



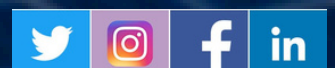
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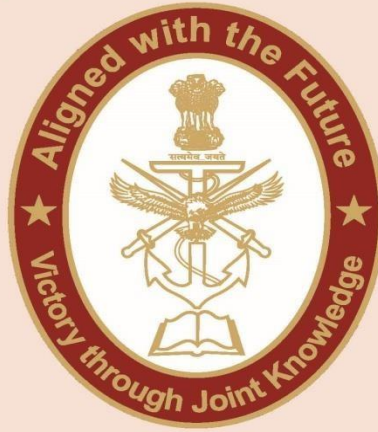
SOLAR, SECURITY AND SUSTAINABILITY: INDIA'S COLLABORATIVE MODEL WITH THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

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SOLAR, SECURITY AND SUSTAINABILITY: INDIA'S COLLABORATIVE MODEL WITH THE PACIFIC ISLANDS



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Abstract

The Pacific Ocean has become a geo-strategic hotspot for the global powers. As such, the Pacific Island Countries (PIC) have gained visibility across the globe. Historically, New Delhi had very limited engagement with the region. Nonetheless, with the launch of its Act East Policy and growing interests in the Indo-Pacific region, India rejuvenated its focus on these countries. India has initiated various ways to enhance its influence there. Renewable energy, disaster risk reduction, healthcare and space technology are some of the key areas India is focusing on. The paper explores New Delhi's efforts for enhanced engagement with PIC through various projects like the International Solar Alliance (ISA), disaster resilience programs and early warning systems. It discusses how Beijing's growing influence could pose geostrategic and geopolitical challenge for New Delhi. The paper also examines the various challenges India faces and offers certain recommendations to address those gaps and challenges.

Introduction

Being the largest ocean, the Pacific Ocean covers 46% of the water and 33% of the total surface of the Earth.¹ Its rich marine resources coupled with the numerous sea lane routes make it an area of geostrategic interest for all the countries of the world, especially the U.S., China, Japan, Russia, New Zealand and Australia. And as a part of the broader Indo-Pacific region, it witnesses much competition amongst the powerful countries who aim to have greater influence in the region.² Maritime disputes in the East China Sea and in the South China Sea are clear examples of this. The fact that most of the littoral states of the Pacific are underdeveloped and have limited financial or technological capabilities make them the ideal candidates for this competition to play out. To this end, the 14 PIC have been areas of interest for the major powers of the world.

India had relations with the PICs as part of the Commonwealth, the United Nations as well as due to India's Non-Aligned Movement.³ However, historically the country has focused more on the Indian Ocean than the Pacific Ocean. Nevertheless, as part of its Act East Policy, and its ambition to establish itself as Vishwamitra, India too has now turned its sights towards the Pacific Island countries.⁴ This has played into India's broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Since 2002, India started to participate in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) annually.⁵ The establishment of the 'Forum of India-Pacific Islands Cooperation' (FIPIC) in 2014 lent further momentum to the renewed ties between India and the Pacific.⁶

In September 2019, the India-Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) Meeting was convened by PM Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.⁷ In the Meeting, he announced that India would allocate \$1 million towards 'high-impact development projects' for every PSIDS in a field of their choice.⁸ In the third summit for FIPIC in May 2023 in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, a 12-Point Development Program was announced by PM Narendra Modi. The Program aims to support sustainable development of the PICs, and covers various sectors including healthcare, disaster resilience, renewable energy, etc.⁹

The purpose of this paper is to examine India's growing influence in the Pacific Island countries, as a way to safeguard and expand its strategic and commercial interests. To

this end, the article highlights some of the initiatives undertaken by India in the region. A comparative analysis of China's influence on the PICs has also been made. The paper goes on to list out certain challenges that India might face in its Pacific endeavours and recommendations for addressing these challenges.

Renewable (Solar) Energy Projects

Renewable energy generation has been a strong focus of the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). This is due to their commitment to climate change, as well as their aim to reduce the cost of fossil-fuel based electricity. Sharing a similar outlook, and being the leader in the International Solar Alliance (ISA), India has funded solar energy projects in multiple PICs.

