

## Ear to Asia podcast



**Title:** India and China's growing strategic rivalry in the Indian Ocean

**Description:** The Indian Ocean, long assumed by India to be its own "backyard", is now host to growing economic and military inroads by China. Asia watchers and political analysts Professor Derek McDougall and Dr Pradeep Taneja discuss China's possible designs in the region and the geopolitical risk its mounting presence there may bring.

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Ali Moore: Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Vishal Dahiya on Rayja Sabha TV: The Indian Ocean has become the new global center for trade and energy flows accounting for half of world's container traffic and 70% of petroleum shipments. This has made the Indian Ocean region a potential arena for strategic competition between India and China.

Martine Dennis on Al Jazeera English: Sri Lanka, struggling to pay its debts, has signed a huge port deal with China. Beijing's growing influence in Sri Lanka is making neighboring India anxious, because it considers the Indian Ocean Region to be its backyard.

CDR Abhijit Singh on Rayja Sabha TV: We are going to have to live with greater Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean Region. There are these projects that the Chinese have undertaken under the Belt and Road Initiative.

This is a very smart strategy that has created an organic need for Chinese naval forces in the Indian Ocean.

Ali Moore: In this episode, the India and China rivalry playing out in the Indian Ocean.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne. In Ear to Asia, we talk with Asia researchers about the issues behind the news headlines in a region that's rapidly changing the world.

For centuries, the Indian Ocean has been a crucial trade route with merchant ships trading goods at ports on three continents and many islands in between. Access to the ocean is vital. It's, perhaps, no surprise there's been increasing forays by China into what India considers its own backyard and, traditionally, its sphere of influence.

China's investments and its maritime pursuits have clearly extended Sino-Indian, geopolitical rivalry into the Indian Ocean. From Pakistan to Myanmar, Mauritius to the Maldives, China is a growing presence.

Many of the island nations affected have long come under the patronage of India. In the wake of World War II, when Great Britain began the process of decolonization, India assumed the role of protector of a number of the newly independent island nations in the region. So China's flexing of its industrial and military might over the last two decades impacting on the economic and political lives of nation states across the Indian Ocean has caused discomfort in New Delhi.

What are China's motivations? How is India reacting to a looming Chinese presence closer to its shores, and how can smaller nation-states in the region benefit from this rivalry between India and China?

To examine the current state of competition between the two countries, and how it's playing out in the Indian Ocean, we're joined by Asia watchers and political observers from the School of Social and Political Sciences here at the University of Melbourne. Professor Derek McDougall and Dr. Pradeep Taneja, welcome to both of you.

Pradeep Taneja: Thank you, Ali.

Derek McDougall: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Before we get to the rivalry between India and China, specifically, in the Indian Ocean, can we start with a big picture look at the relationship between the two countries? Because it would seem that there's been such a flurry of high-level visits between India and China. I think the two leaders have met three times in a matter of four months.

Pradeep Taneja: Well, recently, relations between China and India seem to be reset. That's the word being used by the Indian media. That really refers to a visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Wuhan in China to have an informal summit with the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping.

It's unusual for Indian and Chinese leaders to have such summit, but it seems that in international diplomacy, informal summits are becoming very common. Because Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Wuhan was followed very soon after that with a visit to Russia to meet with President Putin, again, in an informal summit. Maybe, this informal diplomacy is becoming a part of India's and China's diplomatic behavior.

But relations between China and India were pretty tense over the last couple of years, and I think this attempt by both sides to try and ease tensions and focus on trying to find common ground where they can work together is probably a welcome step. But, I'm not sure how long it's going to last.

Ali Moore: Ah, indeed, well that would be the question, Derek, wouldn't it?

Derek McDougall: Yes, I guess so. I suppose I see India and China as competitors rather than as intense rivals. Yes, they do compete geopolitically, and they represent rather different political systems.

At one level, they're the two great emerging powers. But that doesn't mean there aren't elements of cooperation. I suppose in terms of international organizations, you've got the BRICS, Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa that has some significance.

