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Expanding Horizons: China's Growing Footprint in the South Pacific and What It Means for India

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Abstract:

China's increased presence in the South Pacific is a new development in the area's politics and creates new problems and openings for India in the region. The paper looks at China's varied strategy of reaching Pacific Island nations by investing in infrastructure, forming economic partnerships and building diplomatic ties, all under the Belt and Road Initiative. By examining bilateral treaties, trade data and infrastructure projects during this period, this research has uncovered the main ways in which China's regional strategy has changed power dynamics in the Pacific. China's increasing role has greatly changed things, as it is switching economic relationships among those island nations formerly allied with the West. Deep-water ports built in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu by the Chinese, thanks to their investments, may have commercial and military uses at the same time. As a result, the country's advances in submarine cable and 5G technology expansion have made their digital technology more noticeable in the region. Because of these recent developments, India must rethink its overall Indo-Pacific approach. What China is doing in the Pacific region has a direct effect on India's sea routes, observation over its waters and relationships with other countries. Under this study, it is suggested that India work towards closer naval exchanges with partners in the Pacific, give more assistance for regional development to counter Chinese influence and cooperate more closely with the Quad. It is recommended by researchers that, for India to maintain South Pacific stability, it should use economic diplomacy, encourage joint maritime security and cooperate on technology. Suggested actions cover India partnering with Pacific Island nations, improving its maritime security and demonstrating its democratic and development strengths to make itself an attractive competitor to China.

Keywords: China-South Pacific relations, Maritime expansion, Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific strategy, India's Act East Policy, Geopolitical competition

1. Introduction:

For a long time, the South Pacific belonged in geopolitical obscurity, but now it is an

important area of contention. China's careful expansion across the vast ocean is one of the biggest strategic events in recent years. It happened in context with what Beijing wants: to reshape the international system to better fit its belief in a multipolar world. Given that India aims to be stronger in its region and globally, the growing Chinese influence in the South Pacific creates a difficult issue for India to consider and address. Each for their own reasons seems eager to engage in the Indo-Pacific a bit more and from New Delhi's perspective, carefully paying attention to how China involves itself with the Pacific Island nations will only become more important for policymakers who want to secure and expand Indian influence in the region.

The South Pacific has fourteen independent islands and areas, located across 30 million square kilometres of ocean and previously in the West's sphere, led by Australia, New Zealand and the United States. China has made significant progress in diplomacy, the economy and security over the past 20 years in the region, causing many power relationships to shift and making it a major partner for several small island nations. The pivot achieves what China's aggressive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) does and reflects the more aggressive stance China has taken towards the world since Xi Jinping became president. Both the shipping lanes, the huge fish supply and the area's expansive space for military operations in the South Pacific are now key aspects of competing among great powers which may affect the order here and beyond.

With its desire to develop friendly ties with nations in the region and provide for a freedom-loving, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, India has begun to worry about these developments. Any stretch of Chinese power into what India considers to be its strategic surroundings worries New Delhi about its potential to safeguard its interests in that region. The shift taking place in the south pacific area influences India-China relations as well as India's partnerships with the United States, Australia, Japan and key countries in that region. The article examines China's role in the South Pacific, discusses its impacts on India and explores possible strategies that Indian leaders can use to handle this situation.

2. China's Strategic Growth in the Southern Pacific Region: A Thorough Examination.

2.1 Historical Context and Evolution of China's Engagement:

China has been engaged in the south pacific since long ago. Relations between Beijing and several Pacific Island nations began in the 1970s, mainly entered on who would be recognized in the area by each country. Still, what singles out the present age is how quickly and diversely China has gotten involved since the early 2000s. During this period, Beijing rose from a minor player to an important power, investing effort to expand relationships with China's neighbours by means of diplomacy, offering economic support, developing key infrastructure, encouraging cultural sharing and giving greater attention to security. As relations with Latin America progress, China is seen to feel more at ease about its place in the world and is determined to spread its influence farther than

Asia.

