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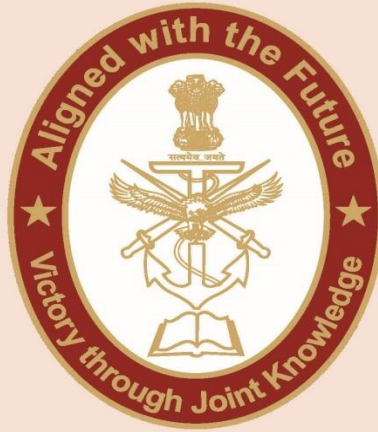
HARNESSING SYNERGIES: INDIA AND PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES (PIC) IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has been identified to be the next geopolitical and geoeconomic hotspot for power contestation. The region has become a space for power contestations between resident and non-resident powers defining a political conundrum for the century. While states have sought to collaboration on traditional and non-traditional aspects, there remains friction in maintaining a 'strategic equilibrium'. The growing competition between the United States and China have manifested military posturing economic statecraft and diplomatic realignments that are shaping the architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

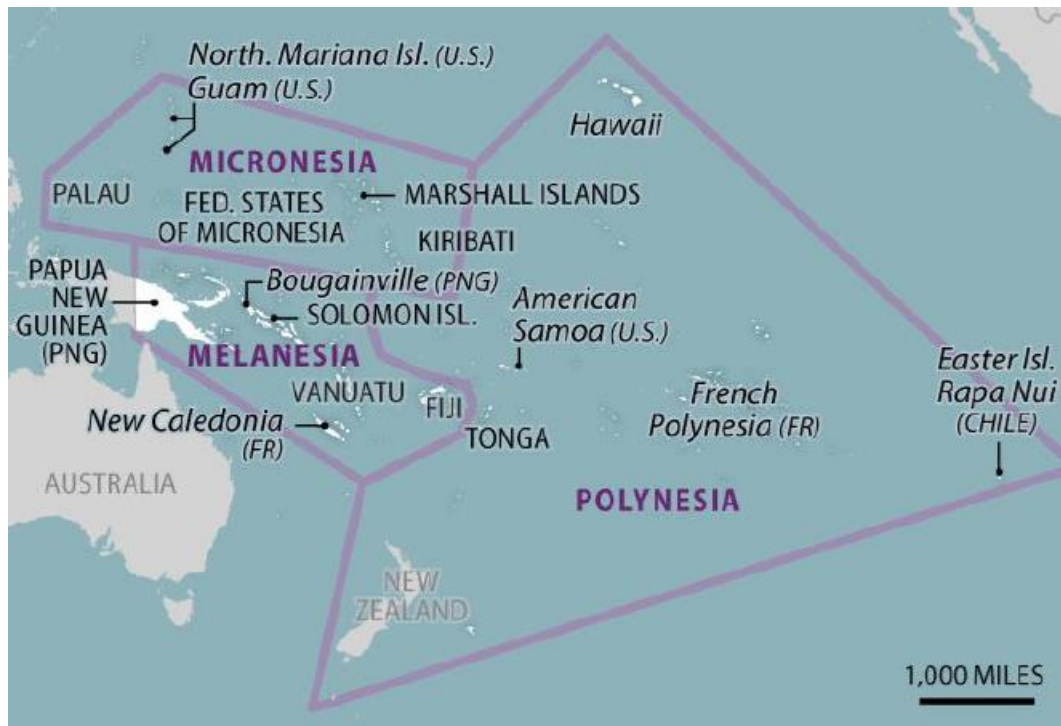
India remains a central partner in the region that has largely been driven by its geopolitical position, economic growth and evolving security posture. Despite power contestations, India continues to occupy a critical position in shaping the regional balance of power through several strategic partnerships in the region. In the Shangri-La Dialogue of 2018, PM Modi's address perhaps emphasised for the first time on the Indo-Pacific as "the heart of India's Foreign and Security Policy".¹ The premise for Prime Minister Modi's astounding remarks were based on "India's geographical, historical and civilisational" links with the region. India's emphasis on maintaining

regional stability, upholding a rules based order, ensuring freedom of navigation underscores its centrality to the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific.

While the larger discourse focus remains on interests shared by the United States and China in the region, the Pacific Island Countries (PIC) are often left out of periphery of geopolitics.² These island countries hold great significance in the region and their alignments can profoundly impact the strategic calculations for major and regional power.³ The PIC's geographical location at the confluence of both the Indian and the Pacific Ocean makes these island nations further central for other countries to pursue their respective Indo-Pacific Strategy coherently. In 2012, during the 'Pacific Islands Forum', Former Navy Admiral Samuel J Locklear highlighted the strategic significance of the PICs by noting that approximately \$ 5 trillion worth of commerce traverses the sea lanes of the 'Asia-Pacific', positioning the peoples of these island countries at the heart of a critical maritime juncture.⁴ The PIC sits at the cross roads for India to also pursue a coherent and 'inclusive' strategy for the Indo-Pacific.

