

## U.S. PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP STRATEGY: PROSPECTS FOR INDIA

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October 6, 2022

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



Image Source: *The New York Times*<sup>1</sup>

### ***Introduction***

From September 28-29, 2022, the U.S. President Joe Biden hosted the first ever U.S. Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington D.C. The first of its kind summit included 14 countries including the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Nauru, New Caledonia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and the host United States of America.<sup>2</sup> President Biden vehemently argued that “The United States is a proud Pacific power. We will continue to be an active, engaged partner in the region.” The Pacific Islands region comprises nearly 15 percent of the Earth’s surface and is undoubtedly a “vital sub-region of the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>3</sup> At the two-day summit, President Biden announced 810 million USD for the 13 nations and 20 million USD were pledged for the Solomon Islands to develop its tourism

<sup>1</sup> Damien Cave, “Countering China, the U.S. Signs a Broad Deal to Aid Pacific Nations,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/30/world/asia/pacific-islands-summit-washington.html>.

<sup>2</sup> “Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership,” *The White House*, September 29, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/declaration-on-u-s-pacific-partnership/>.

<sup>3</sup> “FACT SHEET: President Biden Unveils First-Ever Pacific Partnership Strategy,” *The White House*, September 29, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/fact-sheet-president-biden-unveils-first-ever-pacific-partnership-strategy/>.

**industry.<sup>4</sup> It is to be remembered here that the Solomon Islands signed a security agreement with China in April 2022, which included 730 million USD for the island nation.<sup>5</sup> It is equally important to note that the Solomon Islands has rejected to endorse “Biden’s Pacific outreach as China looms large.”<sup>6</sup>**

The post-summit declaration mentioned that the core principles of “shared history, sacrifice, and values” brought these nations together. It was also declared that the partnership of these nations helped bring “prosperity, peace, and security in the Pacific Islands, the United States, and the world for generations.” Most importantly, 2 core objectives were identified for such a partnership, i) “a worsening climate crisis,” and ii) “an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.”<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, we can well assume that the U.S. is willing to engage the nations of the Oceania to strengthen its Indo-Pacific Strategy and is ready to mitigate the climate crisis, which is indeed a matter of physical existence for many Pacific nations. Besides the overt claim of mitigating the climate crisis, the U.S. seems eager in engaging the Pacific nations to further its Indo-Pacific Strategy and its Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad partners could have a greater role in realising such a strategy.

India is a Quad member and a valuable country in the Indian Ocean Region, and an important partner of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Let us now analyse the prospects of such a new partnership in the Indo-Pacific for India.

### ***Prospects for India***

While being the keynote speaker at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined its priorities for the Indo-Pacific. Most importantly, the speech redefined the Indo-Pacific and delineated India’s geographic definition of the region as “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas.”<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that the speech provided the foundations for India’s future foreign policy orientation, there was one very significant development that PM Modi

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<sup>4</sup> Colin Clark, “US Touts \$810M for Pacific Islands to Help Fend off China, Some for Solomons,” *Breaking Defense*, September 29, 2022, <https://breakingdefense.sites.breakingmedia.com/2022/09/us-touts-810m-for-pacific-islands-to-help-fend-off-china-some-for-solomons/>.

<sup>5</sup> Zongyuan Zoe Liu, “What the China-Solomon Islands Pact Means for the U.S. and South Pacific,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-solomon-islands-security-pact-us-south-pacific>.

<sup>6</sup> Michael E. Miller, “Solomon Islands Rejects Biden’s Pacific Outreach as China Looms Large,” *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/28/solomon-islands-us-pacific-biden-china/>.

