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EPISODE -05

The Long View

**India's Maritime Vision: SAGAR,
MAHASAGAR and the Indian Ocean**

In Conversation with

Prof. Sriparna Pathak

Guest host

Dr Nishit Kumar

**Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations
Chanakya University, Bengaluru**

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Professor, China Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University.

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"The Long View: Conversation. Context. Consequence is a flagship podcast series launched by the Subhas Chandra Bose Chair on International Relations at Chanakya University. Debuting on Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's birth anniversary in 2026, the series provides forward-looking, India-centric perspectives on global affairs, strategic autonomy, and Asian geopolitics.

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Key Takeaways

- SAGAR is best understood as an overarching strategic vision and flexible diplomatic instrument rather than a formal military doctrine.
- India's maritime approach places particular emphasis on humanitarian assistance, capacity building, maritime domain awareness and long-term partnerships.
- MAHASAGAR broadens the geographic and functional ambition of SAGAR, linking India's Indian Ocean engagement more explicitly with the Global South and wider Indo-Pacific.
- Smaller South Asian and Indian Ocean states are likely to continue hedging among larger powers rather than making permanent strategic choices.
- India's principal constraints include economic scale, execution capacity, institutional coordination and the timely delivery of projects.
- The next phase will require stronger public-private collaboration, blue-economy investment, technology partnerships and more consistent communication of India's contributions.

Transcribed and Edited by

Dr Nishit Kumar

Dr. Nishit Kumar is a trained Sinologist and Assistant Professor at the Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations, Chanakya University, Bengaluru. He was previously associated with the Centre for Contemporary China Studies (CCCS), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, where he worked as a Consultant (Research Fellow) on China-related policy research.

He holds a Ph.D. in Chinese from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi (2022), with a thesis titled “China and the Nobel Prize: Reception and Impact of the Literature Prize to Mo Yan.” He also completed his M.Phil., M.A., and B.A. in Chinese Language, Literature and Culture from JNU. He has been a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University and a Senior Visiting Student at Peking University. Dr. Kumar has taught Chinese language at Jamia Millia Islamia, St. Stephen’s College, and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya College (University of Delhi).

His research focuses on China Studies, culture studies, reception studies, translation studies, and international relations, particularly strategic narratives and India–China relations. His work has been presented at leading international forums, and he is also a published translator of Chinese literature into Hindi. long-term strategic strength.

Editorial Note:

This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity, readability and continuity while preserving the substance and conversational character of the original discussion. The views expressed by the participants are their own and do not necessarily represent those of Chanakya University or the Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations.

Transcript

Dr Nishit Kumar: In geopolitics, the most important stories are rarely the loudest. They often unfold quietly across oceans, through trade routes, naval movements and strategic partnerships that may not always make headlines but can shape the future of power.

Welcome to another episode of the podcast The Long View, one of the initiatives of the Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations at Chanakya University. I am your host, Nishit Kumar. The Long View is a platform where we step back from the noise and look at the bigger picture.

Today we are diving into one of India's most often-discussed strategic ideas: SAGAR — an acronym for “Security and Growth for All in the Region,” launched by Prime Minister Modi in 2015, and its evolution into MAHASAGAR — “Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions” in 2025. He also highlighted that “the Indian Ocean Region is one of top foreign-policy priorities.” What does it really mean for India to be the maritime power? Is this our cooperation, or our competition, and how does this vision play out in a region increasingly shaped by China's rise and regional vulnerabilities? To unpack all of this, we have someone who has spent years studying China's strategy and the Indo-Pacific in depth — “Dr Sriparna Pathak.”

Dr Nishit Kumar: Prof. Pathak is Professor of China Studies and Founding Director of the Centre for Northeast Asian Studies at the Jindal School of International Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University. Her work spans China's foreign policy, India–China relations, the Indo-Pacific and wider questions of Asian geopolitics. She has previously worked with India's Ministry of External Affairs and the Observer Research Foundation. She is also the author of Drifts and Dynamics: Russia's Ukraine War and Northeast Asia and is currently examining India's maritime vision under SAGAR. Prof. Pathak, it is a pleasure to have you with us.

Prof. Pathak, let me start with a very basic question to begin with: when India talks about SAGAR, what does it actually mean in practice, and why did India feel the need to articulate this in 2015?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: Thank you so much, Dr Kumar, and thank you, Chanakya University. It's wonderful to engage on such a pertinent topic. Coming quickly to your question: SAGAR is best described, or understood, as an overarching vision which doubles as a very flexible diplomatic instrument for cooperative maritime engagement. Now, it's not a rigid military doctrine or a white paper, but it is a vision for showcasing India's role as a responsible maritime power in the Indian Ocean Region and beyond.

Now, why did we have to do it in 2015? SAGAR emphasises five core aspects: safety and security of India and its islands; a safe, secure and stable Indian Ocean Region; security cooperation and economic cooperation, especially with littoral states — our maritime neighbours and island states; and building capacity. And we also believe in collective action. Now, this had to be showcased as India's own interest started increasing more and more, along with our alignments with smaller neighbours in the island states, [which] became more

visible. There was a need for us to articulate it. So, SAGAR functions as a very broad vision, and what India has also done through this — or hopes to do — is project its rightful role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region. For this purpose, India has undertaken some key implementations, like maritime capacity building — through patrol vessels, through training, multilateral exercises like MILAN or IORA [Indian Ocean Rim Association] engagements, partnerships focused on economy, trade, and so on.

