



India's Development Strategy with the Pacific Island Countries

Killing two (or more) birds with one stone

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► Key Takeaways

- India has maintained a special relationship with Fiji, where 40 percent of the population is of Indian origin and Hindi is an official language. However, India has traditionally kept a low profile in the South Pacific.
- Prime Minister Modi launched the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) in Fiji in late 2014. His visit to Papua New Guinea in May 2023 gave him the opportunity to co-chair the third FIPIC along with Prime Minister John Marape.
- FIPIC was launched along the lines of the Indo-African Summit, with an emphasis on capacity-building in the IT sector, on health, and on climate change adaptation and disaster relief.
- India's current positioning in the South Pacific is driven by its ambition to be the leading voice of the Global South and a willingness to contribute to the effort of its Quad partners to limit China's growing influence.

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's maiden visit to Papua New Guinea (PNG) on May 20-21, 2023 is a testament to India's international positioning and search for a global role. In Port Moresby, Modi co-chaired the third Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) and announced a series of steps to enhance development cooperation with its partners of the South Pacific. India's outreach to the Pacific Island countries (PICs) was clearly in line with its G20 presidency and its campaign to be the leading voice of the Global South. At the same time, Modi reaffirmed India's commitment to a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, opted to contribute alongside the U.S., Japan and Australia to an important telecommunications project in Palau and, more generally, has looked to enhance partnerships with PICs as part of the Quad. Modi's visit to PNG thus reflected India's two-pronged strategy of, on the one hand, working with the U.S. and its allies in the Indo-Pacific and, on the other, mobilizing as many countries as possible under the banner of the Global South.

India's outreach to the Pacific Island countries

India is no stranger to the South Pacific. It has interacted with the Pacific Island countries in the Commonwealth,¹ the Non-Aligned Movement and the United Nations system. It has also been a dialogue partner of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) since 2006 and has maintained a special relationship with Fiji, where 40 percent of the population is of Indian origin and Hindi is an official language.² Nevertheless, India has generally kept a low profile in the South Pacific, as reflected by its rather limited diplomatic presence.³ While familiar with the socioeconomic and environmental challenges faced by small island developing states, India has prioritized the neighboring island countries of the Indian Ocean in its foreign and assistance policies.

However, soon after he came to power in 2014, Modi reached out to the PICs as part of the so-called Act East Policy, the new and updated version of India's two-decade-old Look East Policy. Modi himself took an interest in maintaining regular contacts with the PICs. He visited Fiji in November 2014 and launched the FIPIC; he then hosted the second FIPIC summit in Jaipur in August 2015. Interestingly, both summits saw the participation

1. The Commonwealth-member countries from the South Pacific are Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, PNG, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

2. Quite significantly, the 12th World Hindi Conference was held in Fiji in February 2023 and Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar paid a visit on this occasion. He also inaugurated a gallery dedicated to the memory of Indian indentured laborers who settled in Fiji.

3. India has permanent diplomatic representations only in Papua New Guinea and Fiji. India's High Commission in Fiji is accredited to Tonga, Tuvalu and Kiribati and the one in PNG includes the Solomon Islands. The Indian High Commission in New Zealand is concurrently accredited to Samoa, Niue, the Cook Islands and Vanuatu.

of all fourteen FIPIC countries.⁴ Two years later, in May 2017, under the umbrella of FIPIC, the Ministry of External Affairs organized the India-Pacific Islands Sustainable Development Conference in Fiji. Modi also convened the India-Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) Meeting on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly in September 2019. On this occasion, he announced a USD 1 million allocation to each PSIDS for high-impact development projects in the area of their choice. His visit to Port Moresby in May 2023 gave him the opportunity to co-chair the third FIPIC along with PNG Prime Minister John Marape.

From the outset, FIPIC was launched along the lines of the Indo-African Summit, with an emphasis on developing partnerships and capacity-building assistance. Between 2015 and 2023, India trained nearly 1,000 officials from the South Pacific and sent experts on long-term deputation to agencies in a number of Pacific Island countries to assist them across various areas of economic activity. For the third FIPIC, Modi announced the provision of another batch of 1,000 scholarships for PICs over the next five years. Moreover, like in Africa, India's projects have focused on capacity-building in the IT sector. India has supported the creation of IT centers of excellence at several universities in the region.⁵ At the third FIPIC, Modi also announced that India would upgrade the Centre of Excellence for IT in PNG into a Regional IT and Cybersecurity Hub.

