



## Ear to Asia podcast

- Title:** Who's Afraid of China
- Description:** While China's trade war with the US and its treatment of domestic discontents make the news headlines, its economic and military resurgence has truly spooked the West. But do China's ambitions to regain its pre-19th century glory constitute a threat? What's driving that fear in the US and Australia? Seasoned China watchers Dr Sow Keat Tok and Dr Pradeep Taneja examine the nature of this unease with host Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.
- Listen:** <https://player.whooshkaa.com/episode/?id=460413>
- Voiceover:** The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.
- Ali Moore: Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.
- Sow Keat Tok: I think the reason that Chinese influence is seen as something negative is because China has not been entirely transparent about how they deal with each country about the kind of influence they extend to other countries.
- Pradeep Taneja: Ultimately, only the Chinese people can change China. But in the meantime while China is what China is, the rest of the world has to learn to deal with it.
- Ali Moore: In this episode, who's afraid of China and why? Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.
- On any given day, China is making headlines in Western media. It could be the trade war with the U.S., or China's Belt and Road investments. It's latest moves in the South China Sea or it's increasing intolerance of descent. But the critical focus is not new. The United States first national defence strategy in a decade released in 2018, boldly labels China as a "revisionist power seeking to shape a world consistent with its authoritarian model gaining veto authority over other nations economic, diplomatic and security decisions." Also last year, Australian academic, Professor Clive Hamilton made his own headlines with his book, Silent Invasion which portrays China as a nation on an unrelenting quest for world domination, therefore, a security threat to Australia.
- There's no question China's economic and military resurgence worries many. Especially in the U.S., Canada, Australia and some countries in Europe. But, do China's ambitions to regain its world power status really constitute a threat to the West. What exactly do countries fear from China's



rise? And how will the West come to terms with the prospect of a globally dominant China?

Joining me in the studio to examine the challenges posted by resurgent middle kingdom are two long time China watchers based at the University of Melbourne. Dr Sow Keat Tok from Asia Institute and Dr Pradeep Taneja from the School of Social and Political Sciences. Welcome back to Ear to Asia, Pradeep and Sow Keat.

Pradeep Taneja: Hi Ali.

Sow Keat Tok: Thank you Ali.

Ali Moore: Before we look at what is behind the West's attitudes toward China, I just wanted to explore a little whether fear is the right way to characterise how many view China. The question we're posing is who's afraid of China? Sow Keat, if I can start with you, is fear the right way to put this? Or is it more about apprehension and uncertainty?

Sow Keat Tok: I think you're probably right in saying that there is a little bit of apprehension and uncertainty over there. When most countries look at China, I think you're looking at a spectrum on the one end of the spectrum is fear, and the other one is really some countries that were pretty comfortable with what China is doing; however, most of the others really sit in between where there is a lot of uncertainty; they're not entirely sure where China is going to be and how China will be and that kind of apprehension that they'll be treading very carefully when they're dealing with China.

Ali Moore: Pradeep, would you say "fear" is an appropriate word?

Pradeep Taneja: There's certainly an element of fear I think. And that fear arises from rapid sort of growth of China's, not just economic power, but China's military power. Remember China 30 years ago, basically nobody would compare China with the United States in terms of military power. But China's own indigenous sort of development of military hardware and military capabilities has meant that there is no wide gap between China and the rest of the world, except the United States. And China has become the second biggest military power in terms of defence budget, in terms of its capabilities. The question now is of intentions really. China has developed tremendous military power. The question is that China's intentions are. So there is no doubt, an element of fear in that.

Ali Moore: And we'll look at the military angle more specifically in a minute. But is it also because China is run by the Communist party, it's a party with a very different and more opaque system than many in the West. Is that also key to how many in the West view the country?



Pradeep Taneja: I think it is. I mean China's political system clearly is a factor in this. China has an authoritarian political system that has very little transparency in terms of what China's intentions are. Most of the debates in China at the policy level are conducted internally within the party or party's own intellectual circles and therefore, very little of that debate comes out. In fact, until a few years ago, we actually knew more about what the Chinese scholars and Chinese officials were discussing. But over the last four or five years, that space has shrunk. Now, we don't hear as much about China's policy options and policy debates. There is a genuine concern because we don't know what China's intentions are. China's language is always very general. Very general, win, win, cooperation, community of shared destiny. These are kind of slogans which may appeal to some people, but hardcore international relations and strategic affairs analysts don't see much transparency in those statements.