Ali Moore: They do cooperate, but I wonder how do you see this recent thawing, if I can call it that, up against their competitive relationship that has long been so?

Derek McDougall: I'd say competition is probably more significant than the cooperation.

Ali Moore: If we look at-

Derek McDougall: But they're not enemies. They're not enemies. It's not that intense.

Ali Moore: Well, they've learned to accommodate each-

Derek McDougall: Yeah.

Ali Moore: ... other.

Derek McDougall: Yeah. When you have lots of situations like around the world in terms of major powers, well, the United States and China, the United States and Russia, Russia and China, there's all this jockeying and so on. There's competition and cooperation or accommodation. What is the specific situation at any given point? That's what you're trying to assess.

Pradeep Taneja: They're in competition and cooperation, and I think the two features of the India-China relationship, but it varies from time to time. There was a time under the previous Indian Government of Manmohan Singh when India and China were both negotiating the Paris Accord and, even before that, the Copenhagen Environmental Summit where India and China were working together.

The former Indian Minister of Environment, in fact, even talked about a Copenhagen spirit, the kind of cooperation India and China exhibited in Copenhagen, and he said that this could be a defining feature of the bilateral relationship. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened. Competition seems to be a more important feature than cooperation.

Ali Moore: Though would you go so far as to agree with the description that some put on it of being a new, emerging Cold War, Pradeep? Is that giving it too much on the tension side versus the cooperation side?

Pradeep Taneja: I wouldn't say it's a new, emerging Cold War, because while clearly there is competition between India and China, in some areas more than others, but, at the same time, there are many other platforms where India and China are cooperating.

For example, Derek mentioned BRICS. BRICS, both India and China are major parts of BRICS. In fact, India and China are the only two countries in BRICS whose economies are still growing. Because Russia isn't doing terribly well, Brazil isn't doing very well, South Africa isn't doing greatly. India and China are the only two major countries within BRICS which are still growing.

Plus, recently, India has joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a forum which was formed by Russia and China along with a number of other Central Asian countries. But both India and Pakistan have now joined Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

So there's a number of other platforms. For example, there's India-Russia-China Platform, also, so there's a number of platforms where India and China do engage in trilateral or quadrilateral manner. But, at the same time, I think there is clearly a growing competition, both economic and strategic, between these two countries.

Ali Moore: Derek, how does that play out specifically in the Indian Ocean?

Derek McDougall: I would say this is one context where you do have the rivalry between China and India. I'd say India is clearly the leading power in the Indian Ocean. You can appreciate that just by looking at a map. Unfortunately, we can't have a map with a podcast. But you look at the map and India is, it's not really a dagger, it's more like a, I don't know, a big triangle coming down into the Indian Ocean. It just appears natural that India is going to play a leading role in the Indian Ocean.

It's not quite the force of gravity, but China's somewhat more distant, and it is involved in the Indian Ocean. I suppose at one level partly in terms of its competition with India, but it would also see broader strategic and economic advantages for itself being involved in the Indian Ocean.

Ali Moore: What is India's naval presence in the Indian Ocean? How far do they project?

Derek McDougall: Good question. Well, they certainly have links with the various island states in the Indian Ocean. The ones we have studied in particular. Over the past several years, there's been a mechanism called the Trilateral Maritime-

Pradeep Taneja: Maritime Security-

Derek McDougall: ... Security-

Pradeep Taneja: ... Initiative, yeah.

Derek McDougall: ... Cooperation, involving, well, India is the leading power, and then, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles. It's more than trilateral, but they haven't renamed it.

And in a way, this is symbolic. Perhaps, more significant would be the various bilateral defense arrangements between India and each of the island states. I've studied Mauritius and Seychelles, and India is quite involved in terms of providing security advice, security leadership, defense equipment, radar surveillance.

