



## India and the Pacific Island Countries: What the Future Holds?

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In recent years, India's approach towards the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) has been on a gradual positive shift. This change can be attributed to various geopolitical, economic and strategic factors. Geopolitically, the PICs are a part of the larger Indo-Pacific region. The current globalised world thrives largely on international trade, 90 percent of which is transported via sea routes. The sea-lanes of the Indo-Pacific region are critical to international commerce and the Pacific Islands lie right at the centre of it. Therefore, rising significance of the Indo-Pacific, regionally and internationally, has brought the PICs at the centre of the global attention. The wider Pacific region with its strategic and economic significance has attracted the attention of countries like US, Russia, China, Japan, Australia, and Indonesia. However, the traditional approach in India's foreign policy focussed much more on the Indian Ocean region and the Pacific region including the PICs was relatively neglected. Till date out of the fourteen PICs, India has its resident missions only in two countries i.e. Papua New Guinea and Fiji. However, India's approach towards the region is gradually changing, as India looks beyond its immediate region, with its growing economic, maritime military capacities and strategic ambitions in the wider Indo-Pacific region. In recent years New Delhi has reached out to these small island states, highlighting the government's willingness for greater engagement. The paper here focuses largely on India's relations with the fourteen PICs which are a part of the Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC), a multilateral platform launched by India in 2014. Given India's renewed focus on the region, it becomes pertinent to analyse the significant areas which can facilitate closer cooperation between India and the PICs. This paper largely aims to highlight the future prospects of cooperation beginning with a brief backdrop of the PICs and an overview of India's approach towards the region.

## The Pacific Island Countries (PICs)

The Pacific Islands consists of the three major groups of islands: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. The term Pacific Island Countries (PICs) here commonly refers to the fourteen countries scattered in the South-West Pacific Ocean. These are the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. These are a heterogeneous group with diverse ethnic groupings, culture, languages, economies, and political systems. Of the fourteen PICs, nine are sovereign-the Kingdom of Tonga, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Others are in Free Association with larger nations- which implies that their foreign and defence policies are managed by the larger nations. Cook Islands and Niue are in Free Association with New Zealand, the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, and Palau, with the US.<sup>i</sup>

The region comprises strategically located small island nations (Nauru's total land area is 21sq. Km.), with small populations (Niue's total population is roughly around 1470)<sup>ii</sup>, abundance of natural resources and relatively lesser developed economies. They lie at the crossroads of strategically significant maritime trade routes. Their profile is rising particularly given the popularity of the Indo-Pacific construct. The South Pacific, until recently, was considered more of an area of US' influence managed under the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) trilateral military alliance.<sup>iii</sup> As global attention shifts to the Indo-Pacific, the South Pacific sub-region is becoming increasingly prominent economically, politically, and strategically.



Figure: 1 Pacific Island Countries and their EEZs  
Source: Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)

## India's engagement with the Pacific Island Countries

Historically, India's interaction with the region goes back to the colonial era, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when Indian workers were taken to the region, to work as indentured plantation labourers, most of whom settled there, particularly in Fiji and PNG. Yet, in the post-colonial era until recently the region did not find much significance in India's foreign policy. However, of late, the changing geopolitical scenario and strategic and economic compulsions have driven India to refresh and redesign its Pacific policy. The PICs with their resource rich Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) can be attractive sources of natural and mineral resources like LNG and hydrocarbons to fuel India's growing economy and can also provide new markets for its products. Some of the PICs have EEZs that are larger than the landmass and EEZ of India taken together. Kiribati, one of the smallest countries, alone has an EEZ of 3.5 million square kilometres.<sup>iv</sup> Also as India with its rising naval capabilities begins to look beyond the east of Malacca, the PIC's would become inevitably significant in India's broader maritime strategy. India's renewed interest in the region can also be seen in the light of its own rechristened Act East policy with enhanced geographical reach and strategic substance.

