

India's Strategic Engagement with the South Pacific: Analysing the Extended Neighbourhood Policy

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Abstract

In order to increase its diplomatic, economic, and security ties outside of its immediate neighbourhood, India has developed an Extended Neighbourhood Policy. This study looks at India's expanding ties with the South Pacific Island States, focussing on important topics like economic cooperation, maritime security, diplomatic outreach, and climate change initiatives. With the setting up of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) in 2014, India showed its dedication to advancing environmental resilience, infrastructure growth, and sustainable development among Pacific Island countries. Furthermore, India's increasing focus on the Indo-Pacific region aligns with its strategic objectives of preventing China's expanding hegemony as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and preserving an open and free maritime environment. Through multilateral collaboration, concessional financing, and investments in renewable energy, India has established itself as a dependable partner despite obstacles including physical distance, restricted economic exchanges, and competition from China. This paper analyses the elements that have influenced India's involvement with the South Pacific Island States and evaluates policy options to enhance future cooperation.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Maritime Security, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Extended Neighbourhood Policy, South Pacific Island States.

1. Introduction

The foreign policy of India has seen significant transformation in the 21st century, abandoning its long-standing emphasis on its immediate neighbours in favour of the "Extended Neighbourhood Policy," a more expansive and strategic vision. India's interaction with regions outside of South Asian Countries, such as Middle Eastern countries, African countries, the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries, and the South Pacific island countries, is intended to be strengthened under this policy, which acknowledges the interconnectedness of global geopolitics. The South Pacific Island States, that consist of countries like Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tonga, as well as Samoa, have become a significant but frequently disregarded component of India's foreign affairs outreach. Geographical remoteness and the lack of significant commercial or security reasons have historically constrained India's connections with these island states. Nevertheless, as the world order has changed, India has realised how strategically important these nations are in the region of the Indo-Pacific and has actively worked to strengthen its relations with them through economic, political, security, and environmental collaboration. An important turning point in this interaction was the setting up of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) in the year 2014,

which gave India a formal forum to work with Pacific Island countries on a variety of topics, from capacity building and maritime security to climate resilience and renewable energy. Furthermore, India's outreach to the South Pacific acts as a counterbalance to Chinese dominance and a testament to India's unwavering commitment to a multipolar and global system based on order, particularly as China continues to intensify its commercial and infrastructure investments and funding in the region in the name of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India's wider Indo-Pacific policy, which prioritises liberty to navigate, regional stability, and sustainable development, is also consistent with its expanded neighbourhood strategy in the South Pacific. Strengthening its partnership with the South Pacific Island States becomes both a diplomatic and strategic requirement as India seeks to establish itself as a significant force in the world.

Through an analysis of the initiatives, obstacles, and driving forces behind India's involvement in this crucial region, this article aims to investigate the development of India's extended neighbourhood policy in the island countries of the South Pacific.

2. The Historical Background of South Pacific-Indian Relations

Due to geographical limitations and geopolitical interests centred on South Asia and the region of the Indian Ocean, India has historically had little interaction with the South Pacific Island States. However, an increasingly comprehensive strategy to foreign policy was required in the post-Cold War era due to India's emergence as a major world force. The groundwork for India's linking in the South Pacific was established by its Look East Policy, which under Prime Minister Narendra Modi evolved into the Act East Policy in the year 2014.

The Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), which was established in 2014, was the first significant diplomatic effort. India's diplomatic ties with the 14 Pacific Island states—including Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Fiji—underwent a sea change as a result of this program. Since then, India has worked to increase its involvement in a number of areas, such as energy, trade, maritime security, and climate change.

3. The South Pacific Region's Strategic Significance to India

For India, the South Pacific is strategically crucial. First of all, it is an important maritime area that is abundant in minerals, hydrocarbons, and fisheries. In addition, the area is essential to India's Indo-Pacific strategy, which aims to establish an open, free, and marine order based on rules. Thirdly, through its relations with the Pacific Island nations, India has an opportunity to counterbalance China's growing regional dominance.

