



India's 'Pacific Islands' Outreach: Understanding Regional Narratives, Geopolitics, and Opportunities

Event Summary

Wednesday, 29 May, 2024

- CSEP hosted its 25th Foreign Policy and Security Studies Tiffin Talk on '**India's 'Pacific Islands' Outreach: Understanding Regional Narratives, Geopolitics, and Opportunities**' with **Shruti Pandalai**, Fellow, South-East Asia and Oceania Centre, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.
- The discussion focused on the geopolitics of the Pacific Island Countries and explored India's potential to establish a meaningful presence and engagement in the region.
- The discussants were **George Carter**, Research Fellow, Australian National University, and **Nandita Baruah**, Country Representative, India, The Asia Foundation. The talk was moderated by **Pooja Ramamurthi**, Associate Fellow, CSEP.
- This series of closed-door research seminars is curated by **Constantino Xavier**, Senior Fellow, CSEP and **Shivshankar Menon**, Distinguished Fellow, CSEP. It focuses on contemporary, evidence-based research with policy relevance to bridge Delhi's scholar-practitioner divide.

The speaker explored the renewed global interest in the Oceania region, which last had great geopolitical significance during World War II. Amidst increasing engagement from various actors, the speaker highlighted the economic and strategic value of partnerships between India and the Pacific Island Countries (PIC). The Prime Minister's recent visit to Papua New Guinea for the 3rd Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIIC) summit in 2023 marked a significant step in deepening India's engagement with the region. Against this backdrop, the author aims to explore how New Delhi can meaningfully anchor its presence in the PICs. This builds on India's broader ambitions of inclusive South-South cooperation and sustainable development.

A Buffet of External Actors in the Pacific

The speaker described the long history of external involvement in the Pacific, beginning with European colonial conquests and imperialist policies. Contemporary Chinese inroads into the region add further complexity. While some view this as a pivot away from the West, others describe the islands as "springboards" for Chinese interests, raising concerns about China's military and economic influence in the region.

Other external actors have also been active. For instance, French President Macron referred to a "new Chinese imperialism" during his 2023 visit. France, a longstanding regional player, boasts a significant diplomatic presence and initiatives like the Kiwa Initiative. However, France itself has a slightly contentious political image, having pursued colonial endeavours in places like New Caledonia. The QUAD partners, including Japan, a major provider of development aid and promoter of "quality infrastructure," and Australia, the region's largest aid donor, are also prominent. The speaker described the complex equation that Australia has had with the PICs, having been a central figure in the region following the distancing of U.S. foreign policy from the islands.

Anchoring India's Presence in the Pacific

The discourse on India's engagement with the PICs is often framed through the lens of counterbalancing China. However, participants recommended that India develop a comprehensive development cooperation agenda that extends beyond geopolitical competition. This agenda should define India's strategic and economic interests and ambitions to foster a wave of sustainable development within the region. India's lack of colonial baggage with the PICs positions it as a more accessible partner compared to

Western powers. Additionally, India's historical presence and diaspora could prove to be enablers of a potential relationship. Some challenges hinder India's efforts to become a significant player in the Pacific. A notable obstacle is the lack of resources in terms of institutional capacity and finances in the region.

The Pacific Way

A key recommendation was to approach the region the "Pacific Way." This means developing a deep understanding of the political economy, local norms and priorities of the PICs themselves. Inclusivity must be a central tenet of India's forays in the region. Discussants emphasised centring India's engagement based on the agency of the PICs – an important step in fostering mutual trust. A start would be to rephrase the term "Indo-Pacific," considering it is a term with South Asian origins and not claimed by the PICs themselves. Further, understanding how these states perceive Indian interests and their responses to India's presence is vital.

Additionally, participants cautioned that India's emergence could disrupt ongoing political dynamics in the region and thus requires a thorough evaluation. One proposed strategy involved adopting a regional approach to cooperation. A discussant noted the success of triangular cooperation in regional partnerships in the PICs, suggesting India could pursue the same and contribute to a growing sense of "collective diplomatic solidarity."

Some questions that could prompt further research are: How do Pacific Island Countries manage relationships with superpowers and emerging powers in the region? How do they navigate these relationships and facilitate knowledge sharing even amongst themselves?

Capacity-building

Another key point raised was the importance of capacity-building measures to nurture potential partnerships and enhance local capacity to empower citizens. Participants outlined various levels of collaboration: Government-to-Government (G2G), private-sector involvement, and engagement in civil society. From the PIC perspective, there are also clear demands for capacity-building, such as leveraging technology transfer and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), as well as involving the Indian

industry in healthcare and telemedicine initiatives. Other areas of collaboration were also discussed, such as climate-resilient infrastructure development, logistics, and connectivity.

Participants pointed out how the Indian government could incentivise private sector actors to effectively pursue favourable policies and partnerships in the PICs. This would provide a more dynamic approach to economic co-operation in the region.

A discussant underscored the importance of the generational shift occurring in the PICs and the role of youth in bolstering external engagement and development initiatives. Furthermore, it was noted that the substantial Indian diaspora in the PICs, particularly in Fiji, could serve as a focal point for collaboration.

International Cooperation

Participants acknowledged the challenges India faces in navigating the Pacific alone and advocated for seeking like-minded partners, both in terms of investment and implementation mechanisms. This collaborative approach was deemed advantageous in achieving mutually beneficial outcomes. They highlighted the importance of utilising multilateral forums, such as the G77, to communicate effectively with the PICs, presenting it as a useful model. Triangular cooperation involving ASEAN countries as third-party donors emerged as a promising opportunity for India to enhance its engagement. The concept of promoting "Pacific solutions for Pacific challenges" was mentioned, urging a shift away from the prevailing global narrative that often views PICs solely through a strategic military lens. There was a consensus on the need to re-examine this narrative. Additionally, there was a call to learn from the approaches taken by other countries towards the Pacific and to closely observe the geopolitical and developmental dynamics in the region.

A balanced approach is crucial for India's engagement with PICs. Participants stressed the importance of setting realistic goals and clear priorities. However, it was also noted that India is yet to fully optimise potential cooperation with PICs. Increased engagement in the region would necessitate careful planning and a multitude of measures for cooperation in a robust and visible manner.

All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.

*This summary was prepared by **Dhruv Banerjee**, Intern, CSEP and **Nadine Monteiro**, Intern, CSEP.
For queries, please contact **Anahad Kaur**, Research Analyst, CSEP at akaur@csep.org.*

Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP)

6, Second Floor, Dr. Jose P. Rizal Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, India



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