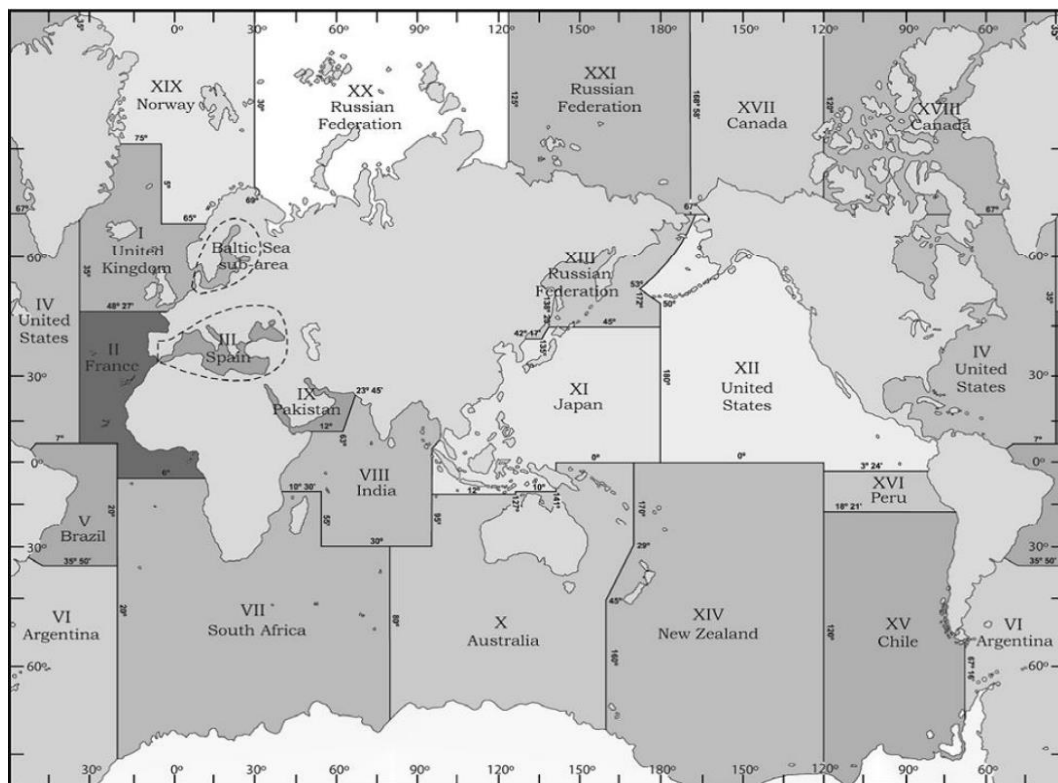
<sup>7</sup> “Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership.”

<sup>8</sup> Darshana M. Baruah, “India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi’s Theater of Opportunity,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 30, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/30/india-in-indo-pacific-new-delhi-s-theater-of-opportunity-pub-82205>.

highlighted about the future of Indo-Pacific which laid in partnerships and working together by means of creating multilateral platforms. The manifestation of such an argument was made visible with the enactment of President Biden’s Indo-Pacific Economic Framework in May 2022. Therefore, India could significantly benefit from the latter as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework includes 14 countries which encompass almost 40 percent of the world’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>9</sup>

### **Analysis and Examination**

Arguably, PM Modi’s definition of the Indo-Pacific as “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas,” portrayed a huge region and perhaps ungovernable even for a combined maritime force due to a number of reasons including the piracy. According to the international maritime navigation, oceanography, and the existing practices in the maritime domains, there are certain Navigational Areas or NAVAREAS. Despite India’s coastline it was only assigned NAVAREA VIII, which is a marginal area in the Indian Ocean (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The 21 world-wide navigational warning service NAVAREAS.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Premesha Saha, “The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF): An Asean Perspective,” *Observer Research Foundation*, June 25, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-indo-pacific-economic-framework/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Navigational Warnings,” *Maritime Safety Information*, 2021, <https://msi.nga.mil/NavWarnings>; “Navigation Warnings on the Web,” *International Hydrographic Organization*, May 2021, <https://iho.int/navigation-warnings-on-the-web>.

It is interesting that Fiji has considerable Indian people and almost 30 percent of its population comprises people adhering to the Hindu religion.<sup>11</sup> Such a population could affect the policymaking of Fiji and help in strengthening India's position in the region. The U.S. is presently pursuing negotiations on bilateral security with Fiji for a renewed Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) and is likely to begin discussions with Papua New Guinea on a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) as well.<sup>12</sup>

### **Conclusions**

The U.S. Pacific Partnership Strategy 2022 could prove a blessing without a disguise for India. It is noteworthy that India maintains cordial relations with Pacific nations like the United States, Japan, and Australia, and such relations are strengthened due to its membership of the Quad. Besides the latter, India has several bilateral agreements and memoranda with Australia and Japan, and such agreements could bolster its trade with the other relatively small Pacific nations.

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<sup>11</sup> "Fiji 2019 International Religious Freedom Report," *United States Department of State*, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FIJI-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Clark, "US Touts \$810M for Pacific Islands to Help Fend off China, Some for Solomons."

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