



China's Expansion in the Pacific Island Countries

For Prelims: EEZs, Pacific Ocean, Indo-Pacific, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Blue Economy

For Mains: Pacific Islands Countries and its Significance, India-PICs Relations, Global Groupings

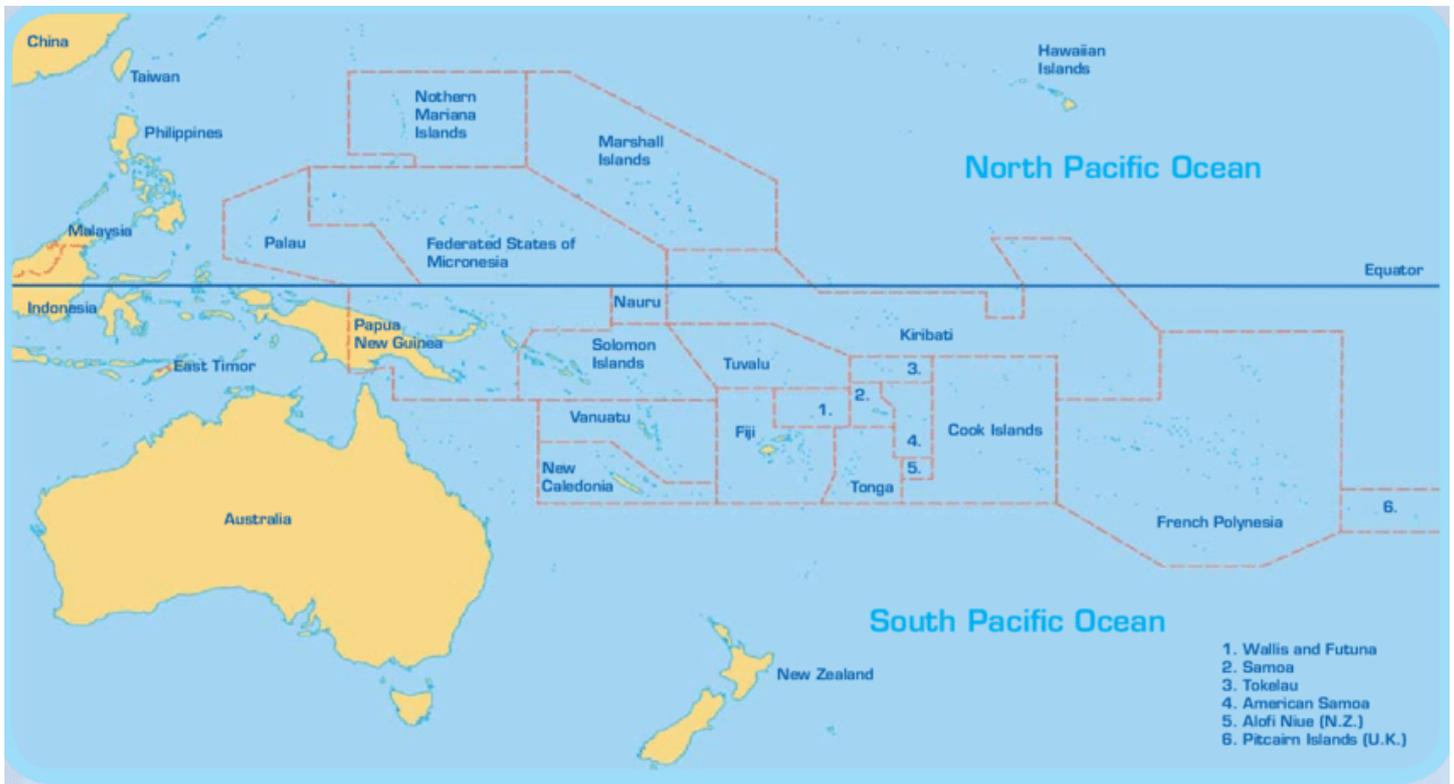
Why in News?

The Foreign Minister of China is currently on a **visit to ten Pacific Island Countries (PICs)** and has co-hosted with Fiji the Second China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers Meeting.

- However, China's effort to push through a comprehensive framework deal **failed to gain consensus among the PICs at the meeting.**
- In April 2022, China signed a **controversial [security deal with the Solomon Islands](#)**, which raised regional concerns.

What are Pacific Islands Countries?

- The Pacific Island Countries are a **cluster of 14 states which are located largely in the tropical zone of the Pacific Ocean** between Asia, Australia and the Americas.
 - They include Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.



What is the Significance of the PICs?