Three unique phases make up China's participation in the south pacific. From the 1970s to the late 1990s, the main focus was to seek diplomatic relations with countries over the China Taiwan conflict, with little else happening. At that stage, Beijing followed a reactive and opportunistic path, had little economic contact and did not clearly plan for the area's future. During the years 2000 to 2013, China's economy greatly expanded due to the increase in trade, investment and sharing of development aid. At the same time, China began its "going out" initiative and became very influential globally. In the first months of 2013, the belt and road initiative brought important changes to the present phase. It has now begun to work with an approach that connects economic activities with its general objectives in world affairs.

When President Xi Jinping visited Fiji and Papua New Guinea in 2014 and 2018 respectively, the attention and importance China was giving to the region became clearer. The FTA and several trade deals, along with trade minister meetings, proved Beijing's resolve to help shape the future of the region. By supporting Beijing in 2019, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati helped show Beijing's strong influence over the political landscape of the area.

2.2 Economic leverage: Trade, Investment, and the Belt and Road Initiative:

In the region, China's biggest impact has been felt in the South Pacific. The transformation of China from a minor economic counterpart to one of the biggest trading countries and investors in the region was accomplished in just a few years. As these small island economies rely heavily on China's flows, their external economies are linked to China, affecting the small islands' foreign policies and decisions.

In just a few years, the amount of trade between China and Pacific Island countries jumped from \$1 billion in 2005 to over \$8 billion in 2019. Pacific countries often ship raw goods such as timber, minerals and seafood to China, but instead purchase machine-made products and machinery from the country. Despite the covid-19 pandemic's impact on trade, global economic interdependence has continued its trend. China has replaced Australia, New Zealand and the United States as the biggest trading partners in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Fiji.

Mining, forestry, fisheries, tourism and real estate have seen the largest amount of Chinese foreign direct investment. MCC, a Chinese company, is responsible for the \$1.4 billion Ramu nickel mine that is considered a key investment in extractive industries in Papua New Guinea. In Fiji, the Chinese have invested in improving tourism and property, yet in the Solomon Islands, they have taken a significant interest in forestry. These investments bring jobs to the host nations, help their economy, but there are discussions about the environment, work put in by employees and displacing indigenous tribes.

China's move to include the south pacific in the belt and road initiative suggests that their

economic policy in the region is being strengthened. Beginning in 2018, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati from the Pacific Island nations chose to be a part of the BRI. The BRI has allowed China to provide funding and construct important infrastructure such as ports, roads, government offices, stadiums and networks for telecommunications. The wharf in Loganville, Vanuatu, the national stadium in Fiji and many government buildings across the region are evidence of how China helps construct infrastructure there. While these actions aim to help developing countries, they have also raised doubts about managing debt, ensuring high quality, reducing corruption and ensuring the cooperation is not misused in the future by China.

People paying attention to China's economic activities have pointed out the importance of its financial engagement. A number of Pacific Island nations owe huge sums of money to China which raises questions about their ability to pay back loans and about their need for financial help from China. Based on a 2020 analysis conducted by Lowy, China supplied 37% of all loans to the region. All three countries, Tonga, Vanuatu and Samoa, are among those with the highest debt from China, compared to what their economies produced last year. Even though the use of debt for political effect can be debated, the resultant unbalance in economies can cause small states with limited diversity and skills to depend on the more powerful country, leading to political influence.

2.3 Diplomatic Breakthrough and Soft Power Projection:

Besides Taiwan, China has worked out inclusive plans to bring the region closer and see itself as a valuable ally in the South Pacific. Various activities are involved, for example, arranging for senior officials to pay visits, participating in regional meetings, stationing more advisers in embassies, organizing learning programs for Pacific leaders, assisting in cross-country school exchanges and using culture to promote diplomacy. Beijing has influenced the region by targeting political elites, bureaucrats, business leaders and civil society, besides simply dealing with neighbouring governments.

