

# Forum for India Pacific Islands Cooperation moves ahead

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The second summit of the Forum for India Pacific Cooperation (FIPIIC-2) in Jaipur on 21-22 August 2015 has made significant progress in strengthening India's engagement with the 14 Pacific Island countries who are members of the Forum. Building upon the previous summit in Fiji in November 2014, FIPIIC-2 announced several new projects and activities. Discussions took place on global issues of importance to members such as climate change and reform of the United Nations. Bilateral interactions among the leaders added value to the Summit. The Summit is to be held regularly every year.

All 14 Pacific Island countries were represented at FIPIIC-2 including 10 heads of state or government. FIPIIC was launched during the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Fiji in November 2014. Though these countries are relatively small in land area and distant from India, many have large exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and offer promising possibilities for fruitful cooperation.

The Pacific Ocean is the earth's largest ocean covering 46 per cent of water surface and 33 per cent of the earth's total surface, making it larger than the entire earth's land area. It is bounded by 41 sovereign states plus Taiwan, and 22 non-independent territories. It is rich in marine resources and accounts for 71 per cent of the world's ocean fishery catch. The Pacific has for long been an area of geostrategic interest for countries such as the US, Japan, China, Russia, Australia, and Indonesia – large economies which lie on its boundary. The 14 PIF members are being wooed by these powers. Two developed Pacific Island countries – Australia and New Zealand – have tended to dominate regional cooperation forums such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).

The PIF was formed in 1999 as a successor to the earlier South Pacific Forum set up in 1971. Australia and New Zealand being much larger economies have tended to dominate the PIF, and the 14 other island members have sought to diversify their external relations, including with the major powers like US, China and Japan. There is a degree of competition among the major powers for influence in the region. The PIF suspended Fiji in 2009, but lifted the suspension in 2014 following general elections.

Regional cooperation has grown steadily under the aegis of the PIF. A trade agreement establishing a free trade area among 14 PIF countries has been signed by all except Palau and Marshall Islands. There is scope for making further progress in airline and telecommunications services to improve connectivity. The fact that these countries are separated by wide stretches of the Pacific makes logistics a challenge.

Given the large number of states and territories in the Pacific, numerous maritime disputes have arisen, especially in the South China Sea (China, Taiwan and six ASEAN countries), and in the East China Sea (China-Japan, China-South Korea). China has a relatively small coastline compared to its land mass, and this may explain its aggressive posture in imposing unilateral claims despite being a party to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

India's focus has largely been on the Indian Ocean where it has sought to play a major role and protect its strategic and commercial interests. The FIPIIC initiative marks a serious effort to expand India's engagement in the Pacific region. The exploitation of hydrocarbon resources in the Pacific area off the coast of countries such as Vietnam has attracted Indian participation and China has objected to this. India has had a long history of

cooperation and close engagement with Fiji, which has a large population of Indian origin. India has participated in PIF meetings as one of the 17 dialogue partners (including US, EU and China).

FIPIIC includes 14 of the island countries – Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. These countries range in land area from the largest Papua New Guinea (461,700 sq km) to the smallest Nauru (21 sq km). The size of their population ranges from Papua New Guinea (7.7 million) to Niue (1,500). Development indicators also vary widely with per capita income ranging from USD 27,340 (Cook Islands) to USD 1020 (Papua New Guinea). These figures highlight the wide disparities among these countries.

While these countries have relatively small land areas, their EEZ encompasses fairly large areas of the ocean. Their EEZ areas range from Kiribati (3.55 million sq km) to Samoa (120,000 sq km). Baselines and maritime boundaries have not been settled though some progress has been made. There are 48 overlapping or shared EEZs which require negotiations to be settled. Thus maritime boundary questions which can be very technical and complex are an area where these countries have a definite interest and need for legal expertise. The PIF countries have a strong interest in settling maritime disputes in accordance with international conventions. The existence of large EEZs makes it important to optimally manage marine living and non-living resources. Management of fisheries and development of aquaculture and the “blue economy” are particularly important.

In November 2014, when FIPIIC was launched, India had offered some major assistance projects. The projects offered include the setting up of a special USD one million fund for adapting to climate change and clean energy, establishing a trade office in India, Pan Pacific Islands e-network to improve digital connectivity, extending visa on arrival at Indian airports for all the 14 Pacific Island countries, cooperation in space technology applications for improving the quality of life of the islands, and training to diplomats from Pacific Island countries. In addition, India has increased the annual "Grant-in-Aid" from USD 125,000 to 200,000 to each of the 14 Pacific Countries for community projects of their choice, and launched a new Visitors Programme for Pacific Island Countries. These represented a significant upgrade in India's relationship with the PIF countries.

FIPIIC-2 has built further on this process and a number of projects were announced. India will set up an Institute for Sustainable Coastal and Ocean Research and a network of marine biology research stations in the region. Research collaboration and capacity building with Indian institutions in this field will start immediately. An International Conference on Ocean economy and Pacific Island Countries will be held in New Delhi in 2016 with participation of officials and independent experts of all 14 Pacific Island Countries.

