

## Kautilya's Mandala Theory: A Realist Framework for International Relations in South Asia

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### Abstract

Kautilya's Arthashastra, composed around the 3rd century BCE, remains one of the earliest and most comprehensive treatises on statecraft and inter-state relations. Among its critical contributions is the Mandala theory, which conceptualises foreign policy and alliances through the metaphor of concentric circles, positing that an immediate neighbour is a natural adversary, while the neighbour's neighbour is a potential ally. This research paper examines Mandala theory as a realist framework and analyses its relevance in understanding contemporary international relations in South Asia. It explores how India's foreign policy behaviour towards Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, and smaller South Asian states such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh often reflects Kautilyan strategic logic. India's enduring rivalry with Pakistan, competitive dynamics with China, proactive engagement with Afghanistan, and calibrated diplomacy towards smaller neighbours align with Mandala prescriptions. However, the paper also critiques the limitations of Mandala theory in the modern context, particularly its static geographical assumptions that do not account for transregional threats, global interdependence, and institutional multilateralism. This study concludes that while Mandala theory is context-bound, it provides a valuable indigenous realist framework to analyse South Asian geopolitics. Integrating Kautilyan thought into IR enriches theoretical pluralism and decolonises the discipline by foregrounding non-Western strategic traditions.

**Keywords:** Kautilya; mandala theory; realism; arthashastra; south Asia; international relations; strategic studies.

### Introduction

Kautilya, also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta, was an eminent political thinker, economist, strategist, and royal advisor in ancient India, whose ideas continue to influence South Asian strategic culture. His treatise, the Arthashastra, composed around the 3rd century BCE, is widely recognised as one of the most comprehensive works on statecraft, governance, and inter-state relations. It lays out systematic guidelines on administration, economic policy, espionage, diplomacy, war, and ethics, reflecting a highly pragmatic and realist worldview (Kangle, 1960; Boesche, 2002). Among its most significant contributions is the Mandala theory, which conceptualises the international environment as a series of concentric circles of enemies and allies surrounding the state. The Mandala theory posits that in an anarchic geopolitical environment, an immediate neighbour is naturally an adversary (Ari), while the neighbour's neighbour is

considered an ally (Mitra) (Rangarajan, 1992). This theory presents a sophisticated understanding of foreign policy and alliance formation based on geographical determinism, where the proximity and relative power of neighbouring states dictate strategic relationships. Kautilya further categorises states into twelve types within the Mandala, ranging from allies, neutral states, and vassals to enemies and potential conquerors, advising rulers to pursue policies based on rigorous cost-benefit calculations and realpolitik (Boesche, 2002). Despite being articulated nearly two millennia before the emergence of modern International Relations (IR) theories in the West, Mandala theory exhibits striking parallels with classical realism, which views international politics as a struggle for power among self-interested states in an anarchic system (Morgenthau, 1948). Furthermore, its structural understanding of alliances and balancing behaviour resonates with structural realism (neorealism), as proposed by Kenneth

Waltz (1979), though Mandala theory grounds its assumptions in geographical proximity rather than solely in systemic anarchy. However, mainstream IR scholarship has often overlooked indigenous non-Western frameworks like Mandala theory, leading to critiques of epistemic Eurocentrism and calls for theoretical pluralism (Acharya, 2014). Integrating Mandala theory into contemporary IR discourse not only enriches analytical tools for understanding South Asian geopolitics but also contributes to the decolonisation of IR theory by foregrounding culturally rooted strategic traditions. This paper seeks to examine Mandala theory as a realist framework applicable to international relations in South Asia, particularly India's strategic behaviour towards its immediate and extended neighbours. It employs a comparative theoretical approach to analyse Mandala theory alongside classical realism and structural realism, identifying both convergences and divergences. The research explores whether Mandala theory can systematically explain enduring rivalries, alliance patterns, and strategic choices within South Asia's complex geopolitical environment.

