but purely for humanitarian missions.

Beside other factors, the significant presence of the Indian Diaspora near sea routes to the Pacific Ocean and littoral regions led the Indian Maritime Strategy 2015 to designate this area as “the secondary area of maritime interest for India.” (Indian Navy, 2015). India’s decision in July 2014 to send its new stealth guided-missile frigate INS Sahyadri to join the RIMPAC naval exercises held by the US in Hawaii was not only a decision taken in competition with China’s similar participation but a test of India’s naval operational capability in the Pacific basin. The island countries consider themselves as ‘large ocean countries’ and endorse the ‘Blue Pacific’ identity for the collective potential of the region based on an explicit recognition of its shared “ocean identity”, “ocean geography”, and “ocean resources”. (Pande, 2018) Any assertive presence by the Indian Navy without invitation from PICs would not be welcomed. Therefore, India has explicitly stated that its intention is to have the South Pacific Islands only within its overall maritime reach; this maritime forward perspective is “not a replacement of their continental partnerships in Eurasia or East Asia.

Lastly, the narrative that India’s global power ambition necessitates it to enhance its strategic presence in every corner of the world including maritime forward posture in the South Pacific would negate India’s own vision of Indo-Pacific which is based on ‘continental partnership’ instead of ‘strategic foray’. India’s global presence is essential, but this pursuit does not need to mirror the strategies of Western powers or China, which rely on military presence and influence. India’s ambition and pursuit to become a global power should not replicate the Western model of global dominance. India, instead, is projecting itself as a ‘compassionate global power’ that would like to shape the emerging global network through its unique capability to lead the world in times of crisis – in other words, crisis-time global leadership, an essential attribute of a major power.

Generally, three attributes characterize a superpower: (1) global presence; (2) insulate one’s own backyard while ensuring any other part of the world is not dominated by other powers; and (3) creation of global governance structures. Most superpowers of our time strived to acquire these capabilities and others have tried to replicate them. Though its diaspora is globally present and its soft power is spreading, India is not militarily spread out like other superpowers. Its own backyard is constantly penetrated by major powers. In terms of the creation of global governance structures, India lags far behind, except for its active participation in many multilateral institutions. Only recently, it was instrumental in the creation of one multilateral energy-related agency i.e., the International Solar Alliance (ISA). Therefore, in classical geopolitical parlance, India does not fit into the global power narrative. But India has always tried to assert its cultural and spiritual superiority along with its ‘largest democracy’ identity to remake the terms of recognition as an ‘exceptional’ country. “Different Indian civilizational imaginaries across time produce a pedagogical imperative, aimed at the transformation of global social hierarchies.” One such Indian lexicon promoted by the highest political officials in recent days is ‘Vishwaguru’, ‘Jagadguru’ (Guru of the world) or Viswabandhu (friend of the world) which is believed to be “the cure for an enervated soul, a healing balm for a wounded world”. (Mehta, 2022) As per this lexicon, India, “a beacon to the world”, is endowed with the power to “bring enlightenment to a benighted world.” (Mehta, 2022) The ideals of Vishwaguru are saintly (on spiritual, material, historical, aesthetic and political levels), all rolled into one as a pedagogical imperative aimed to transform global social hierarchies to bestow India with its rightful place in the comity of nations. It is, in a way, India’s global “assertion of social superiority to remake the terms of global power recognition.” (de Estrada, 2023). The Viswabandhu India, a

major power of its own kind, has assumed the task of offering something that the global community so very critically requires, which the Superpowers or the existing major powers cannot provide, i.e., crisis-time global leadership.

### India's Global 'Crisis-Time Leadership'

The current world order is defined by a power hierarchy, with major powers expected to take the lead during crises to ensure global stability. Crises often crop up in different parts of the world and usually, the US plays, or is expected to play, a stabilizing role. During the Cold War, both superpowers provided leadership to their respective allies by addressing issues that could lead to a crisis situation. In the post-Cold War world, the US, being the sole superpower, assumed the role of a crisis manager or net security provider in different parts of the world by spreading capitalist-liberal ideology and/or through military intervention. At times, superpowers become entangled in conflicts with each other, allowing crises to escalate or go unresolved. Occasionally, they turn inward to focus on domestic issues, leaving global problems without the necessary solutions. For instance, instead of collaborating, both China and the U.S. focused on blaming each other for the spread of the coronavirus, failing to provide the global leadership needed to address the pandemic.

