

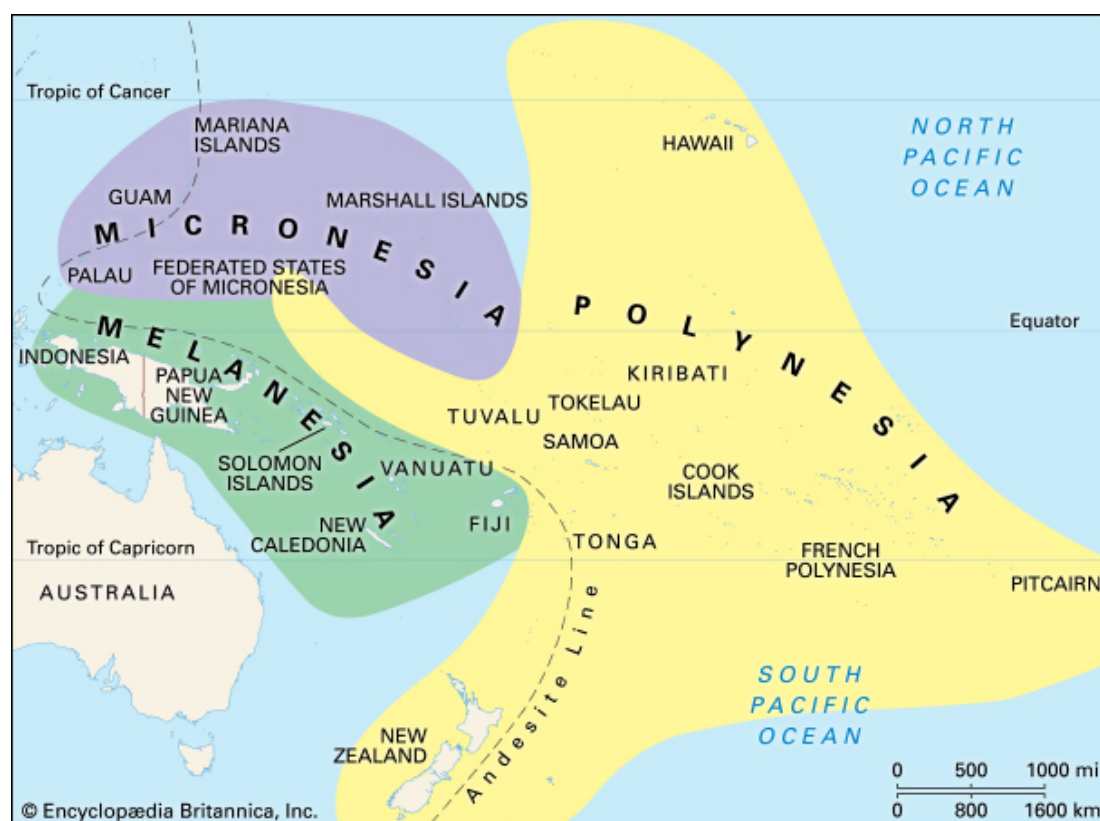
China's Growing Footprint in the Pacific Islands

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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