

India and the Pacific Islands region: Building New Partnerships

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The special policy focus on the Pacific Islands region has given a new thrust to India's Act East Policy and opened fresh avenues for India to engage closely with this strategically located and extremely resource rich region. The forums such as the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) which will bring all the heads of states together every year can provide an important bridge for deepening the economic, political and social engagement in future. The wide range of issues that are included in the agenda and the emphasis on shared aspirations and interests reflects India's intent to chart a new course towards evolving a dynamic relationship with the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and correspondingly solidify its position as a geopolitical power in the regional power balance.

The Pacific Islands region consists of 14 sovereign countries namely Cook Islands, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Diverse in terms ethnicity and topography, these small island nations (with large ocean areas), are faced with a troubling combination of small population base (8 million approx.), low economic development, vast natural resources and weak governmental systems. Throughout the cold war period the region remained under the overarching US presence in terms of security and aid with Australia and New Zealand acting as close partners. However, in the aftermath the waning US interest and the

beginning of the multilateral epoch opened the region to other major powers, of which, China is at the forefront.

India has been a late entrant in the region and a reluctant one too. For long India's approach towards the Pacific Islands region remained confined to a limited engagement with Australia and New Zealand and a larger concern about the racial discrimination faced by the Indian diaspora in Fiji. Whenever there was a coup in Fiji, New Delhi reacted by taking up the issue in the forums like Commonwealth or putting pressure through Australia, largely failing to play an effective role or assure its diaspora. However, post 1991 as India entered its new 'avatar' with opening of its economy and setting aside its rigid non-alignment principles; the Look East Policy (LEP) emerged as a major policy priority for engagement with the east. Focussing largely on Southeast Asia, the LEP in the long run expanded its trajectories to include whole of Asia Pacific. The aid/trade diplomacy started to take shape more definitely expanding India's horizons in the Pacific. India became the dialogue partner and an Observer in Pacific Islands Forum (though hardly participating) which is the focal regional grouping. This policy shift and *India's* geo-economic and geostrategic outreach to the *Pacific Islands region* has been driven, in part to counterweight China's growing influence, but largely by the desire for a greater global role; gaining support for candidature in the UNSC; rich natural resources and maritime security. As the global centre of gravity shifts to the 'Indo-Pacific', these initiatives reflect a strategic realignment that would accord an important role to India in the region.

Under the Modi government, this new tilt in Indian foreign policy got a drastic push. New Delhi has turned the 'Look East Policy' into the 'Act East Policy', and has opened direct avenues for engagement with the Pacific Islands region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Fiji on 18-19 November 2014 (soon after the re-establishment of democracy), launching of FIPIC, meeting PIC heads of state/governments, and proposing to work closely with them to help advance their development priorities was a concrete step towards boosting India's ties with the region. The FIPIC-2 at Jaipur (August 19-21, 2015) further expanded the co-

operation agenda. Some of the important agreements are visa on arrival; an e-network to provide tele-medicine and tele-education; a Special Adaptation Fund of \$1 million to provide technical assistance and training for capacity building to the islands; a hike in Grant-in-Aid from \$125,000 to \$200,000 annually to each of them for community projects selected by them; and a trade office in New Delhi. Some of the proposed areas of engagement other than promoting trade and investment are the direct support for and capacity building for coastal surveillance and hydrographic surveys and strengthening security of their EEZs (on the line of Indian Ocean islands); goodwill visits by Indian Navy to extend support in areas like healthcare through medical camps on the islands; building space and technology assets to help in inventory of land and water resources; fish zoning; forest resources management; coastal and ocean studies; disaster management; assistance in establishing a 'Space Technology Applications Centre' for customized training in space applications; training to broadcasters; and assistance on ocean economy. The Indian President Pranab Mukharjee at the meeting with Pacific heads of states stated that 'India keenly looks forward to harnessing their mineral, marine and hydrocarbon resources and encourage investments in fisheries, agriculture, oil and natural gas, mining and water desalination'.ⁱ

