



India's approach to Oceania: Engaging the Pacific Island countries

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ABSTRACT

India's Indo-Pacific strategy has brought various States under the limelight, that were previously ignored or under recognised in Indian Foreign Policy. The Pacific Island Countries were often relegated to tertiary levels of strategic consideration during the Cold War by the policy makers in New Delhi. But ever since the growth of China and its Belt and Road Initiative, these countries have become increasingly important to all the players in the region. Since 2015, under the new construct of a unified Indo-Pacific, India has actively pursued countries in South East Asia under a new light, but in spite of a upswing in relations with Oceanic countries it has failed to enhance its influence in the region. This paper analyses India's relations with various Pacific Island Countries, in context of the roles played by the United States, China, and Australia in the region. It further identifies areas in which India needs to enhance its engagement with Oceanic States and capitalise on the bonhomie created after the two chapters of the Forum for Indo-Pacific Islands Cooperation.

KEYWORDS

India; Indo-Pacific; Pacific Island countries; China; Oceania; bilateral

Introduction

India's aspirations and geostrategic objectives have grown tremendously ever since the turn of the century and under his first term as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi has directed a significant amount of diplomatic energy and effort towards the orient with the Act East Policy, and the bilateral diplomatic initiatives across the Indo-Pacific. Majority of the academic discourse in lieu of these developments has been around the South East Asian Regional Complex, and East Asia. Very little consideration or insight has been provided regarding South Pacific countries, which in today's globalised and maritime dependent world are integral to strategic and economic goals of all interested States. There are 14 Indo-Pacific independent Indo-Pacific countries: Fiji, Cook Islands (CI), Marshall Islands (MI), Niue, Tonga, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Kiribati, Micronesia, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands (SI), Palau, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. India currently has two diplomatic missions in the entire southern Pacific region-to Fiji and PNG.¹ The other countries' diplomatic outreach is handled by other prominent Indian missions such as the ones in Japan and Australia.

Under the Modi government, the narrative around the value of these countries in Indian foreign policy has changed. Modi was the first Prime Minister, since Indira Gandhi in 1981, to visit Fiji.² His bilateral visits to most of the 14 countries is a symbolic statute in India's understanding of these countries' importance. Under the same administration, the Forum for Indo-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) has seen two chapters, the latest one being held in Jaipur in 2015.³ Furthermore, Prime Minister Modi met leaders from these countries on the sidelines of the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019. FIPIC has served as a brilliant initiative to facilitate multi-lateral dialogue, engaging all countries participating on issues ranging from sustainability to climate change.⁴ The forum has proven beneficial to Indian interest as it has served as streamlining tool for India's still unstructured Pacific policy, and allows India a dual platform stage to engage with these countries multilaterally and bilaterally under one roof.

In spite of such tremendous growth in India's relations with these Pacific Island Countries (PIC) being noted, as of late, namely ever since 2017, stagnation is again being witnessed, as India's drive within the region is losing momentum. Even though, FIPIC morphed into the Indo-Pacific Islands Sustainable Development Conference⁵ and new agreements were met under its aegis, pending MoUs from previous conferences are yet to see substantial public action. Furthermore, Chinese incursion into the region with economic and financial resources, as seen in all other parts of the Indo-Pacific, has raised serious security concerns that directly put India at a crossroads with the East Asian giant (Figure 1).

