



New Great Game in South Pacific

This editorial is based on [“South Pacific: Challenging times ahead”](#) which was published in The Hindustan Times on 13/06/2022. It talks about the Chinese emerging role in the crucial islands of the South Pacific and how the US is responding to it and how India can learn its lesson.

For prelims: Pacific Islands, Quad, BRI(Belt and Road initiative), Pacific islands forum(PIF)

For mains: Increased Chinese influence in the south pacific islands, US pushback against it and what are implications for India

Recently, China and [Solomon islands](#) signed the security framework agreement, which would increase China’s role in the region and Solomon island’s military and commercial ports, airbases, etc, the deal is just short of having a permanent Chinese base on the island.

This set the emergence of a new Great game i.e big power rivalry between the USA and China. There is a need for India to weigh all the options and keep the best foot forward in this multipolar world.



Why are South Pacific Islands Important?

- It’s a strategic location, as they sit between the pacific ocean and Australia and New Zealand and also a part of the Indo-Pacific region.
- A sizable amount of shipping lanes pass through these islands.
- Pacific Island countries have substantial natural resources.

- They are rich in cultural diversity and are rapidly increasing their trade and digital links with global markets.

What are The Issues on These Islands?

- They are the most vulnerable in the world to the effects of climate change and disasters.
- They are small in size with limited natural resources and narrow-based economies, they are physically detached from major markets,
- Small populations spread across many islands, and they are vulnerable to external shocks.

What is the New Great Game in the South Pacific?

- **China's Expansion of Power in the Region:**
 - China is worried about **QUAD (India, US, Australia, and Japan)** gaining more influence in the region, so it also started to woo these island nations.
 - The great power competition in the Pacific, has led to some Pacific Island countries engaging in hedging behavior.
 - China is trying not just to increase its influence in the Pacific, but also to undermine the US and Australian influence.
 - China has been engaged in a charm offensive, focussing on the Pacific Island Countries for some time, through **sustained political, economic, and other efforts.**
 - Beijing sees the south pacific as its **sphere of influence** and is playing the **long-term game** by substantially increasing its presence in the region like the signing of an **MoU** (memorandum of understanding) with ten countries.
 - Solomon island's decision to cut ties with Taiwan and follow 'one china policy'
- **The US Apprehensions and its Countermeasure:**
 - US President Joe Biden became the **first-ever US President to participate in the virtual gathering of the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) leaders.**
 - Announced its intention to **reopen its embassy in the Solomon Islands** after it was closed in 1993.
 - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also visited Pacific Island nations. He became the **first US secretary to visit Fiji in 36 years.**
 - White House delegation led by Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell also visited these islands.
- **Viewpoints of Pacific Island Nations:**
 - Some countries had **raised concerns** that it could become the **epicenter of a future great power confrontation.**
 - While others have argued that it's their **sovereign right to diversify security partners** which are being guided by their **national interest by reducing dependence on Australia**

What are the Implications for India?

- It can be correlated with the Maldives, where earlier also China has invested in its **debt trap policy.**
 - India needs to provide these small and vulnerable countries with **sustainable economic help coupled with providing innovative solutions to climate change as well.**
- India needs to step up its game, for example setting up the **Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC)** and further enhancing cooperation between these island economies, to unlock the underutilized potential.
 - India's focus has largely been on the Indian Ocean where it has sought to play a major role and protect its strategic and commercial interests. The FIPIC initiative marks a serious **effort to expand India's engagement in the Pacific region.**
- Though these countries are relatively small in land area and distant from India, many have large **Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs),** and offer promising possibilities for fruitful cooperation.

Way Forward

- With the rising belligerence of China and counterbalancing by the USA, there is the emergence of new competition among superpowers.
- It's a manifestation of challenging times ahead in the South Pacific, India needs to navigate carefully in these troubled waters and churn out its best possible national interest without indulging in great power rivalry.

Drishti Mains Question

What is the new cold war between the US and China in the south pacific islands and how could it affect India's maritime security? Discuss.

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