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Health has been another major focus of India's development initiatives in Africa, as in the South Pacific. India donated medical supplies, including antiretroviral drugs for HIV patients in Fiji and PNG on several occasions. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it supplied PPE kits and N95 masks and extended vaccine assistance to various PICs. In May 2023, Modi announced the setup of a cardiology hospital in Fiji, as well as the provision of dialysis units and sea ambulances in all other PICs. Starting from 2024, India will also organize two Jaipur Foot Camps per year in PICs (Jaipur Foot Camps provide prosthetic limbs free of cost. One was organized in 2022 in Fiji and supplied 600 persons; the next one is to be held in PNG in 2023).

India has also led SME development projects in every Pacific Island country, providing machinery and technology supplies as well as capacity-building programs. Community development projects have been another key sector of India's development priorities. In the South Pacific, many projects have focused on solar electrification (a USD 1.5 million project of solar electrification for 2,800 houses in the 14 PICs was launched in mid-2016).

4. FIPIC includes the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

5. For instance, at Fiji National University, University of PNG, the University of South Pacific in Niue, the National University of Samoa, and in the Solomon Islands National University.

In the field of climate change adaptation and disaster relief, India set up a tsunami alert system in Tonga and repeatedly provided relief and humanitarian assistance when PICs were struck by major natural disasters such as volcano eruptions or cyclones (e.g., to Vanuatu, Fiji, PNG and Tonga). In late 2020 for instance, when Tropical Cyclone Yasa struck Fiji, India flew 6 tons of relief material for the cyclone-affected people within a week. As follow-up assistance, it sponsored the renovation of twenty schools and contributed USD 1 million to the Fijian Prime Minister's Relief Fund.

To contribute to disaster preparedness in PICs, in May 2023, India launched the Sustainable coastal and ocean research institute at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. This institute will serve as a nodal agency in a network of marine biology research stations to be developed in across the region. Its mission is to explore the potential to benefit from the ocean as a resource in a sustainable manner and track the impact of climate change on marine ecosystems. India also launched the DWEPIC portal or Data Warehouse for Empowering Pacific Island Countries. This portal, which has been developed by the Indian Space Research Organization, hosts geospatial data sets and services, including satellite and terrain data, climate and ocean thematic services, as well as disaster services for access and utilization by the PICs.

Interestingly, India has funded and implemented many development projects in PICs through the India-UN Development Partnership Fund (I-UNDPF).⁶ This fund was created in 2017 to support development projects mainly in the least developed and small

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island developing states, and India has pledged a USD 150 million donation to it over ten years. In the South Pacific, I-UNDPF has funded a USD 1 million project to create early warning climate systems in seven PICs.⁷ The I-UNDPF has funded additional projects in the Marshall Islands (installing solar-powered refrigeration systems), Palau (upgrading of facilities and equipment for ten community health centers) as well as Tonga (repairing and reconstructing an export building and fumigation facility).

All in all, India has positioned itself as a reliable partner for development in the South Pacific and its approach has been in line with the priorities it has set for the G20 presidency, on the adverse impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the criticality of food security, energy security and health, as well as climate-change adaptation and mitigation practices.

6. See the webpage of the India-UN Fund, available at: www.unsouthsouth.org.

7. The Cook Islands, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, the Solomon Islands and Tonga.

India as a leader of the Global South as much as a member of the Quad

In his opening speech at the third FIPIC, Prime Minister Modi insisted on India's various multilateral endeavors, including its G20 presidency and efforts to represent the Global South at the G7 summit held in Japan the day before. He also encouraged the PICs to support India-led multilateral organizations such as the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Initiative (CDRI), as well as India's campaign to reform international institutions.⁸ As far as the reform of the multilateral system is concerned, PICs have actually supported India. During the first FIPIC meeting of 2014, twelve of the fourteen PICs pledged their support for India's permanent membership in the UN Security Council (the two others, the Cook Islands and Niue don't have a vote in the UN).⁹ PICs have also been supportive of India's campaign to be the leading voice of the Global South. As part of its G20 presidency, India organized the Voice of Global South Summit in January 2023 and some PIC representatives attended the event (from PNG, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Samoa, Micronesia, Nauru, the Solomon Islands, and Tonga). This campaign to be the voice of the Global South also strengthens India's quest to United Nations Security Council (UNSC) permanent membership.