Pacific Push

China has committed \$1.8 billion in aid and loans into region since 2006

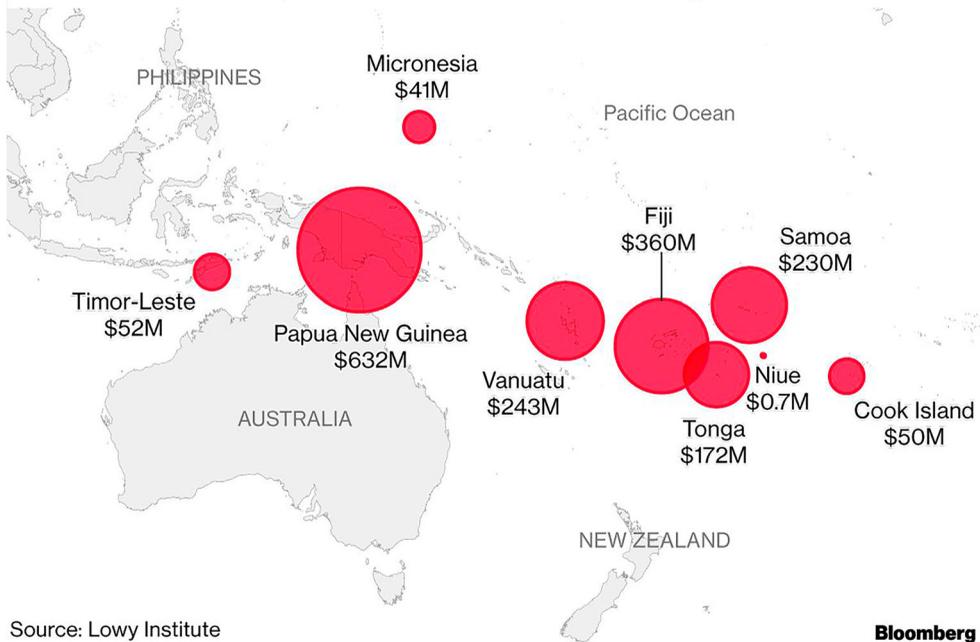


Figure 1. Chinese economic domination among the Pacific Island Countries (Jason Scott, "US Seeks to Counter China with Papua New Guinea Power Grid," *Bloomberg*, November 11, 2018).

The lack of another chapter to FIPIC, coupled with India's limited interaction with the said countries is conspicuous, and raises the questions, "where is India's policy falling short and what new avenues must it explore?" In lieu of these, the paper explores India's bilateral relations with all Fiji, Papua New Guinea and certain Polynesian countries. PIC are crucial to India's geostrategic goals of expanding its influence beyond its littoral. In the author's previous work, he has identified India's three spheres of influence,⁶ and in this contemporary age of blurring territorial spheres, it is important that India does not find itself lagging behind due to its lack of conviction beyond its first sphere.

Fiji

India-Fiji relations have entered a new era with a newly invigorated diplomatic mission. Such vigour and cooperation between the two countries was last seen during the India's moderation effort in allowing a fastened decolonisation of the Pacific countries during Indira Gandhi's term as Prime Minister.⁷ In a recent interview in February 2019, Yognesh Punja, Fiji's High Commissioner to India, had stated there are currently 22 MoUs on the table between the two countries, and Fiji is increasingly pay more attention and attributing more importance to the South Asian country as it continues to expand its footprint in the Pacific region.⁸ In 2014, Prime Minister Modi had announced a \$5 million fund to promote small business and village enterprises.⁹ He identified that Fiji share a series of common problems and it would be in the interest of both countries to tackle these together and in unison. He regarded Fiji as an important partner for India, and also noted their relationship had been adrift up until before his incumbency and needed to be reset on the basis of an old friendship.¹⁰

As per the studies conducted by Lowy Institute during the period of 2011–2018, a total 105 projects in Fiji are either ongoing or completed that funded or sponsored by India.¹¹ Over the same period, a little less than half of Indian aid to the Pacific has been directed towards Fiji (43.9%).¹² This captures the economic and political cooperation that both these countries have shared in this decade. Politically, Fiji along the other 13 Pacific Island-UN member states have endorsed India's bid for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council.¹³ During the second FIPIC summit, Fiji raised its concerns regarding cooperation in setting up a medical facility in Fiji that could act as a hub medical and humanitarian hub for the region.¹⁴ There has been no public response to this concern from the Indian side but the Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map indicates that close to \$450,000 was given by India for hospital equipment for the Colonial War Memorial Hospital.

India and Fiji share a prominent cultural linkage; during colonial times, Indian labourers were taken to Fiji to work on plantations and after the emancipation of Fiji, this community known as Indo-Fijians chose to stay in the Pacific Island country, shedding their political link with India and attempting to naturalise in the Fijian community. Post-independence, there were severe ethnic tensions, and the Indo-Fijian community was subject to persecution by the indigenous populace. Political representation and rights were restricted, with even a law being established that restricted the seat for Indo-Fijians to less than 50% in the Parliament.¹⁵ This law now has been abolished in pursuant of the latest constitution, adopted in 2013. It is estimated that around 36% of the Fijian population is

