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INDIA'S STRATEGIC EXPANSION IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS AND SOUTH PACIFIC: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
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As India wishes to expand its strategic outreach in the greater Indo Pacific region, Pacific Islands which are located strategically in the Far Flank of the Indo Pacific connecting Australasia region to South American countries will get increased attention from New Delhi.

Further, as the geo-political region of the Asia-Pacific is witnessing competition among established players such as the USA and China, the South Pacific Islands have begun to receive more attention especially from New Delhi which has traditional cultural ties with other Pacific Islands. This is especially so in the context of India's maritime, economic, and diplomatic interests and aspirations towards Pacific Islands which has increased with the dawn of the century.

The Pacific Island countries include Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

To start with, South Pacific geopolitics in general and Pacific Islands in particular is complex and multilayered. The Pacific Islands primarily consist of three regions in Polynesian, Micronesian and Melanesian countries.

There are geopolitical differences between the Melanesian (in the mid-southwest Pacific Rim), Micronesian (on the lower northwestern Pacific Rim), and Polynesian (comprised by a geographic triangle extending from Hawai'i in the North to Easter Island in the southeast and New Zealand in the southwest Pacific) blocs.

India's strategic expansion in the Pacific Islands

India's strategic expansion in the Pacific Islands from the dawn of the century coincides with the US pivot to the Indo Pacific region and expanding scope of strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi. On that note, the US and India have increased their strategic presence in the Pacific Islands following China's increased assertiveness in the region.

Coming back to the strategic context of the Pacific Islands and Beijing's interest in the region, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visited the Pacific Islands in May 2023 which was viewed with a lot of interest in New Delhi's strategic circle which to a larger extent promoted India to increase its foothold in the region. To counter Beijing's strategic interest in the Pacific Islands, it's expected that India will soon have diplomatic representatives in both Samoa and Tonga (which are currently served from Wellington and Suva, respectively) thereby increasing its influence in Polynesian, Micronesian, and Melanesian countries.

Meanwhile, China has signed a security pact with the Solomon Islands, a first-of-its-kind arrangement that could pave the way for further Chinese security deals overseas. On the other hand, the other countries in the region rejected Beijing's security deal citing that it will infringe on the Pacific Islands' sovereignty.

Further, as India wishes to extend its influence in the Pacific Islands and South Pacific, it will develop its relations both in the Polynesian and Melanesian countries. Also, Cook Islands were accredited to the Indian High Commission based in Fiji. It's understood that Fiji is the hub of the Melanesian country.

With the above background, India wishes to open diplomatic missions in several countries of the South Pacific, including Samoa and Tonga (which are currently served from Wellington and Suva respectively). The increased presence and India's desire to enhance its influence in the Pacific Islands Forum could be motivational.

India, as it wants to become a permanent member of the forum, understands that it provides an important annual opportunity for Pacific Islands leaders to discuss the political, economic and developmental issues facing the region in a time of rapid change, globalisation and increasing instability.

Meanwhile, diplomatically, India has shown interest in the affairs of the South Pacific by participating in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) annually beginning 2002. India also has begun to provide foreign aid to the islands in the South Pacific by offering soft loans for development projects. Along with aid programs from traditional donor states such as the USA, Australia, and New Zealand, the Pacific Islands have received help from western charities and non-governmental agencies. This is seen as a soft power counter to rising Chinese presence in the South Pacific.

Apart from the diplomatic outreach in the Pacific Islands, India wishes to expand its maritime reach in the region. India's expanding naval presence in the Pacific Islands is in keeping with the view that there is a need for it to have sea lanes of communication for its population. It is a fact that India is concerned about China's expanding presence in this Indo-Pacific region and for the fact that the other powers in the region, the United States, has its military commitments in the other parts of the world, and for the fact that Australia and some of the countries like Indonesia will not be in a position to challenge China's expanding maritime profile. It seems obvious for India to have its expanding maritime region in a way which will help both its economic, military and diplomatic outreach in this region.