India, on the other hand, has shouldered global responsibilities when new geo-political ground realities threaten world peace and harmony. Therefore, many consider it a 'compassionate global power' "with a worldview that fosters global peace, harmony, and the well-being of humanity as a whole." (Kumari, 2022) During the Cold War, both the US and USSR were entangled in an ideological tussle to dominate the world which led the world almost towards Armageddon. This was a prolonged global crisis when the Afro-Asian countries (Third World) were afraid of getting sucked into this rivalry and were in search of leadership to bail them out. India, with its powerful idea of non-alignment, offered a unique solution that helped in containing and defusing the Cold War crisis. In many other crises, India has extended leadership, such as the Indonesian freedom struggle of 1947, the Korean crisis of 1950, the Suez Canal crisis of 1956, Operation Cactus in response to the coup in Maldives in 1988, LTTE crisis in Sri Lanka and India's air operation 1989-90, several air evacuations of nationals from war zones, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operation during 2004 Tsunami in Southeast Asia. In the recent past, India showcased crisis-time leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic when all major powers were inward-looking; India managed to sync its domestic requirements and global responsibilities. Besides humanitarian assistance, "India delivered over 65 million doses of vaccines to 100 countries" and emerged as the 'pharmacy of the world'. (Outlook Web Desk, 2021) Within the crisis-time global leadership narrative, India's presence in the Indo-Pacific, and engagement with the South Pacific small island countries, should be examined.

### India's Pacific Linkage in Retrospect

India's cultural, economic, and political connections with the Indo-Pacific region, in general, can be traced back to millennia. Between 300 AD and Europe's medieval period, the Chola empire in southern India was the cultural and political core of the region. (Medcalf, 2020) During the colonial period, particularly from 1879 to 1916, around 60,000 Indian workers were brought to Fiji by the British to work on sugarcane plantations

(High Commission of India Suva, 2024). In the early 20th century, Indian traders, along with immigrants from Gujarat and Punjab, arrived in Fiji as free settlers. This led to a significant increase in the Indian population over the following decades, which grew by up to 40%. As a result, Fiji is often referred to as the *Little India of the Pacific* (Coulter, 1942).

Post-Independence, India showed the desire to build close links with the Pacific Islands; in 1948 it established a Commission for the Government of India in Fiji. After the independence of Fiji in 1970, India upgraded it to a High Commission and New Delhi conducted its diplomatic functions with other island nations from there. However, India had limited contact with other states like Tonga, Tuvalu, Nauru, and the Cook Islands through its mission in Suva (Fiji's capital city). The mission in Papua New Guinea (PNG) is accredited to Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. The other Pacific Island nations are connected through Indian missions in Wellington, the Philippines and France. India has only two High Commissions across all 14 PICs, therefore, many argue that "given this patchy and difficult-to-coordinate diplomatic coverage, it is not surprising that India has been slow to capitalize on its natural affinities with the region." (Motulalo, 2013)

This does not mean the Pacific region was not on India's diplomatic radar. In 1973, as part of its developmental assistance, India donated clothes and medicines to Tonga; in 2006, India offered Fiji a 50.4 million Line of Credit as assistance to modernize its sugar industry. Visibly, India has prioritized its relations with Fiji due to its sizable Indian diaspora and Papua New Guinea because of trade and minerals. Former Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi both visited Fiji during the 1980s. Political efforts to strengthen ties with Fiji, and Pacific nations more broadly, were hindered by the 1987 coup. In response, India imposed trade sanctions and downgraded diplomatic relations, including closing its High Commission in Suva. Relations with Fiji improved in 1999 with the reopening of the Indian High Commission as Mahendra Chaudhry from the Indian community was elected as Prime Minister. Unfortunately, another coup in Fiji prompted India to impose further trade sanctions in 2000-2001. Many Indians began to migrate to Australia and New Zealand. Thus, many are of the view that "India had little success in engaging with the South Pacific, in large part because India tends to rely on and view the region only through the lens of its relations with Fiji or Australia/ New Zealand." (Motulalo, 2013) The irony is Fiji did not establish a diplomatic mission in India until 2003, and people say that India's strained relations with Fiji since 1987 is "partly responsible for its lack of interest and presence in the wider region." (Prasad, 2012)

