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PM Modi in Fiji: India's Strategic Foray in the South Pacific

By C. Raja Mohan

Synopsis

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's just concluded visit to Fiji marks the beginning of a strategic Indian approach to the South Pacific. Beyond reconnecting with the Indian diaspora, Delhi is looking to forge a development partnership with the Pacific islands.

Commentary

INDIAN PRIME Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprising decision to visit Fiji and the warm welcome he received there are likely to put India into the geopolitical fray among the major powers in the South Pacific.

The last time an Indian prime minister traveled to Fiji was in 1981 when Indira Gandhi arrived there. Since then much has happened in Fiji and around it. The intensification of ethnic conflict in Fiji between the Indian immigrants, who had arrived in the late 19th century as indentured labour, and the native populations saw Delhi focus exclusively on securing the interests of the diaspora.

Leveraging on the Indian diaspora?

The political turbulence in Fiji since the late 1980s and the ethnic tension between the indigenous inhabitants and the local Indian community saw Delhi focus on bringing international measures against the government in Suva and lose its broader influence in the Island. Modi's visit comes in the wake of India's attempt at constructive engagement with Fiji in the last few years.

In the island itself, the elections earlier this year saw the strongman Frank Bainimarama, who seized power in a coup eight years ago, shed his military uniform and win a democratic election with the support of ethnic minorities, including sections of the Indian community.

Against the backdrop of the restoration of democracy in Fiji which set a positive context for Modi's visit, the Indian premier announced a number of steps to boost India's relationship with Suva. This included the expansion of India's development partnership with Fiji, improving air links and announcing visa on arrival for citizens of Fiji.

Long seen as the backwaters of global politics, the South Pacific has emerged as a theatre in the unfolding great power contestation in the Pacific. As elsewhere, the rapid rise of China and its intensive outreach to the islands in the last few years have stirred other major powers into action. What began initially as a competition with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition among the island states has now acquired an intensive strategic dimension.

Growing strategic value of the Pacific Islands

With their vast exclusive economic zones, the Pacific Islands occupy millions of square km of the ocean space and straddle vital sea lines of communication. Some of them provide ideal vantage points for military power projection.

They are also important locations for gathering signal intelligence and monitoring outer space activity. Guam, for example, is now critical for the maintenance of American forward military presence in the Pacific. The United States also tests many of its star wars systems in the littoral.

For China, which seeks to expand its own strategic influence in the Pacific, limit American military primacy in the region, and gain access to the rich natural resources of the littoral, the Pacific Islands have become an important priority. Indeed, Modi was in Fiji just before Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the South Pacific island state to further strengthen China's established linkage with the Fijians.

The last few years have seen China step up its presence through massive aid programmes, civilian as well as military, and frequent deployment of its naval units and the development of maritime infrastructure in the region. China had also built a satellite tracking station in Kiribati, which of course, was dismantled when the island switched its recognition to Taiwan.

In Suva, Modi thanked the government of Fiji for its support for India's much acclaimed space mission to Mars earlier this year. "I want to convey a special word of gratitude from the people for hosting Indian scientists for tracking India's Mars mission earlier this year. Together we made history," Modi said.

Modi also made space cooperation a major theme of his vision for stronger partnership with Fiji and the 16-member Pacific Islands forum, whose leaders he met in Suva.

Tussle for strategic balance

China's intense interest in the South Pacific has given the islands more options in their international relations and the means to resist political pressures from Australia and New Zealand on a range of issues. Fiji has consciously articulated a "look north" policy and played the China card with considerable deftness.

With China raising its profile in the South Pacific, the US has ended its post-Cold War neglect of the islands. In 2012, months after Washington announced its pivot to Asia, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton showed up at the annual meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum.

Japan, which is competing with China for influence across the Indo-Pacific, is also stepping up its engagement with the islands. Australia and New Zealand, which had a free hand in the region after the Cold War, are now recalibrating their policies.

Less than 48 hours after Modi left Fiji, Bainimarama hosted President Xi, who is no stranger to the region, having visited the littoral as vice president a few years ago.

Fiji and the other islands are eager for a strong Indian presence in the littoral. They know that India cannot match the Chinese, dollar to dollar, in providing economic assistance. The islanders, however, would like to have some insurance against over-dependence on Chinese assistance.

India's presence offers the prospect of greater regional balance in the South Pacific and offers more economic and political choices for the island states.

In meeting all the leaders of the Pacific Islands, promising to make the joint forum a regular affair, enhancing India's economic assistance programmes and unveiling defence cooperation with Fiji, Modi has demonstrated that India is ready to turn its historic links with the South Pacific into a strategic partnership.

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