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Finally, some PICs have joined the International Solar Alliance and CDRI as members. For instance, Fiji, Nauru, PNG, Tuvalu, Tonga, Vanuatu and Kiribati were founding members of the International Solar Alliance, which was jointly established with France in 2018. The Marshall Islands and the Independent State of Samoa have since joined the organization as new members. As far as CDRI is concerned, Fiji was among the twelve founding members of the initiative that was launched in 2019 by Prime Minister Modi at the UN Secretary General's Climate Action Summit. Under the CDRI umbrella, the Prime Ministers of India and Fiji (as well as those of the UK, Australia, Jamaica and Mauritius) launched the Infrastructure for Resilient Island States during COP26 in Glasgow, in late 2021. This initiative is dedicated to promoting resilient, sustainable, and inclusive infrastructure development in small island countries.

During his speech at the FIPIC on May 22, Modi encouraged PICs to support India's multilateral campaigns but said little about their vision and multilateral projects. Quite surprisingly, no mention was made of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent

8. MEA, English translation of Prime Minister's opening statement at the FIPIC III Summit, 22 May 2023

9. Although they participate in UN specialized agencies, they are not member states of the UN nor observer states with the UN General Assembly.

endorsed by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2022, and the PIF was cited only once.¹⁰ In contrast, in his short speech, Modi referred to a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific—a concept which has been seen with concern by many PICs. Modi also mentioned the Quad summit meeting that was held in Hiroshima the day before, and highlighted that India would join forces with the U.S., Japan and Australia to establish an Open Radio Access Network (Open RAN) in Palau¹¹ and, more generally, to enhance partnership with PICs in a plurilateral format. In other words, India signaled its willingness to contribute to the effort of the U.S., Japan and Australia to push back against China's influence in the South Pacific.

Interestingly, India held its FIPIC summit back-to-back with the U.S., which hosted its own U.S.-Pacific Island Forum meeting in PNG. And while interacting with the press in PNG, U.S. Secretary of State Blinken (who replaced President Biden after he canceled his trip) acknowledged¹² India's involvement in the South Pacific saying “we very much welcome India's engagement with countries in the region. That, too, is a very positive development for the future that we all want”. Moreover, India is an observer of the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative, which was launched by the U.S., along with Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the UK in 2022, as a response to China's growing influence in the region.

In sum, India's current positioning in the South Pacific results from a combination of different incentives. These include the old principles of South-South cooperation and the new urgency to combat climate change, as well as its renewed ambition to lead a large coalition of developing states under the Global South banner, but also its willingness to discreetly contribute to the effort of its Quad partners to limit China's growing influence.

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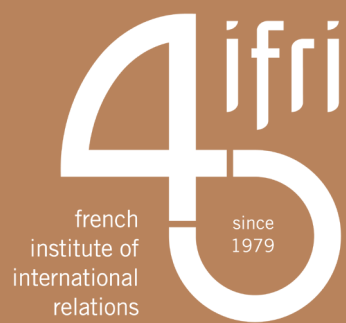
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10. It seems that there was a disagreement between India and the PIF Secretariat with respect to the participation of the French territories of New Caledonia and Polynesia to the third FIPIC. India refused to invite them, despite the fact that they have been full members of PIF since 2016. As seen from India, FIPIC shall be limited to independent and sovereign nations. See: N. Maclellan, “India Snubs French Territories for Regional Summit”, *Islands Business*, 17 May 2023.

11. On the geopolitical significance of Open RAN, see M. Velliet, “‘Open’ Telecom Networks (Open RAN): Towards a Reconfiguration of International Competition in 5G?”, *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, October 2022, available at: www.ifri.org.

12. Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Papua New Guinean Prime Minister James Marape at a Joint Press Availability, US Department of State, 23 May 2023, available at: www.state.gov.



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