

EXPLAINED – INDIA’S ENGAGEMENT WITH PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES: CLIMATE DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGIC COMPETITION

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The Pacific was traditionally less important for India but in the last decade, India has begun to give more importance to the region. One of the drivers is China’s growing interests in the region. This explainer will explore why Pacific island countries are now becoming important to India and how India is able to do climate diplomacy in the region amid severe and fierce strategic competition from the People’s Republic of China.

BACKGROUND

India’s engagement with the Pacific ++Island countries started to be noticed prominently in November of 2014, when the Forum for India Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC) was launched during India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Fiji (Anand, 2025). The initiative becomes all the more critical because many of the pacific island nations are among the countries that are most vulnerable to events such as rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and coastal erosion alongside other types of impacts that hint toward a fast changing climate pattern in the region (SPC, 2025). FIPIC has helped India institutionalise its engagement with the Pacific Island Countries, along with furthering cooperation in fields like climate change, renewable energy, health, education, building capacities and digital connectivity.

Climate change has become an increasingly important area of diplomacy for India. The International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) are among the platforms that have allowed India to engage Pacific Island countries in the issues of renewable energy and climate resilient infrastructure such as with Fiji (PIB Delhi, 2025). India has also emphasised time and again, on the concept of climate justice and developing countries’ concerns at international climate negotiations (Upadhyay et al., 2021; Youdon and Bajaj, 2022).

Nevertheless, India's engagement is happening against the backdrop of changing geopolitics in the region, where China has been increasingly expanding its diplomatic, economic and developmental influence in the region, and US and Australia are becoming more active in the region as well (Gumbaketi, 2026; Pal and Singh, 2026).

STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE REGION FOR INDIA

India's growing engagement with the Pacific is taking place as the region becomes increasingly contested by major powers. China has expanded its diplomatic, economic and development partnerships with Pacific Island countries, while the United States and Australia have also strengthened their presence. This has increased the strategic importance of the Pacific for India, particularly as New Delhi seeks a greater role in the wider Indo-Pacific (Constantin, 2026; Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Antigua and Barbuda, 2022; IANS, 2026).

For India, the concern is not simply China's presence in the Pacific, but the broader implications of a changing regional balance. The Pacific's extensive maritime spaces connect the Indian and Pacific Oceans and are important to wider discussions on maritime security, connectivity and the rules governing the use of the oceans. India's partnerships with Australia, Japan and the United States, including through the Quad, are therefore part of a broader effort to strengthen cooperation across the Indo-Pacific.

However, India's approach differs from simply presenting the Pacific as an arena of competition with China. New Delhi has emphasised development cooperation, climate action, capacity building and respect for the sovereignty of Pacific Island countries. This distinction matters because Pacific governments have their own priorities, particularly climate change, economic resilience, development finance and disaster preparedness.

The strategic challenge for India is consequently two fold: to increase its presence in a region where geopolitical competition is intensifying and to ensure that its engagement remains relevant to the priorities of Pacific Island countries. Whether India can sustain this balance will shape how its role in the Pacific develops in the years ahead. For Pacific island nations, the issue of climate change is directly and intrinsically linked to food and economic security and the environment.

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