Even, in the case of Mauritius, providing a national security advisor to the Prime Minister of Mauritius, and the head of the Coast Guard in Mauritius

is provided by India. India is very much embedded in Mauritian security. The same kind of thing happens in the case of Seychelles, perhaps, not to the same extent, but it's still quite significant.

Ali Moore: I want to look specifically at those island nation states in a minute. That's a broad picture.

What about China, Pradeep, and the so-called String of Pearls? String of Pearls was actually a term initially put forward by I think a management consultancy.

Pradeep Taneja: This is a term which has been around since 2004. It was included in a report commissioned by the U.S. Defense Department with Booz Allen Hamilton, a big consulting firm which consults regularly with the Defense Department. They used the term the String of Pearls to refer to the port facilities that China was building across the Indian Ocean. Even though most of these facilities are actually civilian port facilities, but there is a speculation that they could be used for military purposes, for naval purposes by the Chinese and the PLA Navy.

China has, of course, reacted very angrily to this and saying that this is beat up, there is no substance to it. But, the opening of China's first military base in Djibouti in East Africa has certainly highlighted China's growing military presence.

China has built the Gwadar Port in Pakistan which is, of course, very close to India. And Pakistani officials, in fact, have from time to time called upon China to open a naval base there, even though Chinese have denied that they have any intention of opening a naval base there. But Pakistanis themselves have been actually saying that they would like China to open a military base there.

Ali Moore: Chinese investment in Pakistan is much more than just a port, isn't it? I mean there's that \$60 billion economic corridor. There's so much more that is being built roads, power stations, hospitals.

Pradeep Taneja: Gwadar is the terminal point for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Gwadar doesn't really have much economic activity at this stage. It's a port that China has built. But, at the same time, China's also building highways which will connect China's Xinjiang Province to Gwadar. There's also a plan for railways that will eventually traverse the Himalayan Mountains and all the way up to Gwadar.

There's a number of major economic projects that China is undertaking in Pakistan. It's been said that China wants to use Gwadar to open up China's western region, Xinjiang, particularly, and allow trade to flow from China's interior, China's western regions all the way to the Indian Ocean.

They, in fact, demonstrated a couple of years ago by bringing a number of containers from China via Xinjiang over the Karakoram Pass and then up to Gwadar. But, as it was reported by one of the Pakistani newspapers that half the containers were empty. This was simply a demonstration to show that this corridor-

Ali Moore: This could be done.

Pradeep Taneja: ... could be opened up. That this could be done.

But the reality is that most of China's manufacturing takes place on the east coast of China, not in Xinjiang. Therefore, economically, it doesn't really make much sense for China's trade to flow via Pakistan from Gwadar all the way to Xinjiang and then the east coast of China. So it is much cheaper to transport goods by these huge ships that exist these days, container ships, than to actually use trucks and railways.

Ali Moore: What do you think Gwadar is all about as a port facility?

Pradeep Taneja: I think Gwadar has much more strategic significance than economic significance. I mean economically, it might help Pakistan, and maybe China Xinjiang region to some extent. But it has much greater strategic significance, particularly, as China's power and China's interests continue to grow in the Indian Ocean. Gwadar is likely to play a much more important role in that.

Ali Moore: Could we just shift along a bit to Myanmar, that's another country with a Chinese-funded port development?

Pradeep Taneja: Yes, indeed, indeed. China has also built pipeline, oil and gas pipelines from Myanmar all the way to Kunming in China. There's both an energy corridor and a port facility that China is building in Myanmar.

So China's interest in Myanmar, obviously, is significant. They are related to China's own border areas in Yunnan. Yunnan Province of China has close ties, economic ties with Myanmar.

When you look at a map of the Indian Ocean, and you look at the port facilities that China is building all around the Indian Ocean, whether we like to call it or not, String of Pearls, the fact is that there is a large number of ports that are built and in many cases operated by Chinese companies.

The concern from the Indian point of view is that these port facilities, under pressure, could be made available for Chinese military in a crisis situation. That's been the fear in India. And that was the essence of the report that Booz Allen Hamilton did for the-

Ali Moore: Did for the U.S.-

Pradeep Taneja: ... U.S. Defense Department, yes.

Ali Moore: ... Defense Department.

Derek McDougall: And China doesn't worry too much when there is a more authoritarian government in power in a particular country, if you're thinking about Myanmar. Well, China being authoritarian itself, so if it has certain strategic objectives, and I think you saw this in the past with Myanmar and right up to the present.

China does focus on its strategic objectives. And comparing with India, India has more scruples I suppose in terms of whether the government is democratic or not. But, sometimes, there's a bit of a gray area there too. That can relate to the competition with China. I think that was the case in Myanmar.

Ali Moore: If we look at Pakistan, and we look at Myanmar, but, as you mentioned earlier, Derek, you were talking about Mauritius and the Seychelles. In fact, both of you have recently co-authored a paper on competition in Indian Ocean island countries.

Why for you the focus on these smaller states? Sri Lanka, which, of course, is key, and if you talk about port facilities, which we will in a minute, there's a story there. The Maldives, Mauritius, and the Seychelles, Pradeep, how important do you think these nation states are?

Pradeep Taneja: The small island states in the Indian Ocean, obviously, are important strategically from India's point of view, and, increasingly, from China's point of view. But I think there's a tendency to see them as basically passive players. That other countries can try and influence these countries, and they will simply follow.

But, often, it is neglected that these countries, these small island states, in fact, have their own agency. In other words, they have their own perception of their interests. They also want to maximize gains, particularly, economic gains, by often playing one of these powers against the other.

They know that China has much bigger economic resources, even though, traditionally, India has exercised much greater strategic influence in the Indian Ocean Region. But, China is now coming with a much bigger largess, in terms of China's loans and grants that China is able to offer to these countries. So there is a tendency on the part of these countries to play one against the other.

Ali Moore: Is that a dangerous game?

Pradeep Taneja: It's a dangerous game. It's a dangerous game as we saw, for example, in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, as Derek said earlier, India was reluctant both for domestic reasons and for other reasons to provide military assistance to the Sri Lankan Government during the civil war.

The civil war was between the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamils, the ethnic Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. India, of course, has a very large Tamil

population in the Tamil Nadu state of India. Therefore, India was not willing to offer military assistance to Sri Lanka. But, China stepped in, and China provided military assistance which eventually led to the crushing of the Tamil Tigers and deaths of nearly 40,000 civilians in the last phase of the Sri Lankan Civil War.

But the close relationship that Sri Lanka developed under the former President Mahinda Rajapaksa with China, ultimately, once the civil war ended in 2009, Sri Lanka then continued to work closely with China. And China then offered to build port facilities in Hambantota, the new airport, the new cricket stadium, the highways, a whole new infrastructure with loans extended to Sri Lanka. Then, in 2014, Sri Lanka allowed two Chinese submarines to dock in Colombo, in Sri Lanka's capital, in the Colombo port unannounced as far as India was concerned.

There is an understanding between Sri Lanka and India that Sri Lanka would let India know if any such development was likely to take place. But, Sri Lanka did not inform India. India found out later on that Chinese submarines were visiting Colombo port. From India's point of view, these surprises are not welcome.

Ali Moore: Derek, we saw that's very much the internal politics of Sri Lanka affecting how they're playing the game between China and India. How much does domestic politics influence how these island nations balance their interests and their level of agency?

Derek McDougall: I think domestic politics is very important. With the domestic politics of the island states, those politics are very important in terms of maximizing the agency, the independence, if you like, of the island states. The general point is that if you have a fair bit of consensus or unity within an island state that can increase the bargaining power, if you like, of the island state vis-à-vis the great powers.

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 political scientist, Professor Derek McDougall, and Dr. Pradeep Taneja from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne.

We were just talking about Sri Lanka and definitely the influence of China and India from a political point of view, and I guess also economically. How different is that going to be under the current government? As you were just talking about, Pradeep, a lot happened under President Rajapaksa. But, we have a new government now, are things changing?