But as the political situation improved in the island state in subsequent decades along with the birth of a new diplomatic framework—the 'Look East' policy of India (MEA, 2009) that dove-tailed with the 'Look North' Policy of the Pacific Islands—India's engagement with the PICs took on a new identity. Look North policy refers to the efforts by the island countries, starting in the 1970s when they emerged as independent nations, to build deeper ties with the stronger economies of Asia – mainly Japan and China to overcome their economic difficulties. (Croccombe, 2007) In 2005, a diplomatic breakthrough emerged with a series of positive developments like the setting up of a joint mechanism the Fiji-India Foreign Office Consultations (FOC), India announcing loans to upgrade Fiji's sugar mills, the visit of Fijian Prime Minister Qarase and Foreign Minister Tavola to India, and signing of the Development Cooperation Agreement in October 2006, etc. In December 2006, another coup took place but the new Bainimarama government assured New Delhi of not targeting the Indian community, therefore New Delhi's reaction was muted.

Besides Fiji and PNG, India, of late, has also established some links with other South Pacific countries like Tonga, Cook Island, Vanuatu, Samoa, Kiribati, etc. Besides bilateral engagements, India has been part of many regional frameworks that have had a positive impact on India's engagement with the Pacific Islands. Some of

these include: the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) which was set up in 1999, the Pacific Community (PC) was set up in 1947 and involved in development work, the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) was launched in 2012, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) set up in 1989, the Regional Pacific NDC Hub, Climate Action Pacific Partnership, the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Pacific Islands Developing States (PSIDS), etc. But in reality, until 2014, India's engagement with South Pacific "remained limited and aloof" though it was a dialogue partner at these forums; it had "not articulated its role in a constructive manner, unlike China, Japan, Korea, and even Indonesia." (Prasad, 2012)

In 2014, India initiated an action-oriented multinational grouping named the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) for cooperation between India and the fourteen Pacific Islands. Ever since, India has broadened its engagement canvas and showcased its crisis-time leadership through development partnerships by viewing them not as Small Islands but, "as large Ocean States with vast potential". (MEA 2015) This can be discernible from India's decision to recast the MEA to align with its new policy priority of the Indo-Pacific region in general and the South Pacific in particular by creating a dedicated division, the Oceania Division, by bringing together the Indo-Pacific and ASEAN policies under this single unit. (Mint, 2020)

### India's 'Crisis Time Leadership' in the South Pacific

India's engagement with the island nations in the South Pacific is said to be driven by the principle of 'partnership of equals with mutual aspirations', and "never aimed to extract any economic and strategic benefits from the PIC". Rather their interactions have been more economic and developmental in character. (Mathur, 2023) This is discernible from India's volume of imports from PICs which is higher than its exports. India's approach towards the South Pacific countries is need-based and inclusive, but India did not articulate its role in a concerted manner until 2014.

Most of India's engagement with the region was confined to crisis-time assistance and management. Many view this engagement as a projection of India's 'soft power' to woo the small friends in the South Pacific, like other members of the Quad. (Prasanna, 2023) Many others view this as a process of helping the growth of India's position in the world. Given the current geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific, shouldn't India reconsider and revise its strategy? This is especially important in light of China's growing engagement, aid, and influence in the region, as well as the increasing global focus on the Indo-Pacific.

