

India's outreach to Pacific Islands: Making a difference

By Dr Bhaskar Balakrishnan

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India is set to host a summit with leaders from 14 members of the Pacific Islands Forum (FIPIC) in Jaipur on August 21, which is expected to be attended by 10 heads of state/government from the PIF members. The initiative has the potential to revitalise India's relations with these countries, as expressed during the summit meeting held during the visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Fiji in November 2014. Though these countries are relatively small, and distant from India, there are several areas for fruitful cooperation.



Why Pacific Ocean matters

The Pacific Ocean is the earth's largest ocean covering 46 percent of water surface and 33 percent of the total earth's 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 percent of the world's ocean fishery catch. As major economies such as the US and China lie on its boundary, the Pacific has for long been and will continue to be a major factor in the geostrategic calculations of major powers such as the US, Japan, China, and Russia. Entangled in this situation of strategic rivalry and competition are many smaller states and island territories, including the 14 PIF members.

Geopolitical Games

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 6 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 stakes

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. This is being challenged by China in recent years. The exploitation of hydrocarbon resources in the Pacific area off countries such as Vietnam has attracted Indian participation, and China has objected to this. The presence of Indian-origin communities in islands such as Fiji has motivated greater linkages with the region. In particular, India has had a long history of cooperation with Fiji.

In recent years, India has been seeking to build its relations with 14 of the PIF island countries (Cook islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu), and has participated in PIF meetings as one of the 17 dialogue partners (including US, EU and China). The forthcoming summit is part of this effort. Australia and New Zealand, which are also PIF members, are, however, not included, as in the case of past meetings between India and PIF

members.

The PIF was formed in 1999 as 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.

The 14 PIF countries range in land area from the largest Papua New Guinea (461,700 sq km) to the smallest Nauru (21 sq km). The population ranges from Papua New Guinea (7.7 million) to Niue (1,500). Development indicators also vary widely with per capita ranging from US\$ 27,340 (Cook Islands) to US\$1020 (Papua New Guinea). These figures highlight the wide disparities among these countries.

Blue Economy

While the PIF countries have relatively small land areas, their EEZ encompasses fairly large areas of the ocean. The 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 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.

Regional cooperation has grown steadily under the aegis of the Pacific Island Forum. 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.

India's Pacific outreach

During Prime Minister Modi's visit to Fiji in November 2014, India offered some major assistance projects. A Forum for India Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) was set up, and the forthcoming meeting in Jaipur is part of this process. The projects offered include setting up of a special fund of \$1 million 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 fourteen 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 US\$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 represent a significant upgrade in India's relationship with the PIF countries.



There are certain issues that need attention. Implementation of projects offered by India should be improved by appropriate reforms in project management and financial approval processes. Indian diplomatic representation is weak and many of the PIF members are covered by non-resident Indian missions which are not able to make

frequent visits. One 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.

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 based industry has not been developed. The scattered nature of the PIF members across vast ocean spaces mean that telecom and TV 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.

The forthcoming FIPIC meeting in Jaipur should make 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.

(Dr Bhaskar Balakrishnan is a former ambassador of India who has been involved in some projects with the PIF countries.)

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