Who are the Pacific Island Countries?

The Pacific Island Countries (PIC) constitutes of Cook Islands, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Palau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu⁵. These 14 countries sit at the convergence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.⁶ Additionally, the PIC offer abundant natural riches as well as great linguistic and cultural diversity. However, they are physically distant constituting extremely small populations and pose the highest vulnerability to the effects of climate change and natural disasters.⁷ These countries are known for their picturesque landscapes and biodiversity, however, due to their strategic and economic significance, the PIC sit at a crucial hub for global trade and economic stability.⁸



Source: US Congressional Research Service⁹

The PICs share great strategic relevance as they sit on important sea routes responsible for carrying global trade in the Southern Pacific. The region's stability is imperative for ensuring maritime security and uninterrupted flow of global trade.¹⁰ Furthermore, there are sea lines of communication passing close to these island countries that largely remains influenced by powers like US and China.¹¹

PIC at Geopolitical Crossroads

The growing power polarisation and vexed geopolitical competition between US and China have caught these island countries into a cobweb. The concept of Indo-Pacific had initially left these countries from strategic competition. However, both US and China have unleashed several initiatives that have become “stepping stones” for regional initiatives and framing policies.

The US has held major economic and strategic roles in the region vis a vis the PIC. The Micronesian region is home to two US territories namely Guam and the Northern Mariana Island.¹² The US ‘Indo-Pacific Command’ (US INDOPACOM) based in Hawaii has encompassed the Pacific Islands as an “area of its responsibility”. The military base in Guam has underscored the US defence strategy in the region with key technological developments underway. In a US Congressional paper, the Department of Defence mentioned building a ‘high-frequency radar system’ in

Palau¹³ with intentions of upgrading the airport. Reports of deploying air defence assets had also surfaced. The US also maintains close military ties with Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Tonga and continues to work closely with other countries like Australia and New Zealand for joint military exercise.¹⁴ The country's engagement in the region remains largely concentrated in the diplomatic and security dimensions with key focus on Palau, Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia that shares Free Association with the US.

President Joe Biden had released the US Indo-Pacific Strategy in February 2022 that stated, "will work with partners to establish a multilateral strategic grouping that supports Pacific Island countries as they build their capacity and resilience as secure, independent actors." Towards this the US has launched multiple initiatives that include the US-Papua New Guinea Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) in 2023. The agreement allows the US to "develop and operate out of bases" in the country with the government's approval.¹⁵ Further, the US has simultaneously established new embassies in the Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu.¹⁶ In 2024, the US INDO PACOM established the Joint Task Force Micronesia (JTF-M) as a new command in Guam that will primarily remain responsible for the region's operational defence.¹⁷

In keeping with this, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) states had declared in 2023, the first Open Radio Access Networks (RAN) deployment in Palau among other deliverables. The QUAD has committed \$20 million towards this effort that aims in delivering "trusted technology solutions" and boosting long-term collaboration with the PIC.¹⁸ While the US continues to expand its cooperation with the PIC, balancing China's influence remains a challenge.

China is pursuing tighter political, security, and economic ties with the region, having established diplomatic relations with three Pacific Island governments that previously recognized Taiwan. The market continues to hold significant importance for the export of natural resources and tourism of the island countries.¹⁹ Notably, ten PICs have joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), facilitating the advancement of infrastructure projects supported by China's investment.²⁰

Although China's engagement with the PIC gained momentum during the early 2000s, it is under incumbent President Xi Jinping's ambitions that Beijing has heightened engagement in the region.²¹ Xi Jinping's strategic interest can be narrowed down to three important factors; one to promote China's diplomatic and

strategic priorities, two reduce the international space for Taiwan and three, gain access to the PIC's natural resources. The US-China Economic Review Committee had reported that China continues to have a greater influence in Micronesia that is a component of the second island chain.²² The PIC could play a significant role in China's offshore defence strategy providing a premise for the country to develop a blue water navy.²³ China has attempted to establish bilateral relations with the PICs.