How India will revisit and reshape its engagement and objectives in dealing with the Pacific Island countries is a matter of conjecture but until now its engagement is purely based on capacity building in economics, education, disaster management, agriculture, renewable energy, IT, space technology application, etc. Moreover, India's partnerships in all these fields are designed for each individual country's size, requirements, resources and threat perception. All Pacific Island countries are vulnerable to a range of disasters, including sea-level rise, cyclones, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, floods, forest fires, and epidemics. India has presented itself as a reliable and prompt "early responder," equipped with disaster risk reduction measures and the necessary resources. Most Pacific Island Countries "often lack resources and adequate capacity to deal with ever-increasing disasters and, therefore, rely on external support." (The Asia Foundation, 2022) As asserted by India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in November 2022, "India has emerged as a regional power and net security provider in the Indo-Pacific as its capacity to provide

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humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to its citizens as well as regional partners has grown in recent years”. (ANI News 2022) A brief look at India’s outreach to Pacific countries during natural disasters highlights its leadership capabilities and resolve in times of crisis. India’s initial engagement with the Pacific islands as a ‘crisis responder’ and development partner goes back to May 1973 when India donated clothes and medicines to Tonga which was badly affected by the cyclone (MEA, 1973). Ever since, India reached out to the Pacific Island Countries almost in every disaster situation to help the affected country and subsequently to mitigate future suffering. The following table enumerates some of the attempts in the recent past by India to help the small Pacific countries.

Year	Country	Disaster Situations and Assistance
2007	Solomon Island	Earthquake-Tsunami – India provided relief and rehabilitation for victims.
2012	Tuvalu	Severe drought – India contributed USD 100,000 for storage, supply and management of water. Chain-saws were supplied; funds for lawn-mower and a grass cutter.
2013	Marshall Islands	Drought – India provided disaster relief assistance of USD 100,000. Supplied with USD 162,833.10 for the purchase of minivans, computers, and communication equipment.
2014	Palau	Super Typhoon Haiyan – India provided USD 50,000 in disaster relief/ upgraded and modernized community healthcare centre.
2015	Vanuatu	Cyclone Pam – India provided humanitarian assistance.
2016	Fiji	Cyclone Winston – India assisted in renovating 20 schools; gifted 5 tons of vegetable seeds; 45 tons of relief material, and relief assistance worth USD 3 million.
2017	Fiji	To revitalize the Sugar industry, India announced a grant of USD 1.06 million.
2018	Vanuatu	Ambae Island Volcanic eruptions – Calamities due to the eruption of Manarao Volcano and Tropical Cyclone Hola. India offered grant assistance of USD 200,000 in July 2018 as humanitarian assistance towards the evacuation of Ambae island residents and their settlement after frequent volcanic eruptions.
		Earthquake and Ulawun volcanic eruption – India supplied earthquake restoration work Tonga – Tropical Cyclone Gita – India offered USD 1 million assistance.
2019	PNG	Earthquake and Ulawun volcanic eruption Disaster Risk Reduction and Management is an important pillar of India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans’ Initiative (IPIO) announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
2020		Cyclone Yasa – India sent relief material
2022	Fiji	Covid-19 Pandemic – NDRF airlifted over 6 tons of relief supplies.
	Tuvalu	Supply of Tuberculosis medicine
	Tonga	Tsunami in the Pacific Ocean – Relief assistance of USD 200,000 to deal with the disaster that was triggered by the explosion of a massive underwater volcano.

(\*Data collected from various sources online)



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In 2017, India launched the Climate Early Warning System under the India-UN Development Partnership Fund in seven Pacific Island Countries (High Commission of India Suva, 2017). The project aims to enhance the resilience of partner countries to natural disasters and will play a key role in achieving climate change goals. Besides, India's dedication to supporting resilient infrastructure development is exemplified by its significant contribution of USD 1 million to the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) fund, enabling the Pacific Island Countries to engage in coral reef and coastline monitoring via satellites.

