

# India's Engagement with the Southwest Pacific Island States: 1991-2008

Aaditya Swaroop\*

PhD Research Scholar, Centre for Indo Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

**Abstract – The most fragmented area on the globe is the South Pacific. It is dotted with small to broad island nations and dependencies, with a number of more than two thousand four hundred. The smallest government units in the world are each of these nations. Australia, by comparison, is a continental nation (7.6 million sq. km.) in area. Nauru is the smallest republic in the country, with a meager territory of 21 sq. Km. Politically, the region 's real promise resides in the large array of coastal waters and exclusive economic zones with an immense resource base. The greatest recipients of the Rule of the Sea introduced in 1982 were the countries of the Pacific Islands. In several of these nations, mining has become a significant economic practice, e.g. copper and gold mining in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Fiji, phosphates in Nauru and Kiribati and natural gas in Papua New Guinea. Since the 1970s, the 'pacific route' a term popularized by Fiji's Ratu Mara has become used to demonstrate the nature of the Pacific and their consensual attitude to coping with the reg.**

-----X-----

## INTRODUCTION

The interest of India in the Pacific area is a natural expansion of its eastward-looking agenda, which originally targeted the area of South East Asia and now spreads farther east to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. Trade relations have developed with this region; India has emerged as the sixth largest export market in Australia. As the most formed of the Pacific Island states and the home of over three lakh citizens of Indian descent, India has an evident strategic interest in the Fiji Islands. The alliance with the Pacific Islands Forum has provided India's increasing presence in the South Pacific area a new dimension.

Because of its construction expertise, the Pacific Islands have turned to India for assistance. However, as small countries with minimal experience in foreign diplomacy, some of the participants of the Forum have asked for Indian assistance in the area of international affairs, such as preparing an argument for safeguarding their rights during the World Trade Organization diplomacy.

At the United Nations Security Council, Fiji was a vocal advocate of India's candidacy. At his U.N. speech, General Assembly, Prime Minister Laisenia of Fiji

Japan and India were identified by Qarase as the two nations who should have seats on an enlarged Security Council. Fiji was one of the six Pacific nations who sponsored the United Nations G-4

resolutions, with Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Tuvalu and Solomon Islands being the others.

India has initiated formal and continuous exchanges with the countries of the Forum, keeping their specific needs into account. Both parties also attempted to create a creative partnership. The history of India with its own island territories has provided it an appreciation of the complexities and special demands of small island creation while preserving its delicate habitats. India made a suggestion at a discussion meeting in 2004 to undertake a report on the chemical effects of Kava. Kava, a non-alcoholic, slightly soporific liquor, is drunk in the Pacific and, for its medicinal effects, is part of typical Western countries and has been a significant export commodity for many Pacific countries. Some studies, however, have related liver toxicity to ingestion of Kava and have knocked it off the international market. Members of the Forum enthusiastically accepted the offer to perform experiments at Indian laboratories on Kava, as it plays an important role in the lives of the islanders and provides them with a source of income. With global change and increasing ocean levels eating through their territory, Pacific islanders have learned the hard way to care about their climate. The remote environment and limited scale of the islands also ensured that their delicate biodiversity has been seriously affected by over-exploitation.

In monetary terms, Indian aid to the Pacific Islands might be minimal, but it does have a broad effect.

On the Pacific Islands, coconut is widely cultivated, but it is primarily used for food and oil. Senior officials from the Fiji and Micronesia Coconut Production Authority visited the Coconut Board in Kerala to learn how to improve the output of coconut plantations through the use of all coconut palm components and through intercropping with other plants to allow better use of property. The sugar industry is one of the cornerstones of Fiji's economy, but India has provided technical assistance to revitalize the sugar industry in Fiji as a preferential price mechanism with the European Union owing to the phase-out. The goal of sugar technology is to upgrade the industry through a soft loan of \$86 million from India's EXIM bank. Solar equipment panels worth Rs.1 crore were issued by the Marshall Islands, while Kiribati was equipped with physiotherapy and orthopedic equipment for its main hospital. Unique programmes at the Tata Economic Research Institute is attended by trainees from Micronesia.