Now, given that the Indo-Pacific is now another huge flashpoint for conflict, and it is vital for trade — several lines of trade, lines of communication, pass through it — it isn't just that it's the fastest-growing major economy, which is India, and a responsible actor; India has a vision in place. So, partners who have similar visions can align, and it becomes more explicit, and we can actually navigate crises much better. So, this is Indian Ocean Region-centric, but it has linkages to broader Indo-Pacific strategies. And India has been using it to counter newer challenges, like piracy — threats from non-traditional actors, external assertiveness — while prioritising regional stability. So, all in all, while there were so many things which were unfolding, it was important to get all of them under one umbrella. That umbrella became SAGAR.

Dr Nishit Kumar: For our audience, how should we understand SAGAR: as a doctrine, a vision, or a diplomatic instrument?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: There is no standalone “SAGAR doctrine.” There is no such explicit document. SAGAR operates through practical initiatives — like naval diplomacy, integration into India's broader foreign policy and security policy, and so on. SAGAR, last year, evolved into MAHASAGAR — “Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth” — across the regions, and expanded from just a regional, Indian Ocean Region focus, to a wider global outreach.

So, it's not a doctrine, it's not a white paper. It's more of a vision which doubles as a very flexible diplomatic instrument. If you look at all the statements that have come up in the past from many — you know, different leaders from our country — we never actually say that it's a doctrine or a white paper. It's not a military strategy, although military and security do form components of it. It is more of an overarching vision. So, I think “vision” would be the best way to describe what SAGAR, or now MAHASAGAR, is.

Dr Nishit Kumar: Thank you, Prof. Pathak. So, SAGAR is a vision. Now let's move to what SAGAR means for India's neighbourhood. Countries like Sri Lanka — India laid out about USD 4 billion during the Sri Lanka crisis in 2022. In 2025, India launched Operation Sagar Bandhu — an HADR (humanitarian assistance and disaster relief) operation to help Sri Lanka fight the devastating impacts of a cyclone. Indian naval ships — INS Vikrant, INS Udaygiri, INS Sukanya — and the Indian Air Force delivered more than 1,000 tonnes of food, clothing, and tonnes of medicines, and the Indian Navy assisted in evacuating civilians. India laid out this support — but China still has “Hambantota.” What does that tell us about the limits of SAGAR?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: Very interesting question. Coming first to India showcasing itself as a net security provider — and as you correctly noted — [there are] so many examples where we have engaged. Now, India's practices, be it through SAGAR/MAHASAGAR or outside it, are

near-charitable, you know. India has gifted, or shared, coastal radar systems, or has been constructing patrol vessels, training programmes for neighbours like Mauritius, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and so on. Now, the Indian Navy and the Coast Guard operationalise these actions via regular HADR or humanitarian and disaster-response missions.

China is not there whenever a crisis happens — as it was during the cyclone, when India was the first respondent. Arguably, yes, it is also closed off by Hambantota, but also there is a question about responsibility: given that China has been trying to show itself as a responsible actor to India's neighbours, the question is — when countries are really in distress, where is China? India has been there. It has forever been there. And this is not the first instance — be it in Nepal, during Nepal's earthquake, or during any sort of water crisis, in the Maldives — India has always been there as the first respondent. Above that also, you know, we have delivered vaccines, food aid, relief during COVID-19, or during cyclones in Mauritius, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Sri Lanka.

India has tried to create maritime domain awareness, and this is done operationally through the IFC-IOR [Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region], which was established in 2018, and India has shared real-time data with 28 partners to combat piracy, illegal fishing, and trafficking. Do we often talk about it? India's style — maybe it comes from an old saying, which is “neki kar, darya mein daal” [do good, and cast it into the river — i.e. do good without expecting recognition in return] — and, you know, one can never really say that our foreign policy, or any country's foreign policy, can ever be dissociated from the larger, older culture of its people. So, some of this also ends up leaving us, you know, shy of projecting the good things which we have done. So, that is why SAGAR was important. Because at least some sort of enlisting of whatever we have done should be there. It's great to “neki kar, darya mein daal.” That's great. But unfortunately, when one keeps doing things, but another actor, with malicious motives, comes in and showcases itself as the better actor — that is where it really goes wrong.

