

The Pacific Islands can benefit from an India-Australia development partnership



Photo Credit: [Anthony Albanese/Twitter](#)

by Anthea Mulakala and Peter Yates

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Has there ever been a busier 12 months in the India-Australia bilateral relationship? Prime Minister [Albanese's lap around a cricket stadium](#) with the [Indian Prime Minister and stadium namesake](#) by his side may be the crescendo, but it comes on the back of multiple Australian ministers having made the journey over the Indian Ocean. And in return, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has visited Australia on three occasions in the last 12 months. Both countries have [reached for the superlatives](#) and into the [diplomatic protocol goodies bag](#) to demonstrate just how valuable and increasingly warm the relationship is.

Concrete indicators of this amplified bilateral relationship include Australia's \$5.8 million (US\$3.98 million) commitment for a [three-year partnership with India on critical minerals](#), including the opening of a Centre of Excellence for Critical Technologies in Bengaluru; ratification of the [India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement](#) in November 2022; [expanded diplomatic footprints](#) in both countries; and plans to establish a new [Centre for Australia-India Relations](#) in 2023, with \$20 million in funding for *Maitri* (friendship) scholars, grants and fellowship programs.

Australia and India have also committed to enhanced multilateralism and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Discussions at the [Raisina@Sydney Dialogue](#) emphasised that India, as G20 chair, will prioritise development issues of non-G20 states. India has already consulted 123 countries on their priorities as a first step in developing a G20 agenda on economic growth and global development. Australia's Energy Minister Chris Bowen, who was also speaking at the dialogue, strongly [endorsed India's G20 presidency](#) and applauded India's leadership on energy transition.

India and Australia are founding members of the [International Solar Alliance](#) and the [Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure](#), forums where both countries can deepen their engagement and partnerships to support climate resilience, disaster

risk reduction, and energy security in the region. During the Quad foreign ministers' meeting in Delhi on 3 March, Jaishankar and Wong affirmed their **commitment to development priorities across the Indo-Pacific**, including health security, climate change, clean energy transition, critical and emerging technologies, infrastructure, and connectivity.

Cooperation in the Pacific Islands region is important to both countries, especially amidst contemporary geopolitical competition. **China's appointment of a special envoy** for the Pacific puts pressure on Australia and its Quad partners to deepen their engagement. Having travelled to Sydney directly from a **visit to Fiji** on his most recent trip, Jaishankar highlighted that **India's influence, interest, and footprint in the world is growing** and that regional partnerships with Australia are an important pillar of the bilateral relationship. The recent **Quad foreign ministers' joint statement** also emphasised Pacific Island partnerships.

These efforts open the door for Australia-India development cooperation partnerships which address Pacific Island articulated priorities.

India has been a **longstanding bilateral partner** to the Pacific Islands in areas such as cultural collaboration, disaster relief, health, and digital technology. While momentum has slowed over the years, **Jaishankar's visit to Fiji renewed commitment** for both countries to advance cooperation in key areas such as economic prosperity, climate mitigation and sustainable development. Adding heft to this rhetoric, Jaishankar announced that **India will co-host the third summit of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC)** in the coming months.

Launched by Prime Minister Modi in 2014, the FIPIC is the principal multilateral forum through which India engages with the Pacific Island countries. The Forum was initially launched with proposed projects, including a US\$1 million fund to support climate change adaptation and clean energy. Last week Fiji Prime Minister Rabuka and Jaishankar furthered this pledge, launching a two-year \$1.3 million project to **install solar power systems in the official residences of Pacific heads of state**, starting with the solarisation of the presidential residence in Fiji.

While this is a notable initiative in modelling solarisation, rural electrification is a critical need in the Pacific and an area where India and Australia have relevant expertise and resources to bring to the region. India's south-south cooperation, while broad in scope, is well known for its distinctive appropriate technology and grassroots approach. Indian private sector companies are producing low-cost off-grid solar products and services, including lamps, stove tops, pressure cookers and **decentralised solar powered health centres**, which are designed for remote and rural areas with limited or no electricity. An Australia-India collaboration in the

Pacific Island countries could provide these low-cost off-grid solar solutions and strengthen local capacity to use and eventually manufacture them.

A similar partnership is feasible in health security. **Diabetes is amongst the most pressing health issues** for several Pacific Island countries, with estimates that nearly 40% of people above the age of 40 have been diagnosed with the disease. However, awareness about diabetes prevention and management is quite limited, resulting in serious health complications including amputations. India's health innovations, including a flagship telemedicine platform, digital glucose monitoring, **mobile clinics** and **accessible and affordable prostheses**, are enabling India to prevent and manage its diabetic incidence. A triangular cooperation initiative focused on diabetes awareness, prevention and management supported by India, Australia and the Pacific Island countries would build on India's medical and technical expertise in the management of diabetes and bring life-saving solutions to Pacific people.

India and Australia see it in their national interest to look for opportunities to work together across all arms of statecraft – defence, trade, diplomacy and development cooperation. Therefore, further exploring the development cooperation arm together is common sense. Practically, Australia's deep networks, resources and implementation experience in the Pacific Islands can facilitate access for relevant Indian solutions. Strategically, initiatives such as these, which deliver real, sustainable, coordinated benefits to Pacific people, will play to India and Australia's strengths as development cooperation partners, provide the region with more choice, and add to the list of what they can offer the Pacific Islands vis-à-vis other geostrategic competitors.

Chinese observers assert that India and Australia's intensifying cooperation is ultimately about countering and containing China. Pacific Island partners are likely wondering the same. The challenge and imperative for India and Australia, in leveraging their development cooperation to gain geopolitical advantage, is to remain steadfast, committed and sincere in their promises to partner countries. Until then, partner countries will remain suspicious of fair-weather friends.

*This post is part of a collaborative series?with **The Asia Foundation**.*

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