Creating the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in 2006 was a major achievement for China in relation to its multilateral diplomacy in this region. At the 2018 Asian-African Forum in Papua New Guinea, China spent billions of dollars on loans and aid for countries in the region, seeking to strengthen their regional role. There are now more bilateral relationships between China and each of the Pacific Island nations that has established embassies there.

Chinese influence is spread through the way people learn in China. Approximately 2,500 students from the Pacific Islands were given scholarships by the Chinese government between the years 2006 and 2019, representing a significant increase. They leave a lasting impression and help form the ideas of people who will navigate the country's future. Likewise, China is offering more training to officials in the Pacific islands, hosting thousands at programs that cover topics such as

agriculture, public health, public service and security.

Cultural diplomacy is helping to expand China's influence over the region. In Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Samoa, people can better understand and value Chinese culture and language at the Confucius Institutes. Cultural troupes from China regularly perform their arts for residents in the area. Radio broadcasts with Chinese perspectives have appeared in local languages as China Radio International has collaborated with different media organizations. Such cultural measures aim to help Pacific Island citizens connect positively with China and defend themselves against stories and views spread by the western media and its government.

When speaking to the countries of the south pacific, China regularly highlights several themes that have meaning for them: respect for sovereignty and no outside involvement, a sense of unity because they all are developing nations, historic freedom from colonial rulers and commitment to tackling problems such as climate change. This novel depicts China as a helpful and understanding partner, standing out from western powers, whose history of colonialism and treating others patronizingly often leads to anger. Instead of liberal democracy and free-market economics, China proposes an alternate development model because it has lifted many people out of poverty.

2.4 Security Engagement and Strategic Implications:

The focus on security in China's relations with the south pacific has grown gradually, though it has picked up speed in recent times, making some regional security powers such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States, less confident. The security engagement includes areas such as defence diplomacy, sending troops for military missions, police collaboration, developing cybersecurity cooperation and allowing access to the people's liberation army navy (PLAN). While China's importance in this area is relatively small, these moves reflect its intention to be recognized as a major player dealing with security in the area.

China's defence policy towards the Pacific includes making port visits, discussing mutual defence, undertaking planned military exercises and exchanging learning experiences with staff from other countries. Chinese ships visited Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Vanuatu at least 20 times between 2013 and 2020. One of the goals of these activities is to underline China's growing expertise at sea, allow their sailors to adjust to the regional environment and allow the Chinese military to exist more commonly in areas once managed by western governments. At the same time, China gives military aid by supplying equipment, vehicles and training grounds to Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Tonga.

This security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands is a landmark in China's role in the region. Despite the fact that the remaining text has not been made public, drafts leaked in February show that Chinese troops could be based in the island nation to keep things secure and help refuel Chinese naval ships. The agreement made in the area caused worry among leaders in the west

and increased fears of China's military role in the region. Even though both sides claim they have no plans for a permanent Chinese military base, the new agreement suggests increased security ties that could be repeated with more Pacific Island nations.

China is focused on security more than just its military and that includes cybersecurity, technology for surveillance and eyes on the water. Because of its involvement in Samoa, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, Huawei's role in mobile networks has prompted concerns regarding intelligence gathering. Chinese companies have installed surveillance systems across the Pacific Islands, claiming it benefits islanders' safety and security. Relying on modern technologies may create ways to obtain sensitive information during emergencies.

China's role in the southern Pacific is highly important. China does not operate bases on foreign territory, but its military presence and knowledge of the region allow it to expand its power similarly to other countries in Asia and cause new difficulties for the U.S. and its allied forces in scenarios of conflict. Because it lies between the Americas and Asia and has important sea routes, it plays a key role in all major contests in the Indo-Pacific. For Australia which sees the South Pacific as an area near to them and has built defence plans around that, China's enhanced security activities directly go against their existing strategies.