Indo-Fijian.¹⁶ In lieu of these cultural ties, along with projects India has repeatedly invested in, in Fiji, it is important for New Delhi to pay closer attention to this community that not only shares a cultural linkage with India but also is sociologically associated with Indians by the Fijian population and consequently the Fijian government. India's continued support for micro-business and small business groups facility is an indicator in which sector policy makers in New Delhi have primarily been focused on. It is to be noted here that these sectors are majorly dominated by the Indo-Fijian community. Indo-Fijian community has been heavily persecuted and has had little-to-no access to public sector employment, the government, etc. and thus has often been reduced to operating the private sector or as labourers and farmers.¹⁷ Therefore the continuous monetary support that has been attributed to Fiji has often essentially trickled down to this community. Keeping in mind the marginalisation of the Indo-Fijians, India's foreign aid can be conceived as cultural aid solely for the Indo-Fijians considering it is this community at large where these funds finally trickle down to. In order to tackle this, there is a two pronged approach that must be considered:

- To identify and invest in sectors that do not inherently have ground-level Indo-Fijian domination. This would allow a more equitable distribution of Indian funds amongst other sects of the Fijian populace, incrementally but positively changing India's already increasingly benevolent image over a period of time.
- To further invest in changing the image and condition of Indo-Fijians within Fijian society. Despite of this community not being a political responsibility of India, it has vicariously added to the image and thus impacted the actions of India. An education and awareness drive within Fiji with the support of the now liberal government would be beneficial for future Indian prospects and also, the marginalised community as well.

In regards to infrastructure, a prominent point of consideration is China. The East Asian country and Fiji signed an MoU pertaining to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on 12 November 2018.¹⁸ The MoU brought both the States closer for economic and infrastructural cooperation. In consideration of the immense growth seen in BRI initiatives across Asia, presence of Chinese money in a crucial Pacific country such as Fiji is a cause for concern for New Delhi. Fiji's close allies are closely following Chinese investments in Fiji; Australia outbid China in the funding of the construction of Republic of Fiji Military Forces Black Rock Camp, thereby restricted an influential footprint of Beijing in the Pacific Island region.¹⁹ India's infrastructural input in Fiji has been around climate change,²⁰ sustainable development, and space technology.²¹ The next frontier of India's infrastructural investment in Fiji needs to in regards to water management and sanitation. Due to poor sewage and sanitation systems in some parts of Fiji, the Pacific country has faced a recurring problem of poor waste management, blockages and water pollution.²² Frequent flash floods in urban centres in Fiji have been attributed to inefficient drainage designs and deteriorating system. It is noted that this system was established during the colonial period and has not been updated ever since.²³ There is an increasing dependency on water resources in Fiji as the population with the State is increasing steadily and is also migrating towards urban settlements. The current system is already

struggling to keep pace, and in consideration of current projections it will soon buckle under the surmounting pressure.²⁴

Quality of water protection and preventing water-borne diseases is the principal agenda in water resource management sector in the Pacific Island State at this point in time. There have been chronic outbreaks of water-borne diseases in Fiji, and cases have been noted almost every year ever since the previous decade.²⁵ In 2018 itself, a research study group identified the Fiji was at high-risk of a major typhoid outbreak.²⁶ The research notes that Oceania currently has the lowest coverage of improved drinking water and sanitation and there exists a large and under-appreciated typhoid burden.²⁷ Access to safe drinking water in rural areas, and sanitation and water management in urban areas are two parallel issues Fijian government is struggling against all over the country. A better sanitation system and protection of water resources management programme would significantly reduce the risk of outbreaks of water-borne diseases, though, being a low-resource country Fiji cannot do so unilaterally. India's interest in investing in such infrastructure in Fiji comes at a time when the island country is lacking infrastructure to tackle an increasingly national level problem.

