

## Sea change | Business Line

### Why India must do more for the Pacific islands

India is to host a summit with leaders from 14 members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). The event, to be held in Jaipur on August 21, will be attended by 10 heads of state from the region. It has the potential to strengthen India's relations with these countries. Though these countries are relatively small and distant from India, they offer several areas for fruitful cooperation.

In recent years, India has been seeking to build its relations with 14 of the PIF island countries, namely the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. India has participated in PIF meetings as one of the 17 dialogue partners (including US, EU and China).

### The blue economy

The PIF was formed in 1999 as a successor to the South Pacific Forum of 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 relations, including with the major powers such as the US, China and Japan.

There is a degree of competition among the major powers for influence in the region. While the PIF countries have relatively small land areas, their exclusive economic zone (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 yet, though some progress has been made. There are 48 overlapping or shared EEZs which require negotiations to be settled.

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 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.

### The road ahead

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, establishing a trade office in India and Pan Pacific Islands, e-network to improve digital connectivity. They also include 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.

Also, India has increased the annual grant-in-aid from \$125,000 to \$200,000 to each of the 14 Pacific countries for community projects, and launched a new Visitors Programme. 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.

*The writer is a former ambassador*

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