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India's Strategic
Approach Towards
the Pacific Island
Countries

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Abstract

India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) aims to promote a free, open, and inclusive order in the region. India engages with countries in the region through diplomatic channels and multilateral frameworks. However, as competition intensifies, there needs to be a deeper analysis of India's strategic relations with Pacific Island Countries (PIC). This issue brief examines India's approach to engaging with PIC and its likely strategic benefits.

Keywords: Pacific Island States, Indo-Pacific, IPOI, FIPIC, PIC.

On November 4, 2019, India's Prime Minister launched the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) at the East Asia Summit in Bangkok, Thailand¹. India's strategic vision of having a free, open, and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a paramount foreign policy agenda that embodies India's resolute response on the emerging challenges to the international rules-based order. India has recognised the immediate need to safeguard and preserve the normative frameworks that are a part of the current global order².

Given the strategic location of India in the Indo-Pacific, the strategic vision of the IPOI provides India with an all-encompassing scope that spans from the shores of Africa to that of America, which reflects India's commitment to preservation of the current global order and the realisation of its national interests. At the forefront of India's endeavours in the Indo-Pacific lies the revamping of relations with countries in the continents of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Relying primarily on diplomatic initiatives, India is on the path to creating robust relationships with regional countries, fortifying its Indo-Pacific position³. Recognising the immense potential of minilateralism, India is steadily playing an active role in nurturing frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC). By aligning with like-minded countries, India aims to forge an unassailable front of regional cooperation and amplify collective security.

In the ever-changing global landscape, India finds itself embroiled in intensified strategic competition as the world gravitates towards the Indo-Pacific through increased diplomatic, economic, and military engagements. For instance, island countries under the influence of regional powers are now seeing a rise in global attention⁴. These Pacific Island Countries (PIC)

hold strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific, and their alignment choices can profoundly impact the strategic calculations of major regional powers. Recognising the crucial nature of the geographical position of the island countries, India is actively working to fortify its ties with the PICs.

Amidst India's pursuit of enhancing relations with PICs, it becomes imperative to delve into the intricate complexities of India's strategic approach within the broader framework of its IPOI vision. The paucity of in-depth analyses scrutinising India's strategic relations with these small islands has resulted in a noticeable gap in our understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play. Therefore, it becomes paramount to undertake a comprehensive analysis of India's interaction with the PICs, considering factors such as historical ties, economic cooperation, security collaboration, and broader geopolitical implications. This analysis will help us understand the choices made by PIC countries within the context of their IPOI vision.

The Pacific Island Countries (PIC)

In the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, these islands are as diverse as they are unique. These islands, often overlooked in global discourse, can be categorised into three major clusters: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. These countries encompass the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Each country has distinct ethnicities, cultures, languages, economies, and political systems, contributing to the region's rich tapestry⁵.

Nine PICs enjoy sovereign status, while the remaining countries operate under Free Association agreements with governments, which entails delegating their foreign and defence policies to more developed countries. For instance, the Cook Islands and Niue Islands have Free Association agreements with New Zealand. In contrast, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau have similar arrangements with the United States of America⁶.

Despite their relatively small size and population, the PICs possess abundant natural resources and occupy a strategically important position in crucial maritime trade routes. Their significance in global affairs has grown recently, partly fuelled by the increasing popularity of the Indo-Pacific construct. Formerly considered an area primarily influenced by the USA, Australia and New Zealand, the South Pacific region is now gaining prominence in terms of its economic, political, and strategic relevance⁷.

Pacific Island Countries in India's IPOI

In the ever-changing landscape of geopolitics, India's vision of an accessible and inclusive Indo-Pacific remains steadfast to maintain and uphold the established rules-based international order that has been a boon to India since its independence. While India and many other countries have championed preserving democracy, human rights, state sovereignty, and adherence to international law, many formidable challenges have surfaced recently.

