

At first glance, it looks like a diplomatic love-fest. There was Chinese President Xi Jinping, toasting the birthday of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a quiet dinner earlier this week in Modi's home state. There were the two leaders, deep in conversation as they walked along the Sabarmati River, Xi dressed in a Nehru jacket.

The men are full of praise for one another, and one another's countries. Xi gushes over India as "an enchanting and beautiful land." Modi declares that their pledges to work together "will open big gates for progress and development in the world." Just a few hours into the Xi's three-day visit, Indian newspapers were awash with accomplishments: a joint industrial park, a sister-city pact, ramped up cultural ties, business deals and investment promises from China worth well more than \$20 billion.

Left largely unspoken, though, are the deep worries in India over Chinese maneuvering in the Indian Ocean, where New Delhi's years of dominance is being chipped away by billions of dollars in aid from Beijing and gargantuan Chinese construction projects.

And while China's recent push for dominance in the South China and East China seas get more attention, the quiet contest for influence in the Indian Ocean is being watched carefully from Tokyo to Washington, D.C. More than anything else, the worries are over energy.

The tankers that move through Indian Ocean carry 80 percent of China's oil, 65 percent of India's and 60 percent of Japan's, making those waters crucially important to three of Asia's great powers. A significant slowdown in tanker traffic - whether from diplomatic standoff, piracy or war - could cripple those countries and send shockwaves around the world.

So for years Beijing has been working to ensure it is not left out of the regional equation, building ports and forging alliances in coastal nations from Myanmar to Pakistan.

"China wants to be a major player in the Indian Ocean, alongside India and the U.S." said Kanwal Sibal, a former Indian foreign secretary who also held a series of ambassadorships. Xi's latest initiative is the maritime Silk Road, a series of agreements that would link China to Europe by sea. But if China heralds the Silk Road as a vision of international cooperation, many in the Indian government worry it is a Trojan horse to hide Beijing's expanding influence, said Sibal, who is well-connected in New Delhi's foreign policy circles.

"It is a precursor to eventually positioning themselves more permanently in the Indian Ocean," he said.

Xi, notably, made two stops before arriving in India, both in Indian Ocean nations. First came the Maldives, the isolated archipelago and high-end tourist destination where Beijing's influence has been growing steadily. Next was Sri Lanka, a war-battered island nation where China has become the largest investor, and where it has built a colossal port in the once-quiet town of Hambantota.

"They are building pockets of influence," Sibal said.

Beijing, for its part, firmly denies it is on a quest for Indian Ocean influence. In a signing ceremony for the Silk Road plan in Sri Lanka, Xi called it a chance to "strengthen our cooperation" in everything from port development to maritime security.

Wang Shaopu, director of the Center for Pan-Pacific Studies at Shanghai Jiaotong University, noted that competition was natural given the importance of the region. But, he added, that doesn't make conflict inevitable.

"China and India should make a high priority of cooperation and avoid letting competition become cutthroat," he said. "I think both countries already have realized this."

Publicly, that is definitely the case. The neighbors might have plenty of room for disagreement, from an immense Indian trade deficit to an Indian state that China claims as its own territory. But they have also become highly adept at avoiding the most sensitive issues, playing down disagreements to focus on economic growth.

Even in India, where China's emergence as a world power stings national pride deeply, plenty of people say that's not automatically a bad thing.

China "has the opportunity to build massive infrastructure," across the Indian Ocean as part of the Silk Road initiative, said Vijay Sakhujia, a former Indian naval officer and head of the New Delhi-based National Maritime Foundation. "They make world-class ports ... So can we emulate them or partake" of what they build?

India, however, is also being careful not to put too much trust in China, forging diplomatic agreements in an attempt to balance Beijing's growing strength.

Just weeks ago, for instance, Modi returned from a highly successful trip to Japan, China's fiercest rival, bringing home pledges of billions of dollars in aid and investment along with agreements to strengthen security and economic ties. Then, just days ago, the Indian and Vietnamese presidents issued a joint statement calling for freedom of navigation in the South China and East China seas - a clear jab at Beijing's aggressiveness in the region.

And the underlying tensions between India and China never go completely away.

Indian officials said a few days ago that Chinese soldiers had again entered Indian territory in the isolated Himalayan border region of Ladakh. The soldiers were said to be building a road. While Modi made a brief mention Thursday of border disagreements during a joint appearance with Xi - saying he had raised the issue of the "repeated incursions" with the Chinese leader - his statement was overwhelmingly positive, concluding by saying their relationship was "filled with vast opportunities."

That didn't surprise Sibal.

"We rarely speak frankly to China," said Sibal, the former diplomat said. "We have preferred to speak about areas where we have common interests."--AP