Ali Moore: Sow Keat, a perfect example of that sort of language is the Belt and Road Initiative isn't it? Which is very much portrayed as a win, win that takes us to China on the economic stage. How do you think Belt and Road plays in to how the West views China?

Sow Keat Tok: I think Belt and Road is a very, very ambitious programme that Xi Jinping decided to take on and the sheer mass of that project is not just wowed observers worldwide, the big question is, will they be able to pull it off and why did they do it in the first place? So far, Belt and Road, as we have discussed elsewhere is that China has not been truly transparent about what their intentions really are, except for the idea about helping the developing world in their infrastructure development.

Ali Moore: Building economic corporation [crosstalk] and trade corridors isn't it? In theory.

Sow Keat Tok: Yeah. In theory, but it's almost like the language that has been used, it's almost like we're doing it for the bigger good and we're providing a kind of common good for the region. It would definitely be a lot better if China has been more transparent in what they have got to gain out from it. And be forth front about what they think about it. Going back to a little bit about what Pradeep has said earlier on is that I beg to differ slightly on the point about Communist party. I think China being a Communist state is just of the reasons why the West is not comfortable with China. But on top of that, I think other countries like Vietnam and Cuba are not really real threats to the world, whereas, North Korea is.

So it's more like the perception of what is going inside the country and what are the uncertainty over their intentions that really cause the fear. Not because of the Communist regime itself. And we have to take into account that China has become one of the largest economies in the world. In fact, the second largest economy in the world. And readiness for China to convert



that economic power to other forms of power, that military power and political influence are making people uncertain of what they're going to get from China.

Ali Moore:

Pradeep, do you agree with that? Because on the face of it, you can look at the massive investment, lets take the China and Pakistan economic corridor that seems fairly clear that is about providing China access to ports and it's also about providing Pakistan with much needed infrastructure. Do we go further than that?

Pradeep Taneja:

I think it is more than that. Clearly, Pakistan is a country which has been struggling financially. Pakistan economy is in deep trouble, even now in spite of all the assistance that Pakistan has sought from the IMF and Saudi Arabia and China. Pakistan is not a country which attracts a lot of foreign direct investment. The fact that the Chinese government was willing to invest through loans and investments by Chinese state-owned companies in excess of 60 billion U.S. dollars, tells me that it's not about economic rationale.

One of the strategic purposes of course is, there is a feeling in China among unofficial circles that if you help develop Pakistan's economy, then it will create jobs and therefore those Pakistani youth who become involved in terrorism and such activities, they would be weaned off of this because they would be able to find jobs. And this would have a bearing on China's own Xinjiang province, because many of the Uyghurs do go to Pakistan and there is a support system in Pakistan for them.

So there is a feeling that if we help Pakistan to develop its economy by developing its infrastructure, this will improve the situation. But I think that's a minor point. I think the main important point is China has, since the early 1960s, used Pakistan as a way to keep India hobbled. And that's been part of China's strategic objective. Earlier China used to give Pakistan economic and military aid which was sort of modest. Now that China is world's second largest economy, China has got huge reserves, huge capacity to give foreign aid and loans, now China is helping Pakistan through methods which are clearly, clearly strategic in nature.

Ali Moore:

And if we look at this in the context of China as an economic threat, I mean, it's not just Pakistan. It's been very clear we're seeing the implications of Chinese investment in Sri Lanka, we've got Chinese very heavily invested in Myanmar and Chinese virtually dominate Laos for example. Heavy investment in Cambodia. Do you see that more as a win-win or do you see that more as China using its money for a greater geopolitical ambition?