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is possibly the most exciting prospect for investments in the Pacific Island region at this point in time. India and PNG have also noted an upswing in relations ever since the advent of the Modi administration and India's "Act East" Policy. Similar to Fiji, PNG was heavily engaged on a multilateral level at both the FIPIC summits which ultimately led to tightening ties and cooperation, which essentially has opened up new doors in the Pacific region for India. Former President Pranab Mukherjee's visit in 2016 led to various MoUs being agreed upon, spanning across issues from HIV/AIDS to Agricultural research and establishing PNG Center for Excellence in IT.²⁸ The joint statement following the meeting for President Mukherjee and Govern General, Grand Chief Sir Michael Ogio categorically established the current standing and position of Indo-PNG bilateral ties vis-à-vis various sectors. PNG firstly, reiterated its support for India's bid for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council and supported the early adoption of a "Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism" treaty at the United Nations, proposed by India.²⁹ In 2015, India had announced visa-on-arrival for all nationals flying in from all Pacific Island Countries, and in reciprocity PNG offered the same facility to Indians flying to the Pacific Island country 2016 onwards. Consensus was found on India providing PNG a coastal surveillance radar system and coast guard patrol vessels.

Energy and Oil, and infrastructure were areas that were also discussed in the 2016 meeting. New gas in quality reservoir has been found in the PNG-the Barikewa field, which was originally discovered in 1957 is showing signs of increasing viability and is potentially ripe for commercialisation.³⁰ Indian companies such as ONGC should be encouraged to pursue this line of development, and take an active role in acquiring licenses in newly discovered, enriched blocks in this reservoir, and the ones in other provinces in PNG.

An MoU was signed for an Indian line of credit worth \$100 million for the infrastructural development in PNG.³¹ The specifics of which and what kind of infrastructure was

not specified. With India's growing needs for energy security in mind, PNG agreed to pave new avenues of cooperation with India via the private and public sector in existing and upcoming energy projects.³² The current environment (in 2019) around both these areas in PNG is an indicator for India to push the pedal on these agreements before it finds itself severely lagging behind other major players in region, namely China.

The conclusion of the recent Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in 2018, in PNG led to various contradicting narratives being established on the media plane. In spite of the infamous "tantrum diplomacy" again being on display by Chinese officials at the summit,³³ PNG continued to reject U.S. narrative around the BRI and continued to play a balancing act between the two Pacific rivals.³⁴ After the summit, PNG's foreign minister, Rimbink Pato had gone on record, rejecting U.S. assessment of the BRI as "a constricting belt" and a "one-way road".³⁵ Pato went on further to state that PNG signing onto the BRI infrastructure building programme was in the interest of the people of PNG and solving issues that currently plague the State. This statement is stands in contrast to the public concern over Chinese investment in PNG, and groups in the Pacific State have called for greater caution against the greater economic hold China is increasingly getting over the country.³⁶ Currently, PNG has the largest debt the East Asian giant in the South Pacific; an estimated amount of \$590 million.³⁷ Chinese investments have risen astronomically since 2013–2014, mainly in the infrastructure area. As of 2017, China has spent close to \$2 billion in PNG and has committed to spend another \$4 billion solely to building essential roads to increasing connectivity with the South Pacific State.³⁸ The promised road network will primarily be connecting the capital, Port Moresby to the economic hub, Lae-critically solving an outstanding issue, as there exists no road connection between the cities as of now.³⁹ Another area of infrastructure that is ripe for the taking for international investors is the electricity and power grids across PNG. According to the World Bank, as of 2016, only 22.9% of the population in the South Pacific country have connectivity to uninterrupted electricity. The United States, along New Zealand and Australia⁴⁰ have colluded together to counter China and fund the establishment of a more comprehensive grid that aims to connect 70% of the population by 2030.⁴¹ In spite of this heavy push from the western coalition not only in PNG, but across the South Pacific and the Indo-Pacific at large, a Morgan Stanley report states that it will still be dwarfed by China's BRI which is estimated to invest a total of \$1.3 trillion by 2027.⁴²

India's entry point in these scheme of things is the increasingly multilateral investment portfolios emerging to counter China. As already seen in the electricity grid case, countries like the United States and Australia are not inherently opposed to the idea of collaborating with other countries to diversify and strengthen the investment being funneled into PNG. Australia has already mentioned that it is looking to partner with India for projects in the Pacific region, and this is now a fundamental pillar of their Indo-Pacific strategy.⁴³ The Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) is being set up to boost Australia's infrastructural support to the PIC-this \$2 billion programme will facilitate infrastructure in sectors like energy, water, telecommunication, and transport.⁴⁴ All these areas fall within India's orbit of interest, and it already has bilateral agreements with PNG on the same lines. Furthermore, collaboration with Australia and consequently the United States in these areas could lead to extended avenues opening up in the Pacific. The Manus Island Base deal is close to an agreement between Australia and PNG, which

would potentially allow a permanent Australian naval presence in the latter's waters.⁴⁵ It is also noted that the United States will be joining Australia in building the said base, thereby allowing U.S. naval presence in PNG waters as well.⁴⁶ Even though, establishment of naval bases is a sensitive topic between the U.S.A. and India, as the latter has continuously denied the opportunity to the occidental country to build one in its territory in South Asia, in consideration of current trends and the increasing bonhomie for multilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific there is scope for negotiation and consensus building that can allow increased Indian naval presence in the region.