3. Implications for India: Strategic Issues and Possibilities:

3.1 India's Strategic Interests in the South Pacific:

Despite not being involved for as long as China, India's presence in the south pacific remains important and has several aspects. Lately, these interests have changed a lot with India moving its interests towards the oceans and away from just focusing on Asia. To analyse the results of China's regional rise and wait for any Indian response, it is critical to be familiar with these interests.

Most of India's links with the south pacific throughout history came from diaspora networks formed in areas like Fiji, where a large number of Indians now live. Currently, India looks after a range of interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Since India depends greatly on sea trade routes, it is important for India to support secure and open communications in the Indo-Pacific's sea lanes, including those in the south pacific. Coastal areas and significant waterways in the region greatly affect India's maritime security.

Second, as India sees it, the south pacific plays a necessary part in an Indo-Pacific region that is both free and accessible to all nations. As mentioned in several policy documents and highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address at the Shangri-La dialogue in May 2018, India seeks to strengthen respect for the rules and institutions that govern the Indo-Pacific, including the South Pacific. What happens here provides a clear insight into how India can advance its concept of the Indo-Pacific in different places.

Next, various important resources in the south pacific, especially in deep-sea mining,

sustainable fishing and renewable energy, help India meet its economic needs. In Papua New Guinea, minerals such as gold, copper and liquefied natural gas are present, meaning India could import these products to benefit their resource supplies. One more point is that the Indian Ocean is home to major exclusive zones where fish and other natural resources can be found and its environment allows for developing solar, wind and geothermal energy, things that Indian enterprises can achieve.

Furthermore, since the south Pacific faces serious challenges from climate change, India can position itself as a global leader on this essential issue for Pacific islanders. Because island states are affected by rising levels, fierce weather and acidic oceans, India's climate efforts like the international solar alliance prove useful for developing responses that tackle the region's main security problem.

As a result, the impact of the South Pacific region on global discussions is very important for Indian diplomacy. Because the 14 independent pacific island nations are a strong voice in the United Nations and other international groups, they could prove helpful to India in achieving its goal of better global governance such as becoming a permanent member of the UN security council. Promoting friendship through joint efforts and diplomatic activities benefits India in its role at the multilateral level.

3.2 Analysing China's Impact on India's Strategic Calculus:

The rising role China takes in the South Pacific is severely affecting India's approach to strategy by posing both present and future dangers to India's interests. In essence, China's expansion in the region forms a pattern of blockading India's actions across the Indo-Pacific. By behaving aggressively in the region, China limits India's ability to respond effectively in the Indo-Pacific. With its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor initiative in Pakistan and support for ports and the military in other countries, China has increased its reach in some of India's main strategic areas. China's encircling approach is extended to the south pacific which could assist its team in avoiding India in the east and causing further issues for its security near the Indian Ocean.

Many Indians are concerned about the military effects China's activities in the South Pacific may have. Having a couple of military bases set up in the area, as the security deal implies, would boost the plan's chances of dealing with situations in the eastern Indian ocean and western pacific. Such progress in technology would require Indian naval planners to reconsider their budgets and plans, as such investments might exceed what India is able to maintain. While China does not own bases in other countries, their growing familiarity with the area and the many dual-use sites they operate give them strategic strength in difficult times.

India is finding it challenging to follow its plans for global leadership, as China strengthens its diplomatic presence in the south pacific. As Beijing provides economic help and builds

infrastructure among Pacific Island nations, it gains backing for its interests in human rights and sea disputes from these countries. It hinders India's efforts to gain the support of others at multilateral events for its reform of the UN Security Council, its anti-terrorism initiatives and its backing of rules in the Indo-Pacific region.

Because of China's influence in the region's economy, India is often faced with difficult patterns in getting resources and trading. By securing mining agreements for the long run, dominating important markets and building critical infrastructure links, Chinese corporations restrict Indian companies from participating in these areas. India cannot broaden its cooperative links in resources and trading, as this strategic action limits it.