Pradeep Taneja:

Technically speaking, there's nothing wrong with China using its financial muscle to seek geopolitical [crosstalk] sort of objectives. The problem is, how China goes about it. China projects it as something that is benign, it is only there to help people. China has no strategic objectives in it, and then



the same applies to the Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative is about building a community of shared interest. There are no strategic ... In fact, if you mention this to officials in China, they immediately react, no, No, no. Who told you that this is strategic? This is not about strategic objectives. A degree of honesty would help. For example, when Australian politicians talk about foreign aid, why Australia gives foreign aid, they are often quite open about saying while it is good for us, there are economic incentives. There are economic benefits. I remember during the previous Hawke-Keating government, there was a minister who was in charge of Australian foreign aid called Gordon Billy. And Gordon Billy if I remember correctly, he said, every dollar that we spend on foreign aid, we get three dollars in return. And that kind of honesty you don't see in China's foreign aid programme or in China's [crosstalk 00:10:56].

Ali Moore:

And Australia talks about soft power diplomacy quite a lot and middle power diplomacy. It's quite open about doing why it's what it's doing.

Sow Keat Tok:

Absolutely. I think that's the thing when I say that China has not been up front about their intentions. And if it's really building political links with the third world, they might as well just say it out and say this is what we want to do. We want to break out from the encirclement and we just want to prove that we are good neighbours with regional countries. And when they put up a veil and try to hide behind it and say we are doing it for goodwill and for altruistic reasons, I think very few observers are going to buy into those kind of arguments.

Ali Moore:

At the same time, if we look at how China has worked with the global multi-lateral institutions that were set up after World War II, if we look at the World Bank, at the IMF, the U.N., the WTO, and China certainly with many others has been agitating for change to recognise the rebalancing of global economies, but it has been working within those systems. It's not advocating for them to be dumped, it's advocating for them to be reformed. So when we talk about China playing by rules or not playing by rules, are they not trying to work within the established system?

Sow Keat Tok:

I think Ali, you made a very good point. So far, what China did really with World Bank, IMF and even a setting of AIB, the Asian Infrastructure Bank have been playing by the rules rather than reshaping whatever existing system that was set up after World War II. I mean, China is a big country, it has big economic power. It has a huge stake in whatever there is in our international environment what is conducive for its own diplomacy and its own activities. Naturally, it will want to make sure that it crafts a system or an environment that's conducive for itself. But the good thing that China did is that it has so far refrained from overturning whatever regulations or systems that has benefited for the past 40 years and really try to work within the system. Trying to reform the system. I think some of the

accusation or criticisms towards China that they have been trying to overturn the current system is a little too far in my opinion.

Pradeep Taneja: I would disagree with that. I think China doesn't have to go and sabotage the existing system or withdraw from the institutions that China has joined since the open-door policy started in the late 1970s. China is creating alternatives. And so Belt and Road...

Ali Moore: So it can do both.

Pradeep Taneja: Exactly. You can't stay a member of the existing institutions and be a part of those while at the same time, creating alternatives. Working with other illiberal systems like Russia for example, to try and create alternative institutions and Belt to Road has to be seen within that context. Belt and Road Initiative is not about foreign aid. It is not even about building infrastructure. It's about creating a new strategic global system.

Ali Moore: Indeed Pradeep. You've just spent a significant amount of time in Germany and I just wanted to bring up a quote from Germany's former foreign minister who in his last speech before he left the role, he said, "Where the architecture of the liberal order begins to crumble, others will start to erect their pillars in the building. The entire construction will change in the long term." So in some ways, is that expressing a concern in the West that even if China does work within the current framework of multilateral institutions, what will those institutions look like when China's finished with them?

Pradeep Taneja: Indeed. Indeed. And what about the sort of alternative institutions that China may seek to develop in the future? And there is a great deal of concern in Europe, not only Germany, but even France and a number of other countries. Poland, for example. There is a concern about the alternative institutions, alternative infrastructure that China is building. Remember that much of the board infrastructure that China is developing is part of the Belt and Road all the way from Asia and Africa to Europe. Can be dual use. It can be used for civilian or in mercantile purposes, but it also can be used for defence purposes depending on the attitude of the host country. And therefore, those countries which have been willing to host this infrastructure may in fact be persuaded as China's economic and military power continues to rise, may be persuaded to allow military use of those facilities.