Pradeep Taneja: Things have changed I think from India's point of view. There has been a difference compared to the previous, the Rajapaksa Government.

For example, first of all, when the new government came to power in 2015 in Sri Lanka, they temporarily suspended any construction of a number of projects in Sri Lanka. Partly, because they wanted to scrutinize contracts, and they wanted to make sure that the developments were in Sri Lanka's

interest. Many of those projects have resumed, and there is construction going on. There have been re-negotiations, of course.

But, given that Sri Lanka currently has a serious balance of payments problem, Sri Lanka has a huge foreign debt. A big part of it is owed to China. Therefore, the Sri Lankan Government's hands are tied in the sense that there's a limited degree of freedom that they have in terms of negotiating.

India doesn't have the financial capability to bail Sri Lanka out, so Sri Lanka is now looking at the International Monetary Fund to try and get assistance, so that they can repay some of the foreign debt, particularly, the Chinese debt.

But, at the same, in terms of relations, for example, when the Sri Lankan Government signed an agreement with a Chinese company to hand over the management of the Hambantota Port to this Chinese company called China-

Ali Moore: Because they-

Pradeep Taneja: ... Merchants Port.

Ali Moore: ... couldn't pay the debts.

Pradeep Taneja: Because they couldn't pay the debt, they signed a 99-year lease with the Chinese company, China Merchants Port.

But, when they handed over the port's management to this Chinese company, the Sri Lankan Government assured India that this port will not be used for military purposes. That the military use of the port will be controlled by the Sri Lankan Government.

And recently, they made a decision to move one of the naval bases from Galle to Hambantota, which is again an attempt to reassure India that while for economic reasons Sri Lanka has allowed this Chinese company to manage the port, because they had really very little choice. But, at the same time, they will make sure that the developments in Hambantota are not inimical to India's interests.

Ali Moore: If we look at Seychelles and Mauritius, Derek, how does China position itself in those two island nations, and where does India see it? Can you draw us a picture of how those influences work on the ground?

Derek McDougall: As far as China is concerned and starting off with Mauritius, I think the attraction of Mauritius currently is that it provides an economic platform, if you like, for Chinese entrée into various African countries. Mauritius has agreements with a number of African countries to facilitate investment and economic development of one kind or another.

China involving itself in Mauritius can derive advantage from those agreements. From the Mauritian perspective, they see Chinese involvement

as helping their own economic development. Mauritius might be very much focused on India from a security perspective, but they don't see any major problems in terms of involving China.

Ali Moore: There's two quite different relationships. One is-

Derek McDougall: Yeah, well-

Ali Moore: ... more economic, one is more-

Derek McDougall: ... it's a little bit like, the Australian situation. There's the alliance with the United States. Very important in terms of security, and, of course, there's a very strong Australian economic relationship with the United States.

Derek McDougall: But, that does not preclude Australia wanting to develop its economic relations with China. Australian Governments have seen those two dimensions as being quite compatible. So Mauritius is a little bit like that on a smaller scale.

Now, as far as Seychelles is concerned, it's a much smaller country. And there's Chinese involvement in areas, such as tourism and various aid projects. But, China doesn't really see Seychelles as being of major significance I think in terms of developing Chinese economic links with Africa.

Pradeep Taneja: It does in some respects. For example, recently, there was a case where India and the Seychelles Government had signed an agreement where India was going to help build basically a military base for the Seychelles on one of the islands. This was a bilateral agreement.

Then, the Seychelles Government late last year asked to renegotiate it. Then, the Indian Foreign Secretary at the time, Jaishanker, he went to Seychelles to renegotiate it. They thought okay, the re-negotiations had reached an agreement which India could live with.

But then the Seychelles Parliament decided not to ratify their agreement. In other words, that agreement that the Indian and Seychelles governments had agreed for India to build a military facility, which will be a joint facility, it will be used by both the Indian and the Seychelles navies.