- **Solarisation of Head of State Residences (SOHS) Programme:** This was an initiative by the UNDP, under which solar photovoltaic (PV) systems would be installed in public buildings across 11 member countries of the Pacific Island Development Forum (PIDF).¹⁰ India has contributed \$400,000 through the India-UN Development Partnership Fund (I-UNDPF), and \$700,000 through the India-UN Development Partnership Fund Commonwealth Window. Other international collaborators include the United Nations Office of South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC) and Solar Head of State (SOHS), a non-profit organisation. The solar photovoltaic (PV) panels were donated by Solaria, a private sector manufacturer, through a public-private partnership.¹¹

Some of the buildings that have benefitted from the project include the President's residence (Fiji, Micronesia), President's office (Marshall Islands), State House (Fiji, Kiribati), PM's residence (Fiji), Dialysis Center (Nauru), VP office (Palau), Governor General's residence (Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu) and National Women Council (Tonga).¹²

- **India-ISA Project Implementation Agreement:** On 26 November 2024, India and the ISA signed a Project Implementation Agreement, for operationalising solar energy projects in 4 PICs, namely Fiji, Seychelles, Madagascar and Comoros. As part of the Agreement, solar rooftop panels, solar pumps and solar refrigerators would be installed in these PICs by mid-2025.¹³ The Agreement

includes two solar projects in Fiji. The Solar Rooftop Panels (Healthcare) project, with a value of \$261,900, aims to supply sustainable and reliable energy to healthcare facilities. The Solar Cold Storage initiative, with a value of \$277,500, aims to establish a strong cold chain infrastructure that will prolong the shelf life of perishable food items and lifesaving medicine.¹⁴

India has committed an investment of \$2 million for this project, which underscores its Quad Climate Working Group commitments.¹⁵ It also demonstrates India's commitment to its Panchamrit initiative for climate action, its Indo-Pacific Ocean Initiative (IPOI) and Island Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁶

- **Grants-in-aid for Solarization:** In 2005, India had provided \$242,500 to the Marshall Islands for purchasing solar panels and two-way radio sets for its Outer Islands Health Centre. Again in 2008, India provided \$100,000 to the country for solar powered street lights.¹⁷ Additionally, 2800 residences have also been solarized across the 14 PICs with the help of funds from India.¹⁸

Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Initiatives

'Disaster Risk Reduction and Management' is an important pillar of India's Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative (IPOI). As part of this, India provides Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) to other nations either as humanitarian relief funds or via deployment operations by both government and military agencies.¹⁹ Providing HADR is also part of India's QUAD commitments under the 'Quad Partnership on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) in the Indo-Pacific', which was signed by the US, India, Australia and Japan on 23 September 2022.²⁰ India has also contributed to capacity building, exchange of knowledge and infrastructure development for disaster relief in the PICs.

Humanitarian relief funds - In 2013, India provided Palau with \$50,000 as relief aid after it was hit by the Super-Typhoon Haiyan.²¹ In 2013, the Marshall Islands received \$100,000 from India as relief aid after the country suffered a drought.²² On 18 March 2016, Ambassador Sujan R.Chinoy presented a grant of \$100,000 for Disaster Relief and Recovery during his credential visit to the Marshall Islands.²³ In 2016, India

provided an immediate relief fund of \$1 million²⁴ and sent 40 tons of medicine, food and tents through a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft²⁵ to Fiji in the aftermath of Cyclone Winston. In the aftermath of Cyclone Yasa in 2020, India sent relief material of 6 tons to Fiji, contributed \$1 million to the PM relief fund and renovated 20 schools.²⁶

Papua New Guinea has also received Indian aid on numerous occasions, including after the 2018 earthquake in Hela Province and Mount Ulawun volcanic eruptions in 2019 and 2023 (\$1 million).²⁷ Most recently, New Delhi provided \$1 million as immediate relief aid for the landslide that occurred in the Enga Province on 24 May 2024.²⁸ Some important aspects are:

- **Early Warning Systems:** During the period of 2017 to 2019, the 'Climate Early Warning Systems in Pacific Island Countries Project' was established to provide timely warnings about hydro-meteorological disasters in the PICs.²⁹ India contributed funds to the project via the I-UNDPF. It was implemented by the UNDP Pacific Office in Fiji and managed by UNOSSC. Other collaborators included the government offices of the PICs, the Pacific Community Hydrological Department, the Pacific Meteorology Council, the Central Training Institute Pune-RTC India, the India Institute of Technology Roorkee, the World Meteorological Council and the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research.³⁰
- **India Provided Capacity:** building training and learning opportunities to the PICs' hydrology and meteorology technicians.³¹ The project also focused on hydrology services such as flood warnings/ alerts and atoll freshwater lens management. Consequently, in-line salinity metres were installed in these atoll nations to preserve freshwater supply.³² The results of the project contributed to SDG13 (Climate Action) and the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action Pathway (SAMOA Pathway).

Additionally, India's renowned Indian Tsunami Early Warning System (ITEWS) provides timely advice to littoral states of the Indo-Pacific. India has also established a Tsunami Alert System in Tonga.³³

- **Disaster Preparedness and Resilience Initiatives:** In May 2023, 'Sustainable Coastal and Ocean Research Institute' was launched by India at the University of the South Pacific, Fiji. This institute would be the nodal agency for a marine biology research station network in the region. India has also invited the PICs to participate in the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), of which Fiji was a founding member. In 2021, during the Glasgow summit of COP26, the Infrastructure for Resilient Island States (IRIS) was launched by India, Fiji, UK, Mauritius, Australia and Jamaica, under the umbrella of CDRI. The aim of these initiatives is to promote sustainable, inclusive and disaster resilient infrastructure in the SIDS.³⁴

Healthcare Initiatives

On several occasions, India has donated medical supplies to PICs, such as antiretroviral drugs for the HIV patients of Fiji and Papua New Guinea, as well as PPE kits, N95 masks and vaccines during the Covid-19 pandemic.³⁵ As part of the 12-Point Development Programme, India also aims to set up a super-specialty cardiology hospital in Fiji. Additionally, all 14 PICs would receive sea ambulances and have dialysis units set up. India also aims to establish Jan Aushadhi Centers in the region along with biannual Jaipur Foot Camps.³⁶ India has also funded the upgradation of 10 Community Health Centres in Palau through the I-UNDPF.³⁷

Capacity Building in IT Sector

Several PIC universities have received India's support in creating IT 'Centers of Excellence'. These include Fiji National University, University of Papua New Guinea, the University of South Pacific in Niue, the National University of Samoa, and the Solomon Islands National University.³⁸ During FIPIC's third summit, India also announced the upgradation of Papua New Guinea's IT 'Center of Excellence' into a 'Regional Information Technology and Cybersecurity Hub'.³⁹

SME Development

India's 12-Point Development Program also included the development of the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector in the PICs. This would be carried out by supplying

them with the necessary technology, machinery and conducting capacity-building programs.⁴⁰

Space Technology and Connectivity Initiatives

India has offered to help the PICs with its space technology capabilities to support disaster management, fish zoning, weather and climate change, forest resource management, land and water resource inventory as well as coastal and ocean studies.⁴¹ India can provide support for training in space applications, especially through specialized courses, and proposed to establish a 'Space Technology Applications Center' in any PIC for the whole region.⁴²

At the launch of FIPIC in 2014, India had proposed establishing a Pan Pacific Islands e-Network in the PICs to improve digital connectivity.⁴³ The 'Data Warehouse for Empowering Pacific Island Countries' (DWEPIC) portal has also been developed by ISRO. The portal would host geospatial datasets and services for the PICs to access and utilise.⁴⁴ In collaboration with its QUAD partners India also aims to establish an Open Radio Access Network (O-RAN) in Palau. An investment of \$20 million has been committed by QUAD for this project, which was announced in 2023. Furthermore, a target has been set to connect all the PICs by a subsea cable by 2025.⁴⁵

