



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?

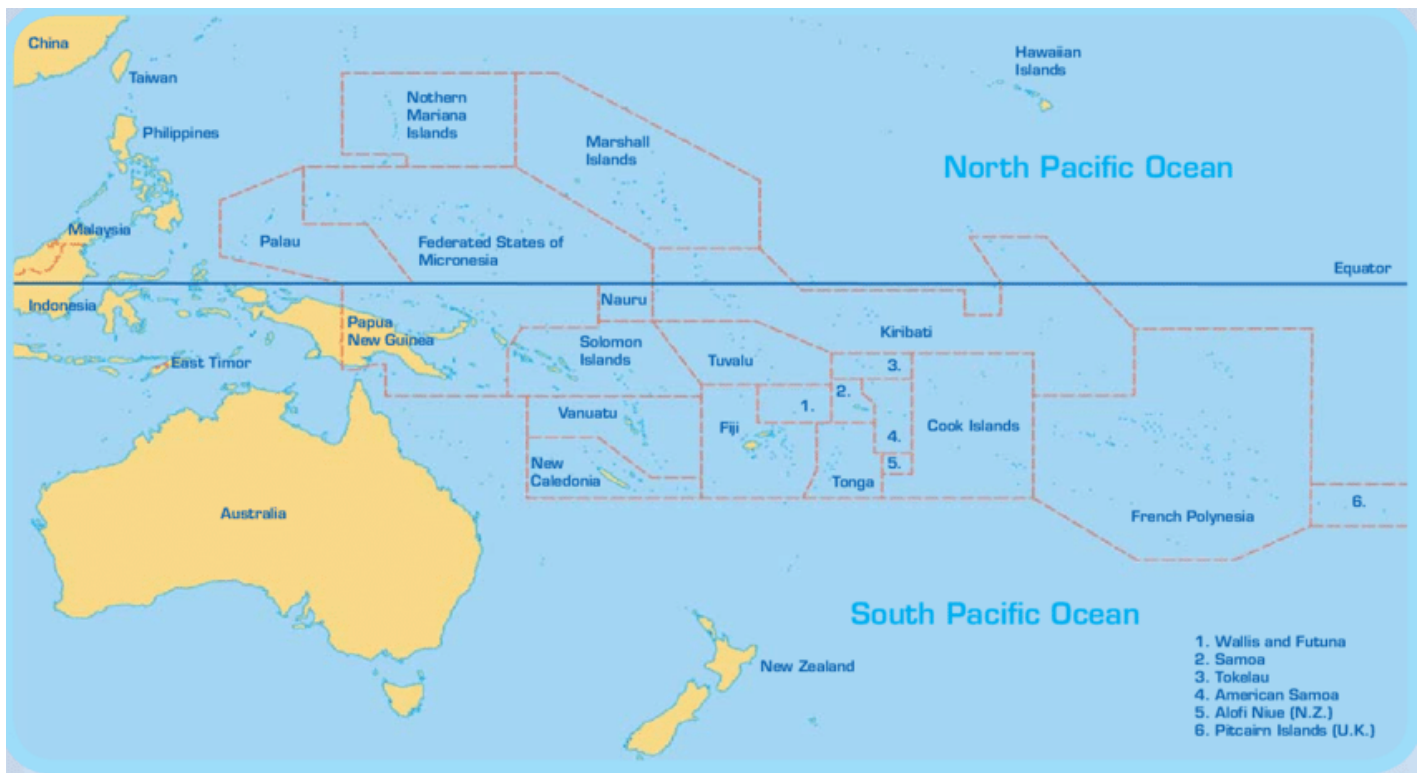
The Foreign Minister of China is currently on a **visit to ten Pacific Island Countries (PICs)** and has co-hosted with Fiji the Second China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers Meeting.

- 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.

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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.

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