China's increasing investments in the South Pacific as an outcome of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have sparked worries about Beijing's strategic ambitions and debt dependence. India wants to provide a different model of development cooperation that is marked by openness, respect for one another, and shared wealth by increasing its influence in the area.

4. Diplomatic Interactions and Multilateral Collaboration

Through active involvement in regional organisations, multilateral summits, and bilateral visits, India has improved its diplomatic relations with almost all the Pacific Island republics. The main forum for communication and collaboration is now the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC). Since its formation India has played host to several FIPIC summits since its founding, when leaders from the Pacific Island nations have discussed commerce, healthcare, technology transfer, and climate change.

India has also increased the number of its diplomatic posts in the region as well. For example, India has increased its presence in Fiji, which has a sizable Indian diaspora, and established a new High Commission in Papua New Guinea in 2018. Indian president's high-level trips to Pacific Island countries and vice versa have strengthened diplomatic ties by encouraging cooperation and trust.

Trade and Economic Cooperation

The South Pacific Island States and India have steadily increased their economic collaboration in the past few years. India has provided development aid and credit lines to a number of Pacific countries for projects related to sustainable energy, farming, medical care, and infrastructure development. Despite being tiny in comparison to India's commerce with larger economies, the volume of trade has been growing as a result of India's growing exports of machinery, textiles, and medicines.

Offering concessional loan lines for the building of infrastructure in Pacific countries is one of India's major economic endeavours. The Pacific Island countries' dedication to sustainability and climate resilience is in line with India's investments in renewable energy projects, such as wind and solar energy installations. Additionally, Indian companies are looking more closely at prospects in the region's information technology, tourism, and fishing industries.

5. Security Cooperation in Maritime Sector

Collaboration with the South Pacific states on defence and maritime security is another key component of India's vision of extended neighbourhood policy. India continues to have actively working with Pacific countries to build awareness of the maritime sphere and security capacities in light of growing worries about piracy, illegal fishing, and climate-related maritime issues.

India has given many Pacific Island countries naval support, including patrol boats and marine training programs, as part of its dedication to regional security. Many Pacific nations have embraced India's vision of Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) because it supports their goals of maintaining a safe and secure maritime environment. To improve the operational capabilities of the marine forces of the Pacific states, India has also carried out cooperative naval exercises and capacity-building initiatives.

6. Sustainability of the Environment and Climate Change

Rising level of sea and harsh weather seasons carries a grave risk to the South Pacific Island States, making climate change a crucial problem. By promoting renewable energy projects, disaster resilience initiatives, and capacity-building strategies for sustainable development, India has established itself as a trustworthy partner in the fight against climate

The International Solar Alliance (ISA), whereby Pacific Island countries have joined to take use of solar energy solutions, is one of India's leading projects in this area. Additionally, India has offered financial and technical support for climate adaption initiatives, such as coastal protection measures and cyclone early warning systems. In order to promote resilience and long-term sustainability, India has incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework into its regional development cooperation initiatives.

7. Challenges and Future Prospects

India's relationship with the South Pacific Island States is fraught with difficulties, notwithstanding notable advancements. First of all, physical distance creates logistical and connectivity challenges that restrict face-to-face communication and direct trading. Second, India is still concerned about competition from China, which has a greater economic and infrastructure presence in the area. Thirdly, the execution of development programs is slowed down in many Pacific Island countries by institutional capacity constraints and bureaucratic obstacles.

India's extended neighbourhood strategy needs to take a more proactive stance in order to overcome these obstacles. It will be essential to improve digital collaboration, increase the frequency of high-level diplomatic encounters, and fortify direct air and sea connectivity. Furthermore, India's influence and presence in the South Pacific can be increased by utilising regional groupings with the US, Australia and Japan under the umbrella of QUAD framework.