With increasing role in the south pacific, China is beginning to challenge India's belief that it is the leading power in the region and able to influence neighbouring nations. Since China is now active in regions that were not previously considered significant to India, people are questioning how effective New Delhi is in projecting its power and influence across the Indo-Pacific region. Because India is not as advanced as it wants to be, China can use this gap to secure its advantage when vying for regional importance and authority.

3.3 India's Current Involvement and Policy Response:

India's activities in the south pacific were modest at the beginning but have grown at a slower pace over the last decade than China's actions. It covers activities such as diplomacy, development support, capacity development and use of Fiji's diaspora, all centered on Fiji. Even though India's contributions are smaller than China's, they aim to support the region, ensure India plays an active role and form a strength there as countries compete.

The establishment of the India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) in 2014 during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Fiji is the chief way India engages with the region diplomatically. During the meeting, India joins with 14 Pacific Island nations to organize efforts on issues like climate, clean energy, health, farming and preparing for disasters. The summit in Jaipur in 2015 saw a number of agreements and commitments made and the process has kept moving forward with each meeting since then. Because of these efforts, India now considers the south Pacific region as more significant and has regular means for important talk with various countries.

Although India's assistance to the region is not large in quantity, it has been targeted at chosen sectors that are most needed by the local community and match the abilities and skills of India. Through the ITEC program, India has given training to many officials from Pacific Island countries in IT, renewable energy, healthcare and agriculture. There are also centres of excellence in India, including information technology centres in Papua New Guinea and solar energy projects on several islands. The efforts are intended to let India supply helpful technology and knowledge, not get involved in China's main emphasis on building infrastructure.

More and more, India is collaborating with the Pacific in maritime matters. Indian Navy ships have visited Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and have also provided hydrographic survey assistance to improve awareness of the maritime region. India has given both resources and expertise to improve the maritime security skills of the Pacific island forces. These projects support India's larger Indo-Pacific strategy and role in securing the seas, while also keeping naval assets in regions of growing strategic value.

India is using climate change diplomacy to increase its cooperation with Pacific nations. With rising sea levels and unusually strong weather events threatening Pacific Island nations, initiatives like the international solar alliance led by India help by providing genuine solutions for their urgent security needs. India's efforts to boost solar energy options and transfer proper renewable energy solutions are similar goals for the Pacific islands, so both can cooperate and meet community needs while strengthening India's commitment to the environment.

Yet, India has several obstacles that block it from being more sure of its presence and challenge China's influence in the South Pacific. There are extra problems to overcome and expenses to worry about when maintaining a relationship over a long distance. The small number of India's diplomats in Fiji and Papua New Guinea makes it hard for India to be more involved and connect with the region's many countries. Being short of money and strong institutions, India cannot equal China's large-scale investments in infrastructure and development financing. Essentially, the South Pacific comes after its near neighbors and the Indian Ocean in India's list of strategic priorities. For this reason, the political effort and money spent on peaceful actions tends to be quite scarce.

4. Recommendations for India: Adapting to the Evolving Regional Landscape:

4.1 Collaborating with Other Organizations and Groups:

Instead of competing with China by itself, India should join forces with other nations when dealing with China's influence in the South Pacific. In view of India and China's huge differing abilities and the difficulties in keeping in touch over long stretches of land, acting together is the best strategy for preserving Indian interests and preventing Chinese dominance in Southeast Asia.

Through QUAD—made up of India, Australia, Japan and the United States—India can most effectively participate in discussions on security matters in the South Pacific region. Because of popular culture, easy access and generous finances, Australia naturally helps connect India to the region. Japan has worked on partnerships for development in Pacific Island countries for many years. Even though the United States does not always pay close attention to Guam, it remains present militarily and economically and has chosen to focus more on the region in recent years. By including Indian initiatives in the quad's groups focused on infrastructure, climate change and maritime security, their role would grow and the work would be shared by partners with similar backgrounds.

