

# 12. India's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

Premesha Saha and Genevieve Quirk

- India is a key player in the Quad diplomatic partnership (Quad), aimed at maintaining a stable regional order in the Indo-Pacific. The expansion of China's maritime capabilities and interests contributes to India's pursuit of partnerships with a distinctly Indo-Pacific focus. For India, this highlighted the strategic value of

relations with Indian Ocean Island States and Territories. To shore up its waning influence, India improved engagement through regional joint dialogues, as well as naval and coast guard exercises. Now, India focuses on the Pacific Islands, recognising their strategic significance in the 'island chain' defence of China.

- India's recognition of its reliance on a free and open Indo-Pacific led to the establishment of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation. In the South West Pacific, India emphasizes strategic South-South cooperation with an empathetic approach to regional needs, frequently addressing specific development challenges unique to tropical nations. Through soft diplomatic efforts and in collaboration with allies, India contributes to maintaining the regional balance of power.

India, as global South power, is focused on an expansive Indo-Pacific presence. Ranked 7<sup>th</sup> globally in its maritime capabilities, India is an important strategic partner in the maintenance of the region's balance of power.<sup>364</sup> India has, since 2002, been an official **Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue Partner**. Diplomatic relations were significantly upgraded when India established the **Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation** in 2014. Additionally, India has deep historical alliances with the Pacific Island countries through the **Commonwealth, Non-Aligned Movement** and at the United Nations through the **Group of 77**.<sup>365</sup> These deep diplomatic links underscore the mutual interests and shared goals that strengthen India's partnership with the Pacific.

As a developing nation, India offers strategic empathy and advanced capabilities to address development and maritime challenges it shares with the region. In 2015 the **Indian Navy** formally made the shift to an Indo-Pacific sphere of operation under the '**Indian Maritime Security**



**Strategy.**<sup>366</sup> Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised in 2018 that ‘India Armed Forces, especially our Navy, are building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region for peace and security, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. They train, exercise and conduct goodwill missions across the region.’<sup>367</sup>

India’s diaspora form direct links within the Pacific and are largely located in Australia, Fiji, New Caledonia, and New Zealand.<sup>368</sup> Notably, Fiji has the largest Indian population, comprising almost 40% of its residents. In 2017, India signed a defence cooperation MoU with Fiji regarding their defence industry, military training, and humanitarian assistance & disaster management.<sup>369</sup> This cooperation has included the training of Fijian officers by the Indian Navy.<sup>370</sup> These efforts highlight the deep and tactical ties between India and the Pacific region, driven by both historical connections and mutual strategic interests.

The **Quad diplomatic partnership** (Quad), comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, is a strategic partnership aimed at promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific. At base, tensions arise for the Pacific region when the Quad promotes its operation under an Indo-Pacific framing. This creates a clash in strategic narratives, with the Pacific striving to ensure its Blue Pacific Continent narrative is not eclipsed in this broader framing.<sup>371</sup>

The relationship between the Pacific region, India, and the Quad is complex, particularly when considering the strategic priorities at play. The prospect of declaring the Pacific a ‘zone of peace’ as a ‘contribution to world order’ is challenging to reconcile with the Quad and other states’ array of military and security arrangements.<sup>372</sup> Notably, within this context, the 2023 Quad leaders’ statement adopted a respectful tone, aiming to achieve shared aspirations and address common challenges. It recognized climate change as the region’s greatest security threat and committed to a ‘listening to and being guided by Pacific priorities at every step, including climate action, ocean health, resilient infrastructure, maritime security, and financial integrity.’<sup>373</sup>

India’s involvement in the Pacific is shaped by a careful balance of factors: direct border tensions with China; a significant

trade partnership with this rising power; a commitment to non-alignment principles; and its dual identity as a developing nation with the world’s third-largest economy.<sup>374</sup> India’s nuanced approach in the Pacific, influenced by its complex geopolitical and economic considerations, results in a less resolute partnership stance. As Sullivan de Estrada notes, within the Quad, ‘India has declined to pursue an overt, collective strategy of Chinese containment’,<sup>375</sup> reflecting its strategic balancing act.

India’s strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific is multifaceted and complex. However, its absence as a **Partner in the Blue Pacific** is particularly notable, especially as it is the only Quad member not participating. This could be attributed to its unique status as the sole developing nation within the group. Regardless, as the only developing and ‘tropical’ power in the QUAD, India holds a distinct advantage in addressing the unique needs of developing tropical nations, from mosquito-borne diseases to the impacts of climate change at these latitudes.<sup>376</sup>

In 2014 India established a diplomatic dialogue with Pacific States – the **Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation**. Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 2015 FIPIC offered to engage the Indian Navy in IUU fishing, natural disaster management, and aiding Pacific Island countries with hydrography and coastal surveillance of their EEZs,<sup>377</sup> knowledge critical for strategic maritime security operations in the region. It is, however, unclear to what extent Prime Minister Modi’s offer was accepted by the members of the FIPIC. In any case, India demonstrates its respect for upholding and defending UNCLOS, including adherence to rulings on its own critical maritime boundaries.<sup>378</sup>

The FIPIC membership does not comprise all members of the Pacific Islands Forum excluding the French Territories, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>379</sup> Wallis and Saha (2023) contend that the current membership configuration raises questions about India’s commitment to the centrality of the PIF.<sup>380</sup> By comparison, support for the centrality of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a clearly articulated aspect of India’s foreign policy with ASEAN states.<sup>381</sup> The centrality of ASEAN, PIF and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is also expressly acknowledged by the Quad.<sup>382</sup> From the Pacific’s viewpoint,

‘recognising and engaging with the full Forum Membership’ is the primary principle of the new **Blue Pacific Principles to guide Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue and Engagement**. This suggests that FIPIC membership should be revised to align with the new rules of engagement with the PIF as One Blue Pacific. India has existing relationships with Australia and New Zealand and would benefit from further engagement with the French Pacific Territories. Working alongside all members of the Pacific Islands Forum is aligned with India’s own approach to the Indo-Pacific through the principles of inclusiveness and issue-based partnerships.<sup>383</sup>

Through the FIPIC, India has demonstrated a keen understanding and exceptional competence in addressing frontline development needs, delivering tangible and immediate changes. This includes a regional speciality hospital in Fiji, cyber training in PNG, educational scholarships and sea ambulances in all 14 Pacific States.<sup>384</sup> Soft diplomatic cultural offerings also extend India’s reach in the region through the establishment of yoga centres and the translation of essential cultural literature books into Pacific languages.<sup>385</sup> India wields its strength in the Pacific region through this strategic empathy as a soft balancing power.

As a developing state, India finds a great convergence of interests with the Pacific Island countries, particularly regarding the importance of partnerships in upholding and defending the regional balance of power. India’s position as a power of the Global South allows it to relate to the developmental needs and aspirations of Pacific Island countries. This strategic empathy, combined with its robust maritime capabilities, positions India as a pivotal partner in fostering regional stability.

The Pacific can leverage India’s intention for deeper outreach in the region to its direct advantage. From a maritime security perspective, this means the Pacific can utilize India’s extensive experience in the Indian Ocean with island states to build regional capacity. By doing so with a rising global power, the Pacific stands to significantly enhance its maritime security and overall regional stability.