India's interaction with the PICs still largely revolves around its engagement with Fiji and PNG, mainly driven by the presence of sizeable Indian Diaspora; nearly 40 percent of Fiji's population is of Indian origin and about 3000 Indians live in PNG.<sup>v</sup> In terms of institutional engagements,<sup>1</sup> India participates in the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) as one of the key dialogue partners of the Forum.<sup>vi</sup> However, the most important development in facilitating India's interaction with the PICs in recent years has been the formation of FIPIC. The Forum which was formed in 2014 marked India's renewed strategic interest in the region. Discussions to date, in the FIPIC, have mainly revolved around issues of regional and global significance like environment, climate change, United Nations reform, fisheries management, energy security, maritime security, sustainable development etc.

### Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC)

FIPIC is a multinational grouping which was launched during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Fiji in November 2014, as part of his three country tour including the visit to Myanmar for the India-ASEAN Summit and the East Asia Summit and to Australia for the G20 Summit in Brisbane. The historic visit to the island nation was the first by an Indian Prime Minister in 33 years, since Mrs. Indira Gandhi's visit in 1981. The inaugural FIPIC summit, at the level of Heads of Government, was held in Suva, Fiji, on November 19, 2014.

Speaking at the first FIPIC summit on November 19, 2014, Prime Minister Modi called for building closer partnerships with the PICs and announced the following measures for the same:

- Recognising Climate Change as a major issue of concern for PICs, a Special Adaptation Fund of US\$1million was announced to be set up, to provide technical assistance and training for capacity building to the Pacific Island Partners.

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<sup>1</sup> Pacific Regionalism finds expression in the PIF, based "on the sense of common identity and purpose". PIF earlier known as South Pacific Forum, founded in 1971, it comprises of 18 members and also has 18 dialogue partners.

- E-networks are an effective means for coordination, given the distance and poor connectivity between the islands. In keeping with the success achieved in the Pan-African e-network Project, a Pan Pacific Islands Project was announced for tele-medicine and tele-education.
- Willingness to work on solar energy projects with the Pacific Islands at the community level was also expressed.
- Indian visa on arrival to all the 14 countries was announced to facilitate exchanges and promote better people to people contact.
- Since most of the island nations are aid dependent, it was announced to increase the India's Grant-in-Aid to PICs to US\$ 200,000 annually.
- Focusing on the long-standing request from the PICs to enhance trade relations with India, Prime Minister Modi announced the setting up of a Trade Office in India. He also highlighted the possibilities of joint research in traditional medicine and developing healthcare facilities.
- Other important proposals included deputation of technical experts to the PICs including in the fields of agriculture, healthcare and IT, training to diplomats of these countries, 'Distinguished Visitors Programme' under the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), to strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding, promoting cooperation in space technology application for improving communication and quality of life of the people, possibilities of sharing data that could be used for monitoring climate change, disaster risk reduction and management, resource management.
- Lastly, India proposed that FIPIC be held on a regular basis.<sup>vii</sup>

The **second summit** of the FIPIC Forum was hosted by India at Jaipur, Rajasthan, on 21-22 August 2015. Building on the first summit, discussions took place on various issues of significance to the members such as climate change, clean energy, food security and reform of the United Nations. The then President of India Pranab Mukherjee welcoming the leaders, said that "our bilateral cooperation and engagement has not reached its potential. India wants to partner with the Small Island Developing countries in their quest for securing inclusive growth and sustained economic development".<sup>viii</sup> He highlighted the mutually beneficial areas to strengthen trade and investments like "fisheries, agriculture particularly sugarcane, rice, coconut, coir, oil and natural gas, mining, water desalination and other areas of interest".<sup>ix</sup>

At the opening session of the summit, Prime Minister Modi in his keynote address called for closer partnership between India and the PICs "forged by shared aspirations and challenges".<sup>x</sup> He argued that in the current globalised world the centre of gravity of opportunities as well as challenges is shifting towards the Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region, bringing the two Oceans together and has brought India and the Pacific Islands even more closer. He emphasised the idea of space and ocean as the drivers of economy, for sustainable development contributing in energy security, food security, and new medicines. He called for reforms in the United Nations, seeking support from the PICs' leaders for the same and said that India will extend its support for a "dedicated seat for Small Island Development States (SIDS) in a reformed United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and also support realisation of vision of Pacific Regionalism".<sup>xi</sup> The Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj said that "India appreciates and is grateful to the PICs for their

expression of support for India's quest to become the permanent member in the expanded United Nations Security Council".<sup>xii</sup>