## Literature Review

The study of Kautilya's Arthashastra and its Mandala theory has attracted scholars across disciplines, from ancient history and political philosophy to international relations and strategic studies. R. P. Kangle (1960) provided one of the earliest comprehensive English translations of the Arthashastra, highlighting its systematic articulation of governance and foreign policy rooted in realpolitik. Kangle notes that Kautilya presents politics as an autonomous sphere governed by pragmatic calculations rather than moral or religious ideals.

Boesche (2002) argues that Kautilya was arguably the world's first great political realist, preceding Machiavelli by nearly two millennia. According to Boesche, Mandala theory exemplifies Kautilya's realist worldview by conceptualising foreign policy as a perpetual contest of power, deception, and strategic calculation. Boesche emphasises the amoral nature of Kautilyan realism, which advocates Sama (conciliation), Dana (gifts), Bheda (division), and Danda (force) as legitimate instruments of statecraft, paralleling Machiavellian tactics of fear, manipulation, and coercion.

Rangarajan (1992) elaborates on the operational dimensions of Mandala theory, describing how Kautilya advised rulers to perceive their neighbours as enemies and their neighbour's neighbours as potential allies. This geographical determinism, he argues, underpinned ancient Indian strategic culture, with states pursuing alliances and enmities based on proximity and power dynamics rather than ideological affinities.

In the broader field of International Relations, Morgenthau (1948) articulated classical realism as a framework grounded in the assumption that politics is governed by objective laws rooted in human nature's drive for power. Similarly, Waltz (1979) developed structural realism (neorealism), shifting the unit of analysis from human nature to the anarchic structure of the international system, where states seek security by balancing power to ensure survival. Both frameworks resonate with Mandala theory's assumptions of state-centrism, anarchy, and self-help.

However, Acharya (2014) critiques mainstream IR for its epistemic Eurocentrism, arguing that non-Western contributions like Mandala theory remain marginalised despite offering robust explanations for regional politics. He calls for a Global IR approach that recognises indigenous strategic traditions as valid theoretical frameworks.

Recent scholars such as Pant (2016) and Mohan (2003) have explored India's foreign policy behaviour through strategic realist lenses, implicitly reflecting Mandala assumptions. Pant highlights India's balancing behaviour towards Pakistan and China while cultivating ties with Afghanistan and smaller South Asian states to secure its strategic environment. Mohan similarly argues that India's foreign policy combines realism and pragmatism, although both studies stop short of systematically theorising Mandala as an indigenous realist framework. Furthermore, Subrahmanyam (1997) emphasises the importance of integrating pre-modern Indian strategic thought into contemporary security studies to understand continuity in India's strategic culture. He argues that Mandala theory, along with concepts such as Matsya Nyaya (law of fishes) and Rajamandala, shaped Indian diplomatic and military traditions long before the colonial encounter.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that while Kautilya's Mandala theory has been extensively studied as a historical and philosophical text, its potential as a systematic international relations theory remains underexplored. This paper addresses this lacuna by critically analysing Mandala theory as a realist framework, comparing it with Western realism, and assessing its applicability to contemporary South Asian geopolitics.

## Methodology

This study employs a comparative theoretical analysis, juxtaposing Mandala theory with classical and structural realism to evaluate:

1. Their conceptual similarities and differences.
2. Applicability of Mandala theory in explaining India's relations with Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, and smaller South Asian states.

The analysis draws upon secondary literature on Kautilya's Arthashastra, classical IR theory, and South Asian strategic studies to provide a multidisciplinary perspective.

## Analysis

Kautilya's Mandala theory provides a conceptual framework deeply rooted in realist principles, positing that the international environment is characterised by perpetual competition among self-interested states. This analysis examines Mandala theory's realist assumptions, its operational logic, and its relevance to South Asian international relations today.

## Mandala as Classical and Structural Realism

Firstly, Mandala theory aligns with classical realism, which views politics as governed by the drive for power rooted in human nature (Morgenthau, 1948). Kautilya's focus on Rajamandala (circle of kings) reflects this, emphasising that rulers should prioritise self-interest and state security over moral or religious ideals. His prescriptions for dealing with allies and enemies using conciliation, gifts, division, and force mirror Machiavellian tactics, underscoring the amoral essence of realist thought (Boesche, 2002). At the same time, Mandala theory parallels structural realism (neorealism) in its systemic assumptions. Waltz (1979) argues that international politics is shaped by the anarchic structure of the system rather than human nature alone. Similarly, Mandala theory posits that the structure of geopolitical proximity and power distribution dictates state behaviour. For example, it assumes that an immediate neighbour is naturally a rival due to conflicting security interests, while a neighbour's neighbour can be an ally to balance against the adversary. This mirrors the balance of power logic central to neorealism.

