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## **SPS Insight**

# **India broadens strategic canvas, establishes role in Indo-Pacific**

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## India Broadens Strategic Canvas, Establishes Role in Indo-Pacific

After 33 long years, in the month of November 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Fiji, a South Pacific archipelago of about 300 islands. It has been estimated that about 37 % of its 900,000 population is of Indian origin. During this visit, PM Modi mooted the concept of 'Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation' (FIPIC) in order to reach out to other Pacific Island Countries (PICs). This visit can be considered as a milestone in India's relations with PICs due to the inauguration of the first summit of FIPIC in Fiji in 2014. FIPIC has India and 14 South Pacific Islands like Fiji, Cook Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

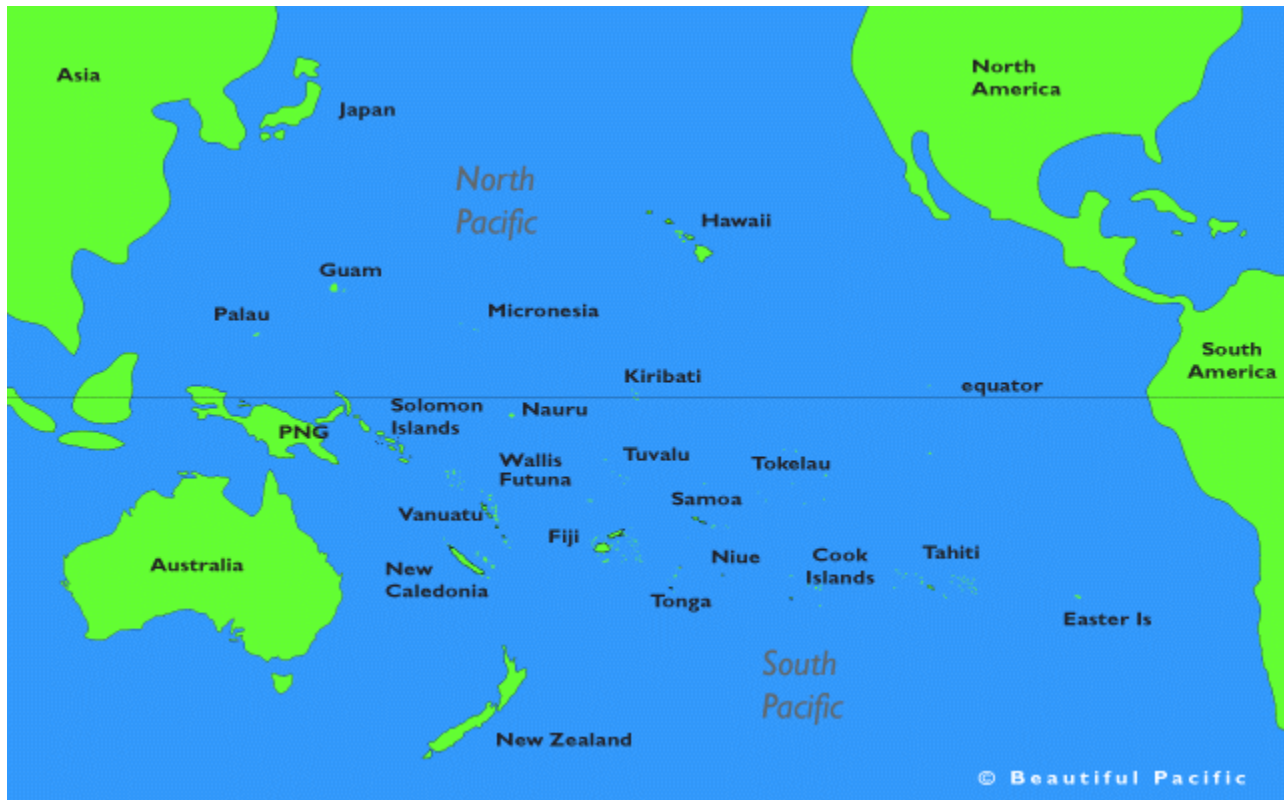
The second summit of FIPIC was held in Jaipur on August 21, 2015. Agenda of the summit touched upon several issues like climate change, blue economy, space collaboration and trade to mention a few of them<sup>1</sup>. Modi held a bilateral meeting with the representatives of all the 14 countries from the region on the sidelines of the Summit. To continue the momentum in India's relation with PICs, in April 2016, the President of India, Pranab Mukherjee visited Papua New Guinea (PNG). This indicates that India is trying to establish individual links in the region. Mukherjee's visit to Papua New Guinea was the first by an Indian president. In this visit, India offered a USD 100 million line of credit for development of infrastructure in PNG and agreed to jointly develop new avenues of cooperation to explore and develop the Pacific nation's vast oil and gas resources<sup>2</sup>.