Highlighting the progress on implementation of announcements made in the first summit Prime Minister Modi pointed out, India's increased grant-in-aid to the PICs from US\$125,000 to US\$200,000, e-tourist visas, deputation of Indian experts in the area of coir industry and a special training programme for diplomats of the PICs. While announcing the establishment of the FIPIC Trade Office at the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), New Delhi, he said "trade, more than aid, is the enabler for development".<sup>xiii</sup>

The latest in the series of events under the aegis of the FIPIC was the 'India-Pacific Islands Sustainable Development Conference', held in Suva, Fiji from 25-26 May, 2017. Key partners at the conference were The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) as its key knowledge partner, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). The central issues of discussion in the conference included the blue economy, adaptation-mitigation practices for climate change, disaster preparedness, health, the International Solar Alliance as well as finding practical solutions to Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) implementation.<sup>xiv</sup> The conference aimed to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experience, and initiate public-private partnerships and collaborations for the benefit of all participating countries.<sup>xv</sup> On the sidelines of the conference, India also signed several MoUs with the Pacific island nations to deepen cooperation across a variety of fields. These include MoUs for setting up of Centres of Excellence in Information Technology (CEIT) with Fiji, Cook Islands, Nauru, Samoa and Niue. India and Fiji also signed three MOUs for 'Cooperation in Youth Development', 'Cooperation between Broadcasting Agencies' and Cooperation in Renewable Energy.<sup>xvi</sup>

At this stage no official confirmation has been made about for the next FIPIC summit. Since its formation FIPIC has clearly brought India and the PIC's closer providing a platform to discuss common areas of cooperation and highlight India's interest in the Pacific Island region.

### **Prospects for Cooperation: The Road Ahead**

Analysing the discussions taken up at the two subsequent FIPIC summits and the Sustainable Development Conference of 2017, certain crucial areas can be identified for future cooperation between India and the PICs.

The geography of these countries makes them vulnerable to various challenges from traditional and non-traditional angles. One of the major critical challenges to the livelihood, security and well being of the people, faced by the PICs is the issue of Climate Change. The increasing soil salinity due to the rising sea level threatens the low lying island states, also giving rise to the problem of relocation. The 48<sup>th</sup> PIF Communiqué reiterated the support of PIF's countries to international efforts on Climate Change, welcoming the Fiji's Presidency of the twenty-third Conference of the Parties (COP 23) 2017, under the United Nations Framework

Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It called for urgent, ambitious action from the global community to address the issue climate change.<sup>xvii</sup>

At the second edition of the World Sustainable Development Summit in New Delhi, India in February 2018, the Fijian representative, Attorney-General and Minister for Economy Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum argued that climate change presents an immediate threat to food production, and there is an urgent need to enhance finance and sustainable development assistance available to climate vulnerable nations like PICs'. He particularly highlighted the case of "the Government of Kiribati's purchase of land in Fiji to address food security concerns due to rising sea levels".<sup>xviii</sup> At the summit the Pacific Island Development Forum (PIDF)<sup>2</sup>, with the aim to create Green-Blue Economies in the Pacific, emphasized the need to promote the "effective South-South Cooperation under the FIPIC".<sup>xix</sup> Recently, the Climate Action Pacific Partnership (CAPP) Conference was held at 26-27 July, 2018 in Suva, Fiji. Speaking at the conference the Fijian Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama argued that the Pacific Islands have "their moral authority as vulnerable states to drive the world to a more ambitious, more aggressive climate action".<sup>xx</sup> India with its long coastline and 1300 islands, clearly shares the concerns of climate change of the PICs. India has been an active participant in various international initiatives on climate change. Therefore, climate change is a crucial area of common concern where closer partnership can be developed for effective and concrete solution and could be a core area for providing technical assistance by India.