Polynesia

Polynesia consists of Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Niue, and New Zealand but for the purposes of this paper, we will be addressing Samoa, Tonga, and Cook Islands while considering all these countries as a part of Polynesia apart from New Zealand. This is in line with the immediate need for policy makers in New Delhi to demarcate and structure the difference between "Pacific Partners" and "Pacific Island Countries".⁴⁷

- **Samoa**

Samoa and India have shared extensively cordial relations ever since the independence of the former. With active participation of both countries in multilateral forums such as both the chapters of FIPIC, the Sustainable Development Summit and the Small Islands Developing States Conference (SIDSC),⁴⁸ their relation is well set in mutual understanding and common goals in sustainability and growth in the Indo-Pacific. Aid to Samoa has been modest, though in 2014 the Modi administration increased the grant-in-aid to Samoa to \$200,000.⁴⁹ A prominent sphere of collaboration between the two countries has been medical aid and supply. India, chronically has found means of cooperation with the South Pacific country-by exchanging medical instruments such as dialysis machines.⁵⁰ A deal was also struck between the Samoan health ministry and Indian hospitals to facilitate medical operations such as chemotherapy and organ transplants locally, at a relatively lower cost.⁵¹ India is also increasingly becoming Samoa's principal choice in sending patients for medical treatment as it is the financially cheaper option compared to New Zealand. Two patients were sent to India in March 2017, and there has been a steady flow of patients coming to Indian hospitals ever since.⁵² The conducive environment set in this sector with a healthy exchange of medical supplies and personnel further solidifies the relationship between the two States.

In spite of this growth in relationship, Samoa's broader international relations shed light on the reality of how India's position in the country has stagnated in comparison to China. Reports have indicated that there is significant disparity in trade between India and Samoa, when compared to China's goods' presence in the South Pacific country.⁵³ Samoa's markets are dominated by Chinese goods, and after being included into the BRI, Samoa has seen an increasing amount of short term benefits. Farmers in Samoa have enjoyed tremendous growth in the agricultural sector, and have praised the initiative and the politicians.⁵⁴ The China-Samoa Agricultural Technical Cooperation is currently aimed at reducing the South Pacific country's reliance on imported

vegetables.⁵⁵ While doing so, the project also enhances food security by sustainable means and increasing the income of local farmers and agricultural labourers, which constitute two-thirds of the national labour force.⁵⁶ The project is divided in four phases and has a budget of \$6 million.⁵⁷ Samoa has signed onto multiple MoU with China under the BRI, estimating the deal to be a win-win, bringing in an era to trade, progress and economic independency.⁵⁸ The Prime Minister, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegao has gone on record rejecting all claims of China's "debt trap diplomacy" and has hailed Samoa to be fortunate to be receiving China's grants.⁵⁹

One significant area of paucity in India's approach to Samoa has been lack of bilateral exchanges and agreements. Unlike India, China is known to have done its ground-level research on the issues that plague Samoan society, and then has conducted a bottom-to-top analysis on how it can aid the South Pacific country.⁶⁰ India needs to further venture into Samoa and document the ground reality that exists, thereby identifying areas that suit its interests and its financial capabilities. It needs move past the multilateral agreements over mutual issues such as climate change, and must channel its resources in identifying areas of cooperation primarily on the bilateral level.