It is interesting to note that the minimum distance between India and the South Pacific Islands is around 11,000 km. Then why is India interested in these remote islands? To understand this we should know the geopolitical and geostrategic issues in the region.

### Why Engage

Gravity of the world economy is shifting to the Indo-Pacific region and PICs sit at the pivot of the Pacific. Though land area and population of the South Pacific region is minuscule, it has abundant resources in store. For example, land area of Kiribati is merely 810 sq. km, but its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is more than 3.5 million sq. km (greater than India's land area). In 2012, Cook Islands PM Henry Puna said that PICs are large Ocean island states<sup>3</sup>. The region

is rich in copper, nickel, gold and Liquefied Natural Gas and has a huge fishing potential. Until very recently South Pacific Islands were managed by the Western world with the help of Australia and New Zealand. Growing economic and strategic opportunities pushed them to bypass regional big powers; Australia and New Zealand and have bilateral relations with powerful countries in the world.



**Map: South Pacific Islands**

Courtesy: [www.beautifulpacific.com](http://www.beautifulpacific.com)

For India, PICs can offer sea lanes of communication and ports, access to fisheries, military bases and decisive votes in international for UN Security Council reforms. Of the 14 PICs, 12 are UN members; and 10 states have announced their direct support for India's bid for permanent seat in the UNSC and one state supports G4 resolution (thus indirectly supporting India). Of the 14 PICs, Fiji is the most important Island. In 2006, the Western world boycotted Fiji due to a military coup. China took advantage of this and cultivated relations with Fiji and other states in the region. China wooed this region with aid diplomacy, investing in the region to get access for building military bases - the most important aspect of which is signals intelligence

monitoring<sup>4</sup>. China is also seeking naval access to the region's ports and exclusive economic zones. Washington and other important capitals in the world are alarmed due to increasing Chinese interest in the region.

India also took note of this. Earlier, due to its disputes with Pakistan and China, India focused much on continental aspect and ignored the maritime domain. However, India is now focusing on maritime domain too. Besides that, Modi reinvigorated earlier 'Look East' policy into actionable 'Act East' policy. The fast-changing maritime domain in Asia — where an increase in geo-political competition is binding the Pacific Islands and Indian Ocean into a single theatre — is the obvious trigger for India's relatively new interest in these islands. India is working to increase its influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Now, India has started to use the term 'Indo-Pacific, to reflect that its area of interest lies in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

In the first week of June 2016, while speaking during the Shagri La Dialogue - a track II initiative by International Institute for Strategic Studies - Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar consciously used the term Indo-Pacific<sup>5</sup>. This was for the first time, India officially used this term. Later on, while addressing the US congress, the Indian PM Modi elaborated that Indian interests lies in the Indo-Pacific and urged the US congressman to work together in this region to ensure peace and stability<sup>6</sup>. Traditionally India's connection with the South Pacific Islands has been fairly limited. However, the relationship is gaining momentum under PM Modi's government, and not just with Fiji, but across the South Pacific. PICs are now becoming part of India's extended Act East policy and government's Act East Policy is a sub-part of a grand Indo-Pacific strategy.

India has a huge diaspora in the South Pacific region (close to 0.29 million Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and 0.59 million PIOs). The eagerness of the current Indian government to leverage the potential of a widely-spread presence of the people of Indian-origin across the world is being reflected in its constant efforts attempt to reconnect with them. This Diaspora, it is understood, can act as a bridge between India and South Pacific region.

As per the 'Indian Maritime Strategy 2015', the sea routes to the Pacific Ocean and littoral regions in vicinity with considerable Indian diaspora falls under secondary area of maritime interest for India<sup>7</sup>. Though at present there are not many Indian stakes involved in this region,

but in the near future, this region is going to play a significant role as Indian interest get closely aligned with geo-politics in the Indo-Pacific. It is important to note that, India is in final stages to sign Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the United States. In future, if necessary, India may take advantage of this agreement to evacuate members of the Indian community from Fiji in the event of natural calamity or any other eventuality.