The importance of foreign diplomacy has grown for small states with a rising array of conferences, treaties and international organizations. India also provided training courses to diplomats from Pacific countries through its Foreign Technological and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) project. Government representatives have taken lessons, including the preparation of laws, on diplomacy as well as legislative activity. In November 2004, a senior parliamentary officer from the Kiribati Parliament took part in a program for international parliamentary officials in Delhi, and a senior parliamentary counsel attended a constitutional drafting course for international parliamentary and government officials.

There is a reciprocal advantage to India's growing engagement with the Pacific region; its growing engagement with the Pacific region has lifted its prominence in the Pacific countries and increased its presence within a number of small developing countries.

The state visit to Papua New Guinea (PNG) and New Zealand by President Pranab Mukherjee marked a major milestone in India's extended 'Act East' policy. It signaled the new momentum that has emerged in India's relations with the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) after Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed power in May 2014. Representatives from 14 PICs—Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, visited India in August 2015 for the second summit of the Forum for India Pacific Cooperation (FIPIC) initiated during Modi's visit to Fiji in November 2014. The importance of the recent visit by Mukherjee lies in the fact that it was the first presidential visit by India to Papua New Guinea and New Zealand, and the first high-level visit by India to Papua New Guinea.

A sub-division of the larger Indo-Pacific, the South Pacific has long been considered a backwater of global affairs.<sup>1</sup> The region is home to a significant number of islands that can be separated into Micronesia (Northern Pacific), Melanesia (Western Pacific) and Polynesia (Eastern and Central Pacific). These islands have historically had close economic and political ties with the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, the United States (US) and, to a lesser degree, Japan.<sup>2</sup> The Free Allied States of the United States (Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau) are considered, along with Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, to be the security border of the United States in Asia-Pacific.

After World War II, the region was dominated by the US, which exerted its influence by its partners, Australia and New Zealand. The latter's primary duty was to help promote development and maintain the political stability of the country, which was necessary for US defence. But in the mid-nineties, the region did not receive the requisite attention from the US, which truly relied on and supported the Australian leadership. On its part, Australia used its power "to advance an intrusive and authoritarian regional government policy intended to improve the" effectiveness "of Stats. This led to regional dissatisfaction among the PICs.<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, China made inroads in the area by offering financial assistance to Stats." Moreover, in part, the US has announced its 'Asia-Pacific' move. Consequently, the geopolitical relevance of the area was only realized during the last decade when the global attention shifted towards the Indo-Pacific.

Three problems are addressed in this context against this backdrop: How strategically important is the region to India? What are the advantages India has over China in the field, given that both are extra-regional performers? And in view of the visit of Mukherjee, what is the relationship of the state of India with Papua New Guinea? <sup>6</sup>

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following is a thematic presentation of the Literature pertaining to the study of India. Policy towards southwest Pacific, the Literature examined consists of a varied corpus of writings such as books, journals newspapers, surveys, government and ministry documents as well as the internet.

### The South Pacific: A Regional Profile

In his book *The South Pacific*, Ron Crocombe (2001) outlines the key developments in the past, current and potential futures of the varied and exciting cultures of the most distributed region in the world. The primary emphasis is on the Pacific Islands today, but most of what is occurring today, both inside the Pacific and outside, is influenced to various degrees by what happened yesterday. The

powers that are now in place will affect most of what occurs tomorrow. The final segment contains a select list of Pacific Islands organisations and programs, information on journals and films related to Pacific studies, a bibliography and an appendix on the essential details regarding each Pacific Islands country or territories. The papers tend to be self-contained so that they can move right to the study subject. The book is a significant contribution to the awareness of the Pacific, the Third World and the debate on creation.

"Frank Frost (2006) addresses the internal disturbance in many Southwest Pacific states in an essay" *Perspective on Australia's Foreign Policy 2006*. He claims that these diseases have threatened the ability of Australia to provide successful short- and medium-term solutions. He outlined some of the key challenges Australia faces in the Southwest Pacific and how it can better aid the states of the country to mitigate the big socio-economic difficulties sometimes posed by political disputes and conflicts. The author has a rather impressive amount of detail on the complexities of the Southwest Pacific.