- **Largest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs):**
 - The islands are **divided on the basis of physical and human geography** into three distinct parts — **Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia**.
 - Despite their small land area, the **islands are spread out over a wide swath of the Pacific Ocean**.
 - As a result, though they are some of the smallest and least populated states, they have **some of the largest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the world**.
- **Economic Potential:**
 - Large EEZs have a **great deal of economic potential** since they can be used to exploit the wealth of fisheries, energy, minerals, and other marine resources present there.
 - Hence, they prefer to be **identified as Big Ocean States, rather than Small Island States**.
 - In fact, Kiribati and FSM, both PICs, have EEZs larger than that of India.
- **Role in Major Power Rivalry:**
 - These **countries have played an important role in major power rivalry** as springboards for power projection and laboratories for developing and demonstrating strategic capabilities.
 - The **major powers of the colonial era competed with each other** to gain control over these strategic territories.
 - The Pacific islands also **acted as one of the major theatres of conflict** during the **Second World War** — between imperial Japan and the U.S.
- **Major Nuclear Weapon Test Sites:**
 - **Some of the major nuclear weapon test sites of the U.S., the U.K. and France were located here** due to the remoteness of these islands from the Soviet Union and major population centres of the world.
- **Potential Vote Bank:**
 - The 14 PICs, **bound together by shared economic and security concerns**, account for as many votes in the United Nations, and act as a potential vote bank for major powers to mobilise international opinion.

What is the Significance of PICs for China?

- **Become an Effective Blue Water Capable Navy:**
 - The PICs lie in the **natural line of expansion of China's maritime interest** and naval power.
 - They are **located beyond China's 'First Island Chain'**, which represents the country's first threshold of maritime expansion.
 - The PICs are **located geostrategically** in what is referred to by China as its **'Far Seas'**, the control of which will make China an **effective Blue Water capable Navy** — an essential prerequisite for becoming a superpower.
- **Countering Quad:**
 - The **need to influence the PICs have become an even more pressing matter for China** at a time when the [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue](#) has emerged as a major force in the [Indo-Pacific](#) vis-à-vis China.
- **Role of Taiwan:**
 - Apart from the vast marine richness of the PICs, the [Taiwan](#) factor plays a major role in **China's Pacific calculus**.
 - **China, which considers Taiwan to be a breakaway territory**, is preparing for what seems like an inevitable military invasion.
 - In this context, **it becomes important to break Western domination of island chains** of the Pacific which could impede reunification.
 - Wooing the PICs away from the West and Taiwan **will therefore make the goal of Taiwan's reunification easier for China**.
 - China has been successful in getting diplomatic recognition from 10 out of the 14 PICs through its economic largesse.
 - Only four PICs — Tuvalu, Palau, Marshall Islands and Nauru, currently recognise Taiwan.

What are the Implications of China's Latest Move?

- **May Drag PICs into Major power Conflicts:**
 - The **PICs as a collective did not agree to China's extensive and ambitious proposals**, and therefore China failed to get a consensus on the deal.
 - Signing the economic and security deal proposed by China, **could have negative implications for the sovereignty and unity of PICs** and may drag them into major power conflicts in the future.
- **Made Traditional Powers in the Region More Cautious:**
 - The **intensification of China's diplomacy towards the Pacific Islands** have made the powers who have traditionally controlled the regional dynamics like the US and Australia more cautious.
 - The US has **started revisiting its diplomatic priority for the region** ever since the China-Solomon Islands deal.
 - The role played by the US in mobilising opposition against China's proposed deal could not be ruled out as the **Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)** is the only country which recognises China and at the same time is part of the Compact of Free Association with the US.
 - The Federated States of Micronesia is a country spread across the western Pacific Ocean comprising more than 600 islands.

What are the Highlights of the India-PICs Relations?

- **About:**
 - India's interaction with the PICs is **still largely driven by the presence of sizeable Indian Diaspora** in the region.
 - Nearly 40% of Fiji's population is of Indian origin and about 3000 Indians living in Papua New Guinea at present.
 - In terms of institutional engagements, India participates in the [Pacific Island Forum \(PIF\)](#) as one of the key dialogue partners of the Forum.
 - The most important development in facilitating India's interaction with the PICs in recent years has been the formation of an action-oriented [Forum for India and Pacific Islands Cooperation \(FIPIC\)](#).

- FIPIC, a multinational grouping, was launched in 2014.

- **Areas of Cooperation:**

- **Blue Economy:**

- The PICs with their **resource-rich EEZs can be attractive sources of natural resources like Liquefied natural gas (LNG) and hydrocarbons** to fuel India's growing economy and can also provide new markets.
 - India can engage with these countries particularly, given its own emphasise on the idea of '**Blue Economy**'.

- **Climate Change and Sustainable Development:**

- The geography of these island countries makes them vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate challenges.
 - The increasing soil salinity due to the **rising sea level** threatens the low lying island states, also giving rise to the problem of displacement.
 - Therefore, **climate change and sustainable development are crucial areas of concern** where a closer partnership can be developed for effective and concrete solutions.

- **Disaster Management:**

- Most of the Pacific Island countries are prone to a variety of natural disasters, with widespread social, economic and environmental consequences.
 - India can assist in building capacities of Disaster Risk Resilience.
 - In September 2017, India launched Climate Early Warning Systems in seven PICs.

Way Forward

- PICs while geographically small yet they have **considerable economic, strategic and political significance** in international affairs.
- The recent efforts to engage with the region have brought India much closer to these countries.
- India's **approach towards the PICs focuses on a transparent, need-based approach and inclusive relationship** with the region based on shared values and a shared future.
- In the coming years **India's engagement with the PICs is expected to grow deeper** with the third FIPIC summit scheduled to be held soon.

Source: TH

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