This was emphasised in the state visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Fiji in November 2014, soon after his visit to Australia. The impetus to take New Delhi's reach to the Pacific Islands countries was visible during this visit, since apart from the diplomatic and cultural overtones, the military dimensions of the visit could not be ignored. The visit attracted worldwide attention since it was considered as being a significant step in India's expanding geo-political horizon to the South Pacific Islands. The high point of the visit was the first India-Pacific Islands leaders' summit meeting

held in Suva in November 2014, followed by the Second India-Pacific Islands Forum held in Jaipur in August 2015 and the third summit which was held in Papua New Guinea in 2023 which was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In that context, India will also strengthen its strategic partnership with existing like minded countries such as Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand as a part of its effort to increase its strategic presence in the Pacific Islands and South Pacific.

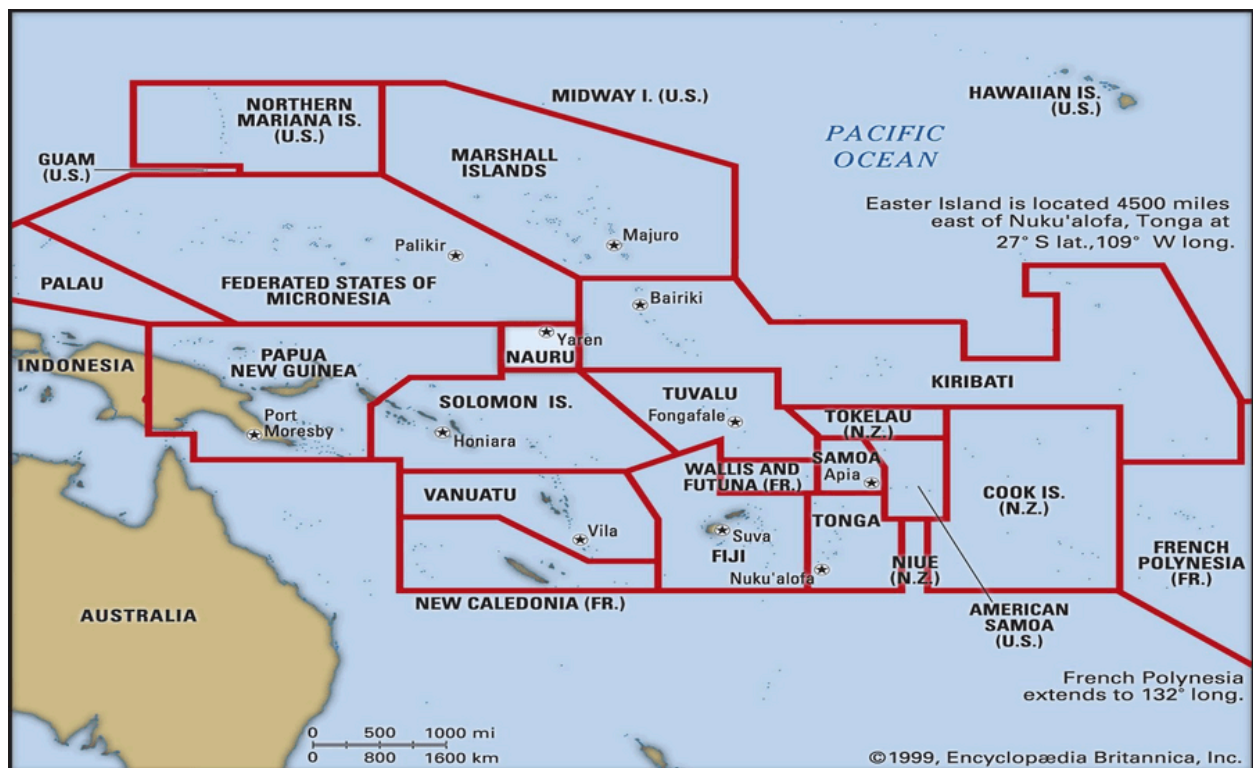


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