8. Conclusion

Under its Extended Neighbourhood Policy, India's connection with the South Pacific Island Nations has developed into a complex strategy that includes economic, political, strategic, and environmental collaboration. India has made great progress in fortifying its relations with these countries over the last ten years through organised institutions like the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), concessional funding, capacity-building initiatives, and developmental aid. In line with its larger Indo-Pacific vision, this expanding relationship demonstrates India's dedication to promoting a resilient and sustainable South Pacific.

The strengthening of diplomatic ties through high-level visits, the opening of official diplomatic missions, and active involvement in regional multilateral organisations are some of India's main accomplishments in its South Pacific policy. By supporting people-centric development initiatives with an emphasis on healthcare, renewable energy, climate change mitigation, and technology transfer, India has effectively positioned itself as a reliable partner. India's willingness to support regional stability and sustainable development is demonstrated by the aid it has given to Pacific Island countries for solar power and disaster management projects.

India has made an effort to boost commerce and investment in the area, but there are still obstacles to overcome in order to extend market access and get beyond logistical obstacles. Compared to India's commercial ties with other regions, the amount of trade between the Pacific Island nations is quite small; however, programs like support for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) and concessional credit for infrastructure development show a sustained commitment to economic engagement. Indian companies are progressively looking into prospects in fields like information technology, tourism, and fishing, which could improve economic relations between the Pacific countries and India.

Another crucial aspect of India's involvement is cooperation on security, particularly as the Indo-Pacific region's geopolitical rivalry heats up. Common worries about illicit fishing, transnational crimes, and the growing militarisation of the Indo-Pacific area are the driving forces behind India's emphasis on marine security and naval cooperation with Pacific Island countries. To improve the security framework in the area, India has contributed marine surveillance technologies, coast guard support, and defence training. Furthermore, many South Pacific countries that aim to protect their marine sovereignty from outside influences share India's commitment to preserving an open and free Indo-Pacific.

Notwithstanding these successes, a number of obstacles still stand in the way of India's potential to fortify its bonds with the South Pacific. First, frequent diplomatic contacts, trade, and direct investment are restricted by logistical and connectivity issues caused by geographic distance. One major obstacle to economic integration is still the absence of direct maritime and air links. Second, India faces a competitive challenge from China's mounting regional dominance through massive infrastructure projects and financial aid under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although India presents itself as a development partner founded on the values of openness and respect for one another, it will take consistent and calculated action to offset China's impact. Third, maintaining long-term, high-priority engagement with Pacific Island nations is difficult because of India's obligations in South Asian region, the Indian Ocean region, and African region, which frequently strain its diplomatic and economic resources.

India needs to have a more proactive and long-term strategy in the South Pacific to overcome these obstacles. To strengthen economic and diplomatic ties, it will be essential to invest in digital infrastructure, improve connectivity, strengthen international collaborations, and improve trade facilitation tools. Furthermore, using its soft power—such as educational scholarships, cultural exchanges, and networks of Indian diaspora members—can promote goodwill and closer interpersonal ties among Pacific Island countries.

Additionally, by working with similar-minded allies like Australia, Japan and the United States, India must keep integrating its South Pacific involvement within the greater Indo-Pacific framework. India's position in the region can be effectively strengthened through collaborative projects in disaster resilience, renewable energy, and blue economy initiatives. Furthermore, in order to make sure that its strategic goals and developmental aid are in line with the lasting benefits of Pacific nations, India's participation in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and other regional organisations should be increased.

In a nutshell India's commitment to a multipolar international order and its changing global aspirations are reflected in its Extended Neighbourhood Policy as it relates to the South Pacific. Despite its traditionally low level of involvement in the area, recent actions show a sincere attempt to create a long-lasting influence. The effectiveness of this approach will rely on India's capacity to resolve logistical issues, boost economic participation, and handle complex geopolitical issues. By forging stronger commercial, diplomatic, and strategic relations with the Pacific Island nations, India can raise its profile internationally and contribute to the development of a more prosperous, safe, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

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