

Geo-politics of South Pacific Islands and India's Strategic Interests

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As the geo-political region of the Asia-Pacific is witnessing competition among established players such as the USA and China, the South Pacific Islands have begun to receive more attention. This is especially so in the context of India's maritime, economic, and diplomatic interests and aspirations.

Despite the tyranny of distance from Eurasia the South Pacific Islands received much attention during both the World Wars. Subsequently, this attention became somewhat limited during the Cold War since Europe, North Asia, South-East Asia and Latin America became the new sphere of competition between the Super Powers (the USA and the Soviet Union). However, the new maritime competition between the USA and China in the Asia Pacific has led to the South Pacific Islands beginning to regain attention. This has been especially so with the announcement of the US Rebalance to the Asia Pacific, the interest shown by China, and (interestingly) the expanding reach of the Russian Far Eastern Fleet—all complicating the existing *status quo* in the region.

The geopolitical stock of the South Pacific Islands has increased for other reasons too. It is now understood that the region will face increased maritime traffic once the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) is finalized. The geo-strategic location of the Islands – connecting Australasia to the Latin American sub-continent – is another important factor. The South Pacific Islands begin in the South-West Pacific, and stretch till the South-East Pacific, and they are divided regionally into Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia from West to East. Geo-political competition is very much evident among the Melanesian countries (Vanuatu Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea); the Micronesian islands (Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, and Palau—as well as the three US territories—Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, and Wake Island); and the Polynesian

countries (Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Niue, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia).¹

India's maritime interest in the region stems from the fact that it is an expanding regional power, with ambitions to spread its diplomatic, military and economic reach beyond its immediate neighbourhood. In an effort to strengthen its existing place in the multilateral regional and global institutions such as the United Nations, India is renewing its Act East Policy by including the South Pacific Islands in its policy, thus extending its range and scope.

India has stated explicitly that its intention is to have the South Pacific Islands only within its overall maritime reach (mainly because India is understood as not being a predominant Pacific power in terms of geography); nevertheless, it is true that India's strategic orientation is focused on the distant islands. This was emphasized in the state visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Fiji in November 2014, soon after his visit to Australia. The impetus to take the New Delhi's reach to the Pacific Islands countries was visible during this visit, since apart from the diplomatic and cultural overtones, the military dimensions of the visit could not be ignored. The visit attracted worldwide attention since it was considered as being a significant step in India's expanding geo-political horizon to the South Pacific Islands. The high point of the visit was the first India-Pacific Islands leaders' summit meeting held in Suva in November 2014 which was followed by the Second India-Pacific Islands Forum held in Jaipur in August 2015.

India's current strategic interest in the South Pacific islands should compensate for the lack of it during much part of the 20th century. India's attention to the South Pacific islands region was dismal for most part of the last century as 'Independent India' failed to identify its own geographic and cultural confluence and outreach with the South Pacific. The cultural and maritime ties between the South Pacific and India go back to trade links between the Cholas kings in Tamil Nadu and the Polynesians. This has been much discussed by the famous Indian Historian V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar in the book titled *The Origin and Spread of the Tamils*.²

South Pacific Islands in India's Strategic Horizon

India's politico-military interest in the South Pacific islands is an extension of New Delhi's trajectory towards becoming a maritime power in the wider Asia Pacific region, which can court the island atoll countries for its effective maritime outreach, supplemented diplomatically by its Look East and Act East Policy.

Earlier, India's expanding maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific region included Vietnam, Philippines and Indonesia within the ambit of its Act East Policy relating to Southeast Asia. Its current expanded maritime thinking towards the Asia Pacific region will no doubt include the Pacific Islands as and when its Eastern Fleet extends the range and scope of its operations beyond the Straits of Malacca to the South-West Pacific.

India's expanding naval presence is in keeping with the view that there is a need for the security of its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) for its economic prosperity for the wellbeing of its growing population. India also feels anxious due to China's expanding presence in the Asia Pacific region. Other powers in the South Pacific Islands (such as the USA) have military commitments in other parts of the world. It is also doubtful whether Australia and other countries like Indonesia are in a position to challenge China's expanding strategic profile in the South Pacific. India, therefore, may need to enhance its economic, military, and diplomatic outreach to these countries. Fiji seems an obvious choice to function as a spring board for such this purpose.³

Whereas China's maritime strategy is based on the Three Island Chain concept (through which, Beijing hopes to challenge the United States maritime supremacy in the Asia-Pacific including in the South Pacific Islands), India's maritime strategy is based on expanding its 'blue water' presence, first in the Indian Ocean and then extending it to the South-West Pacific. What India may like to do is to expand its naval capabilities, or to have some sort of an understanding with the South-West Pacific countries to have its naval presence in this region, maybe in one of the islands of Fiji, or in any of the South Pacific countries which would be comfortable with such an idea.