Grants-in-Aid and Lines-of-Credit

The annual grant-in-aid offered by India to the PICs has been increased from \$125,000 to \$200,000. This grant is provided to every PIC to develop their chosen community projects.⁴⁶ The annual value of India's bilateral development partnership via grant-in-aid programs is \$3 million (approx). These grants are driven by demand and have had a significant impact in the 14 PICs. At the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Dialogue Partners Session in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, India announced that it would support one Quick Impact Project (QIP) of each PIC worth \$50,000.⁴⁷

China in the Pacific- A Brief Overview

The Pacific region has seen an increase in activities by China since 2006. Beijing has provided grants and loans worth \$1.5 billion (approximately) to the PICs between the

years 2006-2017.⁴⁸ It deployed various measures and initiatives to expand its influence over the Pacific, increasing its security presence and exploiting the marine and natural resources of the region. Another reason for China's growing presence is its intention to hinder any diplomatic support that was or may be extended to Taiwan. An example of this was when Solomon Islands and Kiribati severed their diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 2019, recognising China's One China Policy.⁴⁹

In 2022, China and Solomon Island entered into a security pact, paving the way for China to establish a military base in the region. The agreement allows the Chinese navy to dock and replenish at Solomon Islands.⁵⁰ China had reportedly also drafted a plan for upgradation of a WW-II era runway at Kiribati, which was originally built by the US.⁵¹ In May 2022, Beijing had also proposed a regional policing and cybersecurity agreement to 7 PICs.⁵² There are also reports that China aims to establish a China-Pacific Free Trade zone.⁵³

In terms of infrastructure and community development in the region, China invested \$256 million in 2022. This has secured it the position of being the second largest bilateral donor in the PICs. It has also funded school upgrades, government vehicles and new roads in Kiribati and Solomon Islands.⁵⁴ China has built a National Stadium in Honiara, Solomon Islands for the 2023 Pacific Games.⁵⁵ Moreover, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which focuses on infrastructure development, has also seen the addition of 10 PICs.

It is clear that China is leaving no stops to expand its presence and undermine the influence of the US in the region. In turn, the US released its first Pacific oriented strategy in 2022, the Pacific Partnership Strategy. It has also committed to giving \$8 billion to the Pacific, most of which came from the renewal of 'Compact of Free Association' agreements.⁵⁶ This has led to the Pacific becoming a zone of power competition between China and the US.

Navigating the Impediments

Amidst this, India faces constraints which challenges its endeavours to enhance engagements in the region. Some of them have been discussed in the following paragraphs:

- **Geopolitics.** With the strategic importance of the Pacific and PICs becoming more prominent, the region has turned into a hot-bed of geopolitics. Major powers of the world are vying to expand their presence and influence in the region. For India to do the same, it has to be prepared to face competition from these major powers including the US, China, Australia, etc. Balancing its diplomatic ties, while asserting its own interest would require New Delhi to walk a tightrope when navigating this complex landscape.
- **The Chinese Competition.** China's growing presence in the region poses a major challenge to India. Be it in terms of finance, infrastructure or science and technology, India still has some way to go before it can counter China's influence in the PICs. For example, their huge infrastructure requirements compel the PICs to continue borrowing from China. This is augmented by the fact that Chinese loans are easier to avail.⁵⁷
- **Limited Diplomatic Presence.** India has limited diplomatic presence in the Pacific nations. Indian Permanent Missions are present only in Papua New Guinea and Fiji. This limits India's capacity to effectively engage the PICs, and is a major challenge to expanding India's presence in the region.
- **Economic, Developmental and Resource Constraints.** The geographical territory covered by all the PICs combined is vast. Moreover, they have a diverse range of needs, and face unique economic as well as developmental challenges. India has limited ability to deal with such challenges, owing to its own developmental priorities and resource constraints.
- **Maritime Disputes.** There are many disputed maritime borders amongst the PICs. This has resulted in an overlap or sharing of 48 boundaries, and consequently the EEZs, of these nations. By July 2020, 35 of these had been settled.⁵⁸ However, the remaining (and any new) disputes would pose a challenge for India to establish any major initiatives in the region.
- **Logistical Issues.** The islands of the Pacific nations also suffer from logistical challenges, as they are scattered and distant from each other. Many of them are

also remote and isolated. This makes it difficult for India to establish effective communication with them or carry out any operations/ initiatives.

Recommendations

- **Connectivity Initiatives:** India has already supported and established many initiatives in the fields of infrastructure, technology and connectivity. However, keeping in mind the limited capabilities of the PICs, there is scope for India to do much more. Initiatives such as the Open Radio Access Network (O-RAN) in Palau and subsea cable connectivity project that is being undertaken by India as part of QUAD have a great significance for improving connectivity in the region. India can develop and support more such initiatives, which will not only strengthen its ties in the Pacific but also serve its own strategic interests. The proposed Pan Pacific Islands e-Network and DWEPIC portal also need to be launched sooner rather than later.
- **Satellite Technology:** Many of the islands of the PICs are remote and isolated, making it difficult to establish terrestrial lines of communication. Satellite technology can bridge this existing gap in communication infrastructure. And India has much to offer in terms of space and satellite capabilities to the region. New Delhi can make efforts to develop and establish satellite communication services in the PICs, similar to. These services can be expanded for use not only in communication but also monitoring and surveillance in the area.
- **Extending NavIC Services:** India's Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC) system currently is limited to the Indian Ocean Region. Steps can be taken to extend its coverage to the Pacific as well. This will greatly improve the navigational accuracy and safety of vessels in the maritime waters of the Indo-Pacific. It would also improve the efficiency and response time of disaster relief operations for the PICs. The data provided by NavIC can also be instrumental in mapping resources and environmental monitoring in the region.
- **Renewable Energy Initiatives:** India shares an alignment with the PICs in their commitment to renewable energy. New Delhi can tap into this and propose more initiatives that would help the PICs harness renewable energy. Apart from the

already existing solar power initiatives, India can look into establishing hydro-power and wind power generating projects.

- **Collaboration with like-minded Nations:** Although India is expanding its presence in the Pacific Ocean region, its influence on the region is less compared to that in the Indian Ocean Region. To overcome this, India can collaborate with like-minded nations such as Japan and Australia, to strengthen its maritime security capabilities. Such partnerships can also be used to enhance and modify training initiatives to include the PICs, and provide them with operational exposure. India can also offer its expertise in maritime surveillance and connectivity to initiatives in the PICs (such as the Pacific Fusion Center, Vanuatu) and offer technical support.
- **Strengthening Bilateral and Multilateral Relations:** New Delhi must focus on strengthening its friendship with its counterparts in the PICs, and augment it with greater diplomatic presence. This would go a long way in securing India's foothold in the region, amidst the complex geopolitical competition it is embroiled in. More often than not, it is the government of one PIC that has the capability to influence the decision making of another. India needs to display its sincerity and commitment to the region by establishing robust ties with all the PICs, so that none of the nations oppose its presence in the region.

Conclusion

With the shift in India's focus from the Indian Ocean Region to the broader Indo-Pacific, the islands nations of the Pacific have gained greater significance in New Delhi's strategy. India has taken concrete steps to strengthen its ties to the PICs. The establishment of the FIPIC, India's 12-Point Development Program, IPOI, etc. are a testament to this. India has also provided support in the form of funds for developmental initiatives and disaster relief as well as capacity building training and learning opportunities to the PICs. This has been done both at the bilateral level and as part of multilateral collaborations such as the QUAD and PIF.

However, with the Pacific becoming a hotbed of geopolitics, India would face multiple challenges in establishing its presence in the region. The growing presence of China

only adds further complications to the matter. Nevertheless, if India can leverage its strengths, such as its space and satellite capabilities, maritime strength, commitment to renewable energy, technological knowledge and disaster resilience, then it can become a major player and ally to the Pacific Island Countries.

DISCLAIMER

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