- **Tonga**

Tonga is a strategically valuable country for India, due to it being an archipelago in the Southern Pacific region. India's INS "Tabar" paid a goodwill visit to Tonga in July 2006, but no visit has taken place ever since.⁶¹ India has on-going training for a limited number of Tongan Defense personnel in various institutions.⁶² The South Asian country has versatile investment portfolio in Tonga—a \$100,000 grant-aid to establish a road network from Wharf to Hunga Village was given in 2007, a \$300,000 grant-aid for a Tsunami Alert System was given in 2014, and a \$115,000 grant-aid to "upgrade the Office of the Public Service Commission ICT infrastructure" was given in 2014 as well.⁶³

Tonga as an Indo-Pacific participant is strategically well-aligned with the United States, but economically is more well incorporated with China.⁶⁴ The archipelagic State is potential partner in the South Pacific for India to collude with it expand its influence beyond its littoral and find a stronger foothold in that sphere of the Indo-Pacific. But the lack of naval interaction between the States exemplifies the stagnation that exists in the maritime sphere. In this contemporary age, where maritime affairs and the Indo-Pacific is adopting a fundamentally important standing in Indian Foreign Policy, Tonga and the attached maritime opportunities is still an unexplored avenue. The Modi administration has initiated the establishment of diplomatic goodwill, by donating \$1 million to Tonga after a category 4 cyclone hit the South Pacific Island country.⁶⁵ Oxfam had estimated that close to 70% of the population was affected by the cyclone,⁶⁶ and there was significant infrastructural damage, including to the parliament building which was flattened by the storm.⁶⁷ There exist avenues for infrastructural cooperation in lieu of these developments, similar to the ones seen in India's funding for infrastructure in Afghanistan.

China in Tonga is also increasingly strengthening its foothold. As the Pacific Island country signed up for the BRI, China deferred the repayment of its loans, acting in line with its "debt-trap" diplomacy method. The deferment was issued right before the repayment was to be initiated, which would have heavily encumbered the financial

machinery of Tonga.⁶⁸ Tonga's reliance on Chinese money can be traced back to the previous decade, when the East Asian giant sponsored the rebuilding of the capital, Nuku'alofa when deadly riots had destroyed the city. Roughly \$65 million was given by Chinese, and due to the heavy interest rates, a total of \$115 million was owed to them.⁶⁹ Tonga even backed down from collectively, with the other PIC, face China and ask for a Chinese waiver on their surmounting loans. It is reported that, this decision came in pursuant to Chinese complaints against Tonga initially coordinating this response.⁷⁰ In spite of the deference, the original threat regarding repayment of China's loan and also its possibly consequent failure is seizure of assets. As seen in Sri Lanka, Tonga if in the future is unable to financially supplement what is owed to the East Asian giant, it could led to the latter gaining control over strategic assets,⁷¹ potentially hampering the balance of power in the region.

- **Cook Islands**

There is a significant paucity in public information about India-Cook Islands relations. The Ministry of External Affairs has stated that India had given \$50,000 to Cook Islands in 2005 to executing small projects, which was increased to \$125,000 in 2009 to facilitate sustainable development programmes. India further has given \$94,347.65 for the procurement of Audit Software for the Audit Office in Cook Islands, and IT equipment for various ministers.⁷²

Cook Islands is highly dependent on tourism sector, and this decade has seen a sharp rise in income via this sector. While this growth is welcomed, it consequently has placed immense pressure on public sector facilities and infrastructure.⁷³ Currently, according to the bail out agreement, signed after the massive debt shock at the latter end of the previous century, New Zealand included a component which capped tax revenues at only 25% of the country's GDP.⁷⁴ This automatically has maintained the aid-dependent reality of CI's economy. New Zealand, historically has been its chief aid sponsoring State⁷⁵ but this status quo is rapidly being questioned by China and the BRI. Since 2010, total amount of external aid in CI increased due to Chinese incursion into its economy.⁷⁶ CI recently agreed to two agreements with China, one for a grant of \$6.8 million, and the other was an MoU signing CI into the BRI.⁷⁷ A separate report has claimed that the grant was for \$10 million under a economic and technical cooperation agreement.⁷⁸ Even though the sector that shall receive this aid is still undecided, considering China promising to open up the Island country to China's tourism market, it is most likely going to be invested in public sector infrastructure, such as roads, guest-houses, and entertainment and leisure facilities.⁷⁹ New Zealand is concerned about Cook Islands turning increasingly vulnerable to Chinese money and was essentially blindsided by the multimillion dollar deal between the two countries.⁸⁰

India does not have enough momentum in CI to make severe headway into the country yet. To generate this, it must look into the public sector, mainly administrative sector to alleviate the burdened, under-equipped, poorly financed government operations. A significant challenge that has been noted is the poor recruitment and sub-par skilled employees in this sector that has led to erroneous operations chronically.⁸¹ It is further noted that certain positions in the administration do not have suitable candidates from the local population.⁸² Considering how China's modus operandi includes dumping Chinese population as tourists and labourers in all BRI included States, this

paucity creates a demand that the Chinese may be willing to meet. An export of highly skilled Indian personnel for training and temporarily for conducting day-to-day administrative operations would be a feasible programme and that would significantly generate goodwill between the two States and deter Chinese control in the administration in the Cook Islands.