Ali Moore: Before we get to military, Sow Keat, I would ask, do you accept that point? That you can play in the current infrastructure, but you can also be forwarding your alternative?

Sow Keat Tok: I agree with the point, but I don't see a problem with that. Especially when if what like the former German foreign minister said, if the pillars were crumbling, then there is no reason why someone cannot come in and erect



something that's different. I see the order as an evolving process rather than a stagnated system. Even when we talked about the post-World War II system has undergone multiple changes since 1945. We see the decolonization process, we saw the onwards of the post-cold war order. And order is always evolving and I like to see that with emerging new powers such as China, there will be new form of network of relationship, a way of working that benefits everyone.

I'll just give you an example. More recently, the South Pacific Forum, the South Pacific nations were just very forth front about it and say if Australia is not going to help, we're going to go for China. It's a good option for them. Use them as bargaining chip and leverage. It allows developing states and those that are in need of investments and economic help to choose rather than just sticking on to one single system where they only can approach Australia or some other Western liberal economies for help in this case.

Pradeep Taneja: I think that's a different issue, because what Sow Keat is saying here is, the behaviour of small states. Small states always behave in this manner. They always try to hedge.

Ali Moore: Get the best deal.

Pradeep Taneja: Always try to get the best deal. So it doesn't matter whether it's China or Russia or any other country, they would be willing to gain whatever benefit they can get by playing one against the other. That's been the common pattern we've seen for a long time. So there's nothing surprising about South Pacific states or in fact, across the Himalayas, the South Asian states doing that between China and India on a smaller scale.

So this kind of behaviour is nothing new. But the argument that it doesn't matter just because China is the new power and therefore, there's nothing wrong with China trying to create an alternative sort of global system, I think that's a very amoral argument. It doesn't take into account the fact that the liberal order was based on certain values. Those values may have been Western values, but many of the states in the world, smaller states in Asia and in Africa and in Latin America, in fact accepted those values. Many of the states democratised. Many of the states built democratic, liberal institutions. Which were based on, essentially, Western institutions.

Ali Moore: So the issue from your point of view is not that they're building an alternative order, it's the values that underpin the order which they are building.

Pradeep Taneja: And the values that are underpinning China's political system.

Ali Moore: Sow Keat, you're nodding.



- Sow Keat Tok: I actually agree with Pradeep, yes. But what is the problem with changing the values of the system? We have been accepting the Western system for decades. Maybe it's time for a change. I'm putting my foot forward here.
- Pradeep Taneja: Which values would you like to bring in?
- Ali Moore: I was going to say, is there not an issue here of transparency. Because while China does have very specific values that underpin the Communist party, they're not necessarily represented in the way that society is run.
- Sow Keat Tok: I don't see it as the building of a new value system is something that is amoral. I think there is a new moral standards that China is trying to promote here. Now, without buying into the whole China being good kind of argument, I do agree that China has not been entirely transparent the way that they do. That is an understatement really. They have not been transparent at all, which is creating that fear in the very first place. Rather, I'm trying to say that when China is trying to promote a value change in the system, they should be forthcoming and say that these are the type of things that we are trying to promote. But they have not been doing that.
- Ali Moore: I've got to say, Pradeep, from the West point of view in the beginning of that quote from the German foreign minister, where the architecture of the liberal order begins to crumble, I mean, isn't this the problem that China is simply doing what it can do because the architecture of the liberal order right now is not strong.
- Pradeep Taneja: Remember, the liberal order doesn't just exist in isolation at the international level. Liberal order is also reflected at the domestic level. What's happening in Hong Kong for example is clearly an extension of that liberal order. So, the Chinese state is worried not just about the liberal order, internationally, but what it might mean in China. And the preservation of the monopoly of political power of the Chinese Communist Party is the primary goal. So, for the CCP, that is the foremost goal. That the preservation of the monopoly on political power of the Chinese Communist Party cannot be challenged. And anything that challenges that or comes into conflict with that objective, is not acceptable. When you talk about values, what values [does] China bring to the international system? We need to consider China's bottom line. The bottom line is an authoritarian system ruled by one party is not to be compromised.
- Ali Moore: But that bottom line though does depend on a level of economic development and a level of well-being of the population that gives the party legitimacy. So again, in terms of being an economic threat, let me ask you, China needs markets. They have to sell their stuff to someone. So does that help ameliorate China as an economic threat?