In 2019, India responded meaningfully by launching the IPOI. This strategic vision's primary objective is to manage and counteract the existing challenges in the Indo-Pacific effectively. The IPOI, encompassing the vast expanse of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and all the nations therein, is India's way of answering the complex challenges, ensuring all countries, no matter how small, have a say in the measures being invoked. By advocating a "free and open" Indo-Pacific in a comprehensive, inclusive, and transparent manner, India seeks to establish a stable and cooperative environment that benefits all actors involved⁸.

In India's vision, there exists a resolute commitment to advance established international norms and rules. This dedication is buttressed by a multifaceted approach which seeks to bolster economic connectivity through diverse avenues, most notably infrastructure development initiatives and the forging of agreements in multiple spheres. Furthermore, India demonstrates its unwavering dedication to preserving regional security by providing comprehensive capacity-building programs to neighbouring countries. India's IPOI vision has established the following seven spokes: Maritime Security, Maritime Ecology, Maritime Resources, Capacity Building and Resource Sharing, Disaster Risk Reduction and Management, Science Technology and Academic Cooperation, and Trade Connectivity and Maritime Transport⁹. The seven spokes in the IPOI are tailored to bolster the recipient countries' capabilities and empower regional states to maintain stability within their respective security environments.

India's recognition of the PICs in the Indo-Pacific has grown significantly. In 1981, the then-Indian PM, Late Smt Indira Gandhi, was the first to visit Fiji¹⁰. Thirty-three years later, in 2014, the current PM, Shri Narendra Modi, reinvigorated relations with the PICs by visiting Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG)¹¹. Prime Minister Modi's visit to PNG highlights India's efforts to expand its engagement in the Pacific region beyond traditional partnerships. While India has a deep-rooted relationship with Fiji, the visit to PNG recognises the region's potential and India's need to build new partnerships. India and the Pacific region share a common interest in helping tackle the spectre of climate change. Developing renewable energy sources to mitigate carbon

emissions and address energy challenges¹² is a step in the right direction. While the Pacific nations face obstacles such as outdated power infrastructure and dependence on imported fossil fuels, India's expertise and technological advancements can help build the necessary infrastructure, capacity, and policy frameworks to facilitate the transition to renewable energy. Collaborative efforts and knowledge-sharing initiatives between India and the Pacific region can foster the development of indigenous renewable energy solutions tailored to local needs.

India's vision of an accessible and inclusive Indo-Pacific conceptually underscores the strategic importance of the PICs. Although these states lack the individual capabilities of great powers to influence broader international politics, their geographical positions are significant in determining regional security and normative stability. Acknowledging their geostrategic importance, India seeks to maintain amicable relations with these island countries while remaining prepared to address strategic contingencies.

India's Interests and the PICs

The PICs, an assemblage of 14 distinct countries, are in a peculiar predicament where economic and human resources are not readily abundant. Consequently, pursuing substantial economic development becomes a formidable challenge, compelling these islands to seek external assistance from more robust powers. However, it is essential to discern that their dependence on external aid is not merely an outcome of their contemporary circumstance; instead, it traces its roots back to the colonial experiences and intricate political arrangements that unfolded during the tumultuous period of the 19th and 20th centuries¹³. Between 1960 and 1994, all 14 countries attained the prized status of independence¹⁴. This shift marked a seminal turning point in their history as they emerged from the shadows of external domination, firmly embracing their newfound sovereignty and developing strong relations with the Western and non-Western powers. This paradigm shift has allowed these island countries to construct a distinct diplomatic stance, bolstering their global presence and sovereignty.

In the rapidly evolving geostrategic landscape of the Pacific region, India finds itself faced with the imperative of safeguarding its economic stakes in the Pacific region. As the world gravitates towards the oceans to fulfil their basic human needs, the PICs, given their access to bountiful resources in the Pacific Ocean, hold an undeniable allure. The presence of vast natural resources forms a pivotal driver behind India's pursuit of resource security¹⁵.

Second, the total trade between India and the island countries in the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) in 2021-22 was 571.66 million US\$. Major exports from India

include pharmaceuticals, sugar, surgical instruments, and plastics, while imports to India include mineral fuels, ores, and precious stones. The maritime trade is heavily dependent on the SLOCs, and thus, securing the SLOCs in the Pacific is vital for India's national interest¹⁶.