You mentioned Hambantota Port. Now, that is, I would say, a strategy to rewrite the rules-based international order. Because, if you see, traditionally, when we engage in borrowing and lending, it's based on written principles — you know, we do not take sovereign territory. And even China itself says it has been leased out. It's been leased out for 99 years. Who amongst us is living [to be] 99 years? I don't think a child born today would even live to 99 years. So, for all purposes, it is the PRC's [People's Republic of China]. But let's look at the silver lining. What it also shows is that when India lends, or extends, a line of credit, it is not predatory. Terms are listed out. Interest rates would be listed out. If there is a default, what happens would be listed out. And it is never a territory grab. Territory grabs are seen as difficult — as things which should be avoided in international law — and, over the years since the Second World War, countries and institutions have come up and tried to prevent territorial grabs. It does happen — I'm not denying that — but rewriting the rules that we play by, you know... say, for example, tomorrow I say: “Dr Kumar, can you lend me your pen,” and I take it, and for whatever reason I lose it, and then you say, “Dr Pathak, now you've lost it” — but I didn't tell you this, and now you have to give me an ear to pay it back — that's not okay, right? Something like that. So, let's look at the silver lining: it also shows that India is not predatory. We create sustainable



development projects — things which partners actually need. So, that's where we stand.

Dr Nishit Kumar: Okay. So, in respect of Sri Lanka, I just have a small question about the Sethusamudram [Ship Channel Project]. Do you think it is going to materialise in the near future?

Moving on to another country in our neighbourhood: the Maldives. India is one of the Maldives' largest development partners; projects include the Greater Malé Connectivity Project. Yet we have seen "India Out" campaigns create political backlash.

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: See, "India Out" campaigns — we have seen this before; it's not something new. We've seen it in — you know — multiple different countries. And again, there is a lot of influence at play — and it's done, sadly, by most great powers of the world; they do it. China definitely does it. So, if you go back and trace the origins of the "India Out" campaigns — be it in the Maldives or in Bangladesh — the fact is that sustained peddling of narratives, using social media or other discourses, or narrative-pushing, did happen.

Now, fortunately or unfortunately — whichever way we frame it — the thing is, you know, we have South Asia — India and its neighbourhood — with positive demographics, which means we have a significant amount, or number, of youth who basically get all their information, or rely, on the internet. And the internet is no longer something which is a luxury; it is a necessity. Now, if you constantly keep inflaming things by using the internet, or certain mindsets, you know — let's go back, say maybe 20 or 30 years ago: we ended up becoming the sort of people shaped by the sort of books that we used to read, right? It will also shape your mentality, your ideology, and all sorts of those things, and your worldview — agree? Now, when we've shifted to a more digital age, and people are increasingly online, again, the sort of material that you're exposed to does shape your mentality, does shape your mindset, and so on. So, if you look at the beginnings of the "India Out" campaigns, a lot of them can be traced to bots — you know — emerging from China, or coordinated efforts from the PRC, and so on. Why would the PRC do this, right? Because, unfortunately, there is a saying in Chinese, and, you know, it goes something like — one mountain cannot have two tigers. In terms of theory, it is said that for any country to be the hegemon, or the leader, of the international system, it first has to establish regional hegemony. Now, of course, China wants to — I'll repeat, the US is the leader of the international system, and there is no India angle to this at all. It's a big thing going on between the US and China. But if China wants to do that, it first has to establish regional hegemony. Which region does it live in? Asia. And in Asia there is another tiger, which is currently the world's fastest-growing major economy i.e. India, which has more, and better, credentials, worldwide, has more acceptability. So, how do you ensure that it doesn't become a threat to your regional hegemony? Keep it tied down to the neighbourhood. Keep your neighbours pinned down. So, that is why they are constantly dousing the flames. So, that's what it is.

Coming back to SAGAR — because we aim at sustainability, we do not impose rules; we actually engage with our partners and find out exactly what it is that they need. And that's how we engage. See, for example, in Sri Lanka, we built schools — so that's a long-term thing, as they say, you know: if you want a person to be fed, teach him or her to fish, right? We teach

them to fish, so that he or she can learn to fish and, you know, get access to food forever — coming to fish, when — when Sri Lanka was in debt distress, when it had to lease out its ports — leased out Hambantota, had to go to the IMF to seek relief — India not only extended lines of credit, but also understood what could be the population's requirements. What did we give? And this is just a few examples: fishing nets. Why fishing nets? Because in coastal communities, right, they would need fishing nets for survival — fair enough. Let's assume, as, say, taxpayers, you and I, whatever money we give also goes into India's foreign aid. We've given fishing nets, right? Can we retrieve fishing nets? No, right? That's how India's policies are.

What we also did was we gave malaria vaccines — entirely — because, as a country in a similar neighbourhood, with similar climatic conditions, we understand that malaria is a challenge; people would need vaccines. So, now, the country is in distress, the government is in distress, the people need help. So, let's step in with things which the people need. So, there is no push-back against this, and we are not extractive. It's not, you know, an extractive sort of diplomacy.

I'll go back quickly to your question on Sethusamudram — the shipping channel project — it has been mired in certain sorts of legal difficulties, and, unfortunately, it is stalled as of 2026, because of ongoing legal hurdles, environmental issues, sensitivities, and a lack of central-government momentum as well. It wants to create a 167-km shipping channel in the Palk Strait, between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka; it wants to link the Gulf of Mannar and Palk Bay. And this would actually help both countries. But then there are issues which Sri Lanka has raised, and I think there will be talks, but at the moment it's not the primary concern being discussed to sort out, and India doesn't push things down other partners' throats. So, if a country raises objections, we listen to it. We agree to it. We leave it on the back burner, and we decide that we will come back to it, and we will have discussions, and so on. There have been no major updates or restarts in the last two years, because there are other things India is working on together with Sri Lanka, and the focus is on those sorts of things at the moment.

