



# CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

## In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 34/2023

08 June 2023

## India bolstering its engagement with the Pacific Island Nations

**Simran Walia**

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies

**Keywords:** India, Pacific Island, Papua New Guinea, Indo-Pacific



Source: Indian Express



**Disclaimer:** The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS]

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

The Indo-Pacific region has been undergoing major geopolitical shifts, and nations like the US, India, and China have come up with concrete maritime strategies towards the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The developments around the island nations, that is, from Sri Lanka to the Solomon Islands, are vital amidst great power competition in the current scenario. However, island nations have not been at the forefront and have not gained much attention regarding shaping the Indo-Pacific agenda despite being influenced by them.

The Pacific Islands are a group of fourteen island nations in the South Pacific Ocean and have been of relatively low interest to the global powers. However, this has changed over time due to China's rising power and great power rivalry in the world. India initiated its developmental engagement with these island nations decades ago, around the year 1973.<sup>1</sup> The strengthening of ties between India and all fourteen island nations has great potential for India as several new markets come up for Indian exports and also for favourable access to the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of the Pacific Islands. Furthermore, the island nations benefit from India's vast experience in fields that include low-cost renewable energy.

India's involvement with these island nations widely aligns with PM Narendra Modi's Act-East policy, wherein India focuses on fostering relationships through developmental aid and embrace the South-South cooperation. As an extension to the Act-East Policy, India established the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) and its inaugural meeting was held in Fiji in 2014.<sup>2</sup> The second meeting of the FIPIC was held in 2015 in India, where the focus was on promoting the development and well-being of the people. The third (FIPIC) summit was held in Papua New Guinea in May 2023, wherein PM Narendra Modi engaged in several talks with leaders from the Pacific Island nations.<sup>3</sup> India thus believes that it is a reliable partner of the Pacific Island nations, and it is vital to bolster their cooperation to secure the Indo-Pacific region.

### **Indian PM's Visit to Papua New Guinea**

PM Modi was welcomed to Papua New Guinea by Prime Minister James Marape. In a very warm and respectful gesture, PM Marape touched PM Modi's feet. This was indicative of the prospect of intensifying relations between the two nations. During this visit, India launched a comprehensive initiative aimed at improving India's collaboration with the countries in the Pacific region. These initiatives included development projects, healthcare facilities, solar projects, and the setting up of yoga centres. Moreover, both nations aim at collaborating on several community-building projects, which include revamping schools and their libraries and colleges, improving IT infrastructure in educational institutions, and making access to digital libraries easier.

India has been keen on reaching out to the South Pacific due to its location, which is at the crossroads of significant maritime trade routes and is also vital to the Indo-Pacific strategy. The competition for resources in the South Pacific is going to be critical over time. Therefore, it is pertinent for the Pacific island nations to be included in working towards securing a secure Indo-Pacific region.

### **China and the US factor**

China has been active in the Pacific island region since 2006, and PM Modi tried to countervail China's involvement in the region by launching the FIPIC. India attempted to indirectly lash out at China by claiming that during the pandemic, it was India that helped and provided vaccines in large numbers to these island nations. Under India's Vaccine *Maitri* Initiative, India provided around 1 lakh vaccines to Fiji in 2021 and around 1.32 lakh vaccines to Papua New Guinea.<sup>4</sup>

The US has also been attempting to maintain a prominent position in the South Pacific for a long time. However, from 2006 onwards, Chinese involvement in the region increased manifold, and from 2006 to 2017, China provided approximately US \$1.5 billion in grants and loans to the Pacific island countries. China's activities in the region attempt to increase its security presence, further prevent the region's diplomatic support for Taiwan, and exploit the natural resources of these nations. China also signed a security agreement with the Solomon Islands in 2022, which could perhaps be used for establishing a Chinese base in the region. Due to China's rampant pressure, the Solomon Islands cut off their ties with Taiwan and recognised China. China is also trying to overtake the influence of the US in the region by unlawfully bribing elites in island nations and intruding in their domestic politics.

The US involvement in the region is linked to the Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreement that was signed in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Originally signed between the US, Micronesia, and Marshall Islands, the COFA has been extended to Papua New Guinea and Palau.<sup>6</sup> The US provides defence as well as economic assistance through this agreement. The US has been trying to counter China's involvement in the region through this agreement. In May 2023, the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, visited Papua New Guinea and further enhanced commitments for bilateral maritime and defence security agreements with Papua New Guinea.<sup>7</sup> The US has also announced that it will provide around US \$6.5 billion over 20 years through the COFA.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the US is now keener on reaching out to the Pacific island nations through its allies like Australia, India, and Japan.

## Way Forward

PM Modi's visit to Papua New Guinea also coincided with the US signing the extension of COFA. China also signed its own agreement with the Solomon Islands last year, which sent signals about China increasing its foothold in the region. India and the US' collaboration in the Pacific island nations region is vital to counter China's involvement. The US can guarantee strong security for the islands, while India could prove to be a reliable development partner.

The FIPIC platform is a win-win situation for the participating countries, as it would enhance India's role and presence in the international arena while also ensuring security and development partnerships for Pacific island nations. Furthermore, as a part of India's Act-East policy, India plans to increase its grant aid for Pacific countries in the near future. However, China cannot be underestimated as it possesses the world's largest navy, which is better equipped for a long-term strategic tussle. Therefore, India's efforts should be placed in a way that proves to be long-lasting, and India should have consistent outreach strategies for its partner countries. Moreover, India needs to grow its economy in order to have a strong maritime component on its agenda. In lieu of volatility and the importance of the Indo-Pacific region, Pacific island nations, too, have gained attention from nations like Japan, Russia, and the US. India and the US are planning to jointly hold the Army Chiefs Conclave in the coming months to counter China's assertive behaviour and its influence in the Pacific islands.

**NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> Dr Rani D Mullen, 'India-Pacific Islands Brief', *Centre for Policy Research*, November 2014, [https://cprindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/India-Pacific-Islands\\_Final.pdf](https://cprindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/India-Pacific-Islands_Final.pdf) (Accessed on May 31, 2023)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister meets leaders of several Pacific island countries on sidelines of FIPIC summit, *The Economic Times*, May 22, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/prime-minister-meets-leaders-of-several-pacific-island-countries-on-sidelines-of-fipic-summit/articleshow/100412761.cms> (Accessed on May 30, 2023)

<sup>4</sup> Sandip Kumar Mishra, 'FIPIC and India's Reach-out to the South Pacific', *India Times*, May 24, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/fipic-and-indias-reach-out-to-the-south-pacific/?source=app&frmapp=yes> (Accessed on 01 June, 2023)

<sup>5</sup> Patricia O'Brien, 'The US Is Squandering Its COFA Advantage in the Pacific', *The Diplomat*, February 08, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/the-us-is-squandering-its-cofa-advantage-in-the-pacific/> (Accessed on 02 June, 2023)

<sup>6</sup> "US to sign pacts with Micronesia and PNG as Washington seeks to counter China in Pacific", *The Guardian*, May 16, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/16/us-and-micronesia-to-renew-cofa-pact-as-washington-seeks-to-counter-china-in-pacific>. Accessed on June 6, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> US and Papua New Guinea sign pact amid Pacific militarisation concerns, *The Guardian*, May 22, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/22/us-png-defence-security-agreement-papua-new-guinea-china-india-modi-pacific-militarisation-concerns>. Accessed on June 05, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid