

India reaches into the South Pacific to counter China

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted leaders from 14 Pacific Island countries at the second Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) in Jaipur, India on August 21. The Pacific Islands present were Fiji, Cook Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Eleven of the tiny island nations were represented by their heads of state or government, and the remaining three by foreign ministers.

The meeting followed the founding of the FIPIC in Suva, Fiji, in November 2014 during a bilateral visit by Modi. In opening this year's gathering, Modi declared that "the centre of gravity of global opportunities and challenges are shifting to the Pacific and Indian Ocean region." He said that while small, the countries assembled were important to India and pledged to stand by them in international forums.

In return Modi made a pitch for support for India's long-cherished ambition of UN reform and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council—"to ensure its relevance and effectiveness in the 21st century."

The summit was part of Indian efforts to build defence and strategic ties in the Asia-Pacific, designed to counter China's diplomatic and economic influence. The strategy aligns India more comprehensively with Washington's "pivot to Asia"—the drive to isolate, surround and if necessary wage war against China.

According to the *Straits Times* on August 22, Indian think tanks have been explicit about the need to counter China, despite India's smaller resources. Rajeswari Rajagopalan, a senior fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, declared that "China has engaged with the smallest of nations while India has had a hands-off approach till now." India justifiably thinks it "needs to better manage the rise of China," he said.

Since assuming office in May 2014 at the head of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, Modi has strengthened India's global strategic partnership with the US. Following US President Obama's participation in India's Republic Day celebrations in January, Modi and Obama signed a "Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean."

Within this context, India is exercising its own claims to "great power" status. Washington is buttressing India's ambitions through the sale of advanced weaponry and by supporting its involvement in the Indian Ocean and expanding economic and military-strategic influence in South-East Asia.

The FIPIC conference followed Modi's visit in March to three Indian Ocean island states—Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka. These are all countries where no Indian prime minister had travelled for decades but where China has spent billions of dollars in the recent period. The Modi government is seeking to expand India's ties in Africa with a visit by foreign minister Sushma Swaraj to South Africa in May.

According to the Calcutta-based *Telegraph* newspaper on August 5, Modi's focus on east Africa and the Indian Ocean had involved "reviving traditional relations" with these countries, which have significant populations of Indian origin. However, it noted, "the intent with the Pacific Islands is unprecedented."

China has intervened in the South Pacific by providing a mixture of aid, construction, commercial and trade inducements as well as loans to island nations. It has benefited from longstanding resentments in the Pacific over the neo-colonial activities of the main regional powers, Australia and New Zealand, who have mixed police-military rule with exploitative labour practices and commercial dealings.

Fiji, where ethnic Indians form almost half the total

population, was previously India's sole interest in the Pacific. New Delhi twice broke off diplomatic ties with Fiji after military coups which targeted the Indian community. India concluded, however, that its actions had only pushed Fiji's military rulers closer to China. In 2006, after a third military coup, India refrained from criticising Fiji, and subsequently followed Washington's lead in re-engaging with the regime. Fiji is central to the FIPIC grouping.

New Delhi is seeking to expand its military reach into the Pacific. India is lobbying for its naval ships to be able to dock in the western Pacific and for a site to build a satellite-monitoring hub in the region. According to senior Indian officials cited by the *Telegraph*, a satellite-monitoring centre would help India overcome a current "blind spot" whenever its satellites pass over the Pacific—a "shortcoming" that forces it to depend on Australia or the US, thus "limiting strategic applications."

The Indian navy will also extend the same package of "security" and survey assistance that it has for the Indian Ocean, and promote regular "goodwill" visits by its warships. In June the Indian navy deployed four warships to conduct training with Malaysian vessels in the vicinity of the disputed Spratly Islands, near where the Indian state-owned ONGC Videsh has offshore energy exploration leases from Vietnam.

India's push into the Pacific so far has the tacit support, not only of Washington, but also Australia and New Zealand. According to India's *Business Standard* newspaper on August 21, Indian officials claim that during bilateral discussions, Australia and New Zealand have voiced their concerns over China's expanding influence and have sought to draw New Delhi into a full regional anti-China alliance.

India, however, continues to seek investment from Beijing and has so far fended off joining the US and its allies, including Japan, in a formal alliance. Briefing the media ahead of the FIPIC summit, an Indian government spokesman downplayed its anti-China implications. When asked how India compared its involvement with Pacific Island countries to China's, he answered: "I think we are not comparing ourselves with others."

At last week's meeting, Modi offered various incentives to the Pacific Island countries, including the establishment of an FIPIC trade office in New Delhi to

enhance trade with India. He also played to their concerns about global warming which threatens many of the low-lying islands. Modi offered to fund solar power and to assist in setting up early warning and response systems for extreme weather events.

The Pacific Islands leaders, however, insisted they would not be used in the geopolitics of "big powers" in the region. Following the summit, Fijian Prime Minister and former military strongman Frank Bainimarama declared that the Pacific states did not want to be "exploited" by other countries—a signal that Fiji intends continuing doing business with China.



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