Dr Nishit Kumar: Okay. So, India doesn't just provide assistance, but does “neki kar, darya mein daal” — we should also put our narrative out there. So, roughly two years back, in 2024, Prime Minister Modi met Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu and also provided emergency financial assistance of around 100 million US dollars, as a bilateral currency swap. So, what is your take on this — that after the “India Out” campaign, we are still assisting our neighbours?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: See, that's the beauty of engaging with India. One can act very vitriolic about this, and say: “well, you wanted India Out, so be it.” Let's look at this from two perspectives — one emotional, and one rational. If a country does go into doldrums, whichever country is causing the problems is going to come in and take over assets — and this is our neighbourhood. Do we want a country which has proven, time and again, that it's a threat actor to step in? So, what do we do here? We continue engaging. We wait, because, you know, karma has its own ways. And, unfortunately, we keep seeing traces of it in foreign policy as well. Well, if “India Out” was implemented, and it was stated by the President, as it was the cost of it also gets visible very soon, you know, because the other actor was then in overdrive, and it entrenches its tentacles even deeper. Which is what happened, and then the “India Out” campaign, on its own, got flushed out, and then, you know, when Minister Muizzu



— well, there was also a meeting, as you said, between Prime Minister Modi and him, and we extended a line of credit so that it doesn't fall into deeper trouble. The emotional reaction would be: "that's it, let's just stop, they've wronged us." But, you know, emotions should not take over national interest, ever, because that's generally the case in Indian foreign policy, which has a very thick skin and a very long-term view; we tend to avoid emotional decisions.

This is our neighbourhood. If we get tied down to it, we lose all the momentum that we have right now for the rising stature of India in geopolitics or geoeconomics. No conversation in any part of the world is now complete without a mention of India. Be it in Europe, be it in the US for whatever reasons, be it even in China, be it in Russia — nothing is complete without India. If we get tied down to the neighbourhood, and keep dousing the flames, it's going to be problematic. So, we continue and show that, well, this is what the Indian approach is. However, I am very sure our diplomats and our leadership have also done this — maybe behind closed doors — also communicated that: look, we have red lines. Please do not keep crossing our red lines. We are friends, and we will always behave as friends, and we will be the lender of last resort. We are the net security provider, but there are red lines. So, I believe this has been communicated.

Dr Nishit Kumar: So, India's foreign policy is pragmatic and practical. Prof. Pathak, you have recently visited Mauritius. How much does Mauritius matter for MAHASAGAR?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: If SAGAR had a geographic centre of gravity, it would probably be Mauritius. Absolutely, yes — which is why, you know, the announcement was also made in Mauritius, right? You know, whenever any country is engaging, or showcasing its projects, or its vision — be it SAGAR or now MAHASAGAR — it chooses the countries of announcement strategically. Which is why the Belt and Road Initiative was announced in two separate countries: one in ASEAN, one in Southeast Asia, and one in Central Asia. For us, Mauritius — because of its geopolitical position — it is important the announcement happened there.

Now, even this year — because, you know, conflicts, unfortunately, have become the norm of the day — when I visited Mauritius, things were difficult, because the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz is creating difficulties even for Mauritius, as it is for the US, as well as for China, as well as for any other actor in the world. So, Mauritius now has to rethink – what to do, because it's a tourism-based economy, you know. The population is of Indian origin, or a significant amount of it — this is indentured-labour descent; previous generations who were taken there, and a significant part of that labour was taken from Bihar. Now, these are the people there; now there are other ethnicities and groupings, and so on, as well. But it's a tourism-oriented economy. At best, they would export some sort of jaggery, sugarcane — those sorts of primarily agricultural goods. Now, it's important, because, you know — empire [i.e. sphere of influence] is still a thing. And, given that we already have an active crisis happening in West Asia, we don't want another one happening around the Taiwan Strait — with certain justice missions and other sorts of things around the Taiwan Strait, and so on. It is important for India to have a big role in Mauritius, and to have a big partnership. Mauritius is a partner in the Indian Ocean Region dialogue, in IORA, and so on. So, discussions are happening as to how we want to get out of this current West Asia crisis unscathed, and what we really do if another one emerges, you know. So, Mauritius is important for India, also to show how our HADR efforts,

and all of these sorts of things, are vital. So, Mauritius is in a difficult spot right now, thanks to the crisis, but it represents more than ever — especially if we look at it through the lens of SAGAR and MAHASAGAR. It matters now because of its location and our expansion from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR. Because when we were talking about SAGAR, it was more about our immediate neighbourhood, but when we talk about MAHASAGAR — the expansion of SAGAR — then we are talking about the global oceans. So, do you see [that] the location matters, be it Mauritius or any other country? MAHASAGAR is expanded — it has connotations for the Indo-Pacific as well. SAGAR initially was just restricted to, largely, our neighbourhood, the Indian Ocean Region, and so on. But MAHASAGAR is also talking, more, in terms of using the lessons which would be pertinent for the Indo-Pacific. Say, for example, MAHASAGAR expands SAGAR's cooperative vision to the Global South, because MAHASAGAR is also talking about technology sharing, sustainable blue-economy projects, naval diplomacy — like joint exercises — and that's an inclusive alternative to China's BRI. Now, India's model, over the years, and especially now, through SAGAR and MAHASAGAR, [India] has been emphasising regional ownership, which would not be the case when we are talking about, say, the BRI. We are also talking about capacity building, high-impact community projects, generic-medicine [Jan Aushadhi] training programmes, long-term self-reliance instead of dependency, and so on. So, all of these things are important from the Indo-Pacific point of view.

