

# India's soft power diplomacy at Pacific Island nations

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**The initiatives will help build a friendly image of India in the region — something which will help New Delhi counter Beijing's roadmap**



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Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets President Surangel S Whipps, Jr of the Republic of Palau on the sidelines of FIPIC Summit in Papua New Guinea. Credit: PTI Photo

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's [visit to Papua New Guinea](#) to attend the third Forum of India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) has gained much media attention. The forum, which was held in Port Moresby, has 14 member nations: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu). The FIPIC was launched in November 2014, during Modi's visit to Fiji. It is an important initiative under India's Act East Policy.

During this edition, New Delhi promised to be a credible partner and help the nations achieve their developmental and diplomatic goals. It has promised several bilateral projects in the fields of IT, healthcare, Climate Change, food supply, medicines, among

others. The Prime Minister also underscored that New Delhi was happy to be helping the countries in the Pacific, using the phrase “a friend in need is a friend indeed”.

New Delhi's promises seem to follow the non-security aspect of the relations. India unveiled a 12-point programme, which includes the promise to build a hospital, extend scholarships, dialysis centres, and subsidised medicines.

New Delhi aims to strengthen its footprint in the region by focusing on non-defence and security parameters. India is not keen to get militarily involved in the region, but wants to extend its influence. Thus, it has been pushing to make inroads in the pharmaceuticals, healthcare, IT, and Climate Change-related sectors. India has also promised organising of Jaipur Foot Camps in the region every year which will help in providing prosthetic limbs. These initiatives will help in building a more benign and friendly image of India in the region — something which will help it in countering Beijing's roadmap.

Another interesting coincidence is that this visit comes exactly after a year since Beijing concluded a security deal with the Solomon Islands, one of the attendees to the forum. This security deal had threatened the existing peace and power equations in the region. Australia considers itself to be the logical regional power and the overtures made by Beijing has had the capacity to flip this balance. This deal also assures the presence of Chinese military in the region which will help Beijing monitor the movement in Australian sea lanes. In addition to security deals, Beijing has also been using its financial clout to lure the Pacific Island nations who continue to have diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The Pacific has been on Beijing's radar for a very long time, and it has not shied away from investing in the region. It is also essential for Beijing's aspirations to become an important global and naval power.

Even if India's focus on the region is diplomatic and in being a catalyst for regional development, it is interesting that New Delhi is ready to make inroads to this region, which for long did not feature on the Ministry of External Affairs' radar. India is increasingly getting comfortable asserting its position in the geopolitical equations. During the speech at the third FIPIIC, Modi reiterated the need for an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. He said, “For me, you are large ocean countries and not small island nations. Your ocean connects India with you”. This highlights that New Delhi is ready to assert its centrality in the Indo-Pacific while underscoring the argument that it is a strong naval power. It also wants to project that the Pacific Islands nations are India's neighbour in the Indian Ocean.

Since its inception, the idea of an Indo-Pacific forum as well as the QUAD has been perceived by China as groupings with a clear anti-China stance. The fact that New Delhi is ready to push its development and friendship in the Pacific region may not go down well with Beijing. If not directly, such forums will be viewed by China as India's attempt to challenge its place in the region as well as global position.

The increasing attention smaller nations in the Pacific are receiving from bigger and stronger countries is a sign that it will soon become a playground for power and muscle flexing. The smaller nations have a lot to gain; however, there is a high probability that their concerns may become secondary to the power games which seem to be gaining pace.

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