In addition to the quad, India could participate in “mini-lateral” groupings, each centered

only on the south Pacific region. If there was better cooperation between Pacific island nations, traditional regional powers Australia and New Zealand, the islands could use complementary resources and democracy to develop new options besides relying on Chinese loans. Just as well, joint efforts with Japan and France, who are both active in the region and have strong maritime strengths, might produce good results in using limited resources while keeping the region under rules.

Because of the strong diaspora bond between India and Fiji, India gains more chances to play a bigger part in the region. Because it is the biggest and most developed Pacific Island (excluding Papua New Guinea) and a key centre for regional diplomacy, Fiji opens the door for wider Indo-Pacific cooperation. More trade, investments, exchange of ideas and togetherness on security matters between the two nations would support India's role in the area and show off the importance of New Delhi's partnership.

A coalition approach will allow India to focus on the south Pacific, while save its resources and not ignore the Indian Ocean. Working with existing partners from the region and focusing on their special skills, India can support region stability, avoid problems caused by China and secure its main interests without meeting China's heavy resource investments head-on.

4.2 Developing a Differentiated Value Proposition:

Rather than imitating China's route which depends heavily on infrastructure building, India should bring together its key positives and fill the area's real needs in the south Pacific. It recognizes the unequal distribution of resources between India and China and supports Pacific Island countries with solutions that help and encourage their progress.

Making the region more resilient to climate challenges is considered India's greatest opportunity. Pacific island countries are endangered by high seas, major weather problems and shifting patterns of rainfall, while India has gained valuable experience in dealing with climate issues and is leading many global initiatives. India might choose to set up a climate resilience fund for the Pacific islands, putting extra attention on launching green energy, saving coastal areas, improving water resources and planning for disasters. Tackling the most pressing problem in the region helps prove India's commitment to action on climate and sustainability.

Building Indian capacity and sharing digital connections offer another opportunity to engage in a unique way. India's work in using internet technology for identity, payments and government operations could provide useful templates for the Pacific region. Focusing on information technology, cybersecurity and learning digital skills would not just train people but also lead to the creation of lasting relationships with people in leadership. Digital initiatives in India happen because of "digital India" and the nation's expertise in technology. They want to address development priorities without trying to build the same basic physical infrastructure as China.

Teaming up in healthcare care can additionally be seen as one more side of India's unique

value proposition. During the covid-19 pandemic, the Pacific islands experienced problems like a lack of medical buildings, a shortage of healthcare workers and trouble getting vaccines. Thanks to India's skills in manufacturing drugs, telemedicine and remote treatment, more solutions become possible. Support should be provided to healthcare workers in the Pacific Islands, access to telemedicine should be set up, having enough vaccines should be a priority in future outbreaks and efforts to support local pharmaceutical production should be pursued whenever conditions permit.

In focusing on climate resilience, digital connectivity and healthcare, India has the opportunity to cooperate in particular ways and avoid trying to compete with China everywhere. The strategy supports the strength of local people, finds ways to make the most of what they have and provides Pacific Island states with opportunities they do not have to choose between global powers for.

4.3 Institutional and capacity improvements:

Long-term involvement and resources for the south pacific should be supported by improvements in institutions and capacity that support India's interest in the area. Such steps would prove that India is dedicated to being influential in the Pacific and will introduce ways for Indian-Pacific collaborations to be better organized and effective.

Starting with greater diplomatic presence is extremely important for India. At present, India operates embassies in Fiji and Papua New Guinea and other Pacific Island countries are represented by these embassies or by officials from New Delhi. If India opened a second mission, either in the Solomon Islands or Vanuatu, it would enhance its presence, data collection capabilities and dealings with the diversity of countries across the region. Another choice would be setting up diplomatic hubs or sending rotating diplomats, to save resources while still maintaining India's visibility in these nations.