Dr Nishit Kumar: MAHASAGAR, as you said, expands the scope of SAGAR. The terms themselves also invite an Indian conceptual analogy: *sagar* and *mahasagar*, and even the *Samudra Manthan*, which produced both *visha* (poison) and *amrit* (nectar). Using that analogy, what would you identify as three major achievements and three major challenges of SAGAR over the past decade?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: I'll come first to the *visha*, because, as the saying goes: “*baad mein amrit ki zaroorat hogi na*” [we'll need the nectar later]. So, first the poison. See, SAGAR's biggest limitations have been in execution capacity, or in institutional depth and economic scale. It's not that it doesn't have conceptual flaws, *per se*, but here is the thing: when we do SAGAR, and when we are reaching out as a net security provider, it does incur economic costs, right? Now, India is also the world's most populous country; we are a rising power; industrialisation is increasing, and so on, right? How many Indians pay taxes, direct taxes? So, you see, that's a challenge there. Capacity constraints — you know — limit — scalability. India has strong ambitions and capabilities in operating assets like patrol vessels or radar systems. But there have been things in the past which have limited timely delivery, you know. The thing is, if we promise, we have to deliver, right? And I think that can be scaled up, that can be worked out, while we are figuring out the other thing. Also, what is needed is inter-ministerial coordination and [reduced] overlap amongst agencies. What happens is that when there is less inter-ministerial coordination, it leads sometimes to duplication of work, or efforts — efforts tend to get wasted — [and] that leads, further, to slower project implementation, right? These are very rational sorts of things which have happened, because India is [now] playing this role — I would give credit to India, and credit where it's due, this was done early. So, this is the first time that we are tracing this thing, you know, and we are not the US or China yet, [but] we are sharing responsibilities. So, credit — where it's due — also, we have never really thought of this before, you know, not before 2010, or even 2014. So, given that



we, you know, from 2015 to 2025, I think we have done a laudable job. You know, generally we tend to end up comparing ourselves to China — which we should not. The world has given China a lot of time, economically. How long has it been given to become the — you know — manufacturing platform of the world? Deng Xiaoping's reforms [began] 1978 onwards; the world started giving recognition to it, largely, around 2008, 2010, and so on. So, do you see: 1978 to 2010 — this is how much time it was given. Secondly, Western powers, like the US, enabled its entry into the WTO, [and] lobbied for several years for it. Do we have that support? We don't. We are on our own, and we are doing it all by ourselves, in a much shorter timeframe. So, I understand that, given we are also a developing country, within Asia, the world, and we Indians also, tend to compare ourselves with the PRC. But that, I would say, we need to be a bit kinder with India. Whatever we have done in the last 10 years has been great. But again, one needs to also understand what the shortcomings are. If we could leverage private-sector engagement under MAHASAGAR, that would expand the potential for leveraging Indian industry in blue economy projects, technology sharing, or large-scale connectivity initiatives, and so on. And SAGAR has already delivered tangible results in trust-building. The world does take cognisance of India as a trusted player. If it's HADR, [or] emergency response — you know, there are ample numbers of documented instances as to what the Indian Navy has done. Again, going back to Hormuz — because, what can we do, we are stuck [with the crisis] in Hormuz, and our minds are just stuck there — [but] the Indian Navy [is] escorting our vessels. How amazing is that? How many countries' navies have been successful [enough] to do that sort of thing, you know? So, there is a need to enhance trade, blue economy investments, technology sharing. So, better public-private collaboration, [a] reduction in duplication of work, more inter-ministerial cooperation — I think that would be a great step forward. Look, we have laid down the base. We just have to be a bit more present, and kinder, and not think that China has done great things. It has not. It suffers from several flaws. Both you and I have lived there for an ample amount of time; I think India is doing pretty much well.

Dr Nishit Kumar: It is difficult to not name China [in this conversation] — whenever we talk about India and its neighbourhood. If we look at China's BRI, the project is worth over a trillion dollars — [it's] global. However, India's overseas infrastructure capacity is much smaller by comparison, and there is a "String of Pearls" narrative around China. There are ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Djibouti, and China has poured hundreds of millions into ports and infrastructure across the region. So, my question is: can SAGAR or MAHASAGAR now compete without that kind of economic power?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: Interesting question. Ports — again, I'll go back to my theory, because — what to do? I just finished classes and came here. See, if a country wants to be the global hegemon — and China's real game is vis-à-vis the US, right, it wants to be — the "middle kingdom," and the leader of the world order. It will have to focus on ports. The US has far more, you know, bases and ports, et cetera, around the world. China is nothing compared to that, right? But China would want to build that. Now, China sees India as being US-aligned; that is completely untrue. Maybe they do it to needle India, or provoke India, or whatever, but largely they see us as leaning towards, or [being loyal] to, the Western side. Also, because it has to keep India tied down to the neighbourhood — so that's its real game with the US. As it keeps going on, it will create more ports too. As we now see, if you look at — you mentioned