Pradeep Taneja: When China began to open up its economy in the late 70s, China changed laws, China brought new laws to attract foreign investment, foreign companies initially starting from Hong Kong and other Asian countries, but increasingly Japan and the United States and European Union all started to invest in China. And there was a perception that if China continues to evolve down the market path, if Chinese economy continues to evolve down this path, China has a liberal economy and liberal economy would lead to rising living standards, emergence of a new middle class in China and that new middle class will eventually demand political change and China will become like us.

Over the last five years, particularly since President Xi Jinping came to power, there has been a new perception, that that hypothesis hasn't worked. It's not going to work. And therefore, concerns about China's rise, concerns about China's growing power have become more serious because now there's a perception that we were wrong. We assumed that China was going to change, China was going to become like us. Like what happened in many other Asian countries, South Korea, Taiwan went through the same process. That China might go through the same process, but now we know that China is not going through that process. China in fact, is going backwards in some ways. So there is a fear that if China continues to grow its influence, then we are in trouble. In other words, then China would become a threat to the liberal order and people are already talking about this illiberal order.

Ali Moore: Regardless of its need for continued economic growth.

Pradeep Taneja: This is a decision...

Ali Moore: That would become secondary.

Pradeep Taneja: This is a decision that China has to make. But if the Chinese Communist Party were to come to the conclusion that continuing engagement with the international markets on increasingly different conditions threatens the monopoly on political power of the CCP, they would rather preserve the monopoly on political power than continue to change.

Sow Keat Tok: Now Pradeep, your argument there is based on a premise that liberal order is good for everyone. I'm not going to dispute that, but if we were to raise the discussion to another level where we have to really question what that liberal order has brought us since the end of the cold war. The Asian financial crisis, the global financial crisis, and if you talk about morality, the global financial crisis was one of those situations where the liberal order failed to live up to those moral values that they preach.

Pradeep Taneja: When the liberal order fails to deliver, you try and find remedies to liberal order. You don't seek to overthrow it lock, stock and barrel. And also when



you talk about values, my question is what alternative values would you like to introduce?

Ali Moore:

I'm going to draw you back here, because I think we will do a whole other Ear to Asia episode on arguing about whose values are the right values. But can I just, Sow Keat, ask you to respond to Pradeep's point that if China gets to a point where it finds that engagement with the International economic community on terms that increasingly threaten its supremacy, it will simply withdraw. Would you agree with that?

Sow Keat Tok:

No I don't agree with that. At this point of time, I don't see how China will want to withdraw from this, because by withdrawing, they are reducing its stake in that system. So, China could accelerate the process of trying to build more alternative arrangements. But to withdraw from the existing system would be a very, very bad decision I think.

Pradeep Taneja:

I don't think that China will withdraw because given the nature of the Chinese economy, withdrawing completely is not an option. But I said they would prioritise the preservation of the monopoly on political power.

Ali Moore:

It would be different levels.

Pradeep Taneja:

There would be increased resistance for example, to the system being maintained or system being altered and new conditions being imposed for example. If the international community decides that we need to change this order for example, what President Trump is trying to do with China on the bilateral level, if that is reflected at the global level, then certainly they would be much more increased resistance from China.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Dr Pradeep Taneja and Dr Sow Keat Tok. We're talking about fears of a rising China. We're very much focused on I suppose the question of values and the issue of China as an economic threat. What about China as a military threat, Which Pradeep, you touched on earlier? If you look at past history, China has not proven aggressive militarily, in fact, if you put them up against the number of attempted regime changes, successful or otherwise, by the Americans, then China rates very well. Are they a threat militarily?

Pradeep Taneja:

China is not a threat as such, if you look at China's current disputes, China has a number of disputes, and for those countries that China has disputes with, certainly there is an element of threat because China is an irredentist state. China seeks to claim territory which it perceives to be China's territory. Whether it's border dispute with India or in the South China Sea territorial disputes with other Southeast Asian countries.