In an edited text, *India and Australia: Past, Culture and Community*, Shubha Singh (2004) argues that it is the economic connections that establish the most stable connections between countries and the region. She claims that the interest of India in the Pacific area is a rational extension to regions further east of ASEAN of its 'Look East' agenda. She has briefly presented different directions in which India can provide the Pacific Island nations with its expertise and other assistance. She feels deeply that India should formulate a robust Pacific approach. Muktesh Pardeshi (2004) provides a profound insight into the regional profile of the South Pacific in the same novel. He has divided his study into five parts on the geographical profile, ethnic and cultural profile, the Pacific Islands Platform partnerships in India, and eventually the potential prospects. He also proposed different approaches and steps that could contribute to a greater understanding of each other and help create relations with the region. In the same novel, Prof. Man Mohini Kaul (2004), another scholar with the same prestige, firmly claims that the South Pacific gained little support from Indian decision-makers, with socialization until recently mostly restricted to Australia and New Zealand, with very little interaction with the South Pacific island states. With this opinion, she also highlighted three significant reasons for the mindset of India. This study will be quite helpful for her to consider India's South Pacific strategy, which is the key theme of this study.

*India and Australasia: Past, Culture and Community*, edited by N, is the book that hits the heart of the subject. (2004) of N. Vohra. In *India and the Southwest Pacific countries*, it provides an essential and unique content. Via case studies, scholars from India and Australasia address the management of immigration and multicultural policies, origins of

social cleavages and tensions, and so on, in this book. In the background of multi-racial Australasia, where the effects of social unrest contribute to the pressure of the already economically disadvantaged micro states whose cultures have historically been divisive rather than homogeneous, the topics raised are especially important.

In his book *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West*, Ron Crocombe (2007) claims that although the initial Pacific tribes originated from Asia, almost all the Pacific Islands nations were colonies of Western Forces for much of the past centuries and earlier. But Asia has started to play a greater role in all facets of the life of the Islands over the last fifty years or so: migration, exchange and investment aid and growth, governance, strategic ties, corruption, schooling and jobs replacing the West. The function is immutable. Ron Crocombe records the early links between Asia and the Pacific, outlines recent and current threats and presents daunting hypotheses about the future through his signature scope and depth of insight and perception of the field, focused on over half a century of practice, observation and deliberation.

In an article "Strategic Imperatives of India as an Established Participant in Pacific Asia," David Scott (2006) argues that in the last decade, India's ties to the Pacific have steadily emerged. This was originally seen in the strategy of Look East that was enunciated in the early 1990s. In terms of its focus on economic ties with ASEAN countries, this approach has been very narrow in nature. The last decade, however, has seen India shift beyond such economic horizons as ASEAN and Southeast Asia. The 'phase-2' has reached its Look East strategy. Consequently, India, especially through naval deployments and maritime diplomacy, has become further involved in the projection of military-security strength. India has also shifted to larger settings in East Asia (Pacific Asia) and the Pacific Basin (southern Pacific). Rivalry with China is apparent in doing so, as is the balance with other Pacific players including Japan and the US. While the push of India in the Indian Ocean remains more obvious and clear, it has spilled more eastward. Inside the Pacific Asia balance of strength, India has thus become a Pacific participant and a factor.

Margaret M. Taylor (1991) offers an outline of Australian and New Zealand relations with the South Pacific Island countries in an edited book by Ramesh Thakur "The South Pacific: Challenges, Concerns & Opportunities" and also relates it to the perspectives of Papua New Guinea. In addition, he draws some general assumptions on the potential position Australia and New Zealand could play in cultivating their ties with the region's small island countries.

## South Pacific importance for India

Before the 1980s, Indian foreign policy had been largely continental in its outlook and paid little heed to the maritime portion. This condition of affairs has changed since 1991, when the economy was liberalised. Under the leadership of then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, India began pursuing the 'Look East' approach, which returned strategically relevant regions to the east, such as South East Asia, East Asia and Oceania, to the radar of foreign policy strategists. Modi has added further purpose to the 'Look East' policy by renaming the 'Act East' policy, indicating the greater sense of value that India brings to the region. India's experiences with PICs are part of the extended 'Act East' solution.

