



Webinar Report

Trilateral Approaches to Indo-Pacific Stability

January 16, 2025 | Thursday

CUTS International Global Affairs hosted an in-depth virtual Panel Discussion on "Trilateral Approaches to Indo-Pacific Stability" on January 16, 2025. This webinar highlighted the importance of regional cooperation among India, Australia, and Pacific Island Countries (PICs) in addressing pressing challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. The session featured insights from distinguished experts across various domains.

Moderator

- **Anil Wadhwa**, former Ambassador and Distinguished fellow of CUTS International

Panellists

1. **Col Edison K. Napyo**, Papua New Guinea's Defence Advisor to India, PNG High Commission
2. **Cmde. Anil Jai Singh (Retd.)**, Honorary Adjunct Fellow of the National Maritime Foundation
3. **Dr Teresa N Cain**, Council member, Australian Institute of International Affairs, Australia
4. **Gurjit Singh**, former Ambassador, also a Distinguished Fellow at CUTS
5. **Joel Abraham**, CEO of, the Fijian Competition & Consumer Commission (FCCC)
6. **Jillatieno Juma**, Sub-Regional Trade Advisor (Melanesia), Pacific Islands Forum



Background and Context

The evolving geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region highlights the increasing importance of regional partnerships to address shared challenges. With the recent Indian Ocean Conference in Perth and DefSat 2024 in New Delhi emphasising India-Australia collaboration, the timing is opportune to integrate the voices of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). These nations, facing existential challenges like climate change, natural disasters, and economic vulnerabilities, demand urgent attention. Most Pacific nations, including Tuvalu, Fiji, and Vanuatu, grapple with high debt-to-GDP ratios exceeding 70 percent, exacerbated by post-pandemic pressures. Coupled with their remoteness and fragile ecosystems, the PICs represent a development flashpoint that India and Australia, through trilateral partnerships, can address.

This webinar aims to explore these pressing issues, leveraging complementary capabilities to create sustainable solutions aligned with the Pacific Islands Forum's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent in areas such as **renewable energy, disaster management, climate-resilient agriculture, and maritime cooperation**.

India and Australia have made significant strides in advancing their strategic partnerships, including economic agreements and multilateral initiatives like the Quad. These partnerships align with the development objectives outlined in the Pacific Islands Forum's (PIF) 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Together, these nations can help PICs address their vulnerabilities while advancing sustainable and resilient economic growth in the region.

Key Discussion Points

The session began with the statement by moderator Anil Wadhwa, “Small island developing states in the Indo-Pacific face an existential threat from climate change, sea-level rise, and natural disasters, making it imperative for major donors and partners to amplify their voices and address these urgent challenges”. He also mentioned India and Australia should pool their financial resources and work together in areas like climate change mitigation, disaster resilience, capacity building, and protection of biodiversity and ecosystems, and the partnership should also facilitate enhanced Indo-Pacific Region cooperation in disaster management.

1. Trilateral Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Former Ambassador Gurjit Singh echoed Prime Minister Modi's statement, ‘India is ready to listen and respond to local priorities, ensuring a partnership based on respect and inclusivity’. This partnership not only presents an opportunity to tackle existing vulnerabilities but also reflects a commitment to securing a prosperous and stable future for all stakeholders. He also highlighted :

“India and Australia share a common strategic view of the Indo-Pacific, making it easier to align on development priorities and deliver a full spectrum of SDGs, addressing not just climate change and gender but the broader needs of the region.”

The panellist emphasised the importance of a unified approach where India, Australia, and PICs can pool their respective strengths to tackle common challenges. India’s growing technological expertise, Australia’s resource capabilities, and the deep local knowledge of PICs create an ideal synergy for addressing issues such as climate resilience, regional security, and sustainable development. Establishing trust, fostering mutual respect, and aligning with PICs' regional strategies were highlighted as essential for effective trilateral cooperation.

2. Renewable Energy and Sustainability

Dr Tess N Cain called for the development of a roadmap identifying specific areas of collaboration among India, Australia, and the PICs, focusing on renewable energy, disaster resilience, and climate-resilient agriculture while recognising the region's diverse complexities. She emphasised that the PICs are sovereign nations with distinct policies, strategic priorities, and security concerns, stating:

“While Pacific leaders hear claims of long-term partnerships from global powers, there remains a healthy skepticism that these efforts are more about countering China than genuinely addressing the region’s needs.”

The discussion also underscored the critical need for energy transformation in the Pacific Islands, where reliance on imported fossil fuels makes energy expensive and unsustainable. The panellists highlighted the potential of renewable energy sources, such as solar, wind, and hydrogen, to revolutionise energy accessibility in PICs. By combining India's capacity for affordable renewable energy solutions with Australia's advancements in energy storage technologies, a pathway can be forged to reduce emissions, improve energy independence, and foster sustainable development in remote island communities.