Gwadar, right — I don't [know] how much of the benefit has gone to Pakistan alone. I wish there were field marshals there, and they would know — but, objectively speaking, not much employment has been created, and not so much [economic benefit either]. But, look, here is the thing: China prepares in advance, until the day it's needed — it would be safe to say that, yes, in the future eventuality of a crisis, China could use Gwadar Port, because it would connect to West Asia; it would connect towards Europe, and so on. But now that Hormuz is choked, there are certain reports which have come up that Pakistan is, you know, transmitting oil from ships offshore. Now, if you see the line, well — it reaches Gwadar — [they] use Gwadar, and it goes to the PRC. Hmm, interesting. So, this is how they prepare for it.

Myanmar — Kyaukpyu Port — Myanmar also has oil reserves. There is a new civilian government, or that's what's being reported; there has just been an election there, and so on. Now, for China to continue its industrial rise, and be the manufacturing platform of the world — whether it currently is or not, it will be, in future — I don't know what it needs, [but] it will need energy resources. So, it's going to double down, even in Myanmar, and every other place that it has built ports in — right. Also, it itself has its own state dilemma: if India and the US come together, it's going to be problematic [for China]. So, this is going to keep getting agitated further. It just plans well ahead in time. It probably does a lot of game theory, you know, sweats it out, and plots what the options are, and so on, but it prepares itself in advance for a rainy day. Can we push back against this? Do we need to push back against this? We have to keep our own interests secure, of course. And, yes, wherever there is a “String of Pearls” — look, Pakistan is a separate question, or story, altogether. It's a failed state, unfortunately, so not much can be done there. But, yes, we can leverage our relationships — whatever we have with Nepal, or Bangladesh, et cetera — as we have done in the past: say that we have our red lines, please do not cross the red lines. Can we build as many ports as them? Do we want to? I don't think India wants to topple the US, or even China, and become the world's leading actor, and be the hegemon. That is not what our goal is. Our goal — you know, I think our government's goal is to prioritise our people: our people's livelihoods, our people's sustainability, our people's development, access to jobs, access to food. It is not that sort of mentality which the PRC has. So, should we just compete with them, forget all of this, and do that? China can do what it does to its people, because no one is going to question that — it's a one-party state. But that's not the case for a democracy, and definitely not the world's largest democracy.

Dr Nishit Kumar: Prof. Pathak, if we have to bring a framework into this: what different kinds of frameworks are used by India and China, and do you think India is operating a genuine alternative model in the Indian Ocean Region, or is it actually operating at a structural disadvantage compared to China?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: See, given that the world's two major powers right now have shown the world that they definitely don't believe in the rules-based international order — if you look at SAGAR, and everything we have done, we have just tried to uphold the rules-based international order. We believe in freedom of navigation, and that is exactly what SAGAR has done so far: all the HADR, or, you know, sharing of technology inputs and patrol vessels, and so on. I think we have proven it. India has proven it beyond the shadow of a doubt that



our approach is not transactional, the way China's is exploitative, or the way the US's is. So, unfortunately, amidst all of this crisis, it is difficult for the world — or, I understand that it is — but let's look at the silver lining. It's the best way to show that India's way is the correct way. I understand it is slow. Democracies are slow. We cannot be like — well — a one-party state or an autocratic dictatorship, and so on. But then, if we have been able to create benefits for our neighbours, for our so-called partners, despite being at the receiving end of "India Out" campaigns — does it not show the brilliance of India's diplomacy, and our naval engagements, and everything we have done through the years of SAGAR? You know, a lot of times it gets difficult to measure the trust we've created, or the value we've created. But when you go down to people's level, and speak with the common people of these countries, you will see that this does give us tangible benefits. Yes, it does — because, again, if I give you, say, Hambantota, BRI projects, and so on — evictions and bidding, and all of these sorts of things going on — are the people really happy? They are protesting. China brings in its own labour. When has India ever done that? We hire local labour, you know. Ours is — again, this is my occupational hazard, since I'm a professor: think of it as a classroom, right? There are two — you know — brilliant-looking [students], or let's say girls, my gender — two brilliant-looking girls who are super-cool, excellent in spoken English, and all sorts of those fancy things, and they are constantly at each other's throats. They definitely look like they're from an affluent class, right? One of them — whose name is the US — has had a long history of influence. The other one, whose name is China, is the nouveau riche. Now she wants to be the super-cool one, you know, the boss of the class, and everything. And then there is one silent, very hard-working girl — constantly, quietly taking notes, with oil in her hair. Just imagine every sort of Bollywood-style depiction of the hard-working one — let's assume she's from Bihar. Okay, quietly, quietly taking down notes, trying to understand what the teacher has really taught, going through more notes. She shares her notes also with the others, while these two keep squabbling. The rest of the class — there is an election, right — and the teacher shortlists these three. So, India is like the girl called "India," who's like: "Okay, why me? I don't understand" — but she has been sharing her notes all the while, she has been helping out, she has been sharing her food, even cooking her own food and studying at the same time, right? Good-girl syndrome. And then she is like: "Okay, I don't know how these two will take it, maybe I shouldn't" — and has an inner confidence. But when the teacher asks the class, out of these three, which one they would want [as class monitor], the majority says [India] is capable, [but] the other two create hassles for us also — it's, you know, dividing us: "you're in my sphere, you're in Mary's sphere," or, you know, undermining the other one's alliances and friends — as compared to this one, who doesn't do that. She is "Vishwa Bandhu" [friend of the world]. That's where we are; the good-girl syndrome is what India has. Okay, so I hope our audience will understand this over-simplification of India, US, and China.