Another significant area is assistance and capacity building in disaster management. Given their geography, most of the Pacific Island countries are prone to a variety of natural disasters, with widespread social, economic and environmental consequences. India can assist in building capacities of Disaster Risk Resilience to ensure sustainable development. India had proposed to enhance their capacities through conducting courses on early warning system, training programmes on Space Based Disaster Management System and such other areas. In September 2017, India launched *Climate Early Warning Systems* in seven PICs.<sup>xxi</sup>

At the closing session of the FIPIC II, Prime Minister Modi said "India will be pleased to create capacity in Island States to deal with natural disasters, including through human resource development" and recognising the utility of space assets and technology for early warning system and incident response system, he suggested setting up of "Space Technology Applications Centre in any one of the Pacific Island Countries".<sup>xxii</sup> He also proposed that the Indian Navy can provide coastal surveillance and hydrographic surveys assistance to the Pacific Island partners, to strengthen security of their EEZs.<sup>xxiii</sup> As part of goodwill visits to enhance cooperation and mutual understanding, the Indian Navy's Offshore Patrol Vessel Sumitra visited Fiji in October 2016.<sup>xxiv</sup> Earlier this month, INS Sahyadri paid a goodwill visit to the Port of Suva from 13-16 August.<sup>xxv</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> PIDF is a unique platform bringing together leaders from the public and private sectors and civil society to address regional development challenges, through mutually beneficial innovative partnerships. see more at : <http://pacificidf.org/what-is-pidf/>

Recently as a part of HADR assistance, India sent relief assistance worth US\$ 3million to Fiji when Tropical Cyclone Winston hit the country in February 2016.<sup>xxvi</sup> India also gave an assistance of US\$ 1million to the Kingdom of Toga in February this year in the aftermath of Tropical Cyclone Gita.<sup>xxvii</sup> In July this year the Indian government also handed over a grant assistance of US\$200,000 to relief and rehabilitation efforts of the Government of Vanvatu, as the country has been suffering calamities for a year due to frequent eruptions of Manarao Volcano and the Tropical Cyclone Hola in March this year.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Another critical area for cooperation is in the sustainable utilisation of ocean resources. As Prime Minister Modi speaking at the FIPIC II said that “I see you as large Ocean States with vast potential”<sup>xxix</sup>. The small island nations with large EEZ’s provide an opportunity as well as a challenge to harness the resources in a sustainable manner. India in the recent years India has been vocal about ocean led growth at various international platforms. Similarly, in 2017 the Pacific Island Forum Leaders also “endorsed the ‘Blue Pacific’ identity as the core driver of collective action. The ‘Blue Pacific’ seeks to re-capture the collective potential of the region based on an explicit recognition of it’s shared “ocean identity”, “ocean geography”, and “ocean resources”.<sup>xxx</sup> The idea provides a common ground where India can engage with these countries given its own emphasise on the idea of ‘Blue Economy’. The aims of sustainable development, economic growth, and strengthened security for all can very well be pursued by focussing on the Ocean led development, under the framework of ‘blue economy’ and ‘blue pacific’.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Energy is a key priority for these countries. The possibility of renewable energy- wind and solar can be harnessed to fulfil their growing demands.<sup>xxxii</sup> In March 2007, India facilitated a training workshop on sustainable development in Suva, Fiji through the Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI). The primary objective of the workshop was to help the small islands states of the South Pacific enhance capacity in renewable energy utilization, rainwater harvesting, and waste management.<sup>xxxiii</sup> A notable example of India’s efforts to foster the availability of affordable renewable energy in the PICs is the training program organized in 2012 for elderly women from Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Samoa, Kiribati and Nauru at the Barefoot College in Rajasthan.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The programmes aims at “turning grandmothers into solar engineers trough training”, to install and maintain solar lighting and power in their home villages.<sup>xxxv</sup> Highlighting the significance of such training programmes at the FIPIC II, Prime Minster Modi said “during the last three years, India has trained 43 rural women from 8 island countries as solar engineers. We now commit to train 70 women solar engineers and to provide solar electrification to 2,800 houses -200 houses in each Pacific Island Country”.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Therefore, sustainable utilisation of ocean resources can provide a long term solution to the problems of food and energy security.