India keenness to increase mutual understanding and making a common cause with the development agendas of the island countries, has generated a convivial, friendly response in the region which was reflected in the huge media coverage Prime Minister Modi's visit received. India is already one of the top destinations for medical and education purposes for the region. The capacity building offered to the island countries through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and ICSSR and fellowships are hugely sought after. The Indian government has increased the number of such fellowships but it should also ensure that they are taken up genuinely and are fully utilised. The two way traffic has substantively increased in the recent past. The PICs are well represented in international organisations (UN, WTO and several others) that provide space for mutual support and cooperation on broader global issues. Pacific nations- walking a thin line with China- have shown a widespread support for India's

candidature in the UNSC.ⁱⁱ India too has offered support for a comprehensive, balanced and fair outcome of United Nations Climate Change Conference, (COP2).ⁱⁱⁱ

Apart from the region as a whole India also sought deeper bilateral engagement with the PICs. Some impressive gains were recorded with PNG and Fiji. In 2012, of the total trade of US\$228 million between India and the Pacific Islands region, PNG accounted for 58.16% and Fiji 17.12%. Countries like Tonga and Vanuatu are waiting to be explored and will give a further push to this cooperation. In addition, priority based assistance from India is also on the agenda. At FIPIC -2, the Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa outlined his hopes for support, with respect to post-graduate training for Samoa's doctors in India and also requested Indian doctors and medical instructors to 'periodically work and take sabbaticals in Samoa to support capacity building efforts'^{iv}, for which New Delhi has readily agreed.

New Delhi can also use its democratic heft to strengthen its presence and diplomatic relations with the regional powers. India should proactively foster close cooperation with liberal democratic stakeholders like U.S., Australia, Japan and New Zealand under trilateral or quadrilateral mechanisms for a shared responsibility of sea-lane security, counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and disaster relief etc. The South Pacific is a potential theatre of the unfolding great power contestation and India has a huge scope to step up its influence in a still fluid regional power equation. However, the Pacific Islanders are fully aware of their vulnerability and are sensitive towards being caught in this great power rivalry, which needs to be respected and given due concern. In this regard India has an additional advantage of its soft power pursuit. The presence of a sizable Indian diaspora in the region (despite the problematic relationship in Fiji) has developed a familiarity about India. In other words it is about engaging horizontally (rather than vertically) by using the local resources, employing local workers and helping them build- a chronically underdeveloped- human resource and thus bringing about change in life and economic condition of the people.

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Some of the immediate steps both India and the PICs need to take to strengthen this partnership are to raise, a rather patchy, diplomatic representation. At present India has only two diplomatic offices i.e. PNG and Fiji and same is true for the PICs too. India needs to have its diplomatic representation in all the countries and also in the regional organisations for an effective presence. Of late, India has got representation in some more regional forums, like Pacific Islands Development Forum (a Fiji led grouping which does not include Australia and New Zealand) but what is needed is a more regular and effectual participation. Another issue seeking attention is the problem of connectivity with these countries. At the moment India and the Pacific Islands region have a total trade of about USD 300 million (India's exports are around USD 200 million and imports are around USD 100 million). However India is keen to explore newer areas for co-operation in terms of micro, small and medium enterprises which are very compatible with the regional economies and societies. The private sector too, has major role to play in this partnership. There are companies from India with specific expertise that are suited to carry out projects in these countries. Two way traffic needs to be strengthened and the annual FIPIC summits have to be followed by official level interactions for implementing decisions.

New Delhi's orientation towards capacity building, strengthening 'Human bonds for enduring relations' (as was stated by the Indian PM at FIPIC Summit) and aligning its own interests with the developmental agendas of the regional countries are the steps in the right direction. But the crux is that if India is to be taken seriously and become a factor in regional balance of power, it needs to be regular and consistent in its ventures, both symbolically and substantively. India's democratic disposition, knowhow for small scale industries, inexpensive healthcare, educational facilities and keenness towards blue economy have big takers in the region and can provide India with a firm ground to pursue future engagement but this can fructify only if interactions are strengthened at every level through regularity and consistency.

Endnotes

i <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/speeches-detail.htm?423>

ii <http://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm>

iii <http://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm>

iv <http://www.talamua.com/samoa-seeks-health-sector-support-from-india/>