Notably, the Solomon Islands-China security agreement in March 2022, had raised questions of deploying Chinese naval security assets. Further, in 2023 the two countries signed a policing agreement that ignited distress that China might seek port facilities for its naval assets causing a diplomatic "handwringing" with the US and Australia. Additionally, The Solomon Islands and Kiribati have formally reoriented their diplomatic recognition transitioning their allegiance from Taiwan to China.²⁴ Fiji resumed its relations with China in 2024 after a two-year halt in reviewing its relations.²⁵

Even if China's initiatives are occasionally tinged with a likely 'corrupt' or 'coercive' intent, there has been a drive by Chinese diplomats to understand the local interests of the PICs. There have been initiatives to address internal political demands with major aid and investment commitments by China to other PIC like Fiji and Nauru. While the strategic relevance remains persistent, both the US and China need to look at the real well being of the PICs.

India's Engagement with the PIC: A Brief

While India and the PIC are separated by two oceans, India's link with the region dates back to 1879, when Indian labourers were transported to Fiji as part of the structured system of indentured servitude.²⁶ India established the 'Commission for the Government of India' in Fiji, immediately after independence. It was only in 1973 that India established 'development partners' with the PIC. Traditionally, India shared cordial relations with only Fiji, relatively due cultural connections and economic strength in the Pacific Islands Forum.²⁷

The former Minister of External Affairs, E Ahmed had observed in 2009 that New Delhi's engagement with the island countries is the "logical expansion of India's Look East Policy."²⁸ India's extension of the Look East Policy complimented with the PIC's 'Look North Policy' that had earlier limited their engagement with only East Asian

countries. It was when Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, the erstwhile 'Look East Policy' was revived to the 'Act East Policy' that India reached out to the PIC with a fresh framework.²⁹ Since 2014, PM Modi himself has made several visits to the PIC with the recent one in 2023 when he visited Papua New Guinea.³⁰

India's revived approach towards the PIC gained momentum with the establishment of the 'Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation' (FIPIC) during the visit of PM Modi to Fiji in 2014.³¹ The FIPIC, co-chaired by PM Modi and the leaders of the PIC has aimed to deal with an array of non-traditional security issues ranging between health to climate change. During PM Modi's visit to Port Moseby in Papua New Guinea last year, he outlined the '12 Point Development Program' to boost ties between India and the island countries.

"India respects your priorities. It feels proud to be your development partner. Whether it's humanitarian assistance or your development, you can count India as a reliable partner. Our perspective is based on human values" stated PM Modi at Port Mosby, ushering a new momentum for India-PIC relations. The '12 Point Development Program' also launched multiple initiatives like the Regional Information Technology and Cybersecurity Hub in Papua New Guinea, Super speciality cardiology hospital in Fiji, a ready on the go helpline for all the PIC to state a few.³² This was an important turning point that encouraged continued involvement in infrastructure, healthcare, trade, aid, IT, and other areas. Additionally, "without any hesitations", India has also offered capabilities in Space technology for fishing zones, coastal and ocean studies, disaster management to these PICs.³³

The PICs at the Heart of India's Indo-Pacific Ocean's Initiative (IPOI)

A significant shift in India's strategic outlook was marked by the elevation of island nations within its Indo-Pacific vision. Historically, these nations have been marginalised and relegated to the periphery amidst great power rivalries.³⁴ India has established cooperative mechanism to increase its strategic and diplomatic footprints throughout the PICs, albeit slowly. While India's primary theatre for concern and cooperation remains within the Indian Ocean, the development strategy pursued by India with the PICs is commendable and promising.

India launched the IPOI in 2019 with a primary objective to "manage and counteract" the challenges that plague the region. Through the IPOI, India seeks to pioneer a stable and cooperative environment that remains complimentary to benefits of

stakeholders involved.³⁵ The IPOI is premised on seven pillars namely; Maritime Security, Maritime Ecology, Maritime Resources, Capacity Building, Disaster Risk Reduction and Management, Science Technology and Academic Cooperation, and Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport.³⁶ The IPOI's seven pillars are designed to strengthen the capacities of the recipient nations and provide regional states the authority to uphold their stability in broader security contexts.³⁷

India's growing recognition of the PIC advocate the former's intention for tapping regional potential and build new partnerships. Both India and the PICs shares a common interest in growth and resilience in the Indo-Pacific. The vision shared by India to usher an "accessible and inclusive Indo-Pacific" is underscored by how it has maintained amicable relations with the island countries to address mostly non-traditional security challenges. Since the inception of the FIPIC, India has captured the essence of the island countries by addressing nuanced issues including renewable energy and disaster management. India engaged in high level discussion with the 'Pacific Islands Developing States' (PSIDS) on the margins of the UN General Assembly in 2019 to announce and immediate grant of \$1 million for "high impact projects" of their own choice. India has also pledged to offer \$150 million as "concessional" line of credit for the PIC to invest in projects like solar power and other energy related issues.³⁸

The PICs offer India with four core interests namely economic development, regional security, geopolitical influence and cultural diplomacy that remain closely intertwined.³⁹ Therefore, India must prioritize its interests with the PIC against the backdrop of a dynamic geostrategic environment. the PICs have an irresistible appeal as the globe turns to the oceans to meet its basic requirements and this premises why India must protect its interests with the PICs vis a vis the momentous IPOI.