PICs are distinct, sovereign nations with international bodies, such as the Commonwealth and the United States, both with voting privileges, among others. In the age of multilateralism, winning political recognition in the form of votes for the role of a nation on global problems such as climate change or trade deals has become entirely significant. Together, in multilateral forums, one of the biggest chunks of votes is images. India has been pursuing support from these countries in order to achieve its aim of being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). "At the 2015 FIPIC summit in Jaipur, Modi said, "We are seeking your permission of the President of the General Assembly's terms as a basis to modify the Security Council. Your supportive voice for the permanent membership of India's Security Council will give the United Nations a global character and balance that our generation reflects."

Because of its strategic position, the South Pacific is an ideal place to set up a monitoring and tracking station for satellites. India's Mars project was monitored from Fiji and two ships (SCI Yamuna and SCI Nalanda) carrying Ship Borne Terminals were stationed at suitable locations in the South Pacific, among other monitoring positions. For the Mars mission, in telemetry, tracking and order, the region proved its importance. Because of its successes in launching national and foreign satellites, India has an ambition to enter the global commercial satellite launch industry to an important degree. This is going to make the South Pacific Ocean relevant for India in the coming years.

Pictures are "major states of the ocean islands," as Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna said. All of them have exclusive economic zones (EEZs) with enormous potential for energy that are larger than the land mass. The region is rich in deposits of copper, zinc, gold and Liquefied Natural Gas, and has a major fishing potential. In contrast, the unexplored seabed of the South Pacific also provides fantastic possibilities.

Currently, India's exports to the region account for just 1.4% of its overall exports and 2.5% of its total imports are from the region. On the trade front, there is tremendous growth opportunity, given the Pacific economies are 'highly open economies, contributing to lower tariff rates.' The region may be, along with Australia and New Zealand, a possible market for robust and equal Indian products.

After the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) falls into force, the area is positioned to become even more strategically salient. Astride the vital Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) that link Asia with Latin America, the Pacific Islands rest. To keep SLOCs healthy and accessible all the time, the ideal role they occupy is critical. For collecting signal intelligence, the position of these islands is also relevant.

## The South Pacific of China and India

China has the ability to become the second largest donor in the area within a couple of years, according to Dr. Philippa Brant, while Australian assistance already dominates the area and will continue to do so in the immediate future. It enjoys a special partnership with that nation, the scale and place of which has provided it a geostrategic role in the South Pacific, because of China's staunch support for Fiji after the 2006 coup. China is also Fiji's main bilateral donor.

India has a few advantages over China, despite being a minor player in the field. Compared to the area's main donors, Indian assistance to the country is puny. But unlike China, whose beneficiaries have already begun to worry about their increasing indebtedness to Beijing owing to ambiguous commercial ties, India's financial aid to the region is clear.

India recently settled the maritime border dispute with Bangladesh in compliance with UNCLOS by international arbitration. For PICs, as there are 48 conflicting or mutual exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the area, this may become a test case. It has proven that it is necessary to settle maritime conflicts respectfully and in compliance with international law. In stark comparison with the condition in the South China Sea, the Indian case remains.

It is possible to create questions about the motives of Beijing in the area, given its actions in the South China Sea, counter to the "Peaceful Growth" doctrine. However, it stands out as a trustworthy and trustworthy collaborator in the production of Stats and a country that does not have any hegemonic ambitions, given India's status as a democracy that adheres to the rule-based world order and international norms. It is not just the Pictures that invite Indian participation in the

region, but also regional forces, such as Australia and the US.

With eight of the 14 PICs, China has diplomatic ties. Six of the 14 island nations with diplomatic relations with Taiwan are the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Nauru, Palau, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati. For China's diplomatic ties in this area, this is a big irritant. On the other side, India enjoys cordial ties with all of the region's nations.