3. Disaster Management and Resilience

Col Edison K. Napyo, Papua New Guinea's Defence Advisor to India, called for collaborative disaster resilience strategies, noting, "India and Australia, with their technological advancements and proximity to the Pacific, can play a transformative role in helping Pacific Island nations develop robust early warning systems and disaster response training programs." The panellists emphasised the need for robust disaster management frameworks to combat frequent natural calamities in the region, such as cyclones, earthquakes, and tsunamis. India and Australia's expertise in early warning systems, advanced cyclone prediction models, and disaster response training programs can be leveraged to enhance the resilience of PICs. Building local capacity was highlighted as critical to reducing dependence on external aid and ensuring rapid and effective disaster response mechanisms.

"Transfer of technology and capacity building from India and Australia can help Pacific Island nations build resilient infrastructure, enhance disaster data management, improve communication networks and empower local communities."

Lastly, the discussion explored opportunities for expanding rural electrification and energy independence in PICs through solar, wind, and hydrogen energy technologies. By combining India's affordability and Australia's advancements in energy storage, these renewable solutions can address energy access challenges in remote and underserved areas. This synergy aims to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and promote sustainable development in the Pacific Island nations.

4. Maritime Cooperation and Economic Connectivity

Cmde. Anil Jai Singh (Retd.) emphasised the need for enhancing maritime security, stating, "India and Australia can bolster regional maritime domain awareness by leveraging their interoperability, such as shared use of maritime patrol aircraft and multilateral exercises, to address capacity gaps and prevent external inducements in the South Pacific."

"The well-being of Pacific Island nations is inextricably linked to the oceans, yet their disproportionately large maritime boundaries often exceed their capacity to secure or exploit them, leaving them vulnerable to external exploitation."

The discussion further highlighted the role of maritime trade and port development in fostering economic growth and regional integration, including India's shipbuilding ambitions and Australia's expertise in sustainable marine practices. By improving port infrastructure, enhancing logistical capabilities, and strengthening maritime security, trilateral efforts can boost trade and connectivity for PICs, ensuring they are better integrated into global value chains.

5. Climate-Resilient Agriculture and Fisheries

Joel Abraham, CEO of, the Fijian Competition & Consumer Commission (FCCC) stated how India's drought-resistant crop technologies and Australia's water management expertise can support PICs in achieving food security and sustainable fisheries while preserving marine ecosystems.

“Innovations like sustainable agriculture, hybrid crop varieties, and resilience-enhancing technologies are lifelines for Pacific farmers and fishers facing the harsh realities of unpredictable weather and climate change.”

Panellists underscored India's advances in drought-resistant crop technologies and Australia's expertise in water management as crucial solutions to support climate-resilient agriculture. Additionally, promoting sustainable fishing practices and protecting marine ecosystems were identified as essential steps to balance ecological preservation with economic needs in the region.

6. Trade Barriers and Practical Challenges

Jillatieno Juma, Sub-Regional Trade Advisor (Melanesia) for the Pacific Islands Forum, raised significant concerns regarding the practical challenges to trade in the region. She emphasised that while market access is often outlined in agreements, real difficulties lie in market entry due to sanitary and phytosanitary measures and technical trade barriers. She highlighted the urgent need to enhance trade facilitation by addressing issues such as MSME trade finance, strengthening digital infrastructure, and improving air connectivity. These measures are essential for enabling PICs to overcome systemic obstacles and participate more effectively in global markets. She also mentioned:

“Expanding airline connectivity to include more flights to the Asian market, particularly India, would enhance export markets and labour mobility for Pacific Island countries.”

The session also addressed the complexities of navigating geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. The panellists highlighted the importance of respecting PIC-led regional organisations, such as the Pacific Islands Forum, to ensure collaborative efforts align with local priorities. They emphasised that partnerships must be approached sensitively, focusing on genuine developmental

objectives rather than serving as counterbalances to external influences, particularly in the context of China's growing regional presence.

Conclusion

The webinar concluded with a strategic framework that prioritises collaboration and sustainability. India and Australia, as key stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific, have the resources and expertise to help PICs overcome their unique challenges while advancing shared goals of regional stability and economic growth. The Indo-Pacific region can become a model of resilience, sustainability, and inclusive development by fostering trilateral partnerships rooted in mutual respect and aligned with the Pacific Islands Forum's 2050 vision. This collaboration represents not only an opportunity to address current vulnerabilities but also a commitment to a secure and prosperous future for all. At the end, Purushendra Singh, Associate Director of CUTS International said "Building capacity, enhancing technological expertise, improving connectivity, and amplifying the spirit of "unity in diversity" pave the way forward".