# China’s Growing Footprint in the Pacific Islands

## What is the issue?

China’s effort to push through a comprehensive framework deal in the China-Pacific Island Countries (PICs) Foreign Ministers meeting failed to gain consensus among the PICs.

## What are PICs?

- The Pacific Island Countries are a cluster of 14 states which are located largely in the tropical zone of the Pacific Ocean between Asia, Australia and the Americas.
- They include Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.
- The islands are divided into three distinct parts - Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia.
- The main Pacific Islands span the Equator obliquely from northwest to southeast and can be divided into two major physiographic regions by island type - continental and oceanic.

## What is the strategic significance of the PICs?

- **Huge potential of EEZs**- Though they are some of the smallest and least populated states, they have some of the largest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the world.
- Large EEZs translate into huge economic potential due to the possibility of utilising the wealth of fisheries, energy, minerals and other marine resources present in such zones.
- **Role in power rivalry**- These countries act as springboards for power projection and laboratories for demonstrating strategic capabilities.
- The Pacific islands also acted as one of the major theatres of conflict during the Second World War between imperial Japan and the U.S.
- **Vote bank**- The countries act as a potential vote bank for major powers to mobilise international opinion.

## What does China seek to achieve from the PICs?

- **Marine richness**- The PICs lie in the natural line of expansion of China’s maritime interest and naval power.
- They are located beyond China’s ‘First Island Chain’ at Far Seas, the control of which will make China an effective Blue Water capable Navy.
- **Indo-Pacific issue**- At a time when the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue has emerged as a major force in the Indo-Pacific, the need to influence the PICs becomes more pressing for China.
- **Taiwan factor**- China which is preparing for what seems like an inevitable military invasion needs to break Western domination of island chains of the Pacific.
- A zero-sum game has been underway in the past few decades in the Pacific between China and

Taiwan in terms of gaining diplomatic recognition.

## What are the implications of China's latest move?

- **Recent moves**- In April 2022, China signed a controversial security deal with the Solomon Islands, which raised regional concerns.
- It has also prepared two draft documents - China-PICs Common Development Vision and China-Pacific Islands Five-Year Action Plan on Common Development (2022-2026).
- The PICs did not agree to China's extensive and ambitious proposals, and therefore China failed to get a consensus on the deal.
- **Implications**- The intensification of China's diplomacy towards the Pacific Islands have made the traditional powers like the U.S. and Australia more cautious.
- The U.S. has started revisiting its diplomatic priority for the region ever since the China-Solomon Islands deal.

### References


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