### **Indian Assistance to PICs**

Fiji is the hub of the Pacific and provides an important link to most of the PICs. Hence, India is spending time and money to serve stronger ties with Fiji. During his visit to Fiji last year, Modi offered Indian help to build a Digital Fiji. India had announced a number of new initiatives and mutually beneficial cooperation programmes during the Suva summit in 2014. Climate Change is a major issue of concern for PICs. In this, summit India offered to set up a Special Adaptation Fund of USD 1 million to provide technical assistance and training for capacity building regarding Climate change and clean energy. India also extended its help to establish e-network in the region to improve digital connectivity.

Internationally, India is viewed by space-faring nations as an emerging space power. Hence, India offered to cooperate with PICs in space technology applications for improving the quality of life of the islands<sup>8</sup>. FIPIC-2 has built further on this process and a number of projects were announced. India will set up an Institute for Sustainable Coastal and Ocean Research and a network of marine biology research stations in the region<sup>9</sup> (Balakrishnan, 2015) PICs have also welcomed Indian's assistance of tele-medicine, tele-education, space cooperation, and technical aid for bolstering democracy and community activities. In his maritime strategy, Modi has emphasized on developing 'Blue Economy'<sup>10</sup>.

PICs have abundant natural resources and it is necessary to exploit them to develop the region into Blue Economy Zone. India is trying to woo them for this very purpose. At present, India's trade with PICs is very marginal. India's exports to the region are just 1.4 per cent of its total exports and imports from the region are 2.5 per cent of its total imports. Economies of PICs are very liberal and there is an immense potential to exploit their market<sup>11</sup>. India has expertise in the fields of fisheries, mining, oil and natural gas that it can use for the benefit of the Pacific countries. In addition, India may also supply radars for coastal surveillance, fishing trawlers and

patrolling craft to PICs. To exploit economic potential of the region, India offered to help them with their hydrography and coastal surveillance via Indian Navy.

PICs are eager to have a stronger Indian presence in the region. They do not want to remain over dependent on Chinese support. However, we should know that China has a huge lead over India in its relations with this region. China is using its financial clout to engage with PICs. For India, it is advisable not to engage in a zero-sum game with China in this regard. India will not be able to match Chinese Dollar diplomacy. However, China is facing one major irritant in its relations with the region. China has diplomatic relations with eight of the 14 PICs. Six of the 14 island nations—Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Nauru, Palau, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati—hold diplomatic ties with Taiwan. In this regard, India has an advantage over China. India enjoys cordial relations with all the countries in the region.

### **Conclusion**

During the Jaipur Summit, India assured PICs of realization of Pacific regionalism. India does not want to challenge the primacy of regional players, but wishes to have independent and robust relations with PICs who are looking for extra-regional powers for their developmental needs. Geographical location of PICs is very relevant in the monitoring of space. India is one of the leading players in space technology and offered help in preparing an inventory of land and water resources, surveying of forest resources and its management and, in disaster management support. India's Mars mission was monitored from Fiji and two ships (SCI Yamuna and SCI Nalanda) carrying Ship Borne Terminals were deployed at suitable locations in the South Pacific, among other tracking locations<sup>12</sup>.

Geographical location of South Pacific is suitable for establishing monitoring and tracking stations. As mentioned earlier, an emerging space power, India is looking to enter into global space market and prove its mettle. In this context, for India, PICs may prove very crucial and vital in the coming years. Climate change is a major cause of concern for this region. India is ready to share its expertise in mitigation measures and renewable technologies to overcome hurdles faced by PICs. India has also fulfilled its promise of credible negotiator at COP-21 (Paris Climate change conference). Earlier, PICs were little apprehensive about India's promise because its image as stubborn negotiator. India had assured the PICs that it would work with

them and others for a comprehensive, balanced, and fair outcome at COP 21 in Paris<sup>13</sup> and Delhi delivered on its promise.

India, being a maritime country needs to have a coherent maritime strategy. India has just started working on it and views the vast region from Madagascar to Marshall Islands as a one single coherent region - the Indo-Pacific. To make it a success, it is important to reach out to sub-regions and small countries of the world which lack economic and military power. Due to this, prospective countries may look towards India as a viable alternative. Strengthening relations with the PICs is pertinent for its success. The summit of FIPIC is a part of India's extended 'Act East' Policy. Modi is likely to travel to the region for next Summit. Through FIPIC and frequent high level visits, India is trying to redefine its core national interest based on a broader geographical canvas and to portray itself as a leading player pushing for stability in the Indo-Pacific.

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**Endnotes:**

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