### Capacity Building and Development Partnership

Though India's commercial, economic and developmental connection with the Pacific Island Countries is old and dates back to the 1970s, from 2014 onwards there has been expedited engagement, especially after the launch of the FIPIC that "bridged the distance of geography through shared interests and action" (MEA, 2018). Today India's development partnership with all PICs is based on the 'Development Compact' meant to provide "development assistance that works at five different levels, namely trade and investment, technology, skills upgrade, lines of credit (LOC) and, financial grants" (Chaturvedi, 2017). It is a comprehensive approach involving a gamut of activities at multiple levels for capacity-building in multifarious areas in the recipient country. While co-chairing the third meeting of the FIPIC in PNG on 22 May 2023, Prime Minister Modi announced a 12-point development plan for the Pacific Island nations (*The Wire*, 2023). The plan includes several new development initiatives from super specialty hospitals, sea ambulances, Jan Aushadhi Centres to Yoga (Ayurveda) centres for promoting sustainable lifestyles. In fact, the list of India's engagement with the PICs in developmental projects has been very long and continues to expand.

India's footprint is miniscule in the domain of PIC trade, aid and investment. As per the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), during 2021-22, India's total trade (export and import) with the FIPIC Islands stands at USD 571.66 million only. The major items of exports include machinery and mechanical appliances, pharmaceutical products, plastic and articles thereof, mineral fuels, mineral oils, cotton, iron or steel etc. Items like ores, slag and ash, wood and articles of wood, wood charcoal, etc. are imported. Given the huge distance and low population and consequent small market size in the Pacific Island Countries, the volume of their bilateral trade is abysmally low. Furthermore, a large proportion of India's trade in the region is mainly shared by a few countries like PNG, Fiji, and Solomon Islands. But the bilateral trade potential between them is very high given their resource-rich Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), and vast natural and mineral resources like LNG and hydrocarbons. Similarly, though India's link with the region is very old, it only began to disburse financial aid to these countries in 2006, starting with an annual grant of USD 100,000 to each, and from 2009 onwards the amount was increased to USD 125,000 (Denghua and Shivakumar, 2017) subsequently to USD 200,000. In comparison to aid from other partners (Australia, US, China, New Zealand, Japan, France and the EU), this amount is meagre. However, India's aid to the PICs has been on the rise during the past few years. More importantly, India considers "trade, more than aid, is the enabler for development" and therefore established the FIPIC Trade Office at the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), New Delhi as "the first step towards promoting trade and investment opportunities between Pacific Island nations and India" (*The Times of India*, 2015). As India's trade is mainly shared by a few countries like PNG, Fiji, Solomon Islands, the need is to broaden their economic engagement and accelerate the development of small industries and people-to-people contact.

The main objective of India's initiatives in the Pacific Island countries is to support projects promoting sustainable development and resilience against climate change. Besides financial contribution, India plans to set up scientific-industrial networks to utilize the ocean in a sustainable manner, access renewable energy, etc. India setting up an Institute for Sustainable Coastal and Ocean Research, a network of marine biology research stations, space technology application centres, IT laboratories, solar engineering training, water resource management, sugar industry modernization, academic exchanges with the IGNOU, and short-term training courses in various Indian institutions, etc. All these indicate India's goodwill towards the Pacific nations and genuine concern for the Pacific nations' development. India's partnership objectives are clearly discernible in the 12-point action plan proposed by PM Modi. Through this, India essentially attempts to "fulfil the developmental aspirations of the people of the region and consolidate a shared vision of a free, open and prosperous Indo-Pacific." (ANI News, 2023)

### Good Start but A Lot More to Be Done

India's recent engagement with the Pacific Island nations is a promising beginning. As a cooperative partner, India is welcomed in the Pacific to play a more prominent role in addressing the region's major challenges. However, for India to strengthen its geopolitical position among the major powers in the South Pacific, New Delhi still has much more to do. Currently, India's involvement in the South Pacific nations has primarily been economically driven and focused on development. Now both must broaden their engagement focusing on people-to-people contact and cultural ties along with a common development vision. Each sector of cooperation that has already been initiated should be accelerated through deeper development partnerships, giving the island nations a sense of greater flexibility in their dealings with other powers in relation to India. Currently, most economic activities in these countries are part of the unorganized sector. Therefore, India needs to focus on specific organized sectors of economic engagement, along with a unified strategy to engage with the small-scale economies and communities of the island nations. Projects such as seafood processing, establishing a presence for the Indian film industry, promoting tourism, hosting cricket tournaments, setting up solar photovoltaic panel production units, and introducing state-of-the-art electric boats like the Water Metro fleet could be explored. As energy security is a common problem, India can engage the island nations in deep-sea mining and liquefied natural gas extraction besides other renewable energy collaborations. Additionally, India should diversify its economic engagement to include all island nations, rather than focusing solely on PNG, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands, as each of them has the potential to develop a vibrant blue economy. India's primary focus has been on large island nations in Melanesia but has undertaken fewer development projects in Micronesia and Polynesia. India's business community should also create new forums and organize more initiatives involving all island nations.

