

# Turning the South Pacific tides important for India

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RAVI THAPAR | New Delhi | May 31, 2023 6:16 am



Representation image (Photo:SNS)

Of late, the South Pacific has emerged as an important contender for external patronage – whether for reasons as mundane as providing vast supplies of tuna – it is the world's second largest centre for harvesting this fish – or because it facilitates strategic, military and defense bases in its remote territories.

It is a matter of contention however, as to whether such forays and heightened interest by external donors address the Pacific Island Countries' (PICs) core concerns. In March 2022, when China signed a security agreement with the Solomon Islands, the island country witnessed strong, internal disturbances when its largest and most populous Malaita province dissented with the central government at Honiara and opted to continue with its practice of according diplomatic recognition to Taiwan.

While Malaita received US\$25m directly from the US government, PM Sogavare's government at Honiara was promised US\$730m by the Chinese. Earlier this month, the US signed a security pact with PNG, following which it has undertaken to provide US\$45m to it for enhancing security-related cooperation. The pact provoked strong protests by civil society groups and others who expressed misgivings about the increased militarization of the region and especially that the South Pacific is getting caught between heightened geo-political rivalry between the US and China.

While the US is maintaining military and air bases at Guam and a Ballistic Missile facility at Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, it is constructing a high-frequency radar system at Palau and has military ties with Fiji, PNG and Tonga. China, on the other hand, seeks to develop dual-use ports and airfields. The Solomon Islands China security pact signed last year, grants the Chinese navy rights to dock and replenish, suggesting that the facility could be expanded in the future.

On a similar note, in March this year, at the request of Kiribati – which switched its affiliation to China from Taiwan in 2019 – Chinese experts conducted a study to upgrade a US-built, World War II-era runway on Canton Island, Kiribati, ostensibly only for civilian purposes.

The trends have understandably put regional players such as Australia and New Zealand which have traditionally shepherded the Islanders' interests, on alert. While Australia seeks to counter Chinese influence with a liberalized budget under its Pacific Step-Up programme, New Zealand has introduced its Pacific Reset initiative to kick-start availability of more aid for its Pacific interlocutors. All such aid inflows notwithstanding, the PICs cannot be blamed if they remain apprehensive about their land and mineral resources being targeted by external donors.

Or, if they shy away from being caught up in military or geo-political rivalries. Geographically remote, bereft of adequate infrastructure even in urban centres and generally engaged in primary economic activities such as agriculture and fishing, their communities obviously have other, critical priorities.

A case in point is their long-pending appeal for more attention on the risks posed by natural calamities and Climate Change-induced loss of their physical territories – due to rising waters in the wake of Global Warming. Or their misgivings about their mounting debt burdens, loss of tourism and other revenues during Covid.

Separately, it would be difficult to brush aside the fact that, in the current era of globalization and intense market competition, it would take long years before these countries can develop the skills, expertise and manufacturing edge for participating in global supply chains.

The latest trends unfolding in the South Pacific obviously, will need to elicit appropriate foreign policy responses from India. To a considerable extent, India's sensitivities about the South Pacific are an extension of its concerns regarding the Indo-Pacific – keeping the maritime lanes free and moving and ensuring that any naval bases or other such facilities do not pose any defense or security-related risks. Also, regarding the welfare of its diaspora residing in some of them.

Given that it would be too expensive for its upcoming blue navy or strenuously-assigned, defense forces to open new fronts, it would be best to limit deterrent initiatives to those under the Quad umbrella. Stretched as it is by its own monumental economic challenges, India's preference in such matters, understandably, has been to not routinely participate in big ticket, infrastructural projects.

Except, as in the case of neighbouring countries, when tangible economic or strategic advantages are at stake. Given the PICs emerging strategic importance and also because of their votes in the UN, we might need to revisit these constraints and allocate more resources in the future.

Until then, it might be advisable to give further teeth to our ongoing, benign Development Partnership engagement, especially for strengthening the human resources capital in such countries.

There are very few donor countries which can match the skills and expertise of India's vast pool of scientists and experts in areas such as agriculture, ICT and digital technologies, medicine, biotechnology and pharmaceutical sciences, disaster-management, renewable energy, outer space or other high technology disciplines.

Also, they specialise in providing guidance and assistance on the most frugal, economic terms. India's recent offers to donate dialysis units; commitment on setting up a super-specialty cardiology hospital at Fiji; providing sea ambulances to 14 FIPIC members; supplying diabetes and other medicines; upgrading or setting up new Centres of Excellence for imparting IT training; providing machinery and technology for upgrading the SME sector in recipient nations and other such initiatives announced at FIPIC III are therefore timely. By providing PICs with a voice and support on Global South issues, including on existential aspects such as Climate Change or on UNSDG-related themes, India has validated its humane and 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' credentials. It now needs to deepen this interface even further and carry the ongoing camaraderie and bonhomie under FIPIC, to the next level.

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