But, there is speculation in India that that decision by the Seychelles Parliament was, in fact, at the behest of the Chinese. That the Chinese had obviously influenced some opposition politicians in Seychelles and blocked the development of this facility.

Ali Moore: Can India counter that?

Pradeep Taneja: The Seychelles President recently visited India, and he said that India and Seychelles are still continuing to discuss this. So India has not given up on it.

I believe that that facility will be built. But, at the moment, within the domestic politics of the tiny Seychelles, it is at the moment stuck where opposition has objected to it.

Derek McDougall: In the case of the Seychelles, generally, they have this balancing strategy. There's a fair bit of consensus about that. But, if a government goes too far in one direction, either towards India or China, and I think what Pradeep has referred to is a good recent example, the opposition might be critical. So in that case, the opposition was critical on the basis of the government going too far towards India.

But, the same opposition has also been critical of some of the aid projects supported by China in the Seychelles. Specifically, China was a major donor in relation to the building of Parliament and the Supreme Court. I think the opposition said, well, this was not really a good situation seeing China was not a democracy, nor was it particularly noted for upholding the rule of law.

Ali Moore: This is the classic not too close to one, not too close-

Derek McDougall: Yeah, yeah.

Ali Moore: ... to the other, and it just depends how you can balance it.

Pradeep, in the Maldives, there's been a lot more political influence, hasn't there?

Pradeep Taneja: Maldives and India have had long-standing, historical ties, both economic and strategic. But, again, in Maldives, there is a government in power at the moment, which came to power after overthrowing a democratically elected government in 2012.

President Yameen, the current Maldivian President, he, obviously, has developed very close ties with China. He's trying to attract investments from China. He's trying to borrow money from China.

Ali Moore: China warned India not to intervene.

Pradeep Taneja: Exactly. Earlier this year, we had a situation where the Maldivian Government staged what's been described as a self-coup. Where the Maldivian Supreme Court gave a verdict where they asked the government to release the opposition politicians who had been imprisoned a few years ago.

The President of Maldives responded by arresting the Supreme Court judges. India, of course, criticized that. There were calls by the former Maldivian President, Nasheed, for India to intervene militarily.

There is, of course, a history of Maldivian Governments asking India to intervene. In 1988, India had intervened in Maldives by sending in Indian troops to save the government of the then President Gayoom, who is currently in jail.

The Indian Government has been calling upon the Maldivian Government to release the judges and release the opposition politicians. But Chinese official media published editorials about the Maldivian situation, and essentially warning India not to intervene in Maldives, because there will be consequences. That China will not sit idly by if India did that.

India and China apparently have had negotiations. At least India has tried to explain to China the situation in the Maldives. But, I think when push comes to the shove, India is unlikely to cede its influence so close to India's neighborhood.

Maldives is 400 kilometers from India's southern shore, so India is unlikely to be deterred by China. I think if the situation in Maldives deteriorates, we could see Indian intervention in Maldives.

Ali Moore: And then, would China back off? Because that becomes the key point, doesn't it? When push comes to shove, how far does each go in pursuing their own geopolitical, strategic interests?

Pradeep Taneja: I think Maldives is important for China, because China is trying to exert its influence in the Indian Ocean. But, I don't think China is willing to go to war with India over Maldives. It is not as strategically significant for the Chinese, at least not at this stage.

The Chinese are very good at recognizing spheres of influence, but, at the same time, they tend to push. They recognize their own sphere of influence. But the problem has been that the Chinese seem to be deaf to this idea that perhaps another major Asian power, India, in this case, which is now the world's fastest growing economy. It has a population comparable to that of China. It has its own neighborhood, and it has its own strategic interests.

John Garver, the American India-China relations expert, in fact, recently described China as an autistic power. That it's unable to understand or empathize with the concerns of others while it pushes its own concerns. But it's unable to understand that other powers have similar concerns.

As far as the Indian Ocean is concerned, India clearly sees itself as having the dominant role. India also recognize that the United States is the predominant power in the region.