Ali Moore: But it's not far to shot across its border as I understand it. Since 1988 and that skirmish between China and Vietnam.

Pradeep Taneja: True. You know I mentioned the China, India border dispute. China, India border, despite the differences on the border, both sides have agreed to maintain peace on the border. And neither side has fired a bullet for more than 30 years across the border. But that doesn't mean that China will remain or will refrain from using force to pursue its objectives forever. China's ambitions are growing. China's objectives are growing and therefore, China will continue to push the envelope when it comes to its territorial ambitions.

Sow Keat Tok: I'll be more concerned if China went beyond South China Sea to claim other parts of Southeast Asia for example. I think in that case, I am slightly more optimistic than Pradeep. China is not irredentist state in that way, because all the borders that it tries to govern has been part that has claimed in history. By history, it means that when the Republic of China was formed in 1912. Now South China Sea is a very interesting case. We can have a whole new podcast about it. But to put things in a simple way, the South China Sea issue is a postcolonial issue. When all the states around South China Sea, they became more than sovereign nation states. They drew borders around that area that nobody seems to care until the 1970s. So, it was then that they realised that oh, China has drawn that [crosstalk 00:27:10]

Ali Moore: Nine dash or eleven dash line.

Sow Keat Tok: Yes. Nine dash, eleven, thirteen dash lines.

Ali Moore: Which is rather ambiguous.

Sow Keat Tok: Which is rather ambiguous, I have to admit. But at the end of it, we have to realise that it was because those areas were not the focus of all the modern nation states in the neighbourhood until very recently. That everyone started to claim that 200 nautical miles exclusive economic zones. So, China since early 1910s have already claimed South China Sea. So that was not disputed really until about 1970s. Again, I am not going to say who is right and who is wrong, but that overlapping claim is something that is as far as China is concerned, they're looking at it as that is part of their territory.

Ali Moore: But what about [crosstalk 00:27:50].

Pradeep Taneja: But that's what being irredentist means. If you say you have historical claims, which are not verified, which are not acceptable under international law. But you keep insisting that these are your claims. Well then how is it possible for example, that in the South China Sea, all those little reefs and rocks and islands don't belong to any other country, even if it really is the closest to those rocks? They belong to China. This is an irredentist claim.



- Sow Keat Tok: I actually disagree with that. I think what Philippines is doing, or what Vietnam is doing are irredentist as well. And all states will be irredentist in that sense. So, I hope you agree with me that the South China Sea itself was really unclaimed for a long time and the issue didn't really come into play until the UN convention of the law of the sea.
- Ali Moore: Pradeep says just because they've not fired a shot doesn't mean that they won't in the future. What are their future ambitions?
- Sow Keat Tok: I think China is a threat by its sheer presence. It doesn't need to have military power. China was a threat in the 1960s when all their social engineering programmes were going on in China in the 1970s due to cultural revolution, and it is a threat, whether or not it has the power. And military wise, China has modernised. But to balance it all is still far away from the capabilities of the United States and in the region, it's far from the capability of Japan as yet.
- Ali Moore: I was going to say, interestingly, the whole idea of China as a military threat ties quite nicely to the issue which is of great concern in Australia at the moment of foreign influence. Because if you look at recent comments by Australia's outgoing spy chief, he says that foreign interference is now a greater threat than terrorism. So if you think of state sponsored military violence as terrorism, then we're actually talking about something that is far more dangerous and significant than that. He did not mention China by name, but that of course is where all the debate is centred. In Australia, Sow Keat, is Australia right to be worried about foreign influence?
- Sow Keat Tok: Australia is probably right to be worried about influence from China. As much as they should be concerned about influence from United States and from other parts of Europe. I think the reason that Chinese influence is seen as something that is negative is because China has not been entirely transparent about it. And I would go back to the whole idea about transparency. China has not been transparent about intentions. Now, we have members of federal government visiting Washington all the time, sponsored by the United States without any issues. But, when we have visits to China, sponsored by China it seems like it's going to be Chinese influence.
- Now, China needs to be clear about what exactly they were doing and not doing things under the table kind of way. Which is just causing that fear and creating that aura that you're trying to do something that is not accepted by others and you're doing it because you're just trying to extend your influence. Every country is constantly trying to influence other countries. That is part of diplomacy in the very first place. But I think China needs to come to terms that in order for it to be accepted as a member of the international community, they have to be transparent about how they deal with each country about the kind of influence they extend to other



countries, especially sensitive countries such as Australia which is very concerned about preserving its own Western heritage.