In the field of healthcare and medicine, India plans to explore developing capacity for health services, set up a pharmaceutical manufacturing plant and distribution centre in the Pacific Island region for access to affordable drug and has offered a Line of Credit for this project. In 2016 President Pranab Mukherjee, during his two days State Visit to Papua New Guinea from 28-29 April 2016 announced a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for broad ranging cooperation in the health sector. He “announced that Government would provide retro-

viral drugs and equipment for the treatment of 20,000 HIV patients in Papua New Guinea for one year”.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Such initiatives are crucial in building capacities in healthcare sector. The goodwill visits by the Indian Navy ships to the Pacific Islands can also support in areas like healthcare through medical camps on the islands.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

A major area where India needs to focus in strengthening ties with the PICs is economic cooperation. In most of the PICs aid narrative has mainly determined their relationships with the larger countries. The region is one of the most aid-dependent in the world. While Australia remains the largest aid and development partner, over the last decade China has emerged as one of the significant donors to the region. Possibility of China’s large scale intervention has led to debate about its intentions and implications, creating apprehensions particularly in Australia and New Zealand. Some of the largest aid providers to the PICs over the past decade include the following:

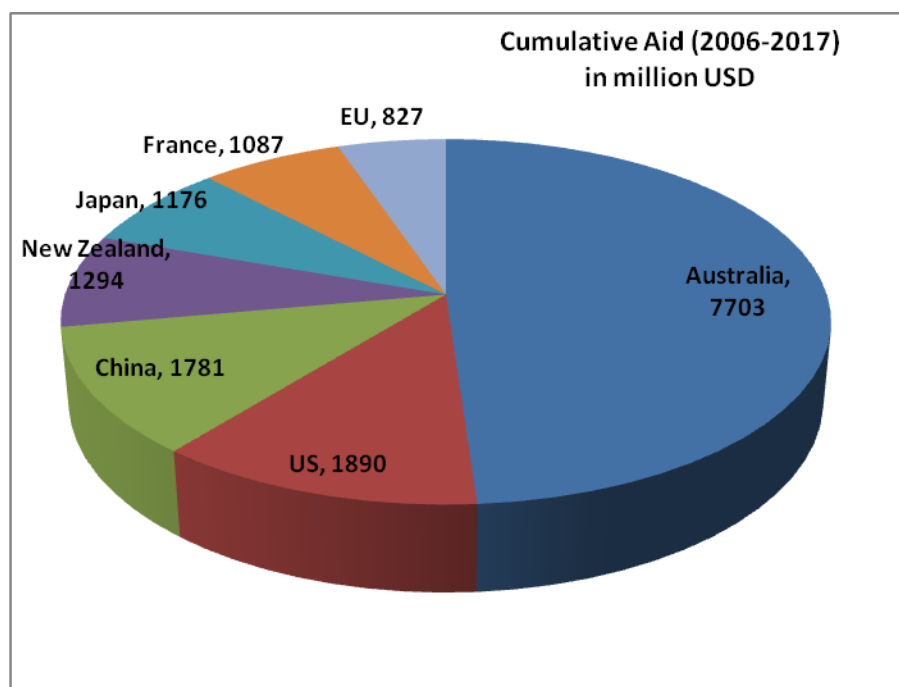


Figure: 2

Source: The Mapping Foreign Assistance in the Pacific Project, Lowy Institute for International Policy, <https://chineseaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/>

India began to disburse aid to the PICs only since 2006 when a minor annual grant of US \$100,000 to each of the 14 island nations was announced, and the volume was increased to US\$125,000 in 2009,<sup>xxxix</sup> which now stand at the US\$200,000. Although India’s aid to the PICs has subsequently increased in the past few years, it is also, important to focus on improving trade relations with the PICs. The island nations have time and again expressed desire to engage more on trade and investment. India can explore the possible areas where a durable long-term trade partnership can be developed.