But, the Chinese are not quite good at looking at this. They sometimes talk about, perhaps, India and China working together to weaken American influence in the Indian Ocean Region. I don't know why this would be in India's interest, particularly, working with China to weaken the American position.

Ali Moore: And particularly, when you think about the reigniting of the so-called Quad, when you've got Japan, Australia, and India and the U.S. working, many would say, specifically, to try and weaken China's sphere of influence.

But it goes to that broader question, doesn't it, Derek? Of what do you see as the likely outcome, and, fundamentally, can India compete with the very deep pockets of China?

Derek McDougall: I think India has a lot of geopolitical advantages going back to the map. This is really India's backyard. It doesn't have to project its power very far to have a significant influence.

You mention the United States. Well, in terms of cooperation, among the great powers in the Indian Ocean, cooperation between the United States and India would be most significant. India also has quite a lot of cooperation with France actually in the Southwest Indian Ocean.

I think back in the 1980s, India had contingency plans for intervening in both Mauritius and the Seychelles. That did not happen. But, you did have the interventions in both the Maldives and Sri Lanka, and how did China respond then?

I think it's a situation, or these situations, if they arise would not elicit a military response by China. But, they're significant in terms of India in a way getting into more difficult territory. It doesn't really want to go to that last resort of military intervention.

It's really just a complicating factor for India. Is that in China's interests or not? China wants to advance its position, but does it want to do so to the point where it might encourage Indian intervention? I'm not sure about that.

Ali Moore: To summarize, do you think it is a peaceful, competitive landscape is how you see the future? That they will find a way to not necessarily literally accommodate each other, but they will find a way to work around each other?

Pradeep Taneja: I think as long as there is an understanding, from the Chinese point of view that like China likes to have its own spheres of influence, Indian Ocean traditionally has been the sphere of Indian influence. As Derek said, India is at the heart of the Indian Ocean, just geographically, that's the geography of India.

India has access to the open seas, unlike China. India has access to most of the choke points in the Indian Ocean, even though there is clearly a difference between the naval capabilities of China and India. But, as far as India's naval capabilities are concerned for the protection and for the promotion of India's naval interests in the Indian Ocean, India, in fact, is I think quite capable of doing that.

But, at the same time, in India, there is a growing recognition that the Indian Ocean is not India's lake. That India cannot prevent other powers, and, particularly, China, in this case, from having a certain degree of presence in the Indian Ocean.

There is that understanding I think among Indian strategic circles that China will be a player in the Indian Ocean. The question is whether China will be the dominant player in India's own neighborhood. That is something which is unacceptable to India.

Derek McDougall: Yes, I think India still wants to have the leading role.

Pradeep Taneja: Yeah.

Derek McDougall: But it has to work out how to play that role in conjunction with other powers being involved. I think from China's perspective, perhaps, the goal is to see how far it can go in terms of extending its influence without provoking actual military conflict between China and India. I don't think China wants that, but, obviously, it's prepared to go a fair way in terms of extending its political influence.

Ali Moore: So as we see it now, neither of you can see a potential flashpoint in the immediate future?

Pradeep Taneja: In the Indian Ocean, I don't think China and India are likely to go to war, so to speak. But, at the same time, there will be growing competition. There will be growing situations where the interests of the two might not coincide.

Therefore, there is a possibility that a situation develops in the Indian Ocean, particularly, as the small Indian Ocean island states try to play one against the other that we could have situations where there could be tensions. But, at the same time, I don't see any full-scale conflict between China and India in the Indian Ocean.

Ali Moore: I think we'll take the glass half full, optimistic route for ending this conversation. Derek and Pradeep, many thanks for your time.

Pradeep Taneja: Thank you, Ali.

Derek McDougall: Thank you.

Ali Moore: Our guests have been political scientist, Dr. Pradeep Taneja and Professor Derek McDougall of the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne.

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I'm Ali Moore, thanks for your company.