



India's policy towards South Pacific: Expanding horizons of the Indo-Pacific region

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ABSTRACT

For India, the concept of Indo-Pacific spans from the East Coast of Africa to the Western Pacific. This is because for India, it is the outer limit of the Indo-Pacific, and South Pacific acts as the new periphery of its Act East policy. Many ASEAN nations are deliberating about the utility of the Indo-Pacific. In the past, the then Indonesia Foreign Minister Marty Natalagewa had proposed the Indo-Pacific treaty and in 2019, ASEAN discussed the new geo-strategic construct despite variations in the approach and subscription. For India, South Pacific has three major objectives catering to its Act East policy; its need for supporting votes for its Security Council permanent member seat, Indian diaspora in the region, and harnessing sea bed mineral resources with island nations under the blue economy concept. However, whether India does have the desire or is just scouting for resources and therefore wants to protect its strategic interest across the Indo-Pacific region needs further scrutiny. India's approach with regard to Indian Ocean has been appreciated but now it is using Act East policy to encapsulate South Pacific region through its Oceania approach. The paper discusses strategic and functional aspects of India's approach.

KEYWORDS

India; China; colonialism; South Pacific; diaspora; Fiji; Australia; Papua New Guinea; FIPIC; space; nuclear disarmament

With the onset of second phase of Look East Policy (LEP) rechristened as the Act East Policy (AEP), the whole of Southwest Pacific (primarily Pacific Islands) is included in India's extended neighbourhood. India's LEP paved way for the country's economic engagement with Southeast Asia through bilateral free trade agreement with Thailand (2003-Early Harvest Programme) and the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Singapore (2005), and facilitated strategic partnerships with Indonesia (2005), Vietnam (2007), and subsequently with Malaysia (2015) and Singapore (2018) under AEP. India's approach towards the South Pacific¹ was stymied because of political apathy in terms of bilateral visits and the deficit in financial and material support. India did not enhance engagement into the western pacific beyond Singapore.² India has constrained itself in undertaking larger global responsibilities because of the limited resources, and it weighed larger geo-strategic dynamics before undertaking any expeditionary role in the Pacific Ocean. Initially, the policy concentrated on building capabilities through education, vocational training and human resource development while, at the same time, espousing the

cause of development cooperation and engagement in regional bodies. With the incremental growth of its economic and increasing international clout, India undertook calibrated measures through political, economic and cultural initiatives to promote its soft power. Lately, the South Pacific island nations have been seeing India in a new perspective because of its economic growth, vibrant democratic norms and rising power status.

India has adopted the policy of reaching out to the South Pacific region (primarily islands) which is also known as Oceania (including Australia and New Zealand). India's approach towards Australia and New Zealand has served India's interests through bilateral mechanisms. India's maritime strategy, subscription to Indo-Pacific and outreach to South Pacific needs to be addressed from four different perspectives. First, India has nurtured this ambition of working in the Indo-Pacific region and Oceania approach acts as a stepping stone. Second, how far the multilateral structures support the India's outreach to South Pacific. Third, whether the larger Indo-Pacific strategy has resources and geo-strategic ambitions embedded into it. Lastly, whether such a strategy would be accepted by the major players in different regions or would it be construed as an encroachment into their strategic spaces.

There are 20 political units in the Oceania including 14 nations scattered across the South Pacific. From the outer limits of Northern Mariana Islands, the region expands from Micronesia, including New Caledonia and Tonga in its Southern periphery and French Polynesia (a French colony) at its eastern limits. Out of these 20 territories, fourteen nations are in United Nations (UN) as fully sovereign countries, while few other islands are protectorates of their erstwhile colonial masters.³ Cook Islands and Niue are not part of the UN General Assembly and nurture association with New Zealand. Geographically, in the South Pacific region, Fiji and Papua New Guinea are large geographic entities while the rest are relatively small and tiny island states.⁴ However, because of their geographical location in the midst of the Pacific Ocean, Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of these islands are very large. For India, it is a vast opportunity, which needs to be explored under its Ocean economy blueprint.

Historical backdrop

In the post-colonial phase (1950–1970s), the Indian approach to the well-being of these smaller nations (14 island nations), especially in terms of nation building, institutional support in the larger South Pacific space, was manifested through occasional support in health, quality education through scholarships, training, capability building, small industries and building models of sustainable development. The models of sustainable development were drawn from India's experiments within district and village units because of limited capital investment and labour-intensive small-scale industries. However, in subsequent phases, owing to Cold War compulsions and the administrative and financial benefits with the respective imperialist powers, these small island nations have their reservations and also Indian foreign policy outlook was limited in scope. Moreover, contrasting stances on global issues, such as nuclear disarmament, have also created sufficient grounds for estrangement. The predominance of Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. in South Pacific affairs also ensured that India's approach to the region would be seen with apprehension. The power bloc politics projected this region as the U.S. strategic backwater.

Geographically, the South Pacific comprises of the ethno-geographical diverse regions of Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. It is argued that the policy application in this region has been marred because of the Cold War bloc affiliation and the rather non-Asian policy approach of the two large countries of the region, namely Australia and New Zealand. These two major powers in the region have been managing the security and stability in the Pacific Island nations with the help of the U.S.. Australia's "pro-white" policy⁵ and New Zealand's liberal outlook towards apartheid regime⁶ in South Africa, as well as differing perceptions about a number of contentious issues, kept India and Oceanic nations, at a distance from each other. However, because of the engagement through Commonwealth and other institutional programmes, such as Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC), Southwest Pacific islands from Polynesia and Melanesian ethno-graphical landscapes have benefited from the agricultural assistance and technical support provided by India, at times of need. This has created a positive outlook towards India's rise. However, India being a non-signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), differing policy stances on Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)⁷ and India's nuclear tests of 1998, have somewhat irritated the Pacific island nations, which have been completely against nuclear testing because of health and environmental hazards. These nations have adopted a strong policy approach against the nuclear powers that have been testing their nuclear devices in the placid waters of the Southwest Pacific. This propelled the South Pacific Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SWPNWFZ) Treaty, which came into being in 1985.⁸ To a certain extent, India has been insulated from the developments in the South Pacific region because of the incremental decolonisation, aid-dependent economies and low resource base in the region. India was seen as the leader espousing the cause against colonialism and a pioneer in Non-Aligned Movement, so any overture towards this region was also seen with suspicion because of the power bloc politics and the domineering influence of France, the U.K. and the U.S.

In the post-Cold War phase, India's policy stance has been affected also because of the non-inclusion of India into the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) organisation and the discriminatory policy of successive Fijian governments towards ethnic Indians in the country. Moreover, the divergent stance on the nuclear issues, World Trade Organization negotiations, multilateralism, alliance commitments, a relatively weak institutional link through Commonwealth and greater emphasis on Non-Alignment have influenced the policy approach towards this region. The approach changed in the post-2000 phase when the U.S. started seeing India as an important player in the balance of power politics, global anti-terrorism initiatives and a relevant partner in the Indian Ocean affairs. With the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal signed in 2005, a need was felt to reinvigorate estranged ties to reach out to this region. During that period, there were supporting voices for India's inclusion into APEC, and Australia and New Zealand joined the EAS summit through the larger ASEAN+6 mechanism. The expansion of EAS by involving the U.S. and Russia has made this region a natural extension under India's Look East Policy. It became a policy compulsion for India to reach out to the region. India's low-key engagement in the region is reflected by the fact that it has two High Commissions for consular interactions. Indian High Commission in Fiji was established to look into the interests of Indian Diaspora, while Indian Embassy in Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea) was aimed at exploring possibilities of trade and import of minerals. India routinely goes

unrepresented at regional meetings held in the other 12 PICs. In contrast, China has a major diplomatic mission in almost every PIC⁹ and this has to do more with countering Taiwan diplomatic clout and also looking for possible trade opportunities. In 2019, two PICs (Solomon Islands and Kiribati)¹⁰ changed their affiliation and recognised China instead of Taiwan. In 2003, Kiribati had shifted loyalties to Taiwan and before that had diplomatic ties with China and hosted Chinese space tracking station.¹¹ China has been scouting for a military base in Vanuatu with satellite tracking facility¹² and a naval basing facility¹³ at Tulagi (major naval base for Britain in South Pacific during World War II) in Solomon Islands.

Nevertheless, there have been a few other issues, which have been getting consideration in the Indian academic and policy circles that acted as catalysts for convergence. India's strategic engagement with Australia because of better relations with the U.S. was catalyst to the increased interactions. Australia's strategic presence and ambitions in the South Pacific has been increasing. The Oceania has been seen as the exclusive region of influence, though fully conscious that it is the U.S.'s preponderant military presence and the U.S.-Australia alliance, which enabled Australia to enjoy its dominance in the region. The other important aspect was the growing influence of China in the South Pacific. In the recent years, China has made major inroads in the South Pacific islands in search of mineral resources and energy besides strengthening its influence in Australia and New Zealand. Chinese aid diplomacy in Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste has also been seen with concern.

Renewed vigour for engagement

The U.S. has reinforced its commitment to remaining as the pre-eminent power in the Western and Southern Pacific region. The "Pivot to Asia" policy under the Obama administration was a strategic hint and with the increase in presence of other powers, namely, Russia and China, U.S. presence is expected to be reinforced through either new bases or increased frequency of political and military officials' visits to these island nations. Australia's policy towards the Indian Ocean region is also undergoing change with the strengthening of the Darwin base and the positioning of the U.S. troops in Darwin as well as the U.S. air base in Cocos (Keeling) Islands of Australia. Further, the U.S. has been considering basing its naval ships in Australia. As there will be greater enmeshing of strategic interests between ASEAN and Australia, this is increasingly being seen conducive for India's interest in both Southeast Asia and Southwest Pacific region. Further, increasing reference about "Indo-Asia Pacific" or "Indo-Pacific" has made this region an important strategic space in the geo-political construct. With new discourse germinating about the Blue Economy and the use of Ocean resources for development, the large EEZ that these nations control have become important for resource exploitation in a sustainable manner through joint ventures and cooperative initiatives. The possibilities of rare earths and mineral deposits in the South Pacific have also drawn the attention of the multinational corporations and scientific institutions.

With changing circumstances and complex power dynamics in the region, India will have to reach out to the region because with the expansion of the East Asia Summit and the inclusion of two Oceania nations, namely Australia and New Zealand, it has become imperative for India to reach out to these nations under a comprehensive

policy approach. India has been keen to get into Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) as a member since the moratorium on new members was lifted in 2010 but has not received support because of the need to balance an equal number of Asia and Pacific countries as new members. In order to diversify its energy and mineral resources requirements, India has reached out to Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the other smaller nations in the region including Fiji. With the issues of climate change gaining momentum and India being increasingly projected as the recalcitrant nation, Pacific Islands might see it as detrimental to their development, existence and sustenance needs. The Indian Diaspora in the region is increasingly identifying itself with India and needs a recalibrated policy approach, so as to act in consonance with India's national interests. India's aspirations for a permanent membership in Security Council would be fulfilled only if two-third members vote for its candidature in the General Assembly and this region has a sizeable number of UN members.

With the changing strategic dynamics and the increasing presence of the countries in the Pacific region, like Russia, China, U.S. and Japan, a need has been felt that India can cultivate this region as a Zone of Peace, Prosperity and Development rather than transforming it into the ring of great power politics and a military base theatre. China is scouting for bases in Vanuatu while making overtures to the aid-dependent economies of the region. India has always aspired for anti-colonialism and South-South cooperation, which was seen positively by Pacific islanders because of being the last bastion of colonial powers where countries such as France (colonies such as New Caledonia, French Polynesia), the U.S. (colonies such as American Samoa, Guam) still exist. There has been increasing voices of independence that are resonating in French colonies across Indian and Pacific oceans.

With the concept of Indo-Pacific being propagated in academic circles, it is necessary that India should review its priorities in the region. In a speech at Honolulu in October 2010, the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton used the phrase "Indo-Pacific" to describe a newly emerged and integrated theatre. She spoke about how the U.S. was "expanding our work with the Indian navy in the Pacific because we understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce".¹⁴ This is an explicit and significant reflection of the growing strategic convergence between the two countries with respect to the region.¹⁵ The convergence of two ocean spaces, namely Indian and Pacific Oceans, would make the Oceania more geo-politically important. Adding to this debate, C. Raja Mohan¹⁶ has written that the United States is reorganising its military disposition in the Indo-Pacific for greater efficacy, modifying its military doctrine to cater to challenges as access denial, through new security partnerships and strengthening military bases. Strengthening its traditional alliances with Japan and Australia and building new security partnerships with countries like India are now central to the new U.S. strategy that involves a measure of burden-sharing. Delhi's changing maritime orientation¹⁷ provides strategic support to the changing U.S. approach to the Indo-Pacific.¹⁸

India's approach to the Indo-Pacific order ensures that Asia's Maritime Commons are open and accessible to all and are not territorialised in the name of either nationalism or historical claims.¹⁹ Reflecting on the sentiments of Indian strategic thinkers, it is pertinent that India should take a new understanding and approach towards this South Pacific region, which encapsulates the Indo-Pacific region. Whether India needs a hyphenation or a de-hyphenation between Indian and Pacific Ocean is a matter of conjecture, but

going by the international debate from the U.S. side, it seems that strategic compulsions have given an urge to India to act, but for the long run, the hyphenation needs to remain, so that the Indian Ocean does not become an Ocean of dominance and great power politics. The aim of India's engagement in Oceania is to look into possibilities and how India should devise its policy in a manner so as to cater to its future political, strategic, economic, and cultural needs. Oceania had been important for the major powers because of the expanse of Japanese reach during Second World War, which defined the contours of engagement with these micro island states as well as Australia and New Zealand.

The South Pacific sits at the “pivot” of the Pacific rebalancing. It is a largely stable region with a relatively small population; it has abundant resources; it is at the crossroads of vibrant and growing maritime trade routes; and it is increasingly strategically located. Under the “one country, one vote” rule of many international forums, the 14 Pacific Island Countries (PICs) play a significant role in deciding international institutional legitimacy, which is increasingly important for India as it seeks a greater role in global affairs.²⁰ There is enormous scope for closer economic, political, and strategic ties between India and the South Pacific. Ties between the two are already friendly and age-old, with myriad cultural compatibilities. But if India continues to neglect the region, it will become increasingly difficult for India to maintain, or to regain, a toehold, while other powers like China manoeuvre for, and establish, entrenched positions.²¹ India has given hints of engaging the region through defence interactions and liaison visits.

Maritime strategy and outlook – the South Pacific approach

In the Indian Navy Maritime Strategy Document of 2007 (but publicly released in 2009), it indicated that among the secondary areas of interest include but are not limited to the following: “South-East Indian Ocean, including sea routes to the Pacific Ocean and littoral regions in vicinity, South and East China Seas, Western Pacific Ocean, and their littoral regions. Southern Indian Ocean Region, including Antarctica as well as Mediterranean Sea, West Coast of Africa, and their littoral regions”.²² It shows that the Indo-Pacific came as a natural extension of India's maritime ambitions. The thought-provoking reference states “Other areas of national interest based on considerations of Indian diaspora, overseas investments and political relations”.²³ The document remarked that for formidable navy it is important to have reach and it states “... national maritime power at long distances from home base, and for extended periods. This reach of naval forces enables a wide spectrum usage of maritime power in areas of national interest overseas, which would otherwise be beyond the sphere of the nation's influence using other components of national and military power”.²⁴

The subsequent maritime strategy document of 2015 did not give any hints of its Oceania strategy and had indicated “these include naval deployments for exercising presence in our areas of interest, engagement with maritime forces of friendly nations in a number of ways and at multiple levels, maritime capacity building and capability enhancement through cooperation in training, technical areas and hydrography, cooperative efforts for development of regional MDA, and conduct of maritime security operations, both independently and in coordination with other maritime forces in the region”.²⁵ Elucidating on maritime force strategy and capability development, it stated “the major thrust

areas for force development have been defined, with focus on indigenisation, MDA, Network Centric Operations (NCO), force projection and protection, maintenance and logistics, and new technologies”.²⁶ Within the document, it has enlisted Lombok, Ombai & Wetar, and Sunda Straits as critical choke points of interest to India. Interestingly, these straits are also of importance to the South Pacific region.

India’s core strategic interests lie from the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, to the IOR, and increasingly discussed Indo-Pacific Region, as well as the Atlantic Ocean. The “international sea lanes (ISLs) to these areas have, accordingly, grown in importance for India, with sea routes through the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, South-East and South-West Indian Ocean, and the Indo-Pacific region contributing to India’s SLOCs.”²⁷ As it has been discussed that areas such as Antarctica and Western Pacific Ocean have been areas of interest. Naval acquisitions (Aircraft Carrier Vikramaditya) and India’s strategic air lift capacities (C-17 Globe master and C-130 Hercules) clearly show that India aspires to be a major regional player with global aspirations.

For India, as enumerated by Prime Minister Modi in his Shangri-La speech “to the East, the Malacca Strait and South China Sea connect India to the Pacific and to most of our major partners – ASEAN, Japan, Republic of Korea, China and the Americas. Our trade in the region is growing rapidly. And, a significant part of our overseas investments flow in this direction ... an important pillar of this (U.S.) partnership is our shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region.”²⁸ He added with regard to maritime security, “India Armed Forces, especially our Navy, are building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region for peace and security, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. They train, exercise and conduct goodwill missions across the region.”²⁹

While there has been appreciation of India’s stance against anti-colonialism at international fora, there is dissonance regarding India, being a non-signatory to Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). From the point of view of Oceania nations, nuclear arms race creates regional insecurities and, therefore, problems in their sustenance and economic growth. Therefore, most of the nations in Oceania have been against India’s nuclear tests; though the tone and tenor differed from that of Papua New Guinea to Australia. The nuclear coffin issue³⁰ in South Pacific is gaining traction in international media. These island nations have criticised the nuclear powers for nuclear testing with serious long-term health and environmental hazards. This was catalyst to the signing and ratification of the 1985 South Pacific Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SWPNWFZ) Treaty.³¹ Marshall Islands had filed a case in International Court of Justice against India³² and other major powers for their nuclear testing and the lack of commitment to denuclearisation.

Forum for India Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) initiative

Under Prime Minister Modi initiatives such as Forum for India Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC)³³ formed in November 2014, galvanised and addressed these island nations under region specific policy approach. Two meetings of FIPIC have been held, at Fiji (2014) and Jaipur (2015). The FIPIC acted as a platform to address requirements of these islanders in terms of training, capacity building, aid and technical assistance. Further, education and medical facilities have been the important demands from the Pacific island countries. Now with active foreign policy approach, there have been

supporting voices for India's inclusion into APEC. With increased concerns related to climate change and the development of the concept of Blue economy, these islands have become the zones of opportunity as many of the South Pacific islands hold ten times the size of their land mass as their Exclusive Economic Zone. India has already got 10,000 sq. kms of Ocean area for exploration of mineral resources in the Indian Ocean³⁴ and possibly in future it might have to scout for such zones in the South Pacific too. Also, India's low cost satellite launch expertise is growing multifold and it might need two monitoring centres in the South Pacific to know the launch trajectory and also monitor the positioning of satellites in geo-synchronous and polar synchronous orbits. Many of these island nations might approach India to utilise their slots by launching low cost satellites, and also sharing of geospatial data with India. India might consider sharing of critical weather data and early warning systems to help these islands and their fishermen in avoiding natural disasters and typhoons. India also needs to work on the assessment of their undersea resources so that complementarities and cooperation can be explored between the two.

India, through the FIPIC mechanism, should support these nations to identify and collate resources data, especially in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Hydrographic surveys and reach related to marine life would help them in seeking international cooperation and also preserving their natural resources. The low cost scientific research particularly towards desalination of water, waste management, water conservation and technical assistance would create a positive constituency for India. The projects that can be undertaken in this region in terms of sustainable development and capacity building models can be applied in coastal African nations and Indian Ocean states. With China making inroads in the region through Belt and Road Initiative and supported project in Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa, India will have to work towards maintaining its visible presence in the region along with partners such as Japan, Australia and the U.S. For India to emerge as the global player as well as nurture its aspiration to be a permanent UN Security Council member, the 14 votes from these island nations would be substantial. India's low cost education (particularly distance education programmes by IGNOU), healthcare (e-medicine) and agriculture equipment exports would create optimistic influence in the region.

Conclusion

The South Pacific policy is in nascent stages but India has started subscribing to the Indo-Pacific theatre, which integrates Indian and Pacific Ocean. The boundary of Indo-Pacific has been defined with Japan and Australia as the anchorages of the approach. However, India has framed its approach towards the larger Indo-Pacific in which Oceania is important because of four major factors. First, the large EEZ of the Pacific islands opens up possibilities for projects under the Blue economy. India needs to collaborate with Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. in its pursuit. India's space research programme with the launch of Moon mission and success of Mars Mission need more monitoring stations to get data about flight path of launch vehicle and separation stages. Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and Biak, in Indonesia have hosted India's Telemetry, Tracking and Command (TTC) station and there is a need for a Data Reception and TTC Station in a few South Pacific islands also. China has been looking to open a base facility in Vanuatu (Y shaped island) strategically located in the Pacific Ocean, and has shown

interest in refurbishing its Kiribati space tracking station which was used for monitoring its first manned space mission. There are media reports that China possibly might build naval facility at Tulagi, Solomon Islands. China's interest in the particular area might have strategic purpose. Chinese establishment could monitor India's space programme to collect data as India have to position ships in Pacific to get flight path information. Third, Kiribis have ratified ocean and resource protection agreements with the U.S. for protection of its ocean resources as well as fisheries. India might be willing to provide training and capacity building. Further, China because of its deep sea dredging activity and island building in South China Sea, might entice islands in to build dykes and sand bars to protect these low lying islands from submerging. China is also trying to use aid and assistance as a ploy to wean away six island countries from recognising Taiwan and instead adopt one China policy. Two have already succumbed to Chinese aid charm. Last, the islands have a potential for understanding the climate change effects and develop a long-term strategy against sea level rise and protecting coastal communities.

Notes

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