Most of the economic activities in these countries fall under the unorganised sector. Development of small industries can speed up the process of economic development. India has the expertise to support the development of micro, small and medium enterprises. India has provided financial assistance for SME sectors in these countries, helping many small scale entrepreneurs to develop their own business. At the FIPIC II it was announced that India “will extend support for purchase of machinery for coconut processing and enhancing rice and sugarcane yields”.<sup>xi</sup> In December 2017, India announced US\$1.06 million, to help Fiji Government to revitalize the country’s sugar industry, especially for procurement of agricultural equipments and vehicles.<sup>xii</sup> In an effort to provide a boost to economic cooperation, FICCI launched the *Business accelerator for FIPIC* in September 2015, with the objectives of providing necessary information and facilitation to businessmen on both sides regarding prospects of trade and investment, facilitating meetings between the concerned businessmen and organising events/trade fairs.<sup>xiii</sup>

<b>Country</b>	<b>Imports 2017-18</b>	<b>Exports 2017-18</b>	<b>Total Trade</b>
	<b>Rs. Lacs</b>	<b>Rs. Lacs</b>	<b>Rs. Lacs</b>
Cook Island	4.79	115.45	120.24
Fiji	314.67	34,974.99	35,289.66
Kiribati	354.91	-----	354.91
Naurau	8.24	877.58	885.82
Niue	3.72	-----	3.72
Palau	504.07	42.48	546.55
PNG	126,615.80	27,037.91	153,653.72
Samoa	164.96	1,548.06	1,713.02
Solomon Island	43,701.73	823.60	44,525.33
Tonga	-----	809.01	809.01
Tuvalu	0.77	40.34	41.12
Vanvatu	0.46	1,464.37	1,464.83
<b>Total</b>	<b>171, 674.12</b>	<b>67733.79</b>	<b>239,407.91</b>
<b>% share in India’s total</b>	<b>0.0572</b>	<b>0.0346</b>	<b>0.0483</b>

Table: 1

Source: Department of Commerce, Export Import Data Bank, Ministry of Commerce and Industry  
Available at: <http://commerce-app.gov.in/eidb/icstcntq.asp>

India's total annual trade with the PICs presently, hovers around US\$ 300 million. Some of the major items of exports include machinery and mechanical appliances, pharmaceutical products, plastic and articles thereof, mineral fuels, mineral oils, cotton, iron or steel etc. Imports mainly include items like ores, slag and ash, wood and articles of wood; wood charcoal.<sup>xliii</sup>

India has also been looking for increasing investments in the PICs. A MoU for an Indian line of credit of US\$ 100 million for development of infrastructure in PNG was signed during the then President Pranab Mukherjee's visit in 2016.<sup>xliiv</sup> The low volume of trade between India and the PICs is due to the small population and market sizes in these islands, as well as their distance from India.<sup>xliv</sup> The data shows that a large proportion of India's trade in the region is mainly shared by a few countries like PNG, Fiji, Solomon Islands. The need is to focus, on one hand, on the idea of inclusive economic cooperation with the region as a whole, while at the same time also focus on exploring complementarities in trade with the individual countries. India's engagement with the region can provide it greater access to the markets far away from its shores. It could be an important tool to strengthen its own presence in the Pacific region.

## Conclusion

The Pacific Island countries, while geographically small yet they have considerable economic, strategic and political significance in international affairs. They have an independent voice at various international forums, have enormous amount of natural resources, and can be a lucrative market for a rapidly growing economy like India. Therefore, these island nations can no longer be ignored. Some of the crucial prospective areas which need to be focused in deepening India's engagements with the Pacific Island nations include space technology, informational technology, trade and investment, sustainable development, maritime security, disaster management, human resource development and people to people contact. India's diplomatic efforts are understandably focussed more on Fiji and PNG. However, it is important to develop a comprehensive and a clearly defined strategy to engage with all the PICs. Such engagements can be developed at bilateral and multilateral settings and regional and global forums, like the UN, PIC, FIPIC. The recent efforts to engage with the region have brought India much closer to these countries. The formation of FIPIC has given a much needed push to India's relations with the PICs. It has provided a platform to facilitate multilateral and multidimensional cooperation between India and the PICs.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

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## End Notes

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