In comparison to China

All the countries in the region are under the looming threat of falling victim to China's debt trap and being used as a strategic foothold by the East Asian State. The region has seen a sustained series of investment from China continuously since 2006, and its portfolio of investment has continued to diversify into various sectors. The Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map indicates that the sectors China has invested in ranges from agriculture, communication, and education to civil society, health, mining, energy, transport, and sanitation. Whereas India's investment is very nascent, and has truly taken off only since 2017. Noting that India has committed significant amount of money in about 2 years to various countries in the region, it is still lagging behind in the sectors where it has invested and the number of commitments that it promised are yet to materialise. Currently, India's areas of investment are agriculture, energy, multisector/cross-cutting, and education. Tables 1 and 2 show the amount of investment both countries have into specific countries in the region (Table 1), and the number of commitments that have actually materialised within the same (Table 2).

Considering the amount invested and committed by China, the evident concern around debt diplomacy are well founded. However, many countries in region have rejected the idea of falling into the debt trap. Fijian ambassador to China rejected the notion of China setting a debt trap on Fiji and stated that the Belt and Road Initiative is setting up a platform on which China can better assist Fiji.⁸³ Furthermore he appreciated the Chinese reforms and it opening up to the world, a sentiment that is increasingly being shared amongst other States in the region as well. Currently, 8 other States are a part of BRI and share bilateral diplomatic relations that have resulted into a multisectoral investment and loan agreements.⁸⁴

Papua New Guinea in August 2019, chose to approach China to refinance its national debt and it chose to do so by bypassing a long-term traditional partner in Australia. It has

Table 1. Comparison between Indian and Chinese investment in the region.

Indo-Pacific island country	Indian investment (as of November 2019)	Chinese investment (as of November 2019)
Fiji	\$16.15 million	\$316.71 million
Papua New Guinea	\$5.21 million	\$518.58 million
Cook Island	\$691,000	\$8.81 million
Tonga	\$900,000	\$159.25 million
Samoa	\$400,000	\$244.62 million

Table 2. Comparison between Indian and Chinese commitment and projects in the region.

Country	Amount committed	Amount spent	Projects undertaken
India	\$238.13 million	\$35.64 million	115
China	\$6.94 billion	\$1.62 billion	265

been noted that Australia was the traditional ally PNG approached to resolve its previous financial issues, and the continent-State was its largest donor.⁸⁵ In a high-level visit to Australia in 2019, PNG's Prime Minister stated that he wished to change the "donor-recipient" dynamic between the two States and envisioned both of them as leaders in the Pacific region. But considering that PNG's tool to shift the status quo in its favour supposedly is by moving towards China is concerning. PNG has asked China to refinance its debt which is amounting to \$7.95 billion as of 2019, which is about 33% of its GDP.⁸⁶

Conclusion

India's outreach to PICs has grown in this decade but it hasn't done so in a wholesome manner. The series of MoUs that have been signed between the Indo-Pacific countries and India have focused on the macroscopic and mutually shared issues that all these countries face together. China, on the other hand, has focused significantly in gaining bilaterally with these countries, an aspect in which India has been lagging behind. Countries like Fiji and Papua New Guinea are increasingly turning into the next domino that is bound to fall victim to China's economic expansionism and the money that India has invested in these countries needs to be diversified to sectors beyond the ones it is being engaged in now. An in depth study of issues faced by the populace of these countries (such as poor sanitation, water-borne diseases, lack of skilled human resources, etc.) needs to be conducted to find further areas of investment that will yield tangible and effective results. These results then can be portrayed by the Indian administrations to its tax payers as a tool for greater relations with States beyond its littorals, allowing it further flexibility in future prospective outreaches.

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