Defining Future Contours of India-PIC Relations: The Way Forward

Both India and the island countries share growing alignment and strategic ambitions for development in common sectors like energy, climate and sustainable ecosystems. India has strategically taken advantage of these overlaps and adjusted its Pacific aid correspondingly.⁴⁰ The following recommendations are enlisted for a bolstering tie between India and the PICs:

- **Towards Resilience.** The PICs lack in infrastructure particularly in the energy sector. Therefore, transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy remains a potential issue that seeks collaboration. India has already undertaken projects like 'Barefoot Grandmothers' for training to install solar power units for the PICs. However, India being the founder of the International Solar Alliance can leverage on this platform towards the promotion of renewable energy in the PICs.
- **Countering Climate Change.** In 2021, during the COP26 Summit, Tuvaluan Foreign Minister Simone Kofe delivered his address in knee-deep water to highlight the effects of rising sea level and the threat it poses to all the low-lying PICs.⁴¹ Despite the launch of 'Climate Early Warning Systems' established by India, there remains gaps in creating a sustainable ecosystem. The Pacific's '2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent' is complemented by India's goal of using ocean resources to create a sustainable and climate-resilient "Blue Economy." The latter seeks to establish a sustainable blue economy by utilizing the area's maritime identity, location, and resources. India can collaborate with regional partners to create coherence amongst several agencies that could provide momentum in climate control. Additionally, India can also explore to provide training to locals and other regional agencies towards HADR activities and disaster management.
- **Enhanced Maritime Security Cooperation.** Despite the geographical distance, India and the PICs can collaborate on creating an enhanced maritime security architecture through naval cooperation. Although this may give rise to tensions vis a vis US and China's interests in the region, the possibility of India-PIC Maritime cooperation cannot be subdued. Inspirations can be drawn from the MoU between India and Fiji to collaborate for boosting interoperability. This will only have a lasting impact for disaster preparedness and personnel collaboration for enhanced maritime security in the region.
- **South-South Development.** India lays emphasis on South-South cooperation as a regional power. While countering China in the region could be a delinquent, the PICs have supported India's banner for a multilateral order. During the Global South Summit in January 2023⁴², some PIC countries like Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Samoa had attended it. This further

accelerates India's pursuit of permanent membership in the UN Security Council and strengthens its efforts to advocate for the interests of 'Global South' within the framework of a multilateral global order.

- **Integrating QUAD.** The QUAD has emerged as a regional partnership that have primarily addressed non-traditional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. India as an integral member of the QUAD can propose a working group towards the development of the PICs. There exist defined working groups to deal with climate change and technology development, by creating a QUAD's Working group for the PIC, there can be a coherence in these agencies that would ultimately address development challenges posed by the PICs while also addressing issues of sustainability and resilience.
- **Ushering Dialogue.** Although India has held annual FIPIC Summit, there remains a requirement for ushering Track 1.5 and Track 2.0 dialogues between India and the PICs. These could bring together several agencies that would assist in addressing grass root level issues and induce capability development through training and logistical support. The example of FICCI-FIPIC which had launched an 'Accelerator for Business' between India and PICs remains substantive to set future cooperations. These dialogues can champion development for both matters related to traditional and non-traditional challenges in the region.

Conclusion

India's pivot towards underscoring the strategic value of the PICs in the Indo-Pacific have created a momentum in India-PIC cooperation. The evolving partnership remains significant for shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific. While great powers like US and China remain contested with primarily security and diplomatic interests with the PICs, India through multifaceted cooperation in areas like climate resilience, sustainable development, maritime security and capacity building have demonstrated a share commitment to fostering mutual growth and stability.

The cooperation has not only transcended regional economic agenda but also enhances the broader geopolitical landscape through sustainable development. Aid remains as the cornerstone for India's strategic perusal of ties with the PICs. As the Indo-Pacific continues to remain a geopolitical flashpoint, it is imperative that India continues to further deepen strategic ties with these island nations. While India's interests in the PIC remains in securing economic interests, there remains an area of untapped potential for collaboration that could drive India's Act East Policy. Furthermore, strengthening ties with the PICs will uphold the essence of India's IPOI and ensure a resilient, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific, marked by shared prosperity and enduring stability.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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