If India wishes to expand its military presence in the Island Nations, this could be achieved as countries which have military presence in the South Pacific Islands—such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand and France (which has a South Pacific Fleet in French Polynesia)—will be happy to have Indian military presence as an effective counter-weight to Beijing's ever expanding military profile in the South Pacific. The defence and security orientation of the Pacific Island countries is inward looking; they lack any robust maritime capabilities of their own. It is this fact that has helped China to silently expand its maritime capabilities, while the USA was distracted by its military commitments in Europe and Asia.⁴ Operationally, a greater Indian military presence in the South Pacific islands could include significant intelligence-sharing between India and those countries in the region that have a permanent maritime military presence, such as USA, Chile, New Zealand, Australia and France.

Also, since Fiji is reviewing its national security and defense policy framework, which is likely to be articulated in a Defence White Paper. The Indian military establishment

will be keen to be a factor in such a policy framework, in various ways, including enhanced naval cooperation, besides institutionalizing Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogues.

The fresh prospects of greater strategic co-operation between India and Fiji come at a time when, after the September 2014 elections, the Fijian military is moving towards becoming more professional under civilian control. The military force of Fiji is could effectively boost its combat capabilities in cooperation with Indian military forces, which would also bolster the former's contribution to the United Nations peacekeeping missions.⁵

Interestingly, during the second India-Pacific Islands meeting held at Jaipur in 2015, it was decided that India will have certain civilian monitoring stations in the Island nations. Though this was not explicitly stated, these stations could be used by Indian naval forces, if required.⁶

India's Soft Power in the South Pacific Islands

India's presence in the South Pacific Islands through its Look East Policy should be a variation of its hard as well as its soft power. If the hard power impetus is provided by the geo-strategic importance of South Pacific Islands, the soft power initiative could complement India's projection of its image as a Great Power.

India's Look East policy has not fully extended through the Malaccan Straits as yet. In the next five years, it is envisioned that India's Look East and Act East outreach will expand diplomatically in the South Pacific, particularly in Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand. Each of these countries has important political and cultural ties with India. Fiji's domestic demographic contains a population in which nearly 40 per cent are identified as "persons of Indian origin." For their part, Australia, and New Zealand have sizable and long-established Indian expatriate communities. These communities wield significant economic and political influence in each country, and provide an open conduit for information exchanges between the South-western Pacific neighbors and the Indian homeland.

India's competitor and rival in the Asia-Pacific region is China which has been quite active diplomatically in the South Pacific. After Fiji was expelled from the Pacific Islands Forum, China encouraged it to be an active participant in the Melanesian Spearhead Group, and even provided funds for the establishment of its secretariat. Moreover, and Beijing has expanded its trade relations with the Polynesian countries such as Samoa and Tonga.

Diplomatically, India has shown interest in the affairs of the South Pacific by participating in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) annually beginning 2002. India also has begun to provide foreign aid to the islands in the South Pacific by offering soft loans for development projects. Along with aid programs from traditional donor states such as the USA, Australia, and New Zealand, the Pacific Islands have received help from western charities and non-governmental agencies. This is seen as a soft power counter to rising Chinese presence in the South Pacific.

At present, India has no military presence in the Pacific. However, this may change in the next five years as India starts increasing the Eastern Command's operational capabilities. Given its expanding commercial engagement with Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific, it would seem like a natural evolution for its navy to participate in maritime patrols along the sea lanes involved.⁷

Secondly, India should push itself forward on the strategic and politico-military levels if it has to play a major role in international affairs. Narendra Modi has made several references to this issue at meetings with leaders in various countries, including with the countries in the South Pacific Islands.

Further, a Special Adaptation Fund of US\$ one million to provide technical assistance and training for capacity building to the Cook Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Nauru, Kiribati, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Niue, Palau, Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Fiji and Papua New Guinea was also announced. A hike in Grant-in-Aid from US\$ 125,000 to US\$ 200,000 annually to each island for community projects selected by them was announced, and a trade office of the Pacific Island nations in New Delhi was also launched.

Indian diplomatic presence in all of the South Pacific Islands is also warranted because of the Indian navy's expanded reach in times of calamities such as the recent cyclones in Fiji.⁸ Indian Diplomatic Missions are present only in two countries of the South Pacific Islands—in Fiji and Papua New Guinea—apart from New Zealand and Australia in the entire South Pacific.

To enhance India's presence in the South Pacific, New Delhi could consider establishing diplomatic missions in Cook Islands and Samoa, which are as significant as Fiji in terms of geo-strategic orientation. Also, the existing diplomatic outposts could have defence representation.

Conclusion

As a growing power in the Asia Pacific, India's interests in the South Pacific Island states are manifold. It can safely be said that the Pacific Islands Nations are India's far flank, and this interest has been included in India's Extended Look East Policy. This policy and the fact that India's graduation as an important power in the Pacific Islands will be welcomed by powers such as Chile, Australia, New Zealand and the USA, augurs well for the future.

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