India has offered its Navy's direct support and capacity building, especially for coastal surveillance and hydrographic surveys, to gain a better understanding of maritime zones and strengthen security of EEZs. More goodwill visits by the Indian Navy to Pacific Islands are planned, including support in areas like healthcare through medical camps on the islands.

India has offered its capability in Space technology to help in inventory of land and water resources; fish zoning; forest resources management; coastal and ocean studies; weather and climate change; and, disaster management support. India can assist in setting up a 'Space Technology Applications Centre' in any one of the Pacific Island Countries for the entire region and enhance support for training in space applications, including through customized courses.

India has offered to create capacity in Island States to deal with natural disasters, including through human resource development and application of space technology for early warning system and incident response.

In the human resources area, under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation training programme, Fiji

will get 110 slots, and the number of slots for the other 13 countries will be doubled from 119 to 238, a significant jump. In addition, India has offered two scholarships for college education in India to each of the 13 countries that do not receive them yet, while continuing with the 33 scholarships presently offered to Fiji. The programme of training courses for Pacific Island diplomats will be continued, and, in addition, a two-week business management course has been offered at the globally renowned Indian Institute of Management in Bengaluru.

India has already trained 43 rural women from eight island countries as solar engineers. This will be stepped up by training 70 more women solar engineers and by providing solar electrification to 2,800 houses – 200 houses in each Pacific Island Country. This will save kerosene worth about a million US dollars and provide livelihood to women.

One information technology laboratory will be set up in each Pacific Island country to improve local IT infrastructure, and help to provide tele-medicine and tele-education to the people.

On trade, besides the FIPIC Trade Office in New Delhi, India is to support the development of micro, small and medium enterprises and will extend support for purchase of machinery for coconut processing and enhancing rice and sugarcane yields. India will also improve market access for Small Island Developing States.

In the field of health, India will focus on developing capacity for health services. Generic drugs from India are presently supplied through third countries at a higher cost. India is ready to set up a pharmaceutical manufacturing plant and distribution centre in the Pacific Island region and has offered a Line of Credit for this project.

Last year, electronic visas were announced for Pacific Island countries. India will now provide gratis visa to the nationals of Pacific Island countries.

In the media field, Prasar Bharti, India's national broadcaster, will gift television and radio programmes on culture, entertainment, news, education, etc., in English and Hindi to the PIF countries. Prasar Bharti will also organise a specialised training programme over the next few months for broadcasters from the Pacific Island Countries. India will also support creation of India Centres through e-libraries and supply books to libraries at universities in the PIF countries.

Since November 2014, there has been good progress in building relations with the PIF countries. FIPC-2 has added substantially to the package of projects and activities, thus both deepening and widening cooperation. This has now to be matched by delivery and implementation, which are challenging tasks for the government. Implementation of projects and activities pledged by India abroad should be far better than the record of implementing projects at home. Appropriate reforms are needed in project and financial management processes including empowerment of implementing agencies and timely release of funds. Unfortunately there is a tendency to follow the processes for project implementation within India for projects abroad, resulting in slippages in delivery, time frame, cost, and quality. This must change to a special mechanism for projects to be implemented abroad.

Indian diplomatic representation is weak and many of the PIF members are covered by small non-resident Indian missions which are not able to make frequent visits. More frequent visits are required, which implies strengthening our Missions covering the region. Another approach could be to have, in addition, Special Envoys from India for promoting bilateral relations with these countries. These could provide advocacy and give a push to cooperation.

On global issues, there has been a good exchange of views on climate change. India's position against

mandatory carbon cuts for developing countries has been forcefully articulated, while the PIF countries have projected their concern over continuing growth in total carbon emissions into the atmosphere. Obviously, new technology for carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) could bridge the gap. On reform of the United Nations, and in particular the addition of India as a new permanent member to the UN Security Council, support was expressed. India's efforts to push through a UN General Assembly resolution on UN reform were also supported. However, the opposition of some of the present permanent members remain an obstacle.

The PIF countries face significant development challenges and threats from global warming induced rise in sea levels and extreme weather events. Transport, communications, renewable energy, health services, fisheries ("blue" economy), and agro-based industries are areas where India can make an impact. For example, coconut- and coir-based industry has not been developed. The scattered nature of the PIF members across vast ocean spaces mean that telecom and television services via satellite could be a game changer. Power generation from biomass gasification and solar energy are promising areas. There is demand for services of Indian experts and for training of personnel in India in a wide variety of fields. More opportunities could be provided for students from these countries to study in India. Tertiary health care is a challenge and patients have to be flown long distances for these services. FIPIC-2 has moved ahead in some of these fields.

FIPIC-2 in Jaipur has made further progress in bringing the warm and friendly people of the Pacific islands closer to India. India on its part can share relevant expertise with these countries. In a shrinking world, distance need not be a barrier to closer relations.

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*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India*