## Application to South Asian Geopolitics

Kautilya's Mandala theory remains particularly relevant in South Asia's geopolitical landscape, characterised by enduring rivalries and alliance formations that reflect the theory's core assumptions.

- 1. India-Pakistan Rivalry:** Mandala theory's conceptualisation of the immediate neighbour as a natural adversary resonates with India's strategic approach towards Pakistan. Since partition, India and Pakistan have engaged in military conflicts, covert balancing, and diplomatic contestation, underpinned by territorial disputes, ideological rivalry, and security dilemmas. Mandala theory would interpret this as an archetypal Ari relationship.
- 2. India-Afghanistan Relations:** India's engagement with Afghanistan to counterbalance Pakistan illustrates the Mandala principle of Mitra (allying with the neighbour's neighbour). India's investments in Afghan infrastructure, education, and security cooperation enhance its strategic depth vis-à-vis Pakistan, aligning with Kautilya's recommendation of supporting allies to weaken adversaries (Rangarajan, 1992).
- 3. India-China Competition:** Although China is not a direct geographical neighbour in Mandala's immediate sense, contemporary connectivity and regional power projection have brought it into India's strategic calculus as a systemic adversary. India's efforts to balance China through strategic partnerships with the US, Japan, and Australia under the Quad reflect Mandala-inspired balancing behaviour adapted to modern multipolar geopolitics.
- 4. Smaller Neighbours (Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives):** Mandala theory also recommends managing peripheral states through a combination of incentives, coercion, and diplomacy. India's policy towards Nepal and Bhutan, including security treaties and economic assistance, and its outreach to Bangladesh for connectivity and counterterrorism cooperation, reflect the pragmatic application of Mandala logic. Simultaneously, China's growing influence in Sri Lanka and Maldives has prompted India to intensify engagement under its 'Neighbourhood First' policy, reflecting balancing and containment strategies.

## Limitations in Contemporary Context

Despite its analytical strengths, Mandala theory has limitations in explaining modern inter-state relations. Its geographical determinism is less applicable in a globalised world where transregional threats, such as cyber security risks, terrorism, and climate change, transcend proximity. Furthermore, its acceptance of deception, espionage, and coercion as legitimate instruments raises normative concerns under contemporary international law and diplomatic ethics (Acharya, 2014). Its static assumptions also overlook the role of multilateral institutions and international norms in shaping state behaviour today.

## Discussion

The findings of this research indicate that Kautilya's Mandala theory provides an indigenous realist framework with enduring relevance for understanding South Asian geopolitics. This discussion situates the theory within broader International Relations discourse, examines its contemporary applicability and limitations, and considers its implications for theoretical pluralism and policy analysis.

## Mandala Theory and Realism: Bridging Traditions

The analysis reveals significant conceptual convergence between Mandala theory and classical realism. Both view inter-state relations as driven by self-interest, competition, and the pursuit of power. Kautilya's advocacy of Sama (conciliation), Dana (gifts), Bheda (division), and Danda (force) mirrors the Machiavellian notion of power politics, where morality is subordinate to state security and strategic advantage (Boesche, 2002). Furthermore, Mandala theory's structural assumptions—that the international system is anarchic and states must engage in balancing behaviour to ensure survival-align closely with neorealist propositions (Waltz, 1979). However, unlike Western realism, Mandala theory explicitly integrates geography as a determinant of alliances and enmities. Its core principle that immediate neighbours are adversaries and the neighbour's neighbours are potential allies highlights a geographically grounded systemic logic. This aspect resonates with modern geopolitical theories such as Mackinder's Heartland theory, albeit rooted in indigenous Indian strategic traditions (Rangarajan, 1992).