Third, India has a significant interest in gaining support from the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) in various international forums, especially the United Nations (UN). This interest intensifies regarding UN Security Council (UNSC) reforms, as India aims to secure a permanent seat at the UNSC, to demonstrate its dedication to global issues and responsible international involvement¹⁷.

Fourth, the association between India and the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) may have been subdued, but it has always been amicable. Despite the considerable geographical distances and the lack of pronounced strategic or economic interests, it is crucial to acknowledge that certain Pacific Island nations, including Fiji, PNG, and the Solomon Islands, share a significant historical connection with India as former British colonies¹⁸.

The dynamics between four fundamental interests – economic prosperity, regional security, geopolitical influence, and cultural diplomacy – are intricately interwoven, especially considering the current international order's mounting challenges.

India's Engagement with the PICs

Despite the PICs geographical expanse and relative remoteness from India, they boast substantial exclusive economic zones (EEZs)¹⁹, thus presenting a fertile ground for mutually beneficial partnerships. India's strategic focus has traditionally revolved around the Indian Ocean, emphasising safeguarding its strategic and commercial interests. Diplomacy is pivotal in India's engagement with diverse PICs, necessitating understanding their unique local needs and conditions. The complexities arising from political, economic, and social diversities demand a tailored diplomatic approach, making bilateral diplomacy a crucial avenue for India. To strengthen relations, financial aid to PICs has been increased to balance out China's growing influence in the region²⁰.

Multilaterally, India has established the Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC). The inception of FIPIC occurred during the visit of the Indian PM to Fiji in November 2014. The initiative's launch also signifies India's concerted endeavour to broaden its footprint in the Pacific region. Generous assistance projects by India accompanied the inaugural launch of FIPIC in November 2014²¹. These encompassed a diverse array, such as a dedicated USD one

million fund to address climate change and foster clean energy practices, establishment of a trade office in India, facilitation of the Pan Pacific Islands e-network to enhance digital connectivity, extension of visa on arrival privileges at Indian airports to all 14 Pacific Island countries, cooperation in space technology applications to elevate the islands' quality of life, and diplomatic training for Pacific Island country officials²².

For India to increase its presence in the PICs, the IPOI needs to be incorporated into the respective policies of the island countries. The seven spokes of the IPOI provide the PICs with an opportunity to select facets of the framework that they can work with India and other Indo-Pacific countries. As a result, while India incorporates the PICs into the IPOI and reiterates the significance of the FIPIIC, the region could regard the strategic concept of IPOI as a part of the region's overall policy.

Future of India's Strategic Approach to the PICs

The Government of India, well before the formulation of the IPOI, had strategically incorporated the PICs into its scope of engagement. New Delhi's constant involvement through socioeconomic development assistance enabled India to cultivate deeper strategic ties with the PICs. India's current approach centres on gaining support for its vision through bilateral channels while fostering an environment where regional fora become a part of India's strategic vision, Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), of which the IPOI is an integral part.

Despite India's efforts, achieving regional collectivism among the PICs has not always been successful. The island countries, being sovereign entities, have prioritised their own regional and national socioeconomic development, domestic politics, and the allure of multiple strategic options. Nevertheless, India's engagement efforts remain relevant, as they provide the island countries with strategic options and prevent them from becoming overly dependent on a single power. External engagements enable the island countries to balance their strategic positions and avoid rapid shifts in regional power dynamics. India's core objective in the Pacific is maintaining the regional rules-based order while avoiding divisive engagements. New Delhi must navigate its existing initiatives adeptly, ensuring that functional cooperation remains at the forefront and mitigate the negative consequences of escalating great-power competition. India's strategic engagement in the Pacific Islands region is a delicate balancing act. By leveraging its existing initiatives and emphasising functional cooperation, India can foster a supportive regional environment without compromising its core strategic objectives. India

must maintain a confident and unwavering commitment to regional stability, ensuring that the island countries' interests remain at the forefront of its engagement.

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