Pradeep Taneja:

I think there's a difference between the way China exerts its influence and exercises its influence in other parts of the world, particularly in liberal democracies. Then how the United States or Australia or Great Britain do. Systems are very different. I keep coming back to the Chinese system. Chinese political system is essentially an illiberal system. It's not a very open system. And therefore, there are things that China is able to do in terms of exercising its influence in liberal democracies that we cannot do in China. So for example, Chinese ambassadors all over the world write opinion pieces in Western newspapers. Mass circulation newspapers. Propounding essentially the propaganda of the Chinese government. Their foreign policy views. The articles may in fact be written in the foreign ministry in Beijing and they are then published in [crosstalk 00:31:56].

Ali Moore:

But you get the American ambassador in Australia with an opinion piece every now and again.

Pradeep Taneja:

But we can do that in the New York Times too.

Ali Moore:

Yes.

Pradeep Taneja:

So this is the thing, there is no reciprocity there. So it is impossible for Australian government, Australian ambassadors to articulate views and have them published in mass circulation newspapers in China.

Ali Moore:

In the people's daily.

Pradeep Taneja:

Particularly when those views may be contradictory to the views of the Chinese government. Newspaper proprietors, private newspaper proprietors in countries like Australia or in the United States, they worry about advertising. Because Chinese government, Chinese ambassadors have the capability to influence the advertising decisions of Chinese companies operating in those countries.

So if you have a perceived threat that if you do not carry an editorial or opinion piece from a Chinese ambassador or any other Chinese official, and then you might stop getting advertising revenue from Chinese companies, that would be a threat for a commercial publication. Which is not the case in China. Because newspapers are part of the propaganda system.

Ali Moore:

Do you think Pradeep, that we are selective in how we worry about foreign influence? Sow Keat said we should be worried about foreign influence, but just as much as we're worried about it from other countries. Do you think that we worry about America, but we do worry about China and is that unreasonable? Or if you go back to your earlier vigorous debate about



values, that would in many ways, I suppose, explain why we approach these countries differently.

Pradeep Taneja:

I think it's a question of what those opinions and influences represent. So for example, Australia is actually a treaty ally of the United States. So if an American ambassador or American official wants to come and give a lecture in Australian universities, it doesn't raise heckles. It doesn't raise any concerns because ultimately, Australia and the United States are allies. China and Australia are not military allies. And therefore, there would be concerns if there were views being articulated openly in a classroom discussion or in a seminar in an Australian university around China's strategic ambitions. If those were academic views, I don't think there's any problem.

But if the Chinese government official, Chinese ambassador wants to come and give a talk on China's foreign policy, it would be scrutinised. I'm not saying that's wrong, I personally have no problem with the Chinese ambassador to Australia coming to give a seminar about Chinese foreign policy in an Australian university. I would in fact, welcome that. Particularly if the ambassador is open to questions.

Ali Moore:

Sow Keat, we've spent a lot of time talking about the issues behind the way Western liberal democracies view China. What about the rest of the world? You started this conversation by talking about the two ends of the spectrum and one end was countries comfortable with China. But particularly in the region, is there concern about China. So they share some of the concerns that Australia, Canada, America and parts of Europe have?

Sow Keat Tok:

I think it depends on which political persuasion those countries are in. There are some like Singapore, they are quite concerned about China's rise and not just economically, but militarily as well. But there are others for example in Central Asia who are pretty enthusiastic about China's willingness to invest in Central Asia and bringing a new alternative to the region. You know all the while they have been ignored; they are the backwaters. At least when I was in contact with some of those academics and business people and coming from those regions, they seem quite receptive to China's new found confidence and investments into those regions.