Due to its reputation as a tough leader in international forums on climate change problems, the Pictures were nervous regarding India's place at COP-21. India, however, told the Pictures that at COP 21 in Paris it will work with them and others for a detailed, structured and equitable result. And by leading to a good result at COP-21, it delivered that guarantee.

### **India-PNG Relations**

PNG has traditionally based its regional attention on Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific. Eventually, however, PNG aims to expand its relations, among others, with countries such as India, China and the UAE. India and PNG share cordial relations. In 1975, India established diplomatic relations with PNG when it gained independence from Australia. However, it took 34 years to hold the first ever bilateral ministerial meeting between the two nations. In July 2009, Foreign Minister Sam Abal of PNG paid a four day visit to India. Subsequently, there were many ministerial-level visits. In August 2015, Prime Minister Peter O'Neill visited India for the second summit of FIPI in Jaipur.

Aside from bilateral visits, PNG has been a member of the Non-Aligned movement. Its constitution, introduced in 1975, is based on India's Constitution. It is the only Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) member to be part of the South Pacific Island State, which India is willing to be part of. In addition, PNG is also an important participant in regional and sub-regional initiatives such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), the Nauru Negotiation Groups (PNA) and the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), which attractively excludes major regional players such as Australia and New Zealand.

The partnership between India and PNG reflects on PNG's developmental requirements and its own energy needs. India has supported PNG in capacity building through training courses, scholarships and grants-in-aid. India agreed to add a USD100 million line of credit for development projects during President Mukherjee's state visit. In addition, India is lending a helping hand in sectors such as information technology (IT), agriculture, health and infrastructure, which was reaffirmed by the signing of four Memorandums of Understanding with respect to these sectors. In order to fulfill the demands of the vital life-saving drugs of PNG, India agreed to help

establish a Pharmaceutical Research Unit. The conclusion of a Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (IPPA) for investment facilitation has been stepped up by both parties.

PNG is the biggest of the PICs and is mineral-rich. The natural wealth account for 72 percent of its earnings from exports, and mining is one of the world's largest employers. Its main items are iron, gold, and crude. "The country is also rich in minerals such as nickel and cobalt." India is largely interested in the discovery of liquefied natural gas (LNG) as it aims to diversify its capital streams. Via joint ventures and investment in new and existing projects by the Indian public and private sector, PNG has agreed to develop new areas of cooperation with India for the exploration and development of its vast oil and gas deposits. Besides LNG, Indian investors have shown interest in setting up a gold refinery in the past.

Through harnessing solar resources, India has been at the top reducing its carbon emissions. Expressing its aim to become a founding member of the International Solar Alliance, which was launched in Paris in November 2015 on the sidelines of COP21, PNG welcomed the Government of India's initiative to mobilize solar-rich countries between the Tropics of Cancer and the Tropics of Capricorn. These actions prove that, in relation to the climate change crisis, the two countries are on the same page.

In addition, the two countries emphasized the need to work closely on a number of international and regional topics, including terrorism, maritime security, disaster management and the effort by India to become a permanent member of the PNG-backed UNSC. In July 2015, the Council of the International Integrated Multi-Hazard Early Warning Systems (RIMES) endorsed the creation of the RIMES Sub-Regional Center for Earthquake / Tsunami Monitoring and Extreme Weather Trends and Environment Conditions in Papua New Guinea and the Papua New Guinea Pacific Region, with the assistance of President Mukherjee and Governor General Sir Michael Ogio.

The two countries agreed to create a mechanism for regular consultations between their foreign ministries in order to diversify bilateral ties in areas of mutual concern. This is a reflection of the desire of India to collaborate with multiple partners in the world and extend its relations with Images.