Setting up particular frameworks would support better collaboration and a stronger strategy for pacific engagement. For example, the ministry could found an office dedicated to the pacific region, send a representative to take charge of pacific island issues or establish a team from various ministries to oversee the implementation of India's pacific strategy. With these systems in place, the region's stability will not diminish despite other priorities and all major efforts—diplomatic, economic and security—can work together.

Developing greater knowledge and skill on the south pacific among Indian strategic and academic groups is necessary. Now, there is no concentrated study of pacific island politics, economics and security topics in Indian think tanks, universities and government agencies. By supporting research, joining forces with local academics and training diplomats, we help build an intellectual foundation for working closely with the varied countries of the Pacific area.

Bringing the Indian private sector into Pacific engagement allows India to expand its

influence without placing pressure on the government's budget. Businesses in renewable energy, information technology, pharmaceuticals, agriculture and the fishing industry fit well with the region's development plans and help India use its strengths. If we put in place ways to detect opportunities, lower risks and improve business relationships, we can make the most of the private sector's contributions and remain in line with India's main strategic goals. It is therefore important to continue talks with pacific island nations to reflect India's permanent interest in the region. Using the current structure for working with Pacific Islands, India can schedule regular summits and arrange ministerial and working group talks on distinct areas of cooperation. Structured interactions would give them a reliable base and offer a way to talk about and solve new problems and discovered possibilities.

5. Conclusion: Toward a Sustainable and Strategic Approach-

The rise of China in the south pacific has major significance for India's place in the developing Indo-Pacific order. Because China is working to deepen economic, political and growing security linkages across the region, traditional strength among nations is being modified in ways that may hinder India's strategies and ambitions in this area. Still, the changing environment allows India to develop its own approach to relations that responds to each region's needs and worries.

The research in this article provides guidance on how India should respond to China increasing its presence in the Pacific region. India needs to avoid following China by giving its neighbours large infrastructure loans and making huge economic offers. Due to the long distance, lack of resources and contrasting demands in the area around India such a strategy is both impractical and would be unwise. India should adopt unique ways of engaging that make the most of its assets and focus on areas that really matter to the region, for example, building resilience to climate change, better digital links and collaboration in healthcare.

Working with others and uniting organizations gives India its strongest chance of continuing to influence the South Pacific. Whether in the quadrilateral security dialogue or by improving relations with Australia and New Zealand and important regional states like Fiji, working together with partners also boosts India's impact and distributes the costs among various partners. They support the ideal of an Indo-Pacific where authority is spread evenly among nations instead of resting with only one. Finally, institutions should make necessary adjustments which guarantee lasting attention to activities and successful use of strategies. If India increased its diplomatic activity, put in place mechanisms just for peaceful contributions, built expertise in certain areas, asked the sector to take part and arranged regular talks, it would be much easier for India to become influential in the region.

Because both the United States and China are competing sharply in the Indo-Pacific, India and other middle powers have difficult decisions about how to safeguard their own interests in this

tense environment. Even though the south Pacific is separated from India by vast distances, it has a strategic role in this wider competition—an area where what happens now will shape the region's future order and distribution of power for many years. With a strong value proposition, relationships with others and higher institutional capabilities, India is well-placed to help Asia Pacific countries preserve their own choices instead of powerful nations taking over.

Indian policy should not be focused on countering Chinese presence in the region which would involve large resources, but instead on finding a new plan that helps pacific islanders and meets India's main interests. Success will only come if political leaders stay focused, show firmness and are ready to work and connect with others for a long time. The prize at stake is India's ambition to take a leading role in shaping the whole Indo-Pacific region or to settle for influencing the Indian ocean area alone. By watching how India acts in these situations, we will learn how it plans to use its expanding resources in the Indo-Pacific which is becoming highly competitive.

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