Dr Nishit Kumar: Do you think small countries, as with the US right now — talking about trust and mistrust between two different nations — are small countries hedging between India and China, rather than choosing?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: They do. They very often do — looking rationally speaking every country will have to leverage whatever advantage it has, right? So small neighbours

have often done this in the past — they play the India card against China, or they play the China card against India. We've got examples from Nepal, even from Bangladesh, even during the time of Sheikh Hasina, which was seen as more favourable to India. But if you look at, you know, defence [ties] — India was not the largest defence partner; it was China, right? So, this happened in the past. Now, for these countries which are seeking either investment, loans, or, you know, whatever sort of exports — be it tech, or economic, or whatever — what can they really do to get a better deal? They will hedge; they will pit one country against the other. So, that's what they've done. India understands that — which is why our diplomacy, also, over the years, has undergone changes, trying to keep up with the newer sorts of tactics which neighbours use. Logically speaking, it's understandable. They will do what they have to do. But, well, you know, every country loves its own national interest. So does India. So, we also do what we have to do. We also politely tell [them] our red lines. We engage through partnerships. Since I mentioned Nepal, there are several BRI projects which simply did not take off in Nepal, and for all of them, at least, [things now] lean towards India. There is a new government now, of course, but even under the previous governments, that was the case — [it's] one example, [the] same case with Bangladesh. So, look, these countries will hedge, and we have to understand that, and just prepare better — think of possible unfolding scenarios. So that's rational behaviour from a sovereign state.

Dr Nishit Kumar: But if we look at the asymmetric defence budgets between India and China, India's defence allocation is substantially smaller than China's. Can SAGAR or MAHASAGAR succeed without a much stronger economic component?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: There will have to be an economic component to it, and over the years it has been increasing. Again, it cannot become like China's overnight, because our goals — you know, our foreign-policy visions — are completely different. And, since you mentioned the defence budget look, simply increasing the defence budget is not really going to be helpful. Let's not forget the fact that the last full-scale war which China fought with any country was in 1979 — Vietnam — and that too, it lost. You know, as opposed to that, the Indian Army has had several experiences — be it with our neighbour, well, a non-state-actor-supporting neighbour, Pakistan — and it has acclimatised better to the extremes of cold in the Himalayas, et cetera. This is not to defend, or justify, the fact that we need to push in more budget or have more budgetary allocations. But here is also the thing: like, you know, we, for example, right now, have the Vibrant Villages Programme, right, against China's Xiaokang [border] villages, and so on. Xiaokang villages started much earlier; we started the Vibrant Villages Programme [later] — there is budgetary allocation, infrastructural development, in the North East. The Sela Tunnel is just one example. Those sorts of things have started, or the activation of newer airbases, last year — these are happening. Just bringing it down to defence budgets, I think, would be the wrong step forward, going back to SAGAR and MAHASAGAR. Yes, there is a need for greater economic inputs — which is why, in answering one of your previous questions, I already said, if we can have better public-private partnerships, getting private players more and more involved in engaging with this whole theme of blue economy, or trade, it will give us better advantages. I think it's being discussed, and hopefully there will be more action on this in the coming years. I think also one thing that can be added is: the framework we operate in — we don't have that "trip-wire diplomacy" kind of thing; we work on partnership. So, we can



have a partner alongside another nation, without it being that “trip-wire” kind of diplomacy.