## Relevance to South Asian Geopolitics

The application of Mandala theory to South Asia illuminates how India's foreign policy reflects Kautilyan logic. Its adversarial relations with Pakistan, competitive dynamics with China, strategic investments in Afghanistan, and calibrated diplomacy towards smaller neighbours demonstrate alliance formation and balancing behaviour grounded in realist assumptions. For instance, India's strategic outreach to Afghanistan to counterbalance Pakistan reflects the classic Mandala principle of allying with the neighbour's neighbour (Pant, 2016). Similarly, India's partnerships with Japan, Australia, and the US under the Quad to balance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific echo Mandala-inspired balancing logic adapted to contemporary multipolar contexts.

## Limitations of Mandala Theory in Modern IR

Despite its explanatory strengths, Mandala theory has inherent limitations. Its geographical determinism may inadequately capture globalised interdependence, transregional threats, and the role of non-state actors in shaping international relations today. Cyber security, terrorism, pandemics, and climate change transcend immediate neighbourhood calculations, demanding frameworks beyond territorial proximity. Moreover, its acceptance of amoral tactics espionage, deception, and coercion raises ethical and normative concerns within the modern international legal and diplomatic framework (Acharya, 2014). While realism acknowledges power politics' amoral nature, contemporary diplomacy operates under constraints of international norms, laws, and institutions that regulate state behaviour to some extent.

## Implications for Theoretical Pluralism and Policy Analysis

Integrating Mandala theory into modern IR scholarship contributes to decolonising the discipline, challenging epistemic Eurocentrism by foregrounding indigenous frameworks rooted in South Asian strategic traditions. It demonstrates that realist thought is not confined to Thucydides or Machiavelli but is equally present in ancient Indian political thought.

For policy analysis, Mandala theory offers a culturally grounded lens to understand regional geopolitics and anticipate strategic behaviour. Policymakers can use Mandala logic to design pragmatic strategies of alliance formation,

balancing, and strategic communication within South Asia, ensuring policy approaches are informed by regional historical traditions alongside contemporary global theories.

### Conclusion

Kautilya's Mandala theory offers an enduring realist framework grounded in pragmatism, state-centrism, and power politics, aligning with and even predating Western realist thought. Its foundational premise—that the immediate neighbour is a natural adversary and the neighbour's neighbour is a potential ally—reflects a sophisticated understanding of inter-state dynamics and strategic balancing rooted in geographical determinism. This conceptualisation remains strikingly relevant in South Asia, where enduring rivalries, historical mistrust, and competitive geopolitics define regional relations. The analysis demonstrates that India's foreign policy behaviour towards Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, and its smaller neighbours reflects Mandala logic. Its strategic engagement with Afghanistan to balance Pakistan, apprehensions regarding China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean and South Asia, and management of Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh through diplomacy and economic assistance mirror Kautilyan prescriptions. In this sense, Mandala theory provides an indigenous realist lens that complements and contextualises Western IR theories for South Asian geopolitics.

However, the study also reveals critical limitations. Mandala theory's geographical determinism overlooks non-contiguous transregional threats and globalised interdependence, which shape contemporary international relations beyond immediate neighbours. Its acceptance of amoral realism, including deception, coercion, and subterfuge, raises normative and ethical concerns in today's diplomatic and legal frameworks. Moreover, its relatively static assumptions may not fully capture the fluidity of modern multilateral engagements, institutional frameworks, and complex interdependence shaping regional and global orders. Despite these limitations, Kautilya's Mandala theory remains a testament to the sophistication of ancient Indian strategic thought. Its integration into modern IR scholarship not only enriches theoretical pluralism but also decolonises the discipline, foregrounding indigenous concepts and frameworks often neglected in mainstream academia. As South Asia continues to navigate multipolarity, power shifts, and complex regional dynamics, Mandala theory offers policymakers and scholars a culturally rooted analytical tool to understand, predict, and navigate inter-state relations with strategic pragmatism. Future research should further explore how Mandala theory can be adapted to incorporate non-traditional security issues, multilateral institutions, and extra-regional actors, ensuring its continued relevance in analysing and shaping South Asian and global geopolitics.

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