

India's Growing Influence in the Pacific Region

India aspires to champion the 'Global South' amidst the strife between the US and China in the Pacific region. Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri. Narendra Modi, said during his visit to the Pacific region that India has emerged as a reliable partner for the nations in this region. The relations between India and the Pacific nations emerge from historical connections. India's undivided attention in the region provides an alternative to the Pacific countries, otherwise sandwiched between the US and China.

Throughout the summit with Pacific leaders in Port Moresby on 22 May 2023, PM Narendra Modi reiterated his commitment to the member countries of the India-Pacific Islands Cooperation that India would be a reliable partner to these island nations amidst geopolitical situations and disruption in the Global Supply Chain due to COVID-19 and climate change.^[i] Fourteen countries of the Pacific region which are members and participated in this summit are Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Niue, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.^[ii]

The India-UNO Joint Development Partnership Fund was formed in 2017, designed to fund need-based and demand-related sustainable development projects in developing nations and LDCs, including small island developing nations. PICs have been beneficiaries of this fund.^[iii] Under Act East Policy, India inveterate the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation in 2014 to strengthen links with these nations via developmental aid as part of South-South Cooperation.^[iv]

The major attraction of this year's FIPIC Summit was the total involvement of leaders from all 14 nations. The convergence of these countries underscored the importance and potential of strengthening ties with India.

During this summit, the PM inaugurated an all-inclusive 'Twelve Points' drive to advance India's partnerships with the Pacific island nations. These projects include solar connections for Government buildings, desalination units for drinking water, sea ambulances, dialysis units, 24x7 emergency helplines, Jan Aushadi Kendras, and Yoga centres. The major development partnership projects include infrastructure development, predominantly stressing education, health, culture etc. More emphasis was given to the community development projects to enhance the capacity building. These projects included revamping libraries and school buildings, refurbishing colleges, extending IT infrastructure facilities to educational institutions, and setting up digital libraries.^[v]

Traditionally, India's vision was restricted to the Indian Ocean Region. But, with China's increasing expansionism in the Indo-Pacific Region, India decided to change its approach to foreign policy, keeping in view current geopolitical realities. Thus India increased its outreach to Pacific Island nations to counter China's unexpected expansionism and exploitation.

In addition to geopolitical considerations, increasing cooperation with the Pacific Island Countries will help India economically. The Pacific Ocean is the world's largest ocean, covering 46% of the world's water surface and 33% of the total land area. It has 41 sovereign states, plus Taiwan, and 22 non-independent territories. This region has copious marine resources, contributing roughly 71% of the world's ocean fishing harvest. Although PICs cover a limited

geographical area, but their exclusive economic zone (EEZ) spans a significant portion of the ocean with enormous mineral and other hydrocarbon resource potential. The importance of energy resources for a developing nation like India is unrivalled.

Also, to gain permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), India needed the support of most of the country, regardless of its size, wealth, or geopolitical importance. In the United Nations, PICs are a significant and influential voting group. PIC's support will aid in protecting Indian interests in global climate talks. There are sufficient reasons to take India's relationship with the PIC to the next level.

During the colonial period and after independence, India didn't pay much attention to the Indo-Pacific Region. But the Act East policy and more excellent maritime activities have revived non-operational ports on India's eastern seaboard to establish links with countries in Indo-Pacific Region. For India, the strategic importance of FIPIC lies in several key aspects:

It expands India's geopolitical influence in the Pacific region. India can strengthen its presence in this highly competitive area. This could help India establish and maintain strategic partnerships in the Pacific.

FIPIC enables India to counterbalance the influence of other major power players in this region. China has been increasing its engagement with the PIC through aid, investments, infrastructure development projects, and debt diplomacy. India's active participation in FIPIC allows it to offer an alternative partner for the Pacific Island Countries, promoting a more balanced regional environment.

The PIC possess vast maritime resources, including fisheries, minerals, and natural gas reserves. Engaging with them provides India with opportunities to secure access to these resources and strengthen its energy and economic security. Moreover, FIPIC facilitates trade relations and investment opportunities between India and the PIC, opening up new markets for Indian businesses.

The PIC are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including rising sea levels and natural disasters. India can collaborate with these countries to address climate change challenges and share expertise in renewable energy, climate resilience, and disaster management. Cooperation in these areas helps India build goodwill, enhance its global standing as a responsible actor, and contribute to the collective efforts to combat climate change.

Conclusion: The Pacific region holds strategic importance in maritime security, given its vast oceanic expanse and strategic sea lanes. FIPIC provides a platform for India to strengthen its cooperation with the PIC in maritime domain awareness, surveillance, search and rescue operations, and combating transnational crimes. Such collaboration enhances regional security and stability, benefiting India and the PIC. Overall, FIPIC serves as a means for India to expand its diplomatic, economic, and strategic engagements with the Pacific Island Countries. By doing so, India can advance its national interests, foster regional stability, and contribute to the development and well-being of the Pacific Island nations.

End notes

[i] India seeks to become 'Global South champion', as US- South China Morning Post
<https://www.scmp.com> › This Week in Asia › Politics

[ii] IBID.

[iii] Importance of Pacific Island Countries & FIPIC for India The Financial Express
<https://www.financialexpress.com> › business › defence

[iv] FIPIC Summit: India's strategic engagement with Pacific. Livemint
<https://www.livemint.com> › news › world › fipic-sum..

[v] FIPIC Summit: India's strategic engagement with Pacific . Livemint
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Uploaded on : 06-06-2023

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