Dr Nishit Kumar: Looking ahead, what should SAGAR and MAHASAGAR look like over the next decade if India’s maritime vision is to remain relevant and effective?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: See, long-term success — talking of whatever we have built so far — will hinge on consistent execution, which will convert vision into more resilient partnerships. We have active partnerships, we have built trust, and so on, but this has to continue. And we have been able to leverage, you know, India’s geographic position, [its] proximity, [its] reliability, and so on. Now, success will also be measured, in the next 10 years, by whether the Indian Ocean Region and Global South partners consistently view India as their preferred, reliable partner for security cooperation. We have done some great things in the realm of HADR, in terms of capacity building, [and] deep strategic partnerships, but we have to ensure this continues. And there will be new challenges. We will have to anticipate and prepare in advance, because — over the long run — a more secure, stable Indian Ocean, which reduces piracy, illegal activities, or IUU [Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated] fishing, [and improves] maritime domain awareness, means [something] good for everyone. These are going to become the flashpoints in the next 10, maybe 15, years. What India has to focus on is thinking about how we continue delivering tangible results, where security tools — like naval diplomacy, exercises like MILAN — enable more concrete economic outcomes. And we have to transition from this visionary framework to a more coordinated policy, which means more discussion is needed between different ministries, agencies, [and] people, and so on. What we also have to do is show that our leadership is differentiated. It is not extractive, it is not transactional. Positioning India as a responsible, inclusive maritime power has to be leveraged by showcasing whatever India has done, utilising our resources and our partnerships. “Neki kar, darya mein daal” is great, but it is also important that one understands what one has achieved, and showcases it. We should show our strengths. So, that has to be done. We comply with our own [principles] — unlike our big neighbour, you know, we focus on mutual growth. So, this actually shows it, and in the next 10 years we have to continue delivering. We have to think of newer challenges which will emerge. We have to be adaptable to greater challenges, and, maybe, increase our presence further and further. MAHASAGAR has already expanded the scope, but now we need to think about — say, what do we really do if, God forbid, there is a Taiwan Strait crisis, or some other crisis? For that matter, are we adequately prepared? Do our navies, of the Indian Ocean Region and beyond, discuss these things, and so on? So, I think, in the next 10 years, these are just some of the things — you know, I can just speak off the top of my mind — [that] I think are doable and should be done.

Dr Nishit Kumar: That brings us to our final question. India is often described as aspiring to be a “net security provider.” Should India think of itself as a “net security provider” or a “preferred security provider” in the region?

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: Well, that’s a matter of semantics. So, I’m glad you mentioned this. Indian diplomacy probably would not show us as a “preferred” [provider], because when you use the term “preferred,” we are pitching ourselves against someone else, right? Dr Kumar is preferred to Prof. Pathak, right? Or, say, out of this trio, Dr Kumar is the preferred one — so obviously there is a comparison. Do we want to do that? We don’t bring in other countries;

we show our power — or at least that's what I have seen Indian diplomacy doing over the last many years. We don't name names. We do our own things, and, definitely, we have a name in mind, but we don't do it publicly. Indian diplomacy is also mature — that's for sure. Which is why, in terms of semantics, it will be “net security provider” — showcasing our net worth. Now, you know, it's not our gross, overall worth, but the net — the real — worth. You see how semantics come in here. So, it will be the “net security provider.” Okay. So, if there is one thing this conversation makes clear, it is this: the future of global power may not just be decided on land, but across oceans. SAGAR and now MAHASAGAR reflect India's attempt not just to respond to this shift, but to shape it. But, as we've discussed, ambition alone is not enough. It requires capacity, credibility, and consistent engagement with neighbours who are navigating their own pressures and choices.

Dr Nishit Kumar: Prof. Pathak, thank you so much for joining us and helping us unpack these complexities with such clarity. And, to everyone listening, if you have enjoyed this episode, do follow The Long View, and please do watch our previous episodes with Ambassador Ashok K Kantha, Professor Sugata Bose, Ambassador T. C. A. Raghavan, and Professor Harsh Pant. We will continue to bring you conversations that go beyond headlines and help you see the bigger picture. Until next time, keep looking beyond the immediate, and take the long view — because in geopolitics, what matters most is not what happens today, but what it leads to tomorrow. Thank you so much. It was your host, Nishit. Namaste.

Prof. Sriparna Pathak: Thank you again, Dr Kumar, and thank you to the Subhas Chandra Bose Chair for International Relations, and Chanakya University. Namaste!



Summary

In this episode of The Long View, Prof. Sriparna Pathak joins Dr Nishit Kumar to examine the evolution of India's maritime vision from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR. The conversation explores India's role in the Indian Ocean Region, its approach to humanitarian assistance and capacity building, the strategic importance of Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Mauritius, and the growing influence of China across the region. It also considers the limits of India's economic and institutional capacity, the choices available to smaller states that hedge between larger powers, and what India must do over the next decade to translate maritime vision into durable partnerships and tangible outcomes.

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About the Guest

Prof. Sriparna Pathak is Professor of China Studies and Founding Director of the Centre for Northeast Asian Studies at O.P. Jindal Global University. She also serves as Associate Director of the Jindal India Institute. Her teaching and research focus on Chinese foreign policy, India–China relations, East Asian geopolitics and international relations theory. Earlier, she worked with the Ministry of External Affairs, the Observer Research Foundation and academic institutions in India. She has authored and edited scholarly works on contemporary Asian geopolitics and contributes regularly to debates on China Studies and strategic affairs.

About the Host

Dr Nishit Kumar is a trained Sinologist and Assistant Professor at the Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations, Chanakya University, Bengaluru. He previously served as a Consultant (Research Fellow) at the Centre for Contemporary China Studies, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. He holds a PhD in Chinese from Jawaharlal Nehru University and has been a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University and Peking University. His research focuses on China Studies, strategic narratives, India–China relations, culture, translation and reception studies. He has taught Chinese at several Indian universities and is a published translator of Chinese literature into Hindi.

Transcription Note: Audio transcribed using Tactiq and edited by Dr Nishit Kumar, Subhas Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations, Chanakya University, Bengaluru.



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