### **The Ahead Lane**

According to the 'Indian Maritime Security Strategy 2015', the Western Pacific Ocean, its coastal region and areas with broad Indian diasporas have been defined as the secondary sector of maritime interest to India. Although the region is not actually involved in too many Indian stakes, the region

would play an important role in the future as the destiny of India is closely connected to the Indo-Pacific nation's geopolitics. India is not a revisionist movement. It does not want to challenge the primacy of the traditional regional players. At the same time, however, India wishes to develop separate and rigorous relations with the States to fulfill its growth needs in search of extra-regional partners. India will also be careful in pursuing, among other items, a cooperative approach to regional and sub-regional projects throughout the country in the fields of sustainable growth, the blue world, fisheries and climate change, as well as strong bilateral ties with PICs.

Considering the diversity among the PICs, there is a substantial scope for developing multi-sectoral cooperation adapted to the particular circumstances of these islands. Due to large EEZs scattered across millions of square kilometers, the protection and management of resources is of vital importance. India has fishing, mining, oil and gas skills that it can use to benefit the Pacific nations. In addition, with coastal surveillance radars, fishing trawlers and patrol boats, India may also supply PICs.

Agriculture and fisheries are the subject of much of the economies of the South Pacific. These economies will benefit immensely if the know-how regarding value addition to primary production is given to them. India will share its experience in this regard and assist them in developing agro-based industries. Countries such as PNG would export palm oil, peas, and cocoa to India to fulfill the rising demand for a large number of agricultural products.

India has a large diaspora (close to 0.29 million NRIs and 0.59 million PIOs) in the South Pacific region that it can leverage to its own advantage. The current administration has recognised and is making attempts to reconcile with the diaspora's importance. About 40 per cent of Fiji's population is of Indian origin. As a result, it was no mistake that Fiji was the first choice for the country's visit to Modi in 2014. The diaspora in the region would act as a connection between the South Pacific and India. There is also an ability to exploit India's soft power with such a large diaspora, through Bollywood film, music, and cuisine.

India has fulfilled its previous commitments, whether related to cooperation during COP-21 or to the establishment of a commercial office in New Delhi, which has added prominence to its contribution to this region. Furthermore, this has opened up different perspectives for future space cooperation, oceanographic research, HADR, etc. India is likely to be able to help Pictures to launch its own satellite or to share satellite imagery produced by Indian satellites for early warning and to map the natural resources of each of the islands.

India has recommended that the International Conference on the 'Ocean Economy and Pacific Island Nations' be held in 2016, where New Delhi is scheduled to host officials and independent experts from all 14 Photos. Modi could even travel to the region for the third FIPIC summit. With the frequent high-level visits of late, India has shown readiness to engage the region constructively and 'turn its historical ties with the South Pacific into a strategic partnership.'

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To assess sectors of cooperation between India and the countries of southwest Pacific and examine convergence and divergence of approaches.
2. To study the changing image of India in the South West Pacific region.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to respond to research questions. This article aims to bind the rest of the papers together such that the analysis to be set at the beginning is linked. Therefore, it will illustrate the evolving developments in India's South Pacific strategy against countries defined by their collective efforts to establish stability and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

## REFERENCES

1. C. Raja Mohan (2014). "PM Modi in Fiji: India's Strategic Foray in the South Pacific", RSIS, p. 2
2. Biman Chand Prasad (2012). "Opportunities from India-Pacific Islands Cooperation", Focus, New Zealand Contemporary China Research Centre, Victoria University, p. 1.
3. Thomas Lum, Bruce Vaughn (2007). The Southwest Pacific: U.S. Interests and China's Growing Influence, CRS Report for Congress, p. 9.
4. Denise Fisher (2013). France in the South Pacific: Power and Politics, Australian National University E Press, p. 248.
5. Shahar Hameiri (2015). China's 'charm offensive' in the Pacific and Australia's regional order, The Pacific Review, Vol. 28, No. 5, p. 648.
6. Tevita Motulalo (2013). India's Strategic Imperative in the South Pacific, Gateway House Report, p. 6.

7. Text of PM's opening remarks at Forum for India Pacific Island Countries (FIPIC) Summit, Jaipur, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, August 21, 2015.
8. Pacific 'Large Ocean Island States' Conserve Huge Marine Areas, Environment News Service, September 3, 2012.

---

**Corresponding Author**

**Aaditya Swaroop\***

PhD Research Scholar, Centre for Indo Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University