So I go back to my point, it depends on how much you benefit from it and the kind of political persuasion you're from and how you perceive China as a rising power.

Ali Moore:

And maybe how close China is to you. Literally, physically.

Sow Keat Tok:

Absolutely. How close China is to you does matter a lot. Because the physical distance does give the kind of fear towards China.



Ali Moore:

Pradeep, do you agree?

Pradeep Taneja:

Yeah. I mean I think if you have a contiguous sort of boundary to China, if you share a land border or a sea border with China, then certainly you would be much more cautious in how you respond to Chinese decisions. Whether they are strategic decisions or economic decisions. But I come back to the point about the reason why China is feared and not just by Western liberal democracies, but also a number of other states in the region is because what the Chinese system represents. Remember that even countries like Cambodia have elections of some kind. But the nature of the Chinese political system will continue to be a source of concern. China's political system is a very opaque political system. It is a one-party system. And as China's power continues to grow, I think those concerns about China's power will continue to rise.

Ali Moore:

So this brings me to my last question to both of you, which quite possibly could kick off an entire new podcast. But how do countries like Australia come to terms with this fear? Because China clearly is not going to change. Pradeep, if you're right, then you've explained the imperatives very clearly. So how do we ameliorate that fear? Because particularly for example, foreign influence. Be very careful what you wish for, because the very freedoms we hold very close to our hearts are those that could be at risk if we try to shut certain countries down. So how do we come to terms and ameliorate this fear?

Pradeep Taneja:

There is a limit to what other countries like Australia can do to ameliorate the fear. China can do a lot more too. To be more acceptable as a global rising power. So it's not only the behaviour and conduct of countries like Australia, but it is also what China would do in the future. But as far as Australia's concerned, I think, as a liberal democracy, for Australia, we have to consider what Australian values are and politicians often talk about these values, things get bandied around by politicians. But sometimes, we're not consistent when it comes to the implementation of those values. Practising those values. So we have to demonstrate with our behaviour that these are our values and we are very consistent. We don't compromise on those values.

Now we know that most states fail to do that. America for example, has been a great champion of democracy, but then America has also supported dictatorships and authoritarian regimes and even contributed to bringing down democratically elected government. And that is the inconsistency that generates cynicism. So what countries like Australia need to do is to be consistent with the values that you claim to uphold, when it comes to implementing those values, practising those values, be sincere about those values.



- Sow Keat Tok: First of all, I think the whole big idea about Australian values is a big question. Is there such thing as an Australian value or what? But beyond that, I take it from where Pradeep left off in terms of what China should do. I think China again, I repeat my point, China should balance up the idea that on the one hand, they must acknowledge that they are causing lots of concerns in countries that doesn't share the same kind of values or the same kind of political system as them. On the other hand, they have to think if constantly shying away from being more transparent in the way that they approach [crosstalk 00:39:02].
- Pradeep Taneja: But Sow Keat, that's the nature of the political system. You cannot expect greater transparency within that system.
- Sow Keat Tok: Well, I think you can try. You cannot expect everyone to be transparent all throughout. Even when I talk about transparency in America, there's certain limits to their transparency. But what really I'm trying to say is if China can try to shake off that kind of general statements that you were saying earlier on being content-less kind of statements, you try to pull up something that is more acceptable.
- Pradeep Taneja: No, I'm not trying to change China. Ultimately, only the Chinese people can change China. But in the meantime, why China is what China is, the rest of the world has to learn to deal with it.
- Ali Moore: And that's the hard lesson that so many are struggling with just writing the rule book for that lesson. Thank you so much to both of you for talking to Ear to Asia.
- Pradeep Taneja: Thank you Ali.
- Sow Keat Tok: Thank you Ali.
- Ali Moore: Our guests have been Dr Sow Keat Tok from Asia Institute and Dr Pradeep Taneja from the School of Social and Political Sciences. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify or SoundCloud. And if you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple podcast. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. And of course, let your friends know about us on social media.
- This episode was recorded on the 6 September, 2019. Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bemmel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under creative commons, copyright 2019, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore. Thanks for your company.