Similarly, India's diplomatic coverage in the region needs to expand with new separate representations in other PICs as it has only two High Commissions in the region. The decision to offer free visas and provide television and radio programs on culture, entertainment, news, education, and more to the nationals of Pacific Island countries is a step towards fostering greater people-to-people and cultural interaction. India should explore additional engagement opportunities and seek more platforms, such as the Quad, for multilateral negotiations involving the Pacific Island nations.

## Towards India-Designed Maritime Security

In addition to projecting soft power, India can involve the island nations as stakeholders in the Pacific regional security arrangement. First, the island nations can be encouraged to secure their EEZs, age-old trade routes of shipping lines, and key sea lines of communication. Given their strategic location, the island nations can play a crucial role in intelligence sharing. However, these efforts must be carried out in line with their comfort levels. India needs to navigate regional security concerns carefully, including addressing radical elements within some island populations.

Additionally, India must remain aware of China's growing engagement and influence in the region. After all, "India is geographically located outside of the South China Sea but geopolitically and geoeconomically operates inside the South China Sea" (Scott, 2013). To maintain its foothold in the region, India must navigate carefully. Countries with strong bilateral ties to China and involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) should not be disregarded by India. China's proposal for a security and trade deal has not yet been endorsed by the island nations, as they view it as a potential threat to regional stability (Al Jazeera, 2022). In fact, Pacific nations drifted closer to China because they had no option. Moreover, China's rise is a fact in the world order, and "managing China's rise" is "a euphemism for containment.... China cannot be contained and its rise cannot be reversed. Its international influence will undoubtedly increase" (Jaishankar, 2019). Instead, India should work to create a level playing field in the Pacific, positioning itself as an attractive partner for the nations there. Given the escalating tensions between China and the U.S., along with China's 'chequebook diplomacy' leading to a 'debt trap,' the island nations will eventually seek to break free from this strategic cycle and turn to a neutral partner like India. Will India be able to win over all Pacific Island countries when China has already established a strong presence and continues to strengthen its influence? In the long term, India is likely to perform better economically and become a preferred development partner for the region. However, in the strategic realm, India must focus on making its presence felt and gaining regional goodwill, something New Delhi needs to seriously consider now. The 'development-only partnership' can go a long way undoubtedly, but 'security-abstinence' in their bilateral engagement would hamper achieving sustainable development in the long term. India must reassess its partnership with South Pacific nations to ensure an inclusive, open, and free Indo-Pacific for all. Just as India has developed the SAGAR strategy for the Indian Ocean littoral, a similar framework could be created to achieve this goal in the Pacific.

For such a framework to develop, India needs to spell out a new maritime security strategy extending beyond the Straits of Malacca. Currently, India's maritime operation in the Indian Ocean is managed by its Eastern Fleet operating from Vishakhapatnam; its operational scope and capability extend up to Malacca, but not as far as the Pacific Islands (Chandramohan, 2018). By adding another fleet to the Andaman and Nicobar Command and exploring the options for a naval base in the South Pacific, India can realize its ambition of becoming a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific region. Given the development of China's naval base in Vanuatu, India's attempt to strengthen its maritime presence in the Pacific "may be welcomed by other regional powers like Australia, New Zealand, the US, Indonesia and France." (Chandramohan, 2018) India must involve the Pacific Island nations and make them stakeholders in the maritime security architecture designed by India. This is achievable; the key question is how soon and how smoothly it can be done. While waiting for the right opportunity and circumstances, it is strategically important for India to continue its development efforts in the Pacific region to maintain its image and goodwill.

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